

## **Relationship between the Use of Language on Billboard Advertisements and Consumers' Urge to Purchase Products in Lagos State, Nigeria**

Femi Kayode\*, Obielodan O and Ogunduyile S. R

*Department of Industrial Design, Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria*

This study investigates the relationship between the language of expression used on outdoor billboards and consumers' urge to purchase products in Lagos State, Nigeria. It adopts the descriptive research of the survey type. Three hundred and sixty-two product consumers selected through purposive sampling technique and all of the seventy-two registered product advertisers formed the sample for the study. Data collected were analysed using percentage, frequency count and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Statistics. The result of the study reveals that there is no significant relationship between the use of language on the billboard advertisements and consumers' urge to purchase products in Lagos State. In addition, it reveals that language of expression is an important factor when campaigning for product patronage and that, adopting appropriate language of expression on outdoor bills influences and induces enormous consumers' urge to purchase products in Lagos State. The implication of the findings is that the official language (English) for outdoor product advertisement is no more as effective as the Nigerian indigenous languages and an advertising regulation on community signage is called for. Based on this, it is recommended that advertisers in Lagos State should adopt more of the language that is native to a particular target population on outdoor billboard product campaigns.

Keywords: products, neighbourhood dialect, advertisement, persuasion, linguistic

### **Introduction**

The use of language has been occurring before recorded history. Drawings, symbols and hand signs could have existed as a tool for meeting the need for communication (Reader's Digest Association, 2004) but one of the freest gift ever given to man by nature for exchanging ideas has been language. As human beings are creatures of language and product consumption, advertising was becoming all the more important while flexibility of language of expression also became pivotal. Seung (2003) and Osborne & Coleman (2008) point out that billboard advertising in Lagos State is increasing in new language tactics and coverage and that the changing shopping habit of consumers is a product of the conviction established by the expressive power of the language.

The language system is by far the most potent expressive model in spoken word and textual writing ever activated by people of all cultures. Human ability to read and write is closely associated with the power of expression which liberates one from ignorance, superstition and perpetual obscurity. When the language system is faulty, communication becomes garbled and indiscernible. A language disability or severe retardation in communication has

the same profound influences on informational growth and a severe emotional involvement (Nduka, 1989 and Ekpunobi, 1999). The language of expression manifest itself in the ability to say, write, produce or do something to show feelings, opinions and ideas. This notion presupposes that expressions creatively inhere in a wide degree of language lexis and structure. This generally implies that the use of language, which is an ability to express a written or verbal concept explicitly or convert concepts into intelligible discourse, is by no means an exclusive preserve of a particular race, culture, strain of individuals or industry.

The advertising and marketing study conducted in Schneider (2003) reveals that customers are far more likely to buy products and services in their own native or regional language, even when they can read the English language well. Most companies, according to Schneider (op cit) realize that the only way to do business effectively in other cultures is to adapt to those cultures. The phrase, *think globally act locally* is relevant in this regard. Spoken or written, Reece-Myron (1998) is of the opinion that the clarity of the language of expression remains the issue of first priority in billboard advertisements. Effective words are needed for mass mobilization and for the reflection of the personality of the product as well as the integrity of the business organization. The

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\*Corresponding author. Email: femiofk@gmail.com

planning for product advertisement begins with the selection of the target group while the channel and style of communication to the broad spectrum of people differentiated by literacy and illiteracy must be carefully selected (Galvis & Soong, 1999). It is possible to have all it takes to arouse the urge in a consumer to buy a product but every effort is not working. Marks (2009) is of the opinion that some aspect of the outdoor audience can not read messages in the language of expression that is in conformity with the rhythms of native linguistics. Most public billboards in Lagos are composed in English language and the semi-literate, by which we mean individuals and group of people who can only manage to read their native dialect and those who would prefer every communication in vernacular would require a go-between before they can sensually process and recall language different from neighbourhood dialect. Indeed, the success of a billboard advertisement will depend on the full penetrating potentials of graphic design concept and the linguistic captions as forms of expression (as seen in Figures 1 – 4).

### The Background

Aside English, the three major native dialects in Lagos State of Nigeria are Ijebu, Egun and Awori. The use of English language as a medium of billboard advertising expression is the most frequent and effective, even though the three native dialects are proudly what can be referred to as offshoots or

appendages of the sub-ethnicity of the entire Yoruba tribe. The first settlers in Eko (Lagos) were the Aworis who were predominantly hunters and fishermen (Aig-Imokhwede, 1991). The other two groups of Lagos citizens are the Ogu people (Egun) of Badagry and its environs and the Ijebus in Ikorodu and Epe local government areas. The Ijebu people of the Ikorodu and Epe areas share a collective heritage with their kith and kin in the present day Ogun State of Nigeria, but have also developed strong trade and cultural links with the entire coastline of Nigeria, with its interlaced pattern of waters and creeks which empty into the lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean.

### Problem Statement: Billboard Messages and Public Contentions

Visual emphasis is an emerging process identified with all outdoor advertising media. In recent time, there appears to be dual impressions about the multiplicity of outdoor billboard advertisements on both the inlands and the hinterlands and as a result of the deliberate stress placed on visible elements (coloured pictures, typography and the logotype). A part of the society alleges that density of colourful billboard advertisements as shown in Figure 1, having fascinating pictures and writings excessively engage the concentration of viewers and, rather than create the urge in the commuters to buy products are linked to most road traffic accidents.



Figure 1. Density of colourful billboard advertisements on Lagos highways.

Most people in contrary however uphold that such impression about outdoor medium of advertising is an accusation of bias. The latter believe that it is possible that the placements of billboard advertisements along the highways are of value in reducing drivers' boredom, which many believe is a positive contribution to road stress reduction and highway safety (Figure 1). Corroborated in Linguarama International (2000), visual content and design in

product advertising have great impact on consumer reasoning, as it helps people to identify the product and remember it. Conglomerates like the telecommunication network operators or beverages companies in Nigeria are shifting a little of the emphasis away from English language expression to dialectal expressions with adequate reference to culture in order to penetrate into their indigenous audiences along the local routes.



Figure 2. A shift of emphasis from English language to local (Hausa) dialect.

More contentions are springing up against the effective display of billboards in urban centres. For instance, there is an obvious challenge that outdoor advertising is characteristically a rapid communication medium that limits copy to a few words for comprehension in a few seconds (Osunbiyi, 1999). Of a truth, this is an issue of concern to the viewing audience. Information presented about a product or service may generally not be detailed enough to generate conviction or strong interest that will induce or elicit positive response from a potential audience or the existing customer. Choosing a particular place to erect a billboard or signpost is a problem on its own. Ideally, exposure areas are crucial to every advertising campaign and are sighted along the mass traffic routes but advertisers are still handicapped in hives of commercial industry where government has placed restrictions. Exposure areas are synonymous with the urban land use which Okewole (2002) says is conventionally subdivided into residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, offices, public-semi-public (educational, health, community hall etc), transportation, open spaces and green area uses. Each of these areas is appropriate and commercially viable but unfortunately, may not be authorized by government or appropriate agencies. Rather, they are

vulnerable to restrictions and bans by adverse government policies and environmental laws.

### Culture and Language Issues in Billboard Advertisement

Issues relating to culture and language have a plethora of implications for creative diversities that are of unassailable identity. For instance many people with individual differences would not be able to co-exist peacefully except when there is cultural understanding or integration. Leveridge (2010) maintains that the relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. Different ideas stem from differing language use within one's culture and the whole intertwining of these relationships starts at one's birth (Leveridge, 2010). The two constructs: culture and language have interconnectedness and like Siamese twins, are uneasy to separate. Wider in range and themes than any other value (Ojo, 1999), culture bearings are as diverse as occupations, religion, festivals and ceremonies, dress, dance and entertainment, rites of passage and traditions to mention but a few.



Figure 3. A linguistic expression of different cultures but one tradition.

Figure 3 shows the three major cultures in Nigeria (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa) in dress values performing a traditional rite of prayer and libation captioned 'Many prayers, One drink'. Little wonder, in most public discourses and in literatures people refer to culture as the way of life of a people. In a study on cultural erosion and the crises of development Yakubu (2002) reiterates that culture is presented from various angles: for instance, it is the manner in which people learn to organize their behaviour and thoughts in relation to their environment (Howard, 1965); the patterned way of life shared by a group of people (Nanda, 1987); a broad network of references which indicate the entirety of a people's material, intellectual and metaphysical patterns of living (Dafinone, 1999). With all of these it is not out of place to agree with the position in Ajiboye (2005) that culture is multifariously resident in forms and expressions (Figure 3).

One of the vehicles through which such expressions are rendered is the language mode. Language is the formative organ of thought (Skotko, 2010). As simply as can be deduced from Komen (2010), language is the basis of all communication. Without it, no culture or society would be able to develop because the people will lack a mean through which they can express their ideas with one another (Komen, op cit). Otite (2000) once noted that one of the most important diacritical symbols is language, a vehicle for transmitting and preserving ethnic culture,

and thus for affording members the shared ability to communicate and interact. Interactions through billboard messages are rendered in precise, short but discernible language ordering of words and sign system to notify the public of the arrival of a new product or effectiveness of existing one and persuade the target audience to buy.

### Features of Billboard Expression

Language communication has powerful influence over people who read it and their behaviour. This is especially prominent when it comes to outdoor billboard advertisements. As Kyrnin (2010) put it, billboard expressions are rendered with some kind of emphasis which creates a focal point or dominance for the piece of writing. It is of the essence for the advertising copy fitter to control both the attention and the straying rate of the eyes of the readers. The features which distinguish an outdoor advertising expression from other expressions in public places are its commercially-minded emphasis, humour, hyperbole and propaganda, although other figurative expressions such as simile, metaphour, symbol and pun to mention just a few are used to add *ornaments* to expressions. Ornament in this context is an operational word that implies the language beauty that brings expression out of its original meaning so as to invoke in the reader an emotional sensitivity.



Figure 4. Use of emphasis of size for emotional sensitivity.

It should be mentioned that the use of adjectives such as 'new', 'good', 'free', 'fresh', 'special' and verbs like 'make', 'get', 'give', 'have', 'see', 'buy', 'look', and 'special' are among the variables used invariably in advertising persuasions. As for emphasis, the bigger the texts the clearer and more imposing on the viewer it become. Laying emphasis on the major thrust of an advertisement as in Legend Extra Stout in

Figure 4 therefore conjures up attention and takes the target audience to a buying realm just as music can evoke a dancing mood in the listener. Emphasis manifests as extra force in form of size (Figure 4), colour, underline, asterisks or repetition to back up a message on the billboard. They are central to the understanding and appreciation of the message. The more coloured the texts the more fascinating, the

more the usage of underline and asterisks the more attentions drawn and of course, repetition in any given expression, verbal or written is the law of lasting impression. The central purpose of any expression is to communicate. Communicating effectively in advertising terms calls for tactics that are strong enough to attract attention, engage the mind, trigger emotion or change perception.

Apart from emphasis, advertisers adopt the concept of humour, propaganda and hyperbole as common key figures of speech. Although these are not mutually exclusive, they in most of the time overlap each other as true representation of the intention of the advertisement. The experience of humour as noted in Sultanoff (2010) relieves emotional distress and assists in changing negative thinking patterns. Humorous advertising campaigns, propaganda statements and hyperbolic expressions can be ludicrous textual renditions but still aim to show the product positively. Boles (2007) averred that every specialized trade or discourse has its own unique language and media literacy. With the density of billboard advertisements in every public place, market squares and industrial areas inclusive, passersby are often bewildered by the seemingly interchangeable expression of words used by practitioners in the advertising industry. For instance, hyperbolic statements which are bold and deliberate overstatements are employed. Although all of these language features may naturally not be taken literally or hook line and sinker, they are valid as catalyst for creating heightened effects for products and services advertised.

## Methodology

This is a descriptive research of survey that involved correlation research design. In order to confirm the relationship between the use of language on billboard advertisements and consumers' urge to purchase products the following hypothesis was examined: *There is no significant relationship between the language of expression for billboard advertising and the urge of consumers to purchase products.*

It employed questionnaire to survey the opinion of respondents concerning the relationship that exists between the use of language on billboard advertisements and the urge of consumers to buy a product in Lagos State. Instrument was administered one-on-one in February 2012 with the help of some research assistants and survey data were collected on the spot. Questions asked revolved round the understanding, interest and reactions of the consumers when a particular language is employed in billboard advertisements. Enquiries were also made

into whether the advertisers in Lagos achieve their goals by carrying out billboard messages in English language or by shifting tactics to the use of only the languages native to their target audience. The sample for this study was three hundred and sixty-two (362) product consumers selected through purposive sampling technique, and which involved both the existing and potential ones. The instrument for the study was an inventory titled 'Visual Design Concept and Product Promotion Questionnaire'. A pilot study was then carried out. A test retest method of estimating reliability of instrument was employed. The questionnaire was administered twice on twenty (20) respondents from three local governments in Ogun State, Nigeria at an interval of two weeks. The data collected at the two different administrations of the questionnaire were subjected to Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis and the coefficient obtained for each set of the questionnaire was 0.67 for Outdoor Advertising Agencies, Conventional Advertising Agencies and the Graphic Designers/Artists, 0.61 for Consumers/End-users of products and 0.65 for the advertisers. Data collected on the relationship between the use of language of expression and consumers' urge to purchase products was subjected to inferential statistics. Specifically, the hypothesis was analysed using correlation statistics i.e. Pearson Product Moment Correlation and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

## Results

Sample was taken in Ikeja, Apapa and Surulere areas of Lagos because of the high density of billboards and advertising agencies there. The respondents were three hundred and sixty two in number, out of which two hundred and four were males and one hundred and fifty-eight were females. All the respondents were classified into different age groups in which fifty-six were below the age of twenty while one hundred and twenty-nine were below the age of thirty. It was also observed that ninety-eight, forty-four and thirty-three were below the age groups of forty, fifty and sixty respectively. Majority of the respondents (three hundred and thirty-one) were able to read and write, while a few (thirty-one) were not. Respondents were categorized into different economic status. Fifty were self-employed; one hundred were civil servants, while traders were two hundred and twelve. The sample was taken

This hypothesis states that there is no significant relationship between the language of expression for billboard advertising and the urge of consumers to purchase products.

In testing this hypothesis, the questionnaire items were scored and summed up for each respondent on language of expression and the urge to purchase consumer products. The two sets of score were subjected to Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The result is as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Relationship between language of expression in the outdoor billboard and the urge of consumer for purchase of products

Variables	N	r-cal	r-tab
Language of expression	362	0.352	0.195
Consumers urge to purchase product	362		

$P \leq 0.05$  (Result Not significant)

From Table 1, it is observed that the calculated coefficient ' $r$ ' was 0.352 while the r-table value was 0.195 at  $df$  360 and level of significance 0.05. Since the r-table value is greater than the r-calculated value, then the hypothesis that states there is no significant relationship between language of expression and the urge of consumers for purchase of products, is therefore rejected.

## Discussion

The result arrived at in this study deduced that the language used in expressing a billboard message goes a long way to propel urge in consumers to buy a product. Such urge however may be conscious or unconscious. This result has been found to be in agreement with Neeham and Dransfield (1992) and Arueyingho (2001) in which it is noted that carefully selected written billboards messages influence behaviours, engage minds, trigger emotions and create beliefs in the minds of prospective customers. McNamara (2008) adds emphasis to Neeham & Dransfield (1992) and Arueyingho (2001) by mentioning that textual expressions are important factors when mounting campaigns for product patronage. Although not all of Neeham & Dransfield (1992), Arueyingho (2001) and McNamara (2008) were carried out in Lagos State, they are all consumer-product-related studies which used the same type of respondents who were up to 368 in number.

## Conclusion

The paper has dealt with issues that attend the use of language on billboard advertisements and consumers' urge to purchase one product or the other in Lagos

State. It has been mentioned that human beings are habitual and linguistic and are, prone to making decisions when captivated by sweet words about a product. The advertisers too use the power of language expression to brand their business so as to attain profits. With the continuous emergence and application of new media concepts and technologies, the outdoor advertisers are devising new creative tactics in the form of humour, propaganda, metaphor and simile to win the heart of their target audience. By implication, the use of official language (English) for outdoor advertising is no more as potent as the Nigerian native languages. A gap still exists in the study for the implementation of an advertising regulation on *community signaging*. The study therefore looks forward to a time when outdoor bills an absolutely written in the native dialect of the community where such billboards are mounted.

## Recommendations

As Lagos State is of multi-ethnic population and multicultural environment that harbours a very high density of advertisers and advertising agencies, it is recommended that advertisers should go beyond general languages to specific local dialects in order to penetrate into the interiors. Specific rural settlements and outskirts are developing in speedy progression.

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