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The Influence of Billboard Advertising on Electorate's Voting Decision: A Study of the 2019 Cross River State Gubernatorial Campaign

Essien Oku Essien^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of billboard advertising on electorate's voting decision during the 2019 Cross River State gubernatorial campaign. The study sought to ascertain the level of relevance attached to billboards as a means of political information by the electorates, to find out if the voters in Cross River State actually believed in the political messages presented on the billboards, as well as to ascertain if the electorate were actually influenced by the billboard messages. To achieve these, relevant concepts and empirical studies were reviewed and the agenda setting theory as well as the social marketing theory were adopted in the study to establish a workable theoretical framework. The study employed the mixed method with the questionnaire and interview inventory as the research instrument. Through multi-stage sampling, 399 respondents were selected for the survey from the three senatorial districts in Cross River state and 2 interviewees for in-depth interviews. The findings indicated among other things, that electorates in Cross River State were significantly influenced by their exposure to these billboards and most of them were persuaded not only by the messages but by the visual composition of the billboard. The study found out that the billboards are at a better advantage over the handheld printed communication media, which might be easily misplaced by an individual. In the light of the findings, the study concluded that the billboard can be used both for political campaigning and for political orientation/education. With these, it was recommended that billboards should be constructed with materials that will be able to withstand any weather condition without being damaged in order to sustain its messages. Its messages can also be written in local dialects in order to induce the desired results from the electorate. The study also recommended that the government should adopt billboards as major tools for political education and electoral orientation.

INTRODUCTION

Out-of-home (OOH) Advertising is the second-fastest-growing media category after the Internet. Billboards and posters viewed while moving are included. It also includes location-based media, which can be found in convenience stores, medical centers, and other physical locations. A billboard (a hoarding) is a huge outdoor advertising structure (a billing board) often seen in high-traffic locations such as expressways and highways. Passing pedestrians and automobiles see enormous advertisements on billboards. Billboards are highly visible in the top designated market locations, usually with funny phrases and striking images. According to Bartle (2014), the largest ordinary-sized billboards are typically found on major roads, expressways, or major arterials, where they receive high-density consumer exposure (mostly to vehicular traffic). These provide the most notice, not just because of their size but also because they allow for creative "customization" with extensions and embellishments.

Billboard advertisements are intended to rapidly capture a person's attention and leave a lasting impression, leaving the reader wondering about the advertisement long after they have passed it. Because they are generally viewed at high speeds, they must be readable in a very short amount

of time. As a result, there are usually only a few phrases in huge size and a brightly colored graphic that is amusing or arresting. Parts of the figures hang off the billboard edges or jut out in three dimensions, while other designs spill aesthetically outside the real space provided to them on the billboard (Siang, 2020).

Billboard advertising is useful for raising awareness and communicating goals to a large number of people. When compared to other advertising tactics, billboards get the maximum number of views and impressions because they are located in such busy regions (Decker, 2019).

According to Wroblewski (2018), "digital billboards have improved this advertising strategy, particularly in the twenty-first century." Whether or not you agree with this argument, there is no denying that billboards have some distinct advantages as a business and political communication tool.

Political communication, on the other hand, refers to organized political campaigning aimed at influencing the decision-making process inside a given group. Political campaigns in democracies frequently relate to electoral campaigns in which political leaders are elected, or referendums are resolved. The most high-profile political campaigns in modern politics are centered on general elections and candidates with the aim of selecting leaders

¹ Department of Communication, Culture and Media Studies, Drexel University, Philadelphia, USA

* Corresponding author's e-mail: coe25@drexel.edu

that will drive good governance as highlighted in Tukur (2023).

The candidate's campaign messages contain the ideas that he or she wishes to convey to voters. When running for a political office, it is to enlist the support of individuals who share their beliefs. Several talking points about policy concerns are frequently included in the message. The bullet points highlight the campaign's essential arguments and are repeated frequently to leave a lasting impact on voters. For any democratic system to exist, political parties and politicians must give voters with sufficient information about party policies, a clear vision, and their political objectives, allowing voters to make informed decisions about their candidates (Holtved, 2011).

During campaigns, political parties employ billboards to do this. In any community, billboards serve an important role in keeping citizens informed about current events and creating awareness about various topics (being a medium of communication). It also has a significant influence on public opinion and thinking. Billboards are one of the tools used to shape and sometimes control public opinion. Simply expressed, the electorate must have sufficient information of the candidates, political parties, and election policies for an election to be called free and fair.

Election campaign techniques in the past emphasized personal interaction and political rallies. However, since Nigeria's shift from military to democratic administration, political ad campaigns have grown in popularity, owing to a growing understanding of the media's power (Oche, 2010). As a result, political parties and politicians all over the world invest heavily in political advertising campaigns to position themselves as the preferred brand among voters. Citizens are more likely to believe a candidate who creates his or her campaign statements to reflect the battle to improve voters' lives, and if the words have a high level of integrity.

In other words, voters are more likely to trust candidates whose political billboard ads promise to provide their basic needs and wants rather than candidates who focus solely on their personal accomplishments. In political billboard ads, however, personality, look, and language play important roles. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of political billboards in influencing voters to vote for a candidate is still debatable (Ojekwe, 2016).

Political parties and candidates in Cross River State were heavily involved in political campaigns for the 2019 gubernatorial elections, displaying various campaign information on billboards of various sizes in an attempt to obtain votes from citizens. In the end, the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) nominee Benedict Ayade was re-elected as governor of Cross River State. His political campaigns, which included billboards with his photos and strategic comments, had taken over the streets, local government regions, and towns for every class of voter. The billboard campaign complemented his jingles, which were broadcast on radio and television stations and social media sites.

Statement of the Problem

The transient/ephemeral aspect of billboard advertising, which hurts communication, is a major problem as identified in this research study. Anyone driving down the motorways is bound to run across multiple political campaign billboards, yet it is unclear how that information is received. Billboards only target mobile audiences, and it is impossible to know what kind of impression they will have on them. Its use may become ineffective if the intended audience (electorate) is not always on the road. Furthermore, political billboards do not only include colorful designs, but also contain convincing messages that detail what the candidates would do for the people if elected. Billboards have the ability to capture the attention of the target population as a means of political communication, however it is unclear if the voters will respond to or align with these statements. Hence, the influence of billboards on the electorate voting decision during the 2019 gubernatorial campaigns in Cross River State, Nigeria, is investigated.

Research Questions

1. What level of relevance did the electorate in Cross River State attach to billboards as means of political communication during the 2019 Cross River State gubernatorial campaign?
2. Did the electorates in Cross River State believe in the political messages presented on the billboards during the 2019 Cross River State gubernatorial campaign?
3. How did the political billboards messages influence/affect the electorates' decision of voting during the 2019 gubernatorial campaign?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advertising is a form of commercial communication in which a product, service, or concept is promoted or sold through an explicitly sponsored, non-personal message (Shiproh, 2007). Businesses that want to market their products or services are often advertising sponsors. Advertising differs from public relations in that the advertiser pays for the message and has control over it. It varies from personal selling in that the message is not personalized, that is, it is not directed at a specific person. Advertising is at the forefront of getting the right message out to customers and prospects. The goal of advertising is to inform customers about a company's product and persuade them that their services or products are the best, to improve the company's image, to identify and create a need for products or services, to demonstrate new uses for existing products, to announce new products and programs, to reinforce salespeople's individual messages, to attract new customers, and to retain existing customers (Shiproh, 2007).

In various parts of the world, billboards are big advertising structures erected in public locations that display advertisements to passing pedestrians and automobiles. They are most commonly found on major roads with a lot of passing automotive and pedestrian traffic; but

they can be found in any site with a lot of people, such as on mass transit vehicles and stations, retail malls or office buildings, and stadiums. Using huge moveable structures (tents) in public spaces on a temporary basis, sheltered outdoor advertising mixes outdoor and inside advertising. The product is advertised indoors, where the innovative decor can strengthen the impression, while the big exterior advertising area tries to impose a powerful pull on the viewer. Mobile billboards or digital screens are usually put on vehicles. These can be on specialist vehicles created specifically for transporting advertisements along routes chosen by clients, highly outfitted cargo trucks, or even giant banners dispersed from planes.

Billboards are frequently illuminated, with some being backlit and others using spotlights. Some billboard displays are static, while others fluctuate, such as rotating advertisements continually or sporadically. Target advertising, one-day and long-term campaigns, conventions, athletic events, store openings and similar promotional events, and large billboards from smaller enterprises are all examples of how mobile displays are employed in urban regions around the world.

Effective billboards must have a clear, succinct message, appealing images, and a pleasing aesthetic look (Achien'g, 2009). They should be as clutter-free and easy to read as possible. Because they only have 2-4 seconds of an individual's attention, the message must be simple to comprehend. It is difficult to evaluate the value and efficacy of billboard advertising. Newspaper ads and direct mail campaigns are two examples of advertising that yield outcomes that are easier to evaluate. The difference with billboard advertising is that it reaches a large audience, but there is no way to determine who truly understands the message. Methodologies have been used to assess efficacy, although their validity has been questioned.

Billboard advertising has a particularly strong psychological influence, given the channel's unique nature and how voters interact with it. While this may appear weird, it can be explained by the unconscious mind's amazing processing capacity, which can analyze up to 11 million pieces of data every second. The conscious mind, on the other hand, can only process 40 pieces of data in the same amount of time, limiting its ability to handle enormous amounts of data in real-time (Inman, 2018). In this way, the subconscious mind functions like a sponge, absorbing information from its surroundings and the surrounding natural environment. Given the ability of billboards to blend in organically and seamlessly with their surroundings, it is apparent that voters are receptive to campaign messaging provided through this medium, whether they are aware of it or not. This also undermines the conscious mind's predisposition to judge information based on its nature and the source from which it was obtained.

Billboards increase conversion rates by creating familiarity; as humans, we are averse to change, even when it has the potential to be beneficial (Hayward-Cole, 2019). This

is because some humans are more likely to do things that make them feel pleased, secure, and fundamentally comfortable than to try new things that are outside of their comfort zones. This mindset has a significant impact on the attitudes of voters, who prioritize election candidates they are already familiar with, and they tend to seek out political parties they know and trust to help them solve their problem (Wolf, 2017), this is where outdoor advertising comes into play, as larger-than-life billboards placed in strategic locations helped to build candidates' awareness and drive recognition over a long period of exposure.

One of the key features of an emergent democratic system is the institutions that are established and constitute the respective parts of the entire system. Elections and institutions that carry out electoral processes are not only central to the entire democratic system, but also attract significant attention because they facilitate the process of legitimizing leadership (Oche, 2010). This they do through voting processes and through also facilitating the systematic acquisition and transfer of political power. Gubernatorial election is a primary key feature of a democratic system, and it can be traced back to the 1700s when it first began in the United States. Gubernatorial simply refers to the governor (Swifter, 2017) and the voting process that brings a governor into power and also vesting gubernatorial powers on the governor is known to be the gubernatorial election.

Every four years, Nigeria conducts elections for these elected political offices in three phases: National Assembly elections, presidential elections, and gubernatorial as well as state Assembly elections. The 2019 election season in Nigeria, which kicked off on February 23 with the National Assembly polls, followed by Presidential elections on the same date preceded the last phase of the election season which included the gubernatorial and state assembly election that took place on March 9. The 2019 Cross River State gubernatorial election was conducted on March 9 to choose the Governor of Cross River State. The election was held concurrently with various state level elections. Governor Benedict Ayade on September 30, 2018, emerged as the governorship candidate of PDP for the 2019 elections through affirmation by delegates at the party's primary election. He won the APC flag bearer John Owan-Enoh at a direct general election in March 2019 and hence eligible to run for second term under PDP. He polled 381,484 votes to defeat the APC that polled 131,161 (Ikechukwu, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The agenda-setting and social marketing theories are used to validate the study's concepts and topics in order to assess the scope and influence of billboards as a communication channel. According to McCombs and Shaw (1968), agenda framing is accomplished through a cognitive process known as "accessibility." In the context of this study, "accessibility" means that the more popular and prominent billboard advertisements cover a

candidate, a political party, or election related material, the more times that element of coverage becomes accessible in the audience's recollections.

During the 2019 gubernatorial campaign, the contesting political parties launched over 2000 posters and complementary billboards in every corner of the state (Nyok, 2021), not only to reach out to the electorates, but also to access their minds with the billboards' contents, thus influencing their perceptions, impacting on their choice, and educating them on the biometric pattern of voting. The agenda-setting effect is caused by the cumulative impact of a large number of communications, each of which has a different substance but all of which deal with the same general subject.

On the other hand, Social marketing aims to comprehend the social and psychological aspects that contribute to societal reluctance to change (Levit and Cismaru, 2020). It improves the target group's acceptance, responsiveness, and practice of any social idea. Market segmentation, exchange theory, and consumer research are all common marketing techniques. Operational social marketing and strategic social marketing are the two types of social marketing (Narwhal, 2021). Operational social marketing is used to influence behavior, while strategic social marketing is used to generate new policies and development initiatives. The theory is significant to this study because it gives a framework for planning, creating, implementing, and evaluating social campaigns with the primary goal of information sharing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The mixed method was employed in this study as it appeared to be the most suitable for gathering data for this study. This study incorporates the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in gathering of data, which enhances the level of comprehension

of the study. Qualitative research is expressed in words. This method of research enables one to gather in-depth insights on topics that are not well understood. The survey research method, through the questionnaire, was adopted for the quantitative research. This is because of the large population as the instrument can be sent across the entire population thus enabling the population in the selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Cross River State to participate in the process conveniently.

For the purpose of this study, three (3) Local Government Areas from the three senatorial districts in Cross River State were considered, these which included; Calabar Municipality (Southern senatorial district), Ikom (Central senatorial district) and Ogoja (Northern senatorial district). The population of the study were the total number of registered voters in the three sampled LGAs which are 361,569 persons (Okay, n.d.). The sample size for the questionnaire was obtained using the Taro-Yamane (1967) formula to extract a minimum sample size. The formula states thus; the formula states thus;

$$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$$

Where n = sample size

N = Population under study

e = the margin error and is usually 0.10, 0.05 or 0.01

1 = Constant

thus;

$$N = 361\,569$$

$$e = 0.005$$

$$n = 361\,569 / 1 + 361\,569(0.005)^2$$

$$n = 361\,569 / 1 + 361\,569 \times 0.0025$$

$$n = 361\,569 / 1 + 903.9225$$

$$n = 361\,569 / 904.9225$$

$$n = 399$$

Therefore, a sample size of three hundred and ninety-nine (399) respondents was drawn for this study across the three local government areas in focus.

Table 1: Proportionate Distribution of the Population

LGA	Registered Voters per LGA	Percentage % of Population	Sample size
Calabar Municipality	166066	45.93%	183
Ikom	105769	29.25%	116
Ogoja	89734	24.82%	100
Total	361 569	100%	399

Using the multistage procedure, the study area (Cross River State) was divided into three senatorial districts using the cluster sampling technique. One local government area each in the clusters were randomly selected, thus, Ogoja LGA, Ikom LGA and Calabar Municipality LGA. From each of these Local Government Areas, one town each were randomly selected, and they included: Abakpa, Yala-Nkum and Calabar. These towns were divided into streets (units) and twelve (12) streets in each town were randomly selected. In all, 36 streets were randomly selected for the purpose of this study. To select individual respondents from each of the 12 streets, the study adopted the

convenient sampling technique. As such, samples who were present at the time of administering the questionnaire were given a copy of the questionnaire to complete. The purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting key interviewees for the in-depth interview approach. The study employed the questionnaire and interview guide as instruments for data collection. Data obtained from the survey was presented and analyzed using the Frequency/ Percentage Distribution table, the bar chart and the pie chart methods of data analysis. Data from the in-depth interview were transcribed verbatim.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

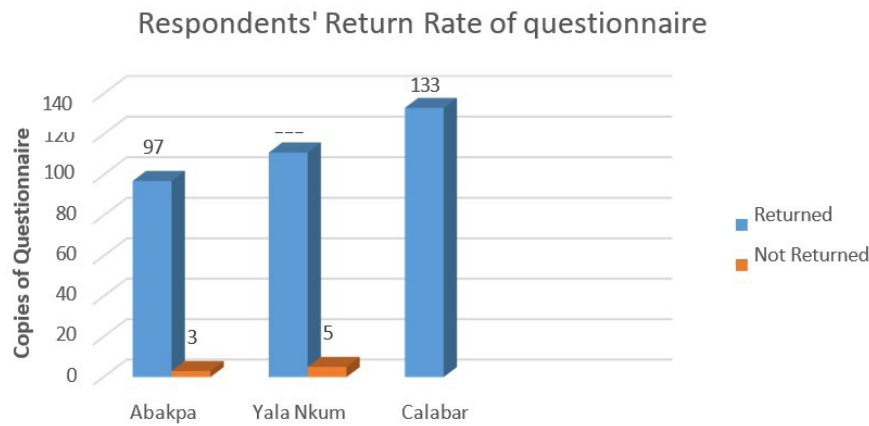


Figure 1: Respondents' Return Rate of questionnaire

Out of the administered three hundred and ninety-nine (399) copies of questionnaire to the residents in Abakpa, Yala Nkum and Calabar towns, three hundred and ninety-one (391) copies of the questionnaire were correctly filled and returned. This accounted for 97.9% success rate. Eight (8) copies were not correctly filled or returned,

accounting for 2.0% failure rate. Thus, with a success rate of 97.9%, the data collected from the field were deemed representative enough for the population of the study as presented above.

Demographic Analysis

Gender Distribution of Respondents

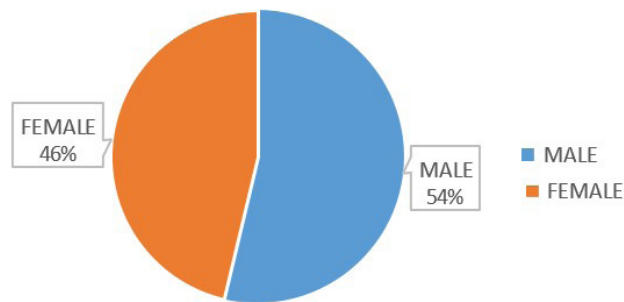


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Respondents' Marital Distribution

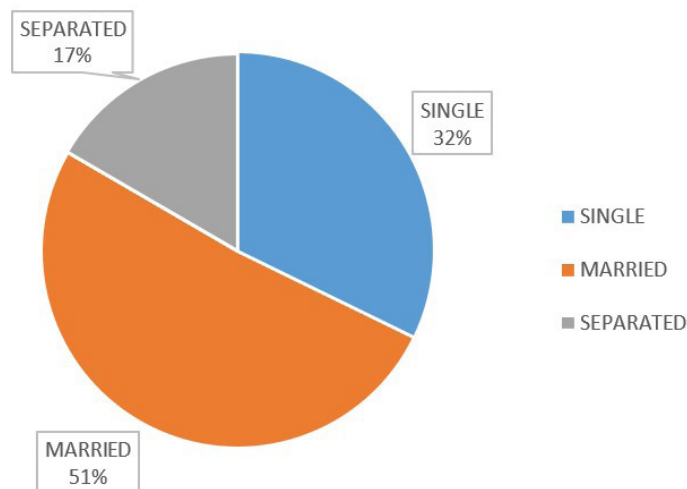


Figure 3: Respondents' Marital Distribution

Respondents' Religion Distribution

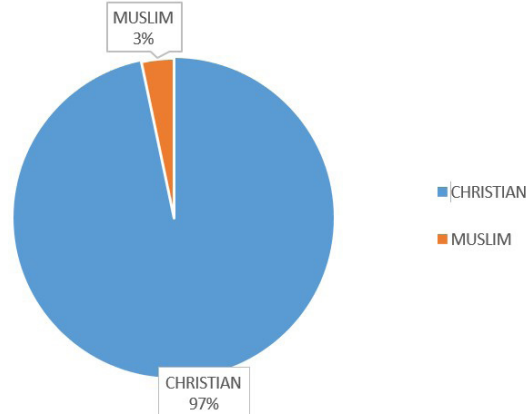


Figure 4: Respondents' Religion Distribution

Respondents' Academic Qualification Distribution

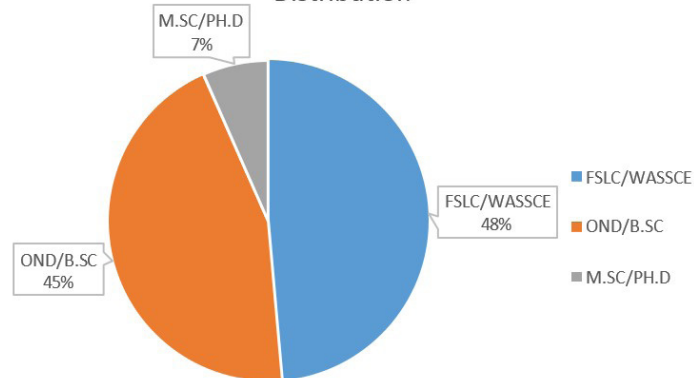


Figure 5: Respondents' Academic Qualification Distribution

Respondents' Occupational Distribution

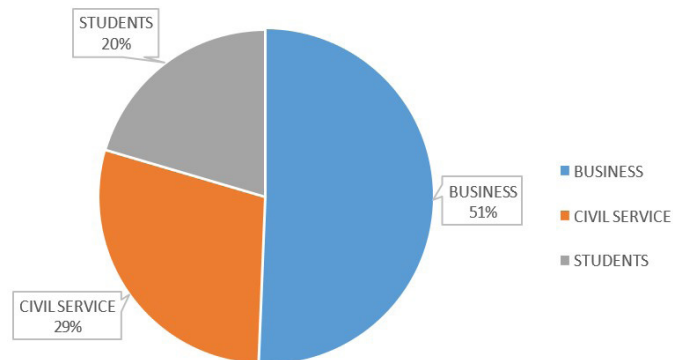


Figure 6: Respondents' Occupational Distribution

Respondents' Age Distribution

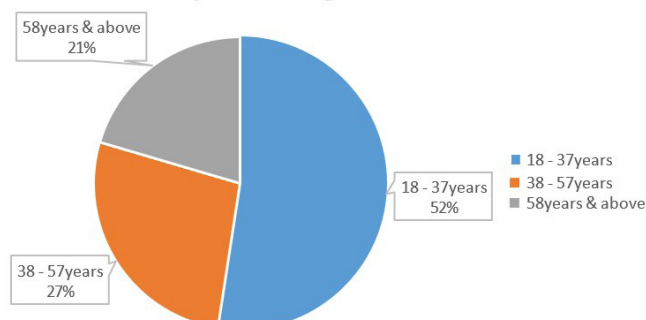


Figure 7: Respondents' Age Distribution

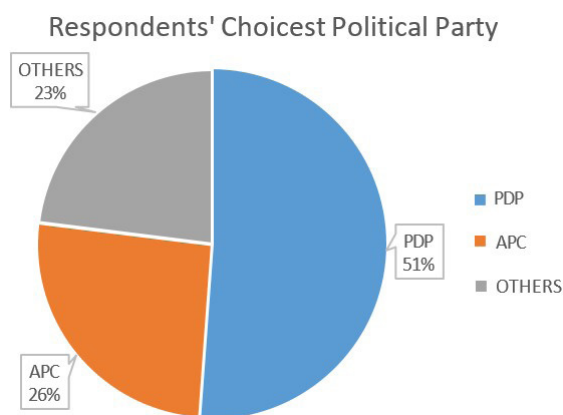


Figure 8: Respondents' Choicest Political Party

Psychographic Analysis

Table 2: Reactions to Billboards relevance in political information dissemination

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	150	38.3
Agree (A)	150	38.3
Undecided (U)	20	5.1
Disagree (D)	40	10.2
Strongly Disagree (SD)	31	8
Total	391	100

Table 3: Reactions to Billboards relevance over other media of political advertising

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	98	25
Agree (A)	100	25.5
Undecided (U)	50	13
Disagree (D)	90	23
Strongly Disagree (SD)	53	13.5
Total	391	100

Table 4: Reactions to the effects of billboards information on the electorates' attitudes towards the electoral process

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	189	48.3
Agree (A)	98	25
Undecided (U)	10	2.5
Disagree (D)	60	15.3
Strongly Disagree (SD)	34	9
Total	391	100

Table 5: Reactions to Billboards contributions to the electorates' choice of candidates

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	90	23
Agree (A)	180	46
Undecided (U)	1	0.2
Disagree (D)	70	18
Strongly Disagree (SD)	50	13
Total	391	100

Table 6: Reactions to Billboards usefulness in electoral orientation

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	102	26
Agree (A)	208	53
Undecided (U)	11	3
Disagree (D)	50	13
Strongly Disagree (SD)	20	5
Total	391	100

Table 7: Reactions to billboards dense placements around the State

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	120	31
Agree (A)	90	23
Undecided (U)	60	15
Disagree (D)	70	18
Strongly Disagree (SD)	51	13
Total	391	100

Table 8: Reactions to electorates' belief in the billboard as a medium for political advertising

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	200	51
Agree (A)	120	31
Undecided (U)	16	4
Disagree (D)	44	11
Strongly Disagree (SD)	11	3
Total	391	100

Table 9: Reactions to the influence of ethnic background on electorates' belief in the billboard messages

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	6	1
Agree (A)	15	4
Undecided (U)	50	13
Disagree (D)	200	51
Strongly Disagree (SD)	120	31
Total	391	100

Table 10: Reactions to the influence of religious affiliations on electorates' consumption of billboard messages

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	40	10
Agree (A)	160	41
Undecided (U)	10	2
Disagree (D)	100	25
Strongly Disagree (SD)	81	21
Total	391	100

Table 11: Reactions to the contribution of the advertised political party on the electorates' belief in the genuinity of the messages

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	200	51
Agree (A)	150	38
Undecided (U)	12	3
Disagree (D)	20	5
Strongly Disagree (SD)	9	2
Total	391	100

Table 12: Reactions to the conviction of billboard pictures on the electorates

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	180	46
Agree (A)	191	49
Undecided (U)	5	1
Disagree (D)	8	2
Strongly Disagree (SD)	7	1
Total	391	100

Table 13: Reactions to the contribution of billboards' visual elements in the conviction of the electorates

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	200	51
Agree (A)	160	41
Undecided (U)	5	1
Disagree (D)	15	4
Strongly Disagree (SD)	11	3
Total	391	100

Table 14: Reactions to the influence of the extra-large billboards over the smaller ones

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	120	31
Agree (A)	40	10
Undecided (U)	205	52
Disagree (D)	25	6
Strongly Disagree (SD)	1	0
Total	391	100

Table 15: Reactions to the impacts of brief billboards messages over lengthy messages

Options	Frequency (r)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree (SA)	180	46
Agree (A)	100	25
Undecided (U)	6	1
Disagree (D)	70	18
Strongly Disagree (SD)	35	9
Total	391	100

Summary

Interviewee 1

Mr. Efiok Ita Nyok (Head of publicity affairs to Mr. Eyo Ekpo – a 2019 CRS gubernatorial candidate, Social Democratic Party)

Date

16th July 2021

Location

Conflict Management & Peace Mediation Seminar Centre, Calabar

Summarily, the interviewee stated that the Social Democratic Party (SDP) equally adopted the billboard as one of its campaign mediums during the 2019 Cross River State gubernatorial election. He added that CRISAA (Cross River State Signage and Advertising Agency) had frustrated their extensive usage of campaign billboards around the state owing to political sentiments and discrimination. In his statement “Political parties do not depend on the communication strategy of the billboards alone to win election. It is one thing for the billboard to be located in strategic locations, but other things apply which may include vote buying, election rigging and the electoral processes. The billboard message is only there for the masses’ consumption, but the decision of the voters and the entire stakeholders involved in the electoral process including INEC is a different ball game. In his word, “Notwithstanding, sometimes when we go to the nooks and crannies of the state, people easily identify with us not because they have met us before but because our physical description matches some of the elements that are already reflected on the billboard.” The interviewee pointed out that the billboards go ahead of them to send the message even before their arrival, creates the desired awareness and even after their departure, the billboards stand as a memorial to sustain the memories of previous encounters.

Interviewee 2

Mr. Effanga Effiong (Chief Executive Officer, Digital Graphics House, Calabar)

Date

20th July 2021

Location

Digital Graphics House, Calabar

Summarily, the interviewee pointed out clearly that the nature of the billboard cannot be taken away from the billboard, putting it that it can never come to a point where billboards will be squeezed into vehicles or mounted inside the house for continuous viewership and if this would ever happen at all, then such technology has gone out of the scope of the billboard and as such, should be given another identity. He pointed clearly that crafting a message of long sentences with complex diction will not only mar the communication objective but will defeat the initial essence and purpose of communication. The interviewee stated that there are various formats and sizes for billboard design, nevertheless a graphic designer should be able to determine which layout, and format will fit in well for an electoral situation.

Discussion

The findings according to the research questions posed are discussed as follows;

Research Question One: What Level of Relevance Did the Electorates in Cross River State Attach to Billboards as Means of Political Communication During the 2019 Cross River State Gubernatorial Campaign?

Billboards are relevant enough to serve the purposes of political communication, candidates marketing, mass persuasion and electoral orientations. Electorates in Cross River State actually believed in the relevance of the billboard during the 2019 gubernatorial election. According to data on table 4.1, 38.3% of the respondents strongly agreed that the billboards were relevant, another 38.3% agreed to its relevance, 5.1% were undecided, 10.2% disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed to this.

The findings of this study align with Ngwoke (2016) who asserts that all those who voted during the 2015 general elections were aware of political Billboards in Enugu and the rest who still did not vote accepted the fact that they saw the Billboards. As stated in her findings, “it also appeared easy for voters (respondents) to agree that the billboard is a better political medium than other media of political advert” and this further establishes the survey findings on table 4.2 which points out that 25% of the respondents strongly agreed that Billboards are more relevant than the other media of political advertising, 25.5% agreed to this, 13% were undecided, 23% disagreed and 13.5% strongly disagreed to this. This finding strongly argues with Ezegwu *et al.* (2015) who opines that the electorates should not rely on billboard advert or campaign as the only source of information about contestants. It should explore other sources such as radio, television, social media, friends and party members who could offer useful information for its voting decision, because billboard messages are always brief and cannot tell all about a candidate.

Research Question Two: Did the Electorates in Cross River State Believe in the Political Messages Presented on the Billboards During the 2019 Cross River State Gubernatorial Campaign?

Political messages are the strategic and planned contents of a political campaign medium/media which are consciously targeted at the electorates within a particular area or location with the main purpose of influencing their voting choices and decisions. Data from table 4.7 reveal that 51% of the respondents strongly believed in the political messages presented on the Billboards during the 2019 CRS gubernatorial election, 31% believed in the messages, 4% neither believed or not, 11% disbelieved the messages and 3% strongly disbelieved the political messages.

The findings of this study support the social marketing theory which implies the design, implementation, and control of programmes calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of publicity message planning, design, communication, distribution, and response survey. This theory tries to show clearly how social and psychological factors work to increase the effectiveness of mass media information campaigns. Narwhal (2021) points out that the social marketing theory possess six (6) distinct features, all of which contributes to the persuasion and conviction of the electorates’ belief system. These features include; audience awareness, targeting the right audience, reinforcing the

message, cultivating images/impressions, stimulating interest in the target audience and inducing desired results. Every political message tends to portray these features, and this supports the assertion by Tejumaie *et al.* (2018) that political advertising tends to reinforce the electorates' choice of candidates. Choice reinforcement as an objective of a political communication plan will guide the crafting process of a strategic message that will thereafter influence the electorates' beliefs and as identified by Nyok, E. (personal communication, July 16th, 2021), billboards play a pivotal role in reinforcing and impacting the electorates' choices even before their encounters with the political actors in-persons. To this end, this finding argues with Ngwoke (2016) who found out that the billboards are compellingly attractive, but the choice of candidate does not even come into play when the electorates look at or admire the billboards.

Research Question Three: How Did the Political Billboards Messages Influence/Affect the Electorates' Decision of Voting During the 2019 Gubernatorial Campaign?

The electorates in Cross River State were actually influenced by the messages displayed on the billboards and the reinforcement/conviction of their choice of candidates through these messages was credited to several other visual factors which determined the individual's visual appreciation for aesthetics. Data from tables 4.11, 4.12 and 4.13 shows that the various design elements (which are the basic units of any visual design) formed the billboard's structure and conveyed the political messages visually. According to Siang (2020), such visual elements Includes line, shape, negative/white space, volume, value, colour and texture. These elements should be appropriately composed in relations with the basic principles of visual design as identified by Hayward-Cole (2019) which includes balance, alignment, hierarchy, contrast and rhythm.

The findings of this study demonstrate that a strategic message over a well-composed visual background on the billboards can capture the electorates' attention, register the message/design composure in their sub-consciousness, keep them thinking and talking about it whenever it occurs to them and go on to reinforce/influence their choices. This finding establishes Effanga, E. (personal communication, July 20th, 2021) who stated that the principles and elements of designs must be appropriately applied to avoid misconceptions and to achieve the objective of public persuasion. Nevertheless, this can be understood more from the lens of the agenda-setting theory which assumes that when an issue is covered prominently, the audience will regard the issue as more important. This theory describes the way that media attempts to influence public opinions/interactions and establish a hierarchy of prevalence; it implies the creation of public awareness and concern for salient issues by the media. This therefore challenges Ezegwu *et al.* (2015) who assert that "the influence of these billboard campaigns

are limited to what people allowed it to be" further establishing that billboards influence political freedom and citizenship agency in regard to the emergence of political figures as shown in Essien *et al.* (2023).

CONCLUSION

The 2019 Cross River State gubernatorial election took place on March 9, 2019, following an intense campaign period by candidates from several registered parties. These campaigns utilized many communication platforms to disseminate strategic messages aimed at shaping public opinion. Prominent media employed consisted of strategically positioned billboards in key areas around the state to maximize exposure and effectiveness. This study examines the effect of billboard advertising on voter decision-making, assessing its significance as a mass communication tool within the broader context of media influence and political communication.

The study was guided by specific objectives and research questions, supported by a review of relevant literature. The theoretical framework was founded on agenda-setting and social marketing ideas. A mixed-methods study technique was utilized, with a sample of 401 individuals selected using a multi-stage procedure. The data analysis encompassed pie charts, bar charts, and frequency distribution tables, revealing substantial results. Political billboards are regulated by outdoor advertising companies, and while they impact public persuasion through visual aesthetics and message clarity, their effectiveness is affected by factors such as vote-buying and electoral manipulation.

In conclusion, billboards play a multifaceted role in political communication, combining strategic messaging with visual appeal to influence voters. While not the only determinant of political outcomes, their ability to capture attention, convey ideas subconsciously, and withstand competition from other media shows their importance as powerful tools in shaping public opinion, citizenship agency, and voter behavior.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the statistical analyses of the research questions, the following recommendations are made for the study;

1. Government should adopt billboards as major tools for political education and electoral orientation. Billboards messages should not be relegated only to the function of candidates' publicity during political campaigns; such messages can be employed as a strategy towards mobilizing the masses for political sensitization.
2. Political messages meant to be displayed on the billboards should be concise and straight to the point, void of any fluctuation and ambiguity.
3. Design elements applied in the interpretation of the political billboard's intents should be composed based on and guided by the basic principles of visual communication to avoid misconceptions.
4. Billboards messages can be written in local dialects

in order to drive the right message and induce the desired results from the electorate. Illustrations should include what the non- educated segment of the electorate will be able to decode and comprehend easily.

5. Political parties and candidates should make good use of billboards in selling their manifestos (as part of the political message) to the general public during the political campaigns. This will definitely increase the possibility of influencing the electorates' decisions.

6. Billboards placement regulations by the regulatory agencies should not be on the basis of political sentiments and bias. Genuine regulations will facilitate the advertisers' objectives of influencing the general populace.

7. Billboards should be constructed with materials that will be able to withstand any weather condition without being damaged. The ability of the billboards to last for a longer period of time (especially during the political campaigns period) will keep its message ringing.

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