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Beyond the Jingle: A Thematic Analysis of Creative Persuasion in Nigerian Telecommunications Advertising

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Abstract

Background: The study of creative approaches in functional advertising is a key focus for marketing communication scholars, as advertisers constantly work to capture the attention of television's vast audience. This study examined creative approaches in contemporary television advertising within Nigeria's highly competitive telecommunications industry.

Objective: The primary objective was to analyse the creative strategies—specifically the use of dominant versus emerging approaches—deployed by MTN, Glo, and Airtel, and to assess their effectiveness in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

Methodology: The research adopted a thematic content analysis design on a sample of 14 contemporary television commercials (four from MTN, five from Glo, and five from Airtel). Inter-rater reliability was ensured through a standardised coding process with research assistants.

Results: The findings revealed a clear and consistent pattern across all three brands: a deliberate shift away from purely dominant creative styles towards a maximalist utilisation of emerging creative approaches. Advertisements heavily featured creative themes such as emotional storytelling, humour, and celebrity endorsements, suggesting a strategic focus on engaging the audience through the peripheral route of persuasion, as outlined by the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the target audience for these brands is primarily the younger generation, necessitating a shift towards dynamic, culturally relevant, and engaging advertising. The findings underscore that in a cluttered market, a compelling creative approach that resonates with the "spirit of the new age, powered by science and technology" is essential for effective audience engagement and brand success.

Keywords: Advertising, Creativity, Thematic Content Analysis, Persuasion, Elaboration Likelihood Model.

Introduction

Advertising is an art and a science, a fusion of creativity and persuasion. The effectiveness of an advertisement in delivering its marketing message is directly proportional to its creative appeal. For a brand to successfully connect with its target audience and achieve its campaign objectives, persuasive creativity must be the dominant force in both message conceptualisation and design. Consequently, advertising is defined as the strategic creation of high-intensity brand awareness in an engaging and interesting manner. It is the organised and persuasive promotion of a product, service, or idea with the aim of achieving a predetermined set of objectives (Arens, 2006).

The fundamental goal of advertising is persuasion, which ultimately seeks to influence audience attitudes and opinions, encouraging them to reconsider choices and take a desired action. This process places advertising squarely within the sphere of Behaviour Change Communication (BCC). As articulated by Nnanyelugo Okoro (2005, unpublished lecture notes), advertising is not a tool for coercion but rather for the persuasive presentation of information, enabling the target audience to independently favour the product or service being advertised.

This study is motivated by a curiosity to understand the advertisements that most effectively resonate with audiences, with a specific focus on the highly competitive telecommunications industry in Nigeria. As a heavy-spending segment of the market, it is imperative to analyse the advertising strategies of leading telecommunications brands—MTN, Glo, and Airtel—to decipher the creative approaches they have adopted.

The business of advertising is ultimately to sell. Any advertisement that fails to drive sales is, by definition, not fulfilling its purpose. Researchers (Elanguoud et al., 2025; Sakaeva et al., 2025; Wan Mohd Ghazali et al., 2025) agree that the aim of advertising is to sell. For an advertisement to persuade and convince consumers to make a choice from a wide array of options, it must be both creative and interesting. Creativity is the predominant concern for advertisers because it is the engine that can tickle the fancies of an audience, prod their imagination, and ultimately provoke a desire that leads to a purchase decision.

This study examines the creative strategies employed by the three aforementioned telecommunication companies. We will assess the effectiveness of these creative approaches, exploring how they connect with the audience, drive brand patronage, and foster customer loyalty. Furthermore, the research will identify perceived deficiencies in the approaches deployed and offer solutions for more effective audience engagement.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to conduct an analytical survey of the creative approaches deployed by MTN, Glo, and Airtel in their contemporary television advertising. It seeks to understand how these creative strategies are used to engage and persuade the Nigerian audience. Based on this aim, the specific objectives are to:

1. To determine and categorise the specific creative approaches, both dominant and emerging, utilised in the contemporary television commercials of MTN, Glo, and Airtel.
2. To ascertain the extent to which these telecommunication brands combine dominant and emerging creative approaches in their television advertising to appeal to a modern audience.
3. To analyse the perceived effectiveness of these creative approaches in engaging with the audience and influencing brand patronage and loyalty.
4. To determine any deficiencies in the creative approaches deployed and to offer practical recommendations for better audience engagement.

Literature Review

Creativity and Advertising

Creativity is a cornerstone of modern advertising. Advertisements are frequently hailed as "creative", and those who develop them are often referred to as "creative types". Advertising creativity can be defined as the ability to develop fresh, unique, and appropriate ideas that serve as effective solutions to communication problems. For a creative idea to be successful, it must be pertinent to the target audience (Okoro, 1998). As Nwaeze and Ibekwe (2024) assert, creative appeal is a direct precursor to brand recognition. Providing value to customers by creating a meaningful connection through creative advertising is a proven method for fostering brand recognition. Consumers are more likely to resonate with an advertisement if it is relatable or relevant to their interests, highlighting the increasing importance of creativity in today's fiercely competitive market.

Nwaeze and Ibekwe (2024) citing Iwara (2015), defines advertising creativity as "the use of imagination or original ideas to create something." The creative strategy employed is a pivotal determinant of a campaign's success or failure. This strategy is essentially the process of transforming a brief into one or more "creative ideas that clearly, powerfully and persuasively convey to the consumer what the brand does for them and why it should matter to them" (Batra et al., 2003, p. 415). Okoro (1998, p. 121) further notes that creative strategy is influenced by how an advertiser decides what to say, how to say it, and where to say it, adding that "creative execution demands perceptive analysis and correct interpretation."

A notable aspect of creativity is its lack of a formal rule or a stated formula. To be truly creative, an advertisement must transcend the 'normal' and defy the rules of logic. The pursuit of a major selling idea is at the heart of creative strategy. John O'Toole, as cited by Belch and Belch (2007, p. 254), sees creativity as the "search for the big idea" in advertising. The "big idea" is that "flash of insight that synthesises the purpose of the strategy, joins the product benefit with consumer desire in a fresh, involving way, brings the subject to life and makes the reader or audience stop, look and listen." Thus, creative strategy is about determining the most effective creative angle from which to solve a marketing problem.

The need to maximise advertising creativity is more critical than ever, driven by the new age of technology. We live in a society with a growing population of young, energetic individuals, often termed Generation Z, who are profoundly influenced by science and technology. Batra et al. (2003,

p. 178) suggest that this segment is particularly skeptical of "hype" and demands "more no-nonsense, fact-filled and value-themed advertising." The essence of creativity, therefore, is to capture the audience's attention, engage them, and stimulate them into action. The modern advertising environment is increasingly cluttered, making it difficult for an advert to stand out, be processed, and remembered. The effectiveness of adverts is significantly reduced by the high levels of clutter, especially from competing brands within the same product category (Batra et al., 2003, p. 221). Therefore, when targeting the new generation, creativity is not just an advantage; it is a necessity to prevent adverts from getting lost in the noise.

Television Advertising

Before the advent of the internet and other new media, advertising was dominated by four main media: TV, radio, print, and outdoor. Among these, television has always held a prestigious position due to its unique combination of audio-visual capabilities, which allows it to engage audiences in a most appealing and interesting manner. With its technical characteristics and broadcast approach based on repetition, television is highly effective in increasing recall levels. Its ability to reach a vast audience and provide content tailored to specific time slots makes it a powerful tool for the advertising industry. As Yelda and Ozkocak (2019) note, despite competition from other media, television has secured its place as a key advertising medium.

Television advertising remains one of the most effective ways to connect with consumers, offering wide reach, high frequency, and significant impact (Nwaeze & Ibekwe 2024). TV adverts leverage multiple senses by combining sight, sound, and motion, which is why music, special effects, and compelling visuals are frequently included. Every television advertisement is created with a specific marketing objective in mind, from increasing brand awareness to generating sales. As Luxing and Xiaorui (2020) observed, one of the greatest features of TV advertising is its short length, typically between 5 and 30 seconds. The main goal is to impress consumers within this brief window and stimulate their desire to purchase. A successful TV commercial should be concise, yet impactful, reflecting the brand's features or comparative advantages.

According to Nwaeze and Ibekwe (2024), TV is still the dominant medium for advertising. Latif and Abideen (2011), also cited by Nwaeze and Ibekwe (2024), highlight that television's massive reach makes it a very strong advertising medium, given that an average person watches approximately four hours of television daily. As Nwaeze and Ibekwe (2024) summarise, "TV allows advertisers to combine sight, sound and motion, thus appealing to almost all of the viewer's senses. The advantages of television advertising are a combination of sight, sound and motion. TV commands high appeal to the senses, commands high attention and has far reach."

Dominant and Contemporary Creative Approaches

Creative approaches in advertising can be broadly categorised into dominant and contemporary styles. Dominant creative approaches are well-established and foundational to advertising theory, while contemporary approaches are emerging styles, often inspired by technology and a new understanding of audience engagement.

Dominant Approaches

1. Unique Selling Proposition (USP): This concept was developed by Rosser Reeves (1961) in his influential book, *Reality in Advertising*. A USP-based advertisement must make a clear proposition to the customer and offer a benefit that the competition either cannot or does not provide.
2. Positioning: Developed by Jack Trout and Al Ries, positioning is about creating a distinct image for a product in the consumer's mind. It involves "what a manufacturer does to his product to create benefits for a particular group of prospects" (Okoro, 1998, p. 41).
3. Image Advertising: Developed by David Ogilvy, this approach is crucial when products are highly similar. Ogilvy (Belch & Belch, 2007, p. 257) argued that "every advertisement should be thought of as a contribution to the complex symbol which is the brand image."
4. Inherent Drama: Leo Burnett's philosophy of advertising focuses on uncovering the "inherent drama" within a product—a dramatic characteristic that makes consumers want to purchase it. Burnett believed this was the "most interesting and believable of all advertising appeals" (Belch & Belch, 2007).
5. Entertainment and Emotion: Popularised by Philip Dusenberry, this approach advocates for advertisements that are entertaining and emotionally resonant, shunning the mundane and focusing on the people who use the product rather than the product itself.
6. Small Town Warmth: Developed by Hal Riney, this style uses sentimental, emotional tones and realistic elements to create an emotional connection with the audience. Riney's ads often resembled short films, using quick cuts and natural dialogue to build a sense of warmth and authenticity.

Contemporary Approaches

Emerging creative approaches are highly engaging and often technologically-inspired. Leading advertising authorities such as Ogilvy (2013), Ries and Ries (2002), and Tellis (2004) have researched and written on these styles.

- Emotional Storytelling: Advertisers use narratives to evoke feelings like joy, sadness, or excitement, connecting with the audience on a deeper, more personal level.
- Dramatic Elements: This involves incorporating elements like dance, music, acting, and acrobatic stunts to make adverts more memorable and engaging.
- Use of Humour and Comedy: Humour is a powerful tool used to entertain, engage, and make advertisements more memorable.
- Animation: Globally, animation is used to capture viewers' attention and convey messages creatively.
- Local Flavour: Incorporating local elements like Nigerian Pidgin and street slang makes advertisements more relatable and authentic.
- Linguistic Creativity: This involves exploiting linguistic diversity to create compelling and resonant language techniques.
- Influencer and Celebrity Endorsements: Partnering with influencers and celebrities is a popular strategy to increase brand awareness and credibility.
- Social Proof: This approach uses testimonials, reviews, and ratings to demonstrate a product's value and build trust with consumers.

- **Interactive and Immersive Storytelling:** Using technologies like Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), and gamification, advertisers create memorable and engaging experiences.
- **Dance and Music:** The creative use of dance and music is a common approach for creating energetic and engaging advertisements, particularly for a younger audience (Ries & Ries, 2002; Tellis, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Selecting a suitable theoretical framework for this study was a complex task, given the spontaneous nature of creativity itself. However, to provide a robust analytical foundation, this research adopted the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion. Developed by sociologists Richard Petty and John Cacioppo in 1986, the ELM explains the similarities and differences in how audiences process and respond to creative and persuasive messages, including advertising (Batra et al., 2003, p. 229). The model analyses how persuasive messages influence changes in attitude and behaviour. According to the ELM, attitude formation or change depends on the level and nature of "elaboration"—the extent to which a person engages in careful thinking and evaluation of the information presented in a message. The model identifies two distinct routes to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route.

The central route involves a high degree of elaboration. The audience is highly motivated and has the ability to actively process and scrutinise the message's content. Under this route, persuasion occurs when the receiver carefully considers the message's arguments and supporting information. It is assumed that the audience is engaged and requires a compelling, creative message to be persuaded.

Conversely, the peripheral route involves a low degree of elaboration. In this instance, the audience lacks the motivation or ability to engage in active information processing. Instead, they rely on peripheral cues—such as the message's source, its emotional tone, or the use of celebrities—to form an opinion. Persuasion under this route is less about the strength of the message's core arguments and more about these external factors (Belch & Belch, 2007, p. 157). The ELM thus provides a powerful lens for examining how telecommunication brands use both compelling content and persuasive cues to influence consumer behaviour.

Methodology

This study employed a thematic content analysis approach to examine the creative strategies in television advertising by three major Nigerian telecommunications brands: MTN, Glo, and Airtel. This method was chosen for its systematic approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting recurring patterns, or themes, within a given body of content (Vaismoradi, et al., 2013). The study focused on contemporary television commercials to ensure relevance to current market trends. The specific time frame for analysis was from January 2024 to June 2025.

A total of 14 distinct television adverts were selected for analysis. This sample was strategically chosen to represent a balance of contemporary campaigns from each brand: four from MTN, and five each from Glo and Airtel. To ensure the reliability of the analysis and minimise researcher bias, three research assistants were engaged. They were trained using a standardised coding sheet that outlined the key creative themes derived from the literature review. This training process aimed to achieve inter-rater reliability, ensuring consistency in how each advert's creative elements were identified and categorised. The commercials were observed during the prime-time viewing slot of 7:30 PM to 10:30 PM on four prominent Nigerian television stations: Channels TV, Arise TV, NTA, and Delta Broadcasting Service (DBS), Asaba. This time slot and

these stations were selected for their high viewership and diverse programming, which ensures a comprehensive exposure to the advertising messages.

Method of Data Analysis:

The data analysis was conducted in three distinct phases:

1. *Familiarisation and Initial Coding:* The researcher and the three assistants independently viewed each of the 14 advertisements multiple times. During this phase, they took detailed notes, writing down initial codes and observations about the creative elements, messaging, and overall tone of each commercial.
2. *Developing Thematic Categories:* The researcher then reviewed the initial codes from all four observers. Common codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. For example, codes like "funny dialogue," "comedian endorsement," and "light-hearted tone" were grouped under the theme of "Humour." Similarly, "moving stories," "dramatic plots," and "inspirational narratives" were categorised as "Emotional Storytelling."
3. *Refining and Finalising Themes:* The developed themes were then discussed and refined in a collaborative session with the research assistants. This process ensured that the final themes accurately represented the data and that a consensus was reached on the primary creative approach for each advertisement.

Reliability of the Analysis

To ensure the reliability of the findings, the inter-rater reliability of the coding process was formally calculated. A random subset of five of the 14 advertisements was chosen for a formal coding test. The researcher and the three assistants independently coded these five adverts using the final list of thematic categories. Cohen's Kappa (κ) was used to measure the level of agreement among the four coders (Cohen, 1960). The calculated Kappa value was $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating a high level of agreement and strong inter-rater reliability. This result demonstrates that the coding process was consistent and the findings are not based on subjective interpretation.

The commercials were observed during the prime-time viewing slot of 7:30 PM to 10:30 PM on four prominent Nigerian television stations: Channels TV, Arise TV, NTA, and Delta Broadcasting Service (DBS), Asaba. This time slot and these stations were selected for their high viewership and diverse programming, which ensures a comprehensive exposure to the advertising messages.

Results

This study employed a thematic content analysis of 14 contemporary television advertisements from MTN, Glo, and Airtel. The analysis revealed a consistent pattern across all three brands: a predominant use of emerging creative approaches over dominant creative styles. The findings indicate that advertisers have shifted their strategies to appeal to a younger, digitally savvy audience that is less responsive to traditional advertising models. The duration for all the analysed adverts was consistently between 30 and 45 seconds per spot.

Creative Approaches by Brand

- *MTN Nigeria:* MTN's advertising blends both dominant and emerging creative themes. The analysis showed a reliance on emotional storytelling and humour in campaigns like "Who Go Help You?" to build a human connection. While it still uses brand positioning in "Everywhere You Go," it enhances this with memorable jingles. The "Pulse" campaign is a clear example of a youth-focused approach, leveraging social proof and influencer endorsements.
- *Glo Nigeria:* Glo's strategy is heavily skewed towards emerging creative approaches. The "Glo with Pride" campaign, while building a brand image, does so through emotional patriotism and the celebration of cultural heritage. The "Glo Yakata and Brekete" campaigns are a prime example of a multifaceted approach, incorporating a wide array of cues, including celebrity endorsements, music and dance, and gamified elements, to engage a broad audience.
- *Airtel Nigeria:* Airtel's advertising uses a balanced mix of creative styles. The "Smart Speed" and "4G LTE" campaigns use classic demonstration advertising and brand positioning to highlight technological superiority. At the same time, the "Data is Life" campaign combines emotional storytelling, humour, and influencer endorsements, supported by a powerful metaphor in its tagline.

Discussion

The findings of this study directly align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion. The dominant use of emerging creative approaches—such as humour, celebrity endorsements, and emotional storytelling—suggests that the telecommunication brands are primarily targeting the peripheral route to persuasion. This strategy is an attempt to influence consumer attitudes and behaviour through cues that do not require deep cognitive processing. This approach is highly effective in a competitive and cluttered advertising environment, where gaining and holding attention are primary challenges.

The shift away from purely dominant styles like the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) and inherent drama is a strategic adaptation to the changing nature of the audience. As noted by Batra et al. (2003, p. 178), the younger generation is "skeptical of 'hype'" and requires a more authentic, value-driven, and entertaining form of communication. The creative approaches deployed—from the cultural patriotism of Glo to the humorous and relatable scenarios of MTN and Airtel—are designed to resonate on an emotional level, bypassing rational scrutiny to build brand loyalty and connection.

The consistent use of celebrity and influencer endorsements across all three brands further underscores this shift. By featuring popular figures, the brands are leveraging the authority and trustworthiness of these individuals as powerful peripheral cues. The effectiveness of this tactic lies in its ability to transfer the celebrity's positive attributes onto the brand, making it more appealing to their followers.

Conclusion

This research has successfully demonstrated the immense importance of creativity in modern advertising and has shown how its effective use can determine the success or failure of a campaign. The study concludes that the television advertising of MTN, Glo, and Airtel is strategically designed to target a younger, technologically-inclined audience. The observed brands have shifted away from traditional, fact-based appeals and have adopted dynamic, engaging, and emotionally driven creative approaches. This strategic pivot reflects the need to cut through a cluttered media landscape and forge a meaningful connection with consumers who are increasingly influenced by entertainment, social proof, and authentic storytelling. Ultimately, for these brands, effective advertising is creative, compelling, and relevant to the spirit of the new digital age.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered for telecommunication companies and advertising professionals seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their television advertising campaigns.

1. *Prioritise Emotional and Entertaining Content*

While dominant creative approaches are foundational, this study shows that the most impactful campaigns are those that prioritise emerging, emotional, and entertaining content. Advertisers should move beyond simply stating product benefits and instead focus on creating compelling, relatable narratives that resonate with the audience's aspirations, fears, and daily lives. The use of humour and cultural references, as seen in the "Who Go Help You?" and "Glo Café" campaigns, is crucial for capturing attention and making messages memorable.

2. *Maximise the Peripheral Route to Persuasion*

The study found that all three brands heavily relied on the peripheral route to persuasion. Advertisers should continue to strategically use this approach by:

- *Leveraging Celebrity Endorsements:* Partner with influencers and celebrities who authentically embody the brand's values. The right celebrity can serve as a powerful peripheral cue, fostering instant credibility and likability.
- *Incorporating Immersive Experiences:* Use elements like music, dance, and even subtle AR/VR effects to create a multi-sensory experience that engages the audience and stands out from the advertising clutter.
- *Creating Catchy Taglines and Jingles:* Memorable slogans, such as Airtel's "Data is Life," can serve as a potent peripheral cue, ensuring the brand stays top-of-mind even when the consumer isn't actively thinking about it.

3. *Tailor Content to the Youth Demographic*

The findings confirm that the primary target audience for these campaigns is the younger generation, often referred to as Gen Z. Advertisers must therefore:

- *Adopt a "No-Hype" Approach:* Avoid overly corporate or formal messaging. The youth are perceptive and prefer straightforward, authentic communication.
- *Integrate User-Generated Content:* Give the audience a voice in the advertising process. Campaigns that incorporate social media shared experiences or user testimonials foster a sense of community and authenticity.
- *Embrace New Age Aesthetics:* Use fast-paced visuals, modern music, and a style that mirrors the content consumed on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This ensures the television ad feels relevant and not outdated.

4. Balance Innovation with Brand Identity

While experimenting with new creative approaches is essential, it is equally important to maintain a consistent brand identity. Campaigns should be innovative yet clearly tied to the company's core values. For example, while Glo's use of humour is creative, it is underpinned by a consistent message of national pride and cultural relevance. This balance ensures that the brand remains recognisable and its message doesn't get lost in the pursuit of novelty.

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