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The Persuasion Paradox: Religious Advertising and the Primacy of Relational Evangelism in Abeokuta

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Abstract

Background: This study examines the influence of religious advertising on church membership in Abeokuta, Nigeria, exploring a complex relationship that is often overlooked in scholarly discourse. Drawing on the Persuasion Theory and the Advertising Exposure Model, the research explores how a faith-based message, disseminated through mass media, influences an audience's spiritual behaviour.

Objective: The primary objectives of this study were to: (1) ascertain the level of public awareness

and perception of religious advertising; (2) determine the extent to which this advertising directly influences church membership; and (3) identify the most impactful advertising media and non-advertising factors that contribute to a person's decision to join a church.

Methodology: A quantitative survey design was employed to collect data from a sample of 370 residents in Abeokuta. Questionnaires were used to gather information on demographics, awareness of religious advertisements, perceived effectiveness of various media, and the primary factors influencing decisions about church membership. Descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequencies, were used to present the data, and the sample size was calculated using the Taro Yamane formula.

Results: The findings reveal a nuanced pattern: religious advertising is effective at building awareness but has limited success in directly converting individuals into church members. While a combined 46.3% of respondents reported high awareness, a significant majority (74.3%) stated they did not become members as a result of these advertisements. The data further indicates that the public holds a positive perception of religious advertising as a practice, with 63.5% of respondents rating it as "good" or "very good." However, the most influential factors for membership were identified as personal invitations and church-based programmes, which had a greater impact than mass media campaigns.

Conclusion: The study concludes that religious advertising serves primarily as a brand-building and public relations tool rather than a direct recruitment strategy. It creates a supportive environment for relational outreach and community-focused initiatives, which were found to be the most effective drivers of membership. The findings have important implications for religious organisations, suggesting a strategic shift from mass media conversion to a more integrated approach that prioritises in-person experiences and personal connections.

Keywords: Religious Advertising, Church Membership, Persuasion Theory, Advertising Exposure Model

Introduction

Advertising is a fundamental communication tool used by businesses and organisations to create awareness and influence behaviour. For decades, it has served as a powerful mechanism to inform consumers, build brand identity, and drive patronage (Wan Mohd Ghazali et al., 2025). The high level of competition in the modern marketplace necessitates effective communication to capture consumer attention and maintain a competitive edge. The principles of informing, influencing, and reminding consumers are critical functions that make advertising a central component of any marketing strategy (Shimp, 2007).

While advertising is traditionally associated with commercial products, its application has expanded to non-profit and religious organisations. Churches, like other modern institutions, are increasingly adopting promotional strategies to reach potential members and grow their congregations. This has led to a noticeable increase in religious advertising across various media platforms, including radio, television, print, and, most prominently, outdoor and digital channels. This trend suggests that religious institutions are actively competing for a share of the public's attention and spiritual commitment. As Spurlock (2014) notes, the convergence of religion and advertising is a growing phenomenon, with churches employing persuasive communication to

promote their services and philosophies. The use of branded items and public messaging has become a common strategy to create a heavy presence in the minds of the target audience.

Despite the growing prevalence of religious advertising in urban centres like Abeokuta, there remains a gap in understanding its actual effectiveness. While churches invest significant resources in billboards, flyers, and other promotional materials, the direct link between these advertising efforts and the decision-making process of potential members remains poorly documented. Existing literature often focuses on the theological or social implications of this practice but rarely provides empirical evidence of its influence on membership recruitment and retention.

This study addresses this research gap by empirically investigating the influence of religious advertising on church membership in Abeokuta, Nigeria. It seeks to move beyond anecdotal observations to provide a data-driven analysis of how different advertising strategies impact residents' perceptions and decisions regarding church affiliation. The study aims to achieve the following:

1. To ascertain the level of awareness and perception of religious advertising among residents of Abeokuta.
2. To determine the extent to which religious advertising influences church membership in Abeokuta.
3. To identify the most impactful advertising media and other factors that influence church membership among residents of Abeokuta.

By addressing these objectives, this research will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of religious communication and provide valuable insights for religious leaders and scholars in the field of sociology of religion and marketing.

Literature Review

The practice of using advertising for commercial purposes is well-established, serving as a key element of the marketing communication mix (Belch & Belch, 2003). Advertising is a persuasive, paid, non-personal form of communication designed to create awareness, influence consumer behaviour, and ultimately drive sales. Its core functions include establishing brand goodwill, preparing the market for new products, and helping firms navigate a competitive landscape by reinforcing brand loyalty (Lane et al., 2005).

Over time, the application of advertising has expanded beyond the commercial sector. Non-profit organisations, public institutions, and religious bodies now employ similar strategies to disseminate their messages and attract audiences. In Nigeria, for instance, churches are increasingly engaging in coordinated promotional activities to announce their existence, communicate their doctrines, and attract new members. This trend is driven by the highly competitive religious landscape, particularly in urban centres like Abeokuta, where churches are abundant and actively vie for new congregants (Appiah, 2013).

A variety of media channels are utilised for religious advertising. Traditional media, such as radio and television, offer broad reach and an audio-visual appeal, respectively, although they face

challenges like audience disengagement during commercial breaks (Grant & O'Connor, 2005). Newspapers offer a sense of permanence and provide a targeted geographical reach, but they suffer from high clutter and a risk of ads being overlooked (Brassil, 2007). In recent years, social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) have become powerful tools for religious outreach, providing direct engagement and a vast, demographically diverse audience.

However, a particularly prominent medium in the Nigerian context is outdoor advertising, specifically billboards. The use of billboards is pervasive due to their ability to capture attention with bold visuals and messages in high-traffic areas, making them an effective tool for communicating with both literate and illiterate audiences (Benson-Eluwa, 2005). They provide continuous exposure and are relatively cost-effective per thousand views compared to other media (Asemah, 2011). Despite their advantages, they are susceptible to environmental damage and government restrictions.

While the use of advertising by churches is widespread, the academic literature on its effectiveness and influence on religious behaviour remains limited. De Run et al. (2010) acknowledge that religion significantly influences attitudes, values, and behaviours, which suggests that religious beliefs can shape how individuals perceive and respond to advertising messages (Mokhlis, 2009). However, existing studies have primarily focused on the influence of religion on attitudes toward controversial product advertising, with little attention paid to the efficacy of religious advertising itself (Naseri & Tamam, 2012).

Empirical studies have yielded mixed results. For example, Spurlock (2014) found that exposure to religious outdoor advertisements did not increase an individual's intention to attend church services, whereas Kuzma (2015) highlighted the high success of the marketing strategies employed by "mega-churches." This suggests that the effectiveness of religious advertising may depend heavily on the specific strategy employed, the medium used, and the cultural context. Appiah (2013), in his study on Ghanaian churches, found that radio advertising was the most impactful tool for church growth, indicating that media preferences are also a significant factor.

This review of the literature demonstrates that while the tools and principles of advertising are well-understood, and religious institutions are increasingly adopting them, there is a significant research gap regarding the specific influence of these advertising strategies on church membership in the unique context of Abeokuta, Nigeria. Previous studies have either focused on different geographical locations or different aspects of religious marketing, leaving the core question of how religious advertising influences local church membership largely unanswered. Our study seeks to bridge this gap by providing an empirical analysis of this phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the foundation for a research study by defining the key concepts, variables, and the relationships between them. This study on the influence of religious advertising on church membership is grounded in Persuasion Theory and the Advertising Exposure Model. These frameworks help explain how advertising messages influence the attitudes and behaviour of a target audience.

Persuasion Theory

Persuasion is a core communication process that aims to influence an individual's beliefs, attitudes, or behaviour through the use of written, spoken, or visual communication (Gardikiotis & Crano, 2013). This theory posits that effective messaging can change how people think and act, even within a context of relative freedom. In the realm of marketing, persuasion serves a critical role by convincing consumers to favour a particular brand or idea over its competitors.

This theory is directly relevant to this study because religious advertising, like commercial advertising, is fundamentally an act of persuasion. Churches employ persuasive communication to encourage individuals to attend their services, adopt their doctrines, or join their congregation. The messages disseminated through billboards, flyers, and other media are designed to influence the target audience's decision-making process by appealing to their interests, values, and spiritual needs.

Advertising Exposure Model

Proposed by David Aaker, the Advertising Exposure Model posits that repeated exposure to an advertising message can lead to a positive attitude toward the advertised product or service. According to Moser (2009), this model outlines several key processes that occur after a consumer is exposed to an advertisement:

- Awareness and Familiarity: Frequent exposure creates an awareness of the brand and a sense of familiarity, making it feel less foreign and more trustworthy.
- Information Conveyance: Advertisements convey key information about a brand's benefits and attributes.
- Brand Personality and Image: Through visual elements, spokesperson choice, and creative execution, advertisements build a specific brand image or "personality" that the audience can associate with.
- Peer and Expert Association: The advertisement can create the impression that peers or trusted individuals favour the brand, thus influencing the consumer's decision.
- Emotional Connection: Advertising can generate feelings in an audience that become linked to the brand.

This model provides a suitable framework for this research, as the study examines the effects of repeated exposure to religious advertisements. The assumption is that continuous exposure to church billboards and other promotional materials in Abeokuta can increase public awareness, build a favourable perception of the advertised churches, and ultimately influence a person's decision to attend or join a specific denomination. The model helps to explain the potential causal link between exposure to advertising and the desired behaviour (in this case, church membership).

Methodology

This study employed a survey research design to investigate the influence of religious advertising on church membership among residents of Abeokuta, Nigeria. This quantitative approach was

selected for its suitability in collecting data from a large population to make generalisations about perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours.

Study Population and Sample Size

The target population for this study consisted of all residents of the Abeokuta Local Government Area. Based on a 2006 national census, the population was 449,088. Using a population projection formula to account for population growth over 14 years, the projected population was estimated at 612,556.

A sample size of 400 was calculated using the Taro Yamane formula, with a 5% margin of error ($e=0.05$):

$$n = \frac{1 + N(e)^2}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1 + 612,556(0.05)^2}{1 + 612,556(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1 + 1,531.39}{1 + 1,531.39}$$

$$n = \frac{1,532.39}{1,532.39}$$

$n \approx 399.7$, which was rounded up to 400.

Sampling Technique

Simple random sampling was used to select participants from the study population. This technique ensures that every resident of Abeokuta has an equal chance of being selected, which enhances the generalizability and representativeness of the findings.

Data Collection

A structured questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire was designed to gather data on respondents' awareness of religious advertisements, their perceptions of these advertisements, and their reported influence on decisions regarding church membership. The instrument included both closed-ended and open-ended questions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Reliability and Validity

A pilot study was conducted with a small subset of the target population ($n=20$) to assess the reliability and validity of the research instrument. The pre-test was used to identify any ambiguous questions or formatting issues and to ensure that the questionnaire was clear and comprehensible to respondents.

Reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha (α). This statistical test assesses the internal consistency of the questionnaire items, ensuring that all questions intended to measure a single

concept (e.g., "perception of religious advertising") are consistently related to one another. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, ranging from 0 to 1, indicates the instrument's reliability. A commonly accepted value for an instrument to be considered reliable is 0.70 or higher. Our calculations yielded Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.76.

The validity of the instrument was established through the pilot study, which confirmed that the questionnaire effectively measured the intended variables. This ensured that the questions were relevant to the research objectives and addressed the concepts of interest. This step was crucial in ensuring the robustness of the data collection process and the credibility of the study's findings.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were coded, organised, and analysed using descriptive statistics. Simple percentages and frequency tables were used to present the findings, providing a clear and straightforward summary of the results.

Results

This section presents the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire. The findings are based on the 370 valid responses received, representing a 92.5% return rate from the 400 distributed questionnaires. The data are organised in tables to provide a clear and concise summary of the findings.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n=370)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Sex</i>	Male	137	37.00%
	Female	233	63.00%
	Total	370	100.00%
<i>Age</i>	16-20	168	45.40%
	21-25	118	31.90%
	26-30	54	14.60%
	31 and above	30	8.10%
	Total	370	100.00%
<i>Marital Status</i>	Single	277	74.90%
	Married	93	25.10%
	Total	370	100.00%
<i>Education</i>	O'level	103	27.80%
	OND/NCE	65	17.60%
	B.A/BSc/HND	202	54.60%

	Total	370	100.00%
<i>Religion</i>	Christian	365	98.60%
	Muslim	5	1.40%
	Total	370	100.00%

The demographic findings reveal that the majority of respondents were female (63%), single (74.9%), and young (77.3% were between 16 and 25 years old). The educational profile was high, with over half the respondents holding a bachelor's degree or its equivalent. Nearly all respondents were Christian, reflecting the study's focus on religious advertising in churches.

Findings on Religious Advertising

Table 2: Awareness and Perception of Religious Advertising

Question	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Level of awareness	Much/Very much	171	46.30%
	Little/Very little	142	38.40%
	Not at all	57	15.40%
	Total	370	100.00%
Perception of effectiveness	Effective/Very effective	173	46.80%
	Neutral	162	43.80%
	Less/Very less effective	35	9.50%
	Total	370	100.00%
Assessment of practice	Good/Very good	235	63.50%
	Normal	117	31.60%
	Poor/Very poor	18	4.90%
	Total	370	100.00%

Table 2 shows a moderate level of awareness of religious advertising among respondents, with 46.3% reporting "much" or "very much" awareness. The overall perception of the practice is positive, as 63.5% rated it as "good" or "very good." However, opinions on the effectiveness of these adverts were mixed, with a significant portion of respondents remaining neutral (43.8%).

Table 3: Influence of Religious Advertising on Church Membership

Question	Category	Frequency	Percentage
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Became a member as a result of adverts?	Yes	95	25.70%
	No	275	74.30%
	Total	370	100.00%
Extent of influence	Large/Very large extent	121	32.70%
	Little/Very little extent	124	33.50%
	Not at all	125	33.80%
	Total	370	100.00%

Table 3 indicates that religious advertising has a limited direct influence on a person's decision to join a church. The majority of respondents (74.3%) stated that they did not become church members as a result of these adverts. Furthermore, the extent of influence was minimal, with a combined 67.3% reporting "not at all," "very little," or "little" influence.

Table 4: Most Impactful Strategies and Factors for Membership

Question	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Most effective medium	Others (Billboard, pamphlet, handbill)	122	33.00%
	Radio	92	24.90%
	Television	86	23.20%
	All of the above	70	18.90%
	Total	370	100.00%
Primary factor for keeping members	Programmes/activities	91	24.60%
	Miracles/Dressing	76	20.50%
	Other factors	80	21.60%
	All of the above	74	20.00%
	Total	370	100.00%
Other factors for becoming a member	Programmes	127	34.30%
	Invitation	111	30.00%
	All of the above	74	20.00%
	Radio/Television	32	8.60%
	Newspaper advert	26	7.00%

	Total	370	100.00%
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Discussion of Findings

This study's findings provide a nuanced understanding of the influence of religious advertising on church membership in Abeokuta, Nigeria. The data, organised around the research questions, reveals a disconnect between the public's awareness and acceptance of religious advertising and its direct influence on their membership decisions.

The first key finding is the moderate level of awareness of religious advertising among residents. While nearly half of the respondents reported being "much" or "very much" aware, this awareness is not universal. This suggests that the churches' advertising campaigns, while present, are not saturating the local media landscape. However, the high percentage of respondents who rate the practice of religious advertising as "good" or "very good" indicates a general public acceptance of this modern approach to outreach. This positive perception is crucial, as it suggests that churches are not alienating their target audience through their promotional efforts. This finding aligns with the Advertising Exposure Model, which posits that repeated exposure, even without immediate action, can build brand familiarity and a positive perception.

The most critical finding, however, is the limited direct influence of advertising on church membership. The overwhelming majority of respondents (74.3%) stated that they did not become members as a direct result of advertising. This finding challenges a simple application of the Persuasion Theory in this context. While advertising is inherently a persuasive act, it appears that other, more powerful factors are at play. This result is consistent with the empirical finding of Spurlock (2014), who found no significant link between outdoor religious advertising and increased church attendance. It suggests that a person's decision to join a church is not a simple consumer choice driven by a billboard or television commercial. Instead, it is a complex social and personal process.

This is further supported by the data from Table 4, which highlights that "programmes" (34.3%) and "invitation" (30.0%) are the most influential factors. This finding underscores the power of personal relationships and a church's internal offerings—such as community engagement, quality of worship, or spiritual support—over a mass media message. This implies that religious advertising functions more as a brand awareness and a public relations tool rather than a direct recruitment strategy. It may serve to initiate contact, but the real work of attracting and retaining members is done through word-of-mouth and the tangible experience the church provides.

Interestingly, when assessing the effectiveness of advertising media, respondents rated "other" media (33.0%)—which includes billboards, pamphlets, and handbills—as the most impactful. This finding supports the argument by Benson-Eluwa (2005) that outdoor advertising can be particularly effective in capturing attention. The high-visibility, non-intrusive nature of billboards makes them a powerful tool for a population that may not be actively seeking out religious content on other platforms. This suggests that while all advertising media play a role, outdoor advertising may be the most efficient for creating initial contact and brand recall.

In conclusion, while religious advertising has a place in the modern church's communication strategy, it should be viewed as a supplementary tool. It successfully builds awareness and a positive public image, fulfilling the initial stages of the advertising exposure model. However, it is not the primary driver of church membership. The ultimate decision to join a congregation appears to be more heavily influenced by in-person experiences and personal invitations. Therefore, churches should integrate their advertising campaigns with robust community programs and strong relational outreach efforts to achieve sustainable growth in membership.

Implications of the Results

The findings of this study provide significant insights that extend beyond the specific context of Abeokuta, offering implications for both theory and practice, as well as scholarly research.

Theoretically, the study provides a valuable refinement to the Advertising Exposure Model and Persuasion Theory. While the findings confirm that advertising exposure successfully builds public awareness and a positive perception of religious organisations, they challenge the assumption that this translates into direct membership action. This indicates a gap between cognitive and behavioural outcomes in this specific context. The limited influence of mass media on membership suggests that persuasion in a spiritual domain is fundamentally different from commercial persuasion. This study proposes that a "relational persuasion" model, where personal invitation and firsthand experience are the primary drivers of behavioural change, may be a more appropriate framework for understanding how individuals join faith communities.

Practically, these results offer clear guidance for religious leaders and church marketers. The findings suggest that relying on mass media advertising as a primary recruitment tool is ineffective. Churches should instead utilise these platforms for brand building, public relations, and event promotion. The data strongly support reallocating resources towards relational outreach efforts, such as training existing members to invite others and investing in high-quality programs and activities. The fact that billboards were rated as the most impactful advertising medium suggests that churches should focus on high-visibility, concise messaging that directs people to a church's physical location or specific event, rather than attempting to convey complex theological concepts through a single ad.

Scholarly, this research opens several avenues for future inquiry. Future studies should explore the dynamics of "relational persuasion" within religious contexts using qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic research. This would provide a deeper understanding of the social and personal factors that influence membership decisions. Furthermore, comparative studies in different cultural or religious contexts could determine if these findings are generalizable to other populations. A content analysis of specific religious advertising messages could also shed light on which types of appeals (e.g., emotional, community-focused, or doctrine-based) are most effective in initiating engagement.

The "Relational Persuasion" Model

This study proposes that a "relational persuasion" model offers a more accurate framework for understanding how individuals join faith communities, particularly when compared to traditional,

media-centric models. This model posits that personal invitation and firsthand experience are the primary drivers of behavioural change, with mass media advertising playing a supportive, rather than a leading, role. It suggests that a person's decision to join a church is not a simple consumer choice but a complex journey that is profoundly social and personal.

Under this model, the process of church growth unfolds in a multi-step manner:

1. **Initial Awareness (Media-Driven):** Advertising media like billboards, flyers, and social media ads serve to create a general awareness of the church. This step, although important for public visibility, is not intended to convert individuals directly. Instead, it creates a sense of familiarity and reduces the psychological barrier to engagement.
2. **The Invitation (Relational Catalyst):** This is the most crucial step. A personal invitation from a trusted friend, family member, or acquaintance acts as the primary persuasive tool. This personal connection provides a level of credibility and trust that mass media messages cannot.
3. **Firsthand Experience (Experiential Confirmation):** The final step involves the individual's direct experience with the church community. The quality of the worship service, the warmth of the welcome, and the relevance of the programs serve as the ultimate confirmation of the decision to join.

In essence, the "relational persuasion" model reframes advertising from a direct recruitment strategy to a tool that facilitates personal connection. It suggests that a church's advertising efforts should be designed to give its members a tangible and credible brand to invite others into, ultimately relying on the power of human connection to foster membership. See this visual illustration in Figure 1:

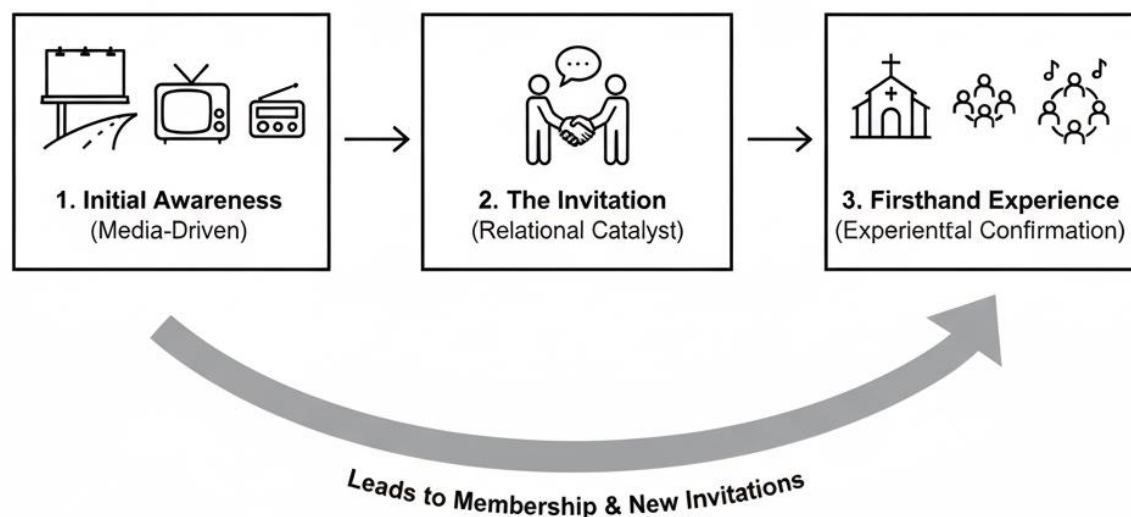


Figure 1: Author's proposed relational persuasion model

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of religious advertising on church membership in Abeokuta, Nigeria, revealing a complex relationship between promotional efforts and spiritual commitment. The findings confirm that while religious advertising successfully raises public awareness and builds a positive brand image for churches, it is not a primary driver of membership growth. The majority of respondents were aware of these advertisements and held a positive perception of them, fulfilling the initial stages of the Advertising Exposure Model.

However, the core finding is that this awareness does not directly translate into action. The decision to join a church is influenced more by relational factors, such as personal invitations, and the tangible quality of a church's programs and activities. Mass media advertising, therefore, serves a supportive role by creating an initial point of contact and an enabling environment for personal evangelism and community-based outreach. In essence, advertising gets people's attention, but it is the in-person experience and social connection that ultimately lead to membership.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are offered for religious leaders, marketers, and researchers:

1. **Strategise for Relational Outreach:** Churches should prioritise investing in programs and training that empower their members to engage in personal evangelism. This involves teaching members how to effectively extend invitations and provide a genuine, welcoming experience to visitors. Resources should be allocated to creating high-quality, engaging programs that serve as the primary attraction for new members.
2. **Redefine the Role of Advertising:** Religious advertising should be viewed as a tool for brand building and public relations, not as a direct recruitment strategy. Campaigns should focus on communicating a church's core values, community impact, and upcoming events that offer opportunities for personal engagement. The goal is to build trust and familiarity, making the church a viable option when an individual receives a personal invitation.
3. **Optimise Media and Message:** Given the finding that billboards and outdoor advertising were considered the most impactful, churches in Abeokuta should continue to leverage these media. The messages should be concise, visually compelling, and include a clear call to action, such as an address or a QR code linking to a specific event page.
4. **Conduct Further Research:** Scholars should conduct follow-up studies using qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, to understand the nuanced motivations behind an individual's decision to join a church. Future research should also investigate the effectiveness of various advertising appeals and conduct comparative studies in other cultural contexts to assess the generalizability of these findings.

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