

Political Persuasion Through Cultural Appeal: An Analysis of Radio Commercials of the 2015 Election in Oyo State, South-West, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study is a content analysis of radio commercials on the various gubernatorial candidates for the 2015 election in Oyo State, South West, Nigeria. It focuses on the commercials of candidates from the four most prominent parties in the state. Basically, the paper attempts to identify the dominant radio commercial formats and advertising appeals adopted in the selected political radio commercial as compared to traditional product ads. It was then discovered that the contemporary political ads have now taken after the traditional product ads in terms of strategy. Also, when cultural content combines with voters' economic needs in an ad, it becomes very effective. We therefore recommend that political parties and their candidates should combine both cultural content and economic needs of voters in their commercials to be more effective. Further research uptake is recommended on children as vote determinants.

Key words: political commercial, elections, voters economic needs, cultural content, advertising appeal, radio commercial formats.

Introduction

The 2015 general elections in Nigeria were keenly contested at all levels. The battle field was clearly set on the mass media whose messages overwhelmed the audience. This shows that the media have taken responsibility for providing adequate election information in order to prevent a failed election (Aghamelu, undated) and ensure issue-based campaigns as agreed upon by the registered political parties in the Abuja Accord (Ibrahim, Ogwezzy-Ndisika & Tejumaiye, 2015). In fact, free and fair election is hinged upon adequate knowledge of the candidates, political parties and election policies by the electorates as facilitated by the media (Ojekwe, 2015). The ubiquity feature of radio was exploited by the aspirants to reach the masses, especially those at the grassroots.

Right from the pre-colonial era, radio and its content genres (including commercials) have been recognized as being very powerful in conscious engagement of the target audience especially during electioneering process (Nwokeafor and Okunoye, 2013; Spenkuch and Toniatti, 2015; Ojekwe, 2015). It adopts theatre-of-the-mind, music and sound effects to bring the audience into active participation in the message creation and delivery. An advert that emanates from a good marketing research and purely original creative concept is bound to sell the brand effortlessly (Daniyan, 2005). This is why the 21st century political advertising messages have been consumerized. The political communication of the contemporary time is not dissimilar to purely business and commercial communication (Adolphsen, 2009). The reason for this is obvious. Unlike what it used to be, the electorates now have more choices at their disposal for a single post and rely on information to take voting decisions. This situation is not atypical of a multi-party state like Nigeria. Hence, the election featured more of “votes to persons rather than to parties, and swings of the electorate from one party to another in different elections” (EUEOM, 2011: 11). Considering the sportsmanship and businesslike calculations of an average politician, it is not unlikely that to win in an election, the candidate needs to win the electorate’s mind. This is why contemporary political communication campaigns now adopt commercial marketing strategies and processes. One way of doing this is to identify and appeal to specific and general interests and needs of the electorate (Jawah, 2012). This model was glaring in the 2009 American presidential election (Adolphsen, 2009; Ojekwe, 2015) and Nigeria seems to be taking after that now.

In Oyo State for instance, mere observation revealed that the 2015 gubernatorial race featured strong actors in the political scene of the state and those candidates recognized that. One very unique feature of the political radio commercials by the various candidates was an appeal to the indigenous language and cultural orientation of the people. Although it is quite unclear, how well those commercials were able to influence voting decisions; quasi-statistical senses (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005) reveal that those commercials were to a large extent memorable.

This understanding is premised on how phrases from the radio commercials became talk of the town among radio audience in the state. The focus of this study therefore is to examine the style, the linguistic qualities and the various appeals used in the various radio commercials of selected gubernatorial candidates in the 2015 election in Oyo State.

The study adopts content analysis design since that is the appropriate method for the analysis of media content (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011). Audience involvement theory was used to drive the study. According to Werder (2009), Herbert Krugman who propounded the theory in 1965 believed that persuasive communication depends on active message processing. The main thesis of the theory “linked message effectiveness with the audience’s degree or lack of personal involvement with the message”. Werder (2009: 20-21) writes on the theory as follows:

Krugman understood involvement not as attention or interest but as connections that an audience member makes between the message stimuli and the member’s own life; Krugman distinguished between two types of involvement (high and low), both of which can lead to effective advertising. The argument goes that a decrease in involvement does not increase resistance to the message but rather lowers processing; that is, learning is passive as consumers do not connect the message with a personal want or need and hence learn information randomly as a result of repetitive message encounter. In high involvement, a message acts directly on modifying beliefs; in low involvement, the impact is rather on exposure to sensory appeals (e.g., brand logos). As the latter occurs more gradually, effectiveness requires repeated exposure. According to Krugman, there are only three levels of exposure in psychological terms: curiosity, recognition, and decision.

The following research questions are therefore, drawn from the theory and the focus of the work to put the contents of the advertisements in perspective. What are the various formats of radio commercials adopted by gubernatorial candidates in Oyo State 2015 election? What are the various appeals adopted in the selected political radio ads? These guiding questions will help to identify the various ad formats adopted in the political ads during the election. They will help to deduce the persuasive strength of the various styles, linguistic qualities and advertising appeals of the ads.

Trends in Political Communication Campaign in Nigeria

Political communication is a generic term for election campaign, political advertising, political public relations, political marketing etc. (Norris, 2004). It is the means through which electoral information gets to voters from political parties, candidates, campaign organisations and other electoral information machineries. While discussing modern election communication, for instance, Norris (2004) phased it into three stages. The first stage is the “pre-modern” stage which originated in 19th century and “continued in recognizable form in most post-industrial societies until at least the 1950s, when the advent of televised campaigns and the publication of regular opinion polls started to transform the process”. Its basic features include:

the expansion of the franchise, party organization was predominately locally-oriented, relied heavily upon the partisan press as the main source of mediated information, and the primary impact of elections was to reinforce partisan supporters, rather than to produce new converts (Norris, 2004: 3-4)

The second stage according to him is “the modern campaign” which appeared between the early 1950s and the mid-1980s was marked by several related developments in established democracies. These include nationally coordinated strategic campaign, the development of a more detached and instrumental electorate, long campaign, adoption of newspaper publication, subsequent introduction of broadcast media as supplement and professionalization of political communication and consultancy. In the 'post-modern' campaign which is the third stage, there are:

fragmentation of television outlets, with the shift from national broadcasting towards more diverse news sources including satellite and cable stations, talk radio and 24-hour rolling news bulletins; the opportunities for newer forms of party-voter interaction facilitated by the rise of the Internet; and the attempt by parties to reassert control in a more complex, fragmented and rapidly changing news environment through strategic communications and media management during the permanent campaign, with the continuous feedback provided by polls, focus groups and electronic town meetings to inform routine decision-making, not just campaigns (Norris, 2004:6).

This last stage which is still under development is more clearly evident in some democratic societies including Nigeria. With this, the nature of the nation’s campaign communication will keep changing unpredictably. The change referred to here, tends towards commercial marketing communication.

Piontek (n.d), having established that political marketing in Poland was born in 1989, went further to identified five dimensions that interplay in its political campaign communication. These factors also apparent in Nigerian political terrain are legal limitations on political communication, financial regulation of campaign expenses, political stability, media factors and mental nature of the politicians who usually feel they are better without public relations training. Because advertising plays an important role in our lives generally (Ojekwe, 2015), politicians have long recognized its role in electoral process. This justifies the coinage and conception of the term political advertising. Scholars have regarded political advertising because the outcomes of our elections determine how we lead our lives and the kind of policies that will be approved. To lay credence on this, scholars have found that four out of five Americans get their information about political candidates from advertising rather than news.

To operationalize the concept, Political advertising includes communications supporting or opposing a candidate for nomination or election to either a public office or an office of a political party. This study, however, delimits political ads to only political ads in radio formats. In addition, the uses of advertising goes beyond selling politicians to the voting public during elections, it also can be used to help shape public policy. Scholars have identified different types of political ads as adopted at different stages of campaigns. These include name identification ads at the early stage of the campaign and aiming at identity, followed by argument ads for creating political ideology, then attack ads which are basically negative and insulting, and finally positive visionary ads for image building.

All these are observable in the Nigerian political campaign communication process. In Nigeria, political advertising has undergone immensely growth in the last two decades. Ojekwe (2015:4) writes:

Between the 2007, 2011 and most recent 2015 elections in Nigeria; presidential and gubernatorial, the use of political advert campaigns have widened from mode of delivery, type of language used, to forms of media used to communicate these messages.

This is simply because politicians have recognized the importance and power of advertising in accomplishing electioneering and political agendas. Observably, political campaigns in Nigeria have since shifted from the monotony of public campaigns and political speeches to the massive and overwhelming influence of advertisements.

Appeals in Political Commercials

The advertising appeal is the persuasive angle or ingredients adopted by the strategic message designer to get the attention and win the mind of the target. Since the ultimate aim of political ad is to get the voters vote for a candidate, policy or a course of action, the message must have an effective appeal to goad the target into a desired or intended behavior.

Political ad appeals according to literature come in pairs (positive/negative) as follows: hope or despair, compassion or coldness/alooofness, ambition or lethargy, trust or deviousness, nostalgia or unconcern for the past, intimacy or distance, reassurance or gloominess, local pride or local shame and national pride or national shame. All these were examined in the selected radio ads analysed.

Political Commercials: Cultural Content as Memory Aid

Generally when styles or formats are discussed in ad production, the mention is made of announserial, jingle, drama, conversation, testimonial, etc. (Daniyan, 2005).

All these common in commercial ads are not different from what is used in political ad today. Hence, the styles of ad found in political campaign communication are actually borrowed from commercial advertising.

As both sender and receiver must share common code (Beall and Seiller, 2005), the language of communication must be well understood by both of them. Perhaps this is the reason for the growing interests in the adoption of indigenous language and cultural content in the ads of multinationals. All political ads in Oyo State during the electioneering campaign stuck to the indigenous language, Yoruba. Nwagbara and Umor (2012) found that advertisements containing local cultural content sold more products than those without. This is an indication that people's language and culture are likely to serve as means of involving them emotionally in the persuasive process thereby leading to purchase. Han and Shavitt (1994:4) argued that:

...it is reasonable to assume that those who are attempting to persuade others will select approaches consistent with their own past experiences within the cultures to which they belong, and that they are selected, in part, on the basis of their ability to handle a style congruent with the culture. Research on individualism and collectivism has also suggested a link between culture and attitudinal process.

The role of lingo-cultural content in strategic and persuasive message on achieving an outcome cannot be neglected. Therefore, if it worked for commercial products as mentioned above, political ads can also benefit immensely from it.

It is against this backdrop that the researchers also examined the Yoruba cultural content adopted for persuasive purposes in the selected radio commercials of gubernatorial candidates in Oyo State during the 2015 elections. The analysis is presented in the next section.

Discussion of Findings

Our findings are discussed under two thematic constructs. The first is the various ad formats adopted by each candidate. The second, of course, has to do with the appeals employed in the ads. The appeals were constructed from two broad perspectives based on extant literature. These are economic appeals which could generate economic votes and cultural content identified by Nwagbara & Umoru (2012) as strong motivational and persuasive tool to voters in the specific culture. Cultural content is capable of generating audience involvement (Werder, 2009) and theatre of the mind, a fundamental concept of radio commercial (Daniyan, 2005). The discussion which follows in the next few paragraphs was based on two thematic areas arising from our research questions.

Dominant Radio Commercial Formats in the 2015 Election Campaign in Oyo State

Among all the gubernatorial runners in Oyo State during the 2015 elections, only four were selected for this study. They were purposively selected based on party popularity in the state. The four most popular parties were Accord Party (AP), All Progressives Party (APC), Labour Party (LP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). After examining their radio commercials at the last stage of the election campaign, the following were discovered in relation to the formats of the adverts. It was found that AP and LP used drama ads; PDP used a musical ad featuring a Fuji star (Abass Akande Obesere), while APC used a combination of musical and announorial ad. All these are examples of radio commercial formats identified in literature (Daniyan, 2005) and further support the fact that political campaigners of the contemporary time operate more or less like commercial advertisers (Adolphsen, 2009; Ojekwe, 2015). These researchers also concur with this because the essence of advertising is to influence behaviour in consonance to the advertiser's desire.

Hence, every advert whatever the context must be able to do that. It is important to note here that the two ads (AP and LP) that adopted drama had the candidate (product) mentioned much later (after the first 10 seconds) into the ad which culminates into apparent deficiency in radio ad where the product needs to be mentioned earlier (like in the first 5 seconds) into the ad. Contrarily, the two others, PDP (adopting musical) and APC (combining musical and announcements) had the candidate mentioned much earlier into the ad. Hence, for the AP and LP ads, there is the possibility of the target's remembering the dramatic plot at the expense of getting persuaded.

Advertising Appeals Found in the Selected Radio Commercial

As identified in the AP's ad, out of the constructs for economic appeals in our content categories, only social amenities and security were passively mentioned while poverty alleviation and job creation were not indicated at all. This, in our own opinion is a formidable deficiency which may reduce audience involvement and subsequently affect vote counts. This deduction is supported by existing literature (Ojekwe, 2015; Ibrahim, Ogwezzy-Ndisika & Tejumaiye, 2015) who posit that Nigerian electorate now vote based on factual information they receive from campaigns as different from emotional voting. This notwithstanding, the AP ad was very rich in language and culture of the people of Oyo State. Produced in Yoruba language, it was highly rich in proverb, idiom, anecdote and philosophical analogy which make it very memorable. For instance, here are some excerpts from the ad:

*Ileto rikisi, ileto abosi, ilu ti o see gbe nii.
Ki Olorun ma je a ba won gbe'be lae-lae.*

*Opuro kan n gbin paki; ikeji re n gbin'la
si'nu oko t'alabosi da. Odale e re n
b'alarekereke e d'ore.*

*The settlement of where intrigue reign, the
settlement where treachery prevails, may we
not dwell therein.*

*A liar is cultivating cassava; his accomplice
is tending okra.*

*This unruly fellow connives with a partner
in
crime.*

However, all these entertainment contents were allowed to overshadow the identity of the candidates and economic issues the electorate would have loved to hear from the commercial. We think it is a tyranny of entertainment (Ojebode, 2015) over information.

Related to this is that of PDP which adopted popular culture of music and celebrity endorsement. It however did not engage any economic issue important to the wellbeing of the electorate. Rather, its lyrical lines directly invited voters to vote for Teslim Folarin with a rhyming refrain, *Tee s'oju e!* (thumb print on it!).

This invitation was not eventually effective for many obvious reasons outside the purview of this study. But it is important to indicate that one of the reasons might be because the commercial was not economically promising to the electorate. People practically mocked away the *Tee s'aju e* mantra, even on the election day, without actually heeding its bids. The ad is however unique in its identity for all geo-political zones of the state by calling them one-by-one.

The LP advert which also adopted drama format was also averagely rich in cultural content of proverbs and idioms. What follows here illustrates this:

Adaba o see fi we tolotolo; labalaba o see fi w'eye.
The comparison between a dove and a turkey is illogical; A butterfly is incomparable with a bird.
Eni Olohun da o se e f'ara we.
Haa! Taa lo nki baun-un?

Taa naa nio tun se j'Adebayo Alao Akala lo!
Eni o m'aju ogun ni e je o pa'bi n'ire o.
The god-chosen man can't be impersonated.
Haa! To who is that tribute directed?
Who else than Adebayo Alao Akala!
He who the cap fits, let him wear it.

It engaged electorates' economic needs like job, poverty alleviation and improvement of social amenities but neglected security need which is a key factor in the political historical experience of the Oyo people. From the lines of the advert, emphasis was on "free education (*eto eko ofe*), quality health care services (*eto ilera to pe'ye*) and improvement on standard of living across Oyo State (*igbaye-gbadun-un gbogbo Ipinle Oyo*)". One unique feature of this ad is touching on the plight of the children:

Maa' mi! Maa' mi!! A du'pe oo; b'Adebayo Alao Akala aba di gomina Ipinle Oyo, igbe e ko s'owo ati aroye pe won ti wo soobu-u yin a ti e d'opin. E e le maa fun mi ni gbogbo nkan ti mob a beere lowo o yin.

Mum! Mum!! We'll be grateful if Adebayo Alao Akala becomes the governor of Oyo state; the complaint on economic down turn and demolition of your shop would stop. You can then afford to provide all my requests.

The foregoing excerpt was rendered by a child in the advert. However, it has not been established in literature that children are vote determinants especially in Oyo State.

As for the APC, the commercial is a hybrid of musical and announcements formats. It was produced in Yoruba language just like others. It covered all the constructs under economic needs such as "poverty alleviation (*igbogun ti'se at'osi*), job creation (*ipese ise f'awon odo*), improvement of social amenities (*amojuto awon ohun amaye de'run*) and general security in the state (*aabo to pe'ye fun emi ati dukia*) of our content categories. Its cultural contents also covered proverb, idioms and anecdote.

It however did not make specific identification with any set of people in Oyo State. Rather a global clarion call of ‘re-election’ of Isiaka Abiola Ajimobi (the incumbent governor) was made to them all. Although the power of incumbency cannot be ruled out in the victory of APC and its candidate in the state, it is apparent that two other factors contributed to it. One, his ad was predominantly issue-based. The second factor is the victory of Muhammadu Buhari as the President of the Federation which Ajimobi also appealed to in his advert. The lines:

Naija maa dara; Ipinle Oyo o nii daru.

Nigeria’ll be better; Oyo State’ll ever settle

Bi e se d’ibo fun Buhari ti o wo’le aare
E d’ibo f’Ajimobi
Ki ile yi le sun w abo
Ed’ibo f’Ajimobi
Ki ise rere te si’waju
Oro yen niyen

As you elected Buhari president
Vote Ajimobi
For all to enjoy this land
Elect Ajimobi
That the good work may continue
That is the fact!

O ti seese ni agbara Olorun
Tori bi a ba bo’ju bo’mu
Isale agbon laa dari e si

By God’s grace, so shall it be
As when we wipe the face from above the nose
It is always completed below the chin

Gbogbo omo ipinle Oyo ooooo
E ti fako yo
Bi E ti fi ibo gbe Buhari wole gege bi aare
Amo e ranti o
B’uju ba se meji won a riran kedere
B’ese ba se meji won a rin wasa-wasa
B’ijoba apapo at’ipinle ba jokan
Ohun rere a tun sun wa bo ni’pinleOyo
Ise rere ajimobi a le ma a te s’iwaju

Oh people of Oyo State!
You’ve in deed excelled
By voting Buhari President
But remember!
Each eye pairs with the other for clear vision
A pair of legs makes balance movement
When the same party rules at all tiers
It will be better for us in Oyo State
The good work of Ajimobi’ll continue

Eegun Ajimobi ti joo re;
ka gbodo fun un lo to
Ka f’ibo dupe oore
Ni’joo Satide ojokokanla osu kerin
to n bo yii
Iwaju igbale ti nse aami egbe e APC
ni e teka si o. APC... Change!

Ajimobi has really performed
He deserves massive support
Let’s appreciate him with votes
On Saturday April 11
Thumb print in front of broom, the symbol of APC

Generally, it is observed from the foregoing that cultural content in political ads are good memory aid but the persuasive power of cultural content will be effective if the economic needs of the electorate are adequately catered for in the ad. This position is an amalgam of the two different views existing in literature (Ibrahim, Ogwezzy-Ndisika & Tejumaiye, 2015; Ojekwe, 2015; Spenkuch & Toniatti, 2015). With this, the scale of political ads becomes balance.

Conclusion

As democratic dispensation develops and endures in Nigeria, the understanding of its operation and terms get better among all stakeholders in the country. The old paradigm of political campaigns is predominant speech and public speaking/campaign based. This narrow approach to political communication campaigns has since changed as political parties and their candidates started adopting commercial marketing approaches in political communication. Nigeria in the past two decades has since shifted to commercial advertising approach in party and candidate marketing. This paradigm shift tailored after the American model employs advertising and public relations for political ends just like commercial advertisers do for their products.

While extant literature established the effective power of building electorate's economic needs and cultural contents into political ads for persuasive purposes, these two persuasive constructs have ever been perceived to be effective independently. This study therefore discovered that when both are synergized for political ads, their persuasive strength would be stronger.

The study also found that while strategizing to win the audience's minds, the entertainment elements in political ads may overshadow the core message electorate look for in political radio commercial.

One important area this study stumbled on but did not address is children as vote determinant in political campaign. It becomes important because political aspirants now appeal to children in their ads just as commercial advertisers do for some products. Further studies in this area may reveal the empirical position on this.

By and large, the study of political communication in Nigeria has recently been attracting scholars' and practitioners' attention. It only needs consistent and conscientious efforts to guard and guide the growing democracy in the nation.

We therefore recommend that political parties and their candidates should combine both cultural content and economic needs of voters in their commercials to be more effective. Further research uptake is recommended on children as vote determinants. Further research is also recommended in this line of enquiry especially on audience opinion of the effective appeal in political adverts.

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