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Critical Analysis of Communication Barriers in Selected Billboards in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a critical analysis of communication barriers in selected billboards within Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria. The study focuses on identifying and understanding communication challenges and barriers prevalent in the messages of billboards promoting various products and services. The theoretical framework for the study draws upon the Semiotics Theory and the Information Discrepancy Theory, as they offer valuable insights into the interpretation of signs and symbols in communication and the impact of incongruent information on message reception. The research methodology utilises a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods. Through content analysis, the study identifies the prevalent communication barriers, including language, cultural, environmental and visual barriers in the billboard messages, while also examining the use of symbolism and messaging styles. In addition, the study conducts interviews with members of the public to gain insights into how these communication barriers are perceived and interpreted. The research found some incongruent messages, environmental barriers as well as language and semiotic barriers in the selected billboards examined in the study. It was, therefore, concluded that advertisers, communication practitioners, and policymakers should always ensure effective design and dissemination of billboard messages to overcome communication barriers and enhance target audience engagement.

KEYWORDS

Communication
barriers,
billboard,
semiotics,
information
discrepancy

The research findings aim to inform advertisers, communication practitioners, and policymakers on the effective design and dissemination of billboard messages to overcome communication barriers and enhance audience engagement in Ibadan Metropolis.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is a crucial element in advertising, as it determines how well messages are received and interpreted by the target audience, who are prospective consumers of the product or service in the advert. Billboards, as a popular form of outdoor advertising, play a crucial role in the media mix strategised for promoting products and services. Albeit, communication barriers can hinder the effectiveness of billboard messages, leading to misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the promotional message (McQuail, 2010; Mishra & Sharma, 2023). The Ibadan Metropolis, southwest, Nigeria, with its diverse population, presents a vast market for assorted products with a unique challenge in designing effective billboard messages that resonate with the linguistic and socio-cultural diversity of an ancient but swiftly metamorphosing modern city.

Research has shown that language, cultural, and visual barriers can significantly impact message comprehension and retention (Abu-Arqoub & Alserhan, 2019). In Nigeria, where English is the official language, linguistic barriers may arise from the use of local languages or dialects, both from the side of message designers and the target audience of the message. Cultural barriers may also emerge from the diverse ethnic groups and beliefs present in the Ibadan Metropolis. Moreover, visual barriers can occur due to the use of complex imagery or symbolism that may be unfamiliar to the audience, just as environmental barriers may prevent the message from reaching the target audience, who are usually transient (de Oliveira, Bento, Partidário, & Morrison-Saunders, 2023).

Despite these challenges, billboard advertising remains a popular medium for reaching a wide audience. To overcome communication barriers and enhance audience engagement, advertisers and communication practitioners must consider the cultural, linguistic, and visual context of their messages (Kalilu and Alimi, 2022). This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by identifying and analysing communication barriers in billboards within the Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Advertising as a marketing communication strategy is prone to various levels of interference, just like any other form of human communication process. Extant literature has demonstrated unavoidability of communication barriers, hindering message comprehension and retention (Abang and Abim, 2021; McQuail, 2010). The Ibadan Metropolis, with its diverse demographics, presents huge opportunities for marketing communication as it simultaneously poses a unique challenge in executing effective product promotional messages. Hence, billboard messages are extensively rife, especially on routes plied by heavy traffic at motor parks and marketplaces. Despite the widespread use of billboards in marketing communication, language, cultural, environmental and visual barriers continue to impede message effectiveness (Abang & Abim, 2021; de Oliveira, Bento, Partidário, & Morrison-Saunders, 2023).

Research has shown that linguistic barriers arise from the use of local languages or dialects, while cultural barriers emerge from diverse ethnic groups and beliefs (Ovcharenko & Ovcharenko, 2023). Visual barriers occur due to complex imagery or symbolism unfamiliar or unfriendly to the audience, while environmental barriers are present from the positioning and placement of the billboard relative to the views of the transient audience of the message (Abu-Arqoub & Alserhan, 2019). These barriers lead to misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and decreased audience exposure, product recognition and sales.

Previous studies highlight the importance of considering the cultural, linguistic, and visual context of messages (Oprishch, 2022). However, there is a need for a comprehensive analysis of communication barriers in billboards within the Ibadan Metropolis, which appears to have been neglected in the body of knowledge in this area of study. This study, therefore, aims to address this gap by identifying and understanding the communication challenges and barriers prevalent in billboard messages, providing insights for advertisers and communication practitioners to design effective messages and enhance audience engagement.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following objectives drive the study:

1. To identify the prevalent communication barriers in billboards within the Ibadan Metropolis;
2. To examine the use of symbolism and messaging styles in selected billboard messages.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is anchored on the following research questions drawn from the objectives of the study:

1. What are the prevalent communication barriers in billboards within the Ibadan Metropolis?
2. How do symbolism and messaging styles contribute to communication barriers in billboard messages?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Barriers and Billboard Advertising

Communication barriers, otherwise known as noise or interference, refer to any obstacle that hinders effective communication between the sender and receiver in all communication contexts (Rani, 2016). In the context of billboard advertising, communication barriers can cause misinterpretation, misunderstanding, unintended meanings, decreased product recognition and sales, as well as a reputation crisis, causing the brand valuable time and resources to reverse. Research has identified several types of communication barriers, including language, cultural, and visual barriers (Abu-Arqoub & Alserhan, 2019).

Language barriers arise when the message is encoded in a language that is not familiar to the audience (Adegbija, 2004; Kalilu and Alimi, 2022). This can occur

when the billboard message is crafted in a language that is not widely spoken among the target audience, or when the language used is too complex or technical for the audience to comprehend. For instance, a billboard advertisement for a product targeting a local audience may be ineffective if it is constructed in a language that is not widely spoken in the target market (Kotler et al., 2009).

Cultural barriers emerge when the message is not sensitive to the cultural beliefs and values of the audience (de Oliveira, Bento, Partidário, & Morrison-Saunders, 2023). A recent instance illustrating this is a flyer bearing the message *Jesus paid your debts, not your taxes*, posted on social media handles of the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS). The agency agreed that the message had unintended meaning within Christian circles and apologised to the Christian Association of Nigeria in a press release entitled “*Jesus paid your debts, not your taxes*” flyer: *FIRS Apologises* (Premium Times, April 2, 2024). Visual barriers occur when the message is not clear or concise, or when the imagery or symbolism is unfamiliar to the audience (Ojo & de Lange, 2022). It can also occur when the billboard message is too complex or cluttered, or when the imagery or symbolism used is not easily recognisable or understandable by the target audience. For example, a billboard advertisement that uses abstract imagery or complex graphics may be ineffective if the audience experiences difficulty interpreting the message (Ojo & de Lange, 2022). Beyond this, a billboard advertisement that uses imagery or symbolism that is offensive or insensitive to a particular cultural group may be ineffective or even counterproductive (Kalilu and Alimi, 2022). The case of Peak Milk 2023 Easter advert: *Bruised and Pierced for us #Good Friday*, on social media, aptly illustrates this. The company had to apologise to CAN following open criticism that trailed the advert on social media (Odunmorayo, 2023).

Audience Engagement and Billboard Advertising

Literature has established that billboard advertising is a major component of outdoor advertising, which plays a significant role in shaping consumer behaviour and enhancing brand awareness. In other words, it plays multifaceted roles in marketing strategies and has broader sociocultural implications on the audience. Studies show that billboard advertising can effectively influence purchase decisions and increase brand recognition (Zekiri, 2019; Mishra & Sharma, 2023). Research also indicates that billboard advertising, when combined with other (social) media, can enhance brand awareness and drive consumer engagement (Wasserbauer, 2023). In the same vein, billboards also promote products as well as construct and reinforce urban lifestyles through language and visual elements (Liyana et al., 2021). The use of code-mixing, foreign languages, and specific visual cues in billboard advertisements contributes to shaping societal ideologies and urban identities (Liyana et al., 2021). However, key factors contributing to billboard effectiveness include strategic location, clear messaging, and creative design (Mishra & Sharma, 2023). What this implies is that a consideration of these factors would go a long way to enhance audience engagement.

Audience engagement is the extent of audience involvement and interest in the message (Grall, Tamborini, Weber & Schmälzle, 2021), irrespective of the medium. Effective audience engagement is central to billboard advertising, as it determines how well the message is received and retained. This is the reason the location and direction of billboards are functions of audience traffic. Besides, there are certain factors influencing audience engagement. This, according to Mishra and Sharma (2023), includes attention, comprehension, and motivation.

The combination of all these determines the quality of audience engagement a message attracts.

Attention, which is the first step in audience engagement, is influenced by factors such as size, colour, and location (Vidyapu, Vedula, & Bhattacharya, 2020) of the billboard. Comprehension, influenced by factors such as language, imagery, and symbolism, refers to the audience's ability to comprehend the message (Wyer & Shrum, 2015). Motivation refers to the audience's willingness to act on the message and is influenced by factors such as incentives, rewards, and social norms (Sinha and Castillo, 2023).

The foregoing is critical to billboard advertising, the most popular form of outdoor advertising that uses visual displays to communicate messages to a wide audience (McQuail, 2010). Billboards must be strategically located on roadsides, highways, markets and city centres to optimise visibility and reach a large audience. Billboards are effective in capturing attention, building brand awareness, and influencing consumer behaviour (Reddy, Ghouse & JS, 2023; Wasserbauer, 2023). However, billboard advertising also faces challenges, such as competition for attention, limited space, regulatory restrictions, and is often criticised for being intrusive, distracting, and environmentally harmful (Mishra & Sharma, 2023).

Contextual Factors in Billboard Advertisement

Communication barriers are not limited to message-related factors. There are factors external to the encoded message in a communication context. These factors are regarded as contextual factors. They have enormous influence on the communication process (Cao, Meadows, Wong & Xia, S. 2021). In relation to billboard advertising, contextual factors include the physical environment, social norms, and cultural values. It is noted that contextual factors can significantly impact audience engagement and message effectiveness (Mishra & Sharma, 2023).

The physical environment includes factors such as lighting, weather, and noise level, which can affect the visibility and readability of the message (Huo, Feng, & Fang, 2024). Social norms and cultural values can also influence audience engagement, as they shape the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Sharma & Lulandala, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the Semiotics Theory (Hall, 1976) and Information Discrepancy Theory (Hawkins & Hoch, 1992). Semiotics Theory posits that messages are encoded with meaning by the sender, but the receiver's decoding process can lead to misinterpretation due to cultural, linguistic, or personal differences. In the context of this study, it is assumed that any linguistic or cultural barriers observed in the billboards' messages could affect the receivers' interpretation of the advertising messages and defeat the purpose for which the sender put up the billboards. Semiotics Theory is relevant to this study because the analysis of signs and symbols used in persuasive messages could aid in unearthing the meanings and values that the sender intends to pass across (Nwaoboli, Ogunyemi, & Ezegwu, 2023).

Information Discrepancy Theory explains how incongruent information can affect message reception, leading to cognitive dissonance and influencing how

the message is processed and retained. In line with this, McQuail (2010) emphasises the importance of considering the audience, message, and context in message design and dissemination. This underscores the need for effective communication to overcome barriers and enhance audience engagement in all communication contexts. These theoretical underpinnings guide the analysis of communication barriers in the selected billboards, enabling the identification of effective strategies to enhance audience engagement and message effectiveness in billboard message design, especially in Ibadan Metropolis.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a combination of qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews sequentially. The researchers first conducted a content analysis of 9 billboards, carrying messages in English and Yoruba. The analysed billboards were selected purposively from the 339 billboards collated from different areas of Ibadan Metropolis. The location of the billboards covered major public places, roads and markets in Ibadan, such as Bodija Market, New Gbagi Market, Dugbe Market, Aleshinloye Market, Ring Road, Challenge to Agodi Gate, Toll-gate to Iwo Road Round About, Mokola Round About to Ojoo, Mokola Round About through Gate to Iwo Road Round About and Total Garden through Bodija to University of Ibadan. The content categories were message, semiotics, contextual barriers and information discrepancy, while the unit of analysis was words, images and obstructions. The researchers then interviewed two language experts (one each for English and Yoruba to provide additional insights into the impact of communication barriers on audience engagement by the selected billboard messages. The items of the interview guide were directly connected to the communication barriers identified in the billboards through content analysis. Where necessary, the picture of the billboard or a specific message of the billboard was shown to the respondent to ensure clarity of question and appropriateness of response. The interview responses, which were later transcribed, were analysed qualitatively using dominant themes as parameters.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study was driven by two research questions, which were interrogated in turn with the data gathered through qualitative content analysis and in-depth interview. These qualitative data were interpolated to arrive at findings connected to the data orientation and extant literature.

The first research question interrogated the prevalent communication barriers in the analysed billboards selected from the Ibadan Metropolis. The data revealed barriers such as linguistic, environmental and production barriers, all of which significantly, are potential sources of interference with message clarity and comprehension to the target audience of the billboards. For instance, the headline of a Semovita billboard located in Bodija Market, Ibadan says *Eforiro will love it* as shown in Plate 1 below.



Plate 1: Code-mixing Billboard with linguistic barriers (wrong orthography)

The orthography of *Eforiro*, according to the billboard, is wrong. Firstly, there are two words here, one modifying the other. In standard Yoruba writing, *Efo* (vegetable) is the key word in the phrase, while *riro* (roasted) functions as an adjective. The following excerpt was extracted from the expert interview during data collection:

In that context, the two words are a phrase, in which case one modifies the other rather than a compound word that is written together as one. ...*riro* (roasted) is a modifier to *efo* (vegetable). So, the right orthography is *Efo riro* (Researchers Fieldwork, 2024)

So, writing them as a single word was not only orthographically wrong, but also introduced both semantic and phonological noise into the message, especially because all the diacritics (tonal marks and vocal signs) on and beneath the vowels were absent. This finding showed that the billboard has failed the test of effectiveness with its unclear message (Mishra & Sharma, 2023). Our second expert interviewee also commented on the message of the billboard:

The word *Eforiro* in the body copy of the ad is capable of introducing both phonological and semantic barriers, especially because there is no orthographic indication that *Eforiro* is a Yoruba word. Without the necessary diacritics (tonal and vocal signs), *Eforiro* could be confused for an English word, making it difficult to interpret the ad message (Researchers Fieldwork, 2024).

Therefore, messages such as the one on the analysed plate has a tendency to distort the receiver's decoding process, which could lead to misinterpretation due to the linguistic barrier posed by the manner in which the billboard message was designed (Searle, 2020).

Plate 2 below illustrates other linguistic barriers found during the content analysis.



Plate 2: Bilingual Billboards with linguistic barriers (wrong diacritics)

Another example of linguistic barriers identified in the content analysis was a bilingual billboard of *Ufit Homes* in which the Yoruba translation of the advert message was given outright wrong tonal marks, causing both phonological and semantic confusion. Apart from the meaning loss in this particular billboard, it is both annoying and embarrassing to the predominantly Yoruba-speaking target market for a billboard to bastardise their language to that extent, giving the impression that there were no experts around to assist in proper message design. This may cause a wrong brand perception from the target market where Yoruba is their mother tongue. All these leading to phonological noise will necessarily cause semantic noise, especially when the words are placed within English expressions, causing content discrepancy and meaning loss. This constitutes some form of visual noise as the message is not clear (Huo, Feng, & Fang, 2024).

Plates 1 and 2 above illustrate barriers related to message clarity as a result of wrong rendition of messages targeting Yoruba audience as identified in the content analysis with validation by the expert interview. Apart from the foregoing linguistic barriers identified, the content analysis also revealed some billboards laden with barriers of contextual factors. Many of these billboards were erected behind physical barriers, which is a form of contextual factors that could interfere with the effective delivery of billboard messages (Mishra & Sharma, 2023). Plate 3 below illustrates this.



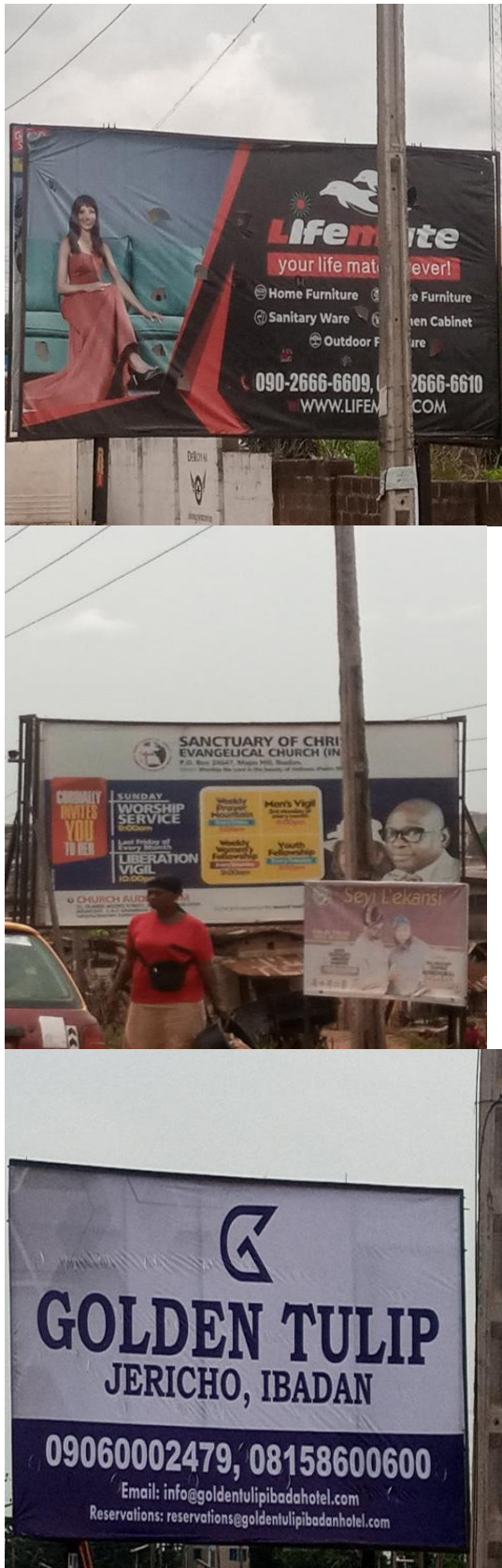


Plate 3: Billboards behind contextual barriers

This factor becomes pertinent in outdoor advert management because it is a transient medium. Any slight barrier is capable of preventing audience exposure

to the original message. The implication of this is that a larger chunk of the target audience may miss the message. It is, however, observed that many of the billboards in this category are not of high corporate brands. They are mostly local brands with a few brands of national and international status among them. Plate 2 below illustrates this aspect of the data.

The second research question focuses on the contribution of symbolism and messaging styles to communication effectiveness in billboard messages. This aspect, which points to effective utilisation of semiotics in advertising, partly speaks to contextual factors in understanding billboard advert messages. The billboards in Plate 4 below have barriers, ranging from choice of colour to font type and font size, causing the problem of legibility for the advert.



Plate 4: Billboards with Message Style barrier

This is an obvious barrier because a billboard is typically a transient and visual medium. Lack of message clarity in terms of visual designs will necessarily result in message loss (Nwaoboli, Ogunyemi, & Ezegwu, 2023) according to the Semiotic Theory. The *ADRON Home* advert, for instance, contains a collage of pictures, some of which are not congruent with the message, thereby making the message too complex for the audience to process. The colour mix, the font type and size, and the solid background make the whole production difficult to process in a jiffy by the mobile target audience. Traditionally, the synergy between the text (headline and body copy), the illustration (the semiotic element) and the paralinguistic elements (general artistic design) of the billboard advert should register a memorable symbolic brand message in the sub-consciousness of the target audience to create a permanent mental model leading to brand recognition, brand identity and interest in the target audience.



Plate 5: Billboard with clear and effective message design

It is, however, important to note that there were a good number of billboards with clear and effective messages among the samples analysed. For instance, Plate 5 above portrays good example of a billboard with clear message and cultural inclusiveness (Kalilu and Alimi, 2022), making the advert resonate with cultural orientation of the target audience, unlike the recent Easter adverts of Peak Milk and Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS), which boomeranged with unintended meanings.

CONCLUSION

The study on communication barriers in billboard advertising within the Ibadan Metropolis has revealed significant insights into the factors that influence the effectiveness of billboard messages. The key findings highlight three main types of communication barriers: language, cultural, and visual. These barriers have a substantial impact on how billboard messages are perceived and understood by the diverse audience in Ibadan. Language barriers arise from the use of complex or unfamiliar terms that may not be widely understood by the general public. Cultural barriers are evident when messages do not align with the values, beliefs, and norms of different ethnic groups. Visual barriers occur when the design elements of billboards are too intricate or abstract, leading to misinterpretation or lack of engagement. The implications of these findings are profound for advertisers and communication practitioners. It is crucial to consider the cultural, linguistic, and visual context when designing billboard messages to ensure they resonate with the

target audience. By addressing these barriers, advertisers can enhance the effectiveness of their campaigns, leading to better engagement and response from the audience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the study, the following recommendations were made to overcome the identified communication barriers and improve the effectiveness of billboard advertising in Ibadan. One, practitioners should utilise simple and clear language that is widely understood by the target audience. To achieve this, it is critical to avoid jargon and technical terms that may confuse the public. Two, advertisers should avoid using imagery, symbols or references that may be offensive or misinterpreted by different cultural groups, as Nigeria is a multi-cultural setting. Three, strategic colour schemes and design elements should be employed to capture attention and convey the intended message effectively. Four, billboards that capture attention through strategic use of colour, size, and location should be encouraged. This would ensure that the message is easily comprehensible and motivates the audience to take the desired action.

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