

Chapter 19

The Art of Deception in Political Advertising: A Study of Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election Campaigns

Stella Amara Aririguzoh

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7309-1519>

Covenant University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Television advertising is a growing important aspect in presidential electoral campaigning. It accounts for a big part of the electioneering expenses. Presidential political advertisements are important sources of information to voters. Their messages may influence poll results. Using a content analytical method, this study examined 12 of the presidential campaign advertisements created for ex-president Goodluck Jonathan and his People's Democratic Party (PDP); and the opposition coalition flag bearer, Retired General Muhammadu Buhari and his All Progressives Congress during the 2015 Nigerian presidential election campaigns. The aim of this study was to identify the deceptions in these advertisements. This study found that both sides engaged in deceptive advertising. Buhari/APC engaged more in misinformation, lies, misrepresentation and spreading of unproven facts. Goodluck/PDP avoided misrepresentations and misinformation, but used lies, unproven assertions and pufferies. It is recommended that campaign advertisements be scrutinized before they are aired.

INTRODUCTION

Presidential election campaigns provide opportunities for contestants to deliver some pieces of information that may persuade some voters to their favour. However, Kalla and Broockman (2018, p.148) point out that the impact of political campaigns to persuade individuals may have limited effects. Therefore, some contestants take to television and the social media to advertise themselves. Presidential political contestants spend millions of naira giving out persuasive information to reinforce the decisions of those

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loyal to them; change the perception of the ambivalent and hone the decisions of the apathetic. However, Opeibi (2006) points out that political advertisements were unpopular in Nigeria until the 1990s.

According to Alawode and Adesanya (2016, p. 237) “political advertising is a form of campaigning used by political candidates to reach and influence voters”. This type of advertising is not new in Nigeria or in any country where elections are periodically held. What may be new are the exaggerated half-truths and outright lies that campaigners and their message creators engage in, in attempts to secure more votes, split votes or discourage voting. Aririguzoh (2019) writes that some candidates and their supporters use music to tell their own sides of the stories or draw negative attention to their opponents.

Deceptive political advertisements misrepresent, omit or repeat messages that may likely mislead reasonably thinking voters. Some of their presentations are incorrect or unproven information. They deal with three issues: the advertiser, the message of the advertisement, and the consequential voter acceptance of the advertised product. Here, the advertisers are the politicians, their political parties and sympathisers. The message is the demand that voters give them their votes or at least not to vote for the opposition. The consequential voter acceptance is to believe the message as the truth and vote accordingly or see them as lies and do as occasions serve them against the advertised product (the contestant, his party, his message, manifesto or whatever they are angling to sell to voters).

According to Williamson (2002) the advertising message is what the advert claims. Millstein (1964) writes that the falsity of an advertisement’s claim must be examined against standard knowledge where such a standard exists to determine this truth. The claim must be a lie and invalid to be deceptive. In other words, the *truth* is a question of fact to be determined by evidence. Political video messages are deliberately created to deceive and misguide the electorate by presenting unclear or conspicuous disclosures to misinform voters about themselves or their opponents. This by itself is the art of deception. A deceptive audio-visual campaign message interferes with the abilities of voters to discern and make informed choices, especially, when these messages are critical in their making of decisions on who to vote for. It intentionally presents a false or misrepresents a fact so as to influence the voting decisions of the public. A false or misleading statement is literally false. Even if it is literally true, the statement may likely mislead, confuse, or has a tendency to deceive the public. A misrepresentation essentially deceives or has the tendency to do so to a considerable segment of the electorate and causes the opponent to lose goodwill and or votes from the members of the voting public. This takes deeper meaning when it is placed alongside Westen’s (2008) observation that the public’s decision to support political parties is based on emotions and not data or facts.

The Independent National Election Commission (INEC) is Nigeria’s body in charge of conducting elections. It registered 26 political parties with only 11 of them submitting the names of contestants running in the presidential race. However, it became evident that the battle was between the then incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the flag bearer of the opposition coalition, Retired General Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC). Both sides released a blitz of campaign advertisements. Their deceptive advertisements are the audio-visual messages that do not have empirical evidence or facts backing in part or whole any of their claims of accomplishments or accusations/allegations of corruption, sleaze, maladministration, cronyism, nepotism and similar denunciations or pronouncements.

The problem for investigation is to identify the deceptions in the Nigerian 2015 presidential television campaign advertisements of the PDP presidential contestant and his political party; and the opposition, the APC presidential candidate and his own party. This paper examines some of these presidential advertisements that were aired on national television or placed on the social media platform of *YouTube*.

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