

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Political Ads and Voter Decision Making: Effectiveness and Ethical Implications of Campaign Communication Strategies

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Received: 03 January 2024 Accepted: 11 January 2024 Published: 02 February 2024

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## Abstract

The study examined political ads and voter decision specifically xraying the effectiveness and ethical implications of campaign communication strategies. The study was anchored on the agenda setting theory and the powerful effect theory. The study adopted the survey research design and the questionnaire as the instrument for data collection which was distributed to 399 respondents who were drawn from the population of 208,098 people in Asaba. The data collected from the respondents were presented in tables and analyzed using simple percentages. The study found among others that political ads are effective in influencing the voting decision of electorates to a great extent. It was also found that although political ads have an effective influence on the respondents' voting decision, they are not passive recipients of media messages. This implies that they have the inalienable ability to sieve through the contents of political ads before making voting decisions. Based on the research findings and conclusion, it is recommended among other that political advertisers and campaign handlers learn to focus their campaigns on the candidate, the political party and their accomplishments and policies. Political ads should not be an attack tool or a means of pulling down the other candidate but should be used to propagate the reasons a candidate should be voted for. Sometimes, political advertisers make the mistake of presenting themselves as a lesser evil by exposing the weaknesses of the other party while entirely jettisoning their own pros.

**Keywords:** Politics, Political Ads, Voter Decision, Ethics, Campaign Communication.

## 1. Introduction

Even before the democratic dispensation in the world politics, whether it is an autocratic monarch or a despotic military head of state, there has always been a need by societal leaders to promote their political ambitions, policies and interests to the masses often with the intention to convince or coerce the public into accepting and supporting them and whatever they stand to represent. In projecting their political interests, politicians tend to adopt every means of persuasion and coercion in some cases. Large crowds of audience would usually be gathered at King's

palace, the village square, market square and houses of communal opinion leaders or military edicts or notices posted in relevant and public places; these were the ideals of political advertising in Nigeria and in most societies prior to the advent of the media but today, political advertising has taken a new shape.

In today's democratic dispensation in Nigeria, political parties and candidates have developed outstanding means of reaching the public. What was hitherto a herculean task has not become an easy click of the computer mouse, a simple sliding of the finger across a mobile phone or a simple click of the

**Citation:** Obinna Johnkennedy Chukwu, Chiadika Joseph I. Political Ads and Voter Decision Making: Effectiveness and Ethical Implications of Campaign Communication Strategies. *Annals of Journalism and Mass Communication*. 2024;3(1):1-10

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TV remote and surely a simple flip of the newspaper pages. Voters are constantly bombarded with political ads on the media for the sole purpose of getting their supports and votes. Political advertising refers to the systematic and non-personal messages on the media that is often paid for by an identified sponsor for the purpose of galvanizing supports and votes from the electorates.

Ansola and Iyengar (1995) argue that political advertising (TV) has become a veritable tool for selling candidates of political parties during election campaigns. In the past two decades or more, the use of political ads to galvanize or gather supports from the electorates has witnessed a tremendous increase. This seeming paradigm shift may be as a result of the effectiveness of political ads and/or the sudden realization of the power of the media in changing the political dynamics, voter behaviour and decision making. Political ads have been found to be very effective in endearing political candidates and their parties to the heart of the electorates.

Ansola and Iyengar (1995) are of the view that advertising campaigns are effective as they help position the candidate positively in the minds of the voters. They state that TV political advertising is persuasive and not manipulative, and that it message inform voters about the candidates' position and allow voters to develop differentiated images of candidates. They add that although more involved and attentive voters learn more from competitive political advertising, people who do not pay close attention to campaigns, such as low income voters can benefit from the information in the advertising messages.

The array of political marketing strategies provides information which voters need to assess candidate's capability in satisfying their needs. The contents of the campaign blue-print are the expressions of candidate's objectives for seeking votes from the electorate (Owuamalam, 2014). It is therefore no gain saying that political ads have the tendency of influencing voter decision making. The debate has since shifted from the impact of political ads towards its effectiveness and the ethical implications of campaign communication strategies. There is no doubt that with the emerging new communication platforms, the dynamics of political communication cum advertising has changed and so has the advertising strategies. Today, politicians are willing to lie, tarnish the image of opponents, and exploit religious and ethnic sentiments among others in order to get the

supports and votes they desire. This study therefore became imperative in order to explore the effectiveness and ethical implications of campaign communication strategies adopted in political advertisements towards voter decision-making.

The specific objectives of the study include:

1. To find out whether political ads influences voters' decision
2. To know some of the ethical implications of campaign communication strategies
3. To determine voters' perception of unethical strategies in political ads
4. To ascertain campaign communication strategies that are more effective in influencing voter decision-making

## 2. Concept of Political Advertising

The idea of advertising is to make known, to influence patronage, to increase brand loyalty and support and to maintain or sustain acceptability. Arguably, in a general sense, any product without advertising will remain at the manufacturer's shelf and any idea or service that is not communicate to the right public will remain an untapped idea or service. It is for this reason that advertisers spend money, time and other resources to make sure that the public receive enough information about a product, brand, service or an idea.

Political advertising is an offshoot of advertising and a child of political communication. It is concerned with projecting and promoting political ideas, political parties and political candidates through various media of mass communication for the purpose of engineering the public to accept, support and promote such political idea, party or candidate. It is a systematic and non-personal means of appealing for votes and supports for a particular candidate. Joseph and Balakrishnan (2021) explain the concept of political advertising this way:

Political Marketing or political advertising means information disseminated by a state politician, political party, its member, political campaign participant, on behalf and/or in the interest thereof, in any form and through any means, for payment or without return consideration, during the political campaign period or between

political campaigns, where such information is intended to influence the motivation of voters when voting at elections or referendums, or where it is disseminated with the purpose of campaigning for a state politician, political party, its member or political campaign participant as well as their ideas, objectives or program.

Political advertising is simply an aspect of advertising politics and political ideas. It is the act of arousing political patronage from electorates for a political party and/or its candidate. Robs (2009) gives a narrow conceptualization of political advertising by limiting it only to “the use of media by political candidates to increase their exposure to the public”. This view was earlier shared by Ansolabere and Iyengar (1995) when they wrote that “political advertising has become a veritable tool for selling candidates of political parties during election campaigns”. Samila (2003) cited in Okpara, Anuforo and Achor (2016) gives credence to the preceding views by describing advertising and public relations as taken the centre stage of promotion of political candidates and parties vying for different political positions during campaigns”.

Democracy gives room for all who is qualified to run for an office as guaranteed by the constitution and Electoral Act to contest but allows only one individual to be elected for that office per time. This makes elections and the electioneering processes an often serious and competitive activity. Political parties and their candidates therefore jostle among each other to obtain the larger share of the people’s votes and support. They engage in all manner of maneuvering and political re-engineering in order to influence voters’ voting decision and behaviour in a way that will favour. This view is supported by Owuamalam (2014) who defined political advertising as “messages whose content is political and presented to influence voters’ behavior through its perceived persuasive impact”. Expanding this view, Owuamalam (2014) asserts that “It harasses the guards of the electorate as it seeks endorsement from voters at election periods, like the proposed March 28, 2015 presidential election in Nigeria”.

### **3. TV Political Advertising and Election Campaign in Nigeria**

Within the promotional mix are two elements: public relations and advertising. During campaigns, public

relations and advertising play a key role in promoting political candidates and parties competing for various political posts. In the same vein, Ansolabere and Iyengar (1995) argue that TV political advertising has become a veritable tool for selling candidates of political parties during election campaigns.

The use of sponsored media to influence political decisions made for and by particular groups is known as political advertising. The advertising message is created by campaign staff and election strategists, and it may span multiple media outlets and several months of the election campaign. Over the past 20 years, Nigeria has seen an upsurge in TV political advertising. This is attributed to the development of information and communication technology as well as the recognition of the potent influence of mass media on the packaging of ideas and political candidates in addition to goods. Campaigning for elections is a marketing strategy used to get votes. They make it possible for political parties and candidates to allocate funds more wisely and to comprehend the factors that influence voters’ choices.

Nwosu (2016) underscores this:

The political parties in the Third Republic, SDP and NRC, engaged the services of advertising/PR agencies to develop campaigns for their parties. The governorship hopefuls and presidential aspirants such as Chief M.K.O. Abiola for the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Alhaji Bashir Tofa of the National Republican Convention (NRC) made use of advertising and PR in their political campaigns.

Furthermore, political parties advertised their manifestos to their consumers (voters) in newspapers, radio, and television. Political candidates (that is, the “products” being marketed by their makers in political parties) emphasized their virtues and other characteristics, including their related experience and qualifications, to entice people to vote for them. In these political campaigns, gubernatorial candidates’ banners and pamphlets were publicly used, as was the marketing of parties and political candidates by groups of party faithful moving in convoys of automobiles from one community to the next. Aside from that, town criers were paid to promote candidates and political parties. Delta State’s 2023 election has its own idiosyncrasies, as Nigerians witnessed some of the most unique campaign methods in recent memory.

#### **4. TV Political Advertising and Persuasiveness**

The adoption of television as a communication tool has permanently altered how politicians connect with citizens. They may now reach a larger audience than was previously feasible through electoral gatherings. Scholars have been studying the impact of political advertising. Since the first television commercials and campaigns aired in 1952, “Eisenhower answers American”, some of the best available empirical evidence suggest that TV political advertising is ineffective at engaging the voters (Ashworth and Clinton 2007, Krasno and Green 2008) and it only has very transient influence on people’s perceptions.

Others, however, point out that even statements that are self-serving may help the democratic process by giving voters potentially useful information about politicians and their rivals. But are individuals informed or convinced by TV political advertisements? The persuasive feature means that commercials can influence voter conduct even if they offer no information about the candidate’s “quality” or the party’s programme. Studies support the persuasive view by experimentally showing that by appealing different emotions advertising can have differing effects on voters “behaviour” (Brader, 2005).

Evidence exists that suggests advertising has a significant influence on those who are less informed. By directly targeting voters, special interest organizations may be able to avoid political influence if advertisements convince rather than inform residents. Scholars have only tangibly touched on the influence of TV political advertisements on voter choice and how political parties utilise the media to interact with their constituency.

#### **5. Effectiveness of Political Ads on Voter Decision Making**

Before now, at least two decades ago, political parties and their candidates relied solely on personal contacts and political rallies, campaign tours and public opinion leadership. This however has changed over time as political ads have become not only popular but arguably the most used strategy for influencing voter decision making, participation and over all political behaviour. For this reason, Nigerian politicians and indeed politicians all over the world have devoted all resources available to them to political ads to sell their manifestos and political visions.

Ever since the advent of political ads and the subsequent utilization of the political ads by politicians and political parties in the electioneering process has raised several questions among scholars. There seems to be a divergent view on the effectiveness of political ads on voter decision making. Duru (2021) stated that new media political campaigns did not influence the electoral behaviour and voting pattern of electorate in Imo State, Nigeria during the 2019 governorship election. Results also shows that the 2019 presidential election was extremely monetized, violent, fraught with all manners of electoral misconducts that are antithetical to principles and practices of political marketing (Akinola & Adekunle, 2022).

Political advertising draws from gaining attention of the voters, through the various mass media with the main aim of creating awareness about a party’s candidate in order to influence voters (Okpara et al., 2016). Scholars (Adanlawo & Reddy, 2020; Nwosu, 2003; Okpara et al., 2016) conceptualize political advertising by narrowing it to the use of media by political party’s candidate to increase voter exposure about the party and candidate. Political advertising is a form of campaign used by candidates contesting for a public office to reach and influence voter. Some scholars have argued that political advertising in electoral campaigns are marketing actions employed to get the attention and influence voters in elections (Akinola & Adekunle, 2022). They explain that it enables parties and their candidates to know how to allocate their resources and develop better knowledge on how and why voters make their decisions and preferences.

Although academics and practitioners alike believe that TV political advertising is vital in every election campaign, there appears to be little consensus on how TV political advertising affects electoral outcomes. Regardless of the apparent success of political advertising, discussion regarding the extent to which these efforts mobilize or demobilize the voters continues. Ansolabere and Iyengar (1995) are of the view that advertising campaigns are effective as they help position the candidate positively in the minds of the voters. They state that TV political advertising is persuasive and not manipulative, and that is message inform voters about the candidates’ position and allow voters to develop differentiated images of candidates. They add that although more involved and attentive voters learn more from competitive political advertising, people who do not pay close attention



to campaigns, such as low income voters can benefit from the information in the advertising messages.

Owuamalam (2014) describes political advertising based on nomenclature of the message or content. He sees advertisement messages whose content is political and presented to influence voters' behaviour through its persuasive impact. Okwechime (2015) aligns with the forgoing when he contended that political advertising is a tool of political campaign which is widely viewed as a product of the electronic age communication aimed at influencing voters.

In their study the examined the extent of political advertisement on voters' choice of candidate during the 2015 governorship election in Imo State, Nigeria, Okpara et al. (2016) found that there was a significant relationship between voters' exposure to political advertisement and voters' choice of candidate. They also found that voters informed voting decision was significantly attributed to different style by which political advertising were presented. In a quantitative study that investigated the influence of political advertising on voters' endorsement in the 2015 general elections in Ondo State, Nigeria (N=400) Felix and Olakunle (2017) revealed that political advertisement did not stimulate voters to cast their votes in the 2015 general elections in Ondo State. According to them, this was because the electorates were not influenced at all by political campaign advertisements. This result is contrary to findings from other studies (Okpara et al., 2016; Olujide et al., 2011).

These studies unlike Felix and Olakunle (2017) found strong evidence of exposure to political advertising and voters' choice of candidate. Felix and Olakunle (2017) found that political advertising has no significant effects on the electorate and that political advertisement was not a determining factor that made voters cast their votes as majority of the voters were not motivated by the political advertisements throughout the period of the elections. So, the advertisement message made little or no impact on voters. While the results of these studies are mixed with many of the results leaning towards no impact of political marketing to voter change in behaviour, the current study is conducted to add a voice in the literature particularly as it concerns South-South region of Nigeria.

## 6. Theoretical Framework

Theories help us to understand the relationship between different phenomena. It helps us to

understand how things work and makes some things that were otherwise abstract to become plain and easily understandable. To put this study in better perspective, this study is anchored on the agenda setting theory and the powerful effect theory.

### 6.1 Agenda Setting Theory

The agenda setting theory was propounded McCombs and his colleagues in a seminar study where they argued that the media in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). They further stated that readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and position (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). They also noted that while the media do not tell people what to think, that they tell them what to think about by determining the issues and the organizations that will be put on the public agenda for discussions (McCombs, 1977; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The import of this is that the media through the level of frequency, positioning and depth of attention given to a particular issue, to a great extent set agenda for the public. Such agenda goes on to determine what the public talks about over a particular period and of course by extension determine how they view such issue being discussed. Folarin (1998) says that agenda setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what they actually think, rather, it ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

Within the context of political ads and voter decision making, the agenda setting theory stipulates that the media may not tell electorates who to vote or support in an election, but the media surely provide to the electorates choices to make among the different candidates for the election. By displaying, publishing or reporting political ads, the media provide varying options among the electorates from which they must choose.

### 6.2 Powerful Effect Theory

The powerful effect theory is the opposite of the agenda setting theory. Unlike the agenda setting theory which puts the media in an almost passive position, the powerful effect theory positions the media in the most powerful, aggressive and effective position. The powerful effect theory was first proposed by Elisabeth

Noelle-Neumann in her 1973 article “Return to the Concept of Powerful Mass Media”. It contends that the mass media has a powerful effect on what people do, think and what decisions they make. In relation to this study, the powerful effect theory postulates that the media, through political ads have the ultimate power to determine the voting decision of voters and other political behaviours.

### 7. Methodology

For this study, the survey research method was used, with an online survey questionnaire serving as the data collection instrument. The researcher belongs to several political and professional groups within the study area; it was therefore convenient to distribute the online survey questionnaire to these groups. According to Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafu & Okpanachi (2012), survey is used in research when dealing with a very large population. The population

of the study consists of residents in Asaba, Delta State. According to the 2006 National Population Census, the population of Asaba stands at 149,603. However, given this population census was taken 17 years ago, the population is projected to have grown. In this scenario, the UNDP’s yearly rise rate of 2.28% was utilized to determine the new projected population of 208,098 people. The sample size was determined by using Taro Yamane’s sample size calculation, which resulted in a sample size of 399 respondents. The data collected from the respondents are presented in bar charts and analyzed using simple percentages.

### 7.1 Presentation of Results and Discussion of Findings

A total of 399 responses were recorded from the online survey. It is based on this that the following results were gotten and therefore presented below:

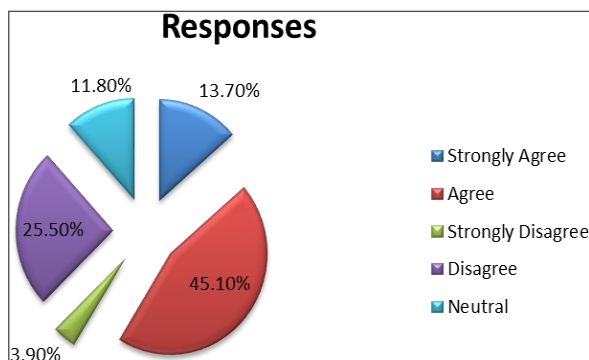


Figure 1. The content of political ads greatly influences my decision on who to vote for

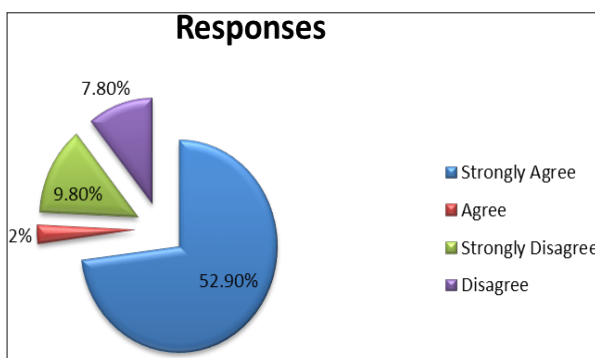


Figure 2. Political ads that attack an opponent’s character or personal life are unethical

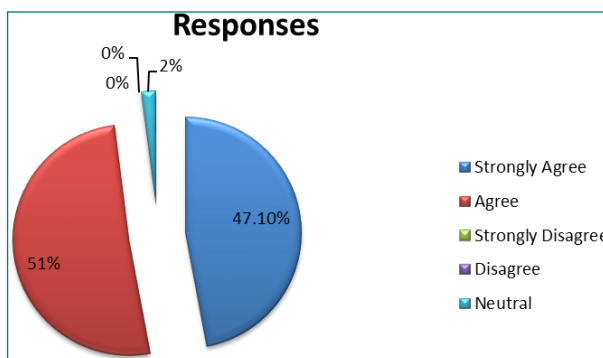


Figure 3. Political ads that provide factual information about a candidate’s record are helpful in making an informed decision.

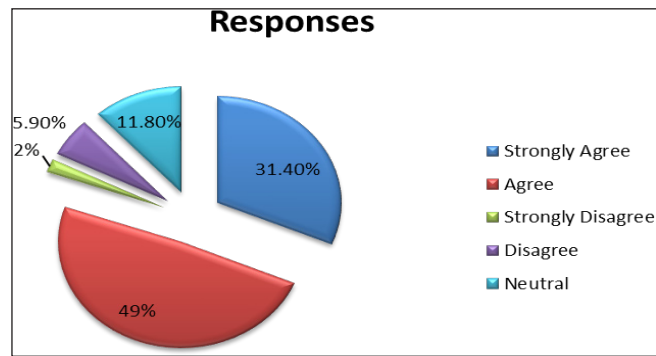


Figure 4. Candidates who use negative political ads are less trustworthy in my eyes

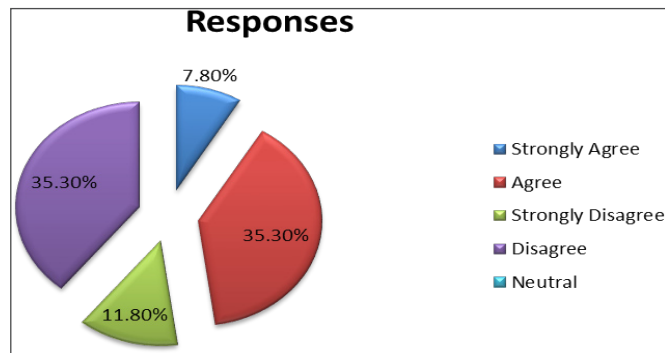


Figure 5. Political ads that use emotional appeals, such as fear or anxiety, are effective in shaping public opinion

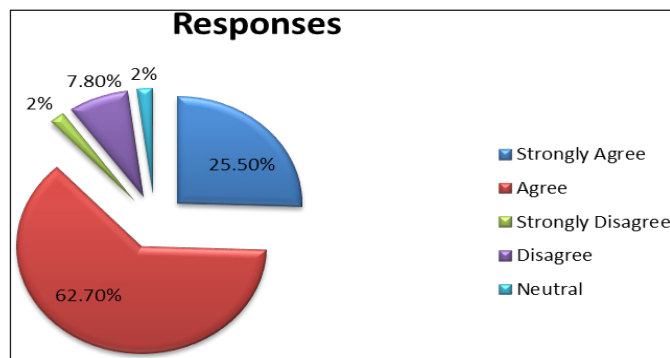


Figure 6. Political ads that focus on a candidate's policy proposals are more trustworthy than those that focus on personal attacks.

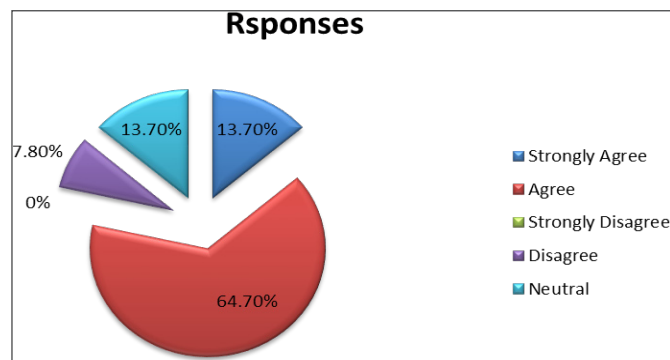


Figure 7. Campaign ads that use humor or satire can be an effective way to engage voters.

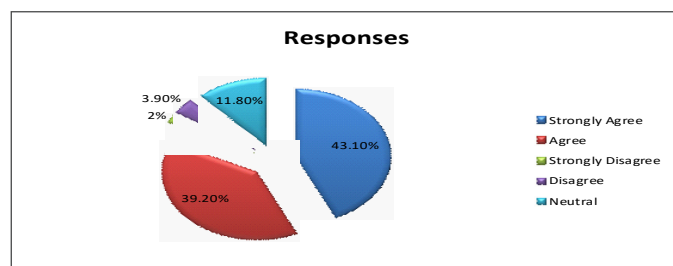


Figure 8. Political ads that exaggerate or distort the truth should be banned

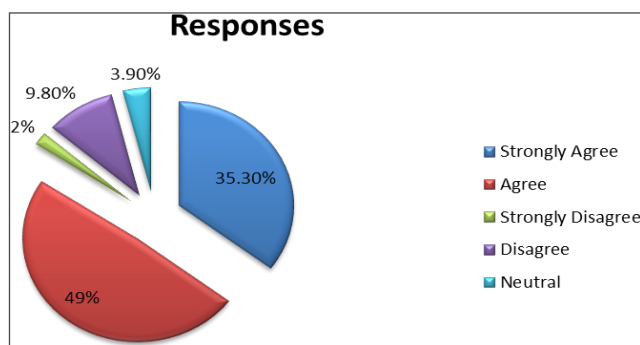


Figure 9. Political ads that focus on highlighting a candidate's accomplishments are more effective in swaying voters.

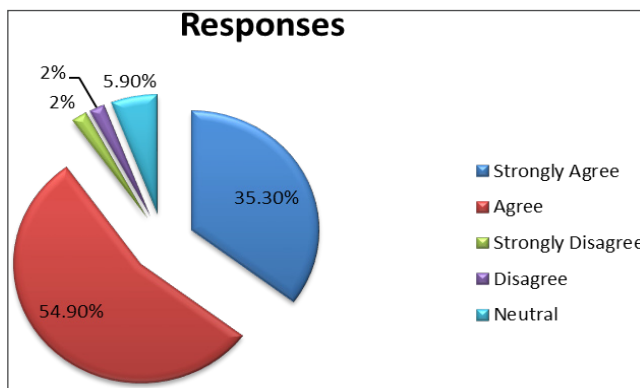


Figure 10. I believe there should be stricter regulations on the content and messaging of political ads.

## 8. Discussion of Findings

The results of this study reveal that majority of the respondents representing 45.10% agree that the content of political ads greatly impact in their decision on who to vote for. This shows that political ads are effective in influencing the voting decision of electorates to a great extent. This aligns with the postulations of the Powerful Effect theory that the media is powerful enough to determine what we do and what decisions we take. This finding aligns with Ansolabere and Iyengar (1995) who were of the view that advertising campaigns are effective as they help position the candidate positively in the minds of the voters. They state that TV political advertising is persuasive and not manipulative, and that is message inform voters about the candidates' position and allow voters to develop differentiated images of candidates. They add that although more involved and attentive voters learn more from competitive political advertising, people who do not pay close attention to campaigns, such as low income voters can benefit from the information in the advertising messages.

The study also found that 52.90% of the respondents are of the opinion that political ads that attack an opponent's character or personal life are unethical. This implies that although political ads have an effective influence on the respondents' voting decision, they are not passive recipients of media messages. This implies that they have the inalienable

ability to sieve through the contents of political ads before making voting decisions. More so, this shows that the incessant attacks on political opponents in political ads which has become the norm in Nigerian electioneering landscape is seen by the electorates as unethical. This finding aligns with Ate, Chiadika, Nwadiwe and Ekene (2023) who argued that the Nigerian social media political campaigns have also been marred by continuous attack campaigns against political opposition candidates, parties and supporters. They opined that this defeats the essence of political campaigns which is to promote a candidate and his missions with the aim of engaging with voters and convincing them to vote. While such attacks are targeted at defaming the reputations of the opposition, it does in a way present the campaigner as lacking vision and sportsmanship (ibid).

Furthermore, the study found that majority of the respondents representing 51% and 47.10% strongly agrees and agree respectively that political ads that provide factual information about candidate's record are helpful in making an informed decision. This implies that as opposed to attack campaigns, which have been established to be unethical, political ads focusing mainly on providing factual information about political candidates, would be more effective in garnering support and positive voting decision for a political candidate. Providing such information about the candidate acts as a persuasive tool to drawing



the attention of the electorates to the candidate and further influencing their voting decision. No wonder Owuamalam (2014) defined political advertising as “messages whose content is political and presented to influence voters’ behavior through its perceived persuasive impact”. Expanding on this view, Owuamalam (2014) asserts that “It harasses the guards of the electorate as it seeks endorsement from voters at election periods, like the proposed March 28, 2015 presidential election in Nigeria”.

Also, the study found that majority of the respondents believes that candidates who use negative political ads are less trustworthy in their eyes. The import of this finding is that the use of negative political ads is unethical and makes the electorates to mistrust the candidate. Negative ads do not make the public or electorates to believe the candidate as truth no matter how hidden will definitely come to light. Today electorates are no longer passive but active participants who can now divorce truth from falsehood.

The study also found that the use of emotional appeals such as fear or anxiety is effective in shaping public opinion. However, there also seems to be a little margin between those who agreed and those who disagreed. This implies that emotional appeals such as fear and anxiety may be effective in shaping public opinion and also be ineffective. It is little wonder therefore that this study also found that majority of the respondents representing 64.70% agreed that campaign ads that use humour or satire can be effective way to engage voters. This is because humor is an emotional appeal that not only relaxes the audience but also entertains them. Consequently, it is important to choose the right emotional appeal when creating a political ad in order to achieve desired results.

Furthermore, the study found that majority of the respondents representing 62.70% agreed that political ads that focus on a candidate’s policy proposals are more trustworthy than those that focus on personal attacks. This implies that electorates are eager to see what a candidate brings to the fore, what policies he/she is going to make and generally, what the candidate is hoping to do differently from other candidates or representatives before them. Therefore, political ads focusing on candidate’s policy proposals is more trustworthy, more believable and resonates more with the aspirations of the electorates than attack political ads. We now live in a more civilized society and the crudity in political ads decades ago can no longer be entertained by the today’s active and informed electorate.

In the same vein, the study found that political ads that focus on a candidate’s accomplishments are more effective in swaying voters. This implies that the electorates are more interested in a candidate’s prior accomplishments be it in the political scene or in other fields. This helps to build trust and firm belief that the candidate will do what he says he will do or at least has the capacity, ability and will to fulfill his electoral promises as proposed in the political ads. This is because every politician promises to lead better than the other but what track records, they hold should be the deciding factor on who should be believed and who should not be believed and consequently, who should be voted for by the electorates. Majority of the respondents opined that political ads that exaggerate or distort the truth should be banned and that there should be stricter regulations on the content and messaging of political ads.

## 9. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study demonstrated the influence of political ads on voter decision making and x-rayed the effectiveness and ethical implications of campaign communication strategies. The study has shown that the voting decisions of electorates depends majorly on political ads and the better the ads, the more the likelihood that a candidate will receive support and garner votes from the electorates. The electorates however are not passive recipients of political campaign messages. They actively listen, read and watch political ads and places the campaign communication strategies on a weighing scale to determine which should be trusted, believed and which resonates with their political aspirations.

Hitherto, political ads in Nigeria have often been marred by unethical activities such as name calling, image and personal attacks, outright falsehood and exaggeration of facts. These ethical malpractices now have a different impact on electorates. Instead of making the electorates to support a candidate who attacks other candidates or say unprintable things about them, the electorates lose their trust for them and would prefer a political ad that is issue-based and an expose on the accomplishments and policy plans of the candidate.

Based on the research findings and conclusion, it is recommended that political advertisers and campaign handlers learn to focus their campaigns on the candidate, the political party and their accomplishments and policies. Political ads should not be an attack tool or a means of pulling down the other candidate but should

be used to propagate the reasons a candidate should be voted for. Sometimes, political advertisers make the mistake of presenting themselves as a lesser evil by exposing the weaknesses of the other party while entirely jettisoning their own pros.

Issue based campaigns is the ideal campaign communication strategy. Today electorates are more interested in what a candidate has to offer and what stands him out from the crowd, so campaign handlers must make sure to hand them this information without breaching ethical codes. Exaggeration of truth is as bad as falsehood and so is over sensationalizing of political ads. Political advertisers should therefore learn to draw the line between truth, falsehood and exaggeration of both.

Advertising regulatory bodies need to pay adequate attention to political ads that breach ethical codes. It is their responsibility to ensure that the public are safe from harmful campaign communications and it is also their responsibility to ensure that another individual's rights are protected. Finally, electorates should endeavour to conduct more researches about a political candidate outside the political ads on the media as this will help them make more effective and right political decisions.

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