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Application of Design Principle and Elements in Print Advertising: A Qualitative Case Study of Selected Advertisements in Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

Design serves as the visual language that influences, informs, and shapes brand identity in advertisements. However, the intentional use of design principles and elements in Nigerian print advertising has not been thoroughly explored in local academic discourse. This paper refines the broad topic of "design principles and elements in advertising" into a specific investigation of how Nigerian advertising professionals implement universal design fundamentals such as line, shape, color, texture, space, and typography as elements, and balance, contrast, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, unity, and movement as principles within the culturally specific context of Lagos, governed by the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON, previously APCON). Adopting a qualitative case study approach, the research posits that understanding design meaning is contextually bound and complex; thus, it should be explored through the in-depth analysis of specific advertisements rather than through the generalized methods typical of quantitative surveys. By examining a selection of print ads and existing literature on Nigerian advertising design, this study offers an interpretive account of how design elements and principles coalesce to create persuasive advertisements that resonate with local culture. The analysis draws on Gestalt theory of visual perception and is bolstered by previous Nigerian research on cultural symbolism and advertising design. The paper concludes that successful advertising design in Nigeria necessitates a thoughtful integration of universal design principles with local cultural references and recommends that design and advertising education, along with regulatory frameworks, pay greater attention to this integration.

Keywords: design principles, design elements, advertisement design, visual communication, qualitative case study, Nigerian advertising.

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Introduction

Advertisement design exists at the crossroads of art and commerce: it must be visually captivating enough to grab attention and structurally organized enough to deliver a persuasive message within seconds of viewing (Lester, 2014). This discipline is guided by two interconnected sets of ideas long established in visual communication research of elements of design, which are the fundamental visual components (line, shape, color, texture, space, and

typography), and the principles of design, which are the compositional guidelines (balance, contrast, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, unity, and movement) that dictate how those elements are arranged (Dondis, 1973; Lester, 2014). Although these basics are often presented as universal, their use in advertising is never culturally neutral: audiences interpret ads against the backdrop of local visual customs, symbols, and values (Nwagbara & Umor, 2012; Oladumiye, 2018).

Advertising generally aims at promoting and selling goods, services, and ideas. These include tangible items such as beauty products, drinks, toiletries, and intangible services like banking, medical care, and interior decoration, repairing works, fashion and designing. Ideas such as political, economic, religious and cultural among others are placed in the media to inform, educate and call for patronage (Nwagbara, 2010). For this persuasive communication strategy to achieve its goal, the packaging of the message is paramount. That is, a basic consideration in the conceptualization of the advertising message is how acceptable the final 'copy' will be. To the advertiser and the mass media, saddled with the responsibility of relaying the message to the audience, it is not just the creation of the message with the best concept that is important, but that the message is capable of selling the product, idea, or service and that it is acceptable to the consumer or potential consumer. To achieve this, advertisers must recognize the fact that advertising should take place within a specific cultural context. Cultural norms and values should provide direction and guidance to all members of society in all aspects of their lives including their consumption patterns. Understanding how this works is necessary in designing meaningful advertising copies (Nwagbara, 2010). Similarly, Mboho (1991) argues that when an advertiser, the producer, or even the mass communicator shows concern about the content of his message, he is in fact, recognizing that information has potential persuasive powers on any audience, and he knows also that the audience's reaction to information is not only dependent on content, but also on several factors that may be psychological, social or environmental. The media are entrusted with the role of informing, educating and entertaining the society. Advertising messages are tailored towards mass communication and as such, are directed at large towards heterogeneous and scattered audiences. The mass media audience is made up of a variety of persons who are different in social class, educational attainment, values, norms, economic status and cultural beliefs. Individual's level of exposure to technology and their acceptance of media messages present a segregation that calls for attention by virtue of the goal of advertising.

The effectiveness of advertising can be enhanced if advertisers ensure that messages are created to reflect the cultural symbols associated with their target audience using any chosen media of mass communication or any other media so decided. This is because "…the influence that culture has on individual's consumption pattern is strong enough to affect their choice of goods and services and by extension, their response to advertisements" (Nwagbara, 2002). Therefore, it will be less effective without the use of cultural symbols in visual communication of print and electronic advertisement.

Statement of the Problem

Much of the available literature on the elements and principles of design originates from Western graphic design and advertising traditions and was developed with reference to Euro-American visual culture, media systems, and consumer markets (Dondis, 1973; Lester, 2014; Arens et al., 2008). These frameworks are widely taught in Nigerian tertiary design and advertisement programmes largely in the form in which they were originally formulated, with comparatively little curricular adaptation to reflect indigenous visual traditions, symbol systems, or audience reading habits. Jibril and Saidu (2019), reviewing the graphic design curriculum across Nigerian tertiary institutions, found that programme content remains heavily oriented toward imported design theory and software-driven technical instruction, with limited structured engagement between foundational design principles and the cultural context in which Nigerian graduates will

eventually practice. The practical consequence is that Nigerian design students and early-career practitioners frequently acquire a vocabulary of balance, contrast, emphasis, and unity without a corresponding, empirically grounded account of how these principles behave when applied to Nigerian subject matter, symbols, and audiences.

At the same time, the body of literatures that does focus specifically on Nigerian advertising has tended to concentrate on cultural symbolism, regulatory compliance, or consumer response, rather than on the compositional mechanics of design itself. Nwagbara and Umor (2012) demonstrate that Nigerian cultural elements are deliberately incorporated into advertisement design and that this incorporation improves audience believability, but their analysis is framed around cultural resonance rather than the classical elements-and-principles vocabulary. Oladumiye (2018) similarly identifies specific indigenous symbols used in Nigerian advertising and explains their cultural efficacy, again without systematically mapping that efficacy onto categories such as balance, proportion, or rhythm. Dalamu (2016) extends this line of enquiry into the verbal-visual interplay of Nigerian advertising texts but likewise stops short of a design-theoretic reading.

The result is a body of Nigerian-focused literature that is rich in cultural insight but comparatively thin on design-theoretic precision, existing in parallel with a body of design-theoretic literature that is comparatively thin on Nigerian cultural specificity.

This leaves a demonstrable gap between design theory and situated Nigerian advertising practice: neither literature, taken alone, offers design educators, students, or practitioners a framework that explicitly shows how the classical elements and principles of design are retained, adapted, or reinterpreted when applied to specific, bounded Nigerian print advertisement cases. Left unaddressed, this gap has practical consequences beyond the academy, since design curricula, professional training, and regulatory guidance issued under the ARCON/APCON framework all continue to rely, by default, on design vocabulary whose cultural applicability to the Nigerian advertising environment has not been systematically tested.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify how the classical elements of design (line, shape, colour, texture, space, and typography) manifest in selected Nigerian print advertisements.
- To examine how the classical principles of design (balance, contrast, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, unity, and movement) are applied to organize those elements persuasively.
- To assess the extent to which cultural and regulatory context (APCON/ARCON standards, indigenous symbolism) shapes the application of these universal design fundamentals in Lagos-based advertising.
- To justify, methodologically, why a qualitative case study approach is appropriate for this inquiry.

Research Questions

- How are the elements of design deployed in selected Lagos-based print advertisements?
- How are the principles of design applied to organize these elements for persuasive effect?
- In what ways does Nigerian cultural context and regulatory practice inflect the use of otherwise universal design fundamentals?

Literature Review

Exploring the Elements and Principles of Design in Product Design

Design elements and design principles constitute fundamental components of visual communication and product development. Design elements encompass line, shape, colour, texture, space, and form, which serve as the basic visual components through which designers construct meaning and organize visual compositions (Lidwell et al., 2003). These elements can be strategically manipulated to communicate information, direct users' attention, evoke emotional responses, and enhance the functional and aesthetic qualities of a product. For instance, the use of dynamic lines may create a visual

impression of movement, while variations in texture can contribute to tactile interaction and enhance the user's sensory engagement with a product. Consequently, the effective application of design elements plays an important role in shaping both the visual identity and user experience of a product.

Design principles provide a framework for the systematic organization and application of these elements within a design composition. Key principles, including balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, rhythm, proportion, and unity, facilitate the creation of visual harmony, coherence, and structural organization (Ambrose & Harris, 2010). These principles determine how individual design elements relate to one another and influence the way users perceive and interact with a product. For example, balance can contribute to visual stability, contrast can establish distinction and hierarchy, while proportion and unity can promote coherence among different components. The appropriate integration of these principles therefore enables designers to develop products that are not only aesthetically engaging but also functionally effective, comprehensible, and appropriate to their intended context.

Product design can be conceptualized as a systematic process involving the conception, development, and realization of tangible solutions that respond to identified user needs and market requirements (Ulrich et al., 2020). It encompasses both functional problem-solving and aesthetic considerations, requiring the integration of technology, materials, form, usability, and user experience. Contemporary product design extends beyond the creation of physical objects to incorporate broader considerations such as emotional value, sustainability, cultural relevance, accessibility, and user-centred experience. This broader perspective recognizes that successful products must satisfy practical requirements while also responding to the social, environmental, and emotional expectations of users.

The relationship between design elements, design principles, and product design is therefore fundamental to the development of innovative and meaningful products. A comprehensive understanding of how visual elements are selected, organized, and applied enables designers to establish a balance between aesthetic appeal, functional performance, usability, and contextual relevance. The integration of these dimensions ultimately contributes to the development of products that effectively address user requirements while communicating meaning and creating positive user experiences.

The Elements of Design

The elements of design are the irreducible visual components from which every composition, including an advertisement layout, is built. Dondis (1973) identifies line, shape, tone, colour, texture, dimension, scale, and movement as the basic visual alphabet of any composed image, while Lester (2014) organizes the same territory around line, colour, and form as the primary components manipulated in graphic design and advertising layout. In advertisement design specifically, colour operates as an emotional and mnemonic device: consumers learn to associate particular hues with particular brands, and colour choices therefore carry both aesthetic and strategic weight (Arens et al., 2008). Typography, closely related to line and shape, determines legibility and tone; an advertisement can fail on message clarity alone if type choices are inconsistent with the audience's reading habits (Lester, 2014). Space, including the disciplined use of empty or negative space, is what allows the eye to isolate a focal point within an otherwise busy advertising layout.

The Principles of Design

Where the elements are the vocabulary of visual composition, the principles are its grammar. Balance (symmetrical or asymmetrical) prevents an advertisement from appearing visually unstable; contrast differentiates dominant from subordinate information and directs the eye to the advertisement's key message; emphasis establishes a clear focal point, typically the product, brand mark, or headline; rhythm and repetition create consistency across a campaign's multiple executions; proportion governs

the relative scale of elements such as headline, product image, and logo; and unity ensures that, despite variety, the composition reads as a single coherent message (Dondis, 1973; Lester, 2014). Gestalt psychology offers the underlying perceptual explanation for why these principles work viewers do not perceive isolated design elements but organize them into a coherent whole, following tendencies such as proximity, similarity, and closure, which is why disciplined use of balance, contrast, and unity produces advertisements that are read as a single message rather than as disconnected fragments.

Design and Culture in Nigerian Advertising Practice

Nigerian advertising scholarship complicates the assumption that design elements and principles operate identically across cultural contexts. Nwagbara and Umor (2012), working with a purposive sample of print advertisements and a survey of Port Harcourt urban respondents, found that Nigerian cultural elements were deliberately incorporated into advertisement design and that such incorporation enhanced audience believability and product patronage. In a related vein, Oladumiye (2018) surveyed 137 respondents in Lagos State and identified specific indigenous symbols among them the kola nut, cowries, the talking drum, and the head crown as culturally resonant motifs that Nigerian advertisers draw upon precisely because audiences relate to familiar cultural stimuli more readily than to unfamiliar ones. Dalamu (2016) similarly demonstrates, through analysis of Nigerian advertising texts and images, that verbal and visual design choices in Nigerian advertising function as a form of socio-cultural reproduction rather than neutral commercial communication. Taken together, this body of work suggests that the classical elements and principles of design are not applied in a cultural vacuum in Nigeria: colour symbolism, culturally coded imagery, and locally resonant motifs are layered onto the universal design grammar described by Dondis (1973) and Lester (2014), and this layering is itself governed within statutory limits by the advertising regulatory framework administered in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Gestalt theory of visual perception, which holds that audiences perceive a composed image as an organized whole rather than as a sum of discrete parts. Applied to advertisement design, Gestalt theory explains why the deliberate manipulation of design principles proximity, similarity, balance, and closure among them that produces advertisements that communicate a single coherent message, and why poorly balanced or visually inconsistent advertisements are perceived as confusing or untrustworthy regardless of the quality of their individual elements.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design. Yin (2018) defines the case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident description that fits the study of design elements and principles as they are actually deployed in specific, real, culturally embedded advertisements, rather than as abstract textbook categories. Creswell and Poth (2018) similarly identify case study research as an appropriate qualitative approach when the researcher seeks an in-depth understanding of a bounded system (here, a bounded set of Lagos-based print advertisements) using multiple sources of information.

Justification for a Qualitative Case Study Approach

A qualitative case study approach is justified over a quantitative alternative for three interlocking reasons. First, the object of inquiry how design elements and principles combine with cultural symbolism to produce meaning is interpretive rather than purely measurable; understanding why a particular colour, symbol, or layout choice succeeds in a Nigerian advertising context requires close reading of the advertisement in its cultural setting,

not merely the counting of design features (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, the case study format allows the advertisements to be treated as bounded, information-rich units, consistent with Yin's (2018) argument that case studies are well suited to "how" and "why" questions about contemporary phenomena the researcher cannot manipulate. Third, prior Nigerian studies that combined documentary or content analysis with contextual interpretation (Nwagbara & Umor, 2012; Oladumiye, 2018) have proved more able to surface the cultural layering of design choices than studies relying on decontextualised quantitative indices alone, lending precedent to the approach adopted here.

Case Selection and Data Sources

Cases are purposively selected print advertisements drawn from established Nigerian and multinational brands with a visible presence in the Lagos advertising market, following the purposive logic used in comparable Nigerian design studies (Nwagbara & Umor, 2012; Oladumiye, 2018). Selection criteria include: (a) availability of the advertisement as an archivable print artefact; (b) evident use of one or more of the classical design elements and principles under review; and (c) sufficient cultural or regulatory relevance to allow discussion of local inflection. Three complementary sources of evidence are triangulated, consistent with Yin's (2018) emphasis on multiple sources in case study research: (i) documentary evidence, that is, the print advertisements themselves; (ii) the existing academic and professional literature on Nigerian advertising design; and (iii) publicly available regulatory guidance issued by Nigeria's advertising regulatory authority. This documentary, multi-source approach allows the study to proceed without requiring new primary fieldwork, while still meeting the depth-of-context standard that defines qualitative case study research.

Data Analysis

Each selected advertisement is analyzed descriptively against the two design frameworks established in the literature review, the elements of design (line, shape, colour, texture, space, typography) and the principles of design (balance, contrast, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, unity, movement). This descriptive coding is then read against the cultural and regulatory literature to determine where and how local context modifies the application of an otherwise universal design vocabulary, an analytic procedure consistent with the within-case and cross-case analysis techniques recommended for case study research (Yin, 2018).

Discussion of Elements and Principles in the Nigerian Advertising Case

Nigerian print advertisements in the Lagos market exhibit a recurring pattern in universal design fundamentals are retained as the organizing grammar of the layout, while specific elements are most visibly colour and imagery are substituted with locally resonant equivalents. Where a global advertisement might use a generic lifestyle image to create emphasis and unity, the Nigerian cases documented by Oladumiye (2018) show culturally specific motifs such as kola nuts, cowries, and the talking drum performing the same compositional function, drawing the eye and anchoring the message, while simultaneously carrying connotative cultural weight that a generic image would lack. Nwagbara and Umor's (2012) findings that audiences respond more favourably to advertisements incorporating recognisable Nigerian cultural elements can be read, in design terms, as evidence that emphasis and unity are strengthened, not weakened, when the focal element is culturally familiar rather than merely visually striking. This suggests that, in the Nigerian context, the principle of emphasis is not satisfied by visual dominance alone but by a combination of visual dominance and cultural legibility.

Balance and proportion likewise appear to be negotiated against local reading conventions and regulatory constraints. Nigerian advertising practice operates within the statutory frameworks maintained by the country's advertising regulatory authority, which govern claims, imagery, and taste in ways that shape how boldly contrast or scale can be used to achieve emphasis. Typography choices documented

in Nigerian advertising analysis (Dalamu, 2016) further indicate that language mixing English alongside Nigerian Pidgin or indigenous-language phrasing functions as a design element in its own right, contributing to rhythm and cultural resonance in ways not fully anticipated by design theory developed outside the Nigerian context.

Findings

- The classical elements of design (line, shape, colour, texture, space, typography) remain the basic vocabulary of Nigerian print advertisement layout, consistent with established visual communication theory (Dondis, 1973; Lester, 2014).
- The classical principles of design (balance, contrast, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, unity, movement) continue to govern composition, but their application is culturally inflected: emphasis and unity are strengthened when the focal design element is a recognisable indigenous symbol rather than a culturally neutral image (Oladumiye, 2018).
- Colour and imagery function simultaneously as universal design elements and as culturally coded signifiers, requiring Nigerian advertisement designers to satisfy both compositional and cultural criteria at once (Nwagbara & Umor, 2012).
- Typography and language choice operate as an additional, context-specific design element in the Nigerian advertising environment, shaping rhythm and audience identification (Dalamu, 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper adjusted a broad thematic interest in the principles and elements of design in advertisement into a focused, qualitative case study inquiry into Lagos-based Nigerian print advertising. The review of design theory and Nigerian advertising scholarship indicates that classical design fundamentals, line, shape, colour, texture, space, and typography as elements, and balance, contrast, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, unity, and movement as principles, remain structurally indispensable to advertisement design, but that their persuasive effectiveness in the Nigerian market depends on their integration with indigenous cultural symbolism and regulatory context. A qualitative case study design, justified through Yin (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018), is well suited to this inquiry because it allows design choices to be interpreted within their real cultural setting rather than abstracted from it.

It is recommended that design and advertisement curricula in Nigerian institutions explicitly teach the elements and principles of design alongside their local cultural inflections, rather than as culturally neutral universals; that advertising practitioners document and share case examples of culturally adapted design solutions to build a Nigerian-specific body of design knowledge; and that future research extend this documentary case study approach with primary data, practitioner interviews or audience response studies, to test the interpretive conclusions.

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