

Audience Perception of CSR Advertising and Environment-Friendly Messages: A Study of Awka, Nnewi and Onitsha

Raphael Onwudinjor

Abstract

The study was aimed at examining audience perception of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) advertising and environment friendly messages. A random sample of 346 respondents drawn from an estimated population of 2,560 business people from the Eke Awka Market, Onitsha Main Market and Nkwo Nnewi Market as used for the study. Descriptive (quantitative) statistical method was used to analyse the data. Chi square was used to test the hypotheses. The result showed that 82.5 percent of the respondents stated that there is a significant relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) advertising and environmental sustainability. This gave statistical support to the alternate hypothesis implying that environmental causes are a predictive factor towards CSR advertisers' motivations. 17.5 percent of the respondents thought otherwise. It was, therefore, recommended that CSR advertising must not be only a principle declaration, but it has to materialize into concrete and continuous actions and be real.

Keywords: Audience Perception, CSR Advertising, Environment Friendly Messages

Introduction

Today in Nigeria, it is becoming increasingly difficult for government to provide even sixty percent of the social needs of the people. While the forces of demand and supply keep diverging and the nation's economy keeps dwindling, the citizenry are consistently in search of alternatives for respite. Consequently, they look up to, expect and sometimes besiege business organizations or corporations with requests and proposals for support of social causes. One of such requests borders on sustaining the environment.

There are many environmental issues either waiting to be addressed or have not adequately been addressed in the country. Some of them include recycling, elimination of the use of harmful chemicals, reduced packaging, prevention of municipal solid waste or waste management, protecting the land, protecting the air, conserving or preserving water.

Some business organizations with environmental vision do sometimes listen to the calls to support sustainable use of the earth's resources, regarding them as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). They, therefore, incorporate social messages into their advertising, hence CSR advertising.

According to Arens, Weigold and Arens (2011) the advertising industry is part of a large business community. Like any good neighbor. It has responsibilities to keep its property clean, participate in civic events, support local enterprises, and improve the community. Advertisers are regularly chided when they fail the social responsibility litmus test. Concerned citizens, consumer advocates, and special interest groups pressure advertisers when they perceive the public's welfare is at risk.

Institutions within a society have a responsibility to help maintain social harmony through appropriate stewardship. Expectations are usually high that advertising will deliver consistently on this. This may naturally stem from three foundations or premises. It is society that gives advertising the locus to exist. It is the people that give advertising the focus to function because it cannot do so in isolation. It is the people or citizenry that sustains advertising through patronage; otherwise the industry would commence today and fold tomorrow. The society would perhaps not be asking for too much to expect that advertising would subscribe to and significantly support

causes that would uplift, bring about justice, effect harmony to give joy and progress to the society. It would also mean that advertising should not go below ethical standards that support the society and contribute to the economic system, realizing that the people have got the power to attack and to praise.

It can ever be debated whether advertising has been socially responsible. It can ever be debated if the people will consider advertising messages as environmentally friendly.

Statement of the Problem

The point has been made that government can hardly attend to the social needs of the citizenry. The private sector has immense power to offer a good complement or alternative. When organizations in this sector come in, they consider it as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to the people. CSR advertising is an advertising that supports a social cause. In their advertising, they incorporate messages that support social causes as environmental sustainability. However, it has not been sufficiently evaluated or examined how friendly these organizations have been in responding to public or audience desire in terms of environmental sustainability by promoting their CSR commitment through CSR advertising. In view of this, there is need for a research into the CSR content of these organizations to ascertain whether they have been feeling audience need and expectations. In doing this, have their messages been environmentally friendly? Are advertisers contributing enough towards environmental sustainability? What is the audience rating of the CSR content of advertising messages regarding environmental sustainability?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- a. To ascertain audience rating of the CSR content of advertising messages on environmental sustainability.
- b. To discover whether advertisers are favourably disposed to environmental sustainability.

Hypothesis

The following hypotheses are formulated for the study

Ho₁: Advertisers are unlikely to be favourably disposed to environmental sustainability.

Ho₂: The audience is unlikely to rate the content of CSR advertising messages on the environment highly.

Literature Review

CSR advertising has immense power to support behavior change campaigns. Messages put to effect these changes can make or mar the success of the campaigns. Onwudinjor (2009) posits that "Any advertisement or advert message that is directly or indirectly insensitive to societal wellbeing is not socially responsible. Its corporate social responsibility (CSR) rating would be low or very low".

Advertisements that are environment friendly have been identified by some scholars as green advertising. Rahbar and Wahid (2011) describe green advertising as advertising that promotes green products and informs customers of their environmental benefits. Their objective, according to the authors, is to influence consumers purchase behavior by encouraging them to buy environment friendly products and to direct their attention to the positive consequences for themselves and for the environment of their purchase behavior.

Kotler and Lee (2005) observe some socially responsible business practices recorded by Motorola in the promotion of environmental protection. The company's environmental vision called for it to fully support sustainable use of the earth's resources, with responsible business practices concentrated in three major areas: protecting the land, protecting the air, conserving water. Programmes designed to protect the land included a programme called Waste Wise, a voluntary U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) programme where organizations eliminate costly municipal solid waste, benefitting their bottom line and the environment. Since joining the Waste Wise programme in 1994 Motorola's U.S. manufacturing sites were reported to have recycled

within six years, almost 125,000 tons of waste. In the year 2000 Motorola was one of the three companies chosen by EPA as “Waste Wise Partner of the Year for Very Large Business”, recognizing these accomplishments in waste reduction.

According to the report, Motorola also developed packaging reuse systems, such as the compact system, developed to eliminate the need for separate product packaging by using a standardized tray to receive incoming components from suppliers and then reusing the tray to ship the finished pagers to customers. This system eliminated over 140 tons of packaging waste each year and saved Motorola approximately \$4.3 million annually. The compact system was featured as the “Innovation of the month” in a U.S. EPA Waste Wise bulletin. Motorola’s advertisements as reported during the period recorded immense success as the people appreciated its support for environmental safety and consequently patronized its products. Motorola’s participation in EPA’s waste reduction programme was an opportunity for an alliance that strengthened its brand positioning.

Environment friendly messages as a strategy for CSR advertising is a good business practice. It has a lot of benefits. Business for Social Responsibility Education Fund (2000) notes that a wide range of benefits have been experienced by corporations that adopt and implement socially responsible business practices and there appears to be an increasing ability to link these efforts to positive financial results. The financial benefits have been associated with decreased operating costs, monetary incentives from regulatory agencies, and increased employee productivity and retention. It adds that marketing benefits are numerous as well, with the potential for increasing community goodwill, creating brand preference, building brand positioning, improving product quality, and increasing corporate respect. And, as with other social initiatives, these activities also provide opportunities to build relationships with external partners such as regulatory agencies, suppliers, and non-profit organizations.

The Ford Motor Company is another good CSR advertiser with an environment friendly posture. The company participated in an initiative that uses greeting cards to support abandoned and neglected children. The programme involved company employees collecting old and used greeting cards that are then sent to children at St. Jude’s Ranch for Children in Nevada, in the United States, who then used them to make new cards that are sold to support the non profits scheme. Part of the advert message had read “Greeting Card Recycling ... please deposit *used cards* fronts in marked containers”. The company’s news release in 2003, assessing the initiative reported: Our six dozen Ford Motor Company volunteers should be proud. This was another successful year and their effort not only helps Mother Nature with tons of material diverted from the waste stream but also helps deserving young people from St. Judes as well.

Kenneth Cole Productions, Inc. is known to integrate his environment friendly posture in his CSR advertising messages. According to a 2003 article in the *Washington Post*, the messages are known for their “snappy one-liners to promote a social agenda, burnish his corporate image, and sell his shoes”. Several examples of these one-liners were cited in this article and featured as follows, demonstrating the strategic use of environmental concerns to claim and own a brand position;

1. “Have a heart, give a sole” was used with a visual where ads showed “tattered work boots of the homeless in lieu of a shiny pair of loafers”. The ads then promised a discount on a pair of new shoes if a customer donated a pair of their old ones to the homeless.
2. “Buy a pair of Kenneth Cole Shoes and you might be responsible for bringing one homeless person in from the cold” read another billboard ad, which as noted in the *WashingtonPost* article, was in sharp contrast with others in the industry. “Gucci advertising promises its customers a night of sweaty sex. Hermes ads suggest that a shopper has finally earned the keys to a private club”. The latter ads are not being environment friendly or socially responsible.

Environment friendly message in CSR advertising ordinarily endears not only the promoted product or service but also its advertiser to the buying audience. Even when the message carries a penalty for a default, it does not

change audience patronage or goodwill. They naturally take the cause of action advocated by the ad message.

The 7-Eleven Inc., a portable food and drinks manufacturer in the United States, is a case in point. It had supported Texas Department of Transportation on its litter campaign tagged “Don’t Mess With Texas”. The marketing campaign launched in 1968 sought to persuade Texans to keep their trash in the car and off the roads.

7-Eleven’s message on its products read “Dine on the Dash but Stash Your Trash”. The company unveiled what was believed to be the world’s largest trash bag at a “Don’t Mess With Texas” local rally and cleanup event that offered customers a chance to practice tossing trash into a bag while enjoying refreshments. Each store had decals identifying it as a “Don’t Mess With Texas” partner posted on the door and at the gas Islands. Volunteers from keep Texas Beautiful conducted spot checks for litter at 7-Eleven stores and ranked their exterior appearance. Feedback was then routed to the appropriate 7-Eleven management personnel.

According to 7-Eleven’s website in 2022:

It was estimated that more than a quarter of a million customers shopped nearly 3000 Texas 7-Eleven stores each day and saw the antilittering message, which include a reminder about the state’s \$500 maximum fine for each littering violation.

Working for the Texas authority, the Tuerff-Davis environ medic Inc. recorded in its website in the same year: “Between 1995 and 2001, litter thrown on Texas highways decreased by more than 50 percent and cigarette butt litter decreased by 70 percent.”

Audience perception or assessment of CSR advertising messages as whether friendly or unfriendly, “altruistic” or “extrinsic” according to some scholars is sometimes based on how reputable or not the advertiser is. At other times, it is based emotions. The audience generally expects companies with a good ethical reputation to behave in a socially responsible way. When such companies carry out and communicate new initiatives, they will be perceived as sincere, as opposed to companies with poor ethical reputations (Tao and Ferguson, 2015). On the other hand, a bad reputation could increase the level of skepticism about the company’s CSR activities (Lii and Lee, 2012; Elving, 2013). The audience, therefore, considers the message of an ethically reputable advertiser as environment friendly, sincere, positive as against that from the non-reputable advertiser whose messages are considered extrinsic or artificial because the company is after making profit at the expense of the environment. Sometimes their arguments are logical, sometimes they are emotional. When they border on emotions, Batra and Ray (1986), Holbrook and Batra (1987), and Aaker *et al.* (1988) suggest that all the effects of feeling responses may not be captured by the attitude towards the advertisement and add a previously neglected link in the form of a range of emotions. Emotional responses to advertising have been investigated extensively and diverse typologies have been developed. For example, Batra and ray (1987) identify 13 categories of affective responses that include interest, surprise, skepticism and anger. Edel and Burke (1987) summarise 52 items in three dimensions: upbeat, negative, and warm feelings. Homer and Yoon (1992) consider attention, pleasure, skepticism and downbeat feelings. Later, Orth *et al.* (2007) worked with the constructs of downbeat feelings, pleasure and attention.

Emotions (positive and a negative) are found to be independent and the presence of positive emotions does not preclude the presence of negative feelings; in fact, it is normal that both types of emotions co-occur (Huang, 2001; Williams and Aaker, 2002). The issue can emerge in CSR advertising. The main aim of a company is to make as much profit as possible, while donating money to a good cause is usually motivated by a willingness to help society. These contrary motives are not easily linked in the cognitive process of an individual (Elving, 2013). Everything will depend on the greater or minor weight of the altruistic of extrinsic attributions inspired by the communication.

Theoretical Framework

The advertising theory relevant to this study is the attribution theory. According to attribution theory (Kelley, 1973), individuals try to understand why companies support social causes and this evaluation leads them to consider two primary motivations: extrinsic or business-service versus altruistic or public-serving motives. The first motivations are linked to increasing sales or boosting the company’s image, whereas the second motivations refer to benefits to society or raising awareness for a specific cause (Becker-Olsen *et al.* 2006)

These attributions which could be both negative and positive (Rifon *et al.* 2004) will help us to independently measure perceptions of our audience regarding the environmental friendliness of messages of companies’ CSR engagement.

Methodology

The descriptive research method, was used for the study. Using Taro Yamane’s (1964:280) formula, a sample of 346 was drawn from an estimated total population of 2,560 traders at the EkeAwka, Nkwo Nnewi and Onitsha Main Markets, which featured in the study. The formula is

$$n = \frac{n}{1 + n(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{2,560}{1 + 2,560 (0.0025)}$$

n =346

Therefore, 346 served as the sample size of the 2,560 population of the study. The population figure was supplied by authorities at the markets.

The primary source of date was used to obtain information from the sample. Therefore, the major research instrument used in conducting this research work was questionnaire. The questionnaire was well structured and the respondents found it easy to write their responses. With 320 returned copies of the questionnaire the response rate of 92 percent appeared impressive and adequate. The presentation of data was done using the tabular form and percentages featured in the analyses. The nature of the hypotheses easily lent themselves to test with Chi square testing tool. A four point likert scale was used for study. The results are given below.

Analysis and Result

Table 1: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	214	67
Female	106	33
Total	320	100

Source: Field Survey

Out of the 320 respondents, 214 representing 67 percent of the population were males while 106 (33%) of them were females.

Table 2: Age Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
25-34	41	13
35-44	153	18
45-54	88	27
55 and above	38	12
Total	320	100

Source Field Survey

Result from age distribution shows that majority (88%) of the respondents were below the age of 55. This made them the appropriate target of the study as they had tendency to be more exposed to environmental concerns than other age categories.

Table 3: Percentage response to awareness of CSR advertising

S/N	City	Aware	Not aware	Total
1	Awka	95	15	110
2	Nnewi	78	28	106
3	Onitsha	87	17	104
	Total	260(81%)	60(19%)	320(100%)

Source: Field Survey

While 260 respondents representing 81 percent were aware of CSR advertising 60(19%) were not.

Table 4: Sectoral structure of CSR advertisers with environmental message contents

S/N	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Sector 1	Beverages	25	8
Sector 2	Telecommunications	97	30
Sector 3	Fast moving consumer goods (FMCG)	88	28
Sector 4	Textiles	110	34
	Total	320	100

Source: Field Survey

25 respondents representing 8 percent of the population spotted CSR advertisers with environment message contents from the beverages sector, while 97 respondents (30%) spotted them from the telecommunications sector. While 88 respondents representing 28 percent of the population spotted them from the fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, 110 (34%) found them in the textiles sector.

Table 5: Factorial structure of CSR advertisers' motivations towards on environmental cause

S/N	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Factor 1	Advertisers feel morally obliged to help	74	23
Factor 2	Advertisers feel society expects it	73	23
Factor 3	Advertisers are taking advantage of the environmental cause help their own business	145	45
Factor 4	Advertisers do not really consider it as it hardly offers a return an investment	28	9
	Total	320	100

Source: Field Survey

74(23%) respondents are of the view that CSR advertisers are motivated towards an environmental cause because they feel morally obliged to help, while 73 (23%) think that CSR advertisers feel that the society expects it. While 145 (45%) respondents are of the opinion that CSR advertisers are taking advantage of the environmental cause to help their own business, 28 (9%) are of the view that CSR advertisers do not really consider it as it hardly offers a return on investment.

Table 6: Assessment of CSR Advertising’s Environmental Message Contents

S/N	Assessment	Frequency	Percentage
1	Business: They will get more customers by making this offer	130	41
2	Altruistic: They have a long-term interest in the community	45	14
3	Profit: they hope to increase profits by making this environmental activity	89	28
4	Explicative: They emphasize company’s image but are not reciprocal with respect to causes	56	17
	Total	320	100

Source: Field Study

While 130 (41%) respondents rate CSR advertising’s environmental message as business-oriented, 45 (14%) regard them as altruistic; while 89 (28%) respondents see them as actuated by profit, 56 (17%) consider them as exploitative.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Advertisers are unlikely to be favourably disposed towards environmental sustainability.

Table 1: χ^2 test of relationship between CSR advertisers’ motivations and environmental causes

S/N	Major Markets			
	Eke Awka	Onitsha Main	Nkwo Nnewi	Total
1	20 (33%.78)	32(38.83)	50(35.38)	102
2	83 (62.93)	61(61.15)	46(65.90)	190
3	1 (3.97)	8 (3.86)	3(4.16)	12
4	2 (5.3)	2(5.15)	12(5.55)	16
Total	106	103	111	320

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The result of χ^2 test of relationship, shows that, with $\chi^2_{43.69} > \chi^2_{.05, 6} = 12.592$, there is a significant relationship between CSR advertising and environmental sustainability. Therefore the null hypothesis one is rejected. This implies that environmental causes are a predictive factor towards CSR advertisers’ motivations.

Hypothesis 2: The audience is not likely to rate the CSR content of advertising messages on the environment highly.

Table 2: χ^2 test of whether CSR advertising’s message on the environment is highly audience-rated

S/N	Major Markets			
	Eke Awka	Onitsha Main	Nkwo Nnewi	Total
Strongly Agree	60(45.09)	21(47.12)	49(37.78)	130
Agree	13(15.60)	9(16.31)	23(13.07)	45
Disagree	27(30.87)	55(32.26)	7(25.86)	89
Strongly Agree	11(19.42)	31(20.30)	14(16.27)	56
Total	111	116	93	320

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The result χ^2 test of relationship, shows that with $\chi^2=73.81 > \chi^2_{.05, 6}=12.592$, there is a significant relationship between audience of CSR advertising's message content and the message's success with the environment. Therefore the null hypothesis two is rejected. This implies that audience assessment is a predictive factor towards the success of CSR advertising with the environment.

Discussion of Findings

CSR advertising have been found in this study to be highly rated by the audience when it has environmental considerations. Individuals perceive that CSR advertisers assume that customers or society expect socially responsible behavior (such as acts in environmental sustainability), so they carry out philanthropic actions to attend to their demands and acquire more customers, retain clients and improve their image. Thus, CSR advertising can be effective and generate positive results in terms of better attitudes, loyalty and favourable word-of mouth.

Conclusion

This study points out the existence of a strong relationship between on advertisement pursuing an environmental cause and its acceptability to the people. Consumers have a mix of both positive and negative emotion that influence their attitude towards the CSR advertisements. As long as the advertisement generates a strong attribution of intrinsic motives, the positive emotions will have a higher weight in the evaluation and the general impression will be favourable.

Recommendation

Considering the findings of the study, the following recommendation are given:

- i. CSR advertising must not be only a principle declaration, but it has to materialize into concrete and continuous action and be real. Everything communicates in an organization, so it must be oriented towards CSR in order to be perceived as such in all its contacts with the public. The key is to have a good CSR reputation.
- ii. Companies can use a lot of controlled sources to publicize what they are doing in CSR activities; for example, social reports, web pages and advertising. With regard to advertising, there have been doubts about its suitability and effectiveness for communicating CSR actions, because it can raise the skepticism of the audience. Our research shows that CSR advertising can be effective. It is true that consumers perceive extrinsic motivations that provoke negative feelings, but if the company has achieved a good prior ethical reputation, altruistic attributions will be activated as well. These attributions will enhance positive emotions and will reduce the negative ones. As a result, the attitude towards the advertisement will be favourable, as will be the subsequent consumer reactions.

References

- 7-Eleven Inc. "7-Eleven Tells customers: Divine on the dash but stash your Trash", [http://www. 7-eleven.com/newroom/articles.asp](http://www.7-eleven.com/newroom/articles.asp). (Accessed October 7, 2024).
- Arens, W. Weigold, C. (2011) *Contemporary Advertising and Integrated Marketing Communications*, 13th ed; MC Graw-Hill.
- Batra, R. and Ray, M. (1986). Affective Responses Mediating Acceptance of Advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*; September 13 (2).
- Becker-Olsen, K., Cudmore, A. and Hill, R. (2006). The impact of perceived corporate social responsibility on consumer behavior. *Journal of Business Research* 59:46-53.
- Business for Social Responsibility Education Fund *Corporate Social Responsibility: A guide to Better Business Practice* San Francisco: Business for Socially Responsible Education, (2000), 179
- Elving, W. (2013) Skepticism and corporate social responsibility communications: the influence of fit and reputation. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 19(4).
- Ford Motor Company, news release: "Ford Volunteers collected 2 tons of Greeting cards for St. Judes", Dearborn, Michigan, February 11, 2003.

- Givhan, R, "Polishing an image: Kenneth Cole Brings Social Activism to Fashion Industry, "Washington Post, August, 2023.
- Homer, P. and Yoon, S. (1992) Message Framing and Interrelationships Among Ad-Based Feelings, Affect, and Cognition. *Journal of Advertising* 21 (1).
- Huang, M. (2001). The Theory of Emotions in Marketing. *Journal of Business and Psychology* 16: 239
- Kelley, H. (1973). The Processes of Casual Attributions. *American Psychologist* 107-128.
- Kotler, P. and Lee, N. (2005) *Corporate Social Responsibility: Doing the Most Good for Your Company and Your Cause*, John Wilney and Sons Inc.
- Lii, Y. and Lee, M. (2012). Doing Right Leads to Doing Well: when the type of CSR and Reputation Interact to Affect Consumer Evaluations of the Firm. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 105 (1).
- Motorola Inc. "Motorola and the Environment: Motorola's Environmental Vision" <http://www.motorola.com/EHS/environment/> accessed October 7, 2024).
- Onwudinjor, R. (2009) "Marketing Foundation for Advertising and Public Relations", Tansian University, Umuaya; Unpublished Lecture Note.
- Rahber, E. and Wahid, N.A. (2011) Investigation of Green Marketing Tools Effect on Consumers Purchase Behavior. *Business Strategy Series* 12(2)
- Rifon, N., Choi, S. Trimble, C.Li, H. (2004). Congruence effects in sponsorship: The mediating role of sponsor credibility and consumer attributions of sponsor motive. *Journal of Advertising* 33(29).
- Tao, W., and Ferguson, M. (2015). The Overarching Effects of Ethical Reputation Regardless of CSR Cause Fit and Information Source. *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 9(1).
- Tuerff-Davis EnviroMedia Inc, "Don't Mess with Texas" Litter Prevention Campaign, <http://www.enviromedia.com/study4>. Php (access October 7, 2024).