ADVERTISING ETHICS AND AUDIENCE MANIPULATION: A STUDY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN LAGOS MEDIA AD CAMPAIGNS

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ABSTRACT

Advertisement is a tool to help the public get to know more product, service and information that can make life easier for them, however, it can also be a tool of destruction if not well regulated. Advertising in Lagos, Nigeria, has grown into a dynamic, competitive, and highly persuasive industry. While its primary purpose is to inform and persuade, ethical dilemmas arise when manipulation overshadows transparency. This study investigates advertising ethics and audience manipulation in Lagos media campaigns through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Using a mixed-method approach survey (Quantitative & qualitative data collection method), the study explores how manipulative strategies in Lagos advertising generate psychological discomfort among consumers, how audiences reconcile dissonance, and whether ethical concerns influence purchasing behavior. Findings reveal that aspirational and emotional appeals dominate Lagos advertising, often leading consumers to experience regret or rationalization when product outcomes fall short of advertised promises (Ogedebe, 2018; Ajiboye & Olatunji, 2020). However, it does not in any way have advert or long-term consequences/effect on consumers. ARCON (Advertising Regulator Council of Nigeria) which is one of the advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria recommends stronger ethical regulations, heightened consumer awareness, and adoption of transparent advertising practices (ARCON, 2022). The implications extend to policy, marketing education, and consumer protection frameworks in Nigeria.

Key Words: Advertising ethics, cognitive dissonance, consumer behavior, persuasion, audience manipulation, Lagos media.

INTRODUCTION

1. Background of the Problem:

Advertising is a cornerstone of modern economies, functioning not only as a mechanism for promoting products and services but also as a powerful tool for shaping consumer behavior, cultural values, and lifestyle aspirations. In Nigeria, the advertising industry contributes significantly to economic activity by driving demand, supporting brand competitiveness, and influencing patterns of consumption (Belch & Belch, 2015). Lagos, the nation's commercial hub and Africa's most populous megacity, stands at the center of this activity, hosting some of the largest advertising agencies, media houses, and multinational brands. The city's vibrant consumer market has made advertising an indispensable instrument for firms seeking visibility and competitive advantage.

However, the increasing intensity of competition among brands has led to a **shift in advertising practices**. What was once largely informative and persuasive communication has, in many cases, transformed into **manipulative strategies** that prioritize consumer persuasion over transparency and truthfulness (Okpara, 2019). Techniques such as exaggerated product claims, hyperbolic imagery, emotional manipulation, subliminal cues, and aspirational messaging are increasingly deployed to sway consumer decisions. While these tactics may achieve short-term marketing objectives, they pose ethical questions about fairness, honesty, and consumer autonomy (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997).

This raises a significant concern: when advertisements **overpromise and underdeliver**, consumers experience a gap between expectation and reality, leading to **cognitive dissonance**. Cognitive dissonance, a psychological discomfort that arises when an individual's beliefs or expectations conflict with actual experiences, often manifests in post-purchase regret, dissatisfaction, and mistrust of both the product and the brand (Williams & Osei, 2022). In Lagos, where consumers are daily inundated with advertising across television, radio, billboards, social media, and digital platforms, the risk of dissonance is amplified.

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of advertising in Lagos is becoming increasingly salient. Issues such as **consumer exploitation, misleading claims, stereotyping, and disregard for vulnerable audiences** (including children and low-income groups) have sparked debates about the social responsibility of advertisers. Research has shown that when advertising is perceived as manipulative or unethical, it erodes consumer trust and diminishes the credibility of both the message and the medium (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009). Trust, once broken, not only affects individual brands but also weakens the legitimacy of the advertising industry as a whole.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

While advertising seeks to inform and persuade, manipulative strategies can mislead consumers and distort decision-making. In Lagos, consumers often encounter media campaigns that emphasize idealized lifestyles or exaggerate product benefits, leading to disappointment and mistrust (van Esch et al., 2021). As mentioned by the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria that the absence of stringent ethical enforcement further compounds the problem (ARCON, 2022), creating a research gap in understanding how manipulation and cognitive dissonance intersect in Lagos media advertising.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study examines the ethical dimensions of advertising in Lagos and explores how manipulative advertising strategies trigger cognitive dissonance among consumers.

1. To identify manipulative strategies in Lagos media advertising.
2. To evaluate ethical concerns associated with Lagos media advertising practices.
3. To examine the role of cognitive dissonance in consumer responses to advertising.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What manipulative strategies are employed in Lagos media advertising?
2. How does cognitive dissonance influence consumer responses to Lagos advertising?
3. To what extent do ethical concerns in advertising affect consumer trust and behavior in Lagos?

1.4 Research Hypotheses: The following hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance of the study.

HO1: There is no significant relationship between manipulative strategies and consumer purchase decisions in Lagos.

HO2: Cognitive dissonance does not significantly affect consumer perception of Lagos media advertising.

HO3: Ethical concerns in advertising have no significant effect on consumer trust in Lagos.

1.5 Significance: This study contributes to understanding advertising ethics in Nigeria and provides practical recommendations for regulating manipulative strategies in Lagos media campaigns (Ajiboye & Olatunji, 2020). It informs advertisers, consumer protection agencies, and policymakers while enriching academic discourse on consumer psychology and media ethics.

1.6 Scope of the Study: The study is limited to Lagos State, focusing on media advertisements (television, radio, print, and digital). It covered the perspectives of consumers across socio-economic classes as well as insights from advertisers and media practitioners.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE: Literature covers conceptual framework, theoretical framework, and review of empirical studies.

2.1 Advertising ethics:

Basically, concerns the moral principles guiding how persuasive messages are created, targeted, and disseminated. Core ethical tenets include truthfulness, fairness, social responsibility, respect for persons, and avoidance of harm (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997;

Belch & Belch, 2015).

2.1.2 Audience Manipulation Techniques & Cognitive Dissonance:

2.1.3 Manipulative Techniques:

Emotional Appeals (fear, guilt, pride, hope): Leverage affect to shortcut deliberation, especially under low involvement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Excessive fear without efficacy information can be manipulative and elicit avoidance.

Framing & Anchoring (was–now pricing, reference prices): Can obscure true value; deceptive anchoring inflates expectations and later dissonance.

Influencer & Native Ads (concealed sponsorship): Non-disclosure heightens perceived manipulative intent (ARCON, 2022).

Scarcity & Urgency ("Only 4 remaining", countdown timers): Trigger loss aversion and FOMO (Cialdini, 2009). Overuse or falsified scarcity increases perceived deception and post-purchase regret.

Social Proof & Bandwagon ("1 most used", influencer testimonials): Heuristic cues that can mislead when evidence is weak or undisclosed (Cialdini, 2009; ARCON, 2022 on disclosure).

Data-Driven Microtargeting (hyper-personal persuasion): Blurs line between relevance and manipulation when exploiting vulnerabilities or sensitive attributes.

Visual Manipulation (airbrushing, CGI, misleading before–after): Inflates expected outcomes; known to elicit disconfirmation and complaint behaviors.

Authority & Expertise (lab coats, professional titles): Heighten compliance even with minimal evidence; requires substantiation and fair presentation (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997).

2.1.4 Ethical Issues in Advertising Practice:

Comparative Advertising and Brand Denigration: Comparative claims should be factual, verifiable, and non-misleading (Belch & Belch, 2015).

Subliminal and Neuromarketing Concerns: Nudging and affect-based priming raise concerns about autonomy when they bypass deliberative reasoning (Williams & Osei, 2022).

Digital Ethics, Dark Patterns, and Influencer Marketing: Ethical standards require clear disclosures for sponsored content and transparent data practices (Ajiboye & Olatunji, 2020).

Truthfulness, Deception, and Puffery: Deceptive advertising involves explicit or implied claims likely to mislead a reasonable consumer (Ogedebe, 2018). **Puffery**, subjective, non-verifiable superlatives ("best ever") is often tolerated but can still prime unrealistic expectations.

Targeting Vulnerable Audiences: Children and low-literacy consumers are less able to process persuasive intent. Ethical practice requires age-appropriate content and restrictions on risky products (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997).

Stereotyping, Representation, and Social Harm: Gendered tropes and class-based portrayals can normalize inequality. Ethical advertising strives for authentic, dignified representation and cultural sensitivity,especially salient in Lagos (Okpara, 2019).

2.1.5 Cognitive Dissonance Outcomes and Reduction Strategies:

Cognitive Strategies: Selective exposure (seeking consonant reviews), trivialization ("it wasn't expensive"), or attitude change (up rating the brand) (Festinger, 1957; Brehm, 1956).

Behavioral Responses: Complaints, returns, negative word-of-mouth, or **brand switching** (Williams & Osei, 2022).

Affective Discomfort: Anxiety, regret, and annoyance following purchase mismatch (Sweeney, Hausknecht, & Soutar, 2000).

2.1.7 Moderators in the Lagos Context:

Cultural Norms & Endorsement Fit: Authority and celebrity cues carry extra weight; misfit increases perceived manipulation.

Platform Type: OOH/radio vs. social media/influencer environments show different cue salience and disclosure norms.

Ad Literacy & Education: Higher literacy dampens manipulation effects and dissonance intensity. **Involvement & Risk:** High-involvement categories (finance, health, beauty) show stronger dissonance effects.

Behavioral Indicators: Complaints, return rates, switching intentions, negative WOM.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: The research study is anchored on a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation that integrates insights from communication, psychology, and business ethics. Since the research explores the intersection of advertising ethics, manipulative strategies, and consumer responses in Lagos, three major theories are particularly relevant such as: **Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Ethical Theories of Advertising, and Elaboration Likelihood Model (Persuasion Theory).**

2.2.1 Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957)

Cognitive Dissonance Theory serves as the central framework for this study. It posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort (dissonance) when there is an inconsistency between their beliefs, expectations, and actual experiences. In advertising contexts, this occurs when consumers encounter manipulative or exaggerated claims that set unrealistic expectations. For instance, when an advertisement in Lagos media promises superior product quality or lifestyle transformation that is not delivered in reality, consumers experience dissonance, which may manifest in post-purchase regret, distrust, or negative word-of-mouth. This theory explains how manipulative advertising strategies create a gap between consumer expectations and product realities, leading to dissonance that shapes consumer perception, trust, and future decision-making.

2.2.2 Ethical Theories of Advertising

To evaluate the ethical implications of manipulative advertising, this study draws on **Deontological Ethics** and **Utilitarian Ethics** as applied to marketing communication (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009):

Utilitarian (Consequentialist) Perspective: Evaluates advertising based on its outcomes, considering an action ethical if it maximizes overall well-being. Manipulative advertising in Lagos may generate short-term sales but risks long-term harm to consumer trust, brand reputation, and the credibility of the advertising industry. Ethical frameworks provide the moral lens through which manipulative practices are evaluated, allowing this research to link audience experiences of dissonance to broader questions of trust, responsibility, and the sustainability of the Lagos advertising ecosystem.

Deontological (Duty-Based) Perspective: Argues that advertisers have a duty to communicate truthfully
and respect consumer autonomy. From this view, manipulative advertising is inherently unethical, regardless of outcomes.

2.2.3 Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), a persuasion theory, provides further insight into how audiences process advertising messages. The model identifies two routes of persuasion:

Peripheral Route: Where consumers rely on surface cues such as celebrity endorsements, emotional appeals, aesthetics, or peer influence.

Central Route: Where consumers engage deeply with information, carefully evaluating arguments and evidence.

2.3 Empirical Review

Empirical evidence underscores the dominance of emotional appeals over purely informational content in advertising within Lagos. Okpara (2019) observes that emotional narratives tend to resonate more deeply with consumers, driving engagement and purchase intent. However, such tactics, when not backed by factual claims, may border on deception, raising concerns about consumer manipulation.

Research by van Esch et al. (2021) reveals a strong correlation between ethical advertising and key consumer outcomes such as brand trust, credibility, and loyalty. Ethical transparency, they argue, fosters long-term brand-consumer relationships, especially in saturated markets. The marketing landscape in Lagos is fiercely competitive, particularly among FMCG, telecommunications, fintech, and beauty brands. Ajiboye and Olatunji (2020) note that this competitive pressure drives brands to adopt increasingly aggressive and, at times, manipulative advertising tactics to capture consumer attention.

2.4 Gap in Literature

While numerous studies have explored the effectiveness of emotional versus informational appeals in advertising, there is limited research focusing on how these strategies operate within ethically ambiguous or poorly regulated markets like Lagos. Most existing literature tends to examine advertising ethics and consumer behavior in well-regulated Western contexts, overlooking the unique socio-cultural and regulatory dynamics present in emerging markets.

Furthermore, although some studies (e.g., ARCON, 2022) acknowledge regulatory weaknesses in Lagos, there is a lack of in-depth, empirical analysis on how such gaps are exploited by brands, especially on digital platforms. The role of influencers in shaping consumer perceptions through emotionally charged but unverified claims remains underexplored, particularly within the local Nigerian context.

3. METHODOLOGY

Data Design: Descriptive survey research design with qualitative support from interviews.

Population: Consumers exposed to Lagos media advertisements.

Sample and Sampling Technique: Target was 100 respondents but was only able to get 93 responses through the survey.

Instrument: Structured questionnaires, interview guides.

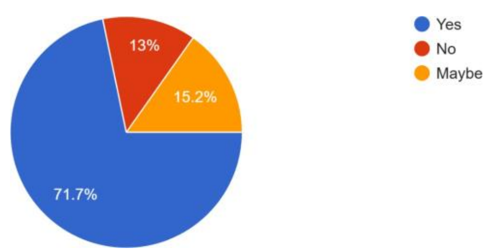
Validation and Reliability: Instruments review by a lecturer in the university of Lagos (Sociology Department).

Method of Data Collection: Primary data from surveys, interviews, secondary data literature.

Method of Data Analysis: Quantitative analysis using Excel (descriptive statistics, chi-square tests) and qualitative thematic analysis.

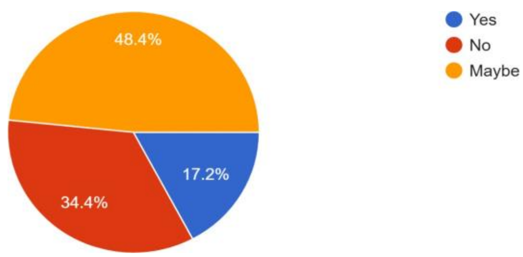
4. ANALYSIS

Figure 1: Stating Information on Negative Effect of Product/Service Advertised



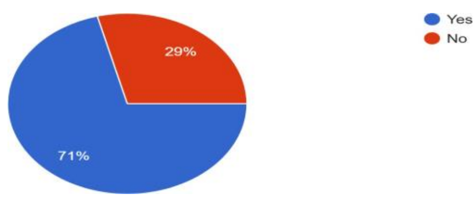
As indicated in the chart above, 71.7% of the respondents agreed that clear information of the negative effect of product/service advertised should be stated, 15.2% of the respondents did not agree that clear information of the negative effect of product/service advertised should be stated while 13% of the respondents were not certain if they wanted the negative effect of an advertised product/service to be stated or not.

Figure 2 : Whether Respondent Believes Advertisement Agencies Follows Ethical Guidelines



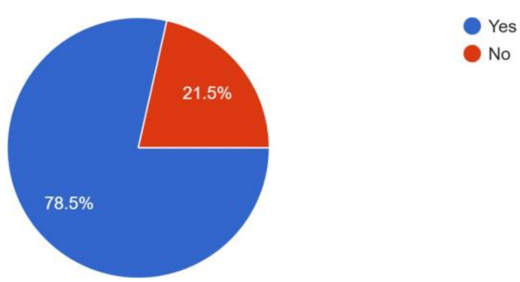
As indicated in the chart, 48.4% of the respondents were not certain of advertisement agencies following ethical guidelines, 34.4% of the respondents did not believe that advertisement agencies follow ethical guidelines while 17.2% of the respondents were certain that advertisement agencies follow ethical guidelines.

Figure 3: Internally Pressure or Emotionally Influenced to Purchase a Product Due to Advertisement



From the chart above, 71% of the respondents mentioned they were internally pressured or emotionally influenced to purchase a product while 29% of the respondents mentioned they were not internally pressured or emotionally influenced to purchase a product.

Figure 4: Whether Respondents Regret Buying a Product after Purchase

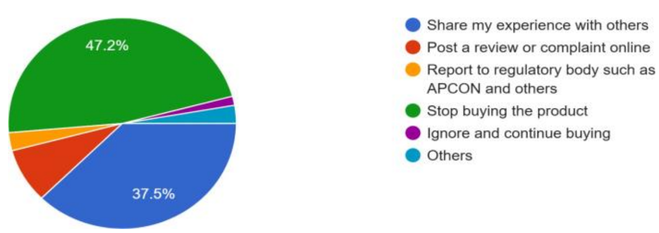


As indicated in the chart above, 78.5% of the respondents mentioned they regret buying a product/service due to an advertisement while 21.5% of the respondents mentioned they do not regret buying a product/service due to an advertisement.

Figure 5: Technique Used in Manipulating Audience in Purchasing a Product

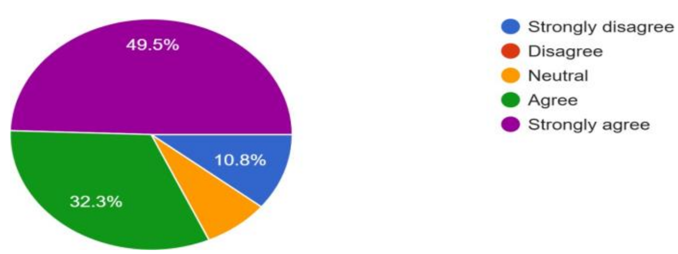
As indicated in the chart above, 37.6% of the respondents mentioned advertisement agencies use over-promising results to lure them into buying the product/service, 34.4% of the respondents mentioned advertisement agencies use celebrity influence to lure them into buying the product/service, 18.3% of the respondents mentioned advertisement agencies use misleading visuals to lure them into buying the product/service, 5.4% of the respondents mentioned advertisement agencies use emotional appeal to lure them into buying the product/service while 4.3% of the respondents mentioned advertisement agencies use limited time offer (urgency tactics) to lure them into buying the product/service.

Figure 6: Action Taken by Respondents After Feeling Deceived



As seen in the chart above, 47.2% of the respondents mentioned they stopped buying the product after feeling deceived by the advertising agency, 37. 5% of the respondents mentioned they share their experience with others after feeling deceived by the advertising agency, 8.3% of the respondents mentioned they post a review or complaint online after feeling deceived by the advertising agency, 2.8% of the respondents mentioned they report to regulatory body such as APCON (Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria) and others after feeling deceived by the advertising agency, 2.8% of the respondents mentioned they take other action after feeling deceived by the advertising agency while 1.4% of the respondents mentioned they ignore and continue buying after feeling deceived by the advertising agency

Figure 7: Whether the Advertising Agency Should be Punished For Misleading People



As indicated in the chart above, 49.5% of the respondents strongly agreed that the advertising agency should be punished for misleading people, 32.3% of the respondents agreed that the advertising agency should be punished for misleading people, 10.85 of the respondents strongly disagreed that the advertising agency should be punished for misleading people while 7.5% of the respondents were neutral on whether advertising agency should be punished for misleading people or not.

CHI-SQUARE

The Chi-square (X 2) formula is given as:

x 2 =Σ (o-e) 2, Where, x 2 = Chi-square, o = Observed frequency, e = Expected frequency, Σ = Summation

DEGREE OF FREEDOM

The degree of freedom is the number of respondents (`r') observed in the sample size multiplied by the population (`c') parameters estimated from sample observations. Thus d.o.f. = (r-1) (c-1), Where r = Row, c = column

The level of significance is 0.05 (alpha level)

DECISION REGION

The decision region is based on the rules that if the p-value (i.e. asymptomatic value) is less than 0.05, there is a significant relationship. But if the p-value is higher than 0.05, then there is no relationship.

Hypothesis One

H0: There is no significant relationship between manipulative strategies and consumer purchase decisions in Lagos.

H1: There is a significant relationship between manipulative strategies and consumer purchase decisions in Lagos.

Chi-Square Test of Independence

Table 1: Relationship Between Manipulative Strategies and Consumer Purchase Decisions in Lagos.

Manipulation Technique	**Never**	**Sometimes**	**Yes**	**Row Total**
Celebrity Influence	24	6	0	**30**
	80.0%	20.0%	0.0%	**100%**
	27.3%	6.8%	0.0%	**34.1%**
Over-promising	24	9	1	**34**

Result	70.6%	26.5%	2.9%	**100%**
	27.3%	10.2%	1.1%	**38.6%**
Misleading visuals	10	5	0	**15**
	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%	**17.0%**
	11.4%	5.7%	0.0%	**100%**
Emotional appeal	2	3	0	**5**
	40.0%	60.0%	0.0%	**100%**
	2.3%	3.4%	0.0%	**5.7%**
Limited time offer	4	0	0	**4**
	100%	0.0%	0.0%	**100%**
	4.5%	0.0%	0.0%	**4.5%**
Column Total	**64**	**23**	**1**	**88**
	72.72%	**26.14%**	**1.14%**	**100%**
X 2 c= 8.49, df=8, significance =0.05 and p-value=0.387				

Decision rule

As seen, Figure 8 above shows the cross tabulation of the relationship between manipulative strategies and consumer purchase decisions in Lagos. The calculated chi-square from the table is X 2 c = 8.49, p-value=0.387 with the degree of freedom of 8 at 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value of 0.387 is greater than the level of significance 0.05, the null hypothesis (H0) which states that there is no significant relationship between manipulative strategies and consumer purchase decisions in Lagos will be accepted and the alternative hypothesis is rejected. Hence, there is no significant relationship between manipulative strategies and consumer purchase decisions after realizing deception in Lagos.

Hypothesis Two

H0: There is no significant relationship between Cognitive dissonance and consumer perception of Lagos media advertising.

H1: There is a significant relationship between Cognitive dissonance and consumer perception of Lagos media advertising.

Table 2: Relationship Between Cognitive Dissonance and Consumer Perception of Lagos Media Advertising.

Cognitive Dissonance	**Trust Product (Yes)**	**Trust Product (No)**	**Row Total**
Regretted=Yes	10	46	**56**
	17.9%	82.1%	**100%**
	13.2%	60.5%	**73.7%**
Regretted=No	3	17	**20**
	15.0%	85.0%	**100%**
	3.9%	22.4%	**26.3%**
Column Total	**13**	**63**	**76**
	17.1%	**82.9%**	**100%**
X 2 c= 0.058, df=1, significance =0.05 and p-value=0.809			

Decision rule

As seen, Figure 9 above shows the cross tabulation of the relationship between Cognitive dissonance and consumer perception of Lagos media advertising. The calculated chi-square from the table is X 2 c = 0.058, p-value=0.809 with the degree of freedom of 1 at 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value of 0.809 is greater than the level of significance 0.05, the null hypothesis (H0) which states that there is no significant relationship between cognitive dissonance and consumer perception of Lagos media advertising will be accepted and the alternative hypothesis is rejected. Hence, there is no significant relationship between Cognitive dissonance and consumer perception of Lagos media advertising.

Hypothesis There

H0: There is no relationship between Ethical concerns in advertising and consumer trust in Lagos.

H1: There is a relationship between Ethical concerns in advertising and consumer trust in Lagos.

Table 3: Relationship Between Ethical Concerns in Advertising and Consumer Trust in Lagos

Stricter Regulations on Misleading Ads	Trust (Yes)	Trust (No)	Row Total
Strongly agree	10	30	**40**
	25.0%	75.0%	**100%**
	50.0%	48.4%	**98.4%**
Agree	8	20	**28**
	28.6%	71.4%	**100%**
	40.0%	32.3%	**72.3%**
Neutral	2	5	**7**
	28.6%	71.4%	**100%**
	10.0%	8.1%	**18.1%**
Strongly disagree	0	7	**7**
	0.0%	100.0%	**100%**
	0.0%	11.3%	**11.3%**
Column Total	**20**	**62**	**82**
	24.4%	**75.6%**	**100%**

X2c= 4.56, df=3, significance =0.05 and p-value=0.21

Decision rule

As seen, Figure 10 above shows the cross tabulation of the relationship between Ethical concerns in advertising and consumer trust in Lagos. The calculated chi-square from the table is X2c = 4.56, p-value=0.387 with the degree of freedom of 3 at 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value of 0.21 is greater than the level of significance 0.05, the null hypothesis (H0) which states that there is no significant relationship between Ethical concerns in advertising and consumer trust in Lagos will be accepted and the alternative hypothesis is rejected. Hence, there is no significant relationship between Ethical concerns in advertising and consumer trust in Lagos.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Manipulative Advertising Strategies and Consumer Purchase Decisions (H01 and RQ1)

The study revealed that manipulative advertising strategies—such as scarcity appeals, social proof, exaggeration, hidden charges, and fear appeals—do not significantly influence consumer purchase decisions in Lagos. This finding is consistent with Vakratsas and Ambler (1999), who argue that not all advertising appeals lead to sustained behavioral change. While manipulative strategies may generate **short-term attention or impulse buying**, they often fail to build long-term loyalty.

Darke and Ritchie (2007) further explained that repeated exposure to deceptive or exaggerated claims may trigger **consumer skepticism and defensive processing**, thereby reducing advertising effectiveness. In a saturated advertising environment like Lagos, where consumers are frequently exposed to exaggerated and emotionally charged campaigns, such skepticism becomes a protective mechanism.

Nevertheless, the persistence of manipulative appeals highlights their **short-term utility**. Belch and Belch (2015) emphasized that emotional appeals can trigger immediate purchases, while Smith and Cooper-Martin (1997) observed that firms exploit consumer vulnerability when regulation is weak. This is especially relevant to Lagos, where Ogedebe (2018) noted that regulatory enforcement remains inadequate, leaving consumers more exposed than in advanced economies with stricter advertising standards.

5.2 Cognitive Dissonance and Consumer Perception (H02 and RQ2)

The study found that cognitive dissonance does not significantly shape consumer perception of advertising. However, consumers who discovered deceptive claims expressed **reduced trust in both the product and the**

medium. This supports Festinger's (1957) *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*, which states that individuals experience discomfort when reality conflicts with prior expectations, leading them to reassess their evaluations.

Sweeney, Hausknecht, and Soutar (2000) confirmed that post-purchase dissonance often results in dissatisfaction, regret, and negative word-of-mouth. Similarly, Cummings and Venkatesan (1976) argued that deceptive advertising heightens consumer sensitivity to both brand credibility and media reliability. In Lagos, where digital advertising and influencer marketing are widespread, ARCON (2022) has noted a surge in consumer complaints about misleading claims, making dissonance particularly relevant.

Thus, while cognitive dissonance may not statistically alter **general perceptions**, it emerges as a **qualitative factor**
influencing consumer dissatisfaction and long-term brand evaluation.

5.3 Ethical Concerns in Advertising and Consumer Trust (H03 and RQ3)

The findings revealed that ethical concerns in advertising do not significantly influence consumer trust. This outcome supports Singh and Pandey (2013), who found that ethical advertising is valued, but **brand trust is anchored more in product quality, brand reputation, and personal experience**. Likewise, Laczniak and Murphy (2006) argued that consumers often separate advertising ethics from overall trust in a brand, especially when the product delivers functional value.

However, this finding contrasts with van Esch, Matzler, and Skiera (2021), who reported that ethical advertising positively correlates with consumer trust in advanced economies. The divergence suggests a contextual difference: in Lagos, practical factors such as affordability and availability may outweigh ethical concerns when consumers decide whether to trust a brand.

Despite this, respondents in this study strongly favored **stricter regulation** of misleading advertising, reflecting growing consumer awareness and demand for accountability. This aligns with global research (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009), which shows that ethical advertising practices—truthfulness, transparency, and respect for privacy—foster long-term loyalty. Within Nigeria, this validates ARCON's (2022) recent reforms to advertising codes, especially concerning influencer marketing and digital disclosures.

5.4 Implications of Findings

5.4.1 Theoretical Implications

1. It challenges prior evidence (e.g., van Esch et al., 2021) by showing that **ethical advertising does not directly drive trust** in the Lagos context, highlighting the role of socio-economic factors.
2. The study extends *Cognitive Dissonance Theory* (Festinger, 1957) by showing that dissonance in Lagos primarily shapes **post-purchase dissatisfaction** rather than general consumer perception.

3. It supports Vakratsas and Ambler's (1999) advertising response model, which emphasizes that not all manipulative strategies convert into purchase behavior.

5.4.2 Practical Implications

1. Advertisers in Lagos should be cautious with manipulative strategies, as their long-term effectiveness is questionable due to rising consumer skepticism.
2. Brands should prioritize **product quality and consistency** over manipulative advertising, as these remain stronger predictors of trust.
3. Regulators such as ARCON should continue tightening oversight of digital and influencer marketing to reduce consumer vulnerability to deceptive practices.

Qualitative Findings Summary

Advertising Ethics in Lagos Media: Respondents agreed that **ethical guidelines exist** (NBC Code, ARCON standards, internal policies), and large/reputable brands generally comply with ethical principles. However, **smaller brands** and many digital advertisers often ignore the rules, leading to misleading, exaggerated, or culturally insensitive campaigns. Respondents also believed that regulation is **more effective in traditional media (TV/radio)** than in digital platforms, where enforcement remains weak.

Audience Manipulation and Persuasive Strategies: Common persuasive techniques such as emotional appeals, celebrity endorsements, catchy jingles, visual manipulation, and urgency appeals were mentioned to be the manipulative techniques. These techniques become manipulative when they exaggerate product benefits, exploit vulnerable groups (youth, low-income earners, children), or create unrealistic expectations.

Cognitive Dissonance and Consumer Reactions: Respondents observed that many Lagos consumers experience **regret, frustration, or distrust** after purchasing products that do not deliver on advertised promises. Dissonance is heightened in categories like **health, finance, betting, and beauty products**, where exaggerated claims are most common.

They also believed that advertisers sometimes respond to backlash through **message adjustment, public apologies, or campaign revisions**, though rebuilding trust is often difficult.

Consumer Awareness and Protection: Lagos audiences are **increasingly aware** of manipulative advertising, especially in digital spaces. However, not all demographics are equally informed; young people and vulnerable groups remain more susceptible. The consumer advocacy groups play an important role in **calling out bad ads** and raising awareness, though their efforts are not always widespread. There are also ongoing **media literacy initiatives** through NGOs, workshops, and school programs to empower consumers.

Regulatory Environment: ARCON and NBC (News Broadcast Association) were identified as the main regulatory bodies. They vet and monitor ads, issuing fines for violations such as airing alcohol ads outside approved hours. Regulation is seen as **effective but inconsistent**, especially in online/digital media where monitoring is difficult. Respondents cited **preferential treatmen**t and weak penalties as gaps in enforcement. Stronger monitoring, tougher sanctions, and international models (UK ASA, European EASA, US FTC) were suggested as possible frameworks for Lagos.

5.5 Conclusion

The study concludes that manipulative advertising strategies, cognitive dissonance, and ethical concerns do not significantly determine consumer purchase decisions, perceptions, or trust in Lagos media advertising. Nonetheless, they shape consumer experiences in important ways: manipulative appeals may drive short-term purchases, dissonance influences post-purchase dissatisfaction, and ethical concerns drive calls for stricter regulation. The qualitative data shows that while Lagos has an **established regulatory framework**, enforcement remains inconsistent, especially online. **Manipulative strategies are widespread**, often leading to cognitive dissonance and erosion of consumer trust. However, growing consumer awareness and calls for accountability signal a shift toward greater demand for **ethical, transparent, and socially responsible advertising practices** in Nigeria.

5.6 Recommendations

- **Promote Transparency and Honest Messaging**

  Advertising agencies should ensure that product information is passed clearly without misleading, exaggerated, or vague claims. Transparent communication builds consumer trust and enhances long-term brand loyalty. For instance, instead of using unrealistic promises, agencies should emphasize genuine product benefits that directly address consumer needs. This aligns with van Esch et al. (2021), who emphasized that honesty and transparency in advertising foster consumer trust and self-regulation within the industry. By focusing on what consumers truly need, advertising can return to its core purpose—serving as an informative and persuasive tool without manipulation.

- **Establish Effective Feedback Mechanisms**

  Agencies should provide accessible feedback channels where consumers can easily communicate their concerns, make enquiries, and share experiences. Feedback systems—whether through helplines, social media platforms, or digital surveys—allow advertisers to monitor consumer satisfaction, identify ethical breaches, and respond promptly. This fosters two-way communication, strengthens accountability, and creates a culture where consumers feel heard and valued.

- **Ethical Training for Marketers**

  Advertising agencies should incorporate ethical training programs into staff development initiatives. Teams need to understand the implications of manipulative strategies and be equipped with frameworks for ethical persuasion. Training can cover areas such as responsible messaging, avoiding exaggeration, respecting cultural sensitivities, and adhering to industry codes. This echoes the objectives of the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON, 2022), which stresses strengthening ethical and regulatory frameworks for Lagos advertising practices. Such training ensures that persuasion does not cross into manipulation and that campaigns remain truthful and credible.

- **Eliminate Stereotypes and Encourage Stakeholder Dialogue**

  Agencies should avoid the use of harmful stereotypes in advertising messages and instead embrace inclusive and socially responsible campaigns. Moreover, there is a need for continuous dialogue between advertising agencies, policymakers, industry leaders, and consumer advocacy groups. Stronger policy frameworks and collaborative regulation will ensure that advertising practices remain ethical and transparent. Regular monitoring, evaluation, and joint initiatives will help enforce accountability. If stakeholders consistently supervise and agencies commit to these ethical standards, consumer trust will be enhanced, and transparency maintained (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

- **Consumer Relationship Building**

  Beyond regulation, agencies should focus on building long-term relationships with consumers rather than prioritizing short-term gains through manipulative tactics. Relationship marketing strategies—such as loyalty programs, personalized communication, and post-purchase engagement—can strengthen trust and emotional connection with the brand (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Consumers who feel valued are more likely to remain loyal despite market competition.

- **Encourage Consumer Education and Awareness**

  There should be continuous consumer education initiatives designed to raise awareness about manipulative advertising tactics. Educated consumers are better equipped to critically evaluate advertising messages, reducing their vulnerability to deception. For example, public campaigns, school programs, and media literacy workshops can empower audiences to make informed purchasing decisions. This recommendation is in line with Ajiboye & Olatunji (2020), who highlighted that advertising literacy is essential for protecting consumers in Nigeria's complex and fast-changing media environment.

5.7 Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to Lagos and may not capture dynamics in other Nigerian states. Self-reported data from consumers may also introduce bias.

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APPENDICES

QUESTIONNAIRE

SOCIO DEMOGRAPHICS

Age

Sex

Location

Level of education

What is your current employment status?

ADVERTISEMENT CONSUMPTION AND MEDIA ETHICAL AWARENESS

Are you aware of media advertisements?

How often do you watch or listen to media advertisements?

Have you ever come across a misleading/exaggerated advertisement on product/service?

How often do you notice false or exaggerated information in advertisements?

Do you think advertisements should inform its targeted audience of all possible negative effects of a product? In your opinion, do advertisers in Lagos consider consumer rights in their campaigns?

Do you believe media advertisements ethical guidelines are followed in Lagos State?

ADVERTISEMENT MANIPULATIVE STRATEGY & COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Have you ever felt internally pressured or emotionally influenced to buy a service/Produce after seeing an advertisement?

Have you ever bought a product/service due to an advertisement and regretted it after the product/service was purchased?

Were you still able to trust the product after regretting your purchase? Which technique do you notice they use in manipulating people the most? **RESPONSE**

MECHANISM TO DISSONANCE

After realizing you were deceived by the product advertised, did you continue using the product/service? What action do you take when you feel deceived by an advertisement?

SUGGESTION

Should there be stricter regulations on misleading advertisements?

Should the platform at which misleading advertised products are projected be penalized? How can advertisements in Lagos be made more truthful and less manipulative?