

Prophet-centrism in Church Advertising: A Visual Cultural Reading of Nigerian Church Adverts

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Abstract

Pentecostalism is one of Nigeria's most rapidly growing movements, with approximately 40 million adherents. Religious leaders or pastors, and prophets who have become household names in Nigeria are mainly responsible for the popularity of this movement. The pastors /prophets have distinct ways of presenting themselves and interpreting the gospel, thus separating themselves from other churches and pastors/prophets. This situation has lent itself to a particular type of church advertising where religious leaders take a giant posture in all church-related advertisements. While earlier studies have focused on church commercialization and analysis of church advertisements, this study differs slightly in that it dwells specifically on the centrality of the 'man of God' in almost every activity of the modern Pentecostal church. The study argues that church advertising in Nigeria relies more on the charismatic influence of the pastor than on spiritual benefits such as healing and blessings that churches often claim to deliver. This article is part of a larger study, which used multi-modal discourse analysis as a theoretical framework to analyse 15 Pentecostal church advertisements. However, for the purpose of this analysis, we only refer to five (5) adverts that reflect the role of the man of God in church

advertising. The results show that Pentecostal church advertising focuses more on the person of the man of God (his/her charisma and spiritual power) rather than that of God or Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Pentecostalism, Prophet-centrism, Advertising, Discourse.

Introduction

Church marketing has become exceedingly prominent in Nigeria and Africa alike. Appah and George (2017: 103) concur that there is an increasing influx of marketing philosophies and principles into churches every day due to the pressing need for raising resources. While Moore (1994) affirms that religious services operate in a greatly competitive environment where religion has become a product, Adebayo (2015) indicates that churches, and most especially Pentecostal ones, have become obsessed with the desire to become mega-churches as well as global brands and so have adopted elaborate marketing strategies, frameworks and tools.

Adebayo (2015) establishes a strong link between church practice and marketing activities based on the argument that the attachment between people and religion is as strong as that which exists between people and brands. In examining how church leaders transfer marketing principles from the corporate ‘world’ into the church to fulfil its social values, Adebayo stipulates that marketing components now form a part of church programme planning, directing and implementation. For Kotler and Armstrong (2010), church marketing involves the adoption of commercial marketing principles, concepts, theories and instruments in designing appropriate programmes, which have the capacity to influence the behaviour of people and improve their social wellbeing for societal development. It is thus evident that religious advertisements do not only persuade readers/viewers into Christianity, but also convince the audience to visit a church, attend a church programme or use a Christian service.

Belch and Belch (2005) recognize the potency of outdoor advertisements in the form of posters, billboards and banners, which they confirm play a significant role in selling and exposing the opportunities of the church to the outside world. Churches often locate billboards or posters where there are a significant amount of traffic and people can easily identify

them. In KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Jefkins (1995) says that churches have adopted posters, billboards and banners as a means of reaching out to people on the road. In the South African context, churches place marketing materials around high traffic areas in the town, as well as areas of strong pass ways, in order to expose church programmes to the people.

Pentecostalism has attracted enormous attention from different scholars. Dube (2018) considers Pentecostal leaders as spiritual parents who assume the role of mentors and guardians, thereby usurping the role of biological parents. The idea of ‘spiritual parenting’ does not only put itself in competition with biological parenting but also portrays biological parenting as ‘worldly’ and therefore less important. Dube (2018) likens this perspective (spiritual parenting) to the analogous modern-day idea of adoption, the only difference being that the spiritual parent is not legal and permanent. Though ‘spiritual parents’ share no blood relation with their spiritual ‘children’, Dube argues that Christians often regard them as more important than they regard their biological parents. This position cements the popularity of pastors or prophets in today’s world and churches. Unlike earlier studies, which have sought to examine the impact and technicalities of church advertising, the current study deviates slightly by focusing on how prophets have seemingly dominated church advertising and by implication suggesting that church and religious activities revolve solely around the prophet.

Pastors are set apart mainly to teach the word of God and perform religious practices, but overall churches (or God?) appoint them to provide leadership within the community (Luong & Westcott 2015). Pentecostal pastors have become significantly popular and, in some instances, they have become demigods who are capable of performing miracles and other forms of spiritual intervention. Most churchgoers believe that pastors have direct contact with God and as such, they are revered. Thus, in most Pentecostal church commercials, pastors and prophets are always the faces of the church, which implies that the church views them as ambassadors of God. In some cases, this prophet-centrism has created a situation where believers see the man of God as equivalent to (or a substitute of) God. We use the phrase ‘man of God’ instead of ‘woman of God’ advisedly because the majority of church pastors/prophets, especially in Nigeria, are men. Biwul (2018) cautions that the modern-day Pentecostal church’s obsession with the man of God is detrimental to the church and the gospel.

In the Nigerian context, pastors are increasingly abandoning the

responsibility of keeping the flock (Biwul 2018: 92) and many claimants to the pastoral ministry are becoming more self-centred than people-centred. Biwul (2018) observes that churches in Nigeria no longer use Jesus as a guide or model. The focus of the gospel has now significantly shifted from God to human beings – pastors – setting the standard, which has resulted in a competitive spirit as pastors seek to be like or to surpass some other pastor. Olorin (2007) attributes this pastoral behaviour to the ideology of dominion and domination; power and authority to possess and exercise one's authority over sickness, poverty, demons and bad luck; and the quest to remain in power for the benefit of personal veneration and dominance over one's church members.

Nigeria and Pentecostalism

Christianity in Nigeria dates back to the fifteenth century when Portuguese missionaries attempted to Christianize the people of Benin and Warri (Ogunrinade & Ogbale 2013: 122). Although Christianity did not appeal so much to Nigerians at the time, it is now one of the most popular religions/faiths in Nigeria. Just as there are many churches in Nigeria, there are also many followers.

Pentecostal churches in Nigeria can be traced to a rift that occurred in the missionary churches in the nineteenth century when Africans felt that they were being side-lined. With time, and with this rift serving as a catalyst, many Pentecostal churches sprang up. Some of the earlier prophets of these churches were Moses Tunolase Orimolade of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Joseph Ayodele Babalola of Christ Apostolic Church, and Samuel B. J. Oshoffa of Celestial Church of Christ (Owoeye 2006). Nowadays, Pentecostal churches, most of which believe in the power of prayer and faith for healing have mushroomed everywhere.

Gabriel (2015: 67) posits that the offshoot of these churches is essential as they are a great source of inspiration to Christians and have a great impact on the spread of the gospel. Gabriel makes a strong case for the Pentecostal churches in that most of them are familiar with the plight of Nigerians and are at home with the cultural setting of the people. Today, Pentecostals parade amazing testimonies of wondrous works of God; their messages on prosperity tend to give hope and succour to a vast number of toiling Nigerians (Rotimi, Nwadiakor & Ngwucha 2016).

Conceptual Framework

The idea of visual culture emphasises intertextuality or ‘the way one text is connected with others’ in order to make meaning. Barthes’ (1970) idea of a text as an ‘inter-text’ suggests that one can only understand a text in relation to other texts with which it is connected. In the context of this study, this implies that an advertisement does not have meaning in itself; rather its meaning derives from the context in which it is situated. Any attempt to disconnect a text from other texts leads either to total breakdown of meaning or absolute misunderstanding of the text. The notion of visual culture in this paper recognises the inter-connectedness of texts– images operating inter-dependently with other images, sounds, and spatial delineations. This implies that texts from different media ought to be read together rather than in isolation. We can derive layers of meanings from texts in relation to the context in which they are located.

The current study adopts the concept of visual culture to interrogate multimodal and aesthetic features of visual church advertising. Jenks (1995), in his explanation of visual culture, states that ‘what we see, and the way we come to see it, is not simply part of a natural ability ... it is rather intimately linked with the ways that our society has, over time, arranged its forms of knowledge, its strategies of power and its systems of desire There is only a social not a formal relation between vision and truth’. In addition, Mitchell (2002: 167) opines that ‘vision is (as we say) a cultural construction, that it is learned and cultivated, not simply given by nature’. These two assertions indicate a social relation between vision and truth (the way we see things and the things we see). Visual culture can benefit from discursive resources, which are already available within a society such as church advertisements. Mirzoeff (1998: 6) notes that visual culture does not only deal with images but also human visual experiences of existence. In the same vein, Rogoff (1998: 14) intimates that ‘visual culture opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds and spatial delineations are read on, to and through one another’.

Mitchell (1984) identifies the family of images as consisting of five different types of images. These are graphic, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal images. Of importance to this paper are only three families namely: perceptual, mental and verbal. The perceptual aspect suggests that we can transfer messages or information through any of the senses, especially sight. The mental aspect insinuates the representation of the physical world in a

person's mind. Thus, the way a person's mind works determines what constitutes that person's mental image. Verbal images refer to the pictures created by particular words or expressions when people utter or hear them. Mitchell's idea of the image family is appropriate to this study for two reasons. Firstly, mental imagery has developed into 'picture theory' which deals with how people picture (see, imagine, visualise) the world through images (Mitchell 1984: 508). Secondly, perceptual imagery is important because the analyst needs to understand the images based on perceptions. Thirdly, image types are not hidden and private. Rather, they are open to the public and located within a particular cultural context. Mitchell (1984: 520) expatiates this concept when he says that 'knowledge is better understood as a matter of social practices, disputes, and agreements, and not as the property of some particular mode of natural or unmediated representation'. These ideas are applicable to advertising, which is an integral part of this article. Although advertisements make use of words, many images often accompany the words. As such, images are as important as words in advertising.

Methodology

The paper discusses the dominant role played by church leaders in church advertising. As such, specific focus is placed on billboards and posters used by selected churches to advertise their gospel and church services. This study particularly targeted church advertisements in Nigeria. It adopted a qualitative approach because it examined complex patterns of interactions between variables, particularly because we conducted the research in a natural setting (O'Cathain *et al.* 2015). The approach is even more important in that while it is impossible to study a whole population, the qualitative approach allows for generalisation of findings (O'Cathain *et al.* 2015).

Data was gathered through purposive sampling which allowed the researchers to select data that could provide answers to the research questions. Hence, we approached the data with a specific purpose in mind. The criteria for data selection were already predefined. Therefore, we selected only those advertisements with the pictures of religious leaders as dominant features on the billboard or poster. For this paper, we selected five (5) sample adverts. We identified elements of prophet-centrism in the adverts and analysed them using a multimodal discourse analysis framework. The

billboards and posters were selected from across the South-Western region of Nigeria.

The South-Western region (where Lagos, the most popular city in Nigeria is located), has witnessed the emergence of many commercial activities over the years. Various Nigerian citizens have come from their different environments to settle in Lagos with the intention of exploring its commercial opportunities. This situation has thus seen churches take a strong hold in this populous city. We deployed Castleberry and Nolan's (2018: 809 - 815) four steps for carrying out an analysis namely: compiling; disassembling; reassembling and interpreting to make sense of the data.

Prophet-centrism in the Discourse of Church Advertising: An Analytical Discussion

The notion of prophet-centrism underscores the importance of the man of God or prophet in any church advertisement. The man of God is at the centre and believers consider him/her as God's representative on earth. Many churches consider the man of God as the centre of the affairs of the church. Ukah (2008) supports the position that Pentecostal advertising constructs a public profile for pastors whose images literally adorn every street corner. In what he refers to as self-promotion, which is highly important in Pentecostalism, Ukah (2008) posits that Pentecostal advertising is manipulating, exploiting and controlling in subtle but seductive ways. In some churches, the man of God is the founder of the church, while in others he/she has been ordained into what Bonis (2015) calls pastoral leadership. Pastoral leaders are set apart to instruct, nurture, guide and direct the church and individuals in pursuit of God and in paths of ministry particularly suited to that group of believers.

Johnson (1995: 182 - 183) recognises the role of the pastor as primarily that of a theologian, preacher and shepherd. However, in today's churches, the role of the pastor is much broader. The pastor is also a therapist, head of the church, finance/prosperity coach, motivational speaker, and a specialist in developing and growing the church. Significantly, the man of God is the face of the church, with power and authority vested in him by virtue of his divine calling. It is unsurprising that some church members may even ascribe the role of God to pastors, judging by the miraculous activities they perform on behalf of congregations. This has been the case for many

years in Nigerian churches, and more recently in South Africa.

According to Nwanganga (2017: 1), ‘spiritual calling/ direct revelation from God through dreams and visions’ and ‘a search for spiritual development in private mannerism’ account for why there are many churches in Nigeria. This also explains why the man of God is the centre of attraction. People focus on the men of God because of the belief that they can bring healing and other spiritual benefits. People seeking divine healing or divine intervention in their lives throng prayer houses, miracle centres, and crusade meetings. Figure 1 below exemplifies the centrality of the man of God in the lives of the believers.



Figure 1: A billboard church advert titled Baba Shilo.

In Figure 1, the man of God is the center of attraction and first point of contact for those who wish to visit or become members of the church. For this reason, the man of God often stands out from the rest of the congregation.

Owoeye (2006: 97) affirms that from the twentieth century to date, many Pentecostal pastors have arrogated to themselves powers or gifts to heal all sorts of diseases (Owoeye 2006: 97). This advertisement presents the pastor in a large image with a multitude of people behind him. Since the pastor sits in the office of the prophet, which is often considered a holy office, he commands a lot of respect from the followers who look up to him not only for spiritual guidance but also for material blessings as he is seen as God-sent.

The image of a happy and fulfilled family is particularly attractive in a modern world where many marriages fail. The next advertisement implies that the man of God is successful because he works together with his wife in

his ministerial duties. The woman is a divine helper designated by God to help the man of God pursue his calling.



Figure 2: A billboard church advert titled Solution Night.

Figure 2 presents the man of God as an example of a good husband who works hand-in-hand with his wife.

This view resonates with Ukah's (2008) observation that Pentecostal leaders attempt to legitimise their would-be successors by advertising their wives alongside themselves as 'charismatic', 'qualified', and 'ordained' by God.

The advert also presents pictures of other ministers, which could also signify corporate anointing. If one man of God represents a vehicle for the transference of God's blessings, the implication is that more men of God equal more blessings. In Christianity, ministers are authorised to perform functions such as the teaching of beliefs, leading of services and providing spiritual guidance to the community.



Figure 3: A billboard church advert titled 2017 Fire Convention.

The centrality of the man of God in the church is evident in Figure 3, which presents invited guests as some kind of 'wallpaper' for the pastor's large image.

While the face of the man of God is clear, the faces of the other ministers are somewhat obscure. This implies that they are not the main pastors of the church, although the latter have invited them to take part in the event due to their spiritual calling.

As observed in the advert, the ministers stand side by side with the pastor of the church. Since these ministers have different callings and gifts, their presence signifies more spiritual power. As such, potential attendees are confident that the church has enough capable hands to attend to their worries. Just as in the previous advert, the pastor's wife provides a supportive role, suggested by leaning on the shoulder of the man of God. This suggests that the man of God and his wife share a similar vision, goal and objective for the church. The presence of a wife in many of the advertisements may also suggest that in Pentecostal churches, God's work has become a business that involves every member of the family.

Ukah (2008) also cautions that where pastors have begun to make their wives as popular as themselves, this is an attempt to keep the leadership of the church in the family and not extend it to strangers. Bertrand and Schoar (2006) concedes that individual churches have become 'family firms' grounded in family control and nepotism, while simultaneously promoting 'strong family values' as a desirable quality for organisational leadership. Apart from the spiritual implication of the advert in figure 4, there is also a physical manifestation of the supernatural through a visual representation of Christ. The picture of Jesus Christ at the top of the billboard is deputised by the picture of the man of God directly beneath it. The pictures of other ministers are in front of the man of God. The man of God wears priestly regalia, which gives an impression that not only is he priestly in his words but also in appearance.

This portrayal of the man of God resonates with prophet-centrism within Pentecostal churches. The pastor is God's representative on earth, as he stands between the human and the divine. Magezi and Banda (2017: 1-2) also pontificate that pastors or prophets mediate their presence in the lives of their followers through anointed objects such as their personal pictures, anointing oil and armbands. In Figure 1, the pastor's name or popular appellation is Baba Shiloh. This is in fact a popular practice in Nigerian Pentecostal churches, meant to set the man of God apart from ordinary members of the church. 'Baba' is a Yoruba word, which means father. Since the role of the father includes supporting and providing for children, the pa-

rent must be in charge of the child's development in all its ramifications.

Dube (2018) considers Pentecostal leaders as spiritual parents who assume the roles of mentors and guardians, thereby usurping the role of biological parents. Although Pentecostal spiritual parents share no blood relation with their 'children', Dube (2018) says they are parents in the sense that they are responsible for their growth and development. Put differently, pastors are the spiritual fathers of members of the church and thus responsible for all their spiritual needs and development. It is also worth noting that referring to someone as 'Baba' in the Yoruba culture in Nigeria signifies a high degree of respect for such a person, except in cases where it is used as a form of solidarity amongst friends.

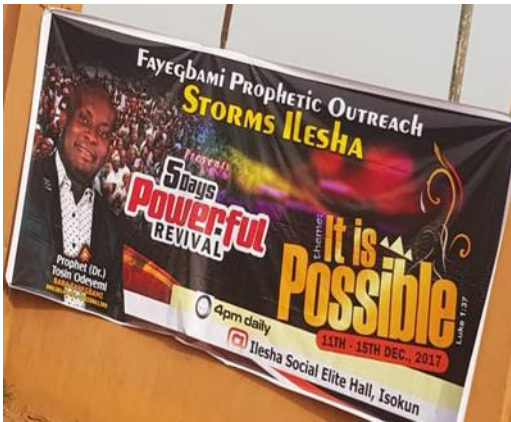


Figure 4: A billboard church advert entitled Fayegbami Prophetic Outreach.

In Figure 4, the titles 'Prophet (Dr.)' accompany the pastor's name. The abbreviated title does not indicate whether the bearer holds a doctorate in any discipline, or he is a medical doctor or just an honorary PhD holder.

In the medical field, a doctor is someone knowledgeable in health-related issues. In the academic field, a doctoral degree is the highest academic qualification attainable and it signifies that someone is knowledgeable in a field or discipline. Judging by these explanations, 'Dr.' is not only a title but also a symbol of knowledge and wisdom. In this regard, referring to the pastor as a 'Dr.' implies that he is knowledgeable, both spiritually and otherwise. The pastor is both a 'prophet' and a 'Dr.' which suggests that he is endowed with both earthly and heavenly wisdom. The title 'Dr.' is likely to attract an educated audience, amongst which medical doctors and academics are included.

The sequence of the two titles 'prophet Dr' suggests that one is more important than the other. The title 'prophet' is more important to the man of

God, and possibly to church members. Cazarin (2017: 471) also notes that the religious titles of preachers often imply a certain set of gifts, skills and expertise.



Figure 5: A church advert titled Christ Apostolic Church.

Figures 4 and 5 refer to pastors as ‘prophet’, which resonate with the notion that they are powerful and capable of spiritual awakening.

Magezi and Banda (2017: 1-2) argue that pastors or prophets, as they tend to refer to themselves, either consciously or unconsciously compete with Christ by their domineering role in Pentecostal churches. These authors argue that the mediatory role of Pentecostal prophets competes with the mediatory role of Christ and it tends to usurp Christ’s role within the church.

As such, pastors are no longer channels that lead people to depend only on Christ for their spiritual security. Prophets now present themselves as super-spiritual authorities that people should rely on in addition to Christ. Pastors or prophets project themselves as uniquely anointed by God. Hence, they receive spiritual power and authority over other believers. In this sense, Kangwa (2016: 3) also claims that Africans are attracted to the performances of prophets and prophetesses in Pentecostal-charismatic churches where they are promised good health, prosperity, marriages and travelling opportunities to the UK or America.

The pastor is the leader while others follow. In some instances, the congregation reveres such men of God more than God Himself. The title ‘prophet’ has become popular in the Pentecostal movement in recent years because it has connotations of someone with powers to see what ordinary people cannot see. People visit prophets to get visions or prophecies about

their lives and their future. Pentecostal churches present the man of God as much more important than the congregation. The man of God is the centre of attention, the vision bearer and the point of contact. This portrayal of the man of God resonates with the idea of prophet-centrism propagated within Pentecostal churches. God has called the man of God, and he stands in between the human and the divine.

It should, however, be cautioned that such obsession with the man of God could be read as idolatry. This is because people tend to focus more attention on the man of God than they focus on God Himself. This is evident in the way the members of the congregation look up to the man of God in Figure 2. The man of God is not only different because of the office he occupies but also because of how he dresses. In Figure 2, the pastor is dressed formally, with a suit and a tie, while the congregation is an anonymous mass that is hardly visible. Given that Christianity is a religion that emanates from the West, the leader of the church does not only practice the teachings of the Bible, but also adopts Western mannerisms and dress code. The modern-day Pentecostal church is thus not only a vehicle for spreading the gospel but also globalisation (read as Westernisation). In Figure 2, the man of God dresses in some kind of American style. He wears a black suit and a white shirt with black dots.

It can be thus be surmised from the above that the images and postures of pastors in church commercials play a significant role in attracting the audience. In fact, the choices of texts used to support the images also reinforce the power evident in pastors and prophets, further suggesting that pastors are imminently becoming human demigods.

Conclusion

Since advertising is about what appeals to the people, one can assume that a picture of Jesus Christ on church advertisements is not as appealing as pictures of pastors or prophets generally. McCauley (2012) also cautions that the tendency in descriptions of new Pentecostalism is, in fact, to distinguish units not by denomination or theological interpretation, but instead by the individual pastor or Pentecostal leader himself. This is the hallmark of what we characterise as prophet-centrism – the Pentecostal church's obsession with the personality of the man of God. The idea of prophet-centrism permeates church advertisements in Nigeria, which is also evident in the

samples discussed and substantiated above. This study contends that if the church does not take care, going forward, pastors will conveniently take the space of Jesus Christ given the power they attribute to themselves as well as those attributed to them by their followers. If church advertisements continue to emphasize the powers of the pastor, while paying limited attention to the power of Jesus Christ, followers will continue to assume that spiritual healing and power rests solely with the pastor, which will prove highly dangerous to the gospel of God.

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