

# MCR

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# **MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION REVIEW**

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# Determining Negativity in Selected 2015 Presidential Election Campaigns Press Advertisements

Olayinka. A. EGBOKHARE

## Abstract

This paper reviews the message content of selected adverts used during the 2015 Presidential election campaigns with a view to identifying the extent to which negative content was employed. Traditionally, political parties hold rallies and engage in public speeches across major geo-political zones prior to elections. Campaign messages are now disseminated via the broadcast and print media along with online engagements from Twitter to Facebook. Using the Functional theory of Campaign discourse as the background, the study examined 20 purposively selected print ads from 4 (four) major Nigerian Newspapers. Using content and descriptive analysis, the researcher looked at the headline, body copy, illustration, call to action and sponsor of the selected advert. Findings show that many of the print ads were direct criticisms and verbal attacks on the character and judgement of the contestants. Messages bothered on direct name calling and attack on personality and character of one's opponents. Many of the adverts did not have identified sponsors and in some instances sponsors simply called themselves Concerned Citizens or similar appellations. Many of the messages bypassed APCON's gate-keeping and received cooperation from media houses who ran adverts that were not vetted by APCON. The paper recommends stricter penalties against offensive and inciting political advertisements.

**Key words:** Campaigns. Negativity, Presidential Elections, Press Advertisements

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## Introduction

The role of the media in electoral campaigns is fundamental. However, equally crucial is the nature of the messages placed in the media. Hence, Okigbo (1992) observes that elections are won and lost largely on the ability of the campaign managers to use communication effectively. According to Castells (1997), "it is not that the media control politics as such, rather they have come to create and constitute the space in which politics now chiefly happens for most people ...whether we like it or not, in order to engage in the political debate, we must do so through the media." Thus, the media play a pivotal role in helping candidates define or shape their images for voters.

A report in the Vanguard Newspaper of March 23, 2015 holds that N4.9 Billion was expended on communication for the 2015 elections. The Print media alone raked in 1.049 Billion. The biggest spender was the sitting party at the time, that is the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party). The monumental use of the social media and the heated debates generated on those platforms make the 2015 elections campaign attention worthy. As it appears, the content of the political campaign messages is a topic that is always on the front burner for many scholars and political analysts especially in an election year. Critics agree that with the 2015 electoral campaign, the media set a fundamental agenda for what appeared to be a war of words, accusations, counter accusations, name-calling, mudslinging and smear campaign. In fact, Mark Amaza, a blogger while writing about the 2015 elections observed that "on the negative side, is the unprecedented level of gratuitous attacks witnessed in this campaign season."

The outcry about the negativity of the campaign content was so much that the then Registrar of the Advertising Practitioner Council of Nigeria (APCON), on January 21, 2015, Alhaji Garba Bello Karkarofi, issued a Press release titled Electioneering Campaign: Appeal to Mass Media Owners/Managers. In the write-up, the Registrar pointed out that "a keen observer of the electioneering campaign communication will feel worried by the

pedestrian, combative, provocative and insensitive messages, language and style of several of the campaign communication". The Registrar went on to further spell out the existing regulations which require that political advertisements do the following:

- Deal with issues (campaign manifestoes, promises, etc.)
- Avoid the use of foul or abusive language as well as false, distorted or unsubstantiated claims or misrepresentations of facts:
- Should not exploit or incite ethnic, religious or other sectional interests
- Should clearly indicate the identity of the sponsor of the advertisement (anonymous or unidentifiable advertisers are not allowed to place advertisement in the media)

The last requirement spelled out by APCON in the Press Release stipulated that "like every other form of advertisement, political advertisements are required to be submitted for pre-exposure approval by the Advertising Standards Panel.

A number of studies have been conducted on the 2015 elections in Nigeria (Alawode and Adesanya, 2016; Tejumaiye, Simon and Obia, 2018). The belief of some observers is that even though the campaign thrust was generally negative, Rtd. Gen. Buhari and the APC party were more on the receiving end. Some however uphold that each of the two leading parties threw as much mud as the other. To some others, the messages were not negative because they were truthful situation reports which voters had a right to be privy to. Inadvertently, the events on the political landscape fast suggest that it may be impossible to run electoral campaigns without a character slurring and name calling. The use of negative campaign may not be noticed in every election. It is said to be more commonly demonstrated in senatorial and presidential elections. (West 2005, 28-30). For instance, in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, the use of negative campaign was most notable in the Presidential elections. However, there were some recorded cases of smear campaigns in Governorship elections in states like Rivers, Lagos, Abia, Port Harcourt, Oyo, Ekiti, just to mention a few.

This paper is an examination of selected print ads from the 2015 election campaign with the aim of drawing attention to the nature and structure of the negative information/content. The researcher studied samples of negative political advertising from the 2015 Presidential elections in Nigeria with a view to establishing the pattern of message development. One explanation for the study is that "the widespread presence of negative advertising in the political market has been a serious concern to policymakers, scholars, and news commentators alike" (montana.edu/urban/documents/JEEADraftD1\_5RR.pdf). The fear has always been that negative advertising is "harmful to the health of a democracy" (Franz, Freedman, Goldstein and Ridout, 2008, p? ). In fact, some studies suggest that many voters have developed a sense of apathy towards political campaigns because of the negativity that permeates the air during campaign periods (Ansolabehere, Iyengar and Simon 1999).

This study examines the adverts to find out their negative structure. Are they negative because they lie about the target? Or because the claims or actions discussed are negative? Are they negative because they come from the opposition? Or because they generate negative feelings in the receiver? What makes an ad negative? The study is driven by the following research questions:

- i. What is the nature of the message content of the selected political adverts?
- ii. To what extent are these message contents negative in view of the axioms of negative political advertising?
- iii. Looking at APCON Regulations, do the selected adverts fall foul of the standards?

## **Literature review**

Negative political communication is an established political strategy to paint the opponent as the undesirable other. Or like Richard Nixon was quoted to have said, "It is necessary for me to establish a winner image; therefore, I have to beat somebody" (Drew, 2007). Establishing a winner image therefore mandates that a contestant casts aspersion on the person or character of the other contestants. In fact, it becomes somewhat legitimate to question the character, the antecedents, the competence and the ideology of the other candidates. Ultimately, this strategic weapon is designed to diminish the image and the overall profile of the opposing candidate and make him less acceptable to the electorate.

While establishing the popularity of negative political campaign messages in American elections, Kaid and Johnston (1991) reported that the percentage of negative advertisements in U.S. election campaigns has increased over the years. Some twenty years later, Baumgartner reports that the 2012 presidential ad campaign was the most negative in recent memory (Fowler, 2012; Slack, 2012). By one estimate, "only 14.4% of pro-Obama and 20.4% of pro-Romney ads, which include those sponsored by the candidate, their party, or other groups, could be considered strictly positive ads. The remaining ads were either negative (58.5% for Obama and 49.2% for Romney) or contrast ads. It was specifically reported that in the 2012 presidential race, Obama spent \$404 million on negative advertising alone. This represented 85% of his advertising expenditure. Similarly, Romney spent \$492 million on anti-Obama ads, which amounted to 91% of his advertising costs (washingtonpost.com, 2012).

In the 2017 Presidential election involving Clinton and Trump, the use of negative advertising was also hugely reported. Even though Clinton spent more money on Television advertising than Trump did (\$258 million to his \$92million and 400,000 adverts to his 120,000), the contents of the ads still show that Clinton used more of Negative ads. Sean Higgin, writing for the Washington Examiner on March 9, 2017 noted that Clinton outspent Trump in



the election campaign. Also, the consensus was that as far as advertising was concerned, Clinton's ads were far more negative in tone and content. The majority of Clinton campaigns were negative advertising which attacked Trump as an individual, with 90% focussing on his character and personality while only 10% concentrated on policy issues. This did not mean that Trump was less negative in his campaign; apparently, he employed other means apart from advertising to throw his own darts. In fact, John Geer, a Vanderbilt University professor who specialises in political advertising, argued that "Trump's propensity to verbally attack Clinton in an incendiary way essentially made his rallies and interviews into attack ads on their own." (Stanage, 2016) In other words, even though Trump did not use TV Ads as much as Clinton, he did not employ less of negative campaigning.

The popularity of attack ads over the years is reflective in the number of studies devoted to them. Researchers have asked questions about whether or not they work and how they work. While some studies have shown that they may stimulate voters turn out (Goldstein and Freedman, 2002), others have said negative ads decrease turnout (Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, 1993) some have said they neither increase nor decrease turnout (Clinton and Lapinsky, 2004). Some studies claim they always hurt the sponsor and increase liking of target (Sufaro, 1998), others studies say they hurt their target and are more memorable (Bradley, Angelini and Sungkyoung, 2007). In the submission of Pinkleton, Um and Austin (2002:22), a major reason negative political ads are used successfully is that voters tend to weigh negative information more heavily than positive information when forming impressions of political candidates.

Marketing communication is about effect and influence and result. Ultimately, an electoral campaign is a marketing action used by politicians to get votes in an election. In fact, political parties and their candidates are also interested in knowing which campaign tactics work so as to know how to allocate their resources and develop better knowledge about how and why voters make the

choices they make. The Texas Ethics Commission in its 2011 brochure states that for an advert can be adjudged as political or otherwise by trying to answer these two questions:

- What does it say?
- Where does it appear?

A political advertising message is expected to promote contestants' superior attributes or policies over those of their opponents. The message is designed to elicit specific behaviours, such as voting, and/or increased awareness of the candidate or party. Political advertising aims to ensure that the public is aware of an opponent's weaknesses whilst promoting the sponsoring candidate's strengths and policy differences (Roddy & Garramone, 1988; Pinkleton, 1998; O'Cass, 2002; Meirick, 2002;). Candidates can control the message sent to the target audience and its format, and can associate the sponsoring candidate with positive images and their opponent with negative images (Roddy & Garramone 1988; Niffenegger, 1989; Christ, Thorson & Caywood, 1994).

One other way of looking at the phenomenon is to view negative advertisements strictly as those that only present negative information about a competing candidate (Meirick 2002). The content is such that it casts aspersions on the personality of the opponent, his character or past deeds, in and out of office. In a succinct view, Bradley et. al. (2007: 116) describe them as ads that are "based on direct criticism of an opponent's issue, stand, track record, or personal character, with the purpose to discredit the opponent's image and turn voters away from that candidate". This definition echoes the submission of many researchers who have conducted studies into negative political advertising. (Newhagen and Reeves, 1991; Ansolabehere et.al. 1993; Devlin 1994; O'Sullivan and Geiger 1995). Generally, one might then affirm that negative ads are those which evoke negative responses (Devlin 1995).

Are negative political adverts the same as attack advertising? Scholars suggest they are not exactly the same. Attack advertising contains an aggressive, one-sided assault, designed to draw attention to an opponent's weaknesses in either character or issue positions (Pfau and Kenski, 1990). Attack advertising and negative advertising are often used interchangeably, but "attack advertising also represents the most malicious form of negative advertising. Negative advertising directly assaults a targeted candidate for broken promises, a poor voting record, public misstatements, and the like". Such advertising often is referred to as "mudslinging" (Garramone, 1984). So, looking at samples from the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, were there more of 'attack advertising' or 'negative advertising'?

For further clarification, Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) propose that there are three types of negative political ads: direct attack; direct comparison (ad features the candidate as well as the opponent and contrasts their records, their experience and their issue positions. ) and implied comparison (ad does not make specific references to the targeted candidate and in some cases it may not feature the sponsoring party/candidate until the very end). The ethical question again raised here is, does the blow land softer on the opponent who is being attacked if the negative portrayal is a direct comparison as opposed to a direct attack? Since a direct comparison only juxtaposes the scorecards of the opponents against each other, is that fair game? Is it also the case that voters are likely to find some types of negative ads easier to deal with than others? Is the smudge on the candidate lighter when the negative comment borders on policies as opposed to personal weakness or failing?

The thin line separating attack advertising and negative advertising depends on the volume of venom injected into the message, the nature of the information given and the motive. However, it can be argued that whether attack or negative, these advertising forms portend no good omen for their targets. Ultimately, negative ads present ugly details about a contestant,

making disparaging comments and denting his image before the electorate with the aim of influencing voting behaviour in favour of the attacker or the opposition party. Such portrayals always borrow from information which presents the target as weak, unfit or ill equipped for the position for which he wishes to contest. It does not matter if the attack ad is based on half-truths or outright lies, the damage would still have been done and no amount of refutations can fully restore an already dented image.

If like Kaid (1999) observes, exposure to advertisements does influence public perception of candidates, then a better understanding of how negative advertising works is necessary. Thus, at their very core, negative political advertisements involve criticism of a candidate, a policy decision, or past performance. There may be a need to distinguish between “mudslinging” and “legitimate criticism” (Kahn and Kenney, 1999). In other words, if the information given about the candidate is true, is it still negative advertising or simply rendering of facts? Does calling a politician under whose watch, huge funds are unaccounted for and awarded projects not completed, a thief and a rogue amount to negative advertising?

In an attempt to make the classification clearer, Stevens et al. (2008) reiterate that comparative or contrast advertisements are those that offer legitimate critiques, qualifications, and other substantive materials about a candidate or pair of candidates in order to disseminate the information to the general public. The intention of these ads is not to cast a negative light on either of the candidates, but to inform the public through facts, why one individual should be voted for and not the other. These types of ads also educate the public in reference to the candidates’ policy stances on issues that are important during the course of a specific election. Ads compare and contrast the candidates so that the voters can construct a more educated opinion about each individual (whether positive or negative) in reference to the policies and issues that matter to them most. In so doing, the individual voter chooses a candidate as a direct result of whether they support

similar views. This type of advertisement is not intended to be positive or negative, but simply reflect reality and past professional actions of a candidate. An exception to this type of ad is if it uses innuendo on top of facts to affect the voters' choice of candidate. Innuendo may take the form of inciting photographs, verbiage, or colour, and may subsequently make the ad negative.

Negative campaigning directly criticizes some aspect of a political candidate's stance or behaviour, and is usually sponsored by an opponent, an opponent's political party, and/or supporting group. Negative campaigning can also be broken down into two categories: negative issue or negative image. Negative issue ads, as defined above, usually benefit the sponsor, because they are more liked by the public because they use substantiated statements; however, they add a negative "spin." (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1989) Negative image advertisements usually focus on an individual's personal characteristics, which may or may not be substantiated, and usually make judgmental statements about an individual's past or the motivation behind past political actions (Roddy and Garramone, 1988).

Without doubt, negative campaigning maybe an effective tool, depending on the situation. In Presidential primaries, when candidates have similar positions on policies, negative issue campaigning is likely to occur specifically in this regard (Damore, 2002; Krebs and Holian, 2007; Schulman and Rivera, 2009:2-3). In addition, one other reason for the popularity of negative ads is because of the advantage that those already in office have over those who are running for that office. Incumbent candidates generally have an advantage in terms of media coverage, so challengers may have to use their ads to contrast their stand on issue and policies with those of incumbents (Kaid and Johnston, 2001).

Furthermore, Lau and Pomper (2001) identified negative political messages during several U.S. Senate campaigns as either person based or issue based. Further in their study, they found no

evidence that these two types of attacks differentially affected voter turnout. In contrast, significant effects were found on the perception of political sources as they discovered that the effect of the campaign depended more on the credibility of the information source and less on the nature of the attack. (Carraro and Castelli, 2010:619). No wonder some negative campaigns focus on political scandals as their thematic content to make an argument against the opposing candidate (Garramone et al. 1990; Kaid and Bystrom 1999; Tedesco 2002).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is hinged on the Functional theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit, 2007). This theory is most relevant because it focuses on the nature of campaign messages. It explains that candidates seek to appear preferable to other candidates in order to win elections. The theory is based on six axioms which have been tested in several political election studies. The first axiom holds that voting is a comparative act. This is understandable as one candidate must be perceived as preferable to his opponent. Secondly, the theory holds that candidates must distinguish themselves from their opponents as one cannot be preferable if the contenders are indistinguishable. Third, political campaigns or messages are the means for establishing a distinction. They are an avenue for voters to acquire information about the candidates.

Furthermore, the fourth axiom holds that candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking and defending. It is understandable that if one candidate is to be preferred, then comparisons may be unavoidable. Acclaims are said to be positive statements that identify the qualities, accomplishments or desirable attributes of a candidate. Attacks are criticisms and they identify the weaknesses or limitations of an opponent or his political party. Defences are refutation of attacks from opponents. The fifth axiom holds that campaign discourse occur on two topics: Policy and Character. Policy may be seen as dealing with issues: education, employment, security, national defence,

economic decisions and other related matters. Policy can also be presented from three angles: past deeds (accomplishments and failures), future plans (specific campaign promises) and general goals (campaign objectives).

The last and the sixth of the Functional theory axioms states that the last aim of every political campaign which is for a winner to emerge. The theory however holds that a candidate must win a majority or plurality of the votes cast. The functional theory strongly reflects in this present study especially along the dimensions of the peculiarities of political campaign messages. One major challenge is that the theory appears to emphasise the candidate over the political party whereas in many instances, the image and the assessment of the candidate is woven into that of the party it represents. Also, in a country like Nigeria where ethnicity, religion and 'stomach infrastructure' feature in the voters' decision making, will the actions of the candidate in relations to these factors be classified as policy or character?

### Methodology

The paper examines 20 purposively selected print ads from the 2015 Presidential campaign. Samples were drawn only from the campaign of APC and PDP as they were the most vocal contestants in the race. A pre-test was carried out using a group of seven selected and trained coders who are students of advertising from the Department of Communication of Language Arts, both at the Undergraduate and Postgraduate levels. From a pool of adverts that ran between January to March in major Nigerian Newspapers - The Punch, The Nation, The Guardian and the Nigerian Tribune. All four newspapers met the inclusion criteria of being widely circulated and popularly read especially in the locality in which the study was carried out.

The categorisation yardsticks include the following: the tone-use of innuendo, message focus (issue or character), direct attack or name calling, negative image, casting aspersion (personality, character or oneself), defending past deed self -acclaim. Each of

the selected adverts was analysed using the major components of the press ad-Headline, Subhead, Body copy, Illustration and Call to Action and sponsor as basis. The purpose and the nature of the message was examined along these content categorization yardsticks: the tone-use of innuendo, message focus (issue or character), direct attack or name calling, negative image, casting aspersion (personality, character or past deed) acclaiming, distinguishing a candidate or trying to make a contestant to appear preferable.

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Results

TABLE A- APC PRINT ADS WITH ANTI- GEJ (GOODLUCK EBELE JONATHAN) MESSAGES

S/No	Headline	Body Copy	Illustration	Call to action	Sponsor	Content
1.	For those who care to know, the following are Jonathan's true achievements so far. (Monday March 2, 2015, THE NATION, PAGE 9)	Increase in National debt, depleted excess crude oil account (from \$20bn to \$2bn) high unemployment rate and poverty level etc.	Picture of Jonathan looking pensive, against a dark background	Vote APC, Vote for CHANGE	Defenders of Democracy	Negative tone and illustration. Creating a negative image for GEJ. Innuendo-use of 'achievements' to refer to problems.
2.	President Jonathan's scorecard- Rule of Law F Corruption A+ (Monday, January 19, 2015. THE NATION Friday, January 16, 2015 THE NATION)	Allegations of financial frauds and issues relating to breach of court orders and other unlawful political moves	A score card showing the grades in bold and encircled	Vote wisely	Coalition for change	Negative. Casting aspersion Using reference to performance in office/past deeds Reference to Character and Focus on issue

3.	We know what Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Lee Kwan Yew and Barack Obama represent. (THE NATION, January 22, 2015)	The rather confusing ad (pictures of the leaders named are not in the illustration) says Mr Goodluck Jonathan, this is where you belong... and this is followed by an obscure arrow pointing at the illustration. The message could mean Goodluck Jonathan belongs with the leaders named in the headline.	Pictures of Mobutu Sese Seko, Robert Mugabe, Goodluck Jonathan Blaise Compaore Idi Amin	Vote wisely, vote for change	Defenders of Democracy	Casting aspersion Reference to Character, Personality and Past deeds Direct attack and Name calling
4.	Oh Yes! They are correct. Still under his watch, Nigeria has become No.1 in broken promises. (THE NATION, Thursday January 8, 2015)	Reference to Goodluck Jonathan's promise to build a 2 <sup>nd</sup> Niger Bridge if voted in 2011. The President was later quoted as saying <i>I don't know the exact statement I made in terms of the completion.</i>	A picture of GEJ in a small box and a larger picture of a smiling Buhari.	Vote Mohammedu Buhari	CAN	Use of innuendo Accusation of Making promises, denying knowledge of them and not fulfilling them.
5.	NIS 2014 RECRUITMENT	Gives data on unemployment	Shot of the mass of job seekers at the	Vote for Change	JUST (Joint Union for	Direct attack Failed promise

	CALAMITY-Are these the kind of jobs he's promising? (Nigerian Tribune, February 5, 2015.)	from Minister of Finance, National Population Commission etc.	ill-fated NIS Recruitment		Service and Transparency	Accusation of Incompetence, purpose is to discredit the target.
6.	Imagine another four years of insecurity. (THE NATION, January 23,2015)	Reports of killing at Gwoza, Bomb blast in Abuja and abduction of Chibok girls.	Picture of CHIBOK girls clad in grey and black Ijab	Nigerians will not reward failure, make change possible	JUST(Joint Union for Service and Transparency	Using fear appeal and reference to performance in office, the target is presented as inept and the opponent is made to look preferable
7.	The Goodluck Jonathan Administration has bankrupt Nigeria (The Punch, February 3,2015)	A catalogue of negative developments-increase in national debt, poverty, unemployment, price of petrol etc.	12 Hexagonal boxes bearing different figures showing statistics in support of the claim of bankruptcy	This must stop, we need CHANGE, VOTE FOR CHANGE	Not identified	Casting aspersion The administration Is accused of Poor performance With far reaching Consequences. The opponent is Presented as preferable
8.	Can you trust this man? (THE NATION, Friday, January 16,2015)	Challenges a statement credited to Jonathan-My administration has reduced poverty rate in Nigeria by 50%. Refers to this as one	A silhouette of Jonathan	Nigerians, it's in your hands. Vote wisely, vote change.	CAN	Attack on personality and character. Target is called a liar, opposing party distinguishes itself.

		among the chronicle of Jonathan's transformation lies.				
9.	The umbrella is not working (The Punch, Monday, February 9, 2015)	Catalogues the problems faced by the country-no light, insecurity, collapsed educational system, no health care plan, dwindling foreign reserve	Darkness and a bleak light from a small kerosene lantern and the APC Logo	Vote Buhari / Osinbajo 2015	Sponsor not identified	Using innuendo, the sitting party is again discredited. The party symbol, the umbrella is said to be ineffective or out of order.
10.	Anyone who doesn't take truth seriously in small matters cannot be trusted in large ones either- Albert Einstein (THE NATION, Sunday, January 25, 2015)	The body copy again challenges the statement credited to Goodluck Jonathan that his government had reduced poverty by 50%	A small picture of Goodluck Jonathan inserted after the quotation on poverty reduction.	No call to action, just a logo of APC and the CHANGE slogan	The message is signed by Lai Mohammed, National Publicity Secretary All Progressives Congress(APC)	Casting aspersion on personality. Outright Name-calling Direct attack

Analyse one Table before the presentation of the second Otherwise, simply summarise your major results and transfer both tables to Appendix section.

TABLE B: ANTI- BUHARI MESSAGES

S/No	HEADLINE	BODY COPY	ILLUSTRATION	CALL TO ACTION	SPONSOR	Comments
1	This is not politics, this is all about integrity.  (Guardian, February 8, 2015)	Questions are raised about some allegations concerning Buhari's administration of the PTF Fund. The copy questions Buhari's claim to integrity.	Buhari in army uniform	This is a challenge to the Civil Society Organisations to do the right thing (suggesting the need to probe the allegations)	Leadership and Accountability Initiative	Subtle attack on Personality. One major argument put forward for the choice of Buhari as President was his integrity. This ad attacks that image using past deeds. The purpose is to discredit
2.	Buyers Beware  (Nigeria Tribune February 7, 2015)	A quotation from Buhari saying <i>Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria were fighting wars and they conducted elections, what is Boko Haram? Boko Haram is only in 14 Local governments.</i>	A picture of Buhari wearing a scowl. Pictures of Boko Haram terrorists an mangled body strewn around them and fire from a bomb blast scene	No direct call to action just a note of caution See <i>those who say they want to secure you</i>	South West Study Group	This advert plays on the raw emotions of the electorate. The Offensive reference is to <i>what is Boko Haram?</i> The illustration lends credence to how unsympathetic and unfeeling such a statement is coming from someone who wants to rule a nation. Attacks the target's personality.
3.	Nigerians Be Warned-Nigerians I have set before thee life and death. Therefore, choose	The body copy simply says will you allow history to repeat itself, enough of State burials	With Zuma rock in the background, pictures of 2 Military leaders	Vote Wisely, Goodluck Jonathan	Ayo Fayose, Governor, Ekiti State	This advert was adjudged the most negative of all the ads used for the 2015 election. It caused a lot of controversy. Death is a

	LIFE that both thee and thy seed may live. Deut. 30 v 19 (Punch, Monday, January 19, 2018)		and 1 Civilian President who died in office, all from Northern Nigeria (Murtala Mohamed, Sani Abacha and Musa Yaradua and a picture of Buhari with a question mark and his age 72 written in red. A separate picture of Goodluck Jonathan appears at the bottom of the page.			topic that is discussed with hushed tones in Nigeria. To allude to the possibility that a contestant would die in office like some other of his tribesmen did before him was seen as very insensitive. The message uses a Bible verse and presents a candidate as Life and his opponent as Death. Outright attack and ill wish.
4.	Nigerians have to be prepared to suffer for at least five straight years before we can stabilise this country security wise and economically, when Buhari says SUFFER, he means SUFFER (Sunday Guardian, February 2015)	The advert asks why Nigerians should choose to suffer when President Goodluck Jonathan is already providing the solutions	A younger Buhari in Military fatigue	Vote Jonathan, vote PDP	Directorate of Media and Publicity	This advert again casts aspersion on the personality of the target. His image, character and antecedents are called to the focus of the electorate. The other contestant is presented as preferable and the sponsoring party distinguishes itself as being humane and capable of handling the affairs of

						the nation without having people suffer
5.	Do Elder statesmen talk like this? (Wednesday, February 11,2015)	Three statements credited to Buhari, two of them inciting voters to violence and the third promising support for total implementation of Sharia all over Nigeria.	Cartoon sketched images of Buhari	Vote wisely	Concerned Nigerians	Direct attack, the character and personality of the target are called to question. His pronouncements are presented as proof of his disposition towards violence and religious bigotry
6.	A septuagenarian in today's world  (Nigerian Tribune Friday February 6, 2015)	The copy speaks of African countries that are struggling with long entrenched undemocratic gerontocrats, quotes Mandela saying he would give over government to a younger man and suggests Buhari should take a back seat and act as an adviser on national issues instead of seeking to be elected as President.	Picture of Buhari pressing his fingers to his brow as if he is massaging the veins in his head.	Not really a call for action it is more of a statement of affirmation Nigerians will never forget, Nigerians will vote for a progressive, peaceful and considerate government, we will never go back.	Alliance for Nigeria's peace and progress	Subtle attack using age as a reason for not preferring a candidate but Call to action suggests more when it said Nigerians will never forget and would vote for a peaceful, considerate progressive leader. What do the two first adjectives have to do with age? The illustration suggests that the target is too old to cope with the rigors of the office he is clamouring for

7.	Who is fooling who? I will stamp out corruption in Nigeria-Pa Muhammadu Buhari (Punch, Tuesday February 10, 2015)	~Chichidodo says it hates excreta but feeds on maggots~	A picture of Buhari with a scowl on his face. He is surrounded by Bola Tinubu, Rotimi Amaechi, Atiku Abubakar, Bukola Saraki Danjuma Goje . Underneath their pictures, wads of Naira notes are displayed	No call to action	Southwest Study Group	Use of innuendo and a catchy proverb make this attack advert look like a subtle negative ad. No outright accusations, the proverb, the illustrations are meant to be interpreted by discerning readers. This advert is meant to discredit and again put a nail through the targets claim of integrity and his campaign promise to wipe out corruption.
8.	Verdict from the Economist Magazine  (The Nigerian Tribune, February 9, 2015)	Opinions about Buhari's rule as a Military Head of state: nasty, brutish and short, banned free speech, detained thousands, used secret tribunals etc.	Picture of Buhari with a scowl on his face	Vote Wisely. This call was preceded by the question <i>Should a former dictator with such a record be offered another chance? Of course no!</i>	Concerned Nigerians	This advert appears like an ordinary score card except that it uses a credible source to make very damaging submissions about Buhari's antecedent as a Military Head of State. There was some name- calling- Former Dictator, brutish ...The advert disparages the target and presents his opponent as a better choice



9.	<p>Imagine this white lie.</p> <p>Friday February 20, 2015. Nigerian Tribune</p>	<p>A statement released by APC on Facebook saying the Buhari was going to visit the Chibok community after a successful rally in Borno State. The APC Director of Media and Publicity later acknowledged that the visit did not take place. The copy ends with the line imagine this white lie from the incorruptible Buhari.</p>	<p>Picture of a smiling Buhari</p>	<p>Vote Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, Vote PDP</p>	<p>New Nigeria Group</p>	<p>Attack ad uses indirect name calling to cast aspersion on the personality and character of the target. Again the purpose is to discredit and to make the opponent/sponsor appear preferable.</p>
10	<p>This is all about integrity (February 8,2015 Sunday Punch)</p>	<p>The copy calls on Buhari to show his certificate and prove his detractors wrong. The copy further says the issue is not about not having a certificate but lying about it and that lying under oath is a criminal act.</p>	<p>Picture of Buhari in army Uniform</p>	<p>CSOs please wake up to your responsibility</p>	<p>Directorate of Media and Publicity, PDP Presidential Campaign Organisation</p>	<p>This advert in a subtle way calls to question the integrity of Buhari. The contention is about the controversy surrounding his certificate. Falsehood is alleged and the aspirant is asked to prove his integrity.</p>

## Discussion

A total of 20 press adverts are presented in Tables A and B under the headings Anti -GEJ (Goodluck Ebele Jonathan) ads and Anti Buhari Ads. Drawing from literature and the Functional theory of Campaign Discourse, all the selected adverts contain negative elements and they were purposively selected. The adverts are examined using the major elements of print ads namely the headlines, body copy, illustration, call to action and identified sponsor. The major feature of the headlines is that they clearly draw attention to the motive behind the ads. Like most negative ads, they were intended to discredit the target and present the sponsor as the preferred candidate. Without doubt, the aim was to discredit the candidate who is the focus of the attack with the aim of influencing voting behaviour. The headlines are mostly direct criticism and all of them present only negative information:

"President Jonathan's scorecard- Rule of Law F, Corruption A+" (Table A, No.1)

"His rule was nasty, brutish and mercifully short" (Table B, No.8)

"Can President Goodluck Jonathan be trusted with all that he promises? Can you trust this man?" (Table A, No.8)

"What kind of leader constantly incites violence with his utterance?" (Table B, No.5)

Using the typology identified by Johnson-Cartee & Copeland (1991), the contents of the headlines fall under direct attack, direct comparison and implied comparison. The headlines were crafted in such a way that they could serve as stand- alone messages. In another perspective, they could also be seen as the summary of the entire message. For instance, from tables A and B we see the following messages;

"Oh Yes! They are correct. Still under his watch, Nigeria has become No.1 in broken promises." (Table A, No.4)

"Nigerians have to be prepared to suffer for at least five straight years before we can stabilise this country security wise and economically, when Buhari says SUFFER, he means SUFFER" (Table B, No.4)

"Imagine another 4 years of unemployment" (Table A, No.6)

"Do you want to go backwards to 1985?" (Table B, No.6)

The Goodluck Jonathan administration has bankrupt Nigeria" (Table A, No.7)

"Who is fooling who? I will stamp out corruption from Nigeria. Pa Mohammadu Buhari

(Table B, No.7)"

The body copies of the ads served as further explanation of the claims made in the headline. They gave additional information, statistics and quotations in support of the assertion made in the headline about the target of the attack. Negative campaigns are basically designed to scandalise and bring into disrepute the target thereby diminishing his viability for the post to which he aspires. The tone of the body copies in the ads selected for the study is clearly negative. The nature of the attacks in the selected ads is to focus on the weaknesses or the failure of the opponent. For example, in Table A, numbers 1 and 2, we have the following allegations against the government of GEJ: increase in National debt, depleted excess crude oil account (from \$20bn to \$2bn) high unemployment rate and poverty level and financial fraud.

The messages in the selected ads dwell less on the strengths of the sponsors and more on the alleged faults and weaknesses of the competitor (Lau and Rovner, 2009; Nain and Walker, 2015) One interesting factor about the two contestants in this campaign was that they had both had stints in government, one as a military ruler and one as the sitting Civilian president. Therefore, both sides had records of performance in office to make reference to. Maybe Geer (2006) is correct when he says that if no one else highlights the weaknesses of their competitor, there may be no other way to make voters aware about such faults. In essence this politics of "maximising our chance by minimising his chance" is clearly

visible in all the 20 press ads presented in Tables A and B. The dominant theme is *why you should not vote for them*. Some researchers have found out that negative ads are beneficial (Geer and Lau, 2006) just as they have been said to sometimes have backlash or boomerang effect (Lau et. al.,1999) Hence, "while attacks may hurt the targets, they may also harm the attacker".

While looking at these adverts from the point of view of the Functional theory of campaign discourse, one sees a leaning towards one of the three features of negative adverts namely which favours attacking an opponent's credentials. None of the ads selected for this study used self-acclaim although some of the ads in the larger pool did. For example, there were press ads extolling the achievements of Goodluck Jonathan and it is in fact some of such press ads that informed the ad series tagged Jonathan's score cards or real achievement. Out of the 20 press ads used for this study, close to 95 % were direct attacks on opponent's credentials, personality, performance and character. None of the ads attacked the opponent while defending own reputation. A further analysis of the content of the selected ads shows that they replicate the axioms of the functional theory. First, they clearly show that voting is a comparative act and this was made obvious in the content of the adverts especially their call to action. Calls were made to vote for Buhari/Osinbajo or Vote for Goodluck Jonathan, none of the press ads mentioned the name of Jonathan's proposed Vice-President. Both sides advised the electorate to vote wisely. Some of the press ads still managed to import some negativity into their call to action. For instance,

"This must stop, we need change, vote for change" (Table A, No.7)

"Nigerians will not reward failure, make change possible" (Table A, No.4)

"Should a former dictator with such a record be given a second chance? Of course, no" (Table B, No.8)

“Nigerians will never forget. Nigerians will vote for a peaceful and considerate government. We will never go back.” (Table B, No.6)

Again, an example from Table B, No.8 asked *“should a former dictator with such a record be given a second chance?”*, while the entry in Table A, No.4 counters this call by saying *“Nigerians will not reward failure”*. Two of the press ads in their call for action asked the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), to wake up to their responsibility (Table B, Nos. 1 and 10). This call came after the ad copies accused the target of impropriety.

Secondly, both political parties distinguished themselves from their opponents and presented themselves as preferable, this follows from the second axiom of the functional theory. Thirdly, reasons were put forward for this distinction using mostly one of the three functions earlier mentioned: that is attack the opponent. There was no record of the use of self-acclaim or defence of a reputation. The policy utterances covered past deeds both failure and performance. Future plans and general goals were not the focus of the ads under study. Rather, the selected ads used more of character and policy attack. It is observed that in some instances, even when attack was on policy, they still managed to link this failure to the character of the target. This was more visible in the anti- Buhari ads. The major issues raised about character bothered on image, competence, integrity, honesty and being compassionate.

Examples:

“Should a former dictator with such a record be offered another chance?”

“How can we separate the real Buhari from the deceptive APC Buhari?”

“Nigerians will never forget, Nigerians will vote for a peaceful and considerate government. We will never go back.

“Do Elder Statesmen speak like this?”

The policies featured include education, security, employment, national defence, economy, and provision of basic amenities. It is pertinent to note that the attacks did not focus on the candidate's weaknesses alone, they sometimes also identified the limitations of his party. (Table A, No.8)

The selected ads made use of illustrations and some of the images used were in themselves negative. The anti- Buhari press ads presented in Table B seemed to favour pictures showing Buhari in army uniform. This was probably to drive home the point that was made in some of the ads about the fact that at heart Buhari was still a general and not a democratic civilian. In fact, one headline (though not used in this study) said a leopard cannot change its skin while another press ad which had a general cap as its illustration boldly acclaimed, "Generally speaking, *the more some people change, the more they remain the same*". One other well used illustration in the selected negative ads shows Buhari with his face upturned in an expression which could pass for a scowl or a snarl. The body language here was so aggressive and it perfectly suited the image of a harsh dictator, lacking compassion, just like some of the messages portrayed. For the anti- Goodluck Jonathan ads, one popular image used in the selected ads to depict insecurity under the Goodluck Jonathan presidency is the picture of the Chibok girls. The girls are all adorned in dour coloured, mostly grey, Ijab (headcover). This picture resonated with many Nigerians and represented doom and gloom arising from the fears about the fate of the abducted girls. One other image that was employed to showcase the failure of the Goodluck Jonathan administration was a cross section of the mammoth crowd of unemployed youth before the stampede at the NIS Recruitment exercise in Abuja.

Clearly, the selected adverts contravened the APCON Regulations which mandate that political adverts deal only with issues. The line between issue based attack and character based attack is very thin in the selected adverts as character and issues are lumped together (Table A items 1, 4 and 8 and Table B, items 1, 5 and 7)The

adverts showed that it is difficult to discuss issues without touching on the actors involved in the issues. One other factor at play in discussing negativity of political adverts is the truthfulness of the campaign. Is it negative if it is based on facts or truth? If a candidate claims he possesses a certificate that he cannot produce in evidence and he is said to have told a lie, is that name calling? If such information is used as a basis for a Press ad, is the campaign negative? In other words, is it still negative advertising when you use legitimate but negative information, for example, Table A, item 5 with the headline *"Do Elder Statesmen Speak Like This? If what happened in 2011 should again happen in 2015, by the grace of God, the dog and the baboon would all be soaked in blood"*. Is it acceptable under the guideline to quote a negative utterance credited to a candidate?

Furthermore, on the second mandate of avoiding foul and abusive language, both parties found ways of calling their opponents liars and rogues without using those exact invectives. Some selected adverts talked about lies and one even asked if you would believe the candidate. One of the headlines called the attention of a section of the country to the past deeds of one of the aspirants and there were a couple of references to a candidate's strong support for Sharia and this was also interpreted as an Islamisation agenda. In contravention of APCON regulations, some of the Press ads ran without identifying their sponsors (Table A items 7 and 9). There were two adverts in the sample that were signed by individuals, Table A item 10 was signed by Lai Mohammed and Table B item 3 was signed by Kayode Fayose, the then Ekiti State Governor. Some ads were credited to an organisation called CAN. The full name of the group is written in such tiny fonts that one may be misled into thinking it was signed by the Christian Association of Nigeria. Some of the groups had names that suggested their affiliation; Defenders of Democracy, Coalition for Change, Joint Union for Service and Transparency (JUST), Leadership and Accountability Initiative, Concerned Nigerians, Citizen's Watch Network, Alliance for Nigeria's Peace and New Nigerian Group, among others. For the Pro Buhari ads in Table A, 70% of the

selected ads were sponsored by these non-party groups, 20% were not signed by any sponsor and the Party (APC) claimed responsibility for only 10% of the press ad.

One other fact that emerged was that some of these ads ran without vetting by the Advertising Standards Panel (ASP). In other words, some of the media houses chose not to play their roles as gate-keepers either because of factors of ownership or vested interest or pecuniary rewards. In a situation where political ads manage to run without pre-exposure vetting, then this is outright breach of APCON Regulations. One of the excuses given is that some of the media houses would rather flout this rule, pay the fine and enjoy the traction caused by the negative ads. One such advert was the *Nigerians Beware* advert which appeared in some selected Nigeria Newspapers on January 19, 2015. This particular advert was designated by many voters as the vilest and most insensitive advert in the entire 2015 campaign. It projected that if voted in, Buhari will most likely die in the state house like some other past Northern presidents did. Obviously, APCON was aware of this deliberate circumvention of the vetting regulation as the APCON Registrar pronounced,

We are appalled that the publishers and managers of some of the national newspapers have grossly compromised their patriotic and professional ethics to the lucre of advertisement patronage by political candidates. They have brazenly abandoned their gate-keeping duties and accepted all manner of insensitive, irresponsible and spurious advertisement in contravention of the nation's advertising regulations and in disregard of several pre-emptive engagements with APCON.

While it is in order to guard against negative political campaigns because of the effects they may have on the electorate, one cannot deny the need for voters to be informed about the contestants and their antecedents. In addition, one cannot incapacitate or gag media houses by telling them whose cause they may promote. They are wont to follow the principles of their owners or sponsors as was the case not just with the privately owned papers but with



the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and some of the state-owned media houses who chose to go with the ruling party.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, this paper examined the message content of 20 selected press ads from the 2015 Presidential election in Nigeria. Negative ads by their nature are crafted to tell voters what is wrong with the other candidate, like Moyers (2008) observed, the bulk of negative campaigning rests on questioning the opponent's character and judgement. This well-honed art of verbal attack has come to be synonymous with political campaigns the world over. The adverts presented in the study had elements of negativity in the headlines, the body copy and the illustrations and the call to action. The nature of the negative political content ranged from direct attack to direct criticism and implied criticism. The adverts only presented negative information about the opposing candidate. Clearly, the aim of the messages was to disparage the target and influence voting behaviour. Gatekeeping by media houses was a challenge as issues relating to the right of expression had to be respected while considering the need to generate funds by selling space and airtime. The selected ads focused on the past deeds and performance in government by the two contestants namely Mohammadu-Buhari and Goodluck Jonathan. Messages from both parties employed name-calling as well as attack on personality and character. Even when issues were raised, they were still lumped with the character of the target. Majority of the adverts were sponsored by support groups and even in some instances, sponsors were not identified. This raises the question of identified sponsor as opposed to the real sponsor(s) who was/were responsible for these adverts.

The paper recommends that beyond issuing Press releases, APCON should enforce pre-exposure vetting and attach stiffer penalties to the breaking of this regulation. Much as individuals and groups have a right to express their views, people should be made to be more responsible for the kind of messages they develop for political campaign so as to guard against adverts that

can incite people to violence or cause untold damage to the candidates and the electorate. As elections loom, politicians, advertising agencies, media houses and regulatory bodies need to be sensitized on the latent effects of negative advertising with the hope of sanitizing the political environment in preparation for elections that are truly free and fair to all.

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