

Cognitive Dissonance And Message Distortion Factors As Communication Bias In Advertising Of Products In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The psychological state of the human mind has been contentious and prone to sensitive decisions when subjected to the interpretations of communications especially in advertising messages. The process of dissonance and its reduction constitute one of such issues which have to do with inconsistencies in beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and perceptions resulting from conflicts of ideas. The objectives were to determine the role of communication biases and message distortions in the cause of dissonance in the advertisements of products in Nigeria. A survey was used on selected advertisement presentations in the media. Data gathering was by secondary data and the analysis of data was by qualitative inferences. Results indicate that distortion of advertising messages had great influence on consumer dissonance and occurred as pre and post action activities. Hence, it was recommended that communication should be objective and sufficient for consumers and advertisers' needs, and that intensive research on advertising messages amenable to consumers should be employed to avoid dissonance.

Key words: *Cognitive dissonance, message distortions, advertising, communication bias.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years the Psychological state of the human mind has been a contentious issue when subjected to a condition of interpretation of different communication messages especially on the advertisement of a product. The process of dissonance and dissonance reduction constitute one of such issues arising from the conviction on advertising message. Many notable studies according to West & Turner (2010:124) have explored the diverse processes of dissonance and dissonance reduction in contexts such as family (Buzzel and Thurner, 2003), friendships (White, 2006), business, (Shinnar, Young & Meana, (2004), political communication, (Sullivan & Turner, 1996). Cognitive dissonance is considered a psychological and subjective feeling of tension in consumers in reaction to the decision that failed to meet with expectation. It is an attitude/belief and behaviour/action situation that consumers go through when a decision or reaction to a message about a product is implemented. The reactions of consumers differ when a product is purchased and may be compounded by the nature of information at the disposal of the individual. In choosing a product the consumer rely on available information and the judgments from beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, perceptions, feelings and experiences for final decision. In extant literature consumers are nurture for repeat purchase, continuous patronage and unalloyed loyalty which are dependent on the feelings of satisfaction at the product, (Olver, 2006). Advertising messages may be imbued with many connotations that could sway the opinion of the consumer in the judgment or decision to buy or reject the product. Cognitive dissonance and message distortion factors are the effects of information dissemination and the inferred meaning or understanding and the interpretation of the individual, (Dainton and Zelle, 2005).

The use of information is diverse and intended for positive goal in the sale of a product, the advertiser use it to direct attention on awareness and persuasion and the purchaser needs it to be informed and convinced. The beliefs and attitudes of the purchaser determine the extent and depth of the feelings of dissonance especially with the different levels of expectations on the performance of the product. An infected and diluted attitude and belief is an easy prey to dissonance. A biased communication could be the subject of interference or what the message connotes to individuals or the desperation and deliberate intention by an advertiser to win over the customers. This study focused on the cognitive dissonance and message distortion factors as communication bias in advertising products in Nigeria

Statement of the Problem

Cognitive dissonance has many perspectives. Consider the works of Sween et al., (2009), Gibbs, (1994), Brownstein et al., (2004) and others that assert dissonance as confusion in individuals (Festinger, 1957). Communication is a process of information dissemination that conveys different meanings and the interpretation differs in individuals, resulting in conflict of ideas in some people. Cognitive dissonance as a psychological and subjective feeling of tension in reaction to the decision taken from available information, constitute an aspect of the conflict. Advertising messages are expected to inform and persuade individuals favourably to products but the inconsistencies of these messages often misinform and create tension and anxiety and causing the feelings of dissonance. A further consideration of cognitive dissonance is the inconsistencies in beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and perceptions from distorted messages. Attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that are infected and diluted with distorted messages have the tendency to regard every information with trepidation and bias. Communication bias constitutes the problem of interference in information dissemination or the wrong connotation by the receivers or the desperation and deliberate intention by an advertiser to win over the receivers. Communication bias could be highly unpredictable and there are reasons to suggest that media or channel inadequacies abounds, for example, in the dimensions of quality, clarity, heavy noise, high level of urban and rural illiteracy, falsification of information in the market place and use of antiquated equipment that may be difficult to operate and deliver reliable and accurate messages. Consumer durables and political products attract over 95 percent of consumer interests but there are no sufficient and reliable messages and often individuals embark on intensive search for information that is elusive. The nexus of this study covers the exposition of the various situations of cognitive dissonance and message distortion factors that emanate from communication bias in the advertising of products. In essence the theoretical framework, literature review, study objectives, methodology, discussion of findings are the sequence of presentation.

1. Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were:

- i. To determine the extent communication biases of advertising messages as causes of dissonance in pre and post-purchase action experiences in Nigeria.
- ii. To ascertain the extent message distortions cause dissonance in public consumption of products' advertisements in Nigeria.

2. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. Does a communication bias of advertising messages significantly cause dissonance in pre and post-purchase action experiences in Nigeria?
- ii. To what extent do message distortions cause dissonance in public consumption of products' advertisements in Nigeria?

3. Research Hypotheses

The following null-hypotheses were tested in the study:

- i. Communication bias of an advertising message does not significantly cause dissonance in pre and post-purchase action experiences in Nigeria.
- ii. Message distortions do not significantly cause dissonance in public consumption of products' advertisements in Nigeria.

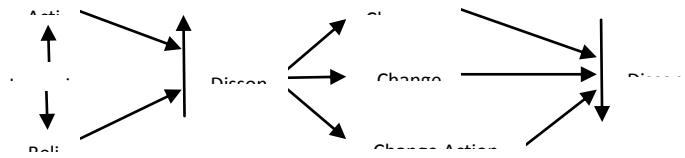
4. Theoretical Framework

Cognitive dissonance as postulated by Festinger (1957) is a condition of uncomfortable feeling that stems from a psychological tension in an individual. The inconsistencies and disharmony in beliefs and attitudes evoke cognitive dissonance as an unpleasant experience. This situation motivates individuals to seek cognitive consonance and consistency for the restoration of harmony and achieve reduction of dissonance as Brown (1965) notes that "dissonance is disequilibrium and consonance is equilibrium." The role of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours is constant in dissonance experience.

The four basic assumptions of dissonance theory are the desire for consistency in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours; it is a creation of psychological inconsistencies; it drives individuals to actions with measurable effects and motivates efforts to achieve consonance or dissonance reduction, (West et al., 2010).

Communication is an important instrument for the reduction of dissonance and to encourage consonance through persuasion. Dissonance reduction is a change of action and an account of how beliefs and behaviours can change attitudes, (West, 2010). These changes are brought about by the desire to improve the satisfaction derived from attitudes and behaviours against the inconsistencies and dissonance. The three approaches to attitude change as fundamental assumptions from Festinger theory are the change from old to new attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, the acquisition of new information that is superior and counter to the dissonance beliefs, and discouraging or reducing the importance of the cognition, (McLeod, 2008).

Figure 1. Cognitive Dissonance Theory



Source: Mcleod 2008).

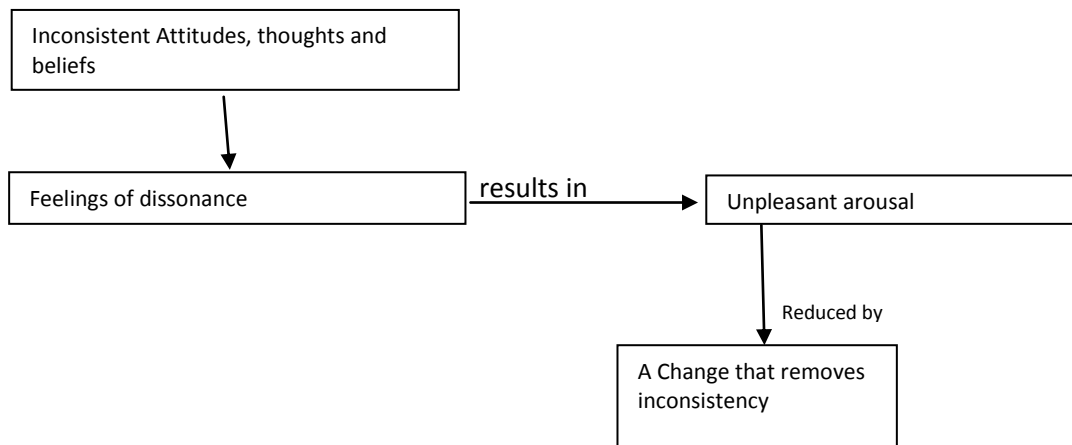
<http://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive%20dissonance520theory.pdf>(retrieved (17th Mar 2015)

The cognitive dissonance theory as an action directed counter intuitive opinion theory is vested in the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of individuals are warped in inconsistencies, conflicts and confusions emanating from decisions taken and the desire to restore normalcy and harmony. The challenge of dissonance is the desire to change attitude, belief and behaviour positively. The message distortion and bias factors account for the degree of dissonance. The significance of the issues involved determines the dissonance ratio which is the strength of dissonance cognitions experienced relative to the consonant cognitions, (Zimbardo et al., 1977) and the rational for the actions, (Matz et al., 2005).

5. Literature Review

7.1 The Cognitive Dissonance Concept Cognitive dissonance has been severally discussed in marketing and psychology, examples (Woodside et al., 2001; McGuire, 1976; Mcleod, 2008; Festinger, 1957; Berkowitz, 1969 and Hawkins et al., 2010). In marketing, the two dominant interests are product and consumers. The consumers require communication and information in all the decisions to be taken about products, and in doing this the beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and preferences about products are gradually developed. The marketers therefore are interested in determining how consumers react to products while exhibiting any of these behavioral facets. Motivation is the reason for behaviour (Hawkins et al., 2010), and needs and motives influence what consumers perceive as relevant that may influence their feelings and emotions, (McGuire, 1976). Dissonance has the discomforting effects on consumers considering that every consumer decision has to do with choosing between alternatives, and whatever is forgone has the boomerang of dissonance, (Eztel et al., 2001).

Figure 2. The Process of Cognitive Dissonance



Source: West, R., & Turner, L. H. 2010. *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application* (4th ed.). Boston, McGraw- Hill

In marketing the challenge is always to win or make customers and this is only possible when favorably disposed towards the object of sales as Festinger, (1957), Mcleod, (2008) note cognitive inconsistency can give rise to irrational attitudes and maladaptive behaviour.

7.2 Attitude and Belief Culture of Consumers

Attitudes and beliefs are the main elements for behaviour of consumers towards objects of interest. Attitude is the predisposition to act negatively or positively towards an object as belief is a descriptive thought that a person holds about something, (Krech et al., 1962; Alport, 1935; Blythe, 2006) and it determines to a great extent what consumers will or not buy. Accordingly, holding conflicting thoughts in belief or attitude result in cognitive dissonance, (Schiffman et al., 2010). Cognitive dissonance theory motivates the search for information to enhance internal consistency in individuals thereby offers an insight into relationship among attitudes, beliefs, cognitions, affect and behaviours as it further suggests routes to attitude change, (West et al., 2010). The three

components of attitude including cognition, affective and conative are strongly used in advertising to change consumer attitude by recognizing, liking and deciding action on products.

7.3 Dissonance, Attitude Change and Advertising Messages

The positive use of dissonance is the inducement of change in consumer attitude, and it has been suggested that dissonance can contribute to such changes in three ways that include the change of one or more of the attitudes and beliefs; acquiring new information superior to the dissonant beliefs and reducing the importance of the cognitions of beliefs and attitudes, (Mcleod, 2008). Attitude is required to be in consonant with the actual intention to acquire a product in order to bring about a positive decision. The change of attitude and belief have been linked with the four strategies of change about the consequences of behaviour, changing evaluation of consequences, changing beliefs about the perceptions of others and strengthening motivations to comply, (Petty et al., 1986).

Advertising messages are specifically directed at consumers about existing and available products and in the process consumers rely on information from advertising messages for better appreciation of the products in the market place. Consumers also need to form attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, perceptions and preferences about products using superior information from advertising messages. Advertising messages are specifically designed for attitude change and this happens when it aims at reinforcing consumers' decisions by complementing their wisdom in the choice of products, offering stronger guarantees and providing details on correct use of products, (Schiffmann et al., 2010). As a corollary advertising resonance controls the reduction of dissonance by use of external features to complement a product in an advertisement, (McQuire et al., 2003). Cognitive dissonance in advertising is also experienced when advertising copy is to knock consumer off balance only to promise restoration by purchase and use of the product, (Patterson et al., 2008). Cognitive dissonance induces consumers to process information by being extremely or highly involved such as obtains in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of the central route to attitude change, (Petty Et al., 1993).

7.4 Message Distortions in Advertising

The inconsistencies in advertising messages often misinform and discourage individuals thereby creating dissonance. Cognitive dissonance and message distortion factors are the results of misinformation and misinterpretation from disseminated information. The frustrations in individuals arising from this information disorderliness constitute dissonance, and it is widely known that after a decision is made, people distort information in favour of the chosen alternative in order to reduce cognitive dissonance, (Elliot et al., 1994). Distortion of advertising messages is to infer a different meaning from what was intended. The noise factor in advertising is an interference that can change the meaning of the message. Distortion may be caused by cultural, ethnocentric, egocentric biases, ideological differences, and the level of understanding as in homophile and heterophily. The interference in advertising messages constitutes distortions in different media. The television for example has obliterations in information by snowy screens, poor colour and visual clarity, power failure that causes discontinuation of broadcast and advertising messages, poor timing of advertisements and deliberate misinformation with wrong messages. The radio is not an exception as the air waves are always noisy and distractions with incoherent signals. The billboards are readily defaced with superimposed copies of advertisement papers, most are completely mutilated and torn off within few minutes of placements and others have holes punched on strategic positions that deface the adverts.

Distorted messages also include clone or imitation of messages, wrong use of company logos, names, product cloning, twisting messages for wrong interests and deliberate use of half truths, puffery, scanty and falsity of messages. The occurrence of these distortions motivates and compels consumers to seek alternative information thereby changing their attitudes and behaviours towards the objects or products. Consumers emotional use of advertising messages often cause irrational behaviours and sometimes they are not well informed about various claims made in advertisements, thus, imposing the clause of "caveat emptor" or "buyer beware" on consumers, (Patterson, 2008).

7.5 Cognitive Dissonance in Communication and Bias

Communication aims at changing attitudes besides the fundamental objective of dissemination of information. The interest in the use of communications as a means of arousing dissonance in individuals is to alter their behaviour through seeking better information that can reduce dissonance. The meaning of communication differs in individuals and this creates dissonance in circumstances that is considered negative, such as connotative meaning with individuals interpreting information differently in unique manners as against denotative in which words mean same thing to everybody. Thus persuasive context of communication can be used in variety of ways, (Griffin, 2000; West et al., 2010). The strength of any communication is in the media of dissemination of the message and several reasons have been adduced to this including the technology as in equipment disparity (Innis, 1951), the media ecology on its influence on perception, feeling, understanding and value (Parameswaran, 2008). The dissonance in communication are barriers that could frustrate individuals including clarity of messages, accessibility to the media, distortion to information, proper use of the media and media structure. The cultural aspect is an important dimension especially in ethnocentrism (Shimp and Sharma,

1987) and could lead to outright rejection of communication. The disparity in past and present meanings and experiences ascribed to communication could also give rise to failure (Blythe, 2006). Communication bias can aggravate the feelings of insecurity, unpleasant and discomfort in individuals. The wrong interpretation of messages or the level of discrepancy between the meaning of messages to receivers and the intention of the sender or source could constitute bias. There are also issues of biases from cultural and social psychological factors. In the use of internet messages there are series of biases in unwanted or unsolicited messages, spamming, fake websites, and incomplete messages which can frustrate individuals as dissonance. The wrong interpretations of messages and other stimuli inconsistent with individual's expectations is expectation bias, (Hawkins et al., 2010).

7.6 Dissonance in Pre and Post-Purchase Action Activities

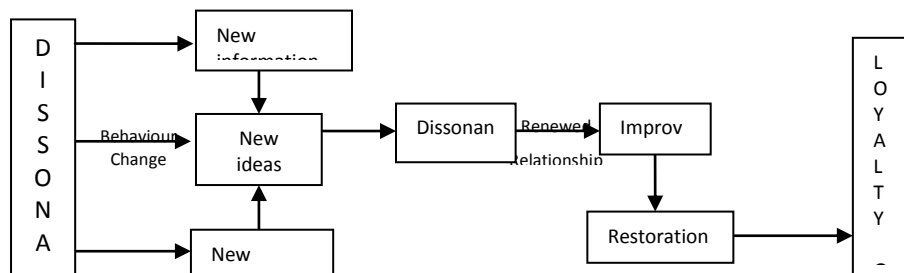
The feeling of dissonance occurs in different forms and times and has been referred as post action dissonance and in other times it could be pre action dissonance, (Oliver, 2006; Woodside et al., 2001; Brownstein et al., 2004, Simmons et al., 2004; West et al., 2010). The conflicting beliefs or attitudes, confusions and doubts expressed or conceived in the process of initiating a purchase action are pre action dissonance or the cognitive concept of dissonance. In the alternative the considerations of unique brands not selected, the curious search for detailed information on action taken, the dissatisfaction experienced from a purchased product are post purchase dissonances. The effects are same in the two situations as both involve the modification and change of attitude and behaviour especially the conformity in consonant with actual purchase behaviorism, (Schiffmann et al., 2010). The post dissonance behaviour is a remorse for action taken and requires more positive information to reduce the dissonance, (Brownstein et al., 2004), and Ertel (2001) notes it as state of anxiety brought about by the difficulty of choosing from among alternatives. Ouwersloot et al., (2008) consider that customers generally search for more information or look more deeply into their feelings if dissonance occurrence is during the evaluation of choices before the actual purchase.

7.7 Conceptual Mode

ADVERTISEMENTS OF CONSUMER AND POLITICAL PRODUCTS IN NIGERIA

The Nigerian situations in the advertisements of consumer durable and political products constitute major areas of effects of feelings of dissonance in consumers. The consumer durable products including refrigerators, electronics equipment, households and offices and the non-durable type detergents, fashion wares and food items packaged in protective containers are major attractions of advertisement distortions and communication bias thereby arousing dissonance in consumers.

Figure 3: Dissonance Reduction Process and Loyalty Goal Model



Source: Ehikwe, A.E., Eze, F. J., & Odigbo, B. E. 2015. Cognitive Dissonance and Message Distortion Factors as Communication Bias in Advertising of Products in Nigeria (forthcoming).

This model in figure 3 is used by advertisers to win the loyalty of customers in Nigeria. The political products are the candidates for elections whose characters cannot be easily observed and consumers rely heavily on advertisement messages to arrive at their decisions on who to choose for the different elective positions. These messages are heavily distorted and with high degree of bias in all the information about the candidates. Politicians deliberately receive tribally and culturally distorted communication especially from their constituencies. Broockman et al., (2013) and Butler et al., (2011) argue that the same bias and distortions are experienced hence minorities are not usually well represented as they got drowned in the clutter of false advertisements. Minorities face a lot of institutional barriers (Hajnal, 2009) and as always racial favouritism and animosity among the politicians is real, (Broockman et al., 2013b). This situation is similar across the world between majority and minority races in different countries.

The various tribal and cultural barriers cause systematic bias that cut off the voices of minorities relative to the major and stronger tribes and this has been a puzzle such that the minorities receive less significantly and substantive representation in all offices across Nigeria. The frustration and dissonance arising from these issues have often included under development of the areas inhabited by the minority tribes.

The consumer durables' advertisements distortions and bias include scanty information and misuse of authentic packaging with wrong logos, imitation packs, fake or imitation products often more exposed than better quality products. The implication is minimal interests in the products for lack of sufficient motivation as consumers do not actively participate or get involved with information processing as postulated, Cacioppo et al., (1993). The high dissonance rate constitutes the bane of marketing the products for lack of sufficient information (Nwosu and Nkamnebe, 2006, Ehikwe, 2005). The attitude of consumer is rather changed through product uses from experience and from word of mouth (Eze et al., 2014) which does not rely on conscious effort to access and evaluate compared to information from advertisements, (Ehikwe, 2005).

The electronic online media contain much of unverifiable facts in various messages with high distortions and biases from claims and counter claims in advertisements. In Nigeria mass media influence is shaped by the media ownership structure, tribal, ethnic and cultural interests. The distortions of messages and bias cause people to be often irrational and emotional in most decisions and are not necessarily well informed about claims in various advertisements. The caution of "caveat emptor" or "buyers beware" is at the consumers' mercy (Patterson et al., 2009). The billboards attract distortions and biases as most are sited at awkward locations that deliberately distort messages especially the written words, photographs and colours. Banners are also not legible in presentations all in a bid to distort messages. The distortion of messages cuts across headlines, images, slogans and captions mostly deceptive. The ability of the advertisements to capture and direct consumers attention is often the primary criterion in the evaluation of layouts, (Pieters et al., 2004) but this is only theoretically relevant as the real situation is gross misapplication of this principle, (Ehikwe, 2005) and generally constitute the major sources and causes of dissonance.

II. METHODOLOGY

Cognitive dissonance is an abstract behaviour that cannot be easily observed or measured but its impact can be recorded by the resistance to continue with same behaviour, rejection of product, outright objection to inconsistency and the strive for consistency, normalcy and behaviour stability. The investigation was to determine the communication role, message distortions and communication bias in the occurrence of dissonance in the advertisement of products in Nigeria. A consumer survey on selected advertisements in the media was used. The area of study was Lagos, Enugu, Ibadan, Kaduna, Kano and PortHarcourt, due to the concentration of newspapers, television, radio, and other media in these cities in Nigeria. The population of the study was 1,200,000 consumers, while a sample size of 300 was judgmentally determined from that and purposively distributed on equal ratio basis. The data gathering was by opinion survey through structured questionnaire. The data were analyzed with Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis which was computed electronically by the use of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21.

III. DATA ANALYSIS

9.1 Data Presentation

Out of the 300 copies of questionnaire distributed, 282 representing 94% were completed and returned, while 18 representing 6% were not returned. The analysis was computed at 95% level of confidence and 5% margin of error. All further analysis were based on the 282 returned copies which were all correctly filled and thus validated.

9.2 Test of hypotheses

H_{01} : Communication bias of an advertising message does not significantly cause dissonance in pre and post-purchase action experiences of consumers in Nigeria.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation for Communication bias of an advertising messages and dissonance in pre and post-purchase action experiences of consumers in Nigeria.

	Communication bias	Dissonance in pre and post-purchase
Pearson Correlation	1	.311
Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
N	282	282

Dissonance in pre and post-purchase	Pearson Correlation	.311	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	282	282

Source: Fieldwork, 2016.

The result in Table 1 shows the Pearson Product Moment Correlation of communication bias of an advertising messages and dissonance in pre and post-purchase action experiences in Nigeria. With r-value of 0.311 and a probability value (0.001) less than 0.05 significance level, it reveals that there is significant relationship between communication bias of an advertising message and dissonance in pre and post-purchase action experiences of consumers in Nigeria.

Ho₂ : Message distortions do not significantly cause dissonance in public consumption of products' advertisements in Nigeria.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation for Message distortions and level of dissonance in public consumption of products' advertisements in Nigeria.

		Message Distortions	Dissonance in products' advertisements
Message Distortions	Pearson Correlation	1	.448
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	282	282
Dissonance	Pearson Correlation	.448	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	282	282

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

The result in Table 2 shows the Pearson Product Moment Correlation for Message distortions and level of dissonance in public consumption of products' advertisements in Nigeria. With r-value of 0.448 and a probability value (0.001) less than 0.05 significance level, it reveals that: "Message distortions significantly cause dissonance in public consumption of products' advertisements in Nigeria."

6. Discussion of Findings and their Implications

The number one finding of this study reveal that there is significant relationship between communication bias of an advertising message and dissonance in pre and post-purchase action experiences of consumers in Nigeria; while the number two shows that message distortions significantly cause dissonance in public consumption of products' advertisements in Nigeria. The implications of these results are that advertising messages in the country lacked evidence in their claims and consumers not weary of the antics became victims of dissonance. Information was highly distorted to favour chosen alternatives designed to sway the consumers who bought the products and turned around and sought information to improve the state of discomfort thereby changed the attitudes and beliefs. Different media had different forms of distortions that caused dissonance. The advertisement of consumer durables and political products had great influence on consumers in their choice of products. Political products were highly venerable to bias advertising messages as the characters of the products were not visible and consumers relied on available information and limited experience on the political candidates. There was a high degree of misinformation and this finding agreed with the report in the Daily Independent on the sanction by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) against the electronic media including the national and private media "for breaches in political advertorials in the build up to the general elections." The various biases in cultural and tribal barriers became destabilizing factors that the minorities wallowed in subjection to the whims and caprices of the majority tribes. The consumer durable products attracted advertising with distortions of high magnitude. Information was scanty, and when sufficient such were devoted to misinformation, false claims and counterclaims, distortions in headlines, images, logos, captions, and wrong presentations that were unreliable. Cognitive dissonance was experienced in both directions as pre and post action activities. The magnitude of dissonance differs and pre action dissonance was avoidable but with the pain of inconvenience in search of appropriate and sufficient information. The post dissonance attracted loss of product and time, discomfort, confusion, irrational and maladaptive behaviour. The two concepts were associated with discomfort of feelings and attitude change.

IV. CONCLUSION

Cognitive dissonance is an experience and behaviour related that creates the drive for remedial action for normalization of self-consistency on feelings of discomfort, confusion and frustrations in beliefs and attitudes of

individuals. There is the need for avoidance of grief, fear and deepening of feelings of loss as consumers are inclined to adopt selective information that leads to reduction of dissonance. The misinterpretation of advertising messages and the different meanings ascribed to communications are problems that cause dissonance. Cognitive dissonance and message distortion factors are real situations that should be controlled through conscious efforts for correct and factual information in advertising and communication.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the authors recommended as follows:

- i. That communication is an important information dissemination process that should be highly objective and sufficient at the disposal of consumers.
- ii. That advertisers should always conduct extensive research before embarking on the production of their messages and actions, and;
- iii. That consumers should seek information and proper knowledge in advertisements before embarking on their purchases to avoid dissonance.

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