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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Use of Fashionable Images and Religious Symbols in Contemporary Christian Advertisement

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Abstract

This study assessed the extent to which Christian print adverts have been dominated by images of personalities and religious symbols and the role they play in advertising church programmes. The study is Qualitative and the Case Study approach was employed. Observation was used to study images of advertised posters and banners. Structured questionnaires were also used to solicit opinions of Christians who were randomly selected in the study area. Descriptive statistics using percentages were used to express the views of respondents and the results were discussed qualitatively. The study revealed that, the most used print advertising channels by churches were Banners and Sign boards. The study also indicated that the image of Jesus Christ and those of Pastors were prevalent in print advertisement. The results further showed that as much as 41.5% of respondents consider the current state of Christian advertisement as trendy and fashionable. Another 33.7% opined that, the fashionable nature of the images and symbols is what drew the public to Christian programmes.

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INTRODUCTION

Fashion has always been a reflection of society – to some it is considered an art form. Fashion can transform an image; help express a person's identity, or even make a social statement. Fashion is about promoting the new and is concerned with constantly changing aesthetics (Burke, 2001, p.11).

"Fashion is often thought of as a kind of mask disguising the 'true' nature of the body or person. It is seen as a superficial gloss" (Craik, 2005, p.1). Yet according to Craik, "if we follow Mauss (1973, 1985) and Bourdieu (1986), we can regard the ways in which we clothe the body as an active process or technical means for constructing and presenting a bodily self. Western fashion (elite or high fashion) is a particular variant of this in which the designer plays the role of definer". The assumption is that, trends in clothing and other fashionable images are determined by the market in collaboration with Fashion designers. These active players therefore determine what is fashionable or trendy.

Christianity is a live changing experience, which makes demand on its members to totally make a commitment to a saviour called Jesus Christ. It is a voluntary call for a new experience, which theologians refer to as conversion. Grudem (1994 p.709) defines conversion as "our willing response to the Gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation". Again, Grudem as cited in Foubert *et al.* (2012) defines salvation as the critical concepts underlying conversion and describes the experience as turning from sin (repentance) and proclaiming faith in Jesus.

To the Christian, life is not just about God's forgiving sins because of Christ's finished work. Instead the transforming spirit of Christ within a person is supposed to 'bring forth fruit just as the sap of the vine brings forth the fruit in the branch' as a benefit of the individual's communion with Christ. (Schaeffer, 1990) as cited in

(Echeverria, 2007) explains that, fruit bearing in the Christian context, involves advertising the transformation that has taken place in one's life to the world.

During Jesus' days, attention was drawn to him by the miracles he performed directly and testimony shared by patrons and beneficiaries of his good deeds. For example, after his encounter with the woman at the well, the Bible recounts that the woman left her water jar and went back to Samaria and announced Jesus to the town folks (John 4: 28 – 30). This word-of-mouth advertisement made many people believe in Jesus.

With the passage of time, the New Testament Church employed several means to get the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. Technology allowed the use of various forms of print and electronic media to advertise Christian programmes. The cross, which is the mark of Christ and the symbol of the suffering he went through, was adopted as the object and symbol of advertisement. For instance, it was a common practice to have the cross embossed or inscribed on a chapel or poster as a means of advertisement in Ghana in the early 1990's. However, Henley *et al* (2009) expresses the need for practitioners to carefully consider the relevant context when co-opting Christian symbols for their advertisements and to be sensitive to the target audience.

Dotson and Hyatt (2000) studied the use of religious symbols as peripheral cues in advertising. The study revealed that people who were dogmatic about religion had divergent attitudes towards the purchase of brands especially when the symbol of the cross was present in its advertisement. This is because according to Roberts (2004), symbols can be objects, words, behaviours, or stories that represent or remind someone of something else and are considered to have powerful behavioural effects.

The twenty first century has seen a radical change in the mode of Christian advertisement in Ghana. The cross no longer feature prominently in Christian advertisements. It has become trendy for advertisers of Christian programmes to incorporate various items in their Adverts. The list of items includes text, images and symbols such as religious personalities, Jesus Christ, Bible, Chapel, Cross, Crown and Logo. Figure 1 to Figure 6, are examples of various Christian print Adverts, captured from the catchment area of the Study.



Figure 1: Advertising Church programme with text and personalities



Figure 2: Advertising Church service with text, personality, and image of Jesus on the cross



Figure 3: Advertising Church service with text, Chapel, Bible and the Cross



Figure 4: Advertising Church programme with text, personality, Cross-and Crown

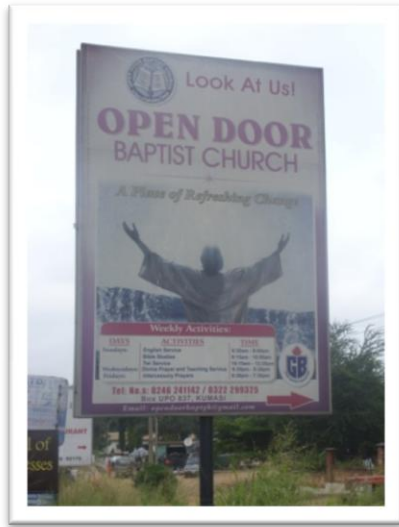


Figure 5: Advertising Church service with text, image of Jesus, Bible and logo



Figure 6: Advertising Church service with text and Chapel

The study seeks to trace the extent to which it has become trendy for Christian advertisement to be dominated by fashionable images and religious symbols.

1. Materials and Methods

The study is qualitative and the case study method was used to conduct inquiry into the use of fashionable images and religious symbols in Contemporary Christian Advertisement. The study involved Christians of different denominations in the Kumasi Metropolis. The Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly has ten Sub Metropolitan District Councils namely; Bantama, Subin, Manhyia, Oforikrom, Tafo-Pankrono, Nhyiaeso, Kwadaso, Suame, Asokwa and Asawase. Four (4) out of the ten (10) sub-metros were purposefully selected for the study. The sub-metros selected were; Subin, Manhyia, Bantama and Asokwa. These selected sub-metros are the ones, which are currently operational administratively, according to Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly website.

Christians from various denominations in the sub-metro were randomly selected for the study. The instruments used for the study were questionnaire and observation. In all 400 questionnaires were distributed, with an average of 100 questionnaires for each administrative sub-metro. The response rate was (92%). The opinions solicited from the respondents boarded on the use of fashionable images and religious symbols on the advertisement of Christian programmes. Images of print advertisements in the selected sub-metros were also critically observed to support the views expressed by respondents. Descriptive statistics using percentages was used to express the views of respondents.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The views expressed by respondents were processed and presented using frequency tables. The discussions were supported by careful observation of photographs of print advertisement taken from the study area. Table 1 presents frequency distribution on demographic characteristic of respondents. Table 2 presents frequency distribution on the use of Images and symbols for church advertisement. While Table 3 presents respondents' satisfaction level of church advertisement components

Table 1: Frequency Distribution on Demographic Characteristic of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total
Gender			368
Female	192	52.2	
Male	176	47.8	
Age Group			366
Below 20 years	43	11.7	
20-24 years	140	38	
25-29 years	87	23.6	
30-34 years	47	12.8	
Above 34 years	49	13.3	
Marital Status			364
Single	250	67.9	
Married	94	25.5	
Others	20	5.4	
Religious denomination			363
Catholic	76	20.7	
Protestant	57	15.5	
Charismatic	103	28	
Pentecostal	85	23.1	
Independent Church	42	11.4	
Department at Church			365
Men's	48	13	
Women's	48	13	
Youth	214	58.2	
Children's	24	6.5	
Other	30	8.2	

Table 1 presents the sample characteristics of frequency distribution on demographics of respondents. Among the Christians, randomly sampled, 52.2% were females and the remaining 47.8% were males. Majority of the respondents constituting 38.5% fall within the 20–24 years age bracket. As much as 67.9% of the respondents were single. As much as 58.2% constituting the majority of the respondents belong to the youth group in their churches.

The results show a high female participation in the study. The youth between the ages of 20 and 34 years constitute as high as 99.4% of the respondents. This explains why the percentage in the youth department in the church is high.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution on the use of Images and Symbols for Church Advertisement

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Widely used Advertisement channel at Church			366
Banners	122	33.2	
Hand Bill	77	20.9	
Posters	66	17.9	
Sign Boards	101	27.4	

Mostly used Images & symbols for church Adverts			366
The Pastor	104	28.3	
The Church Building	52	14.1	
The Cross	57	15.5	
Images of Jesus Christ	108	29.3	
Others	45	12.2	
Current state of Images and Symbols in Christian Advertisement			366
Over emphasised	104	28.3	
Trendy and fashionable	153	41.5	
Simple	57	15.5	
Others	52	14.1	
Reasons for making Images and symbols fashionable in advertisement			364
To Make the Advertisement Attractive	97	27.2	
To Promote Religious Personalities	100	26.4	
To Promote Church	43	11.7	
To Draw People to Programmes	124	33.7	

The study revealed that 29.3% constituting majority of the respondents subscribe to the popularity of image of Jesus to advertise church programmes. Another image that attracted a high percentage is the image of Pastors recording 28.3%; almost at par with the image of Jesus. On the description of the current state of Christian advertisement, 41.5% of respondents considered it as trendy and fashionable. Twenty eight percent (28%) indicated that the images and symbols have been over emphasised while 15.5% suggested that it was simple. Opinions were divided as to why images and symbols used for Christian adverts are fashionably presented. However, 33.7% of respondents constituting the majority opined that it has the potential to draw people to programmes.

Table 3: Respondents' Satisfaction Level of Church Advertisement Components

Variables	Level of Satisfaction (%)		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Billboard with Pastors Picture (Relevance)	143(37.5)	43(11.7)	182(49.4)
Billboard with Jesus' Picture (Relevance)	61(16.6)	48(13.0)	249(67.7)
Billboard with the Cross (Relevance)	67(17.3)	43(11.7)	246(66.8)
Billboard with Messages only (Relevance)	100(27.2)	56(15.2)	198(53.8)
Billboard with Church Building (Relevance)	172(46.8)	62(16.8)	125(34)
Church Programme Advertisement (Importance)	67(18.3)	31(8.4)	262(71.2)

Table 3 shows the satisfaction level of respondents' attitude to church advertisements. It is evident from Table 2 that majority of the respondents are in agreement with the use of various symbols for church advertisement. With the exception of the use of the church building and personalities, which recorded 34% and 24.8 respectively,

the other symbols scored above 50%. The study revealed that respondents are comfortable with the use of particular symbols and messages (text) to advertise church programmes. As much as 71.2% of the respondents, constituting an overwhelming majority subscribe to the importance of advertisement in religious programmes.

The high satisfaction level of the use of the various symbols for adverts shows how popular and widespread the practice is. It is also indicative of the fact that the practice is trendy and accepted by a large segment of the Christian community. This is supported by the responses in Table 2, which indicates that as much 41.5% of respondents see the current state of Christian advertisement as trendy and fashionable. The high satisfaction level of the advertising components is corroborated by the six adverts captured from the catchment area as indicated by Figures 1 – 6. Figures 1 – 6 display the various ways images and symbols have been employed in the advertisement of various Christian denominations.

Figure 1 prominently displays images of Church personalities who are adorned with fashionable garments and accessories. Figure 2 combines the image of a personality with a crowd of people looking up to Jesus on the Cross. The main feature in Figure 3 is the front view of a magnificent Church building. Figure 3 also displays the Bible and the symbol of the cross. Figure 4 uses personalities, the symbol of the cross and the crown of thorns that was placed on Jesus's head. Figure 5 displays image of Jesus, the Bible and a logo of the Church that was being advertised. Figure 6 uses a Church building with a modern architecture as its main object of advertisement.

The descriptions reveal the inventory of the various items that have been used to advertise church programmes in contemporary times. It is curious to investigate why they have been elaborately designed and fashionably presented. The trend suggests that advertisers were following the taste of consumers and being abreast with trends in the local market. After-all the objective of any advertiser is to convince the public to patronise its products. This view is supported by responses in Table 2, which records 33.7% of respondent's supporting opinion that fashionable images and symbols draw people to Christian programmes.

4. Conclusion

The study investigated the extent to which it has become trendy for Christian print adverts to be dominated by images of personalities and religious symbols. It was observed that as much as **71.2%** of the respondents, constituting an overwhelming majority subscribe to the importance of advertisement in religious programmes. The study revealed that the most popular channels of advertisement by Christian denominations are Banners and Signboards.

The study also indicates that the most popular images in this print advertisement are the images of Jesus Christ and Pastors. As much as **41.5%** of respondents consider the current state of Christian advertisements as trendy and fashionable. Another **33.7%** indicated that, the fashionable nature of the adverts draw people to Christian programmes. Fashion is a trend driven activity, which is determined, by the market in collaboration with the Fashion designer (Craik, 2004). This behavioural pull factor is also characteristic of images and symbols when it comes to advertisement. Roberts (2004) opines that, symbols can be objects, words, behaviours, or stories that represent or remind someone of something else and are considered to have powerful behavioural effects.

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