

Utilisation of persuasive communication and strategic marketing for the Calabar Carnival, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the utilisation of persuasive communication and strategic marketing in promoting the Calabar Carnival, a flagship cultural tourism event in Cross River State, Nigeria. The purpose was to assess how these tools could reposition the Carnival as a competitive and sustainable tourism brand. Anchored in Persuasion Theory, which posits that effective communication must engage both cognitive and emotional dimensions to influence behaviour, the study adopted a qualitative methodology. Data were collected through focus group discussions involving twelve purposively selected stakeholders from the Cross River State Carnival Commission and private tourism service providers. The findings revealed that while persuasive communication is acknowledged as vital, its application remains inconsistent, lacking strategic coherence and audience segmentation. Strategic marketing efforts were found to be fragmented, reactive, and largely traditional, with limited use of digital platforms and a lack of experiential storytelling. The study concluded that the absence of a unified marketing framework and the underutilisation of persuasive techniques have significantly undermined the Carnival's visibility and appeal. It recommended the adoption of an integrated marketing communication strategy, capacity building for stakeholders, and the use of emotionally resonant content across digital media to enhance engagement. The implications suggest that without a deliberate shift towards strategic, persuasive, and audience-focused communication, the Calabar Carnival risks further decline in global relevance and economic impact.

Key Words: Persuasive Communication, Strategic Marketing, Calabar Carnival, Tourism Promotion, Experiential Storytelling, Integrated Communication.

Introduction

The Calabar Carnival, often celebrated as "Africa's Biggest Street Party," has long stood as a cultural and economic beacon for Cross River State and Nigeria at large. Since its inception in 2004 under the administration of Governor Donald Duke, the Carnival has evolved into a multifaceted platform for showcasing Nigeria's rich cultural heritage, promoting tourism, and stimulating economic development. It has attracted local and international tourists, fostered cultural exchange, and positioned Cross River

State as a notable destination within the African tourism landscape (Cross River Tourism Bureau, 2019). However, despite its early promise and regional acclaim, the Carnival's trajectory in recent years has been marked by stagnation, operational inconsistencies, and a troubling decline in tourist engagement. These developments raise critical questions about the sustainability of the Carnival and the strategic frameworks, or lack thereof, guiding its promotion and management.

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The suspension of the Carnival in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the socio-political unrest of the EndSARS protests in 2021, exposed the fragility of the event's institutional and promotional infrastructure. The 2022 edition, organised after a three-year hiatus, was met with cautious optimism but failed to fully restore the Carnival's former vibrancy. Stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality sectors have expressed growing concerns about the event's viability, citing inadequate promotional and persuasive communication strategies, poor maintenance of tourism infrastructure, and a lack of coherent strategic marketing vision as key impediments to its growth (Akpan, 2017; Okoi, Obukoadata, & Ebia, 2021). These concerns are not merely anecdotal. Empirical data reveal a stark decline in attendance, from 18,227 visitors between 2006 and 2015 to just 15% of that figure between 2018 and 2022 (Akpan, 2017). This precipitous drop underscores a deeper structural problem: the absence of a sustainable, persuasive, and strategically coherent marketing approach.

Tourism, as defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2019), involves the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their usual environments, including travel experiences, services, and infrastructure. Godwin (2012) highlights tourism as both an economic driver and a social catalyst that can transform communities through cultural exchange and economic diversification. The Calabar Carnival should act as a strategic asset that entertains and empowers, yet its current impact suggests a disconnect among stakeholders due to perceived lack of persuasive engagement or effective marketing.

One significant gap in the Carnival's operations is the underutilization of persuasive communication in marketing. This approach, rooted in rhetorical theory and marketing science, is vital for shaping perceptions, influencing behavior, and building brand loyalty (Effiom, Obukoadata & Ukam, 2023; Donath, 2021). It involves crafting messages that resonate with audiences, evoke emotions, and prompt action. In tourism, where choices are driven by perception and experience, persuasive communication is crucial (Haq & Medhekar, 2020; Falk & Vieru,

2021; Rahayu, 2018). However, the Calabar Carnival's promotional efforts have largely missed this opportunity, relying on sporadic advertising and outdated tactics that fail to engage potential tourists.

The persuasive theoretical foundation on which this study is anchored posits that effective communication must engage both the cognitive and affective dimensions of the audience to induce behavioural change (Folarin, 2006; Rokeach & Defleur, 1989) if it is to strategically provoke corresponding engagements from the participants (Obukoadata, 2022a; Zhang, Wen, & Li, 2019). This theory is particularly relevant in the context of tourism marketing, where the goal is not merely to inform but to persuade; to convince potential tourists that a destination offers unique, enriching, and memorable experiences (Jaeggi, 2016). The failure to apply these idiosyncrasies in the strategic marketing of the Calabar Carnival represents a critical oversight and a missed opportunity for growth.

The Carnival's marketing strategies may not effectively address the complexities of tourism promotion. As Obukoadata, Uduma & Obukoadata (2021) highlight, successful tourism marketing should consider factors like natural attractions, cultural heritage, and local attitudes while being responsive to trends such as digital marketing and experiential travel. Unfortunately, the Calabar Carnival's promotional efforts often seem reactive, lacking the adaptability to changing markets and failing to present a compelling value proposition to international audiences.

More incongruous is the fact that the structuring of the Carnival, originally envisioned as a bastion of month-long engagement, has not been fully optimised to deliver sustained cultural, economic, and promotional impact. According to Amalu and Ajake (2012), the Carnival provides a strategic platform for enhancing brand visibility and fostering consumer awareness through tourism. Held annually from December 1 to 31, it coincides with the festive season and has garnered international recognition. Each edition is guided by a central theme, interpreted through elaborate performances, costumes, music, and artistic displays (Cross River Tourism Bureau, 2019). Despite this rich programming, there seems to be a disconnect between the Carnival's

content and its communication strategy, which has undermined its potential as a globally competitive cultural brand.

The Calabar Carnival features a wide range of vibrant events, including traditional music, dance, drama, fashion shows, bikers' parades, the Christmas Village, J'ouvert Band fetes, the crowning of carnival royalty, a children's carnival, and cultural displays from various Nigerian states, and offers a unique opportunity to showcase African heritage and creativity. These performances highlight traditional dances, acrobatics, and colourful costumes. A major highlight is the *Miss Africa* beauty pageant, whose winner represents the continent internationally. The Carnival concludes with a grand international event, which has previously featured global celebrities like Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, and John Boyega. Over the years, the Carnival has significantly contributed to Cross River State's tourism and economy by creating jobs in areas such as costume design, food services, and event planning. It also showcases numerous competitive bands, including *Bayside*, *Seagull*, *Freedom*, *Master Blasta*, *Passion 4*, and newer additions like *Calas Vegas* and *Diamond Band* (Okoi, Obukoadata, & Ebia, 2021).

The lack of a cohesive marketing framework limits the Carnival's reach and impact. As highlighted by the Cross River Tourism Bureau (2019), the event aims to empower local participants and promote cultural pride. However, without a strategic communication model that incorporates digital engagement and authentic storytelling, the Carnival risks stagnation. To reposition it as a key tourism attraction in West Africa, stakeholders should adopt an integrated marketing approach to enhance cultural visibility and competitiveness. This involves evaluating current persuasive communication strategies, identifying areas for improvement, and determining effective media platforms, particularly digital channels. Ultimately, the Calabar Carnival is at a critical juncture. It can either continue its decline due to poor planning and promotion or embrace a new direction that leverages persuasive communication and strategic marketing. This study calls on stakeholders to reimagine the

Carnival as a brand and a catalyst for sustainable development.

Statement of the Problem

The Calabar Carnival was envisioned as a flagship cultural and economic initiative to position Cross River State as a premier tourism destination. Since its inception in 2004, the Carnival has showcased the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria and attracted both local and international tourists. However, in recent years, the event has experienced a marked decline in visibility, attendance, and overall impact. This decline is not solely attributable to external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic or socio-political unrest, but more critically to internal structural deficiencies, chief among them being the absence of persuasive communication and coherent strategic marketing.

Despite the Carnival's potential as a tool for economic development and cultural diplomacy, its promotional strategies seem largely reactive, fragmented, and outdated. Empirical data reveal a significant drop in tourist attendance. This sharp decline cannot be divorced from a failure to engage target audiences through compelling narratives and emotionally resonant messaging, which are hallmarks of persuasive communication. Moreover, the lack of a sustained strategic marketing framework may have led to poor brand positioning, limited international reach, and diminished stakeholder confidence.

The Carnival's promotional efforts have often relied on sporadic advertising and traditional public relations tactics, which fail to capture the imagination of modern tourists who are increasingly influenced by digital content, experiential storytelling, and authentic cultural engagement. The disconnect between the Carnival's rich programming and its communication strategy has resulted in a weakened brand identity and reduced tourist loyalty. Furthermore, the infrastructural and service-related challenges, such as poorly maintained roads, substandard hospitality services, and inadequate visitor experiences, are compounded by the absence of persuasive messaging that could otherwise mitigate these shortcomings by shaping positive perceptions and expectations. In the absence of strategic marketing, these issues remain unaddressed in the

public domain, further eroding the Carnival's appeal.

Therefore, this study identifies a critical gap in the application of persuasive communication and strategic marketing in the promotion of the Calabar Carnival to optimise level especially since its resurgence. It seeks to explore how these tools can be effectively utilised to reposition the Carnival as a compelling, competitive, and sustainable tourism brand. Without a deliberate and integrated communication strategy that persuades, informs, and inspires, the Calabar Carnival risks continued decline and eventual irrelevance in the global tourism landscape.

Objectives

Subsequently, in a bid to underscore the compelling roles of persuasive communication and strategic marketing, the study aligns with the objectives of:

- a. Exploring how persuasive communication is utilised in the strategic marketing of the Calabar Carnival and assessing its role in promoting the event.
- b. Ascertaining the nature of persuasive and strategic marketing employed at the Calabar Carnival.
- c. Finding out the most suitable media for persuasive communication and strategic marketing of the Calabar Carnival.

Literature Review

The exploration of how persuasive communication can function as a strategic marketing tool for the Calabar Carnival remains under-researched. This literature review emphasises the significance of persuasive communication in enhancing positive outcomes for the Carnival. According to Crittenden and Crittenden (2022), persuasion encompasses the use of moods, symbols, images, words, and emphasis to influence a message recipient, encouraging them to take the desired action proposed by the sender. They stress the importance of distinguishing persuasion from manipulation; while persuasion aims to influence beliefs, attitudes, intentions, motivations, or behaviours through ethical means, manipulation often involves misleading tactics for the seller's advantage. Research indicates that persuasion is a vital component of communication strategies.

Vladutescu (2014) notes that it serves to recommend products or services to end-users, ultimately benefiting them, and is frequently employed by salespeople who use logical and rational arguments to prompt further action or purchases.

Braca and Dondio (2023) define persuasive communication as any message intended to shape, reinforce, or alter the responses of others. In contrast, Obukoadata et al. (2024) characterise propaganda as the dissemination of a particular viewpoint aimed at persuading recipients to adopt that perspective as their own, highlighting its ideological bias, institutional nature, mass persuasion tactics, and reliance on ethically questionable methods. While both persuasion and propaganda seek to influence, manipulation diverges by coercing individuals against their will for the benefit of the influencer. Importantly, the ethical implications of persuasion hinge on the motives of the persuader, which can either enhance or undermine its integrity.

Seiter and Gass (2010), alongside Obukoadata (2022b), review the positive impacts of persuasive communication within the business context, defining it as a process intended to modify attitudes or behaviours toward organisational products, events, ideas, or services through effective communication. Persuasive communication is thus characterised by its intent to change, shape, or reinforce responses, yielding favourable outcomes (Obukoadata, Uduma, & Aniefiok, 2021). O'Keefe (2002) posits that successful persuasion is contingent upon the effectiveness of the communication, asserting that true persuasion only occurs when the attempt to influence is successful. This relationship underscores the concept of success as integral to persuasion.

Perloff (2008) and O'Keefe (2002) argue that for an action to be deemed persuasive, the recipient must have some freedom in their response. Perloff emphasises that effective communication is crucial for persuasion, while O'Keefe points out that successful messaging influences the recipient's behaviour or mindset. Lister (2019) notes that persuasive communications, especially in advertisements, aim to elicit specific actions, typically to encourage product purchases across various

marketing channels, including the Internet, television, and print.

According to Jackson (2013), marketing involves cultivating and maintaining exchange relationships, starting from attracting customers to ensuring their retention by meeting their needs. Blakeman (2018) describes marketing as creating mutually beneficial exchanges, while Kotler & Armstrong (2010) highlight the importance of generating customer value. Marketing communications, as defined by Kotler (2000), are the strategies used by firms to inform, persuade, and remind consumers about their products and brands, aiming to influence purchasing decisions (Obukoadata, Uduma & Aniefiok, 2021).

In the realm of marketing communication, Fill (2009) asserts that marketers employ diverse tools to cultivate brand awareness among potential customers, thereby creating an image of the brand in their minds that aids in their purchasing decisions. These marketing communication tools encompass advertising, sales promotion, event marketing or sponsorship, public relations and publicity, direct marketing, interactive marketing, word-of-mouth marketing, and personal selling (Obukoadata, Okon & Obogo, 2024). Collectively, these communication tools are known as the marketing communication mix (MCM). Supporting this notion, the Business-Jargon Group (2017) contends that effectively communicating market potential to consumers is paramount.

Fill and Jamieson (2006) argue that there is no singular definition of marketing communications; rather, many definitions have emerged from a promotional perspective, viewing marketing communication merely as a means to persuade individuals to purchase products and services. The focus has primarily been on short-term, one-way communication aimed at products.

Jackson (2013) emphasises that marketing communication is not a 'one size fits all' approach; organisations must deliver tailored messages through various channels to diverse audiences. As it engages with consumers and stakeholders, marketing communication is often regarded as the voice of the corporate world, integrating targeted and measurable communication that facilitates customer acquisition and retention while fostering deeper

relationships. The Calabar Carnival could also leverage digital marketing to achieve broader outreach (Chikandiwa, 2013; Wymbs, 2011).

Persuasion Theory

This theory draws upon Aristotle's foundational concepts within his rhetorical framework of communication. However, the formalisation of Persuasion as a mass communication theory emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, following studies focused on identifying the optimal persuasive effectiveness of propaganda in political and advertising contexts (Folarin, 2006). Ogbuoshi (2020) elucidates that, as a mass communication theory, persuasion theory addresses messages intended to subtly modify the attitudes of recipients. This approach relies on the utilisation of mass media to disseminate messages that are meticulously crafted to engage audiences and prompt compliance with the actions that the communicator seeks to inspire (Rokeach & Defleur, 1989).

Folarin (2006) posits that persuasion is a process aimed at inducing changes in attitudes and behaviours by engaging an individual's cognitive and affective processes. He further asserts that for a persuasive message to achieve its intended impact, it must effectively alter the psychological functioning of the recipient, prompting them to respond overtly in alignment with the behaviours suggested by the communicator. The underlying assumptions of persuasion theory centre on the psychodynamics of the audience, which can be categorized as follows: an audience's interest in information necessitates that messages be crafted to capture attention; individuals are more inclined to engage with messages that reinforce their preexisting beliefs; audiences tend to filter information that aligns with their preferences, leading to potential misunderstandings; and information that resonates with the audience's existing views is more likely to be retained, with longer messages enhancing persuasive effectiveness.

The significance and application of persuasion theory lie in its capacity to foster the patronage and brand loyalty that every business aspires to achieve. Attaining this objective necessitates the employment of persuasive communication techniques that effectively convey messages and captivate the audience. Consequently, marketing messages are

intentionally designed to provoke specific actions from audiences, encouraging them to believe in the organisation's products, contemplate the brand, and maintain loyalty thereafter.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative research design, employing a projective policy-based technique to explore the subconscious motivations, perceptions, and sentiments of key stakeholders involved in the marketing and promotion of the Calabar Carnival. The qualitative approach was chosen to allow for in-depth exploration of the nuanced roles that persuasive communication and strategic marketing play in tourism promotion. This approach was implemented through focus group discussions (FGDs) that centred on themes emphasising the role of Persuasion Theory and the importance of marketing within the context of the Calabar Carnival.

The population for this study comprised professionals directly involved in the planning, promotion, and execution of the Calabar Carnival. This included personnel from the Cross River State Carnival Commission (CRSCC) and private tourism service providers (PTSPs) operating within the state. Given the specialised nature of the study, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with demonstrable expertise and long-term involvement of seven years and above in the Carnival's operations.

A total of twelve (12) participants were selected for the study. These individuals were drawn from two key stakeholder groups, which are the CRSCC and the PTSPs. From the CRSCC, six participants were senior officials within the Commission, holding positions such as Assistant Director of Marketing, Head of Public Relations, and Senior Event Coordinator. Each had a minimum of seven years of continuous service with the Commission and had been actively involved in the strategic planning and promotional activities of the Carnival. Their job schedules included overseeing media campaigns, coordinating stakeholder engagement, and managing event logistics. From the PTSPs, the remaining six participants were drawn from the private sector, including tour operators, hospitality managers, and destination marketers. These professionals had between 8 to 15 years of

experience in the tourism and hospitality industry, with a focus on event-based tourism. They had worked with organisations such as local travel agencies, hotel chains, and cultural promotion firms that regularly partner with the Carnival Commission. To ensure ethical compliance and protect participant identities, pseudonyms were used in reporting findings. Participants were labelled as D1a–D1f for the first focus group and D2a–D2f for the second.

Data were collected through two focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising six participants. The discussions were guided by a semi-structured protocol centred on three thematic areas: (1) the use of persuasive communication in marketing the Calabar Carnival, (2) the nature and effectiveness of strategic marketing approaches, and (3) the most suitable media platforms for persuasive tourism promotion. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights relevant to the study objectives.

Results and Discussion

The focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that while persuasive communication is recognised as essential, its application in the marketing of the Calabar Carnival remains inconsistent and underdeveloped. Participants from both the Cross River State Carnival Commission (CRSCC) and private tourism service providers (PTSPs) acknowledged the importance of persuasive messaging but highlighted gaps in its strategic deployment. For instance, Mr. D1a, a Senior Marketing Officer at the CRSCC, stated: "We use persuasive communication to influence tourists' decisions and interact with our customers online, especially through social media. But we don't have a unified strategy; it's often left to individual departments." This admission underscores a lack of institutional coherence in the application of persuasive techniques. While digital platforms are being used, the absence of a coordinated strategy limits the impact of these efforts. Obukoadata, Uduma, and Aniefiok (2021) had earlier maintained that marketing tourism is inherently a collective and collaborative

endeavour, integrating elements of marketing, advertising, public relations, publicity, and persuasive communication, rather than an isolated effort.

Similarly, Ms. D2a, a tour operator with over a decade of experience, noted that “We try to emotionally appeal to tourists by showcasing the beauty of Calabar and the Carnival experience, but we don’t always have the resources or training to craft messages that truly resonate.” This points to a broader issue of capacity and skill gaps among private sector actors (Dore & Crouch, 2003), who are often at the frontline of tourist engagement but lack formal training in persuasive communication.

The discussions revealed that persuasive communication is often conflated with general advertising or public relations. As Mr. D1c, Head of Public Relations at CRSCC, explained: “We see persuasive communication as part of our PR work, but we don’t always measure its effectiveness or tailor it to specific audiences.” This reflects a common misconception that persuasive communication is synonymous with publicity. However, as Seiter and Gass (2010) and Brooks (2017) argue, persuasion is a deliberate, goal-oriented process that requires message tailoring, audience segmentation, and feedback mechanisms. Moreover, the lack of audience research was evident. Ms. D2c, a hospitality manager, observed that “We don’t really know what kind of messages work best for international tourists. Most of our promotions are designed for local audiences.” This is a critical oversight, especially given the Carnival’s aspiration to attract global visitors. Without understanding the motivations, preferences, and cultural contexts of diverse tourist segments, persuasive communication efforts are unlikely to yield desired outcomes (Okoi & Agba, 2023).

Despite these challenges, participants unanimously agreed on the power of emotional appeal and storytelling as a key ingredient of persuasion and strategic marketing. Mr. D2e, a cultural promoter, emphasised the fact that “When we tell stories about the Carnival, its history, the people behind it, the colours, the music, it connects with people. That’s what makes them want to come.” This aligns with the literature on experiential marketing (Obukoadata, 2022a), which highlights the importance of

narrative in creating memorable and emotionally engaging tourist experiences (Henche, 2018; Braca & Dondio, 2023). Emotional storytelling not only enhances message retention but also fosters a sense of belonging and anticipation among potential tourists.

The FGDs also highlighted the growing role of digital media in persuasive communication. Ms. D1f, a digital content strategist at CRSCC, remarked that “Social media give us a chance to be creative. We use videos, testimonials, and behind-the-scenes content to show what the Carnival is really like.” This reflects a shift towards content marketing, where value-driven, visually rich content is used to engage audiences strategically. According to Lister (2019), persuasive advertisements that evoke emotion and provide vivid imagery are more likely to influence consumer behaviour. However, participants noted that these efforts are often ad hoc and lack strategic oversight.

The findings affirm the relevance of Persuasion Theory in tourism marketing. As Folarin (2006) notes, effective persuasion requires an understanding of the audience’s psychographics, such as interests, values, and emotional triggers. The Calabar Carnival’s current promotional strategies, while well-intentioned, fall short of this standard due to limited audience research and message customisation. Furthermore, the study supports the argument by O’Keefe (2002) that persuasion is only successful when it results in the desired behavioural change. In this case, increased tourist attendance and engagement. The decline in visitor numbers suggests that current communication efforts are not achieving this goal, thereby necessitating a more structured and theory-informed approach that amplifies strategic marketing and persuasion.

To improve persuasive communication in Calabar Carnival’s strategic marketing, the CRSCC should establish a centralised framework for all promotional activities to ensure consistent messaging and strategic alignment. Incoherent messaging lacks strategy, so stakeholders must work toward this goal. Capacity training should be intentional, with public and private sector actors trained in persuasive techniques like message framing, emotional appeal, and digital storytelling, alongside understanding tourist

motivations and preferences to create effective messages. Social media, email, and content platforms should focus on visibility and engagement with persuasive narratives highlighting the Carnival's unique value. Communication efforts must be regularly assessed with metrics like engagement, conversion, and tourist feedback.

Nature of persuasive and strategic marketing

This objective explores not only the types of marketing strategies used but also how they are perceived and implemented by key stakeholders, including government officials and private tourism service providers. Participants acknowledged the use of various persuasive and strategic marketing tools but noted inconsistencies in their application and a lack of integration across platforms. Mr. D1d, Assistant Director of Public Relations at the Cross River State Carnival Commission (CRSCC), explained, for instance, that “We use a mix of public relations, social media, and event sponsorships to promote the Carnival. But there’s no central strategy guiding all these efforts. Each department does its own thing.” This statement highlights a key issue: while multiple marketing tools are in play, they are not coordinated under a unified strategic framework. This lack of cohesion undermines the potential impact of otherwise effective tactics.

Ms. D2d, a senior tourism consultant with over 12 years of experience, added that “In today’s world, experiential marketing is everything. People want to feel what the Carnival is about before they even arrive. But we’re still stuck with posters and jingles” that cater only for an ageing group to the detriment of an experiential digital natives (Obukoadata, Uduma & Aniefiok, 2021). Her observation underscores the gap between contemporary marketing trends and the methods currently employed. Experiential marketing, which emphasises immersive, emotionally resonant experiences, is increasingly recognised as a best practice in tourism promotion (Hench, 2018; Braca & Dondio, 2023). Yet, the Calabar Carnival’s marketing remains largely traditional and reactive.

Participants generally agreed that persuasive communication is used, but often in a limited or superficial way. Mr. D1e, a media

liaison officer, noted that “We try to use emotional appeal—talking about culture, unity, and celebration. But we don’t always back it up with visuals or stories that really connect.” This aligns with the literature, which emphasises that effective persuasion requires more than slogans; it demands storytelling, emotional resonance, and audience-specific messaging (Seiter & Gass, 2010; Lister, 2019). The Carnival’s messaging, while well-intentioned, often lacks the depth and personalisation needed to truly persuade.

Ms. D2e, a hotel marketing manager, elaborated as follows: “We use persuasive language in our ads, words like ‘unforgettable,’ ‘vibrant,’ ‘Africa’s biggest street party.’ But tourists want more than words. They want to see it, feel it, believe it.” Her comment reflects the growing importance of content marketing and visual storytelling in tourism. According to Vladutescu (2014), persuasive communication must engage both the rational and emotional faculties of the audience. Without compelling visuals or immersive narratives, even the most eloquent language may fall flat (Ajake, 2015).

When asked about the strategic dimension of their marketing efforts, participants offered mixed responses. Mr. D1f, a digital strategist at CRSCC, stated that “We have a calendar of events and some partnerships with media houses. But we don’t really segment our audience or track engagement metrics”, thus revealing a critical gap in strategic planning. Effective marketing requires not only message dissemination but also audience segmentation, performance tracking, and continuous optimisation (Fill & Jamieson, 2006; Obukoadata et al., 2024). The absence of these elements suggests that the Carnival’s marketing is more tactical than strategic.

Ms. D2f, a destination branding expert, contend that “Strategic marketing means knowing your audience, crafting a message that speaks to them, and choosing the right channels. We’re not doing enough of that. We’re not thinking long-term.” Her critique is supported by the findings of Obukoadata, Uduma, and Aniefiok (2021), who argue that tourism marketing must be holistic, data-driven, and future-oriented. The Calabar Carnival’s current approach, while enthusiastic, lacks the analytical

rigour and foresight needed to compete in a global tourism market.

The FGDs also explored the media platforms used for persuasive and strategic marketing. Participants cited radio, television, billboards, and social media as the primary channels. However, the effectiveness of these platforms varied. Mr. D2b, a social media manager, observed, for instance, that “Social media is our best bet right now. It’s cheap, fast, and interactive. But we need better content—videos, testimonials, influencer partnerships.” This reflects the broader shift towards digital-first marketing in tourism. As Chikandiwa (2013) and Wymbs (2011) note, digital platforms offer unparalleled reach and engagement potential, especially when combined with persuasive storytelling and user-generated content. For Ms. D1b, a communications officer, “We still rely heavily on traditional media. But younger tourists are on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. We need to meet them where they are.” This generational insight is crucial. Younger audiences, as Godwin (2012) emphasised, are not only more digitally savvy but also more responsive to authentic, visually rich content. Ignoring these preferences risks alienating a key demographic.

The Calabar Carnival's marketing is marked by enthusiasm, creativity, and cultural pride, but is fragmented, with limited planning and underused modern tools. Although stakeholders see the value of persuasive communication, its inconsistent application lacks the depth to influence tourists effectively. To advance, the Carnival must embrace a more integrated, data-driven, and audience-focused strategy to regain its status as Africa's top cultural tourism destination after a three-year break.

Most suitable media for the persuasive communication and strategic marketing

In the digital age, the success of tourism marketing hinges not only on the message but also on the medium through which it is delivered. The Calabar Carnival, as a flagship cultural event in Nigeria, requires a media strategy that aligns with contemporary communication trends and audience preferences. Media selections for strategic communication campaigns should ensure the effectiveness of a message. In tourism marketing, media that allow for rich, interactive,

and emotionally engaging content (e.g., social media, video platforms) are more likely to activate the central route, leading to lasting attitude change and behavioural commitment (Fill & Jamieson, 2006). This is particularly relevant for the Calabar Carnival, which targets diverse demographic groups across local, national, and international markets.

The FGDs revealed a consensus among participants that while multiple media platforms are used to promote the Carnival, their effectiveness varies significantly. Mr. D2f, a digital marketing consultant, stated that “Social media is by far the most effective platform we have. It allows us to reach young people, diaspora Nigerians, and even international tourists. But we’re not using it to its full potential.” This sentiment was also echoed by Ms. D1a, a communications officer at the Cross River State Carnival Commission (CRSCC), who added that “We post on Facebook and Instagram, but we don’t have a content calendar or a strategy. Sometimes it’s just last-minute updates” with no real strategy attached, but just done out of something to do at the time. These comments highlight a critical gap between media availability and strategic utilisation. While platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube offer powerful tools for visual storytelling and audience engagement, their impact is diminished without a coherent content strategy.

Despite the rise of digital platforms, traditional media such as radio, television, and billboards remain part of the Carnival’s promotional mix. Mr. D1b, a senior PR officer, noted that “Radio is still very effective, especially in rural areas. We use it to reach people who may not be online.” Similarly, Ms. D2b, a hotel marketing executive, observed that “TV ads during the festive season help build excitement. But they’re expensive, and we can’t run them consistently.” These insights align with the findings of Greco (2019) and Kotler (2000), who argue that traditional media still play a role in brand awareness, particularly in regions with limited internet penetration. However, their one-way communication model limits interactivity and personalisation, which are key elements of persuasive communication.

Participants emphasised the importance of visual content in conveying the vibrancy and cultural richness of the Carnival. Mr. D2a, a tour operator, explained thus: “Tourists want to see what they’re signing up for. Videos of past Carnivals, testimonials, behind-the-scenes clips—these are what really persuade people.” This aligns with the literature on experiential marketing, which emphasises the role of immersive, emotionally resonant content in shaping tourist perceptions (Blakeman, 2018; Henche, 2018; Rahayu, 2018). Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram Reels are particularly suited for this purpose, allowing marketers to showcase the Carnival’s music, dance, costumes, and atmosphere in dynamic formats.

Ms. D1e, a visual content creator, added that “We need to invest in professional video production. Right now, most of our content is amateur. That doesn’t reflect the quality of the Carnival.” Her comment underscores the need for quality control and brand consistency across media outputs. As Lister (2019) notes, persuasive advertising relies not only on message content but also on production quality, which influences credibility and emotional impact.

Several participants also highlighted the growing role of influencers and user-generated content in tourism promotion. Mr. D2c, a social media strategist, stated that “When influencers post about the Carnival, it gets more traction than our official pages. People trust peer recommendations more than ads.” This observation is supported by Braca and Dondio (2023), who argue that peer influence and authenticity are key drivers of persuasion in digital environments. Influencer marketing, when aligned with strategic goals, can amplify reach and enhance message credibility. Also, Ms. D1f, a digital engagement officer, added that “We should partner with travel bloggers and cultural influencers. Let them experience the Carnival and share it with their followers.” This strategy aligns with the multistep approach to opinion formation and moulding of communication in shaping public opinion and behaviour.

While participants recognised the potential of various media platforms, they also identified several challenges: Media use is often reactive rather than proactive; high-quality

content production and media buying are limited by funding. Messaging varies across platforms, leading to brand dilution, and some stakeholders lack the skills to manage digital campaigns effectively.

The most suitable media for persuasive communication and strategic marketing of the Calabar Carnival are those that combine reach, interactivity, and emotional resonance. While traditional media still have a role, digital platforms, especially social media, video-sharing sites, and influencer networks, offer unparalleled opportunities for engagement and persuasion. However, to fully harness these tools, the Carnival’s marketing efforts must evolve from ad hoc promotions to a strategically integrated, audience-focused, and content-rich communication model. Only then can the Carnival reclaim its status as a premier cultural tourism brand in Africa.

Implications

The findings of this study uncover crucial insights into the marketing dynamics of the Calabar Carnival and highlight the urgent need for a strategic overhaul. The lack of a cohesive and unified marketing strategy has led to fragmented promotional efforts that fail to utilise the full potential of persuasive communication. This disjointed approach weakens the Carnival’s ability to influence tourist behaviour effectively, as persuasive communication, according to Persuasion Theory, must be deliberate, emotionally engaging, and tailored to the audience’s cognitive and emotional dimensions.

The study also emphasises a significant underuse of experiential and emotional storytelling, which are vital for creating memorable tourist experiences. Participants consistently stressed the power of narratives that evoke cultural pride, excitement, and connection. Nevertheless, the Carnival’s current messaging lacks depth and personalisation, limiting its capacity to resonate with diverse audiences. This gap is especially concerning given the rise of experiential marketing, which prioritises immersive and emotionally enriching content as key drivers of tourist engagement and loyalty.

Another consequence is the limited extent of audience segmentation and research. The Carnival’s promotional efforts mainly target local audiences, with little understanding of the

preferences and motivations of international tourists. This narrow focus restricts the Carnival's global appeal and hampers its potential as a tool for cultural diplomacy. Without detailed audience profiling and psychographic analysis, persuasive communication efforts risk being generic and ineffective, failing to generate the behavioural change central to successful persuasion.

The study further exposes a disconnect in media strategy. While digital platforms such as social media are recognised as effective, their usage remains sporadic and lacks strategic clarity. Traditional media, though still relevant in specific contexts, do not offer the interactivity and personalisation required for modern tourism marketing. The implication is that the Carnival should adopt an integrated media strategy that combines the reach of traditional platforms with the engagement potential of digital channels. This approach should be guided by the principles of Integrated Marketing Communication, ensuring message consistency and reinforcement across all touchpoints.

Capacity and skill gaps among stakeholders also present a significant barrier to effective marketing. Both public and private sector actors expressed a need for training in persuasive communication, content creation, and digital engagement. Without these competencies, even the most well-intentioned marketing efforts are unlikely to achieve their desired impact. The implication is that capacity building must be prioritised, with targeted training programmes designed to equip stakeholders with the tools and knowledge required for strategic and persuasive marketing.

The demographic composition of Carnival attendees, which remains predominantly local, indicates a failure to reach and attract international audiences. This limited reach not only curtails the Carnival's economic potential but also its cultural influence. Expanding promotional efforts to include transnational media platforms and diaspora networks is essential for repositioning the Carnival as a globally competitive event. Influencer partnerships, travel blogs, and international tourism forums can serve as effective channels for increasing the Carnival's visibility and appeal.

Finally, the lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in the Carnival's marketing efforts constitutes a major challenge. Without clear metrics and feedback systems, it becomes difficult to assess campaign effectiveness or make data-driven adjustments. This absence of accountability and performance tracking hampers strategic planning and resource distribution. Establishing robust evaluation frameworks is therefore vital for ongoing improvement and long-term sustainability. Overall, these findings suggest that a paradigm shift is necessary in how the Calabar Carnival is marketed and communicated. This transformation demands not only structural changes but also a commitment to innovation, collaboration, and continuous learning throughout the tourism value chain.

Conclusion

The Cross River tourism industry has significantly overlooked the critical role of persuasive communication in its marketing strategies, a factor that is essential for attracting a larger influx of tourists to the Calabar Carnival. To enhance the Carnival's appeal, the industry must adopt a comprehensive strategic marketing mix that effectively integrates public relations, advertising, and robust communication practices. This integration is vital, especially as other regions are rapidly developing unique tourist destinations that compete for the attention of potential visitors.

The Cross River tourism industry must acknowledge and harness the substantial growth potential that exists within the state. The sluggish pace of development can largely be attributed to egocentric approaches and outdated press agency strategies that fail to resonate with modern audiences. To meet the ambitious tourism benchmarks set by the State Government for 2030, it is essential to embrace persuasive communication and strategic marketing techniques. These methodologies are not merely supplementary; they are fundamental to attracting new tourists while simultaneously retaining the loyalty of existing visitors.

The marketers responsible for the Calabar Carnival, particularly the Okham Global company, must recognise that to fulfil their mandate within Cross River State, they need to weave persuasive communication and strategic

marketing principles into the very fabric of their operations. These principles should function as the veins and arteries that transport vital information and engagement from the "heart" of tourism to the broader system, facilitating a dynamic exchange based on mutual understanding. By doing so, they can better align the interests of destinations with those of tourists, effectively bridging the credibility gap that currently exists.

This is a pivotal moment for the Cross River tourism industry. It is essential to take decisive action and implement these necessary changes to revitalise the sector. By embracing a more strategic approach to marketing and communication, the industry can significantly enhance its ability to attract a diverse array of tourists, thereby ensuring the long-term sustainability and growth of the Calabar Carnival and the broader tourism landscape in Cross River State.

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