

# Billboard Advertisement and Racial Perception in Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines why business people in Ghana prefer using images of white people on their billboard outdoor advertisements. To attain the study's objective, a cross-sectional survey was used. Data was collected from only a section of retail and wholesale businesses within the Ejisu and Juaben districts in the Ashanti Region of Ghana which use images of white people on their billboard outdoor advertisement. The survey findings show that retail and wholesale businesses use images of white people on their outdoor billboard advertisements because they are more attractive than images of black people. Also, the use of images of white people indicates a seal of professionalism, desirability, and quality services. The survey's discovery reveals the racial perceptions of the white race in comparison with the black race by most African business people. The usage of the images of white people as the symbolic representation of ideal beauty, attractions, quality products and services, and model of authentic marketization has unfolded some of the factors that stymie the utilization of the images of the black people on an outdoor billboard advertisement. This paper contends that there is a necessity for a balanced moral reasoning and constructive racial perception of images of black people and self-identification.

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## INTRODUCTION

The mainstream medium of disseminating information in today's modern society is through advertisement. The forms of advertisement differ. This may be due to the level of development of the region, media availability, and accessibility to the internet or television colour for both the advertiser and the consumer. In its definitional affiliation, advertising is seen as a paid form of non-personal presentation of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor to disseminate information concerning an idea, product or service.<sup>1</sup>

Malte P. Jorda asserts that in contemporary times advertising is a powerful vehicle through which new values are popularized and transmitted with speed and effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> This is why people are bombarded with lots of information through multi-media avenues such as newspapers, magazines, billboards, television and

<sup>1</sup> Leo O.N. Edegoh, Ifeyinwa Maureen Nwanolue, & Nkiru Comfort Ezech, 'Audience assessment of the use of models in billboard advertising: A study of consumers of Amstel Malt in Onitsha, *Nigeria International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities*. Vol. 6, No. 1 (2013): 217-227.

<sup>2</sup> Malte P. Jorda, 'La publicidad como transmisora de cultura / Advertising as a culture transmitter. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 42, (2017): 131-135. doi:10.15198/seeci.2017.42.

the internet.<sup>3</sup> Advertising as a form of communication relies on companies to persuade an audience to purchase their products. This communication is usually through various forms of paid media; TV and radio commercials, print advertising, billboards and more. Every communication in advertising is intended to be persuasive.<sup>4</sup>

If one drives through the streets of cities such as Kumasi, Tema, and Accra, 'they' will notice that billboards advertisement is a prevalent medium used in these big cities of Ghana. Billboard advertising, which is considered as 'outdoor advertising' is traditionally associated with printed, painted, and projected images that may be internally or externally illuminated. Signs may be on buildings, fascias, windows, walls and roofs. Freestanding signs may be in frames, on poles and pylons and street furniture such as bus shelters as well as on balloons, inflatables, trailers, buses, suburban trains, taxis and other commercial vehicles. The advertising messages can be animated and include flashing signs, neon signs, televisions, electronics and fibre optics.<sup>5</sup>

The success of billboard advertising is due to its primary objective to gather and attract consumers' interest and attention.<sup>6</sup> Due to this reason, billboard advertisements are preferred by advertisers and marketers. It is observed that the imageries used in most of the billboard advertisements lack the similitude with the people within the geographical framework. As in the case of Kumasi, most billboards and products are brims with images of white people. The usage of these images could reveal the contents of the racial perception of the black race in relation to the white race. It is this rational framework that forms the wherefore of this paper. Accordingly, the objective of this paper is to examine the reasons why retail and wholesale businessmen and women use white images on billboard advertisements in Ejisu and Juaben districts (Ghana). And, suggestive measures can be observed to enhance these business people's understanding of racial perception.

### Racial perception

Perception refers to the mental acquisition, organization, identification and interpretation of the contents of the external world in order 'to make' and 'to give' meaning to them. Accordingly, racial perception is the conscious comprehension and mental presentation of a particular race. Racial perception is the way one sees a particular race 'as' (seeing as) and not the way a race 'is' (factive).<sup>7</sup>

Racial perception as presented above plays a role in one's mental conception about the race he/she belongs to, in comparison with other races. The contents of our mental conception would determine the patterns of ranking, categorizing, approving and disapproving, comparing of people from a race other than our own. In the business industry, the choice of images used in ads could reveal a wide range of racial perceptions by advertisers. In more contextual parlance, billboard advertisements, which is the prime subject of examination by this study, reveal advertisers' racial perception of people of colour in comparison with people who are considered 'white'.

**Image of white people:** an image of white people is used in its social construct to refer to the image of people of a non-black race.

**Image black of people:** an image of black people is used to refer to images of people of colour.

<sup>3</sup> Zain Ul. Abideen & Latif Abdul. Do Brand Extensions Affect Consumer Attitude: An Empirical Experience With Reference To Pakistani Consumers, *Journal of Applied Business Research*, 27(2), (2011).

<sup>4</sup> M. Zulu, *The Impact of Billboard Advertising on Product Promotion: A Case Study of Cavendish University Zambia*. (Zambia: Cavendish University Zambia, 2019), 21.

<sup>5</sup> T. Davidson, *Outdoor Advertising: A View From The Industry*. Accessed May 2, 2021. <https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/8070/2c1.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>6</sup> M.R. Elden, *Advertising Copy Writing*. (Istanbul: Letiflim Yaynlar, 2003) cited by Zulu M. *The Impact of Billboard Advertising on Product Promotion: a case study of Cavendish University Zambia*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel O'Brien, D. On Perception. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (2008, May 10). Accessed August 29, 2021, <https://iep.utm.edu/epis-per/>

## Billboard Advertisement

Billboard advertisement is considered the commonest medium of outdoor advertising.<sup>8</sup> Billboards are often covered with images of celebrities, paintings, and highlights of products available for sale. Most effective billboards have a clear, concise message, attractive illustrations and visual appearance. This is to allow them to be clutter-free as possible and easy to read. The targets groups are customers travelling or moving from one place to another, to create awareness about available services and products. However, this most times receives about 5-10 seconds of a consumer's attention.<sup>9</sup>

Due to the progressive nature of technology, billboard advertisement has taken dynamic and realistic motioning views more or less like colour television. This is called an electronic Billboard. It is a programmable display that has the capability to present a large variety of coloured and symbolic imagery. However, this type of billboard advertising is not common within Ejisu and Juaben Districts.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper used a cross-sectional design for its unit of the survey. Hence, questionnaires asked open-ended questions. To realize the objective of the analysis, the study population comprised of nine retail and wholesale business that use images of white people on their billboard advertisements. Thus, data collection was limited to only images of white people related to billboards. *Twi* is relatively a widely spoken language within Ejisu and Juaben municipality. This notwithstanding, some respondents' responses were recorded and then transcribed into English. More so, an oral interview was conducted with respondents who could understand but cannot write in the English language.

## Brief Description of the Study Area

Ejisu is a small and one of the most popular towns within Kumasi in the Ashanti region of Ghana. It is situated in the middle sector of the Ashanti region and is found within latitude 1.15° N and 1.45° N and longitude 6.15° W and 7.00° W.<sup>10</sup> It is a developing city. Agricultural activity is one of the areas which 68.2% of the people depend on for a living.

The common cash crops in the district are cocoa, oil palm, and citrus, while food crops like cassava, maize, cocoyam and tomatoes for domestic consumption and commercial sales, are sold every Thursday and Sunday. It is the centre of commercial activities which is referred to as 'Ejisu Market'. It attracts people from other districts coming in mostly every thursday and sunday to engage in buying and selling respectively. The commonest businesses progressing in Ejisu are Banking, FM stations, Carpentry, Bars and Restaurants, Hairdressing salons, Printing Presses, Mobile Money Agents and Pharmacies. These businesses use billboard outdoor advertising methods to showcase their products.

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<sup>8</sup> Davidson, Outdoor Advertising: A View From The Industry .

<sup>9</sup> J.A.Achien'g, The effectiveness of Billboard advertising: the Case of Soft Drinks in Nairobi. (MBA., University of Nairobi, September 2009) Accessed June 20, 2021, <http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/13150>

<sup>10</sup> Edward D. Wiafe and George Asamoah. Land-cover change assessment in Ejisu –Juabeng district in Ghana. *Eurasian Journal of Forest Science*, 6(1) (2018), 1-8. DOI:10.31195/ejefs.429741.



Fig 1: Map of Ejisu<sup>11</sup>

## PRESENTATION OF DATA AND FINDINGS

According to the respondents, images of white people are used to attract customers, thereby, increasing consumers' interest in the company's products and services. It was also claimed that the use of white images confirms a product's genuineness and trustworthiness. Hence, it makes products of these businesses' sell faster. In this section, detailed responses from the respondents are presented, alongside the sample billboards with were taken with permission from the respondents.

### Billboard Sample I



Fig 2: Billboard Sample 1

<sup>11</sup> Wiafe and Asamoah. Land-cover change assessment in Ejisu –Juabeng district in Ghana, 3.

Billboard Sample 1 as seen in Fig.2 above is a business that focuses on training children and interested adults on how to play the piano, guitar, and other musical instruments. It also sells books such as novels, fiction, and motivational and self-help books. Hence, it also operates as a local library. It believes in billboard advertisement because it attracts people to the business.

#### ***Interview with the Business Owner***

##### ***Do you have reasons for using a white girl's image on the billboard?***

- I used it to make my business interesting.
- Having a white girl on the billboard will show that we are serious in our business.
- Having her on the billboard makes our business beautiful.
- It will make people have more interest in our business.

##### ***Do you have reasons for not using a Black girl?***

- Yes. Images of black people (Ghanaians) will not attract people to our business.
- Black people don't like their pictures being used on the billboard advertisement.

##### ***Will you consider using an image of a Black girl in the future?***

- Yes. To make Ghanaians know that the business is in Ghana.

#### **Billboard Sample 2**

Billboard Sample 2 is a printing press. The business name was not allowed to be revealed. It has been in operation for two years. They use billboard advertisements to tell people about their work and the location of their business.



*Fig 3. Billboard Sample 2*

#### ***Interview with the Business Owner***

##### ***Do you have reasons for using a white lady's image in your advertisement?***

- White people are more attractive than black people.
- When we use the white lady, people will believe that our enterprise offers quality services.
- If I use an image of a black person on my banner or the billboard advertisement, he or she can sue me to the courts which can ask me to pay a fine.

##### ***Will you consider using a black person in the future?***

- No. I will not use a black person.

### Billboard Sample 3

Sample 3 is a micro supermarket that sells different kinds of baby items. It has been in operation since 2019. It believes that billboard advertisements will tell people about the kinds of products they sell.

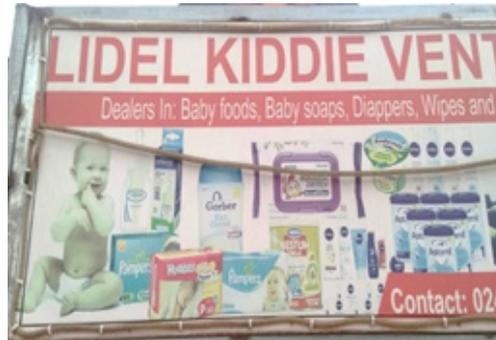


Fig 4. Billboard Sample 3

#### *Interview with the Business Owner*

***Do you have reasons for using a white kid's image on your billboard?***

- I use the white baby's picture to beautify my business.
- For a clearer view of the products we sell. Because when people see the beautiful white baby's picture, they will quickly notice our products.

***Will you consider using a black baby's picture in the future?***

- No. I don't like using black baby images for my advert. So, I will not use them on my billboard advertisement.

### Billboard Sample 4

Sample 4 is a business that sells digital appliances. It has been in operation for two months. It believes that the use of billboard advertisement will attract customers, make the business sell faster, and it will tell the public about the location of the business.



Fig 5. Billboard Sample 4

#### *Interview with the Business Owner*

***Do you have reasons for using white celebrity pictures on your billboard?***

- To show Ghanaians that our products are affordable.
- To show the qualities of our products.
- To make the billboard attractive. This is because they are more attractive than black football players and celebrities.

***Will you consider using black celebrities' pictures in the future?***

I will use both black and white celebrities' images to show that the business belongs to Ghanaians.

**Billboard Sample 5**

Sample 5 is a health care centre. It has been in operation for the past three years. According to the officials, billboard advertisement is an essential medium for informing the public about the work they do, and also to tell passers-by about the location of their health centre.



Fig 6. Billboard Sample 5

***Interview with the Business Owner***

***Do you have reasons for using images of white people on your billboard?***

- They are more attractive than images of black people.
- White people manufacture presentable medical products.
- People (Ghanaians) will believe that we offer excellent medical services.

***Will you consider using Black celebrities' pictures in the future?***

- I will use my own pictures or my nurse's pictures.

**Billboard Sample 6**

Sample 6 is also a medical centre. It has been in operation for four years. It believes in the use of billboard advertisements to tell the public about their hospital and the services they render.



Fig 7. Billboard Sample 6

**Interview with the Business Owner**

**Do you have reasons for using a 'white' medical worker on your billboard?**

- To tell people that we offer life changing services.
- White people have good doctors and nurses. Using white health workers will tell the public that we have good doctors and nurses.
- To attract white tourists around Ejisu. When some white people come to Ghana and especially here in Ejisu, they will be attracted to our hospital by seeing their kind of images will have on our billboard.

**Will you consider using Black medical workers' pictures in the future?**

- I will consider using our people (Ghanaians) if they are attractive enough.
- I will also use both; the white medical workers and Ghanaian medical workers.

**Billboard Sample 7**

Sample 7 is a business that offers laundry and cleaning services. It has been operating for the past two years. This enterprise believes in billboard advertisement because it shows the public its location and the kind of services they offer.



Fig 8. Billboard Sample 7

**Interview with the Business Owner**

**Do you have reasons for using white people on your billboard?**

- White people are more attractive than black people.
- People will believe that we do our work well.

**Will you consider using black laundry workers' pictures in the future?**

- I see nothing wrong with using white people on my billboard ads, I will use any images available: black or any Ghanaian person next time.

**Billboard Sample 8**

Sample 8 is a photo studio and a printing enterprise. It has been in operation for two years. It believes in a billboard advertisement. This is because it tells people about the services they offer.

**Interview with the Business Owner**

**Do you have reasons for using images of white people on your billboard?**

- I believe that white people are more attractive.
- They catch attention.

- When people see the white girl, they will believe that we do quality work.

***Will you consider using a black lady or man's picture in the future?***

- I will think about it.



Fig 9. Billboard Sample 8

***Billboard Sample 9***

Sample 9 is a student-based online business. They offer services like how to write a professional CV, how to win an interview, how to apply for a job, and how to find a job of your choice.



Fig 10. Billboard Sample 9

***Interview with the Business Owner***

***Do you have reasons for using white people on your billboard?***

- It is used to catch the attention of the public.
- People will believe the people operating the business are white people.
- To give people the impression that they are going to work for the white people.
- Using white people will make people patronize our business.

### **Will you consider using images of black people in the future?**

- I will try using *black people's pictures* if only it will promote our business.

### **ANALYSIS**

There have been criticisms over Western/European misrepresentation of Africa in commercials. This misrepresentation is most times based on the racial perception—the western perception of the Black race as inferior in comparison with the White race. A similar claim in support of this submission is offered by Branwen Jones. In her two pennies worth, the negative representation of Africa is shaped by Eurocentrism.<sup>12</sup>

European and American writers are the masterminds on the scholarship and theories that underlie the understanding of international relations and epistemologies. While greater attention has been given to powerful states and actors in the global political economy, less focus is given to the colossal destruction and ruination of colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism in developing countries. These scholarly postulations cum the media reports which fashion eurocentrism are responsible for the negative perception of Africa.<sup>13</sup> An observation made by Peter J. Schraeder and Brian Endless also gives clearer support. They reported that the portrayal of Africa by the New York Times between 1955 and 1995 is a “sensationalist and often negative aspect of the continent” and that 73% of all the articles told negatively on Africa’s politics and society. In 1955 67% reported negatively and in 1985, 93% reported the same and in 1995, 85% of the reports followed the same trend.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to the claim that the negative racial perception of Africa is fueled by western media reports and scholarly postulations, this paper discovered what Africans think of themselves or how Africans see themselves in relation to the white race. To put things in context, Africans are contributors to white superiority; the ideal model of beauty is seen in being a white person; model businesses are owned by white people, authentic products should be of foreign origin because they are models of quality consumable products.

The predominant response from respondents as to why they use images of white people for billboard advertisements was that images of white people are more attractive than images of black people. Relative to this context, this can be responsible for the reason why black images are not used in billboard advertisements. The notion of white supremacy is not only a western driven belief, it is also a belief of most Africans, as seen in the above mentioned responses.

Another point worth consideration is the notion that the use of images of white people ‘will communicate to the consumers that there are quality products and services in a particular enterprise’. This conversely suggests the usage of images of black people will communicate to the public that poor products and services are available in a particular enterprise. The findings of Robert A. Opoku and Patrick A.K Akorli showed that 40% of Ghanaians consumed internationally made goods and 32% consumed both locally and internationally made commodities. The percentage of usage reveals consumer attitudes towards made-in-Ghana goods.<sup>15</sup> In like manner, the use of an image of a white person on billboard advertisement is a sign of the good quality products and services offered in most enterprises in the Ejisu and Juaben districts. The question that deserves an investigation is, does the use of images of white people on billboard advertisements influence consumers’ behaviours towards an industry’s products and services?

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<sup>12</sup> Branwen G. Jones, Africanist Scholarship, Eurocentrism and the Politics of Knowledge. (2015) ,In: Araújo M., Maeso S.R. (eds) Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137292896\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137292896_7)

<sup>13</sup> Afolabi, R. F. “The Untold Story of Africa: What Advertising from Africa Reveals” (MA., City University of New York, 2016): 7-8. Accessed on: May 10, 2021, from [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/2042](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2042).

<sup>14</sup> Peter J. Schraeder and Brian Endless, “The Media and Africa: The Portrayal of Africa in the ‘New York Times’ (1955-1995).” *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, 26, (2), (1998): 29.

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Opoku and Patrick A.K Akorli. The preference gap: Ghanaian consumers’ attitudes. *African Journal of Business Management*. 3 (8), (2009,): 350-357,. doi:10.5897/AJBM09.085.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this survey reveal a grave postulation for moral and attitudinal consideration. The portrayal of the images of the white people as signs of iconic attractions to boost businesses' sales and progression and, as an epitome of standard products' quality and services needs a balanced moral reasoning and constructive racial perception of the images of the black people and self-identification.

It is a cardinal error and social devaluation of the black race by promoting white supremacy through the use of billboard advertisement. If a white image must be used, a blend of the two (black and white) images should be considered in a billboard advertisement.

In the course of data collection, the author asked few consumers if it is always the case that white images on billboard advertisements suggest a mark of quality products and services, they said responded: "when you go into these stores, one will realize that the products that are home-made are not well packaged and are generally of low quality". It can also be said that the use of images of white people by most businesses is a form of public deception to cover up their shoddy homemade products and services.

According to McKinsey and Company, and Feyi Olubodun, advertising must reflect society's values, lifestyles, beliefs and culture to be successful.<sup>16</sup> This can be applied to billboard advertisements in the Ejisu and Juaben districts in Ghana. Billboard advertisement should mirror the people and place of business location. This will aid in the promotion of homemade products and add to the value of the perception of the black race.

## CONSIDERATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The objective of this paper was to examine the reason why enterprises in the Ejisu and Juaben districts, use images of white people on their billboard advertisements. One limitation of this study was the unavailability of literature on the topic under discussion. A possible consideration for further research could be driven by the following research questions: does the use of images of white people on outdoor billboard advertisements affect product promotion? Why do most businesses in Ejisu and Juaben districts, and other parts of the country not use images of black people on billboard advertisements? Aside from the usage of the images of white people on the billboard advertisements by most retail and wholesale businesses, the white images are also used by most private schools in their billboard advertisements. More so, images on most learning materials at the basic level, are brimmed by the images of white people. Therefore, investigation can also be made on: why most authors of educational materials use white images for illustrations and other purposes? What is the impact of using the images of white people on school billboard advertisements on the learners' racial perception? What is the impact of using the images white images on educational materials on the learners' racial perception?

During the interview, most of the respondents especially the Mobile Money agents mentioned that they are not responsible for most of the images used on their billboard advertisement. The designers contracted to design the billboards used images according to their discretionary ability. This suggests that painstaking consideration should be given to investigating the reasons why most designers prefer the utilization of the images of white people while designing billboards.

## CONCLUSION

As herein contended, the images used on billboard advertisements should reflect the social and cultural ideology of their environmental framework, and promote a healthy racial perception of the Black race. The ideation of promoting racial content that signals fair racial perceptions among young Ghanaians and young Africans needs to be encouraged among business people, products advertisers, authors of basic learning materials among others. This is because children, as well as adults, are exposed to different myriads of advertising media that affect their thoughts on race and racial injustice. Hence, advertising content should be portrayed to exhibit a positive racial perception of all races.

<sup>16</sup> McKinsey & Company. "The Rise of the African Consumer." 2017, April 16. Accessed May 21, 2021 <http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-rise-of-the-african-consumer>;

Feyi Olubodun, "Nigeria Advertising Should Reflect Local Tradition and Culture to Excel." 31 Mar. 2015. Accessed July 7, 2021. <https://allafrica.com/stories/201503310038.html>

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