



Sustainable Marketing Communication in the Digital Age of Advert Blocking: Implications for Telecommunication Service Providers in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The advent of digital technologies has revolutionised marketing communication, offering unprecedented opportunities for brands to engage with their target audience. As consumers increasingly seek to control their online experiences and mitigate interruptions, the adoption of advert-blocking techniques has surged, posing significant challenges for organisations, thereby inhibiting their sustainable marketing communication plans. This paper explores the implications of advert blocking on sustainable marketing communication practices. It examines the factors driving the adoption of ad-blocking and the strategies organisations can employ to navigate this phenomenon for marketing communication sustainability. Anchored on the Selectivity Factor and the Uses and Gratification theories, the study deployed a mixed-method approach, incorporating qualitative analysis of service providers and consumer perceptions as well as quantitative data on advert-blocking trends from a sample size of 163 internet users in South-West, Nigeria. Findings reveal the pervasive nature of intrusive advertising practices and the growing apprehensions surrounding privacy and data security, driving the widespread adoption of advert blocking. Moreover, analysis indicates a correlation between ad-blocking behavior and heightened levels of brand scepticism and avoidance tendencies among consumers. Based on findings, organisations are advised to adopt sustainable brand communication strategies, Alternative approaches such as other below-the-line channels, native advertising, branded content, and influencer marketing emerge as promising avenues for engaging audiences while circumventing advert-blocking barriers. The research work accentuates the necessity of adjusting marketing communication strategies to align with evolving target audiences' preferences, thereby promoting sustainability in the digital era's marketing landscape.

KEYWORDS

Advert-Blocking,
Digital Age,
Marketing
Communication,
Sustainable
Marketing
Communication

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable marketing communication in the digital age has important implications for service providers, particularly in relation to advert blocking/avoidance. The success or failure of companies in Nigeria depends on their ability to incorporate sustainable values into their marketing strategies, use digital technology to engage consumers, and implement innovative and successful marketing techniques in response to consumers' growing environmental and social consciousness. In the digital era, blocking or avoiding adverts has become a major worry for stakeholders, industry leaders, academics, and marketing communication specialists. Research by Farok (2017), Brinson and Britt (2021), Dinana (2022), Çelik, Mehmet, and Mehmet (2023) and others have shown that the exponential rise in digital marketing communication has caused consumers to be more exposed to commercials, which has caused them to block or ignore them. These days, internet users deliberately employ adblocking software to protect themselves from the incessant stream of advertisements that websites show. 94% of worldwide publishers surveyed by the Pagefair Adblock study in 2022 stated they were unable to exactly calculate the income loss brought on by adblocking.

In recent times, the term "sustainability" has gained popularity. Ideally, the goal of sustainable development is to satisfy current needs without endangering the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own (Blázquez and Peretti, (2012), Mahanayak, (2024)). Nonetheless, it is mistakenly associated with things that are only green or environmental. This perspective of sustainable development is deprived of much of its content and integral significance by such a reductionist vision because the subject has three complementary and interconnected aspects: sociocultural, environmental, and economic (Galarza, 2020 quoted by Lopez-Gutiérrez et al., 2022, Mahanayak, 2024)). Sustainability in relation to marketing communication requires companies to strategically plan their communication efforts for an enduring future in the committee of global brands, especially in the digital age. However, negative consumer dispositions such as blocking/avoiding adverts are an issue of concern to captains of industries. The implication of adblocking phenomena is that advertisers, publishers, marketing professionals and academics alike must make efforts to address the reason people block marketing communications promotional messages with a view to achieving better returns on marketing investments through consumer satisfaction.

Despite a significant increase in Western scholars' interest over the past couple of years in research on advert avoidance/installation of advert-blocking software and its impact on marketing communication, there is still limited empirical investigation of advert avoidance in developing countries like Nigeria. This has caused the body of knowledge on advert blocking/avoidance in the digital world to remain fragmented. It has become imperative therefore to devote research attention to the evolving adblocking adoption and the dynamic digital marketing communication environment in Nigeria.

OVERVIEW OF THE NIGERIAN TELECOMMUNICATIONS SUB-SECTOR

Nigeria has one of the largest telecommunication markets in Africa and the Middle East region, although most of the consumers rely more on mobile telephony for their communication needs, Okoyeuzu, Nkwor, Arize and Kalu (2023). At the moment, there are four major Global System for Mobile (GSM) service providers: MTN Nigeria, Airtel, Global Communication and 9 Mobile with subscriber figures of 58.3 million, 25.4 million, 24 million and 19.1 million respectively. Virtually all the major telecommunication service providers promote their services through a careful blend of integrated marketing communication tools, interactive marketing inclusive. Specifically, website services displays, search marketing, social media marketing, and online public relations are some of the tools that MTN, Airtel, Globalcom and 9mobile have deployed for their digital marketing promotions. Therefore, understanding consumer attitudes, behaviours, and the cognitive processes leading to advert blocking/avoidance is crucial for organisations to mitigate brand devaluation and wasted marketing communication expenditures for a sustainable business model.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In today's environmentally conscious world, businesses are increasingly realising the importance of integrating sustainability into their marketing communication strategies. One of the growing concerns is the avoidance behavioural disposition of the information and technologically empowered consumers to organisation's commercial messages on digital devices due to clutter.

The internet is flooded with lots of online advertisements. For example, a typical internet user is served up to 1707 banner advertisements per month, whereas the click-through rate is less than 0.1%. An average of 25- 34-year-old is exposed to 2094 banner adverts in a month (www.Marketing-trends-congress.com). The users of Internet through any digital device are constantly bombarded with advertisement, an individual on a day is exposed to 3000 to 20000 advertisements (www.Marketing-trends-congress.com). Again, the number of online video adverts has increased up to 205% since 2013. More than 5.3 trillion display advertisements were provided to the United States alone in 2013. In Nigeria, Internet users are exposed to digital promotions of over 3 billion mobile advert impressions in a month (Proshare Nigeria from Terragon insights cited in Digifacts 2013: 27)

Due to these, some customers now purposefully try to avoid digital marketing and advertising, costing genuine firms income and precious traffic. Literature has established that many times, consumers click on advert blocking and skip advert options on their desktop and mobile devices. Kotler and Keller (2013;498) affirm that technology and other factors have profoundly changed the way consumers process communications and even whether they choose to process them at all".

A recent study by Pagefair states that at the end of 2021, there were over 290 million monthly active users of desktop adblocking software globally, based on an analysis of over 10 billion pageviews across 9,453 sites. Although, desktop adblocking growth initially slowed in 2016-2018, then declined in 2018-2020; however, the last two years show a reversal of that trend. In addition, as of the first quarter of 2021, those that installed adblocker software on their mobile devices were 586M globally. Which tends to double the figure for desktop advert blockers. As of 2022,

only 8 percent of Nigerians have installed adblocker on their mobile devices, (Pagefair 2022) while other Nigerians use one manual adblocking/avoidance method or the other.

Many studies have been carried out on digital communication and achieving marketing goals through digital marketing generally. Few studies drew their conclusions focusing on the dynamics of adblocking in digital marketing communication. Besides, most of the studies on advert blocking/avoidance of digital promotions by consumers were carried out in other countries like the United States, Poland, Germany, Japan, India, China and so on (PageFair 2022, Todri, 2020, Miroglio et al., 2018, Dinana, 2022, Jagan et al., 2018, Jayanthi, 2021, Rus-Arias et al., 2021, Franssen, Verlegh, Kirmani, and Smit (2015) and Li and Huag (2016).

In Nigeria, much of the literature on digital marketing communication and advertising focused on the use of digital marketing and consumer purchase behaviour to digital promotions. For example, Oluwasola (2020) researched into use of digital marketing communication for private higher education. Also, Wild Fusion and Lagos Business School (2016) studied digital channels' effectiveness for marketing. However, the studies of the implications of adblocking/advert avoidance on digital marketing initiatives of organisations by researchers in developing countries like Nigeria have been less than expected. This study intends to fill that gap in literature. The motivation for choosing to conduct research in this aspect of digital marketing communication is that it is an area commanding growing concern among industry players, marketing professionals and academics alike, especially in relation to sustainable marketing communication.

This work, therefore, intends to validate empirically, the impact of advert avoidance on the digital promotions of Nigerian firms with a focus on the telecommunication sector. This will enable the researcher to establish why consumers block or avoid digital promotions.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The general objective of this research work is to evaluate the impact of advert blocking on the digital marketing strategies of corporate organisations in Nigeria.

Other specific objectives are to:

1. Investigate the advert blocking/avoidance method used by MTN, Globacom, Airtel and 9Mobile subscribers in South-West, Nigeria;
2. Examine the factors driving the adoption of advert-blocking by MTN, Globacom, Airtel and 9Mobile subscribers in South-West, Nigeria; and
3. Explore the strategies telecommunication organisations in Nigeria can employ to navigate advert blocking for marketing communication sustainability.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What advert blocking/avoidance method do MTN, Globacom, Airtel and 9Mobile subscribers in South-West, Nigeria use?
2. What are the factors driving the adoption of advert-blocking by MTN, Globacom, Airtel and 9Mobile subscribers in South-West, Nigeria?

3. What are the strategies telecommunication organisations in Nigeria can employ to navigate advert blocking for marketing communication sustainability?

MAPPING LITERATURE AND EXISTING STUDIES

Consumers Avoidance/Blocking Behavioral Dispositions to Digital Promotions

Marketing communication messages whether online or offline are meant to persuade consumers – by creating brand and product awareness and ultimately encouraging the purchase of such promoted products/services. Research has proven that consumers are, however, not always open to promotional messages as they often resist or avoid such messages. Clutter as stated earlier, can prompt undesired behaviours such as advert resistance, advert avoidance as well as attitudes contrary to those that the company's advertising campaign objectives hope to achieve. Zhao, Wang, Kalra, Vaks, Borcea & Chen (2017) citing Speck and Elliot (1997) said advert avoidances are 'all actions by media users that differentially reduce exposure to advert content. Although the use of adblocker is not so popular in Nigeria, in fact, statistics show that only 8% of Nigerians use adblocker while in the United States, 19%, United Kingdom, 18%, Ukraine 45%, India 15%, Croatia 55% and Poland 25%, use the adblocker to block adverts on their mobile and desktop devices (Page Fair (2022).

Today, almost everyone has an opinion about blocking/resisting or avoiding digital promotions whether as a layman or an experienced academic. Those against the blocking/avoidance of marketing communication messages online assert that commercial messages support organisations, content creators as well as publishers. This line of reasoning posits that avoiding/blocking commercial messages will prevent publishers and content creators from having financial gains since most revenues are received based on consumers' interaction with such messages (in the case of pay-per-impression). A marketer may be able to optimise digital advert spend, especially in a pay-per-click arrangement because those who block adverts would not click on the adverts.

On the other hand, those who support advert avoidance/ blocking (Manjoo (2015): Arment (2015) cited by Young (2016:16) maintain it reduces bandwidth consumption, increases internet user experience, eradicates accidental clicks as well as reduce reasonably the lack of privacy from the tracking and behavioral targeting in interactive marketing. More importantly, they reasoned that avoidance/blocking of commercial messages online will force publishers and advertisers to adapt to producing promotional messages that are less invasive of privacy and intrusive on user experience.

Besides, they argue that for consumers who are not interested in making purchases online, avoiding adverts can save time. This is because any promotional message that appears on a website consumes part of the user's attention budget since each advert enters the user's; field of view and as such may be consciously ignored (Cognitive avoidance) or dealt with in some other way. Shewan (2015) posits that while blocking or avoiding commercial messages has numerous benefits for consumers such as faster page load time and reduction in data usage, at the same time, he opines that avoiding adverts has a high negative effect on advertisers and websites owners who rely on promotional messages revenue to keep their sites running.

Past research – Dinana, 2022, Jagan et al., 2018, Jayanthi, 2021, Garimella et al., Rus-Arias et al., 2021 have established that consumers often develop negative attitudes towards marketing communication messages (whether online or offline) that they consider annoying, intrusive and irritating.), ultimately affecting advertisers' return on investment. For instance, Jayanthi et al. studied the major reasons behind the ad-blocking practice of online consumers in Navi Mumbai, using crosstab and one-way ANOVA while Rus-Arias et al 2021 explored the sociological variables that prompt consumers to use ad-blockers for digital promotional messages. Res et al. reiterate that Internet advertising can be very intrusive for many users adding that, all variables investigated, except marital status and education, influence users' opinions. In addition, Jagan et al (2018) in a study to understand the series of actions that lead to advert blocking, reported that advert avoidance and blocking are occasioned by irritation to intrusive digital advertising, which ultimately impacts brand image and valuation negatively.

Todri, 2020, Miroglio et al., 2018) reported that Ad-blockers significantly reduce online consumer spending by approximately \$14.2 billion annually, shifting purchases towards familiar brands and decreasing search activities across information channels, in contrast, Frik et al., 2021 in a lab experiment study on the impact of ad-blockers on product search and purchase behaviour established that users perceive advert blocking positively as it doesn't significantly affect search time or satisfaction with products, prices, or quality, indicating no compromise on consumer welfare for privacy and security benefits.

An earlier study by Malloy et al. (2016) on Adblockers: Global Impact and Prevalence used a mixture of Proportion Estimation to investigate the impact and prevalence of adblocking software, the authors report that even though a user may have an ad blocker installed, they are still exposed to a significant number of adverts. Malloy et al. study was, however, contrasted two years later in a study on the effect of advert blocking on website traffic and quality by Shiller et al., 2018). Shiller et al. reported that users perceive advert blocking as reducing website traffic by 0.67% per additional percentage of advert-blocking software users, leading to decreased content quality and revenue loss thereby posing a threat to ad-supported web. The authors concluded that ad blocking poses a threat to the advert-supported web because it reduces visits, and remaining visitors blocking adverts do not generate revenue. A more recent study by Todri (2021) tends to align with Shiller et al.'s study. The study which focuses on the impact of adblockers on online consumer behaviour empirically analysed a consumer-level panel data set and found that adblockers have a significant impact on search and purchase behaviour.

This proves that the concepts of advert avoidance, advert blocking and resistance have been widely studied by diverse authors in relation to different medium. For example, resistance/avoidance behaviour towards television advertising has been called numerous names such as: zapping, flipping, zipping, flicking and so on. While in print medium, Rafian (2015) citing Dahleh and Edenius (2007) affirms that consumers simply avoid promotional messages by flipping past them. Speck and Elliot have been adjudged as leading authors in advert avoidance literature. Although they helped to lay a good foundation for the concept of avoidance, however, their study focuses on television, radio and print.

The different methods consumers adopt to avoid adverts reported by early researchers include avoiding television adverts by switching channels flipping through print adverts registering in Do-not-call lists to avoid telemarketing adverts and ignoring marketing emails. Rafian, (2015). Principally, past studies on avoidance/resistance disposition of consumers to promotional messages have identified different types of consumer dispositions which include physical avoidance, behavioural avoidance, affective avoidance, mechanical avoidance and cognitive avoidance (Speck and Elliot (1997) in Marieke (2015), Cho and Cheon (2004) and Seyedghorban et al. (2016) cited by Zhao et al. (2017).

Cognitive avoidance is the psychological defence mechanism that results in users intentionally ignoring promotional messages they are exposed to Prendergast, Tsang and Cheng (2014) cited by Li and Huang (2016: 948). In this case, consumers may engage in selective exposure and selective attention (the tendency to avoid or devote less attention to persuasive communications that are likely to contain messages that contradict existing beliefs and opinions (Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani and Smit (2015).

According to Cognitive psychology researchers, when people are interrupted from an online task, they react negatively to the need to expend mental effort to process additional information. The interruption also interferes with the consumers' attention thereby limiting the amount of information that is received and understood (McCooy et al. (2001), Johnson (2013). Consequently, a variety of techniques exist that allows consumers to avoid/resist marketing communication promotional messages from the time-tested ignoring of adverts or changing channels during television commercials to recent technological innovations such as installation of advert blockers, manually blocking online adverts, skipping video adverts, filtering emails or subscribing to do not mail or do not track options.

Mechanical avoidance includes zapping, zipping or muting the television or radio when a commercial message is on. (Fransen et al., 2015). In relation to online media, advert blocker software usage belongs to the mechanical avoidance typology, Seyedghorban et al. (2015) cited by Zhao et al. (2017). Mechanical avoidance typology seems to be more empowered with technology. Advances in technology have consistently led to more sophisticated mechanical avoidance; just as remote control paved the way for resisting television adverts, so have spam filters emails and banner and pop-up adverts have paved the way for advert blockers.

In addition, physical avoidance entails a variety of strategies aimed at not seeing or hearing the advert: These include: leaving the room or skipping the advertising section in a newspaper or magazine and all modern methods of blocking online adverts such as filtering emails, do not track, call or email programmes (Johnson 2013 in Fransen et al. (2015) while behavioural avoidance is consumers' avoidance/resistance actions to promotional messages other than lack of attention to the messages; Cho and Cheon (2004) such as scrolling over advert without paying attention, closing or intercepting online adverts.

The researcher is of the opinion that mechanical, behavioural and physical avoidance pinpointed by Fransen, Seyedghorban, Cho and Cheon and Johnson are basically expressing the same kind of avoidance but with different nomenclature. Much of the emphasis of this current research work is on mechanical/behavioural/physical avoidance. Affective avoidance on the other hand is

outright hatred for digital commercial messages which may in turn lead to a negative disposition towards the brands being promoted.

From the foregoing, one can infer that frustration of the internet user experience is one top reason that encapsulates all other reasons for consumer's avoidance/resistance behavioural disposition of customers to digital marketing communication promotional messages. Therefore, an intrusive message is a minus to an organisation's marketing goals, since the consumer may not decode the message correctly (Smith, 2011:5). Invariably, advert avoidance/blocking constitutes a challenge that is costing companies billions on their returns on investment.



From the various findings by earlier researchers, we summarised their findings with the figure above.

Source: Author, 2024

Typical with most earlier studies on advert blocking, most documented evidences are based on the installation of advert blocking software; allowances have not been adequately made to investigate manual blocking/avoidance of adverts by users. To this end, this research work intends to assess through mixed research methods, the impact of avoidance behavioural disposition of consumers to the digital marketing strategies of selected telecommunication companies in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

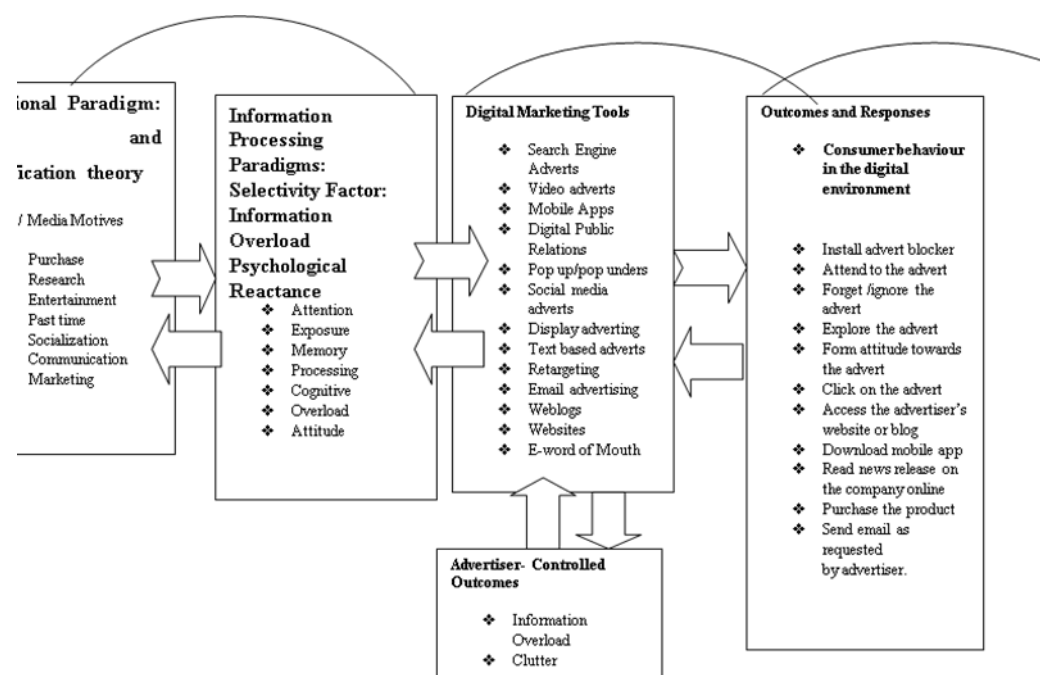


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for Advert Avoidance/Blocking Towards Digital Marketing Communication.

Driven by the functional and information processing paradigm such as Uses and Gratification and Selectivity Factor theories, consumer behaviour in the digital age has also changed due to access to digital technology and exposure to a plethora of commercial messages from different organisations. This in turn influences consumers' disposition and reactions to such messages thus, making consumers either accept the marketing communication messages by attending to such messages (through purchase or taking specified desired actions) or to resist/avoid/block such messages altogether. All these interactions are of course shaped by the prevailing environmental issues for both the consumers and the companies involved.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-method approach, incorporating qualitative analysis of service providers and consumer perceptions as well as quantitative data on advert-blocking trends through an online survey from a sample size of 161 internet users and an interview of two industry experts in South West, Nigeria. Data from the online survey which was served to respondents in English language on WhatsApp was gathered through google form between January and April, 2024.

Multistage sampling procedure was used to draw the sample for the survey. In the first stage, the entire population was stratified into two, internet users and non-internet users. In the second stage, purposively, active adult users of the internet irrespective of their digital nativity (whether digital natives or digital migrants) were included in the sample that filled the online questionnaire. The researcher purposively used WhatsApp as the platform to disburse the online questionnaire to people because WhatsApp is used by almost all active internet users who can both read and write. Again, the platform is enabled by both the internet and a registered telecommunication line. This implies that nobody uses Whatsapp without being a

registered subscriber of at least, one of the telecommunication network providers. Two representatives of telecom service providers were also interviewed. Pre-established themes with narrative interpretation were developed from respondents in order to extract the linked thematic elements connected to blocking advertisements in the digital age. In order to address the study objectives, descriptive statistics; simple frequency counts and percentages were used to statistically evaluate the data and draw relevant conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The study empirically establishes why Nigerians in the digital age avoid/block adverts. The demographic distribution of the respondents, the index of people who avoid or block adverts in Nigeria as well as suggested strategies to ensure sustainability of marketing communication efforts of Nigeria firms. The data gathered is presented below.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Information

Variable	Option	Percentage
Sex	Female	57.1
	Male	42.9
Age	18-29	68.3
	29-39	21.1
	40 and above	10.6
State	Lagos	26.4
	Ondo	12.1
	Oyo	12.2
	Ogun	8.0
	Osun	9.1
Education Level	Ekiti	32.2
	O'Level	47.2
	First Degree	34.2
	Others	18.6
Sampled Population		161

Source, Field Survey,2024

Demographics

Data represents diversity in the demographic constitution of respondents. In terms of sex, 57.1 % of females and 42.9% of males participated in the study. Youths and young adults (89.4%) dominated the surveyed respondents. Although respondents are all from the South West, the participants represent a varied population: 26.4% of them said Lagos was their permanent home, followed by 32.2% from Ekiti State, 12.2% from Oyo State, 12.1% from Ondo State, 8.1% from Ogun State, and 9.1% from Osun State. Demonstrating a noteworthy distribution of attendees from all six (6) South Western states in the nation.

Table 2: Advert Blocking/Avoidance Status and Method of Respondents

Variable	Options	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision Rule	Remark
Advert Blocking/Avoidance Status	People Who Block /Avoid Adverts	129	80.1	0.80	0.39	≥ 0.5	Significant Majority
	People Who Do Not Block /Avoid Adverts	32	19.9	0.19	0.39	< 0.5	Significant Minority
Advert Blocking/Avoidance Method	Avoid/Block adverts manually	111	86.0	0.80	0.35	≥ 0.5	Significant Majority
	Install Advert Blocker	18	14.0	0.18	0.35	< 0.5	Significant Minority

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Surveyed participants are subscribers of MTN Telecommunications, Global Communication Nigeria, Airtel and 9 Mobile. Data presented in the table above reveal that most of the surveyed participants 129 (80.1%) disclosed they avoid adverts while 19.9% said they do not avoid /block advertisements. Out of the 129 that avoided or blocked adverts, (86%) did it mechanically/manually (closing, skipping) while only 14 % installed adblocking software. This could indicate that some people are generally not satisfied with internet adverts. The significant proportion of manual advert blockers suggests that internet adverts are actively managed. Besides, certain advertising may be so annoying or irrelevant to users that they need to be manually removed. The very low rate of ad-blocking software usage (14%) suggests a market for raising awareness and uptake of these technologies. This low number may point to perceived complexity, a lack of knowledge about these solutions, or a preference for managing advertisements on a case-by-case basis.

Table 3: Rationale for Blocking /Avoiding Advertisements

Variable	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision Rule	Remark
Intrusiveness/Obstruction of internet experience	43%	0.4	0.49	≥ 0.3	Significant
Too many adverts	12%	0.1	0.10	< 0.3	Moderately Significant
Data concerns	32%	0.3	0.46	≥ 0.3	Significant
Deceptive advertising / brand skepticism	11%	0.1	0.31	< 0.3	
Mismatch between adverts served and users' interests	2%	0.02	0.14	< 0.3	Insignificant

Source: Field Survey,2024

The findings reveal that the top two concerns among users are "Intrusiveness/Obstruction of internet experience" (43%) and "Data concerns" (32%). This suggests that users are primarily worried about advertisements interfering with their online experience and about their personal data being used without their permission. Response variation is moderate, as indicated by the standard deviations of 0.49 and 0.46, respectively. Significant worry is indicated by the mean values of 0.4 and 0.3 for these two categories, respectively, which are higher than the threshold of 0.3. In contrast, the concerns about "Too many adverts" (12%), "Deceptive advertising/brand scepticism" (11%), and "Mismatch between adverts served and users' interests" (2%) are less significant, with mean values below the threshold of 0.3. The results indicate that consumers are most worried about how advertisements may affect their online experience and personal information. Advertisers and online service providers should prioritise correcting these issues in order to improve the customer experience.

NAVIGATING ADVERT BLOCKING FOR MARKETING COMMUNICATION SUSTAINABILITY

This was an open-ended question that led to some interesting discoveries. For instance, advert blocking/avoidance seems to be linked to a decline in online sales as well as a bad perception of businesses. Conversely, using advert-blocking software seems to be associated with increased time spent on websites. Respondents were asked to recommend permissible strategies and digital marketing communication tools

that consumers find less nauseating. Common themes that emerged were quite eye-opening. The themes were grouped into subcategories. Specifically, respondents recommended interactive Short Messages (SMS), MMS, email marketing, influencers, proper targeting to avoid mismatch, websites, native advertising and reduced pop-up adverts on social media. Besides, industry experts added collaborative efforts and requisite regulation.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The digital advertising ecosystem is seriously threatened by advert blocking/avoidance, which has an impact on sustainable marketing communication. Studies reveal that advert blockers lessen the amount of advertising, which lowers the quality of the material and ultimately harms consumers. Findings from research objective one established that respondents avoid/block advertisements online. The results show that a significant portion of respondents (80.1%) block or avoid adverts, while a smaller percentage (19.9%) do not. This suggests that there is a considerable need for advert-free experiences and that most users deliberately try to stay away from adverts. The mean value of 0.80 and the standard deviation of 0.39 indicate a high level of agreement among respondents, with most of them falling into the "block/avoid adverts" category. Research objective two yielded the following findings: 86.0 percent of respondents blocked or avoided adverts manually, whereas 14.0 percent used advert blocker software. The mean score of 0.86 and standard deviation of 0.35, which indicate a strong preference for, show that users are actively avoiding adverts, which points to a high preference for manual blocking and avoidance techniques.

Factor analysis was done for research objective three on why consumers block adverts and the finding was quite revealing. This involves identifying common patterns in responses and grouping them into different factors. The majority of respondents (80.1%) block/avoid adverts, indicating a significant preference for advert-free browsing experiences. The factors advanced are privacy concerns, clutter or too many adverts, inconsistency between the adverts that users see and their interests, data/internet speed concerns and scepticism towards brands. Research has indicated time and time again that people's key motivation to avoid or use ad-blocking software is the presence of obtrusive or bothersome advertisements. In line with earlier studies (Cho & As-, 2004; Frik et al., 2021; Respati & Irwansyah, 2020), our results show that 43% of respondents cite intrusive or annoying advertisements as the main reason for avoiding adverts or using advert-blocking software. This emphasises the importance of redefining advert experiences to mitigate advert-blocking. In addition, the study's finding that 32% of respondents express concerns about privacy and data security as their main motivation for avoiding/blocking adverts corroborates Respati & Irwansyah, 2020 and emphasises the need for advertisers to address these concerns through transparent data practices and privacy-friendly advert formats. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the majority of our respondents were younger, with an average age of 18-39, indicating a considerable likelihood of using or avoiding ad-blocking software. This underscores the significance of targeting younger groups with non-intrusive ad experiences and is in line with previous research (Çelik et al., 2023; Rus-Arias et al., 2021, Abramek, Sołtysik-Piorunkiewicz and Strzelecki, 2019). In addition, empirical studies have consistently shown a rising trend in consumers

blocking /avoiding adverts via the adoption of advert-blocking software and manually ignoring or skipping adverts globally. As earlier stated, research by PageFair found that 820 Million global devices adopted ad-blockers in 2021 alone, indicating a significant and increasing trend. In fact, our study also found that consumers blocking/avoiding adverts are more likely to avoid websites with intrusive advertising, but they also tend to be more engaged with online content and spend more time on promotional messages that offer non-intrusive advertising experiences. The results of this study are consistent with the growing worldwide trend of individuals blocking advertisements, indicating that Nigeria is not an isolated case. In addition, one of the surveyed participants said: “Many people find adverts to be annoying and disruptive, especially when they are trying to focus on something else. Some people feel that adverts are intrusive and an invasion of their privacy. Some people are concerned about the security risks associated with adverts, as they can be used to distribute malware or phishing scams”. This contradicts experts’ opinion, who blamed improper targeting, unprofessional digital marketing communication service providers and misuse/non-usage of clapping as reasons why people block or avoid adverts altogether.

In addition, many themes were generated from the qualitative data gathered from surveyed respondents through the instrumentality of the open-ended question raised on marketing communication strategies that consumers can be comfortable with to avoid avoiding or blocking adverts. One theme that emerged conspicuous is that the Nigerian survey emphasised the importance of enhancing the user experience as a strategy for organisations to navigate advert blocking and sustain marketing communication. They highlighted the need for non-intrusive and relevant advertising that adds value to their online experience. One participant noted, "I appreciate when adverts are seamlessly integrated into the content, I'm viewing rather than disrupting my browsing experience." This finding resonates with research by (Abramek, Soltysik-Piorunkiewicz and Strzelecki, 2019) which emphasises the negative impact of intrusive advertising on user satisfaction and engagement. Their study suggests that prioritizing user experience leads to higher acceptance of online ads and can mitigate the effects of advert blocking.

Another interesting theme that emerged was the need to seek the consent or permission of users before serving them adverts. Respondents reiterated the need to grant permission before being exposed to promotional messages. To them, granting approval will militate avoiding blocking adverts on grounds of irrelevancy. For instance, one of the respondents proposed that: “They should signal before advertising their products or services”. Another respondent said: “Network service providers can always ask if the digital device user would love to view those adverts instead of just popping them up”. This result is consistent with studies by Wang and Tang (2018) and Brown, A., Jones, P., & Reffel, F. (2020), which advocated that open and honest communication increases credibility and trust among customers. According to their research, companies that place a high value on permission and openness are more likely to build strong bonds with their audience, which improves the durability of marketing communications.

Furthermore, in order to successfully reach consumers, respondents recommended that firms vary their marketing communication channels beyond conventional Internet advertising platforms. More specifically, respondents emphasised the value of investigating alternate channels including influencers, email

marketing, less pop-up advertisements on social media, interactive brief messaging, and interesting content on websites. "I'm more likely to notice brands that engage with me through multiple offline channels rather than bombarding me with adverts online," noted one participant. This finding is consistent with research by Abramek, Sołtysik-Piorunkiewicz and Strzelecki, 2019 which explores users' responses to advert blocking by diversifying marketing channels. According to their research, companies may continue to be visible and engage users even in the face of ad blocking by making investments in alternative channels. Besides, Pagefair 2022 reports that 82% of installed Adblock users globally prefer a lighter advert experience by default over receiving prompts to disable their adblocker or whitelist a site. Just as our findings reveal that respondents prefer reduced exposure to online advertisements stressing that they will prefer interactive Short Messages (SMS) instead and reduced pop-up adverts that will not impede their online journey.

Furthermore, collaboration among industry stakeholders emerged as a key strategy to address the widespread issue of advert avoidance/ blocking. One of the industry experts reiterated that: "There is need for collaboration and requisite regulation of practitioners involved in digital marketing communication campaign to sanitise the industry from quacks. This is a bid to ensure best practice and sustainability of the organisations in Nigeria"

While we acknowledge that the sampled respondents may not capture the behavioural dispositions of the entire population of Nigeria, the above findings offer valuable insights into the multifaceted strategies organisations employ to navigate ad blocking for marketing communication sustainability. These insights offer a thorough grasp of the changing digital advertising scene by correlating with the results of empirical research. They also emphasise the significance of flexible, user-centred, and cooperative methods in tackling modern marketing communication issues.

One fact that this study establishes is that most surveyed respondents physically and mechanically avoid adverts thus aligning with Fransen et al. (2015) and Zhao et al. (2017) that users avoid marketing communication messages cognitively, physically and mechanically. This empirically validates the fact that the installation of advert-blocking software is not so popular among Nigeria users and thus resonates with Pagefair 2022 adblock report that puts the percentage of Nigerians using adblocker software at 8% unlike the United States – 19%, United Kingdom – 18%, Ukraine – 45%, India – 15%, Croatia – 55% and Poland – 25%. These results imply that online service providers and advertisers should reconsider their advertising strategies in order to better suit user preferences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND THEORY

The findings of this study point to four major issues that underline the crucial question of why people block adverts and perhaps install ad-blocking software. These include data/security concerns, advert clutter, intrusiveness, and inconsistency between the adverts that users see and their interests. These results provide insights into the factors driving the adoption of advert-blocking by consumers in Nigeria and inform strategies for advertising agencies, organisations and policymakers to address consumer concerns and preferences regarding marketing communication in the digital age. Stakeholders may effectively adjust their plans by using data gathered to better understand how consumer behaviour is influenced by blocking or avoiding

advertisements. For example, to lessen the detrimental effects of ad blocking on consumers' perceptions of businesses, they could need to concentrate on alternate advertising channels or enhance the calibre and applicability of marketing communication messages on the internet.

CONCLUSION

Advert blocking/avoidance presents some obstacles to businesses' sustainable marketing communication efforts, particularly in the changing digital marketing communication environment. Some major themes that provide useful insights into practical tactics for overcoming advert blocking and advancing sustainable marketing communication in the digital age have arisen from the study. For example, enhancing user experience emerged as a paramount strategy, with consumers expressing a strong preference for non-intrusive and relevant advertising that adds value to their online interactions. To establish trust and credibility with customers, transparency and permission were emphasised, highlighting the significance of unambiguous communication and user control over ad settings. Furthermore, the importance of value-driven content and the expansion of marketing channels beyond conventional platforms highlighted the necessity for businesses to innovate and adapt in order to effectively reach audiences.

RECOMMENDATION

The results of objective one demonstrate the widespread use of invasive marketing communication strategies as well as the rising concerns about installing ad-blocking software and avoiding advertisements. According to the findings, the main concerns of consumers are related to the impact of ads on their online experience and personal data. In order to better accommodate consumer preferences, it is advised that internet service providers reevaluate their advertising strategies. The results of the study suggest that to engage audiences and get around obstacles to advert avoidance or blocking, organisations should implement alternative sustainable brand communication strategies. These include below-the-line channels, native advertising, fewer pop-up ads on digital devices, branded content, email marketing, and influencer marketing.

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