

Deceptive online advertising: An exploratory study of TikTok advertisements in Nigeria

Abstract

The study investigated the deceptiveness of online advertisements on TikTok in Nigeria, their socio-economic impact on university students in Bayelsa State, and adherence to ethical standards. The study was grounded in the Nudge Theory, supported by Persuasion Knowledge Model, and adopted quantitative and qualitative methods. The study population comprised students of Federal University Otuoke (Federal government-owned), Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island (state government-owned), and Hensard University (privately-owned). The findings revealed that most TikTok advertisements in Nigeria are deceptive, and have a socio-economic impact on university students in Bayelsa State. Advertisers of food, medicine, cosmetics, and skin care products on TikTok often fail to adhere to advertising ethical standards. It was concluded that social media advertising in Nigeria, especially on TikTok, enables dishonest commercials that mislead consumers into purchasing undesirable goods and services. It was recommended that regulatory bodies such as the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON), National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) closely monitor social media advertising to prevent deceptive practices.

Keywords: advertising, deception, socio-economic impact, TikTok, populace, unethical practice

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Introduction

The social media world is becoming a place that no longer offers users only communication and entertainment, and a main player in the advertising industry, but has also become a place where there are an increasing number of malicious scams, which can cause great financial and emotional damage to users. As Baltezarevic¹ noted, there is a lot of pressure on people to live up to the imposed social norms and expectations, which primarily concerns beauty, clothing. That is, products that simply must be had, so that the individual does not feel excluded from the group. Aware of such conformist tendencies of a large number of people, companies often resort to deceptive (misleading) advertising messages to reach naive consumers.^{2,3} These messages often make untrue claims about the quality or usefulness of products and services. Online applications like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok, which are widely available today, are also used to enhance the images and videos of supermodels promoting brands in such advertisements.

Increasingly, social media influencers are being hired to launch this kind of misleading content.⁴ They recommend products to their followers that companies have paid them to promote, which they probably wouldn't use themselves.¹ Influencers on TikTok are perceived by consumers as creators of public opinion and credible sources of information that can be trusted.^{3,5} However, when they come into possession of a product advertised with such deceptive advertising, consumers realize that they have been deceived, which results in their disappointment, anger and financial loss. Hyman, Franklyn, Yang and Rahmati⁴ found that on average, 29% of respondents believed paid marketing content from six different influencers were not paid ads and 8% were unsure, with significant variation by influencer. The labelling used by influencers to identify influencer marketing content is not consistent – let alone clear and conspicuous. With evidence of two-way blurring; on average, 29% of respondents thought unpaid influencer content on Instagram and

TikTok were paid ads, and 9% were unsure, with significant variation by influencer. Neubaum⁶ (2020) noted that while there is plenty of opportunity for advertising on the TikTok, multiple ethical dilemmas arise for advertisers. Therefore, it is important to investigate the deceptive adverts on TikTok.

Recently, in many countries, this kind of deceptive advertising has become increasingly common, both in the real world and in the online environment, which is why companies are increasingly being sanctioned for such misleading activities.¹ In the race for higher profits and better sales, companies are not aware that by such action they can cause great damage to themselves, which is primarily reflected in the loss of good reputation and trust of consumers. These new forms of advertising found in mobile and interactive media and smart technologies, often powered by personal data, are more difficult to identify.⁷ According to TikTok, the app's algorithm is very user-specific, and curates each user's feed with a recommendation system.⁸ The personalised "for you" page recommends content specifically tailored to the user's interests and past activity on the app. This can become confusing for young users due to the four types of advertisements available on TikTok: in-feed ads, brand takeovers, branded hashtags, and branded effects. In-feed ads appear in between regular videos, making them difficult to distinguish from native content, while brand takeovers appear when users first open the app. Hashtag challenges allow users to create their own content to go along with the campaign, and the branded lenses allow users to try different effects and filters. The personalised content, powered by the collection of personal data, along with the interactive and in-feed ads, makes it easy for advertisers to persuade children and teenagers on the app.

This ethical quandary has already been seen on TikTok. TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, has received backlash for allowing fake advertising on the app for products such as low-interest loans and "miracle drugs".⁹ Other products advertised on TikTok, like freemium games that charge additional fees, "entice young users to open their wallets".⁹ Aside from false advertisements, many legitimate

advertisers have joined the app solely to appeal to the young audience. Luxury brands, in particular, have eagerly joined TikTok due to the growth of Gen Z users in the past year.¹⁰

TikTok has opened the world to a whole new type of entertainment because before now everything was controlled by gatekeepers of entertainment industry. Echezona¹¹ claims that in the Nigerian entertainment industry today, TikTok users are smoothly integrating with entertainment lovers to display their content on third party apps. What truly sets TikTok apart is the high level of engagement and attention. TikTok is an immersive, full-screen, and sound-on experience, where people give their undivided attention. Not only do they spend more time watching TikTok every day, but they are also more engaged on TikTok than any other platform.

Tobi and Amusun¹² observe that 46% of TikTok users engage with content on TikTok without distractions or multiscreening by so doing brands stay focused and drive impact because today business owners are rushing to some famous Tiktokers based amount of followers and popular they have become. Nigerians are increasingly turning to computers and mobile devices for their online shopping, but even with this growth in popularity, consumers remain concerned about product or idea quality, payment security, validity of data protection, false claims, and inadequate information disclosure.^{3,5} Nowadays, TikTok social media app have become an avenue for content creators in the country to engage in creating harmful and deceitful contents as bait just to attract monetization. Dancers, singers, comedians, spoken word artists and content creators who usually wait for one 'big man' in the entertainment industry to look their way is now a thing of the past because through TikTok and reel social media platforms the world can see them and immediately recognize what they do.¹³ Anyone who makes constant use of TikTok particularly those who have a TikTok account are easily referred as "Tiktokers." Some have used the TikTok app to get noticed by casting agents. Professional dance companies like the American Ballet Theatre have turned to TikTok as a branding and recruitment tool of getting new talents all over the world.

The speed at which ideas can be displayed on TikTok is a common drawback of advertising. This speed raises the possibility of deceptive or misleading practices, in which advertisers manipulate a product's features or a promotional strategy to gain significant profits at the expense of the financial stability of their target audience.¹⁴ TikTok advertisers can also sway consumers by making them more prone to making irrational choices. Svetlana¹⁵ states that false advertising usually highlights the product, price, and promotion; as such it is important to investigate the deceptive trends of TikTok advertising in Nigeria. Many young people purchase products advertised on social media, but they may not get the full value they expect. Some users have reported skin damage or injury from products advertised on social media platforms, especially on TikTok. TikTok distinctive feature allows users to create and share short, uncensored videos, promoting themselves and their goods without going through regulatory censorship.

TikTok advertisements in Nigeria often pose problems due to their unethical nature as such this study investigates the deceptive nature of such adverts. Many advertised products make false claims, and they invariably have negative impacts on the socio-economic wellbeing of Nigerians.

Basic advertising requirements, as indicated on ARCON's website, as noted by Dunu et al.,¹⁶ include: All advertisements shall be legal, decent, honest, truthful, respectful and mindful of Nigeria's culture. They should be prepared with a high sense of social responsibility and should avoid misinformation. All advertisements should conform to

the principles of fair competition generally accepted in business, and of fair comments expected in free human communication. The aim is to enhance public confidence in advertising and should always be in the interest of the consumer and wider society. However, many products advertised on social media in Nigeria are unlicensed or unauthorised by regulatory agencies such as the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) and the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). NAFDAC has the responsibility to regulate and control the manufacture, importation, exportation, advertisement, distribution, sale, and use of food, drugs, cosmetics, and medical devices.

As social media trends and platforms change, so do the opportunities for online advertisers. TikTok is a rapidly growing social media app that is used by youths around the world. While there is plenty of opportunity for advertising on the app, multiple ethical dilemmas arise for advertisers on TikTok. This study aimed to investigate three key aspects: 1. The prevalence of online advertisements on TikTok in Nigeria are deceptive; find out if online advertising via TikTok in Nigeria are deceptive, 2. The socio-economic impact of such advertising on university students in Bayelsa State, and 3. The adherence of TikTok advertising to ethical standards, with a focus on the implications for the Nigerian social media space, and on the populace.

Theoretical fortification

The paper was anchored on the Nudge theory, and supported with Persuasion Knowledge Model to discuss how advertisers convince customers to buy things, in which nudging is about influencing customers without their knowing.

Nudge theory

Introduced by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in their 2008 book "Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness." This theory, rooted in behavioural economics and behavioural sciences, emphasises how decisions and individual and group behaviour are affected.¹⁷ It is a subtle strategy of motivating people that is founded on a sophisticated understanding of the decision-making process. This approach is applied in business and politics equally. The Nudge Theory is a valuable tool in sociology, politics, economics, and business. Digital marketers must consider the prejudices, feelings, and social interactions that shape consumer behaviour. Mac-Ozigho et al.,¹⁷ Richard Thaler,¹⁸ marketers often overwhelm consumers with information, neglecting the issue of information overload. A more effective approach is to simplify information to encourage informed decision-making. Advertisers employ social pressure bias in their marketing strategies by including phrases like "most people prefer" on their products, recognising the significant influence that social media has on consumers.¹⁷ Thus, Nudge theory provide explanations to prevalence of deceptive online advertisements on TikTok and the socio-economic impact of such advertising. The Nudge theory suggests that People can be nudged out of their biases, but also into new ones. It may be utilised for both telling the truth and lying, particularly in TikTok advertising. This theory is relevant to this study as it emphasises how social media platforms like TikTok can be used to distribute unregulated advertisements, potentially through deceptive tactics.

Persuasion knowledge model

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), first introduced in 1994, is focused on a user's knowledge of persuasion motives and tactics to interpret, evaluate, and respond to influence attempts from marketers

and others.¹⁹ Further, the Persuasion Knowledge Model has impacted the way researchers assess advertisements by allowing them to look closer at the motives behind the model.¹⁹ Resourceful participants with high persuasion knowledge have the ability to select response tactics from their repertoire, similar to the way agents select persuasion tactics.¹⁹ Persuasion is both complex and impersonal. Persuasive messages engage the audience quickly and are developed for a wide variety of audiences.²⁰ While the actual delivery of advertisements has changed and shifted towards social media, the principles of effective persuasion have not. The subject of persuasion knowledge through advertising techniques has been an ongoing concern for researchers, especially within the past few decades.²⁰

In a study assessing persuasion knowledge and attitudes toward advertisements, individuals with higher persuasion knowledge exhibit less positive attitudes towards advertising which can subsequently prevent them from engaging with an advertisement.²⁰ Moreover, high scores of skepticism and persuasion knowledge towards advertising among consumers concluded a need for advertisers to modify their practices in order to gain more advertisement views from consumers.²⁰ As stated previously, text variance is just one of the many ways advertisers can modify advertisements to draw attention. There have been studies of advertising analysis within other forms of media that were conducted to see the influence of the Persuasion Knowledge Model on online advertisements.²¹ Various studies have been undertaken in the field of persuasion knowledge primarily dealing with Facebook or other media sources such as newspapers, television, and radios. Previous research implies that the higher the participant's persuasion knowledge, the greater probability that they will choose an advertisement with less influential text.²² Thus, the higher the deceptive TikTok advertising the more it is having influence on the participants. It is equally expected to see the socio-economic impact of such advertising on the users.

Activities of TikTok

TikTok, a popular, but contentious social media platform, has revolutionised how Gen Z consumes content.²³ Initially launched as Musical.ly in 2014 by Alex Zhou and Louis Yang,²⁴ the app gained massive popularity after merging with the Chinese app Douyin. In 2017, Byte Dance, Douyin's parent company, acquired Musical.ly for approximately US \$1 billion.²⁵ After announcing its closure, a year later, Musical.ly was eventually replaced by the well-known TikTok.²⁴ As a result, all Musical.ly accounts were moved, and the idea of a community where anybody could participate in creating content was born.

TikTok's early success was marred by scandals including accusations of data mining by India and the United States. The Chinese corporation controlling the app was alleged to have collected user data without consent. For instance, a California student, Misty Hong, stated that she had previously downloaded the App, and used it for a short while, but she had never made her own personal account.²⁶ After several months, Misty found that her phone number was used as the password when the software created an account on its own. Hamilton²⁶ said that TikTok was also charged with stealing unfinished films and sending personal information to servers in China. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama recently announced plans to ban TikTok, for at least a year, starting January 2025.

This decision follows the death of a schoolboy in November 2024 which further fuelled fears about the influence of the short video-sharing platform on children. Ovuakporie²⁷ reports that discussions around the negative impact of social media on children were further amplified a couple of weeks ago after a 14-year-old school was killed,

and another injured in a fight near a school in southern Tirana, with reports suggesting the confrontation began on social media. Rama is quoted to have said that "In China, TikTok promotes how students can take courses, how to protect nature, how to keep traditions, but on the TikTok outside China, we see only scum and mud. Why do we need this?"²⁷

Romanian-born Professor of Digital Diplomacy at the University of Oxford, Corneliu Bjola, an expert in the methods used to counter digital propaganda, explains how manipulation methods thrive on social media during elections. He shared his view on the 2024 Romania's presidential election, where TikTok allegedly played a major role in boosting Calin Georgescu, a relatively unknown far-right, pro-Russia candidate, in the initial round 1.²⁸ Also, Australia has passed the world's strictest laws, banning children under 16 from using social media platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram and X. According to Ritchie²⁹ of BBC News, Sydney, the ban, which will not take effect for at least 12 months, could see tech companies that don't comply face fines of up to A\$50m (\$32.5m; £25.7m). The Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, says the legislation is needed to protect young people from the "harms" of social media.

Social media and deception

All new media technologies that allow for the interactive sharing of text, images, videos, and other content on websites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp are collectively referred to as social media.^{30,31} These platforms facilitate local and international communication, with Facebook and TikTok being particularly due to their information-sharing capabilities.³² According to Boyd and Ellison,³³ millions of people use social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Orkut, LinkedIn, and Twitter (X), integrating these sites into their daily lives. One key benefit of these sites is that they connect people with shared interests, political views, or experiences. According to Amri et al.,³⁴ social media have surpassed as a more popular news source for young people globally. This shift has led to the spread of misinformation and fake news online, which is easier to create and distribute than traditional media.^{35,36} Likewise, a study on Twitter the dissemination of online news on Twitter found that 70% of struggled to distinguish between real and fake news, with false information spreading six times faster than truthful content.^{37,38}

Research has shown that false information spreads much more quickly, deeply, and widely than the truth. The effects are more noticeable when it comes to false information about politics and entertainment than they are when it comes to false information about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information.^{37,39} For example, over a million tweets containing fake news were projected by the end of 2016 US presidential election.³⁴ In 2017, a Germany government spokesman affirmed: "We are dealing with a phenomenon of a dimension that we have not seen before," referring to an unprecedented spread of fake news on social networks.³⁴

Social media influencers are a subset of digital content providers who can spread false information. They are people with a substantial number of online followers, an established brand, and a history of successful commercial collaborations.⁴⁰ Influencer marketing promotes goods or services through social media users with a strong reputation and rapport with their audience. Remarkably, social media influencers are relatable people who can sway their followers' purchasing decisions by regularly sharing their thoughts and impressions on products or services. They often gain attention for their expertise in fitness, healthy diet, and beauty, and some followers are drawn to their content, regardless of its accuracy, and aspire to

emulate their way of life. TikTok's user-driven video content creation feature has fuelled its popularity, yet also sparked debate among publishers, advertisers, and journalists regarding the platform's ethics and safety.³² Critics argue that TikTok has failed to address issues like racism, cultural appropriation, and racial biases, with some Videos appearing exploitative and inappropriate. This has some people to think TikTok is an enemy of traditional media, citing its lack of ethical business practices.

TikTok's large user base has raised concerns about misinformation and election meddling. The apps' handling of content during the June 2019 Hong Kong protests, where all related content was deleted, emphasised censorship issues.⁴¹ Under China's National Intelligence Law, all Chinese businesses including TikTok, are required to collaborate with the government. This has sparked concerns about the social networking platform's role in disseminating false information, which is easily disseminated on TikTok. TikTok has become a popular platform for celebrities and young people to share lifestyle videos that may, or may not, be true.

Online advertising

The Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) now called the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) defines advertising as a type of media communication about goods, services, or concepts that is funded by a named sponsor.⁴² However, online advertising requires a new paradigm, considering the medium's nuances, functions, and capacities.⁴³ According to the current definition, advertising is compensated, but modern forms, such as social media advertising, consumer-generated media (CGM), and viral brand messages, can be unpaid or indirectly funded, providing valuable alternatives.⁴⁴ According to Kisyova et al.,⁴³ advertising has historically been thought of as a one-way communication channel, sending messages from advertisers to their target audience via media. However, with the rise of Web 2.0, social media, and interactive advertising apps, the dynamics has changed. Social media can now facilitate two-way (or multi-way) communication between brands and customers, shifting online advertising from passive consumption to interactive dialogues, and shared control.⁴⁴ This has given rise to powerful tools like word-of-mouth, and viral advertising, which can leverage sponsored advertising efforts.⁴⁵

Online advertising is superior to traditional advertising in analysing consumer reactions and behaviour. Unlike expensive billboards, TV, radio, magazines, and print media, digital platforms offer quantifiable consumer responses. Businesses use digital marketing tools, such as blogging, email marketing, search engine optimisation, and video production to communicate value to customers. The distinction between digital and conventional advertising lies in the tools used, rather than the approach. As consumers increasingly shift toward digital content, the term "digital marketing" will eventually become redundant, and will simply be called marketing. Video marketing is a subset of digital marketing that includes content generation using techniques like blogging, streaming, and vlogging. Vlogs, especially, enable people to build their brand by providing an audience with a personalised experience. Advertisers are fervently incorporating social media into their advertising campaigns to boost digital engagement. For instance, Adidas has shifted its marketing focus to digital and social media platforms, saying, "Digital engagement is key to us".⁴⁶

The rise of new media has liberalised the advertising landscape, with social networking sites like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, enabling millions of people to create online communities and connect with others who share common interests and activities, share information, and engage with one another

using a range of web-based tools.^{43,47} Social media advertising is a relatively new element of firms' integrated marketing communication (IMC) programmes, according to Efendioglu and Durmaz.⁴⁸ Corruthers⁴⁹ claims that "integrated marketing communication (IMC) coordinates the elements of the promotional mix, which include direct marketing, publicity, public relations, advertising, and personal selling." (p. 3). Organisational communication has been altered by the rise of social media. According to Corruthers,⁴⁹ the advent of Web 2.0 has transformed organisational communication, providing people with tools to exchange information, collaborate on projects, and develop social and professional relationships. Social media marketing campaigns typically focus on creating engaging content that grabs readers' interest and motivates them to share it on social media. Social media platforms offer businesses a free, accessible space to engage with customers, raise brand awareness, and run affordable marketing initiatives.⁴⁹

Deception in online social media advertising

Deceptive advertising includes dishonest practices, such as false assertions and impressions, created by advertisers to induce consumers to make a purchase. The primary characteristics of deceptive marketing include price manipulation and hidden expenses, abuse of terms like "going out of sale" or "free," insufficient or inconsistent comparisons, misleading colouring, "angel dusting," bait and switch, and a lack of default risk acceptance.⁵⁰ Wang, Ashraf, Thongpapan and Wang⁵¹ claim that deception in advertising is a common occurrence that results from unmet expectations occurring when marketers' promises are not fulfilled. Since various consumers have different expectations, Chen, Wu and Jiang⁵² claim that only the deception outcome would appear to be subjective when a consumer consumes or experiences the performance of a service or product. A consumer's held belief that is supported by a prior purchase belief from other advertisements is the third requirement for deceptive advertising.⁵⁰ The first requirement is that it must involve credible claims that are blatantly false or blatantly obvious. The second requirement is that it must involve encouragement that deviates from what consumers believe the advertisement to be and what is true.⁵³

Boveé and Arens⁵⁴ list the following as examples of unfair and deceptive advertising practices: false testimonials, false promises, visual distortions, bait-and-switch offers, partial disclosures, false comparisons, false claims, insufficient descriptions, and small-print qualifications. According to Gardner's definition of misleading advertising from 1975,⁵⁵ it involves lying and making up assumptions that could sway a customer's decision. Customers' behaviour demonstrates how they attempt to compare the features of the product with the claims made in deceptive advertising, and point out any discrepancies. Nekmahmud et al.⁵⁶ claim that a consumer's behaviour, intentions to make additional purchases, and level of product loyalty are all impacted by their sense of dishonesty. Abd el Baki⁵⁵ asserts that deceptive advertising results in expenses, social disbelief, and psychological distress for the customer.

Although social media holds great potential for financial institutions, as well as for our industry, Okaiyeto et al.,² state that the pace of change and the effort to integrate social media tools and their dynamics into organised professions like advertising have proven challenging. Thus, this challenge is compounded by the dissemination of unverified information, slander, and intentional lies, as well as hacking and control issues, which can create internal and external crises for organisations. According to Natasa et al.,⁵⁷ social media users frequently share personal information online. While users are typically required to give consent before having their information published, there may be ethical concerns when using this information.

This raises concerns about the exposure of people's privacy in social media advertisements. Measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of a social media marketing programme is essential to its success, yet this task poses significant challenges. Social advertising campaigns have a lot of evaluation recommendations available in the blogosphere, according to Mordough.⁵⁸ However, Clarisse et al.,⁵⁹ highlight a significant unethical concern in social media advertising, especially on newer platforms like Instagram and TikTok. This issue is evident in Nigerian social media advertising, which has been criticised for being extremely dishonest, as shared content often misrepresents the services companies and advertisers provide.

Deceptive social media advert and purchasing behaviour of the public

Unethical social media advertising refers to the practice of governmental, religious, political, or commercial entities promoting cultural norms and values to individuals seeking moral and ethical guidance. It often involves dishonest and immoral advertising tactics that manipulate or mislead audiences.

Sing is the production of false ideal information and its public dissemination via social media platforms. Deceptive advertising aims to harm the reputations of rival brands. False or inflated statements are the main tactic used in unethical advertising to confuse and mislead consumers. The use of children in commercials, exaggeration, puffery, deceptive brand comparisons, surrogate advertising, and overblown promises are examples of unethical advertising methods. These adverts can negatively impact viewers, leaving them feeling down.⁶⁰

Hanan et al.,⁶¹ suggest that social media marketers exaggerated claims about their products and services can harm companies' competitiveness and marketability due to unethical promotion. According to Tyagi,⁶² unethical advertising includes advertisements for products that are detrimental to customers' health as well as illegal products like alcohol and cigarettes. Furthermore, Sharma & Bumb⁶⁰ note that a significant focus of unethical marketing involves stereotyping and exploiting gender and presenting Unrealistic portrayals of men and women. Making false claims about a product's capabilities is also considered unethical. There is a claim that deceptive social media advertising is bad for society. Manipulative social media advertising negatively affects consumers, and harms values and the environment. Deceitful social media advertising uses socio-demographic and cultural factors to influence consumers' decisions to buy.⁵¹ Moral principles and morals have a major impact on consumers' judgments of unethical advertising.⁶³

Unethical advertising is a bad and immoral behaviour that can damage people's character and influence their attitudes. According to Qutp et al.,⁶⁴ unethical advertising can be deceptive, contradict moral principles since it influences people's attitudes both individually and collectively. Furthermore, it encourages people to purchase superfluous products and instils false notions in their minds. The immoral behaviour of advertisers perpetuates ethical issues in advertising.

Implications of TikTok deceptive adverts on socio-economic life of the populace

Clarisse et al.,⁵⁹ argue that millions of people are creating online communities- local, regional, and global- through social networking sites like Instagram and TikTok, enabling connection, content sharing, and communication. To Rostam,⁶⁵ the rise of social media has also had detrimental consequences on young people's social lives and marketing. As Barros⁶⁶ agrees that there are risks associated with

using social media, which might result in problems and difficulties, highlighting the double-edged nature of social media. According to Lyon,⁶⁷ some Facebook and TikTok users are deceived into subscribing to paid goods or services through misleading advertisements. The difficulty in verifying content on social media platforms, where everyone can contribute, can lead to the spread of false information. Moreover, publishing fraudulent material can severely damage a company's reputation, even if the online community eventually alerts others to the deception.⁶⁸ Monitoring Internet advertisements poses remarkable challenges. However, APCON (now ARCON) collaborates with Google and online ad networks to control the content on major corporate websites.⁶⁹ Additionally, Nwokpoku⁶⁹ found that OLX and Karewa, two of the biggest online classifieds companies in Nigeria, have systems in place to filter out fraudulent content and safeguard users.

Nwokpoku⁶⁹ cites OLX Africa's Head of Marketing, Ms. Brown Johnson, as admitting that: "We have people who read every advert submitted before it is posted, and there are certain things that they look out for to ensure that it is not a scam. We generally take a zero-tolerance approach to that kind of entry, and we do not let it go. We also report to local authorities, like the police, if we pick up such things. We know we cannot guarantee 100 per cent safety, but we do all the things we can to protect our users."

Advertising is a field where ethics play a crucial role, but studies by Natasa et al.,⁵⁷ reveal concerns about unethical behaviour, or code of ethics violations by practitioners, particularly in the digital era. These concerns about unethical advertising include deceit, child-targeted marketing, sexual and gender exploitation, and subliminal advertising. Research on influencer marketing classified influencers as information sources. Information providers are social media influencers (SMI) who function in the social media space, and beauty makers are SMIs employed in the cosmetics industry.^{70,71} The impact of beauty influencers on their audience varies. Influencers from the general public have a greater influence on young consumers' purchasing behaviours and views toward brands than celebrities do.^{72,73} However, a study by Trivedi⁷³ shows that in the fashion and lifestyle industries, customers' emotions are more likely to be influenced by attractive celebrity influencers than by generic influencers. Moreover, in the cosmetics industry, influencers from the general public were found to be more successful in influencing consumers than celebrities.^{70,71} According to Kim and Lee's⁷⁴ research, a friend's recommendation has a greater power to convince a customer to purchase a product- even if the celebrity does not explicitly state that it is sponsored. To succeed, a company needs to gain a significant level of customer trust. Good news spreads more slowly than negative news, as we are all aware. It goes without saying that when someone cheats on someone, fewer people will ever trust them again. Once lost, trust can jeopardize future business prospects with distributors, consumers, and potential marketing partners. Even in the virtual world, reputation remains a valuable asset.

Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data were collected through interviews and questionnaire. The study focused on undergraduates from three universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria: Federal University (Federal University Otuoke- FUO), established in 2011, and located in the Eastern Senatorial District of the State; a State University (Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island- NDU), established in 2000, and located in Central Senatorial District of the State, and a Private University (Hensard University,

Toru-Orua), established in 2024, and located in the Western Senatorial District of the State.

Study population

The total population of undergraduates from the three universities is 27,158 (11,040 from FOU, 16,000 from NDU, and 118 from Hensard University). The data were retrieved from the universities' official websites (www.ndu.edu.ng; www.fuotuoke.edu.ng; www.hensraduniversity.edu.ng respectively).

Sampling technique and sample size

The purposive sampling technique was adopted in choosing these institutions while a systematic random sampling procedure was used to select the number of students that participated in the survey from each tertiary institution. Cozby's⁷⁵ table of sample size determination was used to arrive at the sample size of 384. The formula states that, at +/-0.05 error of margin, a population beyond 100,000 will have a sample size of 384. Hence, the sample size of this study is 384 respondents. The multi-stage sampling technique was used to select respondents from each university. In the first stage, the simple random sampling technique was used to randomly select 3 faculties from each university. In the second stage, purposive sampling was used to select a department from each faculty.

From Federal University, Otuoke, the Faculties and Departments selected were Faculty of Nursing Sciences (Department of Mental Health and Psychiatric Nursing); Faculty of Social Sciences (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Criminology and Security Studies, and Social Work), and Faculty of Education (Department of Business Education). From Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, the Faculties and Departments selected were Faculty of Agricultural Technology (Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology); Faculty of Arts (Department of Theatre Arts), Faculty of Environmental Sciences (Department of Fine and Applied Arts). From Hensard University, Toru-Orua, the faculties and departments selected were Faculty of Arts, Social & Management Sciences (Department of Accounting); Faculty of Communication and Media Studies (Department of Film and Multimedia Studies), and Faculty of Sciences and Computing (Department of Software Engineering). In the third stage, the population was divided into male and female strata using stratified sampling to ensure balanced response from both genders. In the fourth stage, a simple random sampling technique was used to select the respondents. The proportionate allocation approach was used to determine the number of respondents to select from each university to make up the sample size, thus:

$$\text{FOU: } 11,040 \times 384 \div 27,158 = 156.10$$

Approximately 156

$$\text{NDU: } 16,000 \times 384 \div 27,158 = 226.23$$

Approximately 226

$$\text{Hensard University: } 118 \times 384 \div 27,158 = 1.67$$

Approximately 2

For qualitative data, two students from each university, were selected for oral-in-depth interviews, totalling 6 students. This left 378 students for the quantitative survey. A structured questionnaire was administered to 378 respondents, yielding 364 (96.30%). The data retrieved from the field were analysed using simple percentages and tables.

Operationalization of research variables

Deceptive advertising: The study considers advertising on TikTok that promote false claims to users of the social media application.

This is measured using Likert scale of five-levels; from 1-Strongly Disagree to 5- Strongly Agree.

Socio-economic Impact: The study considers socio-economic impact when the false adverts on TikTok have led to the users of the app adopting the false claims in their social and economic life. This is measured using Likert scale of five-levels; from 1-Strongly Disagree to 5- Strongly Agree.

Ethical standards: This consider whether the adverts follow laydown ethical guidelines as stated in Online Advertising ethical codes among which frown against deceptive advertising. This is measured using Likert scale of five-levels; from 1-Strongly Disagree to 5- Strongly Agree.

Data presentation and analysis

The data in Table 1 confirm that most of the advertisements via TikTok in Nigeria are full of deception.

Table 1 Online advertisements via TikTok in Nigeria are deceptive

Responses	Frequency	Percentages
Strongly Agree	280	76.92
Agree	22	6.04
Undecided	9	2.47
Strongly Disagree	34	9.34
Disagree	19	5.23
Total	364	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 indicates that, indeed, deceptive online advertising via TikTok in Nigeria has a socio-economic impact on university students in Bayelsa State (Table 2).

Table 2 Deceptive online advertising via TikTok in Nigeria has a socio-economic impact on university students in Bayelsa State

Responses	Frequency	Percentages
Strongly Agree	175	48.07
Agree	143	39.29
Undecided	9	2.47
Strongly Disagree	18	4.95
Disagree	19	5.22
Total	364	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data in Table 3 imply that the majority of the advertising done through TikTok does not follow the laid-down ethical standards of advertising as enshrined in the ethical codes of APCON (now ARCON).

Table 3 Advertising on TikTok adheres to ethical standards

Responses	Frequency	Percentages
Strongly Agree	24	6.59
Agree	33	9.07
Undecided	4	1.1
Strongly Disagree	163	44.78
Disagree	140	38.46
Total	364	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Discussion of findings

Table reveals that most Online advertisements on TikTok in Nigeria are deceptive, reflecting a broader issue of dishonesty in social media advertising in Nigeria. Research by Okocha et al.⁵ supports this finding, showing that the majority of the commercials on these platforms contain false information; fail to meet ethical standards, and utilise deceit to attract customers. The in-depth interview with Treasure Fynman, a student of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Criminology and Security Studies, and Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences of Federal University Otuoke, shared her experiences with deceptive advertisements on TikTok, especially those advertising cosmetics. Treasure emphasised that many online users prioritise creating content over its potential harm or value to the public. She recalled falling victim to a deceptive online advertising, which led her to buy a damaging skin cream. She sought help from a dermatologist, incurring appreciable expenses.

In Nigeria, there are a lot of misleading TikTok videos intended to promote goods and services. Teenagers exploit the platform to promote fraudulent products, in an attempt to make quick money. This phenomenon aligns with Lyons⁶⁷ analysis of a *Newsweek* article that claims that some users of Facebook and other social media platforms are duped into signing up for paid goods or services through deceptive advertisements. Verifying the authenticity of online content is challenging due to social media's open nature, which is that anyone can add content to them.⁷⁶ This study also revealed that deceptive online advertising on TikTok in Nigeria has significant socio-economic implication for university students in Bayelsa State. This is so because many students naively buy these promoted goods on social media platforms like TikTok, while advertisers use deceptive tactics to lure customers who would not otherwise use their services, ultimately harming their socioeconomic wellbeing. This finding is corroborated by García-Nieto et al.,⁵³ who argue that when consumers believe an advertisement to be factual, when it is not, they could suffer negative consequences.

Anthony Amapere, a student of the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, shared his perspective on the socio-economic impact of deceptive online advertising on university students via TikTok in Nigeria. He mentioned cases of students who spent their school fees on disappointing products after being misled by online ads, and they were disappointments at the end of the day. He specifically mentioned the case of one "Gladys" who is ashamed to attend lectures because a cream she bought, due to its advertisement on TikTok, over-bleached her face. It is double jeopardy for her because she lost her money as well as missing her lectures, which is the main reason for her being in the university.

Invariably, consumers are often short-changed, when online advertised products fail to deliver intended benefits, resulting in financial loss and potential physical harm, including damaged skin from wrong cosmetics. These socio-economic effects are worsened by deceptive online advertising. Hence, Vaishnavi⁷⁷ asserts that unethical advertising propagates negative attitudes, moral principles, values, age, gender, and religion when it portrays a consumer as they could look or behave better, ultimately influencing consumer purchasing behaviour. Lastly, Table 3 categorically unveiled the fact that the majority of the advertisements on TikTok do not adhere to ethical standards. This aligns with the stand of Clarisse et al.,⁵⁹ who think that there is a substantial disreputable problem in social media advertising due to the explosion of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Bobra Edward, a student of the Department of Film and Multimedia Studies, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies of Hensard University, Toru-Orua, expressed concerns about TikTok advertisers' disregard for ethics. He noted that if advertisers adhered to ethical standards, they would not make exaggerated claims about their products' capabilities. Bobra asserts that there are known grand laws that guide advertising, and that most TikTok advertisers do not obey them. Regulatory bodies like APCON and NAFDAC play critical roles in combating unethical behaviour and advertising violations in Nigeria. However, APCON's (ARCON's) effectiveness in regulating advertising is limited, with a greater focus on broadcast media advertisements than social media advertising. This is a result of a dearth of data on online and social media advertising firms, leaving many social media advertisements. Consequently, deceptive advertising persists on platforms like TikTok. Nwokpoku⁶⁹ asserts that APCON (now ARCON) is collaborating with Google and other online ad networks to regulate online content and ensure major corporations maintain control over their website information. This effort acknowledges concerns raised by Kisyoova et al.,⁴³ who contend that social media technology allows for unethical practices, such as violating user privacy and disregarding other advertising codes of ethics.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social media advertising in Nigeria, especially on TikTok, has become a platform for deceptive commercials that mislead consumers into purchasing goods and services that do not correspond with their preferences. This is largely due to the lack of adherence to recognised advertising ethics. Consequently, such uncensored advertisements have significant socio-economic impacts such on Nigerians, especially university students in Bayelsa State. Effective communication in human society depends on truthfulness, which is why honest advertising is critical. This is the reason this article emphasises the importance of honest advertising. However, Nigeria's current legal framework fails to adequately protect consumers from misleading advertisements. Certainly, TikTok is a great communication channel, however, the negative ways through which it is being used to advertise unhealthy products is quite alarming, and this necessitates urgent attention to curb reputational damage. This study aims to address this critical issue and contribute to the existing knowledge on the subject.

Study implications

The study has shown that advertising regulatory bodies are yet to grapple with social media adverts as such deceptive advertising abounds on TikTok. Thus, policy makers and practitioners in advertising and consumer protection should as a matter of urgency review and update their regulation modalities to capture social media advertising. This study is limited in the area of methodology, scope and population strengths. A content analysis could provide practical examples of deceptive TikTok advertising as survey and in-depth interview is limited to that effect. Also, the study only covered some selected students in few selected universities which may not be a true reflection of the general population of Tiktokers in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommended as follows:

- i The Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON), the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), and other regulatory bodies most closely monitor

social media advertising to prevent advertisers from deceiving the public and violating Nigeria's advertising ethical standards, thereby curtailing deceptive online advertising.

- ii To mitigate the socio-economic impact of deceptive online advertising, relevant regulatory bodies should loosely monitor individuals, companies, and advertisers, reviewing their content before they are posted online. This would reduce the instances of misleading job postings and advertised services.
- iii To deter unethical advertising practices, ARCON, NAFDAC, Standard Organisation of Nigeria (SON), and other regulatory bodies should impose severe penalties on violators of the Nigerian advertising code of ethics. Producers of harmful advertised products should face legal consequences and pay compensation to victims of their harmful products. To address regulatory shortcomings, ARCON, NAFDAC, SON, and the legislative branch of government should collaborate on comprehensive policy development, considering the unique features of the digital media landscape.

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Conflicts of interest

There is no conflicts of interest.

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