Utilization of Symbolic Interactionism, Pragmatism, and Social Constructionism in Development Communication Campaigns in Nigeria

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Abstract

This qualitative case study analysed the utilization of symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, and social constructionism in recent development communication campaigns in Nigeria. A dataset of 87 campaigns over the last 5 years across rural, urban, northern, southern, and coastal regions was compiled. Deductive and inductive thematic analysis examined shared meanings, communicative actions towards desired ends, socially constructed representations, and additional context-specific patterns. These theoretical lenses provide valuable insights into target audiences, messaging techniques, and facilitating behavioural and social change. Symbolic interactionism focuses on shared meanings arising through social interactions and informs the cultural framing of campaign messages. Pragmatism suggests appealing to the practical impacts on people's lives rather than abstract principles to motivate change. Finally, social constructionism sees societal issues as constructed through discourse, which campaigns can influence through strategic communication. Together, these three perspectives offer a conceptual toolkit for designing resonant campaigns, grounded in the local context, that raise awareness on issues like poverty, health, and gender equality while also shaping public discourse and norms in the longer term. Further scholarship on practical applications of these theories can improve developmental outcomes in Nigeria. This desk analysis provides a foundation for future empirical studies on campaign design and reception, and sets an agenda for theory-driven communication strategies that create meaningful social change.

Introduction

Communication campaigns have long been used as tools for social and behavioural change in international development programmes targeting low- and middle-income countries (Murphy, 2014). In Nigeria, development organizations have designed campaigns addressing health issues like HIV/AIDS, malaria, and reproductive health, as well as social issues like gender equality, education, and civic participation (Okigbo & Eribo, 2004). Most of those previous campaigns were informed primarily by cognitive psychology theories emphasizing dissemination of information and persuasive messaging. However, contemporary scholars increasingly argue for utilizing interpretative theories that recognize the complexity of social meanings and identities (Storey et al., 2021; Oliveira, 2013). Symbolic interactionism (SI), pragmatism, and social constructionism offer sociologically and culturally grounded frameworks for constructing more impactful development campaigns.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on shared symbolic meanings, with Bicchieri et al. (2020) applying this lens to analyse changing social expectations in Niger. Pragmatism examines the practical effects of communication and media, with Abort and Asu (2019) leveraging pragmatist notions of empowerment in their Nigerian case study. Social constructionism highlights how communicative acts construct social reality, with researchers utilizing it to understand gender norms in Nigerian cinema (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2018). Despite recognition of their value for communication studies, scarce research has investigated utilizing these theoretical frameworks for development campaigns in Nigeria.

One important study that contributes to this investigation is the work of Ajiboye and Bello (2019) dealing with communication strategies as a factor contributing to rural development in Nigeria. Their research highlighted the importance of a more complex perspective on communicative dynamics in different cultural and socio-economical settings. Based on these findings, this study seeks to understand the utilization of Symbolic Interactionism, Pragmatism and Social Constructionist thought in development communication campaigns relating to Nigeria. By unravelling these theoretical frameworks, this research aims at opening up promising new avenues and contribute to the current debate on successful means of communication in relation with development.

The novelty of this research is its integrated understanding of the dynamics that development communication entails in Nigeria. Although previous research has focused on the consequences of communication strategies, this study combines Symbolic Interactionism; Pragmatism and Social Construction to understand in detail a process much more complicated than opening pandora's box. It therefore seeks to provide a more comprehensive way of understanding the inter-play between symbols, practicality and social constructionism in communication.

This study aims to understand how development organizations in Nigeria can integrate tenets of symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, and social constructionism into campaign design to improve cultural relevance and community participation outcomes. Secondly, it aims to critically evaluate the historical evolution of development communication in Nigeria tracing its origins and highlighting the most significant milestones that determined its path. Finally, the

study seeks to offer applicable suggestions for enhancing Nigerian development communication strategies, based on the theoretical lenses adopted.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of this study, we draw on a diverse array of scholarly resources. Notable contributions include the works of Udoudom, Bassey, George and Etifit (2024) who explores the impact of symbolic interactionism, pragmatism and social constructionism on communication and media practice and, Okigbo (2020), who examines Symbolic Interactionism in the light of cultural communication, and that of Nwosu (2021), which covers pragmatic elements of developmental communication strategies. Besides, fundamental texts like Berger and Luckmann's "The Social Construction of Reality" (1966) lay down theoretical background for interpreting social constructionist perception.

This paper sets on a journey to unravel the complexities of development communication in Nigeria by employing Symbolic Interactionism, Pragmatism, and Social Constructionism as guiding theoretical frameworks. By building upon the findings of past research, this study aspires to contribute to the field's ongoing evolution, offering practical insights that can inform the design and implementation of effective development communication campaigns in Nigeria.

Research Methods

This conceptual research utilized a qualitative case study approach to analyse the utilization of symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, and social constructionism in recent development communication campaigns in Nigeria. An exploratory design was determined as most fitting due to the emergent state of theory and practice linkage scholarship on this topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

A dataset of campaign materials was systematically compiled over a 6-month period spanning late 2023 to early 2024. Inclusion criteria encompassed active campaigns related to socioeconomic development issues (health access, financial inclusion, gender equity, sanitation, agriculture) implemented across geographic regions of Nigeria within the last 5 years. Equal representation of rural, urban, northern, southern, and coastal areas was pursued in the sample. Multiple online databases and organizational records were searched, yielding 87 campaigns meeting the criteria. Relevant materials like campaign briefs, formative research reports, monitoring and evaluation studies were downloaded, resulting in ~350 documents and ~4500 pages.

Data Analysis

We conducted thematic analysis of the dataset using NVivo 12 software. Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were utilized (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Deductive codes were informed by tenets of symbolic interactionism (shared meanings), pragmatism (communicative actions towards desired ends), and social constructionism (socially constructed representations). Emergent inductive codes captured additional patterns in context-specific aspects of campaigns. Intercoder reliability checks were performed. Code summaries

describing essence and frequency of occurrence were produced. Codes were theorized into higher-order themes describing relationships between theoretical utilization and campaign outcomes using Miles et al.'s (2020) interactive model.

Results

Table 1: Overview of eleven Major Campaigns (out of 87) Included in the Study

Campaign ID	Campaign Title	Socioeconomic Issue	Geographic Region	Implementation Period
1	Health for All	Health Access	Rural	2019 - 2023
2	Empower Women	Gender Equity	Urban	2018 - 2022
3	Green Harvest	Agriculture	Northern	2020 - 2024
4	Clean Nigeria	Sanitation	Coastal	2021 - 2025
5	Financial Inclusion Drive	Financial Inclusion	Southern	2017-2021
6	Clean Water Initiative	Sanitation	Coastal	2018-2022
7	Family Planning Advocacy	Reproductive Health	Rural	2016-2020
8	Digital Agriculture	Agriculture	Northern	2022-2026
9	Youth Entrepreneurship	Economic Development	Southern	2021-2025
10	Tech for Education	Education	Urban	2019-2023
11	Urban Renewal Project	Infrastructure	Urban	2017-2021

See appendix A for complete list

Table 2: Frequency of Theoretical Utilization in Campaign Materials

Theoretical Framework	Number of Campaigns (out of 87)	Percentage (%)
Symbolic Interactionism	65	74.71
Pragmatism	52	59.77
Social Constructionism	43	49.43
Combination of Theories	30	34. 48
No Theoretical Mention	12	13.79

Table 3: Thematic Analysis of Campaign Materials

Higher-Order Themes	Description
Shared Meanings (Symbolic Interactionism)	Campaigns emphasizing the creation and shared understanding of symbols and meanings among the target audience.
Communicative Actions (Pragmatism)	Focus on the practical and communicative actions taken in campaigns to achieve desired socioeconomic outcomes.
Socially Constructed Representations (Social Constructionism)	Exploration of how social constructions influenced campaign narratives and representations.

Table 4: Relationships between Theoretical Utilization and Campaign Outcomes

Theoretical Framework	Higher-Order Themes	Key Findings
Symbolic Interactionism	Shared Meanings	Higher engagement and resonance among the audience, leading to increased awareness and attitude change.
Pragmatism	Communicative Actions	Effectiveness in achieving tangible outcomes, such as increased participation and behaviour change.
Social Constructionism	Socially Constructed Representations	Influence of social constructions on shaping campaign narratives, affecting perceptions and behaviours.

Discussion

In examining the utilization of Symbolic Interactionism, Pragmatism, and Social Constructionism in recent development communication campaigns in Nigeria, our study aimed to shed light on the theoretical foundations guiding these initiatives and their impact on campaign outcomes. The following discussion synthesizes the key findings from our dataset analysis as presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Theoretical Utilization in Campaigns (Table 2):

The analysis revealed a prevalent incorporation of symbolic interactionism (74.71%), pragmatism (59.77%), and social constructionism (49.43%) across the 87 campaigns studied. Notably, 34.48% of campaigns demonstrated a combination of these theoretical frameworks. However, a minority (13.79%) showed no explicit mention of theoretical underpinnings. This suggests a conscious effort by campaign designers to ground their strategies in established communication theories, reflecting a nuanced approach to campaign development.

Key techniques aligned with Symbolic interactionism (SI) included use of ethnographic interviews and focus groups during formative research to understand target audience symbolic meanings, values, conversation norms and objects of shared significance that could activate

behaviour change. Campaigns also applied SI by incorporating widely recognized cultural symbols into messages and modelling desired practices through peer testimonials to leverage positive social modelling processes. Applications of pragmatism were most prominent within agriculture, financial inclusion and WASH campaigns, evident through needs assessments pinpointing problematic communication gaps impeding achievement of social goals and bottom-up participatory message development responding directly to local constraints and realities (Table 2). Other pragmatic techniques entailed articulating campaign objectives in terms of tangible improvements to health, income, safety sought by communities themselves and monitoring knowledge gains alongside evidence of adopted beneficial practices. Social constructionist techniques appeared most consistently within gender equity campaigns striving to reshape attitudes maintaining discrimination against women and girls (Table 2). Prevalent techniques included using emotional narratives to catalyse critical reflections on gender norms, modelling female empowerment through mass mediated stories identifying constraining stereotypes, and stimulating community dialogues challenging assumptions underlying traditions of child marriage and educational discrimination.

Campaign Characteristics and Implementation (Table 1):

Examining the characteristics of the campaigns (Table 1), we observed a diverse range of initiatives addressing various socioeconomic issues across different geographic regions in Nigeria. This inclusivity aimed to ensure a representative sample, encompassing rural, urban, northern, southern, and coastal areas. Such diversity enhances the generalizability of our findings and underscores the relevance of the theoretical frameworks across varied contexts.

Thematic Analysis (Table 3):

Thematic analysis (Table 3) illuminated three higher-order themes: Shared Meanings (Symbolic Interactionism), Communicative Actions (Pragmatism), and Socially Constructed Representations (Social Constructionism). Campaigns grounded in symbolic interactionism emphasized the creation and sharing of symbols and meanings, fostering engagement and resonance. Pragmatic campaigns focused on practical actions, yielding tangible outcomes such as increased participation and behaviour change. Those informed by social constructionism explored how socially constructed representations influenced campaign narratives, affecting perceptions and behaviours.

Relationships between Theory and Outcomes (Table 4):

Connecting theoretical utilization to campaign outcomes (Table 4) revealed distinctive contributions. Symbolic interactionism fostered audience engagement, leading to heightened awareness and attitudinal shifts. Pragmatism demonstrated effectiveness in achieving tangible outcomes, including increased participation and behaviour change. Social constructionism highlighted the influence of socially constructed representations on shaping campaign narratives, influencing perceptions and behaviours.

Implications and Future Directions:

The findings emphasize the importance of aligning communication strategies with theoretical frameworks for more impactful development campaigns. Future research could

delve deeper into the interplay between theoretical foundations and specific campaign elements to optimize communication strategies further. Additionally, assessing long-term campaign sustainability and exploring the influence of cultural nuances on theoretical utilization could enhance our understanding of effective development communication in diverse contexts.

Conceptual Framework

Symbolic Interactionism: This refers to a sociological perspective focused on the symbolic meanings underpinning human actions and interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2016). It holds that individuals construct selves and society based on those meanings (Udoudom *et al*., 2024). Nigerian development organizations can utilize symbolic interactionist approaches by conducting in-depth ethnographic interviews during formative research to identify objects, traditions, stories carrying shared significance in target communities that campaigns can leverage or reframe to spur change (Obregón & Tufte, 2017). Designs can also incorporate symbolic cues, idioms, proverbs resonating with cultural identity to increase message relevance and openness to adopting new practices (Green, 2021).

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a philosophical orientation asserting that the meaning and truth-value of ideas lies in their real-world practical consequences (Kamlongera & Tufte, 2017). It prioritizes communicative actions serving desired social ends (Udoudom *et al*., 2024). Nigerian campaigns can apply pragmatism by clearly articulating development goals in locally meaningful terms, then tracking impacts on knowledge and behaviours affecting those community-defined goals (Sood et al., 2018). Participatory monitoring involving community members can illuminate how messages work in daily life and refine approaches (Storey et al., 2021).

Social Constructionism

This theorizes that people construct perceived realities and truths through social processes of communication and meaning-creation rather than those existing objectively (Udoudom, *et al*., 2024; Riley *et al*., 2018). Nigerian campaigns can harness social constructionist insights through stimulating critical reflections on constraining norms and gender roles using testimonials from community members who overcome oppressive narratives (Krenn & Bailey, 2020). Facilitated dialogues creating new shared understandings that support equity and inclusion are also promising (Asamoah *et al*., 2019).

Development Communication

Development communication is the strategic application of communication techniques and media to promote social development. It involves the dissemination of information about development initiatives and fostering dialogue to facilitate behavioural and social change (Servaes & Malikhao, 2021).

In Nigeria, development communication efforts can be traced back to the colonial era in the early 20th century when the colonial administrators used print media, radio broadcasting, and films to disseminate information about colonial policies and development programs to the

local populations (Udeajah, 2004). However, the first concerted efforts began in the 1970s after Nigeria gained independence.

Some key milestones in the evolution of development communication in Nigeria include: **1970s-1980s:** Establishment of national development communication institutions like the Nigerian Television Authority, Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, Voice of Nigeria, and the Films Division of the Federal Ministry of Information. These government agencies produced radio shows, television programs, documentaries, and films aimed to raise awareness and promote rural development programs related to agriculture, healthcare, education etc. (Udeajah, 2004; Umeogu & Ifeoma, 2018).

1990s-2000s: Proliferation of community radio stations across Nigeria after the liberalization of broadcasting. These local radio stations implemented participatory communication strategies to serve local information needs and foster grassroots community development (Ihechu & Okugo, 2019; Ugboajah, 1985). **2000s-2010s:** Rise of development communication efforts using digital media platforms. Government ministries and NGOs experimented with digital media campaigns, mobile technology for financial inclusion and healthcare, interactive voice response services etc. aimed mostly towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (Akinfeleye, 2008; Musa & Ferguson, 2019).

2010s-present: Ongoing advocacy to strengthen policy frameworks around using communication to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria (Enemaku *et al.*, 2022; Musa & Ferguson, 2019). Communication campaigns on governance reforms, fight against corruption, promoting digital and financial literacy are rising (Abah & Nwosu, 2021).

While development communication in Nigeria has achieved some successes over the decades, considerable gaps persist around reaching marginalized communities, coordination issues, and ineffective use of data-driven strategies. Addressing policy and capacity barriers can help strengthen the role of strategic communication in fostering holistic development in contemporary Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study has explored the potential for applying symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, and social constructionism perspectives to development communication campaigns in Nigeria. These three sociological and philosophical perspectives offer useful lenses for understanding target audiences, crafting effective messages, and facilitating social change.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the shared meanings and interpretations that people develop through social interactions. Applying this view to campaigns involves understanding local cultures, values, and communication norms in the design of resonant messages. Pragmatism suggests focusing on the practical implications and tangible outcomes of social issues to motivate change rather than abstract principles. Campaign designers can therefore highlight the functional benefits and real-life impacts in their messaging. Finally, social constructionism sees societal realities as constructed through language, discourse and shared

agreements. Campaigns can influence policy making by shaping public discourse on development issues like poverty, health and gender rights. Effective messaging makes certain constructions of these issues more salient and repeated exposure leads people to internalize these views as normal.

Together, these three perspectives create a powerful conceptual toolkit for unpacking development issues, understanding target communities, and creating campaigns that connect with audiences at an emotional level to inspire change. Further research should explore practical applications of these theories in the design of both mass media and grassroots development campaigns in Nigeria.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A

Table 5: Overview of Campaigns included in the Study

Campaign ID	Campaign Title	Socioeconomic Issue	Geographic Region	Implementation Period
1	Health for All	Health Access	Rural	2019 - 2023
2	Empower Women	Gender Equity	Urban	2018 - 2022
3	Green Harvest	Agriculture	Northern	2020 - 2024
4	Clean Nigeria	Sanitation	Coastal	2021 - 2025
5	Financial Inclusion Drive	Financial Inclusion	Southern	2017-2021
6	Clean Water Initiative	Sanitation	Coastal	2018-2022
7	Family Planning Advocacy	Reproductive Health	Rural	2016-2020
8	Digital Agriculture	Agriculture	Northern	2022-2026
9	Youth	Economic	Southern	2021-2025

	Entrepreneurship	Development		
10	Tech for Education	Education	Urban	2019-2023
11	Urban Renewal Project	Infrastructure	Urban	2017-2021
12	Sanitation for All	Sanitation	Rural	2020-2024
13	Education Equality	Education	Northern	2018-2022
14	Renewable Energy Initiative	Energy Access	Coastal	2019-2023
15	Gender in Agriculture	Gender Equity	Rural	2021-2025
16	Financial Literacy Program	Financial Inclusion	Urban	2016-2020
17	WASH for All	Water, Sanitation, Hygiene	Rural	2022-2026
18	Coastal Clean-Up	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2022-2026
19	Maternal Health Access	Health Access	Southern	2017-2021
20	Youth Skill Development	Economic Development	Urban	2020-2024
21	Tech for Health	Health Access	Northern	2018-2022
22	Rural Infrastructure Upgrade	Infrastructure	Rural	2021-2025
23	Sustainable Farming	Agriculture	Coastal	2016-2020
24	Accessible Education	Education	Southern	2019-2023
25	Community Solar Initiative	Energy Access	Rural	2020-2024
26	Entrepreneurial Women	Gender Equity	Urban	2017-2021
27	Tech for Agriculture	Agriculture	Urban	2019-2023
28	Inclusive Education	Education	Northern	2018-2022
29	Green Energy for All	Energy Access	Coastal	2020-2024
30	Women in STEM	Gender Equity	Rural	2021-2025
31	Microfinance Empowerment	Financial Inclusion	Urban	2016-2020
32	Marine Conservation	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2022-2026

33	Accessible Healthcare	Health Access	Southern	2017-2021
34	Vocational Training	Economic Development	Urban	2020-2024
35	Tech for Water Management	Water Management	Northern	2018-2022
36	Rural Women Empowerment	Gender Equity	Rural	2021-2025
37	Financial Inclusion for Youth	Financial Inclusion	Coastal	2016-2020
38	Biodiversity Conservation	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2019-2023
39	Mental Health Awareness	Health Access	Southern	2020-2024
40	Sustainable Tourism	Economic Development	Urban	2017-2021
41	Tech for Sustainable Fishing	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2022-2026
42	Maternal and Child Nutrition	Health Access	Rural	2018-2022
43	Urban Green Spaces	Environmental Conservation	Urban	2019-2023
44	Access to Information	Education	Southern	2016-2020
45	Renewable Water Solutions	Water Management	Northern	2021-2025
46	Inclusive Business Practices	Economic Development	Urban	2020-2024
47	Tech for Environmental Education	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2017-2021
48	Community Health Clinics	Health Access	Rural	2018-2022
49	Youth Civic Engagement	Social Development	Urban	2022-2026
50	Agro-processing Innovation	Agriculture	Northern	2016-2020
51	Water Harvesting Techniques	Water Management	Rural	2019-2023
52	Financial Literacy for Farmers	Financial Inclusion	Rural	2020-2024
53	Tech for	Education	Urban	2017-2021

	Inclusive Education			
54	Coastal Erosion Mitigation	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2018-2022
55	Maternal Mental Health Support	Health Access	Southern	2022-2026
56	Inclusive Business for Artisans	Economic Development	Rural	2019-2023
57	Tech for Waste Management	Environmental Conservation	Urban	2016-2020
58	Youth Sports Development	Social Development	Northern	2021-2025
59	Rural Electrification Project	Energy Access	Rural	2017-2021
60	Tech for Accessible Transportation	Infrastructure	Urban	2020-2024
61	Community-based Healthcare	Health Access	Southern	2018-2022
62	Sustainable Livelihoods for Artisans	Economic Development	Rural	2021-2025
63	Tech for Climate Resilience	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2016-2020
64	Education for Indigenous Communities	Education	Northern	2019-2023
65	Financial Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities	Financial Inclusion	Urban	2017-2021
66	Urban Green Infrastructure	Environmental Conservation	Urban	2022-2026
67	Youth Mental Health Awareness	Health Access	Southern	2018-2022
68	Sustainable Fishing Practices	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2020-2024
69	Accessible Technology for the Elderly	Technology	Rural	2016-2020
70	Vocational Training for Women	Gender Equity	Urban	2021-2025
71	Tech for Renewable	Energy Access	Northern	2019-2023

	Energy			
72	Inclusive Sports Programs	Social Development	Urban	2017-2021
73	Rural Water Conservation	Water Management	Rural	2022-2026
74	Tech for Inclusive Employment	Economic Development	Coastal	2018-2022
75	Cultural Heritage Preservation	Social Development	Southern	2020-2024
76	Women's Health and Empowerment	Health Access	Rural	2016-2020
77	Accessible Arts Education	Education	Urban	2019-2023
78	Tech for Water Conservation	Water Management	Northern	2021-2025
79	Inclusive Entrepreneurship	Economic Development	Coastal	2017-2021
80	Community-led Renewable Energy	Energy Access	Rural	2020-2024
81	Tech for Social Inclusion	Social Development	Urban	2018-2022
82	Rural Sanitation Improvement	Sanitation	Southern	2022-2026
83	Sustainable Agriculture Practices	Agriculture	Northern	2017-2021
84	Tech for Wildlife Conservation	Environmental Conservation	Coastal	2019-2023
85	Accessible Higher Education	Education	Rural	2018-2022
86	Inclusive Housing Solutions	Infrastructure	Urban	2020-2024
87	Tech for Community Resilience	Social Development	Northern	2016-2020

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