

Exploring the Untapped Market of Nigerian Akwete through Strategic Advertising Campaigns

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Abstract

Over the past decades, Nigerian traditional textile markets have experienced low patronage, neglect and poor exposure to potential global consumers. This is due to Nigerian government's inability to manage, grow and revive some textile industries that are moribund in some parts of the country. In most cases, people prefer to patronize foreign made fabrics like the Indian *george*, laces, brocades, *ankara* etc.; sadly, this dangerous trend is adversely affecting the growth and acceptability of most of our traditional and indigenous textile materials (like the *Akwete* fabrics) in the local and global markets. The literature review method was applied in this research where secondary sources of data collection from journals, books, internet etc. were used. Findings show that *Akwete* fabrics could be accepted globally when they are properly branded and packaged to meet international standard. This paper therefore examines the possibility of adopting strategic and integrated marketing and advertising campaigns, with the intent of promoting our traditional woven *Akwete* fabrics, so that it will have global acceptability. The implication of the study is that it will help to ex-ray the impact of branding, advertising and integrated marketing on product marketing. It is noteworthy to state that the market of *Akwete* textile materials is largely untapped, with many potentials, due to its uniqueness and intriguing connection to our cultural values; and deeply embedded with traditional and philosophical connotations.

Keywords: traditional textiles, akwete, advertising, marketing, untapped market

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Introduction

One of the Igbo oldest traditional dressing is called Akwete, a woven fabric of diverse colours and designs. Okpoko (2023) believes that Akwete traditional weaving boasts of a rich history, deeply embedded in the cultural heritage of the Akwete people. This indicates that the origin of Akwete fabric could be traced to a community called Akwete, in Ukwu East Local Government, Abia State, Nigeria. The Akwete dress is beyond clothing, it is more of a philosophical representation of the rich cultural values of the Akwete clan of the Igbo nation.

Regrettably, Chudi-Duru (2024) lamented that Akwete woven fabrics are not frequently utilized in the contemporary fashion scene like some of its indigenous counterparts hence it has become imperative to access the weaving tradition. Despite the fact that the *Akwete* cloth is enriched with deep cultural significance, yet this great treasure has not received enough global recognition and acceptance. Nigeria is blessed with rich cultural heritage, which includes her food, dressing, music, ceremonies etc. Every Nigerian tribe has their distinct and unique dressing culture and pattern. However, these cultural heritages from different parts of Nigeria are neglected by the government, who would have invested in them, and enjoy their economic values through tourism and trade, as seen in a country like Dubai. There is no gainsaying that the rich cultural values embedded in the akwete fabric could be of economic importance if the government pay attention to it. Infact, Chukueggu and Ogu (2013) lamented that Nigeria as a developing nation has several natural and cultural endowments which have been neglected over the years as a result of the over-burdened oil exploration. If attention is given to the textile industry by the government, it could immensely contribute to national economic growth and job creation. The textile sector is an untapped market, ready to yield great economic dividends when it is sufficiently funded and adequately managed. Despite its potential as a cultural export and creative industry driver, Akwete weaving remains marginalized. The absence of professional advertising campaigns, poor visibility, fragmented production, and lack of government-private

collaboration have hindered its development. Imported textiles dominate Nigerian markets, eroding consumer preference for indigenous fabrics (Bailey, 2023). Consequently, Akwete's rich heritage risks extinction amid neglect and poor market integration.

In addition to seeking government support, if the Akwete fabric is given sufficient media exposure and coordinated publicity campaigns required, it will definitely gain global attention, presence, influence and patronage. All that is required in this case is adopting a Strategic Advertising and Publicity Campaign for the Akwete cloth; create a brand design for it and package it better. This way, the Akwete fabric will have strong media presence, and confidently compete with other globally accepted fashion and textile designers like Givenchy, Louis Vuitton, Hermes, Dior, Nike, Gucci etc. Branding gives the product a distinct and valued impression in the mind of the consumers, and helps it to have higher patronage.

Objectives of the Study the study seeks to:

1. Examine how poor advertising and branding limit the visibility of Akwete fabrics.
2. Explore how strategic advertising and IMC can reposition Akwete in local and global markets.
3. Propose an advertising model for revitalizing the Nigerian indigenous textile industry through Akwete weaving.

Conceptual Clarifications

Akwete Fabric: The Akwete cloth is a handwoven textile produced using vertical looms, typically by women. Its motifs are often inspired by folklore, environment, and social experiences (Ogu & Ndebilie, 2011). Beyond its aesthetic role, Akwete embodies the economic resilience of rural women and the creative spirit of Nigeria's traditional industries. However, the fabric's commercialization has been impeded by the influx of cheaper imports and inadequate marketing infrastructure (Fibre2Fashion News Desk, 2024).

Strategic Advertising is a planned communication process aimed at shaping consumer attitudes and behavior toward a brand through consistent, research-based messaging (Belch & Belch, 2007). It involves identifying target audiences, designing persuasive messages, and selecting appropriate media channels to achieve brand objectives. For cultural products, it means aligning advertising narratives with heritage, identity, and lifestyle values.

Cultural Branding, as proposed by Holt (2004), posits that brands can achieve iconic status by embedding themselves in the collective identity and cultural myths of a society. It moves beyond functional appeal to emotional and symbolic resonance. Akwete can be reframed as a "cultural icon" by embedding its story in broader narratives of African creativity, sustainability, and female empowerment.

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is the strategic coordination of promotional tools—advertising, public relations, social media, sponsorships, and personal selling—to create a unified brand experience (Schultz, 1993; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Applying IMC to the Akwete industry ensures that all communication touchpoints consistently convey its cultural and economic value.

Indigenous Textile Industry: Nigeria's indigenous textile industry comprises traditional crafts rooted in handwoven and handmade techniques. Despite their heritage potential, these crafts face structural challenges including limited capital, poor technology adoption, and weak brand visibility (Ogu, 2008; Akpomovie, 2011). Strategic promotion is thus essential for transforming them into viable creative enterprises.

Historical Perspectives to the Akwete Fabric Designs

As stated earlier, historians have traced the origin of the Akwete fabric to a community in Ukwa Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria, called Akwete. There are diverse views on the actual period

when Akwete craft began in Abia State. On one hand, Ikegwuonu (1979) opines that the origin of the Akwete cloth has been traced from Ada Nwakata in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the same vein, Okpoko (2023) writes that Ada Nwakata emerges as the pioneer of the intricate designs adorning Akwete fabric. Oral traditions attribute her accomplishments to divine inspiration, endowing her work with an aura of sacred significance (Bellafricana, 2016). Other narratives allude to her ingenuity in appropriating patterns from fabrics originating in Portugal, skillfully adapting, and incorporating them into her own creations, thereby establishing herself as a much sought-after artist renowned for her distinct designs (Bellafricana, 2016).

On the other hand, other scholarly discourse believes that the tradition is as old as the Igboland, Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi (2012). Also, Ekweme (2009) argues that historically, majority of the ancestors present in Akwete clan came from the Island of Bonny in Rivers State. After their settlement in the early 17th centuries (1850s), the men folk were concerned with fishing in river ponds while the female folk engaged in weaving fabric on vertical looms as a way of keeping themselves occupied and earning little incomes. The production of Akwete fabric is historically reserved for the women folk in Ndokiland. Professional weaving of Akwete fabric is a traditional practice that is taught to the young girls at an early stage of life by their mothers and handed down from generation to generation. Ogu (2012) reveals that every woman in Akwete knows how to weave and every Akwete girl is taught how to weave as soon as she can operate the narrow wall loom. However, the weavers were so conserved not to let the skill outside the town by any form whatsoever; not even by marriage. Ekweme (2009) maintains that Akwete woven fabrics gained popularity during the trade boom on palm products between the indigenes of Ndoki and other people from outside their cultural background. This trade exposed the beauty and creative designs of Akwete to the outside world, including the Europeans. In summation, it could be deduced from the above cited scholars that Akwete fabric originates from Akwete clan in Ukwa L.G.A., of Abia State; also, it is a craft largely engaged by the women folk. It represents the rich culture of the hardworking people of Akwete, dating from as old as 17th century, or probably before.

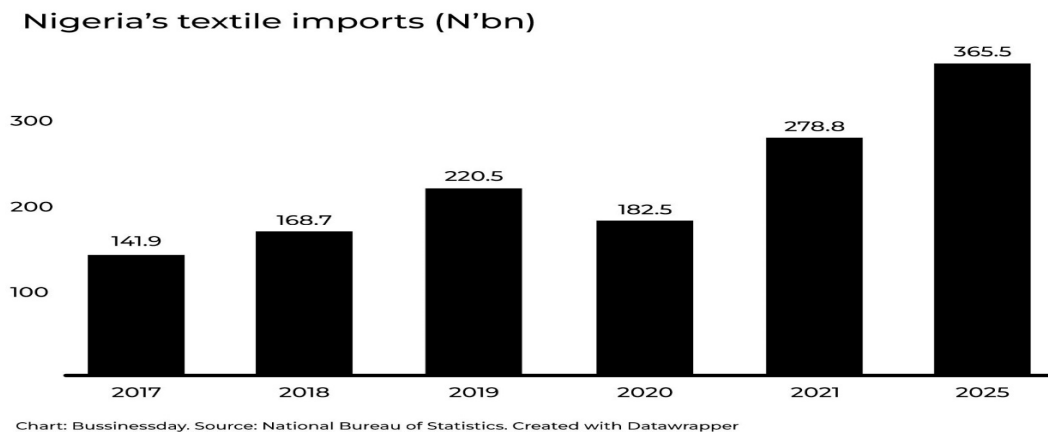
Methodology

This paper applied the literature review research approach. Templier and Pare (2015) describes this approach as a collection of accessible (both published and unpublished) theme documents that contain facts, concepts, data, and evidence published from a particular viewpoint to obtain or express those viewpoints on the subject's nature and how it should be examined, and effective review of the research papers involved. This underscores the fact that this research work is specifically based on secondary data collection from books, journals and internet. The collected data were critically analyzed, examined and logically discussed with the view of presenting a well-informed analysis of the subject matter. This is in agreement with Gilson and Goldberg (2015) which states that conceptual papers do not have data, because their focus is on integration and proposing new relationships among constructs. Thus, the onus is on developing logical and complete arguments for associations rather than testing them empirically.

Akwete Fabric Designs: The Untapped Market

Clothing, as one of the basic needs of man, will always be on high demand, even in this period of global economic meltdown. The market for Akwete fabrics in the local and global market is yet untapped. This paper believes that Akwete fabric will be of high demand when it properly branded, packaged and advertised. This belief is based on a report published in Fibre to Fashion online magazine which reveals that import of textile products into Nigeria has increased by 106.7 per cent over four

years, from N182.5 billion in 2020 to N377.1 billion in 2023, despite several intervention programmes by the central bank to boost the sector. Data from the country's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) show the textile import figures were N278.8 billion in 2021 and N365.5 billion in 2022. Another related report by Bunmi (2023) as seen in the chart below (Plate 1) shows that textile import in Nigeria was at N141.9 billion in 2017, and rose rapidly to N365.5 billion in 2025. With these data, it is evident that a great percentage of Nigeria populace patronizes the textile sector annually.



Source: NBS created with Data Wrapper

Plate 1.

Therefore, looking at the above report, one can confidently assert that the textile sector is a viable market, and Akwete fabric is a potential product that could penetrate the global market when it is branded and packaged like other popular designers' brand. Celebrity brands like Givenchy, Gucci, Adidas, Louis Vuitton, Dior etc. are not better than Akwete. The difference is that while these popular designer brands are added value by branding and packaging, Akwete fabrics are made to look local and of less quality without branding.

Apparently, the fact that Akwete fabric is unique, connected to a rich cultural heritage, and embedded with designs (motifs) that have deep philosophical meanings, are its strong selling points. Unlike other textile materials that have regular and identifiable motifs, the Akwete cloth is enriched with unusual motifs and beautiful texture, as well as appealing colour combinations that make it distinct and sought-after. In a recent research work done by Okpoko (2023), the researcher discovered that the major target market for Akwete fabric are Westerners (foreigners) and Africans in diaspora. The information was gathered from the researcher's encounter with an Akwete weaver and a major distributor of Akwete in diaspora. Hence, Okpoko (2023) reveals as follows:

“In a conversation, Ola reveals her pursuit of excellence by crafting stunning fashion clothing and accessories with Akwete fabrics. Drawing clients from diverse backgrounds, including tourists with an appreciation for traditional fabrics, she establishes herself as a sought-after provider. As she shared, “Most of my products are bought by foreigners who come on tour to Lagos. They buy them from the stores I supply in Lagos” (Ola, 2022). Notably, Ola observed an interesting trend in the market, noting that while family and friends show unwavering support by purchasing her clothes, accessories like bags and sandals emerge as top sellers, particularly among tourists. This valuable insight offers a glimpse into the potential international demand for traditional woven fabrics. Presently residing in

Canada, Ola (2022) reflected on her recent experiences as an Akwete business owner, where her products attract significant attention and admiration. “When I go out with one of my bags, the people here stop me to compliment me and even ask for my contact information so they could buy my product. I believe the best audience for my products would be Westerners and Africans in the diaspora who feel nostalgic about their cultural heritage.” Indeed, this sentiment is shared by Priscilla, the weaver, who concurred that her outreach to international clients is significantly bolstered through the social media. This convergence of artisanal craftsmanship and digital platforms highlights the global reach and potential for traditional fabrics to transcend geographical boundaries and captivate hearts across cultures.

According to Priscilla (2022), the revered Akwete fabrics have garnered the attention of notable fashion designers, who now incorporate them into their exquisite collections. One such designer is Coker, who drew inspiration from Kenneth Ize, who is renowned for featuring traditional Nigerian textiles in his acclaimed global fashion shows, thereby embracing Akwete fabrics for his own creations. Notably, Lisa Folawiyo joins the league of designers who utilize the Aso oke woven cloth of the Yoruba people to craft luxurious clothing items, often commanding prices in the thousands of dollars (Priscilla, 2022)”

The above revelation shows that the market for Akwete fabric has not been fully explored. Though some scholars rightly believe that the government has a vital role to play in ensuring that our indigenous products are given increased market acceptability and patronage. Akpomuvie (2011) regrets that successive African governments, albeit inadvertently, have contributed to the decline of native technology by unrestrictedly importing foreign technological goods. He argues that this extensive importation has cultivated feelings of inferiority among Africans, leading to a biased perception that foreign products are superior to their indigenous counterparts. However, a coordinated advertising campaign and creation of strong brand identity will definitely change the perception of some local and global consumers towards our indigenous products; it will also help to unlock the untapped market of the Akwete textile brand.

The Problems of Over-dependence on Imported Products

It has been established that the major factors contributing to the poor patronage given to Nigerian indigenous products include the negative Nigerian mind-set for our indigenous products, and superiority tendency towards imported products among Nigerians; especially the elites, some of whose penchant and inordinate urge for display of affluence and unhealthy competition among their peers are insatiable. Aptly, Ugochukwu (2019) asserted that imported products are gaining preference due to their fashionable appeal and cost-effectiveness, thereby overshadowing domestically crafted fabrics. Some people prefer to patronize imported products because they want to pay more, so that they will show-off, not minding that the Nigerian made version of the same product are in most case more durable, fashionable and cheaper.

Also, Andah (1988) observed that colonial history detrimentally impacted local industries, subtly eroding the confidence of craftsmen, such as weavers, potters, carpenters, architects, and doctors. He emphasized that European entrepreneurs and governmental bodies further exacerbated this situation by appropriating local patents and designs in areas like weaving, furniture-making, architecture, and medicine. In addition, Okpoko (2023) laments that the influx of cheap imports from China and the prevalence of second-hand clothing from the US and Europe have significantly impeded the growth

of locally produced fabrics, including Akwete textiles, within the Nigerian market, thus undermining the domestic textile industry.

Honestly, if nothing critical is done as urgent as possible, some of our age-long indigenous products (that are already moribund) will go into extinction. This is worrisome, knowing that many countries of the world are doubling their efforts in promoting and exporting their indigenous products to other nations, especially to Africa. This trend is adversely affecting Africa's hope of growing their own industrialization of locally made products; it will invariably promote neo-colonization of African. Hence, there is need to revitalize, revive and intentionally invest in the promotion and growth of the Nigerian made products, including Akwete fabrics and other traditionally inspired wears.

Strategic Advertising Campaigns for Akwete Fabrics

Advertising is a marketing communication that employs a sponsored, non-personal message to promote or sell a product, service or idea. It is a paid form of communication by those who send them and are intended to inform or influence those who receive them. Belch G. and Belch M. (2007) defines advertising as any paid form of nonpersonal communication about an organization product, service, or idea by an identified sponsor. Product advertising deals with the process of promoting the features and benefits of a particular product to potential consumers. The major goal of product advertising is to increase brand awareness and drive massive sales for the product.

Strategic Advertising Campaigns (SAC) are integral part of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC). The IMC, according to Belch G. and Belch M. (2007), is a strategic business process used to develop, execute, and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communications programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, employees, associates, and other targeted relevant external and internal audiences. The goal is to generate both short-term financial returns and build long-term brand and shareholder value. The Strategic Advertising Campaign (SAC) comprises of all the intellectual, financial and creative investments given to every advertising and publicity campaigns for the promotion of products and services. Components of SAC include: product branding and brand management (creation of cooperate identity), publicity and promotional strategies, market survey, product stability and competitive evaluation plans, creation and production of market-storm materials (such as billboards, handbills, branded gifts etc.), recruitment and training the human resources for the project, and making detailed financial plans.

Therefore, it will be a great idea to adopt the SAC model, principle and ideology in promoting Akwete fabric. This implies creating a strong brand identity, that will not only attract consumers in large numbers, but also will give it a niche in the midst of other established fashion brands. The brand ideas suitable for Akwete fabrics could be adapted from the varied traditional motif/designs woven on the Akwete cloth. These motifs have deep cultural and philosophical connotations and significance, therefore could be strong selling point when they are adapted in the brand ideas. After creating the brand identity for the product, it also requires a well-coordinated and planned publicity campaign for launching this unique traditional textile brand to the market. With this approach, it will definitely attract so many investors, who will help to sufficiently promote the brand, especially using some locally and internationally recognized male and female models for the project.

Packaging of Akwete Fabrics for Market Acceptability

One of the major identified problem of Akwete fabric is that the physical finishing and packaging are not appealing to the eye. All that is required is creating a very captivating label design, brand identity and package for it. Product packaging plays vital role on the product's acceptability and visibility in the market. In line with the above, Forsyth (2022) describes packaging as the preparation of a product

for appropriate transportation and storage. Depending on the type of commodity, the packaging process may entail wrapping, bottling, strapping, sealing, marking, cushioning, bracing, weatherproofing or blocking. The fundamental role of packaging is to astatically present products before the consumer and to protect them from damage in transit and storage till it gets to the consumer. Since one of the key reasons for product packaging is to increase its physical value by giving it a very beautiful and simple design, there is need to adequately apply design principles if the product must gain higher visibility in the market. Akwete fabrics are not less in value than other textile materials, it only requires a brand design to add value to this unique indigenous product. Hopefully, when it is branded and packaged, it will increase its market value, drive market demand and become a better alternative to the imported brands.

In support of this view, Forsyth (2022) believes that product packages help to differentiate each product from their competitors, ensuring they are recognizable and marketable. In addition, Nwachukwu and Aghanya (2022) clarifies that packaging helps to identify, describe and promote the product. They insist that great idea behind product packaging is to create a lasting positive impression in the mind of consumers towards a product, which in turn is believed to translate to increased demand of the product above others due to its physical look. Good packaging contributes to the degree of acceptability and visibility of a product; hence the Graphic Designer must painstakingly pay keen attention to details and properly observe the design rules in order to achieve this onerous goal.

Recommendation

The following recommendations are offered in order to promote the Akwete fabric designs for local and global acceptability.

1. Government and financial organizations should urgently help to revitalize and reactivate the moribund and abandoned textile industries in Nigeria.
2. There is need for the government to formulate policies that will discourage high demand of imported products, especially among the elites and government functionaries.
3. Strategic Adverting should be explored by local investors so that their product will have media presence. This is very paramount especially in this era of new media and modern technological advancements.

Conclusion

The Akwete fabric has suffered a lot of low patronage; findings show that due to neglect, poor publicity and lack of adequate funding, the Akwete cloth production has experienced low acceptance both in the local and global markets. These problems can be tackled if proper attention is paid to the moribund textile industries all over the country. It is also established that the market for Akwete fabrics is yet green and untapped. Based on these facts, the industries should be revived, and be provided with modern equipment, so that they will comfortably provide the global market with sufficient Nigerian made textiles, especially the Akwete fabrics. Also, Strategic Advertising Campaign should be explored for the promotion and creation of awareness for the Akwete brand. Many businesses neglect the impact of branding on products, not knowing that branding has the capability of getting more consumers for their products.

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