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Strategic Advertising for Climate Change Mitigation in Africa: A Social Marketing Theory Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines advertising as a strategic tool for climate change mitigation in African contexts, drawing on Social Marketing Theory to frame perspective of the paper. It identifies six core functions through which advertising can support pro climate change mitigation behavioural change: creating audience awareness, targeting specific groups, reinforcing messages, cultivating emotionally resonant imagery, stimulating public interest, and inducing desired outcomes. Each function is explored with reference to relevant literature and contextualised within Africa's socio-cultural and developmental realities. The study argues that when advertising is strategically designed and systemically supported, it can contribute to measurable mitigation efforts. By aligning advertising with local priorities and leveraging culturally grounded communication strategies, practitioners can enhance the effectiveness of climate messaging and foster sustained behavioural change.

Keywords: Strategic Advertising, Climate Change, Mitigation, Africa, Social Marketing

Introduction

Climate change stands as one of the current most pressing global issues, characterised by ongoing Arctic ice melt, escalating sea levels, unprecedented global temperatures, prolonged droughts, severe floods, and extreme weather events, all occurring alongside the highest atmospheric carbon dioxide levels recorded in three million years (Garcia, 2021, International Council on Mining and Metals [ICMM], 2017). This situation has necessitated a lot of calls for actions, including the UN's sustainable development agenda (Sustainable Development Goal 13 [Climate Action]) for a swift decarbonisation of the global



economy to avoid severe climate impacts (ICMM, 2017). Additionally, a key United Nations climate report 2025 has cautioned that, although some progress has been made, global efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions remain insufficient, leaving significant gaps between climate goals and actual implementation (Panda, 2025).

Africa is not exempt from the challenges of climate change; it faces its own share of rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, and extreme weather events that disproportionately impact vulnerable communities. Although it contributes the least to global climate disruption, it remains among the first regions to endure its most severe consequences (UN, 2020). According to United Nations, Africa is warming at twice the global average, with devastating consequences. That year alone saw the destruction caused by cyclones Idai and Kenneth, alongside numerous underreported climate-related crises stretching from the Sahel to Zambia, and from Kenya to Madagascar. A locust infestation, linked to climate conditions, brought widespread hardship across East Africa, with warmer seas fuelling more cyclones and creating ideal breeding grounds for these pests, contributing to an unprecedented outbreak in Ethiopia and beyond (UN, 2020). In the same vein, West Africa's coastal zone supports over 20 million residents and contributes more than half of the region's GDP through key sectors such as trade, fisheries, tourism, and other maritime industries. However, this critical economic hub faces mounting risks, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) cautioning that rising sea levels, intensified coastal erosion, and extreme weather events are set to affect the region's shores more severely than in the past century (Nordic Development Fund [NDF], 2025). It is not any different in the North African Region, as Climate change poses a serious risk to North Africa, which is recognised as a climate vulnerability hotspot. The region is grappling with rising temperatures, dwindling water resources, and increasingly frequent extreme weather events. These impacts could result in a reduction of up to 11 percent in GDP per capita for every 1°C rise in global average temperature, a loss significantly higher than the 8 percent projected for Africa overall (Economic Commission for Africa [ECA], 2025).

In light of such climate-induced disruptions, particularly those affecting vulnerable regions across Africa, attention is turning to the role of communication in shaping public response and resilience. Kivuva (2025) observes that effective communication acts as a vital link between scientific insight and public understanding, enabling informed choices and collective action. Given the complexity of climate change, translating its intricacies for diverse audiences remains a significant challenge. Nonetheless, with deliberate and well-crafted communication strategies, it is possible to overcome these barriers and catalyse meaningful societal shifts.

One domain where such strategic communication is gaining traction is advertising, which when ethically harnessed, can serve as a powerful tool for climate engagement and behavioural change in support of mitigation. Advertising, traditionally associated with commercial persuasion, is increasingly being repurposed for climate advocacy, awareness, and behavioural nudging. While the advertising industry directly and indirectly exacerbates climate change through the promotion of unsustainable consumption and greenwashing practices, it also possesses transformative potential in advancing climate action (Hertmann et al, 2023). In this context, this paper therefore explores how advertising can be leveraged to support climate change mitigation, especially within Africa's vulnerable regions and, as Sithole (2024) notes, its under-communicated landscapes.

Literature Review

Advertising has traditionally been understood as a persuasive mechanism aimed at influencing consumer behaviour and stimulating market demand. As a central component of the promotional mix, it enables marketers to engage target audiences through carefully crafted messages. Typically, it involves showcasing goods or services in ways that attract attention and foster positive associations (Tellis, 2004). In more recent scholarship, advertising has been reframed as a strategic communication tool capable of



shaping consumer choices and driving behavioural outcomes (Smith, 2020). Hartmann et al. (2023) extend this view by arguing that, when ethically harnessed, advertising can play a transformative role in advancing climate action, reshaping cultural narratives, promoting low-carbon lifestyles, and disengaging from high-emission clients. This reframing opens new possibilities for advertising to serve not only economic interests but also environmental and civic goals.

Building on this, Hartmann et al. (2023) further contend that while the advertising industry contributes directly to carbon emissions and indirectly exacerbates climate change through unsustainable consumption and greenwashing, it also possesses significant potential for reform. By reducing its own environmental footprint, rejecting high-emission clients, and resisting misleading environmental claims, advertising can become a strategic ally in the transition to a low-carbon economy. This perspective highlights the role of green advertising in reshaping consumer behaviour through psychological mechanisms such as moral gratification, ecological connectedness, and fear-based appeals.

Despite Africa's acute vulnerability to climate change, media coverage remains sporadic and underdeveloped. Sithole (2024) identifies persistent gaps in climate-focused messaging, citing limited resources, low prioritisation, and a disconnect between media narratives and lived realities. Okoliko (2023) similarly notes that climate discourse in African media often lacks continuity, surfacing primarily during global events and fading thereafter. This undercommunication constrains public engagement and policy responsiveness, underscoring the need for strategic interventions, such as advertising, that can bridge informational and motivational divides. Muposhi and Nyagadza (2025) further critique the superficiality of many African green campaigns, highlighting their short-lived nature and lack of strategic depth. In response, ethical advertising frameworks advocate for transparency, cultural sensitivity, and alignment with low-carbon goals, principles essential for repurposing advertising as a credible tool for climate advocacy in African contexts.

Recent developments in Africa's corporate landscape illustrate how ethical advertising and sustainability-focused messaging are beginning to take root. CSR Reporters (2025) highlights five leading companies such as Safaricom, MTN Group, Nigerian Breweries, Anglo American, and Standard Bank Group, that are integrating climate-conscious strategies into their public communication and CSR initiatives. These firms promote clean energy, water stewardship, digital inclusion, and low-carbon transitions, often through branded campaigns and community engagement platforms. Their efforts demonstrate that advertising, when aligned with environmental goals and social equity, can serve as a credible tool for climate advocacy. This emerging practice reinforces the relevance of ethical advertising frameworks and signals a growing recognition of the private sector's role in shaping climate-aware behaviours across African contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Social Marketing Theory, originally developed by Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman (1971), which applies commercial marketing principles to promote socially beneficial behaviours. The theory provides a structured framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating communication campaigns that aim to influence voluntary behavioural change (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). In the context of climate change mitigation, it offers a valuable lens for understanding how advertising can be repurposed to promote low-carbon lifestyles, environmental stewardship, and civic engagement. Key tenets of the theory, such as audience segmentation, behavioural targeting, message reinforcement, and cultural relevance, are particularly pertinent in African contexts, where climate discourse is often fragmented and media access uneven. By identifying psychological and social barriers to climate action and tailoring messages to overcome them, advertising can serve not only economic interests but also



environmental and developmental goals. Social Marketing Theory provides the tools, principles, and evaluative criteria to analyse how advertising in Africa can be ethically crafted and strategically deployed to foster climate mitigation transformation.

Method

This paper draws from peer-reviewed articles, campaign reports, advertising toolkits, and media analyses, selected through a systematic literature search, with inclusion criteria focusing on African-based case studies and materials addressing climate communication, advertising ethics, and behavioural change to examine advertising as a strategic tool for climate change mitigation in African contexts.

Advertising as a strategic tool for climate change mitigation in African contexts

Advertising can be used as a strategic tool for climate change mitigation in Africa by applying some important principles from Social Marketing Theory.

1. Creating Audience Awareness

Creating awareness is a critical strategy for positioning advertising as a tool for climate change mitigation in African contexts. Advertising can play a pivotal role in elevating public understanding of climate issues, particularly in regions where media coverage is fragmented, and climate discourse remains peripheral to mainstream public debate. Drawing on *Social Marketing Theory* (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971), awareness is recognised as the foundational step in promoting voluntary behavioural change. Saturation advertising, across radio, television, mobile platforms, and social media, can ensure visibility of climate-related messages, especially among populations with limited access to formal education or scientific discourse.

Rodriguez-Sanchez (2023) reinforces this view in his analysis of environmental social marketing programmes, emphasising that communication strategies must be both persuasive and grounded in behavioural insight. Frameworks such as Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM) offer practical guidance by focusing on the identification of behavioural barriers and the enhancement of perceived benefits. This approach increases the likelihood that individuals will voluntarily engage in pro-environmental behaviours by making those behaviours attractive, contextually relevant, and emotionally resonant.

In African settings, where climate change intersects with poverty, infrastructure gaps, and cultural diversity, advertising must be designed with ethical sensitivity and strategic precision. Persuasive communication frames, enabled by new technologies and tailored to local realities, can help translate abstract climate risks into relatable narratives. When strategically deployed, advertising becomes more than a vehicle for information, it becomes a catalyst for behavioural transformation and a bridge between scientific knowledge and public engagement, thereby contributing meaningfully to climate change mitigation.

2. Targeting the Right Audience

Targeting the right audience is a strategic imperative for using advertising as a tool for climate change mitigation in African contexts. *Social Marketing Theory* emphasises the importance of audience segmentation, whereby messages are tailored to specific groups based on behavioural needs, cultural values, and media habits. In African settings, this means designing advertising campaigns that speak directly to farmers, youth, urban dwellers, or marginalised communities, using channels that resonate with



their lived realities, such as radio for rural populations, mobile platforms for peri-urban areas, and social media for digitally connected youth.

Rotar (2024) underscores audience segmentation and emotional appeals as pivotal in driving meaningful action on environmental challenges, which reinforcing the need for strategic message design. By aligning advertising content with the motivations, constraints, and aspirations of distinct audience groups, communicators can maximise relevance and impact. This approach not only ensures efficient resource use, but also deepens message penetration, making climate action more accessible and compelling across diverse African publics.

When advertising is informed by behavioural insight and delivered through appropriate media ecosystems, it becomes a targeted instrument for climate engagement, capable of shifting attitudes, fostering dialogue, and catalysing pro-environmental behaviours at scale

3. Reinforcing the Message

Reinforcing the message is a vital strategy for using advertising as a tool for climate change mitigation in African contexts. *Social Marketing Theory* emphasises that behavioural change is rarely achieved through single exposures; rather, it requires consistent and repeated messaging across multiple touchpoints. In African media environments, where climate communication is often sporadic and event-driven, advertising can provide the continuity needed to embed sustainable habits.

Strategic reinforcement through billboards, community radio, SMS campaigns, and influencer content ensures that climate messages remain visible and emotionally resonant. Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. (2023) affirm that this by noting the repetition and multi-channel exposure as critical in sustaining pro-environmental behaviour, thus highlighting the importance of sustained engagement. This is particularly relevant in African contexts, where infrastructural limitations and competing socio-economic priorities can dilute the impact of one-off campaigns.

By leveraging diverse media ecosystems and aligning message frequency with audience habits, advertising can serve as a behavioural scaffold, supporting climate-conscious decision-making over time. When thoughtfully designed, repeated exposure not only strengthens message retention but also normalises climate-positive behaviours, making them part of everyday life.

4. Cultivating Images or Impressions

Cultivating emotionally resonant imagery is a strategic function of advertising in climate change mitigation, particularly within African contexts where oral traditions, symbolism, and visual storytelling are deeply embedded. Social Marketing Theory supports the use of symbolic associations, such as family wellbeing, ancestral land, and community pride, to make climate messages relatable and culturally meaningful. Advertising, when designed with these associations in mind, can shape public perceptions by linking climate action to values that audiences already hold dear.

French (2025) highlights that emotional framing plays a central role in memorisation and decision-making, and that emotionally charged messages are more likely to be remembered and acted upon. In an information-saturated environment, emotionally framed advertising fosters authentic connections and transforms abstract issues into personally relevant narratives. This is particularly powerful in African settings, where climate change is often perceived as distant or externally imposed. By embedding climate messages in culturally familiar imagery and emotionally compelling stories, advertising can foster identification, empathy, and a sense of agency.

When supported by visuals, music, and storytelling, advertising becomes more than a conduit for information, it becomes an affective experience that motivates climate-conscious behaviour. In this way,



image cultivation serves not only to inform but also to inspire, making climate action feel both urgent and attainable.

5. Stimulating Interest

Stimulating public interest is a strategic function of advertising in climate change mitigation, particularly in African contexts where climate issues often compete with pressing socio-economic concerns. To overcome apathy and disengagement, advertising must capture attention through creative, unexpected, or dramatic content that resonates with local audiences. Social Marketing Theory supports the use of public events, symbolic actions, and record-setting initiatives to generate visibility and social buzz. Rodriguez-Sanchez et al. (2023) note that interest stimulation is a validated strategy within community-based social marketing interventions, especially when designed to evoke curiosity, excitement, or emotional investment. In African settings, where climate narratives may be perceived as abstract or externally imposed, advertising can reframe these issues through culturally relevant spectacles, storytelling, and participatory campaigns. By integrating symbolic gestures, community involvement, and multimedia storytelling, advertising becomes a dynamic tool for engagement. It not only draws attention to climate challenges but also invites audiences to see themselves as active participants in the solution, thereby fostering deeper commitment to pro-climate change mitigation behaviour.

6. Inducing Desired Results

Inducing measurable behavioural change is the ultimate objective of using advertising as a strategic tool for climate change mitigation in African contexts. Whether the goal is to promote the adoption of clean energy, reduce waste, or encourage support for climate policies, advertising must move beyond awareness and interest to catalyse sustained action. Social Marketing Theory frames this as the final stage in the behaviour change process, where communication efforts are translated into tangible outcomes.

Domegan (2021) argues that social marketing must operate within the dynamic interface of human and natural systems, recognising that behaviour change is shaped by complex, interconnected forces. In this view, advertising cannot function in isolation but must be embedded within broader systems that support transformation at individual, community, and societal levels. In African contexts, this means aligning advertising with local development priorities, engaging stakeholders, and ensuring that campaigns are reinforced by policy mechanisms, institutional support, and community-based structures.

By integrating advertising into systems-oriented social marketing strategies, communicators can enhance the likelihood of long-term behavioural change. This approach positions advertising not merely as a persuasive tool, but as a catalyst within a wider ecosystem of change, one that supports the achievement of climate change mitigation

Conclusion

This study concludes that advertising, when guided by Social Marketing Theory and tailored to African contexts, serves as a strategic tool for climate change mitigation. Through six key functions, creating audience awareness, targeting the right groups, reinforcing messages, cultivating emotionally resonant imagery, stimulating interest, and inducing behavioural change, advertising moves beyond conventional persuasion to actively support climate action. When aligned with local realities and development priorities, advertising can help translate climate science into accessible, culturally relevant messages that prompt voluntary behavioural shifts. In sum, advertising contributes not only to public engagement but also to the measurable behavioural outcomes necessary for effective climate change mitigation across diverse African settings. By aligning advertising with local priorities and leveraging culturally grounded communication strategies, practitioners can enhance the effectiveness of climate messaging and foster sustained behavioural change



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