# Semiotic Resources in the Rhetoric of Advertising Tertiary Institutions Qualifying Exams Preparatory Classes in a Nigerian University Town

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## Abstract

Proprietors and proprietresses of extramural classes in the university town of Ile-Ife, Nigeria, aggressively advertise their exams preparatory centres by appropriating multimodal resources to persuade admission seekers to higher institutions to choose their services over and above those of other competitors in the vicinity. This article examines the semiotic resources in the discourse to achieve their communicative goals. The data for the study comprise purposively selected posters from some prominent tutorial centres. The study adopts van Leeuwen's social semiotics theory. The study reveals that the advertisers deploy semiotic resources which suit the symbolic context of appealing to the dreams and anxiety of the admission seekers. It also demonstrates how general features of advertising language are harnessed creatively with digital resources to achieve rhetorical effect.

Keywords: Rhetoric; advertisement; extramural classes; qualifying exams; university town

**Introduction**

Gaining admission to the university in Nigeria appears to be a tough call given certain encumbrances. Among such constraints is that the number of admission seekers almost always overshoots the quota that specific universities can accommodate despite the fact that many private and state universities have sprung up in recent years in addition to the existing federal universities. It, therefore, turns out that most admission seekers to Nigerian universities end up getting stranded and sometimes frustrated even though their performances are not below par after all. In a world that looks like it is a narrow way that leads to the four walls of any Nigerian universities with multitudes striving to make it to the finish line, extramural classes have sprung up over the years as interventionist centres to further prepare prospective undergraduates and fortify their knowledge vault for the huge task of gaining admission to a university in the end.

In most university towns in Nigeria, therefore, extramural classes have become a defining feature of the academic world of such environments apart from the existing university campuses. Such preparatory classes target admission seekers with the assurance that they have all it takes to boost candidates' chances of gaining admission to universities of their choice. To pass across assuring success messages to the admission seekers in Ile-Ife and its environs, operators of extramural classes design posters which are widely circulated in Ile-Ife town, the university campus and satellite towns such as the Moro community which hosts the university's distance learning centre. While the casual observer could note the proliferation of such centres in the university town and a parent could make enquiries as to which of the centres truly live up to its billing for the sake of their child/ward, the present researcher finds it intriguing how producers of the posters exploit the anxiety of university admission seekers in a given rhetorical situation which identifies a seeming hurdle to be scaled by the target audience and projects an

entity (an extramural centre) as a viable option, pathway, grilling machine, or purveyor belt to lead the client to the Promised Land.

The rhetorical appeals generated in the discourse via both verbal and visual semiotic resources become compelling for the rhetorician-cum-semiotician to investigate. Hence, the aim of this study is to explore verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources designed as psychological hooks to appeal to the interests and anxieties of admission seekers to make informed choices as to where quality services are supposedly offered and there have been testimonies of sound successes by candidates who have passed through the advertised centres in recent times.

**Statement of Problem**

Scholars such as Oluwasanmi (2016), Mogaji (2019), Tukur, Abubakar, Sayuti and Ijeoma (2019) Nguyen and Mogaji (2022) adopting cross-sectional method of analysis, survey research method and an integrative literature review respectively examine branding of universities, both private and government owned to bring home the importance of advertising universities.

Studying political advertisement, Elegbe and Okon (2016), Hakokongas and Sakki (2019) examine the role of visual rhetoric and rhetorical appeals in order to aid understanding of how advertising is used as a tool of political persuasion. From the foregoing, it is established that a lot of studies have been carried out on the rhetoric of advertisement of various products, such as, alcohol, cosmetics, campaigns, telecommunication, universities, among others. Taking the competition in higher education sector into consideration, Oluwasanmi (2016) and Mogaji (2019) explore how universities use branding and logos to rhetorically build their identities with the intention to outrun others. However, an exploration of the semiotic resources in extramural advertisements in a given university town, particularly in Nigeria has not been adequately investigated. This is the knowledge gap that the present study attempts to address.

**Theoretical Framework**

Van Leeuwen's (2005) social semiotics is about the *how* of communication in terms of how material resources are used to produce meaning. Thus, this study borrows insights from Van Leeuwen's (2005) social semiotics which centres on how semiotic resources are used to construct meaning in discourse. Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 3) defines the notion of semiotic resources thus:

> Semiotic resources are the actions or artefacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced psychologically – with our vocal apparatus; with the muscles we use to create facial expressions and gestures, etc. – or by means of technologies – with pen, ink and paper; with computer, hardware and software; with fabrics, scissors and sewing machines, etc.

From this definition, therefore, it appears that semiotic resources are embedded in every form of communication. The question to ask, however, is: How are these resources studied to understand their semiotic potentials? Van Leeuwen (2005), states that these semiotic potentials do not have a "one size fits all" answer, but potentials are context dependent. In other words, what a semiotic resource stands for is affected by its use. Citing Gibson's (1979) use of "affordance", van Leeuwen illustrates semiotic potentials as observable properties. This is to say that semiotic potentials lie on individual's observation about a semiotic resource, depending on both the context of use, interest and needs of such observer. Technically therefore, van Leeuwen (2005, p. 5), citing Gibson (1979) postulates that "the meaning we find in a word are both subjective and objective". Hutching (1998) appears to be in agreement with Gibson (1979) when he describes one, among the semiotic resources; colour, as man's need- pressure, concerns and enjoyment. However, Kress (2002) perceives it as an 'interpersonal' affair. Nonetheless, van Leeuwen (2005, p. 5) states expressly that "the fact that resources have no objectively fixed meaning is not

to say that meaning is free-for-all". This is to say that although individuals can make meaning out of a discourse, they are however guided by some social and cultural rules.

Making meanings from words in specific context which scholars submit that is challenging for dictionaries to give, is what Ellison (2014), following Barthes' (1984) philosophical argument calls "grabbing hold" of the denoted meaning and transforming it. This transformation he refers to as connotation. Succinctly, Chandler (1994, p.1) refers to connotation as the socio-cultural and personal association of signs. These, according to him are related to the interpreter's class, age, gender, ethnicity, among others. Adegoju (2008) accounts how connotation opens up possibilities of meaning, in that an interpreter could possibly provide meaning that differs totally from the writer's. Explaining the choice of meaning an interpreter/ individual gives a semiotic resource, Ellison (2014) avers that such is based on reality. Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 4) positions are based on "past uses and potentials" which could be either explicit or implicit. Further reacting to connotative meanings based on past realities, Ellison (2014) buttresses that such meanings are choices that hold the rhetorical import of the message at a given time. This can thus be argued that rhetoric gives value to connoted meaning in relation to the context. Rhetoric renders signs effective, in other words, rhetoric is that part of social semiotics that focuses on semiotic effect which transmits meaning by signs from mind to mind.

**Methodology**

The data for study are composed of posters either distributed in the form of hand bills at strategic locations in the university town of Ile-Ife which is the host community of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife or pasted on strategic notice boards or walls of the university campus. These posters usually advertise services for the preparation of Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), qualifying exams to Obafemi Awolowo University degree or pre-degree programmes. Marketers of these centres see the campus as their catchment centre because it is believed to be a convergence zone for both prospective candidates and their parents/

ward to seek reliable information. With the aid of a digital camera, about 25 posters were initially captured before 10 were purposively selected for the analysis based on the richness of the semiotic resources deployed in them to appeal to the sensibilities of the prospective clients. The data were collected over a period of two peak periods of students seeking admission between 2019 and 2021. One of the posters dated 2018 was used based on its semiotic import. The analysis employs a qualitative method whereby significant semiotic resources are subjected to description and interpretation of the rhetorical devices used.

**Analysis and Discussion**

This section is dedicated to the analysis and discussion of the data in relation to the social communicative resources and advertising strategies embedded in the text. The analysis is divided into three sections, guided by colour, image and numbers which are the semiotic resources prominent in the posters. These resources are analysed and discussed drawing upon the principles of the theoretical perspectives of the study.

**Deployment of Images**

Images are said, on the one hand, to contain more messages than their physical objectives and, on the other hand, convey more messages than written texts. Owing to this, viewers or readers, as Harriosn (2003) posits, no longer solely rely on written texts for comprehension. Therefore, the advertiser in the posters below tend to explore the power of images coupled with written texts in an advert.

Figure 1



Figure 2

Images and texts in the figures above suit Horn's (1999) concept of "tight coupling" which reveals the close-fitting relationship between words and images in an advert. This is seen in the figures above, where images are used as available rhetorical strategies to boost the meaning of the written text, "crush". The verb "crush" as will be discussed in the second section, is not left for the viewers to probably imagine how to "crush OAU pre-degree and OAU POST UTME" respectively, but it is with a demonstration of how it should be done with an image of fist, in figure 1.

The fist can be likened to van Leeuwen (2005) semiotic resource which he refers to as an observable action. Going by Harrison's (2003) classification, such an image is an indexical image. He describes an indexical image as an image that is not just observable but understandable, because there is a relationship between the concept and what it stands for. This "understandable" image is therefore engaged in order to boost the written text, as a fist is characteristic of force.    In the second section for instance, where the verb "crush" will be discussed in detail, there may be room for viewers to have several perspectives or

interpretations, this is in line with van Leeuwen's (2005) position that individuals interpret according to their socio-cultural experiences and believe. Therefore, as an image of fist attempting to crush "OAU pre-degree and OAU POST UTME" was employed to persuade the audience/viewers of a particular point of view, Harrison (2003) opines that this could help to control viewer's attention among many other competing perspectives in an advert.

Harrison (2003) helps to understand the power of still images with the opinion that images on adverts are not merely an act of creativity, they are rather used to negotiate meaning. Hence, the advertiser tends to understand his/her target audience and believes the image of fist crushing what seems like a mountain on their path could serve as a persuasive strategy. This is likely to be so, because as van Leeuwen (2005) posits, connotation is aided by an interpreter's age and gender, among others, and it is no doubt that the target audience of this advertiser (figure 1) are strong and energetic and can therefore easily defeat any form of hindrance on their path. In the same vein, attempting to persuade, the advertiser in figure 2 stirs up sentiment in his/her viewers by the image, projecting possibility. Because, ordinarily, it may be impossible for anyone to run through a brick wall (unbruised), but the image in figure 2 presents such possibility. With deliberative performance, a rhetorical element that is concerned with persuading audience to take action, the advertiser conveys a propelling image to pump the adrenaline of the viewers towards achieving the somewhat unachievable. This is suggestive of portraying the extramural centre as one which can surmount the insurmountable(s) for it students. In other words, though OAU Pre-degree feels like a mountain, the extramural centre can help the students to make it plain.

**The Persuasive Strength of Colour**

It is the persuasive habit of human to identify and create signs for making one thing to stand for another. Kress (2002) postulates that this brings about aesthetics and beautification to a text. Creating signs for making meaning is far beyond language, according to Saeed (2003).

According to psychologists, colours serve as a determinant of human behaviours, given this, advertisers deploy colours to beautify and appeal to their prospective customers. The choice of colours advertisers make is not only for aesthetic motivation, but also to significantly depict certain world. Kress (2002) reechoes Verner-Bonds' (2001) claim, that adding colour to document can increase the reader's attention span more than 80%. He simply submits that people use colour to actually energize. To Ford (2019), colours play attention grabbing, aesthetic and symbolic roles. It must be noted, however, that though colours are constant everywhere in the world, they are perceived and classified differently. It is a general knowledge, for instance, that western and eastern cultures perceive colour black differently. While black to the western society symbolises death, death in the eastern society is symbolised with white. In order therefore for advertisers to appropriately communicate with their audience, they tend to choose colours that can effectively do this on their behalf. In this section of the study, the persuasive strength of colours in extramural posters shall be investigated, as educational materials are not seen to be without colours.

Of note, in each of the posters below is the combination of several colours projecting different linguistic elements of the posters. Explaining the possible reason(s) behind this, Kress (2002) submits that colours are coordinated to enhance textual cohesion…colours are meant to make the different parts more distinct, as well as to suggest at least aspects of meaning. In this light, we will discuss the use of colours to enhance the message in figures 3-6.

Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 5



Figure 6

Common among the posters above is a white background, which according to colour psychologists enhances the readability of an advert. This appears to be in relation with Aristotle's *Logos* aimed at persuading the audience logically, with the combination of other colours. Logically appealing to their target audience, the proprietors/proprietresses of these

tutorial centers seem to be aware of the power of urgency in colour red, hence, it is used in "POST-UTME" in figures 3-5. An average Nigerian (student) tends to dread POST UTME more than UTME itself. This is likely to be so because, every higher institution wants to be seen or known as the best amongst equals, they, to this effect, want to admit the best of the students, therefore the entrance examination appears a bit difficult than UTME. Being abreast of this fear among students, extramural proprietors therefore deploy a strong semiotic resource, which is colour red to trigger action and possibly stirs emotion in their target audience. This is in relation with van Leeuwen's (2005) core definition of socio semiotics which states how resources are used to communicate. Proprietors/proprietresses therefore communicate "action now", a rhetorical deliberate performance to persuade prospective undergraduate with colour red. This seems to suggest something like "drop all fears and take action now by enrolling in our tutorial centre"

Significant to note of the posters above, which enhances the effect of colour red discussed are the verbs "crush" and "slay" respectively, which are suggestive of force, violence or pressure. These verbs are used to enhance the use of colour as a semiotic resource, which could mean on the one hand that "action now" is not to be taken anyhow, but forcefully/violently to achieve the expected result. This can be likened to a verse in the Holy Bible: "from the days of John the Baptist, the kingdom of God suffereth violence and the violent men take it by force". (Matthew 11 vs 12, KJV). In this sense, higher institutions can be compared to a kingdom which requires violence to gain entrance in to. Of note however, is that violence in this sense is not that which involves bloodshed, but the violence which requires academic rigour. On the other hand, these verbs appear to be used to guide their target audience's meaning of the colour red used to project POST-UTME. This may likely be so, because red to many people/culture represents 'danger', which may likely create more fear in the minds of their target audience. Therefore, in order not to give room for several connotative meanings which van Leeuwen (2005) posits is

individualistic, the verbs "crush" and "slay" appeared to be used to guide the likely interpretation of the colour red used. Shedding more light on connotation, van Leeuwen (2005) expatiates that connotation is related to interpreter's class, age and gender. Thus, proprietors/ advertisers seem to be aware of how energetic their target audience could be, they therefore engage rhetoric, a tool which moves audience to thought and action to stir up sentiment (POST-UTME) and in turn, taking step to "crush and slay" POST-UTME.

Of semiotic importance also in the posters is the use of colour blue. Going through both the cultural and social meaning of blue, in *My Professional Advertising website*, blue is best described as a colour of security and serenity. Colour psychologists argue that advertisers who make use of blue, do so to project an image of reliability and seriousness. This is therefore evidenced in figure 5 above, where the name of the extramural centre is written in blue. This semiotic resource reechoes Aristotle's rhetorical appeal and rhetorical performance, *Ethos* and demonstrative respectively which project the credibility of the speaker. As Aristotle avers, the credibility of the speaker defines the audience's perception towards him or her. In the light of this, "God First Tutors" (figure 5) can be seen projecting trustworthiness among its equals. This could be subtly put as "you can count on us for your desired result in any of the exams, Obafemi Awolowo University examinations, specifically". Again, precisely, the shade of blue used is as well significant for interpretation. Psychologically, dark shade of blue is used to represent seriousness and intelligence. Therefore, the choice of this shade is rhetorically striking. As stated earlier, rhetoric is an ability to convince the listener, in an attempt therefore to convince the target audience of its credibility and reliability, a dark shade of blue was engaged. This specific shade is to solidify the importance of blue in general as used for the name of the tutorial centre in the poster.

Discussing the possible diversities in semiotic resources as stated above, van Leeuwen (2005) makes it clear that what a semiotic resource stands for is affected by its use. In other

words, as discussed above, although red is associated with danger, its use in the posters under study is not that of danger but to trigger action in audience. How best can this claim be said to be true with the use of colours blue and white in "crush" and "slay" in figures 3 and 5 above? A look into what colour psychologists give as the meaning of these colours may be of great help in providing possible insight into this puzzle. While colour blue is generally believed to be best used to convince people of security and serenity, white is best associated with innocence, cleanness and purity. Given these attributes, let us consider how they are possibly used in the posters under discussion. In figures 3 and 5 above, the verb "crush and "slay" are both written in white text on blue background, which should ordinarily presuppose purity and security. But given the meaning of these verbs, there appears to be strange collocations. Briefly, let us take a look at how *Cambridge Dictionary* defines these verbs; "crush"- to defeat someone completely, and "slay"- to kill violently. Going by these definitions therefore, it appears these colours were used ignorantly, or to say they are used just to enhance the readability of the text. This is because it is strange to attribute violence with purity, neither is there safety where one is likely to be crushed. However, given the power of social semiotics, which according to Adegoju (2008) must be situated, as meaning of texts are generated according to each reader, and Almalech (2017, p. 4) who submits that: "One and the same colour can have opposite meanings, and many colours can mean the same feeling or idea", these colours and texts can thus be interpreted differently. Colours are said to trigger changes in mood, in a bid therefore, to trigger mood or possibly project credibility among peers, (*Ethos*), these advertisers seem to give the impression of purity by writing these verbs in white to suggest a pure defeat without dent. That is, defeating OAU POST-UTME without any form of examination malpractice.

Colour is a major communicative and visual design element that affects how effectively a visual is received, Davis (2009) submits. Consider the posters below.
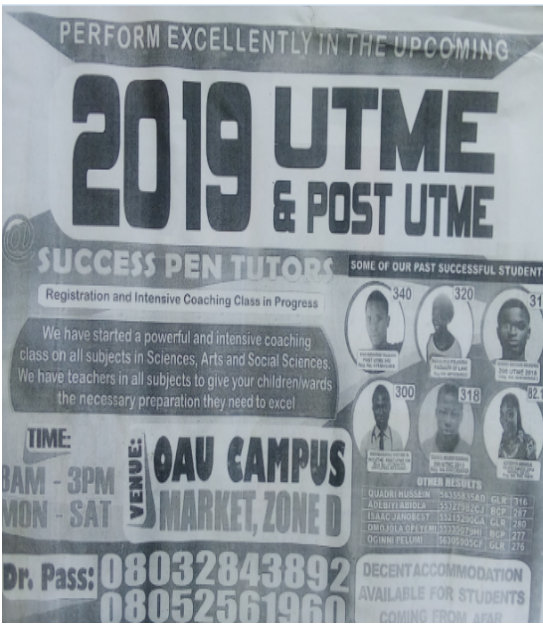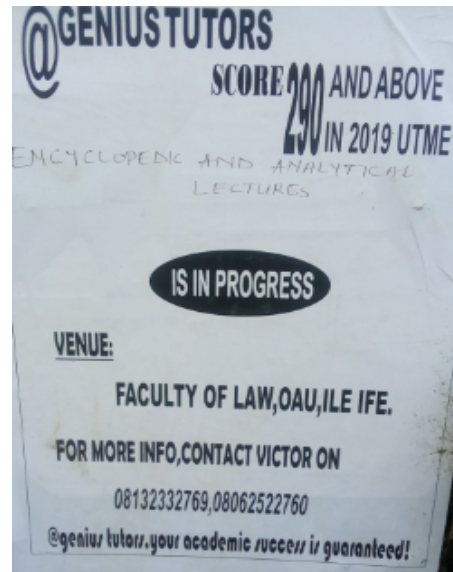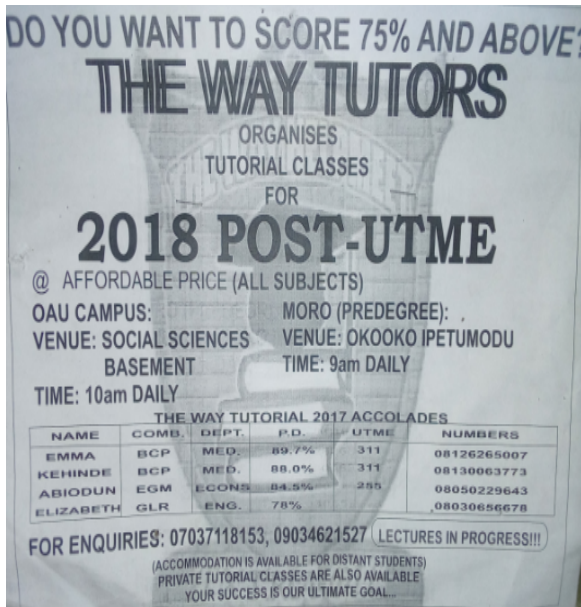
Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Figure 10

Psychologically, monochrome adverts are believed to be unique. As colour psychologists aver, the main essence of choosing a monochrome mode of advertisement is to stand out among competitors. The question however to ask is: How well are monochrome adverts appreciated? No doubt, the first thing that may likely come to audience's mind when a monochrome print advert is seen is lack of funds. Curious to confirm this perception, this researcher visited some print advert designers; the outcome of the visit tends to be in line with the popular perception about monochrome print adverts, as the designers submit that "it is an act of saving money and still achieving the same purpose a coloured print advert does". However, it may be biased to lean only towards the ideology that monochrome posters/ adverts are poor when colour experts have a totally different position about this. Colour psychologists aver that a monochromic advertisement aids in content concentration and it is also a symbol of sophistication. In other words, coloured adverts may cause distractions, as colours are said to trigger mood. Colour psychologists in fact refer to coloured adverts as an act of artificiality. That is to say that monochrome adverts, just as seen in figures 7-9 above project their products as natural as possible.

To possibly answer the question posed above, there may be need for us to consider van Leeuwen's (2005) take on connotation. This is so because, the advertiser is not adverting because of him/herself, but advertising to an audience/viewer, and the meaning an audience gets out of an advert determines how the product would be purchased. To van Leeuwen (2005), connotation relates with an interpreter's age, class, gender and ethnicity. If this is the case, another poser is: Are the audiences of these posters likely to interpret or appreciate monochrome adverts, considering their age? Although, it can be seen from the posters, according to the knowledge gathered from colour psychologists that they are projecting originality, which is a rhetorical device to announce the credibility of the speakers in selling their product with sophistication and purity as that is what black and white stand for, it may not likely go down well with the target audience who are largely youth dominated. To possibly convince their audience about their credibility, these advertisers project their past results, which is an attempt to logically persuade their audience. This is one of the elements of Aristotle's rhetoric, *Logos.* We shall take a critical look at this in the next section.

**Numerals as Carrots of Enticement**

There is a general saying that "men are moved by what they see", but the same is not the case here, as there is no gender limitation in extramural posters; suitable in this context is "admission seekers are moved by what they see".  Based on this fact, it is not an exaggeration to postulate that the posters in this study employ numbers both to catch attention and to boost the credibility of their advertising message. In other words, they are backing their facts with figures. Campbell (2000) opines that numbers in adverts are engaged because of its rhetorical powers. One of the powers of rhetoric according to Garver (2009) is the power of conviction. To therefore convince audience, extramural proprietors/proprietresses showcase some of their outstanding results in the posters above. The main essence of social semiotics according to van Leeuwen (2005) as discussed above is the investigation of how resources are used to

communicate. In this instance, numbers (past results) are used to communicate to the audience their level of achievement, hence their credibility so far. Credibility is Aristotle's *Ethos*, a rhetorical element that does more than giving speech but shows the credence of the speaker. These numbers are used to shape audience's perception. That is, allowing their works to speak on their behalf. These works in Van Dijk's (2000) view, signal precision and truthfulness.

The caption used in figure one above, to present the result is engaging; "[o]ur record speaks volume". The proprietor/proprietress of this extramural centre seems to be aware of the fact that meaning is ascribed to a resource based on the interpreter's several experiences and culture. This, van Leeuwen (2005) refers to as connotation. To therefore limit all possible interpretations which may arise from other semiotic resources employed in the poster, the proprietor/proprietress therefore makes use of the idiomatic expression "our record speaks volume" to say more of its reliability. It may also aid in the meaningfulness of every other semiotic resources in the poster. Among Aristotle's submission on *Ethos* is a speaker's ability to build a good perception of him/herself in the mind of their audience, by so doing, the essence of rhetoric is achieved. To this effect, the proprietor therefore used the expression to move audience to thought with the hope that it would in turn move them to action, which is registering in their extramural centre.  In all but one of the posters above, past results of the extramural centres are not just summarised linguistically, rather, precise figures were captured in the posters. This is likely used to lay emphasis on the other linguistic/semiotic resources such as "slay" and crush" above. Not only that, to probably also erase all possible doubt about their extramural centres, as evidence convince more than mere talks. This is likely to be the reason behind one of the words of Jesus Christ in John 4:48 which reads: "Then Jesus said unto him, except you see signs and wonders, you will not believe"

Attention grabbing among the posters above are figures 5 and 6, in that one would expect figure five, whose name of extramural centre is "God First Tutors" to have such captions seen in

figure 6, "David Great". Captions such as: "Arise and shine for your light has come" and "Are you really thirsty for studying…", these captions at first interaction, project religious activities as the tutorial name in figure 5, "God First" also suggests. The captions in figure 6 projects more of religious activities than educational activities. These captions can be related to some of Jesus' words as recorded by Prophet Isiah, in Isiah 60:1: "ARISE, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee"; and 55:1: "HO, everyone that thirst, come ye to the waters"…respectively. This extramural centre, (figure 6), appears to project itself as the savior to the admission seekers. This is because the words of whom he borrowed are the words of whom the Christians believed to be the saviour. It is interesting to note also, that this supposed "saviour", 'David Great' is also of the opinion that seeing is believing, this enhances a showcase of "testimonies" in the poster. It would not be an overstatement if the proprietor/proprietress of this extramural centre is said to be a clergy, as all of his/her captions are religiously related. The proprietor/proprietress again, in presenting his/her past result, inserted religiosity in: "This is the Lord's doing", which is also a biblical reference.

Although the proprietor/proprietress might have used such religious captions in an attempt to stir up sentiments, as Nigerians are believed to be religious, it may as well generate rebel, especially, from those who see such acts as barely necessary. This attempt, Aristotle refers to as *Pathos,* a rhetorical element used to stir up sentiments. Nelson (2005) posits that such act appeals to passion or to mobilise emotions, in figure 6, the proprietor/proprietress therefore appears to mobilise religious emotion alongside academic. A critical engagement with the posters under study gives an insight into another perspective into the use of figures in the posters. We should observe that not only are results presented in these posters but the numbers of these results also seem to matter to the advertisers. This, Bell (1991) avers is to enhance the value of an advert. From another perspective, these numbers, according to Kilyeni (2013) are not just used to project facts or precision, they have some rhetorical purposes they serve; one of

which is a positive self-representation, which is Aristotle's demonstrative performance. In an attempt therefore to project a positive image of themselves, these proprietors present as many results as possible, even when, in some cases the results are hardly visible, this is typical of figures 3, where twenty results were presented, 4, twenty-two and 10, eight respectively. Although, figure 5 has more results (15) presented than figure 10, the visuals in figure 10 is not sight friendly which may likely repel the audience, however, the colours, (white and yellow) of texts used in figure 5 seem to have enhanced its readability.

## Conclusion

We have been able to identify and analyse some significant semiotic resources used by the advertisers in the discourse. It is noteworthy that the producers of the advertisements creatively harness local resources in the immediate environments of the people to appeal to their sensibilities. We must admit, however, that the goal of making profit in the end is paramount to the aggressive marketing of their services, hence the projection of the ideological posture of positive self-representation by every producer of the discourse to attract prospective candidates. In all, it can be said that the advertisers' choice of semiotic resources ranging from colours, images to numerals to persuade their prospective clients draws attention to the capacity of one and the same sign to generate multiplicities of meaning in context.

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