

## **Patriarchal Universe of Advertising: The Nigerian Example**

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**ABSTRACT** From the purview of the patriarchal universe of discourse theory, the paper examines sex role stereotyping in Nigerian TV. Commercials. An in-depth analysis of TV. Commercials of products in alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverage as well as laundry soap, communication facilities, baby product, confectioneries and transportation categories revealed that female characters were used as sex objects and were made to play the role of mothers and housewives. This portrayal does not, in the opinion of the authors, do justice to the many women who have made their marks in business and the profession hence the paper calls for a correct reflection of the role of women in TV. Commercials. More so since impressionable members of the society are likely to expect conformity with these portrayal thus doing damage to the cause of the womenfolk

### **INTRODUCTION**

Advertisings increasing sophistication and sophistry are clearly evident in today's world. Sophistication is manifest in attention grabbing ad copies which virtually compel recipients to pay undivided attention. Sophistry as manifested in the various gimmicks and underhand deals designed to win the hearts and minds of consumers. No wonder advertising agencies and practitioners have been accused of engaging in unfair and deceptive practices such as false promises, incomplete description, false and misleading comparisons, bait and switch offers, visual distortion and false demonstration, false testimonials, partial disclosures as well as small print qualification (Arens, 1996)

In addition to these unbecoming activities, advertisers are also adept at employing stereotypes especially as it affects women. The primary stereotypes are portrayal of women as sex objects and as housewives. One or two examples will suffice.

"Topless or covered" print ad by Globe Motors showed a young female model in two poses related to the two types of Mercedes Benz cars advertised. As regards the convertible the model's hair was uncovered and her hands were folded across her braless breast. In the second pose she was prim and proper as a normal, covered Benz car. The Royco seasoning television commercial had a housewife whose cooking with the inviting aroma enabled her to placate her angry husband. In another TV commercial on "Boska" a drug for treating malaria

fever, the housewife had to leave her washing to take care of her husband who had come home early from the office down with a fever.

Even though these adverts and many more were crafted to sell products they convey certain underlying messages about the women folk. So women's sexuality should be used to sell cars and the men would presumably gloat and then go out to buy such cars? And in this day and age when a number of women have achieved so much in their careers is it still right to keep portraying them as housewives and mothers as if they have nothing else to offer society?

Wells (2000) sees this presentation of a group of people, and in this instance womenfolk, in an unvarying pattern that lacks individuality as one of the major criticisms against advertising. The sad thing about all this is that the way advertising portray various segments determines in some measure the treatment meted out to them (Russel and Lane, 1996). This is even more striking considering the second - class status that women and the girl child have been assigned in many cultures.

*Patriarchal Universe of Advertising:* Julia Penelope has done tremendous work in showing graphically how the English Language has been patriarchal and oppressive of women-the patriarchal universe of discourse (Littlejohn, 1992: 243). She sees language as male created and a tool for the continued domination of women. The rules and conventions of the English language are arbitrary and designed to achieve the above. She illustrates this by taking a close look at dictionary definitions of manly, masculine, womanly and feminine:

*The qualities listed under manly and masculine are the "good", things an individual might wish to be: strong, brave, determined, honest, and dignified. Not a single one of the negative qualities commonly attributed to maleness are listed .... Look closely at the long list of characteristics in the definition for manly compared to the circularity of the pseudo-definition for womanly, "like or befitting a woman". That's not a definition; it assumes that we already know the behaviours that "befit" a woman. The real definitions for womanly are implied as "oppositions" to "manly qualities" ... positive attributes commonly associated with females, nurturing, kind, and loving, have been omitted.*

To redress these inequities in language use, a feminist dictionary authored by Cheris Kramarac and Paula Treichler has been designed to serve as a feminist universe of discourse. (Littlejohn, 1992). The entries include birth name – a term used by feminist as a more accurate label than maiden name which has sexual double standards; foremother an ancestor and many more (ibid).

The advertising world probably because it is populated and dominated by the men folk appears to be perpetuating the same stereotypes that have elicited the questioning of the status quo in the use of language. And it appears that this negative trend is a universal phenomenon as some examples would indicate.

A 1985 study<sup>1</sup> of Canadian television commercials corroborates this negative portrayal of the women folk. The study reported that the primary setting for 50% of the major female characters was the home while only 29% of their male counterparts appear in home settings. The paid work setting had 90% of women and 22% of men. Other findings were: outdoor setting with 11% of women and 19% of men; men only adverts constituted 24% while women only adverts accounted for 13%; adverts with voice-overs had 94% male participation.

In the U.S., portrayal of adult women stresses passivity, deference, lack of intelligence and punishment for exerting significant effort (Wells et al., 2000). Men, in contrast, were portrayed as constructive, powerful, autonomous and achievement oriented (ibid). They note that subtle aspects of self-presentation such as poise, language and facial expression indicate gender stereotyping. They conclude by stressing that a major challenge advertisers face is realistic

portrayal of women as mature, intelligent people with varied interest.

The viewers' forum (1999) has pinpointed dominant stereotypes that require re-examination:

A woman's role in the home is that of a domestic help

A woman's physical beauty is an instrument for selling any product

A woman is always looking for or struggling to hold on to the right man

A woman is typically show-cased as a wife/mother.

She is shown to be coy, submissive and as a suffering person

The most harmful stereotype is that of projecting a woman as another woman's enemy.

These stereotypes take on more harmful dimension when looked at from the point of view of Gerbner's cultivation theory as well as the postulation of the cultural norms theory. TV presents men as dynamic and aggressive and women are shown as passive and domestic (Folarin, 1998), yet these messages have effects that are said not to be negligible (Severin and Tankard, 1992). This slanted portrayal of women can come to be accepted since the cultural norms theory holds that through emphasis on certain themes impressionable audience members "would tend to pattern their behaviour along the lines of such presentation" (Folarin, 1998).

**Objectives of the Study:** Over the year, women have been given diverse roles in television commercials. However, one of the criticisms against television commercials has been the issue of gender inequality, i.e. an unequal portrayal of women. Wells et al. (2000) wrote that:

*The portrayal of women in advertisement has received much attention over time, initially, critics complained that ads showed women as preoccupied with beauty, household duties and motherhood. Research shows that portrayal of adult women in U.S. television and print advertising have stressed passivity, deference, lack of intelligence and credibility and punishment for exerting significant effort. In contrast, men have been shown as constructive, powerful, autonomous and achievement oriented.*

Considering the above statement which is given weight by Russel and Lane (1996), it is the intent of this study to reveal if really there are any form of discrimination against women in television commercials shown on Nigeria television stations.

The study also intends to increase the awareness, if any, of such unequal representation and the issue of sex role stereotyping in the broadcast media vis-à-vis television commercials.

In addition, the study has an objective of encouraging the elimination of sex-role stereotyping in television commercials. This it intends to do by encouraging advertisers to portray a realistic representation of women in diverse roles, both at home, at work and other activities. Well et al. (2000) have argued that one major challenge which advertisers face is the ability to portray women realistically without any form of stereotyping and with a new freedom. And as mature, intelligent people with varied interest and abilities.

The study therefore sought answers to the following research questions.

- R.Q.1: What roles will the major female characters be given in television commercials?
- R.Q.2: Will the type of product affect the roles given to women?
- R.Q.3: Do the roles reflect any form of stereotype?

**Scope of Study:** The study examined adverts shown on Nigeria television stations both privately owned and government owned operating in Lagos state.

To allow for an equal representation of television stations, two private stations namely: African Independent Television, Lagos and Channels Television, Lagos as well as the Nigeria Television Authority Channel five, Lagos and the Nigeria Television Authority Channel ten, Lagos which are government owned stations were purposely chosen for this study.

In order to ensure as much representation as could be possible, a sample of nine television advertisements were chosen each representing a different product line. The advertisements are listed below:

- Non Alcoholic Beverage : Bournvita
- Laundry Soap : Ariel detergent washing powder
- Communication Facilities : MTN
- Alcoholic Beverage : Bailey Irish Cream
- Baby Product : New Pampers disposable diapers
- Food Seasoning : Royco Seasoning Cubes
- Confectioneries : Mcvites
- Medical : Cofmix cough syrup
- Transportation : Peugeot 406

**DEMOGRAPHIC ATTRIBUTES OF MODELS ON TV COMMERCIALS**

Table 1 shows that out of all the major characters in the advertisements chosen, 50% were males, 25% were females and 25% were children. This shows a higher number of major male characters in the advertisements chosen.

**Table 1: Sex/Level of maturity of models**

<i>Sex</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Females	25
Males	50
Children	25
Total	100

Table 2 shows that though only 25% of the major characters were females. 50% of them were portrayed primarily as housewives, 25% as mothers. None of the major female characters had any identifiable paid occupation. 25% of them were portrayed in other roles such as an artist and a snooker player.

**Table 2: Roles for the major female models**

<i>Roles</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Mother	25
Wives	50
Employees	-
Other roles	25
Total	100

Table 3 shows that with the exception of Peugeot 406 and Bournvita which have no female characters, the product line does not necessarily dictate the role women will play. The major female character in the MTN advertisement was still shown in the house doing domestic work. Except for Mcvities and Bailey Irish Cream, in all the other products, women are portrayed either as house wives and or mothers. The roles assigned women as housewives and or mothers reflect stereotypes as indicated in Table 3.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

**Women as Housewives/Mothers:** For 50% of the major female characters, the primary setting is the home. Among men, 30% appeared primarily in the home. The outdoor environment included 20% of women and 20% of men.

Though, men constituted a higher majority of the advertisement characters – 50% compared

**Table 3: Roles by products**

<i>Products lines</i>	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Wives</i>	<i>Employed</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Total</i>
Peugeot 406	-	-	-	-	-
Royco Cubes	-	12.5	-	-	12.5
MTN	-	12.5	-	-	12.5
Pampers diapers	12.5	-	-	-	12.5
McVities	-	-	-	12.5	12.5
Cofmix	12.5	12.5	-	-	25.0
Bailey Irish cream	-	-	-	12.5	12.5
Bournvita	-	-	-	-	-
Ariel detergent	-	12.5	-	-	12.5
Total	25.0	50.0	-	25.0	100.0

with women 25% and children 25%. The advertisements still had the trend of showing women as pre-occupied with house hold duties. However, the outdoor environment showed a balanced portrayal of both men and women at 20% each.

**Women as Employed:** None of the major female characters had any identifiable paid occupation. However, 90% of the men had employment status. Females are usually shown performing domestic tasks relating to the product or in the house e.g. Royco Cubes, Ariel detergent powder and MTN. However, in 50% of the advertisements men are shown using the product, giving approval or being joined to use the product.

**Voice-overs :** Of the voice-overs, 60% were male even for domestic products e.g. Ariel and Royco. Only 30% of the voice-overs were female.

### CONCLUSION

The findings of the study lead to the conclusion that television commercials have a trend of portraying women mainly as wives or mothers. This proves critics right when they alleged advertisements stereotypes such as Well et al. (2000), Russel and Lane (1996) and verifies the findings of the content analysis on the portrayal of sex roles in Canadian Radio – Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) 1985 report. It shows an unequal portrayal of women being shown mainly as preoccupied with household duties and motherhood.

However, two of the advertisements, portrayed a different perspective as they showed women preoccupied with varied interest and abilities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers suggest that advertisers should seek to portray women in a more realistic

setting. Though, women roles include being wives and mothers, they are taking up new challenges, hobbies and jobs. Advertisers should face up to reality by portraying women without any form of stereotype, but as mature intelligent people with varied interest and abilities.

Advertisers, in designing their messages must be sensitive to the various characteristics of their different targets. They should be careful how they portray different groups and live up to their social responsibility of portraying what is accurate and representative.

The researchers also suggest a development of sex role portrayal code for television broadcast by the authorities and the parties involved in the programme development and production, programme acquisition decisions and commercial message production.

### NOTE

1. Canadian Radio - Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) Report 1985.

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