

## THE LINGUISTIC AND PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENT LABELS AND SYMBOLS IN ANAMBRA STATE

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### **Abstract**

The media's power and reach can unite and magnify women's voices, particularly in the fight for gender equality. The media's portrayal of women, in contrast, appears to have exacerbated the patriarchal disadvantage women already face and heightened the view that they are impoverished, weak, and sexual objects. To entice buyers, certain media advertisements use sexual objectification, subjugation, and stereotyping of women. Labelling and images used by advertisers may be sexist. Advertisers' language is closely linked to gender issues such as objectification, sexism, subjugation, and stereotyping, which the target audience does not recognise because of its subtlety and obscurity. Previous studies have not adequately accounted for how Anambra State's different linguistic and pictorial representations of women in commercial labels and symbols affect women's psychology and social status. Thus, this study examines the effects of pictorial representation of women in print, bill board and other electronic advertisement on Nigerian women. The standpoint theory and visual semiotic theory were the underpinning theories for this study. The qualitative research method was used and implemented through textual analysis method. Ninety newspapers were selected purposively, all of which were published in 2019 (January-June). Similarly, periodicals published in the spring of 2019 (April-June) were analysed. Five billboards and two television stations were used in the study, while interviews were conducted with market women and men in Onitsha and Eke-Awka. The study revealed that advertising can lead to the subjugation of women because it can increase men's disdain for women, undermine women's confidence in themselves, and strengthen the forces that push women to the side-lines in this patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistic, sexism, advertisement, women, language

### **Introduction**

Advertisement forms an integral part of any successful business venture. It plays a major role in the growth and expansion of business ventures, and for that, businesses owners latch on to it tenaciously. Advertising is 'designed to spread information with the view to promoting the sales of marketable goods and services' (Kannan & Tyagi, 2013). They provide people with information on the availability of particular products, the place of purchase, the nature of products etc (Ayoola & Akin Odebunmi, 2016). This reveals its social role and relevance to the society. It serves as a medium of social communications. Through it, people get informed about the efficacy and availability of particular goods and services through advertisement. Again, advertisements help to align the attitude of consumers towards the trend of time. These shape the opportunity of making decisions on their commercial activities and the stock of product to use in their homes in line with the latest commodities. However, worrisome is the fact that, advertisement has taken on a more subtle but dangerous means of portraying the same message such that a whole lot of concepts that can be classified as stereotypes and sexism go unnoticed by the unsuspecting audience.

Since marketing is often a competitive affair, companies and dealers of goods and services struggle to capture a wide attention and customers to patronise them. They do this through the use of verbal and non-verbal techniques in advertising their goods and services. Advertising is one of such old practices of marketing, which started with the style of oral information from person to person; family members to friends and group to groups. Today, advertising has taken up far more complex means in order to influence the behaviours and interest of a target audience. Advertisers employ various forms of appeal when reaching out to their audience. Popoola (2004) identifies the following kinds of advertising appeals that are used in the Nigerian advertising industry today to include: Emotional appeal, Rational appeal, Sex appeal, Scarcity appeal, Music appeal, Masculine-Feminine appeal, Brand appeal, Snob appeal, Adventure appeal, Less than perfect appeal, Romance appeal, Youth appeal, Endorsement appeal, Play on words appeal, Statistics appeal, Plain appeal, Bandwagon appeal, humour appeal, guilt appeal, fear

appeal, among others. Among these, sex appeal is a type of advertising appeal that has generated worldwide criticism, and which has been referred to as mostly unethical. Belch et al (1982) note this:

The advertising appeals that have received the most criticism for being in poor taste are those using sexual appeals and/or nudity. These techniques are often used to gain consumers' attention and may not even be appropriate to the product being advertised. Even if the sexual appeal relates to the product, people may be offended.

Advertisers, fuelled by the knowledge that advertising has become an ever-present part of the society, stop almost at nothing to seduce their target audience. Some of them go as far as organising a street carnival to advertise their products and services; others buy the services of the media organisations such as TV/ Radio stations, newspapers, magazines, online platform and the like to publicise their goods and services to large community of people. Media have been the powerful sector for connecting people, giving access to information, reflecting the societal changes, tracking the economic and developmental leaps and educating the mass with no boundaries. The role of the mass media in any society goes beyond the ordinary act of informing, educating, entertaining to that of shaping opinions and attitudes of people through proper and accurate analysis and interpretation of the news event (Aghadiegwu, 2008). Advertisers with this knowledge put in a huge resource into media advertisement so as to boost their marketing strength and traffic more than their competitors. Media and advertisers have designed a more catching advertising technique which transcends beyond language manipulation to image display.

However, media not only entertains more or showers unlimited benefits but have equally left many troubling questions to ponder on. Media with its strengths and vitality have abundant potentials to bring women all around the world together and their voices stronger especially in the movement of gender equality and feminists' goals. But on the contrary the representation of women in advertisements has not only portrayed them as poor, weak and sex objects but has increased the societal patriarchal disadvantage of women and their status.

A glance at some companies' and products' adverts in media reveals that there is the inclusion of sexual objectification of women, subjugation and stereotyping in the language of their adverts, purposefully, for the need of procurement of consumers' patronage. These sexist forms of language use can be portrayed in the various appeals the advert labels and the pictures hold. However, the effects of such forms of sexist and dehumanising adverts on consumers which are glaring are down played. This, the present study seeks to unearth.

Globally, different images of women are displayed in many print, billboard and electronic media. The need to seduce consumers by outward appearances has enveloped the sense of decency and morality in adverts. But that is not the worst of the ills of sexual objectification of women in adverts. This act has, among other things, many adverse effects ranging from the acquisition of low self-esteem by young women, who may begin to consider their natural body make-up to be less than acceptable, leading to even substance abuse.

The issue of treating a woman as an object of sexual pleasure has crept into our society for a while now, and would definitely stay long if we continue to water, fertilize and nurture this monster tree. Although a lot of research has been carried out on the representation and portrayal of women in media advertisements with respect to role playing, not much has been done on the linguistic items that accompany the pictorial representation of women in print and bill board advertisements, and the attitude of people towards women's portrayal in advertisement, especially in South East region of Nigeria, Anambra State in particular.

## Research Questions

- i. In what ways are women portrayed in subjugated and sexist roles in bill board, print and electronic media?
- ii. To what extent is there interaction between the symbols used in these adverts and the women in the society?
- iii. What are the implications of these linguistic features employed in the advertisements in the women's psychological perception of themselves in the society?
- iv. How does the women representation in the media advertisements project their status in society?
- v. What is the attitude of the marketers of the advertised products towards the products and their customers?

## Theoretical Framework

This study examines the pictorial representation of women in print, bill board and other electronic advertisements on Nigeria women. In doing this there are theoretical considerations and methods of data collection. The theories adopted in this study are standpoint theory of Harding and visual semiotic theory in line with Saussure's principle of "sign, signifier and signified".

## StandPoint Theory

Standpoint theory was coined by American Feminist, Sandra Harding in 1983. The theory points out that people's standpoint affects the way they see the world and things around them. According to standpoint theorists, when one starts from the perspective of women or other marginalized people, one is more likely to acknowledge the importance of standpoint. Nigeria is a country where there are many cultures and tribes, thus culture affects how one views a particular issue or message. With standpoint theory, one can use the inequalities of gender, race, class and sexual orientation to observe how different groups within the social hierarchy tend to generate distinct account of nature and social relationships.

## Visual Semiotic Theory

Meaning and interpretations of things are not only based on words and utterances. Signs, symbols and images also contribute greatly in shaping meanings and interpretations of things in the world. Messaris, (1997) has outlined in his book *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising*, in an advertisement visual image can play three major roles. Those are; "They can elicit emotions by simulating the appearance of a real person or object; they can serve as photographic proof that something really did happen; and they can establish an implicit link between the thing that is being sold and some other images". To Messaris, these three functions of advertising images stem from underlying, fundamental characteristics of visual communication. This informs the place of visual semiotic theory in this study.



Semiotics theory was propounded by Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure in 1985. He described semiotics as 'a science that studies the life of signs within a society'. Simultaneously, American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce published his own ideas about the effect of sign on society. Semiotics which is 'semiology' in Europe is the science of signs. Semiotic analysis is used in the study

of sign processes in various fields such as communication, linguistics, anthropology, architecture, medicine and so on.

There are three schools of semiotics that have constructed ideas from the domain of linguistics to other non-linguistic mode of communication. The first developed the work of Russian Formalists by providing it with a linguistic basis. The second applied ideas from de Saussure and other photography to fashion (Barthes), cinema (Metz) etc. The third began in Australia where the ideas of Michael Halliday inspired the studies of literature (Threadgold, Thibault, O'Toole, Kress and van Leeuwen).



In advertising the image is perfect representation of life and informs the societal realities and interest. According to Barthes "in advertising the signifieds of the image are formed a priori by certain attributes of the product". The theory of visual semiotics aims to clarify the meaning construction process and its interpretation by the reader or audience at their perceptive level.

## Empirical Studies Sexism

Sexism is not a term often encountered in polite company. In conventional usage, it conveys discrimination based on sex and seems to require some conscious action (Rhode, 2007). Yet there is also a subtle side of sexism: A cluster of social expectations and practices that reinforce sex-based inequality. Ultimately, sexism in all its forms is a societal ill. There are two forms of sexism - overt and indirect. (Mills, 2008)



Overt sexism is clear and unambiguous, while indirect sexism is based on pragmatics and interpretation of utterances. Indirect sexism is extremely common and we need new ways to challenge and analyse its usage in language (Mills, 2008). Closely associated with the concept of sexism is sexist humour- a strategy often exploited by acquire patronage? The humour in sexism can be portrayed in adverts such

as "successfully defended in a panel of all male bosses" and even a woman can open it. It can also be seen in pictorial forms where the referent is a human female arms strapping the body of a male 'driver' in the manner of a seat belt. When slandering women with the use of sexist humour, it trivializes sexism by masking it with benign entertainment (Mills, 2008)

### **Language Use in Advertising**

Advertisers are one of the parties involved in the communication between two parties. They strive to achieve and maintain this link between the consumers and themselves through the use of language. The English language has been manipulated by advertisers in several ways that make the interpretation of sexist and offensive meanings possible within various contexts. The meanings of words used in adverts must be taken into account by scholars (Kannan & Tyagi, 2013). For example, the word 'armchair' suggests comfort whereas the word chair arouses no particular feeling.

The word 'even' added to the phrase 'a woman' suggests that the woman is otherwise regarded as 'unable'. This form of language use in advertising bears heavily on the minds of consumers. Scholars have analysed other ways in which advertisers adapt the English Language to express multiple hidden messages to include: the use of adjectives to intensify ideas, short sentences for a forceful effect and weasel words (that suggest a meaning without actually being specific) Kanaan and Tyagi (2013). The meaning of words used in adverts should be interpreted within the context of the adverts. There are four purposes of language usage; they are: expression, exposition, art and persuasion' (Tarigan, 1993).

Advertisers put the English Language to these four uses and the consumers end up interpreting various meanings out of the language. Media occupies a strategic position in society as a means of communication in giving news, assessment or general view about something, has an important role as an institution which form public opinion.

### **Language and Gender Disparity in Advertisement**

Advertising is not just about the promotion of a product to a wider community, but also encompasses the notion of enhancing the group or the entire organization whose product is being advertised. The language of advertisement must be structured in a way that will capture the interest of the audience and they can decode the message. Littlejohn et al., (2017) suggest that a feminist dictionary authored by Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler could serve as a feminist universe of discourse. The use of language by different genders in advertisement often manifests in the nature and choice of issues.

Men are believed to talk more about sports or other physical while women talk about romance and fantasy worlds. Men's language according to Coates is often considered as trivial and easy to ignore. Women choose weaker expletives like oh dear or goodness instead of words like shit or damn. Women in advertisement have always been in the eyes of the storms as the audience often sees them as sexual magnets. This tends to heighten the dehumanization of women in the society as they are presented as sexual instrument. Media advertisements have failed over the years to project women as people who are capable of doing things that men do.

### **Gender Roles and Portrayal of Women in Advertisement**

This shows existence of discriminatory role in the society. The representation of women in advertisements presents the attitude of demeaning womanhood and influences the perception of people about them. Some scholars argue that it is an issue of cross-cultural cum societal beliefs which reveal different cultural attachments on women. However, recent studies have proved that following the war on poor women representation in advertisement, there is a change. Morth & Anta, (2010) in their comparative study on women's representation in advertisement between 1980 to 2010 indicate that there is a major difference in the portrayal of women. The study however concluded that some variables have not changed over the years. Some advertisements in recent time have depicted women as engineers, doctors, politicians and social workers.

### **Social Communication of Female Pictures in Media Advertisement**

Advertisement is a highly visible and seemingly contentious socialization agent. People's lives are influenced directly or indirectly as a result of their exposure to certain types of advertisements. Department of Communication notes that "media affects our ideas of who we are and what we could be". There is a special attachment to the image of people in public sphere which sends a message to the beholders. The exploration of women especially in the use of their pictures in media advertisement has been widely felt and become an issue of concern to many individuals and scholars.

Objectification of women is when women are reduced to a mere commodity, judged by their attributes of their bodies rather than who they are, as a person. A woman's body can be used to push through any product in the market, starting from washing powder to shaving cream or to iron and steel products.

Presentation of sexual image of female in advertisements to large extent endangers them as they are made prone and object of men's sexual needs. This also demeans the morality of women in the society and emphasize sexism in media advertisement. Media's treatment of women is narrow and continually reinforces stereotype gender roles and assumptions that women's functions are that of a wife, mother and servants alone (Sharma, 2013). Advertising is one of the most important ways of communication in the society and everybody is confronted by its ubiquitous nature in the daily life. Meghancorte (1990) maintains that the images sometimes degrade the images of women which lead people to maintain stereotypes in real life. This study supports opinion that good advertisements should portray the right blend of cultural meaning, societal values, and reflects personal dreams of individuals.

### **The Role of Female Journalists in the Media**

The media have a very significant role in promoting or demoting personality as they are sometimes described as the image makers of a society. Journalism globally used to be men's domain, hence the common phrase 'gentlemen of the press' (Sanusi & Adelabu, 2015). Media however, have an undisputable role to play in the struggle for gender equality and social identity gaps between men and women. Scholars have investigated women representation in both print and television media channels and have come with different views.

Jha explains that women journalist as part of women's network like different women's study groups and NGOs work as an activist also utilizing it as platform (web). It offers the women the opportunity to speak out and stand for their quest to eliminate gender role stereotype in society, especially for the fact that women have joined media today compared to what it was in the past. Jha further adds that "sensitized women journalists extend the limit on women's issues by understanding development issue being women's issues and inevitably linked with political issues" (web).

Some scholarly findings show gender discrimination and role denial on women in media discourse. The study of Pande (1991) reveals a clear instance of discrimination of status of female journalist which manifests in language divide between Hindi and English print media. Pande (1991) wrote that:

Unlike women in the English media, women workers in the Hindi media have traditionally remained largely desk-bound. Most of them come from small towns and have studied in Hindi medium colleges... The media organization they work in, with very few exceptions, are owner driven, preoccupied with profit margins and politically ambitions at all level (Pande, 1991).

There is a preferential treatment given to women journalists in English which those of Hindi don't get. This indicates discrimination within women and women roles in media. Although this is not language based but it will create room for division among women journalists. Again, equality is not just a women's issue; everyone benefits from eliminating discrimination (UNESCO).

There is also some discrimination in the kind of task allocated for male and female journalists to do the reporting. Female journalists are generally asked to do soft news and male journalists, hard news. Now, looking at the words 'soft' and 'hard' the synonyms weak and strong readily come to mind. According to Lama (2008) media owners and male editors have a kind of perception towards female journalists which acts as a barrier to provide equal responsibility among male and female journalists. She further said that:



They think women journalists can't walk alone in night, can't travel anywhere, scared to fight with challenges, understand very little about political issues, has to be involved in household works and thus don't readily adopt journalism profession and even after they become journalist, they do not wish to continue it for many years or sustain within this profession (Lama, 2008).

Tomar (2011) reported that the role of women in media-decision making is reflected in the poor representation of women issues and concerns. Other scholars have discovered that there is a professional inequality imbedded in media which is strongly based on social differences that exist between men and women spaces. Tomar (2011) stressed that the exclusion and oppression of women by transnational corporations is translated into media representation and employment. Gallagher remarks that the review of UNESCO worldwide on women and media was targeted to address the issue of women poor representation. She discovered that from the review that there is a remarkably constant picture of women representation when compared from country to country. She presents a summary of women representation in media as carried out by UNESCO thus:

Representation of women can best be described as narrow. On film, press and broadcast media, women's activities and interests typically go no further than the confines of home and family. Characterized as essentially dependent and romantic, women are rarely portrayed as rational, active or decisive. Both as characters in fictional media material and as newsmakers in the press and broadcasting, women are numerically under representation-an absence which underlines their marginal and inferior status in many spheres of social, economic and cultural life. Prevalent news values define most women and most women's problems as un-newsworthy, admitting women to coverage primarily as wives, mothers or daughters of men in the news: in their own right, they make the headlines usually only as fashionable or entertainment figures (Tomar, 2011).

In Nigeria, the participation of women in journalism profession was evident in the recent time. Ikem (1986) captures the beginning of female participation in Nigeria media thus:

The first breakthrough for women in this male dominated profession was in feature writing with the establishment of the Nigeria Daily Times, when lively feature articles began to appear with boxed title-heads (Ikem, 1986).

Although female participation in Nigerian broadcasting and journalism profession as a whole has recorded positive growth in female employment in areas such as programming; the status of women in Nigerian media still indicates that there is a great level of subordination. The study of Pate (1984) on Women in Nigerian Broadcasting Media makes this indication practical. The study reveals that for every one (1) woman employed in the state radio stations and state, and federal television and radio stations represented in the survey there were seven (7) male employees (Pate, 1994).

Ikem (1986) study also shows that there is an improved status of female journalist in Nigeria but with some gaps and restrictions. Ikem (1986) opines that "while line-editor remains one of the most remarkable positions women in journalism have made great progress, as women editors, observations show that the content of the pages they edit are yet to be drastically dynamic to address wider issues of development" (Ikem, 1986).

Global Media Monitoring Project 2015 carried out by an international NGO; World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) reveals that there is a slight change in the female status in media. This study which was conducted in seventy-six (76) countries across the globe found the following. Female reporters predominate in only two topics weather reports on television and radio (52%) and stories on poverty, housing and welfare (51%). There is a 50-50 gender balance among reporters in celebrity news, and in stories on consumer issues. Although many 'soft' new stories are important, they are not always perceived as such in the hierarchy of new values.

The study of Global Media Monitoring Project concludes that women have made great strides in the news media over the past decade but they still struggle to achieve equal treatment. Fair gender portrayal

demands a highly intellectual and professional value with passion, respect and honesty to human happiness and survival. This fight cannot be achieved by women alone but with men and women of honesty and fairness in judgment.

From the foregoing it is deducible that the media are not away from the dominant patriarchal norms, assumptions and practices of the society. This dominance appears to have existed for long time. There are always the stories of struggle, challenges and discrimination of women journalists. Regrettably, this discrimination also exists among women themselves such that they have little or nothing to do about it. None of the literatures reviewed here showed women's action and movement for female journalists' discrimination and status in media. This study becomes very important as it has investigated the attitude of women even journalists in the representation of women in media advertisement.

### **Study Population, Data and Methodology**

The study was carried out in Onitsha and Awka Metropolis of Anambra State. The population of the study comprised of old adults that is individuals who are matured and discerning enough to understand the connotations of bill board, newspaper and TV advertisements. This qualitative study used textual analysis. This study used qualitative and textual analytical methodologies because they focus on text and visual codes. Electronic media speeches were transcribed and analyzed. To study women in billboard ads, five Onitsha and Awka billboards were chosen. Access Bank, Nivea, Magi Star, Coca Cola, and Close Up billboards. Furthermore, The Guardian, Punch, Daily Sun, Genevieve Nigeria Magazine, Pleasure Magazine, and This Day Style Extra Magazine were chosen for print media advertising analysis. Data relevant to this study were intentionally selected and examined. This study structured and textually analysed semi-interviews to collect real-life attitudes and perceptions of women's advertising. This study sampled 90 out of 181 newspapers from January to June 2019. Magazines periodically published between April to June 2019 were reviewed. This study included five billboards. Market women and men in Onitsha and Eke-Awka were interviewed with ten semi-structured questions. Twenty out of the forty participants that were interviewed were selected for textual analysis in this study. Five commercials from NTA and ABS that were recorded on an audio recording equipment and phone were chosen. Forty people in the Anambra metro area were interviewed over the phone for the study, and 20 of those interviews were analysed for their semi-oral content.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The data was textually analysed to discover evidence that answers the research questions developed for this study utilising Harding's principle of viewpoint (Harding, 2004) to examine the effects of advertising on Nigerian women. Ad images were analysed for their semiotic relevance and social communication ramifications using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic principle of sign, signifier, and signified (Culler & Bailey, 1979).

### **Summary of Findings**

The advertising industry prefers to represent women in sleepwear, underwear, and lingerie. Women feature in advertisements for personal hygiene and cooking items at a higher rate than males. This is due to the fact that many of the respondents felt that when women's sensitive parts are revealed, they are only depicted as ornamental non-functioning objects. Female characters in commercial and professional jobs are few and few between, since women are seen as the weakest of creatures, lacking in strength, power, and effectiveness. They are underrepresented in the fields of finance, management, leadership positions, and professions such as law, engineering, and medical professions. The negative consequences of female portrayal in advertisements, labels, and symbols on women include a decrease in self-esteem and health problems such as eating disorders. The positive implications of the employment of women are educational, instructive, amusing, increase the attractiveness of communication, increase sales, and increase public interest.

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### Conclusion

Advertising is a marketing strategy used by marketers to raise customer awareness of and interest in products, services, or ideas. In Anambra State, it has been discovered that the depiction of women in advertising labels and symbols is quite poor. This is capable of severely impacting the perception of women among the big audience of advertising. It can be concluded that advertising is counter-productive and harmful to the advancement of women.

### Recommendations

Advertisers should pre-test their advertising for sex and decency responses, and they should consult with the media, self-regulatory organizations, and other appropriate experts before releasing them. There is need for proper orientation of advertising industry in this part of the world to imbibe in them the spirit of moral norms and respect for the dignity of womanhood. Policies should be made against nudity in advertisement.

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