

## **AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS**

by

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### **Abstract**

This study examined audience perception of the portrayal of women in four selected TV commercials in Owerri. The objectives are among others, to examine the frequency of Owerri TV viewers to commercials that used female models and find out the perception of Owerri TV viewers about the portrayal of women in TV commercials. The survey research method was used in this study and structured questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection from a sample size of 369 respondents who are Owerri-based TV commercial viewers. Findings showed that the majority of Owerri TV viewers have a negative perception about the way women are portrayed in television commercials and sex appeal, dressing mode of female celebrities, wrong role interpretation and existing stereotypes held against women all combined in varying degrees to affect the perception of Owerri television viewers about the portrayals of women in television commercials. It was recommended that there should therefore be less emphasis on the sensuality of the women and more emphasis on their humanity and what they can do and future researchers should examine how TV viewers perceive the representation of women in TV commercials in other localities in the country.

**Keywords: Audience perception, Portrayal of women, TV Commercials**

### **Introduction**

Advertising is unquestionably an effective marketing communication technique. It speeds up the acceptance and development (rebranding) of new products. It also creates jobs and provides consumers with a larger range of options. Business activities in the modern world hinge on advertising for their commercial success. Producers and distributors would be incapable of selling without it and buyers would be oblivious of and overlook

products and services and at the end of the day, the modern world would collapse (Jefkins, 2000).

As a result, advertising has come to be known as the "rock and roll" of the corporate world (White and Woods, 1996). There are many types of advertising, but television advertising has received a lot of attention from academics.

Advertising on television is "different from advertising in all other media, by

virtue of the fact that consumers could see and hear the product in action" according to one study (Batan, 2002, P.346). Advertising is praised and criticized not only for its function in selling items but also for its impact on the economy and society as a whole. Arens (2006), mentions the criticisms thrown against advertising including the fact that advertising has contributed to the enslavement of women as well as establishing gender roles in society through their depiction of men and women. This has prompted many academics to investigate how gender is represented in television commercials in order to determine whether the criticisms levelled against advertising are real or imagined. Belknap (2009), claims that the media aided and abetted male domination in a range of social processes.

Advertising has been blamed for perpetuating stereotypes according to Women Issues (2015), because the negative world of advertising has aided in the enslavement of women and the promotion of patriarchy in society. That is to say, the media's portrayal of women as inferior to males is frequently reinforced by advertising. It is their perspective that core concepts are relatively exaggerated in the manner they are presented in advertising. Some of these ideas, according to Nwagbara (2006), come in the form of supplementary images, which tend to perpetuate negative stereotypes in society. On the surface, stereotypes appear innocent, yet they are "complicated and shorthand ways of referring to some complex ideas and social relationships."

This negative advertising world isn't just restricted to billboards and print media. Electronic media, in particular television, is a common sight in the urban landscape. Courtney and Lockeretz (1971), recognize that men and women are constrained to live within the restrictions imposed by the media. Women, for example, are

frequently depicted as sex objects preoccupied with beauty, household duties, and motherhood and as incompetent when it comes to making decisions or doing important things.

Similarly, young men see images of men with an overly muscular physique working in offices and strive to emulate this image. These images have the potential to reinforce ideas about how one should treat, act, and react to others. The media serves as a kind of social mirror in which you are conceived. The necessity of modeling in advertising has led to a situation where male and/or female images are used to represent the concept behind a product, idea, or service over time.

Because of its prominence in our daily lives, advertising has a special place in the gender discourse in consumer societies. According to Shrimp (2000), advertisers are forced to "draw upon the repertoire of common life events in order to portray the world in a way that could be true."

Advertising has the undeniable capacity to modify, mold and shape public opinion and perception. The dominant forms of gender depiction in the media, as well as the ways advertising contributes to reinforcing conceptions of masculinity and femininity, continue to raise issues. On that note, the purpose of this study is to look into how women are portrayed in the following Television commercials, Royco Seasoning commercial, Boska commercial, Delta Soap commercial, Lipton Tea commercial, and Ambi Pur commercial.

### **Statement of Problem**

The way gender communication is handled in popular culture has sparked passionate disputes about how males and females are depicted in advertisements, raising the question of whether this depiction accurately reflects the roles of the various genders in society. This concern for the

depiction of gender is significant since research reveals that the representation of gender roles in the media is capable of affecting public views about genders.

In Nigeria, the increasing use of female celebrities to sell products in various commercials has raised further concern about the way they are portrayed in the media. According to female scholars, women are typically portrayed in the media as feminine, sex objects, housewives and homemakers while men are otherwise portrayed in situations of power and authority over women. Some of those adverts, it is claimed are swiftly assigning new gender and culture-constrained duties to Nigerian women.

While the portrayal of women in advertising in Nigerian media is certainly a source of concern among academics, it is also vital to understand the public's perception of women in commercials. In light of the foregoing, what is the opinion of Owerri television viewers regarding the portrayal of women in television commercials?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study were to;

1. Examine the frequency of exposure of Owerri residents to TV programmes.
2. Find out the extent of exposure of Owerri TV viewers to commercials generally.
3. Examine the frequency of Owerri TV viewers to commercials that use female models.
4. Find out the perception of Owerri TV viewers about the portrayal of women in TV commercials.

### **Advertising: An Overview**

Advertising communicates several forms of marketing information targeted at addressing the demands of both customers

and sellers in the market space. Advertising generates a picture of a product in the process of telling the audience about it that goes beyond the facts contained in the message. It is pertinent to understand what advertising means. Advertising has been defined in a variety of ways. However, they all have one thing in common.

In today's world, advertising is a tremendously strong method of communication (Ejem & Ejem, 2014). It has the longest and most dense sequence of images in the media system. It's significant in the context of gender representation because it's an important mechanism for advancing capitalism and patriarchal interests and thus acts as a mobilizing force to prevent change (Lewis, 2003). In Ezirim, Onyiriuka, Opara, Asieghu, and Harcourt (2006), the American Marketing Association (AMA) defines advertising as "any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor." Woodrow (1963), cited in Nworgu (2005), defines advertising as "a group of activities aimed at dissemination of information in any paid non-personal form concerning an idea, product, or service to compel action in

Arens and Bovee (1982), defines advertising as "non-personal communication or information typically paid for and usually associated with a sponsor through various media, intended at drawing attention to a firm or its products or both usually non-personal with the identifiable sponsor."

When we describe the functions and varieties of advertising however, we will have a better understanding of advertising. According to Abayomi (2003), there are five primary functions of advertising: marketing, communication, economics and social functions. In summary, Abayomi

(2003), summarizes the functions as follows:

- a. Identifying products and separating them from others: communicating information about products, their features, and where they can be purchased
- b. Encouraging customers to try new products and recommending that they be reused; stimulating the distribution of a product.
- c. Building brand preference and loyalty Ezirim et al-, (2006), outline three distinctive functions of advertising; modify behaviour in such a way as to increase sales; increase the acceptance of a product, service or idea and create goodwill both for the products and for business.

To further understand what advertising is, it is helpful to understand the various classifications of advertising and theory to understand the different types of advertising subsumed under those classifications. Bovee and Arens (1982), classify advertising as follows:

- a. Classification by target audience, which includes consumer advertising and business advertising aimed at ultimate consumers and people in businesses respectively.
- b. Classification by geographical area covered which includes international advertising, national advertising, regional advertising, and local advertising all of which are self-explanatory.
- c. Classification by medium which includes newspaper advertising, magazine advertising, television advertising, radio advertising, direct-mail advertising, and other out-of-home advertising.

- d. Classification by function or purpose which includes product versus non-product advertising, commercial versus non-commercial advertising, and direct-action versus indirect-action advertising.

It is therefore difficult to categorize advertising into distinct groups, but it is however important that we have understood the different classifications provided by authors, professionals and businessmen to better appreciate what advertising comprehensively means.

### **Television Commercials**

A television commercial is a span of TV programming produced and paid for by a sponsoring organisation or individual that conveys a message characteristically to market a product, service or idea. TV commercials have also been considered a specialized form of communication for the reason that to satisfy the market function, it has to influence customers' choices. Achumba and Osuagwu (1994), opine that "TV commercials are one of the most efficient tools that manufacturing companies utilize to create more demand for their product on accounts of its capacity to reach a large number of people at a relatively short time cost".

Tv commercials have also been identified as the ability to communicate with a very large audience. Most businesses implement various marketing tactics to continue or increase profit margins, market shares or sales volume of their products or services. To guarantee an optimal and long-lasting result, all relevant marketing elements ought to be effectually harmonized with the commercial. They further point out that those TV commercials are special audience programmes. They are market and profit-oriented, as their focus is on potential consumers. They use special appeals or

rhetoric to attract the attention and interest of their target audience.

### **Stereotypes and Gender Portrayals**

Most gendered representations in advertising have also been known for their use of stereotypes. A stereotype, according to Taylor and Willis (1999), is the range and construction of undeveloped, generalized signs which classify social groups or individual members of a group. The crudely selected signs used to construct stereotypes usually represent the values, attitudes behavior and background of the group concerned (Ejem et al., 2022).

Hall (1997), sees stereotypes as the practice of representation. He points out that stereotyping is responsible for the reduction, essentialization, neutralization and fixing of differences. Also, it fixes restrictions and excludes everything which does not belong within the boundaries. Then, stereotype tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power. In the same vein, Mahboob (2005), explains that stereotypes fix representations over the shorthand of meaning that upholds disparities amongst radicalized and gendered groups. According to Grunewald and Banaji (1995), stereotypes can be defined as socially common sets of values concerning the attributes and features of members of a definite social category.

Stereotypes are traits that are assigned to groups of people on the basis of gender, ethnicity, national origin and other variables (Anyanwu et al., 2023). The problem with stereotypes is that the characteristics that they project are often overstated representations of the groups or individuals involved. Someone who meets a few people from a specific country and finds them to be quiet and reserved may spread the idea that all citizens from that country are quiet and reserved.

The above scenario then means that generalization such as this does not allow for diversity within groups and may result in stigmatization and discrimination as soon as stereotypes linked to them are negative even the so-called positive stereotypes can be damaging owing to their limiting nature.

### **Media Stereotypes and Portrayals**

Stereotypes seem to be reinforced by the media treatment of groups or individuals who are mostly overlooked, deprived of or unseen. Of women, when they achieve prominence, it is done with biases and negative stereotypes since all they do are play supportive roles for the natural order. They are given little voice, demanded through various forms of behavior which further increases their vulnerability. Ukozor (2004), cited in Amobi (2013), observes that an x-ray of media coverage of gender stereotype issues in Nigeria depicts a dishonorable image of a woman's exclusion that rather than giving fair and balanced reports of issues from women's voices the media portray them as an object that does not have an opinion or only fit for advertising models. The author concludes that they are rarely key players in media issues. Women's exclusion from the media is not startling since the Nigerian media serve as government spokespersons or the mouthpieces of their owners who, more often than not, are men.

### **Gender Stereotypes in the Media**

There are bodies of research that have explored the way men and women are portrayed in advertising and whether genders are shown as equals or not. Solely and Kurzbard (1986), and Ejem et al. (2022), all agree that the majority of those research concludes that women are labelled as sexual objects and submissive participants while positive features of men are over-implied.

The academic recognition of gender as a category of analysis had been one of the most outstanding changes in the humanities since the 1980s. According to Showalter (1982), gender has a different connotation from the term sex. The latter refers to the biological identity of a female or male, or sexuality which is the totality of an individual's sexual orientation, preference and behaviour; whereas the former refers to social or cultural construction. To accentuate that, it has been agreed also that sex is a bodily distinction, and gender is social and cultural.

Rakwo (1986), in Ukozor and Ejem (2016), opines that sex is a biological difference and gender and sexuality are equivalent and are acquired through naturally endowed hormones, but Showalter contends that studies have revealed that the concept of masculinity differs extensively within various societies and historical epochs. Sexuality is a multifaceted phenomenon that is well-defined by socio-cultural contents formed by social and personal experiences.

### **Gender Representation in Advertising**

There are gender stereotypes in advertising for the reason that the media impact advertising and gender stereotypes differently. Female gender stereotypes as represented in the media are a significant aspect of sociological theorizing and research about the place of women in contemporary society.

The difference in the positioning of the male and the female indicates a clear power dimension relevant to society. Even when both images are used in the same advertisement, the man always seems to be in control. Advertising commonly uses women's bodies and sexual contexts that have nothing to do with either. That is, there is no product connection or clear relationship between the product and the

advertising image a clear case of arbitrary use of the images of women and relational use of the images of the models.

William (2006), in his representation of masculinity and femininity in advertising also found out that "the representation of gender in advertisement provides powerful models of behavior to emulate or react against. Masculine images typically convey power strength, virility, athleticism, and competitiveness, whereas feminine images show beauty, submissiveness, and cooperation." Such themes seem repeatedly in advertisements and are frequently acknowledged by those who see them as natural aspects of the human condition. Iman (2000), upholds that the media present dominantly adverse images of women's control and subservience.

Jimoh (2010), said that modern advertisement presents women as being lesser than the masculine gender. Even if these advertisements and many more were crafted to sell products or services they turned out to convey underlying messages about the women folk.

### **Methodology**

As a study that investigates the audience perception of women in commercials, the survey design was deemed most appropriate. The survey probes the attitudes and dispositions of subjects towards a given phenomenon.

The sample size used in this study was 369 respondents. Systematic and cluster sample procedures were adopted for the selection of samples in this study. Four Streets in Owerri were selected from where data were collected. The questionnaire was used as the instrument for collecting data from the respondents. The questionnaire was made up of two sections- A and B. Section A was about the demographic data of the respondents

whereas section B contained questions that reflected the objectives and research questions of the study.

The questionnaire was distributed personally by the researcher with the help

of an assistant who was duly instructed on how to go about it. All 369 questionnaire copies were retrieved. Upon collation, the data were presented in tables analyzed using frequency scores and simple percentages.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table 1: Exposure of Respondents to Television Programmes in Owerri**

Options	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	360	100
No	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 above showed that 360 (100%) of the respondents in Owerri watch TV programmes.

**Table 2: Frequency of Respondents' Exposure to TV Programmes in Owerri**

Options	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Very Frequently	199	55
Averagely	130	36
Rarely	31	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 above shows that 119 (55%) of the respondents are very frequently exposed to Television programmes; 130 (36%) of the respondents are exposed to Television

programmes on average; and 31 (9%) of them are rarely exposed to TV programmes

**Table 3: Respondents' Exposure to Television Commercials**

Options	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	360	100
No	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 above shows that all 360 (100%) respondents are exposed to Television commercials.

**Table 4: Extent of Respondents' Exposure to TV Commercials**

Options	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Very Frequently	320	89

Averagely	40	11
Rarely	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 4 above shows that 320 (89%) of the respondents are exposed to Television commercials very frequently; while 40 (11%) are averagely exposed.

**Table 5: Responses on whether Respondents are Exposed to Television Commercials that use Female Celebrities.**

Options	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	360	100
No	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

In Table 5 above, all 360 (100%) respondents claimed that they are exposed to TV commercials that use female celebrities.

**Table 6: Frequency of Respondents' Exposure to Television Commercials that Use Female Celebrities**

Options	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Frequently	190	53
Occasionally	170	47
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 6 above shows 190 (53%) of the respondents saying that they are frequently exposed to TV commercials that use female celebrities, while 170 (47%) of them reported that they are occasionally exposed to such Television commercials.

**Table 7: Selected TV Commercials with Female Appearances in Owerri to which Respondents are mostly exposed**

Options	Total	Percent
Royco Seasoning Commercial	70	19
Boska Commercial	46	13
Delta Soap Commercial	122	34
Lipton Tea Commercial	87	24
Ambi Pur Commercial	35	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 7 shows the selected TV commercials with female appearances in Owerri. Five (5) commercials were selected. 70 (19%) of the respondents said the TV commercial with female appearances to which they are mostly exposed is the Royco Seasoning commercial, 46 (13%) said the Boska commercial; 122 (34%) said the Delta Soap commercial; 87 (24%) said Lipton Tea commercial; and 35 (10%) said Ambi Pur commercial.



**Table 8: Respondents' Perception of the way women are portrayed in the Television Commercials**

Options	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Positive	125	35
Negative	192	53
Can't Say	43	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 8 above indicates that 125(35%) of the sampled respondents perceive the portrayal of women in TV commercials positively; 192 (53%) perceive it negatively, while 43 (12%) cannot say how they perceive the portrayal of women in TV commercials.

**Table 9: Gender Group of Television Characters whom Respondents Perceive as More Sexually Objectified in Television commercials.**

Options	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Male	145	40
Female	215	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 9 above indicates that 145 (40%) of the respondents perceive men as being more sexually objectified in the select television commercials; whereas 215 (60%) of them perceive that women are more portrayed as sexually objectified in those commercials.

**Table 10: Factors that affect Respondents' Perception of the Portray of Women in TV Commercials**

Options	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Dressing	107	30
Sex appeal	119	33
Wrong interpretation of roles	71	20
Stereotypes against women	60	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 10 displays a few of the factors that affect the respondents' perception of the portrayal of women in TV commercials. The table indicates that 107 (30%) of the respondents said it is their dressing; 119 (33%) respondents said it is the sex appeal often expressed by female celebrities; 60 (17%) said they are affected by their already-held stereotypes against women in perceiving women's portrayals in television commercials.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Research Question One**

#### **What is the frequency of Exposure of Owerri Residents to the TV Programme?**

The answer to the question above is found in Table 1 and 2. While Table 1 showed that all the 360 respondents in Owerri watch TV Programmes, Table 2 indicates that they do so at varying degrees. According to the table, 55% of the respondents are very frequently exposed to television programmes, 36% are averagely exposed while 9% are rarely exposed. However, this breakdown indicates logically that up to 91% of Port- Harcourt residents are reasonably exposed to television programmes (that is, by grouping together those with average exposure and those with very frequent exposure).

The findings agree with the assertion of Cuttliip et al (2000), that no other medium matches television's ability to attract exposure and provide such a massive window of the world. This is because it offers a wide range of possibilities for relating a story using its blend of printed word, spoken word and pictures in motion, colour, music, animation and sound effects into one message. Television, according to Salu (1994), has a broad reach, optimal frequency, chances for demonstration, immediacy, entertainment exposure and almost unlimited prestige.

### **Research Question Two:**

#### **To what extent are Owerri TV viewers exposed to commercials generally?**

Table 3 showed that all the 360 respondents have been exposed to TV commercials. Further analysis in Table 4 showed that majority (89%) of the respondents are exposed to TV commercials very frequently and that only

11% are averagely exposed. The finding here is self-revealing, indicating nothing other than the fact that Owerri television viewers are highly exposed to commercials generally.

As the researcher stated earlier, the wide range of possibilities for relating a story using its blend of the printed word, spoken word, pictures in motion, colour, music, animation, and sound effects into one message and also on account of its capacity to reach large a number of people at a relatively short time and cost, have made TV commercials one of the most efficient tools that manufacturing companies utilize to create more demand for their products.

### **Research Question Three**

#### **What is the frequency of exposure of Owerri TV viewers to commercials that use female celebrities?**

Table 5 showed that all the respondents have been exposed to TV commercials with female celebrities. But Table 6 indicated that 53% of the respondents are frequently exposed to TV commercials with female celebrities; while 47% of them are occasionally exposed. Moreover, Table 7 showed that of the five (5) commercials which the respondents have been exposed to, because of their use of female celebrities, the finding revealed that the one with the highest number of female appearances is the Delta soap commercial. Showalter (1982), says that the rise of gender as a category of analysis had been one of the most striking changes in humanities since the 1980s; one cannot do anything now without referring to gender. This has crept into the world of advertising with women and men used to market certain commodities that appeal to their respective gender.

## Research Question Four

### How do Owerri TV viewers perceive the portrayal of women in TV commercials?

Table 8 showed the various strands of perception among Owerri TV viewers about the portrayal of in Television commercials. The table reviewed that while 12% of the respondents were undecided in their perception, 35% of them perceive that women are positively portrayed in Television commercials. Yet, a greater proportion of the respondents (53%) perceive the portrayal of women in Television commercials negatively. These perceptions are influenced by certain factors as revealed in Table 10. They include dressing, sex appeal, wrong interpretation of roles, and stereotypes held against women.

The finding agrees with the framing theory. The theory posits that advertising actively engages in frame building by selecting certain attributes and elements from reality, packaging these selected dimensions through an issue, and highlighting them through the use of cinematic techniques such as cameras, situational contexts, certain actors/actresses, language, and script. All these attributes will shape the perception of the social category used in the advertisements.

This finding also agrees with Kramara's 1981 muted theory which assumes that because men are the dominant group in society, females are perceived as weaker and less prestigious and are mostly seen as sexual and vain. The female perception and systems of perceiving more sensual and vainer: and that to become participating members in society women must transform their perceptions and models of perceiving into terms of the dominant group. Barry (1999), argues that the art of advertising is derived from the process of perception as well as the ability

to create a reflection of reality through framing the content to create attitudes.

### Summary of Findings

The following findings were made in the study:

1. The majority of TV viewers in Owerri are frequently exposed to TV programmes
2. The majority of Owerri TV viewers are frequently exposed to TV commercials.
3. The majority of Owerri TV viewers are frequently exposed to TV commercials with female celebrities.
4. Delta soap commercial is said to be commercial with the highest number of female celebrity appearances.
5. The majority of Owerri TV viewers have a negative perception of the way women are portrayed in television commercials.
6. The sex appeal often expressed by the women, the dressing mode of female celebrities, the wrong interpretation of the roles performed by female celebrities, and the stereotypes held against women all combine in varying degrees to affect the perception of Owerri television viewers about the portrayals of women in television commercials.

### Conclusion

The general objective of this study was to examine how Owerri TV viewers perceive the presentation of women in TV commercials. Findings indicated that there is regular exposure of subjects to TV programmes in Owerri. Majority of the TV viewers are frequently exposed to TV commercials. There is also regular

exposure to TV commercials with female celebrities. But the majority of Owerri TV viewers have a negative perception of the way women are portrayed in TV commercials.

As the framing theory posits that advertising actively engages in frame building by selecting certain attributes and elements from reality, packaging these selected dimensions through an issue and highlighting them through the use of cinematic techniques. The sex appeal often expressed by female celebrities affects the perception of the portrayal of women in TV commercials and so also does the dressing of the female celebrities, among other factors.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Since sex appeal often expressed by the women in the commercials negatively affects the perception of viewers about women in commercials, there should therefore be less emphasis on the sensuality of the women and more emphasis on their humanity and what they can do.
2. Future researchers should examine how TV viewers perceive the representation of women in TV commercials, in other localities in the country.

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