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**Audience Perception of the Portrayal of Women in
Television Advertising**

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Abstract

The paper set out to ascertain the perception of the portrayal of women in television advertising. The rationale behind the study is to ascertain the way people, especially the women feel or perceive how they are portrayed in television advertising; two theories were used as theoretical framework; they are constructivism theory and the standpoint theory. The survey research design was adopted, employing the questionnaire as an instrument of data collection. Findings from the respondents show that women are negatively portrayed in television advertising. More so, findings show that women are not satisfied with the way and manner they are portrayed in television advertising. The paper concludes that women perceive the way they are portrayed in television advertising as negative; based on the conclusion, the paper recommends that women should be portrayed in good light when advertising products.

Key words: Advertising, perception, women portrayal and television advertising

Introduction and Conceptual Clarification

For any organisation, advertising is one of the most important marketing activities. In modern economics, advertising occupies an important marketing position. The advertising industry has grown rapidly to become an important economic entity supporting lives of millions of people in the world. Advertising is not only an economic activity, but it articulates different ideas, attitudes and values, which shape out social life and consumption patterns. Therefore, it can be said that advertising becomes a culture and form by virtue of signifying practices. Advertisements articulate meaning to words and images, although this depends on how we interpret them.

Advertising is such a strong influence in our society that it determines our needs, what we care about, how we raise our children and so on. Advertising plays a role involving a number of relationships, which are created around the object, person, symbolism, power and satisfaction; in this light, advertising has over the years used women as a tool to persuade consumers into buying a product and portray the woman as beautiful and desirable. As noted by Puranik (2011), advertising is nothing, but a paid form of non-personal presentation or promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor with a view to disseminate information concerning an idea, product or service. The message which is presented or disseminated is called

advertisement. In the present day marketing activities, hardly is there any business in the modern world which does not advertise. However, the form of advertisement differs from business to business.

Advertising is any communication that is paid for, identified by a sponsor, directed at a target audience, through the various mass media like radio, television, bill board, newspaper and magazine, with the aim of creating awareness about goods and services. Arens (2008, p.7) says that advertising is the structured and composed non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature, about products, services and ideas, by identified sponsors, through various mass media.

The above definition given by Arens is closely in line with that of Dominick (2007, p. 321), which says that advertising is any form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services, usually paid for, by an identified sponsor. Advertising is a controlled, identifiable and persuasive communication that is presented via the mass media and designed to develop product demand and to create a company's image. Advertising intends to promote the sales of a product or service and also, to inform the masses about the highlights of the product or the service features. It is an efficient means of communicating to the world, the value of the product or the service. Advertising utilises different media to reach out to the masses and uses different types of appeals to connect to the customers across the globe. Thus, it is seen as the process of persuading potential customers to buy products or promote its services. Advertising messages are usually paid for by sponsors and viewed via various traditional media; including mass media such as newspaper, magazine, television commercial, radio advertisement, outdoor advertising or direct mail or new media, such as websites and text messages (Wikipedia, 2011).

Thus, every organisation that wants its products to be known has to create awareness through advertising. Wilson, cited in Asemah (2010) says that advertising by its nature is very controversial and that in the early twentieth century, people clamoured for the regulation of advertising, believing that much of it was exaggerated and untruthful.

The United Nations Conferences on Women recognised the importance of the mass media on the image of Women. The World Plan for Action for the First United Nation's Decade on Women in 1975-1985 made the problems of violence against women an international agenda. The conferences noted that

the mass communication media have great potential as a vehicle for social change and could exercise a great influence in helping to remove prejudices and stereotypes, accelerating the acceptance of women's development process as equal partners.

As noted by Ingham (n.d), television is widely known to represent and reinforce the mainstream ideology of contemporary western culture: patriarchy. While television representations of women have changed greatly in the last twenty years alone, in order to accommodate the changing role of women in society, one is led to ask how much the ideology has changed behind the more modern representations of women. Television is regarded by many viewers to be the most 'real' form of media. If this is the case, then it is important for us to question how real the representations of women are on television and how this affects the attitudes of those who watch. Some of the most watched and perhaps influential genres of television viewing are advertisements and soap operas. In a world where women are numbered greater than men, can television be said to reflect the world as it is or dictate to it?

Limpinnian (n.d) avers that gender representation on the smallest scale has always been important for one to understand what it means to be male or female. So, to look at it in terms of advertising (possibly considered the most powerful and influential medium in this ever-increasing commercial society) is to look at it with a more serious eye. From the images inflicted upon us in the patriarchal mass media that surround us, it is assumed that we have been encouraged to mould ourselves into a set ideal. For a woman, that means having beauty, elegance, passivity and good domestic ability and for a man, that means being tough, competitive and business minded. The new man and new woman might be present in today's society, but to what extent are television advertisements an accurate account of this new lifestyle? One of the reasons why television is resistant to the messages of feminism is that they (sponsors) view those messages as conflicting with woman's desire to consume. Advertisers do not want to present a liberated woman, because this new woman does not want and thus, will not buy their products. Therefore, the paper critically examines the perception of the audience of the portrayal of women in television advertising, using Lokoja metropolis in Kogi State as an area of study.

Understanding Advertising as a Concept

Advertising is any paid form of non-personal communication link, initiated by an identified marketer, to establish or continue exchange relationships with customers and at times, with other stakeholders. Companies advertise to: build awareness, position a product/brand, build preference, and differentiate their products/brands. Asemah (2011a) avers that advertising as a planned communication has had so many definitions since its inception. Advertising is any communication that is paid for, identified by a sponsor, directed at a target audience, through the various mass media like radio, television, bill boards, newspaper and magazine, with the aim of creating awareness about goods and services. Arens (2008, p.7) says that advertising is the structured and composed non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature, about products, services and ideas, by identified sponsors, through various mass media. In the same vein, Dominick (2007, p.321) sees advertising as any form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services, usually paid for by an identified sponsor. One can go a step further to describe advertising as a form of communication, which attempts to interpret the qualities of products, services and ideas in terms of consumer's needs and wants. Wikipedia (2011) gave a comprehensive definition of advertising, thus:

Advertising is the process of persuading potential customers to buy products or promote its services. It is the branch of marketing that deals with communicating to customers about products, brands and services. Advertising is a form of communication used to persuade an audience (viewers, readers or listeners) to take some action with respect to products, ideas or services. Most commonly, the desired result is to drive consumer behaviour with respect to a commercial offering, although political and ideological advertising is also common. Advertising messages are usually paid-for by sponsors and viewed via various traditional media, including mass media such as newspapers, magazines, television commercials, radio advertisements, outdoor advertising or direct mail or new media, such as websites and text messages.

The foregoing implies that advertising is the process of creating awareness about goods, ideas, products and services. Thus, every organisation that

wants its products to be known has to create awareness through advertising. This perhaps explains why Anyacho (2007,p.6) says that advertising involves research- consumer research, product research, marketing analysis, getting the appropriation and developing creative strategy and plans, tactical decisions in regards to budgeting expenditures, media and scheme insertions and broadcasts. The purpose of advertising is nothing, but to sell something - a product, a service or an idea. Thus, the real objective of advertising is effective communication between producers and consumers.

Statement of the Problem

Advertising's increasing sophistication and sophistry are clearly evident in today's world. Sophistication is manifest in attention grabbing advertisement copies, which virtually compel recipients to pay undivided attention. No wonder advertising agencies and practitioners have been accused of engaging in unfair and deceptive practices, such as false and misleading comparisons, bait and switch offers, visual distortion and false demonstration, false testimonials, partial disclosures, as well as, small print qualification.

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. Women are often presented in limited roles as they never seem to be shown in business roles, work settings or any position involving authority. Women are shown as more and more feminine; but more often, men are shown in more dominant roles; they carry characteristics, such as being cool, confident, independent, powerful, etc. The problem this study therefore investigates is the perception of the audience of the portrayal of women in television advertising.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to determine how women are portrayed in television advertising. Specifically, however, the study is aimed at:

- a. Ascertaining the extent to which women are used to advertise goods and services in television
- b. Finding out whether women are more used in advertising than men
- c. Ascertaining how women feel about the way they are portrayed in television advertising.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories have been chosen to serve as theoretical framework for the study; they are constructivism theory and standpoint theory.

Constructivism theory

The theory was propounded by Jesse Delia. The theory simply assumes that people who are cognitively complex in their perception of others have a communication advantage over those with less developed mental structures. These fortunate individuals have the ability to produce sophisticated messages that have the best chance to achieve their own goals. Griffin (2000, p.11) observes that the core assumption of constructivism is that persons make sense of the world through systems of personal constructs. He further noted that constructs are the cognitive templates or stencils we offer, to fit over reality to bring order out of chaos.

The foregoing implies that as human beings, we analyse activities or events, taking place in the society and interpret them, after which we will give them a meaning. The meaning we give to such things depends on how we perceive them. Thus, we may perceive them to be bad or we perceive them to be good. The theory centres on the categories of personality and actions that we use to define the character of another person. The theory explains how human beings are able to depict people, using a vast range of columns, shades and cues.

The relevance of the theory to the study cannot be overemphasised; the theory talks about the way people interpret events and give them meaning; thus, the way women are portrayed in television advertising is based on the interpretation of their roles in the society.

Standpoint Theory

The stand point theory was propounded by Sandra Hardins and Julia T. Wood. The theory simply claims that our standpoint affects our world view. Going by the standpoint theory, the position or stance we take on certain matters affect how we will view things in society. Communication generally has a frame of reference; thus, our frame of reference affects how we interpret every form of communication. This perhaps explains why Griffin (2000, p.447) observes that:

A standpoint is a place from which to view the world around us. Whatever our vantage point, its location tends to focus our attention on some features of the natural and social landscape while obscuring others. Synonyms for standpoint include viewpoint, perspective, outlook and position. Each of these words suggests a specific location in time and space, where observation takes place, while at the same time, referring to values and or attitudes.

Going by the above assertion, the standpoint theory mainly explains how the members of the public differently react to media messages, based on their cultural background. The world is a place where you have different culture. Thus, your culture affects how you view communication messages. This also explains why Griffin (2000, p.447) argues the social groups within where we are located powerfully shape what we experience and know, as well as, how we understand and communicate with ourselves, others and the world. This therefore implies that religion, ethnicity, etc, affect our world view. Standpoint theorists, as noted by Griffin (2000, p.448) suggest that we can use the inequalities of gender, race, class and sexual orientation to observe how different locations within the social hierarchy tend to generate distinct accounts of nature and social relationships. Thus, what people know about themselves, others and society depends on which group they are in.

The standpoint theory also assumes that women are a marginalised group. The theorists see important differences between men and women; men tend to want autonomy while women tend to want connectedness. The theory is also relevant to the study because it talks about inequality in the society and that women are a marginalised group; thus, in terms of television advertising, women are also marginalised. Most of the advertisements on television are done using men, as it is only when they portray negative aspects that they make use of women.

Review of Related Literature

Functions of Advertising

Advertising fulfils some functions in the society. These, among others, according to Asemah (2011b) include:

- (a) It serves a marketing function by helping companies that provide products or services to sell their products. Advertising works

with other forms of marketing communication like personal selling, sales promotion, direct marketing, etc, to sell ideas, goods and services.

- (b) Advertising induces the firm's cost of production per unit output. This is because, advertising increases demand for the firm's output, thereby, encouraging manufacturers to manufacture more products.
- (c) Advertising makes the public to be loyal to a product.
- (d) Through advertising, companies that are new in business can easily penetrate the market. Advertising is pro-competitive. Thus, it helps the new organisations with a new product or service to take on the giants in the industry and carve out a niche for itself in the market.
- (e) Advertising informs the consumers about products in the market. This will enable the consumers to make more intelligent choices in the market place. Thus, advertising aids the competitive process.
- (f) Advertising increases usage of product.
- (g) Directs the public to areas where they can get products.
- (h) Helps the public to identify products and differentiate them from others.

Anyacho (2007, p.9) says most commercial oriented companies advertise to achieve the following results:

- (a) create awareness for new products. This helps to expose the brand and the uniqueness of the product;
- (b) sustain interests and helps to alleviate cognitive dissonance by constantly reinforcing the unique qualities of the product and services;
- (c) fight competition to secure the desired market share;
- (d) increase profit, thereby ensuring the continued life of the business;
- (e) increase sales turn over;
- (f) induce higher production volume resulting from increase in demand;

- (g) get more efficient in the utilisation of resources as a result of increase in profitability;
- (h) invest in research and development;
- (i) lower prices and get more competitive; and
- (j) expansion of market.

Women and Television Advertising

Several studies have shown that women are traditionally portrayed in advertising in stereotypical roles or in ways that do not necessarily match reality. These often negative representations of women in advertising and its effect on young women is a source of concern for many researchers (Matlin, 1987). Ferrante, Haynes and Kingsley (1988, p.231) stated that the portrayal of women in television advertisements is criticised by many who believe that women's depicted roles in commercials have not kept pace with women's changing roles in society. Ferrante, Haynes and Kingsley (1988) found that women traditionally have been overrepresented in the home and underrepresented outdoors and in business settings. Whipple and Courtney's (1985, p.4) research found that there is evidence that advertising presents a traditionally stereotyped portrayal of women and that demography and attitudes have changed dramatically over the past decade.

Advertising industry continues to serotype women to be sex objects, house wives. Advertisers are culpable for the heightened body dissatisfaction amongst women, because they constantly use sexy unrealistic images of ultra thin models, the depiction of women as sex objects and the frequent use of sex, to sell products. Since the late 1960s, there have been concerns regarding the portrayal of women in the media. Bardwick and Schumann (1976) analysed the portrayal of women in commercials and concluded that to an amazing extent, women are preoccupied with dirt. Visual advertisements are bombarded with images and slogans portraying women.

Whipple and Courtney's (1985, p.4) research found that there is evidence that advertising presents a traditionally stereotyped portrayal of women and that demography and attitudes have changed dramatically over the past decade. Whipple and Courtney (1985) found that although advertisers aim to reach all segments of the consuming public, their portrayal of society is not necessarily an accurate reflection of how society is composed.

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housewife” stereotype as a cultural directive, which in turn, may lead them to put aside their own desires regarding career and personal life and replace them with the idea presented through popular culture, including advertisements. Advertising is a powerful tool for selling, but it can also be a powerful tool for attitude change and behaviour. Hence, the danger of advertising, which stereotypes women is that it can lead to forming notions that undermine women and their abilities. One of the most strident criticisms of the way in which women appear in television and print advertisements is that women are portrayed in an extremely narrow range of roles, with depictions concentrated on the traditional occupations of housewife, a mother and secretary. One of the first studies that talked about the image of women in television commercials was by Bardwick and Schumann (1967). Bardwick and Schumann (1967) analysed male and female role portrayals in television commercials and concluded that women are portrayed primarily as homebound or as housewives.

Courtney and Whipple (1974) studied the portrayal of women in television commercials and found significant differences between men and women. Women were over-represented in advertisements for cosmetics and were less likely to appear in advertisements for cars, trucks and related products. Seventy-five percent of all advertisements using women were for products found in the kitchen or bathroom, reinforcing the stereotype that a woman’s place is in the home. Women as compared to men, were portrayed mostly in house settings, rather than business settings. Women did not make important decisions and lastly, women were depicted as dependent on men and were regarded primarily as sexual objects. Courtney and Whipple (1974) defined sexual objects as, where women had no role in the commercial, but appeared as an item of decoration. In most advertising, women are generally portrayed as subordinate to men or merely as a decorative item.

Methodology

The survey research design was adopted in carrying out this work while the questionnaire was used as an instrument of data collection. The purposive sampling technique was used to select four areas in Lokoja; these include: Adankolo, Lokongoma phase I, Lokongoma phase II and new layout, Lokoja. While the simple random sampling technique was used to select one hundred (100) respondents from each of the areas.

The researcher considered the population of the study to include the male and females in Lokoja Local Government Area of Kogi State, Nigeria. The population of Lokoja Local government Area as at 2006 National population census figures stands at one hundred and ninety five thousand two hundred and sixty-one (195,261) people. Thus, the population is 195, 261.

To determine the sample size of the study, a statistical method propounded by Taro Yamane (1964) was used. It goes thus:

$$\begin{aligned}
 n &= N \\
 \frac{n}{1+N} &= (e)^2 \\
 n &= 195,261 \\
 \frac{n}{1+195,261(0.05)^2} &= \\
 n &= 195,261 \\
 \frac{n}{1+488.1525} &= \\
 n &= 195,261 \\
 \frac{n}{489.1525} &= \\
 n &= 399.18
 \end{aligned}$$

Therefore, the sample size is four hundred (400). That is, 399.18 was approximated to 400.

Data Presentation and Analysis

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	UD	D	SD	X	DECISION
1.	Women are negatively portrayed in the advertisement of products on television	220	105	2	23	50	3.9	Accepted
2.	Women are portrayed as strong and hardworking people in television ads	49	37	0	124	190	2.0	Rejected
3.	The extent to which women are used to advertise products is minimal	201	92	0	60	47	3.9	Accepted

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5.	More men are used to advertise products than women	140	133	0	49	78	3.5	Accepted
6	Women are very satisfied with the way they are portrayed in advertisements	11	9	0	99	281	1.6	Rejected
7	Women want a change in the way they are portrayed in advertisement	300	92	0	2	6	4.6	Accepted
8	The older women prefer the way they are portrayed in advertisements	25	13	5	99	258	1.3	Rejected
9	The younger women prefer the way they are portrayed in advertisements	29	26	4	77	260	1.6	Accepted
10	The use of women persuades more people to patronise advertised goods and services	280	88	0	22	10	4.5	Accepted
11	Women see the way they are portrayed as not true	290	40	0	40	30	4.3	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2012

In the above table, eleven (11) items were used to ascertain the opinions of the respondents on the way they perceive how women are portrayed in television advertising; out of the 11 items, 7 were accepted while 4 were rejected. Item 1, which translates to 3.9 shows that women are negatively portrayed in television advertising, item 2 shows that women are portrayed as weaker sex in television advertising, item 3 shows that the extent to which women are used to advertise products is minimal, item 4 shows that women are occasionally used to advertise products, item 5 shows that more men are used to advertise products than women, item 6 shows that women are not satisfied with the way they are portrayed in advertisements, item 7 shows that women want a change in the way they are portrayed in advertisement.

Items 8 and 9 show that both the older and younger women do not like the way and manner they are portrayed in television advertising, item 10 shows that the use of women persuades more people to patronise advertised goods and services while item 11 shows that women see the way they are portrayed as not true. This therefore shows that women do not like the way they are portrayed in television advertising.

Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

Findings show that women are not happy about the way they are presented in television advertising. Majority of the respondents said that women are often portrayed negatively in television advertising as they are often used when it comes to washing of toilets, washing of clothes, etc. This in line with the literature review where it was said that women are negatively portrayed in television advertising generally. Advertising presents a traditionally stereotyped portrayal of women. Women are typically portrayed in advertising in the traditional role of a mother or beauty or sex symbol and these do not represent women's diversity.

One of the most strident criticisms of the way in which women appear in television and print advertisements is that women are portrayed in an extremely narrow range of roles, with depictions concentrated on the traditional occupations of housewife, a mother and secretary. Women were over-represented in advertisements for cosmetics and were less likely to appear in advertisements for cars, trucks and related products.

As indicated in the table, women are portrayed as weaker sex; they are portrayed as people who are weak; who do not have strength. Thus, when it comes to the advertisement of products that show strengths on television, men are used while women are left out. For example, when you see the advertisement of lucozade boost, a man was used and not a woman. This shows that women are portrayed as weak.

The broadcast media over the years, based on their content in programmes, advertisement messages, political campaigns, etc., have failed to project women as people who are capable of doing the things that men do and even doing it better because naturally, women are managers. Looking at the advertisements on television, we would discover that when the advertisement is on products that involve domestic chores like washing, cooking, etc., women are used (stereotype) e.g. advertisements of Omo, Harpic, Indomie, Royco, Maggi, etc. This simply means that even the media project women as

domestic vessels. whose job does not exceed the kitchen. while the men are Asemah, Edegoh & Ojih: *Audience perception of the Portrayal of Women in TV Advertising*

clothes and the mother had to wash it. Another typical stereotyping of women in advertisement is seen in the Dettol commercial where the woman ended the advertisement by saying “if I don’t take care of them, who will?” all building on the point that women are domestic vessels. Even in television programmes where sexual harassment is involved, the female is always the appropriate choice to portray the character. This ought not to be, because negativity is not tied to women alone, neither is domestic chores to women.

Summary and Recommendations

It is safe to conclude that stereotypes exist and are part of our lives and people act according to these stereotypes, because they are considered socially acceptable. Hence, if an individual was to think of an advertisement for a household cleaner, a female will be used. These stereotypes are ubiquitous in television ads, especially when women are portrayed in subordinate or submissive roles. Women are often depicted in television advertising as a reward for men who chose the right product. As a result, advertising has a clear gender bias and the practice of tailoring ads to audiences based on their gender is so pervasive that it becomes obvious to us at an early age. These stereotypes eventually become accepted in our culture. Advertising as a form of social communication, is influenced by various elements of the originating culture and cultural values may determine the differential meanings that people derive from advertising messages. Elements of culture could be in the form of traditional values, family values, national pride or humour. Thus, based on the findings and conclusion, the paper recommends that women should be regularly used to advertise products, women should be portrayed in positive light and that there is the need for women to repose confidence in themselves, because in most cases, the women are the architects of their problems.

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