

Stereotype of Women in the Media: The Fault of the Women or the Media?

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways women are portrayed in media and how that promotes them as sexual objects, submissive to male dominance and wrapped with stereotyped roles. Findings indicate that though the media have the potential and capacity to bring social change in any society, their policy in terms of depicting women's image is somehow distorted. More often than not the media depict women as a sexual object with little value. It sends negative messages about the ways in which women should be treated and constantly degrade status of women in the society.

Key words: *Portrayal, Stereotype, Women and Media*

Introduction

Media, no doubt, play a useful role in dissemination of information on a variety of subjects to the general public; it can be used for creating proper awareness, imparting education and prevention of various societal ills. Sharma (2008, p. 34) states that media play an important role in community development. He further notes that mass media have saturated the industrialized world. To Dines & Humez (1995), the television in the living room, the newspaper on the doorstep, the radio in the car, the computer at work and the fliers in the mailbox are just a few of the media channels daily delivering advertisements, news, opinion, music and other forms of mass communication. Tiemoko & Oku-Egbas (2006) opine that advertisements have not only always been an important marketing strategy but in modern times, advertising has become the lifeline of the business economy. It is a practical and successful method of mass communication. In the era of competition where the customer is the king, the marketers can be successful only if they have what "the king" should know. These days, advertising messages are preoccupied with grabbing attention and sustaining interest, rather than transferring persuasion messages. This has largely been due to a perception that advertising needs to stand out and perform an aesthetic, educational and entertaining function in order to be received by customers. The pattern of value in any society is reflected in the contents of mass communications.

Every day, billions of people interact with interfaces that help them access information and make decisions. Alice & Sarah .(200) assert that as increasing amounts of information become available, systems designers turn to algorithms to select which information to show to whom. These algorithms and the interfaces built on them, they maintain, can influence people's behaviors and perceptions about the world. They however note that both algorithms and interfaces can be biased in how they represent the world. These biases can be particularly insidious when they are not transparent to the user or even to the designer (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). The information people access affects their understanding of the world around them and the decisions they make: biased information can affect both how people treat others and how they evaluate their own choices or opportunities (Sharma, 2008).

The prevailing attitude of the society gets revealed through the way subjects dealing with women are treated by the media. To Shah (2010), Shaw & Lee (2006) and Doghudje & Elegbe (2014), whether deliberately or unintentionally, the way women have been portrayed in media is exaggerated form of real life circumstances and assumptions and it has very little relationship with the real life. To them, the matter of concern however, is that it has a great impact on life style of today's women as they imitate and identify themselves with the character shown in the content of programmes of printed or electronic media.

The purpose of the discourse is to find out public perception of sex-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media particularly advertisements and its relationship with real life experiences of women.

Women, Society and the Media

Women are the prime assets for the development of a country, especially in the context of Nigeria where nearly 50% of total population comprises of women. The time has gone when women were generally considered as an object and their role in family and society was very limited. The women of the 21st century are achieving several mile stones and are becoming sources of inspiration for many. However, as Shah (2010) notes, we cannot say it confidently that the image of women in society has completely transformed, there are many evidences which prove the existence of systematic discrimination and neglect of women. It may be in terms of inadequate nutrition denial or limited access to political positions, education, health and property rights, child labour and domestic violence (Purnima, 2010).

Media has always been a significant pillar of social transformation and social change. To Amobi & Oloruntola (2012), bring a social change the instrumental role of media cannot be denied. It doesn't just have the power to build public opinion by reaching to far, wide and diversified audience but also mobilize people and mould the public opinion. This puts the media in a powerful position in a society. Popular mass media such as newspapers, television, and radio represent a symbolic power of social control. Khan & Moin (2013, p. 40) observe that they effectively solicit public support and participation for the wellbeing of the society in which women have crucial role to play in every sphere of life whether it is household, economic contribution, child rearing or improving the quality of life. To play these roles, Morgan (2012) insists, women should be conscious of their potential and it can only be possible when they will not be deliberately marginalized by male domination. In this context, media has an important role to play to create awakening in women to achieve their potential as the prime movers of change in society. The pattern of value in any society is reflected in the contents of mass communications. The way subjects dealing with women are treated indicates, to a great extent, the prevailing attitude of the society towards women (Amobi & Oloruntola, 2012).

Stereotypical Portrayal of Women in the Media

In news and entertainment media, women have frequently been marginalized with minor changes in proportions over the past decade. The female characters often depicted in film and television cast gender stereotypes and the likelihood of women, specifically young women, to be hyper sexualized in film is far more expected than men. (Doghudje & Elegbe, 2014). In television commercials the trend of sex-role stereotype can be observed

where women are mostly given the roles such as not making important decision at home and outside, dependent on men and needing men's protection (Kumar, 1995). Also commenting on the portrayal of women in the media, Courtney & Lockeretz, (1971) observe that commercials for men's products generally involve women as sex objects (advertisement of deodorant, shaving cream etc.). In an observation of 1000 TV commercials Dominick and Rauch (1974) observed that the role given to women are limited to housewife/mother and rarely given occupational roles. This type of stereotypical representation of women in media can have a detrimental impact on young girls who identifies themselves with their role model shown in these commercials. Women may perceive the image of a complete housewife stereotype as a cultural directive. They may learn to suppress their desire of pursuing their career of interest and replace them with the "ideal" presented to them through the media in their daily lives. Most of the time media depicts the desire rather than the reality. Behind the sensational portrayal of women in advertisements the simple reason is to pursue the target audience in favour of a respective product or service. SiuWai-sum., & Au, Alan Kai-ming. (1997) posit that the message conveyed through the media may misguide the adolescents of today to maintain a slim and skinny body image. They thus warn that this may give rise to many health related issues among adolescent girls. The pervasiveness of sex stereotyped role in commercials can be seen around the world.

Stereotypes and Bias

A stereotype refers to a belief that individuals in a group - e.g., gender, occupation, race, ethnicity, or particular back-ground – generally have one or more traits or behaviors. People make use of stereotypes to explain their own or others' behaviors (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, Reynolds,. and Doosje, 2002) to justify actions or decide how to act (Bodenhausen, & Wyer, 1985) and to define group boundaries. While accurate stereotypes may be useful for making decisions in the absence of more specific information, inaccurate stereo-types can be harmful. Belief that one's group performs poorly at a task can lead to lower performance (stereotype threat (Spencer, Steele, and Quinn, 1999). Stereotyped expectations about someone's behaviour can also lead them to behave in that way, a self-fulfilling prophecy (Williams, 1996) and expectations about one's own abilities can influence aspirations and choices, such as beliefs about what career path one should follow (Correll, 2001). Bias arises when an individual, group or process unfairly and systematically treats an individual or group favorably or unfavorably. Stereotypes about abilities or character are a common source of bias (Heilman, 2001)., often to the disadvantage of a particular race, sexual orientation, or gender. For example, stereotypes about gender and parental roles can systematically limit women's career advancement (Halpert, Wilson, and Hickman, 1993).

Effects of Stereotypes and Bias in the Media

The portrayal of women and racial/ethnic minorities in television and other media has received considerable attention as both a possible source of stereotypes and opportunity to challenge them (Graves, 1999). Exclusion of these groups, Graves (1999, p. 45)states, can imply that they are "unimportant, inconsequential, and powerless." Their inclusion offers specific examples whose implications depend on how they are portrayed, and these portrayals can reinforce or challenge stereotypes. Unfortunately, portrayals often reinforce negative stereotypes, for example, by showing racial/ethnic minorities as criminals, victims of criminals, and in low-status service jobs. Cultivation theory predicts

that television's portrayal of the world affects people's beliefs about reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1986; Shrum, 1995). Portrayals, or the lack of portrayals, can affect whether people believe that people like them commonly participate in an occupation, or their perceived self-efficacy for that role (Tajfel, 1981). Researchers studying television commercials find that women are less likely to be portrayed as workers and that they exaggerate gender-occupation stereotypes. They express concern that such portrayals may perpetuate stereotypes. Cultivation theory has also been found to predict how people perceive risks after experiencing them in a video game (Williams, 1996).and playing a sexualized female character reduces female players' feelings of self-efficacy (Behm-Morawitz&Mastro, 2009).

Women and the Media

During the past decade, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults. Brown (1999) asserts that everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women. However, Dines and Humez (1995) observe that more women are involved in careers in the communications sector, but few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy. The lack of gender sensitivity in the media Gunter (1986) notes, is evidenced by the failure to eliminate the gender-based stereotyping that can be found in public and private local, national and international media organizations.

Goffman (1978) insists that the continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications electronic, print, visual and audio - must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world (Kuhn, 1985). In addition, Minh - Ha (1991, p. 12) observes that violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society. According to him, programming that reinforces women's traditional roles can be equally limiting. He further posits that the world- wide trend towards consumerism has created a climate in which advertisements and commercial messages often portray women primarily as consumers and target girls and women of all ages inappropriately

Suggesting a way out of this quagmire, Spigel & Mann (1992) insist that women should be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology. This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals of women internationally and to challenge instances of abuse of the power of an increasingly important industry. To Trowler (1988), Self-regulatory mechanisms for the media need to be created and strengthened and approaches developed to eliminate gender-based programming. Doghudje & Elegbe (2014) are worried that most women, especially in developing countries, are not able to access effectively the expanding electronic information highways and therefore cannot establish networks that will provide them with alternative sources of information. Women therefore need to be involved in decision-making regarding the development of the new technologies in order to participate fully in their growth and impact. In addressing the issue of the mobilization of the media, Governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in policies and programmes.

Conclusion

The stereotyping of women in our media has not only been with us for some time but is also increasing. The worse part of the whole episode is that there is no revulsion, no change to biased projections and no regrets from any part of the society. We have somehow taken the whole gamut of dialogues, stories and picturization of women as way of our life or as if of no consequences. It is therefore the stand of this paper that the mass media in all societies have not made adequate efforts to discuss serious issues concerning women and prepare them to play their rightful and equal role in society. However, the paper notes that the women themselves had made little or no efforts at redeeming themselves as they gladly accept any role the media assigns them.

The paper, thus, recommends, among others, that there should be positive portrayal of women taking note of their role in all facets of life. Women, on their part, should empower themselves by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology. This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals internationally and to challenge instances of abuse of the power of an increasingly important industry.

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