South-East Nigerian Women’s Perceptions and Responses: Alternative Views to Gender-Based Advertising Messages?

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To date, very little is known about how women in Nigeria respond to gender portrayals in advertisements and the meaning and interpretation they bring to same. This research using women from South-East Nigeria, therefore, examines Nigerian women’s perception of gendered advertisements and how such perceptions translate in their purchase decisions. The research is purely qualitative; hence, Focus Group Discussion was employed to gauge women’s perceptions and responses to some selected product advertisements in realization of the paucity of studies of this nature in Nigeria. Findings show that South-East Nigerian women have divergent perceptions and ambivalent dispositions to gendered advertisements. While all the women in the study consent that most gendered advertisements are offensive and straightjacket women’s roles to the homes, their opinions however, varied as regards their responsiveness or otherwise to the products advertised. The study concludes that Nigerian women audiences are actively involved in meaning negotiation and capable of resisting such messages incongruent to their held values.

Keywords: Gender-based Advertisements, Perceptions, Responsiveness, and South-East Nigerian Women.

INTRODUCTION

For decades now, research on advertising and gender have consistently demonstrated traditional stereotyped portrayal of women in unrealistic ways that have always been criticized for their negative effect on women. For instance, Ferrante, Haynes and Kingsley (1988, p.231) argued that the portrayal of women in television advertisements is ‘criticized by many who believe that women’s depicted roles in commercials have not kept pace with women’s changing roles in society’. Similarly, Rajagopal and Gales’ (2002) content analysis of research on women in advertising found that women are typically portrayed in advertising in one of three roles – mother, beauty or sex symbol – none of which ‘represents women’s diversity’ Rajagopal and Gales’ (2002, p.334). Other similar researches abound in this regard (eg. Ford, 2008; Mckenna, 2006; Kilbourne, 2000; & Goffman, 1976). The underlying assumptions of these previous researches, suggest women’s acceptance of the dominant readings that are mostly the preferred readings intended by the advert producers (Hall, 1980).

However, recent studies on active audience theory suggest that women in the 21st century may provide alternative readings to these advertisements different from what early studies on advertisements suggested. The cultural theory of advertising and the reception theory suggest that ‘individuals actively shape the meaning of advertising’, and audiences do not passively receive messages (Plunket, 2010, p.54). New stream of research that has recently emerged within marketing conceives advertisements as polysemic, i.e., open to multiple readings, and the audiences as active agents in meaning formation (e.g., McCracken 1987; Sherry 1987; Stern 1989, 1993; Mick and Politi 1989; McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Scott 1994a, 1994b; Ritson and Elliot 1995), such that despite what advertisers intend, messages can be ambiguous and even contradictory and audiences may also in turn, read contradictory meanings and oppositionally decode the producers’ texts. This supports Condit’s (1989) observation that polysemous texts are presented to polyvalent audiences who can construct a variety of interpretations and, ultimately, different meanings.

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It is against this backdrop that this study explores the complex interactions and negotiations of meaning of gender-based advertisements from the perspective of the female audience in South-East Nigeria. Similar reception and perceptual studies conducted in different countries (see, Ebren & Celik, 2011; Aruna and Sahni 2008; Elliot, 2008; Sandicki, 1999; Williams, 1995) have supported the notion of polysemic and oppositional readings of advertising messages by different women. It is from these prior works that research presented in this article begins to determine whether similar oppositional decoding as observed in other climes, in different cultural contexts, will obtain among the South-East Nigerian women. This work, a gender reception study, contributes to literature from developing countries’ cultural perspective.

STUDY OBJECTIVE

The major objective of this work is to determine how educated women in South-East Nigeria read and interpret gender role expectations depicted in gendered advertisements; whether they read gendered advertising messages differently than the critical scholars who have written about this topic predict (since most of the arguments in these studies emanate from western climes). Do they conform to the advertiser’s dominant/preferred readings? (Hall, 1980) or do they rather actively interpret and negotiate the intended messages? Or out-rightly challenge and differentially decode the advertiser’s encoded messages? (Condit, 1989; Plunkey, 2010) and provide a variety of meanings based on individual schemata. The major argument of this work supports the active audience theorists’ suggestion that advertisements are never received and decoded in isolation from the wider social and personal characteristics of the audience. Rather audience interpretations and decoding of advertising texts can be influenced by the personal characteristics of the audience interacting with these advert texts which are open for interpretation in various ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advertisements and Gender Role Stereotypes

Over the years, the interests and attentions of communication and feminist researchers have been directed to the role of media advertisements in constructing and perpetuating certain role expectations along the masculine and feminine divides. Hence, myriads of studies have been conducted in the area of media
gender role stereotypes especially in advertisements to demonstrate the existence of such portrayals. Content analysis dominated the empirical studies in this area within the 1970s. Later studies explored other demographics, socio-cultural and other factors that influence perceptions and account for the divergent perceptions and responses that abound in female population. To this end, the attentions of scholars seem to have shifted from the known stereotypical gender portrayals to further investigate the apparentness of such portrayals to especially the female audiences and by extension the kind of response such generate among them. This study on Nigerian women’s perception and responsiveness to gender-based advertisements is one of such shifts.

Scores of studies that have been conducted along this line investigated how the women in particular readily recognized these seemingly obvious stereotypes. Evidence from study of this nature as noted by Chatterjee (2007) indicated that traditionally gendered depictions are apparent to women; they not only sell products, but also that the public was more familiar and comfortable with them. Chatterjee seems to suggest that since the female group is familiar and comfortable with such stereotyped ads, they not only buy into but play out the portrayals. In other words, the women studied tend to be more comfortable with known stereotypes and go a long way to maintain the hegemonic-subservient order existing in several cultures and societies as represented by and through the media. Could this same ‘favourable’ dispositions to gender-stereotyped advertisements found in studies elsewhere obtain among the South-East Nigerian women? And how consistent will these findings be with this study as regards to women’s conformity to the advertising gender-role portrayals?

Conversely, Abd. Rahim, Mustaffa, and Mun (2012) pointed to the fact that the women (Malaysian) have become or had always been wary of the gender portrayals in advertisements as the results of their study indicated that gender advertising, if used inappropriately will tarnish brand image and will cause brand to be taken lightly. According to their findings, Malaysian consumers at present seek concrete information and representation of the brands advertised. This finding suggests that the audiences are becoming increasingly savvy and as such do not take just about anything the media push to them. This study arguably seems to point to differences in interpretation of advertisement as a result of divergent social cultural contexts. These divergences played up in steeped in a culture that defines her and emphasizes her silence; thus within the Igbo culture the supreme identity of a woman is that she is meant to be seen, not heard. But since like the dominant Igbo culture, the women are as well governed by the common cultural trait that emphasizes individual achievements and initiative, alternative prestige goals and paths of action, a tendency toward egalitarian leadership..... (Ndioikwere, n.d), it is expected that the enlightened Igbo women would by implication begin to break free from inhibitory cultural clouts.
research in different cultures suggest a shift regarding consumer responses to advertisements. Going by these perceptible shifts in audience reception of advertisements, the researchers were curious to explore the extent perceptual differences could be found in this study and whether the Nigerian women are as sensitive and critical of the gendered, stereotypical nature of the advertisements that they were exposed to or rather focus on the product quality and testimonials in their response.

Polysemic studies are few in Nigerian study of advertisements; as such, it becomes a challenge to find out how people decode and make sense of advert messages and how all these get intertwined in the consumer’s purchase decision making process, particularly, the Nigerian women audiences. The approach taken in this study concerns investigating the sense making process of an ‘active audience’; hence, we argue that the dominance of stereotypes mediated representations of gender laden with prevalent cultural ideologies, reduces Nigerian women viewers’ own agency and power. Perhaps, Nigerian women elite in the struggle for meaning, interpret these gendered advertisements based on their social context and personality traits and possibly generate ‘negotiated readings’ that will take into account their individual social position but may less likely result in differential decoding. Or what else could have accounted for the continual objectifying depictions of women in especially popular culture and advertising for several decades now as reflected in common research themes across different cultures globally? (Berberick, 2010; Ford, 2008; Mckenna, 2006; & Goffman, 1976). It is therefore, the assumption of this study that these women, although aware and critical of the gendered stereotypical nature of these advertisements; they are prone to be more tolerant and receptive because of their unconscious internalization of the male dominance structure deep-rooted in the Nigerian culture. The advertisers know this; hence the consistent use of stereotypical portrayals that perpetually confine women to subservient positions irrespective of social context.

Patriarchal Universe of Advertising: The Nigerian Example

The Nigerian society like most others is patriarchal in nature, and media texts inadvertently reflect this patriarchy. Most advertisements are packaged to maintain the status quo. Hence, gendered ad contents representing men in traditional roles predominate. Even with more women assuming powers of authority in the country, the Nigerian advertising media rigidly remain undiversified in gender representations (Ifezue, 2010), with women overrepresented in the home and underrepresented in the outdoors and business settings. Jimoh (2010) and Ifezue (2010) clarify that:

Analysis of Nigerian contemporary advertisements suggest that gender is routinely portrayed according to traditional cultural stereotypes; women as housewives, mothers, home makers and sexual objects, men are portrayed in situation of authority and dominance over women. Thus, physical strength is a common theme in ads – men are always taller than women; men are often seen helping women, carry them up in authority. Women are often portrayed caressing and men grasping (2010, p.15).

Nigerian advertisements that lend credence to Jimoh and Ifezue’s (2010) observations abound. For instance, a popular MTN fastlink modem advertisement shows a young female Personal Assistant in the office who received a call from her boss ‘a male’ to get some documents he had asked for the previous day because he was almost at the office and needed them urgently. The lady hurriedly brought out her MTN fastlink and downloaded the files before the ‘Male’ boss got to the office. In this advertisement you see a supposed typical male – always in control, issuing commands to the subordinate female – and a supposed typical female – always docile, submissive, eager and ready to please the ‘male’ boss. Similar product ads like Dettol soap, Sensodyne toothpaste etc. also over-emphasized men’s roles in the workforce as bosses and in the home as breadwinners. Interestingly, more Nigerian women are engaged outside the home as breadwinners but advertisers hardly reflect these changing roles. Often, the gender stereotypes are used as comical relief, but even so, the repeated portrayals only continue to reinforce existing gender roles rather than attempting to challenge these societal expectations. Young people who view these ads are continually subjected to subliminal messages of male dominance and female submission. As Daniel Chandler wrote, ‘Viewers are frequently invited to identify with male characters and to objectify females’. This has been predominant in most Nigerian advertisements.

A Model for Analyzing Women’s Perception and Responsiveness to Gender-Based Advertisements: Theoretical and Methodological Choice

Active audience theorists would remind us that media audiences do not just receive information passively but, actively make sense of the message within their personal and social contexts. As McQuail (1997, p.19) opined, within the ‘culturalist (reception) tradition of audience research’ media use is in itself recognized as an integral part of everyday life and audience readings are diverse, involving ‘resistance’ as well as alignment with dominant ideas. The work of Morley (1986) has also been significant in the discourse of the ‘active audience’ pointing out to the importance of social characteristics and context in the process of decoding and also to the appropriateness of qualitative and ethnographic methods for its investigation (Morley, 1992). Considering especially the promotion and the use of gendered advertising images and portrayals, it
is a challenge to find out how women decode, resist and make-sense or meanings and how all these get intertwined in the final process of purchase of products.

While acknowledging the power of the media which advertisers can harness to sell their products and ideas to the audiences, active audience theorists would, however, privilege the role of the social actors/the active audiences, who possess free will, the basis upon which they respond to the messages they receive from advertisers. According to Rogers (1959) cited in McLeod (2012), ‘we want to feel, experience and behave in ways which are consistent with our self-image and which reflect what we would like to be like, our ideal-self. The closer our self-image and ideal-self are to each other, the more consistent or congruent we are and the higher our sense of self-worth’. Zinkhan, (1991) in a study titled Self Concept and Advertising Effectiveness: a Conceptual Model of Congruency Conspicuousness, and Response Mode, hypothesized that advertising appeals congruent with viewers’ self-concept would be superior to incongruent appeals in terms of enhancing advertising effectiveness. Advertising effectiveness is conceptualized as: brand memory, brand attitude, and purchase intentions. The impact of the symbolic meaning of a product, however, hinges on the association between the product symbol (a subjective meaning assigned to an object) and consumers’ self-image (a mental picture representing an entity). If the symbol of a product does not tie in closely with one’s self-image, it may have little influence on purchasing behaviour, irrespective of its potential symbolic richness (Zinkhan, 1991).

Based on this, the Self Congruency Theory becomes suitable for measuring the effectiveness of all promotional strategies targeted at a particular gender, bearing in mind that the audiences have over the years developed some protective schemata that help them filter and read media messages (advertisements inclusive) reaching them. Therefore, there would be a juxtaposition of Nigerian women’s perceptions of gender-based advertising messages – as being good or offensive – and how such perception translates to their responsiveness or otherwise to the product(s) being advertised, other factors being equal.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research is an audience reception/perception study, anchored on the assumptions of the self-congruency theory. The researchers therefore, used focus groups to elicit elite women’s interpretations of advertisements featuring women and then analyzed themes that emerged from the focus groups using critical-cultural and feminist frameworks. The choice of focus groups as the method is congruent with the study’s intention – interrogating audience interpretations. Focus groups allow people to voice opinions and piggyback ideas, which yield powerful discussions not possible using other methods. Wimmer and Dominick (2003) postulate that focus groups are advantageous since individuals feel less inhibited than in individual interviews, and that makes the results more complete; and the success recorded in previous similar studies in other climes (eg. Sandikci, 1998, and Abd. Rahim, Mustaffa, & Mun, 2012), further strengthens the choice of this approach.

**Participants**

A total of forty (40) participants (eight each across the five states) were recruited from the South-East region of Nigeria using the snowball technique where one contact generated further contacts. The second researcher made the initial direct contact with a female course-mate and colleague who declared interest to participate in the group interaction when hinted of the study aims and also volunteered to contact other women she knew that shared similar interest in discussing gender related issues. She was issued with the research information kits which consisted of the aim of the study, clips of images of women in ads and statement of confidentiality. The interested participants were given specific date and venue to convene in the month of April-May, 2016. Five sets of group discussions were conducted consisting of eight participants each residing within the five states that make up South-East Nigeria. The participants were mostly recruited from institutions of learning and state government secretariats on voluntary basis; all participants are married women who had at some point been exposed to adverts of the products used as stimulants in this study. This sample size is based on Plunkey, (2010, pp.218-219) submission that:

> Qualitative studies intend to focus on a limited population so that the researcher can examine their experiences and perspectives within a specific context. Therefore, the implications of the study cannot be overly generalized, nor can be drawn definitive conclusions.

Similarly, the researchers will not claim that this sample is representative of all brand consumers but will however, point out that the sample did reflect some of the main demographic characteristics of the consumers under focus (see appendix for details).

The respondents in the study have all obtained at least a first degree and all above 28 years of age. These

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2 Nigeria is made up of six geo-political zones. South-East is one of the six zones and it comprises five states, viz.: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo.
characteristics were significant to the researchers as they expected that the women as a result of their age, academic qualifications and social status, would be savvier, more critical and more sensitive to gender advertising as shown in other studies with similar cultural capital (see Sandikci, 1998), but the extent to which gendered advertising messages is challenged may significantly differ based on socio-cultural differences.

**Procedure**

The entire research process was overseen by the two researchers who constantly engaged in critical discourses via emails, telephone and face to face interactions to resolve emerging issues, make research decisions and engage in data analysis. The initial phase of the research process entailed selection of media content (ad images) that served as stimulants in the focus groups. This was informed by Altheide’s (1996) approach to qualitative media analysis. Hence, an inclusion/exclusion process was utilized in order to identify media content likely to generate maximum discussion within focus groups (Hine, 2011). In line with Altheide’s (1996) approach, stimuli materials were generated from internet ad sources in the month of January, 2016. Purposive sampling was used in selecting product adverts the researchers considered to be predominantly associated with women and are gender-based. The images used for this study therefore satisfied the research requirements. Twenty-five (25) images were generated and were given to the respondents in pairs-based on similarity in ad images, messages and supposed intent – to aid recall and stimulate response. This was followed by a structured open-ended question that gauged respondents’ thoughts and emotions that were triggered by the ad images. Questions revolved around respondents’ impressions after observing each advertisement and intentions to patronize the products advertised. The advertisements selected were on domestic products, and include: De Rica’s Tomato Paste, Indomie noodles, Dettol Antiseptic, Guinness Stout and Snapp beer. Although all the women participants viewed the 25 images, six of these ad images were used in this analysis.

**Data Coding, Presentation and Analysis**

Focus group discussions were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The transcribed data were categorized thematically and analyzed. The process of thematic categorization was conducted by identifying responses that fit within the thematic frames that occurred and recurred (Bloor et al., 2001; Sarantakos, 1993). Data coding into corresponding themes and creating of new themes were done until saturation point. This entire process was rigorously and critically conducted by both researchers, thus consolidating the emerging themes with which the analysis and discussions were based. To ensure the participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to denote each participant’s response in the data analysis phase. For easy analysis, these advertisements were put side-by-side and the discussions carried out thematically laced with the excerpts of the FGD simultaneously and intermittently. Analysis focused on participants’ responses and themes manifest in the works of other audience reception and feminist scholars (eg Ford, 2008; Mckenna, 2006; Kilbourne, 2000; & Goffman, 1976). The following major themes in gender advertising as revealed in this study are: gender role stereotypes and women's conformity to role portrayals in advertisements; ambivalent dispositions to advertisements; dissonance between some advertisements and products; objectification of women to enhance sales- women as baits to lure men.

**Gender Role Stereotypes and Women’s Conformity to Role Portrayals in Advertisements**

In reference to the De Rica’s Tomato Paste (Image 1), and the Indomie Noodles (Image 2) advertisements, the women could be seen happily cooking and playing respectively. In the two ads also, gender-role socialization is obvious as the young girls in the ads keenly observe...
their mothers performing socially ascribed domestic roles. The activities of the two women in the images above revolve around the home. These implicitly suggest the role of women as happy house-wives, nurturing mothers, and worthy friends to the children ‘friend like no other’ (figure 1 above). This view was expressed by majority of the participants who openly expressed their dislike in what they consider limiting women’s potentials. This is summed up in the responses thus:

**Amaka:** …these adverts on food condiments make it seem as if cooking or kitchen or taking care of the family is only woman’s role. I have never seen an advert where a man is portrayed as cooking the food or taking care of the family. It is always women that are shown and if you look at this woman, she is doing it happily, by the time you look at it; it would seem as if women are only meant to be house wives and not do other jobs.

**Paschalin (grp2):** … the adverts most times suggest that we can’t be anything except homemakers, good girls, mothers, sisters or even prostitutes and bad influence. (ABS and UNIZIK Staff FGD, April, 2017).

However, within the South-East Nigeria, the ability to make and keep the home is seen as a virtue and women who readily uphold this duty are regarded as being industrious and indeed “o dozi aku” (keeper of wealth or treasure). This singular cultural practice could have accounted for the divergent opinions expressed by the women discussants. Thus, few of the women in the group readily noted that the act and role of keeping the home as well as cooking is not entirely limiting as was noted by the majority of the discussants. According to some of the discussants:

**Chinenye:** this advert that shows a woman preparing a delicacy shows women’s roles can be appreciated. It shows the woman is industrious, homely, charming, welcoming and that she cares about what she gives her family

**Ogochukwu:** Cooking is a woman’s duty I don’t see anything wrong with the advert. It is just showing what we do.

**Adaeez:** Yes it is but these days we do other things they should show it ohh!. (UNIZIK, 2017).

Majority of the respondents also maintain that these advertisements and many other product advertisements emphasize the role of women at home and by extension reinforce the existing stereotype in the society. Even as majority voice their dislike of the stereotypic nature and influence of the ad on women some argue that it merely reflects the culturally ascribed gender roles of Nigerian women - good mothers, wives, and cooks. A few, questioned why the boys were not part of the advert as homemakers and cooks. However, most of the discussants though they agreed yet point out that this role portrayed is incongruent with modern Igbo society since women are now okpata aku (Breadwinners/ wealth creators) and no longer stay at home to cook.

When asked if the women conform to the role expectations in the advertisement their responses were clearly ambivalent and personalized:

**Ebele:** yes, women see cooking, as their own duty not necessarily because of the advert. in fact to me the advert simply showed what most Nigerian women do, taking care of their family. The advert is true. They don’t necessarily conform to the advert. The advert simply shows what the women do and the expected role from them in a home.

**Ada:** yes, because women strive to please their husbands and the society.

**Ifeoma:** well, I don’t think so these days most women don’t have time they are inundated with combining home and work front and most times prefer to buy food from the numerous eateries around. (ABS Staff FGD, April, 2017).

An interesting observation made here from the response of one of the respondents was that women have accepted the discharge of domestic roles as their responsibility from a cultural perspective and not necessarily a sign of conformity to the portrayals in the advertisements. In their thinking, the advertisers simply harp on and reinforce the already existing traditional role stereotypes inherent in the Nigerian society. The advertisements thus, do not exert any direct influence on the women as the cultural demands already condition the women to assume a particular position and perform certain roles in the society.

**Ogochukwu:** I don’t really think we conform, we only do our responsibilities. That I see a naked woman besides beer doesn’t mean I should be naked too and drink beer.

As exemplified in the excerpt above, this respondent is probably influenced by such other ideological state apparatuses that tend to ‘naturalize’ and ‘normalize’ such roles as women’s exclusive responsibilities.

This finding on women being more comfortable with traditional gendered adverts particularly on role stereotypes is consistent with the findings in the literature reviewed earlier in this work (see Chatterjee, 2007). It is instructive here however to note that even on the issue of conformity we had different responses from the women.

**Product: Dettol Antiseptic**

The advertisements of Dettol antiseptic above also show a nursing mother playing with her baby on the floor (image 3) and a male medical practitioner shown on the foreground, confidently posed with hands crossed and focused on the camera with a woman and a girl shown at the background, smiling at the camera (image 4). Although these advertisements have no obvious negative depictions, most of the respondents see it as being very
stereotypical. One of the respondents readily asked ‘why the woman cannot be shown as the medical doctor, why must it be the man?’ (Uchechukwu, ABS, 2017). The universal patriarchy of advertisement was projected in the exemplar images above. Dettol is a popular antiseptic detergent and soap commonly used in Nigerian homes. It is a domestic product and the common association of this product with women creates a mental imagery of the stereotypical roles of women in the homes which was reinforced in these adverts. In image 1 for instance, the positioning of the woman and a child on a ‘bare floor’ as observed by one of the discussants (Betty, UNIZIK FGD, 2017) only portray the woman and the baby as the subordinate group as pointed out by Goffman (1976). Similarly, the representation of the male character in the foreground in image 2 emphasized the superior position of the man; his image is larger than that of the woman and the little girl shown in the background. As observed by Ford (2008), the positioning of the woman and the girl in the background, all suggests that they are subordinates, while the man appears as the main character in a reputable profession and in a position to guide; to direct the woman on how best to maintain proper health hygiene using Dettol. The observation made by a discussant in this study corroborates previous studies that women irrespective of divergent cultural, racial and ethnic background easily identify and recognize and are also critical of gender stereotype as pointed out by feminists.

**Bethy:** This Dettol advert, a man was used as the medical doctor, and the woman was playing with her baby on the floor. We have many women medical doctors here so why not her? Is it not possible that they could have used a woman to be the doctor and not just washing napkins and bathing babies? (UNIZIK Staff FGD, April, 2013).

From their observations, it could be deduced that Dettol ads shown above depict conventional portrayal of men and women in which men have greater power than women, usually demonstrated visually by obvious roles of professionalism, confidence, and assertiveness as also observed by Ford, (2008).

Objectification of Women to Enhance Sales: Women as ‘Baits’ to Lure Men

The advertisement of Guinness Beer (Image 4) above showed a young white woman scantily clad and seductively sitting on a filled large glass of beer. The
woman in this ad was highly objectified and sexualized. The size of the glass of beer and the dark contrasting colour used in presenting it made it the focal image. The image of the glass of beer is larger than that of woman positioned on top of it thereby making it even more important than the woman in line with Goffman’s (1976) observation that a larger figure generally reads as “superior” in an ad. This representation further objectifies and degrades the woman as mere sex object as also noted by Kilbourne (2000) that women’s bodies are atomized into discrete sexualized body parts. The glass is filled with beer indicating that it is ready to be served or consumed, perhaps with the woman invitingly sitting atop it. The women saw this advertisement not only as offensive, but completely unconnected to the product being advertised. Although majority of the women perceive the advert as unafri can and readily associated it with western culture that seems to endorse female nudity in particular; an act a typical Nigerian will classify as obscene and/or indecent, they see no relationship between the advert and the product (beer) advertised. This in their opinion created a kind of **dissonance between the advertisement and the product** (Guinness beer).

**Rose:** …But I don’t see why they should put a naked woman with alcohol; they don’t have anything in common…maybe it is because it is a foreign advert.

**Annabel:** The Guinness advert doesn’t seem to rhyme. They should have used a man with his friends in a bar or at home relaxing after work. , it’s a sex based photograph and it’s very insulting because it means that women have nothing to show except nakedness, and what does a beer has to do with a naked woman sitting even on the glass?

**Ekvy:** Most times, a close look on these adverts, you will not see any relationship between the product and the woman used in the advert. For instance, if you look at this Guinness, one cannot really say what these advertisers mean. Guinness is a beer, and this is a woman, so there is no connection between the two. The advert on Snapp is a bit ok, maybe they want to show us how we’ll look when we start taking the drink (ABS and UNIZIK Staff FGD, April, 2013).

The women here expressed dislike towards the adverts because they perceived that it objectified and depersonalizes women but were more comfortable with the Snapp ad.

Although the women in all the focus groups saw no connection between the woman and the products advertised, sex was the common denominator because as also found by Ford (2008), there is some unnecessary text that connects the beer to sex. The text reads: “there are two things a man can’t resist…a pint of Guinness and another pint!” This text indirectly links the woman to yet another product that a man can’t resist beside the known product in the ad – Guinness. The woman becomes that “another pint” to be gulped down by a man. Sex therefore, becomes a marketing ploy and women as baits to lure the men to the product advertised. The central role of sex as a marketing strategy was succinctly captured in Ford’s assertion that “…sex in advertising is likely to attract attention, but it also gives sexual meaning to otherwise nonsexual products” (2008, p.13).

Majority of the discussants here emphasized their aversion to the fact that female bodies were often used by advertisers as a ploy irrespective of whether they were relevant to the product being advertised. Here are their views:

**Paschalin:**… but they still have sense in what they are doing. Most people that take alcohol also womanize, so once they see that naked woman beside the alcohol, they are attracted to the product.

**Edith:** Woman in this ad is irrelevant only used to attract attention nothing more.

**Obioma:**… It is clear that both adverts portrayed women as objects of attention. I don’t know if this will motivate the men to patronize the beer but the advert is sexy (ABS and UNIZIK Staff FGD, April, 2013).

### Ambivalent Dispositions to Advertisements

The researchers went further to ascertain the responsiveness of the women to the same adverts. Upon which findings show the **ambivalent dispositions of the women to the advertising messages**. While the line was drawn between acceptance and rejection; patronage and boycotting of the products being advertised if the advertisements were considered offensive to the women, some of the respondents said they would not buy the products if the advertisements were offensive to women. The excerpts are shown below:

**Angela:** of course I won’t, I won’t buy the product.

**Researcher:** even when the product is of quality?

**Ogechukwu:** yes, even if it has been proven that such product is the best of its kind since the last century. I will not buy, I would rather go for next one to it, or rather not buy at all if the adverts are offensive. If I do, it means I’m assisting them to publicize and perpetrate an insulting and ungodly advertisement. (ABS and UNIZIK Staff FGD, April, 2013).

On the other hand, greater majority maintain that they would buy the product if it is of quality and capable of satisfying their needs; that it does not matter the kind of advertisement used for the product if it meets their needs. Excerpts:
Maureen (unizik): yes, I will buy the product once it is ok. For example, have you seen the Malta Guinness and Amstel Malt advert? A woman was coming out of the swimming pool almost naked, but everybody drinks Amstel malt because of its low sugar content.

Onyinye: yes, once the product is ok, I’ll buy the product.

Ijeoma (unizik): well, I can buy any product as far as the product is ok. I’m not influenced by what I see, I buy because of the quality and if the product is good I patronize that. Seeing adverts that portray women in a negative way will not influence my buying decisions. If I can afford it then I buy it.

The finding above is to some extent consistent and similar to the findings of Chatterjee, (2007); Morison and Shaffer, (2003), but differed significantly because the women in this study are endeared to the products themselves rather than the gender-stereotyped advertisements as pointed out by the studies alluded to. This seems to suggest the complex process in negotiating the meaning of the advertisements by the women and in this process as suggested by different authors the women bring to bear so many factors and often the meanings are not necessarily transferred from the brand to the consumer. The most obvious fact is that each has different response and perceptions to these advertisements. Worthy of note also are the remarks made by some of the respondents which pointed to the Discord between the advertising world and the real world and the non-uniformity of the power of advertisements to influence. This observation in line with the ambivalent dispositions to advertisements found among the women, go a long way to support the basic postulations of the Self Congruency Theory ‘that the people actively interact with messages and are not necessarily influenced by what they see or hear, but to a greater extent, influenced by those things that are congruent to their self image. The women, when asked the question below, stated:

Moderator: do you think from a woman’s angle or points of view that these advertisements make you conform to some of these things they portray?

Participants: (unanimously laugh) it’s just an advert. Even the lady that is advertising is only doing her work. If a woman cannot cook, she cannot cook. If a woman is not a good wife, the advert will not change it. It’s a personal thing; they are just selling their products. Even the advert is mere acting.

One outstanding point in this last excerpt is women’s understanding of advertising messages as social constructs rather than real world. It is instructive the way they dismiss these constructions of reality pointing to the possibility of non-conformity. It is also important to point out that similarity in the demographic variables of the respondents used for this study (educated young women) may also account for the nature of the result. It therefore, becomes very necessary to conduct further researches using a more diverse female audience.

CONCLUSION

Themes emerging from this study reaffirm previous critical scholarship that women are presented as sex objects, used to attract attention; and that portrayals of advert contain narraties about cultural expectations of femininity. The results also uncovered interpretations filled with divergent polysemous meanings and negotiations of advert content. This study found that gender stereotype depictions in advertisements are quite apparent to Nigerian women; and are offensive to them. Gender role portrayals in advertisements are viewed by the women as natural and traditional roles of women in African cultural context. However, the distinguishing feature of their responses was women’s on-going ‘negotiations’ with, and accommodations of dominant images of cultural expectations of femininity.

What also became evident in this study is that the South-East Nigerian women featured in this study have divergent perceptions and ambivalent dispositions to gender-based advertising messages. The majority of women in this study decoded this image in highly negotiated or even oppositional ways. Many were able to read against the grain of the content by using the lens of their own gendered experience with the dynamics of their social demographic context. Female negotiations with this image were defined by the disjuncture they saw between the image of the objectified female in the ad and the ‘reality’ of life, as they perceived it. This study therefore correlate with previous studies in this area that indeed advertisements are open to multiple readings and at times oppositional decoding by audience as suggested by polysemic studies.

It is evident from the plethora of researches that audiences of today in general and women in particular are indeed active, capable of defining and redefining, negotiating and interpreting advert and media messages in line with their experiences, socio-economic, cultural and ideological dispositions as postulated by the Self Congruency Theory, hence must not be taken for granted. The current paper has demonstrated that meaning is not planted in advertising messages alone rather meaning is created and influenced by the social context of the female individual and negotiated on the basis of the South-East Nigerian woman’s perceived value of the advertisements. It equally has provided insight on how women of a particular social class- educated women in this instance - in developing culture read and interpret gender role expectations depicted in gendered advertisements; showing the universality of women awareness and criticism of gendered advertisements. It further shows that meanings are produced by and product of an individual’s encounter within a social context. It becomes imperative for advert...
producers in Nigeria as is being gradually adopted in other climes to use gender-sensitive communication principles in producing advert message contents.

The heterogeneity of the reality of gendered nature of Nigerian adverts as shown from this study requires a deliberate inclusion of a fair and representative portrayal of men and women and implies the need to adopt measures by advert producers and also Nigerian advertising regulators in order to avoid or minimize stereotypes in advert contents. Most of these measures are well known but need to be enforced. There is need to therefore encourage the portrayal of adverts featuring women and men in a 'balanced' position in order to further correct 'imbalance' in portrayals both in the quantity of adverts featuring men and women, as well as the quality that depicts a balanced and diverse portrayals. The consequence of this continued omission can be reinforcing or perpetuating inequalities or even creating new inequalities. As well as loss of advert revenue for the advertiser since advert messages so created can have oppositional readings. Based on the limited sample size of this study and given that it is qualitative in nature we therefore recommend further investigation into this subject using other methodologies and more diversified sample size.

REFERENCES


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