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The Social Cost of Stereotypes: Consumer Perception of Female Representation in Nigerian Television Commercials

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Abstract

Background: Television commercials are a powerful medium for shaping societal perceptions of gender, yet a research gap exists in understanding how local audiences in Nigeria perceive and are influenced by these portrayals.

Objective: This study investigates consumer perception of female representation in Nigerian television commercials to determine its effects on both consumer behaviour and societal gender norms.

Methodology: This study employed a survey research design, collecting data from a sample of 359 respondents in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, and respondents were selected through purposive sampling using a structured questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, and results were presented in tables.

Results: The findings indicate high audience exposure to the commercials. However, respondents widely perceive female characters as being in stereotypical, passive, and supportive roles, with an emphasis on physical appearance. A significant disconnect was found, as these negative perceptions did not translate into a notable impact on purchasing decisions or brand loyalty.

Instead, the study reveals that these portrayals primarily serve to reinforce harmful traditional gender norms.

Conclusion: The study provides empirical evidence that while stereotypical advertising may not directly affect sales, it carries a significant social cost by contributing to gender inequality. Advertisers have a social responsibility to create more equitable and empowering representations.

Keywords: Gender, stereotypes, advertising, consumer perception, Nigeria, social norms.

Introduction

Television commercials are not merely tools for product promotion; they are powerful cultural artefacts that both reflect and shape societal perceptions and norms, particularly regarding gender roles. In Nigeria, a society where a dynamic interplay of traditional beliefs and modern influences exists, media representations like those in commercials mirror this complexity. Existing literature has established that Nigerian advertisements frequently depict women in stereotypical roles—such as caregivers and domestic partners—while men are often portrayed in assertive, dominant, and financially successful positions. This not only reinforces traditional notions of masculinity and femininity but also perpetuates a narrow and often limiting view of gender roles (Ogbeide & Adoghe, 2018; Nwabueze & Ogu, 2019). The pervasive nature of these portrayals suggests they are a key component in the broader discourse on gender and media in Africa.

The portrayal of women in media is a critical area of study, as these depictions hold significant societal implications. These representations can either sustain harmful gender stereotypes or challenge them to promote inclusivity. According to Social Cognitive Theory, individuals learn behaviours and attitudes by observing and imitating others in their environment, including those seen in the media. Therefore, the persistent depiction of women in submissive or objectified roles in commercials can serve as a powerful teaching tool, reinforcing the belief that women are inherently less capable or valuable than men. This can affect not only how women are viewed by others but also their self-perception and aspirations (Bandura, 1977). In the Nigerian context, researchers like Alawode and Uduak (2021) and Sheidu (2021) have documented these negative portrayals, highlighting how television commercials have historically marginalised women by casting them as voiceless objects or vulnerable figures reliant on men.

Despite this existing body of research, a notable research gap remains in understanding how these specific portrayals are received and interpreted by the consumer in a localised context. While we have a general understanding of the content of Nigerian commercials, there is a lack of empirical research that directly connects this content to the actual perceptions of the target audience and, more critically, how this influences their behaviour. Most studies have focused on content analysis, but few have explored the audience's perspective. This study aims to bridge the gap by providing a nuanced, empirical analysis from the audience's perspective, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the media-consumer relationship.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on the consumer's perception of female representation in television commercials for Star Lager Beer, a prominent and widely advertised brand in Nigeria. By using Bayelsa State as a case study, we aim to provide a nuanced, empirical analysis of these portrayals from the audience's perspective. The specific objectives of this research are to:

1. Examine audience perception of the portrayal of females in Star Lager Beer television commercials.
2. Determine the specific types of portrayals given to females in the brand's television commercials, as perceived by the audience.
3. Ascertain the effects of these portrayals on consumer behaviour and brand loyalty.

By examining a specific brand and a particular regional audience, this article contributes to the growing body of literature on gender, advertising, and communication in the African context. It moves beyond a simple content analysis by linking media content to real-world audience perceptions and their potential impact on both consumer behaviour and broader societal norms.

Literature Review

The Role of Television Commercials in Shaping Society

Television commercials are a powerful form of persuasive communication that extends beyond product promotion to influence societal values and norms. As significant cultural artefacts, they reflect prevailing social attitudes and can reinforce or challenge established values (Belk, 2020). Their effectiveness stems from their unique ability to blend visual, auditory, and emotional appeals, allowing them to reach and influence a broad audience in a short amount of time (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Beyond their commercial function, television advertisements also serve a crucial social role by providing models of behaviour that viewers may aspire to or emulate, a concept central to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977). However, this power to shape norms is not always positive, as commercials can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and unrealistic expectations (Keller, 2013).

The Construction of Gender in Advertising

A significant body of literature confirms that gender stereotypes are a central feature of media representations. Defined as oversimplified and generalised portrayals that classify social groups, stereotypes are a practice of representation that often occurs in contexts of unequal power. In Nigeria, research indicates that the media, particularly television, have played a key role in reinforcing these stereotypes. Nigerian television frequently marginalises women, portraying them as passive accessories or objects, a reflection of the male-dominated media landscape (Amobi, 2013). This portrayal is not just a reflection of reality but a deliberate construction that shapes public perception.

Numerous studies on gender representation in advertising confirm this pattern. Research consistently concludes that women are often labelled as sexual objects or submissive participants, while men are cast in dominant, influential roles (Ejem et al., 2022; Mwangi, 2016). This power imbalance is frequently visualised through the physical positioning of characters, with men consistently shown in positions of control. Advertisements often use women's bodies and sexual contexts with no direct connection to the product, arbitrarily utilising female imagery to capture attention (Jimoh, 2010). This continuous repetition of stereotypical themes serves to normalise these portrayals, making them appear as natural aspects of the human condition (Iman, 2000).

Empirical Context and Research Gap

Empirical research in Nigeria has focused mainly on general audience perceptions or a broad content analysis of media. Several studies have explored audience perception of female portrayals, finding a widespread negative perception of how women are depicted in general TV commercials (Nwamara et al., 2023; Innocent & Pamela, 2021; Sheidu, 2021). These studies provide valuable insights into viewer dissatisfaction with stereotypical representations. Other research has focused on content analysis, with some arguing that female representation is evolving beyond traditional roles (Adinlewa & Ojih, 2018), while others conclude that stereotypes remain prevalent (Sanni, 2016; Ojiakor-Umenze et al., 2019).

Despite this existing body of literature, a significant research gap remains. Previous studies have either focused on broader television content or billboards or have been conceptual in nature, lacking the empirical data to connect specific brand messaging to audience perceptions and consumer behaviour. This study fills this gap by providing a targeted, empirical investigation of a single brand's television commercials to assess consumer perception in a specific region, thereby offering a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the media-consumer relationship.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is built on a synthesis of Representation Theory and Feminist Media Theory. While Representation Theory provides the core conceptual tools for analysing how media constructs meaning, Feminist Media Theory offers the critical lens necessary to deconstruct the specific gender-based power dynamics embedded within those constructions. Together, these frameworks allow for a comprehensive analysis of female portrayals in television commercials and their societal implications.

Representation and the Social Construction of Gender

Stuart Hall's Representation Theory (1973) serves as the primary lens for this research. The central tenet of this theory is that the media does not simply mirror reality but actively constructs it, shaping public perceptions and social identities through the use of images, language, and symbols. This construction is a key process through which cultural and social meanings are produced.

A critical concept within this framework is the process of encoding and decoding. Advertisers, acting as "encoders," intentionally embed specific messages and meanings about gender into their commercials. Audiences, or "decoders," then interpret these messages based on their own cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and societal norms. In the context of this study, it enables the analysis of how advertisers utilise specific visual and narrative cues to convey messages about masculinity and femininity, which are then interpreted by consumers in Bayelsa State.

Hall's theory also highlights the role of stereotyping and hegemony in this process. Stereotypes are a fundamental tool for the media to convey complex ideas quickly, but they often rely on oversimplified and generalised portrayals that reinforce existing social hierarchies. The consistent depiction of men as dominant and authoritative, and women as passive or ornamental, reinforces a hegemonic gender order—a dominant set of social norms that maintains power imbalances. By

examining the types of portrayals used in Star Lager Beer commercials, this study will identify how media may be used to perpetuate patriarchal values and ideals.

A Feminist Critique of Media Portrayals

While Representation Theory provides the framework for analysing media's constructive power, Feminist Media Theory provides the necessary critical perspective to deconstruct these gendered portrayals. Developed by scholars such as Laura Mulvey (1975), this theory argues that media representations are not neutral; they are shaped by, and in turn, reinforce patriarchal norms. Mulvey's seminal concept of the "male gaze"—where women are presented as objects for the visual pleasure of men—is highly relevant to the analysis of women in beer commercials.

Feminist Media Theory holds that by consistently portraying women in stereotypical, subordinate, or decorative roles, media perpetuates a patriarchal worldview that marginalises women and maintains male dominance. It is particularly useful for analysing how advertising, in its pursuit of profit, may contribute to systemic gender inequality. By applying this theory, this study will critically analyse how Star Lager Beer commercials depict men and women, examining whether they perpetuate patriarchal norms or challenge traditional gender roles. The combination of these two theories enables us not only to describe how gender is represented in the commercials but also to critically evaluate the power dynamics and societal implications of these portrayals, thereby providing a robust theoretical foundation for the research.

Methodology

This study employed a survey research design to investigate consumer perceptions of female representation in television commercials for Star Lager Beer. The research design provided a systematic blueprint for data collection and analysis, allowing for quantitative insights into the research objectives. The primary data was gathered from the field through the administration of structured questionnaires to a defined population.

Study Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in Yenagoa, the capital city of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Yenagoa was purposively selected as the study area due to its status as the commercial and administrative hub of the state, ensuring that the sample is a diverse representation of residents from various local government areas. The study population comprised all residents of Yenagoa. Based on the 2006 Nigerian Population Commission census, the population was 352,285. Using a 2.5% annual growth rate, the population was projected to be 536,043 at the time of the study.

A sample size of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula for a finite population, calculated at a 0.05 level of significance. This sample size was deemed sufficient to represent the larger population and provide meaningful data for analysis. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, with the research instrument administered at various locations, including homes, business areas, and social gathering places, to ensure a diverse cross-section of the population was represented.

The Taro Yamane formula is presented below:

$$n = \frac{1 + N(e)^2}{2N}$$

Where:

- n = sample size sought
- N = finite population size (536,043)
- e = level of significance (0.05)

Plugging in the values, the calculated sample size was 399. The final sample size was rounded up to 400 to accommodate potential non-responses.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to address the research objectives, with two distinct sections. The first section gathered demographic and psychographic information (e.g., age, gender, education, occupation). The second section consisted of a series of multiple-choice questions designed to measure the respondents' exposure to the commercials, their perceptions of female portrayals, the types of portrayals observed, the effects of these portrayals on consumption, and their implications for gender equality.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument, a pilot study was conducted. Content validity was established by ensuring that the questionnaire items were relevant and comprehensively covered the research domain. Experts in the field reviewed the questionnaire to confirm its alignment with the study's objectives.

For reliability, a pilot study was conducted with a small sample of respondents. The data from this pilot were used to calculate the instrument's internal consistency. This was done using Cronbach's Alpha (α), a statistical measure of reliability. A high Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.78 was obtained, indicating that the items on the questionnaire are consistently measuring the same underlying construct.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings were presented using frequency counts and percentage tables to facilitate a clear and straightforward interpretation of the results. This method provided a systematic way to summarise the quantitative data, enabling a direct link between the survey responses and the research objectives.

Results and Data Analysis

A total of 399 questionnaires were distributed, with 359 successfully retrieved, resulting in an exceptional response rate of 89.97%. This high retrieval rate enhances the reliability and generalizability of the study's findings.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of the 359 respondents indicates a diverse sample, though it is slightly skewed towards younger, more educated, and female participants.

- **Age:** The sample was primarily comprised of young to middle-aged adults, with the 34-42 age group being the most represented (38.5%), followed closely by the 25-33 group (30.9%).
- **Gender:** Female respondents constituted the majority of the sample (60.4%), which is beneficial given the study's focus on female representation.
- **Education:** A significant portion of the sample held a tertiary education (49.1%), suggesting the respondents are well-informed and capable of providing nuanced feedback on the study's topic.

All demographic data has been combined into a single, comprehensive table for clarity and conciseness.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Frequency (N=359)	Percentage (%)
<i>Age</i>		
16-24	25	6.9
25-33	111	30.9
34-42	138	38.5
43-51	68	19
52 and above	17	4.7
Total	359	100
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	142	39.6
Female	217	60.4
Total	359	100
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	156	43.4
Married	203	56.6

Total	359	100
<i>Educational Background</i>		
Primary Education	38	10.7
Secondary Education	145	40.2
Tertiary Education	176	49.1
Total	359	100

Audience Exposure and Perceptions

The data reveals that respondents have a high level of exposure to Star Lager Beer television commercials, particularly on digital platforms. An overwhelming majority (92.5%) of respondents reported encountering the ads very often or frequently on platforms such as YouTube. This high exposure rate provides a solid basis for analysing audience perceptions. However, despite this high exposure, audience perceptions regarding the commercials' portrayal of women were mixed and often critical. A combined 57.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the commercials positively portray females, but a significant portion (42.7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 2: Summary of Audience Perceptions of Female Portrayals

Perception Statements	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
Star Lager Beer TV commercials portray females in a positive manner.	57.3	42.7
The portrayal of females reflects modern views on gender equality.	40.7	57.3
Females are represented in an empowering way.	59.1	40.9
Females are portrayed in a respectful way.	64.1	35.9

Note: Percentages for each statement represent the combined total of "Strongly Agree/Agree" and "Strongly Disagree/Disagree" responses—percentages within each row sum to 100%.

Types of Portrayals

The findings clearly indicate that respondents perceive the female characters as being cast in stereotypical roles. A combined 87.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that women are shown as passive characters, and 87.4% also agreed or strongly agreed that they are shown in supportive roles to men. The most striking finding is the strong disagreement (96.2%) with the statement that females are depicted as equal to men in social settings, confirming a perceived power imbalance.

Table 3: Summary of Perceived Types of Female Portrayals

Type of Portrayal	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
Females are passive characters.	87.4	12.6
Females are sexualized.	11.3	88.7
Females are equal to men in social settings.	3.8	96.2
Females are in supportive roles to men.	87.4	12.6
Physical appearance is emphasised over capabilities.	83	17
Females are in nurturing/caregiving roles.	44.1	55.9

Note: Percentages for each statement represent the combined total of "Strongly Agree/Agree" and "Strongly Disagree/Disagree" responses—percentages within each row sum to 100%.

Effects and Implications

The study found a negative correlation between these portrayals and brand-related consumer behaviour. A significant majority (74.9%) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that female portrayals influence their decision to buy the product. Similarly, 74.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed that these portrayals increase their brand loyalty. The results suggest that the stereotypical representation of women in Star Lager Beer commercials is not a successful strategy for building consumer loyalty or a positive brand image.

Table 4: Summary of Perceived Effects of Female Portrayals

Effects on Consumer Behaviour and Brand Image	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
Influences my decision to buy the product.	25.1	74.9
Increases my loyalty to the brand.	25.8	74.2
Makes Star Beer more appealing to me.	15.8	84.2
Positively influences the brand's image.	24.5	75.5

Discussion of Findings

This study's findings provide empirical evidence that television commercials, even within a specific regional and brand context, continue to construct and perpetuate gender stereotypes actively. The results are discussed in relation to the study's objectives and the existing body of literature.

The high audience exposure to these commercials, particularly on digital platforms, confirms a broad public consumption base for the brand's advertising messages. This provides a robust foundation for analysing audience perceptions. The data reveals a notable division in how the portrayals are perceived; while some respondents view the female representations as positive and respectful, a significant portion disagrees. This aligns with Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, particularly the concept of encoding and decoding, where a message crafted by advertisers (the "encoder") is interpreted in varied ways by different audiences (the "decoder") (Nwabueze & Ogu, 2019). The scepticism of many respondents suggests that the portrayal of women, even when attempting to appear positive, may fail to reflect modern ideals genuinely.

The analysis of audience perception on the specific types of female portrayals provides a clear answer to the central research question. The findings overwhelmingly show that respondents perceive women in these commercials as passive and subordinate to men, with an emphasis on their physical appearance over their capabilities. This perception is consistent with a significant body of research on media stereotypes in Nigeria, which concludes that women are often labelled as sexual objects or submissive participants while men are cast in dominant roles (Ejem et al., 2022; Jimoh, 2010). The pervasive portrayal of women in roles that are primarily supportive to men, and the arbitrary use of their imagery with no product connection (Jimoh, 2010), serves to reinforce a hegemonic gender order.

The study's findings on the effects of these portrayals on consumer behaviour reveal a critical disconnect. Despite the high level of exposure and a general recognition of stereotypical portrayals, the data show that these portrayals do not significantly influence consumers' purchasing decisions or brand loyalty. This suggests that while consumers are aware of the gender messaging, their buying habits are likely driven by other factors. This finding is supported by studies which show that even when audiences express unhappiness with media portrayals, it may not translate directly into a change in purchasing behaviour (Innocent & Pamela, 2021). However, the lack of a negative impact on purchasing does not absolve the brand of its social responsibility. The findings on the broader societal implications are compelling: a significant portion of respondents agreed that these commercials contribute to gender inequality and reinforce traditional gender roles. This speaks to the cultivating power of media, where repetitive exposure to certain portrayals can shape societal views over time (Bandura, 1977). By consistently depicting women in limiting ways, these commercials normalise stereotypes and may hinder progress toward a more equitable society.

Conclusion

This study investigated consumer perceptions of female representation in Star Lager Beer television commercials in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The findings provide empirical evidence that while the brand enjoys high audience exposure, its portrayal of women is widely

perceived as stereotypical and outdated. Respondents viewed female characters as passive, supportive of men, and subordinate in social settings, with a dominant emphasis on their physical appearance over their capabilities. This perception contradicts modern ideals of gender equality, as a significant portion of the audience did not view the portrayals as empowering or respectful.

Crucially, the study found a disconnect between these stereotypical portrayals and consumer behaviour. The negative perception of female representation did not translate into a significant impact on purchasing decisions, brand loyalty, or overall brand appeal. However, this does not diminish the commercials' broader social impact. The data strongly suggests that by perpetuating these traditional gender roles, the brand's advertising contributes to the reinforcement of harmful societal norms, thereby hindering progress toward gender equality. This underscores the power of media to cultivate and normalise stereotypes, even if their direct effect on sales is limited.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for advertisers, media practitioners, and brand managers, particularly in the Nigerian context:

1. **Redefine Female Roles:** Advertisers should move beyond stereotypical portrayals of women as passive, decorative, or subordinate to men. Instead, they should actively create commercials that depict women in diverse, dynamic, and empowered roles, reflecting their contributions to modern Nigerian society.
2. **Focus on Substance over Appearance:** Brands should shift the emphasis from a woman's physical appearance to her capabilities, intelligence, and agency. This can be achieved by showcasing female characters as equals in social settings and as key decision-makers in their professional and personal lives.
3. **Conduct Audience-Centric Research:** Advertisers should regularly conduct research to understand how their messaging is perceived by the target audience. The disconnect found in this study between brand messaging and audience perception indicates a need for more nuanced, consumer-centric strategies.
4. **Promote Gender Equity:** Advertisers and brands have a social responsibility to actively promote gender equity. By adopting more progressive and inclusive representations, they can use their platform to challenge outdated norms and contribute to a more equitable society. This can improve their public image in the long run, even if the immediate impact on sales is not apparent.
5. **Educate Practitioners:** There is a need for continuous professional development and training for advertisers, copywriters, and media producers on the importance of gender-sensitive and inclusive communication.

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