



REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN SELECTED GHANAIAN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: A RHETORICAL-FEMINIST LITERARY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

In this study, a careful attention was given to the representation of women in selected Ghanaian television commercials. Specifically, the study approached the representation of women as portrayed in Ghanaian television adverts from the rhetorical-feminist perspective. The research presented a blend of the rhetorical triangle vis-à-vis the rhetorical appeals as exposed and demonstrated in these selected commercials. The study further engaged the discussion on the representation of women within Post Feminism theory using a qualitative approach and a descriptive analysis method whilst dwelling on the rhetorical appeals and the relevance to audience understanding. It is often debated that most forms of women representation endorse patriarchal ideology in that women are subservient and only caters to standards set in a patriarchal society. The study revealed that some roles played by women in these television commercials are gendered and appears dependent to men. The research recommended that The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection should liaise with advertising companies to ensure that advertisements produced do not project cultural norms further suggested that the reasons men are attributed to be the centre of strength may be looked at in other studies.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchal, Feminist, Commercials, Women, Post Feminism Theory

INTRODUCTION

Commercials on television serves as one of the medium via which producers of products showcase their products and services. Belch and Belch (2020) explain TV advertising is a form of promotional messaging that reaches a wide range of audiences by airing on television networks. It comprises producing and distributing audio-visual information to audiences in order to advertise goods, services, causes, or concepts. Through this medium, prospective patrons are able to access the products visually before they buy the products. According to

Smith (2020) A television advertising, often known as a TV commercial or ad, is a quick audio-visual message or promotional film created especially to be shown on television networks. Companies, groups, or people create these advertisements to market goods, services, causes, or concepts to a diverse range of television viewers. As a means of promoting goods and services, companies and individuals with products to offer the public, use other people to project how the products may be used. These companies and groups of people, present people to represent their products. Sometimes these representations tend to favour a group of people positively and others negatively. It is an undeniable fact that the role of advertising in contemporary society has been an issue of discussion. Ajala (2021) posits that given that there are more than a million civilisations on the planet, these multinational corporations leverage culture, particularly in advertising, to market their goods. Advertising does not only induce purchasing of goods and patronising of services, (Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2009) but it also aids consumers to form several identities which influences both current attitudes and what they should look like including how they should behave.

According to Nutsukpo (2020) African women's writing when it emerged in the 1970s was primarily aimed at dispelling the negative representation of African womanhood that entered African Literature at the time. Feminists' practitioners, in writing and activism, sought to show that they were relevant to the African context and in particular, they did not simply seek to copy their feminist cohorts in the western world (Nutsukpo, 2020). It has been established in several researches, that media language continues to favour and hold the male gender in a dominant position. It is worth noting that language used by the media report activities which tends to suggest levels of derogatory means of communication. It is a claim that most females are represented negatively in the newspapers and the radio. Advertisements are powerful tools which possess the ability to alter the perspectives and choices of a people. Some adverts to a large extent may shape opinions and reinforce social stereotypes.

The media tends to define the behaviours of male and female within their given spaces. In the society, men are seen to be the ones to discipline the children at home, take charge of the finances among others. The idea of gender and media is best understood with a foundation first in feminism, masculinity and gender relations as a whole. A person's connection to television viewing may be influenced by their gender in a variety of ways, such as the shows they choose to watch, how much time they spend viewing, among others. When it comes to programming, men and women have 'default' distinct preferences. Men like sports, "realistic" plays which may concern investigative shows and programmes relating to crime; news, and factual programming. On the contrary. women like soap operas, romances, and fiction. Men watch television intently, but women prefer to use it as a background for other tasks. Women are also more prone to accept that the show they are watching is ridiculous or poorly created. A woman may experience guilt when she takes time for herself because of her role in the family and her obligations. This may be as a result of the roles gender has designed for the female.

Aysad, (2014) mentions that advertising strategies are characterised by luxury, lavish lifestyle, beauty and sex. These are mostly used to promote a large number of goods and services ranging from food, alcohol, appliances, cars and a host of others. Women show their faces and bodies in adverts most of the time to influence consumer attitude and behaviour. These forms of exposure of the female body as a means of influencing consumer attitudes and behaviour devalues the role and credibility placed on women in the society. Aysad, (2014)

further avers that elsewhere, others argue that it is also a means where women use these avenues such as showing their bodies to reclaim their identity and freedom. In adverts where bodies are exposed, the women are given roles that society perceives to be the preserve of women. Some feminists in the field of academia have lauded this trend and characterised it as the use of 'bodies as works of art' (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008, p. 72). Via these idealised images, advertising communicates who women are and who they wish to be. The self-confidence of women is bruised as a result of the influence of words and messages used in advertising. A woman by this representation is likely to be dissatisfied with her own body leading to excessive control of appearance. The commodification of the female body leads to females playing the role of 'objects of attraction, perfect housewives or independent young women' in adverts and even in some TV programmes (Nagi, 2014, p. 86).

The contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their condition. When, in that process of struggle, at certain historic moments, the contradictions in their relationship to society and to historical process are brought into the consciousness of women, they are then correctly perceived and named as deprivations that women share as a group. This coming-into consciousness of women becomes the dialectical force moving them into action to change their condition and to enter a new relationship to male-dominated society.

Lerner (1986), establishes that story of women has always been untold. In the olden days till present, stories which present women as heroes are not promoted. Lerner (1986) mentions that any disparities between men and women as a group that are currently apparent are a product of women's unique history, which is fundamentally distinct from that of males. This is because women have historically been subjugated to males, a practice that predates civilisation, and because women's history has been denied. The presence of women's history has been disguised and disregarded by patriarchal ideas, a reality which has substantially altered the psyche of men and women.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The representation of women in the media has been a matter of concern and investigation. Stanković, Živković, Marić, and Gajić (2018), in their article themed "Effects of Women Representation in Advertising on Customers' Attitudes" revealed some results wherein lied a picture of women presented as a negative context thus a 'means' for sales. In their article, a direct focus was placed on the psychological effects of the conflicts that these adverts generate. These conflicts as their research revealed are either morally or ethically generated. They questioned the necessity of the representation of women when they are used to promote these adverts. They concluded that this form of representation promotes a negative reflection on self-confidence. Diabah (2018) looked at 'The representation of women in Ghanaian radio commercials: sustaining or challenging gender stereotypes.' The article presented a relationship between gender and advertising. The study cited the representation of women and how they are presented in traditionally stereotyped ways. Using a qualitative research approach, this current study dwelt on the representation of women in Ghanaian television adverts. It sought to identify whether these representations reinforce or demean the feminine practice with respect to these representations in television commercials.

Objective of The Study

- The study sought to investigate how the representation of women in selected television adverts affect their status in society.

Research Question

Based on the research objective, the study sought to answer the question:

- How does gender related television adverts in Ghana reflect the status of women?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Media Framing Theory

Also known as the second-level agenda-setting theory, this theory is built on the premise that media texts are embedded with some consciousness from the creators of the texts and contents (Mass Communication Theory, 2017). The theory, propounded by Gregory Bateson in 1972 has had many scholars interpreting it in diverse spheres of researches. This consciousness exerts some influence on the thinking of audiences. McCombs and Valenzuela (2007) posit that media framing contributes to position particular issues in media texts, news stories among others into meaningful texts. There exist two forms of framing: Media Framing and Audience Framing. 'Frames' are defined as the way in which the audiences interpret the media that is made open to its publics. It further explains that the frames function as a way to organise social meanings. Since the media decides what one views and one views it, the media tends to equally influence the way in which one interprets information. In a sense, the media tells its audience what to think about and how to think about that concept. People who work for media organizations are social beings socialized in a patriarchal society. Consequently, they often inadvertently project patriarchal ideology through their work. With respect to the focus of the study, this theory is relevant in the sense that, the media projects what appears to be society approved. Most African homes and communities at large will not support men assuming roles that are supposedly designed for females. It creates a picture where the male is seen as a weakling in his home where he is expected to be the head. McClure and Sibley (2011) argue that when situations are framed positively or negatively, they have effect on the decision-making faculties of individuals to be proactive. This assumption transcends into advert and other media related programmes because the society approved of such framing techniques and rules. The interpretation placed in these forms of programmes may not go should the roles in the adverts change. In view of this, these adverts are produced to fit into the framing and interpretation of the meanings that would suit society.

Liberal Feminist Approach

It is believed that the advent of classical liberalism as a political theory in the 18th and 19th centuries coincided with the emergence of liberal feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft was an influential writer for early feminist researchers, most notably through her 1792 publication *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Education and social equality for women were causes close to Wollstonecraft's heart. Her essays argue that in order for women to become morally upright and independent adults, they must have an education on par with that of males. Her calls for political reform, including overhauling the country's educational systems, would help elevate the standing of women. Those who conceptualize power as a resource understand it as

a positive social good that is currently unequally distributed amongst women and men. For feminists who understand power this way, the goal is to redistribute this resource so that women will have power equal to men. Implicit in this view is the assumption that power is “a kind of stuff that can be possessed by individuals in greater or lesser amounts” (Young 1990, p. 31).

The conception of power as a resource can be found in the work of some liberal feminists (Mill 1970, Okin 1989). For example, in *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, Okin (1989) argues that the contemporary gender-structured family unjustly distributes the benefits and burdens of familial life amongst husbands and wives. Okin (1989) includes power on her list of benefits, which she calls “critical social goods.” As she puts it, “when we look seriously at the distribution between husbands and wives of such critical social goods as work (paid and unpaid), power, prestige, self-esteem, opportunities for self-development, and both physical and economic security, we find socially constructed inequalities between them, right down the list” (Okin, 1989, p. 136). Here, Okin (1989) seems to presuppose that power is a resource that is unequally and unjustly distributed between men and women; hence, one of the goals of feminism would be to redistribute this resource in more equitable ways.

Muted Group Theory

The Ardeners laid a solid foundation for the Muted Group Theory in 1960. According to the argument put out by Shirley and Edwin Ardenner in the late 1960s, women continue to be marginalised and excluded since language is created by males. According to West and Turner (2010), Kramarae (1996) raises three points that are specifically related to communication. The Muted Group Theory posits that because language is manmade, women remain reduced and excluded. The creation of words, including the norms connected to these words are associated with men which eventually places women in a disadvantaged position. As women become less muted and their voices heard, the dominant position of males in the society will gradually vanish. In this theory, Kramarae (1996) mentions three assumptions which spell out the theory in practice. First and foremost, she argues that women’s voices are silenced because men are the ‘namers.’ She identifies the imbalance communication process between men and women. To this, she mentions that communication is not smooth because the direction and focus of communication are defined by men. Kramarae (1996) sees this as a disadvantage because language is an everyday necessity and also, individual have different view points especially when it comes to men and women. The second assumption posits that, in male dominated world, women find it difficult to articulate their ideas in comparison to men. Kramarae (1996) argues that English language gives men prominence thereby making the language ‘man’ made. Meanwhile, when they give names to female dominated ideas, those names appear derogatory. Words such as ‘slut’, ‘whore’ and ‘easy lay’ are easily used to describe women. Also, a woman’s attitude is easily given names such as ‘gossiping’, ‘nagging’ and ‘whining.’ A male found to exhibit similar traits has more glorified vocabulary which appears as though the same attitude shown is positive. She argues that the negative words may lead to women doubting themselves in effect building a negative self-esteem. The third assumption, posits that women appear to choose their words carefully when they are in a social space.

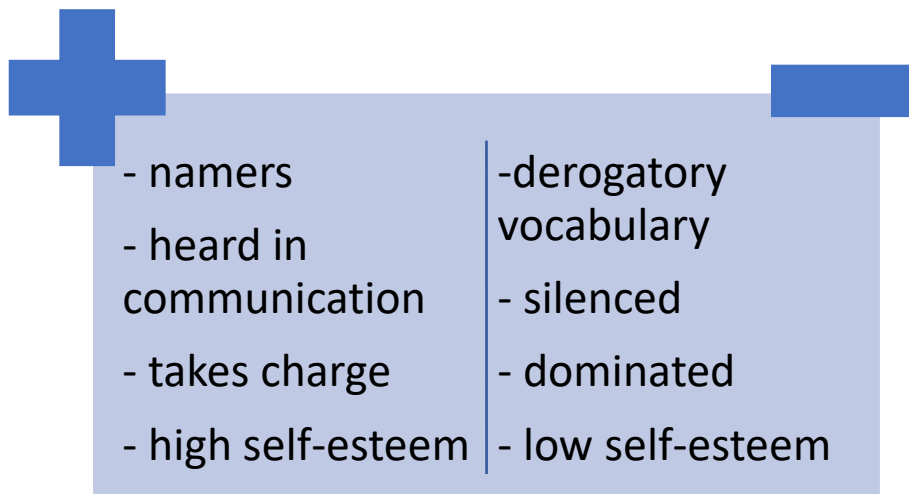


Fig 1: The ‘PosNeg’ Model of the Muted
Source: Authors’ Construct

The model above, named the ‘PosNeg’ Model of the Muted, goes to support the three theories being used for the study. The Gender and Media, Liberal Feminist Theory and the Muted Group theory all have similarities which place the male on a positive side and the female on the negative side. The model to the left has a ‘plus’ which represents the male and the attributes given to him. On the other hand, is the female which has the ‘minus’ representing negative attribute that appear to be society defined. Most of these assumptions as represented on the model in Figure 1 above, are embedded in the theories used to support this study.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, the adverts analysed were obtained on TV and Youtube. They included Adonko Bitters, Vodafone Cash, Onga Chicken Tablet, Fanyogo, and Heaven Mosquito Coil. The data collection technique was through the simple search and trace technique (Tanin & Samantha, 2017). On TV, the adverts come as sponsors to programmes running during a specific time. They also run intermittently during news bulletins, talk shows and entertainment news. They offer the audience some moments to refresh as well as create suspense depending on what programme is showing. The study purposively sampled the five adverts aforementioned above, (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011), adverts which had gendered contents and also relating to gender issues. Likewise, these adverts, had contents which captured alcohol, food, housekeeping, marriage and others. The adverts basically run for at least 60seconds. The analysis of the adverts was based on qualitative content analysis. The adverts were then placed under themes using each advert as the unit of analysis (Creswell, 2014).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Women as Housekeepers

Ashford (2012) commenting on women and education argued that in many traditional societies, girls are prevented from attaining their full potential because of lower priority placed on educating daughters (who marry and leave the family) and the lower status of girls and women in general. For this reason, in the past, most women never had the opportunity to enjoy formal education. Even in some traditional homes, women who have careers to pursue still go home

to domestic chores. In the *Onga Chicken Tablet* advert, a woman is seen in a kitchen with her daughter whilst her son played on the compound.



Figure 2: A picture of a woman and her daughter in the kitchen

Source: Onga Ghana, Youtube

Women are generally seen to be meant for domestic purposes making the projected function of the woman to appear domestic even from ancient times. Murniati (2013) asserts that women frequently fulfil three tasks in life: social, home, and productive. These three, or what are more often called varied duties, involve taking up the roles of protector and administrator in the home, earning a living (productively), and engaging in society—all of which are characteristics that women share. According to Prah (1996), a woman's place in a society is determined by her engagement, which includes her financial contributions to the development of the country. In the *Onga Chicken Tablet* advert, the woman later calls out to her son to get the chicken tablet for cooking. The representation of women is clearly defined from the beginning in the advert. The woman is expected to take care of the home; similarly, the girl is expected to learn how to keep the home from her mother.



Figure 3: A picture of the boy sent on an errand

Source: Onga Ghana, Youtube

The boy on the other hand may not do anything unless he is instructed. In Figure 5 above, he runs an errand for his mother. The boy is projected as mature and able to perform tasks outside the home. Even at a younger age, these gender roles are defined just as the advert portrays.

Liberal feminists like Okin (1989) will attest to the fact that power is a resource that is unequally and unjustly distributed between women and men. Either ways, each gender is likely

to suffer the weight of burdened responsibilities and roles due to gendered patterns of power distributions. The advert presents the female gender as the one that is linked to the responsibility of keeping the home and preparing the meals all the time. It reinforces the assertion by Okin (1989) that the power and for this purpose, the responsibility of preparing meals is ‘unequally’ placed on the shoulders of the female. Linking this to the Muted Group theory, one may agree that it is not negative to leave the responsibility of a home to the female. However, it is herculean to let the female shelve all activities of the home as exhibited in these adverts. The idea of relegating the women to house activities like meal preparation, cooking among other house chores are mostly communicated in these adverts whereas in the same adverts the male is seen reading newspapers, watching football or even returning home from work.

Women as Sex Objects

A very important ideal in Ghana is ‘phallic competence’ or sexual power (Diabah, 2015). A man is not considered a man if he is sexually weak. Sexual prowess and ability may be judged by the number of wives or partners a man has, the number of children he has and his desire for sex (Lindgren, K. P., Parkhill, M. R., George, W. H., & Hendershot, C. S., 2008). Women are most of the time at the receiving end of this lecherous attitude of some men who wield sex as an authority. If a man fails to exhibit traits of having interest in women he is branded weak, scared of women and in some cases described as being less of a man. In the *Adonko Bitters* advert, a man is surrounded by fifteen ladies, with the drink placed on a seesaw in Figure 1 below. There was a quick swift to replace the drink with a man indicating an equivalence of the drink with the man.



Figure 4: Adonko bitters on a swing
Source: Ghana Online Mall, Youtube



Figure 5: A man on swing
Source: Ghana Online Mall, Youtube

As indicated earlier, the man was placed on the seesaw and all the women pushed him to and fro on the seesaw in Figure 2 above. Whilst others held on the drink and danced, others pushed the man on the swing with excitement. These women although decently dressed represent the power the man has to satisfy them equally after taking the Adonko drink. How these women push and pull the man, represents the movement of the sexual act itself. Their faces, looking bright and beaming with smiles explain their satisfaction of sharing one ‘strong man.’

The advert seems to denote that every man who patronises Adonko Bitters will be potent to have more women, thereby endorsing society's ideologies that a male can have more than one female.



Figure 6: A picture of women carrying a man
Source: Ghana Online Mall, Youtube

The advert reinforces the idea that women are there to satisfy men sexually regardless of how many of them (women) they (men) will desire. The female gender is sharply presented as sexually depended on men thereby reinforcing the weakness society places on the female gender.

Men as Providers

As is typical of patriarchal societies like Ghana, men are the heads of the family and are thus expected to play dominant and leading roles. They are not only expected to wield authority and provide for the material needs of their family, but they are to provide them with protection too (Diabah & Amfo Appiah, 2018). Although the woman is presented as the housekeeper, the same advert portrays the male gender as a symbol of authority who directs the affairs of the home. This is seen in the *Heaven Black Mosquito Coil* advert.



Figure 7: A man calling his wife
Source: Heaven Insecticides, Youtube



Figure 8: Women as shopkeepers in the advert
Source: Heaven Insecticides, Youtube

The man in the advert puts a call through to his wife to check whether the home is well kept and safe for the family. As the provider of the home, he makes provision to keep to provide safety in the home. Meanwhile, the women in the advert presented as storekeepers and housewife (his wife in the advert). This portrays the idea that, being a man does not automatically make a man responsible thus making him a provider. Women, in this instance

are represented as solely dependent on men because in the Heaven Black Mosquito Coil advert, the woman waits for instructions from her husband, the other woman chases her husband because she is helpless and she needs her husband's assistance to take care of their sick child. Similarly, in the Vodafone Cash advert, there are only men represented. The absence of the female playing any responsible role leaves much to be questioned. All the men are heard discussing how they work hard to send money for the upkeep of their families. The women, supposedly once again are at the receiving end. Referring to what 'Frames' do to audiences, we can emphatically say that the analyses are generated out of the social meanings built and nurtured for the female gender. Similar to the tenets of the Gender and Media theory which also exhibit the already socially constructed gendered meanings, the portrayals in the Heaven Black Mosquito Coil advert and the Vodafone Cash advert, are borne out of the functions that the society places on these genders. In the light of these, commercial means of marketing pick from already existent norms, practices and ideologies to sell. In a bit to push their message across, they may be liberal as the request of liberal feminists may posit but in reality, the strength of the female gender will for a long time be muted until there is equal opportunities created to level up.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The mass media is becoming an important tool for helping both men and women adjust to modern life, since power dynamics throughout the world are realigning and women are assuming on more responsibility apart from domestic chores and responsibilities. Men and women are urged to understand one another in both the print media and chat shows on television, where women and men are portrayed as equals. Men are now the target market for beauty goods that were formerly exclusively promoted to women, however they go by the label of male grooming items which still appears to give positive prominence than their female counterparts. From the above submissions, the study concludes that the appeal of women to customers has been harnessed to promote social, psychological and business good in times past and even present. The thought that, in the olden days, men went to war because women will watch and measure their potency is much to be desired. Biblically, in Genesis 3:16, it was said to the women that 'You shall desire for your husband, and he will rule over you.' Since gender constructs are often influenced by cultural context, I suggest finding maxims or proverbs that project and reinforce traditional gender roles. In the light of the above, men have always had the influence, although sometimes in subtle ways to rule over women as seen in the analysis and discussions above. Gender roles have mostly placed women at the receiving end but an appeal to sight of men. Further studies may refer to the reasons men are generalized to be the core of strength although some societal training and development such sex change may lead to men exhibiting the traits of women. The Advertising Association of Ghana should ensure that advertisements produced by its members do not reinforce or project gender roles that confine women to the private sphere. The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection should liaise with advertising companies to ensure that advertisements produced do not project cultural norms which, to a large extent, shape opinions and reinforce social stereotypes.

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