

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES IN NIGERIAN PRINT MEDIA ADVERTISEMENTS

G. U. NWAGBARA

(Received 13 August 2003; Revision Accepted 24 February 2006)

ABSTRACT

This study set out to examine the extent to which cultural stereotype roles are depicted in print advertisements in Nigeria. It specifically sought to highlight what kind of influence (negative or positive) such stereotype representations carry. The study also attempts to identify those factors that may have been responsible for the perpetuation of these roles in advertising. This, it is hoped will lead to a re-appraisal of the content of advertising with the aim of producing improved and stereotype-free advertisement copies.

Two research techniques – the content analysis and the survey method are used in gathering data for the study. Twenty-five advertisement copies from different areas of advertising were analyzed. A ten-item questionnaire was also used to get information from the advertising practitioners as to what informs their use of stereotype roles in advertising.

The finding indicates that advertisers still depend heavily on stereotype roles in designing advertisements. Their reason being that the product manufacturers want it that way, that society also can easily identify with these roles and the advertisers consider it easier building on ideas and concepts that they are already familiar with.

If cultural stereotype roles must be minimized or eliminated completely, advertising regulatory bodies such as the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) and Association of Advertising Practitioners of Nigeria should embark on intensive education of its members on the ills of the use of stereotype roles in advertising especially its effects on the society and subsequently put forward a regulation to outlaw the use of negative stereotype roles in advertising.

(I) INTRODUCTION

Advertising, as important as it is in the contemporary times and with the enormous potentials attributed to it is still replete with ideas, concepts and portrayals that seem to undermine its potency. Certain issues or elements are relatively abused in the manner they are represented in advertisements. This development has engendered a lot of uneasiness, complaints and criticisms.

One of such complaints is that advertising, in the process of selling products and services, also tends to sell some supplemental images, which contribute to the perpetuation of some undesirable stereotypes in the society. As simple and harmless as these stereotype role depictions may appear, they are actually compressed and shorthand ways of referring to quite some complex ideas and social relationships. Stereotyping makes the disadvantaged position of those stereotyped look just, acceptable, legitimate, natural or even inevitable. In reality, the reverse may indeed be the case.

Stereotypes, according to Samovar and Porter (1991, 286) are those "perceptions or beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on previously formed opinions and attitudes". They do not develop suddenly, culture (and by extension the society) forms and moulds them. Because stereotypes are generalized and standardized conceptions of image, belief, habit and other definitive human traits, they have little room for individual differentiation or deviation from group consensus.

The effect of stereotyping is far-reaching. When introduced into our consciousness, it remains part of it for a long time and works as an over-simplified technique in conveying serious matters. Stereotyping can lead to misconception, discrimination and sometimes, blurred judgment. Another danger of stereotypes is their resistance to change or alteration. This rigidity may have come partly from the role they play in social information processing. People would normally show a preference for stereotype matching information. Were stereotypes to change very easily, their utility as concepts guiding and shaping information processing would disappear.

Stereotype in advertising involves "presenting a group of people in an unvarying pattern that lacks individuality and often reflects popular misconceptions" (Wells, Burnett and Moriarty, 1992: 42). A close look at most advertisements in the media will show that some members of the society are portrayed in subservient and unflattering ways that place some kind of stigma on them. Those who are usually the most affected are women, the elderly, the minorities and sometimes the young people. Advertisers have been rather unfair to these groups of people. Women, for instance, are often depicted as sex objects, preoccupied with beauty, household duties, motherhood, not involved in making decisions nor doing important things but dependent on men and incompetent (Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971).

The elderly are used in roles that present them as slow, senile, full of trouble, difficult to get along with, obstinate or unattractive (Wells, Burnett and Moriarty, 1992). To this end, the old people are seen as undesirable and if possible, the society should rid itself of such people.

Advertising does not only sell a product, but it also sells the image, value and lifestyle of the potential user of the product. Because of stereotyping, advertising neither tells the complete story of a product nor that of its users. Stereotypes, more often than not, are based on half truths and generalizations. Some of the elements in stereotypes are either exaggerated or understated. Therefore, advertisements with stereotypes are capable of misleading the public or are out rightly deceptive. The advertisement is deceptive when it contains not only false and misleading statements but also any false impression conveyed intentionally or unintentionally.

(II) CULTURE AND STEREOTYPES

The relationship between culture and stereotypes can better be appreciated when culture is seen not only from the point of view of what it is but also what it does. In a rather very simplistic approach to the concept, culture is the sum total of the learned behavior of members of a given social group. It manifests itself in the pattern of language and thought, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, religions, concept of self, the universe and self-universe among others. Culture is

socially constructed and maintained through communication and above all, it defines our realities.

The influence culture exerts on people usually leads to ethnocentrism and prejudice. More often than not, people tend to view the world unconsciously using their own group and customs as yardsticks for all judgments. This produces in them a frame of reference that denies the existence of any other. Ethnocentrism is the strength behind stereotypes and stereotyping. Thus, stereotypes are the offshoot of a people's perception of things. Because societies create and sustain their own stereotypes, they (stereotypes), are invariably culturally determined.

(III) STEREOTYPES AND ADVERTISING

The concern for stereotypes in advertising dates back to the 1960s. It first began as a concern for women in advertising. It was believed that the depiction of women in advertisements was generally unrealistic and limited. The portrayals highlighted such themes as motherhood, dependence on men, incompetence, sex objects and homemaker.

Some of the early studies with such conclusions include Wagner and Banos (1973), Sexton and Haberman (1974) Culley and Bennet (1976). After about a decade, no improvement was recorded as England and Gardner (1983) found out. Rather, the 2,000 magazine advertisements published over a period of time which they analyzed indicate the following:

- (a) Advertisements consistently pictured women as younger than men. The age distribution of women depicted in the advertisements was much younger than the female readership of the material studied.
- (b) Women were most likely to be portrayed modeling fashions and cosmetics or doing housework, men were more frequently shown on the job or engaged in outdoor recreation.

More recent studies on female depiction in advertising show no remarkable difference. Rather, the use of increasingly explicit sexual appeals is common place. (La Tour and Henthorne (1994), La Tour, Pitts and Snook-Luther (1990). Presenting women as nothing more than alluring and enticing sex objects is very degrading to womanhood.

Minority groups as has already been pointed out, are also affected in this issue of stereotyping. More often than not, they are "the basis of a joke or are alternatively, consigned to a spot in the background" (Wells, Burnett and Moriarty 1992). They are portrayed as the ones who do the menial jobs, unintelligent and sometimes lazy.

A probable explanation for the continuous use of stereotypes in advertising as suggested by Woodside and Motes (1980) is that it is a way of conveying a mood or feeling to the potential customers, which would motivate them to respond favorably to the product advertised. Ordinarily, advertisers would attempt to create this favorable impression through the use of a variety of advertising techniques. But rather than use other appeals such as value structure or price, or quality assertions to achieve this aim, advertisers would very often resort to the use of stereotype roles because they consider some of the images portrayed as status carriers. The more positive the status is, the more appealing it is to consumers. Role portrayals can influence the consumers decision on what to buy. Buchanan and Reid (1977) found out that people tend to appreciate better advertisements depicting roles that closely match the product. In other words, the more closely linked (in terms of suitability) the product is to the model, the more likely it would receive a favorable response from consumers.

Much of the power of stereotypes in advertising lies in its visual impact. Goffman's (1979) analysis of visual images of men and women in advertising illustrates how gender roles are reproduced in postures, relative positions, and expressions of

men and women arranged by photographers and other artists. These images may seem "natural" but they are strong indications of stereotypes and by extension the power of ideology and its ability to shape our thoughts without being consciously aware of it.

Thus, sex-role stereotypes would only delude girls and women into believing that the most they can accomplish in life is to provide sexual satisfaction to their male partners and to become housewives/homemakers. It will also deceive them into seeing themselves as incapable of significant contributions to the society. This disposition will not affect the women by hampering personal development; it will also affect the society as well.

(IV) OBJECTIVES/SIGNIFICANCE

The role advertising plays in the contemporary society is such that cannot be ignored. It is the driving force behind modern marketing. Organizations exploit its potentials to call attention to themselves and to increase patronage of their goods and services.

Advertising is not just about marketing, it is equally a social phenomenon. It sells images, values and lifestyle. Unfortunately, some of those images only tend to perpetuate some undesirable stereotypes in the society. These stereotypes are harmful, debasing and degrading. A constant projection of such images to the society is not very healthy for its psychological balance.

If we believe the content of mass communication (of which advertising is a part) is able to define and shape our values and view of the world, then we know it is necessary for media operators including the advertisers to be careful about what they tell their audience and about how they portray the different groups in the society.

Besides, media operations are tilting towards a free market enterprise. More private individuals will own media outfits and thus, more dependence on revenue from advertising. This development makes it all the more important for the content of advertising to be re-appraised.

In line with the issues raised, the focus of the study therefore was to examine the advertisement copies selected, pointing out those stereotype roles featured and highlighting what kind of influences the images portrayed carry.

(V) RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It was not however possible to study all the advertisement copies in the Nigerian print media thus a representative sample had to be chosen. In this study too, the definition of print advertisement was enlarged to include billboard advertisements. Although the latter should be rightfully classified as out door advertising, we considered the fact that such advertisements are first and foremost in print before they are displayed on billboards out side. They are therefore enlarged versions of what we have in newspapers and magazines.

Twenty-five advertisement copies from five different areas of advertisement were chosen. These are: traditional advertising, product advertising, religious advertising, political advertising and billboard advertising. The selected advertisement copies provided the data on which the content analysis segment of this body is based.

In connection with the second aspect of the aim of this study, that is, the reason behind the continuous use of stereotypes in advertising, information was sought from advertising practitioners. They are the people who conceive and design advertisement copies. Fourteen of such practitioners from eleven advertising agencies were involved. The information got from them formed the bulk of the survey aspect of this work.

The content of the selected advertisement copies were coded into three major categories to determine the presence,

level and direction (of positive or negative) of the stereotype – role depiction. The categories are:

1. The presence and level of cultural stereotype roles
 - Unvarying roles that reinforce status quo
 - Dressing, mannerism, behavior exhibited that is associated with a specific cultural group or subculture.
 - The content of the message – convert or overt stereotypical inclinations.
2. The direction of the portrayal (positive)
 - Unvarying roles that are not derogatory
 - Stereotypical messages that do not contain words or expressions that denote or connote inferiority or negativity of any sort.
3. The direction of the portrayal (negative)
 - Unvarying roles that are derogatory and misrepresent the group and Stereotypical messages that contain words or expressions that denote or connote subservience or any form of negativism.

(VI) DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the advertisements was carried out based on some criteria derived from the three major categories already mentioned. Each advertisement was judged using these categories. For category one, out of the 25 advertisements analyzed, nine (9) representing 36 percent were found to have met all the criteria for judgment in that category, eleven (11) or 44 percent had two elements present in them, one (1) representing 4 percent had one element while four (4) or 16 percent did not meet any of the criteria.

Drawing from the analysis, it is evident that 80 percent of the advertisements had a considerable level of stereotype – role portrayal while 20 percent had little or no stereotype – role portrayal. Therefore to a large extent, cultural stereotypes were present in the advertisements studied.

In determining how positive or negative a stereotype – role presentation was, the criteria already set forth in categories two and three were found useful. Out of the 20 advertisement copies (80 percent) that depicted stereotype roles, 17 representing 68 percent were found to have portrayed unvarying roles that were not derogatory or a misrepresentation of any group and moreover, the messages though stereotypical did not have words or expressions that denote or connote inferiority of any sort. Three (12 percent) of the advertisements that contain stereotype roles , portrayed such roles in derogatory ways that misrepresented the group. In addition, the content of the messages reflected stereotypical ideas with words and expressions denoting or connoting subservience and other forms of negativism. The deduction from this finding is that to a high degree, the advertisement copies analyzed were more positive than negative.

To further establish how significant the result of the analysis was, two hypotheses were formulated and tested. The hypotheses are:

- (i) More than half of the advertisement copies under study will feature a high level of stereotypical portrayal.
- (ii) There will likely be more negative stereotypical representations in the selected advertisement copies than positive ones.

The Chi – square non – parametric test was used for the verification of the hypotheses, that is, in arriving at a conclusion whether to refute or accept them. The calculation was based on 1 degree of freedom and at 0.05 level of significance. In line with the requirement of the test, the hypotheses were stated in the null (Ho) – the logical alternative to the research hypotheses (H1) the null hypotheses (Ho) for hypotheses I (H1) is

- More than half the advertisement copies under study will not feature a high level of stereotypical portrayal.
- Chi square derivation for (H1)

$$X^2 = \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$$

Advertisements	Observed Frequency (O)	Expected Frequency (E)	O - E	(O - E) ²	$\frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$
Stereotyped	21	12.5	8.5	72.25	5.78
Non - Stereotyped	4	12.5	8.5	72.25	5.78
Total	25	25			11.56

For hypotheses I, the computed Chi – square value is 11.56 while the critical or table value of the Chi–square at 1 df and at 0.05 alpha level of significance is 3.841. Because the computed Chi–square value is greater than the table value, we upheld hypothesis I and rejected its null or the alternative hypothesis.

The null hypothesis (Ho) for hypothesis II (H2) is
 -There will not be more advertisement copies with negative stereotypical representations than the ones with positive stereotypical representations.
 Chi square derivation for H2

Advertisements Portrayal	Observed Frequency	Expected Frequency	O-E	(O-E) ²	$\frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$
Positive (High)	6	7.3	-1.13	1.69	0.231
Positive (Moderate)	11	9.7	1.3	1.69	0.174
Negative (High)	3	1.7	1.3	1.69	0.994
Negative (Moderate)	1	2.3	-1.3	1.69	0.734
Total	21	21			2.133

For hypothesis II, the computed chi-square value is 2.133 while the critical or table value of the chi-square at 1 df and at 0.05 level of significance is 3.841. Since the calculated value is less than the table value, hypothesis II was rejected and the null hypothesis upheld. It is obvious from the results

that majority of the advertisement copies studied not only contained elements of cultural stereotypes but these elements were present in such a high degree. There were equally less advertisement copies with negative stereotype-role portrayals than were those with positive portrayals.

The last aspect of the study was to identify the factors

The last aspect of the study was to identify the factors responsible for the continuous use of stereotypes in advertising. This section was actually directed at advertising practitioners who design and create advertising copies/message. To them, their usual choice of stereotype roles was based on what product manufacturers and the society want. People, they say are more familiar with these roles and thus can easily identify with them. Such images they also claim, sell the product.

The advertisement copies studied were not only on sex stereotypes or ethnic or any other stereotype role in particular. The portrayal cut across different stereotype roles. It is unfortunate that advertisements in the Nigerian print media still tilt heavily towards the status quo. Stereotypes, by their frequent use in the society, tend to become shorthand ways of simplifying very complex and sometimes complicated ideas and situations. People hardly give a thought to these stereotypes. They are seen as normal or in line with tradition. Advertisers therefore find it safe to hide under the cloak of tradition or culture to perpetuate stereotypes in advertisements.

If the society considers it inoffensive for certain groups of persons to be constantly portrayed in unflattering ways that place some kind of stigma on them, it is not the place of advertising practitioners to echo or even exaggerate such ideas. In quickly accepting these societal held views as normal, we also easily forget they originated from somewhere and whatever strength they possess, was only conferred on them by members of society. These same people, with a strong reorientation, can see the need for a change of opinion.

The early studies that first drew the attention of the American society to the existence of stereotypes of all types in their advertisements, may not have only wanted to create some awareness on the issue. The aim may have been for the sensitization to lead to stopping or minimizing the use of stereotype roles in advertising. Contrary to this expectation nothing has really changed (La Tour and Henthorne, 1994, Ford and LaTour, 1996, Henthorne, Williams and LaTour, 1998). The findings of this present study also corroborates the stand of these scholars. A situation where for instance the female model in Flourish Gel Toothpaste billboard advertisement (one of the advertisements used for the study) is portrayed as the dumb glamour girl who needs to use her smile to get noticed by a serious minded and high profile man, is to say the least a misrepresentation of today's woman.

Women are as intellectually capable as men if given the opportunity. Some of them are chief executives of companies, some hold sensitive political positions, a lot of them work outside the home, others are big time business tycoons while others are involved in varied gainful ventures. Even when a woman is a wife, a mother, mistress or a girlfriend, it does not mean she has no mind of her own and thus incapable of independent reasoning. Women are known to cope well with their roles and still contribute meaningfully to the society. Presenting her as dumb, is being unfair to her.

Again, a case where the young people in Black Knight Whisky and Benson and Hedges Cigarette advertisements (some of the advertisements used in the study) were shown as wild, unserious, unreasonable, fun loving even when it is dangerous, and unable to determine the limits of their youthful exuberance is very disturbing. Young people certainly deserve a better depiction. Moreover, if the use of the advertised products would lead to such untoward behavior as presented by the advertisers, one would wonder why well meaning youths would go for the product.

(VI) IMPLICATION OF THE FINDINGS

The results of this study suggest that Nigerian advertisers still depend heavily on stereotype roles in designing their advertisements. The reason being that they are inclined to build on ideas and concepts familiar to them and

which they consider will gain the acceptance of product manufacturers and the public. It is unfortunate that advertisers still operate on this level despite the awareness for a change. This cry for a reversal in the trend would not have been necessary were stereotypes not dangerous. They are usually built on half-truths, distortions, sometimes untrue premises and this is made worse by the fact that stereotypes are resistant to change or alteration. With this, one can just imagine what influence a constant exposure of the public to this kind of information will have on them. In that circumstance, people will very easily come to accept lie for fact and myth for reality.

Because very little thought is usually given to these stereotypes, people are prone to misinterpret them. Herein, lies the real danger in stereotyping. If one considers the fact that mass media signals are ubiquitous and advertisers make generous use of the media, one cannot but support the call for something to be done to curtail or eradicate the use of stereotype roles, especially negative ones in advertising. Stereotypes have a way of affecting our sense of value and thus influence our attitude or relationship towards the person or people stereotyped. Thus a process of reorientation or unlearning of those things already imbibed is necessary if any meaningful progress can be made in minimizing the use of stereotype roles in advertising.

The fact that in this study, more of the advertisement copies analyzed contain positive stereotype roles is commendable. It shows there is hope that Nigerian advertisers, with a little more education will be able to see why they should abandon the use of stereotype roles in advertising. If these practitioners must keep listening to product manufacturers or the society before adopting any advertising concept, model or message, it will only suggest that as professionals, they are incapable of doing their job. It is true that manufacturers pay the advertising bills but at the same time as experts, advertising practitioners should be able to advise product manufacturers on what professionally should be allowed in advertising. Similarly, they should be able to guide the society into accepting certain changes that are inevitable.

(VII) TOWARDS LESS STEREOTYPING

A total eradication of stereotyping in advertisements cannot be achieved at just one attempt. One step in the right direction will lead to another and gradually, the target will be met. What is important is the resolve to start. First, the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) and the Association of Advertising Practitioners of Nigeria (AAPN) as regulatory bodies in advertising, should embark on a serious re-orientation exercise on educating advertisers on the negative consequences of their continuous use of stereotype roles in advertising. Thereafter a legislation would be put forward to outlaw their use in advertising. To ensure compliance, a monitoring team should be set up to go round advertising agencies to enforce the directives. Failure to adhere to such laws should also attract stiff penalties.

Some women organizations should through the National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) condemn in strong terms the use of women in stereotype roles that do not tell the complete story of today's woman. The group can register their protest with the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Women Affairs, Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON), Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), APCON and AAPN or at any other place where their voice can be heard. Any other group of people that have been victims of the bad side of advertising can also come together and through an umbrella organization, follow the suggested line of action to seek redress.

(VIII) CONCLUSION

The problem of stereotyping in advertising is linked with the debate on the true position of the content of mass

communication in any society. Advertising is primarily mass communication as well as a tool for marketing. The mass media occupy a vital position in the society's values. The bulk of the information needed for individual and collective survival and development comes from the media.

Knowing that they exert such a strong influence on public opinion should make advertisers and media operators to be more careful about what they tell their audience and about how they portray the different groups in the society. The picture they paint or present should to a large extent be accurate and truly representative. Images carry influence, a negative image, a negative influence and a positive image, a positive influence. If a group of people are constantly shown as inferior, weak, less important or objects of fun, advertisers may not realize what harm such portrayals do to the society or to the group in particular.

Because of stereotyping, advertising neither tells the complete story of a product nor that of its users. It is not all the elements in a stereotype that represent reality. Some are a distortion of reality; that is, they are either exaggerated or understated. Stereotyping does not make room for individuality. False impressions are not healthy for the development of the society.

REFERENCES

- Buckanan, and Reid L., 1977. "Women role portrayals in advertising messages as stimulus cues: A Preliminary investigation", In *Sharing for Understanding: Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the American Academy of Advertising*. East Lansing Mich: American Academy of Advertising.
- Courtney, A. E. and Lockeretz, S. W., 1971. "A woman's place: Analysis of the roles portrayed by women in magazine Ads", *Journal of Marketing Research*, 8 (1): 92-95.
- Culley, J. and Bennet, R., 1976. "Selling women, selling blacks", *Journal of Communication*, 24 (4):
- England, P. and Gardner, T., 1983. "Sex Differentiation in magazine Advertisements" *Current Issues and Research in Advertising*. (6): 253-268.
- Ford, J. B. and La Tour, M., 1996. "Contemporary female perspective of female portrayals in Advertising", *Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, 18, (1): 81-95.
- Goffman, E., 1979. *Gender Advertisement*, London: Macmillan
- LaTour, M. S; Pitts, R. E. and Snook-Luther, D., 1990. "Female nudity, arousal and Ad response: An experimental investigation", *Journal of Advertising*, 19: 51-62.
- LaTour, M. and Henthorne, T. L., 1994. "Ethical judgments of sexual appeals in print advertising" *Journal of Advertising*, 23, (3): 81-90.
- LaTour, M. Henthorne, T. L. and Williams, A. J., 1998. Is advertising still sexist: it is in the eye of the beholder", *Industrial Marketing Management*. 27 (3): 251.
- Samovar, L. A. and Porter, R. E., 1991. *Communication between Cultures*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Sexton, D. E. and Haberman, P., 1974. "Women in Magazine Advertisements" *Journal of Advertising Research*, 4 (4): 41-46.
- Wagner, L. and Banos, J. B., 1973. "A woman's place a follow up analysis of the roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements", *Journal of Marketing Research*, 10 (2): 213-214.
- Wells, W., Burnett, J. and Moriarty S., 1992. *Advertising: Principles and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Woodside, A. G. and Motes, W. H., 1980. "Image versus direct response advertising", *Journal of Advertising Research*, 20 (2): 31-36.