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Representation of Femininity and Masculinity in Televised Advertisements: The Paradigm Shift

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Abstract:

There has been a lot of change in the African media in the recent past, notably in the electronic media, especially television. Advertisements being viewed on the television have a great impact on the social representations of members of the target communities. This therefore underscores the need to investigate the nature of the adverts being aired on television and how these shape societal constructions of gender roles. This study seeks to examine the representations of femininity and masculinity in televised adverts vis-a-vis African cultural representations of on gendered roles. This study will take a critical and scientific analysis of adverts aired across mainstream televisions in Kenya. Specifically, the study will analyse the male and female representations in these adverts, with a view to establishing the shifts, if any, in the way femininity and masculinity are represented. This study will utilize qualitative research design. The researchers used document analysis and content analysis to collect the data. The study took a period of one month. Purposive sampling was used to select the adverts and the study sample. Transcripts of the televised advert and were analysed thematically to arrive at a conclusion. It is expected that the findings of this study will provide a useful basis for media houses, relevant authorities, advertisers, organisations as well as individuals to take up more in-depth studies on the representation of male and female roles in the media in relation to the African culture, which will in turn provide guidelines in advertising policies to advertisers and media houses.

Keywords: Television, advertisers, advertisements, African culture, femininity, masculinity

1. Introduction

Advertisements are known to shape our thinking, perhaps without us being consciously aware about it. Lippke (1995) suggests that the way in which people habitually perceive and conceive their lives in the social world, the alternatives they see as open to them, and the standards they use to judge themselves, as well as other social perceptions are shaped by advertising. This then suggests that adverts do contribute to shaping the society's discourses, including discourses in gender representation. The way masculine and feminine gender roles are perceived is shaped by the consumer adverts that dominate television screens all the time. Schroeder and Zwick (2004) further add that advertising representations influence cultural and individual conceptions of identity, and must be understood as the result of changing social and cultural practices. Even as adverts are created, they flow with the ever-dynamic cultural practices and are constantly being influenced by changing social processes, such as technological innovations as people move towards a free society.

A keen analysis of the recent mass communication strategies indicates that advertising has become very popular among the media in Kenya. It also becomes clear that these adverts clearly segment the audience on the basis of their sex. This means that there are adverts that clearly target men and others that are meant for the women. The role of the influence of advertising in social and cultural development of society is becoming very pronounced in the present adverts, especially on the television. This study examines the both the male and the female representations in televised adverts in Kenya.

In the recent times, the African society has seen so many social and cultural developments and changes. In particular, the Kenyan community has been a beneficiary of technology in the effort of coping with the pace of the developed countries. This has been majorly witnessed in the fast-changing advertising techniques that are aimed at reaching the largest audience and that the advert should have the highest power of persuasion to purchase the product or service. In this case, the television has therefore become the greatest tool for these adverts.

The labels *femininity* and *masculinity* convey dominant connotations. Advertisers use the labels provided to direct their behaviour toward other people and to also understand their behaviour. Gendering in advertisements enables advertisers the easiness of breaking down target consumers. Issues of femininity and masculinity are highlighted very strongly in our cultures and a very essential aspect

of individual personality and self-concept. Therefore, according to Craig (1997) advertisers use this to their advantage and create certain needs and wants according to the behaviour and expectations of society.

To help advertisers address the issues of femininity and masculinity societies have definite values that set the pace of the attributes that are associated with male and female. According to Lips (2005), people adjust their stereotypes of women and men by taking into consideration the roles they occupy. Most advertisers place women in roles that demand or promote good behaviour and men taking charge, therefore the audience will assume that women and men have the qualities required for such roles.

This study focused on televised adverts of products and services aired on mainstream televisions in Kenya. These are: *Citizen TV*, *Kenya Television Network (KTN)* and *Nation Television (NTV)*. Most of the observed adverts were aired in all the stations.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Advertisements have been known to fuel gender stereotypes in our society today. Changing gender roles due to many genders based activist groups is something we cannot ignore. While most goods and services have been commercialized today, it is then important at this point to analyse these adverts, to see if the gender stereotypes that have always existed in the African cultural context still exist today.

1.2. Research Objectives

- Find out if there are products on Kenyan television stations that target particular sex members of the society,
- Find out the possible impact of particular adverts in defining gender roles in Kenyan societies,
- Find out if Kenyan television stations are keen on the balance of the sex representations of the adverts that they air.
 1. To find out how feminine and masculine roles are brought out in the televised adverts
 2. To find out if gender stereotypes known in traditional African context are used in the contemporary adverts
 3. To find out if there has been any gender role shift in the televised adverts viewed today.

2. Methodology

This study utilised qualitative research method.

Purposive sampling was used to sample the adverts for study

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data

3. Findings

3.1. Masculinity Representation in the Adverts

Advertisements play a major role in the construction, maintenance and representation of male as a gender entity. The discourses created by these adverts are drawn from lived experiences of the roles that the male plays in the society. It is thus widely accepted that adverts play a key role in promulgating dualistic gender roles and prescribing social identities. In this discussion, therefore, we shall interpret masculine images in contemporary television adverts as particularly useful places of identity, representation and contestation. Schroeder and Zwick (2004), note that masculinity is irrevocably connected with, opposed to and in relation to femininity. Any discussion on masculinity goes hand in hand with comparison on how femininity is like. Thus, the representation of females in televised adverts discussed in the next section cannot not be ignored.

Most of the adverts portray men as playing a dominance role over women. Batchelor (2003), states that men are shown to be self-ruling compared to women being shown as housewives and mothers. In one *Sunlight* washing powder advert, the male character is portrayed as bold and courageous to speak in front of a large crowd of women and requesting them to use *Sunlight* washing powder. On another *Safeguard* soap advert, the same scenario is brought out. A man is seen as the main character speaking to a large crowd of women who are seen as taking a subordinate role. The man is heard telling these women that “*their family’s health is in their hands*”. This psychological superiority is brought out as a characteristic of masculinity. Williamson (1978) states that meaning is transferred from the look of people in the television adverts on to the products. The *Sunlight* washing powder and the *Safeguard* soap are portrayed as very superior products in the market.

In most of the television adverts observed, the findings suggest that male characters embody the active subject, the business-like, and self assured decision makers. For instance, the *Faulu Kenya* advert, the potbellied man is portrayed as a self-assured decision maker who is trying to convince others to take the same decision as he did. The potbelly is a symbol of status in society. A potbellied man is considered wealthy. In a *Kenya, Commercial Bank* advert, the male character is considered a good decision maker for having realized that it is a good idea to save money in the bank rather than under a mattress. In another advert by *Kenya Power and Lighting Company*, the male character is also portrayed as a better decision maker. His nagging wife asks if he has paid the power bill and the house rent. The wife is surprised that the man already paid the bills through *Easypay* method. These adverts represent men as having a desire for independence, and having a control over their lives for they do not need to consult anyone to make a decision.

In the contemporary advertisements, the aesthetics of male characters are further portrayed through their well-built, nude torso, as well as their stylish and close-fitting tailored pants. The man has thus become a sex object too. His well-built body represents the male as energetic rather than weak. This image is borrowed from the traditional representation of a man who was considered as strong not only physically but also psychologically. His masculine representation was taken to suggest that he could defend his family and the community at large against any adversaries. In the *Nivea body lotion for men* the man is shown as a being masculine through his nude torso. An advert by *Coca-Cola* advertising its *Sprite* brand, shows three young and very energetic men playing basketball. There is

lots of dribbling and dunk shots. Their well-built bodies and their height helps them to do so. These adverts portray the male person as an energetic human being who does everything to ensure his success. This is replicated from the traditional view of men as being energetic.

Further, the man is also represented as a worker who the family depends upon. He works towards success rather than laze around waiting to be fed. He is a go getter. In one particular *Dettol soap* advert, the man is shown how he gets germs from his contact with persons and other items during his working. In the morning, as he goes to work, his daughter is heard saying that her dad smells fresh on his way to work but in the evening, he smells bad. The daughter willingly hugs him as he goes to work but she does not like getting closer to him in the evening. The mother watches in amazement from a distance but hands his husband a *Dettol soap* with a smile on arrival in the house. Kilburn (1998) says that the male has always been portrayed as a strong working individual that takes care of the family and comes home to a loving wife.

In the *Viceroy*, alcoholic drink, several men are shown constructing drum-shaped containers by chiseling and later loading them to a waiting truck. These adverts represent the male gender as a person who should work towards success. In some other instances, the male characters are represented as persons with white collar jobs. The jobs they hold are usually managerial or high profile jobs. For example, in one *Dettol* advert, the doctor is a man urging people to use *Dettol soap*. The dentist advertising *Sensodyne toothpaste* is also a man. The male characters in these two adverts act as real mirror of the society. In most cases, it is the men who hold high profile jobs while women act as their subordinates.

Shroeder and Zwick (2004) says that in interpreting advertising images, we acknowledge their representational power both as cultural artifacts and as bearers of meaning, representing broad societal, cultural and ideological codes. What is represented in the adverts is what happens in our communities and in some instances; individuals copy behaviors from these adverts.

In most of the television adverts observed, the male character embodies the active subject, the business-like and self assured decision maker. For instance, in a *Faulu Kenya* advert, which advertises banking services, a potbellied man - portrayed as a self-assured decision maker - is seen trying to convince others to take the same decision as he did. The potbelly is believed to be a symbol of status in African society. A potbellied man is considered wealthy. Similarly, in a *Kenya Commercial Bank* advert, the lead character, who is male, is considered a good decision maker for having realised that it is a good idea to save money in the bank rather than under a mattress. In another advert by *Kenya power and lighting Company*, the male character is also portrayed as the one in charge of the home finances. His nagging wife asks if he has paid the power bill and the house rent. The wife is surprised that the man already paid the bills through *easypay* method that is being advertised. These adverts represent men as having a desire for independence, and having a control over their lives for they do not need to consult anyone to make a decision

3.2. Feminity Representation in Televised Adverts

Cultural messages within the advertising discourse still function largely to reinforce traditional gender roles. The place of a woman in traditional African setting is viewed as that of being a home maker. Her role has always been to take care of her family by cooking for them, ensuring cleanliness in the home and general health matters. In most cooking oil television adverts, the male characters are portrayed as the head of the family, a leader for that matter. His primary role in relation to cooking is to marvel at the woman's cooking prowess. Traditional African men were known to be leaders not only in their homes but also in their communities. This still comes out in the contemporary televised adverts

Pure & Natural bathing soap advert also appears on the three television stations. These come in different fragrances and various adverts for each. The slogan for the advert "for women who want it all" speak volumes about the target consumer of this product. It is a bathing soap whose brand can be stereotyped to be for women alone. All the adverts are modeled by women and more so, contemporary ones. The adverts can easily put off all male potential customers to the brand. It can also be interpreted to mean that men do not care about hygiene and therefore pointless to convince them to buy the soap.

Ribena runs a televised advert in which a small girl is the main character. A true picture of what an "Alice in wonderland" fairytale would be. The small girl seems content with the world around and happy to be surrounded with smiling berries. This is a soft advert that portrays the innocence of a child and that all that matters to her is a packet of *Ribena*. When her mother asks, "what day is it darling?" she answers playfully that "it's a happy day". Materialistic is what a woman is portrayed to be in this advert. With all those flavors of *Ribena* to chose from, this little girl is content with what the world offers to her at the time. A boy could as well act in this advert because it is not a sex specific product, anyone can take *Ribena*.

The male being has been accused of being so concerned with occupation. However, due to the rise of women in the workforce, gender roles are being changed and the man's place in the job market is being increasingly decreased. In a *Kenya, Commercial Bank* advert and a *Co-operative Bank of Kenya* advert, the female characters are portrayed as being in an office set up. They seem to be the managers offering direction to their clients. They are seen to be in a comfortable position and in the *Kenya Commercial Bank* advert, the other character who is a man seem to be confused and has no idea where to bank his cash. The other characters in the *Co-operative Bank of Kenya* advert, the man and the lady seem so mesmerized to see people owning homes in a flash. They go seeking help to from a lady at the bank who shows them what to do in order to own a home in a flash. However, their beauty and appeal cannot go unnoticed. Their smile and generally beautiful look transcends these ideals into the television commercials.

In the African context, the African man was considered a major decision maker and a leader in his house and in the community (Badejo, 1996). This phenomenon is however changing in the contemporary African Society. Looking at *Eno* anti-acid advert, we see a young radio presenter getting in the studio. His studio director who is a lady seems shocked by the lateness of the presenter who enters the studio ten seconds before going on air. As she counts the remaining seconds to go on air, the young man feels some chocking acid and requests for *Eno* anti-acid. Before ten seconds are over, the presenter is all over roaring his voice on air having had

a gas free stomach. In this situation, the female character is depicted as a leader who provides direction and offers solution to the desperate young man. This is scenario depicts gender role shift.

Mortein Doom runs an advert on Kenyan television stations that define the place of women as being in the home. Even with modern insect killing strategies like the use of the supposedly effective **Mortein Doom**, it has to be done by the woman because the home is her destiny. From this advert, it can also be interpreted that women are quite sensitive, or rather petty when it comes to insects in the house. The message in this advert is similar to that of **Bolt** insect killing spray. In this one, a young lady sprays insects with the insecticide. She wears a serious face and quite offended with the presence of insects in her kitchen. A keen criticism of this advert can quickly point out that in the home, insects can only be found in the kitchen and that the kitchen is a place for women hence their duty to ensure that they are killed

In the **Dettol, Antiseptic Disinfectant** televised advertisement, the doctor is a man. This defines the traditional notion among that all doctors are men are all nurses are women. When the boy child gets home, he rushes to his mum and tells her that “mum today we learnt how to wash hands with Dettol”. This is again another one of those African traditional social perceptions that women/mothers have everything to do with the health and hygiene of the children as well as that of the society in general. It is also clear that mothers are supposed to be home when the children come from school hence the place of the African woman in being a house wife.

Omo washing powder’s advert brings a small girl who wants an autograph from one of her favorite personalities, but she is not confident enough to face the person and request for the signature. A boy comes by and boldly says “I’ll get it”. The machismo in boys is clearly portrayed. Without bringing out the role of the detergent strongly in the advert, it is clear that boys are bold and girls are timid. Boys here are ‘risk takers’ and girls are small little ‘sissys’ who would ‘coil in their’ nets just to avoid getting dirty. However, the **Sunlight** ‘smell the clean’ washing powder portrays a different picture. In this, a woman follows the apparently sweet smell of Sunlight while dancing to it. There are three other women seated who also dance to the tune alongside a couple of a man and woman who dance on the street. It is a very busy advert that is dance tempting. In this advert, one gets the impression of cleaning being a woman’s role. The sweeter the smell of the detergent the more interesting it seems to the women. Cleaning is portrayed as being hectic and quite boring to women that it takes a bit of music and a sweet aroma to make it manageable.

Women are also depicted as sex objects. They are used for sex appeal to attract men. In the **Nivea** for men advert, the man applies the deodorant on his body then later a lady appears in underpants and lie on the man and starts caressing him. This is a clear sign of how women are used to appease men. Some advertisements show women in underwear and lingerie more than professional clothing, (Manca and Manca, 1994). Perhaps a portrayal from most cultures that women should spend their entire life pursuing and pleasing men.

Another advert brings out the fact that women tend to be in roles that demand nurturing behaviour. Water guard sanitizer advertisement- this is an advert about a water cleaning agent. In this advert, a woman adds the cleaning agent to a can of 20 litres, shakes it, and later pours it in a cup for her child saying that she cannot let her child to be affected health wise because of her carelessness. She wants to see her child grow up to be healthy and strong which portrays a woman as one in charge of fostering growth.

4. Role shift in the Male Televised Adverts

Recent developments in the representation of male factors have been influenced by among others the gender based movements particularly those led by women. Most of these movements advocate for the empowerment of women and seek to instill in them the idea that “what men can do, women can do better.” The traditional role and representation of the African man is becoming eroded by an emergent powerful and informed woman. Other issues that continue to influence the representation of masculinity is the shifting patterns of labour market, relaxing cultural representational norms and also the dynamic market of consumer goods, Kilburn (1998).

In these televised adverts, there has been an advent of a new African man represented in a very different way than his traditional counterpart. The contemporary man is being portrayed as an emotionally and domestically involved man, who is more nurturing and pro-feminist. This is a shift from a ‘real African’ man who is supposed to be individualistic and narcissistic, and who was a ‘hard nut to crack’ when it came to defining him.

Some televised adverts have seen the man involved in domestic chores and advertising of cooking items. In one particular maize flour advert, **Soko Ugali**, a man is seen singing in praise of the flour. While holding a cooking stick, he sings of how he now loves the *ugali* (maize meal) since the wife started cooking it with the **Soko Ugali** maize floor. Looking at the faces of the family members when this man dances in the dining room, it is obvious that they are shocked. This can be interpreted that the African man was, and should not be matters pertaining to food or the kitchen.

Roico Mchuzi Mix is a food spice that is advertised on all the three television stations that this research studies. This is one advert that gives an interesting twist to the role and position of men in an African society. Unlike other food adverts in which men either are completely absent or merely part of the eating crew, in this one he is the cook and amazingly he does it with a smile. It is so interesting to see the shift in gender roles and hence the elaborate social appreciation of a ‘modern’ man in the kitchen. In this advert, this cooking man is a gentleman in every sense because he even invites a beautiful lady to tastes his meal and one can tell from her face that the food is very delicious. In most Kenyan societies, such as the Agikuyu, it was taboo for the man to get in the kitchen, especially after circumcision. In the traditional representation of the man, the kitchen was a place of the woman. They were supposed to feed the cook food and feed the family.

The new man has also been represented as an emotional being; a person who can easily interact with his emotional self. In one contraceptive advert, a young man is shown talking to a beautiful young lady on how they would avoid having stress in life that are caused by early pregnancies and STIs that are a result of not using a **Trust Condoms**. This particular advert depicts the man as an

emotional being against the norms of the traditional African society where he was not supposed to publically show his emotions. Although the lady also expressed her affection, but the man is so passionate he comes out clearly as a caring one and understanding lover.

For a long time, the hair salon has been a haven for women. In fact, it is believed to be the 'home' of female gossip. However, this seems to be changing very fast. The 'new' man is now portrayed as a person who can handle such a job with pride without any fear of stigmatization. In a televised advert by *Ashleys Beauty College* in Nairobi, a group of graduates are captured in a celebratory mood, and later they appear to be neatly plaiting hair as a result of their acquired prowess from this beauty college.

The discourse of televised adverts has been shifting its limits in the last few decades because of the new possibilities opening up in the consumer market and due to the much 'empowered' woman. Indeed, good looks and good taste are now also part of male attractiveness which had not been explored in the past. In the *Trust condom* advert the male person shows emotions freely against the norms of the African traditional setting. Although the representation of male gender roles has changed in the last few decades, male dominance in the society still prevails. In an analysis of the magazine *Playboy*, on its effects to male gender roles, Osgerby (2001 203-04), said "Masculine identity and visual codes premised upon youthful hedonism and conspicuous consumerism certainly ruptured and displaced the traditional codes of a bourgeois masculinity rooted in ideals of hard work, thrift and puritanical conservatism. But at the same time, they left wider power structures and systems of inequality essentially intact." His thought was that the male roles in the society essentially remain the same regardless of some few changes witnessed

5. Role shift In the Female Televised Adverts

In the adverts analyzed in this study, women are portrayed as having taken the role similar to that of their male counterparts in these societies. For instance, an advert of Cooperative Insurance Company (CIC), insurance company portrays the female character as economically empowered since she owns an expanse of land on which she has planted grain and has the purchasing power to acquire a massive harvester to and she has high intellectual capability. The female character is shown advising a man (possibly her son or workman) what he ought to do in order to succeed. This is a clear indication that the modern woman is no longer dependent on the man to acquire wealth or to manage resources. A very independent woman.

Women in the African context have in most cases been on a disadvantaged edge when it comes to owning property and wealth. (Ndashe & Sykes, 2007) In an African family for instance, even when the whole family has played a part in acquiring, the wealth of the property acquired belongs to the man. Even in the inheritance issue, the female does not have a right to inherit any property, especially land. This is however changing. However, this is also changing and women are now acquiring wealth as they wish due to relaxed traditional rules and advancement in the bill of rights of different countries. An advert by *Kenya Airways*, advertising a public rights issue urges people to hurry and join a group of other shareholders. On the mention of 'other shareholders', three ladies are shown to represent these shareholders. They are depicted as being shareholders of a fleet of aeroplanes. This is a clear indication of how gender roles have shifted, from men owning property and wealth, to women having the same and being drivers of the economy too.

6. Conclusion

The above findings are an indication of the impact of technology and massively increased literacy levels of the members of the Kenyan society. Ten years back, the scenario was completely different from what we have today. There is a lot of westernization in the Kenyan society and this seems to be the norm in televised adverts.

A few observations come out clearly from this study. The traditional African culture is slowly being eroded. This mostly is a result of the culture mix through education. Women are now able to have their own money, are exposed to other cultures, and their beauty and style is more pronounced. Companies are also increasingly making products and having services that are specifically tailored for the modern women, unlike in the past when women were supposed to be housewives and therefore locked up in the home.

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