



WHAT IS THE GAZE ABOUT? PERCEIVED VISUAL AND TEXTUAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

¹ODOEMELAM, Chinedu Christian, PhD

²ENDURANCE, Obas Vanessa

³ODOEMELAM, Oueen Ohiolei

^{1,2}Department of Mass Communication, Igbinedion University, Okada

³Department of Mass Communication, Benson Idahosa University, Benin City

Corresponding Author: Christian Odoemelum; christian.odoemelum@iuokada.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

As visual and textual messaging gain prominence in the advertising domain, there is need to critically examine perceptions regarding how women are constructed and represented in the advertising space. The portrayal of women in advertising has significant implications for societal perceptions of gender roles and self-identity, particularly within emerging markets like visual and textual messaging. Despite the increasing focus on wellness and self-care, many advertisements continued to perpetuate traditional stereotypes that objectified women or reduced them to passive recipients of beauty and relaxation. This raises concerns about how these portrayals might have influenced audience perceptions, and whether they reinforce unrealistic ideals of femininity and limit the empowerment narrative. The lack of comprehensive research addressing the specific imagery, language, and themes used in such campaigns created a gap in understanding the broader implications of these portrayals. Without a thorough investigation, it remained unclear whether these advertisements empowered women as active agents in their wellness journeys or perpetuated outdated notions of gender and beauty. In this study therefore, we employed the cross-sectional survey to provide a comprehensive understanding of the perceived textual and visual construction of women in advertising in a sampling of 383 Benson Idahosa University Benin City, and Igbinedion University students. The Objectification Theory and Critical Race Feminism provided frameworks for the study. Our findings indicate that the combination of visual and textual advertising reinforces an aspirational, yet commercialized model of womanhood. Our study bears nuanced implications on the importance of ethical advertising practices that promote authentic and inclusive portrayals of women. Our key recommendation is that stakeholders in media and communication should adopt more balanced and progressive construction of women in their messaging strategies.

Keywords: Gaze, Portrayal, Women, Advertising, Visual Textual Messaging, gender.

Introduction

Advertising and the media continue to play significant role in shaping society, especially in the context of the information age. Our continuous interaction with technology and digital devices exposes us to advertising constantly. Modern interactive media technologies are integral to daily life, replacing traditional forms of communication such as newspapers, magazines, and conventional television (Neuendorf, 2017). A study by eMarketer (2023), indicates that 92% of adults in the U.S. used smartphones, further indicating that time spent on social media correlated directly with increased exposure to adverts (Statista, 2023). This shift underscored the importance of understanding how advertising influenced perceptions and behaviors in an increasingly digital world.

In addition to global media trends, scholarly attention has been given to local cultural industries, such as Nollywood. For instance, a study by Okokor (2023), examined the shifting representation of Nigerian women in Nollywood films, arguing that traditional stereotypes portraying women as subservient

and docile, no longer capture the multifaceted identity and evolving roles of women in contemporary Nigerian society. Through the thematic analysis of eight Nollywood films, Okokor (2023) highlights how female characters are increasingly depicted with agency, empowerment, and autonomy, often navigating complex social realities influenced by class, ethnicity, and cultural expectations. Her study emphasizes that Nollywood, as a major cultural force, not only reflects but also shapes societal attitudes toward gender roles, making it a vital platform for reimagining the image of the modern Nigerian woman. (Okokor, 2023).

In similar ways as the Nollywood sector, advertising has long influenced societal norms, particularly in the Digital Age, where constant exposure through smartphones and social media has amplified its reach. With 72% of adults across the world using smartphones advertising now significantly shapes public perception (eMarketer, 2023). In Nigeria, Nollywood films have similarly impacted cultural views, including gender discourse. Okokor (2024) found that contemporary Nollywood is shifting from traditional portrayals of women as submissive to more complex, empowered roles, reflecting changing gender dynamics.

Advertising scholars have discussed the persistent gender and ethnic stereotypes in Nigerian media, despite some progress in showcasing women in leadership roles. While digital media has allowed new advertising formats—like visual and textual messaging for wellness services—to emerge, these often continue to present women either as empowered participants or as idealized symbols of beauty and relaxation (see Odoemelam, 2021).

Stereotypical portrayals remain prevalent in global advertising, often reinforcing outdated gender roles. Studies by Hovland (2022), Eisend (2023), and others confirm that media forms, such as advertising, still influences societal perceptions of gender. Some critics argue that these stereotypes reflect existing societal attitudes, while others believe the media perpetuates them. As digital platforms evolve, advertising must be examined for its role in either reinforcing or challenging these portrayals.

Statement of the Problem

The portrayal of women in advertising had significant implications for societal perceptions of gender roles and self-identity, particularly within emerging markets like visual and textual messaging. Despite the increasing focus on wellness and self-care, many advertisements continued to perpetuate traditional stereotypes that objectified women or reduced them to passive recipients of beauty and relaxation. This raised concerns about how these portrayals might have influenced audience perceptions, reinforcing unrealistic ideals of femininity and limiting the empowerment narrative.

As visual and textual messaging technologies gained traction, the need to critically examine how women are constructed and represented in the advertising space arises. The lack of comprehensive research addressing the specific imagery, language, and themes used in such campaigns created a gap in understanding the broader implications of these portrayals.

Without a thorough investigation, it remained unclear whether these advertisements empowered women as active agents in their wellness journeys or perpetuated outdated notions of gender and beauty. Thus, the study explored perceptions associated with the complexities of women's construction and representation in advertisements for visual and textual messaging.

Research Questions

The following questions were raised to guide the research:

1. What visual elements were prevalent in the portrayal of women in advertisements for visual and textual messaging?
2. In what ways did the language used in these advertisements convey messages about femininity and empowerment?
3. How did audience perceptions of women's roles in wellness and self-care correlate with the portrayals found in advertisements containing visuals and texts?

Theoretical Framework

This study is premised on two theories: Objectification Theory and the Critical Race Feminist theory.

Objectification Theory

Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, which provides a critical lens for analyzing the phenomenon of women's objectification in visual and textual advertisements. The analysis drew on two interrelated theoretical traditions relevant to understanding contemporary objectification of women in advertising.

First, it examines Fredrickson and Roberts' objectification theory, which offers a framework for deconstructing and interpreting commercials within their socio-cultural context. This theory highlights a current trend in visual and textual advertisements that sexually objectified the female body, equating a woman's worth with her physical appearance and sexual functions (Szymanski et al., 2011).

Objectification theory posits that women internalize objectifying messages, leading them to view themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated on superficial attributes rather than competence (McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). The implications of this internalization were severe, increasing women's anxiety about their appearance, fostering body shame, and contributing to disordered eating, depression, and sexual dysfunction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Bartky, 1990).

Critical Race Feminist theory

The critical race feminism stems from studies in critical legal theory, feminist legal theory, and critical race theory (Okokor, 2023; Wing, 2003). Critical race feminism emerged from the intersection of critical race theory and feminist theory, which advocates for anti-essentialist standards of identity, emphasizing multiple voices, identities, and beauty standards (Evans Winters & Esposito, 2010; Collins, 2000). While the present study did not apply critical race theory in its traditional form, it leveraged its fundamental arguments to argue that critical race feminist theory could effectively dismantle the essentialist standard of "white complexion" as the benchmark for feminine beauty.

The theory underscores how visual and textual messaging in advertisements of beauty products, perpetuated colonial interests by signposting white complexion as the exclusive standard of beauty and acceptance. The theory argues that advertisements often portray female images as marketing strategies, targeting women as consumers of beautification products like whitening creams and lotions. Simultaneously, these depictions reinforce rigid beauty standards, creating an "iron cage" of expectations that women had to navigate.

Consequently, the hyper-sexualized and beautified portrayals of women in advertising propagated the dominant ideology that women's value lay primarily in their physical appearance rather than their intellect or agency. This created the illusion that a woman's or girl's success was contingent upon her

physical attractiveness, body language, and clothing. Throughout the analysis, objectification theory was applied to illustrate how visual and textual media functioned as powerful discourses, guiding girls and women, as well as boys and men, into roles that were normalized by a socially constructed sexist culture (Okokor, 2023; Odoemelam, 2021).

Method

- **Materials**

The study concentrated on all advertisements placed on visual forms like television, newspapers, magazines and social media platforms, including their textual narratives. These advertisements specifically focused on wellness and self-care brands that include beauty products such as skincare, skin toning and skin whitening, including other beauty products like foundation, hairdo, powder, etc. In order to eliminate the risk of bias, name-calling and labelling, the study ensured that no specific advertisement, whether foreign or local, was mentioned.

The overriding principle was to rely on advertisements featuring women and beauty products. By focusing on adverts featuring women and beauty products without specifying particular ads, our aim was to analyze the broader representation of women in advertising (Goffman, 1979). It is justifiable not mentioning specific samples to avoid stereotypes, particularly when examining sensitive topics or representations, as the approach allows for a more nuanced and generalisable analysis (Krippendorff, 2004).

- **Technique**

The study employed the survey research design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the textual and visual construction of women in advertising. A cross-sectional survey among $n=383$ university students at Benson Idahosa University Benin city, and Igbinedion University, Okada with population ($N=3,999$, and $N=5000$; Registry units, 2025) students was conducted. This resulted to a combined population of 8,999. A sample size of respondents was selected from the combined population. This size was determined with the aid of the Taro Yamane formula for sample size calculation. With the formula:

Where:

- n = Sample size
- N = Population size
- e = Margin of error (expressed as a decimal, 5% margin of error is 0.05)

Plug into the formula:

$$n = 383$$

A stratified random sampling technique ensured that various demographics within the student population were adequately represented. This includes stratifying the sample by age, gender, academic program, and year of study. The questionnaire served the purpose of measuring the perceptions in the survey.

Data from the survey were analyzed in frequencies and percentages to determine the trend of occurrence of the phenomenon of interest in terms of majority, marginal and least outcomes, with the help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The Results of data were presented through tables and narrative descriptions to convey findings clearly.

Data Presentation

There was 92% (n=375) response rate from the survey participants and this constituted the number for the analysis. Those who reported as male were in the majority (n=196, 52.2%) respondents, while 179 (48.3%) were females. The majority of respondents (62.7%) were in the age range of 16–20, while 35 percent reported 21–30 years. Respondents who were 31–40 years, where the least (1.6%).

With regard to the participant's course level, those in 200 level were in the majority (83, 22.1%), with the least being those in 100 level (67, 17.6%). Data further show that those in the Arts had majority of the participants in the study with 83 respondents (22.1%). Others include Science (n=67, 17.9%); Social science (n=75, 20.0%); Engineering (n=80, 21.3%); and those who identified as Others were (n=70, 18.7) respectively (see table 1 below).

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Data

Option	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	196	52.2
Female	179	48.3
Age		
16-20	235	62.6
21-30	134	35.7
31-40	6	1.6
41 or older	0	0.0
Course Level		
100 level	67	17.6
200 ‘‘	83	22.1
300 ‘‘	70	18.7
400 ‘‘	80	21.3
500 ‘‘	74	20.0
Faculty of Respondents		
Arts	83	22.1
Science	67	17.9
Social science	75	20.0
Engineering	80	21.3
Others	70	18.7

In respect to the visual elements that are commonly noticed in Ads featuring women, data show that, participants who said they commonly noticed the color visual element of advertisements featuring women, were in the majority; (n=217, 57.9%). Meanwhile, 134 respondents (35.7%) commonly notice the body language element of advertisements featuring women; while 17 respondents (4.5%) commonly notice the setting element of advertisements featuring women and 7 respondents (1.9%) commonly notice the others elements of advertisement featuring women.

In response to how visual elements influenced participants' perception of the women being portrayed in advertisement, a significant number of the participants (n=350, 93.3%) indicated that visual elements influenced their perception through the reinforcement of stereotypes.

Others included those who agree that visual elements influence their perception through in terms of empowering and inspiring confidence (4.5%); while eight respondents (1.9%) believe that visual elements influenced their perception through the creating of reliability. What this suggests, is that with regard to the prevalence in the construction of women in ads, including how they shape perception, reinforcement of stereotypes was prevalent (see table 2 below).

Table 2: Prevalence in the construction of women in advertisements

What visual elements do you commonly notice in advertisements featuring women?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Colors	217	57.9
Body language	134	35.7
Setting	17	4.5
Others	7	1.9
How do these visual elements influence your perception of the women being portrayed in advertisement		
They empower and inspire confidence	17	4.5
They reinforce stereotypes	350	93.3
They create reliability	8	2.1
Others	0	0.0

The study sought to ascertain how language used in advertisements featuring women, convey messages about femininity and empowerment. Results indicate that there were mixed responses in those who believe that visual elements shape societal views on women. In that regard, 190 participants (50.7%) believed very significantly that visual elements shape societal views on women, 175 respondents (46.7%) moderately believed that visual elements shape societal views on women; 7 respondents (1.9%) extremely and

significantly believe that visual elements shape societal views on women. Only less than one percent slightly believed that visual elements shape societal views on women.

In reference to how participants viewed language in ads targeting women, there were varying perception among the participants regarding this phenomenon. For instance, our analysis showed that majority, 225 respondents (60.0%) described the language used in advertisements targeting women as empowering; 8 respondents (2.7%) describe the language used in advertisements targeting women as neutral; while 142 respondents (37.9%) describe the language used in advertisements targeting women as objectifying.

We further were interested in knowing whether participants perceived the language used in these advertisements as conveying empowerment or objectification. Our analysis suggest objectification as the language that the ads primarily convey (n=142, 37.9%); meanwhile there was marginal perception of both empowerment and objectification as the language that construct women in advertisements (n=158, 42.1%).

What this indicates is that, visual elements shape societal views on women significantly, while language used in advertisements targeting women were mostly perceived as objectifying. Meanwhile, between empowerment and objectification in the language that the adverts primarily convey, objectification of women was the primary construction (see table 3 below).

Table 3: Language, femininity and empowerment, and resonance with the target audience

To what extent do you believe these visual elements shape societal views on women?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not at all	0	0.0
Slightly	3	0.8
Moderately	175	46.7
Very significantly	190	50.7
Extremely significantly	7	1.9
How would you describe the language used in advertisements targeting women?		
Empowering	225	60.0
Neutral	8	2.7
Objectifying	142	37.9
Others	0	0.0

In your opinion, does the language used in these advertisements convey empowerment or objectification?		
Primarily empowering	75	20.0
Primarily objectification	142	37.9
A mix of both	158	42.1
Neither	0	0.0

To determine how perceptions of women’s roles in wellness and self-care correlate with the portrayals found in advertisements for visual and textual messaging, we asked four questions that relate to the phenomenon. Firstly, we needed to know how the messages about femininity presented in advertisements resonated with participants.

Our analysis indicate varying degrees of resonance of the messages with the participants, with messages about femininity presented in these advertisements moderately resonating with participant (n=108, 28.8%), and, messages about femininity presented in these advertisements very strongly resonating with them personally (n=133, 30.1%). In the meantime, 33 respondents (8.8%) indicated that messages about femininity presented in these advertisements did not resonate with them personally; while 47 respondents (12.8%), slightly agree that messages about femininity presented in these advertisements resonate with them personally;

To ascertain how participants perceive the role of women in wellness and self-care as depicted in advertisements, 143 respondents (38.1%) strongly and positively perceived the role of women in wellness and self-care as depicted in advertisement. In addition, 142 respondents (37.9%), perceived the role of women in wellness and self-care as depicted in advertisement, ‘somewhat positively’.

While, 53 respondents (14.1%), were neutral to either positive or negative perception of the role of women in wellness and self-care as depicted in advertisement. Twenty-five respondents (6.7%), negatively perceived the role of women in wellness and self-care as depicted in advertisement, and 12 respondents (3.2%) strongly negatively perceived the role of women in wellness and self-care as depicted in advertisement. This indicates that, majority of the participants perceived the role of women in wellness and self-care as depicted in advertisements, in positive terms.

With regard to whether the construction of women in adverts align with or challenge traditional views of women’s roles in society, our analysis indicate a mixed view of the phenomenon. For instance, 128 respondents (34.1%) were of the opinion that they align with traditional views of women’s roles in society; while 138 respondents (36.8%), believed that they challenge traditional views of women’s roles in society. Hundred respondents (26.7%) believe that the construction of women’s roles in society as portrayed in the adverts, were mixed. Insignificant number of participants (n=9, 2.4%) indicated they did not align with traditional views.

On whether participants’ views on women’s roles in wellness and self-care have been influenced by advertising, our data show that majority (n=172, 45.9%), believed that their views on women’s roles in wellness and self-care was moderately influenced by advertising. Meanwhile, 95 respondents (25.3%), think that their views on women’s roles in wellness and self-care were slightly influenced by advertising.

Forty-eight respondents’ (12.8%), views on women’s roles in wellness and self-care was very significantly, influenced by advertising. Further, 35 respondents’ (9.3%) views on women’s roles in

wellness and self-care was extremely influenced by advertising. The least was 25 respondents (6.7%) who had no views on advertising and women's roles in wellness and self-care (see table 4 below).

Table 4: How perceptions of women's roles in wellness and self-care correlate with the portrayals found in advertisements for visual and textual messaging

How do the messages about femininity presented in these advertisements resonate with you personally?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not at all	33	8.8
Slightly	47	12.8
Moderately	108	28.8
Very strongly	133	30.1
Extremely strongly	74	19.7
How do you perceive the role of women in wellness and self-care as depicted in advertisements?		
Strongly positive	143	38.1
Somewhat positive	142	37.9
Neutral	53	14.1
Somewhat negative	25	6.7
Strongly negative	12	3.2
Do you believe these portrayals align with traditional views of women's roles in society?		
Align with traditional views	128	34.1
Challenge traditional views	138	36.8
Mix of both	100	26.7
Neither	9	2.4

To what extent do you feel that your own views on women’s roles in wellness and self-care have been influenced by advertising?

Not at all	25	6.7
Slightly	95	25.3
Moderately	172	45.9
Very significantly	48	12.8

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework rooted in Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) objectification theory and critical race feminism. The analysis explored how visual and textual advertisements constructed women as perceived by the research participants, and how these portrayals shaped audience perceptions, including how they reflected broader socio-cultural and stereotypes on beauty standards.

The findings revealed that some of the advertisements commonly featured women through hypersexualized visuals, body fragmentation, and an overemphasis on physical beauty particularly light skin, slim bodies, and Eurocentric facial features. This confirmed Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) argument that women were often portrayed as passive objects of male desire, valued primarily for their appearance rather than their abilities. Szymanski et al. (2011) agreed with this perspective, emphasizing how media reproduced the objectification of women’s bodies for commercial gain.

In the study, audience members reported being subconsciously influenced by such portrayals, associating female beauty with social success and self-worth. These perceptions echoed the concerns of Moradi and Huang (2008), who linked self-objectification with increased anxiety, depression, and appearance-based shame. Still, scholars like McKinley and Hyde (1996) acknowledged that while some women internalized these portrayals, others resisted or reinterpreted them based on personal or cultural values showing that media influence was not always monolithic.

The textual analysis showed that advertisements frequently used language associated with empowerment—phrases like “take control,” “reveal your true beauty,” and “you deserve to shine.” However, these messages were typically tied to consumer products like fairness creams, weight-loss teas, or hair-removal tools, suggesting that empowerment was achievable only through physical enhancement.

This aligns with Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) objectification theory, which explains how surface-level empowerment messaging can actually reinforce self-objectification when it centers on physical transformation. Bartky (1990) critiqued this as a form of “disciplinary femininity,” where women are subtly coerced into conforming to beauty standards while believing they are exercising autonomy.

From a critical race feminist perspective, scholars such as Collins (2000) and Evans Winters & Esposito (2010) argued that these advertisements ignore racial and cultural diversity, promoting a singular, Eurocentric standard of femininity. Participants in this study echoed these concerns, stating that empowerment felt exclusionary when it was visually and linguistically coded as whiteness or Western beauty.

Participants overwhelmingly reported that wellness and self-care were depicted as aesthetic rather than holistic concepts in advertisements. Visuals often showed women engaging in beauty routines—such as applying face masks, using whitening products, or attending spa sessions—rather than focusing on mental, emotional, or physical well-being. This narrow portrayal reinforced the objectification theory claim that women are encouraged to prioritize how they appear to others, rather than how they feel internally (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998).

Audiences felt pressured to align their self-care practices with the ideals presented in advertisements, fearing social rejection or inadequacy if they did not. Critical race feminism offered a deeper critique by highlighting how wellness was marketed through a lens of privilege and whiteness. According to Wing (2003), true self-care must account for the intersecting identities and struggles of women, particularly those in marginalized groups.

Participants from diverse backgrounds in this study noted how their own ideas of wellness—rooted in family, community, or spiritual balance—were not represented at all. Odoemelam (2021) argued that such media portrayals reinforce gendered scripts within a patriarchal culture, subtly guiding both women and men into predefined social roles. The study's findings support this view: women were shown as consumers, caretakers, and beauty projects, reinforcing the belief that their worth was tied to external presentation.

Conclusions

Our findings indicate that the combination of visual and textual advertising reinforces an aspirational yet commercialized model of womanhood, and bears nuanced implications on the importance of ethical advertising practices that promote authentic and inclusive portrayals of women. The study concludes that while advertisements for visual and textual messaging services often aim to align with progressive themes like empowerment and self-care, they simultaneously perpetuate conventional and sometimes limiting ideals of femininity.

The combination of visual and textual strategies reinforces an aspirational yet commercialized model of womanhood—one that risks shaping audience perceptions in ways that may both inspire and harm, depending on individual interpretation and social context. Our key recommendation is that stakeholders in media and communication should adopt more balanced and progressive construction of women in their messaging strategies.

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