

GENDER EQUALITY IN ADVERTISING: ASSESSING THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIAN MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract

Advertising is an influential component of contemporary mass communication because it does not only promote goods, services and ideas but also constructs and circulates meanings about gender, identity, social status and acceptable behaviour. This study examines gender equality in advertising, with particular emphasis on the representation of women and men in media campaigns in South-South Nigeria. The study investigates the extent to which advertising portrays women and men equally in professional, domestic, economic, leadership and decision-making roles and examines the persistence of gender stereotypes, sexualisation and objectification. The study adopts a mixed-method approach comprising quantitative content analysis and survey research. The population consists of adult media consumers and selected advertising campaigns circulated through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards and digital platforms in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States. The study is anchored on Social Cognitive Theory, Social Constructionist Theory, Feminist Media Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory. Recent Nigerian studies indicate that women continue to be disproportionately associated with domesticity, beauty, supportive roles and physical appearance, whereas men are more frequently associated with authority, professional competence and decision-making. For example, Omiunu (2023) found gender bias and greater exposure of female body parts in Nigerian newspaper and magazine advertisements, while a 2025 study in Bayelsa State found that audiences commonly perceived female characters in Nigerian television commercials as occupying stereotypical, passive and supportive roles. Recent evidence from Edo State likewise reports perceptions that advertising frequently portrays women as homemakers and objects of beauty and men as leaders and decision-makers. The study argues that gender equality in advertising requires more than equal numerical visibility; it requires equal dignity, agency, competence, authority and diversity of representation. The paper recommends gender-sensitive advertising policies, stronger regulatory monitoring, gender-diverse creative teams, periodic gender audits and culturally relevant campaigns that portray women and men as equal contributors to family, business, leadership and national development.

Keywords: Gender equality, advertising, gender representation, gender stereotypes, media campaigns, women, men, South-South Nigeria, advertising communication.

Introduction

Advertising has become one of the most pervasive forms of mediated communication in contemporary society. It informs consumers about products and services, creates brand identities and stimulates purchasing behaviour. Advertising functions by reminding consumers about a product or service which has been beneficial to them (Saa-Aondo 2016). According to Okoro (2013), effective advertising is assessed on the platform of its ability make a given brand from mere product level to the brand stage. However, its influence extends beyond commercial objectives. Advertising also communicates symbolic meanings concerning beauty, masculinity, femininity, family relationships, occupations, authority, social status and acceptable patterns of behaviour. Consequently, advertising can reproduce existing social inequalities or provide symbolic resources for challenging them.

Gender representation in advertising is therefore an important area of communication research. Representation concerns not simply whether women and men appear in advertisements, but how they appear, what roles they occupy, what characteristics are attributed to them, who possesses authority, whose voice is heard, whose body is emphasised and who is presented as competent and capable of making decisions. The importance of gender-sensitive media representation has received renewed international attention. UNESCO's gender-sensitive media indicators emphasise the need to assess not only the proportion of women and men appearing in media content but also their occupational roles, social status, agency, stereotyping and sexualisation. Similarly, contemporary gender-and-media scholarship increasingly views advertising as an important cultural site in which gender norms can either be reinforced or challenged.

In Nigeria, this issue is particularly significant because advertising operates within a society characterised by complex cultural, religious, economic and traditional expectations concerning women's and men's roles. Although Nigerian women participate substantially in education,

entrepreneurship, professional employment, politics, media and community development, advertising representations do not always reflect these changing realities. Recent empirical evidence continues to demonstrate this problem. Omiunu (2023), in a study of Nigerian newspapers and magazines, found gender bias in advertising and reported that female body images were more exposed than male body images. The study further observed that many advertisements were gender-specific and recommended that women should not be represented merely as sex objects.

Similarly, Adelabu, Sanusi and Olayede (2024) examined gender portrayal in Nigerian advertisements and observed the persistence of gender stereotypes despite changes in women's educational attainment, economic power and social roles. Their study emphasised the continuing tension between traditional advertising stereotypes and the need for gender-inclusive advertising. Onuh and Okoro's study of 405 residents of South-South Nigeria established that gender significantly influenced advertising-consumption patterns, including the timing, duration and message elements that attracted audience attention. This demonstrates that gender is relevant not only to how audiences are represented but also to how advertising messages are consumed and interpreted.

The issue is not confined to the portrayal of women. Gender stereotypes can also restrict men by repeatedly associating masculinity with strength, authority, financial provision, emotional control and dominance. Gender equality therefore requires advertising that allows both women and men to occupy diverse and multidimensional roles. The contemporary advertising environment also provides opportunities for change. Advertising campaigns can portray women as entrepreneurs, engineers, academics, executives, political leaders and community developers while presenting men as fathers, caregivers, supportive partners and emotionally responsible individuals. A recent study specifically addressing advertising and women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria argues that inclusive advertising can

contribute to changing public attitudes toward women's leadership, entrepreneurship, education and shared family responsibilities.

The problem, therefore, is not simply female underrepresentation. In some advertising categories women may even be highly visible. The deeper issue is whether this visibility is accompanied by agency, authority, dignity, occupational diversity and equality. This study consequently examines gender equality in advertising by assessing the representation of women and men in South-South Nigerian media campaigns.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing national and international advocacy for gender equality, gender stereotypes continue to appear in advertising. Women are frequently associated with domestic responsibilities, childcare, beauty, sexuality, household products and supportive roles, while men are often presented as professionals, experts, leaders, breadwinners and final decision-makers. Recent Nigerian evidence confirms that these patterns remain relevant. Omiunu (2023) found that advertisements in Nigerian newspapers and magazines frequently exposed female body parts more than male body parts and concluded that gender bias remained evident in advertising language and imagery.

A more recent study of Nigerian television commercials in Bayelsa State found that audiences perceived women predominantly through stereotypical, passive and supportive roles, particularly with respect to physical appearance. Likewise, research in Benin City indicates that respondents perceive women as homemakers and beauty objects and men as leaders and decision-makers. These patterns are problematic because repeated media representations may contribute to the normalisation of unequal gender roles. When women repeatedly appear as caregivers while men appear as economic decision-makers, audiences may interpret these portrayals as natural rather than culturally constructed. Social Cognitive Theory suggests that repeated observation of such symbolic models can

influence beliefs and behavioural expectations.

Another problem is that many discussions of gender equality focus predominantly on women without adequately examining representations of men. A truly gender-equitable advertising environment must challenge restrictive representations of both sexes. Furthermore, much of the existing Nigerian research examines the country generally, individual media platforms or individual states. There remains a need for a more focused examination of South-South Nigeria as a regional advertising environment, particularly given its cultural diversity and expanding digital-media ecosystem. This study therefore seeks to address the gap by systematically examining the representation of women and men in South-South Nigerian media campaigns.

Objectives the Study

The broad objective of this study is to assess gender equality in advertising by examining the representation of women and men in media campaigns in South-South Nigeria.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- I. determine the frequency with which women and men appear in South-South Nigerian media advertisements;
- II. examine the major roles assigned to women and men;
- III. assess the extent to which women and men are represented as professionals, experts and decision-makers;
- I. examine the prevalence of gender stereotypes in advertising;
- II. determine the extent to which women are portrayed through physical appearance and sexualised imagery;
- III. assess audience perceptions of gender representation in advertising;
- IV. determine whether contemporary advertising campaigns promote gender equality and women's empowerment; and propose strategies for improving gender-sensitive advertising practice in South-South Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- I. What is the frequency of representation of women and men in South-South Nigerian media campaigns?
- II. What roles are predominantly assigned to women and men in advertising?
- III. To what extent are women and men represented as professionals, experts and decision-makers?
- IV. What forms of gender stereotyping occur in South-South Nigerian advertising?
- V. To what extent are women and men represented through physical appearance and sexualised imagery?
- VI. How do audiences perceive the representation of women and men in South-South Nigerian advertising?
- VII. To what extent do contemporary media campaigns promote gender equality and women's empowerment?

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Gender

Gender refers to socially constructed expectations, behaviours, roles and relationships associated with being female or male. Unlike biological sex, gender is strongly influenced by culture, institutions, family structures, education, religion, politics and media. Advertising participates in this process by repeatedly associating products and lifestyles with particular gender identities.

Concept of Gender Equality

Gender equality refers to equal rights, opportunities, responsibilities, dignity and participation for women and men. Within advertising, gender equality is understood in terms of: equal visibility; equal dignity; equal access to authority; equal occupational diversity; equal representation as decision-makers; freedom from sexual objectification; freedom from

restrictive stereotypes; and recognition of women's and men's diverse social contributions. Thus, an advertisement does not necessarily become gender-equal merely because it contains equal numbers of men and women.

Advertising as a Social Institution

Advertising is commonly understood as paid, persuasive communication intended to influence audiences toward a product, service, organisation or idea. Okoro (2013 p. 235) affirms that Advertising is an openly sponsored paid for enterprise by the advertiser and at his expense for the purpose of selling a given product which could be tangible or intangible. However, its cultural function is equally significant. Advertising constructs desirable lifestyles. It tells audiences what constitutes attractiveness, success, masculinity, femininity, family life and social status. Consequently, advertisers have a responsibility to consider the social implications of their representations.

Gender Stereotypes in Advertising

Gender stereotypes are generalised assumptions concerning what women and men are expected to do or how they are expected to behave. Common advertising stereotypes include: Female stereotypes, homemaker, mother, caregiver, beauty object, dependent wife, emotional consumer, sexually attractive model.

Male stereotypes, breadwinner, businessman, leader, expert, physically strong individual, financial decision-maker, emotionally independent person. Akpan, Umoren and Nwokeocha (2024), in their critical discourse on Nigerian advertising, argue that advertising plays an important role in shaping societal attitudes and perceptions and recommend more diverse representations reflecting the complexity of Nigerian society.

Gender Representation and Objectification

Objectification occurs when individuals, particularly women, are represented primarily through their bodies, physical attractiveness or sexual

appeal rather than through their personality, expertise or agency. Omiunu's (2023) Nigerian study provides empirical support for concerns about female objectification, reporting greater exposure of female body images than male body images in the sampled advertisements. More recently, Akande (2026) examined the regulation of women's objectification in Nigerian advertising and concluded that sexualisation and commodification of women's bodies remain significant concerns. The study particularly identifies beauty, household and cosmetic advertising as areas in which reductive portrayals can occur. Objectification is problematic because it shifts attention away from women's abilities and achievements toward physical appearance.

Advertising and Women's Empowerment

Advertising can also operate as an instrument of empowerment. An empowering advertisement may show a woman: establishing a business; leading an organisation; managing finances; practising medicine; engineering infrastructure; participating in politics; pursuing higher education; making family decisions; or contributing to community development. Similarly, an advertisement may challenge restrictive masculinity by presenting men as involved fathers, caregivers, teachers and supportive partners.

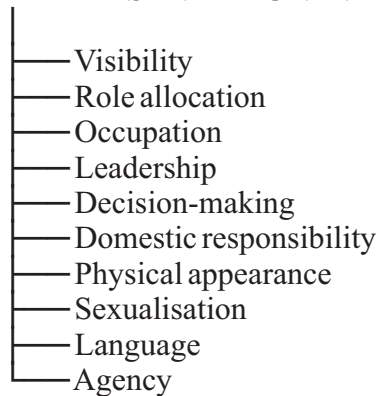
The South-South Nigerian literature increasingly recognises this transformative possibility. Recent work argues that gender-inclusive advertising can challenge harmful gender norms and increase acceptance of women's participation in leadership, entrepreneurship, education and decision-making.

Conceptual Framework

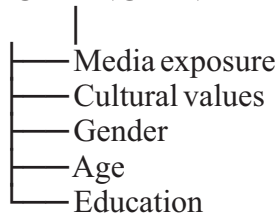
The study proposes the following conceptual relationship:

Plain text

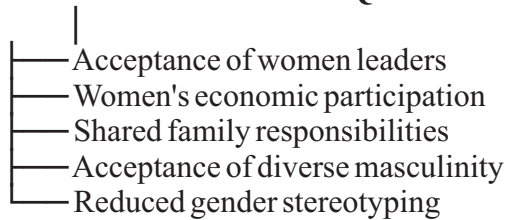
GENDER REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISING



AUDIENCE INTERPRETATION



PERCEIVED GENDER EQUALITY



The framework assumes that repeated exposure to particular gender representations may influence how audiences understand women's and men's social roles.

Theoretical Review

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory, developed principally from Bandura's work, proposes that individuals learn through observation, modelling and interaction with their social environment. Advertising provides audiences with symbolic models. If women repeatedly appear as domestic caregivers and men as financial decision-makers, such portrayals may reinforce conventional expectations.

Conversely, advertising can provide alternative models. When women are consistently portrayed as executives, entrepreneurs or engineers, audiences are exposed to alternative representations of women's capabilities. Recent Nigerian research has explicitly used Social Cognitive Theory to examine stereotypical representations of women in electronic-media advertising. Ashiekpe and Mwansat (2023) found that cultural orientation values also contribute significantly to perceptions of women and that advertising may reinforce pre-existing stereotypes even when representations are improving.

Social Constructionist Theory

Social Constructionist Theory argues that social meanings are produced through communication and cultural interaction. Gender roles are therefore not simply biological facts; societies construct meanings about what women and men should do. Advertising participates in this construction. A recurring advertisement showing a woman in the kitchen does not merely sell a kitchen product—it may symbolically communicate that domestic responsibility belongs to women. This theory is therefore useful for analysing how advertising constructs gender meanings in South-South Nigeria.

Response	Score
Strongly Agree	5
Agree	4
Undecided	3
Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	1

Content-Analysis Coding Sheet

The coding sheet record: sex of character; age category; occupational role; domestic role; leadership role; decision-making role; expert role; product category; setting; dress; physical emphasis; sexualisation; language; agency; stereotype; empowerment; and product-character relationship.

Data Presentation

Since no primary dataset was supplied for this article, the tables below are illustrative examples of how actual results should be presented. They were not presented as genuine field findings in a journal manuscript.

Table 1: Illustrative Distribution of Gender Representation

Representation	Frequency	Percentage
Female-dominated advertisements	118	39.3
Male-dominated advertisements	103	34.3
Balanced representation	79	26.4
Total	300	100.0

Interpretation

The hypothetical result suggests that women may be highly visible in advertising without necessarily receiving equal representation in terms of professional authority, decision-making and social status.

Table 2: Illustrative Distribution of Major Roles

Role	Women (%)	Men (%)
Domestic/caregiving	42	16
Beauty/appearance	28	7
Professional/expert	21	39
Business/entrepreneurship	18	36
Leadership/authority	14	34
Family decision-making	25	38
Entertainment/social	31	29

Interpretation

The illustrative pattern suggests that women are more likely to be associated with domesticity and appearance, whereas men are more frequently associated with professional and leadership roles. Such a result would be consistent with recent Nigerian research reporting similar patterns.

Illustrative Audience Perception

Table 3: Illustrative Audience Responses

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
Women are frequently portrayed in domestic roles	4.08	High
Men are frequently portrayed as decision-makers	4.15	High
Women are often judged by physical appearance	4.01	High
Women are increasingly represented as Professionals	3.71	High
Men are increasingly represented as caregivers	3.19	Moderate
Advertising promotes equal representation of both sexes	3.27	Moderate

Filed work 2026

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, were used to answer the research questions.

Discussion of Findings

The literature reviewed indicates that gender inequality in advertising

occurs at several interconnected levels.

Visibility Does Not Equal Equality

Women may appear frequently in advertising but still be underrepresented in positions of authority. The critical issue is therefore not simply how many women appear, but what they are doing when they appear. More recent research from Bayelsa State provides direct evidence concerning audience perceptions. This finding is supported by the work of Governor and Ebieri (2025) who studied 359 respondents in Yenagoa and reported high exposure to Nigerian television commercials but found that audiences widely perceived female characters as occupying stereotypical, passive and supportive roles, with considerable emphasis on physical appearance. The researchers concluded that such portrayals may reinforce harmful traditional gender norms even where they do not necessarily influence immediate purchasing behaviour.

Ade-Johnson (2025) who studied 400 Benin City residents equally supports the finding by stating that respondents perceived gender stereotypes as heavily used in Nigerian advertising, with women commonly portrayed as homemakers and objects of beauty and men as leaders and decision-makers. Digital media were identified as a prominent source of such stereotypes. For instance, a woman who appears as a beauty model and a man who appears as a bank manager are not receiving equivalent symbolic status, even if both occupy equal amounts of screen time.

Women Continue to Be Associated with Domesticity

Recent evidence from Bayelsa State demonstrates that audiences continue to perceive female characters in television advertising as passive and supportive, while studies in Edo State similarly identify homemaking and beauty as dominant female representations. This indicates that advertising may lag behind changes in women's actual social and economic roles.

Men Continue to Be Associated with Authority

Men are frequently represented as: experts, professionals, executives, financial decision-makers; leaders; and breadwinners. Such representations can reinforce the assumption that authority and economic power are naturally masculine attributes.

Objectification Remains a Problem

The greater exposure of female body parts reported by Omiunu (2023) demonstrates the continuing importance of objectification in Nigerian advertising. Akande's 2026 analysis further suggests that sexualisation and commodification remain concerns in Nigerian advertising practice.

Culture Interacts with Advertising

The evidence from Ashiekpe and Mwansat (2023) is particularly significant because it demonstrates that advertising is not the only source of gender stereotyping. Cultural orientations can independently influence perceptions of women. Consequently, gender-sensitive advertising strategies in South-South Nigeria must engage with local cultural values rather than simply importing advertising models developed elsewhere.

Advertising Has Transformative Potential

The findings also suggest that advertising should not be regarded exclusively as a problem. Advertising reaches large audiences repeatedly and can therefore normalise alternative social realities. Campaigns that show women as entrepreneurs, professionals, leaders and decision-makers can contribute to the normalisation of women's public participation. Similarly, advertisements depicting men as caregivers can help broaden accepted forms of masculinity.

Conclusion

This study examined gender equality in advertising by focusing on the representation of women and men in South-South Nigerian media campaigns. The reviewed evidence demonstrates that gender stereotyping remains a significant feature of Nigerian advertising. Women continue to be

disproportionately associated with domestic responsibilities, physical attractiveness, supportive roles and sexualised imagery, while men are more commonly associated with authority, expertise, professional success and decision-making. Recent evidence from Bayelsa and Edo States reinforces these concerns.

However, the advertising environment is not static. Increasingly, advertisements can be used to portray women as entrepreneurs, professionals, leaders and agents of economic development. They can also challenge restrictive definitions of masculinity. The central argument of this study is therefore that gender equality in advertising must be assessed by the quality of representation rather than numerical visibility alone. An advertisement becomes more gender-equitable when women and men are represented with comparable dignity, agency, authority, competence and diversity. For South-South Nigeria, this means developing advertising that reflects the actual contributions of women and men to families, businesses, professions, communities and national development while remaining sensitive to local cultural realities.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen gender-sensitive advertising regulation:** The Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria should intensify monitoring of gender stereotyping, objectification and discriminatory representation.
- 2. Introduce mandatory gender audits:** Advertising agencies and major media organisations should periodically evaluate their campaigns to determine whether women and men are represented equitably.
- 3. Increase women's participation in advertising decision-making:** Women should be adequately represented among: creative directors, copywriters, producers, account managers, media planners, advertising executives; and senior management.

This is particularly important because available evidence shows that women remain underrepresented in media management in South-South Nigeria. A recent media-management survey reported that women accounted for only 26.5% of sampled media managers in the South-South region, compared with 73.5% men.

Report Women

4. **Reduce objectification:** Women and men should not be presented primarily as decorative or sexual objects when their physical appearance has no meaningful relationship with the advertised product.
5. **Portray women in diverse professional roles:** Advertising should deliberately represent women as: entrepreneurs; engineers; scientists; doctors; lawyers; executives; academics; political leaders; financial experts; and community leaders.
6. **Challenge restrictive masculinity:** Men should also be represented as caregivers, fathers, teachers, nurses, supportive husbands and emotionally responsible individuals.
7. **Encourage gender-inclusive storytelling:** Advertising agencies should move beyond token female inclusion and develop narratives in which women and men share authority, responsibilities and decision-making.
8. **Incorporate local cultural contexts:** Gender-sensitive campaigns should be designed around the cultural realities of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States.
9. **Promote media literacy: Universities, schools and civil society:** Organisations should educate young people to recognise gender stereotypes, objectification and unrealistic representations in advertising.
10. **Establish industry-academic partnerships:** Universities and advertising agencies should collaborate on periodic studies

measuring gender representation across Nigerian media.

Contribution to Knowledge

The study contributes to advertising and gender scholarship in three important respects.

First, it moves the discussion beyond the simple question of whether women are visible in advertisements to the more important question of what kind of visibility they receive.

Second, it provides a regional perspective by focusing specifically on South-South Nigeria, an area with distinctive cultural and media characteristics.

Third, it integrates visibility, role, agency, authority, occupational status, objectification, decision-making and empowerment into a comprehensive framework for assessing gender equality in advertising.

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