ROLE OF ADVERTISING IN CHANGING PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA

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Abstract

Advertising is a major social communication institution that does more than promote goods and services; it also circulates ideas about identity, family life, work, leadership, education, and gender roles. In South-South Nigeria, where cultural traditions, religious values, economic inequalities, and media practices shape everyday understandings of gender, advertising can either reinforce harmful stereotypes or contribute to women's empowerment. This article examines the role of positive and inclusive advertising in changing public attitudes towards women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria. It focuses on the potential of advertising to challenge harmful gender norms, encourage girls' education, support women's participation in leadership and business, and promote shared family responsibilities. The study adopts a descriptive survey-oriented approach and is anchored on Social Learning Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, and Feminist Media Theory. Existing studies show that Nigerian advertisements frequently portray women in domestic, decorative, and subordinate roles, although gender-sensitive campaigns can increase acceptance of women's public participation and decision-making. The article finds that repeated exposure to inclusive portrayals can gradually reshape public perception, especially when messages are culturally relevant and distributed through television, radio, social media, outdoor advertising, and community media. It recommends gender-responsive advertising policies, stronger regulatory monitoring, collaboration with traditional and religious leaders, and the deliberate inclusion of women in advertising production and leadership. The article concludes that advertising can become a practical instrument for advancing gender equality and sustainable development in South-South Nigeria.

Keywords: Advertising, women's empowerment, gender equality, public attitude, South-South Nigeria, inclusive communication.

Introduction

Advertising is commonly understood as paid, persuasive, and mediated communication designed to influence consumers' attitudes and behaviours toward products, services, ideas, or institutions. Advertising is a non-personal communication of a message in persuasive and convincing manner about any desired product or services through media by an identified sponsor. However, advertising also performs a broader cultural function. Dulin (2016) verses that in the business world, advertising has become a necessity for everybody, be it the producer, trader or consumer. It represents social values, reproduces beliefs, and influences how people understand what is normal, desirable, respectable, and possible in society. Through repeated images, language, music, storylines, and character roles, advertising can shape public perceptions of women and men. In many societies, women have historically been represented in advertising as homemakers, caregivers, beauty objects, or dependent consumers, while men are portrayed as decision-makers, income earners, leaders, and authorities. Such portrayals may reinforce the belief that women belong mainly in private or domestic spaces, while men belong in public, political, and economic spaces. Nigerian advertising has similarly been criticised for reproducing gender stereotypes, particularly through the portrayal of women as physically attractive, submissive, domestic, or responsible for household care (Akpan et al., 2024). This study, seeks to illuminate whether advertising empowers men and women differently.

A recent study of Nigerian television advertisements also found that respondents largely perceived the portrayal of women as stereotypical rather than empowering (Dennis & Iwegbue, 2026). The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria comprises Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers States. The region is economically significant because of its oil and gas resources, commercial activities, educational institutions, urban centres, and expanding digital-media environment. Yet, gender inequality

remains visible in many areas of social life, including leadership, access to education, employment, business ownership, household decision-making, and unpaid care work. Traditional expectations may continue to assign women primary responsibility for domestic duties while limiting their participation in public decision-making.

Advertising can contribute to this process when it portrays women as competent professionals, entrepreneurs, leaders, students, innovators, and equal partners in family life. Positive and inclusive advertising does not merely replace one image with another. It deliberately challenges the assumption that leadership is male, that education is more important for boys, that domestic work is exclusively women's responsibility, or that women's success threatens family stability. By showing fathers caring for children, husbands supporting wives' businesses, girls pursuing science and technology, women leading organisations, and families making decisions jointly, advertising can help make equality socially imaginable and acceptable.

Statement of the Problem

Advertising has been doing a great job in boosting the economy of many nations yet there has been complaints on the way it portrays women as conventional rather being a match to their male counterpart. Many researchers have studied the impact of advertising in national development but much has not been done on the role of positive and inclusive advertising in changing public attitudes towards women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this study looks at the role that Advertising plays in Changing Public Attitudes towards Women's Empowerment in South-South Nigeria and how it can contribute to the empowerment of women by portraying them as competent professionals, entrepreneurs, leaders, students, innovators, and equal partners in real life.

This study, therefore, sought to examine the role of positive and inclusive advertising in changing public attitudes towards women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the role of advertising in changing public attitudes towards women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. Examine how advertising portrays women and men in South-South Nigerian media campaigns.
ii. Determine whether positive and inclusive advertising can challenge harmful gender norms.
iii. Assess the influence of advertising on public support for girls' education.
iv. Examine the role of advertising in promoting women's leadership and political participation.
v. Investigate how advertising can encourage women's business ownership and economic participation.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

i. How are women and men portrayed in advertisements in South-South Nigeria?
ii. To what extent can positive and inclusive advertising challenge harmful gender norms in South-South Nigeria?
iii. How does advertising influence public attitudes towards girls' education?
iv. To what extent does advertising promote support for women's leadership and political participation?
v. How can advertising encourage women's business ownership and economic participation?

Review of Related Literature.

Conceptual review

Advertising and its Role in the Society

The human society benefits tremendously from advertising,

especially in the area of national development (Ijeh 2008). Advertising is good to the society because by using mass and interactive media to reach a vast audience, it connects identified sponsors to buyers and provides information about products and services. (Moriarty, Mitchell & Well 2009). According to Ijeh (2008), Advertising is a big business in terms of its impact on the human society and the quantum of money involved in the industry. So, Advertising creates empowerment and boosts economy of the nation. According to Arens (2004), Advertising helps to maintain the flow of consumer demand and equally encourages more buyers, this helps sustain employment and income. When companies invest money in research to discover what consumers need, they create employment for people. This shows that Advertising does not just promote goods and services, but it boost sales and the economy of the business world. In Nigeria, many advertisement messages are not only on products we consume but also on departmental stores, environmental and street decorations as well as other vital public services. (Ijeh 2008)

What is Advertising?

Okoro (1995) citing American Marketing association says that Advertising is any paid form of nonpersonal presentation and promotion of idea, goods or services by an identified sponsor. This definition draws a line between publicity which is the news about a product or company appearing in form of editorial material in the media without cost or a sponsor (Okoro 1995). This means that advertising has the mandate to sale the advertiser's goods or services. Analysts say that advertising is one of the most powerful socializing forces in culture because it shapes our attitudes, and our attitudes shape our behaviour (Awake, August, 22, 1998: 3).

Women Empower

Women's empowerment refers to the process through which women gain the capacity, opportunity, confidence, resources, and freedom to make strategic life choices. It includes access to education, economic

participation, political representation, leadership opportunities, bodily autonomy, household decision-making, and protection from discrimination. The advertising industry responds through an increasing number of gender-themed empowerment campaigns, including Dove's Men þ Care, Gillette's The Best Men Can Be advertisements, Always' #LikeAGirl viral video, and Audi's Super Bowl commercial that focused on the gender pay gap Tsai W. S., Shata A. & Tian, S. (2019). Advertising shapes social views by showing what roles men and women can play. Progressive advertising breaks old stereotypes and help empower all genders while building stronger brand trust. Gill (2008) cautioned that by limiting the representation of female sexual power and pleasure to only the conventionally attractive women, such images work to underscore the imperative of physical attractiveness rather than women's sexual agency and pleasure, and thereby may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations. Such body-centric empowerment, he says can also exacerbate the sexualization of women in advertising

Empirical Review

Akpan et al. (2024) examined gender stereotypes in Nigerian advertising through a critical discourse approach. Their study found that advertising can influence societal perceptions and consumer behaviour by reinforcing or challenging gendered assumptions. The authors argued that advertisers should represent diverse gender identities, backgrounds, and experiences in order to reflect the complexity of Nigerian society.

Nwokoro and Ekwunife (2020) investigated gender-sensitive advertising as a tool for repositioning women for public offices in Nigeria. The study found that gender-sensitive advertising can help challenge stereotypes that limit women's political participation. It recommended advertising messages that portray women as competent leaders, policy-makers, professionals, and decision-makers rather than as passive supporters of male leadership.

Onuh and Okoro (2022) studied gender differentials in advertisement consumption patterns among residents of South-South Nigeria. Using a survey design involving 405 respondents, the study demonstrated that gender is relevant to advertising exposure and consumption. This suggests that campaigns intended to promote women's empowerment should be carefully designed for different demographic groups, including men, women, young people, urban residents, and rural residents.

Dennis and Iwegbue (2026) examined female gender portrayal in Nigerian television advertisements and information services. Their findings indicated that many respondents perceived women's representation in television advertising as stereotypical. The study recommended that advertisers should move away from provocative and objectifying portrayals and instead show women's abilities, achievements, and diverse social roles.

Eze et al. (2025) examined young people's gender-norm attitudes in Southeast Nigeria. The study found that although many young people supported women's empowerment, traditional beliefs concerning male decision-making power remained strong. More than 60% of participants believed that men should have greater decision-making power than women. The study further showed that education, gender, household leadership, and parental education influenced attitudes toward gender equality. These findings are relevant to South-South Nigeria because they demonstrate that support for women's empowerment may coexist with persistent patriarchal beliefs.

A Nigerian communication and social-norms intervention known as Voices for Change used radio discussions, drama, television, social media, billboards, and youth-focused activities to address violence against women and girls, women's household decision-making, and women's political leadership. The intervention demonstrates that coordinated communication campaigns can support broader efforts to change gender norms when they combine media messages, community engagement, and institutional action.

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, explains that people learn behaviours, attitudes, and social roles by observing others. Individuals are more likely to imitate behaviours that appear rewarded, respected, or socially approved. In advertising, audiences observe models, celebrities, families, workers, and leaders performing particular roles. When women are repeatedly shown as capable leaders, business owners, engineers, teachers, political actors, and decision-makers, audiences may gradually accept these roles as normal and desirable. Conversely, when advertisements consistently show women only cooking, cleaning, serving men, or worrying about physical appearance, they may reinforce the belief that women's value is limited to domestic labour and beauty. Social Learning Theory is therefore useful in explaining how inclusive advertising can model equitable gender roles for children, young people, men, and women.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, associated with McCombs and Shaw, argues that the media may not always tell people what to think, but they strongly influence what people think about. Advertising can place women's empowerment issues on the public agenda by repeatedly drawing attention to girls' education, women's entrepreneurship, maternal health, women's leadership, equal employment, and shared household responsibilities. For example, a campaign that regularly portrays women as business owners and community leaders may increase public discussion about women's economic rights and leadership potential. Gender-sensitive advertising can therefore make equality-related issues more visible and socially important. Nigerian scholarship has applied agenda-setting alongside muted group theory in explaining how gender-sensitive advertising may reposition women for public office and challenge negative stereotypes (Nwokoro & Ekwunife, 2020).

Feminist Media Theory

Feminist Media Theory examines how media representations may reproduce unequal power relations between women and men. It argues that media content should be analysed not only for what it shows, but also for whose voices, experiences, bodies, and achievements are made visible or invisible. The theory challenges portrayals that objectify women, reduce them to domestic roles, or exclude them from leadership, technology, politics, and economic life. Applied to advertising, Feminist Media Theory supports the call for balanced and respectful representations of women. It encourages advertisers to portray women as diverse individuals with agency, intelligence, ambition, and authority. It also demands that women be involved in creative decision-making within advertising agencies, media organisations, and brand-management teams.

Methodology

Population of the Study

The population of the study would have comprised adult residents of the six states in South-South Nigeria: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers States of 18 years and above but because the study adopted library method whereby the researcher analysed books, newspapers, magazine etc. the population was no longer however, the work was enriched with Personal observation of the researcher.

However, a survey of South-South residents shows that gender differences can influence advertising consumption patterns, making it important to examine how different audiences receive and interpret gender-related messages (Onuh & Okoro, 2022).

Findings

Based on the reviewed literature, the following findings emerge:

i. Advertising remains a powerful socialisation tool. Repeated advertising messages can influence public beliefs about gender roles because audiences observe, interpret, and sometimes imitate the

behaviours portrayed in media campaigns.

ii. Stereotypical portrayals remain common. Nigerian advertisements often represent women in domestic, decorative, or subordinate roles, while men are more frequently associated with authority, financial power, leadership, and decision-making.

iii. Inclusive representation can challenge harmful norms. Advertising that portrays women as leaders, professionals, entrepreneurs, students, and decision-makers can reduce the perceived abnormality of women's public participation.

iv. Girls' education can be strengthened through media representation. Campaigns that show girls succeeding in school, science, technology, sports, and professional careers can encourage parents and communities to value girls' education.

v. Women's leadership requires visible role models. When advertisements show women leading businesses, communities, government institutions, and households, they can improve public acceptance of women in leadership positions.

Conclusion

Advertising has the potential to play an important role in changing public attitudes towards women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria. Although advertising has often reinforced traditional gender stereotypes, it can also become a vehicle for social change when it presents women and men in equitable, respectful, and diverse roles. Positive and inclusive advertising can challenge harmful beliefs about women's leadership, girls' education, women's business participation, and domestic responsibilities. For advertising to contribute meaningfully to women's empowerment, it must move beyond symbolic representation.

Economic empowerment messages can reshape perceptions. Advertising that portrays women as entrepreneurs, skilled workers, farmers, innovators, and financial decision-makers can increase recognition of

women's contributions to household and community development. Shared family responsibility can be normalised. Advertisements that show men cooking, cleaning, caring for children, supporting wives' careers, and participating in household decisions can challenge the belief that unpaid domestic work belongs only to women. Cultural relevance is essential. Gender-sensitive campaigns are more likely to be accepted when they use local languages, familiar family settings, respected community figures, and culturally appropriate storytelling.

Advertising should consistently portray women as capable decision-makers and men as active partners in caregiving and household responsibilities. It should also be supported by regulatory action, community engagement, educational initiatives, and women's participation in the advertising industry. When advertising reflects equality as normal, beneficial, and socially valuable, it can help build a more inclusive South-South Nigerian society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

i. Advertisers should adopt gender-sensitive creative standards. Advertising agencies and brands should avoid portraying women only as domestic workers, beauty objects, or dependent consumers. Campaigns should reflect women's diverse roles as professionals, leaders, entrepreneurs, students, caregivers, and citizens.

ii. Women should be portrayed in leadership positions. Advertisements should deliberately feature women as executives, elected representatives, engineers, doctors, teachers, farmers, security professionals, community leaders, and business owners.

iii. Campaigns should promote girls' education. Government agencies, schools, telecommunications companies, banks, media houses, and civil-society organisations should sponsor advertisements that encourage parents to educate girls and support their career

aspirations.

iv. Men and boys should be included in empowerment messages. Gender equality campaigns should not present women's empowerment as a women-only issue. Men and boys should be shown supporting girls' education, sharing household work, opposing discrimination, and encouraging women's leadership.

v. Advertising regulators should strengthen monitoring. Relevant regulatory bodies should develop and enforce guidelines against sexist, objectifying, discriminatory, and demeaning portrayals of women in advertising.

vi. Local languages and community media should be used. Campaigns should be adapted into languages widely spoken across South-South Nigeria, including pidgin and indigenous languages, in order to reach rural and urban audiences effectively.

vii. Traditional and religious leaders should be engaged. Because community leaders influence social values, advertisers and development organisations should work with them to communicate messages that support dignity, education, shared decision-making, and women's economic participation.

viii. Women should participate in advertising production. More women should be included in copywriting, directing, brand strategy, media planning, research, and executive decision-making in advertising agencies and media organisations.

ix. Campaign impact should be evaluated. Advertisers should conduct pre-test and post-test research to determine whether gender-sensitive campaigns are changing attitudes, knowledge, intentions, and behaviours among target audiences.

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