

A Critical Evaluation of the Portrayal of Zimbabwean Women in Advertisements and its Impact on Shona Culture

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Abstract – Advertisements portray women in various ways worldwide, some of which are positive others are negative. It has been argued that advertising over the past decade has not presented a realistic view of women and their roles in society. Studies have shown that most of the advertisements portray women negatively and that the negative portrayal usually brings about untold sufferings on women. The purpose of this study is to examine the problems faced by women because of negative portrayal in advertisements and how this negative portrayal affects the Shona culture of Zimbabwe. Interviews were used to collect data from final year Shona Diploma in Education students at Mutare Teachers' College. Interviews with lecturers at the college and document analysis on selected advertisements from both the electronic and print media were also used to collect data. The main findings were that women are negatively portrayed in advertisements resulting in women facing social, psychological and economical challenges. The study also reveal that the Shona culture is heading towards extinction as the young generation seems to look down upon it and appear to be ignorant of some of its values. The main recommendation made was that women should be taught to be proud of themselves and to value their culture so they do not lose their identity.

Keywords – Advertising, Beauty, Identity, Unhu/Ubuntu, Gender.

I. OBJECTIVES

Objectives of the study are to:

- Analyse the portrayal of women in advertisements
- Examine the problems faced by women due to negative portrayal in advertisements
- Assess the expectations of the Shona culture on women
- Make suggestions as to what can be done to minimise or eradicate the problems

II. BACKGROUND

Advertising has been used for decades to communicate information about services and products to consumers in a very persuasive way. Women, who frequently feature in most advertisements, are affected as they are negatively depicted in most of the advertisements and they end up facing challenges. According to Sullivan (http://www.crvp.org/book/series-05/v-4/chapter_vi.htm), advertising has gradually become an integral part of the western culture, thus other cultures are affected in the process of advertising. The author further states that as western life and culture are proclaimed, cultural alienation occurs. This westernisation of Zimbabwean women is

against the Zimbabwe cultural vision as enunciated in the National Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe (1996) which is; "To build Zimbabwean culture based on our traditional values, beliefs and contemporary aspects that respect the dignity and creativity of the indigenous people." In view of this, the study seeks to examine the portrayal of women in advertisements and its effect on the Shona culture and also to highlight the challenges faced by women as a result of the way they are portrayed in advertisements.

It has been argued that advertising over the past decade has not presented a realistic view of women and their roles in society. Images in advertising are generally perceived as a depiction of the major cultural norms. As Nassif and Gunter (2008:754) put it, this means that stereotyped images impact on consumers and create social perceptions as to the roles appropriate to the genders. This reinforces the idea that advertising companies have no care about the negative impact of their work on consumers since they are profit driven. Advertising plays an important role in society as it shapes influences people's world views and how they perceive gender relations. This shows that advertising plays a major role in socialisation, as it defines gender roles and stereotypes through the cultural products it disseminates. The continued negative media representation of women in the media has continuously led to their segregation. Studies have shown that women tend to be either under or misrepresented (Courtney and Lokeretz (1971), Dominick and Rauch (1972) and Gilly (1988)).

Various previous research studies have indicated that the sex object is the most frequently depicted female role (Grau *et al.*, 2007:62; Koernig & Granitz, 2006:91; Razzouk *et al.*, 2003:123). Grau *et al.* (2007:63) found out that suggestive and partially nude attire was found in 81 per cent of advertisements featuring female athletes, placing the focus on the sexuality of the female athlete rather than on her athletic skills. Most advertisements portray women as objects or commodities for pleasure. They are reduced to inanimate objects and a usable tool for personal gratification by men. This type of portrayal goes against one of the objectives of Zimbabwe's National Cultural Policy (1996) to; "Promote those social and moral values that Zimbabwe stands for patriotism, freedom, independence, democracy, self reliance and the respect for human dignity." The advertisements do not respect the human dignity of Zimbabwean women because they are portrayed as cheap and usable.

Advertisement on television and the print media have shaped the perception that women have on beauty.

Advertisements have depicted African women as asexual, miserable and unattractive. Most advertisements promote the Eurocentric standard of beauty valuing lighter women with angled thin bodies and rejecting the Africans' darker fat women with round and protruding hips. In Zimbabwe, beauty is not measured by the lightness of one's skin or size of one's body, but it is measured by presentability and one's moral worthiness in the society. It is against this background that women should appreciate that Africans value natural beauty more than artificial beauty. It is unfortunate that advertisements depict a westernised version of beauty without realising that African women have all shapes and sizes and that are still beautiful in their own way.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by the Africana womanism and Unhu/Ubuntu theories. Africana womanism and Ubuntu are Pan African theories of gathering, interpreting and explaining African life. The theory of Africana womanism helps to correct the stereotypical portrayal of women as helpless and hopeless victims of fate foregrounding their agency. The Africana womanism theory was named by Clenara Hudson-Weems in 1987. She says that the theory has always been there but without a name. This theory is based on Afrocentrism and is meant for African women since it originates from the African culture. It seeks to explain the African women's way of life, the challenges they face as women and their desires as women of Africa. According to Weems (2004) in Marquita (2012) the theory examines the conflicts that exist between Africana womanism and Feminism. It came into existence after women realised that Feminism did not address their issues as African women but was favorable to the white women as it was based on their culture. The two theories agree on certain issues pertaining to women in general like gender equity.

Africana womanism appreciates the fact that men and women are biologically different and encourages them to work together as a team. The theory values the family unit hence the African women do not see men as enemies like what happens with feminism. African women see men as partners whom they work together with to support their families and to fight the common enemy i.e. racism. The theory encourages African women to appreciate their role as mothers of the nation and sisters in their societies who support each other in good and bad times. It portrays the African woman as someone who is proud of whom she is, focused, strong and knows her identity. This theory therefore suits the study as it has much to do with the Shona women who are African and their culture. The theory also helped to understand the expectations of the Shona culture on women.

Marquita (2012) sees the media as a major critic of Africana womanism which encourages its criticism worldwide. The study seeks to address some of the issues which are against the values of the Shona people and their

culture. The theory is significant to the study in that it compares the portrayal of women in advertisements with the cultural expectations of the Shona people.

Asante (1998) indicates that since Africana womanism originated from Afrocentrism it can clearly show how African women should be viewed as compared to what has been happening with feminism. Marquita (2012) cites that Africana womanism values natural beauty and strength found in African women, which contradicts with what is portrayed in beauty adverts, for example the Herbex advert shown on SABC which shows how the product can help women to lose weight in a short time. Being slim is associated with being attractive in the modern and big women are not admired at all, that's why there are these products that help to speed up the slimming process. This modern idea of beauty is the exact opposite of the Shona culture's idea of beauty. The Shona culture sees big women as attractive and strong.

Some adverts were seen to be in line with what the Africana womanism theory states. The Parmalat advertisement shows a couple which is worried when their children refuse to eat the food which they put on the table. When the children are given Parmalat they eat everything and the couple shares the joy of being able to feed their children. Thus the idea of working together is being promoted for the good of the family. This also shows that some of the views of the theory are actually acceptable in advertising.

The Unhu/Ubuntu theory which was also used in this study works mainly for the purposes of examining the Shona cultural expectations on women. Unhu among the Shona is usually seen as the part which makes a person an acceptable human being in society. It is part of the Shona culture which contributes to a person's identity and the way of life of the Shona people. Menkiti in Wright (1984) says if a person does not have Unhu he/she ceases to be a normal human being and loses dignity in society. Therefore, women as normal human beings are expected to have Unhu which can be seen in the way they dress and conduct themselves in public and also their families. The way women are portrayed in advertisements, for example as sex objects earns them disrespect from society, thus they are seen as good for nothing human beings. Unhu among the Shona helps build unity, peace and respect. The absence of Unhu in society destroys the woman as it increases violence and other forms of abuse.

The use of the two theories in this study was quite helpful in trying to achieve the objectives of the study. The two theories actually complement each other. These theories help Africans to discover and discuss lived realities and experiences that expose and negate all false ideas about Africans that have been perpetuated by western scholarship. Their aim is to retrieve African dignity, pride, and African identity which, it can be argued, she lost as a result of her contact with the west. This is seconded by Asante (1998:2) who asserts that Africans have lost their cultural centeredness and are now living in borrowed space.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research design was used to carry out the study. The qualitative design was found suitable mainly because of its descriptive nature for the current situation. According to Burns and Groves (1997) in Chiromo (2006) the qualitative research design can be used to describe issues about people's lives. Therefore, the design is suitable for the study as it is focused on issues to do with women and their culture. The qualitative research design was also used to analyse and present data. It was found to be useful as data is easily interpreted and presented in descriptive form.

Interviews and document analysis were used as instruments to investigate and collect data for the study. The use of two instruments ensured validity of data through triangulation. The students who participated were final year students who had gone through literature studies in Shona, therefore they were the appropriate people as they were expected to have mastered the relevant skills for analysing documents, in this case advertisements. Thus their responses were considered to be reliable. Lecturers were also interviewed and document analysis used on selected advertisements. Overall, fifty students, ten lecturers were used as respondents through the use of interviews, and fifty advertisements were also analysed as part of the data collection process.

V. FINDINGS

The data collected by using the two instruments, which are interviews and document analysis brought about the following findings:

A. *Television channels viewed by respondents*

In response to the question which wanted to find out the television channels watched by respondents 90% of them indicated that they watched international channels which meant that they viewed international advertisements. Such adverts are usually not in line with the Shona cultural values thus there is a possibility of cultural erosion. It was also noted that women are more frequently used in advertisements in both electronic and print media than men.

B. *Portrayal of women in advertisements*

The findings revealed that women are portrayed in advertisements as people who are obsessed with beauty, concerned with trivial issues, dull and childish, dependent on men, not knowledgeable especially on technology and are seen as sex objects. Student teachers cited being obsessed with beauty. Lecturers did not support this view and the difference could be associated with the generation gap between the two groups. The students felt that most beauty adverts showed attractive women using advertised products being followed by men and women going out of their way to get such products at all costs.

The students also felt that women are portrayed as sex objects and this view was strongly supported by lecturers who were interviewed. Data collected by using document analysis showed that advertisements portrayed women as sex objects. The lecturers further explained that this view

was seen in advertisements which showed half naked women or were a part of a woman's body, for example legs, was flashed in the advert. They said such an advert was only meant to attract men and in most cases there is no link between the product and the woman used. Louise Lo (2008) also supports that women are portrayed as sex objects in most advertisements.

Women are also portrayed as dull and childish as revealed in the adverts analysed. The lecturers did not support the view as they felt that there are quite a number of advertisements which showed women doing challenging jobs. Salome (2009) states that women are portrayed as people who are rather dull and childish. This negative portrayal of women is against the Zimbabwe National Cultural Policy ethos which calls for an electronic media which creates an atmosphere "...where the electronic media can enhance national consciousness and self-reliance by making programme content relevant to Zimbabwe's history.... ensuring that there is adequate emphasis on locally produced material and the positive portrayal of Zimbabwean artists and cultural workers." (National Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe 1996: 17).

The findings also revealed that women are portrayed in advertisements as people who are interested in trivial issues like shopping. Students supported this view and advertisements analysed portrayed women in the same manner. The lecturers who were interviewed did not support this view and explained that shopping for women is a necessity which cannot be seen as something trivial.

Roberts and Koggan (1979) indicate that advertisers and their agencies are being criticized for the way they depict women in their advertisements. For instance, women are often shown as housewives, stupid or incompetent, dependent on men, decorative or sex objects, passive and not involved in making major decisions. Some local advertisements have proved to depict women in almost the same way. The Eco Cash advertisement on Power FM had a woman who happened to be a vendor and a male customer who wanted to buy from her using Eco Cash. The woman showed that she was ignorant of the new system and the man had to explain to her, the woman shyly pretended to remember. From this advertisement one can deduce that women are incompetent in as far as technology is concerned and that they are the ones doing lowly paying jobs or businesses. However, African women are actually hardworking and always help their husbands to support the family.

An H.I.V./A.I.D.S advertisement on a poster has an adult man with a teenage girl seated on his legs, beneath the picture is a warning statement written, "Refuse to be cheated; the prize of having a sugar daddy is A.I.D.S." From the poster one can see that it is easier to convince a woman to stop a bad behavior than a man. The adult man, who is old enough to be the girl's father is not reprimanded at all, it is the girl who is warned of the dangers of having a sugar daddy. Depicting women like this may mean that they are weak and cannot make wise decisions hence the need to warn them always. In this case women appear to be vulnerable and lack confidence in what they do. This negative portrayal goes against

Zimbabwe's constitutional requirements on gender which is for the State to "...take reasonable measures, including legislative measures, to ensure that both genders are equally represented in all institutions and agencies of the State and government..." Africana womanism as explained by Weems (1998) shows African women as intelligent and very strong contrary to what many advertisements depict.

Bhargava (2009) at <http://www.countercurrents.org/bhargava06070.htm> cites that advertising generally shows that a woman's goal in life is to attract and attain a man since women are always shown as young and attractive in advertisements. The Pond's Age Miracle advertisement shown on SABC shows a young lady who looks ten years younger after using the product and is forever beautiful as her man says. This gives the impression that getting old is unacceptable as one ceases to be attractive and misses the so called goal in life. Viewing life like this brings untold sufferings to the woman as she has to do everything possible to stay young and attractive. Failure to do so may lead to low self esteem and disrespect from members of society as stated by Bhargava (2009). Some societies in Zimbabwe have been known to associate old people with witchcraft contrary to how the old are viewed in the Shona culture which sees them as sources of wisdom.

Critics of advertising often complain that advertisers make use of beautiful women to attract attention from male consumers even if the women's bodies have nothing to do with the products as cited on <http://soultrout.blogspot.com/2006/02/portrayal-of-women-in-advert.html>. According to this document such advertisements portray women as dull and interested in unimportant things. The Zando.com advertisement shown on SABC shows women as obsessed with fashion to such an extent that they leave men in their lives broke, so men are warned to ensure that women do not know about Zando.com. This way of portraying women sends the message that women are dependent on men and wasteful whereas Africana womanism sees women as hardworking and willing to assist their men in supporting the family.

Various drinks have been advertised on television using attractive and half naked women, for example, the LiquiFruit advertisement shown on SABC has a young lady in bikinis taking the drink. Sprite Zero drink advert also has a lady in underwear only, going out with her man who is shocked when she gets into the car with a Sprite Zero can in her hand. Appearing in public naked is taboo among the Shona people. If a woman walks around half naked she is seen as a prostitute and is treated with disrespect in society. Such adverts are offensive to some cultures and may make viewing television with family very uncomfortable. This also may send wrong messages to society and could explain why women are sometimes disrespected. This is also against the Zimbabwe National Cultural Policy values on dressing which call for Zimbabweans to "...dress in a decent manner that is accepted by our value system." (National Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe 1996: 14).

An analysis of the selected advertisements showed that there are problems associated with the way women are

portrayed in adverts. Women end up with serious psychological problems like depression as they fail to achieve the state of attractiveness shown in adverts. They also end up spending lots of money buying the advertised products which fail to produce the desired results. Socially they end up being outcasts as whatever they might be intending to get might not be acceptable in their societies.

C. Effects of negative portrayal of women in advertisements on society

The following problems were cited by respondents:

- Being looked down upon in society
- Domestic violence
- Divorce
- Being raped
- Prostitution and low self esteem

Respondents cited being looked down upon as a problem which women face as a result of negative portrayal in advertisements. This was supported by respondents who felt that as long as women are portrayed as sex objects they will continue to be disrespected in society. Showing half naked women in advertisements is degrading and being naked in public is totally unacceptable in the Shona culture.

It also emerged that domestic violence and divorce are some of the problems being faced by women. According to the respondents, these problems are a result of continually showing naked women which earns women disrespect in society as well as in family. Greening (2005) cites that some advertisements which overemphasise the importance of beauty in a woman's life may lead to sexual problems as women may continue to be affected psychologically and view themselves as unattractive, and this may lead to domestic violence due to misunderstandings in as far as sexual issues are concerned.

Respondents also cited prostitution as a problem which might emerge as a result of low self esteem hence the women end up giving up on life as they feel useless in families as well as in society. According to Thurm (2001) women who are not satisfied by their physical appearance end up being depressed and lose hope of ever achieving anything in life.

Women aspire to look like the models something, which is impossible since computer programs have retouched these models in order to create the 'ideal' and 'perfect' This beauty industry actively builds an ideal beauty, which is impossible to reach. Women need to understand that all of our imperfections are unique, and we all need to embrace that. With every detail of ourselves that we have, whether we like it or not it defines who we are, the battles we've fought, and all the complications in life that we've overcome. Women of average or normal appearance feeling inadequate or less beautiful in comparison to the overwhelming use of extraordinarily attractive women. Women come up with the theory of "how we look" and what is the ideal female beauty is. Most models in magazines are extremely photo shopped and women feel pressured to measure up to these unrealistic images of women. Unrealistic expectations by men of how women should look or behave. this idealistic representation of women has any sort of

repercussion, influence or effect on our society. In my opinion this 'idealistic' and 'perfect' representation of women in the media only reveals them as objects to be observed but not valued.

D. Effect of negative portrayal of women in advertisements on the Shona culture

Gender roles in the media are authenticated through regular exposures and then adopted by the public as the norm. Such gender discrepancies are then accepted as societal norms through consumer socialization. Consumers are exposed to a wide variety of advertising in different media every day, and from these exposures, certain thinking patterns evolve. Murray, Rubinstein and Comstock (in Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente 2007: 691) emphasise the fact that television commercials are major consumer socialisation agents.

Respondents agreed that the negative portrayal of women in advertisements has a negative effect on the Shona culture and they cited the following:

- Cultural erosion
- Cultural alienation
- Disrespect of women in society as they are seen as lacking unhu

E. Recommendations

The following are the possible solutions from the findings:

- Advertisers should change the way they portray women in their advertisements and this can only happen if the concerned parties engage in talks
- Teaching women through workshops so that they are fully aware of their rights and the importance of valuing themselves
- Advertisers should portray men and women in exactly the same way so that no one is disrespected
- Women should be encouraged to make wise decisions by choosing to feature in advertisements that do not portray them negatively
- Society should be encouraged to respect women as mothers and sisters

It is therefore imperative for African women to develop and circulate affirming images of themselves and to construct an Afrocentric feminist aesthetic of beauty. African beauty should be all encompassing and should not degrade the African culture and heritage. It is also important to redefine black beauty so that people understand that it is not only appreciated when it is associated with light skinned women. After all women's beauty is not solely based on physical appearances but that the mind, spirit and body should be viewed as entities that help make the whole. In fact all these factors are central in aesthetic assessments of individuals. Such concepts will assist to transform the perceptions, self-esteem and self-concepts of the next generations of African women and men. African women are beautiful and trying to physically change complexion is a contradiction to the norm.

Ads for health and beauty products should appeal to a woman's sense of well being for her own sake not to enhance her status as a sex object. These products should be shown helping the woman to achieve objectives that are

central in her perception of her role. A more realistic approach is to call for more accurate representations or rather more positive stereotypes. Media laws should be tightened in order to promote ethical advertisements.

- The use of nude women or half dressed women should be totally prohibited (banned).
- Companies whose products or services are being advertised can be banned or fined heavily for lack of respect of African identity.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study has examined the way women are portrayed in advertisements, the problems it causes and the impact it has on the Shona culture. The findings have shown that women are portrayed negatively in advertisements and this causes various problems among women socially, psychologically and economically. It was also noted that the negative portrayal of women in advertisements affects the Shona culture negatively as it is faced with extinction. It would seem that a more realistic portrayal of women in advertising is not only desirable but fundamental. One can only conclude that there is a gross discrepancy between media initiatives and policy towards gender equality and what is actually being portrayed in the media. If the media is to change in its portrayal of women by projecting positive images of them in media productions it would ultimately lead to improved gender relations in society.

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