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MEDIA PREJUDICE AGAINST WOMEN: IMPACT ON GENDER NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The study examines media violence against women and their impact on the construction of gender role and narrative in the society. In doing so, it employed the content analysis research method in analyzing media violence and how it affects women's position in the society. The study argues that violence against women seems to be a growing phenomenon despite the fact that international treaties acknowledges women's rights as human rights, and prohibit all forms of gender based violence and discrimination. Observably, the media has been promoting advisement campaigns that objectify women and present them as a mere object of sexual fantasy and gratification. This notion has kept women in disadvantaged position in the society, given that women are often perceived and treated in the same way the media portrays them. The article contend that incessant exposure to media advertisement campaigns with images that apparently cause indignity to women, has manipulated the society into accepting media violence against women as a norm. Today the images of women's bodies are used to promote virtually every product in the market, while the members of the society accept such debauched trend without objection. Consequently, the society as a whole including women themselves has unwittingly become an accomplice to gender marginalization and subjugation. In light of the impact of this unhealthy phenomenon on societal behavior and interpersonal relationship and coexistence, the study suggest that an immediate positive actions should be taken to palliate this unfair situation and thus facilitate a more tolerant and respectful society.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is as old as mankind and date back to the biblical story of creation, where the first woman (Eve) was portrayed as disobedient, deceiver and untrustworthy and thus set the platform for the relegation of women. Since then until present, women are portrayed as subordinate to men and whose main essence is to sexually satisfy men. The media unarguably holds a preponderant role in shaping public perception and values in our contemporary world; however, some of their activities seemingly contradict mainstream effort towards women empowerment and gender equality. Notably, the media has consistently promoted seductive advertising campaigns with degrading images of women, without regards to the wider impact of their action on gender-role classification in the society.

To say that women are target of advertisement violence is an understatement rather advertising campaigns have persistently denote women as a mere object of gratification, and this has a detrimental effect on the general perception of women in our societies. The way women are presented and portrayed as sex objects in ad campaigns is evidently disingenuous to peaceful coexistence, because it fosters unhealthy interpersonal relationships among sexes. Worryingly, advertising companies are left to barrage our public space with derogatory images and slogans that reinforce gender violence and gender inequality. Observably, the images of women's body is now used to sell virtually every product in the global market, ranging from toothpaste, chewing gum, jeans, body-spray, cigarette, table-water, roofing sheets, light-bulbs and even tooth-pick.

This raises the question: why are women target of media/advertisement violence? Though one may argue that the exposure to a particular form of popular culture will not necessarily sway a specific behavioral reaction in individuals, however evidence shows that the prevalence of misogynic ads in our society does impact our psychological understandings of gender and sexuality. This article therefore, argues that advertisement has become an unchecked channel that reinforces sexual violence against women and gender inequality.

TREATIES PROTECTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

As a response to asymmetry gender roles and multiple layers of incapacitations it present to women, in 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) or the Treaty for the Rights of Women, as an international bill of rights for women. In its preamble, CEDAW recognizes the fact that broad discrimination against women continues to exist in our societies and as a result, they pose obstacles and challenges to women in terms of equal opportunities and participation on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life. It also suggests the need for a revamp of the conventional gender (men and women) role, in order to achieve gender equality. The treaty apparently introduced the concept of equality for women and outlines an international standard for the protection and promotion of women's human rights. It embraces all aspects of women's lives, political, economic, educational, health, family and marriage. Although CEDAW did not explicitly mention violence against women and girls, however, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights addressed violence against women as a human rights violation. It defined violence against women as: "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (WHO, 2016). In light of the above, women empowerment and elimination of all forms of discrimination (and violence) against women should be addressed wholesomely, which include the media and ad campaigns promoted in our societies.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the content analysis research method. The reason for adopting this method is primarily because the study is a qualitative research that relied heavily on documentary evidence in data collection. Therefore, the content analysis approach and secondary sources of data became imperative.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study employs the social learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory argues that learning is a function of observation and often influenced by factors present within our environment. It suggests that in most cases, learning occur subconsciously. That is to say that learning takes place without the intention to learn and even without the learner's awareness that learning has taken place. Thus, social learning theory believes that a person and his/her environment do not function as independent units but instead they simultaneously depend on each other. Bandura (1977), notes that the simultaneous relationship between a person and his/ her environment facilitates learning deliberately and inadvertently,

through the influence of examples. That is to say that, the exposure to misogynic messages and contexts over time, could influence the acceptance of violence against women in our societies as a norm. The symbolic messages presented by visual media, such as advertisement campaigns are believed to be an influential source of social learning. Available empirical evidence suggests that humans in general acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new ways of behavior/conduct through the mass media. Thus, the media plays an important role in shaping behavior and social attitudes (Bandura 1973). Accordingly, when advertisement campaigns depicting misogynic messages and/or violent sexist behavior are shown on television, billboards, magazines and other media platforms, these values are inherently and subconsciously adopted by audiences under certain circumstances, and then exhibited in their personal relationship and interaction with other people. Besides, the habitual exposure to violent media influences viewer's perception of aggression and violence against women to the extent that they may be considered as a behavioral standard. Allen et al. (1995), argues that programs that contain sexualized violence against women, where men are treated with sexual arousal and gratification may create a model to imitate. In essence sexualized media campaigns may influence the audience into replicating the context presented in them, thus facilitating sexual harassment and rape culture. This is because images and messages depicted in the media are not often assimilated solely in the context and perception in which they are presented; rather the audience tends to expand their meaning by adding their own cultural visions, narratives and understanding.

When an audience is exposed to a certain message, they tend to recreate the message over time as they are continuously exposed to it. This happens because a person tends to deduce a different meaning from a particular message when he/she is exposed to it over a period of time. In that case, the audience becomes an active participant in processing the message rather than being a passive recipient/ absorbent of the message. According to Beard (2001: 4), if the audience assumes an active role in creating new meanings, it implies that the image/text does not convey just one meaning and its supposed meaning is not permanent. Thus, the ways in which images/texts are interpreted depends on what the producers have input into the image when they were created, as well as how the audience understand and assimilate the message. Accordingly, Capella et al. (2010) concluded that exposure to sexually violent/ misogynic ads, makes men to become passive and susceptible to accepting interpersonal violence towards the opposite sex.

In some cases, they develop more aggressive thoughts, and found the most violent ads the most appealing. Conclusively, people in general accept and assimilate what they perceive to be acceptable in the society. Given the fact that misogynic advertisements are incessantly promoted in our societies, they are now perceived as a norm and part of daily life. The challenge associated with such unhealthy phenomenon is that oftentimes women are seen and treated in the same awkward way they are portrayed in media ad campaigns. Consequently, it threatens women empowerment, whilst reinforcing gender based violence and the construction of the society into binary opposition between the men and the women, where men occupy a privileged position while women are treated as subordinate.

THE NOTION OF CONSENT AND PAYMENT

Women in general have suffered marginalization, discrimination and other forms of gender based violence. This situation led the United Nations to declare women's rights as human rights, so as to strengthen the position of women in the society and also in their individual relationships. However, it is unfortunate that the media through provocative advertisement campaigns is promoting misogyny in one hand and misrepresentation of women as object of sexual gratification on the other hand. Apparently, keeping silent to this profane phenomenon makes the society as whole an accomplice. Observably, women are often used for advertisement campaign; however their mental capability is always neglected, while their physical characteristics are given priority. Unfortunately, the society turns a blind eye, while the dignity of women is advertently compromised. The issue of violence against women seems to focus solely on physical violence, the aspect that inflicts bodily injury on women. This is because violence against women is depicted in different formats and through different channels in our societies on daily basis, yet we ignore them and do nothing to stop their spread. For example, what is the use of a naked picture of a woman on the billboard or flyer of a company manufacturing beer or roofing sheets? Evidently, the media has undignified women's body, portray them as subordinate to men and as a sexual object for gratification.

Obviously, one may argue that women give their consent to these ads and in most cases they are paid. On one hand, it is suggested that women offering their body image are doing so to make money, which they use to take care of their needs. On the other hand, it is perceived as a possible way to rise to stardom, for women that want to become photo model. Given the merits of the above argument, the issue of concern is that the media fosters mindsets that accept violence against women and therefore permit it to flourish in our society. The incessant exposure to sexualized images influences the society to accept them as normal. Consequently, women have been cheapened to the point that any advertisement that is not embellished with the image of a woman is considered as not appealing to the audience or target group. Accepted that people should decide what to do with their bodies, however, it is important that the society defines acceptable standards that will foster peaceful coexistence among its members. The continuous bombardment of our public space with erotic images will only shape mindset that accepts and imitates such standard as a norm and thus create a perpetual circle of violence against women. According to Reichert et al. (2001), sexual information transmitted in advertising campaigns attracts attention and influences sexual stimulus rather than attraction to the brand being promoted. Besides, there is no empirical evidence suggesting that promoting a product with sexiest images that demean women's position and role in the society spurs customer's interest in a product. Instead, such campaigns results to calumny against women and therefore reinforce patriarchal dominance.

MEDIA CULPABILITY

Advertising as a concept originated from the Latin word "advertere", which implies to solicit attention. However, its meaning has evolved over the years. As reported by Yin (2004) between 1300 and 1475, the meaning of advertising was to influence people's attention to something and later its

meaning changed from attention seeking to informing people of a particular issue, which could be about a product or other issues. It was not until the end of the 17th century that the word "advertising" became popular after its meaning became to spread commercial information. In contemporary societies advertisement is a common phenomenon that has different meaning to different people. It is perceived as a business, an art, an institution, and a cultural phenomenon. The American Marketing Association defined advertising as any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor (Reid and Bojanic, 2010; Padhy, 2011: 23; Tyagi and Kumar, 2004: 3). Amita Shankar defined it "as all the activities involved in presenting to the target market, an oral or a visual, non-personal, openly sponsored, paid messages related to a product, idea or a service. Advertising messages are conveyed, disseminated or spread through the use of magazine and newspaper space, motion pictures, television, video, direct mail, store signs, hand bills etc" (Kaptan, 2002: 8). A major characteristic of advertising is that it places emphasis on product quality and distinguishes a particular product from its competitors. Worrisomely, advertisement is gradually shifting from depicting product quality to portraying images of sexualized violence for the purpose of product marketing, at the expense of women.

Sexualized violence is anything that disrespects one's sexual being. It could be by demeaning, hurting and damaging one's sense of self and leads to feelings of shame, embarrassment and anger. It is about abuse of power, overwhelmingly committed against girls and women but also against people of other genders (Basile and Saltzman 2009). The depiction of women in such a manner as shown in images A and B above reinforces sexual objectification. By definition, sexual objectification is the prioritization of a woman's body or body parts, in a way that sways the society to view them primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire (Bartky, 1990). The problem associated with it is that it reinforces sexual aggression against women. Whereby, the society, particularly youths perceive women as people whose ultimate goal is to create sexual fantasies and seduce the opposite sex. Another problem is that it leads to self-objectification. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) asserts that objectification of woman has resulted in women themselves internalizing the physical appearance narrative by treating themselves as an object to be evaluated and appreciated on the basis of appearance. In that case, women places greater emphasis on their appearance attributes rather than competence-based attributes. Evidently, women are manipulated to rely on their appearance rather than their mental and other capabilities. Accordingly, women are trapped in a circle of perpetual subjugation and patriarchal domination. Furthermore, objectification of women reinforces rape myth - the cultural assumption that women enjoy sexual assault despite their protests to the contrary and therefore share some of the blame in their attack (Boddewyn and Kunz 1991). The mythic connection is often used to justify violation of women, by implying that a phenomenon such as rape occurs due to tacit agreement by the victim. Whatever be the case, the fact is that media violence against women is fostering negative vibes and interpersonal relationship among sexes.

Conclusion

The study focuses on sexual violence perpetrated in media advertisement campaigns and directed towards women.

It has shown that the media is shaping masculine mentality in our society by promoting derogatory advertisement campaigns that prioritize the physical aspects of women in lieu of their other capabilities. Accordingly, violence and disrespect against women have become a source of fun and a strategy to promote and market goods and services, even though there is no empirical evidence suggesting that using sexualized images influences product preference. Even if in the future, contrary evidence shows that sexualized ads induces or boost product sales, it will still be unfair to use public cost to balance private gain. Therefore, the society should take positive steps and put an end to sexualized ads and the objectification of women. To achieve a gender free society, encourage women empowerment and eliminate discrimination and violence against women, the present media landscape need to be altered and all forms of ads that demean women should be utterly prohibited. The goal of media advertisement campaigns should be to provide socially appropriate role models that encourage healthy behaviors and at the same time increase positive responses to product offerings.

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