

GENDER STEREOTYPING AND REPRESENTATION OF NIGERIAN WOMEN IN ADVERTISING: AN ANALYSIS OF *HAWAII SOAP* COMMERCIAL.

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Abstract

Soap advertising in Nigeria occupies a unique place in the country's gender and beauty economy, selling not only soap cleanliness feature but also complexion, desirability, and social value, and reflecting stereotypes. This study critically examines gender stereotyping and the representation of Nigerian women in Hawaii Soap commercial. Anchored on Hall 1997's Representation Theory, Mulvey 1975; Tuchman et al, 1978; and Zoonen, 1994's Feminist Media Theory, and Fredrickson & Roberts's 1997 Objectification Theory. The study adopts a qualitative content analysis methodology to investigate how visual imagery, language, body presentation, costume, facial expression, camera framing, symbolism, and advertising narratives construct female identities, body display, voice authority, and complexion framing. Findings divulge that Hawaii Soap commercial actively construct particular meanings of femininity, by focusing on beauty, and attractiveness as central to women's identities, affirming Hall's (1997) view that media representations construct rather than merely reflect reality. The study concludes that advertising as a subset of mass media shapes not only product consumption but also cultural values, identities, and biases surrounding gender, race, class, and beauty. Consequently, the study recommends that relevant regulatory bodies or agencies such as the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) should undertake a review of their existing classification rules for televised advertisements and ensure exclusion of sexually suggestive imageries.

Keywords: Gender, Stereotyping, Advertising, Hawaii Soap, Nigerian Women.

Introduction

Advertisement is a prevalent subcategory of mass media, appearing across platforms such as print media, television, radio, billboards, and social media. Further than promoting products and services, advertisement plays roles in cultural values, social norms, identities, and aspirations that shape public perceptions such as gender, race, class, and beauty. Through constructed visual and verbal messages, advertising influences not only consumers' purchasing decisions but also perceptions of what are considered socially acceptable, and attractive. Accordingly, advertising functions as a cultural establishment that actively participates in constructing social realities rather than merely reflecting them (Iyer&Dani 2025; Gupta & Arora, 2023; Gill, 2007).

Because advertisements are short, visually dense, and designed for maximum persuasive efficiency, they rely heavily on artistically recognisable methods to communicate meaning quickly. This reliance makes advertising a remarkably revealing site for the study of gender ideology. Advertising usually promotes media construct that its audience members identify and accept about who a woman is, what she desires, and what she lacks. These tell us a great deal about the broader cultural common sense that advertisement is drawing upon and, in turn, reinforcing Hall's study on cultural representations and practices (Hall 1997).

Toiletry advertising occupies a particularly stimulating position within this background because it markets products applied directly to the body and explicitly tied to appearance, cleanliness, and beauty. Hawaii Soap is produced by Evans Industry and marketed for years to Nigerian consumers. The product is associated with claims of natural ingredients and variants such as carrot, papaya, calamansi and gold, aside engaging celebrities as brand ambassadors from Nigerian celebrities; Big Brother Naija ex-housemates - Mercy Eke and Venita Akpofure, as well as model/actress Sophie Alakija. This positions Hawaii Soap commercial as a rich text for examining how Nigerian soap commercials construct gender norms, and potentially constrains the image of the Nigerian woman, thus reinforcing Khan et al, (2018) studies regarding reproduction of gender hierarchies through television soaps commercials.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Gender Stereotyping in Advertising

Gender stereotyping refers to the practice through which individuals are assigned fixed characteristics, behaviours, abilities, or social roles based primarily on their gender. These stereotypes often simplify complex human identities by associating women with qualities such as emotionality, beauty, dependence, caregiving, and domesticity, while associating men with authority, independence, rationality, and leadership (Wood, 2015). Within media studies, gender stereotypes are understood as socially constructed meanings that are reproduced through cultural institutions, including families, schools, religion, entertainment industries, and advertisement. Advertisement plays significant and believable roles because it combines persuasive communication with powerful visual symbolism. Through repeated portrayals, advertisements can normalize particular expectations regarding how women should look, behave, and relate to society (Gill, 2007).

Advertisement has frequently positioned women within restricted roles. Women have regularly appeared as mothers, wives, homemakers, romantic partners, or objects of male gaze, whereas men have been represented as active decision-makers, professionals, and authority figures (Tuchman et al, 1978). Although contemporary advertising has expanded women's visibility beyond traditional domestic roles, research indicates that stereotypical patterns continue to exist, particularly within beauty and fashion industries. The persistence of gender stereotypes in advertising is closely linked to monetary objectives. Advertisers often rely on familiar cultural assumptions because stereotypes sensationally provide easily recognizable symbols that can rapidly communicate messages to audiences (Gupta & Arora 2023; Kniazian 2014).

Consequently, representations that emphasize youthfulness, attractiveness, submissiveness, or sexual appeal may continue because they are perceived as effective marketing strategies. However, contemporary advertising also reflects changing social expectations. Increasing attention to gender equality, feminism, and consumers' activism have encouraged brands to present women as independent, confident, and empowered. This development has produced feminist philosophy and empowerment narratives that are incorporated into commercial advertising while maintaining traditional beauty expectations; these affirm McRobbie, 2009 stand on feminism, and reinforcing Azogu 2026 take on women's representation that continues to be shaped by entrenched gender biases and objectification (McRobbie, 2009; Azogu 2026).

Therefore, gender stereotyping in advertising should not be understood as a simple opposition between negative and positive representations. Instead, advertising often contains contradictory messages in which women may appear empowered while simultaneously being evaluated according to narrow standards of physical attraction (Wolin 2003).

Gender Stereotyping in Advertisement

Advertising studies have, for several years, acknowledged a persistent pattern in which women are portrayed in narrower, more appearance-centred, and passive terms than men in televised advertisements (Dai et al 2025). Accordingly, advertisements in Nigeria may remain subjected to stereotyped portrayals that hinder the development of confident female role models for younger viewers. Within Nigerian television content specifically, women have been found to occupy far more passive or submissive roles than men, with their bodies objectified (Ezeah&Ifebunandu2025). Cross-national reviews summarised in South Africa's advertising literature note that even where women are shown in professional roles, they are frequently- framed negatively rather than as models of achievement (Mavimbela & Radebe-Nkosi, (2025).

Objectified and Silent: Women in Product Advertisement

Advertisements/commercials for products marketed to Nigerian audiences explicitly including Hawaii Soap alongside brands such as Joy Soap, Siri Soap, Lux Soap, Eva Soap, Delta Soap, Nivea body lotion, and Vivon body lotion products have featured women in objectified and silent roles in their advertisements. Nigerian advertising continues to be filtered through Western-derived visual lens in which women are represented as decorative objects. This study is among the few in the Nigerian literature to treat Hawaii Soap commercials as an object of direct analytic interest, and its outcome that female-targeted product advertising in Nigeria remains disproportionately organised around visual presentation rather than voice provides a direct empirical anchor for gender stereotypes in advertising, this echoing Heathy and Kniazian studies (Heathy 2020; Kniazian 2014).

Femininity roles in advertising that involve household and personal-care products, including soap brands advertising diminish women's roles. Ezeah&Ifebunandu (2025) studies found that even when women were not explicitly cast as being subordinate to men, the advertising nonetheless objectified them by portraying women as wives and mothers rather than as professionals, reflecting youthful physical appearance and associating the product primarily with beauty.

Ezeah & Ifebunandu 2025 maintain that:

Over the years, the portrayal of women in advertisements has been a subject of criticism, as commercial images often reflect and reinforce traditional gender roles. Women are frequently depicted in secondary or submissive roles, perpetuating patriarchal attitudes and unrealistic standards of beauty (p. 190).

The above assertion of Ezeah and Ifebunandu are in consonant with Moradi and Huang studies that echo the stereotyping of women in advertising within conventional gender ideologies and normalise patriarchal constructions of femininity by placing women in submissive and subordinate roles (Moradi& Huang, 2018). Subsequently, these outcomes are impacting on women, reflecting the influence of television advertisements on women's self-confidence (Jennings-Walstedt et al,1980). Thus, affirming Dai et al studies on the effect of advertising on women(Dai et al 2025). These patterned features of women's beauty, and attractiveness justification are directly relevant to the

present study's analysis of how Hawaii Soap commercial emphasize gender stereotyping, by framing women in beauty, attractiveness, complexion and skin glow capacities.

Gap in the Literature

While studies on Nigerian advertisements have firmly established that gender stereotyping is pervasive in Nigerian commercials/advertisements generally, no existing study has undertaken a sustained, single-brand critical analysis such as Hawaii Soap commercial. This study addresses that gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks: Representation Theory, Feminist Media Theory, and Objectification Theory. Together, these theories provide comprehensive frameworks for examining how Hawaii Soap commercial construct meanings about Nigerian women, femininity, beauty, and gender identity.

Representation Theory

Representation Theory, associated with Stuart Hall (1997), provides the primary theoretical footing for this study. Hall argues that representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active process through which meanings are produced, negotiated, and circulated within society. Media texts, including advertisements, do not simply show the world as it exists; rather, they select, organize, and construct particular versions of reality. According to Hall (1997), meaning is produced through systems of representation comprising language, images, symbols, and cultural practices. Advertising therefore, functions as a cultural system that communicates ideas about identity, social roles, and values. The images used in advertisements are not neutral; they potentially carry ideological meanings that influence how audiences understand gender, beauty, and social expectations.

Heathy (2020) further explains that representation is connected to gender stereotypes in advertising, and to power because dominant groups often influence which meanings become normalized within society. In advertisement, repeated portrayals of women as beautiful, youthful, and physically desirable may contribute to dominant understandings of femininity. Therefore, examining representation involves analyzing not only what is shown but also the cultural assumptions embedded within those portrayals.

Applied to Hawaii Soap commercial, representation theory allows this study to examine how Nigerian women are constructed through visual and symbolic elements such as appearance, body presentation, facial expressions, clothing, settings, and advertising narratives. The theory in this study divulges femininity, identities, Nigerian women's bodies and appearances connected to ideas of attractiveness.

Feminist Media Theory

Feminist media theory treats media representation, including advertising, as an active site in which patriarchal gender ideology is constructed. Feminist Media Theory provides a significant theoretical foundation for this study. Developed and advanced by prominent feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Van Zoonen, and Gaye Tuchman. Feminist media theory examines how communication systems reproduce, challenge, or transform gender inequalities. The central concern of feminist media analysis is the relationship between media representation and social power (Steiner 2014).

Early feminist media scholars argued that women have historically been misinterpreted, underrepresented or misrepresented in the media. When women appear in media texts, they are often positioned according to patriarchal expectations that emphasize male gaze, beauty, sexuality, dependence, domestic roles, and their symbolic exclusion (Mulvey 1975; Tuchman et al, 1978; Zoonen, 1994). Feminist studies challenge these patterns.

Within advertising, feminist analysis focuses on how women's bodies are frequently used for commercial purposes. Beauty advertisements construct women as consumers responsible for achieving socially desirable appearances. Such representations can create pressure for women to continuously modify their bodies in accordance with commercial beauty ideals. However, contemporary feminist media studies recognize that representations are not always straightforwardly oppressive. Some advertisements present women as confident, successful, and independent. The critical question is whether such portrayals genuinely expand women's identities or whether empowerment is used as a marketing strategy while maintaining traditional beauty expectations (Gill, 2016; Gill, 2007; Wolin 2003).

This perspective is particularly relevant to Hawaii Soap commercial because the advertisement may simultaneously promote female confidence and reinforce appearance-based definitions of femininity, and invariably stereotyping and fragmenting women. Feminist media theory therefore enables an examination between empowerment and commercialization.

Objectification Theory

Objectification theory, developed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) illuminates how women may be reduced to their physical appearance rather than recognized as individuals with multiple identities and capabilities. The theory argues that women in societies where their bodies are frequently observed, evaluated, and commodified may experience objectification through external representations. Advertising contribute to this process by emphasizing women's physical characteristics and presenting their bodies as objects of aesthetic evaluation. Objectification in advertising may occur through: camera extreme close-up focus on body parts; highlighting physical attractiveness, erotic/sexualized body positioning, exclusion or limited representation of personal achievements, inference between beauty and social success. Beauty emphases are particularly relevant to objectification analysis because they frequently communicate messages that appearance determines confidence, acceptance, and value (Fredrickson & Roberts; 1997).

In examining Hawaii Soap commercial, objectification theory helps determine whether Nigerian women are represented as multidimensional individuals or primarily as visual symbols used to promote consumers' products and objectification.

Methodology

Qualitative content analysis was employed to examine Hawaii Soap commercial video. Content analysis is a systematic research method used to analyze communication materials, including texts, images, audio, and video. It enables researchers to detect patterns, quantify frequencies, and draw objective inferences about broader meanings, themes, and trends embedded within the data (Krippendorff, 2019; Schreier 2012). Coded observations were organised into matrix (Table 1 - 2,) and analysed qualitatively, with focus on patterns across the sampled commercial (Hawaii Soap). Thus, revealing variance associated with endorsers, format of the commercial presentation and illustrative descriptive detail drawn from specific scenes to substantiate each coded pattern.

The advertisement was reviewed multiple times by the researcher, with each of the data coded qualitatively at the level of advertisement's dominant pattern, consistent with qualitative content analysis tradition within advertising analysis.

Data Presentation and Discussion

An analytical outline is developed, informed by interpretation of figures by tables. Figure 1 interpreted through table 1, and figure 2 through table 2. The three endorsed brand ambassadors are analyzed, each having a column in the table according as they appear on each (picture) figure, from left to right; reflecting their depictive roles/features in the columns of each table and their representational portrayal on women.

Figure 1.



Plate 1 above is from advertisement video of ‘Hawaii Soap’

Table 1. Interpretation of Plate 1

S/N	Format	Brand Ambassador	Scenery	Key Take Away
1	Television Advertisement	Sophie Alakija	Waterfall	Bright, Fresh skin
2	Television Advertisement	Mercy Eke	Waterfall	Glowing, radiant skin
3	Television Advertisement	VenitaAkpofure	Waterfall	Natural, soft skin

Source: Field Work, 2026.

- i. Sophie Alakija – a model, and established actress, endorsed as Hawaii Soap brand ambassador featured in television advertisement video of Hawaii Soap. Having Waterfall scene as the scenery. She is depicted as having bright and fresh skin owing to her using Hawaii Soap. This supports the persuasiveness nature of advertisement, and in conformity with Oparaugo, et al, 2020 studies.
- ii. Mercy Eke, a former housemate and the eventual winner of *Big Brother Naija* Season 4 (2019), functions as a brand ambassador for Hawaii Soap. In the television advertisement, she is featured in a waterfall setting that provides a natural and aesthetically appealing backdrop. The advertisement portrays her as possessing glowing, radiant, and healthy-looking skin, thereby reinforcing the brand's message of beauty, freshness, and effective skincare.
- iii. VenitaAkporfure, an ex-*Big Brother Naija* season 4 (2019) housemate, serves as a brand ambassador of Hawaii Soap and is featured in the brand's (Hawaii Soap) television advertisement. The commercial is set against a waterfall backdrop, creating a natural and visually appealing environment. Within the advertisement, she is portrayed as having naturally soft, smooth, and healthy-looking skin; a representation intended to emphasize the perceived skincare benefits and beauty-enhancing qualities associated with the use of Hawaii Soap.



Plate 2 above is from advertisement video of ‘Hawaii Soap’

Table 2. Interpretation of Plate 2.

S/N	Placement	Representation	Body/Face Display	Scenery	Complexion Framing	Expression
1	Women centered for male gaze	Objectification	Alluring and drawing attention	waterfall	Natural Silky skin	Female Voice-over narrator
2	Women in a pornographic scene	Suggestive	Provocatively enticing	waterfall	Glowing skin	Female Voice-over narrator

3	Women in erotic scenery	Amorous	Seductive glances	waterfall	Bright skin	Female Voice-over narrator
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Source: Field Work, 2026.

Across the three brand ambassadors used in Hawaii Soap commercial are features depicting male gaze, pornographic, and erotic scenes placement as shown in figure 2. The advertisement employs nudity as a persuasive device, wherein the exposure of women's bodies is deployed to evoke sexual stimulation in viewers; commonly referred to as sex appeal. A method in which erotic or suggestive imagery is used to capture audiences' attention and elicit an emotional or physiological response that is subsequently associated with the advertised product or brand's intent for higher patronage of the product.

Their representation reflects elements of objectification, characterized by suggestive and amorous depictions that front physical appearance and reinforce sexualized portrayals. The endorsers' bodily and facial presentations in the advertisement are constructed to be visually alluring and attention-commanding. Their postures and expressions are provocatively enticing, while their gazes often directed intently at the camera suggest a seductive feature intended to engage and hold the viewer's attention. This mode of visual presentation is consistent with what media scholars describe as "the gaze" in advertising imagery which is in consistency with Mulvey, 1975 postulation, wherein the endorsers' bodies and expression are composed to invite visual pleasure and sustained viewers' engagement, thereby reinforcing the persuasive and attention-capturing objectives of advertisement.

The advertisement's setting is constructed around a waterfall backdrop, a natural landscape chosen to evoke nature at its most primeval and untouched state. This scenic choice functions symbolically, associating the product with qualities such as purity, freshness, and vitality, while visually reinforcing the advertisement's broader claims regarding skin luminous and natural radiance.

Complexion Framing – The advertisements employ a distinct complexion framing strategy, whereby the brand ambassadors' skins are visually presented as naturally silky, glowing, and radiantly bright. This framing serves to visibly substantiate the product's core value proposition, positioning the depicted complexion as tangible evidence of the soap's efficacy in achieving smooth texture, luminosity, and overall skin brightness. Common features are that, the brand endorsers are all light in complexion, and having ideal slim body structures.

Expression - A further notable feature is the structuring of voice and narrative authority within the advertisement. The narrative is conveyed entirely through a female voice-over narrator, which assumes the role of omniscient narrator, articulating the product's claims and benefits on behalf of the brand. Notably, the featured ambassadors/endorsers Sophie Alakija, Mercy Eke and Venita Akpofure are visually present but not heard, this upholding the assertion of objectified and silent. This separation between visual presence and vocal absence suggests that the endorsers function primarily as visual signifiers of beauty and product efficacy, while narrative authority and persuasive commentary are delegated to an unseen, female narrator.

Findings

Within the construct of the study, the following findings are revealed:

Hawaii Soap commercial create particular understandings of femininity by emphasizing beauty, confidence, and attractiveness as central aspects of women's identities. The finding supports Hall's

(1997) argument that media representations actively construct meanings rather than simply reflecting reality.

Secondly, while the advertisement provide visibility for Nigerian women and celebrate elements of beauty and confidence, they also reproduce narrow expectations regarding feminine appearance. This reinforces the feminist perspective.

Thirdly, this finding aligns with objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which explains how women's bodies may become central objects of evaluation within media culture.

Conclusion

Advertising is a prevalent subset of mass media, spanning print, television, radio, billboards, and social media. Beyond promoting products and services, it shapes cultural values, social norms, and identities, often reinforcing biases around gender, race, class, and beauty. Through constructed visual and verbal messages, advertising influences not only consumers' behaviour but also perceptions of what are socially acceptable and attractive. This study examined gender stereotyping and the representation of Nigerian women in Hawaii Soap commercial through qualitative content analysis. The findings demonstrate that advertisement remains an influential site where ideas regarding the stereotyping of women through femininity, identity, and social value are constructed.

The advertisement (Hawaii Soap) analyzed presents women as beautiful, stunning and desirable, but these representations are frequently tied to narrow ideals of physical attractiveness reinforcing male gaze, and reflecting the stereotyping and objectification of the Nigerian women.

Recommendations

The study consequently recommends that: advertising agencies should develop activities that represent Nigerian women across different complexion, professions, ages, body types, and social backgrounds. Secondly, beauty advertisements should avoid signifying that women's value depends primarily on physical attractiveness or conformity to narrow beauty ideals.

Furthermore, creative professionals should receive training on gender representation and ethical advertising practices. Finally, the study recommends that relevant regulatory agencies such as the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) undertake a review of their existing classification for televised advertisements. Such a review should aim to strengthen the scrutiny applied to advertisement content, with particular emphasis on identifying and excluding sexually suggestive imageries as unwanted features, particularly given its underage audiences/ viewership.

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