



## **Television and Viewers' Perception of Women's Real-Life Roles: An Empirical and Theoretical Review**

*by*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper sought to ascertain the influence of television viewing on viewers' perception of women's role in real life using empirical and theoretical review. Television has been linked with portraying more stereotypical contents of gender roles and norms which affects viewers' perception of what a woman should do, can do and is expected to do in the society. The paper drew backup from three theories including cultivation theory; framing theory and gender schema theory. Findings from the reviewed theories showed that the consistent exposure of television viewers to stereotypical portrayals of women in television contents results in the negative perception of a woman's role in real life and this affects the opportunities women are offered and would like to accept in the society. It was, therefore, suggested that television producers should strive for gender balance in their contents by eliminating all forms of stereotypes against women.*

**Key words:** Television, Viewers' perception, Women's role, Real life, Theoretical review

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### **1. Introduction**

Many scholars have examined television's contributions to viewers' perceptions of behaviours and roles considered acceptable for men and women. Scharrer and Blackburn (2017) asserted that the potential of television to both reflect and shape cultural understandings of gender roles has long been the subject of social scientific inquiry. While some studies found that television is indeed reflective of the people's culture; others have found that it creates new ideas, causes a change in belief and has a major impact on viewers' perception through mediated messages (Sanni, 2016). The mass media, especially television, play an important role in our everyday lives. Television influences viewers' perception on how they see themselves and the world by creating

certain images of the world they live in. Gauntlett (2008) holds that it was highly unlikely to reason that media do not affect people, their manner of thinking, and the way they perceive the world and themselves. Ward and Harrison (2005) stated that “frequent television viewing is associated with creating more stereotypical associations, and that exposure to specific genres is associated with viewers' assumptions about the distribution of real-world roles” (p. 5). This implies that consistent viewing of television programs can affect viewers’ perception of sex role in real life.

Previous studies on gender have shown that men and women are viewed differently, and these views depend on how they are portrayed, framed and characterized in different media contents (Daalmans, Kleemans & Sadza, 2017; Ottosson & Cheng, 2012 & Holtzhausen, 2010). Research has also proven that distorted representations of reality on television can lead to distorted perceptions of reality among viewers (Tilla, Truongc, Marc & Niederkrotenthalera, 2016). For instance, the continuous portrayal of women as domestic workers, dependent, weak, incompetent in decision making etc. can affect viewers’ perception of the role of women in real life. Ibrahim, Yunus, Shah, Ilias and Mokhtar (2017) asserted that the portrayal of women in television is always associated with stereotypical roles either through words or dialogues or through actions that feature women as submissive, emotional, dependent, bossy and or fickle-minded. According to Sanni (2016), such misrepresentations of women contribute to reinforcing stereotypes which in turn contributes to altered perceptions of women by the opposite sex and even among women about what a woman is expected to do or not to do in the society especially like Nigeria. This in turn has restricted women's opportunities for achievement and personal fulfillment. To explain this further, three theories are adopted in this paper to elucidate the effects of television viewing on viewers’ perception of women’s role in real life. A theoretical approach was adopted because much of our understanding of the world, our societies, and ourselves, today, rests on theories (Bailey, Leo-Rhynie & Morris, 2000).

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

The specific objective of this paper was to ascertain the influence of television viewing on viewers’ perception of women’s role in real life using empirical and theoretical review.

### ***Television and Female Stereotypes***

Research on gender roles and television has a long history, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. Generally, several content analyses indicate that television portrays both genders, particularly women in a stereotypical way that aligns with traditional sex roles in different societies (Matthes, Prieler & Adam, 2016; Glascock, 2001; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001). Several studies have also found that television can affect women’s attitudes as a result of gender stereotypes (Wille, Gaspard, Trautwein, Oschatz, Scheiter, and Nagengast, 2018; Ellemers, 2018 & Coombe and Davis, 2013,) as well as the gender suitability of certain traits and behaviours. Exposure to stereotypical portrayals has also been connected to stereotyped attitudes in adults. A study by Witt (2000) affirms that there is a positive affiliation between sex role attitudes and television viewing. Explaining

further, Davies, Spencer, Quinn, and Gerhardtstein, (2002) asserted that the continuous exposure of women to negative stereotypes in television contents can provoke a disruptive state that interferes with their performance and pleasure in the areas where they are stereotyped.

In the world of television, women are seen in limited and stereotyped roles (Sanni, 2016). When they are portrayed working outside the home, they often engaged in lower-status jobs and are hardly able to combine family and career with much success (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Television cultivates such philosophies that women are happier at home raising children and that men are born with more ambition (Ward and Aubrey, 2017) and this leads to stereotypical notions about gender-related traits and behaviours (Lauzen, Dozier & Horan, 2008). Ibroscheva (2007) submitted that those who spend more time watching television are more expected to hold beliefs that align with television world's suppositions about sex roles and then manifest these suppositions in real life towards women causing what is called female stereotype in the society. This implies that people's different degrees of female stereotypes can be traced to the independent contribution of television viewing. Miller (2007) argued that television plays the role of a society's story - teller, conveying a culture's values and myths and promoting a set of beliefs in the minds of the audience. And according to Denzer-King (2016), such impacts may be harmful in as much as television frequently convey a distorted and unrealistic view of the world because the more time one spends watching television, the more likely one is to have adulterated perceptions of social reality which can be traced to television's most persistent representations of life and society. Signorielli (2012) also stated that it is generally accepted that television influences gender socialization in people's self-image with Estes (2003) adding that due to television's continuous gender-stereotyped nature, it forms a lagging social indicator, which reflects how the economy or society was rather than how it is or how it will be.

### ***Viewers' Perception of Female Stereotypes in Television Contents***

Perception is drawn from the Latin word *perceptio* and *percipio*. It means one's view or opinion about anything, issue or person. It is usually a product of one's thinking ability. According to Frank (2018), perception is a subjective, active and creative process through which people ascribe sense to intellectual information to understand themselves and others. A person's perception of anything in life can to a large extent influence his or her attitude and behaviour towards such thing. Research has also shown that viewing television plays a major role in the upkeep as well as the formation of female stereotyped perceptions (Larson, 2001). Thus, television has been heavily criticized for the way it portrays women due to the belief that narrow and stereotyped portrayals of women may, according to some writers, foster misconceptions among the public about the way women are or should be seen. Television viewers are exposed to a wide variety of programs every day in which women are stereotyped and from these exposures certain thinking patterns evolve. Ibroscheva (2007) asserted that gender roles in the media are legitimated through frequent exposures, and are then accepted by the public as a standard. An attitude of male supremacy and female subordination is circulated through gender differentiation (Serra &

Burnett, 2007). Such gender differences are then adopted as societal rules through viewers' socialization. Achira (2015) agreed that consumers' perceptions of specific characters, such as females, may be structured based on their portrayal in the media and this often leads to female stereotypes being promoted.

The claim that television encourages female stereotyping is often manifested in the attitude of audiences who integrate the messages about the nature and role of women, carried directly or indirectly by programs in television into their existing belief systems. However, researches have confirmed that most people base real life beliefs on how various groups are portrayed on television. Daalmans, Kleemans and Sadza (2017) supported this in their opinion that television viewing contributes to the knowledge and preservation of stereotyped perceptions. In agreement, Cottle (2000) and Morgan (2007) asserted that television has the power to shape self-perception, attitudes and behaviour stressing the point that stereotyping plays a vital role in the preservation of power inequalities within wider social, political, cultural and economic structures as prevalent in Nigeria. Female stereotype affects the perception of women in that their frequent exposure to stereotypical roles in television content tends to cultivate a belief, an attitude and behaviour that strengthen the stereotypical roles seen in television. That is why in the Nigerian society today, there are more women indoors performing the role of motherhood and absolutely depending on the men with the perception that women are inferior and cannot compete with their male counterparts. This has deepened such that in spite of several efforts and campaigns to get the women out of their hiding places, most women still refuse to come out to contribute their quota to national development due to media influence on their perception of what a woman can do, should do and is expected to do in the society. Even for the few women who try to come out, these stereotypical perceptions deprive them of support from many people with majority trying to criticize, oppose and frustrate their efforts. In line with this thought, Wolska (2011) summited that people shape their knowledge about the society by decoding and simplifying received media messages. Thus, the attitude of the people towards women in the society gets reinforced from the manner subjects relating to women are treated in television contents. This has a great impact on the life style of today's women as they imitate and identify themselves with the character shown in the content of programs in television (Kumari & Joshi, 2015).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study is theoretically grounded on cultivation theory, framing theory and gender schema theory. The theories were used to explain and give deep understanding of the influence of television on viewers' perception of women's role in real life.

#### ***Cultivation Theory***

Cultivation theory expounds the long-standing formation and shaping of understandings, views and beliefs about the world as a result of media messages (Martinez-Sheperd 2006). It was propounded by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1976. The scholars recommended that "television cultivates certain beliefs about reality that are held in common by mass communication consumers" (West & Turner, 2004, p.

377). The cultivation process takes place through mainstreaming and resonance. Mainstreaming is the tendency for heavy television viewers to see a similar culturally dominant reality to that image in television even though this varies from actual reality. Resonance takes place when viewers' life reality matches with the reality image in television (West & Turner, 2004). As Baron and Davis (2003) put it, resonance is a process in which the audience members identify their life with the world of television. Indeed, viewers with certain personal attitudes identify more with what they see in television, which can strengthen certain attitudes and beliefs (Sorsoli, Porche & Tolman, 2005). These two processes (mainstreaming and resonance) ultimately lead to the learning of assumptions and values from the media. The theory elucidates the long-term effects of television considering the fact that television is the most pervasive form of mass media today (West & Turner, 2004). From the cultivation theory point of view, television is confirmed as one of the main agents of socialization (Signorielli 2012). Larson (2001) noted that television viewing contributes to the learning and the maintenance of gender stereotyped perceptions among television viewers. In support, Signorielli (2012) submitted that television influences gender socialization in viewers' self-image and their image of others. In a simple term, the cultivation theory states that the more time people spend watching television, the greater the probability they would believe that social reality is same with reality portrayed in television. Cultivation theory has incorporated in its field of study misrepresentation, stereotypes, sex roles and underrepresentation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli & Shahnahan, 2002) hence its relevance to this study. This aligns with Ward and Harrison (2005) submission that "cultivation analysis explains why regular watching of television is related with generating more stereotypical connotations, and that exposure to particular categories is associated with viewers' assumptions about the dissemination of real-world roles " (p. 5). Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) also supported this assumption by stating that television creates "a common world view and common stereotypes through a relatively restrictive set of programs, images, and messages" (p. 7).

The images and ideologies conveyed through television heavily influence the perceptions of the real world. According to Morgan and Shanahan (2010), television messages are remembered by viewers and enable an easily accessible mental shortcut to rely on when making judgments about the world. The idea that television has for a long time influenced viewers' perception of social belief and altered reality has in turn affected women. This implies that the frequent exposure of television viewers to female stereotypes in television contents could limit women's abilities and potentials to the role of a mother/wife at home, a model and other of such as portrayed in television programmes and never to be seen as independent and capable in professional and respected outdoor jobs since they are rarely portrayed in that manner. Arslan (2015) submitted that television 'traditionalize' women's roles, while favouring the place of men in the society. For instance, a study conducted by Akpabio and Oguntola (2005) on Nigerian television commercials showed that none of the major female characters in television commercial had a paid employment status while 90% of men shown in these television adverts had employment status. Similarly, findings from a study by Smith (2016) to investigate gender representation and occupational

depictions on primetime television to determine if gender-role stereotypes still prevail in US television programming revealed that women are still underrepresented on-screen, as well as in prestigious occupations, especially when compared to their real world representation. Carter and Steiner (2004) also found that women are depicted in television programmes as having lower and shorter career standing because of their young looks while men are presented as having higher and long lasting career standing as a result of their success and such gender discrepancies are then seen as societal norms.

Researchers in social science have continually claimed that audiences' standards, views and ideology may be influenced on a large scale by television programmes (Coombe & Davis, 2013; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Fischer (2010) in harmony submits that perpetual and constant exposure to stereotypical images in television programmes influences the perceptions and attitudes of viewers about the world and its people, and results in cultivation effects which in turn can restrict women's opportunities for achievement and personal fulfillment. The general perception of a woman's role in Nigeria today might have been informed by how television presents women and the problem in it is the implication that it has on women's contribution to national development. This is because this continuous negative perception created in television contents about women's roles could make the society to deny women certain great opportunities in life all because of the created media impression that women are weak and incompetent. The media-made perception of women could also limit women believe of their God-given potentials and abilities and make them feel they are incapable of contributing to national development. Lipka (2008) asserted that stereotypical portrayals of women in television may have negative outcomes on actual performance of women by causing stress, by reducing their ability to monitor their own performance, and by introducing negative feelings that intrude and discourage performance.

### ***Framing Theory***

Framing theory is a Mass Communication theory that suggests that the manner in which the mass media frame and present issues to the masses influences people's choices about how to process that information. The term 'framing' was first postulated by Anthropologist Gregory Bateson in 1972. He described psychological frames as "spatial and temporary bounding of a set of interactive messages" (Bateson, 1972, p. 197) that functions as a form of Meta communication (Hallahan, 2008). Framing theory says that the media create frames by presenting news items with predefined and narrow contextualization (Arowolo, 2017). This means that frames are constructs that shape meanings in media messages.

Media framing does not only tell the masses what to think about but also how to think about the framed issue. This is why it is sometimes referred to as second-level agenda setting theory because of its close relation to Agenda-Setting Theory (Mass Communication Theory (Online), 2017). Frames draw attention to certain aspects of reality at the cost of others (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). For instance, the way in which the media frame news affects the audience's perception of the news because the media highlight certain issues and position them within a specific context to elicit certain interpretations. By so doing, the media apply a sensitive influence over how the masses

see reality and this can affect their perception by shaping how they see and interpret issues. This explains its relevance to this study as the stereotypical manner in which television represents women can affect viewers' perception about the role and ability of women in real life by shaping or structuring their thoughts towards that direction. In other words, going by the assumptions of this theory, the perpetual framing of women as weaker sex, dependent on men, sex objects, domestic workers, incompetent in decision making and leadership task among others in television contents can affect the viewers' perception of what a woman should do and not do in the society. This is because perceptions are formed by viewers based on the ways in which women's image is portrayed in different television contents.

According to Gauntlett (2002), stereotypes are described as useful devices that visual communicators, such as, cartoonists, filmmakers, graphic artists, television producers and many others can use to facilitate easy understanding even though these stereotypes can illustrate hurtful and unfair messages and play a major role in the way social memory is molded. Coltrane, and Messineo (2000) also agreed that media images provide confirmation of a world view and validate currently acceptable social arrangements. For instance, a study by Mwangi (2014) which investigated the portrayal of gender, gender representation and stereotypes propagated in television commercials in Kenyan revealed that women were mostly framed as homemakers and mothers which ultimately contributed to the most common stereotypes of women as housewives. Similarly, Sanni (2016) in a study that investigated how women are seen in real life by the kind of roles they play in Nigerian television advertisements found that the roles of women were framed within the confine of Nigerian culture as house wives, mothers, cooks, child-careers, and cleaners. The continuous framing of women in stereotypical roles in television programmes results in various harmful effects. Sanni (2016) asserts that the persistent representation of women based on already existing stereotypes has an influence on how women are treated in society (Sanni, 2016). In most cases, women are denied greater opportunities because of the perception created by media that they are weaker sex, subordinate and incompetent.

### ***Gender Schema Theory***

Gender schema theory was propounded in 1981 by a psychologist, Sandra Bem. It integrates parts of both the social-learning theory and the cognitive development theory by describing how people attach certain traits to a gender in the society and how the features generally connected with each sex are upheld and transmitted. The theory involves a process where the schemas are active, enabling an affiliation between television viewers' exposures and beliefs and how they influence viewers' perception of gender roles and attitudes of certain practices. Gender schema theory directs information processing by structuring what an individual is exposed to, guiding behaviour and providing bases for making interpretations. The theory argues that a template called schema is used to orient viewers' perceptions of stimuli and also to regulate the interpretations of those stimuli (Potter, Pashupati, Pekurny, Hoffman, & Davis, 2002). These schemas that individuals form, direct their cognitive processing of information that they come across through the real world and through media (Smith & Granados, 2009).

This implies that schemas are used to shape television viewers' knowledge, guide their behavior, and to predict likely happenings on the role of women in society. In other words, the meanings ascribed to media contents, such as television programmes, are guided by schemas. The schema coming from television contents shapes knowledge of the world because viewers link what they watch on television to how they are expected to handle situations in the real life. For instance, the continuous portrayal of women in television programmes as domestic workers, weak, dependent, sex object and inferior to men will make television viewers to feel same about the role of women in real life and automatically lead to female stereotypes in the society.

Bem (1981) asserted that people who are gender-schematic depend heavily on gender stereotypes to comprehend the social world. According to Bem, when gender-schematic individuals weigh incoming information including television messages, they do so based on stereotyped connotations that are supposed to be significant in their thinking. Television is a source of gender information for viewers. Based on Nabi and Clark's (2008) findings about schemas that are identified in entertainment television programming, viewers' behaviour can be predicted after viewing entertainment television programmes as viewers will be likely to engage in a particular behaviour after witnessing a character engage in that same behaviour. Nabi and Clark (2008) also asserted that schema theory can be used to predict that viewers will enact behaviours seen on television not minding the consequence experienced by the character. According to Bem, viewers learn about male and female roles from the regular exposure to these roles. In support, Ward and Friedman (2006) submitted that television viewers are inclined to adopt the values they are repeatedly exposed to on television. According to this theory, viewers exposed to female stereotypes in television contents adjust their behaviour to agree with the gender norms that a woman's role is to care for and raise children, while a man's role is focused on work and industry. In this way, they develop an internal mental conceptualization of what a man and woman can and cannot do, which unconsciously affects television viewers' perception of the role of women in the society, thus affecting women's contribution to national development in the country.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

There are good theoretical indications that individuals who spend more time watching television are likely to internalise the ideology of television programmes they consume. The way gender is portrayed in television contents does have an influence on how viewers perceive women's roles in real life. This is because television disseminates powerful and compelling messages about gender roles, which are usually stereotypical. For instance, the regular exposure of viewers to stereotypical television contents can affect viewers' perception of a woman's role in real life. Theoretical evidences have also shown that even women who watch these stereotypical programmes shape their perception to align in the same direction thus limiting their God-given abilities and potentials. Television portrays women in traditional gender roles that encourage men to be decisive and manifest leadership traits and women to be reverent and dependent. This will deprive women the opportunity to contribute their talent, experience and knowledge

to national development because viewing stereotypical contents about women in television is linked to the acceptance of relatively slim views about what female gender roles should be in ways that may affect the day-to-day lives of many.

The following are recommended based on the findings of the study:

1. Since television is a powerful and influential medium for creating and reinforcing images of reality, television producers are therefore advised to ensure gender balance and eradicate female stereotypes in television contents in order to communicate the accurate signal that will encourage women to develop a sense of self to fully contribute their part to national development.
2. The government should put in place laws that encourage gender equality as this will serve as checks on media houses on reporting gender related issues.
3. Women should also build confidence in themselves and do not let themselves be influenced by any kind of derogatory or devaluing media message.

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