

GENDER ROLE PERCEPTION AMONG SOCIAL MEDIA USERS:

A Study of Undergraduates in Imo State University

DIKE, Mba Onu¹

OJIAKOR-UMENZE, Ifeoma Ph.D.²

NKWAM-UWAOMA, Adeline PhD³

¹Doctoral Student, Department of Mass Communication

²Department of Mass Communication,

³Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria

Contact: E-mail: ojiakor99@gmail.com

Abstract

The social media provide users an online platform that allows them to communicate widely and even to virtually manage others' impression of the user and also express gender identities. Social media contents also help to understand more about gender roles and the way people present themselves. Thus, the focus of this study is on the perception of gender roles by undergraduate students of Imo State University. A sample size of 373 was drawn from the University's estimated undergraduates' population of 26,000. The study adopted qualified volunteer sampling technique and used questionnaire to collect data. The major finding is that social media users exhibit stereotypical perceptions of the relationship between men and women. The authorities should promote an active and visible mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the social media.

Keywords: Gender, gender role, masculinity, femininity.

INTRODUCTION

Gender roles are the realities of human existence and culture. They prescribe behaviour, attitudes, expectations and characteristics associated with being male and female. Gender identity and roles are unarguably significant parts of everyday life, shaping how people make sense of themselves and their relationships (Sebani, 2017). According to Wood (1994), of the many influences of how we view men and women, media are the most pervasive and are among the most powerful. All forms of media communicate images of sexes. Experts aver that the mass media are a tool in promoting the stereotypes of gender roles (UNESCO, 2014; Craig, 2003).

The mass media have a dominant influence in distinguishing the roles of men and women. In packaging news content, entertainment, advertisements and other consumables, the mass media are unavoidably gendered and are engaged in socializing children into customary stereotypes of gender roles. Essay UK (2019) argues that in mass media advertisements, sex stereotypes tend to be at its greatest. There is a general agreement that mediated communication acts as very significant agents of interaction, cooperation with the family unit and with peers and contributes to ensuring that gender roles are effectively shaped.

Information communication technology has become a key factor in shaping the modern world, revolutionizing the way we seek and receive information. Citing Gates (2000),

Nworgu (2010) submits that digital tools offer a magnified ability to think, the ability to articulate our thoughts and the ability to work together to act on those thoughts. Indeed, virtual global families have developed based on the new media concept. According to Nworgu (2010:1), “Friendship is no longer developed based on local geography but rather, people are getting closer like in a family through digital world of interactive media, based on shared needs and interest, rather than geographical location”.

Though a subjective way of communication, Henitzsch and Hanusch (2012), observe that social media have become the trend for every institution. Gender display is a common feature of social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so on. Rose, Mackey-Kellis, Shyles, Barry, Biagini, Hart and Jack (2012) submit that social media website contents help us understand more about gender roles and the way people present themselves.

However, most studies on media influence on gender roles focus on the traditional media (Craig, 2003). Beyond speculations, however, are social media gendered? Do male and female users engage in different types of social media? How do male and female consumers of social media perceive gender roles? Have the social media played a significant role in the gender role perception of users? Do social media reinforce existing gender stereotypes?

These have become pertinent questions since recent studies indicate that a growing number of people are turning to the internet to search for a number of information for diverse range of decisions.

In line with the questions raised, this study sought to examine social media users' perception of gender roles; find out whether social media alter stereotypical gender perception of users, and; to ascertain, whether social media can be used to effect behaviour change in young Nigerians towards gender equality.

Gender role and gender ideology

Gender role refers to sets of expectations that are attributed to sex. According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social Behavioural Sciences (2001), gender role is a broad term referring to the behaviours, attitudes, and traits that are associated with being male or female. Harcourt (2016) writes:

Gender roles are cultural and personal. They determine how males and females should think, speak, dress and interact within the context of society. Learning plays a role in this process of shaping gender roles. These gender schemas are deeply embedded cognitive frameworks regarding what defines masculine and feminine.

Ayorinde (2015) posits that gender roles vary in different societies. He observes that while men and women have equal rights and opportunities in some, men dominate in others and rarely do women control the administration of a community. According to Cottingham (2017), gender roles have an impact on how and whether men and women have access to essential resources such as education, information, disposable income and health services.

Girls, are often at a disadvantage in the gender gap in education.

Gender-role ideology refers to one's attitude and beliefs about the proper roles of men and women. It, in other words, informs how an individual judges the appropriateness of

behaviours of men and women in a given society. According to Ungaretti and Etchezahar (2013:40), it is a historical construction whose meaning is derived from each culture or “the substrate upon which different meanings are given to the sexes. In this way societies pigeonhole women and men into stereotypes that seem immovable, building belief systems about masculinity-femininity and in consequence, the type of activities and distribution of occupations that are appropriate for each sex”. People who entertain a traditional gender role ideology believe that women should mind home responsibilities while men should be the breadwinners of the family.

Masculinity and Femininity Characteristics

Kimmel (2001) relates masculinity and femininity to the social roles, behaviours and meanings ascribed to men and women in any society at any time. Masculinity and femininity are structured and expressed through such other identities as class, race, age and sexuality. Rose et al (2012) enumerated masculinity–femininity stereotypical gender traits across 25 nations, including.

Table 1 Gender Stereotypes across 25 Nations

Masculine Traits	Feminine Traits
Adventurous	Affectionate
Active	Attractive
Aggressive	Curious
Autocratic	Dependent
Courageous	Dreamy
Daring	Emotional
Dominant	Fearful
Enterprising	Gentle
Forceful	Independent
Independent	Sensitive
Progressive	Sentimental
Robust	Sexy
Rude	Soft-hearted
Severe	Submissive
Stern	Superstitious
Strong	Weak

Source. Williams, J.E., & Best, D.L. (1990). *Measuring Sex Stereotypes: A Multination Study* (Cross-Cultural Research and Methodology Series 8) (Revised ed.). Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc.

Mass Media and Gender Equality

The potential of the mass media to promote gender equality and diversity in all spheres was highlighted during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. All governments met there to discuss gender equality issues. Then all stakeholders were called upon to join forces to combat “stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media” (UNESCO, 2014).

Empirical Review

Onwumehili and Bedeau used thematic analysis to study gender in Nigerian football media narratives from 2010 to 2015. The concern of the study was the issue of inequality between media reporting of female and male football in Nigeria. The researchers did not focus their study on the quality of the game but inequality bound in sexism, discrimination, stereotyping and the continued traces of masculinity attached to female football in Nigerian newspapers. They found four key themes that resonated across the three newspapers: negligence, poor attention to women league, lack of parental support for girl footballers and diminishing of achievement of women football. The thematic analysis pointed to four major themes that described how the newspapers framed female football; quite different from how male football was framed.

Bell and Milic (2002) content-analyzed 827 Australian magazine advertisements from 1997-1998 to determine the presence of stereotypical gender roles. The conclusion of their study is that males were more frequently portrayed in narrative ways (as actors) than females. Women, according to that study, were more likely than men to “behave or express emotion”. Their findings suggest stereotypical gender traits of men and women similar to the findings of other researchers.

Goffman's (1976) analysis of advertisements found that women were more likely to be portrayed performing submissive or appeasing gestures (such as bending one knee inward), **sinding**, clowning and acting less seriously (cited in Bell and Milic, 2002:205). The above studies suggest that gender is one of the variables that mediated communication can consciously shape to suit patriarchal stereotype. Similarly, some researchers have argued that the computer-mediated environment is a “gender-bending world” (Witmer and Katzman, 1997).

As the social media grow in popularity, so does concern for their impact on impression management, relationship and behaviour of today's youth. Stramo (2008) used a qualitative study to observe how males and females presented their profiles in Facebook. He found out that women used their profile pictures more than men for the purpose of impression. This, he interpreted is in order to be seen as attractive. Rose et al (2012) studied the impact of gender on social media images study in 2012 their aim was to assess how gender performed in self-created digital images in social media. They found that traits prominent in pictures of males were active, dominant and independent; traits prominent for females were attractiveness and dependent. Their findings conformed to gender stereotypes found in prior researches regarding stereotypical gender traits displayed in media.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on social role theory. As Ridgeway (2001) submits, Eagly's (1987) social role theory argues that widely shared gender stereotypes develop from the gender division of labour that characterizes a society. According to role theory, people follow unwritten social and cultural rules and norms in behaviour, depending on different and often predictable social identities and situations in which people find themselves. Therefore, gender shapes how people make sense of themselves and their social relationships.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative survey design, given the effectiveness of survey in

attitudinal and behavioural studies. The population of this study comprised all undergraduate students of Imo State University, Owerri, who are registered/users of at least one social media site. The age range of the undergraduate students' population of the university falls mostly between 16 and 25 years. The undergraduate students' population of the University is estimated at 26,000. At least, half of this number is estimated to be registered users of, at least, one social media site; thus 13,000.

The sample size was calculated using Wimmer and Dominic online sample size calculator (2019), (www.rogerwimmer.com) and it gave a sample size of 373. Data were collected using a set of questionnaire. The researchers developed the questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. Quantitative data analysis technique was used in this study. The data obtained using simple questionnaire were coded into frequency tables and then presented using tables and percentages.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

The study distributed 375 copies of the questionnaire, using face-to-face approach to ensure a high return rate and 369 (98.4%) were returned. From the returned number, 19 were improperly filled and 10 failed the lie detection test; a total of 29 were canceled. Therefore, 340 (91%) were analyzed.

Respondents' Perception of Gender Roles												
	SA	%	A	%	Not sure	%	D	%	SD	%	Total	%
Women are affectionate	150	44	119	35	37	11	20	58	14	4.2	340	100
Women are attractive	133	39	166	34	37	11	38	11	16	5	340	100
Males are the aggressive sex	199	35	102	30	37	11	48	14	34	10	340	100
Independence is a masculine trait	180	53	72	21	34	16	28	8.4	26	7.6	340	100
Males are domineering	194	57	78	23	26	7.5	36	12.2	6	1.7	340	100
Females play supportive roles	136	40	105	31	43	12.6	37	11	19	5.4	340	100
Females are submissive	139	41	95	28	43	12.6	26	7.4	37	11	340	100
Men are the family breadwinner	170	50	68	20	34	10	34	10	34	10	340	100
Men are more enterprising than women	105	31	101	29.6	54.4	16	46	13.4	34	10	340	100

From the result presented above, the perception of majority of the respondents is that being aggressive is a masculine trait. Respondents see men as domineering, independent and more enterprising than women and also as the breadwinner for the family. Not differing from stereotypical gender role perception, respondents perceive females as attractive, self-supportive, submissive and affectionate.

The result also indicates a gender role ideology or social construct which derives from the Nigerian cultural environment. Following this social construct, men and women are cast into social pigeonholes which seem immovable. Although social media and the internet have altered almost every aspect of life, social media have not altered users' stereotypical gender perception; thus addressing one of the research objectives.

Does the use of social media influence user's gender behaviour?

Options	Frequency		Total	Percentage
	Male	Females		
YES	62	79	141	41.4
No	66	95	161	47.4
Not sure	23	15	38	11.2
	151	189	340	100

The above table answers question on the use of social media influence user's gender behavior. Almost half of the respondents (47.4%) doubt that social media influence their gender behaviour. More females (25.2%) than males (18%) believe that social media positively affects their gender behaviour. This finding indicates that social media may not be very effective in gender role modification of young Nigerians. It rather agrees with the findings of the Gender Equality Commission's (2014), posit that the media play an active role in perpetuating gender discrimination.

This finding indicates adequate representation of females in the use of social media. This contradicts the common belief that women are under-represented in media; which is said is to be responsible, among the factors, for creating gender inequalities (Gender Equity Commission,2014).

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that social media users retain societal stereotypes perception of masculinity-femininity roles. In other words, social media do not alter users' perception of gender roles. By reason of the foregoing, social media may not be a very effective tool in modifying the attitude of users in achieving gender equity; at least, not in its present form.

Social role theory rests on the supposition that social structure ascribes different roles to men and women. All the agents of socialization ingrain in children their appropriate behaviours, attitudes and overall culture. As children develop, they acquire a deeply-rooted gender ideology or schema and often times, mediated communication reinforces society's gender role stereotypes.

Recommendations

Going by the rapid growth of the social media, this study recommends more attention of parents, governments, religious bodies and educational institutions on social media. The authorities must find a way to engage social media users in positive and developmental contents.

The authorities should promote an active and visible mainstreaming of a gender

perspective in the social media. For gender mainstreaming of social media, there is a need to train the respondents on more equitable gender roles

REFERENCES

- Ayorinde, A. (2015): Nature and Nurture of sexuality in International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Science (2nd Edition), Retrieved November 10, 2019 from www.sacucedirect.com.
- Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). Final Document of the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995.
- Bell, P and Milic, M. (2002), Goffman's Gender Advertisements Revisited: Combining Content Analysis with Semiotic Analysis. *Visual Communication*, 1, 203-222. Doi:10.1177/147035720200,00205.
- Borland, E. (2019). In Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved November 17, 2019 from www.britannica.com
- Burke, R. Y. and Stets, J.E (2009). *Identify Theory* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Byerly, C.M. (2014). The Long Struggle of Women in News (in UNESCO; Media Gender: A scholarly Agenda for the Global Alliance and Media and Agenda.
- Cook, E.P., (2001). Androgyny. In International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behaviour Sciences. Retrieved November 19, 2019 from www.sciencedirect.com
- Crespi, I. (2003) Gender Socialization within the Family: A Study on Adolescents and their Parents in Great Britain. In: A paper for British Panel Survey, Milan, p4.
- Cuttingham, J.C, (2017): Gender Aspects of Sexual and Reproductive Health. In International Encyclopedia of Public Health (2nd Edition), Retrieved November 10, 2019 from www.sciencedirect.com.
- Dollarlude, M. (May 2, 2010). Social Media Definition. Retrieved November 18, 2019 from www.investopedia.com
- Essays, UK (November 2018). The Role of Mass Media in Gender Roles. Retrieved November 9, 2019 from www.ukessays.com
- Francis, D & Kanife D. (2011). Beyond Nature is Nurture in the Scientist October 1, 2011 available at www.sciencedirect.com
- Georgas, J. (2004). Family and Culture. In Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology. Retrieved December 1, 2019 from www.sciencedirect.com
- Gray, J. (1992). *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus: A Practical guide for improving communication and getting what you want in your relationships*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Griffen, E. (2012). *A first look at communication theory*, 8th edition: New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Hair, J.F, Bush, R.P. and Ortinau, D.J. (2000). *Marketing Research: A Practical Approach for the New Millennium*. Boston: Irvin McGraw-Hill.
- Hanitzsch, T and Hanusch, F. (2012): Does gender Determine Journalists' Professional views? A Reassessment Based on Cross-National Evidence. *European Journal of Communication*, 27 (3); pp 257-277.
- Harcourt, H.M. (2016). Gender Roles. In CliffsNotes. Retrieved on November 7, 2019 from www.cliffsnotes.com
- Hunter, A. (2001). Data Collection. Interviewing. In International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences. Retrieved December 2, from www.sciencedirect.com
- International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences, 2001. Retrieved November 10, 2019 from www.sciencedirect.com
- International Labour Organization (ILO) Gender Equality Tool, 1996-2017.
- Made, P and Samhungu, F. (2001): Strengthening Gender Perspectives in IPS News Coverage. In; C. Lowe-Morna, ed 2001. *Whose News? Whose Views?* Southern Africa: Gender in Media Handbook. Johannesburg: Gender Links. Pp 136-142
- Matthew, H. (May 08, 2019). What is Social Media? Retrieved November 19, 2019 from www.thebalancesmb.com
- Ndolo, I.S. Udeze, S.E and Anikpo, N.M. (2015). Let's Socialize while our academic activities suffer: An analysis of Social Media Utilization among Students of Tertiary Institutions in Enugu Metropolis. *International Journal of Media, Security and Development*. Vol. 2, No.1.
- Nwanne, B. (2015). Communication and Social Media use in Nigeria: Order or ordered disorder? *International Journal of Media, Security and Development (IJMSD)*. Vol.2, No.1
- Nworgu, K.O. (2010). *Mass Media and Society in a Globalizing and Digital age*. Owerri: Ultimate Books.
- Nwosu, I.K., Fab-Ukozor, N.T. and Nwodu, L.C. (2007). *Communication for Sustainable Human Development: A multi-perceptual approach*. Enugu: African Council for Communication Education (ACCE).
- Pew Research Center (June 12, 2019). Social Media Fact Sheet Retrieved November 19, 2019, from www.pewresearch.org
- Pew Research Center (June 23, 2017). Americans and Cyber-security. Retrieved November 20, 2019 from www.pewresearch.org
- Ramaoubbu, S (2017). Does gender matter on Social Media? Retrieved November 2019 from <http://m.huffpost.com>
- Ridgeway, C.L. (2001). Small-group Interaction and Gender. In International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Science. Retrieved December 2, 2019 from www.sciencedirect.com

- Rose, J, Mackey-Kallis, S, Shyles, Barry, K. Biagini, D, Hart, C and Jack, L. Face it: The Impact of Quarterly, Vol. 60. No5, November–December, 2012, pp 588-607.
- Rose, J., Mackey-Kallis, S., Shyles, L., Barry, K., Biagini, D., Hart, C and Jack, I. (2012): Face it: The Impact of Gender on Social Media Images. In Communication Quarterly Retrieved November 10, 2019 from www.tandfonline.com
- Rose, K. (2010). Women in the Boyzone: Gender, News and History. In Stuart (ed). Journalism: Critical Issues. New York: Open University Press.
- Strano, M.M. (2008). User Descriptions and Interpretation of self-presentation through Facebook Profile Images. Cyber Psychology. Journal of Psychological Research on Cyberspace 2 (2) article 5 . Retrieved from www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php?asloclanku.
- UNESCO (2014): Mainstreaming Gender in Journalism. In: Media and Gender: a Scholarly Agenda for the Global Alliance on Media and Gender, UNESCO, Paris, p. 84.
- UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2014). Media and Gender: A scholarly gender for the global alienate on media and gender.
- Ungaretti J and Echezanar, E. (2013). Gender Role Ideology according to Sex, Acceptance of Women's Rights and Gay Marriage. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 3, No. 15, August, 2013.
- Williams, J.C. and Best, D.L. (1990). *Measuring Sex Stereotypes: A Multination Study* (Cross-Cultural Research and Mythology Series 8). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Wood, J.T. (1994) *Media Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender and Culture*. Wadsworth Publishing.
- Sibani, C. M. (2017). Gender inequality and its challenge to Women Development in Nigeria. *UNIZIK Journal of Arts and Humanities* (special edition, 2017). Vol.18 No2.
- Mageto, J. (2017). Impact of social media on youths. GRIN Publishing. Retrieved from Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.
- Gender Equality Commission (2014) Of the Council of Europe. Gender Equality and the Media at National Level: Compilation of good practices from member states. Retrieved from www.edoc.coe.int.