Gender Representation in Visual Communication: A Multimodal Social Semiotic Study of Selected Lager Beer Billboard Advertisements

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Abstract

Studies on gender relations have received tremendous attention from scholars working in different disciplines and from diverse theoretical orientations. This study examines how gender is being represented in visual communication using selected lager beer advertisements in Nigeria. Visual communications, especially billboards, exert a considerable amount of influence on how people perceive themselves and how roles are assigned to both genders. Based on insights from the theory of multimodality, this study is an attempt to use a social semiotic approach in the interpretation of visual communication. Multimodality perceives visual as representation and communication. Working within the tenets of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), therefore, we are able to analyse and interpret the primary texts, which invariably helped in decoding the meaning potential embedded in the images and slogans, hence this study portrays how words, images and signs in the selected lager beer billboard advertisements act as basic tools in projecting gender misrepresentation in the Nigerian Society.

Key Words: Gender Representation, Visual Communication, Lager Beer, Billboard Advertisements

Introduction

Studies over time show that gender issues have been greatly explored by media practitioners in their bid to sell their products through advertising. Several researches have been carried out in advertising on diverse issues but none, to the best of the current researchers’ knowledge, has been done on the issue of gender representation using lager beer as a case study, and this is the motivation for this study. Most studies on gender focus on issues of masculinity and femininity in movies, television programmes, arts, advertisements and shows, but very few have viewed gender representation in billboard advertisements as being worthy of scholarly attention. The motivation to explore how gender asymmetry is construed in lager beer billboard advertisements is the focus of this study.

The notion of communication, from time immemorial, has been a vital part of the human society. It is simply the process of sharing ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions, information and messages with one another in a particular place and time. The word, communication, which means to share, derives from the Latin expression communícáre. It is the act of conveying intended meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs and semiotic rules. The major forms of communication include; verbal communication which entails the use of words in encoding and decoding the intended message; non-verbal communication which employs the use of other forms of expression besides writing and talking in sending and receiving messages; and visual communication. Visual communication is chiefly concerned with the use of visual aids such as signs, typography, drawings, graphic design, industrial design, advertising, animation, illustration, colour and other electronic devices or resources in sending and receiving messages. It relies on vision to achieve its aim. The evaluation of visual communication is measured by the comprehension of the general populace and not through any personal aesthetic or perspective. That is, the success of a visual resource is measured by how it is able to communicate the intended meanings to its viewers, the
general populace. Gestures and body language are other ways in which information or ideas are expressed visually. Simply put, visual communication is the representation of images which are used to communicate ideas or information. The interpretation of the ideas being expressed is usually subjective, so an analysis is required in order to deduce meaning or multi-meanings from an image. Paul Martin Lester in his, Visual Communication: Images with Messages (2013), presents six perspectives through which images can be analysed and they include: the personal, technical, historical, ethnical, cultural, and critical perspectives. This indicates that an image can be taken or analysed from more than one orientation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Viewpoint

Roland Barthes studies on multimodal semiotic analysis in the 1960s obviously inspired further enquiries into that domain of knowledge in the later part of the century. Towards the end of the 20th century linguists like Kress, van Leeuwen (2006), and O’Toole (1994) among others commenced serious academic enquires into the social communicative functions of multimodal resources such as language, image, music, gesture and architecture which integrate across sensory modalities such as visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory and kinesthetic. The mid 2000s witnessed expanded researches into multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). This also led to the emergence of diverse theoretical approaches in the study of multimodal resources.


This study is based on Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and van Leeuwen’s (2005) theoretical approach to multimodal discourse and social semiotics which draw primarily from the systemic functional linguistic orientation of Halliday. Studies in multimodal social semiotics were inspired by Halliday’s (1975) view of language as social semiotic. Halliday argues that social and cultural contexts are important in the construction and interpretation of social meaning because language as a system of social interaction is a veritable resource in the creation and interpretation of our social and cultural experiences. Social semiotics studies how semiotic resources such as speech, writing, pictures, colours, artefacts, and actions can communicate social meaning. Van Leeuwen (2005) notes that these semiotic modes need to be studied in social context because “Almost everything we do or make can be done in different ways and therefore allows, at least, in principle, the articulation of different social and cultural meanings” (p. 4). It is therefore the social and cultural contexts where language is used and how it is used in those situations that determine its meaning. The term language as used here means any form of social communication such as verbal, textual or graphic modes.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) adopted the three metafunctions of Halliday (1975) as a framework for semiotic theory of communication. As we noted above, the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) of Halliday offers descriptive and interpretative structures for the study of images. It sees language and visual images as meaning making resources. Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) perceives images as representational and interactive. Consequently, in multimodal discourse analysis, representation correlates with ideational metafunction; interactive with interpersonal metafunction; and compositional with textual metafunctions respectively in the systemic framework. The ideational metafunction enables a semiotic mode to represent aspects of the world as it is experienced by humans. A semiotic mode has to be able to represent objects and their relations in a world outside the representational system. The patterns of representation are ideational. Generally, representations enable us to encode our experiences visually. In the interpersonal metafunction, the semiotic mode has to be able to project the relations between the producer of a (complex) sign, and the receiver of that sign. A semiotic mode therefore has to be able to represent a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer, and the object represented. For instance, the visual space, distance or position between an object and its viewer communicates the form of interpersonal relations between them. The textual metafunction denotes that semiotic modes must possess the capacity to form texts, complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and...
for which they were produced. Perspectives from the dimension of textual metafunction show that different compositional arrangements permit the realization of different textual meanings. Compositional elements can be interpreted in terms of information value; linking; framing; and salience. It therefore means that the arrangement or placement of image and text affects meaning realization or interpretation. This realization or interpretation is politically and ideologically motivated (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Visual structures, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), like linguistic structures, point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction (p. 2). Thus, words and images interact in the construction and interpretation of social experiences. To van Leeuwen (2008), words provide the facts and the explanations for things that needed to be explained in so many words while images provide the interpretations and ideological colourations that may be embedded in the text (p. 136). For instance, an emblem or logo and the slogan of a political party are semiotic resources that explicitly communicate positive evaluations about it and implicitly evaluate the opposition negatively. They make appeals to our subconscious minds for diverse interpretations. Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 142) contends that social actors and their actions can be visually represented and the “language of images” enables the producer to depict entities from a particular angle and also enables the viewer to make explicit that which is concealed in the images. According to him, “If images seem to just show ‘what is’, we need to show that they may not always be quite so. If images seem to just allude to things and never ‘say them explicitly’, we need to make these allusions explicit” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 137). The meanings and ideologies that are encoded in images are connotative or associative and derive from the values and ideas that popular culture associates with their source domain or place of origin.


The conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) (see also Kovecses, 2010), contends that metaphorical insights can be used in the study and interpretation of visual semiotics because social actors, their actions and other social experiences can be framed metaphorically. Insights from critical metaphor analysis (CMA), developed by Charteris-Black (2004, 2005), brings together perspectives from critical discourse analysis, corpus analysis, pragmatics and cognitive semantics. These approaches can be adopted in the interpretation of the ideology that underlies a visual representation or image. The crucial importance of the CMA approach is that it enables the analyst to establish the ideological and rhetorical motivations that underlie the use of language (verbal and visual) in social and cultural contexts. Charteris-Black (2004, p. 42) contends that, “metaphor analysis can be employed to explore ideology.” Semiotic forms are carriers of ideology and the analyst also approaches them from ideological standpoints. Eggins (2004 p.10) observes that to use language at all is to use it ideologically. According to her, our use of language will also be influenced by our ideological positions. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006 p 14) validate this when they argue that “…we see images of whatever kind as entirely within the realm of the realization and instantiations of ideology, as means – always – for the articulation of ideological positions”. Insights from CMA will enable us unearth the ideologies that underlie the conceptualization of lager beer billboard advertisements as representations of gender relations, experiences and attitudes.

Winkler (2012) admits that language is not only gendered but the genders use language differently. She further maintains that there are asymmetries in language use which the resources of language enable its users to express in diverse contexts. Studies reveal that advertisements are used to represent gender relations or stereotypes (Mills, 1995). Popular views contend that women in advertising have been the subject of discussions and debates over four decades with advertisers standing accused of utilizing inappropriate and degrading stereotypes.
Research Data and Analytical Orientation

This study centres on semiotic interpretations of gender representation in selected lager beer billboard advertisements in Nigeria. The selected lager beer billboard advertisements include: Two Gulder lager beer billboard adverts; one Guinness stout advert; and one Hero premium lager beer advert. The billboard advertisements will be explored within the tenets of multimodality and social semiotics with focus on the choice of words, colours, signs, images and other semiotic choices made by the composers to communicate social meaning in context.

Discussion

The analysis of the images will be chiefly along the following paradigm: (1) salience (2) framing; and (3) information value. The approach will enable us explain how these features enhance the realization of the ideologies and social meanings that underlie the visual structures and how they portray gender perspectives and orientations in social and cultural contexts. More importantly, this study will also consider the printed advertising slogan of each lager beer brand and how it contributes to the overall meaning generation and realization of each text.

Figure 1: Gulder Lager Beer

The Gulder beer brand was introduced in response to the growing demand for variety in the beer market, hence, the introduction of the local brewing of Gulder in 1970. Thereafter, the brand has grown immensely and it is now one of the major beer brands in Nigeria currently. Aside from its distinct quality taste, the brand is also known for its extravagant and explicit billboard advertisements in the promotion of the brand.

In Figure 1 above, salience is the key compositional element in interpreting the messages embedded in the images. Salience is concerned with elements that stand out in the construction of an image. Salience creates some form of importance among visual elements, marking out some elements as more important or deserving of more attention than the others. In the figure under consideration, the elements that stand out in the advertisement are the image of Gulder bottle, the advertising slogan (NA MAN YOU BE!) and the image of a fine gentle man in suit. These three elements are given fairly equal level of salience. The significance of this is that the salience invariably draws the attention of the viewer/reader to the billboard advertisement, making the viewer to focus more on the three major elements that have been so foregrounded. This compositional element ideationally communicates the impression that Gulder lager beer is a drink for fine gentle men. This explicitly and implicitly excludes women from participating in the consumption of the product. This is an implicit expression of gender
bias encoded semiotically. Also, the foregrounding of the slogan, “NA MAN YOU BE!” (You’re a real man!) in capital letters does not just serve as an attention seeking device which instantly grabs the reader’s attention and comprehension; it also validates the underlying ideology that the beer brand is exclusively for men (not for women). Again, within the Nigerian social and cultural contexts, the expression also carries the ideation that only “strong” men or men of high social substance can drink the Gulder lager beer. This implicitly underscores the inequality of all men in the Nigerian society or discriminates the “real” men from other groups of (lesser) men in the society. Ideologically, the slogan communicates a sense of otherness and gender asymmetry in the Nigerian society. Thus, the use of salience enhances the implicit realization of representation (ideation) and interactive (interpersonal) values of the visual discourse or image.

Colour, an element of framing, plays a major role in communication as a carrier of social meaning. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p.230) Colour is used by people to present themselves and the values they represent in specific contexts. In figure 1 above, there is a stream of colours ranging from red, gold, black and white, of which each colour serves some specific function. The red is the dominant colour which suggests that it is the official colour of the brand. Here, colours black and white are used to project the energetic image of an impeccable gentle man. The black and white colours exude an atmosphere of affluence and pride which only the brand can afford. Also, the use of colour coordination instead of the repetition of a single colour helps in the promotion of textual cohesion in the image. The intentional use of white for the slogan “NA MAN YOU BE!” is an attention catching strategy that quickly arrests the attention of any passerby and enacts a form of interpersonal interaction between the viewer and the image.

In contrast to figure 1, the visual structures in figure 2 do not have equal salience. The Gulder bottle and the foaming glass of beer are more salient than other visual elements in the text. The significance of this is that the salient features attract more attention to the product on display. This makes the two images to stand out in a significant form in the environment. Similarly, salience is also achieved in the relatively unequal size of the words used in the slogan. “THE ULTIMATE REDEFINED…” is more salient or prominent than “…FOR MEN”. The chief goal of the composer is to communicate a NEW information about a GIVEN. Thus, the fact that the Gulder lager beer is meant for men is a GIVEN but that it is now ultimately redefined is NEW. Hence the composer chooses to foreground the NEW and background the GIVEN. Even at the level of information value, the NEW information is at the top position while the GIVEN information is placed at the bottom. The ideology behind the composition is to invite the viewer and other prospective consumers of the product to explore something new about a seemingly old product. This is a semiotic form of construing ideation and interpersonal relationships between the product and its viewers. The advert also reinforces an old rhetoric about the product, that it is “…FOR MEN.” This is an explicit expression of exclusion and otherness that does not consider the feelings and attitude of women as potential consumers of Gulder lager beer. The ellipsis in the slogan is a rhetorical strategy for stylistically enshrining ideation and interpersonal functions by allowing the viewer to participate in the retrieval and creation of social meaning in the context of the discourse. The framing and information value of the figure interact in such a manner that enhances the

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communicative effect of the advert. The images and the words are placed at the centre of the red canvas, thereby making the images, the words, the red colour and the visual layout to cohere in a striking manner. Again, the colour red, which is the official colour of the brand, serves as the background of the billboard advertisement, thereby, performing the communicative function as an identity marker.

Figure 3: Guinness Stout

The Guinness extra stout is another brand of lager beer that is popular in the Nigerian social world. Its brewing started in 1759 in Dublin. It is owned by Arthur Guinness of which the brand was named after. In the 19th century, Guinness was imported into Nigeria and introduced to the Nigerian beer market. Ever since then, the brand has gained wide acceptance both in Nigeria and the world at large. Guinness (Nigeria) is known for its advertisement prowess, most especially on billboards. Most of the compositional elements of the advertisement communicate the ideology of gender exclusivity and inequality. The visual structures of the advert carry unequal salience as the middle bottle appears to receive more prominence than the other two which seem to have been slightly backgrounded. In all however, the three Guinness bottles stand out as the most salient elements in the advert. This is a strategy employed by the composer to bring to the fore the product being advertised. The relatively large size of the font used for the slogan is a feature of salience that makes it easier for the reader/viewer to see the message from some reasonable distance. Colour contrast is also realized in the advert - there is a change from the dominant colour in the background, black, to a more subtle and eye catching colour white used for the text. The purpose is to capture the attention of the reader/viewer and make them more curious about the message being communicated. However, the communicative function of colour is very significant here. One can deduce from the dominant use of colour black, which serves as the background on the layout, that black is the official colour of the brand and this distinctiveness marks it off from other lager beer brands.

The visual structures in figure 3 lack any frame lines, thereby creating a spatial composition which comprises the text and the picture all within one spatial boundary. There is a continuous flow of visual elements (informational value) from the left to the right. The GIVEN (the three Guinness bottles) is on the left hand side while the NEW (the invitation - “COME DRINK AT THE TABLE OF MEN”) which provide more specific information about the GIVEN, is at the right hand side. The absence of visible disconnecting links between the image and the slogan makes it easy for the reader/viewer to connect the relationship between the two elements.

Ideologically, the Guinness advertisement explicitly expresses bias against the female gender. It is a gender blind advertisement which extols the virtues of men and completely overlooks that of women. The words, images and colour (black) exude male dominance and discrimination against women. A closer look at the invitation - “COME DRINK AT THE TABLE OF MEN” reveals clearly an effortless negation of the cherished universal principle of gender neutrality that is often associated with gender advertising. The tone of the invitation is powerful, authoritative and masculine in orientation thereby giving the impression that Guinness drink is exclusively made for men. The invitation appeals only to
men consumers of the product and implicitly communicates the impression that women are not invited to the table for drink. The foregrounding of the invitation also implies that it may be for some class of men and not for all male gender. Intertextually, the image of the three Guinness bottles connects with the three wise men (the magi) in the Bible that visited Jesus at birth. Thus, the invitation is to some wise men to come over for a drink of Guinness beer. This is a clear case of gender tribalism because it discriminates between men and women.

Figure 4: Hero Premium Lager

Hero premium lager is a brand of beer which is being locally refined in Onitsha, Anambra State. The beer which was launched into the Nigerian market in August 2012 has got other brands of beer on their toes due to its large demand in Nigerian market. The GIVEN, the Hero beer bottle, attracts more attention than any other visual structure. It is strategically projected to capture the attention of the reader/viewer to the brand’s identity and the message it communicates. Unlike the previous images which lack frame lines, figure 4 above has a frame line which demarcates the picture space from the text space, thereby creating separate spatial composition for both spaces. There is no text in the picture space and no picture in the text space. Although the image is viewed as one entity, it is the picture space which invariably lures one to take a look at what the text space might have in terms of information for the picture space.

This is yet another discriminatory advertisement, which in its strict sense extols the virtues of the male gender over that of the female. The advertising slogan “#BETHEHERO” clearly reveals a negation of the gender neutrality principle. Here, a stylistic approach is used, and ‘HERO’ is used in place of ‘MEN’. This may be a discourse strategy that is intended to conceal the gender stereotype or intentionality that underlies the communication, but it implicitly reveals the gender bias that underlies it because the word “hero” is a carrier of some attribution associated with the men folk alone. Its use in whatever context connects with qualities associated with men. The invitation is therefore explicitly intended for men but metaphorically it implies that women who have some attributes of valiant men (hero) are also invited to be “heroes” by participating in the consumption of the product. The fact of this advert, like the others previously examined, is that women have been explicitly excluded from participation in the consumption of a product that is patronized by several men and women in Nigeria. One wonders why the text could not read “#BETHE HERO AND HEROINE”, seeing that it is a-two way traffic. But media practitioners and producers of this brand of beer will prefer to exclude women from advertisement, but yet, collect the monies they get from women who buy the product. It is out rightly wrong that both gender which actively participate in the consumption of the product are known but one particular gender seems to be poorly or not represented at all in its advertisements.
Conclusion

This study reveals that media practitioners intentionally produce and use multimodal products that privilege the male gender over their female counterparts in the advertisement of alcoholic products. The exclusion of women in the advertisements communicates the wrong assumption that alcoholic drinks are either not meant for women or that one has to be a “man”, physiologically and psychologically to be a partaker in their consumption. It may be true that very little population of women drink lager beer, but this does not justify their complete exclusion from advertisements as our study reveals. The basic message would have been an emphasis on responsible consumption of alcohol and not on gender tribalism as explicitly stated in the advertisements examined in this study. Thus, the zero representation of women in lager beer billboard advertisements is just another strategy to fully utilize advertising to implicitly and explicitly express and sustain the traditional patriarchal ideology that espouses women marginalization, subjugation, discrimination and asymmetry in the Nigerian social spaces. All the adverts represent men as strong, independent and always in charge (control) while the exclusion of women implicitly represents women as weak, dependent and submissive.

References


