

## ADVERTISING AND SEXISM: A STUDY OF HERBAL SEX ENHANCEMENT DRINK ADVERTISEMENTS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The lack of regulation and persistent media practices have posed significant questions about the degree of sexism, recurring gendered themes, and the role advertisement plays in shaping societal perceptions of gender and sexuality. The study investigated interconnection of advertisement and sexism where the herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements in Nigeria were used as a case study. The research utilized a survey method approach by researching the prevalence of gender representation, the magnitude of sexist ideologies, and the implication of such representations on the audience perceptions about gender roles and sexuality. Four hundred respondents were selected from three strategic local government areas in the Ondo State, based on the location of the senatorial districts with the highest exposure to such advertisements. Results showed that men are usually projected as sexually dominating and virile whereas women are projected as passive objects of male desire. Such depictions encourage conventional gender subordination and enhance unrealistic ideals of masculinity and femininity. Indeed, statistical analysis revealed that a dominant majority of the respondents agreed that such advertisements sexualize the adverts, encourage pressure on men in society, and have a negative impact on the way women view themselves. The study concluded that the herbal sex enhancement adverts significantly contribute to creation of gender stereotypes which had a huge influence on popular perception of sex. The work recommended that there should be regulation, gender-sensitive advertising regulation, and encouraging equal media portrayals.

**Keywords:** Advertising, Gender Stereotypes, Herbal Sex Enhancement Drinks, Media Representation, Sexism

### Introduction

Advertising is a powerful medium that reflects and reinforces cultural values. In Nigeria, herbal sex-enhancing products are increasingly popular across multiple media platforms. These adverts often employ sexualized imagery, gender stereotypes, and explicit connotations to attract consumers, particularly men, while objectifying women and

reinforcing patriarchal ideologies that portray masculinity as dominant and femininity as subordinate (Okunna, 2005; Uche & Ngwoke, 2018; Kilbourne, 1999; Goffman, 1979). The Nigerian herbal market is largely informal, with minimal regulation, allowing advertisers to disseminate content that can be sexist, misleading, or socially harmful. These ads, frequently aired on radio, online platforms, and billboards during peak hours, normalize gendered stereotypes and expose young audiences to inappropriate messages (Eze, 2017).

Despite rising advocacy for gender-sensitive communication, there is limited research on sexism in Nigerian herbal sex drink advertising. Women are often depicted as passive objects of male desire, reducing female agency and promoting sexualized stereotypes (Goffman, 1979; Okunna, 2005; Ankomah, 2015). The lack of regulation, combined with persistent media practices, raises questions about the degree of sexism, recurring gendered themes, and the role of such advertisements in shaping societal perceptions of gender and sexuality. This study examined gender representations in herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements, assessing their alignment with sexist ideologies, and evaluating their impact on public perception and social constructions of gender in Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of the study was to ascertain the description and appearance of sexism in sex enhancement drink advertisements available in Nigeria. Other objectives seek to:

1. Identify the dominant gender representations in herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements in Nigeria.
2. Analyse the extent to which these advertisements reflect sexist ideologies and reinforce gender stereotypes.
3. Evaluate the implications of these portrayals on public perception of gender roles and sexuality in Nigeria.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the dominant gender representations portrayed in herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements in Nigeria?
2. To what extent do these advertisements reflect sexist ideologies and reinforce gender stereotypes?
3. What are the implications of these portrayals on public perception of gender roles and sexuality in Nigeria?

## Literature Review

In Nigeria, advertisement is used widely to promote products and services through the medium of mass media i.e. Television, Radio, Newspaper, Magazines, Billboards, posters, souvenirs, and the internet. Advertising also reflects and reinforces prevailing ideologies, often replicating patriarchal norms where women are depicted in subordinate roles and men as dominant decision-makers (Okunna, 2005; Nwabueze & Ebeze, 2013). Sexist advertising relies on stereotyping, objectification, and discrimination, portraying women as homemakers or objects of attraction and men as providers, which is evident across media, including alcohol, fashion, cosmetics, and herbal sex enhancement products (Goffman, 1979; Kilbourne, 1999; Uche & Eze, 2017; Ngwoke, 2018). Scholars argue these depictions actively normalize gender inequality, shaping social perceptions (Goffman, 1979; Kilbourne, 1999). Weak regulatory enforcement, patriarchal structures, and conservative values allow sexist advertising to persist, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive approaches (Okunna, 2005; Asemah, 2011; Udegbe & Eze, 2020; ARCON, 2021). Herbal sex enhancement drinks, marketed as natural remedies for male sexual stamina, gain popularity due to cultural faith in traditional medicine, stigma around sexual dysfunction, and dissatisfaction with synthetic drugs (Ankomah, 2015; Oyinlola & Oyetayo, 2016). Aggressive marketing through radio, posters, and social media emphasizes hyper-masculinity, portraying men as dominant and women as passive, while often making misleading safety claims (Odugbemi et al., 2016; Bello, 2019; Oduaran & Oduaran, 2020). Despite health and ethical concerns, high demand and profitability sustain their widespread promotion, making the analysis of gender representation crucial for media accountability, public health, and gender equity (Adebayo, 2021).

Advertising discourse continues to shape gender norms in Nigeria. Omiunu (2023), using content analysis of Nigerian newspapers and magazines, found that male bodies are highlighted for strength while female bodies are sexualized. Similarly, Ihechu, Nwabuisi, and Ifeoma (2021), in a survey of 400 residents in Abia State, confirmed that women are mostly portrayed in domestic or beauty-related roles, reinforcing objectification. Akpan, Umoren, and Nwokeocha (2024) argue for inclusive gender representation reflecting Nigeria's diversity. Using Goffman's (1979) framework, Omowale (2022) found that men appear as professionals while women occupy family roles, urging re-education of advertisers. Adinlewa and Ojih (2018) noted improved female portrayals but stressed ongoing sensitization. Odebode and Awoye (2022) studied married men in Ilorin and found generally positive views toward aphrodisiac herbs, with differences by age and education. Orisakwe et al. (2019) found high levels of lead and cadmium in herbal sex enhancers, recommending stricter regulation. Ariyo (2019) identified 25 plant species used for erectile dysfunction, stressing conservation and further pharmacological research. Olatunji and Olatunji (2017) and Umar et al. (2023) confirmed widespread use of herbal aphrodisiacs across Nigeria, emphasizing the need for public awareness and stronger oversight.

## **Theoretical Review**

This research study was anchored on Objectification Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Framing Theory.

### **Objectification Theory**

Developed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), Objectification Theory explains how women are treated as objects whose bodies are valued for others' use or pleasure. In advertising, particularly for herbal sex-enhancement drinks, women are routinely portrayed as sexual objects whose worth lies in arousing male desire. This normalises objectification and can lead women to internalise it, resulting in self-objectification, body monitoring, shame, and sexual dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Nigerian herbal sex-enhancement adverts often depict women in hyper-sexualised poses, highlighting body parts like hips, breasts, and thighs as symbols of sexual availability and male satisfaction. These portrayals fragment women's identities and strip them of autonomy. Thus, Objectification Theory helps explain how such adverts perpetuate sexism by positioning women as tools for male pleasure.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory posits that behaviour and attitudes are learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Advertising serves as a major agent of socialisation by presenting acceptable gendered behaviours. The youth today internalise these patterns when they see them rewarded or normalised. In herbal sex-enhancement ads, hypermasculine men and submissive women serve as models of desirable conduct, reinforcing toxic masculinity and gender inequality. In Nigeria, where both traditional and digital media are influential, repeated exposure strengthens sexist norms and unrealistic sexual ideals, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes.

### **Framing Theory**

Erving Goffman (1974) and later Entman (1993) explain that media frames shape how audiences perceive reality by highlighting certain aspects while downplaying others. In advertising, framing determines how products—and gender roles—are interpreted.

Herbal sex-enhancement drink adverts typically frame sexual satisfaction around male virility, portraying women as rewards or beneficiaries of male performance. Such framing reinforces patriarchal dominance and simplifies gender relations. Advertisers exploit emotions like shame, pride, and aspiration to drive sales, especially in a society where open discussion of sexuality is still taboo. Through Framing Theory, this study critically examines how these adverts construct sexist narratives and maintain gender hierarchies in Nigerian society.

Together, Objectification Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Framing Theory offer a comprehensive lens for this study. Objectification Theory explains the sexualisation of

women; Social Learning Theory shows how audiences adopt these gendered portrayals; and Framing Theory uncovers how media narratives sustain sexist ideologies. Collectively, they guide the analysis of how herbal sex-enhancement drink advertisements reinforce sexism and shape public perceptions of gender and sexuality in Nigeria.

### Methodology

This study adopted a survey research design to collect data from a large and diverse population, offering insights into perceptions of gender representation, sexism, and public reactions to herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements in Nigeria. The study population consisted of about 5.3 million residents of Ondo State (NPC, 2022), focusing on adults aged 18 and above.

A multistage sampling technique was used. One Local Government Area (LGA) was selected from each senatorial district: Akure South (Central), Owo (North), and Okitipupa (South)—chosen for their urban nature, media exposure, and prevalence of such advertisements. Using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula, a sample size of 400 respondents was determined and distributed proportionately among the three LGAs. Respondents were randomly selected from public spaces like markets, campuses, and residential areas.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into sections on gender representation, sexist ideologies, and implications for gender roles. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The instrument was validated by experts in mass communication and gender studies, with a reliability coefficient of 0.81 obtained using Cronbach's Alpha. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, and standard deviation.

### Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

**Table 1: Perception of gender representation in herbal sex enhancement advertisements**

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD	MEAN	SD
Herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements typically depict men as strong, dominant, and sexually assertive.	144 (36%)	120 (30%)	56 (14%)	48 (12%)	32 (8%)	3.74	1.20
Women in these advertisements are often portrayed as passive or sexually submissive, positioned primarily as objects of male desire.	112 (28%)	142 (35.5%)	56 (14%)	57 (14.3%)	33 (8.3%)	3.61	1.19
The advertisements often emphasise male sexual performance as	101 (25.3)	175 (43.8%)	32 (8%)	51 (12.8%)	41 (10.3%)	3.61	1.17

the key focus, with women seen as rewards for male virility.							
Gender roles in herbal sex enhancement drink adverts align with traditional stereotypes of men as providers and women as caregivers.	107 (26.8%)	159 (39.8%)	25 (6.3%)	65 (16.3%)	45 (11.3%)	3.55	1.25
Herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements portray women as primarily concerned with their physical appearance or sexual attractiveness.	89 (22.3%)	169 (42.3%)	17 (4.3%)	70 (17.5%)	55 (13.8%)	3.42	1.31

Note: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)

**Mean Interpretation:** Values closer to 5 indicate stronger agreement with the statement, while values closer to 1 indicate stronger disagreement.

**Standard Deviation (SD)** shows the variability of responses. Values above 1.0 indicate a wide spread in opinions.

The data in Table 1 highlights how herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements in Nigeria reinforce gender stereotypes. The statement "Herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements typically depict men as strong, dominant, and sexually assertive" had the highest agreement, with a mean of 3.74 and 66% concurrence. This aligns with Eze (2020), who noted that Nigerian sex-enhancement ads emphasise hypermasculinity, portraying men as virile conquerors. It also supports Goffman's (1979) Gender Display Theory, which argues that advertising replicates societal gender regimes by projecting ideal masculinities.

Women are often portrayed as passive or sexually submissive, with 63.5% agreement and a mean of 3.61. This reflects Okunna's (2012) observation that Nigerian media objectifies women, reducing them to background actors in male-oriented advertising. It also supports Mulvey's (1975) Male Gaze Theory, which posits that women are depicted as objects of heterosexual male desire.

The focus on male sexual performance, portraying women as prizes, also had a mean of 3.61. This reinforces Ugochukwu's (2021) findings that herbal sex enhancement ads glorify male virility while relegating women to accessories. Kilbourne (1999) similarly notes that such portrayals impose damaging gender expectations, defining men by sexual dominance and women by availability.

The statement on conventional gender roles ("men as providers and women as caregivers") recorded a mean of 3.55, confirming that these ads maintain traditional

expectations, consistent with Nwosu (2014) and the Social Constructionist Theory, which highlights media's role in shaping societal gender norms.

Finally, "women as primarily concerned with physical appearance" had a mean of 3.42, indicating moderate agreement. This continues the trend of aesthetic objectification noted by Azeez and Idowu (2018), who found women's bodies frequently used to attract attention in advertising.

Overall, these findings align with Adeyemi (2021) and Ogunyemi (2019), showing that sex-related product ads in Nigeria are male-centered and reduce women to sexualised figures. The prevalence of sexist imagery confirms the relevance of Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and Feminist Media Theory, which argue that advertising normalises patriarchal ideologies and devalues women.

**Table 2: Reflection of Sexist Ideologies**

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD	MEAN	SD
The portrayal of men and women in herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements reinforces traditional gender hierarchies, where men are superior to women.	105 (26.3%)	132 (33%)	55 (13.8%)	62 (15.5%)	46 (11.5%)	3.48	1.29
Advertisements for herbal sex enhancement products reflect a belief that men's worth is tied to their sexual performance and virility.	127 (31.8%)	143 (35.8%)	30 (7.5%)	57 (14.3%)	43 (10.8%)	3.64	1.27
These advertisements promote the idea that women's value is largely based on their physical attractiveness and sexual appeal.	120 (30%)	103 (25.8%)	33 (8.3%)	76 (19%)	68 (17%)	3.33	1.42
The advertisements suggest that sexual satisfaction is a male responsibility, and women are depicted as tools for achieving male pleasure.	154 (38.5%)	107 (26.8%)	45 (11.3%)	60 (15%)	34 (8.5%)	3.71	1.26
The portrayal of gender in herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements perpetuates harmful stereotypes about male dominance and female submission.	128 (31%)	100 (25%)	53 (13.3%)	64 (16%)	55 (13.8%)	3.45	1.49

Note: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)

**Mean Interpretation:** Values closer to 5 indicate stronger agreement with the statement, while values closer to 1 indicate stronger disagreement.

**Standard Deviation (SD)** shows the variability of responses. Values above 1.0 indicate a wide spread in opinions.

Table 2 highlights how herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements in Nigeria reflect sexist ideologies and reinforce gender stereotypes. Respondents generally agreed with all statements, indicating widespread acceptance of gender bias in these ads. The statement that adverts support traditional gender hierarchies, portraying men as superior, had a mean of 3.48, with 60% concurrence. This aligns with Nwosu (2014) and Okunna (2012), who note that Nigerian advertising elevates male authority while relegating women to decorative roles, consistent with Goffman's (1979) Gender Display Theory.

Advertisements linking men's worth to sexual performance scored a mean of 3.64, reflecting Ugochukwu (2021) and Eze (2020), and illustrating Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Women's value tied to physical attractiveness had a mean of 3.33, supporting Mulvey's (1975) Male Gaze Theory and findings by Azeez and Idowu (2018) that women are often objectified in sex-related advertising.

The highest agreement (mean = 3.71) was for the portrayal of sexual satisfaction as male responsibility and women as instruments, supporting Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and empirical studies by Adeyemi (2021) and Ogunyemi (2019). Finally, portraying gender in ways that reinforce domination and subordination scored a mean of 3.45, aligning with Feminist Media Theory (Van Zoonen, 1994) and Social Constructionist Theory on the media's role in shaping societal norms. Overall, the findings show that Nigerian herbal sex enhancement advertisements rely heavily on sexist ideologies, glorifying male sexual dominance and objectifying women while reinforcing patriarchal gender norms.

**Table 3:** Implications on Public Perception of Gender Roles and Sexuality

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD	MEAN	SD
Herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements contribute to societal pressure on men to conform to unrealistic sexual expectations.	101 (25.3%)	163 (40.8%)	34 (8.5%)	57 (14.3%)	45 (14.3%)	3.54	1.27
Advertisements that objectify women in sexual ways may lead to a normalisation of sexism in Nigerian society.	132 (33.0%)	134 (33.5%)	34 (8.5%)	50 (12.5%)	50 (12.5%)	3.62	1.29
The portrayal of women as sexual objects in these adverts can negatively	133 (33.3%)	121 (30.3%)	32 (8.0%)	60 (15.0%)	54 (15%)	3.54	1.36

affect women's self-esteem and body image.							
These advertisements shape public perceptions by reinforcing the notion that sexuality and sexual performance are central to a person's identity, especially for men.	111 (27.7%)	142 (35.5%)	37 (9.3%)	47 (11.8%)	63 (11.8%)	3.49	1.37
The way gender is portrayed in these advertisements affects how young people view relationships, sexuality, and gender roles.	105 (26.3%)	143 (35.8%)	34 (8.5%)	61 (15.3%)	57 (15.3%)	3.44	1.35
The portrayal of men in herbal sex enhancement drink adverts may influence young men to adopt behaviors centered around sexual conquest and dominance.	127 (31.8%)	138 (34.5%)	35 (8.8%)	50 (12.5%)	50 (12.5%)	3.61	1.31

Note: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)

**Mean Interpretation:** Values closer to 5 indicate stronger agreement with the statement, while values closer to 1 indicate stronger disagreement.

**Standard Deviation (SD)** shows the variability of responses. Values above 1.0 indicate a wide spread in opinions.

Table 3 shows how herbal sex enhancement drink advertisements influence societal perceptions of gender roles, sexuality, and youth attitudes. Respondents agreed that these ads shape views on masculinity, femininity, and sexual expectations. The statement on advertisements shaping societal views on male sexuality had a mean of 3.54, with 66.1% concurrence, supporting Eze (2020) and Ugochukwu (2021), and aligning with Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity theory. The highest agreement (mean = 3.62; 66.5%) was for the statement that objectifying women normalizes sexism, reflecting findings by Azeez & Idowu (2018) and Oyesomi et al. (2019), and consistent with Goffman (1979) and Van Zoonen (1994).

Women's self-esteem and body image impact scored a mean of 3.54 (63% agreement), supporting Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and observations by Olatunji (2019). Ads framing male sexual performance as central to identity scored 3.49, supporting Mulvey's (1975) Male Gaze Theory and Okunna (2012) on media's role in shaping identity.

Youth perception influence had a mean of 3.44, highlighting their vulnerability to internalizing media messages (Eze, 2020; Adeyemi, 2021) and supporting Social Constructionist Theory. Lastly, portrayal of men influencing young men toward sexual

dominance had a mean of 3.61, linking to Ogunyemi (2019) and the concept of toxic masculinity.

Overall, these advertisements pressure men to perform sexually, objectify women, and shape youth beliefs on gender and relationships, underscoring the need for media literacy, gender-sensitive regulations, and public health counter-narratives.

### **Conclusion**

This study finds that Nigerian herbal sex enhancement drink adverts reinforce gender stereotypes and sexism. Men are consistently depicted as sexually dominant, while women are objectified and subservient, existing primarily for male pleasure. These portrayals influence how both genders perceive themselves and others in sexual and relational contexts and reflect deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. They also normalize female objectification, elevate unrealistic expectations of male sexual performance, and shape young people's views on relationships, sexuality, and gender roles, ultimately hindering progress toward gender equality.

### **Recommendations**

- i. Regulatory bodies like the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) should enforce stricter guidelines to curb sexist or gender-stereotyped adverts.
- ii. Advertisers and creative firms should adopt gender-sensitive approaches that portray men and women respectfully, empowered, and non-exploitatively.
- iii. NGOs, civil society groups, and media literacy educators should run public awareness campaigns to highlight the dangers of sexist advertising and promote critical viewing skills among young audiences.

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