

The Objectification and Sexualisation of Women in the Namibian Mainstream Print Media

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ABSTRACT---*The 1990s saw a growing awareness towards the integration of gender issues in government policies and planning. Gender mainstreaming began to be recognised as an issue that impact women and calling on all government policies to be guided by a gender perspective. Print media remains a critical medium for transforming gender relations, yet gender blindness seems to be apparent in media reports. Societies are composed of complex networks of groups with different and sometimes competing interests. These interest groups heavily depend on the media as important sources of information about the world and a powerful means of shaping attitudes and beliefs. But the media seems to fuel inequalities in their coverage of gender related issues. In the quest to reach its audience, the media is inclined to use sexual imagery which objectifies the woman body as sex object. Given the importance of gender mainstreaming in framing national policies to stem the portrayal of women as objects and temptresses, this study seeks establish whether the Namibian print media objectify and sexualise the Namibian women as sex objects.*

Keywords--- gender blindness; objectification, gender mainstreaming; temptress, collective beneficiary, sexualisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the elements of a working democracy, as UNESCO puts it, is the existence of a free, independent and functional media. In Namibia this freedom is enshrined in Article 21 of the Namibian Constitution which states that “All persons shall have the right to: (a) Freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and other media.” The media are fundamental instruments in the promotion of a working democracy. The Namibian media operate in society with high moral values which demands that they attune and respect these values in addition to representing the world accurately, fair and free from biases and self-interests. Although the role of the media is perceived as important sources of information about the world and a means of shaping attitudes and beliefs (Greer 2008: 53), however, research shows that the media content is often reshaped and constructed in such a way that it does not offer the reality of what the world really is. For most people today, the media are the main sources of information, knowledge and entertainment. Research from USA shows that Americans, on average, watches more than four hours of television every day translating to 28 hours per week and two months per year. On average, Americans spend 32 hours per month on the Internet and this number continues to grow (O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2012). There is no nation that has not experienced the social media explosion that has transformed societies. Today as never before, people truly live in a mediated world. The radical shift from analogue to digital terrestrial television viewing and computed mediated communication (CMC) has made communication much easier and affordable. This transformation of societies by the media has its own advantages and disadvantages one of which is the misrepresentation of women in media coverage.

Public perception shows that the media are central source of information to the public on issues of sex (Malmuth & Impett, 2001) and this makes young people particularly vulnerable to violent or sexual content in the media. Research findings such as this one, has led to feminist theorists and researchers exploring the profound negative consequences that culture and the media's pervasive practice of sexually objectifying women have on them. An 'objectification theory' has been proposed as a framework for understanding the range of psychological consequences that girls and women face by being raised in a culture that constantly and persistently objectifies the female body (Fredrickson & Noll, 1998). This theory posits the idea that girls and women are typically known to internalise the observer's perspective, and to use this perspective as the primary view of their physical selves (Kilbourne (2002). This perspective of self, which is therefore

warped, leads to constant body monitoring which, in turn, can increase a woman's propensity for shame and anxiety. The objectification theory also further explains that changes within the way a woman views her body can lead to mental health risks. The themes and messages which are frequently repeated in the media have an influence on society's perception of social reality. The constant exposure to these themes and messages via the media imprint them to memory and can influence logical reasoning and decision making and is capable of altering moral values of societies and individuals.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. The reason for choosing the qualitative method is because of its two main features, the interpretative and the naturalistic methods. The interpretative approach will help the researchers to understand the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences in the world in which they live while the naturalistic approach helps to explore and understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour and interactions. The qualitative method allowed the researchers to gather concrete data to establish whether women are represented as sex objects in the Namibian print media. Primary data was collected from newspapers and magazines and recorded the discrepancies between the portrayal of women in the Namibian media. Structured questionnaires consisting of both open-ended and closed ended questions were used in order to allow the subjects to discuss their opinions, views and experiences fully and eliminated the risk of the subjects veering off topic. Questions were asked in a pre-determined order, in order for the researchers to gather the exact data that the research required. The population consisted of students and staff members of the University of Namibia at the main campus in Windhoek. A non-probability in combination with the convenience sampling techniques were used. A total of 100 (10 staff members and 90 students) participated in the study. Students from all levels of study from first to fourth years were considered in order to obtain diversified and broad information on the subject under research.

The role of the media: Namibia's post-independence history commenced on 21 March 1990, in so far as it affected the media, it brought both opportunities and a vexing transition as it demanded Namibian journalism to assess its role in society. Perception on the role of the Namibian media varies; there are those who expect them to be the agents of power to play a constructive role in uniting divided communities but also to change attitudes in favour of the political current and shape political orientation. White in Barry Jones (2005) argues that the manner in which people are governed serves as a true barometer of the quality of democracy. Prior to independence, both print and electronic media supported the political orientation of the day. The post-independence media continue to be divided along political lines. The Namibian media have over years represented two contradictory voices; on one hand is the call for the public's right to know and on the other the exercise of responsible journalism. The two extreme voices show that the media are important instruments of information but also that information can play dualistic role of being constructive or destructive. Generally, the Namibian media are expected to emancipate traditional communities by constructing positive social reality in which men and women can live harmoniously and act within the boundaries of respect and civility. This is easily said than done as Mwilima (1999) observes that at independence both parties had to learn the new rules of freedom of expression in the context of a young democracy. Often transition towards working democracy in Africa and elsewhere in the world, calls for the media to redefine the role they can play in society. Within a collective theory, the media, having become dominant social institutions, must not go unchallenged, but should be held accountable to inform the public as organiser and agitator of social reforms.

In carrying out these function, McQuail (1992) points to two outstanding features; first that of specifying the intended collective beneficiary and secondly, the rules of determining the balance of benefits or harm that could possibly be caused by the media. This justifies the arguments that the media are effective instruments to re-enforce the common good of society and balance the two extremes of social good and harm. Due to the shortness of collective memory as part of human nature, the media fills in the space to construct and maintain the sense of continuity and common destiny of citizens. The Namibian media are expected to remind the nation of its belongingness and their common destiny, a role that is a never ending process, one that is to be sustained over a long period of time. This common destiny includes the promotion of women's self-esteem and self-worth. When women are seen as less important, less noteworthy and, in general, lesser than men, it cultivates inequality and promotes patriarchy. This causes women to be seen not as human beings in their own right, but as subordinates to men who live solely for the sexual gratification and pleasure of men. The unequal representation of women in the media may have an effect on media practitioners. It is possible that, due to the objectification, stereotyping and sexualisation of women, the perceptions of reporters are altered, which in turn influences their capability to be objective.

Media consumption: The mass media play a critical role as tools frequently used to inform and educate Namibian citizens about matters political. This is the findings of Christiaan Keulder (2006) which shows that students at the two tertiary institutions in Namibia, the University of Namibia and the Polytechnic of Namibia, have high interest in media coverage. The research shows that 83.6% of students watch television; 79.6% read newspapers and 73.1% listen to radio.

The statistics show two important dimensions; 1) the number of television viewers has surpassed that of radio which was initially perceived as the traditional form of media, 2) that tertiary students are well read and closely follow media reports. As to the media content they are exposed to, the research reveals that three in four students have great interest in local content followed by a significant number (53%) of students following media reports on social issues while those interested in political content is few about 23% and media content on economy with 11%. Statistics reveal that media's coverage of social issues greatly impacts the Namibian youths.

Statistics on television shows collectively almost 80% of students watch TV five days a week or more of which 53.4% watch media content on social issues.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalists as members of society seem to be walking a tight robe in performing their duties as professional communicators. They are often perceived by the public as participants or insiders in the governance and liberal political process. On the other side of the coin, their relationship with politicians has always been hostile. On one hand the media have their goals, customs and practices and on the other are the politicians, activists and interest groups all of which strive for a fair coverage in the media. Each of these groups has its own goals and exerts its own pressure on the media. This causes a tempestuous relationship between them. Concerns about the representation of women in the media have been widely covered. Representation here is defined as the construction of aspects of 'reality' such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities to make them seem natural in the eyes of the public. The woman body is not to be treated as sexual object, a mere body to be looked at, evaluated and critiqued as this can lead to psychological problems (Fredrickson & Noll, 1998).

The use of sexual imagery in the print media is nothing new. Past studies suggest that the level of sex in the print media has increased over the years. Frequently repeated themes and messages seen in the media can influence perceptions of social reality and make them more accessible from memory and when asked to make decisions in real life, people who are more exposed to certain messages are more likely to apply them. During a period of two weeks in September 2012 the British print media were surveyed with results showing that "excessive objectification of women (BBC News, December 3, 2012). Stankiewicz and Rosselli (2008) are of the opinion that this causes numerous societal problems. The use of sexual imagery in the print media is nothing new. Carpenter & Edison (2004) observed an increase in the level of sex in the print media. Their research concluded that frequently repeated themes and messages seen in the media can influence the audience's perceptions of social reality as the constant exposure to these messages and themes make them more accessible from memory, and thus, when asked to make decisions in real life, people who are more exposed to certain messages are more likely to apply them. It is therefore natural to deduce that the constant portrayal of women as sex objects in the media, especially in advertisements, can change the perceptions of society regarding the treatment of women and young girls. When the audience is consistently bombarded with pictures of half naked women advocating the message that "sex sells", it becomes almost second nature to the audience that sex, indeed, does sell, and that there's nothing wrong with these images which objectify women.

These images may seem subtle and almost go unnoticed, but the power of subliminal messaging cannot be underestimated. When magazines and newspapers use pictures of half naked women to advertise perfumes or cosmetic products, and they often see advertisers use pictures of dismembered women - with the focus solely on their thighs and backsides - to advertise sneakers, it may be difficult for society not to be influenced by these overwhelming messages to objectify women (Redwin, 2009). Research has demonstrated the negative effects of the objectification and sexualisation of women in the media. Depression, anxiety, body shame, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders are only a few among the growing list of repercussions. In addition to the objectification and sexualisation of women, the media commits another assault on the dignity of women. Some advertisements highlight one part of a woman's body while ignoring other parts of her body by portraying women with missing appendages or substitute appendages and are aimed at selling a product. Dismemberment advertisements promote the idea of separate entities and encourage a woman to view her body as many individual pieces rather than a whole. The result is that women may feel that their entire body is spoiled on account of one less than perfect feature. If a woman has less than satisfactory legs, then her potential for beauty is spoiled. In other words, if every part of her body is not flawless, then the possibility for beauty is ruined. Girls and women are conditioned from a young age to view the body as a 'work in progress' or something in constant need of alteration. Instead of being satisfied with their body as a whole, they concentrate on what separate entities they lack. Many women compare their bodies and sexuality to the eroticised images that are plastered on billboards and television and in magazines and movies." (Greening, n.d.). The dismemberment of women in advertisements in newspapers and magazines can be seen as the peak of the representation of women as sex objects in the media, as the rest of a woman - such as her face, arms, legs, etc - are neglected, and the parts of her body generally associated with sexual activity - such as her breasts, midriff, thighs, backside and vagina are highlighted. This creates the idea that the "unnecessary" parts of a woman, which do not contribute to sexual gratification, can merely be ignored and promotes the notion that a woman

exist solely to be used for sex and for the pleasure of her male counterpart.

Often stories are used precisely to objectify women, as the use of pictures of beautiful and half naked women have been known to boost newspaper and magazine sales. An example hereof can be found in the English newspaper 'The Sun', ("Five Things About Women in the Press", 2012) where a story which read: "Scientific proof, Coco's buttocks declared '100% real'" was used as an opportunity to print a photograph of a woman wearing nothing but G-string underwear. It can be argued that the authenticity of Coco's backside has no news value and was used solely to objectify and sexualise Coco as a body part, rather than a woman with the aforementioned body part.

On average, men's, women's fashion and female adolescent magazines were more likely to portray women as sex objects. Print media and advertising in particular, create and sustain unrealistic images and stereotypes of women. Analyses assessing the level of sexuality in magazine show an increase in the level of sexual dress. Carpenter & Edison (2004) research shows that there is greater reliance on visual and verbal sexual imagery in the print media and that since the 1850s, sexual imagery has been widely used to sell products, services and ideas. During this time period, the development of cheaper, better printing technologies made using illustrations in newspapers and magazines more affordable and therefore more accessible to advertisers and to the public. The Carpenter & Edison research further shows that level of dress in advertising content today ranges from mere sexual suggestion to full nudity and in some cases, the depiction of intercourse. Because sexual advertisements are more apt to appear in women and men's magazines than in general interest magazines, sexualisation and objectification of women is sold directly to men and women. It can be concluded that the frequent portrayal of women as sex objects in all forms of mass media can influence men's perceptions of women as well as women's perceptions of themselves.

The most prominent means of transporting this sexualised female identity is through mass media representation resulting to 'self-objectification' by women themselves who become more concerned with observable than non-observable body attributes such as feelings and internal body states. Appearance monitoring, which is prevalent in self-objectification, can increase shame and appearance anxiety and diminish the awareness of internal bodily states. These experiential consequences may contribute to the development of several mental health risks, including eating disorders, unipolar depression, and sexual dysfunction. Subsequent studies attest to the negative implications of objectifying the female body (Greening, n.d.)

Due to self-objectification and the fact that women become more concerned with physical appearance than what can be found within, young girls and women have become less likely to be concerned about their personality and intellect, and more likely to focus on the way they look.

They infinite number of hours perfecting the way they look, the make-up they wear, the clothes they wear and what their bodies look like and this creates an overwhelming negative environment for young girls in which to grow up because they are brought up believing that the only thing that matters is physical beauty and less attention is given to the cultivation of intelligence and other attributes. This self-objectification could lead to higher levels of appearance anxiety, which in turn lead to a decrease in the appeal of the physical aspects of sex.

As the media creates unrealistic images of what women should look like, women are often unsatisfied with themselves and their bodies because they do not measure up to the ideals presented to them by the media. This causes inner conflict within women, which in turn causes a general feeling of unhappiness and unease. Greening conclude that the shame and disgust women experience about their bodies may shape their sexual attitudes and experiences.

This argument received support through studies in which a negative correlation was present between shame and self-disgust and the appeal of physical sex. (Greening, n.d.)

Redwin (2009) argues that female stereotypes tend to undervalue women as a whole, and diminish them to sexual objects and passive human beings and argues further that the media's focus on body image and submissive female stereotypes has affected children's thinking resulting into young girls and teenagers to be increasingly concerned with their weight and unhappy with the way they look. "Since the rebirth of the women's movement in the 1960s, critics constantly have raged against the way advertising treats women. Scantly clad, suggestively portrayed women sell every different type of product on television, in magazines and now on personal computer screens, in increasing numbers, since the 1980s. In the past, young educated women were the strongest critics of these advertisements ... With this steady increase of advertisements that portray women as sex objects, we must ask, what have been its effects on attitudes?" (Zimmerman & DaWberg, 2008). The introduction of the third wave feminist theory has encouraged women to view sex as power.

Due to this paradigm shift, young, educated women now agree that the use of sex in certain advertisements can be culturally acceptable. Zimmerman & Dahlberg (2008) concluded that the sexualisation of women in the media has conditioned some women not to see the negative effects of it.

4. FINDINGS

Demography: During the round of data collection, 100 structured questionnaires were disseminated of which 73 were returned and 8 of these were incomplete and could therefore not be used in the study. Of the 73 respondents, 9 (14%) were lecturers and 56 (86%) were students; 27 (42%) of the respondents were male compared to 38 (58%) being female. A conscious decision was made to approach more women than men because the study affects women than it would for men. The largest part of the population fall between 18 to 25 years from which 34 (52.3%) returned the questionnaire followed by the 26-to 30 age group who returned 18 (27.6%) responses. The reason for this high response rate by the 18 to 30 age groups offers two reasons; one that is that the researchers made efforts to target this age group as significant segment of the research population; the second reason could be that the University of Namibia students comprises more of the younger youth. The response from the other age groups was low. For example, those between 31 to 40 years were 8 (12%); 41 to 50 were 3 (4.6%) and from 51 to 60 only 1 (1.5%) response was received.

Reading habits: Their reading habits shows that 59 (90.7%) prefer reading the Namibian newspaper with 29 (44.6%) reading the Namibian Sun. The third mostly read newspaper is the Informante with 27 (41.5%) and is followed by the Republikein with 24 (36.9%) readers. New Era had 23 ((38.3%), Confidente with 16 (24.6%) and Windhoek Observer, country's only broad sheet with 8 (12.3%). Insight Magazine is not as popular at Unam's Windhoek Campus as it is outside and shares the same readership 4 (6.1%) as Red Carpet. Southern Times and The Villager, shares the same readership size of 3 (4.6%). Vision 20/30 Magazine is the least read print media at the institution with 1(1.5%).

Misrepresentation: There is general consensus that the media influence human behaviour with 55 (75.3%) agreeing to the statement while 60 (82.1%) distinguishes the difference in which men and women are portrayed in the Namibian media with only 4 (5.4%) disagreeing. Of those who agree to the misrepresentation of women in the Namibian media, 51 (69.8%) have the opinion that media reports objectify women as sex objects. The misrepresentation of women results in the loss of self-esteem and self-worth, greater susceptibility to gender based violence and loss of moral values.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (80%) believe that misrepresentation of women is more prevalent in advertisements than it is in the news content of the various print publications. Of all the Namibian print media, the respondents are of the opinion this is more prevalent in The Namibian newspaper (20%) followed by Informante (18.4%), Windhoek Observer (13.8%), The Namibian Sun and The Villager (10.7%), Red Carpet (7.6%), New Era and Confidente (4.6%), Republikein (1.5%). Southern Times, Namibia Today, Insight Magazine, and Vision 20/30 have no trace (0%) of women misrepresentation. It should be noted that although The Namibian newspaper topped the list of the print media with the highest misrepresentation of women, content analysis of 64 articles and 91 advertisements, none of both the news articles and advertisements were found to be misrepresenting women.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study show that media coverage is unbalanced and distorted against Namibian women and girls. This calls for the re-organisation of the inherent interpretative nature of reporting by journalists to avoid sensational imagery. The findings seem to validate the claims that the media have a tendency to misrepresent women for the majority of the research population are of the opinion that the Namibian media misrepresent women.

In any civilised society, the media has played a vital role to the formation and continuance of society. In a sense, the structure of a communication system is the skeleton of a social body that developed it and its content the very substance of human intercourse. The Namibian media should, in their coverage, serve the very society within which they operate. The findings of this study suggest exercise of exclusivity and inclusivity on the part of the media when reporting on women.

Although the media do not make ideologically motivated stereotyping to happen, but they facilitate and legitimate it. The study also highlights the two distinctive roles of the media-the constructive role and their magic power to change the attitudes of people. The study reveals that media content can be destructive by dividing communities that through their coverage can foster stereotyping attitudes against women. For many years the media have been perceived as the agents power that proper training and right attitude on the part of media workers, they can empower and transform communities by fostering harmony among members of a community.

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