Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

Website: https://www.eajournals.org/

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Rewriting the Script: Language, Gender, and Social Change in Detergent Advertising in Kenya

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doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.2013/vol13n34151

Published September 10,2025

Citation: Onyiego S. (2025) Rewriting the Script: Language, Gender, and Social Change in Detergent Advertising in Kenya, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 13 (3), 41-51

Abstract: This study examines how detergent advertising in Kenya constructs or contests gender roles through linguistic strategies, visual elements, and cultural symbolism. Anchored in Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the research explores how domestic labor is framed within media discourse and how shifting portrayals reflect broader socio-cultural transformations. Using a qualitative design, six advertisements—three televised and three digital—aired between 2020 and 2024 were purposively selected based on audience engagement metrics. The ads were transcribed and analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on language use, character representation, narrative framing, and visual iconography. The findings reveal a dual tendency: while some advertisements reinforce traditional gender norms, particularly through recurring domestic tropes, others—mainly from digital platforms—offer more progressive portrayals that suggest an emerging discourse of inclusivity and shared domestic responsibility. The study underscores the role of media as a contested site for negotiating gender ideologies and advocates for more socially responsive advertising practices. By offering a localized feminist critique of mediated domesticity, the paper contributes to feminist media studies and calls for further research into gendered discourse across diverse media and product categories in Kenva.

Keywords: gender roles, detergent advertising, Kenyan media, multimodal discourse analysis, gender performativity

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is one of the tools of marketing communication which includes sales promotion, public relations, personal selling and direct selling. It is used to inform, persuade and remind audiences about products ideas and services. It is a sponsored, non-personal form of communication form of communication which is disseminated through media such as print, radio, television, digital platforms (Belch & Belch,2018). Advertising is a powerful discourse practice that is used to construct social meanings and identities. Cook (2001) has observed that advertisements contribute to cultural narratives, reinforce societal values including consumerism gender roles and success. Advertising is therefore not merely a tool for selling

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

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products, it is a potent cultural force that is used to reflect and shape societal values, ideologies and identities.

Advertising has played a key role in reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes especially by depicting women in domestic role and men in authoritative positions (Goffman,1979). Advertising of household detergents is prevalent on television and digital advertisements which target everyday consumers mostly women. Most advertisements for detergent portray women as caregivers and this mostly found in Patriarchal norms (Lazar,2006; Ndungu 2015). Modern society is undergoing significant socio-cultural changes, where women are taking leadership positions in various sectors of the economy and thus gender roles in the home are being negotiated between the genders. It is important to understand how language of advertising is adequately responding to the changes. And also to find out whether the traditional narratives which are mostly gendered are being questioned or challenged and whether they are simply being repackaged.

The current study by analyzing detergents advertisements on Kenyan digital platforms and on television aims at examining how linguistic and visual elements are used to construct or deconstruct gender roles. The study will be guided by multi modal theory and feminist media theory. The study sets to establish whether advertising discourse indicates a change from patriarchal representation or continues to reinforce them. The study is significant, due to the fact that advertising acts as a mirror of society and influences public perception and thus changes in gender representation may influence how identities responsibilities and aspirations are framed and consumed in Kenyan households.

Statement of the Problem

For several years Kenyan advertisers have relied on traditional gender scripts which portray women as caregivers mostly responsible for chores within the family especially cleaning and housekeeping. The success of women was mostly measured through how good they were in housekeeping duties and caregiving. In advertising this was done through the use of repetitive linguistic and visual cues, the advertisements reinforced patriarchal ideologies that equate femininity with domesticity and caregiving. This representation helped to shape consumer expectations and further reinforced divisions of labor which were gender based.

The advertisements have not changed despite the fact that the Kenyan society has greatly changed in the recent past. The transformations have been brought about by political, social and economic changes in society. This change has seen more women occupying leadership roles in society and participating in the workforce and thus putting a challenge on the existing stereotypes. On the other hand, there is a change in the way masculinity is perceived where most household responsibilities are shared or completely held by men in some households where women take leadership roles. These transformations demand a re-evaluation of how gender is represented in everyday media content, including advertisements for domestic use products such as detergents.

Research on how Kenyan detergent advertisements are adapting their language to reflect the changing gender roles in the society is not available due to insufficient studies. Available studies (Ndung'u 2015; Lazar, 2006) tend to focus on reinforcement of traditional gender roles,

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

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with little or no attention to the shifting gender discourse, inclusivity or resistance to patriarchal framing.

The aim of the study is to find out whether detergent advertisements in Kenya are changing in the way they use both language and visuals to portray gender, or they still continue to uphold outdated gender binaries. There is need to address this issue to create understanding of how language in advertising contributes to or challenges the continuing redefinition of gender in the Kenyan society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language and Advertising Discourse

Language is a powerful tool in advertising which is used to inform, persuade and change the behavior of consumers (Cook,2001).Rhetorical strategies such as repetition, emotive language, imperatives and imagery are used to create convincing messages (Goddard,2002).Language of advertising has been observed to be ideological rather than being neutral as it reflects and reinforces power relations in society (Fairclough,1995).An analysis of language in advertising can reveal deeper social constructions, including how gender, identity, and authority are portrayed and maintained.

Gender and Media Representation

Media has been accused for reproducing stereotyping and patriarchal portrayal of gender roles (Goffman, 1979; van Zoonen, 1994). In most advertisements, women are portrayed as homemakers, caregivers, or objects of beauty, while men appear as decision-makers, professionals, or passive observers in the domestic sphere. Language is used to shape public perceptions of gender roles. According to Lazar (2005) advertising often promotes "feminine scripts" where women are perceived to be responsible for maintaining cleanliness, emotional care and aesthetic standards within the household.

Abdel (2018) examined gender representation in selected TV commercials using a multimodal approach. She examined verbal and visual modes. The study established that there was change towards gender stereotypes and gender roles for women. The study further revealed that multimodality contributed to showing both the implicit and explicit messages present in the commercials. Gomaz (2017) in her study examined the roles of images of women in advertising, focusing on advertisements related to western culture. Her study focused on 20th and 21st century advertisements. She used the relevance theory in the analysis of the advertisements. The findings revealed that contemporary advertisements still represented the same stereotypical images of women that existed in the old advertisements.

Gendered Language in Detergent Advertising

Advertisements are rich sites for researching gendered language. The adverts especially those for detergents target women depicting them engaging in domestic tasks. A study by Ndungu (2015) established that detergent ads use emotionally loaded and directive language aimed at women. The common phrases that are used are such as "trusted by mothers", "for the woman who cares" or "tough on stains, gentle on hands" which reflect cultural expectations on women Amal (2021) in his study aimed at establishing how women are portrayed in Egyptian and American TV commercials. The research was guided by multimodality theory which the

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

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researcher used to carry out interactive meta-function analysis of the selected advertisements. The study found out that the Egyptian advertisement presents stereotypical image of women which supports the belief that women have to learn how to do laundry for them to get married. On the other hand, the American commercial showed a positive representation of women. The commercial indicates that a woman has to be confident and successful at her work.

The gendered language is reinforced visually, women are shown as happy, energetic, responsible for household chores, men on the other hand are absent or shown as playing a passive role. The representations do not take into cognizant the fact that family dynamics are changing where domestic duties are shared between men and women.

Shifting Gender Roles in Kenyan Society

The Kenyan society is experiencing changes in the way gender norms are perceived. The changes are driven by education, urbanization, and economic changes. Due to the changes women are increasingly take up leadership roles in sectors such as education, politics, and business (Nzomo,2011).

Kenya is experiencing significant shifts in gender norms driven by education, urbanization, economic change, and feminist advocacy. Women are increasingly assuming leadership roles in politics, business, and education (Nzomo, 2011). There is also a growing presence of men engaged in caregiving roles, especially in urban, middle-class households. Emerging campaigns mostly on digital media platforms have continued to show men doing laundry or families sharing domestic chores. The extent to which these portrayal of men in changing gender roles remains unaddressed through research, especially in the Kenyan context.

There is a growing expectation that media and advertising should reflect the realities of contemporary gender dynamics. However, advertising often lags behind social change, continuing to promote outdated representations for commercial reasons (Mbeke, 2010). Men are engaged in caregiving roles especially in the urban areas. These trends necessitate a change in the way advertisements are done to reflect the changing gender roles. The rise of social media and online platforms has transformed advertising. Brands now engage directly with consumers through personalized, interactive, and real-time content. This shift has also created opportunities for more **diverse and dynamic gender portrayals** (Tuten & Solomon, 2018).

Advertising as a site for social Transformation

There is an ongoing debate whether advertising reflects existing cultural values or actively shapes them (Holbrook,1987). Some scholars argue that media merely echoes societal norms while others suggest that it plays a constitutive role in producing and legitimizing new identities and social scripts.

Butler (1990) is of the view that gender is performative and constructed through discursive acts including those in the media and thus positioning media as a significant space for identity formation. Arias (2019) provides empirical evidence for this view in the form of a field experiment on media and social norms in which he established that public media greatly influence collective attitudes towards gender-based violence and thus highlighting the role of the media in creation of norms and coordination. Mackie (1996) and Chwe (2001) observed

European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 13 (3), 41-51, 2025

Print ISSN: 2055-0138(Print)

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

Website: https://www.eajournals.org/

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

that media can create common knowledge and thus enabling shifts in behavior and social norms by making people aware of what others know and believe. These insights are supported by Hall's (1980) observation that media texts are never neutral and that their meanings are contested and negotiated by audiences.

From the various observations by scholars therefore detergent advertising is seen as not only a commercial tool but also as a strong cultural force capable of reinforcing dominant ideologies. Rosalinda (2007) highlights the power of media in challenging gender streotypes and fostering new norms when it disrupts conventional scripts making the study of such media texts timely and transformative.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by two theoretical frameworks.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough (1995) was used to analyze the use of language in detergent advertisements and how this is used to reinforce or resist gender ideologies. The theory views language as a social practice which is shaped and shaping power relations. The CDA framework was used to reveal how gender roles are constructed, challenged or neutralized in advertising.

Gender Performativity Theory

The theory by Judith Butler (1990) observes that gender is not fixed but a series of repeated actions and discursive practices. In this case advertising is seen to be one of the practices where gender discourses are performed. Through an analysis of the linguistic patterns in the study, it will be revealed whether traditional performance of gender are being reinforced or resisted.

Research gap

It has been observed through the literature that previous research has explored stereotypes in advertising (Lazar,2005; Ndung'u,2015) while ignoring empirical research on how language in Kenya's advertising discourse is adapting to show the changing gender roles. Furthermore, the existing literature has not focused on the relationship between language, visual imagery and social change in the Kenyan context. The current study therefore endeavors to fill the gap by examining current detergent advertisements to establish the extent to which they reflect or resist Kenya's changing gender landscape.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design guided by critical Discourse Analysis.CDA was suitable for the study since it allowed for detailed examination of how language in detergent advertisements constructs, reinforces or resists gender ideologies. Through the CDA the study examined both the visual and textual components of advertisements to unravel power dynamics in gender representations.

Study Area

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

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The study area consisted of television and digital advertisements for selected detergents in Kenya. The TV stations which were included in the study were Citizen TV,NTV and KTN which were selected due to their wide coverage and high national viewership. Detergent advertisements from digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook were included to reflect emerging trends in digital marketing.

Target Population

The study targeted advertisements for selected detergents broadcast on TV or circulated on digital media platforms between 2020 and 2024. This period was selected due to the ongoing gender transformations most of which took place between this period.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

The study used purposeful sampling to select advertisements depending on relevance, representation and accessibility of the major detergent brands in the Kenyan market as follows:

Ariel

Omo

Toss

Sunlight

Msafi

12 advertisements (6 from TV and 6 from digital media) were selected for analysis purposely but carefully to ensure variety in brand, platform and audience preferences. The brands which were chosen represented local and multinational brands with significant market presence in the Kenyan market.

Data Collection Methods

TV Ads were recorded and transcribed manually from television broadcasts, relying on evening commercial breaks and weekend programming blocks. **Digital Ads** were accessed from the official **YouTube** and **Facebook pages** of the respective detergent brands. The selection prioritized recent videos (2020–2024) and those with high engagement (views, comments). All advertisements used in the analysis are publicly available and were accessed strictly for academic purposes in accordance with fair use guidelines.

The data was collected from advertisements on YouTube, Facebook and TV advertisements. It was in the form of Videos and scripts. The researcher downloaded and recorded the selected advertisements and transcribed the verbal content. The visual elements such as characters, settings, actions and customs were also documented for analysis. The key areas of analysis included but was not limited to:

Language used such as key words, slogans and tone Gender roles portrayed such as that of caregiver, decision-maker, leader Voice over narration and character dialogue E.g. male, female Visual representation (who does the laundry, who benefits)

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

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Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) following Fairclough's three-dimensional model consisting of textual analysis- focusing on the linguistic features of the advertisements such as – vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and metaphors and discursive practices which were used to examine how adverts are produced and consumed. Lastly social practice was used to analyze the broader societal implications of the discourse especially how it aligns 0r resists gender roles.

The data is analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), following Fairclough's three-dimensional model:

The study also used Gender Performativity Theory (Butler,1990) to interpret how gender roles are enacted or subverted through the use of repeated linguistic and visual practices in the advertisements.

Ethical Considerations

The study involved the analysis of data from advertisements which were publicly available. The study however maintained ethical researcher considerations by giving full citation and credit to advertisement sources. The study further observed ethical practices by avoiding distortion or misrepresentation of media content and using the collected data for academic purposes only.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Summary of Sampled Advertisements

The study purposely sampled 6 detergent advertisements – 3 from television and 3 from digital media mainly YouTube and Facebook. The advertisements featured local and multinational brands which are mostly consumed in the Kenyan market. A summary of the selected samples in Table 1.1 below:

<mark>Sr no</mark>	Adv.code	Brand	Platform	Year	Summary /description	
1	Dig-adv1	Msafi	Facebook	2024	A couple sharing laundry chores in a	
					"cleaning challenge"	
2	Dig-adv 2	Sunlight	YouTube	2023	A female business lady shows the	
					effectiveness of the brand in her	
					business.	
3	Dig-adv 3	Ariel	YouTube	2020	Shows a professional lady explaining	
					how Ariel fits into her busy schedule.	
4	Tv-adv 4	Ariel	Citizen TV	2022	A lady shows off how bright her	
					family's clothes are while washing	
					her children's clothes.	
5	Tv-adv5	OMO	NTV	2021	Shows mother and daughter bonding	
					while doing laundry; the dad appears	
					at the end of the washing to	
					complement them for the work	
6	TV-adv6	Toss	KTN	2023	A male teacher praises the detergent	
					he uses in the school dormitory	

Table 1.1 summary of TV/Digital Adverts

Source: Researcher 2025

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

Website: https://www.eajournals.org/

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Thematic Analysis of representation of gender in Advertisements Representation of Gender Roles

Most of the selected advertisements continue to show women as primary caregivers who are in charge of cleaning and laundry services. For example, in TV -ADV4 (Ariel), the female character in a voice says:

"I trust Ariel because it helps me keep my family clean and happy"

The language used in this advertisement links women's worth to her ability to maintain cleanliness in her family. The use of the Phrase "my family clean" reinforces the maternal responsibility, while the role of the man is not highlighted in the advert.

In TV-ADV5 (OMO), the narrator (female voice-over) says:

"For mothers who care deeply..."

The use of emotional appeal emphasizes caregiving as a gendered responsibility, and therefore reinforcing the feminine script an aspect supported by (Lazar, 2005).

Changing Gender Roles

A significant change is seen in TV ADV -6 (Toss), a male teacher is seen doing laundry in a school setting. He says:

"As a teacher, I need clean uniforms for my students—and Toss never disappoints."

The language used in the advert associates domestic care with professionalism and public service rather than femininity. The choice of a male speaker subverts the expectation that laundry is exclusively a woman's task.

In **Dig adv-1** (**Msafi**), a couple is shown doing laundry together in a "challenge" format:

Male character: "Let's see who can wash faster. I bet I'll win!" Female character: "Only if you use Msafi like I do!"

The playful tone and equal participation reflect a more egalitarian narrative, suggesting a shift toward shared domestic responsibilities.

Women in Non-Domestic, Empowered contexts

In DIG-ADV 2 (Sunlight), a woman is shown running a cleaning business. She says:

"Sunlight helps me deliver quality results for my clients. It's my partner in business."

The language used in the advert frames the detergent not as a domestic tool but as a **business asset**, aligning with women's entrepreneurial identities. The ad distances the product from traditional home settings and reframes the female character as a professional.

In DIG ADV-A3 (Ariel), a professional woman states while using Ariel:

"Between meetings and deadlines, Ariel keeps my clothes looking sharp."

The language used indicates autonomy, productivity, and self-care, offering a contrast to earlier portrayals where women were defined by their roles as caregivers.

Analysis of Visual and Audio Elements

In TV adv-4 and TV adv-5 visual cues in the advertisements show women smiling while doing laundry in a home setting, surrounded by family members or while serving the family. On the other hand, visuals in digital ads (DIG-ADV-1, DIG-ADV 2) show women in Professional setting working outside of their home. Also, male characters where present appear participating in active roles as opposed to passive (in older adverts they are seen merely commenting or consuming the services). From the analysis the shift in gender roles is more significant in digital platforms and thus indicating that online advertising is more responsive to the changes in society likely due to its younger target audience.

European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 13 (3), 41-51, 2025

Print ISSN: 2055-0138(Print)

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

Website: https://www.eajournals.org/

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Summary of Findings

From the discussions, it can be observed that traditional gender scripts still persist in many detergent advertisements especially the ones aired on television. The findings also indicate that digital advertisements challenge the traditional gender roles by depicting men as involved in domestic chores and women as professionals and entrepreneurs. The language used in newer advertisements seems to be more inclusive by use of terms such ass "parents", "families and l

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Summary of the Study

The aim of the study was to explore gender representation construction through the use of language and visual cues in Kenyan detergent advertisements. The study was guided by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Gender Performativity Theory. The study analyzed 6 detergent advertisements from both television and digital platforms aired between 2020 and 2024. The study objectives focused on the linguistic strategies used to frame gender roles, the visual representation of men and women in domestic and professional contexts and the effect of advertising platform on gender portrayal.

Summary of Key Findings

The study established that persistent traditional gender roles still persist with a number of television advertisements still portraying women as caregivers responsible for cleanliness and welfare of the family. From the study it also emerged that digital advertisements are beginning to respond to the changes in society by portraying men actively participating in household chores while women are engaged in professional activities or are business owners.

The study also found out that there is a relationship between the platform where the advertisement is aired and the way gender roles are portrayed. For example, television advertisements do not reflect changing gender roles compared to digital platforms, which serves younger audiences who are more receptive to the changing realities. They show more linguistic innovation and visual inclusivity.

Lastly the study found out that there is a significant shift in the way language is used, such as the use of first person narrative from women in professional settings or from men discussing cleanliness and endorsing products. This is an indication of the redefinition gender norms within advertising discourse.

Conclusions

From the analysis the study made several conclusions. First, that advertising is a strong ideological tool that reflects societal norms as well as shaping the way they are perceived. The language used in detergent advertisement continues to provide space where gender roles are constructed and contested. Secondly, the study further concluded that traditional gendered discourse is still dominant in television advertising where women are portrayed playing traditional gender roles as compared to men who are either absent or playing passive roles.

Thirdly the study concluded that, that there is change that is underway brought about by digital media advertisements which present gender roles in fluid and inclusive ways, thus showing both men and women engaging in domestic roles and professional responsibilities. Lastly the study concludes that the evolving change in the way language and visual cues are used mirrors

European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 13 (3), 41-51, 2025

Print ISSN: 2055-0138(Print)

Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)

Website: https://www.eajournals.org/

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

the larger socio-cultural transformation taking place in the Kenyan society, where gender roles are being negotiated and redefined.

Recommendations

The study made recommendations for advertisers, policy makers and regulators and for further research. For advertisers the study recommends use of gender-neutral language and imagery that reflects the changing dynamics in the Kenyan society by using content depicting both men and women in domestic and professional roles. For Policy makers and regulators the study recommends media guidelines that promote gender-sensitive advertising

Recommendations for Further Study

The study mainly focused on detergent advertising on Television and digital media platforms and on selected products. The study recommends that further research be done to include other categories of products such as food, beverages and baby products to assess whether similar shifts are taking place across the media advertising landscape in Kenya. The study also recommends a study to investigate how audiences interpret detergent advertisements through the use of other methods such as focus group discussions or surveys to understand how viewers perceive gendered advertising.

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Appendix

Sample of Advertisements and sources

Ad Code Brand		Platform	Year	Ad Title/Description	Source / Link	
TV- ADV4	Ariel	Citizen TV	2022	A stay-at-home mother demonstrates Ariel's stain removal power while caring for children.	Recorded from Citizen TV	
TV- ADV5	OMO	NTV	2021	A mother-daughter laundry scene emphasizing bonding and tradition.	NTV broadcast archive	
TV- ADV6	Toss	KTN	2023	A male teacher explains why he trusts Toss for boarding school laundry.	KTN	
DIG- AD2	Sunlight	YouTube	2023	A female entrepreneur promotes Sunlight as essential to her cleaning business.	YouTube - Sunlight Kenya	
DIG- ADV1	Msafi	Facebook	2024	A couple does a playful "laundry challenge" using Msafi.	Facebook - Msafi Detergent KE	
DIG- ADV3	Ariel	YouTube	2020	A career woman shows how Ariel supports her busy professional life.	YouTube - Ariel Kenya	