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ICT and Gender Representation in Digital Media Platforms: A critical analysis

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Abstract:
This article scrutinises the convergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and gender representation in digital media platforms. It addresses the extent of inclusion of digital technologies in mass communication and its influences on female participation and portrayal in media platforms. This research employed a qualitative approach, and used interviews to investigate the current state of gender representation in digital media and the role of ICTs in shaping these representations. The study found out that ICT has democratised and decentralised the media and has created opportunities for gender representation. It howver, concluded that while ICT has introduced new dynamics to gender representation in digital and mass media, the issue of inequality remains unresolved and therefore recommended that a gender-sensitive media guidelines should be enforced across all digital media platforms.

Key words: Information, Communication, Technology, Mass Media, Gender Representation

Introduction:

The rapid evolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has transformed the entire landscape of mass media, and offers new platforms for content creation/generation, distribution, and consumption. However, questions persist about whether these technological advancements have led to more equitable gender representation in media (Byerly & Ross, 2006). This study critically assessed the relationship between ICTs and gender representation in digital media platforms. Notably, ICTs embodies a vast range of technologies used for communication and data management, including telecommunications, broadcast media, the Internet, and various digital communication tools. Besides, ICTs allow the generation, storage, retrieval, and exchange of information and can have impactful effects on society culturally and economically.

On the other hand, Gender representation in contemporary media refers to how different genders (individuals) are portrayed and understood within various forms and contexts of media, including television, film, advertising, online content and journalism. The portrayal of the different genders can influence societal perceptions and attitudes toward gender roles and equality. ICTs have transformed the ways in which media is generated and consumed, and allow for more diverse representations. Besides, social media platforms enable users to challenge mainstream narratives, share their own experiences, and contribute to discussions around gender equality The interactive nature of digital media allows for a multitude of voices, promoting more inclusive dialogues around gender issues.

Both ICTs and gender representation in digital media are significant fields that intersect in numerous ways. As technology evolves, it offers new possibilities for challenging traditional representations and promoting gender equality through more inclusive and diverse media content.

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Tackling the involvement of the representation of different and various gender in digital media remains mandatory to promoting a more even society.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the rapid growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their ability to change media landscapes, gender differences, and stereotypical portrayals of women in digital media remain a nagging hassle. Over the years, the media industry, seem to have been dominated by patriarchal structures that have over powered and undermined women's voices and perspectives, and have limited them to often subordinate and subservient roles.

The advent of digital media platforms, such as social media and user-generated content, has brought about new possibilities for diversifying media representation and lending voices to the marginalised. However, the level where these technological advancements have been converted to more even gender representation is complex and sometimes contested.

Besides, nagging worries abound about the continuation of gender biases and stereotypes within digital media environments, and the unbalanced distribution of the effect of ICTs on gender representation, shaped by factors such as race, class, and geographic location. This shows the need for a meaningful intersectional analysis and understanding of the relationship between ICTs and gender representation in digital media platforms.

This study seeks to analyse the complexities involved between the adoption of ICTs and the representation of gender in contemporary media, checking the level at which technological advancements have catapulted or slowed the progress towards more inclusive and diverse media representation. Given this background, this work seeks to contribute to the ongoing academic debate on gender, media, and technology, and to inform strategies for leveraging the transformative potential of ICTs to promote gender equity in the media industry.

Research Questions:

RQ1: How has the inclusion of ICTs affected or impacted gender representation in mass media?
RQ2: To what extent do the digital platforms provide opportunities for more even and fair gender representation compared to traditional media, through their contents, presentation and presentation?
RQ3: What oppositions remain against achieving gender parity in media representation despite technological advancements?

Literature Review

Information and Communication Technology

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) explains a broad range of technologies used to handle information and advance communication, including computers, mobile devices, Internet, broadcasting systems and digital networks. According to Davis (2002), ICT is a system that reshapes how individuals interact, learn and participate in society. The expansion of ICT has transformed media systems into interactive, participatory, and globally connected platforms. Similarly, ICT includes technologies that afford access to information through telecommunications which include wireless networks, Internet and communication systems

In other words, the idea of Information and Communication Technology denotes advancement in technology using digital infrastructures to provide, sustain, secure, and promote digital services. On the strength of this, UNESCO (2019) defines ICT as tools and systems that enable creation, storage, transmission, and exchange of information in digital form, and explaining their role in development, education, and communication transformation.

Gender Representation

According to Noble (2018), algorithmic systems which includes search engines, recommendation systems, and ranking tools, gender and racial bias can be reinforced by privileging dominant or stereotypical content. With digital tools, statistics can be obtained about issues of gender representation, discrimination, biases, that have been reported or documented. Digital platforms are noted to offer opportunities to users to promote both positive and negative sides of gender representation, as well as other societal issues.

Even in the digital age, there are people who still hold the opinion that men dominate as experts in different areas of the society and based on that Santoniccolo, et al (2023), stated that gender stereotypes and objectification remain persistent characteristics of media representation in many parts of the world.

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Mass Media

Mass Media refers to an organised system of transmitting information to a large and heterogenous audience through a technological-supported medium. In other words, technologies such as newspapers, television, radio, and recently, the Internet, enable the massive spread of information to a large audience. According to McQuail (2010), mass media are institutions that operate in society to inform, persuade, entertain and provide surveillance of events.

Recent studies in communication emphasises that mass media operates in a hybrid ecosystem, where traditional media and digital platforms combine to influence each other and communicate the needed messages to the audience. (Benoit & Billings, 2021).

Gender Representation in Traditional Media

According to Beckers, et al (2024), the issue of women underrepresentation in the news has received a lot of attention in scholarly research. Consequently, Ross and Byerly (2008) had earlier warned that if news media consistently fail to represent women in elite functions and portray them mostly as victims or as actors in softer news topics, it might influence audience perceptions about the appropriate gender roles

A longitudinal study of television news for the duration (2003-2021), admitted that although women's visibility has slightly increased, it noted that they remain significantly underrepresented especially in governance, economy, security and other sensitive areas. (GMMP, 2020).

Gender Representation in Digital Media

According to Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2018), digital media has provided significant opportunities for gender empowerment and aided immense awareness as well as mobilisation of social movements and cited the #MeToo feminist movement which demonstrated the efficacy of digital platforms in echoing women's voices and exposing systemic gender-based abuse.

In other words, digital platforms have contributed to the advancement of gender representation globally but there is yet to be a total transformation on how women should be seen. Baer (2016) noted that digital platforms have supported the causes of feminism by rapid mobilisation of social right groups, global solidarity across borders and direct communication without traditional media gatekeeping.

Despite the progress ascribed to the digital media for advancing women representation, Shor, et al, (2015), noted that men still dominate positions of power especially, in politics and business.

Theoretical Framework

This work on the mergence of ICTs and gender representation in mass media is grounded in a many-sided or faced theoretical framework that draws upon several complementary perspectives and viewpoints.

Feminist Media Theory

At the core of this study is the feminist media theory, which brings to view analytic lens for investigating the ways in which media institutions, practices, presentation and representations sustain gender inequalities and stereotypes (van Zoonen, 1994). Feminist media theorists propose that the mass media, as a powerful social institution, has over the years reflected and reinforced patriarchal power structures, often subjecting women to small, subordinate roles or excluding them altogether (Tuchman et al., 1978; Wood, 2019).

This theoretical approach promotes an investigation of the underlying gender biases, power dynamics, and systemic barriers that shape and form media content and prevent women from achieving equitable representation and depiction. It emphasises the need to breakdown the gendered nature of media production, consumption, and reception, thereby take on the charge of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the neutrality of media institutions and practices.

Technology Diffusion Theory

To truly know the impact of ICTs on gender representation in mass media, this study also includes the technology diffusion theory, as developed by Rogers (2003). This theoretical framework examines how new technologies are adopted and diffused within a social system over time, and the factors that influence the pace and patterns of this diffusion process.

The technology diffusion theory is important in this study, because it highlights the uneven, different, and complex ways where technological innovations, such as digital media platforms, are cultivated into an already existing social and institutional structures. Moreover, the theory highlights and headlines the importance of examining the joining between technological capabilities, organisational factors, and individual/social characteristics in shaping the adoption and utilisation of ICTs (Ott & Mack, 2020).

Besides, this study is able to contextualise the inclusion of digital media technologies within the wider media landscape, and to critically assess how the pace and patterns of technological change have affected and impacted gender representation in mass media.

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Intersectionality

Additionally, this body of work is appraised by an interconnectedness approach, which posits that gender is inextricably linked to other identity markers, such as race, class, sexuality, and nationality, in forming individual and group experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). An interconnectedness lens is particularly important in the context of media representation and presentation, as it allows for a more meaningful understanding of how diffferent, conecting systems of power and oppression present in the depiction and participation of different women in mass media (Wajcman, 2010). Moreover, the combining of intersectionality into the theoretical framework helps this work to move beyond a simplistic binary understanding of gender representation and presentation, and to check the complex, multidimensional ways in which excluded identities and lived experiences are (or are not) reflected in media content and production processes.

It is imperative to note that marrying these complementary theoretical perspectives namely, Feminist Media Theory, Technology Diffusion Theory, and Intersectionality, this body of work is able to develop a comprehensive analytical framework for analysing the complex and evolving dynamics of the relationship between ICTs and gender representation in contemporary mass media.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach, using semi-structured Interviews. Qualitative interviews with media professionals, content creators, and gender equality advocates were conducted and they provided insights into representation of women in digital media platforms in Nigeria. In all, twenty interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders.

Results and Discussion

` Interviews with media professionals highlighted the potentials of ICTs to promote gender equality in media. One editor stated that: "Digital tools have made it easier to find and amplify diverse voices." (Participant 7). However, challenges remain, as a content creator noted that: "While anyone can create content now, visibility is still an issue. Algorithms often favour established names, which tend to be male." (Participant 13).

Several interviewees emphasised the role of organisational culture in shaping gender representation, regardless of technological capabilities. A senior journalist remarked that: "Technology is just a tool. The real change needs to happen in newsroom attitudes and leadership." (Participant 4).

Discussion:

The findings suggested that while ICTs have created new opportunities for gender representation in mass media, significant challenges continue to persist. The higher representation of women in digital media compared to traditional platforms indicated that ICTs have indeed opened up new avenues for diverse voices. However, the persistence of stereotypical portrayals across both digital and traditional media suggested that technology alone is not sufficient to overcome deeply ingrained gender biases.

The more balanced representation on social media platforms aligned with Megarry's (2014) assertion that these technologies offer women increased opportunities for self-representation. Besides, Loiseau and Nowacka's (2015) noted the potential for ICTs to both empower and marginalise. Furthermore, the qualitative insights from media professionals explained the importance of organisational culture and leadership in driving change. This aligns with feminist media theory's emphasis on structural factors in perpetuating gender inequalities (van Zoonen, 1994).

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that while ICTs have introduced new dynamics to gender representation in mass media, they have not fundamentally resolved issues of inequality. The technology diffusion theory (Rogers, 2003) explained the gradual and uneven adoption of more inclusive practices in media. Nonetheless, the persistence of gender disparities suggested that technological solutions must be accompanied by broader social and organisational changes to achieve meaningful progress.

Recommendation

This study strongly recommends that gender-sensitive media guidelines should be enforced across digital and mass media platforms to ensure a fair representation of women. Besides, it advocates for increased representation of women in media production including editorial and content creation roles, as a way of minimising bias in story presentation. Moreover, there should be a change of narratives from negative to positive about women. Also, women should be encouraged to be at the frontlines of leadership, science, technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, politics, and other positive impactful roles in the society.

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