

## Media Representation and Women's Identity in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Media representation plays a significant role in shaping societal perceptions and influencing the construction of women's identities. This paper argues that media representation remains a critical determinant of women's identity formation in Nigeria and that prevailing portrayals of women continue to reinforce gender inequalities despite recent advances in digital communication. The study is premised on the view that media content does not merely reflect social reality but actively constructs meanings about gender, power, and social participation. Drawing on Feminist Media Theory and Social Representation Theory, the paper examines how stereotypical portrayals, limited political visibility, and culturally conditioned narratives influence the perception and self-construction of women in Nigerian society. Adopting a qualitative documentary research design, the study critically reviews relevant scholarly literature on media representation, gender stereotypes, women's identity, political participation, and digital media. The findings indicate that Nigerian media frequently portray women within restrictive gender frameworks that undermine their visibility and contributions to national development. The paper concludes that more inclusive and empowering representations are necessary for strengthening women's identity, promoting gender equality, and enhancing women's participation in social, political, and economic development. It recommends the adoption of gender-sensitive media practices and increased representation of women in leadership and public discourse.*

### Keywords

Media representation; women's identity; gender stereotyping; Nigerian media; gender equality; social representation.



### I. Introduction

The media remain one of the most influential institutions in contemporary society, shaping public perceptions, social values, and collective understandings of identity. Beyond their traditional functions of information dissemination and entertainment, media platforms play a critical role in constructing meanings about gender and defining societal expectations regarding the roles of men and women. Through news reports, advertisements, films, television programmes, and digital communication platforms, the media influence not only how individuals are perceived but also how they perceive themselves. In Nigeria, where social relations are strongly shaped by cultural, religious, and patriarchal structures, media representations have become important sites through which meanings about womanhood are produced, negotiated, and contested. Scholars argue that media portrayals significantly influence both societal perceptions of women and women's self-understanding, making media representation a crucial factor in discussions of gender equality, social inclusion, and women's empowerment (Endong & Obonganwan, 2015; Wole-Abu, 2018).

The argument that media representations shape social realities is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where women continue to experience unequal visibility and recognition despite their substantial contributions to national development. Existing studies reveal that women are frequently portrayed within narrow and stereotypical frameworks that emphasize

domesticity, beauty, caregiving, and dependence while minimizing their achievements in leadership, governance, entrepreneurship, and professional life (Sanni, 2016). Endong and Obonganwan (2015) contend that such portrayals are products of broader patriarchal structures that sustain gender inequalities in society. Similarly, Aladi and Okoro (2021) found that women remain significantly underrepresented in newspaper coverage and are more often featured in human-interest stories than as authoritative voices in political, economic, and policy-related discussions. These findings challenge the notion that the media merely reflect societal realities and instead support the argument that media institutions actively participate in constructing and legitimizing particular understandings of women's roles and identities.

This paper argues that the consequences of such representations extend beyond visibility to the broader process of identity formation. Identity is neither fixed nor naturally determined; rather, it is continuously shaped through social interactions, cultural experiences, and exposure to dominant narratives. Wole-Abu (2018) maintains that media narratives contribute to the creation of collective memories and future visions of Nigerian womanhood, influencing how women understand their social roles and aspirations. Social Representation Theory further explains that repeated media messages become embedded within collective consciousness and shape public understanding of social groups. Consequently, when women are repeatedly represented as passive, dependent, or secondary actors, such portrayals reinforce social expectations that limit women's opportunities and influence their self-perceptions. Therefore, the question of media representation is fundamentally a question of power, identity, and social inclusion (Ademosu et al., 2025).

The persistence of gender inequality in political communication provides further evidence for this position. Despite growing advocacy for women's participation in governance and leadership, female political actors continue to receive significantly less media attention than their male counterparts. Fafowora (2020) found that women in political leadership positions are often marginalized within news discourse and are frequently evaluated based on personal attributes rather than competence and policy performance. Similarly, Salami (2026) reported that online news coverage of elections overwhelmingly favours male candidates, thereby restricting the visibility of women in political spaces. Ojone (2026) further argues that media representations often reproduce cultural and religious ideologies that reinforce public skepticism toward female leadership. These patterns contribute to the perception that authority and leadership are inherently masculine domains, thereby undermining women's political legitimacy and limiting broader societal acceptance of women in positions of power (Aondover & Ademosu, 2025).

Although scholars have extensively examined gender stereotypes and women's underrepresentation in Nigerian media, existing research has largely focused on specific media sectors such as advertising, political communication, or news reporting (Aondover, 2024). Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how these diverse forms of representation collectively influence women's identity formation within contemporary Nigerian society. At the same time, the rapid growth of digital media has introduced new opportunities for women to challenge dominant narratives, construct alternative identities, and participate more actively in public discourse. Ofei et al. (2026) found that digital media platforms increasingly provide spaces for advocacy, awareness creation, and the amplification of women's voices. Similarly, studies conducted in other contexts demonstrate that online platforms can facilitate more empowering and gender-sensitive representations of women (Syammaella et al., 2024; Al-Wahaibi, 2025).

However, whether these developments are sufficient to transform entrenched patterns of representation and identity construction in Nigeria remains an open question.

Against this background, this paper advances the position that media representation is a central determinant of women's identity formation in Nigeria and that prevailing media portrayals continue to reinforce gender inequalities despite the emergence of more inclusive digital communication spaces (Maradun & Aondover, 2025). Drawing on Feminist Media Theory and Social Representation Theory, the paper argues that media institutions remain powerful agents in the production and reproduction of gendered identities. While digital media have created opportunities for greater visibility and self-representation, the persistence of stereotypical portrayals and structural underrepresentation suggests that significant inequalities remain. Therefore, meaningful progress toward gender equality requires a deliberate transformation of media practices, narratives, and institutional structures to ensure that women are represented not merely as domestic actors but as leaders, professionals, policymakers, and agents of social change. Such a transformation is essential for fostering positive identity formation, promoting social justice, strengthening democratic participation, and advancing sustainable national development in Nigeria.

### **1.1 Theoretical Framework**

This paper is anchored on Feminist Media Theory and Social Representation Theory because both theories provide strong explanations for how media representations influence the construction of women's identities and societal perceptions of gender. The study argues that media representations are not neutral reflections of reality but socially constructed narratives that shape public understanding of women, reinforce gender norms, and influence women's self-perceptions. While Feminist Media Theory explains the power relations underlying media portrayals of women, Social Representation Theory explains how such portrayals become normalized and accepted within society (Mohammed & Aondover, 2025). Consequently, the central argument of this paper that media representation remains a significant determinant of women's identity formation in Nigeria is substantially supported by the propositions of both theories. Nevertheless, the study acknowledges certain limitations in each framework, particularly regarding their ability to fully explain the complexities of contemporary digital media environments and the intersections of culture, religion, ethnicity, and gender within the Nigerian context.

## **II. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Feminist Media Theory**

This paper strongly agrees with the propositions of Feminist Media Theory because its central argument aligns with the position that media institutions play a crucial role in reproducing patriarchal ideologies through the unequal representation of women. Developed through feminist scholarship in the 1970s, particularly through the works of scholars such as Tuchman (1978) and Mulvey (1975), the theory argues that women are frequently marginalized, underrepresented, or portrayed through restrictive stereotypes that reinforce male dominance. The theory maintains that media content reflects existing power structures in society and often privileges male perspectives while limiting women's visibility and agency (Aondover & Obasi, 2025). This proposition is particularly relevant to the Nigerian media environment, where studies consistently show that women are represented within narrow frameworks that emphasize domesticity, beauty, caregiving, and

dependence while minimizing their achievements in leadership, governance, and professional life (Sanni, 2016; Endong & Obonganwan, 2015).

However, while the study agrees with the broader propositions of Feminist Media Theory, it partially disagrees with its tendency to emphasize women's oppression without sufficiently acknowledging women's agency and resistance. The growth of digital media has enabled women to challenge dominant representations, create alternative narratives, and participate more actively in public discourse (Ofei et al., 2026). Consequently, women should not be viewed solely as passive victims of media representations but also as active participants in the production and negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, because the theory was largely developed within Western contexts, it may not fully account for the influence of culture, religion, ethnicity, and class on gender relations in Nigeria. Therefore, while Feminist Media Theory effectively explains the patriarchal dimensions of media representation, it requires contextual adaptation to adequately address the realities of Nigerian society.

## **2.2 Social Representation Theory**

The study also agrees substantially with Social Representation Theory because its emphasis on the creation and circulation of shared meanings complements the central argument that media representations influence women's identity formation. Developed by Serge Moscovici (1961), the theory posits that societies construct collective understandings of social groups through communication processes. According to the theory, the media serve as important channels through which representations are created, disseminated, and normalized. These representations subsequently influence how individuals interpret social reality and understand their place within society (Aondover et al., 2025). This proposition supports the paper's argument that repeated portrayals of women in the media contribute to societal beliefs about womanhood and shape women's self-conceptions.

The study agrees with the theory's assumption that communication processes play a central role in identity construction. Wole-Abu (2018) argues that media narratives influence collective memories and future visions of Nigerian womanhood, while Endong and Obonganwan (2015) demonstrate that repeated representations of women as caregivers and dependents reinforce societal expectations regarding female behaviour. Similarly, Fafowora (2020) and Aladi and Okoro (2021) show that women's limited visibility in political and public affairs reporting contributes to perceptions that leadership and authority are primarily masculine domains. These findings support the theory's proposition that repeated representations become part of social knowledge and shape both public attitudes and individual self-understanding. Consequently, Social Representation Theory provides a useful framework for explaining how media-generated meanings influence the construction of women's identities in Nigeria (Aondover et al., 2025). Overall, this paper agrees with the fundamental propositions of both Feminist Media Theory and Social Representation Theory because they collectively support the argument that media representation is a powerful force in shaping women's identities and societal perceptions in Nigeria.

### III. Research Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative documentary research design because of its suitability for critically examining and synthesizing existing scholarly arguments on media representation and women's identity in Nigeria. The study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from credible academic sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, conference papers, and other scholarly publications addressing media representation, gender stereotypes, women's identity, political participation, digital media, and gender discourse. The choice of documentary research is consistent with the argumentative and position-based nature of the study, which seeks not merely to describe existing knowledge but to critically evaluate scholarly perspectives and advance the position that media representation remains a significant determinant of women's identity formation in Nigeria (Aondover et al., 2026). Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, through which recurring arguments, concepts, theoretical propositions, and empirical findings relating to gender stereotyping, political visibility, media framing, cultural and religious influences, women's empowerment, and identity construction were systematically identified, compared, and interpreted. This analytical approach enabled the study to establish connections between the reviewed literature, Feminist Media Theory, Social Representation Theory, and the realities of women's representation in Nigerian media. The method further provided a robust basis for advancing the argument that persistent stereotypical portrayals and underrepresentation contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities, while more inclusive and empowering media representations can enhance women's identity formation, social inclusion, political participation, and national development.

### IV. Result and Discussion

The central argument of this paper is that media representation is a significant determinant of women's identity formation in Nigeria and that prevailing media portrayals continue to reinforce gender inequalities despite emerging opportunities for more inclusive representation through digital media platforms (Aondover et al., 2025). This position rejects the notion that media merely reflect existing social realities. Rather, media institutions actively participate in constructing social meanings, shaping public attitudes, and influencing how individuals understand themselves and others. The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that Nigerian media portray women within restrictive frameworks that emphasize domesticity, caregiving, beauty, and dependence while minimizing their visibility as leaders, professionals, policymakers, and agents of social change (Sanni, 2016; Endong & Obonganwan, 2015). Consequently, media representation should be understood as a powerful social process that contributes to the construction of women's identities and the maintenance of gender relations within society. This argument is strongly supported by Feminist Media Theory, which contends that media institutions often reproduce patriarchal ideologies through unequal and stereotypical portrayals of women.

Although the study agrees with the Feminist Media Theory's assumption that media representations have significant social consequences because they influence how women are viewed and how they view themselves. Evidence from the reviewed literature demonstrates that Nigerian media often portray women as secondary actors in society, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting broader recognition of women's capabilities (Aladi & Okoro, 2021). Similarly, Fafowora (2020) and Salami (2026) found

that women receive limited visibility in political communication and are often evaluated on the basis of personal characteristics rather than competence and policy achievements. These findings support the theory's argument that media institutions contribute to the maintenance of gender inequalities by normalizing patriarchal assumptions about women's roles. Therefore, Feminist Media Theory provides a strong foundation for the paper's position that media representations are instrumental in shaping women's identities and social experiences in Nigeria.

The persistence of gender stereotyping across various forms of media provides compelling evidence for this position. Studies reviewed in this paper reveal that women are frequently portrayed through traditional domestic and supportive roles, thereby restricting public perceptions of their capabilities and social contributions. Sanni (2016) found that Nigerian television advertisements predominantly depict women as homemakers, caregivers, and objects of beauty, while men are associated with leadership, authority, and economic power. Similarly, Endong and Obonganwan (2015) argue that media portrayals of women often reflect and reinforce broader societal inequalities rooted in patriarchal culture. The significance of these findings lies in the fact that repeated representations gradually become normalized within society. Social Representation Theory explains that repeated media portrayals evolve into shared social knowledge that influences public attitudes and behavioural expectations. Therefore, when women are continually represented through stereotypical roles, society is more likely to accept such portrayals as natural and appropriate, thereby limiting the development of more diverse and empowering female identities. Nevertheless, the study disagrees with the theory's tendency to focus on shared meanings without sufficiently addressing issues of power and inequality (Obasi & Msughter, 2023). Unlike Feminist Media Theory, Social Representation Theory does not adequately explain why certain representations become dominant or how institutional power influences the production and circulation of media narratives. In Nigeria, representations of women are often shaped by patriarchal cultural norms, religious ideologies, and institutional practices that privilege particular perspectives while marginalizing others (Ojone, 2026). Additionally, the theory tends to emphasize social consensus and may underestimate resistance, contestation, and the emergence of alternative representations in digital media environments. Therefore, although Social Representation Theory effectively explains how representations become normalized, it is less effective in accounting for the power structures that shape those representations.

The paper further argues that the underrepresentation of women in news reporting and political communication constitutes one of the most significant manifestations of gender inequality within Nigerian media. Despite increasing participation in governance, public administration, and political processes, women continue to receive disproportionately less media attention than men. Aladi and Okoro (2021) found that women are significantly underrepresented in newspaper coverage and rarely appear as authoritative voices in discussions of governance, policy, and national development. Similarly, Fafowora (2020) observed that female political leaders often receive gendered coverage that emphasizes personal characteristics rather than leadership competence and policy achievements. Salami (2026) further demonstrated that online election coverage consistently provides greater visibility to male candidates than female contestants. These patterns support the central argument of Feminist Media Theory that media institutions privilege male voices and perspectives while marginalizing women's contributions to public life. Consequently, media representations contribute to the perception that leadership and authority are predominantly masculine attributes, thereby influencing both societal attitudes and women's self-confidence regarding leadership roles.

The influence of cultural and religious ideologies on media representations further strengthens the paper's argument that gendered portrayals are socially constructed rather than naturally occurring. Endong and Obonganwan (2015) contend that Nigerian media often reproduce cultural beliefs that define women primarily through their domestic and familial responsibilities. Likewise, Ojone (2026) argues that religious ideologies contribute to women's marginalization by promoting narratives that question women's suitability for leadership and public decision-making roles. These findings suggest that media representations are deeply embedded within broader social structures and cannot be understood independently of the cultural environment in which they are produced. Social Representation Theory supports this perspective by emphasizing that media serve as important channels through which societies construct and disseminate shared meanings. At the same time, Feminist Media Theory highlights how such meanings are often shaped by unequal power relations that privilege male dominance (Aondover et al., 2025). Therefore, the continued portrayal of women through culturally and religiously informed stereotypes reinforces gender inequalities and influences the formation of women's identities.

However, while the literature highlights persistent challenges, the paper argues that digital media have created important opportunities for transforming representations of women and challenging traditional gender narratives. Ofei et al. (2026) found that digital media platforms have increased visibility for women's issues, particularly in areas such as health advocacy and social awareness. Similarly, Wole-Abu (2018) argues that media narratives can shape future visions of womanhood by highlighting women's achievements and contributions to society. Beyond Nigeria, Syammaella et al. (2024) demonstrated that online media can provide positive representations of women activists and challenge conventional stereotypes. These findings suggest that digital communication environments offer women greater opportunities to participate in the production of media content and the construction of alternative identities. Consequently, digital media challenge the traditional gatekeeping role of mainstream media by providing platforms through which women can amplify their voices and redefine societal perceptions of womanhood.

The emergence of digital media also exposes certain limitations in traditional understandings of media power. While Feminist Media Theory correctly identifies the role of media institutions in reproducing patriarchal ideologies, contemporary digital platforms demonstrate that women are not merely passive recipients of media messages. Instead, women increasingly participate in social media activism, online advocacy campaigns, and digital storytelling initiatives that challenge dominant narratives and promote alternative representations of female identity (Vitalis et al., 2025). This development suggests that identity construction is becoming a more dynamic and participatory process. Although structural inequalities remain evident, digital communication has expanded opportunities for resistance, negotiation, and self-representation. Therefore, the future of women's identity formation in Nigeria may increasingly depend on women's ability to utilize digital platforms to challenge stereotypes and create more diverse representations of womanhood. The broader implications of media representation extend beyond individual identity formation to encompass issues of social inclusion, political participation, and national development. The continued underrepresentation of women in media content contributes to the exclusion of women's perspectives from public debates and limits recognition of their contributions to society. Conversely, more inclusive and balanced representations can enhance women's visibility, encourage participation in leadership and governance, and promote broader societal acceptance of women in decision-making positions. Al-Wahaibi (2025) found that positive media representations contribute significantly to social inclusion and public support for women's participation in leadership. These findings reinforce the

argument that media representation influences not only how women are perceived but also the opportunities available to them within society. Therefore, achieving gender equality requires deliberate efforts to transform media narratives and expand the range of identities available to women (Vitalis et al., 2023).

Based on these arguments, the paper maintains that media organizations must adopt gender-sensitive approaches to content production and representation. Women should be represented not only as wives, mothers, and caregivers but also as professionals, entrepreneurs, policymakers, academics, and leaders. Journalism education should incorporate gender-responsive reporting frameworks, while media regulatory institutions should promote balanced and equitable representation across all media platforms. Such reforms are necessary because representation influences identity, aspiration, and participation. When women encounter diverse and empowering portrayals of themselves in media spaces, they are more likely to develop positive self-perceptions and pursue broader social, economic, and political opportunities. The discussion reinforces the paper's position that media representation remains a powerful force in shaping women's identity in Nigeria.

## V. Conclusion

Having critically examined the arguments of scholars and the propositions of Feminist Media Theory and Social Representation Theory, this paper firmly maintains that media representation remains a significant determinant of women's identity formation in Nigeria. The reviewed literature demonstrates that Nigerian media continue to reproduce gender inequalities through stereotypical portrayals, limited political visibility, and representations influenced by patriarchal cultural and religious norms. These portrayals shape societal perceptions of women and influence how women understand their roles, capabilities, and place within society. While the emergence of digital media has created opportunities for more diverse and empowering representations, substantial disparities remain across mainstream media platforms. The study therefore agrees with the view that achieving meaningful gender equality requires a transformation of media practices toward more balanced, inclusive, and gender-sensitive representations. Consequently, media institutions, journalists, and policymakers should promote portrayals that reflect the diverse experiences, achievements, and leadership capacities of Nigerian women. Such an approach will not only strengthen positive identity formation among women but also enhance social inclusion, democratic participation, and sustainable national development.

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