

# Colada Sweet Like Mercy: Gender Stereotyping in Twitter Conversations by Big Brother Naija 2019 Viewers

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**Abstract**—This study explores how a reality TV show which aired in Nigeria in 2019 (Big Brother Naija - BBN), played a role in enhancing gender-biased conversations among its viewers and social media followers. Thematic analysis is employed here to study Twitter conversations among BBN 2019 followers, which ensued after the show had stopped airing. The study reveals that the show influenced the way viewers and fans engaged with each other, as well as with the show's participants, on Twitter, and argues that, despite having aired for a short period of time, BBN 2019 was able to draw people together and provide a community where viewers could engage with each other online. Though the show aired on TV, the viewers found a digital space where they could air their views, react to what was happening on the show, as well as simply catch up on action that they probably missed. Within these digital communities, viewers expressed their attractions, disgust and identities, most of these having a form of reference to sexuality and gender identities and roles, as were also portrayed by the show's producers both on TV and on social media.

**Keywords**—Commodification of Bodies, gender stereotypes, Big Brother Naija, social media, Nigeria.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE representation of women in the media has for years now, been an issue of discussion in several scholarly publications [1]. Scholars, especially feminist theorists, have for decades, put in much effort in studying the representation of women by the media, as well as how well women are then represented even in the decision-making process of dissemination of news. Looking at how the media represents women or people of certain demographics is important, as it is through the media that the masses form opinions of various issues. In every nation across the globe, popular opinions are framed based on what media puts forth to the public [2]. For instance, if the media puts forth images and texts that suggest or enhance the sexualization of women, this will inspire the idea of women being sexualized even in their daily lives, outside the media. As one who is very interested in the representation of women by the media and how this representation reflects on how societies form perceptions and identities to do with women and femininity, we are interested in looking at engagement across different media platforms, trying to understand links between people's expressions and events being discussed in the media.

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Reality TV, a type of TV programming, that is aired to show live action in the lives of actual people in real time, has been looked at by several studies in relation to how it has influenced and played a role in the creation of perceptions, such as gender stereotyping among viewers [3]-[5]. The popularity of reality television shows has by no means lessened in recent years, and though known as *reality* TV, it has been established in previous studies that these shows actually portray less of reality and are actually very much scripted [6]. The argument, therefore, is that, though scripted to provide some sort of organization, reality TV reveals people's true nature – all stakeholders involved show their true selves; the participants of the show, the viewers and the producers.

Social Networking Sites such as Twitter, are now being used by viewers to establish relationships between viewers and media personalities [7], thus causing an evolution in the relationship between audiences and the media. This kind of change in the dynamics of the relationship between audiences and the media, allowing for back and forth engagement of media personalities and/or others with similar media interests via social networking sites, is what is known as a para-social relationship. Para-social relationships are as a result of constant viewing of content, engagement with media personalities, and a development of loyalty by viewers to certain media personalities [8]. Past studies [9] argue that social networking sites not only allow for the development of para-social relationships, but also for the formation of communal watching, where viewers find themselves watching TV programs and having conversations about said programs, without necessarily being together physically. This proved true in the case of BBN 2019, as viewers formed camps based on their preferred show participant. The para-social relationships and communal experiences in this case reveal themselves in the form of all stakeholders mainly highlighting the sexuality of the show's participants.

There are a limited number of studies that have investigated Reality TV, communal experience of viewing through social networking sites and para-social relationships formed in the African media scene [10], [15]. As such, this study seeks to explore how the viewers of the 2019 BBN used Twitter to share and discuss scenes from the aired content on BBN, and how the messages shared through the tweets, revealed aspects of gender stereotyping and sexualizing of the female participants' bodies, among viewers.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. BBN

BBN is a subsidiary of Big Brother Africa, an African version of the Big Brother show, a Dutch reality TV show that features a certain number of contestants who are carefully selected, placed in a house to live together, with cameras constantly monitoring them. At the end of each week, one of the housemates is evicted, so these housemates live together and strive not to get evicted by their fellow housemates and/or viewers. The show involves the audience by providing 24-hour streaming of the housemates' activities in the Big Brother house and gives opportunities for the audience to vote housemates who are up for eviction, in or out. At the end, the sole remaining housemate wins a certain amount of money. This version of the Big Brother show involves contestants from different countries within Africa. As a build up to this version, Big Brother shows within different countries are usually aired, with contestants coming from different parts of said countries; a good example is the BBN show that airs in Nigeria.

The 2019 season of BBN began airing on June 20th, 2019, running for a total of 99 days, until the 6th of October 2019. A report by a Nigerian-based analysis organization, *Future of Work Africa* [10], revealed that over 6.2 million tweets by over 214,388 accounts were related to the BBN participants in August and September. Out of the 26 participants of this year's BBN, two participants, Tacha and Mercy, topped the list of most discussed participants with the most tweets being sent out between midnight and 11:59 am. The report also showed that close to 75,000 tweets contained sexual content, with many discussing sexual relationships between specific female participants and about 3 male participants, as well as sexual tension among participants and the issue of Mercy, one of the participants, possessing sex toys [10].

### B. Twitter in Nigeria

As one of the biggest and most popular African countries, Nigeria's population is reported at 200.96 million [11]. According to a report by business data platform, Statista, the number of social network users in Nigeria in 2017, was at 27.6 million people; this numbers have kept increasing each year, with the numbers being as high as 29.3 million people by the end of 2018, and projected to rise to about 36.8 million people by 2023 [12]. 14.89% of Nigeria's population use Twitter; a quick search of 'Twitter in Nigeria' on Google, gives 705 billion results in 0.63 seconds.

### C. Positioning Women in Nigeria

In 2015, the World Bank indicated that Nigeria's literacy rate among adult females (15 years and above), was 49.68%, with the expected years of education for girls being at 8.15 against the boys' 9.77 years [13]. Nigerian women have always been seen as nurturers, people who are in charge of the wellbeing and growth of families [14]. Many Nigerian women today are educated and have made a name for themselves. However, they live in a society that is male dominated, where they are constantly subordinated and oppressed by men

despite their societal status. Other studies strongly support this argument, and go a step further to point out how the subordination of women in Nigeria is reflective by the way the media industry in the country is dominated by men and very little women are given the opportunity to grow into positions of dominance within the industry [15].

Nigerian women are no longer comfortable with male dominance [15], and have chosen several avenues to speak out and express their discomfort; One of the avenues used is Twitter. Case in point, a 2015 book club meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, led to the creation of the hashtag #BeingFemaleInNigeria, a hashtag that was shared over 80,000 times among Nigerian Twitter users, and led to the creation of similar hashtags by women in other countries such as Ghana [16]. This reiterates the importance of Twitter as a huge part of Nigeria's communication culture for years now and the possibilities Twitter usage provide for many Nigerians to express themselves and discuss issues that affect them in their everyday lives.

### D. Gender Stereotypes

Stereotypes based on gender could easily be defined as the biases and beliefs constructed by people, which determine how they relate with others who share the same gender as they do, as well as those who identify with other genders. Gender biases and stereotypes range from the sexualization of women [17], to the 'less harmful' assignment of nurturing roles to females and assignment of superhero roles to males [18]. Gender biases are some of the most difficult traits to study especially if one seeks to do so by obtaining participants' reactions through questionnaires and interviews [19]. This study argues that this happens because, the nature of human beings is to seek to please others, so participants will not easily express their biases to researchers especially if their beliefs do not seem to align with what they believe are the researchers' beliefs. Human beings tend to reveal themselves more in places they feel invincible, such as on Twitter, for the case of BBN 2019's viewers.

Studies on media influences on perception of women and propagation of gender stereotypes have been extensively carried out in the past [17], [20], with some going as far as to study how these stereotypes evident in the media, shape perceptions among children and adolescents [18], [21]. Others have also investigated how gender stereotyping in Nigeria was enabled by Nigerian video films through the portrayal of women in negative light [22]. Suggesting that films have become huge agents of change in the country, the author argues that for stereotyping to effectively be tackled, the Nigerian video film industry needs to reconstruct its portrayal of women in their content. Though there has been a lot of focus on gender stereotyping as a result of media influence and the way audiences engage with the content they have viewed on their social media pages in the West, limited study has been done on gender stereotyping by Reality TV shows in Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as how they affect audiences' engagement online and their perceptions as revealed through their social media usage.

The media frames content in such a way that influences its viewers and followers, to elicit different reactions and enhance certain perceptions. By studying how the producers of BBN 2019 aired the show, this study shows that the show developed the idea of sexualizing the participants' bodies right from the time it went on air, with producers placing more focus on sexual content and suggestive comments/posts carrying the day both online and offline. These suggestive gestures queued the audience and emboldened them in prioritizing sexuality when viewing and discussing BBN 2019.

### III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are a few studies which directly focus on how Africans use Twitter to express their perceptions [10], [12], which could easily be interpreted as gender stereotypes, as a result of watching Reality TV shows. It is imperative for such a study to be conducted, looking at the relationship between social media usage, Reality TV programming, and people's perceptions on gender in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this case, a study was conducted to investigate how BBN 2019 provided an opportunity for its viewers to engage with each other and with the program's participants on Twitter, and how the show presented content which was used in engagement among viewers, which in turn led to the viewers revealing some gender stereotypes that they carry. This is done by seeking to answer the following questions:

- RQ 1 – How did the viewers of BBN 2019, discuss BBN 2019 female participants on Twitter?
- RQ 2 – What main gender stereotypes were evident in the Twitter conversations of BBN 2019 viewers?

### IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach as defined by previous researchers [23], seeking to understand people's beliefs using interpretive approaches. By studying the messages passed across by Nigerian BBN 2019 viewers on Twitter, the objective was to uncover how these messages are a reflection of the viewers' gender biases, and how these biases could have been more pronounced as a result of watching BBN 2019 and engaging with other viewers online.

The researcher being a feminist and African woman's rights activist, the necessity for such a study is highly elevated. The researcher believes that there is a need for studying the representation of women by the media and how this representation leads to how societies form perceptions, and society's expectations of women and the performance of their femininity. This passion in studying women's issues plays a role in how we conduct studies and interpret data on gender issues. As such, to eliminate bias when extracting data and carrying out analysis, an independent social media analytics tool was used to analyze the content of the text in the extracted tweets.

#### A. Method

To analyze this engagement of BBN 2019 viewers on Twitter, tweets which were shared using the official BBN

hashtag #BBNaija, were studied; said tweets were mined from Twitter using Netlytic, an online analyzing software that makes it possible not only to extract data online, but also to analyze the content/text within said data. Given the limitation that Netlytic has of only being able to give a maximum number of 1000 of tweets per request, as well as the fact that it is limited to only extracting 7 days' worth of data, extraction was done of tweets shared between October 23<sup>rd</sup> and October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The tweets were extracted a few weeks after BBN had stopped airing, to show how impactful the show was that engagement was still at a high even after its airing. By doing so, an analysis was conducted of what content was being shared by BBN 2019 viewers even after the airing of BBN 2019, and how this content revealed perceptions among them, that could be interpreted as possible gender bias.

After extraction, a step-by-step thematic analysis as borrowed from past studies [24] and shown in Table I was used to analyze the extracted tweets and their content. Thematic analysis employed in this study, is defined as "the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data" [25].

TABLE I  
THE STEP-BY-STEP THEMATIC APPROACH [24]. REPRINTED FROM DOING A THEMATIC ANALYSIS: A PRACTICAL, STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING SCHOLARS [25])

Step 1: Become familiar with the data	Step 4: Review themes
Step 2: Generate initial codes	Step 5: Define themes
Step 3: Search for themes	Step 6: Write-up

This study focused on gender biases and stereotypes as revealed within the tweets shared by BBN 2019 viewers. The data extracted and analyzed were also in put into Voyant, another analytic software that allows for the visualization of content based on what is mostly discussed by the BBN 2019 viewers.

#### B. Results, Analysis and Discussion

The data extracted from Twitter via *Netlytics* were guided by using the hashtag #bbnaija and included 1000 tweets across a 7-day period. These tweets were then analyzed by the same software, to reveal popular topics discussed. At the same time, a color code for popular topics was created, and categorized into arising themes. The themes were simply broken down according to what BBN 2019 viewers said about this year's participants and what the tweets seemed to focus on – examples of these tweets and arising themes, are seen in Table II.

The tweets extracted revealed that the BBN 2019 female participants were discussed more than male participants. Even though the program had already stopped airing, the conversations revolved around the participants' fans abusing each other, expressing admiration for their preferred BBN participant, expressing sexual attraction/lust and simply reacting to something said about their preferred participant by someone else. The most revealing themes were the themes of lust, intellect, call to action, fanatic support, reaction to TV content and love & relationships.





call people to action on behalf of their favorite BBN housemates. In addition, some used it to draw attention to their places of business; others to encourage people to follow their favorite participants on other social media platforms, and others used the hashtag to invite people to events. Most of the calls to action were related to BBN 2019; however, some were not.

#### 4. Fanatic Support

Another interesting thing that was noted was how fans and viewers all cooperated to loyally fight for their preferred participants online and offline. This was an observation made throughout the period that the show aired and even after the show had stopped airing, there were still online communities that were showing their support for their preferred participants. This kind of support was shown by people gunning against particular participants, or following the lives of each participant, to find out what was going on, so that they could compare among themselves, which participant was doing much better in their lives than the other participants.

Fanatic support is the backbone to most of the tweets that were analyzed; by looking at any tweet, one could get an idea of what participant the tweet's author preferred. This also influenced how TV viewers reacted to other shows where their preferred participants visited as guests, or even how they reacted to news of engagements or dating among the participants. Therefore, the themes of love and relationship, as well as reaction to TV content, are more like sub-themes to the big idea of fanatic support.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The creators of BBN, as well as those of other reality TV shows within Nigeria and beyond, should consider how to positively influence the public, by avoiding to air and/or promote content that encourages conversations that are surrounded by enhanced gender stereotypes, such as what the ideal woman or man should look like, as well as what the ideal female or male body should be. The enabling of trends such as body commodification on their platforms should also be eliminated to allow for viewers and fans to engage with their preferred TV stars on other aspects other than appearance and sexual attraction.

This study is not void of limitations. The fact that *Netlytics* only allows for the extraction of tweets that were posted within a 7-day period, and not more than 1000 tweets at a time, posed a problem, as this was not representative of all BBN 2019 viewers. It was impossible to collect more data, therefore, for a deeper analysis of conversations by BBN 2019 viewers on Twitter.

Apart from collecting a wider range of data, and performing a deeper analysis of reality TV viewers, it is also recommended that future studies investigate the roles played by reality TV stars themselves, in enabling gendered conversations by viewers and fans.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researcher expresses immense gratitude to Drs Drew

McDaniel and Saumya Pant, of the Media Arts & Studies Department at Ohio University, for their constructive guidance throughout the duration of this study. Their willingness to advice during the creation, planning and development of this research work, is highly appreciated.

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