

STATUS CONFERRAL AND AGENDA-SETTING ROMANCE OF CELEBRITY CROSS-DRESSERS WITH THE NIGERIAN MEDIA

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Abstract

The media has the traditional function of informing the members of society about events around them, educating the public as well as providing entertainment. The powerful effects of the media suggest that the media, under the status conferral theory, has the power to confer status on things and persons due to increased or focused coverage on such persons which by the agenda-setting theory of the mass media, gives people what to think about and inadvertently confers celebrity status on such persons. This paper examines the history of cross-dressing in Nigeria, the relationship between the media and cross-dressers and how these persons have benefitted from these attributes of the media. Utilizing secondary data sources, this paper explores the theoretical ferments and foundations that underpin the aforementioned media attributes with recommendations for further research in the area due to the existence of limited research information on the issue of cross-dressing in Nigeria and the role of the media.

Keywords: Cross-dresser, Celebrity, Media, Status Conferral, Agenda-Setting.

1.0 Introduction

The powerful effect of the media once dominated and even today still dominates the landscape of communication research. At a time in the development of communication theory, the theories of media effects had the underlying assumption that the media is so powerful and capable of doing anything and everything. This assumption deposited all power in the hands of the media, asserting that people or audiences have no say as to how they react to mass media messages.

However, since the advent of social media, it is believed that some of this power of the media has been relinquished to the audience. Other theories in this regard believe that the audiences now have the power to choose how they react to mass media messages. While the assumptions in this regard have been tested and trusted and keep being subjected to empirical findings, it is safe to say, therefore, that regardless of the shifting power dynamics between mass media

messages and audiences, certain theoretical assumptions such as the status conferral theory still hold sway in the world of an empowered media audience.

The media has been described as having the power, capacity, and enormity, to make a previously unknown thing become known. This power is such that a rather unknown personality, issue, or occurrence when covered by the media can suddenly become ubiquitous. According to Sood (2018), the media have the effect of influencing public opinion about issues, events, occurrences or individuals. The power of the media cannot be undermined. It is therefore critical to examine as research questions for this paper:

- i.) Who is a cross-dresser and who is a celebrity cross-dresser?
- ii.) Does cross-dressing have any historical background in Nigeria?
- iii.) What role does the media play in the making of celebrity-cross dressers?
- iv.) What theoretical backings exist to support this role of the media?
- v.) Are there any legal provisions protecting or prosecuting cross-dressers in Nigeria?

1.1 Methodology

Secondary data was used to gather the materials used in this study. Sources from research conducted by other scholars, newspaper publications as well as observation of the media space and social media handles of identified celebrity cross-dressers were used.

1.2 A Cross-Dresser and A Celebrity Cross-Dresser

A cross-dresser is anyone of a particular gender, who intentionally embraces the dressing of the opposite gender, thus portraying his/herself to look like, by virtue of dressing, the opposite gender. This definition is supported by Iwalaiye (2022) and Straub (2015), who view cross-dressing as the act of putting on or wearing clothing that is associated with a particular gender or a status to which that individual does not originally belong.

From the above, we can operationally define a celebrity cross-dresser as someone who is well-known for putting on the dressing of the opposite gender and using this to portray his/herself to look like that gender. Such an individual may not necessarily be known for anything in particular other than the cross-dressing act which then opens opportunities for social influencing, endorsement and other celebrity-related activities including guest appearances at events.

1.3 Cross-Dressing in History

Historically in England and Europe, the phenomenon of cross-dressing dates back to between 1660 and 1789 where although marginal, the importance of clothing in society as a social identity signifier made this phenomenon begin to attract attention. With available literature reviewed for this work, it is observed that the rise of gender-oriented cross-dressing was influenced by theatrical performances and the need to portray female characters in them. This was necessary due to the fact that until 1660, women were not allowed to act in licensed English theatres. Therefore, the male actors had to play the role of women in their theatre performances.

While there is a limited amount of literature on the topic in Nigeria, there is even scarce information available to understand the history of cross-dressing in Nigeria. However, from the materials available, it was discovered that in Nigeria, this phenomenon is not new as might have been previously thought. According to Nwigwe (2019), cross-dressing in Nigeria

dates back to the pre-colonial era when the women from the south-eastern part of Nigeria were prohibited from wearing bifurcated cloth and this prohibition lasted until the colonial era when it was abolished.

While globalisation may have blurred the lines of female to male cross-dressing, that of male to female is more visible and pronounced. Therefore, this leads to the attraction of more media and public attention and also generates more discourse within society therefore, more emphasis may be placed on this pattern of cross-dressing.

According to Iwalaiye (2022), cross-dressing in Nigeria did not start with the popular Denrele Edun or Idris Okuneye, popularly known as 'Bobrisky' as previously opined by Ogunlowo (2017). In fact, it did not start with the popular 'Calypso King' of the 1980s rather, it dates back to the 1970s with a man well known and referred to as "Area Scatter" with the real name Uzoma Odimara.

He is described to have had a normal life as a civil servant with his real name while dressing like a woman with pierced ears and braided hair at other times. The man "Area Scatter" is said to have also been a talented musician who was invited to parties and events to perform, as well as television shows. Whether the invitations were due to his cross-dressing act, we'll never know as there is limited material to aid research in this area. However, it is clear that cross-dressing in Nigeria has its history which must not be forgotten if we are to understand the current realities posed to us by the phenomenon.

2.0 A Status Conferral Romance?

The concept of status is attributed to the work of Max Weber who conceptualizes status as a social evaluation either of an individual or a group. Vis a Vis the degree or extent of prestige and honour accorded to such individual, whether male or female or the entire group (Watson & Hill, 2015). This simply means that status is the evaluation in social terms, of the extent of prestige accorded to an individual or a group. How much prestige is given to an individual within a social context? How much prestige is given to a group? What are the factors or criteria that determine the prestige given to such individuals or groups? The summation of this is what makes for the celebrity status given to cross-dressers in Nigeria.

From the above description of the concept of status, it can be deduced that status can be ascribed. This ability of ascribing status is further affirmed by Watson & Hill (2015), who opine that different criteria can be used in order to ascribe status or even, achieve it. This is consistent with the propositions of the status conferral theory where it is stated that the media confers status on individuals by regularly featuring them.

This regular feature of individuals ends up giving them the status of important personalities within society. They get talked about more, after which the audience starts actively seeking out news on such persons or groups due to the initial attention given to these individuals by the media (Anaeto et al., 2008). To this end, the media, therefore, focus on these individuals because they have become who or what they made them be.

Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton are credited for giving prominence to the status conferral theory of communication when they argued and proposed that the media has the

ability to confer status on an individual or group of individuals especially if the medium in question is one that is highly respected (Harry, 2016).

This is one area that touches on the vitality of this paper and the romance between the media and celebrity cross-dressers in Nigeria. One thing is certain, the criteria used in conferring status on these sets of persons is unknown however, it appears that the abnormality of an occurrence in society ticks the newsworthiness box and this leads to increased coverage on the activities of such individuals or group of individuals. When anything strange or inconsistent with happenings in the society occurs, media coverage may be given to such occurrence or phenomenon with a view to drawing public attention to such.

According to Eilders (2006), negativity is one of the several news factors which could influence the judgement of journalists over what stories are newsworthy and which are not. Negativity in this sense is the damage or the negative effects of an issue on society. While it is possible that negativity may have sparked an initial coverage of activities of such cross-dressers, the continuity factor can also lead to continued coverage. This continuity factor means because such individuals or groups have been in the news previously, that makes for 'updated coverage' to be made or given to them and then the cycle continues.

However, it is evident that a combination or mix of these factors accounts for the cycle of status conferral that is initiated on such individuals and as this cycle continues, from being unknown cross-dressers, such individuals end up becoming prominent figures in society either by their intentions or by the intentions of the media which result in continued media coverage based on the newly acclaimed personality status or eliteness of these individuals (Eilders, 2006).

2.1 An Agenda-Setting Union?

Another school of thought sees the assignment of celebrity status to cross-dressers in Nigeria, to be a function of the agenda-setting theory of the media. This theory was coined by Maxwell McCombs and Daniel L. Shaw and it talks about the frequent projection of a particular news item by the media, to the extent it begins to take a position of importance in the minds of the public who consume such media content (Sood 2018). Part of the propositions of this theory is that rather than telling the public what to think, the media tells the public what to think about.

In view of the assigning of celebrity status to cross-dressers, the media may be said to be working in alignment with this theory as although a position may not be taken by the media on such individuals or group of individuals, the constant coverage positions these persons constantly, in the minds of the public such that any little thing done or said by these persons are then categorized as newsworthy, in order to fit into the agenda-setting narrative and this consequently puts them in the faces of people.

From a place of obscurity or oblivion, a regular cross-dresser who receives constant media coverage gets talked about, the individual becomes a topic for discussion, whether in the advancement of his/her cause or in criticism of it. Regardless, after a period of such constant media mention, the individual inadvertently receives the celebrity status as he or she becomes widely known, widely followed on social media and even becomes a brand influencer for

some brands looking to utilize the controversial status of such members of society, to get attention to their products and services.

2.2 Legal Provisions

The first media mention of anything regarding the law and cross-dressing in Nigeria dates back to August 2007 when a group of men were arrested and arraigned before the courts in Bauchi state, northern Nigeria having been accused of dressing as women to attend a party at a hotel (Shirbon, 2007). While nothing about the Nigerian laws address or state anything concerning this, the state's sharia penal code clearly provides for this with punishments of up to a year in prison and 20 strokes of the cane however, it must be noted that the sharia law does not cover the whole of the country rather, just the north.

The rise to prominence of celebrity cross-dressers such as *Denrele, Bobrisky, James Brown, and Jay Boogie* in recent times has simply given impetus to other cross-dressers who before now would have stayed in obscurity, to come out and make themselves known in the hope that the media beams its focus light on them and after a while, they also would achieve the celebrity status which comes with fame, money and every other thing.

There have been instances of cross-dressers being manhandled or harassed by members of society and in Nigeria, there are no legal provisions which exist to protect them rather, what is being done is further legislation to officially make it a crime to be a cross-dresser in the country. Further to this is the recent attempt by the House of Representatives to pass legislation prohibiting cross-dressing in Nigeria.

Nwabughio (2022), specifies that the bill attempts to punish with a jail term of six months or a fine of half a million naira, anyone deemed to have cross-dressed whether publicly or in private and or displayed such. The interesting thing about this proposed law is that it exempts cross-dressing for the purpose of a stage play or any legitimate public entertainment. This implies that the media will therefore be constrained in giving coverage to such individuals or their activities as the media may also be complicit based on the provisions of this proposed bill.

3.0 Conclusion & Recommendation

The role of the media in the elevation of the status of cross-dressers from ordinary to celebrity cannot be over-emphasized. This status-elevating power is made possible due to the traditional role of the media in informing the public. Theoretically, the status conferral theory and the agenda-setting theories of communication imply that the power of the media through increased coverage of a hitherto unknown individual or group can take such persons from obscurity to the limelight.

There is little research and information available on the relationship between cross-dressing and the media especially in Nigeria. It is therefore recommended that more research be done in this area especially with the use of social media by these persons. Further research may also adopt the content analysis method in order to observe the patterns and nature of media coverage given to cross-dressers.

Also, a lot of research is required to examine the legislations and how they affect the coverage of these issues by the media. Will the media be seen to be portraying such banned display of cross-dressing should the legislation come to be?

It is evident that cross-dressing is not alien to Nigerian history however, this paper has shown that there is little documentation on the trajectory of the act from historical to present times. It is hoped that researchers with expertise in historical analysis will conduct researches that can provide further insight into the start and growth of the trend in Nigeria.

Finally, little research exists to aid fully understanding of the cultural dimensions of cross-dressing in Nigeria. This paper merely scratches the surface and it is hoped that further research will advance the studies on the subject matter.

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