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The Portrayal of Women in Stickers Displayed in Taxis in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to explore the portrayal of women in textual stickers that are communicated among drivers, conductors, commuters, and the public who travel by taxis and bajaj in Ethiopia. The stickers were collected from taxis and the three-wheeled vehicles (widely called bajajs) that are used for the same purpose working in purposively selected towns (Adama, Bahir Dar, Hawassa, and Jimma) located in Oromia, Amhara, and Sidama Regional States, and from the two City Administrations (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa), Ethiopia. Discourse analysis (critical and textual) and interpretative phenomenological analysis were used as theories and analysis methods. The findings reveal stickers that superficially seem entertaining via the content they carry and their language, which is rich in metaphors, label women either positively or negatively. When portrayed positively, women are merely positioned as loving and caring mothers and partners. Contrarily, negative portrayals of women depict them as if they were worried about their looks, wealth, and sex. By doing so, vehicle stickers serve as a way of promoting, inculcating, and communicating gender stereotypes among the commuting community through taxis and bajaj, which are the main urban road transport service providers. Subsequently, a significant uncritical group of the larger public could further share such a portrayal of women. Accordingly, using stickers for acceptable ends has been suggested, among others, as a means of promoting social goods endowed with women, and as an avenue for promoting the health and well-being of society.

Keywords: Communication, Negative construction, Positive construction, Stickers, Women

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Ethiopia claims to have been working hard to become a country where men and women would enjoy equal rights in the social, cultural, and political aspects of their lives. To this effect, the Ethiopian constitution has explicitly addressed the rights women should enjoy as their male counterparts (Article 35); moreover, gender-related policies have been enacted and offices addressing gender-related issues have been established in the Federal and Regional government structures of Ethiopia. Further, many civic institutions and non-governmental organizations are engaged entirely or partly in women's rights-related activities or awareness-creation campaigns. However, it could be observed that the male dominance culture and practice is still a deep-rooted problem in the country.

Despite reports of promising changes, abduction, early marriage, and rape are still being practiced at least in rural communities. On the other hand, it has already become so common to hear/read from the media about the cruel acts of males over females. These acts are not mere verbal abuses alone; injuries using chemicals or other weapons and murders targeting women are being exercised in urban areas of Ethiopia. For example, BBC once reported an estimate by a UK-based non-governmental organization called Acid Survivors Trust International that between 50 and 75 women are attacked with acid in Ethiopia every year (BBC, 20 February 2020).

While several other factors could have their share, language is an important weapon for inculcating such an ideology (Fairclough, 1989); it could also play a significant role in the perpetuation of a culture/practice of male dominance. As Gee (2011) puts it, language serves its users more than just for informing; it helps them to be things and to do things. Its impact becomes so pervasive when it is employed by the media, be it traditional or online media, mainly due to its wider reach and the social power it carries.

The impact of taxi/babaj stickers could not be underestimated because they are mostly produced and disseminated around the drivers, conductors, and owners who are few compared to the urban population; if their target audiences (mainly commuters), who could further disseminate the information via interpersonal and mediated communication (including the social media) are considered, the reach becomes so significant. For example, we could find vehicle stickers posted on Facebook being liked or shared for the funny and/or critical messages they carried. Hence, exploration, description, and interpretation of taxi/babaj stickers constructing women, by categorizing them thematically, would provide us insights not just about a segment of society who would commute for work and other social concerns, but about the urban population at large.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how stickers posted in taxis and bajajs which are the main public transport-providing vehicles construct/portray women, and the meaning these portrayals communicate among drivers, conductors, commuters, and the public at large.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although it has not yet satisfied the mobility needs of metropolitan commuters, it seems that the fast-growing volume of public transport providing vehicles (taxis, mini-buses, and the three-wheeled vehicles mostly called bajajs) in Ethiopia has contributed to the widespread use of vehicle stickers as forms of mass communication. In a world of a fast proliferation of online media, vehicle stickers (also called inscriptions), which could be construed as traditional forms of communication, are being used widely in different parts of Africa for communicating a variety of philosophical, social, cultural, economic, political, and other

contemporary concerns of commuters and the larger society (Mgbemena, 2013; Saidi, 2013; Taluah & Musah, 2015). As a simple observation of some of these stickers would reveal, they have useful messages that inform and instruct, or carry humorous expressions to entertain their audiences (Al-Adaileh & Kreishan, 2021). We could read several stickers addressing almost all sorts of life: economy, culture, politics, religion, society, etc.

However, not all messages conveyed by stickers could positively be welcomed by the target audiences and beyond; the possibility of reading biased messages is quite pervasive. Some of the messages in such stickers are abusive, offending, or embarrassing; they violate the rights of a significant section of the community in mobility, which was meant to get the proper service. Among the offending messages that one could observe from some of the posted stickers are those with gender stereotypes; it is common to read stickers that are posted with sexist language in these transport service-providing vehicles degrading/undermining women, who are at least half of their customers. An unpublished MA thesis conducted in Kenya showed that minibuss graffiti depicted women as weak, cheap, and sexually available (Kenyatti, 2002). In this graffiti, sexist language is “popularly treated as a source of humour more often than outrage” (p. 47) while there could be no humor in undermining others for their gender; in fact, it rather offends them. As Doyle (1989) puts it, “If our language leads to misunderstandings or offends people we are trying to reach, it fails to do what we want it to do; it ceases to be an effective tool for communication. Sexist language has this effect.” Language is a strong tool in this form of communication for those who post the stickers (usually owners, drivers, and conductors) and for their audiences (most of the time their passengers). Based on their own preferences, and considering their addressees, the addressors (mainly drivers and conductors) post textual stickers that carried various messages, written in either prose or poetic forms.

Discourse Analysis (DA henceforth) is the main theoretical framework adopted for this research. According to Barker et al. (2002, p. 87), DA “involves rigorously examining texts, to analyze the repertoires of discourse that a speaker is drawing upon, and the kinds of “subject positions” that the speaker is adopting.” Daymon and Holloway (2002, pp.140-141) understand discourse as an occurrence within a social context, and conceptualize DA as an examination of three aspects of language use: “the form and content of the language in use, the ways in [how] which people use language to communicate ideas and beliefs, and institutional and organizational factors surrounding the discourse under investigation and how they might shape the discourse.”

Gee (2011) broadly classifies approaches to DA into two: as descriptive— that “look only at the “content” of the language being used, the themes or issues being discussed”— and critical— approaches that “pay more attention to the structure of language (“grammar”) and how this structure functions to make meaning in specific contexts” (p. 8). He advocates the approach that “looks at meaning as an integration of ways of saying (informing), doing (action), and being (identity), and grammar as a set of tools to bring about this integration” (p. 8). According to him, critical discourse analysis (CDA, henceforth) “argues that language-in-use is always part and parcel of, and partially constitutive of, specific social practices and that social practices always have implications for inherently political things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power” (p. 68). While the textual stickers in the Ethiopian context are mostly phrases, clauses, or quite brief sayings or couplets, they still carry meaning that could be interpreted by different people in a variety of ways, depending on the varied experiences, tastes, social positions, economy, etc. they could have. Gee’s approach to language use/discourse has thus been adopted in this study. The data collected from the taxis and bajajs in the form of textual stickers were subjected to analyses; first, to understand the varied dimensions of meaning that the subjects construct about women— how language in stickers about women is used as a form of communication— and secondly, the meaning these constructions of women could convey to the sources, the

audiences (the passengers in general and the women in particular) and the urban society at large. The second stage of analysis was meant to reveal hidden meanings constructed as depicted in the second category of stickers; this analysis was made based on Fairclough's conception of 'discourse as social practice'.

In this study, vehicle stickers are taken as discourses constructing people in mobility and how they operate in the context under investigation. In DA, structure and organization of language are analyzed, emphasizing how participants' versions of events are constructed; hence, taxi/bajaj owners'/drivers'/conductors' constructions of social realities they live by (which could be evidenced by choices they make of stickers they buy/engrave and post in their vehicles) are emphasized. Unlike in content analysis, In DA, language is not construed as a transparent medium that merely reflects 'reality'. Analysis in DA focuses on recognizing regularities in language in terms of patterns and repertoires which are not just individual users' constructions but are embedded in culturally and socially constructed situations. Thus, by analyzing the taxi/bajaj owners'/drivers'/conductors' constructions of women as portrayed in the stickers, power relationships, and gender ideologies are uncovered.

Saidi (2013) used DA to conduct a study on textual stickers/inscriptions in Zimbabwe and found out that they are used to reflect commuters' and operators' identities, emotions, relations, and the nature of their daily lives. To examine how religious vehicle stickers are used to construct "individual and group identities, people's religious faith and social vision in the context of religious assumptions and practices in Nigeria", Chilwa (2008) conducted a study. Citing other authorities (Blume; Jeff; Nwoye; Teixeira and Otta), Chilwa also confirmed that stickers "provide individuals, [who are] denied of other legitimate means of social communication the opportunity to express their views on social and political matters or voice their grievances or protest against injustice." Bature and Ibrahim (2019) indicated that stickers are used to express the users' emotions by commenting on social values and personal opinions about their society. For van der Geest (2009), who examined lorry inscriptions in Ghana, stickers are "means of communication ... linguistic brokers between village and city, past and present, local Twi and cosmopolitan English" (p. 289).

With varying levels of depth and emphases, these authors have explored the linguistic, social, and historical dimensions of meaning that stickers on vehicles have addressed. However, none of them examined the role such stickers could play in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes or the representation of women in the stickers they collected and analysed. Moreover, except for Chilwa (2008), no one analysed the texts using DA.

While other methods of analysis were employed, like content-based analysis (Jaradat, 2016), linguistic analysis (Ogunnike, 2013; Taluah & Musah, 2015), ethnographic and case study strategies (Saidi, 2013), no attempt was made to analyze the texts using CDA. Specifically, stickers in Ethiopia have not been explored at all. To fill the research gap, therefore, the study attempted to sort out textual taxi/bajaj stickers addressing women under the varied themes they convey and to reveal the hidden meanings constructed about women as depicted in the stickers. This has been achieved by answering two questions: (1) How do taxi/bajaj stickers in Ethiopia represent women? And (2) how could these stickers that constructed women in some way be ignored just for the humorous messages they may claim to communicate?

2. Research Methodology

The choice of research methodology is determined, among other things, by “whether the research is inclined towards a positivist, interpretivist, or other perspective” (Gray, 2004, p. 25). This research has attempted to understand how taxi and bajaj owners, drivers, and conductors use language to construct women via stickers they post on the interior (but visible for commuters) parts of their vehicles and the varied dimensions of meaning they convey among the urban commuters in Ethiopia. To this end, two qualitative methods of analysis were used: the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA, henceforth) and the DA. IPA “assumes an epistemological stance whereby, through careful and explicit interpretative methodology, it becomes possible to access an individual’s cognitive inner world,” (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008, p.215). On the other hand, DA is an “approach to the analysis of qualitative data that focuses on the implicit meaning of the text or image rather than its explicit content,” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 287). The aim of DA for Denscombe is “to ‘unpack’ the text or image to reveal: what people are trying to do through the talk, text or image, and what background assumptions are needed for this to be achieved” (*Ibid.*, p. 287).

As has been put by Yin (2003, p.9), the case study design is employed when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control.” This study tried to sort out the various dimensions of meanings communicated by vehicle stickers portraying women based on how the inscribers understand their immediate environment and beyond, and why the communicators (the taxi/bajaj owners, drivers, and conductors who post them) prefer the particular stickers they buy and post that construct women the way they did. de Vaus (2001) also indicated that the case study designs are different from other designs mainly because “they seek to achieve both more complex and fuller explanations of phenomena” (p. 221). The explanatory case study design has helped best to achieve the purposes that this study anticipated.

For this research, stickers posted on the interior parts of vehicles (mini-buses and three-wheeled vehicles called *bajajs*) serving public transport provisions in six cities were collected. The study employed the purposive sampling method; hence, stickers were gathered from taxis and bajajs driven on the streets of the selected cities, from February to April of 2018. To make the data collection easier, contacts were made first with the Urban Transport Operation and Inspection officers of the targeted city administrations; the officers directed us to the terminals where the taxis/bajas queue for their round trips, and told us the times of the day these transport providers would usually stay for a bit longer; it was mostly 10:00-11:30 in the mornings and 2:00-3:00 in the afternoons. Since the number of commuters would decrease at these times of each working day, most taxi/bajaj drivers and conductors would use the time to take some rest, having breakfast, tea, or coffee. Hence, it was ideal for us to collect the required data while they were taking a rest and, in the meantime, waiting for their turns.

Upon arrival at the sites, we asked permits from the drivers/conductors to let us copy down or take pictures of the stickers they posted in the interior parts of their vehicles; since copying down took us time and energy, we eventually preferred to take the pictures of the stickers that were posted. The collected data from the six sites was too much to manage; however, we discovered that most of them were repetitions. While similar stickers were posted in taxis/bajajs of the various cities where we collected the data, we tried to collect and analyse diversified and adequate stickers.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

As explained earlier, this study used a combination of qualitative approaches (Frost *et al.*, 2010): IPA and DA. The overall themes that the stickers conveyed were seen by employing IPA, and discursive practices, and the ideological underpinnings implied in the stickers were seen using the qualitative method of critical DA. This report is only about the portrayal of women in stickers. Therefore, in line with the objectives set, the first level of analysis was sorting out stickers constructing women under the varied themes they conveyed. For a thick analysis, stickers that constructed women were selected from the collected data. Hence, following the repeated readings of the stickers, the researchers identified two themes emerged from the available dataset concerning women.

Women are generally given two divergent positions by the stickers shared among people working in the taxi/bajaj transport service-providing sector in particular and the larger urban commuting community in general. The first group of stickers positioned women positively, construing them as mothers or partners, and proclaiming the necessity of dignifying them for their love, care, and kindness. On the other hand, stickers of the second group constructed women negatively, mainly as people who run after wealth, external looks, and as objects of sex. Although the language used in these constructions of women seemed entertaining and intriguing, it was also filled with derogatory expressions and connotations that carried implicit messages violating the rights of not just the she-commuters who deserved respectful service, but the urban women in general. The next section of the paper discusses these issues in some detail.

Positive Constructions of Women. Stickers of this category portrayed women as caring mothers and as loving partners. In both cases, women were constructed as an important section of society, in terms of the positive impact they may have in the lives of men (their children or partners), and they are highly recommended to get the love and respect they deserve. However, implicitly, these positive constructions of women have labeled them as if they were destined to be just mothers and partners, while they could have a lot to offer to society in other aspects of life. Each subcategory is discussed as follows.

Women as Loving and Caring Mothers

ምንም ድሃ ብትሆን ሐብትም ባይኖራት / ሰላም ውላ ትግባ እናት አንድ ናት [even if she is poor and may not have a penny / let her live in peace for a mother does not have a substitute]

በፍቅር አለም የማትሰለች እናት ብቻ ናት [in the world of love, it is only one's mother that can never be bored of]

እናት ውለታዎን ምን መክፈል ባትችሉ፣ በአፀያፊ ስድብ ክብሯን አታቃሉ [even if you couldn't pay back the favors of a mother / do not dishonor/insult her by using offensive words]

እናት ብር ሆኖ እኔ ብበደራት፣ ወለድ እየከፈልኩ ዘላለም ባኖርኳት [what if my mother were wealthy I would borrow / I would then keep her with me paying the interest]

እናት ለምን ትሙት ትሂድ አጎንብሳ፣ የምታሰድግ ናት በችግር ተጠብሳ [let a mother not die but live for ages / for she looks after her children even if she is in poverty]

እናትን በመሰደብ ክብሯን የሚያቃሉ፣ በኢንኩቤተር ነው እንዴ የተፈለፈሉ፣ ካልተፈለፈሉ ዛሬውኑ አቁመው ሸረ አይደለም ይበሉ [people who despise mothers by insulting them / were they breed of an incubator / if they are not breeds let them admit soon and stop insulting any more]

ዝናብ ሳለ ዝሪ / እናት ሳለች ኩሪ [saw when it rains/be confident when your mother is alive]
 የእናት ሞትና የድንጋይ መቀመጫ እያደረ ይቆረቁራል [the loss of one's mother and a seat
 made of stone would eventually cause discomfort]
 አራዳ እናቱን እሚረዳ [a civilized person looks after his mother]

As stated above, good number of stickers constructed women as mothers or as partners. In both cases, women were constructed favorably – as caring and loving mothers that deserved the same love and treatment from their grown-up children, and as caring and loving partners that men need to have if they are to succeed in life. Different reasons could be read from the stickers themselves for these positive constructions of women.

For instance, in *እናት ለምን ትሙት ትሂድ አጎንብሳ / የምታሳድግ ናት በችግር ተጠብሳ* [let a mother not die but live for ages / for she looks after her children even if she is in poverty], that mothers deserve to survive for eternity is expressed. As it could be understood from the couplet, the reason for this positive construction is that mothers would stretch unceasing care and kindness to their kids even if they were too poor to do so.

The wish for a long life for one's mother is well expressed in the sticker that goes: *እናት ብር ሆና እኔ ብብደራት / ወለድ እየከፈልኩ ዘላለም ባኖርኳት* [what if my mother were money I would borrow / I would then keep her with me paying the interest]. When this sticker matched the mother as a debit collected from a financial institute at some interest rate, it was with a bold intention of not paying back the debt at all and settling the issue; hence, by paying back only the interest, the debit (which was used to represent the mother) was wished to be kept as it was with the child forever. In a society that is predominantly religious and hence believes in human being mortality, reading a sticker demanding a mother's eternity in the flesh could indicate the depth of love and care that mothers have shared with their children. Of course, the grammar used in the construction of the sticker (in conditional type II form) also implies that such a scenario is nonexistent – it is no more than a mere wish, which was used only to reveal the depth of love the inscribers had for their mothers.

Moreover, even if a mother might be from the lower economic status (and this is true in Ethiopia where land and other resource ownership has dominantly been held by men), only the fact that she does not have a substitute would let her deserve peace and longevity, as it is expressed in *ምንም ድሃ ብትሆን ሐብትም ባይኖራት፣ ሰለም ውላ ትግባ እናት አንድ ናት* [Even if a mother is poor and has no wealth, she deserves peace as she is irreplaceable]. A wife may come and go; if one needs children, they may come through relationships with this or the other woman. However, one could never find anything matching as a substitute once s/he has lost a mother.

Another sticker depicting the need to love and respect mothers declares she should be honored, and never be insulted. It is not uncommon to hear derogatory expressions, which are used against women among some ill-behaved people in urban areas; hence, some of the stickers could have been posted to refute (and give lessons for) such people. One is read as *እናት ውለታዎን ምን መክፈል ባትችሉ፣ በአፀያፊ ስድብ ክብርን አታቃሉ* [even if you couldn't pay back the favors of a mother / do not dishonor/insult her using offensive words]. The message in this sticker is that though repaying mothers would be too difficult, some people are not even financially strong enough to support their needy mothers; however, they should at least be able to dignify them.

Similarly, the stickers *እናትን በመሳደብ ክብርን የሚያቃሉ፣ በኢንኩቤተር ነው እንዴት የተፈለፈሉ፣ ካልተፈለፈሉ ዛሬውኑ አቋምው ችረ አይደለም ይበሉ* [people who despise mothers by insulting them / were they breeds of an incubator / if they are not breeds let them admit soon and stop insulting any more] criticizes people who would insult mothers as if they were not human beings at all; it associates them with senseless products of machinery -

breeds of an incubator. This is a strong criticism against haughty people (mostly young) who would use derogatory expressions against women for every reason they may have. Of course, if such people regret or are ready to change, room for an excuse is provided in the stickers themselves: “Let them admit soon and stop insulting [women] any more”. As stated above, we could thus infer that stickers are sometimes used for instructive purposes. The minimum thing these people could do instead of insulting mothers according to the sticker is give due respect to mothers, at least by not using derogatory expressions.

Further evidence of this declared love and care that mothers deserved is in the sticker አራዳ እናቱን እሚረዳ [a civilized person looks after his mother], which boldly measured one’s civilization in readiness to help one’s mother. On the contrary, if one is not ready to remember her/his mother, that person would be counted as uncivilized or foolish, ignorant of the love, care, and kindness which s/he had enjoyed from her/his mother. The sticker did not mention how much one may have to support her/his mother; be it of meager or plenty income, a mature, civilized person who supports her/his needy mother.

Moreover, a living mother was constructed as one whose children would be proud of her, as in ዝናገ ሳለ ዝረ / እናት ሳለች ኩረ [saw when it rains/be proud when your mother is alive]. The point in this sticker is that it is only when they get support from their mothers that people can be confident enough to achieve their goals, as it is only when it rains that one could confidently sow the seeds expecting that s/he would someday be able to reap the produce. Hence, only when their mothers are alive, do people get assurance that they can go to school, get educated, and eventually have a career to support themselves.

Even if death is an unavoidable experience for every creature, the loss of one’s mother was constructed as too tough an experience to accept, and hence as a pain that grows day by day as it is expressed in የእናት ሞትና የድንጋይ መቀመጫ እያደረ ይቆረቆራል [the loss of one’s mother and a seat made of stone would eventually cause discomfort]. It could be for this unreserved love and care mothers would give to their children that their love was expressed as unwavering love as in በፍቅር አለም የማትሰለፍ እናት ብቻ ናት [in the world of love, it is only a mother who could never be bored of]. We could further infer from this sticker that marital or any other form of relationship could someday be broken due to boredom from either party, but that would never be expected from a mother-child relationship.

Women as Life Partners

- ሴት ልጅ ተዘርታ ብትበቅል ኖሮ ወንድ ሁሉ ገበሬ ይሆን ነበር [if women had been grownlike plants, all men would have been farmers]
- ሴት ልጅ የዚህ መራራ ኑሮ ማጣፈጫ ቅመም ናት [women are spices of this bitter world]
- ብልህ ሴት ሀብት ናት፣ ብልህ ወንድ ደግሞ ሀይል ነው [a wise woman is wealth whereas a wise man is power]
- ደጋግ ልቦች ከዉብ ፊቶች ይበልጣሉ [kind hearts are better than beautiful looks]
- የሴት ልጅ ውበቷ ታማኝነቷ [the beauty of a lady is her loyalty]
- አንድ ማፍቀር ግድ ነው፣ ሁለት ማፍቀር ንግድ ነው፣ ሶስት ማፍቀር ግን ኮንትራባንድ ነው [to love one is duty, to love two is business, but to love three is an illegal trade]
- ዘናጭ ! [one who dresses well!]
- አቦ ይመችሽ ! [let you be as you wish!]
- ሚስትና ዳዊት ከብብት [keep your wife and your prayer book in your armpit]

⊖We collected stickers about marital/sexual relationship between men and women that positioned women positively. Stickers of the kind *ሴት ልጅ ተዘርታ ብትበቅል ኖሮ ወንድ ሁሉ ገበሬ ይሆን ነበር* [if women had been grownlike plants, all men would have been farmers] and *ሴት ልጅ የዚህ መራራ ኑሮ ማጣፊጫ ቅመም ናት* [women are spices of this bitter world], for example, constructed women as significantly important for the existence of men. The first constructed men as if they were ready to pay all the cost to find women, even if it may not be that simple to succeed. In a country like Ethiopia in particular, farming is one of the most laborious professions; however, men, in fact “all men” were constructed to have been ready to be farmers if women were to grow like crops. The second sticker also positioned women positively; it constructed life as so bitter and women as ingredients that would sweeten it. It could be inferred from the observable realities of the majority of drivers, conductors and their passengers that life is so a challenge for them. They had to always work the whole day in order to collect their daily/monthly income to feed themselves and their family. That would normally make their lives a bit monotonous. The claim constructed in the sticker is that women had the ability of sweetening this boring life that could probably be caused by toiling day and night all the week through.

If we relate *ብልህ ሴት ሀብት ናት፣ ብልህ ወንድ ደግሞ ሀይል ነው* [a wise woman is wealth whereas a wise man is power], it could be inferred that a man who has a life partner is able to win life since he could have two things at the same time - wealth from the woman (his wife) and power from himself. Similarly, in *ሚስትና ዳዊት ከብብት* [keep your wife and your prayer book in your armpit], having a life partner – wife – was not only declared, but she was also matched with a prayer book in terms of the place she should be given, i.e., in one’s armpit as a way of showing love and respect.

Regarding how relationship with women should be created, unlike the popular discourse that emphasized physical beauty, wealth and sometimes education, being humble was given due emphasis. Hence, as could be seen in *ደጋግ ልቦች ከዉብ ፈቶች ይበልጣሉ* [kind hearts are better than beautiful looks] and *የሴት ልጅ ውበቷ ታማኝነቷ* [the beauty of a lady is her loyalty], it is moral values like kindness and honesty that the stickers advocated. Of course, these values are what the traditional society also recognizes as some of the crucial criteria one should take into consideration when searching for a life mate. Of course, in line with the global claims for women’s rights to dress and beautify themselves in whatever way they wish, being *ዘናጭ* ! [One who dresses well!], and enjoying the freedom one has to as s/he wishes, as in *አቦ ይመችሽ!* [let you be as you wish!] were also posted, indicating that such trends have also been well recognized. On the other hand, when they are examined deeply, these seemingly positive portrayals of women could still be construed as problematic for their depiction of women as mere sweeteners of the lives of their children and spouses. Women have a lot more roles in society, as in economy, politics, science, etc. which did not come out even in these positive constructions of women.

Negative Portrayals of Women. Stickers that portrayed women negatively are analyzed categorizing them into three: construction of women as much worried about their looks, women as lovers of riches, and women as sex objects.

Women as Much Worried to External Looks

እንዲታይልኝ ከለበስኝ ምን አስጎተተኝ [if your interest is a show off, why are you so worried to cover it] መስታወት በቆጣሪ ቢሆን ኖሮ ሴቶች ምን ይውጣቸው ነበር [what would happen to women if there were a bill on a mirror]

ፊትሽ ላይ የሌለው የካዲስኮ ቀለም ብቻ ነው [it is only KADISCO's Paints that is not on your face] የሚያምር ጸባይ ካለኝ / ከማንም በላይ ቆንጆ ነኝ [if you have good manners / you are more beautiful than anybody else]

ምንም ብታምሪ ከሚስትነት አታልፈም [it doesn't matter how beautiful you may be for you will never be more than a wife]

ውበት አስር ሲሆን ዘጠኙ ግን አለበበስ ነው [beauty is ten of which nine is based on dressing style]

ሴትና ማንጎ ይወደዳሉ ግን ሁለቱም ይጨማላቃሉ [women and mangoes are loveable but they spoil]

ደጋግ ልቦች ከውብ ፊቶች ይበልጣሉ [kind hearts are better than beautiful looks]

There were many stickers that conveyed looks as critical concern of women. These stickers constructed women as people who were much worried mainly about their external beauty and the stickers sharply criticized them for that. Typical examples of such a portrayal are መስታወት በቆጣሪ ቢሆን ኖሮ ሴቶች ምን ይውጣቸው ነበር [what would happen to women if there were a bill on a mirror] and ፊትሽ ላይ የሌለው የካዲስኮ ቀለም ብቻ ነው [it is only KADISCO's Paints that is not on your face]. The first one would tell us how frequently women use mirrors, obviously to check how attractive/beautiful they were and it questioned how much it would cost them if they were to pay as per the bill if meters that would count the number of times women used the mirrors were fixed on them. We could understand from the sticker that since women use mirrors repeatedly, they would not be able to cover the fees. The second one also criticizes the number/amount of cosmetics women use to beautify themselves. In fact, the only paint one could not find on women's faces, according to the sticker, was a product of KADISCO Paints; the irony is that KADISCO Paints is an industry that produces paintings for buildings, not for cosmetics. Hence, not only just an exaggerated expression was used to indicate the different types of cosmetics women may use to look attractive, but they were also downgraded by implying that they would not make choices at all, indicating that they would use whatever type of cosmetics the market may provide them.

Sometimes we could read stickers that advised women to focus on their inner beauty; for instance, የሚያምር ጸባይ ካለኝ / ከማንም በላይ ቆንጆ ነኝ [if you have good manners / you are more beautiful than anybody else] would imply that the woman is so worried about her beauty that she probably has done a lot to look beautiful or attractive. Instead, it suggests all that she has to prefer is having good conduct. Therefore, the comment (or perhaps the complement) is that women had better focus on their internal beauty instead of on their external looks. On the other hand, stickers like ምንም ብታምሪ ከሚስትነት አታልፈም [it doesn't matter how beautiful you may be for you will never be more than a wife] undermines beauty and women's attempts of beautifying themselves. They constructed being wives as the final fate of women, and hence all the beauty they may have or any attempts of beautifying themselves would be in vain.

We could read other stickers also which portrayed women as too worried about their looks and wearing styles, as in *ውበት አስር ሲሆን ዘጠኙ ግን አለባበስ ነው* [whereas beauty is comprised of ten things, nine of which are based on how you dress] and *እንዲታይልኝ ከለበስኝ ምን አስጎተተኝ* [if your interest is a show off, why are you so worried to cover it]. It could be observed that urban women nowadays have a variety of wearing and dressing styles; some of these styles would expose private parts of the body to the public. The first stickers is a judgmental statement regarding what beauty is composed of – claiming that it is mainly a result of dressing style, and commented against women who might have invested a lot of their energy, time and/or resource on their dressing style so as to look beautiful. The second also questioned women why they would pull their mini-skirts or mini-shirts down their body now and again intending to cover parts of their bodies that were already exposed abnormally.

The sticker *ሴትና ማንጎ ይወደዳሉ ግን ሁለቱም ይጨማላቃሉ* [women and mangoes are loveable but they spoil] also have the implied meaning that though women are adorable, they on the contrary have serious personality related problem that make them despicable.

As *ደጋግ ልቦች ከውብ ፊቶች ይበልጣሉ* [kind hearts are better than beautiful looks] could also indicate, it is not looks but character which is the determining factor for a woman to be liked, chosen or appreciated. The comment here is therefore that women are trying to have good looks by using artificial means like clothes or make-up they wear while they should accept what they are endowed with naturally.

Constructing Women as Running after Money/Wealth

ቅጠል ገንዘብ ቢሆን ሴት ልጅ ጦጣ ትሆን ነበር [if leaves had been money, women could have become monkeys]
 ሴትን ተዋትና ገንዘብን ተሻማ / ትመጣ የለም ወይ ማግኘትህን ስትሰማ [ignore the woman and run after money / for she will chase after you when she heard you became wealthy]
 ሴቶች ድሃ የሚወዱት ፊልም ላይ ብቻ ነው [women may love the poor, but only those in movies]
 ደሀ ነው ትስታ ነው ትይኛለኝ፣ ጭንና ዳሌ እንጂ አንችስ ምን አለኝ [you gossip that I am so poor and deprived / but you too do not have any except for thigh and hips]
 በልታ የምታበላ ሚስት ይስጥህ [let him give you a wife that feeds herself and feeds you too]
 እያለቀስኩ አመጣለሁ እየሰቀች ትፈጫለች [while I collect crying, she consumes it laughing]
 የገጠር ሴት እግር ታጥባለች የከተማ ሴት ኪስ ታጥባለች [while a woman from the countryside washes your feet, a woman from the urban washes your pocket]
 ሴት ልጅ ሒሳብ ሥትማር እንጂ ስትከፍል አይተን አናቅም [we know a lady learns math, but we never see her paying the bill]
 ሹፊር ለጠበሰ ባለ 100 ብር ረዳት ለጠበሰ ባለ 50 ብር ካርድ እንሞላለን [we pay for a prepaid mobile card that worth birr 100 for those who propose a relationship with the driver, and 50 birr with the conductor]

On the other hand, *ቅጠል ገንዘብ ቢሆን ሴት ልጅ ጦጣ ትሆን ነበር* [if leaves were money, women could have become monkeys] and *ሴትን ተዋትና ገንዘብን ተሻማ / ትመጣ የለም ወይ ማግኘትህን ስትሰማ* [ignore the woman and run after money / for she chases after you when she heard that you had become wealthy] constructed women as people who would voraciously run after riches/money. While comment against extreme interest to riches is a

commonly heard one among men and women, the stickers here gave such a character to women only. In fact, poor/young men were advised to work hard and accumulate wealth instead of attempting to find partners, and they are assured the women would come by themselves once they were sure the man had collected enough. Likewise, ሴቶች ድሃ የሚወዱት ፊልም ላይ ብቻ ነው [women may love the poor, but only those in movies] ደሀ ነው ቸስታ ነው ብለሽ ትይኛለሽ፣ ጭንፍ ዳሌ እንጂ አንቸስ ምን አለሽ [you gossip that I am so poor and deprived / but you too do not have any except for thigh and hips] portrays women as using wealth as the main measure in their search for a partner. As the first stickers asserts boldly, it is only in the imaginary or fictional world that women would love poor men. The second one also tells that, even if there could be some level of relationship, that relation has come at risk due mainly to the man’s poverty; it could be for this reason that she was constructed as the same except for the thigh and hips she might present. Hence, if there is no wealth, there would be no love.

Other stickers of the kind በልታ የምታበላ ሚስት ይስጥህ [let him give you a wife that feeds herself and feeds you too] and እያለቀስኩ አመጣለሁ እየሰቀች ትፈጫለች [while I collect crying, she consumes it laughing] also are bold indicators of the construction of women as always running after financial advantages they voraciously seek to have. These stickers portray women as lazy/idle creatures meant for devouring only, and as if they were not ready to work hard to win life. The majority of women in Ethiopia may not be bread winners for their family, but it is obvious that they have a lot of responsibilities, engaging in reproductive activities at home; unlike this fact on ground, they are socially construed as if they were merely sitting idle.

Similarly, የገጠር ሴት እግር ታጥባለች የከተማ ሴት ኪስ ታጥባለች [while a woman from the countryside washes your feet, a woman from the urban area washes your pocket] and ሴት ልጅ ሒሣብ ሥትማር እንጂ ስትከፍል አይተን አናቅም [we know a lady learns math, but we never see her paying the bill] both construct women as not ready to contribute their share, but as only recipients of services from their male partners. Women from urban areas in particular are labeled as bold exploiters of their partners.

Finally, stickers like ሹፊር ለጠበሰ ባለ 100 ብር ረዳት ለጠበሰ ባለ 50 ብር ካርድ እንሞላለን [we pay for a prepaid mobile card that worth birr 100 for those who propose a relationship with the driver, and 50 birr with the conductor] constructs women as if it were too simple to start relationships if they are approached with the least amount of money. Here in this sticker, it is just a mobile top up of Birr 50 or 100 that was proposed for women to convince to start relationships with. Of course, this sticker could also be seen as construction of women as sex objects since it labeled women as ready to start sexual relationship with anyone, driver or conductor in this context, that is ready to cover minor expenses of theirs.

Constructing Women as Sex Objects

- ቆንጆ ቆንጆ ሴቶች አትግቡ ጋቢና ሹፈሩ ላይጋ ይጋለጣልና [do not take the cab you beautiful ladies / for the driver would be exposed to accidents]
- በሬ ያረደና ቆንጆ ያገባ ብቻውን አይበላም [one who slaughtered an ox and married to a beautiful lady would not eat alone]
- እልል በይ ልጡብሰሽ ነው [congratulations! I’m going to ask you for a relationship]
- ሽውጂውና ነይ [deceive him and come]
- ላታመልጬኝ አታሩጬኝ [as you could not escape why you force me to run after you]

The sticker ቆንጆ ቆንጆ ሴቶች አጎግቡ ጋቢና ሹፈሩ ላይጋ ይጋለጣል [do not take the cab you the beautiful ladies / for the driver would be exposed to accidents] may superficially appear as one entertaining passengers, but it implicitly carried the meaning that women are so sexually covetous that they could even be reasons for car accidents to occur when they sit by the side of the driver and tempt him to the extent he lose focus on the task he is at hand.

Sticker of the kind በሬ ያረደና ቆንጆ ያገባ ብቻውን አይበላም [one who slaughtered an ox and married to a beautiful lady would not eat alone] also has a superficial meaning of appreciation to beautiful women. However, it constructed such women as if they were unfit to a married life, labeling them as promiscuous, i.e., as people who have many indiscriminate or casual sexual relationships.

አልል በይ ልጠብስሽ ነው [congratulations!] I’m going to ask you for a relationship] is an explicit but culturally odd proposal for a woman to start a relationship or to have sexual relations with. Other stickers like, ሽውጂውና ነይ [deceive him and come], and ላታመልጩኝ አታሩጩኝ [as you could not escape why do you force me to run after you], both of which are constructed in the feminine gender, are stickers posted on various taxis and the three wheeled *bajajs*. While they could seem to be referring to the vehicles themselves, they are also meant to imply to women with whom the drivers/conductors want to have relationships with. ሽውጂውና ነይ [deceive him and come], for example, is used to invite a woman who already has relationship with someone else, taking it for granted that women could simply engage in such a morally unacceptable relationship for any reason they may have. This is constructed not for human beings in general, but just for women since it is constructed in the feminine gender. Of course she may not give an immediate response for invitations of this sort, invitations that boldly call for a betrayal; however, that she would eventually agree with such kind of invitation is well implied in ላታመልጩኝ አታሩጩኝ [as you could not escape, why you force me to run after you]. The implication is, she might not agree with the invitation or proposal for the time being, but it is sure that she would someday be in a position to accept.

3.2 Discussion

This study has attempted to sort out and analyse the portrayal of women in stickers posted on urban transport-providing vehicles (mini-busses and bajajs) in selected towns and the capital of Ethiopia. This form of communication, while not technologically advanced compared with the present digitalized forms of communication, its impact is overwhelming as it has continued to increase and affect people who produce and consume it (Taluah & Musah, 2015). From the analysis of this study, one can see that the stickers that targeted women are categorised into two as portraying women positively and negatively, each covering different issues and sub-issues.

Regarding the positive portrayal of women, it was found that women are construed as caring mothers and loving partners. By doing so, the drivers/conductors who posted the stickers have expressed their wishes for longevity, honor, respect, and care for women. Moreover, stickers in this category suggested that people should give honor and care to their mothers and partners so that they could gain moral satisfaction and enjoy material success. Such a positive construction of women using stickers in particular might not be investigated elsewhere, at least to the knowledge of the researchers; however, the use of stickers to positively construct other social issues, i.e., social causes like safety/security, is evident in other similar works in Africa (Adamo, 2015; Al-Adaileh & Kreishan, 2021; Jaradat, 2016; Mgbemena, 2013; Ogunnike, 2013).

On the other hand, we have found out that in most of the stickers that are humorous and hence meant to be entertaining, women were portrayed negatively. These stickers portrayed women as sex objects, money-minded, good for nothing, running for show off all the time, having odd/bad character, idle/lazy, etc. Such a characterization of women is sexist; while an implicit intent of entertainment could be inferred, this entertainment seemed to have been communicated via a negative portrayal of women. The use of stickers of various messages with undesirable connotations but are humorous as they are mainly meant for entertaining others is quite common in other contexts as well (for example, in Egypt Hafez, 2020; in Jordan, Karazoun & Hamdan, 2021; Jaradat et al., 2023); however, they do not seem to have targeted women in particular. In the Ethiopian context, both the targeted women and a good segment of men who are commuting may be offended (instead of entertained) when reading stickers that carry such messages. This may need further investigation, but findings of a study on Kuwaitis' attitudes towards vehicle stickers in Kuwait indicated that they generally expressed negative attitudes towards both the content and shape of stickers (Dashti, 2017).

On the other hand, such a negative construction of women by stickers in Ethiopia seems to be taken for granted. Even if a significant number of urban commuters read and talk about these negative portrayals of women almost daily, no one seems to have been openly reacting against this labeling of women. While this may need further investigation, it could be implied from the silence that derogatory language use of this sort that undermines women is so a deeply-rooted problem in the larger society.

The language used in the posted stickers is an important instrument in the ideologically negative constructions of women. While the possibility for such a communication to be ambiguous remains true (Beck, 2001), it is evident from most of the stickers that the intent in the negative portrayals of women using the stickers posted in taxis/bajajs is quite obvious. This message is disseminated among the urban commuters who use taxis/bajajs at least twice a day when going to and coming from work/school or other social engagements. The possibility of transferring these messages to the communities is also quite open, in conversations while the addressees are commuting, and in their daily interactions with family members, neighbors, and work/school colleagues. Hence, stickers are used to inculcate such a negative and discriminatory ideology in urban society. Darwish and Rousan (2019) have confirmed that vehicle stickers in Jordan serve owners and drivers as an "inexpensive and efficient way for voicing their opinions, beliefs, views, emotions, and attitudes in addition to being a low-cost advertising venue" (p. 128).

We have already observed people exchanging vehicle stickers via social media like Facebook. While some of the stickers could have been posted only because they are quite funny, perhaps carrying messages of insignificant impact, others are quite serious, i.e., a bit philosophical and critical. The findings of this study have confirmed that the meanings they carry could be positive or negative. Taluah and Musah (2015) also concluded stickers or inscriptions "on vehicles achieve the purpose for which they have been created." However, as it has also been indicated in a study by Darwish and Rousan (2019), stickers serve to communicate quite simply the attitude of taxi/bajaj owners, drivers and/or conductors towards women. A key finding of this study in this regard is, therefore, its attempt of unpacking sexist and derogatory language use that portray women negatively, a case that has not been investigated in Ethiopia so far but that needs further exploration and recommendation for change.

Finally, it is evident from this study that critical discourse analysis as a method of analysis and theoretical framework serves very well in unpacking meanings underpinned in taxi stickers as forms of language use and communication. The portrayal of women in the negative and seemingly positive constructions in the stickers are unpacked and better understood only when the overall context is taken in which they are constructed

beyond the so-called humorous constructions they are meant to have been entertaining the urban commuters. As Yakubui and Ishaya (2022) also confirmed, “Contextual factors contribute immensely to the pragmatic meanings of inscriptions”; hence, “meanings of inscriptions ... do not depend only on their literal meanings but also on their relationship to context” (p.45). These contexts could be social, cultural, and religious, to mention a few, that need further investigation.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

This study intended to investigate how stickers posted in taxis and bajaj construct/portray women and the different meanings these portrayals communicate among taxi drivers, conductors, commuters, and the public at large. Accordingly, the study attempted to sort out these textual stickers addressing women under the varied themes they convey and to reveal hidden meanings constructed about women as depicted in the stickers.

Overall, the stickers that targeted women are used to construct women either positively or negatively. The positive constructions of women depict women as caring mothers and loving life partners. These constructions portray women as an important group of society that influences the lives of men (their children or partners), and they claim they should enjoy the reciprocal love and respect they deserve.

On the other hand, some stickers portray women negatively. These stickers categorise women into three: women as much worried about their looks, women as lovers of riches/wealth, and women as sex objects. The language used in these stickers usually seems to entertain the urban commuters; however, the use of derogatory expressions against women is so prevalent that some could even be offending the women and men commuters. Hence, the references regarding women depicted in the posted stickers could be construed as acts against the moral, social, and cultural norms of the urban community.

4.2 Recommendations

Stickers are a strong means of communication among urban commuters and transport service providers. From their positive construction of women, one can see that they could be taken as social wisdom and knowledge recorders and disseminators of the lives of contemporary urban society. However, the role of women in society should not be considered to be mothers and spouses alone as they have a lot to offer in the other social, economic, and political arenas. Therefore, it is crucial to use inscriptions/stickers to appreciate such significant roles of women and to study them thoroughly and continuously.

On the other hand, some stickers are quite offensive to a good segment of society, mainly for their sexist and derogatory language use against women. There should be awareness creation schemes targeting taxi and bajaj drivers and conductors first, and then legal sanctions need to be put in place on those who write and post stickers that affect the rights of others, be it implicitly or explicitly. Hence, this study recommends using stickers to promote and inculcate the role played by women, which is recognized by society and family, and to educate the public about issues related to common public health and moral values.

This study has attempted only to sort out and show the role stickers have played as simple but significant forms of communication in the construction of women. Several issues associated with the implications of the portrayal of women should be studied further. For example, investigations on the meaning-making (consumption) of stickers by commuters and the public could give better insight. Stickers posted in other languages could also be examined for their diversity, focus, and distribution.

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Authors' contributions

Author¹: Collected data, transcribed the data, analysed and interpreted the data, prepared and enriched the manuscript.

Author²: Collected data, transcribed the data, and critically commented and edited the manuscript.

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