

Perception of Female Movie Audience on the Portrayal of Women in Nollywood Movies

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Abstract

Against the background of the much-touted gender stereotyping which in Nigeria is often tilted against women, this study was carried out to investigate the perception of female movie audience perception of the manner of representation of on the portrayal of women characters in Nollywood movies. To achieve this broad objective, a combination of survey and in-depth interview methods of research were employed. The survey data were analysed using frequency distribution tables and percentage while views from the interviewees were presented using explanation building. Findings show that gender discrimination and moral decadence accounted more for the way in which women are portrayed in Nollywood movies. Based on this, it is recommended that movie producers and directors endeavour to always edit their movies, especially new ones to ensure that negative portrayal of women characters are balanced or curtailed; that gender-based films should be properly critiqued before their release to the viewing public; and that the Nigerian Video and Film Censors Board screen contents of Nollywood movies so as to ensure that only the acceptable Nigerian/African cultural values - in content and in costuming – are retained in the movies.

Keywords: Movie Audience, Perception, Gender, Portrayal, Nollywood, Movies, Women.

Introduction

The treatment of women in movies has occupied the realm of discourse for several decades now. Feminist scholars, critics and women's movements have relentlessly challenged the stereotypical representation of women in movies. Feminism has millennial roots dating back to mythical figures like Liliath, to the legendary fighting

Amazons of Greece, classical plays like Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and to Nigeria's own *The Wives Revolt* by J P Clark. The desire of women to attain equality of rights with men, to be independent and to gain freedom from oppression and male dominance is a long-standing struggle which women are not prepared to give up.

Throughout the world, legal and social traditions have tolerated and even promoted physical assault of women by men. Under medieval English common law and Nigeria traditional law, a husband could not be prosecuted for raping his wife because the law provided that the wife could not refuse consent for sex to her husband. Experts argue that deep-seated economic and cultural beliefs allowed women only limited roles in society (Uchendu, 2012).

The widespread belief that women are intellectually inferior led most societies to limit women's education to learning only domestic skills. Well educated, upper-class men controlled positions of employment and power in the society. Traditional beliefs, customs and laws restrict the roles women play and also limit their economic opportunities, contributing to their dependence on men. Feminist scholars assert that socialisation teaches boys and girls a belief-system that devalues women, and creates a sense of female responsibility for the maintenance of the family (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002). Since most women lacked the educational and economic resources that could enable them to challenge prevailing social order, women generally accepted their inferior status as their only option. This inferior position has continued to be portrayed in filmic arts: "The media are potentially powerful agents of socialisation and social change – presenting models, conferring status, suggesting appropriate behaviours, encouraging stereotypes" (quoted in Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 17).

Feminists have argued vehemently that the image of women has been consistently exploited, abused and trivialised in the media particularly in the spheres of advertising and motion pictures (films). As such, earliest studies focused not only on women's routine omission or annihilation from the mass media, but also on ways in which women were represented (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Results of numerous studies conducted on the portrayal of women in Nollywood movies have also glaringly revealed that women are usually represented as wayward and of low moral standing, materialistic, lazy, subservient to and dependent on men, causes of family problems, fit for domestic rather than professional and career roles etc (Okunna, 1996).

Women are also generally presented as 'the weaker sex', less ambitious than men, sexual objects and looking glasses – subtly displayed to satisfy the erotic gaze of men (Haskell, 1974). This critical position perhaps, explains the unwarranted placement of half-nude and sexually suggestive pictures in both still and motion pictures of women in films, musical videos and advertisements of products that are not in any way related to women.

Nigeria audience members, particularly the women, have significant power

to negotiate with or distance themselves from these positions, identities or meanings created in the films. In other words, they can re-appropriate and interpret the meanings that are being imposed on them by the films from a set of other situated identities.

The Problem

In most Nigerian films, the problem of gender stereotyping is very prevalent. Female negative profiling where women are subjected to all forms of marginalisation has become a recurring phenomenon. The representation of women in cinema is a matter of debate. Nigerian cinema practices are influenced by the patriarchal ideologies and fantasies of the male filmmaker where women are placed in a lower social status, often domesticated as housewives, secretaries, nurses and child breeders. This kind of maligning of womanhood is augmented with negative portrayals. This type of portrayal is not restricted to films produced by only men in Nigeria; even those produced by women situate women in such ominous positions. After analysing three Nollywood movies, Okunna (2002, p.9) asserts thus:

A look at Nigerian movies in year 2002 shows that it is apparently 'business as usual' as far as their representation of women is concerned. Their preoccupation is still to focus on such themes as women's quest for husbands, childlessness, polygamy, materialism etc to bring out the worst in women who are portrayed in extremely negative ways in the exploration of these traditional themes.

This research, therefore, investigated how Nigerian women perceive Nollywood movies in terms of the representation of women.

The Objectives

This study was aimed at finding out how the audience perceives the manner in which women are portrayed in Nollywood movies. Its specific objectives were to:

1. Investigate the factors that influence the way women are portrayed in Nollywood movies.
2. Determine the dominant features and images of women in Nollywood movies.
3. Find out how the Nigerian female audience interprets the images or portrayal of women in Nollywood movies.
4. Determine factors that influence audience interpretation of the portrayal of women in Nollywood movies.

Research Questions

The study sought to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What factors influence the way in which women are portrayed in Nollywood movies?
2. What are the major features and images of women in Nollywood movies?

3. How do the Nigerian female audience members interpret the images or portrayals of women in Nollywood movies?
4. What possible factors influence female audience's interpretation patterns of women portrayal in Nollywood movies?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study was anchored on Feminist Film and Gaze Framing, Cultural Determinism and Biological theories.

The feminist film theory emerged in the 1970s and is rooted in the women's movement of the 1960s. This theory takes a look at how women are seen as the objects of male sexual desires. Laura Mulvey, in her 1973 essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," provides the theoretical grounds for the rejection of Hollywood and its pleasures, noting that men and women are differently positioned by the cinemas: men as subjects identifying with agents who drive the film's narrative forward and women as objects for masculine desire and fetishist gazing. She argues that female characters in films are plagued with "to-be-looked-at-ness," in which the male sees the woman as either a whore or a Madonna. Thus, Nigerian movies depict women as sex objects meant to satisfy the male visual desires and also as very weak vessels, unable to hold their own and incapable of making the right decisions.

The Gaze Theory as propounded by Mulvey (1975) is rooted in Freud's Psychoanalysis Theory. This theory is adopted in this study to provide a theoretical explanation of why women are often portrayed as sex objects in movies. Mulvey (1975) cited in Gaunlett (2002) argues that there are two pleasures derivable from objects in watching cinemas. One is 'scopophilia', a voyeuristic gaze directed at other people, while the second is narcissistic voyeurism – seeing oneself in the primary character and identifying with it. Mulvey (cited in Gaunlett, 2002) argues further that:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasm onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 38).

Mulvey's argument is that the female character has no importance in a film, beyond her role as a 'spectacle', the erotic object of both the male characters and the cinema spectators – explains the underlying motive behind the representation of women as sex objects in movies. Interestingly, a majority of such movies are most times produced and directed by men – the gender whose erotic gaze the movies were meant to satisfy in the first instance.

According to Baran & Davis (2012), framing theory is based on the central idea that people use sets of expectations to make sense of their social world and the media contribute to the framing of those expectations. These expectations, according to Baran & Davis, can also be referred to as stereotypes, attitudes, schemes, racial, and ethnic bias. This theory implies that we learn social cues through everyday interaction and from observing how they are used in media content.

On cultural determinism and biological theories, Amobi & Sunday (2012) posit that behaviours and what people look like are mediated by biological and cultural factors. They also observe that the major assumption of cultural determinism is that habits, ideas and customs are the major determinants of the shape of a society's political and economic arrangements. Amobi & Sunday (2012) note further that these theories explain why biological differences between men and women – which identify women as weaker vessels – have given birth to role differentiation along hierarchical lines, creating a culture of patriarchy, in which women are subjugated and subordinated. In all this, they argue that media, as purveyors and disseminators of culture, appear to be perpetuating the status quo by influencing people's perception of appropriate gender roles. In essence, the portrayal of women as sex objects of erotic gaze, for instance, appears to have a connection with the biological features of women.

As a kind of preamble to any discourse on the evolution, antecedents and challenges of Nollywood films in Nigeria, which we do not intend to plunge into here, we find it important to state here that the video film plays the role of the most important entertainment medium because of its wide reach. People no longer frequent the cinema. Even in the rural areas, video film rental shops are established for easy access to the low income earner or average man who cannot afford to buy Nigerian video films. With the new technology of compressing video films into DVD format, Nollywood films are as cheap as 150 – 200 naira. Despite the proliferation of video films, enough consideration has not been given to the stories (scripts), with respect to the message and the impact on the society. Maybe, if film is not merely seen as an entertainment but as a medium and process of communication (enlightenment), there could be a re-evaluation of the roles played by women as well as the images they are represented in the scripts written.

According to Shaka (2002), the Nigeria video film industry was firmly established through the production of Kenneth Nnebue's video film, *Living in Bondage* (1 & 2) in 1992, by NEK Video Links, Nnebue's video film production outfit. The success of the video film, which was originally shot in Ibo language, led to a version which was subtitled in English. The success was due to the use of a Super VHS camera instead of the usual VHS cameras, a practice which resulted in a better quality of the post-edited films. With regard to the case of women in this study, a perspective on women's roles in pre-historic times reveals that women were playing prominent roles in society:

We are told that in pre-historic times, women Amazons ruled the world, and that the Golden Ages of the past were characterised by the reign of matriarchs, mother goddesses and Queen Mothers, whose empires led to the study of the beehive as an ideal republic (as cited in Anyanwu, 2003, p. 82).

From Anyanwu's assertion, women played key roles in society; yet he does not indicate if they were featured in celluloid as we see in video films today. He, however, notes that: "Women have appeared in various stereotypical roles on the Nigerian screen as decorative faces in news casting, as garrulous characters" with the example of Apena in *The Masquerade*. He also observes that women have also been stereotyped as "showy and materialistic, bordering on the wayward," with the example of Miss Pepeye in the sitcom *Papa Ajasco* and "this reveals that the real woman often gives way for the fictional creations of men who are usually in control of the fabrication of such images" (Anyanwu, 2003, p. 83).

On the role of women in films during the post-colonial era, Shaka cited another film: *Bisi, Daughter of the River* (Jab Adu, 1977), a Cineventure Production which, according to him, "helped to launch the acting career of Patricia Ebigwei, known internationally as Patti Boulay" (2002, p. 13). In the same vein, Shaka (1994) cites the documentary: *Queen Elizabeth II's Visit to Nigeria* (1956) as one of the documentaries produced by the Federal Film Unit (FFU), an establishment of the British Colonial government in Nigeria which was formerly known as Colonial Film Unit (CFU), later changed to FFU in 1946 (Shaka, 2002).

The exploration or better still exploitation of the image of women in all aspects can be said to be as old as human history itself. Supporting this position, Buckingham & Bragg (2004) posit that the public display of images of naked human bodies cannot be seen merely as a manifestation of our allegedly 'sexualised' modern culture. On the contrary, it has a very long historical antecedent. Some of the earliest works of visual arts, such as paintings, sculptures and carvings prominently featured representations of images of naked human form (mostly those of women), clearly designed for the contemplative gaze, such that Victorian moral campaign movement at that time went about covering over and in some cases, defacing such images. The development in modern mass communication media that saw the emergence of newspaper, television and film however, propelled this trend to an alarming proportion in recent times.

Gregory Austen describes Nigerian women as the sacrificial lambs of moviedom (www.naijarules.com/nollywoodmovie, Retrieved November, 2015). Perhaps, Nollywood's representation of women is an extension of the patriarchal fictional construction, which dates back to classical Greek literature. Several scholars have noted the issue of representation of women in Nollywood. Notable among them is Onookome Okome, a respected academic and film scholar. He has, on several occasions, written on aspects of the representation and objectification of

women in Nollywood video films. He laments that since the release of *Living in Bondage*, the thematic preferences of Nollywood movies have been based on the notions of inherited stereotyping of women perpetuated by patriarchy (Okome, 1997). To discourage this negative trend, Ekwuazi (2007) appeals to television commercial copywriters to present Nigerian women in a decent manner.

While a few filmmakers try to represent the image of the woman in a positive light, a majority of them still continue in the trend of the negative portrayals which has been since the inception of the Nigerian film industry, otherwise known as Nollywood. In most of the Nigerian films, women are portrayed negatively. This might be because of the male domination of the film industry. However, despite the fact that some films are produced and directed by those women who dared to establish their film production companies, negative images of women and patriarchal ideologies are still discernible in these films. In spite of the unprecedented growth and success of the industry, the content of these movies rather than reflects messages that correct societal ills appears to reinforce gender disparity in the portrayal of women.

Methodology

This work adopted a combination of survey method and in-depth interview methods of research. The research methods were selected to complement each other, and to make it possible for the research questions and interview to dig deep enough to elicit responses adequate to evaluate the audience perception of the portrayal of women in Nollywood movies. The need for the in-depth interview is to gain access into the unclear areas of perception and sense impressions.

The population of this study comprised female undergraduates of Rivers State University estimated at 10,382 by the Office of the Registrar of the university in the 2016/2017 Academic Session. Using the online sample size calculator (<https://www/Survey-monkey.com/mp/sample-size-calculator/>), a sample of 371 subjects was drawn from the population to participate in the study. For the in-depth interview, critical case sampling was adopted to purposively select six (6) subjects comprising four film enthusiasts (two male, two female) from among the ranks of the Rivers State University staff and two film producers (one male, one female). A critical case is one that permits analytic, not inferential generalisations (Patton, 2014).

The instruments for this study were the questionnaire and in-depth interview used to access extra or supporting data, especially in determining the nature of some of the variables. The questionnaire primarily addressed the research questions while avoiding possible ambiguities of meanings for respondents.

As described by Merton (1990), the focus group interview was originally used to generate information concerning participants' responses to particular experiences and situations such as watching a film, or listening to radio (Roulsten, 2010). Interview questions focused on the following:

- i. Interviewees' level of exposure and preference for Nollywood movies.
- ii. Interviewees' perception of the manner of portrayal of women in Nollywood movies.
- iii. Interviewees' perception of the effects of the manner of portrayal of women on women self-worth and public image.

Two instruments were used in this study – the questionnaire and the interview schedule. The questionnaire was constructed to reflect the research questions. This was to ensure the generation of adequate data pool. The interview proceedings were designed in tandem with the questionnaire to broaden insight regarding audience's perception of the manner of representation of women in Nollywood movies. In analysing the quantitative data, the simple percentage and frequency distribution tables were used while the interview was reported qualitatively, using explanation building.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

Out of the 371 copies of the questionnaire administered, 325 were retrieved and 46 were lost to wrong completion and other factors. This translated to a response rate of 87.6% and a mortality rate of 12.4%. Data analysis was, therefore, based on the 325 copies retrieved.

Research Question 1

What factors influence the way women are portrayed in Nollywood Movies?

Table 1: Factors Influencing the Manner of Portrayal of Women Nollywood Movies

Response	Freq	%
Loss of Value	50	15.4
Moral Decadence	75	23.1
POP Culture	30	9.2
Tradition	70	21.5
Gender Discrimination	100	30.8
Total	325	100

It is clear from table 1 above that out of the 325(100%) respondents sampled, a simple majority of 100 of respondents indicated that gender discrimination influenced the manner of women representation in Nollywood movies, followed by 75 who said it was moral decadence. Popular culture was the least considered as influencing the manner of women portrayal in Nollywood movies. This implies that gender discrimination most influenced the manner of women representation in Nollywood movies.

Research Question 2

What are the dominant features and images of women in Nollywood movies?

Table 2: Major Features and Images of Women in Nollywood Movies

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Domestic help	48	14.8
Sex object	59	18.1
Ritualistic object	36	11.1
Prostitute	63	19.4
Weaker sex	57	17.5
Wicked mother –in- law	62	19.1
Total	325	100

On the question of the major features or images of women in Nollywood movies, 63(19.4%) of the respondents indicated that women were given the image of prostitutes, followed by 62 respondents who said women were dismissed in the movies as wicked mothers-in-law. Being ritualistic objects is the image least painted of women in Nigerian video films, according to the respondents.

Table 3: Audience Interpretation of the Images and Representations of Women in Nollywood Movies

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Injustice	40	12.3
Oppression	68	20.9
Struggle	64	19.8
Assault	80	24.6
Exploitation	30	9.2
Discrimination	43	13.2
Total	325	100

Table 3 above shows that by the interpretation of the respondents, assault (as indicated by 24.6 % of the respondents) followed by oppression (as pointed out by 68 respondents) were the highest offences against women through the instrumentality of Nollywood while, according to the respondents, the least offence against women was injustice.

Research Question 4

What factors influence female audience's interpretation of the representations of women in Nollywood movies?

Table 4: Factors Influencing the interpretative Pattern of Audience of Nollywood Movies

Response	Frequency	(%)
Age	22	6.8
Sex	170	52.3
Religion	22	6.8
Education	95	29.2
Ethnicity	16	4.9
Total	325	100

As shown by Table 4 above, while sex had the highest influence on the pattern of interpretation of women representation in Nollywood movies, ethnicity had the lowest influence on the interpretative pattern of women representation in Nigerian video films. Thus, the sex of the film viewer, more than anything else, affects the interpretation of how women are presented in movies.

Interview Result

Six interviewees among who were two film producers (one male, one female) were exposed to Nollywood movies but their perception of the manner of representation of women in the movies was divergent as should be expected. Responses from the interviewees confirmed the idea of mass culture, agreeing that Nollywood movies, as a form of culture industry, are devoted to controlling, dominating and portraying women in ways far below what they represent. The response from one of the interviewees set the tone of question two (on perception of women representations in Nollywood movies):

When Nollywood movie presents a woman cooing over a man or kneeling before him, I know that the producer of that movie must be a man or a woman whose idea is that women should always coo over men, cringingly serving him. They present it as if that is the reason women were created. For me, I just take it as the case of the particular character in the movie. However, I pray for a resistance or a change in the cultural practices that bind us.

Responses from the interviewees clearly show that Nollywood movies depict women as sex objects, weaker sex, prostitutes and objects of oppression by men. One of the respondents had this to say:

I have watched so many Nollywood movies but the one that readily comes to mind is *Dumebi the Dirty Girl* played by Mercy Johnson. Dumebi comes to the city only to be used to satisfy the sexual urge of the man that brought her to the city but she isn't fit to be seen in the public with him. Dumebi represents women as sex objects and that is an erroneous representation.

Another participant had this to say regarding question two on perception:

My perception of how women are represented is two-sided. We have been represented both positively and negatively but as a woman, I think the negative portrayals have been overwhelming. An African woman is way far above these negative representations. An African woman will not pound her infant child in a mortar no matter the amount of wealth she plans to achieve. The movie *Barren Woman* really does injustice to women all over the world. Funke Akindele is represented as a woman who will pound a baby because a herbalist told her to do so to become immensely wealthy. For Christ sake, who does that? When did women become this desperate, ritualistic and evil as represented by Nollywood.

An interviewee was of the opinion that most of the roles given to thespians like Patience Ozokwor do not portray women especially mothers-in-law, well. According

to him, film makers should also remember that Nigerian mothers have good understanding and also that a majority of mothers in-law are kind-hearted. Patience has overplayed the role of the wicked mother in-law. Are they trying to scare young girls from marrying men whose mothers are still alive? No wonder you hear statements like “I do not want to marry a man whose mother is still living” forgetting they are also future mothers. Nollywood should try and show more movies with the good mother in-law role.

In essence, the portrayal of women as sex objects, weaker vessels, prostitutes etc appears to have a connection with biological features of women. Similarly, it can be argued from a cultural determinism point of view that the manner in which women are portrayed and the social roles assigned them in movies are firmly rooted in the prevailing cultural beliefs and practices in which these films are produced. However, movies have the power to amplify, modify, or downplay these beliefs and practices. Apart from these representations of women in Nollywood movies, the study revealed that women possess the power to decode the portrayals differently and they could distance themselves from the gender-based themes and concepts of the movies.

Discussing the effects of the manner of portrayal on women's self-worth and public image, a participant demonstrated an 'agitated' and radical reading of Nigerian films by Nigerian educated women, in this way:

For me, the effect of these representations is that they make me angry and give me a reason to fight against the domination of women. I can't find myself identifying with most of the women they show in the Nollywood movies, especially the ones that are shown in negative representations. These negative portrayals really put me on edge with the producers of such movies and to my utter dismay, some of them are women. I blame this mostly on our patriarchal orientation that women are second-class citizens.

Another very calm interviewee had this to say:

I was once affected by the movie, *Silence of the Gods*, in which the king showers more love on Nkoli, the third wife, merely because she has a male child. Then I realised my ordeal in my husband's house when I had three daughters without a son but due to religion, my husband refused another wife his family had arranged for him. After watching the movie, I considered adopting a male child but my husband disagreed.

A respondent, who was also agitated, demonstrated her provocative perception on the effects of these representations of women in Nollywood movies like this:

It is just unfortunate that Nigerian women are too fearful; they do not have high self-esteem. This is why the film makers can get away with all their denigration of women. For me, I reject

them, but my rejection does not stop movies from having effects on women generally and that is why we must not only see them as rubbish or as entertainment, as most of us want to see them. We must reject them entirely and let the men who are producing them for their own purposes know that we do not like the way they portray us. We should let them know that we have our own self-esteem. It is only a woman with low self-esteem that will look to a man for her confidence. I do not need a man to hold my hands to cross the street; I do not need a man to feel good. I might need him as a husband and it ends there.

Discussion of Findings

It is trite knowledge that culture and traditions, especially in Africa, are discriminatory against the feminine gender. These biases manifest in different forms and ramifications, including employment discrimination, professional discrimination, position discrimination and discrimination in access to training (Zwiech, 2009). While some scholars attribute such anomalies to religion (Djerf-Pierre, 2007), some others blame society in general for the skewed attitude against women. Damean (2006) and Nwosu (2012) in their different works, argue that, such discriminatory practices in society also affect the assignment of roles in the journalism profession.

Laura Mulvey, in her 1973 essay entitled “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema”, provides theoretical grounds for the rejection of Nollywood and its pleasures, noting that men and women are differently positioned by the cinema: men as subjects identifying with agents who drive the film's narrative forward and women as objects for masculine desire and fetishist gazing. Mulvey goes further to argue that female characters in films are plagued with “to-be-looked-at-ness”, in which the man sees the woman as either a whore or a Madonna. Mulvey's argument was buttressed with the response of one of the participants:

I think the movies are basically gender-based because hardly will you watch a film without observing a certain gender disparity. The female characters in Nollywood movies are portrayed as sex objects and objects of erotic gaze for men.

According to Amobi & Sunday (2012), the cultural and biological determinism theory explains why biological differences between men and women, which identify women as the weaker vessels, have given birth to role differentiations along hierarchical lines creating a culture of patriarchy, in which women are subjugated and subordinated. With this belief already well entrenched in society, it is difficult to change the view that negate the impression of Nollywood movies serving the interests of not just male cineastes but also female cineastes with patriarchal orientation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Without doubt, women are negatively portrayed in Nigerian video films, in support of existing views on the subject matter. We think this is both wrong and unprofessional. We therefore recommend that movie producers and directors endeavour to always edit their new movies to safeguard public confidence in them and ensure that the portrayal of indecent dressing of women be corrected before they are transmitted to the public; that gender-based films be properly critiqued before their release to the viewing public; and that the Nigerian Video and Film Censors Board screen contents of Nollywood movies to ensure that only the acceptable Nigerian/African cultural values - in content and in costuming – are retained in the movies.

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