

Audience Perception of Nollywood's Role in Redefining Nigeria's Identity Through Storytelling

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Abstract

The remarkable rise of Nollywood, Nigeria's prolific film industry, has transformed it into a potent vehicle for reshaping the country's identity through storytelling. Existing scholarship has shown that Nollywood Known for its storytelling prowess, has transcended national boundaries, captivating audiences worldwide and offering narratives deeply rooted in the Nigerian experience that move beyond stereotypes. This paper seeks to address the central problem of understanding how Nollywood's narratives have influenced audience perceptions and redefined Nigeria's identity on a global scale. The Narrative Perception theory of Julian Hochberg was adopted as the theoretical framework. The study incorporates qualitative and quantitative methodology, using interviews, survey and descriptive analysis. Through these methods, the study examined how Nollywood's storytelling has evolved global perceptions of Nigeria. The study discusses the profound impact of Nollywood's storytelling on audience perception of its role in reshaping and redefining identity of Nigeria, emphasizing its potential to challenge stereotypes and rectify misconceptions. The study's findings underscore Nollywood's transformative role in redefining Nigeria's identity and shaping its global image through storytelling. Hence, the study offers recommendations for Nollywood stakeholders, policymakers, and scholars, emphasizing the importance of continued support for the industry and its potential to contribute to Nigeria's cultural diplomacy efforts and global influence.

Keywords: Audience Perception, Nollywood, Nigeria's identity, Redefining Nigeria's identity, Storytelling, Global influence, Cultural policy, films.

Introduction

Film has long been recognized as a powerful medium capable of shaping societal perceptions and narratives. Beyond mere entertainment, it serves as a mirror reflecting the values, aspirations, and complexities of a society (Narcis, 2023). In the realm of nation-building, the role of film in redefining a country's identity emerges as a significant phenomenon. Through

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compelling storytelling, visual imagery, and cultural representation, film becomes a dynamic force in shaping how a nation perceives itself and is perceived by others on the global stage (Williams, 2002). The Nigerian film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, has made significant strides in the global film landscape. Its storytelling prowess and remarkable ability to engage audiences both locally and internationally have made it a cultural phenomenon.

There are numbers of Nollywood films that have contributed to redefining Nigeria's identity in various ways. Films like "Lionheart" (2018), directed by Genevieve Nnaji tells the story of a young woman who strives to save her father's struggling transportation company. "Lionheart" explores themes of gender equality, family values, and the changing social dynamics in contemporary Nigeria. It gained international acclaim as Nigeria's first-ever submission for the Best International Feature Film category at the Academy Awards. "Half of a Yellow Sun" (2013), directed by Biyi Bandele based on the novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, portrays the lives of characters during the Biafra conflict in the 1960s. It examines Nigeria's post-colonial history, ethnic tensions, and the impact of war on individuals and families. "Half of a Yellow Sun" highlights the complexities of Nigerian identity and the lingering effects of colonialism.

"October 1" (2014), directed by Kunle Afolayan Set in 1960, during Nigeria's transition to independence, follows a police officer investigating a series of murders in a small town. "October 1" reflects on Nigeria's struggle for independence and explores themes of national identity, tribalism, and the challenges of building a united nation. "The Wedding Party" (2016), directed by Kemi Adetiba a romantic comedy showcases a lavish Nigerian wedding and the comedic mishaps that occur during the celebration. "The Wedding Party" captures elements of Nigerian culture, traditions, and the dynamics of modern relationships. It portrays Nigeria's vibrant wedding culture and highlights the fusion of traditional values and contemporary influences. "Maami" (2011), directed by Tunde Kelani tells the story of a single mother's struggles and sacrifices to provide for her son. It explores themes of resilience, poverty, and the strength of a mother's love. "Maami" showcases the everyday lives of ordinary Nigerians and sheds light on the challenges many face, contributing to a deeper understanding of Nigerian society. Each film tackles different themes and aspects of Nigerian culture, history, and social issues, offering diverse perspectives on what it means to be Nigerian.

This research explores how Nollywood plays a multidimensional role in the continuous process of establishing and remaking a nation's identity. It looks at how the audience perceives the role of film in shaping views, encouraging patriotism, challenging historical myths, and

having a conversation with a range of cultural realities. The study also adopts interviews, audience survey and the Narrative Perception theory of Julian Hochberg theory as the theoretical framework. This ultimately highlights the profound impact of film in shaping a nation's collective imagination.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are as follows:

- (1) To examine the role of Nollywood in redefining Nigeria's identity through its storytelling.
- (2) To investigate how Nollywood's portrayal of culture, history, and socio-political realities influences audience perceptions.
- (3) To assess the extent to which Nollywood challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about Nigeria.
- (4) To analyze how Nollywood's narratives resonate with different audience groups, both in Nigeria and abroad.

Research Questions

- (1) What role does Nollywood play in redefining Nigeria's identity through its storytelling?
- (2) How is Nollywood's portrayal of culture, history, and socio-political realities influence audience perceptions?
- (3) To what extent does Nollywood challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Nigeria?
- (4) How do Nollywood's narratives resonate with different audience groups, both in Nigeria and abroad?

Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather comprehensive data. The following methods will be used:

Audience Surveys: Questionnaire was distributed to both local and international Nollywood audiences to understand their perceptions and responses to Nollywood's narratives.

In-Depth Interviews: Interviews stakeholders to gain insights into the intentions behind Nollywood's storytelling was conducted

Significance

Understanding the impact of Nollywood's storytelling on audience perceptions is crucial. This research has several significant implications:

Cultural Identity: It will contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural narratives in film influence the perception of cultural identity, fostering cultural appreciation and pride.

Global Influence: It will highlight Nollywood's global reach and its potential for altering international perceptions of Nigeria.

Social Change: By exploring Nollywood's role in challenging stereotypes and addressing societal issues, this research will shed light on how storytelling can bring about social change.

Theoretical framework

The Narrative Perception theory of Julian Hochberg as a media theory deals with the way people perceive media messages targeted at them. Perception according to Swani Krisbnananda is 'a process of the consciousness of an object. It is one of the means of valid knowledge in the world and consists in an inseparable relation of the perceptive consciousness with its content' (2015). Over the years, a few perception theories have evolved as reported by William (2003) and Folarin (2005). This work makes use of the narrative perception analytical theory in film studies which is supported by Gibson's ecological perception theory. The key question in narrative perception is how viewers become engaged in a story. Gibson's ecological approach suggests that the world consists of observers, where a picture serves as a record of an observation deemed significant. Films, therefore, offer a more precise representation of events worthy of attention. Within this ecological framework, the film's narrative is the focal point. The director's control over the film's content shapes the audience's perception of the narrative. Consequently, Nollywood directors should craft narratives that promote a positive perception.

Empirical Research on Audience Perception on Nollywood Films

Works have been written by researchers and critics of Nollywood on the content and functions of the Nigerian films. More works have also been written on the Audience perception on different aspects of Nollywood and its portrayals. Such works as follows bear evidence;

- Audience Perception of Nollywood's Portrayal of Diabolism and Nigeria's 21st Century Image: A Study of Enugu State Residents-Nwogbo, Ikot-Osin, & Jeremiah

(2021). This study explored how residents of Enugu State perceive the depiction of diabolism in Nollywood films and its impact on Nigeria's image in the 21st century. Utilizing a survey research design, the research focused on the local population. The findings revealed that 41.3% of respondents believe that Nigerian films heavily feature diabolic scenes, contributing to a negative perception of Nigeria. Conversely, 57.1% of participants expressed that Nollywood can play a significant role in enhancing Nigeria's image by promoting themes related to scientific progress, patriotism, and entrepreneurial development.

- The study "Audience Perception of Nollywood Films" by Agba and Ineji (2011) addresses the significant criticism directed at Nollywood films, with some suggesting that these productions lack value. Despite concerns regarding negative themes, weak plotlines, and subpar sound quality, the findings indicate that audiences generally hold a positive perception of Nollywood films.
- Audience Perception of Women's Portrayals in Nigerian Home Video Films, Azeez (2010) conducted a study to explore how Nigerians, particularly women, interpret the representations of women in Nigerian films. The research aims to understand the varying interpretations among different individuals and groups regarding these portrayals. Findings indicate significant differences in how men and women interpret the meanings behind these representations. Additionally, there is a notable divergence in perceptions among women based on educational background; those with higher education tend to interpret the portrayals differently than those with little or no education. This variation in understanding affects how each group of women relates to the images presented in the films. Based on these insights, the study proposes a new model for understanding how Nigerian women interpret popular culture.
- Audience Attitudes Toward Nollywood Films (Akpabio, 2007) explores how the Nigerian home video films have faced significant criticism from both critics and the National Film and Video Censors Board for their focus on occultism, violence, and sensationalism. This study aimed to assess whether audience perceptions align with or differ from those of critics and experts. The findings revealed that, despite the prevalent negative themes, audience members generally hold a positive attitude toward Nigerian home video films.

- Perception of Nigerian Audiences Regarding Nollywood Artistes Portrayed as Villains, Ebelechukwu and Vivian (2019) explore the perception of Nigerian audiences toward Nollywood artistes frequently cast as villains. Research on the mere exposure effect indicates that repeated messaging not only enhances the credibility of a message but also influences audience attitudes. This study examines how Nigerian moviegoers perceive Nollywood artistes who are often typecast as villains. Findings reveal a variety of villain portrayals within Nollywood films. Data indicates that a significant majority of respondents recognize these villainous roles. However, most participants believe that these artistes do not embody villainous traits in their true lives, despite their adept portrayal of such characters.
- Audience Perception of the role of Nollywood films in effective Development Communication: A study of Anambra State Residents, Fab-Ukozor and Obioha (2018). The study tends to discover the audience perception of Nollywood films in the development efforts of Anambra State. It also attempts to find out the extent to which exposure to Nollywood film influence attitudes and behavior change of the people of Anambra state. The study concludes that the film medium is obviously one of factors that enhance development. It causes development and as well as aiding the people to embrace it.

This study then looks into the perception of the audience on the role of Nollywood in redefining Nigeria's identity through storytelling.

Analysis of Data

This section of the study considers the quantitative analysis of data collected using questionnaire and simple frequencies were used in analyzing the data. The section begins with the demographic characteristics of respondents and then followed by the responses analyzed in clusters.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

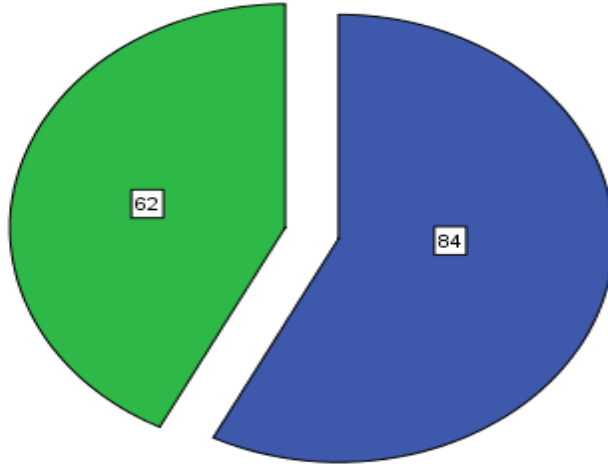
The demographic characteristics of the respondents include gender, age, educational qualification, marital status, religion and socio-economic status as presented in table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

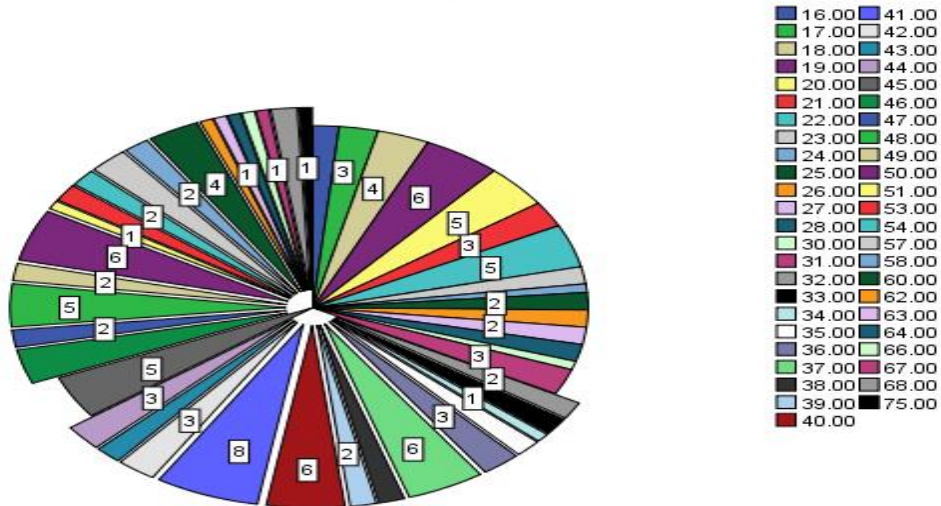
S/No	Variables	Group	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	84	56.8
		Female	62	41.9
		Missing	2	1.4
		Total	148	100.00
2	Age	16 – 75	131	88.5
		Missing	17	11.5
		Total	148	100.00
3	Educational Qualification	Secondary	5	3.4
		Tertiary	141	95.3
		Missing	2	1.4
		Total	148	100.00
4	Marital Status	Single	58	39.2
		Married	82	55.4
		Others	7	4.7
		Missing	1	0.7
		Total	148	100.00
5	Religion	Christianity	137	92.6
		Islam	8	5.4
		African Traditional Religion	2	1.4
		Missing	1	0.7
		Total	148	100.00
6	Socio-Economic Status	Low	12	8.1
		Average	118	79.7
		High	14	9.5
		Missing	4	2.7
		Total	148	100.00

Gender

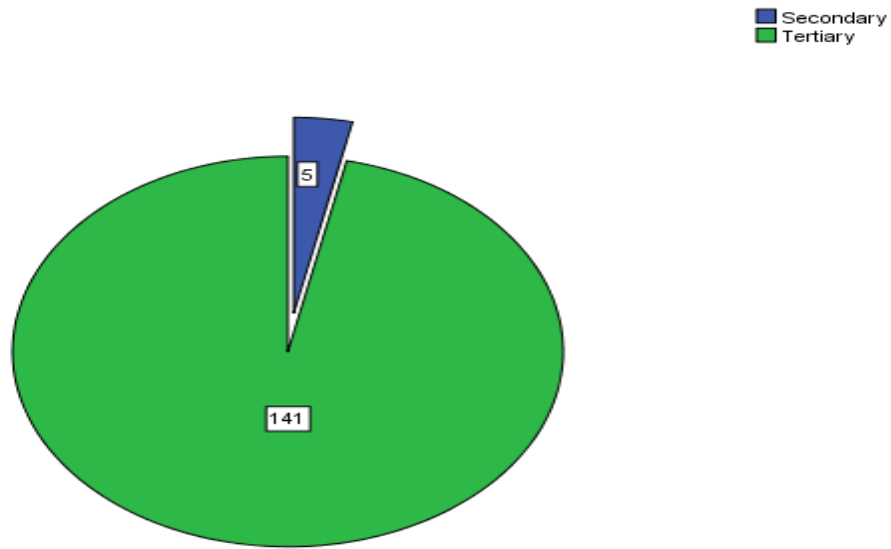
Male
Female



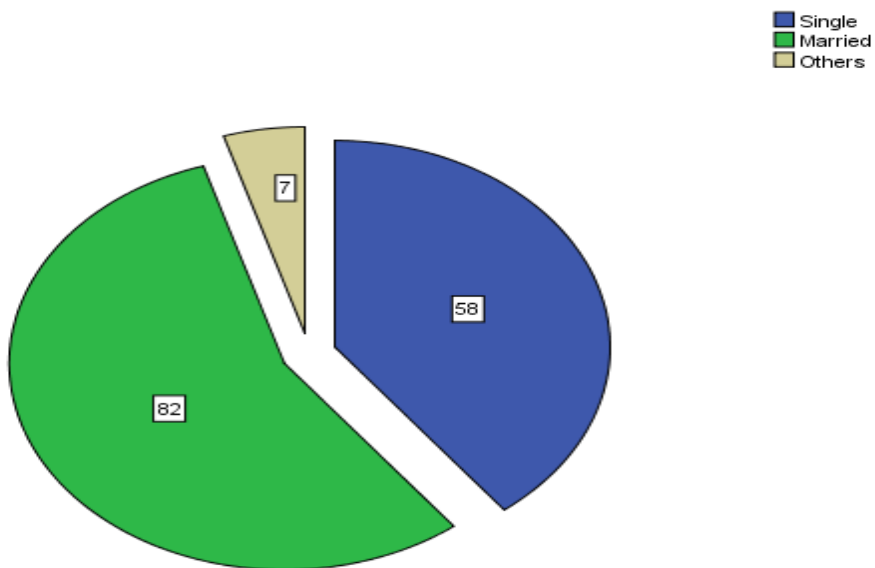
Age



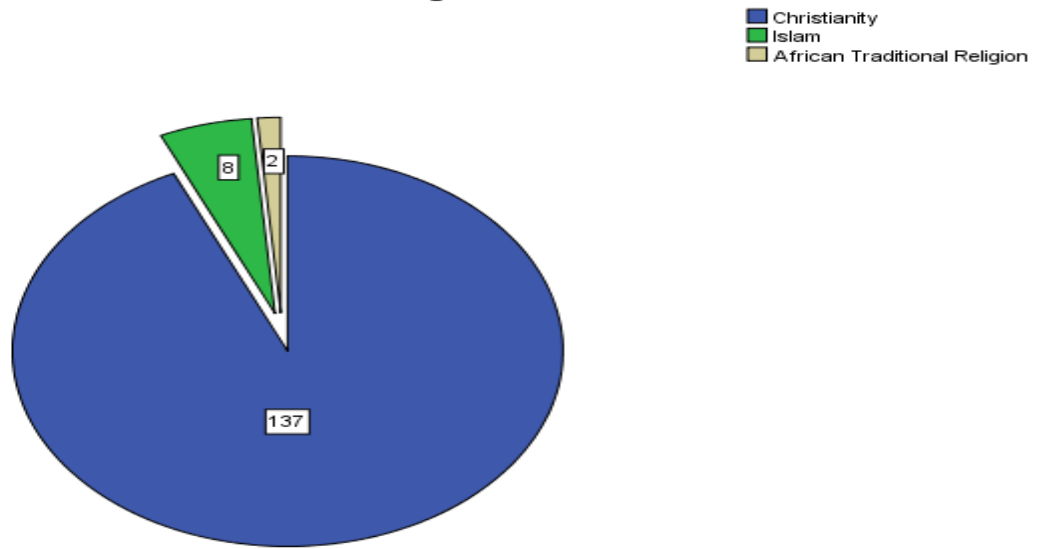
Educational Qualification



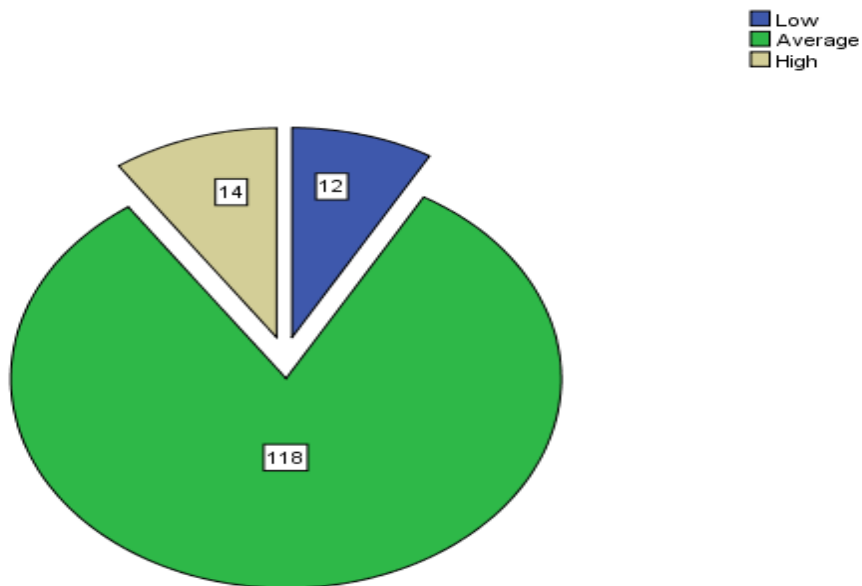
Marital Status



Religion



Socio-Economic Status



Presentation of Responses from the Participants

This section presents the responses from the participants and it is presented according to the research questions as divided into clusters.

Table 2 representing the role of Nollywood in redefining Nigeria's identity through its storytelling

S/No	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Nollywood films accurately portray diverse aspects of Nigerian culture and identity	38 (25.7%))	85 (57.7%))	21 (14.2%))	2 (1.2%))
2	Nollywood plays a significant role in promoting Nigerian values and traditions to both local and international audiences	35 (23.6%))	91 (61.5%))	17 (11.5%))	3 (2.0%))
3	Nollywood films contribute positively to the global perception of Nigeria by showcasing its rich cultural heritage and societal dynamics	36 (24.3%))	85 (57.4%))	23 (15.5%))	2 (1.4%))
4	Nollywood storytelling challenges stereotypes about Nigeria and present a more nuanced and complex portrayal of its people and society	22 (14.9%))	81 (54.7%))	39 (26.4%))	4 (2.7%))
5	The influence of Nollywood on Nigeria's identity is comparable to or even greater than other cultural mediums such as literature and music	31 (20.9%))	70 (47.3%))	39 (26.4%))	4 (2.7%))

This research question 1 is spread into five items of the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents 85 (57.7%) agreed that Nollywood films accurately portray the diverse aspects of Nigeria's culture and identity. 38 (25.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed while 21 (14.2%) disagreed and 2 (1.2%) strongly disagreed. For the question on how Nollywood plays a significant role in promoting Nigerian values and traditions to both local and international audiences, majority of the respondents 91 (61.5%) agreed, 35 (23.6%) strongly agreed while 17 (11.5%) disagreed and 3 (2.0%) strongly disagreed. If Nollywood films contribute positively to the global perception of Nigeria by showcasing its rich cultural heritage and societal dynamics, 85 (57.4%) of the respondents agreed, 36 (24.3%) strongly agreed while 23 (15.5%) disagreed and 2 (1.4%) strongly disagreed. If Nollywood storytelling challenges stereotypes about Nigeria and present a more nuanced and complex portrayal of its people and society, 81

(54.7%) agreed and 39 (26.4%) disagreed, 22 (14.9%) strongly agreed and 4 (2.7%) strongly disagreed. On the question whether the influence of Nollywood on Nigeria's identity is comparable to or even greater than other cultural mediums such as literature and music, 70 (47.3%) agreed and 39 (26.4%) disagreed, 31 (20.9%) strongly agreed and 4 (2.7%) strongly disagreed.

Table 3: How Nollywood's portrayal of culture, history, and socio-political realities influences audience perceptions.

S/No	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Nollywood films accurately depict the cultural traditions and practices of Nigeria	30 (20.3%)	77 (52.0%)	36 (24.3%)	1 (0.7%)
2	Nollywood's representation of historical events help audiences gain a deeper understanding of Nigeria's past	30 (20.3%)	97 (65.5%)	16 (10.8%)	1 (0.7%)
3	Nollywood effectively highlights socio-political issues within Nigeria, sparking discussions and raising awareness among viewers	30 (20.3%)	87 (58.8%)	26 (17.6%)	2 (1.4%)
4	Nollywood films influence audience perceptions of Nigeria's societal norms and values	31 (20.9%)	101 (68.2%)	11 (7.4%)	1 (0.7%)
5	Nollywood's portrayal of socio-political realities encourages audiences to critically reflect on the challenges and opportunities facing Nigeria today	29 (19.6%)	79 (53.4%)	36 (24.3%)	-

This Research question is spread into five items of the questionnaire. 77 (52.0%) of the respondents agreed that Nollywood films accurately depict the cultural traditions and practices of Nigeria. 36 (24.3%) disagreed, 30 (20.3%) strongly agreed and 1 (0.7%) strongly disagreed. If Nollywood's representation of historical events helps audiences gain a deeper understanding of Nigeria's past, 97 (65.5%) of the respondents agreed, 30 (20.3%) strongly agreed while 16 (10.8%) disagreed and 1 (0.7%) strongly disagreed. Answering the question if Nollywood effectively highlights socio-political issues within Nigeria, sparking discussions and raising awareness among viewers, 87 (58.8%) agreed, 30 (20.3%) strongly agreed while 26 (17.6%) disagreed and 2 (1.4%) strongly disagreed. 101 (68.2%) agreed that Nollywood films influence audience perceptions of Nigeria's societal norms and values, 31 (20.9%) disagreed while 11 (7.4%) disagreed and 1 (0.7%) strongly disagreed. If Nollywood's portrayal of socio-political realities encourages audiences to critically reflect on the challenges and opportunities facing Nigeria today, 79 (53.4%) agreed, 36 (24.3%) disagreed and 29 (19.6%) agreed.

Table 4: The extent to which Nollywood challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about Nigeria.

S/No	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Nollywood films present diverse and multifaceted characters that challenge stereotypes about Nigerian people	17 (11.5%)	95 (64.2%)	31 (20.9%)	1 (0.7%)
2	Nollywood storytelling portrays Nigeria's socio-economic diversity, contradicting common misconceptions about the country being homogenous in terms of lifestyle and class	19 (12.8%)	87 (58.8%)	31 (20.9%)	6 (4.1%)
3	Nollywood narratives showcase the resilience and resourcefulness of Nigerians, countering negative stereotypes about the nation's capacity for development and progress	17 (11.5%)	92 (62.2%)	30 (20.3%)	4 (2.7%)
4	Nollywood films challenge Western-centric perspectives by presenting Nigerian stories from an authentic, insider's point of view	31 (20.9%)	84 (56.8%)	24 (16.2%)	4 (2.7%)

5	Nollywood's portrayal of Nigeria's cultural richness and complexity help dismantle oversimplified views of the country as solely defined by poverty or conflict	29 (19.6%)	82 (55.4%)	31 (20.9%)	1 (0.7%)
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This research question is spread into yet another five items of the questionnaire. 95 (64.2%) agreed that Nollywood films present diverse and multifaceted characters that challenge stereotypes about Nigerian people, 31 (20.9%) disagreed, 17 (11.5%) strongly agreed and 1 (0.7%) strongly disagreed. 87 (58.8%) agreed that Nollywood storytelling portrays Nigeria's socio-economic diversity, contradicting common misconceptions about the country being homogenous in terms of lifestyle and class, 31 (20.9%) disagreed, 19 (12.8%) strongly agreed and 6 (4.1%) strongly disagreed. 92 (62.2%) agreed that Nollywood narratives showcase the resilience and resourcefulness of Nigerians, countering negative stereotypes about the nation's capacity for development and progress, 30 (20.3%) disagreed, 17 (11.5%) disagreed and 4 (2.7%) strongly disagreed. 92 (62.2%) agreed that Nollywood films challenge Western-centric perspectives by presenting Nigerian stories from an authentic, insider's point of view, 31 (20.9%) strongly agreed while 24 (16.2%) disagreed and 4 (2.7%) strongly disagreed. 82 (55.4%) agreed that Nollywood's portrayal of Nigeria's cultural richness and complexity help dismantle oversimplified views of the country as solely defined by poverty or conflict, 31 (20.9%) disagreed, 29 (19.6%) strongly agreed and 1 (0.7%) strongly disagreed.

Table 5: How Nollywood's narratives resonate with different audience groups, both in Nigeria and abroad

S/No	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Nollywood films effectively capture universal themes that resonate with audiences regardless of their cultural background	19 (12.8%)	95 (64.2%)	26 (17.6%)	2 (1.4%)
2	Nollywood's portrayal of interpersonal relationships and family dynamics resonates with audiences across various age groups and demographics	22 (14.9%)	106 (71.6%)	14 (9.5%)	1 (0.7%)
3	Nollywood's incorporation of humor and relatable characters makes its narratives	39 (26.4%)	90 (60.8%)	13 (8.8%)	-

	appealing to both Nigerian and international audiences				
4	Nollywood's exploration of societal issues such as love, ambition, and resilience strikes a chord with viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds	38 (25.7%)	89 (60.1%)	15 (10.1%)	1 (0.7%)
5	Nollywood's ability to blend entertainment with social commentary allows its narratives to resonate with audiences seeking both escapism and thought-provoking content	31 (20.9%)	101 (68.2%)	11 (7.4%)	-

Five items of the questionnaire on this research question was responded to by the respondents. 95 (64.2%) agreed that Nollywood films effectively capture universal themes that resonate with audiences regardless of their cultural background, 26 (17.6%) disagreed, 19 (12.8%) strongly agreed and 2 (1.4%) strongly disagreed. 106 (71.6%) agreed that Nollywood's portrayal of interpersonal relationships and family dynamics resonates with audiences across various age groups and demographics, 22 (14.9%) strongly agreed while 14 (9.5%) disagreed and 1 (0.7%) strongly disagreed. 90 (60.8%) agreed that Nollywood's incorporation of humor and relatable characters makes its narratives appealing to both Nigerian and international audiences, 39 (26.4%) strongly agreed and 13 (8.8%) disagreed. 89 (60.1%) agreed that Nollywood's exploration of societal issues such as love, ambition, and resilience strike a chord with viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds, 38 (25.7%) strongly agreed while 15 (10.1%) disagreed and 1 (0.7%) strongly disagreed. 101 (68.2%) agreed that Nollywood's ability to blend entertainment with social commentary allows its narratives to resonate with audiences seeking both escapism and thought-provoking content, 31 (20.9%) strongly agreed and 11 (7.4%) disagreed.

Discussion of Findings

This discussion is based on the findings from this study. The study was carried out with the aim of investigating the role of Nollywood in redefining Nigeria's identity through its storytelling. The objectives of this research are to interrogate how Nollywood's portrayal of culture, history, and socio-political realities influences audience perceptions. It is also to assess the extent to which Nollywood challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about Nigeria. To

analyze how Nollywood's narratives resonate with different audience groups, both in Nigeria and abroad.

Findings from research question 1: What role does Nollywood play in redefining Nigeria's identity through its storytelling? From the finding on this research question, majority of the respondents agreed that Nollywood's portrayal of culture, history, and socio-political realities influence audience perceptions and accurately portray the diverse aspects of Nigeria's culture and identity. They also agreed that Nollywood plays a significant role in promoting Nigerian values and traditions to both local and international audiences as the films contribute positively to the global perception of Nigeria by showcasing its rich cultural heritage and societal dynamics and challenges stereotypes about Nigeria and present a more nuanced and complex portrayal of its people and society. They agreed that the influence of Nollywood on Nigeria's identity is comparable to or even greater than other cultural mediums such as literature and music.

These findings resonate with the view of Ugor (2001) that many African ethnic groups have turned to the film industry as a means of promoting, projecting, and asserting their ethnic identities and image. In essence Nollywood has used its Films in general to redefine and re-imagine Nigeria. Tosan Akinwole (whatsapp interview, 2024) a US base independent film scholar states that Nollywood's role in shaping and redefining Nigeria's identity cannot be underrated. She reaffirms that considering the level of growth experienced by Nollywood and its engagement with almost all of Nigeria's diverse mother tongues and cultures has helped to give the present generation knowledge of Nigeria. In the same vein, Adediran K. Ademiju-Bepo a Professor of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Jos in an interview with the researcher went down memory lane as he observed that Nollywood has been playing this role since inception of shaping and redefining our identity as a nation. According to him, "The live Theatre did once upon a time, television also did go by the array of soaps and other programmes that were broadcast. Dance has also done this but since the coming of the home video in 1985, the stories and the narrativization have given an identity to Nigeria in stupendous ways" (2024). Charles Okwuolwu a Senior Lecturer of Film and Multi-Media Studies in Alex Ekueme Federal University and a Visiting Scholar with Gregory University Uturu, Abia State. He also a Practicing Film Maker, and a Member of Directors Guild of Nigeria also in an interview with the researcher is of the view that Nollywood has the responsibility or ability or that apex role in defining/ redefining Nigeria's identity in Nollywood amongst other social media platforms such as the radio, televisions, and possibly the theatre. He states thus:

Why I feel so is because as an iconographic (audio-visual media), it tends to embody; e.g. the King's Media; the audio-visual medium of Nollywood tends to represent the socio-cultural attribute of Nigerians much more than every other medium. It reflects i.e. most of the films we make reflect the habits of the nation culturally and otherwise (2024).

Nollywood has proven itself in this role by several films it has made in this aspect of defining and redefining of the Nigeria's identity. Speaking as a filmmaker on what role storytelling plays in shaping national identity, Olaniji states that being the most powerful medium of this century, and storytelling has the power to mold national identity. His view is that Storytelling defines a people, their culture, taboos and histories using narratives. "There is a saying: 'The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them.' I can't remember who made the statement but it's popular in storytelling circles." Through Nollywood films, Nigerians have been depicted to be creative, resilient, independent-minded and industrious. These are examples of some films the interviewees found worthy of having played the role of shaping, reshaping, defining and redefining Nigeria's identity. Ademiju-Bepo tracked it to the early Nollywood films from the 1990s like *AjenIyaMi* (1985), *Living in Bondage*, *IGODO*, *Ayo Ni Mo Fe*, *Thunderbolt*, *Taboo*, *Nneka*, *the Pretty Serpent*, *Ijele*, *The Redeemer*, *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile*, *Ikulu*, among others, have been impactful and contributed to the overall narrative of the Nigerian identity.

Moreso, Akinwale mentions films like *Ayinlaa* biopic of a late Egba musical legend. The film exhibited the beautiful egba attire and language spoken by the musician through the movie. And consequently, Okwuolwu illustrated with the film "Amina" by IzuOjukwu which looks at the culture of the Northern people of Nigeria. The film is a historical film that speaks through a particular culture, and ethnic environment. With film, one understands the culture of the Northern region where it is set and everything about them; the historical background, the culture, costume, food, mannerisms, etc. He asserts that, unlike other social media platforms, films have the means of communicating to the soul of people who watch it. Films depict the cultural identity of the creating nation. Hence cannot be underestimated on how it can be used to propagate or market socio-cultural motif of the nation. Tony Olaniji, a Creative entrepreneur explains that Tunde Kelani, Mo Abudu and Kunle Afolayan as shining lights in this regard. That they have succeeded, through various seminal filmic endeavours, to reposition Nigeria as a cultural giant after decades of being tagged a 'ritual country', a name that came, also through the films that were made in the past. He named another filmmaker, who has taken this heritage

to a higher level. C.J. 'Fiery' Obasi. He stated that his new movie, *Mami Wata*, is gathering awards and accolades all over the world. Unofficially, the film looks like the most awarded Nigerian film, apart from the fact that it's the first Nigerian film to win a Sundance award.

Findings from research question 2: How is Nollywood's portrayal of culture, history, and socio-political realities influence audience perceptions? The findings show that Nollywood films accurately depict the cultural traditions and practices of Nigeria and represents historical events the way it help audiences gain a deeper understanding of Nigeria's past. The majority of the respondents agreed that Nollywood effectively highlights socio-political issues within Nigeria, sparking discussions and raising awareness among viewers and that Nollywood films influence audience perceptions of Nigeria's societal norms and values. Their views are that Nollywood's portrayal of socio-political realities encourages audiences to critically reflect on the challenges and opportunities facing Nigeria today. This agrees with Omafume Onoge's (1974) second layer of "crisis of consciousness," 'critical realism' which promotes writings that critically examines society's current reality, in this case Nollywood films. According to writer in layer, the role of the writer (as also Nigeria film industry) in society is to express a clear vision while concentrating on contemporary problems that afflict members of the populace.

Okwuolwu speaking on how Nollywood themes resonate with audiences both within and outside Nigeria started with the fact that Nigeria is a religious nation; from traditional religion to Christian religion. That in the traditional religion, we believe in a lot of superstitions and with these, religious themes (religious genres) resurface in our film industry which try to look at things around religious crisis and intolerance, religious conflict, and denominational angle. He mentions themes that deal with social insecurity and themes that deal with marital problems, personal problems, family problems, and all kinds of problems that all these themes have gone ahead to design special kinds of films which they call generic kind of film. He explains that these themes have tried to demarcate films into various genres like family stories/ drama which often have themes of childlessness, marital crisis.

He further elaborated that there are films that look at rituals and try to interrogate ritual motifs and then of course, historic films with themes that try to interrogate one history or the other like "Invasion" 1987 by Lancelot, produced in 2014 and a couple of other themes that keep coming up. He cited more examples with Niger delta films that try to equally interrogate the resource control. He concludes in this, that the various themes that can be found in Nollywood

are things that try to interrogate Nigeria as a nation, our common thought pattern, our common concern, even try to reflect our heartache as a nation.

Still on the same subject matter, Ademiju-Bepo states that Thematically, Nollywood has contributed to the construction of Nigeria's identity on a global stage. If this were not so, the love for the industry would not have been global. He elaborated several themes of Cultism, ritual, quest for inordinate wealth, human sacrifice, prostitution, folklore, search for heritage, identity, root or unity, fight against class stratification, and so on. He concludes that these themes resonate with audiences both within and outside the country.

Findings from research question 3: To what extent does Nollywood challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Nigeria? Majority agreed that Nollywood films present diverse and multifaceted characters that challenge stereotypes about Nigerian people. They agreed that Nollywood storytelling portrays Nigeria's socio-economic diversity, contradicting common misconceptions about the country being homogenous in terms of lifestyle and class, while showcasing the resilience and resourcefulness of Nigerians, and countering negative stereotypes about the nation's capacity for development and progress as it challenges Western-centric perspectives by presenting Nigerian stories from an authentic, insider's point of view. The findings agreed that Nollywood's portrayal of Nigeria's cultural richness and complexity help dismantle oversimplified views of the country as solely defined by poverty or conflict.

The above findings agree with Ukadike's (1974) observation that cinema embarked upon its own project of total decolonisation following the example of an already flourishing liberationist literature channeled to this same purpose. Akinwale agrees that Nollywood films present diverse and multifaceted characters that challenge stereotypes about Nigerian people in their themes and motifs. She asserts that most themes are on women, and the presentation and representation of women by society, culture, and tradition. She informs that the presentation of Nigerian women from cultural and traditional perspectives has been a controversial issue globally; but that Nollywood has done a lot to change the narrative about African women to an extent, these attempts resonate quite well globally.

In regards to filmmakers navigating the balance between authenticity and audience appeal in their storytelling; Akinwale believes that Films are made for the audience's views, but, audience perception can only contribute to the shaping if film makers cultivate the act of engaging the audience to criticize their movies to meet the audience's needs. Appropriate research on the part of the screenwriters is what can help in the navigation of the needed

balance. Okwuolwu also believes that Film makers most times, look at audience appeal more than authenticity. He opines:

Sincerely, they do and the audience appeal influences a couple of things that happen in film making. In the sense that most times if you want to be so true to a fault in as much as I had earlier said that Nigeria films try to represent Nigerian society the way it is. There is a whole lot of exaggeration too going on. You know, you want to develop a family but that is art and art should paint life better than it is. Actually, they develop a family that is well-to-do and doesn't have a problem; the husband is a flawless human being, most times, that is what the audience wants to see and that is what the film maker gives to them (2024).

So, according to Okwuolwu, audience perception plays a role. Ademiju-Bepo also believes that Audience perception plays a worthy role in shaping the way our films represent Nigeria's identity. Filmmakers tell authentic stories that resonate with the audience in their appeal.

Findings from research question 4: How do Nollywood's narratives resonate with different audience groups, both in Nigeria and abroad? The predominant view is that Nollywood films effectively capture universal themes that resonate with audiences regardless of their cultural background. They agreed that Nollywood's portrayal of interpersonal relationships and family dynamics resonates with audiences across various age groups and demographics and that Nollywood's incorporation of humor and relatable characters makes its narratives appealing to both Nigerian and international audiences. They agreed that Nollywood's exploration of societal issues such as love, ambition, and resilience strikes a chord with viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds, and Nollywood's ability to blend entertainment with social commentary allows its narratives to resonate with audiences seeking both escapism and thought-provoking content.

Nollywood films resonate with the different ethnic groups and audience groups both in Nigeria and outside Nigeria because it tells the tale of Nigeria and Nigerians from the perspective of an insider. Getting the views of the audience goes a long way of creating a more audience friendly and impactful films. In agreement with this, Akinwale states that Nollywood's knowledge of the audience's reception of films from the industry has enabled it to either move on from a theme or solidify the impact made by the film. She draws her example from the societal placement of women which has attained the attention of the whole world and now promotes women's strength and abilities more. Other examples of films are *King of Boys*, *Lionheart* and many more.

Furthermore, factors such as globalization, digital technology, and social media have influenced the way Nollywood films are perceived, both domestically and internationally in

terms of their contribution to Nigeria's identity. All interviewees believed and agreed that these platforms like Netflix have increased the visibility of Nollywood films to a more elite audience and wider range of audiences in general. Ademiju-Bepo agreed that Globalisation, digital technology and social media have been positive to Nollywood. The films' perception domestically and internationally has boosted the market and sales of films. In his words "Today, Nollywood has attracted huge sponsorship from foreign funders and production houses that are providing sponsorship". Consequently, Akinwale affirms that these platforms have enhanced global access to Nollywood's attempt to present and redefine Nigeria's identity. Olaniji, also agrees that the emergence of streaming giants like Netflix, Showmax and Amazon Prime has altered the dynamics of film production and distribution in Nollywood. And that it has given Nollywood films the opportunity to be seen beyond the shores of Africa, and more people now have access to these films.

According to Olaniji Nollywood does not accurately represent the diversity of cultures and experiences within Nigeria, because everything still revolves round the usual 'Wazobian' filmic practice. Most of other cultures are still underrepresented. To arrest this development, his view is that filmmakers don't need to be from a particular culture before they could make films about the said culture. He knows that it could be tricky considering the recent caustic tribal fights online.

He navigates the balance between entertaining audiences and addressing social or political issues in his filmmaking by including the two elements – entertainment and socially-conscious themes – in equal measure. One without the other will produce narrative lopsidedness, he stated. Through universality of themes and character archetypes he ensures his films resonate with both local Nigerian audiences and international viewers. And everybody, regardless of their culture, can relate to those elements.

Conclusion

This study was carried out with the aim of investigating the perception of the audience on the role of Nollywood in redefining Nigeria's identity through its storytelling. At the end of the research, the analysis from the result of the survey showed the perception of the audience on Nollywood roles in redefining the identity of the nation. The audience perception of this role of redefining the identity by Nollywood is positive.

Consequently, Nollywood has been instrumental in projecting Nigerian and African cultures, traditions, and identities through its films. It challenges pre-existing stereotypes and provides a means for Nigerians to tell their own stories from their perspectives. By doing so, Nollywood plays a significant role in redefining Nigeria's identity both domestically and internationally. Through its narratives, Nollywood addresses various societal issues such as gender inequality, corruption, health crises, and environmental challenges. These stories not only entertain but also foster empathy, spark dialogue, and inspire action among audiences. They contribute to a collective understanding of Nigerian identity that is complex, multifaceted, and constantly evolving.

So, Nollywood's storytelling serves as a transformative tool that reshapes perceptions and reinforces a sense of national identity. It allows for the exploration of different "root narratives" within the Nigerian context, promoting a more nuanced and empowered understanding of what it means to be Nigerian in the modern world.

Recommendation

The study offers recommendations for Nollywood stakeholders, policymakers, and scholars; emphasizing the importance of continued support for the industry and its potential to contribute to Nigeria's cultural diplomacy efforts and global influence.

Akinwale recognizes the fact that Nollywood stands a brighter future with the existing and evolving trends in technology. However, she recommends that actors need to braze up for what film producers can do with AI considering the level of the use of AI characters in film production.

Ademumi Bepo recommended that Filmmakers should begin to carry out audience perception survey, and perhaps these trends will emerge.

Olaniji observes that in a bid to appear sophisticated; many Nollywood filmmakers make Hollywoodian films which have themes that are at variance with our realities. To arrest this trend, he recommends that filmmakers need to be educated in their own history and culture. Also, that they must understand how to deploy film as soft power; must understand media effects and film as a moulder of habits and culture.

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