

Rethinking Patronage: Audience Investment Models and the Future of Cultural Funding in Nigeria

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The question of cultural patronage remains central to the survival and growth of literature and theatre in Nigeria. Historically, patronage was derived from royal courts, wealthy elites, and later government institutions; however, these forms have proven unstable, inconsistent, and often subject to political manipulation. In recent years, dwindling state support, coupled with economic uncertainties, has compelled practitioners to seek alternative models of cultural funding. This paper interrogates the possibilities of rethinking patronage through audience investment models that re-centre the consumer of art as a co-creator of value and sustainability. Drawing on theories of cultural economy, postcolonial cultural practice, and audience development, the paper situates Nigerian theatre within both African and global contexts of cultural funding. Using comparative perspectives from South Africa, Kenya, Latin America, and Europe, it highlights subscription schemes, community-based funding, cooperative models, and digital patronage platforms as viable alternatives for Nigeria's creative industries. The study argues that audience investment offers a pathway not merely for survival but for cultural empowerment, as it encourages participatory ownership and reduces overdependence on political or elite benefactors. Ultimately, this approach foregrounds a future of Nigerian theatre and literature that is sustainable, democratised, and more attuned to the cultural agency of its audiences.

Keywords: Audience, Cultural Funding, Investment Models, Nigerian Theatre, Patronage.

Introduction

The sustenance of literature and theatre in Nigeria has historically been tied to unstable systems of patronage. In precolonial societies, cultural production thrived under the support of royal courts, religious institutions, and communal networks. These forms of patronage, though organic, were disrupted during the colonial period, when missionary institutions and colonial administrations imposed Eurocentric standards of art, thereby marginalising indigenous performance traditions. After independence, efforts were made to institutionalise cultural patronage, most notably through the establishment of the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) and the National Theatre in Lagos. Yet political instability, poor policy continuity,

and inconsistent state commitment weakened these structures over time. As Olu Obafemi observes, “the Nigerian state has often treated culture as peripheral to development, reducing its patronage to sporadic subsidies and politicised interventions” (72).

The inadequacy of traditional patronage systems has produced a recurring crisis in the Nigerian cultural sector. Elite sponsorship, while beneficial in isolated instances, tends to be hierarchical and selective, supporting art that aligns with the benefactor's interests rather than with broader cultural needs. Government funding, on the other hand, is vulnerable to economic downturns and political interference, as seen during the Structural Adjustment era when cultural budgets were drastically reduced.

Similarly, corporate sponsorships often prioritise commercial entertainment and branding opportunities, neglecting experimental theatre and serious literature. Femi Osofisan underscores this challenge by noting that “the arts in Nigeria continue to operate on the fringes of economic survival, compelled to depend on sporadic goodwill rather than systematic support” (104), despite the contention that “art is not just a mere duplicate of life and the society but . . . go beyond mere representation to add relevance to humanity” (Iyorza and Iseyen 40). These realities demand an urgent rethinking of cultural patronage in Nigeria.

The first objective of this study is to examine the historical trajectory of patronage in Nigeria and its limitations. Understanding the genealogy of cultural funding provides insight into the persistence of dependency models and their unsustainability. Nwachukwu Ukadike reminds us that “African cultural production cannot be fully grasped outside the legacies of colonial impositions and postcolonial economic realities” (88). Thus, interrogating the history of patronage illuminates how the survival of Nigerian literature and theatre has been shaped by forces that extend beyond aesthetics into the realm of politics and economy.

The second objective is to analyse global and African models of audience-driven cultural investment. Around the world, cultural institutions have experimented with alternative funding strategies, ranging from subscription-based models in Europe to crowdfunding initiatives in Africa and Latin America. David Throsby highlights that “the

cultural economy is increasingly dependent on participatory mechanisms that integrate audiences as stakeholders” (34). For Nigeria, such comparative insights are vital because they provide examples of how other nations in the Global South have navigated similar challenges.

The third objective is to propose practical strategies for applying these models to Nigerian literature and theatre. These strategies must consider Nigeria’s unique socio-economic landscape, including issues of class inequality, limited state support, and digital access. As Biodun Jeyifo argues, “the survival of Nigerian theatre lies in its capacity to adapt creatively to local conditions while drawing inspiration from global innovations” (59). By examining how cooperative funding schemes, community-based patronage, and digital platforms can be localised, this study highlights pathways toward sustainability.

The final objective is to evaluate the long-term implications of audience-centred patronage for cultural sustainability in Nigeria. Beyond securing immediate funding, audience investment has the potential to democratise cultural production, empowering consumers to become co-creators in the artistic process. This would shift the relationship between artists and audiences from passive consumption to active engagement. As Raymond Williams explains, “culture is not only a product, but a lived process sustained by the participation of its people” (112); arguably, it “diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind” (Bassey Ekpe 111).

Additionally, Ekpe and Thompson describe culture as “a fundamental concept within the framework of historical discourse and value treatment” (50)

Re-imagining patronage in this way, the future of Nigerian literature and theatre may be redefined in terms of inclusivity, resilience, and self-determination. This study is therefore significant because it challenges the dependency frameworks that have historically constrained Nigerian cultural production. By foregrounding audience investment, it seeks to reposition Nigerian literature and theatre within a participatory paradigm that resonates with both national realities and global practices. It also contributes to the broader discourse of cultural funding by offering an African-centred perspective, thereby enriching debates dominated by Euro-American scholarship. In doing so, it provides a resource not only for scholars and practitioners but also for policymakers seeking to craft more effective cultural policies for the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Cultural Economy Theory, Audience Development Theory, and Postcolonial Cultural Theory. Together, they provide the conceptual tools to interrogate patronage, audience investment, and the sustainability of cultural production in Nigeria.

Cultural Economy Theory

Cultural Economy Theory, advanced by scholars such as David Throsby,

underscores the intersection between culture and economics, highlighting how cultural goods possess both aesthetic and economic value. Throsby explains that “the cultural economy is marked by a duality of value: cultural products serve economic functions while simultaneously embodying symbolic meanings” (42). This dual character is especially evident in Nigerian theatre and literature, where performances and texts are not only commodities within the marketplace but also carriers of social identity and historical memory.

Applying Cultural Economy Theory to the Nigerian context allows us to understand patronage as a dynamic exchange between producers and consumers, mediated by both financial investment and cultural legitimacy. Traditionally, patronage in Nigeria has privileged elite and state actors as financiers of cultural production. Yet, this has often resulted in limited autonomy for artists and an overreliance on external support. By reframing audiences as potential investors, Cultural Economy Theory enables us to explore models where financial value and symbolic value intersect in ways that empower both artists and audiences. As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, “the consumption of art is itself an act of cultural production, as audiences confer legitimacy and meaning upon what they support” (97).

Other scholars have also elaborated on this duality of cultural goods. John O’Hagan notes that “the economic valuation of cultural activity cannot be separated from its social valuation, since art operates simultaneously in the market and in the moral economy of

communities” (54). Similarly, Ruth Towse argues that “cultural markets are distinctive in that they rely heavily on trust, reputation, and symbolic capital, all of which complicate simple economic models” (21). Within Nigeria, this means that financial models for theatre and literature must be designed with cultural participation and symbolic legitimacy at their core.

Audience Development Theory

Audience Development Theory shifts the discourse from viewing audiences as passive consumers to recognising them as active stakeholders in cultural sustainability. Richard McCarthy argues that “audience development is no longer about increasing numbers but about cultivating deeper, participatory relationships between art and its publics” (66). This comes relevant as Okon Jacob insists on the “dramaturgical function of arts to reinforce influence on human identity and behaviour” (145). In the European context, this has led to subscription schemes, membership drives, and community partnerships that ensure long-term investment from audiences.

For Nigerian literature and theatre, this theory is crucial because it reframes the funding question around the centrality of the audience. Instead of perceiving funding as something external, the theory highlights how audience loyalty, engagement, and participation can translate into sustainable financial models. Osofisan observes that “theatre in Nigeria thrives best when it embeds itself within the community, reflecting their struggles and, in turn, drawing from their

collective support” (118). This aligns with Bassey Bassey’s position that “art is a component of the social ‘superstructure’. . . a component of the ideology of a community” (89). Audience Development Theory therefore provides a framework for thinking about how Nigerian audiences might be mobilised, not just as spectators, but as financial contributors, collaborators, and cultural co-owners.

Scholars such as François Colbert have further emphasised the role of audiences in shaping cultural industries. He notes that “audience development is not simply marketing; it is about creating reciprocal value, where audiences feel invested in the cultural experience” (39). Similarly, Radbourne, Glow and Johanson, in their work on arts engagement, argue that “the twenty-first century demands a shift from audiences as receivers of culture to audiences as partners in cultural creation” (15). These insights are particularly relevant for Nigeria, where new models of community and digital engagement are beginning to redefine cultural consumption.

Postcolonial Cultural Theory

The third theoretical foundation for this study is Postcolonial Cultural Theory, which interrogates the lingering effects of colonial domination on cultural production in Africa. Scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike have emphasised the necessity of reclaiming cultural agency from structures imposed by colonial and neo-colonial powers. Ngũgĩ asserts that “cultural control is the most

enduring form of imperialism, for it dictates not only what is produced but also how it is consumed” (13).

In Nigeria, this perspective is particularly relevant, as much of the current funding framework for literature and theatre remains tethered to foreign grants, donor agencies, and Euro-American institutions. While such support has provided short-term relief, it has also reinforced dependency patterns and limited the autonomy of Nigerian practitioners. Postcolonial Cultural Theory encourages us to question these dependencies and to seek home-grown alternatives that restore agency to local communities. Audience investment, in this sense, becomes a decolonising strategy, repositioning Nigerians as the primary custodians and benefactors of their own cultural heritage. As Ukadike notes, “for African cinema and theatre to achieve true independence, the structures of patronage must be re-imagined in ways that privilege local audiences over foreign benefactors” (102).

Homi Bhabha extends this argument by insisting that “postcolonial cultural practice is most effective when it creates spaces of hybridity, where local agency resists domination and asserts alternative futures” (56). In the same vein, Achille Mbembe critiques the tendency of African states to replicate colonial funding structures, arguing that “the failure to decolonise cultural institutions has left African art perpetually dependent on external validation” (84). These critiques strengthen the case for audience-centred funding models, which anchor

legitimacy and survival in local communities rather than in international donors.

Interwoven, these three theoretical perspectives illuminate the central concern of this study. Cultural Economy Theory provides the framework for understanding the economic and symbolic duality of cultural goods, while Audience Development Theory highlights the potential of participatory models of investment. Postcolonial Cultural Theory situates these debates within Nigeria’s historical and political context, emphasising the need for self-determined cultural funding. The synthesis of these theories underscores the argument that rethinking patronage through audience investment is not merely an economic adjustment but also a cultural and political reorientation. The study is positioned to interrogate both the historical inadequacies of patronage in Nigeria and the emerging possibilities of audience-centred funding. This approach ensures that the analysis is sensitive to economic realities, participatory potentials, and the broader postcolonial struggle for cultural autonomy.

Historical Patronage in Nigeria and Africa

The history of patronage in Nigeria and Africa provides crucial insight into the relationship between cultural production and systems of support. Before the imposition of colonial structures, indigenous patronage systems were deeply rooted in communal, religious, and royal traditions. Theatre and performance were not primarily commodities, but social practices embedded in festivals, rituals, and communal life. Emmanuel Obiechina notes that “oral performance

traditions in Africa were sustained by community participation, where the artist was both a custodian of memory and a servant of society” (24). This collective framework ensured that cultural production was maintained by shared responsibility rather than individual or commercial interest. Jacob considers these performances as “predominant means of eliciting exhilarations and the sublime appreciation of man towards nature and the world around him, just as it has been a means of expression of inner thoughts and feelings, re-familiarising the complexities, apprehensions and contradictions that plague humanity” (144).

In Nigeria, royal courts functioned as major centres of patronage. The Yoruba Alààfin of Oyo, the Oba of Benin, and the Northern Emirs all provided institutionalised support for performers, dancers, musicians, and storytellers. These artists, often retained at court, were rewarded materially and symbolically, thus ensuring their livelihoods. Toyin Falola affirms that “palace patronage was central to sustaining artistic traditions, with rulers investing in art not only for entertainment but also as instruments of power and legitimacy” (61). This form of patronage, while hierarchical, created an environment in which theatre, music, and oral traditions could flourish within specific cultural and political settings.

Colonialism significantly altered these patronage structures. The introduction of Western education, Christian missionary activity, and colonial administration imposed new cultural priorities. Missionary schools began to promote Western drama, music, and

literature, often at the expense of indigenous forms. Jeyifo explains that “the colonial encounter privileged imported theatrical forms while relegating indigenous performance to the margins of the cultural economy” (27). As a result, cultural patronage shifted away from communal and royal bases towards missionary and colonial institutions, embedding Nigerian performance within a Eurocentric framework. Post-independence Nigeria initially witnessed an attempt to revive state patronage of the arts. The 1960s and 1970s, often described as the golden age of Nigerian theatre, were marked by governmental investments in cultural infrastructure. The establishment of the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) in 1975 and the National Theatre in 1976 signalled a deliberate effort to institutionalise cultural patronage. According to Ebun Clark, “state intervention during this period reflected a vision of the arts as instruments of national identity and cultural diplomacy” (83). Playwrights such as Hubert Ogunde, Wole Soyinka, and Ola Rotimi benefited from this climate, staging productions that drew large audiences and received state support.

However, this momentum was short-lived. By the 1980s, the Nigerian economy faced severe decline, worsened by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Public funding for culture dwindled, leaving many artists without sustainable support. Kole Omotoso remarks that “the collapse of government patronage left Nigerian theatre in a precarious state, forcing it into commercial improvisation or outright decline” (91). The once-vibrant repertory theatre movement faded, and practitioners turned increasingly to

corporate sponsorship or foreign grants, which often came with conditions that shaped the direction of artistic expression.

This trajectory is not unique to Nigeria but resonates across Africa. In Ghana, the colonial period also displaced indigenous support systems with missionary and state-led initiatives, while in Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o records how colonial censorship and lack of indigenous funding constrained African performance. He observes that "the struggle for cultural space has always been tied to the struggle for political and economic self-determination" (22). Similarly, in South Africa under apartheid, theatre practitioners were often dependent on external donors, but community theatre movements demonstrated the resilience of audience-driven models, with local communities pooling resources to support productions.

Thus, the history of patronage in Nigeria and Africa reveals a shift from communal and royal support to colonial impositions, and later to fragile state and corporate sponsorship. Each stage has had implications for the autonomy of artists and the sustainability of cultural production. The decline of state patronage in particular has left a vacuum, exposing the urgent need for alternative models that reconnect cultural funding with the audiences who consume and sustain artistic practice. As Toyin Adepaju puts it, "the survival of African cultural institutions lies not in the benevolence of elites or donors but in the rediscovery of audience-centred patronage" (58).

Theories of Cultural Patronage

Cultural patronage has long been theorised as the interaction between creative producers and the structures that enable their work to exist. Broadly, patronage refers to the financial, institutional, or communal support offered to artists and cultural workers. However, theories of patronage differ in emphasis, ranging from hierarchical systems of elite sponsorship to more democratic, participatory models.

The traditional view of patronage is rooted in aristocratic and courtly support. In this model, rulers, nobles, or wealthy elites act as patrons who fund artistic production to reinforce their own prestige and authority. Francis Haskell describes this form of patronage as "an exchange in which art serves as both decoration and propaganda for power, while artists are sustained by elite generosity" (14). This perspective aligns with precolonial Nigeria, where royal courts functioned as cultural hubs, while theatre, dance, and music were sustained within systems of authority. The strength of this model lies in its ability to provide artists with stability, resources, and a secure livelihood, often elevating artistic practices into prestigious traditions. Yet its weakness is clear: the dependence of artists on patrons creates a hierarchical relationship in which creativity is often subordinated to political or social interests. As art historian Michael Baxandall observes, "the conditions under which artists worked were shaped fundamentally by the needs and demands of their patrons" (42).

Another theoretical strand centres on state patronage, particularly prominent in post-independence African nations. In this

framework, the state assumes responsibility for nurturing culture as a component of national identity, unity, and development. Clark argues that “state patronage in Nigeria during the 1970s was not simply about entertainment but about consolidating cultural diplomacy, shaping national memory, and legitimising the state’s vision of modernity” (83). A major strength of this model is that it creates opportunities for large-scale cultural initiatives such as national theatres, arts councils, and festivals, which might otherwise be impossible to sustain privately. UNESCO also underscores this advantage, stating that “state intervention in the cultural sector ensures protection for cultural diversity and fosters inclusion of marginalised voices” (61). However, critics note its weaknesses: state patronage is vulnerable to political interference, corruption, and shifts in government priorities. Omotoso observes that, “the withdrawal of the state from cultural funding exposed the fragility of an arts sector too dependent on government goodwill” (92). In Nigeria, frequent policy changes and underfunding of cultural institutions illustrate how state-led patronage often lacks long-term sustainability.

By the late twentieth century, market-oriented theories of patronage emerged, reflecting the neoliberal turn in global economies. Here, cultural production is sustained through sponsorships, advertising, and commercial markets. The logic of the market becomes the determinant of what thrives. George Yúdice explains that “culture in the age of neoliberalism is increasingly legitimated by its utility, its ability to generate

revenue, attract sponsorships, and serve corporate branding” (28). In Nigeria, this has manifested in the reliance on breweries, telecommunications firms, and banks for sponsorship of theatre productions and festivals. The strength of this model lies in its responsiveness to demand and its potential to mobilise significant private capital. According to David Hesmondhalgh, “the commercialisation of culture has enabled creative industries to expand rapidly, reaching wider audiences and creating jobs” (57). Yet its weaknesses are equally apparent: it prioritises profitability over artistic depth, narrowing the scope of what is produced. John Storey notes thus, “market-driven cultural forms often privilege entertainment over critique, offering pleasure but rarely challenging dominant ideologies” (110). Nonetheless, representing culture through arts is “a tasking and painstaking exercise that requires commitment, dedication, devotion, resilience, doggedness, open-mindedness, firmness and good observation in order to achieve the desired goal” (Nnanake Ekeke 90).

Against this backdrop, audience-centred patronage emerges as a transformative model. This theory situates audiences not as passive consumers but as active stakeholders in cultural production. Scholars of participatory culture, such as Henry Jenkins, have argued that “the shift from spectatorship to participation reflects broader cultural dynamics in which audiences want not only to consume but also to shape and sustain media practices” (137). Leaning on this assertion, Ekpe and Wekpe note that arts products “have proven valuable tools for engaging and

analysing human concerns. . . and have been appropriately situated to reiterate viable communication messages” (130). Applied to theatre and the arts, this means rethinking patronage as a process in which communities pool resources, subscribe to productions, or directly fund the artists they value. The strength of this model is its democratic ethos: by decentralising patronage, it empowers audiences and fosters stronger connections between cultural producers and their publics. It also enables artists to pursue more experimental and socially critical work without fear of censorship from elites, governments, or corporate sponsors.

Within African contexts, this approach is not entirely new. Adepoju reminds us that “indigenous African systems of cultural support were essentially audience-driven, where community participation, collective funding, and shared ownership sustained performance traditions” (57). Ekeke expands this with the assertion that “community theatre describes a group of methodologies that employ song, drama and dance as modes of sensitizing, educating and empowering communities to improve their status quo”. He adds that the “this refers to a process whereby theatre is used to research, analyse and solve critical issues in the community, empowering indigenous people to enhance or make change towards positive behaviours, knowledge and attitudes regarding vital social issues challenging their lives” (146). What is novel, however, is the reconfiguration of these systems in light of digital platforms and crowdfunding models. These innovations enable audiences to bypass traditional

gatekeepers and directly support artists whose work resonates with them. Nonetheless, the weaknesses of this model cannot be ignored. Audience-centred patronage may suffer from uneven participation, with urban elites dominating support, while rural and marginalised communities remain underrepresented. Furthermore, as Sarah Bay-Cheng points out, “participatory models depend heavily on digital access, which risks reproducing inequalities in contexts where internet penetration is uneven” (122).

The theoretical debates therefore reveal an evolution: from elite-dominated models, through state-led and market-based systems, to participatory frameworks that align with democratic ideals. Each model carries strengths and weaknesses, but for Nigeria’s contemporary cultural economy, audience-centred patronage offers a potential balance between sustainability and artistic independence. As Raymond Williams emphasises, “culture is ordinary” (93), and its survival depends on the extent to which ordinary people recognise and invest in its value.

Global Audience-Centred Models

On the global space, cultural production has increasingly embraced audience-centred patronage models that reposition audiences as co-investors and active stakeholders rather than passive consumers. These models, which include crowdfunding platforms, subscription-based theatre schemes, and cooperative cultural enterprises, demonstrate a shift towards democratising

cultural funding and ensuring the sustainability of artistic practices.

One of the most visible manifestations of audience-centred patronage is crowdfunding. Platforms such as Kickstarter, Patreon, and Indiegogo have enabled artists to raise funds directly from audiences who value their work. Paul Belleflamme et al. argue that “crowdfunding is essentially the pooling of small contributions from many supporters, with the internet acting as a powerful coordinating mechanism” (588). In theatre and performance, this has allowed independent artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as corporate sponsors or state agencies. A notable example is the British theatre collective Idle Motion, which raised funds via Kickstarter for productions that would otherwise have been financially impossible. The strength of crowdfunding lies in its ability to democratise access to cultural funding; however, its weaknesses include the volatility of public interest and the tendency for high-profile projects to attract disproportionate support, leaving less-visible artists marginalised.

A second global model is subscription-based patronage, which has been particularly influential in Europe and North America. The National Theatre in London, for instance, operates a “Membership and Friends” scheme where audiences contribute regular fees in exchange for benefits such as priority booking, behind-the-scenes access, and invitations to special events. Pick and Anderton explain that “subscription systems create a sense of shared ownership between audiences and institutions, fostering loyalty and financial stability” (112).

In the United States, regional theatres such as the Guthrie Theatre in Minnesota have relied on subscription-based funding to sustain programming, develop new works, and weather financial downturns. The strength of this model is the predictability of revenue and its ability to cultivate long-term relationships between audiences and cultural institutions. Yet, it can also entrench exclusivity, as benefits often accrue to wealthier subscribers, thereby limiting accessibility for lower-income groups.

Cooperative and community-led patronage models also illustrate global innovations in audience-centred cultural funding. In Argentina, theatre groups such as Teatro Comunitario in Buenos Aires rely on collective ownership and grassroots support from neighbourhood audiences. Beatriz Trastoy notes that, “community theatre in Latin America often emerges from audiences themselves, where local people fund, perform in, and sustain productions as expressions of identity and resistance” (74). The strength of this model lies in its inclusivity and deep connection to community needs, ensuring that cultural production remains relevant to local realities. However, such initiatives often struggle with limited resources and lack the infrastructural support that state or corporate models can provide.

Digital technology has further expanded audience-centred patronage by enabling micro-investment models. For instance, Patreon allows individuals to pledge monthly contributions to artists in exchange for tiered rewards such as exclusive content, acknowledgements, or direct interaction.

Amanda Lotz observes that “the micropayment model signifies a cultural shift in which audiences see themselves not only as consumers but as co-creators of value” (89). This global trend has been particularly significant for independent musicians, digital creators, and theatre companies experimenting with hybrid live-streamed performances. The weakness of this approach, however, is its dependence on digital literacy and access, which may not be evenly distributed across all societies.

These global models highlight both the promise and the limitations of audience-centred patronage. They demonstrate that when audiences are empowered to invest directly in cultural production, the result is often greater sustainability, stronger artist–audience relationships, and more freedom for creative experimentation. Yet, they also reveal risks of exclusion, uneven distribution of resources, and dependence on technological infrastructures. For Nigeria and other African countries, these lessons underscore the need to adapt audience-centred patronage models to local contexts, considering socio-economic realities, digital divides, and existing communal support systems.

Audience-Centred Models in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the search for sustainable cultural funding has led to growing interest in audience-centred patronage. While traditional reliance on state or corporate sponsorship persists, there are several emerging examples of participatory models that place audiences at the centre of cultural investment. Taking into consideration cases such as the Lagos Theatre

Festival, the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON), and community-led theatre initiatives illustrate how Nigerian audiences are increasingly engaging as active stakeholders in the cultural economy.

The Lagos Theatre Festival (LTF), established in 2013 with support from the British Council, represents one of the most significant platforms for showcasing theatre in Nigeria. Although initially dependent on external sponsorship, the festival has gradually adopted models that emphasises audience participation and direct investment. Ticket sales, pay-what-you-can performances, and digital outreach have enabled audiences to contribute directly to sustaining the festival. Akinwumi Isola notes that “the Lagos Theatre Festival demonstrates how urban Nigerian audiences are prepared to invest in cultural experiences that reflect their realities, particularly when they are engaged in non-traditional spaces such as car parks, markets, and abandoned buildings” (211). The strength of this model is its ability to expand theatre beyond elite venues and attract diverse audiences; however, its weakness lies in inconsistent audience turnout and the financial risks associated with relying heavily on ticket sales in a country where disposable income for leisure is limited.

Similarly, the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) provides an important example of audience-centred cultural patronage. Founded in 1983, MUSON has relied heavily on audience subscriptions, ticket purchases, and donations from patrons who value classical and contemporary music. According to Abiodun Akinseye, “MUSON’s

ability to sustain annual festivals, orchestras, and training schools demonstrates the potential of cultivating a loyal audience base that sees cultural patronage as both an aesthetic pleasure and a civic duty” (154). The strength of MUSON’s model lies in its structured membership scheme, which creates a predictable revenue stream and nurtures long-term relationships with audiences. Yet, it has also faced criticism for elitism, as its pricing structures and cultural focus tend to cater to middle- and upper-class Nigerians, thereby limiting accessibility for wider communities.

Beyond urban centres and elite institutions, community-led theatre practices across Nigeria provide another example of audience-centred patronage. In rural and peri-urban areas, traditional festivals, masquerade performances, and grassroots theatre groups are often sustained through collective contributions from audiences. As Jeyifo observes, “community theatre in Nigeria has historically been audience-driven, with performances financed through communal levies, donations, and voluntary services” (63). For instance, village performances in parts of Ibadan and Enugu rely on contributions collected during events, with audiences donating money or food in exchange for participation in performances that speak to their lived experiences. The strength of this model is its inclusivity and rootedness in local identity; however, its weakness lies in its limited scalability, as such initiatives rarely attract large-scale funding or national visibility.

Recent years have also seen experimentation with digital audience-centred patronage. Crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe and Naija Fund have been used by Nigerian filmmakers and theatre practitioners to raise money directly from audiences. Although the practice is not yet widespread, it reflects a growing recognition of the internet as a tool for bypassing state and corporate funding. According to Chukwuma Okoye, “digital patronage provides new opportunities for Nigerian artists to appeal directly to diasporic and local audiences who share a cultural stake in their work” (178). The weakness of this approach, however, is tied to the digital divide: many Nigerians lack reliable internet access or trust in online payment systems, which limits the scale of audience participation.

The Lagos Theatre Festival and MUSON illustrate how urban audiences can sustain cultural institutions through ticketing and membership models, while community-led theatre highlights the deep-rooted tradition of collective audience funding in indigenous contexts. Digital platforms, though still emerging, point towards future possibilities for broader participation. However, for audience-centred patronage to thrive in Nigeria, issues of accessibility, affordability, and infrastructural support must be addressed. This aligns with the argument of Adepoju that “Nigeria’s cultural future will depend on the ability of its artists and audiences to forge new compacts of mutual responsibility” (59).

Challenges of Transitioning to Audience-Centred Models in Nigeria

While audience-centred patronage offers exciting possibilities for the sustainability of Nigerian arts and theatre, the transition to such models is fraught with structural, economic, and cultural challenges. These challenges arise not only from infrastructural limitations but also from broader social and economic dynamics that shape cultural consumption in Nigeria.

One major challenge is economic precarity. Nigeria's economy continues to struggle with inflation, unemployment, and widening income inequality, leaving many citizens with limited disposable income for cultural investment. As Osofisan notes, "the Nigerian theatre has always competed with the basic struggle for survival, and audiences will often prioritise bread over drama" (28). In such contexts, expecting audiences to provide consistent financial support for cultural production may be unrealistic. While elite audiences may sustain institutions like MUSON, the broader population often cannot afford to make cultural patronage a priority. This economic reality severely limits the scalability of audience-centred models in Nigeria.

Another obstacle lies in cultural attitudes towards patronage. Unlike in Europe, where ticketed theatre and subscription-based models have long traditions, Nigerian audiences are more accustomed to communal, festival-oriented, and sometimes free performances. Ahmed Yerima explains that "theatre in Nigeria has historically been public and communal, tied to ritual and celebration rather than commodified access" (44). Shifting audiences towards a mindset of regular

financial investment in the arts requires a cultural transformation in expectations and practices of consumption.

Infrastructure and accessibility also present significant barriers. In many Nigerian cities, performance venues are limited, poorly maintained, or inaccessible to large portions of the population. Relatively, Jacob explains that "maintenance is a term that is associated with all the spheres of human endeavours in all times and situations, theatre inclusive" (137). The Lagos Theatre Festival has experimented with alternative spaces, but outside Lagos and Abuja, audiences often lack access to consistent cultural programming. UNESCO observes that "without infrastructure, even the most innovative models of cultural participation will struggle to reach scale" (77). This lack of physical and digital infrastructure makes it difficult to build sustainable audience-centred patronage systems, particularly in rural areas.

Digital divides further complicate the transition. Crowdfunding and online patronage systems depend on internet access, digital literacy, and trust in online payment platforms. While Nigeria has a vibrant digital youth culture, internet penetration remains uneven, and issues of fraud and distrust often discourage online transactions. Sarah Nwachukwu points out that "digital innovation in Nigerian cultural sectors is promising, but the infrastructural and trust gaps in online payment limit its effectiveness for widespread patronage" (103). Thus, while crowdfunding holds potential, it is not yet a universally viable model.

There is also the issue of policy neglect and weak institutional frameworks. In countries where audience-centred models thrive, they are often complemented by policies that incentivise donations and cultural participation, such as tax reliefs for cultural giving. In Nigeria, however, cultural policy has remained underdeveloped and inconsistent. Emmanuel Dandaura stresses that “the lack of coherent cultural policy in Nigeria has left artists and audiences without institutional mechanisms to sustain mutual partnerships” (61). Without supportive frameworks, audience-centred patronage risks being piecemeal and unsustainable.

Competition from globalised entertainment industries poses a challenge. Nigerian audiences, particularly urban youth, are increasingly drawn to Nollywood, streaming platforms, and global music industries. While this reflects Nigeria’s cultural dynamism, it also diverts audience attention and spending power away from live theatre and community performance. As Stephanie Newell argues, “the Nigerian cultural space is increasingly shaped by global media flows, which create both opportunities and pressures for local producers” (92). In this environment, live theatre and cultural initiatives must struggle to prove their relevance against more accessible and glamorous entertainment forms.

Objectively speaking, transition to audience-centred patronage in Nigeria faces significant challenges: economic hardship, cultural expectations, infrastructural deficits, digital divides, policy neglect, and global competition. Yet, these challenges do not

render the model unworkable; rather, they highlight the need for locally adapted solutions. For audience-centred patronage to succeed, Nigerian practitioners must engage in audience education, develop affordable and flexible participation models, and advocate for supportive policies. Only then can the promise of audience-centred cultural investment be fully realised.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section seeks to analyse and highlight the opportunities, tensions, and implications that arise when attempting to transition to audience-driven cultural funding models in Nigeria. The discussion is structured around three central themes: the viability of audience-centred patronage in Nigeria, the role of digital platforms in reshaping cultural participation, and the balance between local traditions and global influences.

The Viability of Audience-Centred Patronage in Nigeria

The case studies examined reveal that audience-centred patronage is not alien to Nigerian cultural traditions. Community-driven performance systems, such as masquerades, festivals, and grassroots theatre, demonstrate a longstanding practice of collective cultural investment. Jeyifo argues that, “Nigerian popular theatre has historically relied on the people themselves, whether through small levies, voluntary contributions, or the sheer collective ownership of the performance” (63). This suggests that audience-centred patronage is culturally resonant and not merely a foreign import.

However, viability in the contemporary context is complicated by economic realities. The Lagos Theatre Festival, for instance, has demonstrated urban audiences' willingness to pay for immersive, innovative experiences, but it also shows the risks of inconsistent turnout and financial unpredictability. Similarly, MUSON's membership model proves that subscription-based cultural funding can be sustained in Nigeria, though largely among elite and middle-class patrons. Another finding is that socio-economic inequality significantly shapes the reach of audience-centred models. As Karin Barber notes, "cultural participation in Africa is stratified along lines of class, education, and urbanisation, leading to uneven access to cultural production and consumption" (102). What this means is that while affluent audiences may consistently support theatres and festivals, poorer communities may only engage sporadically or in contexts where contributions are voluntary rather than monetised.

Furthermore, Nigerian audiences are accustomed to state and elite patronage of culture, dating back to colonial and postcolonial sponsorships, making the cultural shift to grassroots, individual investment gradual and sometimes resisted. Still, models like the "community levy" system in rural Yoruba festivals show that audiences have historically accepted responsibility for sustaining culture when motivated by communal ownership. Thus, viability is not a question of whether audience-centred patronage can exist in Nigeria, it already does, but whether it can be scaled and adapted to

contemporary realities without becoming exclusionary or elitist.

Digital Platforms and the Reshaping of Cultural Participation

One of the most significant findings from global and Nigerian case studies is the role of digital platforms in expanding audience-centred patronage. Crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and Patreon have been successfully adapted in global contexts, while in Nigeria, platforms like NaijaFund and GoFundMe have provided artists with alternative funding channels. Okoye notes that "digital patronage offers the possibility of connecting local artists to global audiences, including diasporic communities who are eager to invest in Nigerian culture" (178).

Digital patronage also reshapes the nature of cultural participation by fostering intimacy and transparency between artists and audiences. Unlike state or corporate funding, digital platforms often allow patrons to track the progress of a project, receive rewards, or directly interact with creators. Jenkins calls this "participatory culture, where audiences are no longer passive consumers but active stakeholders in creative processes" (115). This creates a sense of co-ownership that strengthens long-term cultural sustainability. Yet, findings also highlight limitations. The uneven distribution of internet access, particularly between urban and rural areas, remains a persistent barrier. The Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) reported in 2023 that internet penetration stood at 47%, with rural communities disproportionately excluded. This means nearly half of the

population remains outside the digital patronage ecosystem. Additionally, mistrust of online transactions, cyber fraud, and lack of financial literacy discourage some potential supporters.

Despite these challenges, examples such as Nigerian musicians raising funds for album releases through Instagram campaigns demonstrate the adaptability of digital patronage. Diaspora communities, in particular, have emerged as consistent digital patrons, motivated by nostalgia and cultural solidarity. However, the reliance on diaspora audiences raises questions about whether digital patronage strengthens local cultural engagement or shifts dependence to external supporters.

Balancing Local Traditions with Global Influences

Another key finding is the tension between Nigeria's indigenous systems of cultural support and the globalised models being imported through digital platforms and institutional practices. On the one hand, audience-centred patronage in Nigeria can build on indigenous traditions of communal performance, where culture was sustained through shared ownership and collective contributions. Adepoju reminds us that "African cultural systems were inherently participatory, with audiences functioning as both consumers and producers of meaning" (57).

On the other hand, Nigeria's cultural landscape is increasingly shaped by global trends, such as the rise of subscription models, online crowdfunding, and digital streaming.

For example, Netflix's entry into Nollywood has shifted audience expectations, where monthly subscriptions are now normalised for cultural consumption. While this global influence encourages financial participation, it also risks imposing foreign consumption logics that undervalue communal, non-monetary forms of cultural support. Another important finding is that global models often assume stable economies and predictable incomes, conditions that are not guaranteed in Nigeria. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is useful here, as he explains that "the capacity to invest in culture is tied not only to income but to educational and social positioning" (76). This reveals why audience-centred patronage is stronger in urban, middle-class contexts than in rural or working-class settings.

Nonetheless, hybrid approaches offer promise. For example, Yoruba travelling theatre historically combined ticket sales with community goodwill, donations, and religious patronage, demonstrating a mix of local and external support systems. The Lagos Theatre Festival has similarly adapted the "pay-what-you-can" ticketing system, balancing inclusivity with financial sustainability. Such hybridity suggests that Nigeria does not need to reject global models but rather indigenise them through cultural adaptation.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The analysis also underscores the importance of institutional and policy support in making audience-centred patronage sustainable. Countries that have successfully implemented audience-driven models, such as the UK and the US, often complement these

with tax incentives, cultural education, and supportive infrastructures. In Nigeria, the absence of coherent cultural policy and weak institutional frameworks hampers such innovations. As Dandaura notes, “without deliberate state action to encourage cultural participation, the potential of the Nigerian creative sector will remain underdeveloped” (61).

One finding is that Nigerian cultural funding policies are often inconsistent and prioritise elite or commercialised events at the expense of grassroots arts. For example, government support is often visible for large film festivals or Nollywood events, but less consistent for theatre or community arts. This selective patronage widens the funding gap for non-commercial cultural forms. Additionally, there is little incentive for private citizens or corporations to support culture. Unlike the US, where tax breaks encourage donations, or the UK, where Arts Council schemes decentralise funding, Nigerian frameworks rarely reward cultural giving. Bolanle Awe argues that “cultural patronage in Nigeria remains unsystematic, shaped more by personal connections and political interests than by structured policies” (144). This makes audience-centred patronage fragile without broader institutional reforms. For audience-centred models to thrive, policies must encourage micro-donations, cultural education, and cultural infrastructure. Partnerships with local governments, civil society organisations, and diaspora networks can bridge gaps left by absent state support.

Discussion of Findings

The findings presented in this study highlight both the promise and the limitations of audience-centred patronage in Nigeria. They reveal that while audience-based models are viable, their success is uneven, shaped by socio-economic disparities, infrastructural barriers, and policy weaknesses. Key findings include:

- i. Audience-centred patronage resonates with Nigerian traditions but risks elitism without inclusivity.
- ii. Digital platforms expand possibilities yet are constrained by digital divides and mistrust.
- iii. Global models provide useful strategies but must be adapted to Nigeria’s cultural and economic contexts.
- iv. Policy frameworks are currently inadequate, necessitating deliberate reforms to encourage sustainable cultural participation.

In essence, audience-centred cultural funding in Nigeria is not a question of feasibility but of adaptation. With proper institutional support, digital innovation, and community involvement, such models can reshape the future of cultural patronage while retaining Nigeria’s unique traditions.

Conclusion

This paper set out to interrogate the future of cultural patronage in Nigeria by rethinking audience-centred investment models and their implications for literature and theatre. Against the backdrop of dwindling state support, inconsistent corporate

sponsorship, and the precariousness of donor-driven funding, the work has examined alternative frameworks that place audiences at the centre of cultural financing. From the theoretical foundation, Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital and participatory culture theory by Henry Jenkins provided lenses for understanding how audience engagement can be both a form of economic and symbolic investment. The literature review demonstrated that African scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Achille Mbembe, and Emmanuel Dandaure, alongside Western theorists, recognise the crisis of overdependence on elite or state patronage, and propose more inclusive systems where audiences are empowered as stakeholders. The study concludes that audience-centred models represent a promising future for cultural funding in Nigeria, but only if they are adapted to Nigeria's socio-economic realities, digitally inclusive, and supported by deliberate policy reforms.

The future of Nigerian cultural funding lies in a reconfiguration of relationships between artists, audiences, and institutions. Audience-centred models, though challenging, offer a path toward resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability. By embracing digital innovation, hybridising global and indigenous models, and fostering enabling policies, Nigeria can create a cultural funding system that empowers audiences as true custodians of culture. As Thiong'o reminds us, "culture is the collective product of a people; it thrives only when people themselves are its primary custodians and beneficiaries" (88).

Recommendations

In light of the findings, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen audience-centred cultural patronage in Nigeria:

- 1 The Nigerian government should design policies that incentivise individual and corporate cultural giving. Tax reliefs, matching grants, and public-private partnerships could encourage a culture of giving. As seen in the UK Arts Council and the US National Endowment for the Arts, state frameworks must not only fund but also encourage citizen participation.
- 2 Cultural institutions should adopt micro-donation systems that allow ordinary Nigerians to contribute in small, sustainable amounts. Subscription models, such as annual memberships at affordable tiers, can democratise participation, ensuring that culture is not exclusively sustained by elites.
- 3 For digital patronage to flourish, infrastructural investment in broadband penetration and affordable internet access is critical. Partnerships with telecommunications companies could provide subsidised cultural data bundles, encouraging wider access to crowdfunding and streaming platforms. Artists and cultural organisations must also

- engage in digital literacy campaigns to build trust and familiarity with online patronage.
- 4 Nigerian cultural producers should adapt global strategies like pay-what-you-can ticketing and crowdfunding while rooting them in indigenous traditions of communal giving. This hybrid approach ensures cultural models remain context-sensitive, culturally resonant, and inclusive of rural and working-class audiences.
- 5 Long-term sustainability requires a shift in cultural attitudes. Cultural education should be integrated into school curricula, encouraging young Nigerians to see cultural investment as part of civic responsibility. Public campaigns should also highlight the role of audiences as co-creators of culture rather than passive consumers.
- 6 Nigerian diasporic communities have proven willing patrons of cultural projects. Institutions and individual artists should formalise these connections through online platforms, dedicated diaspora patronage schemes, and international collaborations that allow the diaspora to contribute materially and symbolically to Nigeria's cultural ecosystem.

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