

The Influence of Nollywood Female Representations on Perception in Rivers State: An Analysis of *Adire* (2023) and *Wura* (2023)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of female representations of women in Rivers State, Nigeria, focusing on gender depiction in select Nollywood films. The study employs a descriptive survey research approach complemented by content analysis of two contemporary Nollywood films, *Adire* (2023) and *Wura* (2023), to explore the influence of Nollywood's representation of women on perception in Rivers State. The findings reveal that while Nollywood films have made some progress in diversifying female character roles, traditional gender stereotypes such as women being primarily depicted in domestic, caregiving, and subordinate roles continue to dominate. These portrayals reinforce societal norms about women's roles in Nigerian society, as suggested by Gerbner and Gross's (1976) cultivation theory. However, the films also demonstrate emerging trends towards depicting women as more resilient, ambitious, and independent, reflecting shifts in societal expectations. Despite this, the portrayal of empowered women is often ambivalent, suggesting that Nollywood is still grappling with how to balance progressive and traditional gender narratives. The study concludes that Nollywood's gender portrayal impacts social perceptions in Rivers State, perpetuating both progressive and regressive views of women's roles. The paper recommends intentional gender-inclusive storytelling and policy frameworks to promote balanced and empowering portrayals of women in Nigerian cinema.

Keywords: Nollywood, Gender Portrayal, Perception, Rivers State, Cultivation Theory, Feminist Theory

INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of women in media, particularly in film, plays a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions, behaviors, and gender relations. In the Nigerian context, Nollywood has emerged as a powerful cultural force with immense influence on public consciousness and the construction of social realities. As one of the world's largest film industries, Nollywood not only reflects societal values but also actively contributes to the formation and reinforcement of gender norms through its narrative structures and character portrayals (*Adire*, 2023; *Wura*, 2023).

Scholars have long noted that repeated media representations can shape audience perceptions of social roles and expectations (Worlu & Harcourt-Whyte, 2025). Gerbner and Gross's (1976) cultivation theory argues that prolonged exposure to particular media narratives can cultivate shared beliefs about social reality, particularly when representations are consistent and stereotypical. In Nollywood, women are frequently depicted in domestic and subordinate roles thus reinforcing traditional gender expectations in Nigerian society (*Adire*, 2023; *Wura*, 2023). Wood (1994) also posits that media acts as a major agent of gender socialization, repeatedly showcasing narrow representations of women that can influence how individuals view both themselves and others.

However, recent trends suggest a subtle but growing shift in how women are depicted in Nollywood films. Characters with traits such as independence, ambition, and resilience are becoming more visible, reflecting changing societal attitudes toward women and gender roles (Chari, 2016). Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory supports this development, highlighting that individuals learn behaviors and shape self-perceptions by

observing models in media. Nevertheless, these more progressive portrayals are often accompanied by cautionary subplots that present female autonomy as problematic or unstable, resulting in what Goffman (1979) referred to as “gender display”—the performance of expected gender roles that simultaneously affirms and negotiates existing power structures.

Interviews with community members and communications experts reveal that these mixed messages have real implications for how women are perceived in everyday life, especially in culturally conservative areas like Rivers State (Worlu & Harcourt-Whyte, 2025). The audience's interpretations are influenced not only by the content of these films but also by their cultural context, leading to a complex interaction between media consumption and gender norms. While Nollywood has the potential to challenge outdated stereotypes and promote gender equality, its inconsistent approach to portraying women often undermines this potential.

Given the socio-cultural importance of film in Nigeria, it becomes essential to critically assess how Nollywood's portrayals of women influence public attitudes and expectations. This study, therefore, investigates the consequences of movie projections of women on social reality in Rivers State and explores the emerging trends in gender depiction within Nollywood. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering a media environment that supports gender equity and empowers diverse female voices. By analysing the films *Adire* (2023) and *Wura* (2023), this study contributes to scholarly discourse and understanding of gender representation within popular culture, with a specific focus on Nollywood and its reflection of women in Rivers State. It also has the potential to inform policy formulation and advocacy efforts aimed at fostering gender equality and women's empowerment in Rivers State. In order to achieve the study's purpose, the objectives of the study are:

1. Investigate the consequence of movie projections of women on social reality in Rivers State.
2. Identify the emerging trends on gender depiction in Nollywood movies.

Based on the above objectives, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the consequences of movie projections of women on social reality in Rivers State?
2. What trends are emerging on gender depiction in Nollywood movies?

Theoretical Foundation

Selective Perception Theory

Selective perception theory, originally propounded by Joseph Klapper in 1960, offers a valuable framework for understanding how individuals engage with media content. According to this theory, individuals interpret media messages through the lens of their pre-existing values, experiences, and attitudes. They seek out content that aligns with their beliefs (selective exposure), interpret messages in ways that support those beliefs (selective perception), and remember information that confirms what they already think while discarding contradictory details (selective retention).

When applied to the context of movie portrayals of women, particularly in Nollywood films, Selective Perception Theory becomes especially relevant. Nigerian movies frequently depict women in stereotypical roles such as the submissive wife, the seductive villain, or the materialistic gold digger (Okunna, 2002). While these portrayals may be designed primarily for entertainment, their repeated exposure can reinforce or challenge societal beliefs about women depending on how audiences perceive them.

The implications of selective perception in Rivers State are significant. The cultural and social setting of the region plays a pivotal role in shaping how film portrayals of women are internalized. For example, young urban audiences may appreciate the depiction of independent and career-driven women as aspirational, while older or more conservative viewers might perceive such characters with suspicion or disapproval (Nwogu, 2015). This divergence in interpretation underscores the idea that media messages do not have uniform effects; instead, they are filtered through complex psychological and cultural lenses.

Moreover, selective perception can contribute to confirmation bias, wherein viewers accept media portrayals that validate their existing views while disregarding those that challenge them. This dynamic may hinder progressive social change by reinforcing entrenched gender stereotypes. For example, if women are consistently portrayed in films as untrustworthy or emotionally unstable, viewers who already harbor sexist beliefs may interpret these portrayals as truthful, thereby deepening existing prejudices (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2012).

In the context of this study, selective perception theory explains why different audience groups in Rivers State respond differently to Nollywood's portrayal of women. For some, such portrayals reinforce traditional gender roles; for others, they provoke criticism and a call for more balanced and empowering representations. The theory thus reveals how movie projections can either sustain or challenge social realities related to gender, depending on the audience's interpretive stance.

Ultimately, selective perception theory highlights the importance of recognizing that the impact of media such as Nollywood films on gender perceptions is not homogenous. The same content can generate contrasting meanings across different audience segments. As such, filmmakers and content creators have a critical role to play in crafting more diverse and balanced depictions of women, which can help promote equitable gender narratives while acknowledging the varied interpretations that exist within the audience.

Gender Roles in Movies

The portrayal of gender roles in movies significantly influences societal perceptions and expectations, particularly in shaping notions of femininity and masculinity. Gender roles refer to the societal norms dictating the behaviors, responsibilities, and opportunities deemed appropriate for men and women (Wood, 2011). In the context of films, these roles are often amplified through storytelling, character development, and visual representation. In Nigerian cinema, especially Nollywood, women are frequently cast in roles that reinforce traditional stereotypes such as the obedient wife, the seductive temptress, or the victim in need of rescue. These consistent portrayals can have profound implications on the social reality of women, particularly in culturally conservative regions like Rivers State.

Movies serve not only as a form of entertainment but also as a mirror and mold of societal values. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), individuals, particularly young audiences, learn behaviors and social norms by observing and imitating what they see in the media. In Rivers State, where movies are widely consumed, especially Nollywood productions, the repeated depiction of women in stereotypical roles may reinforce patriarchal ideologies and influence how women are viewed and treated in everyday life. For example, women shown primarily in domestic roles or as subordinate to men may validate existing societal beliefs that limit women's participation in leadership, politics, and professional fields.

Furthermore, the internalization of these portrayals can affect women's self-perception and aspirations. Research shows that media representations contribute to shaping individual identity and societal roles (Gerbner et al., 2002). In Rivers State, where gender roles are often defined by cultural and traditional frameworks, the persistent media depiction of women in passive or dependent roles may discourage young girls and women from pursuing ambitions outside of conventional expectations. It may also normalize gender inequality in relationships, the workplace, and other spheres of life.

On the other hand, more recent efforts in Nollywood have begun to challenge these traditional gender narratives by portraying women as strong, independent, and successful individuals. When such portrayals are consistently represented, they can serve as a tool for social change by promoting gender equality and reshaping public attitudes. However, the impact of these progressive portrayals is still filtered through the cultural lens of the audience. In more conservative communities within Rivers State, there may be resistance to these changing images, leading to varied interpretations and reactions across different demographic groups (Okunna, 2002).

Therefore, gender roles in movies have a dual potential: to either entrench harmful stereotypes or to challenge and redefine societal expectations. In Rivers State, where traditional gender norms remain influential, the dominant portrayal of women in submissive or morally ambiguous roles risks reinforcing regressive views and

limiting the progress of gender equity. A conscious effort toward balanced and empowering representations in film can play a crucial role in reshaping societal norms and promoting a more inclusive social reality for women.

Cultural Roles of Women in Nigeria

According to Funmilayo (2022), a renowned labor leader, the role and status of women in Nigeria have undergone significant transformations from precolonial times through to the early 21st century. Despite these changes, the historical image of women as helpless, oppressed, and marginalized has continued to dominate mainstream narratives. This misrepresentation has obscured the proper study of women's contributions and has led to the underappreciation of the various critical functions they have performed across different eras.

In the precolonial period, Nigerian women were active participants in both social and economic life. The division of labor was largely defined by gender, with women taking charge of key occupations such as food processing, mat weaving, pottery making, and cooking. Land ownership operated under a communal system, and women could access land through their husbands or family lineages. Even within the patrilineal structure where men were regarded as heads of households, older women exerted considerable authority, particularly by managing the labor of younger members of the extended family.

One of the most significant areas where women exerted influence was in trade. Among the Yoruba, women dominated long-distance trade networks, which afforded them opportunities to amass wealth and rise in social status. The most successful of these women earned the prestigious title of *Iyalode*, a chieftaincy position that conferred immense privilege and political power.

Politically, women were far from passive figures, contrary to how they are often portrayed in contemporary literature. As Funmilayo (2022) explains, the family was the fundamental unit of political organization, and in matrifocal systems, women could wield substantial influence through their roles as mothers and heads of family blocs. Power within households was distributed based on both age and gender, allowing senior women a voice on crucial family and communal matters. The boundary between domestic and public spheres was porous, enabling women's control over household resources and relationships to translate into forms of public power. They could gain respect through food production, exercise authority over children, and influence men. Additionally, they could invoke spiritual power or retreat into the kitchen as a personal domain for interaction and decision-making with peers and kin.

Beyond the household, formal political power was often dominated by men; however, specific political titles and structures were still available to women. The title of queen mother prominent among the Edo and Yoruba was granted either to the king's mother or to a distinguished woman of notable social standing. The queen mother had her own palace and presided over meetings, supported by subordinate female titleholders. Nigerian oral traditions and legends further highlight the historical significance of women in governance. Figures such as Moremi of Ile-Ife and Amina of Zaria, as well as the powerful queens of Ondo and Daura, are celebrated as rulers and heroines who played critical roles in their societies.

The decline of women's influence began in the 20th century, as patriarchal systems combined with colonial interventions to reshape gender relations. Funmilayo (2022) observes that the collaboration between male chiefs and the British colonial administration, particularly in tax collection and local governance, sidelined the roles previously held by female chiefs. The colonial economy, increasingly centered around cash crop production for export—such as rubber, cocoa, groundnuts, and palm oil—was dominated by men and foreign firms. Consequently, women were relegated to subsistence agriculture, losing their earlier economic leverage.

This economic marginalization was further compounded by changes in land tenure systems. Communal ownership, which had traditionally ensured women's access to land, was gradually replaced by a system of land commercialization that favored those with capital primarily men involved in the lucrative cash crop trade. Moreover, Western-style education introduced during colonial rule disproportionately favored boys, thereby excluding many women from emerging professional opportunities. This educational disparity further

entrenched the socio-economic and political disadvantages that women faced under the colonial regime (Funmilayo, 2022).

Nollywood and Social Construction of Reality

Social constructionism is a theoretical framework that explores how individuals collectively construct their understanding of reality through social interactions. Rather than viewing meaning as something generated independently by each person, social constructionism posits that meaning is created collaboratively, shaped by communication and engagement within a cultural and social context. As Leeds-Hurwitz (2009) explains, meanings do not arise in isolation; instead, they are formed through interpersonal relationships and shared experiences.

Central to the theory is the idea that what we often take for granted as “reality” is not an objective truth waiting to be uncovered through scientific inquiry. Rather, it is a product of ongoing interactions among individuals within a society. These so-called “taken-for-granted realities” are social constructs subjective interpretations of the world shaped by cultural norms and communication. Fairhurst and Grant (2010) emphasize that the main goal of social constructionism is to explore the different ways people and communities co-create their understanding of the world around them.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) assert that all knowledge, including the most basic and commonsense understanding of everyday life, is socially derived and maintained. This means that even our most fundamental beliefs about reality are not solely products of personal perception, but are continuously shaped through interaction with others. Supporting this view, Defleur (1971) observed that individuals draw their definitions of reality primarily from the conceptual patterns and belief systems present in their social environments. Our sensory experiences, he argues, offer only limited insight into the true nature of the world.

Baran (1999) adds that the social construction of reality assumes that individuals within a culture share a consistent understanding of meaning. This shared meaning allows for uniform interpretation of symbols—such as a stop sign being understood similarly by nearly everyone. In the same vein, within a specific cultural context, a headless body might be interpreted as a sign of ritual murder. This is because society, based on prevailing cultural narratives, may link such acts to wealth acquisition through rituals.

This brings us to the theory of cultivation analysis, which provides further insight into how media shapes societal perceptions. Baran (2009) explains that cultivation theory argues television “cultivates” a version of reality that, though possibly inaccurate, becomes accepted because it aligns with culturally reinforced beliefs. Television, therefore, becomes a powerful medium through which a manufactured reality is presented and internalized. Viewers may begin to construct their judgments and make decisions based on these portrayals.

Nollywood films, for example, frequently depict human ritual killings as a route to wealth. Prolonged exposure to such portrayals may cause viewers to accept these narratives as real. If a person internalizes this constructed reality, it may influence their perception, behavior, and even moral compass potentially leading them to believe that ritual murder is a legitimate means of attaining financial success.

Consequently, some individuals might come to accept the idea that participating in ritual killings can lead to wealth, especially if they are desperate for financial breakthroughs and believe that others have succeeded through such means. This illustrates how the consistent portrayal of specific themes in Nollywood films can create a perceived truth among viewers. The frequency and intensity of such portrayals reinforce their perceived legitimacy, making these acts appear more socially acceptable or feasible.

As Berger and Luckmann argue, social constructs are ultimately human choices, not natural laws or divine mandates. These constructs are shaped by cultural symbols, media messages, and social cues. Wright (1994) further strengthens the link between social constructionism and perception, asserting that perception is a subjective, internal process that is minimally influenced by objective reality.

In essence, viewers who interpret depictions of ritual killings in Nollywood films as reflections of real-life pathways to wealth are not basing their beliefs on verified facts. There is no empirical evidence supporting the idea that ritual murder leads to financial success. What is being socially constructed and internalized, therefore, is shaped by the viewer's subjective interpretation of media content. These interpretations align with the findings of Gerbner and colleagues, who highlight how media representations can cultivate and reinforce distorted yet widely accepted versions of reality.

Portrayal of Women in Media

Allan and Coltrane (1996) and Wood (1994) provide evidence that the media is a powerful force in shaping societal perceptions of men and women. As both a socializing agent and a source of information, the media plays a critical role in shaping communication rituals and maintaining societal norms. Its widespread reach makes it one of the most effective channels for disseminating images and messages to the public. Beyond informing society, the media also sets trends and influences the topics that dominate public discourse. With the emergence of numerous media platforms, its influence has only grown, shaping opinions, reinforcing norms, and even altering societal beliefs.

This pervasive influence of the media extends to the formation and reinforcement of stereotypes, particularly gender stereotypes. As Eagly and Steffen (2020) note, when people consistently observe a particular group engaging in specific behaviors, they begin to associate those behaviors with inherent traits of that group. Thus, gender stereotypes like other social stereotypes are not random but are shaped by repeated observations, many of which are mediated through the media. The media, therefore, becomes a central tool in constructing social reality, shaping public opinion, and perpetuating societal structures. Film producers must see themselves as leaders in society with tools that influence the society greatly. Therefore, they must hold the ethics of the profession very high. As Dike (2025) puts it, leaders must realize that ethical leadership promotes accountability, transparency, and public trust.

Unfortunately, this influence can have damaging consequences, especially for women. Swift (2013) argues that when the media persistently depicts women as dependent, incompetent, or lacking in value, it fosters a culture in which women are treated with contempt and are more susceptible to abuse. In her special report on gender in the media, Swift highlights how distorted portrayals of human relationships and gender roles particularly in the news and entertainment media negatively affect women's self-esteem and reinforce social inequality.

A consistent portrayal of women as weak or submissive in the media means that when a woman asserts power or independence in real life, she is often mischaracterized as arrogant, prideful, or unfeminine. This tendency to misinterpret strength as defiance frequently leads to women being labeled as "cold" or treated with disdain. For example, the portrayal of rape in Nollywood films often shifts blame to the female victim, citing her clothing, behavior, or company, thereby normalizing a harmful narrative that blames the victim. These depictions, when consistently repeated, begin to blur the line between fiction and reality, influencing how real-life rape survivors are perceived and treated. In many cases, they are unfairly labeled as promiscuous, indecent, or even deserving of their assault—reflecting the same biases shown in the films.

Okunna (2012), in her study on the representation of women in Nigerian films, found that women are frequently portrayed as failures when they cannot bear children. This recurring narrative promotes the notion that a woman's primary value lies in her fertility. When such portrayals dominate, they foster the belief in real life that women who do not meet this expectation are deserving of ridicule, rejection, or mistreatment. Swift's (2013) findings align with this perspective, showing how media messages contribute to entrenched gender biases.

There is little doubt that the media has significant control over how meaning and reality are constructed in society (Smith, as cited in Swift, 2013). This power to set the agenda carries great responsibility, particularly when it comes to representing marginalized groups. While the media's primary role includes informing the public, it also subtly shapes how people think and view others. Ideally, the media should be objective and balanced in its portrayals, but in practice, this is often not the case. Historically, the media has consistently projected negative and misleading images of women, generating biased narratives that do not reflect reality

(Swift, 2013). Although Swift's commentary does not focus specifically on Nigerian women, her observations are highly relevant to the Nigerian context, where the media continues to influence how women are seen, valued, and treated in society.

Media and Gender Stereotypes in Nigeria

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defines gender stereotypes as generalized views or preconceptions about the attributes or characteristics that men and women are assumed to possess, or about the roles they are expected to perform (OHCHR, 2014). At the heart of gender stereotyping lies the deeply ingrained belief that women are inherently unequal to men. Ellemers (2018) highlights that, within these stereotypes, men are often perceived as competent and assertive, while women are viewed as emotionally driven and lacking in strength. This flawed perception extends into virtually every aspect of life, resulting in the marginalization of women and limiting their opportunities for advancement in society.

In the educational sector, for instance, there exists a widespread belief that men are naturally more inclined towards disciplines like science and engineering, whereas women are considered better suited for nurturing roles such as teaching, nursing, and caregiving (Ellemers, 2018). Such assumptions not only restrict women's career choices but also reinforce gender-based barriers in professional growth and personal development.

Gender stereotypes are widely acknowledged as one of the key drivers of social inequality. Okunna (2005) notes that in many African societies, the male child is traditionally more valued, while female children are socialized from birth to accept subordinate roles. This early conditioning manifests in the form of systemic disadvantages for women, socially, politically, educationally, and culturally, leading to what may be described as a form of multidimensional poverty. The Council of Europe (2018) further explains that gender stereotypes serve to uphold and legitimize historic power imbalances between men and women, reinforcing sexist attitudes that hinder women's progress.

One of the most powerful institutions perpetuating these stereotypes is the media. As a major agent of socialization, the media often aligns with dominant cultural paradigms, promoting content that sustains existing power structures. Through its narratives and imagery, the media continues to portray women in roles that reflect and reinforce their marginalization. Among all media forms, film is particularly influential in shaping public consciousness. As Dutt (2014) observes, films are vehicles through which cultural values, social norms, fantasies, and historical moments are communicated and interpreted. Therefore, the way women are portrayed in film significantly shapes how they are perceived in real life.

Okafor (2017) argues that through the lens of the camera, women are frequently represented in ways that distort and damage their identity and dignity. Nollywood has been the subject of extensive academic scrutiny for its portrayal of women. According to the Oak Foundation (2015), female characters in Nollywood films are often depicted as secondary to men, and reduced to objects of sexual desire or lust. This portrayal aligns with the findings of Adewoye, Odesanya, Abubakar, and Olatunji (2014), who observed a recurring pattern of casting women as sex objects, the weaker gender, or domestic servants.

These portrayals reflect a broader cultural narrative, as echoed by Ibbi (2017), who notes that women in Nollywood films are commonly stereotyped in various demeaning roles, including femme fatale, gold digger, trophy wife, housemaid, object of barter, ritual sacrifice, or sexual exploitation. Such representations do not exist in a vacuum; they shape and are shaped by societal beliefs. As Okafor (2017) contends, the repeated portrayal of women in these limiting roles contributes significantly to societal perceptions and reinforces discriminatory attitudes toward women in the real world.

Empirical Review

Olushola, (2016) Portrayal of African Women in Nollywood Films over a Five-Year Period: A Content Analysis of Traits Applying the Stereotype Content Model.

This study builds on existing media and the psychological body of research to examine the stereotypical portrayal of gender in Nigerian movies. The main aim of this study is to determine how media via movies

present gender roles, thus, perpetuating socio-cultural inequalities as well as to investigate whether there is a change in these portrayals in a five-year period. The research shows media to be one of the many influences on how men and women are viewed (Allan & Coltrane, 1996). The study reveals media as the most pervasive way images and messages are communicated to people, and as an agent of socialization and information, the media play a key role in the transmissive and ritualistic processes of communication to ensure that society is not only informed, but that it is maintained. In addition to these, the media also set trends and influence topics of public discourse.

The theoretical focus of this study was objectification theory and cultivation theory. The study finds out the major media avenues where women are increasingly visible is in Nollywood movies (Amobi, 2013). The study reveals audience or as stakeholders, the Nollywood movies are quite popular with African women (Abah, 2008). This visibility and growth of Nollywood notwithstanding, the movie contents still reflect pictures that reinforce patriarchal notions and perpetuate gender disparity.

It is clear from this previous study that Nollywood movies produce images that further relegate women to positions of subservience and domestication. Because of exposure to these movies, viewers cultivate beliefs that women should be domesticated, inferior, and less ambitious than their male counterparts should be, while being judged on their abilities to manage their homes and marriages. Thus, these movies reaffirm the socio-cultural norms and expectations. This prevailing trend is worrisome for women, particularly those in rural areas and with little or no education.

The study further reveals worrisome dimension to this trend is the role women themselves play in these movies. As Adewoye, *et al.* (2014) indicated, women, whether as actresses, producers or directors, are active contributors to the stereotypic portrayals shown in movies. In view of this, the researcher recommends that actresses should not take up roles that demean them sexually and culturally. Secondly the researcher recommends producers and directors, should be more creative in producing movies that are compelling and do not fit the stereotypic patterns present in the society. The research shows that media images are often internalized and viewers then cultivate attitudes that fit the narrative and realities in the media. Nollywood movies, as a form of media, typically depicts images that are not only harmful to women, but also capable of negatively affecting their sense of worth and stunting women's development as well as empowerment. This study differs in scope as the present study is domesticated to residents in Rivers State and their perception of contemporary Nollywood movies.

Roselyn, (2015) Balancing Gender Stereotypes in Nollywood: A Consideration of Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart*.

The study analyses the Nollywood film *Lionheart*. The analysis focuses on the visual rather than textual component of the film. Quantitative content analysis was applied and findings revealed that there was an effort by the producer to 'demystify' the power of men. The researcher stated that issues raised in the movie are topical and relevant to the feminist discourse on women's representation in film and in the media generally. The study found out that movie also provides a way forward for gender-based discourse and serves as a point of reference for other female directors willing to interpret the role of women in a manner that is more accurate and truthfully reflective of their strengths and capacities. The study is anchored on stereotype content model.

The study looks at the current increase in the protest for women's right all over the world, amidst the resurgence of feminist critical thinking in mainstream culture, is giving film researchers a lot to reflect on. Research can be deduced that very little progress has been made to correct the stereotypical portrayal of women in Nollywood films by both male and female producers. In order to examine the stereotypes and investigate the extent to these stereotypes reflect the social reality of both genders in real life, *Lionheart*, a movie produced by a veteran Nollywood actress, Genevieve Nnaji, with an average rating of 5.6/10 on internet Movie Database and was nominated for an Oscar award and was selected. The study revealed that research on gender representation in the Nigerian film industry centres on the portrayal of women in films. This is understandable because the authentic picture of gender representation in Nigerian films becomes clearer only when we analyze the roles assigned to women against the dominance of men. Women make roughly half of the total population of Nigeria (National Bureau of Statistics Report on Women and Men in Nigeria, 2015). They,

nonetheless, appear less often than men in Nollywood films. This apparent disparity in representation and marginalization of women in Nollywood films can be ascribed to the socio-cultural roles ascribed to women in the society (Aromona, 2016).

The researcher further explains how women, by social construction, are subject to the male gender. Films, being the mirror of society, reflect this social order in the manner in which both genders are accorded prominence and roles in films. Men generally enjoy more media exposure than women and, according to Doyle in Wood (1994), are shown to be aggressive, dominant, and engaged in exciting activities from which they receive rewards for. Additionally, men are seldom shown to engage in domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning or taking care of children. Films, therefore, consolidate the dominant image of men by portraying them to be competent, powerful, emotionally in control and sexually expressive (Wood, 1994). The same is true for Nollywood. The Nigerian film industry has, for a long time, been indicted for promoting the subjugation and stereotype of women in the Nigerian society. And as far as the representation of women is concerned in Nigerian films, Okunna (2005) claims that it is business as usual.

The study investigated the perception of women in no small measure, as well as educate the society, and steer the discourse away from female weaknesses to their strengths. Furthermore, the researcher recommends there should be an active effort by filmmakers to ‘demystify’ the power of men. The cinematic representation of men is typically as competent. Secondly, the future films should attempt to explore male weaknesses and incompetence to further balance the existing stereotype around men. Consequently, there is a correlation between the previous and the current study. The previous study examines the Balancing of Gender Stereotypes in Nollywood: A Consideration of Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart*, while the present study looked mainly at Examining Nollywood Depiction of women and its implications on gender dynamics in Rivers State. The gap is in the scope as the study focused on gender stereotypes in *Lionheart* movie while the present study focuses on the perception of residents on women depiction in general (not necessarily stereotypes) alongside the review of movies that depict women in diverse ways.

Church & Chukwudi (2010) the Social Construction of Reality: Analytical Study of the Effect of Nollywood Movies.

The study investigated the social construction of reality: analytical study of the effect of Nollywood movies using the survey method. The researcher isolated Nollywood's (the Nigerian home video industry) themes which portray human sacrifices as efficacious in money making or in attaining success and examined their effect on the viewers' perception, interpretation and production of reality. The study administered Questionnaires to a simple random sample population of Nollywood movie viewers in Enugu metropolis. Data accruing was analyzed and the result show that Nollywood movies exert effect on people's perception, interpretation and (re)production of reality.

Movies, according to Rodman (2006) “have been blamed for a wide range of societal trends and individual effects, including the distortion of reality, violence and stereotyping” (p. 212). The influence of movies and their ability to construct social reality can be found in results of the following studies. The study further revealed the impact of “super story” drama series on people's perception of reality, Okafor (2008) records that results show that films exert influence on viewers as they perceive what they view as a representation of real-life situation. The researcher reports that subjects say movies shape their opinions and are a means of portraying social ills.

Results of this study are consistent with that of several others recapitulated in the literature review. The

researcher concluded that there is no doubt that Nollywood movies portray ritual scenes which viewers use as the basis for their personal opinion formation. Watching violent oriented movies particularly those that portray ritual killings for money making is not the major cause of rituals in Nigeria today.

Consequently, there is a correlation between the previous and the current study. The previous study examines the social construction of reality: analytical study of the effect of Nollywood movies and the most focus objective was on the Nollywood portrayals and how such portrayals contribute to social reality. While the

present study looks mainly at Nollywood Depiction of women and its implications on gender dynamics in Rivers State; the focus here is specifically gender representations in select Nollywood movies.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the descriptive survey research approach complemented by content analysis of two selected Nollywood films to explore the impact of Nollywood's portrayal of women on social reality. This method enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes and patterns related to gender representation in selected Nollywood films. The study population was divided into two categories. The first stream comprised of residents of Rivers State, including students, professionals, and Nollywood viewers. Thus, the first sample size was determined using an online sample size calculator – the Monkey Survey. This software determined that 384 was representative enough for the population while the second sample consisted of two purposively selected films. For data collection, the key instruments employed were: the coding guide and the questionnaire and the interview guide. Given the nature of the study, data collection relied on primary sources, which included the selected films and responses from the respondents who had seen the select films and also expert interviewees. Additionally, secondary data were presented descriptively and interpretatively. Descriptive presentation included the use of tables, numbers, images, and direct quotations, while interpretive analysis involved thematic exploration and narrative insight into the patterns and implications of gender depiction in Nollywood films.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: How Nollywood's Portrayal of Women affect Gender Equity

Response Options	Frequency	Percentage
Promotes gender equality	96	25%
Maintains the status quo	154	40%
Reinforces gender inequality	134	35%
Total	384	100

The data reveal a divided perception: while some believe Nollywood is making progress in promoting gender equality, a larger number feel that the industry maintains the status quo or even reinforces gender inequality. This suggests that despite emerging efforts to challenge stereotypes, traditional narratives still dominate Nollywood's representation of women.

Table 2: The extent to which Nollywood movies shape real-life gender roles?

Response Options	Frequency	Percentage
To a very high extent	115	30%
To a high extent	154	40%
To a moderate extent	77	20%
To a low extent	38	10%
Not at all	0	0%
Total	384	100

Many respondents agree that the way women are depicted in Nollywood movies translates into real-world expectations and behaviors. This implies that media representation is not just about entertainment but plays a crucial role in shaping how society perceives gender roles.

Table 3: How portrayal of women in Nollywood has changed over time

Response Options	Frequency	Percentage
More independent and empowered roles	115	30%
No significant change	154	40%
More regressive portrayals	115	30%
Total	384	100

Table 4: The extent to which female directors and producers influence gender representation in Nollywood

Response Options	Frequency	Percentage
To a very high extent	58	15%
To a high extent	115	30%
To a moderate extent	134	35%
To a low extent	77	20%
Not at all	0	0%
Total	384	100

Findings show that while there is growing representation of independent female characters, many believe that Nollywood has not significantly shifted from its long-standing gendered portrayals. The slow pace of change suggests that entrenched cultural and industry biases continue to shape storytelling in Nollywood.

DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What is the consequence of movie projections of women on social reality in Rivers State?

The analysis reveals that the portrayals of women in movies like *Adire* (2023) and *Wura* (2023) have significant consequences for social reality in Rivers State. Both films largely depict women in limited, traditional roles, reinforcing cultural expectations and affecting women's perceptions of themselves and how they are perceived by others. The thematic analysis of interview data with film directors, a community leader, communications experts, and a social commentator sheds light on the social impact of these portrayals. This discussion is further supported by academic literature on the effects of media portrayals on social behavior and norms.

The recurring themes in *Adire* and *Wura*, where women are primarily depicted as caregivers, homemakers, or romantic interests, have led to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes within Rivers State. The response from the data gathered revealed that the industry seems to maintain a status quo as regards the restrictive view of women's roles, influencing not only how women see themselves but also how men perceive their roles in society. This aligns with Gerbner and Gross's (1976) cultivation theory, which asserts that repeated exposure to certain images in media can shape individuals' perceptions of reality. By consistently portraying women within these narrow roles, Nollywood films contribute to a societal narrative that discourages women from pursuing diverse paths outside the domestic sphere, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles.

On the extent to which Nollywood movies shape real-life gender roles, the respondents agree that the way women are depicted in Nollywood movies translates into real-world expectations and behaviors. This implies that media representation is not just about entertainment but plays a crucial role in shaping how society perceives gender roles. The film directors acknowledged that the reliance on these stereotypes in Nollywood productions is often motivated by audience expectations and cultural norms, which creates a feedback loop that

sustains these portrayals. Wood (1994) suggests that media serves as a mirror to society, reflecting and often amplifying prevailing stereotypes. In Rivers State, these media-projected stereotypes manifest in daily social interactions, where women may be socially rewarded for conforming to traditional roles or stigmatized when they deviate from these expectations.

Another effect of the portrayals in *Adire* and *Wura* is their influence on women's self-perception and aspirations. The respondents agree that these media representations can affect women's sense of self-worth, making them more likely to internalize traditional roles and less likely to envision themselves in leadership or professional positions. This finding is consistent with Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, which argues that media portrayals serve as behavioral models that viewers may emulate. When women repeatedly see themselves represented in restricted, dependent roles, they may internalize these portrayals, limiting their aspirations and professional ambitions.

The interviewees, particularly the social commentator, observed that these portrayals may discourage women from pursuing careers or leadership positions, especially in male-dominated fields. This is a significant issue in Rivers State, where societal expectations often influence career choices and professional development opportunities for women. Research by Sink and Mastro (2017) supports this finding, indicating that media has a powerful role in influencing self-concept, especially for marginalized groups who may have fewer role models in real life. Thus, the limited portrayals of women in Nollywood can indirectly impact the professional aspirations of women in Rivers State, reinforcing a cycle of low representation in leadership roles.

The thematic analysis also reveals that the portrayal of women in movies like *Adire* and *Wura* shapes public perception of gender roles, reinforcing the notion that women's primary contributions are in the private or domestic sphere. The community leader expressed concerns that these portrayals might contribute to the normalization of unequal power dynamics between men and women, influencing how women are treated in public spaces and the workplace. This aligns with Goffman's (1979) concept of "gender display," which suggests that media not only reflects but also helps to define what is considered appropriate behavior for each gender. When media predominantly shows women in submissive or secondary roles, these depictions can validate and perpetuate gender-based discrimination in society.

The social commentator noted that men, in particular, may internalize these portrayals, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes that shape how they interact with women in real life. This perpetuation of unequal gender roles can create environments where women feel restricted, reinforcing their traditional roles within family and community settings. As Signorielli (2009) suggests, media representations influence audience perceptions over time, contributing to a collective consciousness that often resists change. In Rivers State, this effect is evident as these portrayals continue to define societal expectations for women.

Despite the reinforcing effects of these portrayals, the interviews revealed a growing awareness and critique among audiences in Rivers State, especially among younger women who are calling for more diverse and empowering depictions of women. Communications experts noted that although *Adire* and *Wura* rely on traditional portrayals, the presence of social media has enabled audiences to discuss and critique these narratives more openly. This supports Chari's (2016) argument that media consumers are not passive but actively engage with and critique media representations, which can lead to shifts in public expectations and media content.

Both the film directors and the community leader observed that the increased dialogue around gender portrayals might encourage Nollywood filmmakers to broaden their portrayal of women, potentially contributing to gradual social change. By diversifying female roles and showing women in leadership, entrepreneurial, and non-traditional roles, Nollywood could play a transformative role in changing societal attitudes toward women. This finding aligns with the idea that media not only reflects society but can actively influence social transformation, as suggested by Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004). With a more balanced representation, Nollywood could contribute to a more progressive social reality, challenging and ultimately reshaping the gender dynamics within Rivers State.

The representation of women in movies like *Adire* and *Wura* has a profound impact on social reality in Rivers State. These portrayals reinforce traditional gender roles, shape self-perception, and influence public attitudes toward women, contributing to a cycle that sustains patriarchal norms. However, the growing audience critique highlights an opportunity for change. As Nollywood audiences increasingly call for diverse and empowering portrayals, the industry has the potential to challenge and reshape social perceptions, paving the way for a more equitable society. By moving beyond stereotypical portrayals, Nollywood could encourage women in Rivers State to see themselves in roles that extend beyond traditional boundaries, thereby supporting broader social change.

Research Question 2: What trends are emerging from gender depiction in Nollywood movies?

The analysis of *Adire* (2023) and *Wura* (2023), combined with insights from interview data with industry professionals and community members, reveals notable trends in gender depiction within Nollywood. These trends highlight the evolving yet complex landscape of gender representation in Nigerian cinema. Several emerging patterns—reinforcement of traditional gender roles, gradual diversification of female characters, ambivalence toward women's empowerment, and audience demand for balanced portrayals—reflect the broader cultural tensions within Nigeria's sociocultural framework and Nollywood's role in influencing societal perceptions.

Both *Adire* and *Wura* prominently depict women in traditional roles, emphasizing domesticity, caregiving, and subordinate relationships to male characters. According to the communications experts interviewed, this portrayal is reflective of the broader Nollywood trend, where women are often shown as mothers, wives, or love interests. This trend is consistent with Gerbner and Gross's (1976) cultivation theory, which suggests that repetitive depictions in media can reinforce societal norms. Nollywood's recurrent use of these roles not only mirrors but also reinforces expectations about women's positions in Nigerian society, particularly in more conservative communities.

However, data from the respondents on this trend often limits the scope of female characters, presenting them in supporting roles rather than as central figures with complex narratives. This limitation reinforces the notion that women's contributions are mainly domestic, which may hinder viewers' perceptions of women as leaders or independent agents. Wood (1994) posits that when media repeatedly depicts specific roles for genders, it can shape and restrict individuals' expectations of themselves and others, leading to a cycle of stereotype reinforcement.

Despite the predominance of traditional portrayals, there is a gradual trend toward diversity in female character roles within Nollywood, as seen in *Adire* and *Wura*. While still relatively limited, both films feature female characters who exhibit traits of resilience, ambition, and independence, which mark a departure from the passive, dependent portrayals often associated with older Nollywood productions. The directors acknowledged that Nollywood is slowly beginning to recognize the demand for multi-dimensional female characters, reflecting a more modernized view of Nigerian women. This shift aligns with Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, which underscores the role of media as a socializing agent that influences behaviors and self-perceptions through modeling.

Although, diversification is evident, it often coexists with traditional narratives, creating mixed messages about gender roles. The presence of more assertive female characters suggests that Nollywood is gradually responding to calls for modern representations. Still, these depictions often lack depth, limiting their potential to inspire real change among audiences. This finding supports Chari's (2016) argument that while African media is evolving in its portrayal of women, the pace and consistency of change are insufficient to challenge ingrained cultural perceptions effectively.

One of the more complex trends emerging in gender depiction is Nollywood's ambivalence toward women's empowerment. In both *Adire* and *Wura*, women are sometimes shown as ambitious or self-reliant, but their stories are often complicated by narrative elements that portray their independence as problematic or risky.

According to the communications experts, this ambivalence reflects a cultural tension where progressive portrayals are mixed with cautionary messages about women's autonomy.

This ambiguity may result from a desire to appeal to both progressive and traditional audiences, illustrating the dual pressures Nollywood faces. This reflects Goffman's (1979) theory of "gender display," where portrayals in media not only reflect societal norms but also navigate cultural contradictions. In this context, Nollywood's portrayal of empowered women is often compromised by subplots that suggest they are ultimately happiest or safest within traditional roles, signaling an uncertain commitment to fully embracing gender equality in narratives.

CONCLUSION

The study explores the impact of gender representation in contemporary Nollywood films, *Adire* (2023) and *Wura* (2023), on social reality in Rivers State, Nigeria. It found that Nollywood continues to reinforce and challenge traditional gender norms in Nigerian society. Traditional depictions, often emphasizing domesticity, dependence, and emotional subservience, dominate the narrative landscape, shaping audience perceptions and normalizing gender stereotypes. Women in these films are typically portrayed as mothers, wives, or love interests, which limit perceptions of female leadership and autonomy. Interview data supports this observation, with communications experts and social commentators pointing out that Nollywood often sends mixed messages about gender roles, aligning with Goffman's theory of gender display. However, the study also observed a growing trend of resistance to these traditional molds. Both *Adire* and *Wura* featured female characters who displayed ambition, resilience, and independence, although their empowerment was sometimes undermined or problematized. Bandura's social cognitive theory suggests that Nollywood holds significant potential to reshape societal views on women through more intentional and empowering representations. While Nollywood has made progress in diversifying its depiction of women, the pace of change remains slow and inconsistent. African media must do more to challenge entrenched gender norms and affirm the complexity, capability, and centrality of women in society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nollywood filmmakers should adopt intentional and gender-inclusive storytelling that challenges traditional stereotypes and promotes nuanced portrayals of women as leaders, professionals, and independent agents. By embracing narratives that reflect the complexities and capabilities of women, filmmakers can contribute to reshaping public perceptions and advancing gender equity in Nigerian society.
2. Governmental and media regulatory bodies should develop and enforce policy guidelines that encourage balanced gender representation in film and television. These guidelines could include diversity benchmarks and incentives for productions that promote empowering and realistic portrayals of women.

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