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NIGERIAN FILM AUDIENCES ON THE INTERNET

Influences, Preferences and Contentions*

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Introduction

In her illuminating narrative about online distribution of Nigerian films and iROKOTv's efforts in that regard, Jade Miller (2016) writes that "[T]he conquering of the diaspora market is not iROKO's goal . . . [but] . . . to dominate distribution in the domestic Nigerian market . . . one which is as yet, still quite distant" (p. 132). In 2017, iROKOTv founder, Jason Njoku, was jubilant over the fact that Nigeria-based subscribers were soon to occupy the first position of his over 500 million subscribers on iROKOTv (Ndiomewese, 2017), a position which is currently held by US-based subscribers. And in 2020, Njoku published a graph (see <https://jason.com.ng/why-iroko-furloughed-28-of-our-nigeria-team/>) which depicts Nigeria-based audiences significantly being in the lead on his SVOD platform. This is after years of consistent push and upgrade of organisational systems to capture and dominate the online film distribution market for Nigerians at home. Njoku's graph of subscriber numbers for April 2020 reveals a continuous surge and decline of numbers without any guarantee of stability or persistent rise. While the number of Nigeria-based subscribers on the 1st of April is the highest, there is a huge drop on the 26th of the same month, with the numbers in between fluctuating slowly. The apparent success claimed by Njoku is short-lived owing to a number of factors discussed below including the new entrant, Netflix. While it is not poised to overtake iROKOTv, Netflix is increasingly offering premium Nigerian screen content on its platform, which might be taking away some of iROKOTv's subscribers. Before iROKOTv, Showmax and now Netflix, YouTube had been the largest holder of free-to-watch Nigerian films but each online platform attracts a different kind of audience, for different reasons and for meeting varied needs. Netflix's interest in Nigeria is population-driven. With the country's 190 million citizens, the slice of cosmopolitan, English-speaking elite viewers who are Netflix's interest is expected to be high. When added to diasporic audiences, it could be a justifiable sum for the streaming giant's continued interest in Nollywood.

The thrill of seeing a 2018 Nigerian film, *Lionheart*, on Netflix and showing it to my European friends in London in November 2019 left an unforgettable experience. Three factors

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contributed to the excitement: it was a recent release; it had the star power having featured one of Nigeria's most respected actresses, Genevieve Nnaji, and it was on Netflix. Having been disqualified from the 2019 Oscars in the foreign film category, there was a global outcry over the Academy's decision regarding the film; and so Nigeria and its film industry, Nollywood, were in the spotlight. It was this global attention and the controversy it generated that made my friends want to see it. Not to have been able to see the film which was the focus of local and international entertainment news at that time would have been a huge disappointment to me and my friends as well as a loss to the Nigerian film industry. It is well known that controversial films attract more audiences and, in particular cases, more revenue. It was Netflix's acquisition of the film the day before it premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in 2018 that made it accessible to viewers sooner than was the practice for many recent Nigerian films before it. Before then, Nollywood fans based outside Nigeria had to rely on any African film festival that programmed films to be seen in London, on what was available on YouTube or on what iROKOTv and other less known streaming platforms for Nigerian screen content offered, which were not always the latest releases. At the same time, Nigerian film audiences living in Nigeria had the option of going to the local cinemas to watch the latest films or wait to circulate pirated copies among friends (Miller, 2016; Haynes, 2017). It appeared that no local online platform could purchase the license for newer films even though thousands of Nollywood films were already available on YouTube, iROKOTv, AfriNolly, Nollyland, IbakaTV and Okiki to mention some of the online distribution platforms available today (Adejumobi, 2019). Thus, Netflix's acquisition of *Lionheart* was celebrated by many because it closed an access gap for a specific, niche and exclusive audience.

With the Nigerian film industry's rise and the global attention it has drawn in recent years, interrogating audiences' experiences of on-demand culture has never been more crucial. Research on African film audiences and internet usage is on a slow trajectory. The factors that have inspired the move to the internet as the space for consuming entertainment and especially Nigerian film are manifold and relatively complex in a country like Nigeria, and ought to be studied. With increased internet penetration in the African continent and Nigerians outnumbering the rest of the continent on mobile phone ownership and arguably internet usage (Statista.com, 2019), with more screen media content going online through VOD platforms, the spaces of film consumption by Nigerians at home seem to have moved online but with unidentified implications. Because of the uneven access to internet connection between Nigerians at home and those in the diaspora, this chapter focuses on the former and their VOD culture. For this group of people, internet connection is unstable, power cuts are frequent and disposable income is lower than that of their counterparts in the diaspora. Such people are largely excluded from the new consumption cultures and remain on the margins of the digital delivery and on-demand culture debates by Chuck Tyron (2013), Amanda Lotz (2017), Lindiwe Dovey (2018), Moradewun Adejumobi (2019) and Ramon Lobato (2019).

Inspired by the prevalence of Nollywood on YouTube, iROKOTv's (un)successful drive to capture the Nigerian market and the preponderance of Netflix's interest in Nigerian film, this chapter examines Nigeria-based Nollywood audiences and their video-on-demand (VOD) culture. As Chuck Tyron (2013) in his book, *On-demand culture* points out, digital distribution of films will move audiences to a point where they are no longer "wedded to the broadcast schedule or dependent upon proximity to a video store" (p. 3). The conceptual framework for the chapter derives from this notion of on-demand culture as it relates to audiences' 'unrestrained' access to video films due to digital delivery, content and platform mobility. Rather than focusing on the VOD platforms and their owners (Miller, 2016; Dovey, 2018; Adejumobi, 2019) or online communities (Obiaya, 2012; Dekie et al., 2015) alone, the chapter's main focus is

audience experiences. But it inevitably draws in filmmakers' and platform owners' views on watching Nigerian films on the internet to complement the ongoing debates about consuming films in a digital age within the Nigerian context. This is because the Nigerian audience is the primary market of the film industry, and their voices are marginally incorporated into the growing body of film scholarship within Africa. Specifically, the following questions are addressed: what are the influences, preferences and contestations of Nigerian film audiences on digital, internet-based platforms? What implications does the on-demand culture of viewing Nollywood on the internet have for filmmakers and VOD platform owners? To respond to these questions, data obtained from two audience surveys in 2018 and 2020, as well as interviews with a select audience and eight industry experts (filmmakers and platform owners) are presented to argue that while there is evidence of robust audience viewership on the internet in line with extant literature (Obiaya, 2012; Dekie et al., 2015; Adejunmobi, 2019), several factors segment the audiences according to the offerings of the platforms, and arguably prevent VOD culture from taking deep roots in Nigeria today. These factors include Nollywood's ubiquity, the socio-economic status of audiences, smartphone ownership and access to internet data through telecommunication companies, content quality on popular platforms which drives audience exclusivity as well as filmmakers and tech companies' perspectives on consumption patterns. In the sub-sections that follow, the methodology and the relationship between these factors are discussed to reveal the reasons behind online film consumption and whether or not viewers will continue their online spectatorship.

On-Demand Culture

The dearth of literature on African film audiences whether historical or contemporary has been well established (Agina, 2019; Ambler, 2002; Obiaya, 2012; Okome, 2007). Ambler observed that "the scholarship on mass media in Africa focuses on the media themselves and analysis of media products rather than on their consumption, . . . especially for relaxation and leisure" (2002, p. 120). In a digital era that promotes audience liberty and choice, the need to respond to Ambler, Obiaya and Okome in the varied dimensions of film consumption is increasingly obvious.

In his exposé on digital delivery and on-demand culture, Tyron (2013) examines the perennial communication questions of how, when, where, on what platforms and formats we access movies and what the new technological forms of distribution and consumption mean for entertainment culture. The endless possibilities opened up by new technologies and media industries led to Henry Jenkins' convergence theories in which various media texts, devices and internet connection are delivering content, not least films and TV series, in diverse formats, which have considerably altered production, distribution and consumption patterns. Heralded by users as freedom to choose entertainment options without being tethered to broadcast stations' programming schedules, these new forms of delivery and consumption have changed the socio-cultural, political and legal landscape in the territories that have embraced them including Nigeria. Major changes in the production and distribution of Nigerian screen content are happening so quickly that Haynes (2018) called for newer paradigms of studying the phenomena. One of them, the corporatization of Nollywood, refers to the interest and investments made by local and foreign corporate organisations in the film industry in order to re-position their organisations by riding on the success of Nollywood to either co-produce or distribute its films. A relevant example of this is Netflix's presence in Nigeria and other countries (Lobato, 2019), which has several implications for consuming Nollywood one of which is the deepening of the on-demand culture. As Lobato notes, the "assumption that audiences want to see their own

stories on Netflix more than they want to see Hollywood stories is questionable because wider national media landscape may already be structured and regulated to provide significant amounts of local content through existing broadcast and pay-TV channels” (pp. 156–157). Elite Nollywood fans in Nigeria celebrate Nollywood on Netflix because the content it licenses is different (newer films because it pays more than local or satellite stations) from what is obtainable on local and pay TV stations. This point is hinted at by Adejunmobi (2019) in her attempts to theorise slow cinema thus suggesting that newer Nollywood films do not get to local or foreign stations or platforms soon after their theatrical run. Nollywood filmmakers also celebrate the Netflix move and aspire to have their films on the platform because of its global reach, which signals a mark of success. For Nigerian viewers therefore, the thrill of online viewing is the fact that they can combine the local and the global, and if that can be achieved on one platform, even better. This in part explains why YouTube and Netflix are preferred to iROKOtv today. As advanced as these developments and their theorisations have become, scholars in less developed contexts like Africa are yet to fully articulate the same especially for the audiences, which is the focus of this chapter. In an attempt to do so, African contexts and the technologies that they admit in grappling with new modes of media consumption need to be situated and accounted for appropriately. For example, the ownership of iPhones or iPads in the contexts from which Tyron (2013) or Dekie et al. (2015) write cannot be glossed over or taken for granted in Nigeria or Ghana, where an increase in smartphone (not iPhones) ownership still constitutes a news item for tech companies. I will return to this point below.

Audience interactions with African films from varied perspectives have occupied the attention of scholars (Agina, 2019; Dekie et al., 2015; Obiaya, 2012; Okome 2007). While some attention has been paid to the reception of Nigerian films in several African countries in a special issue of the *Journal of African Cinemas* (Ekwuazi, 2014; Tomaselli, 2014) and in the book, *Global Nollywood* edited by Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (2013), the cinema audience who stream films on the internet has received very little attention (Adejunmobi, 2019; Dekie et al., 2015; Dovey, 2018; Haynes, 2018; Obiaya, 2012). In his preliminary study on Nollywood audiences on the internet, Obiaya (2012) examined how the internet has altered the ways of being audiences of a popular and cultural art form. Using netnographic methods of an online forum, he documents the conversation threads of the members of this forum on the sole topic of Nollywood films. Evident in Obiaya’s analysis is the high volume of conversation that goes on among audiences, who would not normally be heard or seen. One of the prominent features of convening online, therefore, is that of being vocal even if and especially when pseudo names are used. Obiaya’s audiences lauded and criticised the films they had seen, received and produced their own texts in an activist tone, drew in aspects of their offline contexts as manifestations of their interest in and affiliation to the film industry. This audience does not care for good use of language as the written expressions are replete with errors, but they communicate in intelligible ways to their fellow fans to generate a communal bond directed at their ideas of improving the film industry. In a similar vein, Dekie et al. (2015) study diasporic online viewers in a media ethnographic approach to reveal how and why the reception of a popular art form is a socially constructed activity in which meaning is co-created and co-shared even though the films are watched individually via the internet. The authors confirm the shift in Nollywood distribution and consumption, which have been witnessed in recent years from the physical formats of VCD/DVD to VOD and SVOD platforms and the implications they have for reception studies. Juxtaposed with Obiaya, Dekie et al do not study a particular online community but individuals of African descent, whose identities and longings for home draw and attach them to the films – a point which has previously and repeatedly been made (see *Global Nollywood*, 2013).

While both authors examined audiences and their reception of Nigerian films in the virtual space, the works of Adejunmobi (2019) and Dovey (2018) address similar concerns from a media industries' perspective. In other words, the latter authors probe quite extensively the business models, acumen and techno-economic factors, amongst others, that enable the kinds of viewing and communal meaning-making that Obiaya and Dekie *et al* write about. Adejunmobi examines the importance of cinema and formats on online streaming platforms particularly to those who run the business enterprise. Here, attention is largely turned to iROKOTv, the leading repository of African film and cinema features, and marginally given to its competitor ibakaTV. More importantly the author attempts an explanation for the processes of licencing and hosting formats while theorising slow and fast cinema in Nigerian film. Understandably, the audience work is limited, and mostly culled from the websites or platforms of iROKOTv, thus opening up the space for this study in which focus is given primarily to the audience of online platforms reporting directly about their film consumption patterns. Dovey's work adopts a critical framework of the cultural geographies of access to foreground the growth and spread of Internet television in Africa, a phenomenon largely ignored in mainstream internet television studies. As Dovey posits, there are several screen media companies creatively circumventing technological hitches to provide entertainment to various groups of audiences in Africa. The Internet has decidedly changed cinema and television globally, and in Africa, the same holds true. In fact, the entertainment provided by the companies examined by Dovey cater not only to Africans on the continent but also to those in the diaspora, including researchers based outside Africa, whose only access to African screen media have increasingly become the Internet through VOD/SVOD platforms. Put together, Dovey and Adejunmobi, unlike Obiaya and Dekie *et al*, offer great insights to the business operations and leading industry players that enable online spectatorship, thus creating a gap about the people who consume these media content of African origin, and especially those who are based in Africa.

Methodology and Shifts in Audiences' On-Demand Culture

This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods, using two online surveys to probe audience experiences, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with a selection of five respondents of the 2020 survey to provide in-depth responses about their consumption patterns. As is the practice with qualitative research, data sources were also triangulated (Creswell, 2009) by interviewing filmmakers, online distribution platform owners and technology companies to provide a richer discussion of online spectatorship. However, the audience perspectives are dominant, given the assumption that key stakeholders in the film industry work towards audience satisfaction. The same online survey (see Figure 12.1 for questionnaire items) was conducted in October 2018 and April 2020 to show what changes might have occurred in audience consumption patterns between one cross-sectional study and another (Kumar, 2014). In March 2020 at the time of writing up this research, it was observed that online consumption patterns and platform preferences were changing. It was, therefore, considered necessary to repeat the study in April 2020 given that internet penetration and smartphone usage – two factors that influence online viewing – are steadily increasing (see Figures 12.2 and 12.3). Furthermore, the COVID-19 lockdowns meant that cinema-going was bound to give way to online consumption, and it was important to the study to trace the resulting shift. The snowball method, which is a non-probability sampling technique, was employed in recruiting respondents for each survey. This is in line with Creswell's (2009) idea of data collection for qualitative studies, in which participants are "purposefully selected" in a way that will "best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (p. 178). Data collected for a

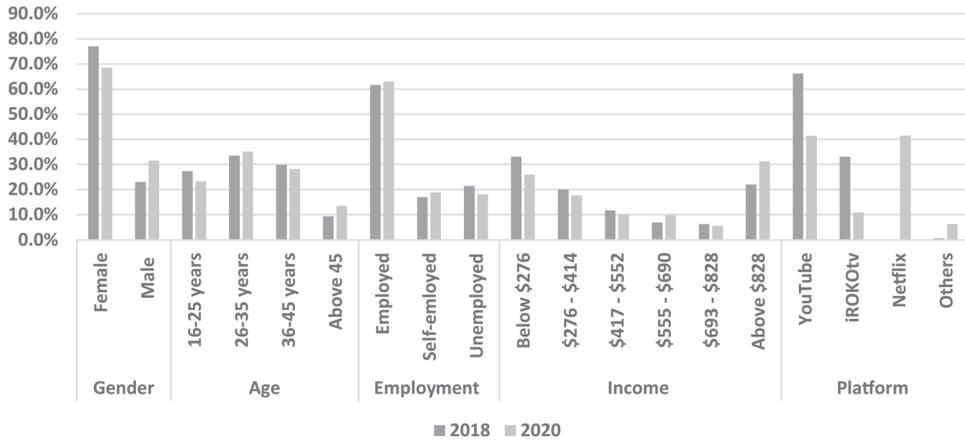


Figure 12.1 Profile and Platform Preference of Respondents 2018 and 2020 Surveys

Long descriptive: The double bar graph shows that in 2018, 77% (138) of sampled respondents were women with over half of them employed, first degree holders aged 26 – 45, and mostly earning below \$276 per month relied more on YouTube at 66.2% for watching Nollywood films than any other platform. But in 2020, 66.8% of 368 with similar socio-economic background preferred Netflix at 41.1% for the same purpose with YouTube leading marginally at 41.7% and iROKOTv falling behind at 10.1%.

month each in 2018 and 2020 show minor shifts in audiences’ on-demand culture. These shifts are discussed below.

After the 2020 survey, film enthusiasts: Uzo, Uju, Bibo, Ojie and Martin, all of whom had responded to the survey, were found and interviewed. Uzo, Ojie and Martin have master’s degrees while Uju and Bibo both have first degrees. Uzo, 41, is a Lagos-based banker, lives in a highbrow Lekki area of Lagos Island with her husband and two kids. Uju, 30, is a supply chain executive in a Lagos-based NGO and lives in Ajah, one of the suburbs of Lagos Island. Bibo, 33, lives with her husband in Lagos Mainland and has two kids, and is an IT specialist. Ojie, 29, is an independent financial consultant, a former employee of Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) and an aspiring film producer, lives in highbrow Ikoyi in Lagos Island and regards himself as an upper-class citizen. Martin, 27, is an aspiring filmmaker, writer, actor and founder of Film Rats Club, an online platform for film enthusiasts. Interviews were also conducted with platform owners and operatives, Nnamdi Uti (NollyLand) and Roncho Kanno (myfilm-houseng), Amarachi (pseudo name for a former employee of Dobox, a defunct VOD platform founded in 2013), four filmmakers – Edosio Deelen Ema, Abba Makama, Ekene Mekwunye and Ehizojie Ojesebholo – whose films are on Netflix and NollyLand, and Obasi Miracle, founder of 3rd Planet Techies, a technology company. Efforts to contact more platform owners, Swift Networks and Telecommunication company, MTN, both of which are internet service providers, failed.

The audience surveys conducted in 2018 and 2020 shed some light on the shifts pertaining to viewer preferences on the internet. First, the rate of responses differed between the years: while there were only 287 respondents in one month in 2018, the 2020 survey attracted 662 respondents in the same period. The discussion emanating from Figure 12.1 above is embedded in the rest of the chapter. On both occasions, the surveys were circulated on WhatsApp through personal contacts and networks of those contacts using the snowball sampling technique. However,

one of the additions to the 2020 survey that may have accounted for the increased response is the inclusion of the possibility of receiving survey results. Respondents were asked to include their emails at the end of the survey if they were interested in the results. Furthermore, the lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic had already begun. People were working from home, some online and several others with little or nothing to do. This contributed both to the increase in returns and the number of respondents for the 2020 survey who view Nollywood online as opposed to those who do not. The 2020 survey was returned with 171 email IDs. Potential respondents did not know beforehand that they could enter their emails at the end of the survey. Eligible responses (138 and 368 for the 2018 and 2020 surveys, respectively) were achieved through a first, screening question. In both surveys, the first question, 'do you watch Nollywood films on the internet', elicited a response that either allowed the respondent to continue the survey or not. Those who responded negatively to this question were immediately taken to a submission and 'thank you' page, while positive responses allowed respondents to continue the survey.

In addition to the elements captured in Figure 12.1, the 2018 study found that more of those (40.5%) who had free access to the internet were inclined to watch Nollywood than their counterparts (18.9%) in 2020. In other words, free internet access was no guarantee of online viewing. Rather, 28.1% of the 2020 respondents privileged the quality of the film over whether the internet data was free or not as opposed to 14.9% of the 2018 group. More than half of the respondents in both years (54.4% and 57.7%) viewed Nollywood films on their smartphones, which points to a steady, even if slow, increase in smartphone ownership reflected in Figure 12.2 below. In both years, more than half of the respondents used their own internet data plans to watch Nollywood with an 11% increase in 2020, indicating the affordability of data plans in subsequent years. Even though data became more affordable with the passage of time and other factors, it did not automatically translate to an increase in online film consumption. Both groups of respondents still complained about it being a deterrent, with the other major irritation being slow internet speed. The following sections shed light on the rationale for these consumption patterns.

Nollywood's Ubiquity and Online Spectatorship

As Chuck points out,

despite the seemingly unlimited choices made available through these online catalogs, users often face bewildering limitations, as video-on-demand (VOD) services compete over streaming rights to movies while internet service providers and cell phone services seek to limit the amount of data consumers use to watch video (2013, p. 2).

The limitations embedded in the on-demand culture are prevalent, with some showing up in one region and others in another. Both technological and socio-cultural limitations including, for example, the unequal availability of internet access in the US and Nigeria determine the extent to which audiences will view, download or look elsewhere for motion picture entertainment. A look at the technological and socio-cultural factors that enable viewership and audience preferences is germane to understanding how and why viewership occurs on the internet. Some factors will persistently slow down the rate at which Nigeria-based subscribers remain on VOD platforms.

Nollywood's ubiquity is the leading factor, which has made audiences embrace Nollywood on free local TV stations rather than on VOD/SVOD platforms. Tyron theorises the velocity

of motion pictures demonstrating that as they move from screen to screen or format to format, “users seek out inexpensive alternatives for viewing movies and television shows” (2013, p. 9). Local TV stations and South Africa-owned Multichoice’s DStv satellite television service offer Nollywood through its Africa Magic channels on a 24/7 diet of Nollywood content. This is made possible simply by purchasing a decoder once for as low as N10,000 (approximately £20) and choosing any bouquet affordable to the buyer on the pay TV system. Most middle-class families in Lagos and urban areas across Africa own televisions (Ambler, 2002) and consequently DSTV decoders, which means that they have access to the channels that feature Nollywood titles regularly.

One of the Nollywood film lovers I interviewed, Uzo, is a regular movie-goer. She visits the cinemas every weekend, sometimes with her family, to watch new releases. She loves Nigerian films to distraction, but she would not watch them on the internet. She said,

I have been watching Nollywood on EbonyLife TV and Africa Magic. But even most of the Naija (Nigeria) movies on Netflix, I have already watched them in the cinemas. I am not huge on Netflix at all. Then, I know a lot of people who watch films on the internet, but not Naija films o. (Uzo, personal communication, 3 May 2020)

The online surveys allowed respondents to check if they watched Nollywood online or not. In 2020, almost half of the respondents did not watch Nollywood on the Internet like Uzo, but they enjoyed the films through other means especially the Africa Magic channels which ensures that viewers in most parts of Africa had access to view a large collection of titles. In 2018, 138 (48%) out of 287 people did not watch online. And in 2020, 368 (55%) out of 667 viewers did. In both cases, more or less than half of the respondents viewed Nollywood online, and from previous studies (Obiaya, 2012; Dekie et al., 2015), it appears that there is robust activity such as viewing, commenting on films and forming online communities, which this study supports. The increase of viewership on the internet is undeniably linked to the domestic confinements imposed by the global pandemic. But Uzo is not one of those viewing or engaging with other viewers online for reasons of Nollywood’s presence in alternative spaces such as Africa Magic and Nigeria’s EbonyLife TV. But by 29 May, ten weeks into the COVID-19 lockdown in Lagos and almost four weeks from her first response, Uzo had purchased four Netflix subscriptions, one for each member of her family, so that she could watch more Nigerian and Hollywood action films undisturbed since her family’s tastes varied and the cinemas were still closed to the public.

Some of the viewers encountered in cinemas for a previous study (Agina, 2019) pointed out that neither the cinemas nor the internet was the place to view Nollywood or African screen media content, again, for reasons of its ubiquity especially on inexpensive, free or previously-owned media technology like television sets and DStv decoders. For this group, it was not the fact of seeing a new release at its opening weekend or getting a subscription on any of the VODs that mattered, it was that money should not be spent on freely-available media; thus, suggesting that only exclusive, premium media content is sufficient to attract patronage. One of the interviewees, Bibo, stated that Africans especially non-Nigerians do not go to the cinemas to watch Nollywood or any other African films since the films are found everywhere. By this, she meant local and cable TV channels and those freely available on YouTube. Cinema-going, in some audience members’ views, was reserved for a Hollywood blockbuster, never for an African film.

Part of Nollywood’s ubiquity is evident in the viewing practices observed in street corners and video parlours (Okome, 2007), public waiting areas in salons, hotels, hospitals, common rooms of university halls of residence and offices where movies are constantly being screened. As of 2007 when Okome’s article was published, cinema-going in Nigeria was still at the very early stages of its renewal. It was only three years since Silverbird Cinemas began operations in Lagos

following the closure of cinemas in the late 1980s to early 2000s (Agina, 2019), and the second largest cinema chain, Genesis Cinemas, was not in existence (it began in 2008). So there was a proliferation of domestic, street corner and video parlour audiences, the latter of which had come to form part of the “visual topography” of Nigerian cities and towns (p. 7). The practice and frequency of viewing Nollywood in places other than the domestic space was commonplace in 2007 and continues to dominate the viewing patterns of lower-middle to lower-class audiences in Nigeria today. It is not surprising then that the affordances of such collective viewing and aspirational conversations precluded any form of individual film consumption by men who were the main patrons of the video parlours (Okome, 2007). It also precluded viewing Nollywood elsewhere since internet sources were unavailable at that time; and the television stations were beginning to provide local film content.

Nearly all local television stations in the country today air Nollywood films of various periods (from the 1990s) and genres at different times. Female salons are notorious for airing films through the DSTV channels in Nigeria’s dominant languages: Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. Seen as part of the salon’s customer service, the films are constantly aired during work hours to entertain the salon’s clientele, and provide the subject matter for discussion among customers who care to interact with one another. While waiting for a ward at Moremi Hall, a female accommodation facility at the University of Lagos, I was entertained by a Nollywood film whose title was unknown to those I met there as well as to the receptionist who had the power to change channels at the viewers’ request. Similarly, in the twelve- to fourteen-hour return trip in commercial vehicles, mostly Toyoto Hiace buses, from Lagos to any of the southern parts of the country such as Onitsha, Enugu or Port Harcourt, bus service providers show Nollywood films on small screens fitted somewhere behind the driver’s seat for the passengers’ viewing pleasure, which is controlled by the driver himself. Again, and as a strategy to lure passengers to a particular transport company, this sparks conversations among patrons who may otherwise not speak to one another for the entire duration of the journey. It is this ubiquity of Nollywood films that satiates viewers, making them less inclined to viewing the films on the internet. This is especially so if they are likely to incur some expense for such an endeavour.

Another important factor that merits attention in discussing Nollywood’s ubiquity is the deluge of Nigerian screen content of various genres and formats on YouTube. Adejunmobi (2019) states that “with the sheer number of films available for free on YouTube, platforms like iROKOTV, requiring subscription and payment had to find some other way to distinguish themselves from the sites offering free films” (p. 228). Leading Nigerian film online platform, iROKOTV, began its online presence by hosting a YouTube channel before fully moving to a paid subscription platform. The fact remains that YouTube holds an enormous amount of free content on African media: films, series, animation, comedies and filmmakers have their own YouTube channels for promotional and publicity purposes at the same time as they maintain their company websites. As evidenced in the survey results, audiences who watch films online will inevitably go to YouTube first before any paying platform, that is, if they do visit the paying ones. Half of those who watch films online will not. While YouTube was the leading source of Nollywood in both surveys reported above, the second source in 2018 was iROKOTV but in 2020, the second online source (behind YouTube) for viewing Nollywood was Netflix. Needless to say that while YouTube is free and advert-based, iROKOTV and Netflix are subscription-based. The audience insights and discussion on platform preferences below extend the argument that Nollywood’s ubiquity is a major contributor to its online consumption and that premium content consumption is defined exclusively by social class. It suffices here to state that given the plethora of entertainment options available to audiences, the appetite for free content (even though the internet data for YouTube viewing has to be paid for) is often satiated before any financial commitments are made through paywalls.

Socio-Economic Status, Mobile Phones and the Internet Audience of Nollywood

The amount of disposable income, itself a signifier of social class, available to the majority of viewers who, more often than not, want free content cannot be ignored when considering factors that influence their online viewing. As reported by one of the filmmakers interviewed for this study, “You have to understand that Nigerians want entertainment, but they don’t want to pay for it” (E. Ojesebholo, personal communication, 24 April 2020). In the 2018 survey (see Figure 12.1), more respondents (47 out of 145) – first degree holders – earned less than N100,000 (\$276) per month while 98 people combined earned between N100,000 and N300,000. Furthermore, a third of the respondents were in the 26 to 35 years age bracket. If this group of people earned less than N100,000 a month, and had to provide feeding, clothing and transport since most of them are employed in the private sector, then it can be reasonably assumed that the money set aside for entertainment, if any is, cannot go to paid entertainment. It is hardly surprising, then, that 59 out of 148 people (40.5%) said that the most important factor that would influence their consumption of Nollywood is free internet access. In comparison to the 2020 survey, 104 out of 332 respondents mostly of the same 26–35 age group and employed in the private sector as well, earned above N300,000 (\$781), were not hugely motivated by free internet access but rather by the trailers of films they had seen. The respondents used the trailers to judge the quality of films available online before deciding to spend money on subscription or data to watch it. Naturally, the higher the earnings, the higher the disposable income from which entertainment costs can be paid. The five audience interviewees earned above N300,000 each.

In Haynes’ (2018) “Keeping up” article, he remarks that class divisions are important in understanding audience segmentation regarding streaming films on the internet. The findings of this study reveal the same, showing how one’s socio-economic status determined what media was consumed (educational backgrounds and exposure to western media played significant roles here), on which device and on what platform: YouTube, iROKOTv or other local platforms and more recently, Netflix. He argues that it is the “corporate neoliberalization of Nollywood distribution [that] introduces inequalities of several kinds” (p. 10), thus providing access to some viewers and not to others. More important to this study and as shall be seen below is that even though inequalities are introduced by distribution mechanisms (Haynes, 2018), audiences play a key role in choosing their own entertainment and deciding which access is granted or denied to them. For example, many wealthy Nigerians are not entertained by Netflix’s offerings just as countless lower-class citizens can get more than a glimpse of Netflix by virtue of working in a company that provides steady internet access. Viewers reported that prior to 2020, when Nollywood films on Netflix surged, they circumvented the free trial period through IP masking, using different email IDs or usernames. Uju, one of the interviewees, chooses iROKOTv over Netflix at times and at other times swaps her choice even though streaming on Netflix is more expensive to maintain. She admitted to knowing about the different ways through which unauthorised access to Netflix was obtained by friends and acquaintances. Another viewer, Martin, chooses Showmax over Netflix but prefers YouTube to both – a point which he claims has nothing to do with his income. Bibo, who lives in the US does not watch films on Netflix, preferring the numerous Yoruba titles on YouTube; and many audiences in southern Nigeria including Asaba and Enugu do not care about Netflix or even iROKOTv films. Yet, their screen entertainment is not undermined by the inequalities brought on by corporatization of the film industry.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have influenced everyday lives of numerous Africans and enabled them to redefine their means of livelihood, socialization processes and entertainment. Film consumption patterns are oscillating notably between satellite

television, the big screens of cinema theatres and the super small screens of the smartphones to mention the more recent trends. Attention is now turned to the smartphone as the main device for viewing Nollywood films on the Internet especially in urban areas of Nigeria. In 2018, 80 out of 147 people used their smartphones to watch Nollywood on the Internet, while 205 out of 358 did the same in 2020. Negligible numbers of respondents used laptops, tablets, smart TVs and desktop computers in descending order. Indeed, African lives and cultural practices have taken on nuanced dimensions to the credit of the mobile phone. One of the spheres of life in which changes are being made is in the choice of entertainment with specific reference to film spectatorship. The possession of a smartphone has empowered and is empowering Nigerians to watch Nigerian and other films. De Bruijn et al. (2009) and Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2016) have examined the nature and varied uses of mobile phones in general in Africa as new communicative and technological devices which engender mobility and marginality across the continent. The relationship between the mobile phone and the society including the people who use them is interdependent and “evolving in a dialectical process of cultural and social appropriation” (De Bruijn et al., 2009, p. 12). The human agency invoked in the face of technological changes must not be taken for granted as users are wont to negotiate their uses in ways that cater to personal desires of a social, economic, cultural and moral imperative. Mobile phone ownership and usage in Africa according to Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2016) is second only to Asia. Although mobile cellular subscriptions are high, smartphone penetration incidentally is not with only 10 to 20% of the Nigerian population using smartphones (Statista.com, 2019). The graph below shows that as of 2019, the number of smartphone users in Nigeria is under 25 million even though it is growing steadily. Of this number, those who fall into the dominant film viewing category of 26 to 35 years are likely to be half of 25 million – a negligible amount when considered in the light of the country’s population size.

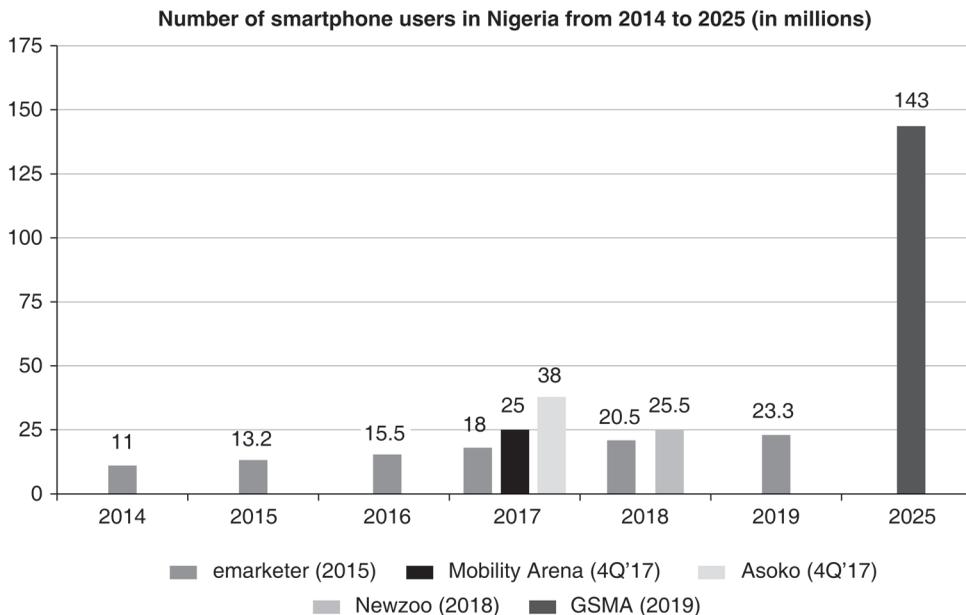


Figure 12.2 Smartphone Users in Nigeria

Source: Statista.com <https://www.statista.com/statistics/467187/forecast-of-smartphone-users-in-nigeria/>

Long descriptive: A bar graph showing the number of smartphone users in Nigeria as reflected in the data collected by five market research companies from 2014 to a 2025 projected level. The years are shown on the x-axis, while the number in millions are on the y-axis. There is a steady increase across the years from 11 million in 2014 to 23.3 million in 2019. In 2017 and 2018, there is an average of 27 million and 23 million respectively. By 2025, 143 million Nigerians will use smartphones. There is no data between 2019 and 2025.

The debates around watching films on mobile phones and the cinephiles who argue against the phenomenon seem out of kilter with the audiences of this study, who seek affordable, if not free, entertainment, and one that is also convenient. A tap on the smartphone is much easier than switching on a laptop and waiting for it to boot when one is on the go. Audiences are able to take their films with them without forfeiting viewing pleasures (since the hardware companies are making bigger mobile phone screens) or communal discussions given that the internet permits online discussions of films at will (Obiaya, 2012). On the same device, audiences can watch a film using one app, and then use another such as Facebook or WhatsApp to discuss the same title without needing to change physical locations. This is supported by Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2016) when they affirm that the ICTs are, therefore, tools through which the creative agency of the user is illuminated as both independent from and in collaboration with ICT devices (p. 4). The apparent greater access, broader political participation, and increased choices which digital delivery ushers in (Tyron, 2013) and which smartphone ownership guarantees make for new and pleasurable ways of watching Nollywood. The audiences studied here are not concerned about how the smartphone and the format that it permits downgrades (if at all) their viewing pleasure. They are content to watch films on their smartphones given that they are mobile but displeased with the interruption or delays that streaming on any other device such as a laptop may constitute.

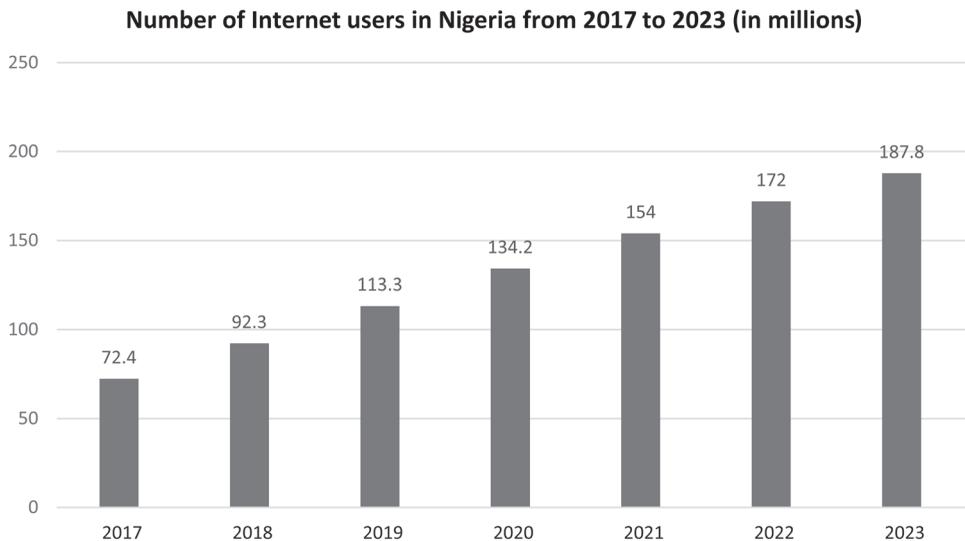


Figure 12.3 Internet Users in Nigeria

Source: Statista.com <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183849/internet-users-nigeria/>

Long descriptive: A bar graph shows a steady increase in the number of internet users in Nigeria from 72.4 million in 2017 to a projected level of 187.8 million in 2023.

If owning a smartphone is a major determinant of online spectatorship and smartphone ownership in Nigeria is still under 30 million in a country of over 190 million (see Fig. 12.2), there is reason to believe that the Nigerian market may not be ready to embrace online viewing fully. Roncho Kanno, who worked with online platform myfilmhouse.org, says that “platform owners struggle to attract active subscription on an ongoing basis” (R. Kanno, personal communication, 25 May 2020); and Martin, audience member, reminds us that “we are a poor and struggling country” (Martin, personal communication, 7 May, 2020). Tech enthusiast Yinka Awosanya (techpoint.com) aptly expresses this when he states that given the “country’s fair share of players entering and exiting the VOD platform . . . , the Nigerian market may not be ready for an online-only VOD platform” (Awosanya, 2018, para. 1). Internet penetration being seemingly higher (Kazeem, 2016; Statista.com, 2019) in 2020 – as Figure 12.3 depicts – than in previous years has not helped the speed of streaming as viewers incessantly complained of poor internet connectivity and slow speed of download. As such, this is a major deterrent to viewers who seek uninterrupted entertainment. Even when videos are compressed to smaller sizes, differing internet speed may hinder the pleasurable viewing of films as several survey respondents complained about.

If, according to the respondents of the surveys, more viewing occurs on the smartphones, then the Internet access for streaming videos online or downloading them to watch at a later time is provided by the telecommunication companies (telcos). In the last ten years, it was unthinkable to watch movies on smartphones because of the prohibitive costs (O. Miracle, personal communication, 3 May 2020). But the last three to five years have seen a consistent reduction in the cost of internet data designed specifically to grab a larger market share and thus capture the digital hearts of mobile subscribers. Promotions of data bundles, bonuses and fancy competitive advertisements have been deployed by the leading telecommunication companies in Nigeria: South Africa-owned MTN, India-owned Airtel, Nigerian Globacom (Glo) and UAE-owned 9mobile. And even though there are eight major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) including Swift Networks, Spectranet, Smile and Ntel, watching films on mobile phone suggests that viewers rely more on the data plans compatible with smartphones. Advertisements of data plans are uploaded on the YouTube channels of the telcos, which play regularly while streaming, thus causing some of the interruptions to viewing that irk audiences to no end. In these advertisements which often feature Nollywood celebrities like Richard Mofe Damijo (see https://youtu.be/aLw7esq3N_c or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbpjQ96Kpp4> for examples), Sola Shobowale or popular musician Ayoleyi Solomon (Reekado Banks), Glo presents itself as the “grandmasters of data” or the “king of data” with their unparalleled offers, thus earning the recognition of being the largest growing network in data subscription.

Whether streaming videos, locating an unfamiliar venue using a SATNAV or watching an important soccer tournament, Glo has a special data offer that allows subscribers who run out of data amidst an important viewing to borrow data even with a zero-account balance. Telco Insider Nigeria, a Swiss-based venture operating from Zurich, publishes news on its website to enable Nigerians stay connected locally and globally on the Internet. Its goal is to provide the Nigerian consumer with information to choose the best Internet plans stating that “In 2019, Glo data plans [we]re the cheapest of all the data plans in Nigeria. In terms of cost and data volume, Glo offers unmatched service in the daily plan, weekly plan, monthly plan, night plan, and so forth” (Telco Insider, 2019). Obasi Miracle, the founder of 3rd Planet Techies’, a technology company, believes that this affordability of data is a driver of online viewing, a factor which was not prominent three years ago when data costs were higher. This

is also visible in the responses obtained from audiences, who attributed their viewership to availability of data.

If 1GB of data is required to screen a film on Netflix, it means that the offerings of Glo (N1,000 for 2.5GB) will permit only two films before the subscriber is due to recharge. Thus, even when data is affordable, the amount required to stream films online or download the same does not guarantee its daily use for such purposes. Audiences agreed to watching films only when there was a free WIFI connection with which streaming could be done. University students revealed that they went to parts of the campus where WIFI was freely available to download Nigerian films and then watched them later. In keeping with Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2016) on individual agency, subscribers choose to prioritize their data usage since there are competing streams of unsolicited entertainment which are beamed at them via social media. One of the most popular social media apps in Nigeria, WhatsApp, enables the sharing of various kinds of audio-visual news, short comic videos, and the promotion of a myriad of popular art genres – some giving dramatic motivational speeches, tutorials of various kinds, or stand-up comedy performances to mention a few. Of the short comic videos circulating widely on WhatsApp, those of the duo, Mark Angel and Emmanuella of Nigeria and Kansime of Uganda, dominate. According to Ikeru (2019), Mark Angel is the most influential and richest comedian in Nigeria with four million subscribers on his YouTube channel. He paired up with Emmanuella Samuel, a child comedienne, both of whom are remarkably famous for their five- to ten-minute comedy skits, uploaded weekly on YouTube and which also circulate on WhatsApp.

What these indicate is that audiences are faced with unlimited entertainment options that vie for their limited data. The saturated creative entertainment space available on YouTube for five minutes or less, and now vastly democratized by new technology including TikTok and other user-generated content, competes with lengthier video films for the limited data available to audiences. This plethora of options, in addition to multiple social networking sites, tend to limit online viewing of films, thereby pushing audiences to watch Nollywood elsewhere. Data is preferably used on social media platforms such as Instagram where social engagement, amusement, self-expression, lifestyle aspirations and updates are all met in much less time than the average ninety minutes of feature films. Therefore, Nollywood audiences will engage more in social media networking or other entertainment options than spend about the same amount of data on watching one film.

Availability of apps and the reduction of video size and length are some of the strategies deployed by platform owners to increase patronage. Obasi Miracle revealed that the development of mobile apps has made it possible for audiences to access more Nollywood films on the go. A quick search on Android's Play Store revealed no fewer than fifty apps all dedicated to Nollywood. Obasi himself composed and tweeted the top twenty apps on which films could be seen easily. These apps allow viewers to watch films at no other cost other than the embedded cost of downloading the app. Undeniably, iROKOTv tops the list of the local apps with quality of films being the main cause of downloads or not. Already, there is a tendency to look down on iROKO films for low production values, so one would wonder about what to expect from other less known app providers. Regarding the quality of films on iROKOTv, both Uju and Ojie agreed that the platform has weaker, lower quality content. Uju maintained a subscription started by her sister in 2017, but since 2019, she stopped renewing it because

there are no known faces in the films on iROKOTv; and even the faces there are not good actors so there's really nothing to entice viewers. I'm not renewing the subscription until I see new films added and those new films must be good because I don't do anything less than 70% rating. (Uju, personal communication, 5 May, 2020)

With the last statement, Uju references iROKOTv's innovative use of audience ratings to attract other viewers, a feature of the app that Adejunmobi (2019) referred to as "the percentage of the viewers that like any given feature or television series on the site" (p. 226). Another viewer revealed that she studies platforms that have smaller file sizes that will download in seconds as a way of conserving her data.

Platforms, Filmmakers and the Consumption Patterns of Audiences

The presence of Nollywood films on the internet dates back to the beginning of YouTube (Adejunmobi, 2019), when filmmakers eager to get their work seen uploaded films, sometimes to their own commercial losses (Haynes, 2018) on the platform for fans. This led to an increased viewership of the films outside Africa, but also within Nigeria. Among those who watched on the Internet, YouTube is always the first port of call. Countless YouTube channels hosting Nollywood films legally and illegally exist and have to be factored in as major enablers of online viewing as already pointed out above. One US-based Nigeria-born spectator, Bibo, said, "I prefer the Yoruba films on YouTube by far to any of the ones on the SVOD platforms" (Bibo, personal communication, 26 April 2020). In the 2018 survey, two-thirds of respondents (66.2% of 145) said that YouTube was their first source of Nollywood films on the internet, and one-third said they would go to iROKOTv. Of the two thirds, half did not know of iROKOTv's existence, while the other half knew about iROKO but would not subscribe. Again, this gestures to the options that audiences have and the choices they make in the face of the possibilities generated by digital delivery. It evokes Nyamnjoh and Brudvig's (2016) notion of individual agency wherein technological devices do not automatically imply consumption in the way intended by platform owners or filmmakers, but rather a discernment that allows viewers to use available platforms or ignore them.

The five film enthusiasts interviewed said that they often went to YouTube. Uju reiterated this several times in the course of our conversation. "I am always on my phone either on YouTube or on Netflix although sometimes, I spend two days downloading many films and the rest of the month watching them. I receive YouTube links from some of my friends of the films they've watched and I just click and watch them too". Like Uju, Martin expressed the disappointment with some YouTube channels that wrongly name films in an attempt to attract viewers. This tends to put viewers off or regard YouTube with the same suspicion with which these viewers treat iROKOTv. Yet, Nollywood content on YouTube is heavily patronised. Of the largest African film and television library, iROKOTv, Uju said, "it has a much weaker collection of films even though it has its own audience. Many people can't afford Netflix, but they can iROKOTv, so I do not think that Netflix is a competition for iROKOTv". Ojie is not subscribed to iROKOTv even though he read a lot of Jason Njoku's blog posts on the development of iROKOTv as a student in the UK. He says, "I prefer the premium content coming out of the cinemas and then going on Netflix. It's not as if I don't respect his (Njoku's) hustle or his contribution (laughs)". He and his friends have Netflix subscriptions and they watch both Nollywood and Hollywood films on the platform. In fact, Ojie subscribed to Netflix after the streaming giant acquired *Lionheart* as an original because Genevieve Nnaji, the director and protagonist of *Lionheart*, is his favourite Nigerian actress. From these, it is obvious that content quality and its consequent audience segmentation, affordability, word-of-mouth promotion and platform owners' strategies for attracting eyeballs determine consumption patterns.

The business strategies of iROKOTv have attempted to widen the subscriber base of the SVOD platform (Miller, 2016; Adejunmobi, 2019) with the total number of subscribers shifting

continuously. Subscribers in 2018 did not activate their subscription in 2020 as the result of this study showed, because other platforms especially Netflix provided better quality content, or their entertainment needs were met elsewhere as stated above. When Netflix began offering Nollywood films in 2015 (Adejunmobi, 2019), attention shifted from iROKOTv because audiences thought that on a Netflix subscription (higher in price than iROKO), they could see Hollywood films as well. This is a major competitive edge for Netflix in Nigeria apart from being the “world’s leading internet subscription service for enjoying TV shows and movies” (Lobato, 2019, p. 20). Whereas iROKOTv offered them only African films, TV series and spotty Asian media content, Netflix offered the same and many more varied content. But industry stakeholders have said that Netflix will struggle in the Nigerian market if Nigeria were its only or major market simply because the internet infrastructure for streaming or even multiple downloads by the country’s smartphone users is just not available. If Netflix as desirable as it is struggles in the Nigerian market, it is almost certain that iROKOTv and others will. Roncho Kanno, an Operations Manager at Filmhouse, revealed that:

iROKOTv is becoming less attractive because premium content is going on Netflix faster than iROKOTv at the moment. iROKOTv is not a public company and until you can see the books, that’s when you can say whether they have made it or not. Netflix has made it because their subscription number keeps on growing and is expanding rapidly . . . because they have access to funds . . . and Nigeria is not their main market. The thing about this business is that if there’s a new player, you can’t make more money from your subscribers. You either go or you increase your price. Except iROKOTv does something drastic, I struggle to see them being that big player in the VOD space because Netflix is the go-to place right now.

(R. Kanno, personal communication, 25 May 2020)

On the contrary, Ojie is of the opinion that Netflix is not a competition for iROKOTv because the production budgets, the audience expectations and the skills set are different, thereby attracting exclusive audiences. Each platform caters to a different kind of audience in the SVOD space, and this has to do with the social class of the audiences. Within Nigeria, and given the infrastructural constraints confronting audiences discussed above, middle to upper-class viewers will subscribe to and maintain their Netflix accounts while lower-middle to lower class will subscribe to iROKOTv and less-known VOD platforms. The higher subscriptions on iROKOTv will arguably come from diasporic Africans, thereby making Njoku’s dream and claim of dominating the Nigerian market improbable. Even though Nigerian films are increasingly being licensed or co-produced for Netflix, the streaming giant’s intention for doing this must be understood. It is not the love or quality of Nigeria’s local content that motivates Netflix as many enthused filmmakers, including those interviewed for this study, are led to think. It is this vast capitalist and cultural imperialism that propels the acquisition of local content. When writing about Netflix’s catalogs in smaller markets, Lobato (2019) expresses this aptly by stating that,

[Netflix] explains its strategic and selective investment in original local content as a way to onboard members and to introduce them to our global [i.e., U.S.] catalog, . . . our aim is not to replicate the programming of the local broadcaster or TV network in a given market but to complement our service with local content where appropriate. (p. 136)

One of the newer, home-grown VODs is NollyLand, which brands itself as Africa's first world-class movie platform even when it is obvious that iROKOTv is the industry leader. The company struggled to attract subscribers; and its staff refused to take filmmakers' calls whenever they called to enquire about money as one filmmaker revealed to me. More so, filmmakers' NollyLand log-in page, through which they could see who was viewing their films, became inaccessible to them after the first couple of months. This testimony shows what potentially awaits newer VOD platforms in Nigerian markets. But when I spoke to Nnamdi Uti, one of the Directors of NollyLand, he was silent about the treatment of filmmakers. He spoke enthusiastically about NollyLand, believing that there are enormous prospects for the Limited Liability Company he co-directs, to offer affordable streaming services and make huge sums of money from it. It took iROKOTv's founder, Jason Njoku, six years of (re)strategising and studying Nigerian online viewers' habits and appetite for Nollywood and other screen content to get to a subscriber base of 500,000 (of local and foreign viewers). Martin Chukwu believes that "the reports of SVOD platforms in Nigeria on their subscriber base is just a grand scheme to put themselves ahead. Everybody working with them is under a contract not to disclose some things so we can't know actual figures" (Martin, personal communication, 7 May 2020). It is a publicity stunt aimed at attracting more subscriptions. Ojie, another Nollywood enthusiast, says that "it is a general rule of thumb in this county not to believe any platform owner" (Ojie, personal communication, 5 May 2020). Before this time, Dobox, another locally-grown VOD platform emerged, offered Nigerian films, music videos and reality TV, but folded three years later. It is now the case study of a failed video-on-demand platform, which interviewees cited to me. Efforts to contact the CEO of Do Media, Gafar Williams, owner of Dobox were unsuccessful.

In my preliminary research for this chapter, I met a filmmaker, Ehizojie Ojesebholo, who complained about NollyLand's inability to remit the license fee to him after his film had been on the platform for six months. Such complaints are not made about Netflix or Amazon Prime even though they have different pricing strategies, he pointed out. Ojesebholo narrated his experiences with local VODs. While he personally loves and believes in VOD platforms as the most profitable for filmmakers like himself, he has received little to nothing from NollyLand and now-defunct Dobox, two Nigeria-based VOD platforms. According to him, online distribution gives a filmmaker a chance to recoup his investment very quickly, but "in Nigeria, and with the exception of iROKOTv, we are still learning to cut our teeth in that space". *Jand Hustle* went from Africa Magic Box Office, to Dobox and then to NollyLand, which Ojesebholo says is setting itself up to be like an African YouTube. Nollyland paid him N151,000 (\$415) once and nothing for the next six months in spite of an agreement that spelt out payment every ninety days. Regarding Dobox, he said "Dobox never paid me anything. The only cheque I got from them was based on the deal I negotiated with Africa Magic through their platform. So essentially, that was an Africa Magic cheque, not Dobox's" (E. Ojesebholo, personal communication, 30 May 2020). The aim of presenting this information that is rather hostile to Dobox is not to celebrate the failure of a local VOD platform, but to buttress the points made above about home-based viewers' structural unwillingness to subscribe to and watch videos online on a consistent basis for reasons discussed above. If platform owners struggle to attract subscribers, then paying content owners becomes difficult if not impossible. It is also to show that given Nigeria's position in adopting technological advancements, a solely online business is rather far from being a sustainable business model especially for services or products that are important but not essential. Those who subscribed to iROKOTv in 2016 may not be active viewers in 2020, but iROKOTv still counts them as subscribers. Problems with payment platforms and administrative glitches could discredit the efforts of entrepreneurs and dissuade audiences from

renewing subscriptions. Uju, one of the audience members interviewed for this chapter, said that at some point while she was still viewing content on iROKOTv, she was required to pay her subscription fee to a bank, and then contact one of iROKOTv's customer service staff with the evidence of her payment. Thereafter, her account would be activated. "Why can't it just be automated?", Uju questioned. "It's one of the reasons I stopped using iROKOTv" (Uju, personal communication, 5 May 2020). A former employee of Dobox reported the same payment problems encountered by audiences for that VOD platform.

For Nigerian filmmakers generally, digital delivery and on-demand culture is "a breath of fresh air" as filmmaker Edosio Deelen Ema, puts it. Just as audiences have the liberty of options, so do filmmakers. Since theatrical releases in Nigeria are not profitable for independent filmmakers because the cinema owners do not allow them to thrive as alleged by all the filmmakers interviewed, "one has either to partner with the cinema owners or hire actors that will draw the audiences to the cinemas" (Edosio Deelen Ema, personal communication, 29 April 2020). In both cases, the independent filmmaker is disadvantaged due to a lack of financial resources. Independent filmmakers fund their films through personal savings as well as support in cash or kind from friends and family. Thus, they are unable to afford paying A-list actors, who will draw the audiences to the cinemas or may not be interested in making the kinds of films promoted by the cinema owners. This leads to the acceptance of VOD platforms wherein filmmakers can thrive, and as one anonymous filmmaker puts it, no one cares about known faces. Edosio Deelen Ema, director of the award-winning film, *Kasala* (2018), and Ehiz Ojesebholo, director of *Jand Hustle* (2013) and television series, *Jimi Bendel* (2016) and Abba Makama, director of *Green White Green* (2016), attested strongly to the golden opportunity, which the VOD platforms present. It gets their films to the audiences who appreciate them and allows them to earn money where the cinemas have failed them. Ekene Mekwunye, director of *Light in the Dark* (2018), said that "theatrical release was a disaster for my film. It's not as big as we think because over 95% of the films that go to the cinemas do not make their money back. If not for that online platform (Netflix, Amazon Prime), I won't lie to you, I'll just be biting my fingernails right now" (E. Mekwunye, personal communication, 27 April 2020). He went on to say that from 19 May 2020, his latest film will go on Netflix for a two-year deal at \$30,000. Edosio Deelen Ema, who made *Kasala* with N4M (\$11,000), got her film on Netflix Africa for \$10,000. This amount is just a little less than her production budget. She got other deals with Canal+ a French premium VOD channel, which is promising for a young and independent filmmaker like herself. Comparatively, Africa Magic Box Office paid Mekwunye N400,000 (\$1,100) being a TVOD.

With the assurance of earning thrice (or more) the sum of money made from theatrical release in Nigeria from some online platforms, the filmmakers set themselves up for better quality films that will be selected at prestigious film festivals globally from where the favourable distribution deals will occur. Abba Makama said that his films have mostly screened and gained popularity at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and at the British Film Institute, which is where he got the Netflix and Canal+ deals. This in turn enables more international audiences from Europe and North America to see and appreciate the quality of his films. Makama, who began his filmmaking career in 2007, claims that he has not received any offers from home-grown VODs like iROKOTv, Ibaka or NollyLand. His artistic output seems to insulate him from some of the local VODs, who, judging from Ojesebholo's experience are not a filmmaker's delight. Edosio's film screened at film festivals including the Online African Film Festival during which distributors discover and track filmmakers. The festival circuits are important platforms for content mobility, which could guarantee distribution deals in an age where film revenue appears to be on a steady decline within Nigeria.

For some filmmakers, licensing their films to foreign VOD platforms is not all rosy. They risk piracy, without knowing specifically who or where the majority of their audiences are based. They can only assume that the viewers are based outside Nigeria. They also face rejection by platform owners for a variety of reasons not least the quality of their production, and the kinds of clientele that the platform owners serve. Netflix does not share subscriber analytics with filmmakers; and sometimes, the distributors who have access to that information conceal it from the content owners. Ekene Mekwunye's film *Light in the Dark* was pirated in two different ways. First, the title and poster of the film were used to attract YouTube viewers to another film not made by the same filmmaker. Second, the film was presumably downloaded from Amazon Prime and uploaded on YouTube. Both cases were reported formally to YouTube, after which they ordered the correction of the infringement. But by the time the film was taken down from the notorious YouTube channel, it had attracted two thousand views. This imposes on a filmmaker the irksome responsibility of monitoring the routes his films travel since as Mekwunye said with resignation, "once something is online, there is no exclusivity to it" (E. Mekwunye, personal communication, 27 April 2020).

The audience of Nigerian films is certainly on the rise. Internet audiences are segmented by social class and they patronise YouTube, iROKOTv and Netflix on the basis of class distinctions and at their own times, which indicate the amount of disposable income available to them. Several online communities have been built to give audiences the space to comment on the films they have seen recently or to source recommendations (Obiaya, 2012; Dekie et al., 2015; Adejunmobi, 2019) among their peers in order to maximise the value of time, and perhaps data, spent on watching a film. From her research on Nollywood consumption patterns via digital delivery, Miller (2016) observed that iROKOTv was mostly patronised between 11am and 4pm, a point indicative of work rather than leisure hours. Ambler (2002) observed that films were advertised during the day and then the audiences watched them in the evenings. This is similar to Agina's (2019) study, which found that cinema-going in Lagos was a pastime observed after work hours on week days with the heaviest cinema attendance occurring between 4pm and 8pm. On weekends, cinema-goers headed to the shows at 12pm. More so, cinema operators reserved the most popular films for the evening slots when there were considerably higher numbers of film lovers. Arguably, film consumption times varied and were influenced by other obligatory and leisure activities. However, digital delivery and the on-demand culture have altered the consumption patterns, putting the power to decide when to watch films in the hands of audiences not in those of cinema managers or programmers. The audiences of this study spent not only their leisure time, but also their work hours downloading, watching or discussing films. This was complicated by the lockdowns from March 2020 necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which compelled people to work from home and with limited, if any, supervision. In Uju's case, she spent two days downloading films and the rest of the month watching them. From this, one can deduce that she performed other roles, but that her viewing decision was not dependent on other people, spaces and devices. Discussions about film in online communities are rarely restricted to time especially when the members of such communities can operate in different time zones. Whatever comments made remain on the discussion forum for as long as the forum administrator decides to keep them, thus enabling the tracking and preservation of such conversations as well as audience responses to them.

Conclusion

So what is the logic of the closure of an access gap by Netflix, cited at the beginning of this chapter or the move by iROKOTv and numerous other VOD platforms in a West African

State? In Nigeria, it can be argued that there is a burgeoning on-demand culture in spite of the obstacles and given the various social classes and exclusive viewership options in existence. Netflix's presence is greeted with loud enthusiasm in some quarters among middle to upper-class, and with indifference in others particularly lower-class viewers. The same applies to iROKOTv and indeed to Nollywood and many like it, which are struggling to emerge. The important consideration for the audiences examined in this study is that each VOD platform attracts its own clientele based on its offerings as Nigerians will only pay for premium content that appeals to their social class. This is a point that Dovey (2018) convincingly demonstrates by showing the various strategies that platform owners adopt to circumvent their perceived and actual obstacles including the audiences they potentially attract. There is the ubiquitous presence of Nollywood to contend with and the fact that YouTube currently holds a very large collection of Nigerian screen media and is a major stopover for any viewer interested in Nollywood films on the internet. As rightly pointed out by Tyron (2013), in the era of platform and content mobility, many will prioritise free entertainment value over paid value. Entertainment options behind pay walls must be exclusive and differentiated to justify patronage. Hence, Adejunmobi (2019) aptly observes that "with the sheer number of films available for free on YouTube, platforms like iROKOTv, requiring subscription and payment had to find some other way to distinguish themselves from sites offering free films" (p. 228). It must also be stated that Nigerians have a huge appetite for foreign media content (Agina, 2019), especially those whose disposable income can pay for the more expensive Netflix subscriptions.

Filmmaker Ehiz Ojesebholo told me that he is planning to set up his own VOD platform just as Nigeria's EbonyLife TV, Airtel TV, and popular lifestyle blogger Linda Ikeji all have recently set up online distribution channels with many more in the offing. The rise of newer digital delivery platforms suggests a growing demand for it. The bandwagon attitude to film production in Nigeria is extended to VOD platforms given the flurry of activity taking place on the internet. They see the potential of the film industry and, like Jason Njoku and Nnamdi Uti, are disappointed at the filmmakers who put their films on YouTube for free, but do not fully grasp the challenges ahead. As a financial consultant with a vested interest in Nollywood distribution, Ojie says that the challenge with this is that "people 'see' the noise and then they jump in. When in, they suddenly realise that they need to have 100 or 200 million in marketing costs alone. They don't realise that they still have to go offline and do the marketing, and most of them don't have that kind of money. What a lot of people don't understand about a platform is that it is a ravenous beast" (Ojie, personal communication, 5 May 2020). Since the VOD culture is still emerging with niche audiences for Netflix, the majority for iROKOTv and others, and the film industry continues to evolve, there is sufficient reason to suggest that many corporates will continue dabbling into the online market for the attraction of screen media audiences (Lobato, 2019) for other services and not necessarily for continued patronage or profitability.

Whether it is a local or foreign VOD platform, only a small fraction of people will subscribe to it if only because of the convenience, power, choice and commentary it affords them. One of the audiences interviewed for this study, Ojie, was initially surprised at Njoku's push for only a million subscribers within Nigeria, given the over 190 million citizens the country has. But he later realised the challenges constraining paid subscription within the country. As Dovey (2018) argues, "[T]here is a stark difference between the content and viewing experiences that people have access to outside Africa through SVODs, and the supersmall screen viewing and short-form content that characterizes internet television for the majority of Africans on the

continent” (p. 104). Even the app-only option made available to subscribers in an attempt to eliminate the purchase of expensive internet data may not have proven successful to platform owners. At least, it has not increased iROKOTv subscription for the audience examined here. The data obtained in this study does not support an upward trend of subscription for iROKOTv if in 2018 33.1% (94 out of 287 viewers) viewed films on iROKOTv, but in 2020 only 10.8% of 667 (72 out of 667 viewers) did, with 41.7% and 41.1% subscribing to YouTube and Netflix, respectively, in the year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lobato’s (2019) and Adejunmobi’s (2019) comments on Netflix’s foray into additional territories including Africa are noteworthy. Adejunmobi (2019) paraphrasing Jason Njoku observes: “since iROKOTv has been harvesting subscriptions in what Njoku describes . . . as Netflix’s backyard for a while, it seems unlikely that the extension of Netflix services to the African continent will affect that subscriber base” (p. 237). Njoku appears to be mistaken here because while his “harvesting” was going on (probably for the likes of diasporic audiences described by Dekie et al., 2015), Netflix arguably had zero Nigerian content on its platform, but by May 2020, there were over thirty Nigerian titles and counting on Netflix with more deals being discussed at the time of writing. Film Rats Club, a group of young and highly opinionated film enthusiasts, who constantly stream films on Netflix and YouTube and who are well informed about other VOD platforms around the globe, believe that there is no competition between Netflix and iROKOTv. Even though the preceding paragraph shows a decline in iROKOTv subscriptions, it must be argued that both platforms hold content that appeal to different social classes: iROKOTv for lower-middle to lower-class viewers and Netflix for middle to upper-class citizens. Ojesebholo’s statement is instructive in this regard, “Some upper-class Nigerians especially those who have been criticizing our film industry will not watch Nollywood if it’s not on Netflix” (E. Ojesebholo, personal communication, 24 April 2020). So, the few middle-class viewers like Uju on iROKOTv will definitely contemplate exploring Netflix to what might be iROKOTv’s disadvantage. Besides, Njoku was harvesting subscribers for Nigerian films not for American fare. It must not be forgotten that Nigerians’ appetite for Hollywood has not declined, and that appetite is being satiated on Netflix during the COVID-19-induced lockdown (when cinemas are closed), not on iROKOTv. In a dismissive tone of voice, filmmaker Mekwunye said that Netflix’s competition is HBO, Disney(+), Hulu, Apple TV – even though they are not buying African content, not iROKOTv. For the audiences examined here, Netflix is standing where cinema theatres stood in terms of access to recent films both local and foreign, and those cinemas were by no means competing with VOD platforms.

However, the good news for iROKOTv, Nollywood and other local platforms as I have been trying to demonstrate is that different classes of audiences will subscribe to different VOD platforms in what may be described as a shifting on-demand culture. The four filmmakers interviewed for this study echoed the same sentiments about different audiences’ appeal for varied quality content. “Asaba guys (low budget filmmaking in southern Nigeria) will still sell their films”; “Asaba filmmakers do not care for Netflix”; “Don’t forget that there are so many apps with smaller size files that people will readily watch instead of looking for Netflix” were some of the comments from the filmmakers. The fact that some audiences in the rural regions who own smartphones and can connect to the internet for WhatsApp messaging but not for ninety-minute feature films do not know or care about Netflix is important. This is owing to the numerous online platforms requiring less internet data and other non-internet based entertainment available to them, which bears out the fact that no keen competition is envisaged between Netflix and iROKOTv, or other platforms for that matter. Rather, the on-demand culture in Nigeria will shift from one platform to another and from one type of content, mostly free or

classy and exclusive, to another because “If I have to pay for it, it had better be a cut above the rest”, one member of the audience admitted.

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