

Audience Perception of the Elderly in Nollywood Films

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Abstract:

This study is an assessment of Audience Perception of the Elderly in Nollywood Films. The general objective of this study is to examine how Nollywood Films affect how people see older people in society. The study examines how film perpetuates age stereotypes among older people. Some of the determined objectives are to discuss how movie representation of the elderly shapes audience perception of older adults in Nigeria. Data for this study was obtained through content analysis, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires. Screen Theory and Reflection Projection Theory were the theories used for this project. Content analysis was carried out on four films: Maami, October 1, Kasanova, and Ayelujara. An in-depth interview was conducted with two lecturers at Caleb University, Imota, Lagos, and questionnaires were distributed to 84 school students. This research established that the portrayal of older people in Nollywood films has influenced how viewers perceive older people. It also established that Nollywood films significantly affect the audience's perception of older people, and film as a medium is vital and goes beyond merely seeing it as entertainment, such as creating mindsets, opinions, culture, and life in general.

Keywords:

Audience; Elderly, Nollywood Films; Perception and Screen Theory

I. Introduction

The stigmatization of old age is sufficiently illustrated in Nollywood films. Although some Nollywood films depict older people in a positive light, most of these films portray old age as an undesirable situation. This persistent projection still influences the audience's negative perception of old age in cinema. This is evidenced by older people being relegated to peripheral roles, which underrepresent them. Unfortunately, these characters result in their being caricatured as senile and decrepit for comic effect. In addition to their comical roles, older people are depicted as demons in Nollywood films, such as "Nneka the Pretty Serpent." They are implicated in the misfortunes of their offspring and family members. In certain Nollywood films, older people are depicted as evil in-laws with no affection for their daughter-in-law. In certain Nollywood films, elderly individuals are described as reliant on their offspring for survival. They portray older people as unproductive (Abba et al., 2021). These negative portrayals have a detrimental effect on the self-perceptions of senior adults, resulting in the internalization of ageism and the reduction of self-esteem. Ageist imagery in Nollywood films frequently conjures narratives of vulnerability, dependence, and infirmity, which are defined by homogeneous terms such as "old people."

The representation of elderly individuals in films is a multifaceted and nuanced subject, including both positive and negative portrayals and a significant issue of insufficient representation. According to Ng et al. in Msughter (2024), the representation of elderly individuals in films is significantly lacking, with their presence as characters being

disproportionately low compared to their actual proportion in the population. The lack of visibility further exacerbates the notion that elderly individuals are inconsequential. Elderly individuals are frequently allocated secondary roles or positioned as peripheral characters rather than being the primary focus of the narrative or having significant storylines when they do appear.

The media content and its utilization raise a variety of inquiries regarding the extent to which the media has a prevalent impact on the audience. Undoubtedly, the media and its contents carry religious, cultural, and social values that influence the audience's perception of older people (De Vuyst, 2020). The primary concern of media scholars is the manner in which the media portrays individuals, specifically older people. This is due to the fact that we inhabit a world that is divided by sexuality, age, disability, ethnicity, class, and location, and the disadvantages, privileges, and exclusions that are associated with these categories are unevenly distributed (Andover et al., 2024). The media has the potential to influence public perception and worldview. Wangler and Jansky (2023) have identified a correlation between the beliefs, stereotypes, ideology, and perceptions the audience internalizes and the content displayed on the screen. Therefore, Jeong et al. (2022) contended that the filmic representation of the elderly influences how society handles and interacts with them and how they are perceived in later life. In this regard, Bandura in Andover (2024) contended in his social cognitive theory that individuals' comprehension of their social environment is significantly influenced by their exposure to the media.

Additionally, how individuals acquire knowledge from media exposure is identical to how they acquire knowledge from the actual world (Andover et al., 2024). Therefore, Sink and Mastro (2017) noted that individuals can establish norms as a foundation for their subsequent actions, beliefs, and thoughts. It has been demonstrated in studies conducted by Wangler and Jansky (2023) that individuals who internalize negative beliefs and stereotypes about the elderly during their lifetime are more likely to develop cardiovascular diseases, while those who hold positive age stereotypes are more likely to experience favorable health outcomes. Many studies on film representation, including those conducted by Kline et al. (2023), have concentrated on sexuality and mental health issues. This study investigates the audience's perception of the elderly in Nollywood films within this context. Recently, one of the researchers (Dr. Gadour) completed a study relevant to this one in relation perceptions (Gadour, A. Amniana, S, 2014).

1.1 Problem Statement

The aging process is seen as a desirable and aesthetically pleasing stage of life since it is universally desired to reach an advanced age. However, as Celik showed in 2023, the existing studies examining the portrayal of the elderly in films are insufficient. Old age is traditionally linked with wisdom and extensive life experience. It should not be shown as a handicap, animosity, or unfavorable cultural norms (Andover et al., 2024).

However, Kline et al. (2023) showed that the elderly are severely underrepresented in cinematic storytelling effects. Wangler and Jansky (2023), in their movie portrayal of the elderly, have focused more on developed countries. There is evidence of ageism in how films are portrayed in developing countries like Nigeria and India. For instance, old characters in Nigerian movies are portrayed as witches, wicked in-laws, and objects of sexual pervasion. However, this only applies to some movies in the Nigerian movie industry. Some movies portray older adults as wise, confident, warm, and patient. The representation of the elderly in

Nollywood movies is still under-researched. Even when research has been done in this area, they are focused on movie portrayal and audience perception in developed countries.

Movie representation of the elderly and audience perception in developing countries like Nigeria is significantly under-researched. In particular, the Nollywood film industry has been accused of peddling reality that often misrepresents or excludes older adults. Nollywood describes the movie industry in Nigeria (Msughter et al., 2023). The elderly in Nollywood movies in Nigeria are portrayed as grossly dependent on their children for survival, ailing, wicked in-laws, and irrelevant segments of the general population.

Despite the growing prevalence of this clichéd depiction, policy officials and NGOs have made insufficient efforts to address the excessive portrayal of the elderly in films and implement legislation to restrict it. A significant portion of the audience, particularly young children and even the elderly has been deceived into adopting inaccurate views and preconceptions regarding the process of aging. These views include the deteriorating physical condition, financial situation, and behavioral changes experienced by elderly individuals (Msughter et al., 2023).

Although studies have investigated the influence of filmic depiction on the audience's reflection and perception, more research needs to be done, specifically focusing on the senior population. This study gap necessitates understanding which segment of the older population is shown in films and the frequency of film representation of this particular segment. The majority of research examining the portrayal of films has been focused on wealthy nations. There needs to be more study on films' portrayal in underdeveloped nations, such as Nigeria. The aspects that contribute to portraying old people in films and how they influence the audience's reflection and perspective differ across different cultures. Prior research on the portrayal of older adults in films has yet to thoroughly examine the lack of representation, biases, and mistreatment faced by this demographic. The persistent lack of representation and bias in society leads to the internalization of age discrimination, resulting in reduced self-esteem, bad health effects, and inadequate treatment of older individuals. Prior research needs to investigate the elements accountable for the insufficient presence of older individuals in films. There seems to be a dearth of study attention on the underlying causes for the ongoing decrease in the portrayal of older people in films. This study aims to address the existing research gap.

The prevalence of cinematic portrayal of older people has significant repercussions, as it perpetuates misconceptions and stereotypes that have a detrimental influence on the senior population. This not only undermines their self-confidence but also leads to emotional instability and adverse effects on their mental well-being. The persistent omission of the elderly in films has strengthened the perception that the elderly are no longer significant in Nigerian society. In addition, they are often assigned small or peripheral parts when they appear in films. These roles depict older people as exaggeratedly senile and frail for comedic purposes, which fail to acknowledge the many characteristics of the older population. According to Wangler and Jansky (2023), age stereotypes harm one's health by fostering negative views about aging, resulting in decreased functional health and a shorter lifespan. The portrayal of older adults in films has consistently had a detrimental effect on the mental well-being of senior individuals. It perpetuates a mistaken belief among those nearing old age that old age is characterized by concerns, health issues, behavioral changes, and potential irrelevance over time.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine how movie representations of the elderly shape audience perceptions of old people in Nigeria.
2. To ascertain the level of representation of the elderly in Nigerian movies between 2011 and 2023.
3. To analyse the cross-section of the elderly in the selected movies from 2011 to 2023.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 USC Annenberg Film Study (2016)

A study undertaken by Humana and Professor Stacy L. Smith at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism reveals the pervasive presence of ageism in films and emphasises the need of embracing a positive mindset for successful ageing. The study analysed the portrayal of those aged 60 and above in the top 100 most financially successful films of 2015. Humana conducted a quantitative study in which elderly individuals were surveyed to determine key lifestyle attributes associated with ageing. Participants were also asked to assess how accurately these qualities describe them and to express their views on the portrayal of seniors in the media. Key discoveries consist showed that in film, the elderly are underrepresented, mischaracterized and demeaned by ageist language.

The findings show just 11 percent of characters evaluated were aged 60 and over; U.S. Census data shows that 18.5 percent of the population is aged 60 and over. Out of 57 films that featured a leading or supporting elderly character, 30 featured ageist comments – that’s more than half of the films. Quotes included characters being referred to as “a relic,” “a frail old woman” and “a senile old man.” According to Humana’s quantitative survey, seniors report they are highly aware (95 percent), resilient (91 percent) and physically active (71 percent). Only 29.1 percent of on-screen leading or supporting characters aged 60 or older engaged with technology, whereas 84 percent of aging Americans report that they use the internet weekly. Of the elderly characters that died on screen, 79.2 percent of deaths were a result of physical violence — such as being shot, stabbed or crushed. This does not accurately reflect causes of death for the aging population, which are heart disease and other chronic illnesses.

2.2 Femke De Sutter and Sofie Van Bauwel (2023)

The research titled "Uncovering the hidden bias: A study on ageism in Hollywood's portrayal of ageing femininities in romantic comedies (2000-2021)" (2023) aimed to investigate how older persons are depicted in popular romantic comedy films. The study specifically examined persons who were 60 years of age or older and had a speaking part in the films being analysed. The age of characters in the films was ascertained by considering their physical appearance, function in the family, living conditions, and other accessible clues, in accordance with prior research conducted by (Robinson et al., 2004). The ages of the characters were thereafter divided into five consecutive age groups (60-65, 66-71, 72-77, 78-83, and above 83).

This study revealed a higher representation of female characters compared to male characters, with 26 women and 22 males. Women are more prominent in romantic comedies since they are also considered the primary demographic for these films. The results indicate that 38 characters were classified in the age range of 60 - 65 years, accounting for 79.2% of the total. In contrast, a significantly smaller number of characters, specifically 6 (12.5%), were

classified in the age range of 66 - 71 years. Additionally, only two characters (4.2%) were classified in both the age range of 78 - 83 years and the age range 'over 83 years'. Regarding ethnicity, 93.8 percent of the elder characters in our research were identified as white. The African American community was the most prominent minority group, accounting for 4.2 percent of the elder characters.

Asian elderly individuals were very uncommon, comprising just 2.1 percent of the elderly individuals in our survey. The examination of the socioeconomic condition of the characters revealed that a majority of the elderly characters were in a favourable financial situation. Specifically, our findings indicate that 33.3 percent of the older characters were classified as middle-class, while 50 percent were classified as upper-class. Conversely, a mere 4.2 percent of older adult characters were classified as lower class. Approximately 12.5 percent of the characters have undisclosed or ambiguous socioeconomic statuses.

2.3 Theoretical Review

According to McQuail (2019), a theory is a general proposition based on observation and logical argument that states the relationship between two observed phenomena. For this study, two theories would be considered: Screen Theory and Projection Reflection Theory

2.4 Screen Theory

Marxist–psychoanalytic cinema theory known as "Screen theory" was first published in the British magazine *Screen* in the early 1970s. It views cinematic visuals as signifiers that serve as mirrors for viewers to get into subjectivity as well as meanings (Idris & Msughter, 2022). The idea looks for a method to theorise a politics of freedom via diverse rather than monolithic filmmaking. Here, the psychoanalytic development of the unconscious led to a change in Marxist focus from the universal consciousness as a foundation for defining liberation to the articulation of diversities and multiplicities of individual and social experience (Aondover et al., 2022).

Colin MacCabe, Stephen Heath, and Laura Mulvey, who are the theoreticians behind the "Screen theory" approach, have described the "cinematic apparatus" as a variant of Althusser's ideological state apparatus. It is the spectacle that is responsible for the creation of the viewer, as stated by the Screen theory, rather than the other way around. The fact that the subject is both formed and subjugated by the story that is being shown on the screen is obscured by the fact that the material that is being delivered seems to be completely realistic. In addition, this is explained by Screen's conception of the post-structuralist theory, which considers a text to be an act of intervention in the present. As a result, the film is seen as a work of construction of meanings rather than a work of reflection. It is more accurate to see representation as a place of departure rather than as a method for recreating what is really genuine (Msughter et al., 2023).

To trace the roots of screen theory back to the works "Mirror Stage" written by Jacques Lacan and *Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier* written by Jacques-Alain Miller. In this hypothesis, a child is described as having a fragmented view of its body; nevertheless, when the infant looks in a mirror, he sees a complete being rather than a fragmented one. According to Lacan, this is a deceit, and it is one that is necessary for the operation of imagined order, which is responsible for the creation of illusory completeness (Aondover et al., 2024).

The primary focus of the screen theory is on the many sections that are seen in animated films. The core of this idea is the discovery of the position of the spectators in the film as well as their unique engagement in the picture (Msughter & Idris, 2023). It actively pursues the goal of gaining an understanding of the implications that the mass media has on the day-to-day lives of moviegoers and those who are passionate about the film industry. Based on what the setting of the film requires and suggests, it is thought that viewers operate and carry an attitude responds in line with what the film wants and implies (Msughter et al., 2023).

Screen theory is an attempt to define the configurations of films via the use of a theoretical framework. Through the utilisation of techniques such as personal impressions, target brief look, and the utilisation of the point of view, object glance, and camera effect refinements, it demonstrates the enormous impact that the theme has greater than what it encompasses. The audiences are recognised as advantaged participant in the realm of films. Regarding the appropriate placements of the subject matter, this theory makes use of and takes into consideration a few Hollywood techniques that are effectively proportioned. This is done in order to maintain a consistent succession of narrative sequences.

2.5 Projection Reflection Theory

According to recent theory and research, film has the potential to influence learning and motivation via the process of identity discovery (Flum& Kaplan, 2012). Some studies have shown that films may help people modify their identities. In turn, evidence demonstrates that identity transformation relates to academic motivation and learning of information. This is supported by studies conducted by Khan (2012), Squire and Jan (2007) and other researchers. For the most part, however, there is a lack of knowledge about the processes of identity change in film consumption. More specifically, there is a lack of knowledge regarding which processes are favourable to learning and motivation, as well as which design characteristics support desired identity transformation.

Projective Reflection offers one conceptual tool for understanding the way learners engage in self-transformation, or identity change in immersive interactive environments such as films. Although society has likely observed variations in physical size since ancient times, its significance as a fundamental distinguishing trait of people has emerged relatively recently. The Projective Reflection framework has been implemented using the Play, Curricular Activity, Reflection, Discussion (PCaRD) pedagogical model to facilitate the process of identity exploration when using games in a given academic domain (Msughter et al., 2021). The theory takes into account an individual's previous experiences, which impact the probability of a behavioural action. Past experiences have a substantial effect on the reinforcement, expectations, and expectancies that influence a person's choice to engage in a specific activity, as well as the underlying reasons for that behaviour.

Foster in Aliyu et al. (2023) presents a paradigm that focuses on both content and self-awareness, seeing learning as inextricably intertwined. Kaplan and Garner (2016) investigated specific identities using the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI). The components taken into account include epistemological beliefs, action possibilities, purpose aims, and self-perceptions and definitions. Projective Reflection applies four DSMRI constructs to game-based learning: a) content knowledge and technical literacy, b) regulated actions, c) interest and valuing, and d) self-perceptions and self-definitions in a specific academic domain.

The Projective Reflection process in films fosters interest and value for the academic topic, helps students acquire competency with the learning material and environment, and allows them to explore their potential selves in connection to it. The CaRD component of curricula is also intended to provide opportunities for inquiry, communication, construction, and expression (ICCE), which can promote self-relevance, triggered exploration, a perceived sense of safety, and scaffolded exploration in the academic domain (STePS) (Hile et al., 2023). While CaRD activities are game-based and draw on students' play experiences, they are also intended to correspond with the goal knowledge and attitudes within certain academic subjects. Thus, the Projective Reflection framework may help with the evaluation and creation of games as well as supporting curricula for identity discovery and transformation. Viewers project their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences onto the characters and events shown on television. The video acts as a mirror, enabling us to fill in the gaps with our own perspectives. This projection might be driven by desires, worries, or past experiences.

III. Research Methods

For this study, the mixed research method design was adopted. Qualitative research is a non-numerical examination and interpretation method, while quantitative research is a numerical examination and interpretation approach. For this project, the researcher adopted a content analysis and survey for the quantitative method, and an interview for the qualitative method. Researchers use a content analysis as a research method to gather data from a pre-identified group of respondents, aiming to gain insights into various topics of interest. It is a systematic analysis of message content. The results will then be prepared on a coding sheet. It is used to quantitatively identify various aspects of the chosen population, and an interview helps to obtain detailed information that sheds light on an individual's perspective, experiences, feelings, and the derived meaning about a particular topic or issue. A survey is a method for collecting and analysing data via highly structured and often very detailed interviews or questionnaires in order to obtain information from the large numbers of respondents presumed to be representatives of a specific population (Johnson, 2012).

IV. Results and Discussion

According to the findings, the elderly are largely stereotyped in Nollywood films with negative traits, including suffering and evil while secondary traits like wisdom were attributed to them. The content analysis showed a prevalent and deeply ingrained trend of stereotyping the elderly. Across various narratives in the four films selected, characters depicting older individuals are often portrayed through narrow and stereotypical lenses, perpetuating outdated tropes and misconceptions about aging. These depictions tend to reinforce ageist attitudes within society, contributing to the marginalization and disempowerment of older generations. As a result, the representation of the elderly in Nollywood films reflects a concerning pattern of discrimination and neglect, warranting critical examination and advocacy for more nuanced and respectful portrayals in media.

It was gathered via the survey that the majority (40%) agree that Nollywood films had an influence on how they perceive the elderly. 22% Strongly Agreed, 18% were Neutral and Disagreed, while 2% Strongly Disagree. This is consistent with empirical review provided by Humana and Smith (2016) which noted that in film the elderly are underrepresented, mischaracterized and demeaned. It also aligns with the Cultivation Theory used in the study, which opines that people are more likely to believe the portrayal of social reality on television

when they spend more time immersed in the television world. This may also be deliberate as studies provide evidence in favour of the theories that the elderly have been singled out as subjects and victims of negative stereotypes, and that society has a well-developed mythology regarding ageing as a biosocial phenomenon. These findings show that the elderly are highly stereotyped in Nollywood films.

The answers from both interviewees indicate that there is a diverse opinion that highlights the significant role played by the technical aspects of production in advancing the narrative. Even though there are stereotypical characters in these films, it was gathered that technical aspects of production, such as the lighting, editing, and sound design, often help to tell complex stories that go beyond simple images. As a result, makers of films can question assumptions and show more complex views on getting older by using images, sounds, and story structures in creative ways. Another factor gathered is that of ageism in society which often leads to negative or limited stereotypes. These stereotypes manifest in film as typecast roles such as frail, grumpy, or wise-old person. This limits the range and depth of characters. The respondents believe that by using these technology tools, Nollywood shows can do more than just support ageist stereotypes. They can also help their viewers feel more love and understanding for the old. So, even though stereotypes may still be around, the technical skill of filmmaking opens the door to more accurate and inclusive portrayals of older people in Nollywood films. This is in cahoots with the Social Cognitive Theory used in the study, which explains that individuals' comprehension of their social environment is significantly influenced by their exposure to the media. These findings imply that environment, production technicalities, and human interest are the reasons for the underrepresentation of the elderly in Nollywood.

This demonstrates how the perspectives of elderly individuals may be influenced by factors such as their gender, social status, and cultural heritage. Older women have distinct challenges and undergo unique experiences compared to older males. Furthermore, individuals belonging to different socioeconomic strata may exhibit distinct approaches towards the process of ageing, therefore highlighting disparities in power dynamics and resource availability. This aligns with empirical research on the perception of older adults by young, middle-aged, and older individuals (Hummert et al., 1994) which showed that they hold several misconceptions about older persons, as described before.

The stereotypes identified consist of eight negative stereotypes (Shrew/Curmudgeon, Despondent, Vulnerable, Severely Impaired, Recluse, Mildly Impaired, Self-centered, and Elitist) and six positive stereotypes (Golden Ager, Perfect Grandparent, Liberal matriarch/Patriarch, John Wayne Conservative, Activist, and Small-town Neighbour). Also, the type of Nollywood movie had a big impact on how people thought about older people; plays, comedies, and thrillers all show older people in different ways. Comedies may use humour to fight stereotypes or show how silly ageism is, while plays may tell sad stories about getting older and thinking about oneself. This informed the response in the survey as analysis showed that a 46% majority of the respondents were neutral to the influence of how they perceived the elderly based on Nollywood Films while 30 per cent agreed, 16% Strongly agreed, while 4% said they Disagree, while another 4% answered that they Strongly Disagree. These results imply that there are limited cross-sections of the elderly in Nollywood films.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study concluded that Nollywood films' portrayal of the elderly has succeeded in influencing how viewers perceive the elderly. It also outlines that film as a medium is very vital and goes beyond merely seeing it as entertainment in terms of mindset, opinions, culture, and life in general. The study also suggests that there is ample scope for additional research in this area. It is therefore concluded that Nollywood films should diversify their portrayal of the elderly and they should engage a variety of characters to enable the audience see this age group in a different light. In the same vein, the use of the elderly in Nollywood films will equally help challenge pre-existing stereotypes that many may hold of them in our society.

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