



Perceived Influence of Nollywood Films on Gender Stereotypes among Undergraduates at Federal University Wukari

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Abstract

Nollywood is one of the most influential film industries in Africa, producing numerous films that address gender roles and social expectations, which may shape public perceptions of gender and gender-related expectations. This study investigated the perceived influence of Nollywood films on gender stereotypes among undergraduates at the Federal University Wukari, Taraba State. The study adopted a quantitative research approach using a survey design and a sample of 385 respondents. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings show that respondents perceived Nollywood films as saturated with traditional and, in many cases, reductive gender roles, portraying women as dependent, emotional, and confined to domestic roles. Respondents also perceived these portrayals as influencing their perceptions of gender, reinforcing stereotypes and, in some cases, legitimising discriminatory attitudes, such as the notion that women who work outside the home are neglecting their traditional roles. Most respondents strongly supported the inclusion of gender-sensitivity training in film production curricula at universities and advocated more balanced and empowering portrayals of both men and women. The study recommends the adoption of media literacy programmes for students, the integration of gender-sensitive content into film studies curricula, and the implementation of policies to promote fair and equitable gender representation in the media industry.

Keywords: Nollywood, gender roles, undergraduate students, media impact, film analysis

Introduction

Nollywood is one of the largest film industries in the world and plays various social roles, including shaping social discourse in Nigeria. Its popularity among youths, especially university students, makes it a powerful vehicle for cultural messaging (Adam, 2021). There has also been growing concern over how gender roles are portrayed in these films, as such portrayals often reinforce narrow or outdated stereotypes about men and women. The representation of gender in media is not a neutral activity: men and women are frequently assigned different roles, characters, and plotlines in films, and these portrayals can shape changing gender expectations among audiences. Depictions of patriarchal values in Nollywood can either challenge or reinforce norms that remain prevalent in the Nigerian environment today (Amonyeze, et al., 2023).

This tension makes the analysis of film and gender more relevant than ever. Although women are gaining greater visibility across various areas of Nigerian life, media representations have not kept pace with these changes (Gbadegesin et al, 2022). Female characters in Nollywood are most often placed in domestic settings, whereas male characters typically occupy semi-public

and professional roles. Left unexamined, such patterns can shape problematic ideas about gender abilities and expectations. Undergraduates represent an ideal population for studying media influence, as they are at a critical stage of identity construction and social attitude formation, during which their perceptions can be shaped by cultural artefacts such as film. However, there is limited research interest in this group within Nigerian institutions of higher learning, particularly in the Wukari region. This research paper therefore examines how gender stereotypes are shaped by Nollywood movies as perceived by undergraduates at Federal University Wukari.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to assess undergraduates' perceptions of gender stereotypes portrayed in Nollywood films at the Federal University Wukari. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine undergraduates' perceptions of the portrayal of gender roles in Nollywood films.
- ii. Investigate undergraduates' perceptions of gender stereotypes embedded in Nollywood films.
- iii. Assess undergraduates' perceptions of the influence of Nollywood films on their attitudes and beliefs regarding gender relations.
- iv. Identify undergraduates' perceptions of possible strategies for mitigating gender stereotypes portrayed in Nollywood films.

Literature Review

Several empirical studies affirm that Nollywood plays a central role in shaping gender perceptions in Nigeria. Adam (2021) and Gwam-Nzekwu (2021), argued that women are frequently represented in Nollywood as victims, housewives, emotionally dependent partners, or economically subordinate characters, thereby narrowing the range of identities and social roles available to female characters. Corroborating, Amonyeze, et al., opined that masculine characters are often constructed around dominance, physical toughness, material success, and emotional restraint. Similarly, Pirzada (2025) studied the phenomenon outside Nigeria, demonstrate demonstrate that ongoing exposure to gender-stereotypical media content directly influences and reinforces individual perceptions of traditional gender roles and societal norms. These studies imply that persistent exposure to stereotypical representations may normalise particular understandings of femininity and masculinity, especially among younger audiences who consume film content regularly. Specifically, the studies suggest that Nollywood does not merely reproduce stereotypes about women but may also reinforce restrictive expectations of masculinity.

The literature is however not entirely deterministic, as some studies identify Nollywood's capacity to challenge rather than simply reproduce gender stereotypes. For instance, Akhtar and Rasul (2025), demonstrate that multidimensional representations of strong female characters can encourage more progressive attitudes towards women's empowerment, suggesting that the effects of film representation depend partly on the nature of the narratives audiences encounter. This position contrasts with the more critical accounts of Adam (2021), Gwam-Nzekwu (2021), and Amonyeze et al. (2023), which emphasise the persistence and consequences of stereotypical portrayals. Onyenakeye et al (2019) provides another important qualification by arguing that Nollywood has considerable entertainment-education potential but has not sufficiently incorporated deliberate gender-awareness strategies into film production. Similarly, Akpan and Isiguzo (2022) acknowledges the transformative potential of cinema but observes that progressive gender messages are sometimes weakened by regressive narratives or comic treatment that trivialises gender-related issues. Leath, et al., (2021) further shows that the challenge is not unique to Nollywood, identifying comparable struggles with historical stereotyping in Black American cinema. These suggest that Nollywood should not be understood as inherently progressive or

regressive; rather, its potential influence is shaped by the quality of representation, narrative context, production choices, and the extent to which audiences critically engage with media content.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Cultivation Theory, advanced by Gerbner, which posits that long-term media exposure shapes viewers' perceptions of reality. Cultivation Theory provides the theoretical basis for understanding how repeated exposure to media representations may contribute to audiences' perceptions of social reality. Applied to the present study, the theory suggests that sustained exposure to recurring representations of men and women in Nollywood films may contribute to the development or reinforcement of particular perceptions of gender roles. Studies of Nollywood representation provide empirical context for this proposition, particularly Amonyeze et al. (2023), Adam (2021), and Onyenankaya et al. (2019), which document recurring gendered representations in Nigerian cinema.

Methodology

A quantitative survey research design was used to collect data from undergraduates at Federal University Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria. The university had a total undergraduate population of 10,558, from which a representative sample was drawn using stratified random sampling to ensure broad representation across faculties. The minimum requirement for participation was prior exposure to Nollywood films. A total of 385 copies of questionnaire were distributed. Data collection took place over a three-week period across lecture halls, campus student activities, and informal campus gatherings. Responses were coded and analyzed using SPSS version 25. Patterns in the data were presented through descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means. This approach ensured that the study was statistically, logistically, and ethically sound, enabling the research team to draw meaningful conclusions about the relationship between Nollywood content and students' perceptions of gender roles.

Findings

Table 1. Demographic and Nollywood Film-Consumption Characteristics of Respondents

Item	Response option	n	(%)
Gender	Male	202	52.5
	Female	183	47.5
Age	16–20 years	120	31.2
	21–25 years	178	46.2
	26–30 years	62	16.1
	31 years and above	25	6.5
Frequency of Nollywood Film Consumption	Rarely (once a month or less)	58	15.1
	Occasionally (2–3 times/month)	92	23.9
	Frequently (1–3 times/week)	157	40.8
	Very frequently (4+ times/week)	78	20.2

Note: Source: Author's Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025; n=385

Table 1 presents the demographic and Nollywood film-consumption characteristics of the 385 respondents. The gender distribution shows a relatively balanced representation, with males constituting 52.5% (202) and females 47.5% (183) of the respondents. In terms of age, respondents aged 21–25 years constituted the largest group (46.2%), followed by those aged 16–20 years (31.2%). Respondents aged 26–30 years accounted for 16.1%, while those aged 31 years and above

constituted 6.5%. This indicates that the respondents were predominantly within the typical undergraduate age range.

Regarding Nollywood film consumption, 40.8% of respondents reported watching Nollywood films frequently, that is, one to three times per week, while 20.2% watched them very frequently, four or more times per week. Thus, 61.0% of respondents consumed Nollywood films at least weekly, indicating substantial exposure to Nollywood content among the sampled undergraduates. A further 23.9% watched films occasionally, while only 15.1% reported rarely consuming Nollywood films.

Table 2. Portrayal of Gender Roles in Nollywood Films Consumed by Undergraduates

Statement	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
Male characters are often portrayed as dominant and authoritative.	10	15	60	35	3.00	0.83
Female characters are frequently shown in subordinate or dependent roles.	8	22	55	35	2.99	0.84
Nollywood films depict men as financial providers and women as caregivers.	12	20	58	30	2.93	0.85
Gender roles portrayed in Nollywood reflect traditional Nigerian cultural values.	9	18	57	36	3.00	0.83
Women in Nollywood films are often portrayed as emotional and submissive.	14	19	55	32	2.88	0.88

Note: Author's Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025; n=385

The mean scores for all statements range from 2.88 to 3.00, indicating that respondents generally agreed that gender roles in Nollywood films reflect traditional portrayals, with men shown as dominant and women as subordinate. The highest mean (3.00) was recorded for two items: "Male characters are often portrayed as dominant and authoritative" and "Gender roles portrayed in Nollywood reflect traditional Nigerian cultural values," reflecting a strong perception of cultural reinforcement in gender role portrayal. The standard deviation values, ranging from 0.83 to 0.88, suggest a moderate level of consensus among respondents across all items. This indicates that students shared similar views on gender role portrayals in Nollywood films.

Table 3. Perceptions of Undergraduates Towards Gender Stereotypes Embedded in Nollywood Films

Statement	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
Gender stereotypes in Nollywood films exaggerate differences between men and women.	9	14	64	33	3.00	0.79
I believe that Nollywood films reinforce negative gender stereotypes.	12	16	60	32	2.98	0.85
Gender stereotypes in films affect how people perceive gender roles in real life.	10	20	58	32	2.98	0.84

The portrayal of gender in Nollywood films is outdated and biased.	15	18	55	32	2.91	0.89
I find the gender stereotypes in Nollywood films to be realistic representations of society.	14	22	54	30	2.87	0.90

Note: Source: Author's Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025; n=385

The mean scores for the statements in this section ranged from 2.87 to 3.00, indicating a general agreement among respondents that gender stereotypes are strongly embedded in Nollywood films and that these stereotypes have real-world implications. The statement "Gender stereotypes in Nollywood films exaggerate differences between men and women" recorded the highest mean (3.00), suggesting that undergraduates perceive these portrayals as highly polarized and exaggerated. The standard deviations, ranging between 0.79 and 0.90, indicate a moderate spread of responses, with relatively consistent agreement across items. This low variation confirms that most respondents held similar views about the presence and influence of gender stereotypes in Nollywood films.

Table 4. Perceived Influence of Nollywood Films on Undergraduates' Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Gender Relations

Statement	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
Nollywood films influence my perception of the ideal roles of men and women.	11	17	62	30	2.97	0.83
Watching Nollywood films has affected how I expect men and women to behave.	13	19	58	30	2.93	0.85
Nollywood films contribute to how I view gender equality.	12	15	62	31	2.98	0.82
I have adopted certain attitudes from Nollywood films regarding male–female relationships.	14	16	59	31	2.95	0.86
Nollywood films shape my beliefs about power dynamics in romantic relationships.	15	19	55	31	2.89	0.89

Note: Source: Author's Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025; n=385

The data above showed mean scores that ranged from 2.89 to 2.98, reflecting an overall moderate agreement that Nollywood films influence undergraduates' attitudes and beliefs regarding gender relations. The statement "Nollywood films contribute to how I view gender equality" had the highest mean (2.98), indicating a noticeable impact of these films on how students perceive gender equality issues. The standard deviations ranged from 0.82 to 0.89, pointing to moderate agreement and consistency of responses among participants. This further implies that many respondents felt similarly about how Nollywood films shape their perceptions and expectations in gender-related interactions.

Table 5. Strategies to Mitigate the Impact of Gender Stereotypes Portrayed in Nollywood Films Among Undergraduates

Statement	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
Filmmakers should portray balanced and equitable gender roles in films.	7	14	62	37	3.08	0.75
Awareness campaigns should educate viewers about gender stereotypes in media.	6	16	60	38	3.08	0.77
Gender-sensitive policies should be implemented in the Nollywood industry.	8	18	57	37	3.03	0.80
Schools should introduce media literacy programs to educate students about gender bias.	10	15	58	37	3.01	0.82
Viewers should be encouraged to critically analyze gender portrayals in films.	9	14	60	37	3.04	0.78

Note: Source: Author's Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025; n=385

The mean scores for all the items in the table above ranged from 3.01 to 3.08, suggesting strong agreement among respondents on the strategies proposed to mitigate gender stereotypes in Nollywood films. The two highest means (3.08) were recorded for "Filmmakers should portray balanced and equitable gender roles in films" and "Awareness campaigns should educate viewers about gender stereotypes in media," emphasizing respondents' belief in proactive media reform and education. The standard deviation values, ranging from 0.75 to 0.82, show a relatively high consensus among respondents. This indicates that the sampled students broadly agreed on the importance of institutional, educational, and policy-driven solutions to counteract harmful gender stereotypes in media content.

Discussion

This research shows that undergraduates' perceptions of gender roles are strongly shaped by Nollywood films, as most participants reported that stereotypical gender roles are common in the films they watch regularly. Students readily identified the recurring portrayal of women as subservient, emotional, and preoccupied with marriage, and men as dominant, economically successful, and unemotional. Respondents not only recognized these patterns but also characterized them as exaggerated and reflective of an outdated understanding of gender roles. These findings are consistent with Okunna's (1996) analysis of Nigerian home-video films, which found that women were frequently portrayed in negative and subordinated ways and argued that such representations could negatively influence audience perceptions of women. Nonetheless, beyond documenting these gender codes, this study proposes that Nollywood can also serve as an educational resource for reforming gender conventions. Similarly, Cultivation theory, developed by Gerbner and Gross (1976), holds that repeated exposure to media content gradually and subtly shapes and normalizes viewers' perceptions of reality. This suggests that students who watch Nollywood films regularly are likely to internalize the rigidly assigned gender roles portrayed on screen. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that media representations contribute to the

development and reinforcement of gender-role stereotypes (Ward & Grower, 2020). In the Nigerian context, Adewoye et al. (2014) found that gender stereotypes in selected Nollywood films reflected and could reinforce existing social beliefs and gender-role expectations, while Onyenankaya et al. (2019) documented persistent stereotypical representations of women across two decades of Nollywood films.

While sexist representations drew considerable criticism, some respondents rationalised or defended such depictions as culturally consistent or as part of established storytelling conventions. This ambivalence is consistent with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which recognises that media texts are not necessarily interpreted uniformly by audiences. Rather, audiences may produce dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings depending on the social and cultural frameworks through which they decode media messages. Thus, the same gendered representation may be rejected by some viewers as sexist while being accepted or rationalised by others as culturally appropriate or narratively conventional (Hall, 1980). It also underscores the importance of treating Nollywood audiences as an active, interpretive community rather than a passive, monolithic one. Another notable departure from prior research concerns student awareness. Unlike earlier literature (e.g., Endong, 2021), which portrayed media audiences as largely passive consumers of unproblematic gender representations, this study identifies a considerable number of students who, while aware of gender stereotypes, would prefer them to be more balanced and positive. This may be driven by greater exposure to international content through streaming platforms, or by ongoing discussions of feminism and gender rights within Nigerian online spaces. Either way, this heightened awareness presents an opportunity for content creators and educators to encourage critical viewing and reform of media narratives.

These findings also align with Amonyenze et al. (2023) regarding the ornamentalization of masculinity. Respondents identified male characters as dominant, aggressive, or violent patterns that discourage emotional expression and cooperative gender relations. This narrow construction of acceptable masculine behavior parallels the constraints placed on women's behavior, creating a zero-sum dynamic between the genders in which masculine dominance is normalized and feminine agency is framed as threatening. This has broader implications for interpersonal relationships, mental health, and gender equity initiatives on campus and beyond. From a policy standpoint, these findings call for reconsideration of how media production is taught and critiqued in the classroom. Respondents' general support for integrating gender awareness into film production courses, as recommended by Omotade and Ifeduba (2025), represents a step in the right direction. Embedding gender analysis into the curriculum equips future filmmakers with the skills needed to drive positive change while cultivating a generation of more knowledgeable and critical media consumers.

Conclusion

This research presents a two-sided account. On one hand, Nollywood continues to disseminate gender stereotypes that subtly shape the attitudes and assumptions of young audiences. On the other, it also stimulates critical thinking and discussion among the very audiences it entertains. Shaped by these underlying narratives yet increasingly critical of them, students occupy the center of an ideological tension in which new possibilities for gender awareness and negotiation through cinema continue to emerge. Nollywood, therefore, cannot be regarded as mere entertainment: it is a powerful institution capable of constructing, reproducing, or dismantling gender hierarchies. The evidence from this study underscores the need for educators, policymakers, filmmakers, and viewers to collaborate in reshaping Nigeria's cinematic landscape. If gender equity is to be meaningfully pursued, the screen must reflect the values it claims to

represent. This paper therefore not only validates the argument that Nollywood movies influence gender perceptions among undergraduates, but also points to an active space for resistance and change.

Recommendations

1. Scriptwriters should be encouraged to move away from patriarchal stereotypes and instead portray male and female characters with greater complexity, depth, and agency.
2. General education programmes could include media literacy courses or workshops that help students recognize and challenge harmful patterns perpetuated by mainstream media.
3. The government should strengthen the role of a national film regulatory body, such as the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), in collaboration with gender advocacy groups, to establish clearer standards and guidelines for equitable gender depiction in Nollywood productions. Periodic reviews should assess whether films perpetuate or challenge harmful stereotypes.
4. Universities can organize regular screenings of popular Nollywood films alongside critical discussions. These forums would give students the tools to deconstruct what they watch, understand gender politics in media, and consider alternative interpretations of media

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