Streaming Services and Film Access in Nigeria: Technological Implications for Audience Behaviour

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Abstract
The global audio-visual industry has undergone remarkable transformation driven by digital convergence, which has redefined how films are produced, distributed, and consumed. In Nigeria, the rapid expansion of streaming services such as Netflix, iROKOTV, and Showmax has altered traditional film-viewing practices, granting audiences unprecedented access to local and international content. Yet, despite their growing appeal, the adoption and use of streaming services remain constrained by infrastructural and economic challenges. This study examines the technological implications of streaming services on audience behaviour in Nigeria, focusing on how digital innovation, accessibility, and socio-economic realities influence film consumption patterns. Employing a textual and conceptual analytical approach, the study draws from secondary data and the Theory of Disruptive Innovation to contextualise audience engagement with streaming platforms. Findings reveal that while streaming services provide convenience, interactivity, and diversity of content, their growth is impeded by poor broadband penetration, high data costs, erratic electricity supply, and inflationary pressures. The study further identifies how mobile broadband expansion, smartphone penetration, and social media integration create opportunities for deeper digital inclusion and audience participation. It concludes that although streaming platforms have democratised film access and reshaped consumption behaviour, achieving sustainable adoption in Nigeria requires addressing the persistent infrastructural and economic barriers that limit equitable access and engagement.
Keywords: Film consumption, Audience behaviour, Digital technology, Disruptive innovations, Nigerian media industry.

Introduction

The global audio-visual landscape has undergone transformative changes over the past two decades, driven by the convergence of previously distinct technological systems. This convergence has reshaped how films and media content are produced, distributed, and consumed, challenging traditional paradigms of accessibility, viewing habits, and audience engagement (Jayabarthi, Maizurah, & Abdul, 2024). Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the transition from cinemas and physical media to online streaming, as lockdowns forced the temporary closure of theatres and production studios, resulting in substantial financial and operational disruptions (Ellul, 2023; Herdanto, 2023; Griffiths, 2024). In response, audiences increasingly relied on over-the-top (OTT) platforms, which allowed on-demand access to films and series across multiple devices, providing convenience, flexibility, and uninterrupted entertainment (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Dhiman, 2023).

In Nigeria, the liberalisation of the media sector in 1992 marked the beginning of a major shift in content distribution. This allowed the incursion of private operators of cable television and direct-to-home satellite platforms to begin broadcast distribution in an industry once dominated by government control. Introduction of cable television and direct-to-home satellite services gradually displaced traditional media formats such as VHS, DVDs, Blu-rays, and disc rental outlets, setting the stage for the digital streaming revolution (Arsenault & Perren, 2016). Historically, film consumption in Nigeria was limited to cinemas and television, often facilitated by Video Tape Recorders (VTRs), DVDs, or VCD players. Today, media convergence enabled by the internet has dramatically changed viewing habits, with audiences accessing content on-demand via digital platforms such as Netflix, iROKOTV, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video. These platforms have evolved from simple content hosts to sophisticated distributors that employ artificial intelligence to recommend personalised content based on user preferences and viewing behaviour (Sujith & Sumathy, 2021; Cho, 2020).

The expansion of streaming services in Nigeria has been supported by advancements in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector. Telecommunications providers such as MTN, Airtel, and Glo have enhanced broadband connectivity, data compression, and secure digital transmission, enabling efficient dissemination of digitised film content (Curtin et al., 2014). Mobile devices, particularly smartphones, have become the dominant medium for media consumption. Global smartphone adoption has grown at a compound annual growth rate of 17%, surpassing the growth of other mobile devices (Deloitte, 2019), while recent reports indicate that smartphone penetration in Nigeria has exceeded 200 million active devices, facilitating access to streaming platforms across urban and semi-urban areas (Vaidya & Fernandez, 2023).

Despite these opportunities, significant structural and socio-economic challenges hinder the widespread adoption of streaming services in Nigeria. Fixed broadband penetration remains low at 0.04%, well below the African average of 0.6% and the global average of 13.6% (Agboola, 2022). Infrastructure in many communities is inadequate, with slow internet speeds and high mobile data costs restricting access. Economic disparities further compound these challenges, as high levels of poverty and unemployment force consumers to prioritise essential needs over subscription-based entertainment (Okamgba, 2024). Moreover, regulatory and policy gaps, such as inconsistent copyright enforcement and content restrictions, occasionally limit the reach and profitability of digital platforms.

Streaming has also introduced notable socio-cultural shifts in Nigerian media consumption. Urban dwellers, especially youths, benefit from better broadband, higher digital literacy, and electricity that supports digital creativity, allowing them to increasingly consume a mix of local Nollywood content and international productions. In contrast, rural audiences often rely on local content through irregular accessible or free platforms, local video clubs, or shared offline media, creating a clear digital divide with urban areas (Ogunyombo et al., 2021). In general, OTT platforms have further facilitated cultural exchange and diversified viewing practices by providing content from multiple genres and regions, while personalised recommendation algorithms allow audiences to discover new content without extensive searching (Palomba, 2022; Patnaik et al., 2021). The convenience of multi-device access, the ability to share viewing experiences remotely, and on-demand availability have all contributed to a growing preference for digital platforms over traditional cinemas (Gaonkar et al., 2022).

Comparative insights from other emerging markets highlight Nigeria's position in the global streaming landscape. In India and Malaysia, for instance, OTT adoption surged during the pandemic, with platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, and iQiyi experiencing significant user growth (Basuroy, 2022; Lim, 2020). These international trends underscore the potential for Nigeria to expand its streaming ecosystem, provided infrastructural and socio-economic barriers are addressed.

While streaming platforms offer considerable potential, there remains a critical research gap in understanding how Nigerian audiences navigate infrastructural limitations, economic constraints, and socio-cultural preferences to engage with digital content. Few studies have explored post-pandemic consumption patterns, the relative preference for OTT versus traditional cinema, and the factors driving adoption and sustained use in Nigeria. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the implications of digital disruption on film consumption in Nigeria, examining how technological innovation, accessibility, and audience behaviour interact within the country's emerging streaming ecosystem.

Statement of the Problem

The emergence of streaming services has revolutionised global film distribution and audience engagement, providing users with improved audio-visual quality, instant playback, reduced distribution costs, and multi-device accessibility. In Nigeria, these digital innovations have expanded access to films and fostered new viewing habits that emphasise convenience and interactivity across social and mobile platforms. Yet, the promise of seamless digital access remains largely unmet. Nigerian film audiences continue to grapple with infrastructural limitations, including unreliable internet connectivity, high data costs, and erratic power supply, which collectively undermine streaming efficiency and satisfaction. These barriers are compounded by the dual financial burden of subscription and telecommunication costs, as well as inconsistent regulatory policies that further weaken audience satisfaction and participation. Despite growing scholarly attention to digital distribution and media convergence, limited empirical research has examined the behavioural and technological determinants influencing Nigerian consumers acceptance and sustained use of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming platforms. This study therefore investigates the technological implications of streaming services on audience behaviour in Nigeria, with particular focus on how infrastructural, economic, and regulatory factors influence the adoption and engagement patterns of film consumers. The research contributes to the broader discourse on infrastructural, economic, and technological factors shape audience interaction with emerging media platforms.

Review of Concepts

Streaming Services

Streaming services, often referred to as Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms, represent a paradigm shift in film distribution and consumption. They operate through digital infrastructures that allow users to access content directly via the internet, bypassing traditional intermediaries such as cinemas and broadcast stations. Globally, platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and YouTube have redefined access to film content, providing on-demand viewing, subscription-based models, and personalised recommendations. In the Nigerian context, local adaptations such as iROKOTV, Showmax, and Netflix Naija have similarly expanded access to diverse cinematic experiences. However, the potential of these services is moderated by infrastructural challenges, data affordability, and cultural preferences that shape how Nigerian audiences engage with streaming technologies. Thus, streaming services are not merely technological artefacts but sociocultural and economic systems influencing access, convenience, and the reconfiguration of audience habits.

Film Access

Film access refers to the degree of ease with which audiences can obtain, view, and interact with cinematic content. Traditionally, access was mediated through physical venues such as cinemas or television broadcasts, often constrained by geography, cost, and scheduling. The advent of digital streaming technologies has broadened access, enabling viewers to consume films on multiple devices, at any time, and from any location. In Nigeria, this digital expansion has democratised viewing opportunities, especially for younger and urban audiences, but it has also introduced new inequalities rooted in technological literacy, internet penetration, and socio-economic capacity. Film access, therefore, embodies both the opportunities of digital inclusion and the realities of infrastructural exclusion that define Nigeria's evolving media landscape.

Technological Implications

The technological implications of streaming services encompass the transformative and disruptive effects of digital infrastructures on film production, distribution, and consumption. These implications extend beyond mere efficiency or quality improvements; they reshape audience expectations, redefine industry value chains, and challenge traditional modes of cultural dissemination. For Nigeria, the implications are dual-edged: on one hand, streaming platforms foster innovation, local content creation, and global visibility; on the other, they expose structural deficiencies such as unstable broadband networks, limited electricity supply, and regulatory uncertainties. Understanding these implications requires a socio-technical lens that situates technology not as a neutral tool but as an active force shaping audience experiences and the sustainability of the film industry.

Audience Behaviour

Audience behaviour in the digital era refers to the patterns of selection, interaction, and engagement that define how consumers relate to film content through streaming platforms. Behavioural models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) offer frameworks for explaining how individuals adopt, use, and derive satisfaction from media technologies. In the Nigerian context, audience behaviour reflects a complex negotiation between convenience and constraint—where viewers value accessibility and interactivity but contend with cost, connectivity, and cultural relevance. Analysing audience behaviour in this environment thus involves understanding both technological motivations (such as perceived usefulness and ease of use) and contextual limitations that mediate digital adoption.

Film Consumption in the Digital Age

Film consumption in the digital age signifies the shift from collective, location-based experiences to personalised, mobile, and algorithm-driven viewing cultures. This shift has redefined audience agency, giving consumers greater control over what, when, and how they watch. Yet, it also introduces concerns about cultural homogenisation, attention fragmentation, and the erosion of traditional cinema culture. In Nigeria, digital film consumption embodies a dynamic intersection between global media flows and local identity construction. Streaming services have amplified exposure to diverse narratives while simultaneously reshaping how Nigerian stories are produced, distributed, and received.

Technological Disruption in Film Distribution and Consumption

The landscape of film consumption has undergone profound changes due to the proliferation of digital technologies, particularly the rise of over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms. These platforms provide audiovisual content directly over the internet, bypassing traditional distribution channels such as cinemas, DVDs, and cable television (Snyman &Gillard, 2019; Kim et al., 2017). In Nigeria, platforms like iROKOTV, Showmax, Netflix, and YouTube have redefined access to film, enabling audiences to stream content on-demand across multiple devices such as smartphones, tablets, and smart TVs (McCreery &Krugman, 2015; Kabusheva et al., 2016). This technological convergence has not only enhanced convenience but also reshaped the way audiences interact with content, facilitating interactivity, personalised viewing, and social sharing (Basuki et al., 2022; Jayabarthi, Maizurah & Abdul, 2024).

From a communication perspective, OTT platforms exemplify media convergence, a process in which multiple media forms, technologies, and platforms integrate to provide users with a unified content experience (Kotler et al., 2020). The shift from passive consumption of traditional media to active engagement with digital platforms highlights the evolving role of the audience from mere receivers to participatory actors (Garrison, as cited in Changsong et al., 2021). Users can now select what to watch, when to watch, and even interact with creators through social media or online communities, emphasising the interactive potential inherent in contemporary media systems. This aligns with contemporary communication theories emphasising participatory media and audience agency in shaping content consumption (Gupta & Singharia, 2021).

Technologically, the disruption of traditional distribution systems is central to understanding the Nigerian context. The Theory of Disruptive Innovation (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Christensen, 2003, 2016) provides a conceptual lens to analyse this phenomenon. OTT platforms initially targeted niche audiences with affordable, accessible, and easy-to-use content, gradually challenging the dominance of television, DVD, and satellite services. The disruptive nature of these platforms lies in their ability to offer new functionalities, such as time-shifting, multi-device streaming, and global content access, that traditional media could not provide (Ebelebe, 2017; Bhavsar, 2018). Over time, these innovations have restructured the market, forcing incumbents to adapt or risk obsolescence.

In addition, digital infrastructure and socio-technical factors significantly influence streaming adoption. While broadband internet, affordable smartphones, and mobile network coverage have expanded access, constraints such as high data costs, erratic power supply, and inflation limit consistent usage (Agboola, 2022; Akintaro, 2023). These challenges highlight the interaction between technological affordances and socio-economic realities, shaping how Nigerian audiences consume film in the digital era.

Furthermore, the globalisation of content facilitated by digital platforms allows Nigerian audiences access to diverse international and local films, promoting cross-cultural exchange and exposure to varied narratives (Malewar &Bajaj, 2020; Changsong et al., 2019). Simultaneously, local content producers in Nigeria are increasingly adopting new Nollywood production models that enhance aesthetics, narrative quality, and technological sophistication, reflecting the co-evolution of audience expectations and content production (Ebelebe, 2017).

Opportunities and Challenges of Streaming Services in Nigeria

Digital technologies have revolutionised the consumption of films, presenting multiple opportunities for audiences and content providers alike. The proliferation of OTT platforms has enabled on-demand access to diverse content, allowing users to watch films and series whenever and wherever they choose (Basuki et al., 2022; Jayabarthi, Maizurah & Abdul, 2024). These services leverage algorithmic recommendations and personalised content delivery, increasing user engagement and satisfaction while fostering active audience participation (Garrison, as cited in Changsong et al., 2021). In Nigeria, platforms such as iROKOTV, Showmax, and Netflix provide access to both local and global content, promoting cultural exchange and offering audiences the ability to explore diverse narratives beyond traditional television and cinema (Malewar & Bajaj, 2020).

The technological affordances of OTT platforms also facilitate multi-device streaming, enabling films to be viewed on smartphones, tablets, laptops, or smart TVs, effectively transforming homes into personalised cinema spaces (McCreery & Krugman, 2015). This flexibility has become increasingly critical during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when cinema closures forced audiences to seek alternative modes of content consumption (Changsong et al., 2019). Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) models have further encouraged audience autonomy, allowing viewers to self-schedule and time-shift content in ways previously unavailable through traditional media (Glass, 2019; Tefertiller, 2018).

From a market perspective, streaming services offer producers opportunities for content monetisation, global reach, and data-driven strategies. Platforms can deploy predictive analytics to understand audience preferences, tailor content offerings, and maximise subscriber retention (Lee et al., 2018; Adi, 2015). For Nigerian filmmakers, the rise of digital distribution channels has reduced reliance on DVD sales and physical distribution networks, helping to mitigate piracy and expand access to international audiences (Ebelebe, 2017). These opportunities collectively highlight the transformative potential of digital platforms in reshaping film consumption patterns, creating interactive, convenient, and economically viable modes of engagement for both consumers and content providers.

Despite these advantages, several challenges constrain the adoption and effective usage of streaming platforms in Nigeria. Foremost among these are infrastructural and socio-economic limitations, including high data costs, erratic electricity supply, inflation, and limited broadband access, which impede consistent and affordable access to streaming content (Akintaro, 2023; Agboola, 2022). Even as digital platforms promise affordability and convenience, subscription fees combined with telecommunication costs often deter users, reducing the perceived value of OTT services.

Moreover, the sheer volume of available content can overwhelm users, resulting in information overload and difficulty in content selection (Sharma, 2017; Sadlowska et al., 2019). While algorithmic recommendations alleviate some of these concerns, the challenge of navigating a rapidly expanding digital library persists, particularly for less tech-savvy audiences. Piracy and unauthorised distribution remain significant hurdles. Although digital platforms have curtailed traditional DVD-based piracy, online illegal streaming and content duplication persist, undermining the revenue potential for creators (Mauyakufa & Pradhan, 2018; Nwokedi & Okonkwo, 2018). Users may inadvertently support pirated services, exposing themselves to privacy risks, malware, and unethical monetisation practices. This reflects the complex interplay between technological access and digital literacy, which is critical in understanding audience behaviour in emerging markets.

Economic factors further exacerbate adoption challenges. Inflationary pressures and rising subscription fees, as seen with Netflix's pricing adjustments in 2025, have rendered streaming services less accessible to large segments of the Nigerian population (Opeisa, 2025). Data traffic congestion, slow buffering, and network instability contribute to quality-of-service concerns, diminishing the perceived reliability and enjoyment of online viewing experiences (Bhavsar, 2018). Finally, the competitive pressures within the digital media ecosystem, including traditional television, cable providers, and emerging OTT platforms, necessitate continuous innovation and audience-centric strategies. While these dynamics stimulate market growth, they also place additional demands on consumers to navigate subscription models, content bundles, and platform usability (Sadana &Sharma, 2020; Li, 2014).

While streaming platforms present considerable opportunities in terms of convenience, content diversity, interactivity, and global reach, the challenges of infrastructural deficits, socio-economic constraints, piracy, and market competition underscore the complex environment in which Nigerian audiences adopt and use OTT services. Recognising and addressing these challenges is critical for sustaining adoption, enhancing user experience, and ensuring equitable access in the evolving digital media landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the Theory of Disruptive Innovation to expound on how digital innovations have influenced the consumption of motion pictures in Nigeria. The original concept of disruptive technology was based on studies of tangible products, including the disk drive industry throughout the mid-1980s to early 1990s, and introduced in 1995 in an article by Bower and Christensen (1995). In it, they expound on the Disruptive Innovation theory which over the years has witnessed its development and adaptability through numerous testing frameworks in various fields (Christensen, 2016). The concept later became the Theory of Disruptive Innovation to better align with the inherent broader meaning of the concept.

Relatedly, digital innovations have created a new market for film consumption in Nigeria, thereby revolutionising the traditional market through substantially enhanced services that are convenient and affordable. Disruptive innovation constructs an entirely new business characterised by low prices for goods and services. While sustaining innovation, Christensen (2003, p.3) defines this process as:

> Evolutionary improvements of established technologies or technological breakthroughs (also known as "revolutions") raise the level of product performance, thereby meeting the demands of the most demanding customers and allowing premium pricing and profit margins. This type of innovation can be introduced by a new entrant or incumbent firm.

Disruptive innovation tends to disrupt the market through new goods and services that are cheap, simple to use, convenient, and appealing to consumers. Once the disruptive goods and services get a foothold in the market, the enhancement sequence begins, as is the case of Online Video Distribution in the country. It started its appeals to the millennial generation providing new ways of watching films on different screens. Later it gained a foothold in the market displeasing the traditional mediums of distribution. As a result of technological advancement in video compression and broadband internet facilitating streaming of videos with better quality films compared to traditional mediums, this has rendered traditional mediums to look obsolete.

The theory of Disruptive Innovation is critical in this study as it will help the researcher to examine the ramifications of digitisation on the consumption of motion pictures in Nigeria. The theory is vital, especially in the era of the digital revolution as it explains how the mushrooming of online video distribution mediums have led to the near demise of traditional consumption hence threatening the closure of movie distribution businesses in the country. It reveals that technological inventions can restructure the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services of a product. These inventions have the potential to obsolete labour and assets of a business in the market. For example, in motion picture advancement, development, and consumption, each new technological innovation has made the incumbent look outdated.

Conclusion

Media of entertainment in Nigeria popular before the advent of streaming platforms now face severe challenges. The significant infiltration of digital technologies and internet have upset the consumption patterns of entertainment once available to consumers and opened up new vistas to access films. Streaming platforms offer unprecedented variety of high-quality content to consumers, with an unequalled convenience of watching content anytime and anywhere. While this innovation is unrivalled, it also has its peculiar challenges ranging from poor network, rising cost of data, fatigue in choosing films, piracy and infrastructural deficit. have made the difference.

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