

**BETWEEN TRADITION AND TRENDING: CULTURAL RECEPTION AND MARKET PRESSURES
IN YORUBA CINEMA**

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay between audience behavior and the decline of Yoruba language cinema in Nigeria. Yoruba films have seen a decline in production and perceived quality, raising concerns about the survival of this culturally significant industry. Drawing on Cultural Reception theory and Uses and Gratifications models, as well as a policy analysis of Nigeria's film regulatory framework, the paper synthesizes empirical data and case studies to explain shifting consumption patterns. It finds that audience preferences have moved toward sensational, short-form, and foreign-language content; widespread tolerance for piracy and free online access; and intensive engagement on social media, all of which have undercut the commercial viability of traditional Yoruba home videos. Digital streaming platforms and diaspora viewing have had mixed effects, offering new reach while amplifying formulaic storytelling to cater to broad audiences. Nigerian film policies (e.g., lax copyright enforcement, limited subsidies) have failed to check these trends. The study concludes that audience-driven factors (not merely declines in talent or technology) largely explain Yoruba cinema's contraction, and recommends media literacy, stronger enforcement, and incentives for quality cultural content as remedies.

Keywords: Audience Behaviour, Digital Piracy, Film Policy, Media Consumption, African Cinema.

Introduction

The Yoruba language film industry, often called '**Yoruba cinema**' or colloquially '**Yoruba-wood**,' has been a vital arm of Nollywood (Nigeria's home video sector) since the 1990s. Rooted in the rich traditions of Yoruba theatre and folklore, this regional industry historically produced culturally resonant dramas and comedies that appealed to Yorubaspeaking audiences at home and abroad. In its heyday, films like *Saworoide* (1999) or *Maami* (2011) were celebrated for their use of proverbs, music, and ethical storytelling. However, in recent years observers have noted a marked decline in both the output and perceived quality of Yoruba films, prompting questions about the causes. In particular, scholars and insiders speculate that changes in audience behavior, spanning content preferences, piracy habits, social media engagement, and new distribution modes have played a critical role in this downturn. This paper therefore investigates how these audience factors have influenced the trajectory of Yoruba cinema, integrating theoretical models, policy context, and case examples to provide a comprehensive explanation.

Historical Background

Research on Nollywood and its regional sub-industries provides crucial context. Nollywood's roots lie in postcolonial cultural initiatives that favored indigenous content over Western imports. In particular, Yoruba travelling theatre luminaries (e.g., Hubert Ogunde, DuroLadipo, Kola Ogunmola) transitioned to film and television in the 1960s, preserving Yoruba cultural narratives through screen media. This legacy made Yoruba language cinema a primary vehicle for Yoruba tradition, reaching not only Southwest Nigeria but also Yoruba communities in Ghana, Europe, and the Americas. For much of the late 20th century, films with Yoruba themes and language (e.g., *Egungun*, *Moremi*, *Oba Koso*) were widely distributed via VHS and television, underpinned by strong local audience appreciation for cultural content. Empirical studies have confirmed that Nigerian audiences have historically welcomed culture-oriented films, enjoying the familiar proverbs, music, and moral values depicted.

Theoretical Framework

To interpret audience-film dynamics, the study employs Cultural Reception theory as well as Uses and Gratifications theory. Cultural Reception theory (Hall, 1980) emphasizes that audiences do not passively absorb media; they actively decode content based on cultural codes and contexts. Nigerian audiences are '**postcolonial**' spectators who enjoy both local and foreign productions without strict allegiance. Thus, Yoruba viewers may choose English language Nollywood, Hollywood, or other global content alongside indigenous films. Uses and Gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) also suggests that audiences select media to satisfy needs; for example, escapism, social identity, or entertainment which shapes demand. Additionally, Jenkins' participatory

culture concept (2006) highlights how social media and fan communities enable viewers to influence media norms and standards. These frameworks together predict that if Yoruba audiences shift their gratifications toward different genres or platforms, the production side must adapt or suffer.

We also consider political-economy perspectives. Nigerian media policy and market structures determine what content can be profitably made. The National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), copyright enforcement, and distribution infrastructure thus mediate audience–producer relations. A policy analysis will examine how weak regulation and incentives have failed to counterbalance adverse audience trends.

This hybrid approach merging reception/cultural theory, policy review, and empirical case study enables a deep analysis. We draw on industry reports (e.g., NFVCB data), market surveys, academic studies of Nigerian audiences, and contemporary media accounts (film reviews, news) to trace patterns. For instance, recent NFVCB (2023) statistics reveal a drop in Yoruba film submissions compared to prior years, suggesting diminished production. Interviews and trade reports highlight rampant digital piracy of local movies. Audience surveys (Abdulsalam 2023) find persistent cultural affinity but also a new appetite for sensational or foreign content. In this context, the paper proceeds to analyze specific factors such as piracy, streaming, social media, consumption, linking to theory, and then draws conclusions with policy implications.

Literature Review

However, by the 2000s and 2010s, scholarship observed significant shifts. Nigeria had become one of the world's largest film producers, and during this boom Yoruba producers often released dozens of low-budget home-video titles annually, leveraging a large Yoruba-speaking market estimated at over 30 million people by the mid-2000s (Haynes, 2011; Okome, 2007). This segmented industry operated largely outside the mainstream English-language Nollywood system; Yoruba films developed their own star system and marketing networks, centred initially on Idumota Market and later Arena/Oshodi distribution hubs, but remained underfunded by government and highly exposed to market pressures (Larkin, 2008; Olugbemi-Gabriel, 2020). The literature further notes that most Yoruba films were produced with minimal financial resources and rapid production cycles, often completed within two weeks, yet they remained commercially viable due to the loyalty of a culturally and linguistically defined ethnic audience (Haynes, 2016; Alamu, 2010).

By the 2010s, analyses began critiquing quality and sustainability. Some scholars observed that audience tastes were fragmenting. Abdulsalam (2023) noted gender and age differences among Yoruba viewers, but more recent reports speak of growing dissatisfaction with formulaic plots and production values. Audience surveys (though limited) found strong cultural affinity but also interest in popular genres like action, comedy, and horror. A key concept is cultural proximity: audiences often prefer content in their own language and culture, but this can shift if alternative content is more accessible or appealing. Recent studies in Nigeria highlight this tension: one survey of university students found many highly exposed to Yoruba movies by background, yet preferring English-Nollywood or international films as well. The literature implies a push-pull: Yoruba films continue to offer cultural comfort, but audience habits are also shaped by globalization, internet access, and evolving norms.

Importantly, the rise of digital technology and media has attracted significant scholarly attention. Scholars like Haynes (2016) described Nollywood's '**create-as-we-sell**' business model, noting how audience demand for new stories fuels quantity over quality. Larkin (2008) emphasizes how media content circulates across Nigeria's networks outside formal theaters. Studies on piracy (Ajaga&Olugboji, 2014) and on social-media marketing (Alamu, 2020) have specifically targeted Yoruba films. For instance, Alamu (2020) reveals that many Yoruba filmmakers had not embraced online marketing due to tech challenges and inadequate copyright law, factors that limit audience outreach. Meanwhile, cross-cultural reception research (Adeyanju, 2019; Abdulsalam, 2023) affirms that audiences will decode films differently based on cultural contexts, suggesting that if Yoruba films stray from core cultural values, their viewers may reject them.

Taken together, the literature establishes that Yoruba cinema once thrived on cultural resonance and captive ethnic markets, but now faces new headwinds: global content exposure, informal distribution, and social-media influences. It also points to policy gaps: Nigeria's film laws (e.g., the Cinematograph Act of 1963 and subsequent indigenization decrees) were designed to nurture local content, but enforcement has lagged. NFVCB reports routinely cite rampant piracy and too many unlicensed copies in the market. To contextualize these claims, the following section outlines the methodology for our inquiry before analyzing specific audience-driven factors.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, evidence-based approach. Given the nature of the question, no original field survey was conducted; instead, existing data and reports were synthesized while academic journals, industry

white papers, newspaper articles, and regulatory documents relevant to Yoruba language cinema and audience behaviour were systematically reviewed. Key sources include studies on Nigerian audience reception and Nollywood economics, reports from the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), and media accounts of piracy and streaming trends. Particular attention was paid to material explicitly or implicitly concerning Yoruba films. For example, Ajaga and Olugboji's (2014) interviews with Yoruba industry stakeholders gave insight into piracy effects, while NFVCB press releases (2023–2025) allowed analysis of production volumes and regulatory efforts.

Additionally, we incorporate case studies of specific films or events as qualitative illustrations. For instance, the Netflix release of a Yoruba film, *Aníkúlápó* (2022), and audience reactions to it (via social media and reviews) serve as examples of streaming's impact, though quantitative streaming data is scarce. We also cite commentary from industry figures; for example, actress Debbie Shokoya's (2024) Instagram critique of Yoruba film quality captures insider perceptions. The analytic framework is deductive: theoretical constructs (cultural reception, uses-and-gratifications, and political economy) guide the interpretation of empirical findings. Where possible, we triangulate sources (industry stats vs. expert interviews vs. audience surveys) to confirm patterns.

Limitations include the absence of comprehensive box-office or viewership data. We compensate by using proxy indicators: NFVCB's count of licensed titles (to gauge production), YouTube view counts, Netflix release lists, and piracy site activity counts reported in the press. Given the available data, this mixed-method synthesis aims to be thorough and current (sources from 2018–2025 predominate) and to connect audience behavior with industry outcomes rigorously.

Analysis of Data

Shifting Audience Preferences

Historically, Yoruba audiences were known to appreciate films that reflected their culture and values. Yoruba cinema's early success was built on '**cultural richness**' – use of proverbs, music, and mythology – which allowed indigenous and even non-Yoruba viewers to admire the storytelling. As Abdulsalam (2023) notes, most Nigerian audiences find pleasure in tradition-oriented films. However, recent evidence suggests tastes have broadened or fragmented.

Firstly, there is genre and tone fatigue. Many observers complain that contemporary Yoruba films have become formulaic. It was a popular opinion in entertainment magazines and columns in 2024 that some Yoruba producers rush to release '**soft porn and horror movies**' with high sex and violence content, at the expense of story depth; an example of this is an entertainment report in *Vanguard News* highlighting how fans and commentators have criticized recent Nollywood (including Yoruba) movies on YouTube for sensational content, repetitive low-quality storytelling, and an over-emphasis on sex and shock at the expense of narrative depth (Vanguard News, 2025). While not an academic source, this captures a perception that audiences now favour sensational or titillating themes. Similarly, actress Debbie Shokoya publicly lamented that substandard Yoruba movies on YouTube have driven audiences away. She acknowledged that many people now say they do not watch Yoruba movies because of poor production quality. These perspectives suggest viewers are blaming weak craft rather than abandoning ethnic loyalty, putting pressure on filmmakers to improve.

Empirically, a reception study of Nigerian undergraduates found that while students were highly exposed to Yoruba films by background, many actually preferred watching English-Nollywood or international films, citing better production values and broader appeal. This indicates a cultural proximity effect: youths who understand English may opt for content that seems more modern or globally trendy, especially if Yoruba films appear dated. In concrete terms, a Yoruba speaking teenager might binge Hollywood or English-Nollywood series on YouTube instead of watching a Yoruba home video.

The literature review's theme holds that Yoruba cinema's decline is partly driven by audience fragmentation. While older or rural viewers may still enjoy cultural tales, urban youth and middle-class viewers demonstrate ambivalence or disinterest. This is exacerbated by multiple media options. Younger Nigerians often grow up bilingual or multilingual, and if Yoruba fluency diminishes, they may skip Yoruba films altogether. However, it should be noted that, survey data on Yoruba language use and media preferences remains needed to confirm this trend, but anecdotal reports and small-scale studies imply it.

Digital Piracy and Revenue Loss

A dominant factor in audience behavior is tolerance for piracy. In Nigeria, many viewers including fans of Yoruba cinema routinely download or stream movies illegally. Multiple sources confirm that piracy is entrenched. Ajaga and Olugboji's (2014) survey of Yoruba film stakeholders found anemic enforcement: "piracy affected the movie industry negatively and producers and marketers struggle to eradicate this menace to

no avail.” (pg.6) Viewers in that study cited the low price and ubiquity of illegal copies, as well as a sense that it is convenient. In short, for many Yoruba-speaking consumers, free pirated access is normalized.

Nigeria’s media environment exacerbates this. In a market with spotty internet access and limited legal streaming options for local content, piracy often provides the easiest way to watch films. This creates a low-cost parallel market. Interviewed stakeholders report that it is common for a new Yoruba DVD or digital release to appear online without authorization within days, undermining legitimate sales. Shokoya’s observations align: one Yoruba film producer noted that many of his expected sales vanished because clips from the movie were circulated for free. In practice, consumers often simply stop watching poor content, rather than abandoning the language or culture. If a new Yoruba movie fails to attract views or sales, the producer is less likely to make another. Many have shifted to releasing short Instagram skits or going into English language Nollywood, underscoring how audience rejection of low-quality Yoruba films leads to production decline.

Streaming and Diaspora Effects

International streaming platforms have introduced new dynamics. Netflix and others have begun hosting Yoruba content, potentially expanding the audience. AzeezSesan (2025) observes that Netflix can globalize Yoruba films, making them available to diasporic viewers and even non-Yoruba learners. Indeed, Netflix’s catalog now lists Yoruba originals (with Yoruba audio), and in 2022 the streaming giant invested heavily in *Anikulápó*, a Yoruba epic by KunleAfolayan. This film has become one of the most popular Yoruba films in recent years, in part due to Netflix’s marketing. Its success shows that when international platforms showcase Yoruba content, it can achieve wider recognition. Yet such projects are the exception; the bulk of Yoruba video content remains off-platform and low-budget. Without consistent streaming deals, most filmmakers cannot afford high production values.

Diaspora communities also play a role. Many Yoruba films, including older classics, have a following among Yoruba speakers abroad. Subtitles or dubbed audio allow these films to be shared in Europe and America, supporting language learning and cultural ties. This represents a modest revenue stream (through subscriptions or downloads) and prevents complete loss of interest. However, diaspora interest has not reversed the home-market decline. In fact, some diaspora-driven demand may unintentionally fuel piracy, as content is often reposted on social media to satisfy overseas enthusiasts. Thus, while streaming and diaspora audiences sustain a niche market, they have not stabilized the broader industry.

Social Media and Meme Culture

Social media has transformed how audiences consume and talk about films. Significant portions of a Yoruba film audience’s viewing experience now occur on platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook, where they share bloopers, memes, and reactions. This signals a shift: the audience consumes a film not primarily as serious drama, but as Internet entertainment. Jenkins’ notion of “participatory audiences” is evident here, (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2009, pp. 5–6) but participation often takes the form of satire or comedic appropriation rather than devoted fandom. For example, clips from recent low-budget comedies are frequently repurposed as jokes, mocking cheap special effects. In this sense, the audience’s interpretive process has changed, prompting filmmakers to respond with more comedy or sensational content but often in ways that further alienate the core cultural audience, creating a vicious circle.

Political Economy and Policy Context

Nigerian film policy and market structures further influence these trends. Historically, Nigerian governments expressed interest in promoting indigenous culture through media especially via the indigenization policies of the 1970s. However, in practice the state’s involvement has been limited. The NFVCB’s current mandate focuses primarily on censorship and classification, with little active promotion of quality indigenous content. There are no significant subsidies, quotas, or incentives targeted at Yoruba filmmakers. Meanwhile, copyright enforcement has been weak and historically geared toward English language media such as enabling international festival participation. This policy environment has effectively sided with audience preferences: if audiences prefer piracy and free content, the state has offered no robust countermeasure.

From a market perspective, the competitive pressure of global media further disadvantages Yoruba cinema. Digital access to Hollywood and international films raises audience expectations, but local industry resources have not kept pace. The literature and industry data confirm that the Yoruba film segment operates within a **loose and largely informal market structure**, characterized by minimal regulatory oversight, low entry barriers, and weak enforcement of professional and copyright standards (Ajaga&Olugboji, 2014; Alamu, 2020; Olugbemi-Gabriel, 2020). In contrast to the state-owned WNTV era when traveling theatres and TV formally showcased Yoruba dramas, today commercial Yoruba studios compete in an open market without protection. Thus, both policy neglect and market realities contribute to shrinking output: if audiences lose interest and there is no subsidy or barrier to prevent it, producers will naturally cut back.

Discussion

Applying the theoretical frameworks, the findings are coherent. Reception theory explains that Yoruba films were once read through a **preferred decoding** by audiences who shared the same Yoruba cultural codes, values,

and symbolic frameworks embedded in the narratives (Hall, 1980; Okome, 2007), but as those viewers assimilate global media, the decoding shifts. Yoruba content must now compete with Hollywood narratives and local English films on thematic and stylistic grounds. According to cultural studies, this creates polysemic readings: some viewers take Yoruba films in a preferred (traditional) reading, while others interpret them oppositional or negotiated (e.g., joking about bad acting). The evidence that audiences mock low-quality Yoruba films on social media suggests that many are not decoding them as serious cultural texts at all, but as objects of humor.

Uses and Gratifications theory also aligns with the data. The massive popularity of piracy sites and streaming implies a shift in which gratifications Yoruba audiences seek. Where once they sought cultural identity affirmation through rich narratives, now they often seek instantaneous entertainment, social engagement (via social media), and cost-free access. This aligns with the idea in media economics that audiences increasingly “**vote with their remote control**” or, in the digital era, with their smartphones by actively choosing content that best satisfies their preferences and abandoning what does not (Puttnam, 1997; Napoli, 2011). When Yoruba films failed to provide these preferred gratifications, audiences turned to alternatives. Conversely, efforts like *Aníkúllápó* that did provide high-level cinematic thrills show that fulfilling modern entertainment needs can recapture interest, but such cases have been rare and expensive.

From a political-economy perspective, the weak enforcement of copyright and the competitive pressure of global content have created a market disadvantage for Yoruba filmmakers. The regulatory and economic environment did not keep pace with audience shifts. Nigeria’s support for film heavily favours English-language productions with export potential, so Yoruba filmmakers operate with limited public backing. The literature and data confirm that no new government interventions (like subsidies or theater construction) have targeted reviving Yoruba cinema. Even as boutique cinema chains multiply in major cities, they screen mostly international films. Yoruba films, frequently positioned at the lower end of Nigeria’s cinematic prestige hierarchy, are marginalised within formal exhibition circuits, which privilege global cinema and English-language Nollywood (Okome, 2007; Haynes, 2016). In this context, regulatory frameworks have largely deferred to audience consumption preferences, allowing streaming dominance and piracy to persist without robust policy resistance, thereby reinforcing audience hegemony over cultural production (Napoli, 2011; Olugbemi-Gabriel, 2020).

Audience Data

Hard numbers on Yoruba cinema consumption are scarce. One pragmatic proxy is NFVCB production data: in early 2023, official records show virtually no Yoruba films licensed from Abeokuta or Ibadan; industry insiders interpret this as meaning few new Yoruba films are being made. Another indicator is online trends: hashtags for new Yoruba releases get far fewer hits than those for English-Nollywood releases. Unfortunately, these figures are anecdotal, but consistent with the narrative that Yoruba films draw less active interest. Audience behavior data from surveys remain limited, so much of this analysis relies on triangulating such partial evidence.

Overall, the empirical findings indicate that audience behavior has been causal in the decline of Yoruba cinema. Certainly, other factors such as lack of capital, inadequate infrastructure, migration of talent to Lagos also contribute. Yet the emphasis on audience reveals that even if resources existed, the current market would not absorb many Yoruba films. As Shokoya’s statement underscores, if people feel they do not watch Yoruba movies, producers will not make them. Thus, consumer demand (or indifference) appears to be driving the supply contraction.

Conclusion

This study concludes that shifting audience behavior is central to the contraction of **Yoruba language** cinema in Nigeria. Cultural reception analysis shows that as audiences diversified their media diet, interest in traditional Yoruba narratives has waned relative to global and English-language content. Consumption patterns now favor free, short-format, or foreign material, which has propelled piracy and discouraged payment. Social media participation has amplified low-quality content and eroded communal pride in Yoruba film heritage. Streaming platforms offer new distribution modes but so far have highlighted mostly a few high-end Yoruba productions for niche audiences, without reversing the overall decline. Policy analysis finds that existing regulatory frameworks have failed to counteract these trends, with weak copyright enforcement and no targeted support for Yoruba filmmakers.

In summary, audience-driven factors – from piracy habits to content taste – have not only reflected but actively caused the Yoruba cinema downturn. This places responsibility on multiple fronts. Filmmakers must strive to raise quality and embrace new media marketing to win back audiences lamenting the current state. Audiences, for their part, may need media literacy efforts to value cultural content and resist piracy. The government and

industry bodies should enforce anti-piracy laws and consider incentive schemes (grants, tax breaks, creative labs) to encourage cultural filmmaking. For example, the NFVCB could allocate more resources to indigenous-language cinema development, beyond mere classification tasks. Future research should gather more hard data on Yoruba audience behavior (e.g., surveys of language use and viewing habits) to better inform these interventions.

Only by aligning incentives and raising standards can the cycle of decline be broken. Otherwise, Yoruba language cinema risks becoming a relic of diaspora nostalgia rather than a living cultural industry. The case of Yoruba film exemplifies a broader media challenge: in a globalizing, digital world, maintaining vibrant vernacular cinema requires both audience support and systemic protections. Without addressing the root causes - audience behavior and enabling policies - even a storied film tradition may fade.

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