

INNOVATION, STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AND PROMOTION OF ARTS AND CULTURE IN AKWA IBOM STATE: THE UYO INTERNATIONAL THEATRE AND FILM FESTIVAL (UTAFF) EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The artistic and cultural industries have become the centre of the new economic thrust, globally. However, the aspect of theatre and film festival is noticeably an underexploited cultural developmental domain; despite the region's rich heritage and potential to grow the creative economy. This study examines the innovations deployed (since 2018) for the strategic management and promotion of arts and culture through *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival* (UTAFF). Using Straut Hall's Cultural Identity Theory and Henry Jenkin's Convergence Culture, this study examines the identifiable cultural components and its innovative convergence as frameworks to strategically situate local theatre and film practices for global appreciation, promotion and preservation. The methodology takes a qualitative study approach, supported by an observant's participatory and resource-based view of strategic management. Findings reveal that, the strategic management of indigenous festivals adds to the repertory of our existing creative practices, even as film festivals has emerged as strategic platform through which the sub-national and national cultures negotiate visibility, economic value and identity in an increasingly globalized creative economy. This will encourage creativity and a sense of belonging in society and help preserve and promote local content for global appeal. This study contributes significantly to the development of culture and cultural products, by showcasing innovative expressions for the socio-economic values of our society.

Keywords: Arts Promotion, Culture, Film festival, Innovation, Strategic Management

Introduction

Arts and culture embody the values and cardinal norms of a given society. It helps human beings to understand and relate with individuals in various settings and across geographical boundaries. Art succinctly offers the chance to showcase communal capacities through presentations and exhibition of its arts. This exhibition provides a medium to link aesthetics with other activities applied to acquire new knowledge about the way of life of a people. It therefore becomes true that art brings people together from different parts of the world and culture is appreciated when we understand each other's diversities. Arts and culture therefore provide an adaptableness and elasticity by providing an ideal atmosphere for promoting creativity.

According to Aniebiet Mbede, "In every age and every culture, audiences come to the theatre with expectations to leave informed, educated and entertained. Audience response can be articulated through direct observation of the numerical strength of the people who view the theatre production (in the auditorium), and online through live streaming, digital photos of the production, videos and comments on the designated social media platforms" (154). Culture protects the sense of who we are and gives irrefutable connection to the past to certain social values, beliefs, customs and traditions of the age. A number of cultural activities exist in the twenty-first century, which creates a unique creative space for producers well as conducive interactive spaces for the promotion of arts; even as many cultural activities have been in practice from time and have given an acclaim of being super-active, but through the *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival* (UTAFF) project. This work becomes better appreciated on a larger scale across both traditional (stage) and social media (online) platforms. The cultural activities in Akwa Ibom are particularly presented uniquely as a twenty-first century curation of sorts, drawing artistic and cultural expressions from many states of the federation, as they showcase diverse creative packages. This creates a multi-dimensional theatrical experience during the festival. "In the digital age where there is convergent use of multiple media channels of communication, multimedia serves as an effective communication system which allows for the digital integration of text, graphics, pictorials, audio, still images, animation and motion videos in a way that provides a user with a high level of control and interaction" (Mbede and Etuk 43). *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival* (UTAFF) is arguably the first combined festival that has merged the traditional theatre and dance spectacles to the innovative silver screen film experience in Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria and the innovative festival features chorale presentations, dances, live drama sessions and film competitions.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a dual and complementary theoretical framework which allows *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival* (UTAFF) to be understood through the lens of cultural phenomenon with the dynamic ability to converge meaningfully and attract audiences and patronage - Straut Halls *Cultural Identity Theory* and Henry Jenkins *Convergence Theory*.

Hall identifies cultural dynamism in the process of art becoming a part of the people rather than an isolated static construct. The transposing of cultural heritage as distinctive artistic assets in forms of dances, costumes, masks, body arts and indigenous language; in a symbolic yet organized into a product that is relevant to the global market.

Innovation concerns hatching of a new concept to aid man contend with challenges around him, and human beings are naturally seen and portrayed as innovators. According to David Hunt, "innovation is bringing up a new approach to carrying out a task" (133). Seema Hasan agrees to the notion that, "innovation is provoked by creativity, and the basic context is setting a process in a way that is viable and strange compared to the way it is known" (224). This may be the reason MacGowan and Melnitz and Chaster Starr submit that, "in the human history, changes occur as a result of human learning and desire to learn more". Innovation in design can be viewed as the creation of a workable instrument to tackle an encompassing challenge. According to Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald, "innovation in creative arts is a normative means of achieving success" (223). It involves deploying a new method that befits a case in process and other unforeseen issues that may affect humanity.

Innovation and Art Promotion in Film Festival Curation

The need to innovate as a strategic arrangement for art promotion actively requires the cloning of new ideas or pruning the already existing ones to make a hybrid (between the old and the fresh) in a way that can tackle issues within a system. According to multimedia director Aniebiet Mbede, "In the light of the evident global shift, it becomes essential for theatre practitioners to reinvent the mode and modalities for publicity and production participation through the integration of socially driven electronic devices to enhance the reach and output of theatrical productions" (Mbede et al. 96). The use of the innovative platforms available for publicity therefore becomes equally important to reach the desired audience for the work of art. Innovation in art therefore becomes the reflection of a new thing from the old one, as a dimension of trend that suits the purpose of the age. As a reflection of the creativity in the human part, innovation tackles a need, in this case the need to promote our art; which includes films, dances, costumes, makeup and culinary impressions. Based on this, innovation in creative arts implies the trends that commands effective response to issue especially as found in theatre and film practices to this effect, innovation "presupposes the existence of common goals between the individual and organization (rebirthing talent) through the unity of purpose and direction as everybody works towards the actualization of the common goal" (Barclays Ayakoroma 53). In an interview with *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival* (UTAFF) Director of Mobilisation, Aniebiet Mbede, she submits that; "the festival is a breath of fresh air that has gathered and showcased talents from the town (film makers and professional actors) and the gown (especially the student community). This will wholistically drive the industry forward in its socio-economic frontiers" (Mbede Oral Interview 02/02/2026).

On this premise, innovation becomes the recombination of ideas, which creates value for an organisation. In this regard, for the creative industry to thrive, innovating on our festival culture becomes a strategy for the reinvention of cultural heritages from the local community to the global stage. "The global film market has therefore been positioned through the advantageous use of use of social media platforms to create short clips in the form of film trailers, behind-the-scene, influencer, partnerships and other such viral campaigns which are prompted to draw the attention of viewers and build anticipation of the film material to gain traction in the crowded attention landscape of the digital space" (Mbede 177-178).

In recent times, film festivals in Nigeria have been experiencing a trajectory of growth as exemplified by the *Uyo International Theatre and film festival* from 2018 till 2026. To this end, this study examines the newness of perspective the festival and its offerings for the arts and cultural venture. This is to identify the value the project has recorded over time, beyond mere aesthetics in its role to inform, educate and entertain. "The evolution of multiple channels of technology in every sphere of human endeavour has birthed an artistic and technical merger of various forms, which has become the director's tool for crafting beautiful content and serving the same to audiences, who look forward to artistic expressions, as a means of entertainment, information or education" (Aniebiet Mbede, 2). This is the kind of merger that UTAFF serves as a bridge between live theatre presentations, and the innovation edge that film presentations and distribution offer to the global cultural landscape. The hybrid screening structure of the festival also speaks to this innovative edge in the use of technology through simultaneous screening platforms and social media driven publicity, audience engagement and digital archiving.

Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival (UTAFF): Origin and Milestones

The *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival* started in Uyo, Akwa Ibom state capital in October 2018. This project maintains the Akwa Ibom finesse in outlook and background undertone in terms of décor and presentation of productions including films which, as presented, always has the filmmaker's culture. UTAFF is curated by Mr. Victor Thompson, an internationally recognised choreographer, President Dance Guild of Nigeria and a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Film studies, University of Uyo, Nigeria. A significant advantage to the Akwa Ibom creative community, UTAFF has maintained steady annual rebirth, and it has been anchored with a flux of performances that allows for the indigenous expressions from Ibibio, Annang, Eket, and Oro extraction of the cosmos to tell their artistic stories through drama, dance. It actually maintains regularity in the aspect of programmes presented in a particular year, however, there is a regular flow of theatre and film productions to its credit.



Plate 1: Official Logo, Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival (UTAFF)

Plate 2: Curator, UTAFF- Mr. Victor Thompson

Source: Film Festival (UTAFF), archive.

According to Victor Thompson, “the various presentations come with various trends and aesthetic highlights. The festival showcases the various artistic and aesthetic elements of African traditional theatre in a blend with contemporary cultures and yet, has maintained a steady outlook in the aspect of innovation and in the promotion of creativity, community cohesion and socio-economic impact in the region after eight editions of the festival” (Victor Thompson - Curator, Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival).

The festival themes since inception are as follows: Discovery (2018), Society and Values (2019), Inspiration (2020), Rethinking Culture (2021), Africanism (2022), Humanity (2023), Friendship (2024), Cinema Nnyin (2025) and Expression (2026). All these themes were intentionally crafted and displayed aesthetically in dance expressions, costumes, accessories, masks, songs, makeup and film displays during the festival.



Plates 3 and 4: Akwa Ibom born Actresses: Aniebi Francis and Eve Esin as poster models

Source: *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival* (UTAFF), archive.

Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival: Strategic Management and Arts Promotion

Nigeria's creative economy is anchored substantially by Nollywood has evolved into a cultural and economic asset. Film festivals have become a networking platform, but a driver of the tourism sub-sector. The Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF), the Lagos Film festival and the emerging *Uyo International*

Theatre and Film Festival (UTAFF). Although Film festivals have become prominent features for showcasing the creative output of every region, there are management strategies that remain unexplored in theoretical framing and in practical application. Most film festival organisers still struggle with funding, resource mobilisation, issues of failed sponsorships, branding and positioning, and partnerships, stakeholder management and the burden of building coalition. risk and sustainability management.

In the view of Socrates in his discussion with Adeimantus, art is primarily the *mimesis* meaning, “creativity from the imitative activity with the ability to influence the society. It can affect the soul. It can make the strong weak and the weak strong. For the influence it commands, a censorship should be established to control it” (Plato 13-14). This knowledge forms values, creates attitudes, and influences behavior. “Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values” (Chris Kluckhohn 86). The creative works of citizens of society is usually the collection of social reality and recollection historical facts to re-position a stance in the outlook of the cosmic reality prevalent in a time. According to Wright cited in Osofisan, “the gold can be replaced, the timber can grow again, but there is no power on earth that can rebuild the mental habits and restore that former vision of life that once gave significance to the lives of those people. Nothing can give back to them that pride in themselves, that capacity to make decisions, that organic view of existence that made them want to live on this earth and derive from that living a sweet even if sad something eroded personalities loom here for those who have psychological eyes to see (45). There is need to showcase the creative endeavors to the public. Through showcasing, other societies of the world may benefit from the arts, and it may become a factor for tourist attraction which may enhance cultural development.

Promoting Culture through *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival*

Culture is both material and immaterial in nature, and all these are found in creative arts such as theatre and film. In the view of Radcliffe Brown, culture consists of the conventional patterns of thought, activity, and artifact that are passed on from generation to generation (40). Culture is not just an observable behavior, but rather the values and beliefs that people use to interpret experience and generate behavior, and that is reflected in their behavior. This means says that “Culture is the man-made part of the environment” (Herskovits 17), while Meade sees it as “the total shared, learned behavior of a society or a subgroup” (22). According to Geertz culture is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (89). In this dimension culture deployed in performing arts gains further promotion through festivals like U. Cultural promotion is the showcasing of cultural norms, values and historical facts deployed into the creative activities of a society for public appraisal. According to Tracey Utoh-Ezeajugh, cultural promotion is “the unique artistic legacies of traditional society displayed in people’s poetry, sculpture, cloth-making, wall-decoration and body design” (23). Beyond this, an aspect of culture that has to do with the documentation of a people’s view of life can be promoted. These dimensions of culture are the ones blended in theatre and film festival. According to Olu Obafemi, cultural promotion is fundamental to human existence and human civilization and embodies the totality of people’s response to the challenges of life and living (since) culture offers meaning, purpose and value to the socio-economic, political and aesthetic ethos of society. Culture is material and immaterial, tangible and non-tangible. In material terms, culture ramified the production, distribution and exchange of social being and relationships of mankind. Our Cultural history and consciousness need to be relevant” (25-36). Through the promotion of culture, the thought perception of a person can be assessed, and assistance too (when necessary) can be offered especially in the Third World countries’ cases of underdevelopment. Cultural promotion is an aspect of self-assessment and a conscious beckoning for public appraisal of a societal cultural view. In the view of Ekong Ekong, “the various human practices interwoven in creative activities stimulate public appraisal and remark. This gives the creator a sense of relevance and power” (46-47). According to Ifure Ufford-Azorbo, “cultural promotion entails that “aesthetics derivatives are made manifest through folk tradition which include proverbs, festivals, ceremonies, rituals, artifacts, costume and makeup, accessories, music and dance, used to foreground the richness of African soil” (263). Cultural promotion creates an affinity between the producer and the consumer of cultures in display. This may lead to further interplays that can delete archaic practices and births healthy and pleasant ways of life through acculturation. The basis of a festival is to promote a course. (Taylor and Kneafsey 181). This claim was significant in the *Uyo International Theatre and film Festival through* film screening sessions, costume parades, make-up and dance presentations; to promote the culture, history, language, folklore, food, hospitality, ethnic craft and economy of the people. The unique blend of traditional theatrical presentation model and the infusion of digital technology via social media is palpable. “From trending stories to and blog posts, to the use of hashtags (#) to locate conversations, case notes, video podcast and infographics; this emerging platform allows multiple users a portal for easy, on the spot communication and collaboration in commerce, education and entertainment has indeed transformed the social fabric of humanity, this is the twenty-first century mystic which traverses every social media platform, with its

uniqueness and strong feature point” (Aniebiet Mbede 4). This makes the UTAFF project a social crusade with the platform that can be described as the conveyor of cultural consciousness in the Akwa Ibom Community.

Promoting Culture through Dance in UTAFF

One of the cultural elements showcased during the *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival* (UTAFF) are the excellent choreographic performances. In 2018, the maiden edition dance displayed of the UTAFF festival was filled with colours, portraying women dancing in various costumes parading the arena - Ibom Silverbird Cinema with well-choreographed indigenous *Ekombi* steps. Culturally, *Ekombi* steps are made to depict the wave sequence of the river within which emphasis is created by initiating a sudden storm, inadvertent scenario that spurns the orderliness of the water flow, and the deliberate stimulation of the dual cosmic interaction of the mortal and the immortal to draw the dance to its climax. According to Ifure Ufford-Azorbo and Tam Azorbo, “*Ekombi* is the major dance style of the Ndem dance. it is an imitational display of the graceful flow of the sea fishes as they swim and mermaid (78). It involves both arms spread out, like the fish spreads it's fins in readiness to swim. The trunk is wriggled in a wave-like manner with the out-spread arms used for steering and balance.



Plate 5: Akwa Ibom Cultural Dance Troupe showcasing *Ekombi* Dance during the Festival
Source: *Uyo International Theatre and film Festival* (UTAFF), 2018

The dancers stand on toes while doing movement execution. The performance space serves as a body of water and as fish swim in the water so does *Ndem* dancer swing her body back and forth” (121). *Ekombi* steps film festival, the question of standing on toes to jerk, swerving and pull back was completely circumscribed. *Ekombi* was rather emphasized with foot flattened to carry the movements across space. In 2021, a remarkable expression of innovation was found the *Ekombi* dance accessory, where beads made from a brand of drinking-straw was used in decorating the *Ekombi* dancer's head. This newness may have stimulated the beads making with papers children are making in the Akwa Ibom today. Another set of *Ekombi* dancers used stringed beads on top of the normal short wrapper usually tied in the waist region for the dance.



Plate 6: *Moninkim* Dancers with full dance accessories
Source: *Uyo International Theatre and film Festival* (UTAFF), 2018

Another trend in the body accessory was the emphasis on sparkling which drew much attention to the set of *Uta* dancers in 2020. The head gear was made of a particular material that looked like wrapping material

for parcel. The design drew much attention to the *Uta* dance, such sparkling distracted the viewers' keen concentration on the fluid wriggling of the dancer's waist. In 2018-2019, The dancers subjected to using the full regalia (indigenous) of the Culture they portrayed ranging from Akwa Ibom Cultural dances which is performed by the Cultural centre, Igbo (*Atilogwu* dance), *Ekombi* dance of the Akwa-Cross people.

The Aesthetic use of Masks in UTAF

Mask is one of the creative art pieces that had a touch of newness during the 2020-2021 Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival. The use of masks paraded the occasion, and spectacles were made to filter through masks. Through face masks for protection, new sets of mask were introduced; but the significant was that the wielders were in a way making campaigns for people to circulate and adhere to government directives through art.

The innovative use of the mask went beyond its functionality to cover the face; but the stimulation of the pandemic consciousness, for self-preservation and the stylistic representation of selves in terms of country, ethnic blocs and world view. Using masks, races delineated and sub-sets like beliefs set, were equally earmarked. The dramatic effect, exaggerated traits and representation of beings were highlighted by the displays as part of the traditions and contributed to the characterisation, storytelling, audience engagement, cultural heritage and the overall artistic and aesthetic impact of the cultural convergence of the Akwa Ibom people.



Plate 7: Use of Masks in the parade

Source: *Uyo International Theatre and film Festival (UTAFF)*, archives.

The Convergence Culture: UTAFF Film Screening Sessions

The high point of the festival is the film screening session, although live-performances, poetic renditions and paper presentations are in display, audience members gravitate towards the film screening. Copious set of film are received and carefully selected for display with themes ranging from: Love, Friendship, Sex, Romance, War and Pain. There has also been on record a creative rebirth in the development of short films previewed for international awards and recognitions on the UTAFF platform. One of such is the documentary, "Production Technology of Oil Palm" in the 2021 edition, which established an entrepreneurial wakefulness in the palm oil production process and the history of Akwa Ibom culture, norms and values. Beside the pursuit of connotation insight, the display of films made by up-coming Nigerian filmmakers was an aspect of innovation. The festival offered an avenue for young Nigerians to showcase their creative prowess. The use of film was also a way of showcasing the creative prowess of the agro-sector and feature some of our young filmmakers in both Akwa Ibom and in the diaspora. It was an opportunity for film makers to promote the film culture of the people.



**PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY
OF OIL PALM**

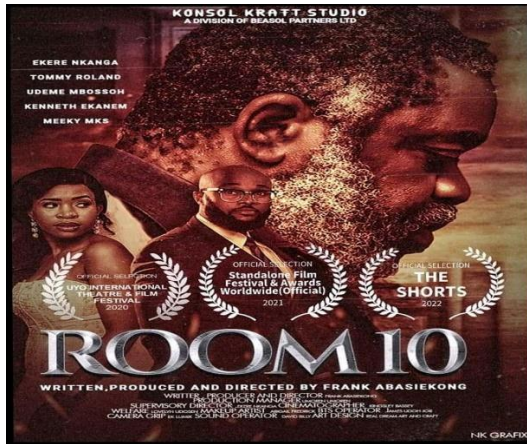


Plate 8: Documentary on Oil Palm, UTAFF

Plate 9 and 10: *Room 10* and *September 23*, films screened at UTAFF

Source: Film Festival (UTAFF), archive.

Costumes, Makeup and Folklore as Identified Cultural Promoters

The use of both indigenous and foreign cosmetics to design the body to communicate in a performance was another way to promote arts during the festival. Some aspects of Makeup were identifiable with countries, people and beliefs across Africa. Some were mere displays of creative conception of human beauty and depth of creativity. Masks were also on display. All of them were showcased prominently during the festival. This was a kind of promotion of creative powers in society. Many bodily gears were showcased during the *Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival*. Apart from the novelty of their outlook, each attempted to showcase human creative powers in fashion, colors, shapes and lines design. The showcasing of these cloths, headgears, bangles, beads etc., is a way to promote arts in Akwa Ibom, Nigeria and African people. The major outlet for projecting Africa's way of life is the revival of the folkways. Folklore was practically set on motion through dance, choral songs, ululation, games, masquerading especially in the films showcased as way of promoting the culture of the state.



Plate 10: *Choral Presentation* at UTAFF

Source: Film Festival (UTAFF), archive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explores the strategic position of film festivals as a tool for cultural identification, construction and circulation of cultural presentations. This has made the Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival a significant partner in curating a symbolic portfolio for innovative cultural development, talent discovery, financing and identity affirmation in Nigeria and most especially in Akwa Ibom. Today, it is on record that UTAFF has made remarkable impact in the creation of newness in arts, in which the valuable norms and conventions of the Nigerian society is projected. In a way, through this festival, Akwa Ibom Culture, Nigerian Culture and African Culture blended in aesthetics are obviously showcased although with its attendant challenges. The lack of government budgetary allocation for film and artistic festivals, disruption of cultural film festival calendar by political events, the underdeveloped digital distribution channels that will link the festival to the global community without hitches in a shared cultural frame.

Recommendations

- Based on the findings of this work, the paper recommends the following.
1. The Government of Akwa Ibom State should partner with the management of the Uyo International Theatre and Film Festival, so that the festival has a multi-year strategic plan captured in the budget, so it can in turn contribute positively to the creative economy of Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria.
 2. The festival management should build a digital database for diaspora reach also project creative works for international awards and recognitions.
 3. Stakeholder and management should focus on audience growth, sponsorship diversification, cultural and economic impact and expanding the cinematic and cultural landscape.

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