

REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN SELECT NOLLYWOOD MOVIES

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ABSTRACT

Nollywood movies are significant channels of communication in Nigeria, known for creative and realistic portrayals of some phenomena in African societies and beyond. However, there is an ongoing debate about the role of Nollywood movies in perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes, particularly their manner of depicting female characters in sexual relationships. Against that backdrop, this study sought to ascertain the real position of Nollywood either challenging or supporting the existing stereotypes representing female characters' sexuality in films from the period of 2020 to 2024. Through the application of a mixed-methods approach, the study examined various contents of selected movies and collected data from some viewers. The social constructivist theory guided this study. Findings show most Nigerian movies perpetuate harmful stereotypes, depicting female characters as passive and submissive. A few movies challenge these stereotypes, portraying female characters as empowered. Based on the above results, the study recommends prioritizing empowered and dynamic female characters by depicting them as active agents in sexual relationships. Such an approach can promote a more inclusive representation of women in Nigerian movies.

Keywords: Gender, stereotypes, female sexuality, Nollywood movies, and empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of female sexuality in African cinema, particularly in Nollywood (Nigerian movies), embodies a multifaceted and contentious dialogue that reflects wider cultural, social, and political realities. Nollywood ranks as the second-largest film industry globally by output. It has emerged as a significant cultural influence that has transformed perceptions of gender, identity, and morality among individuals in Nigeria and beyond Africa. In this cinematic realm, women's sexuality is often depicted as a convergence of tradition and modernity, morality and desire, as well as oppression and empowerment. These representations not only mirror prevailing patriarchal norms but also challenge them, positioning Nollywood as a crucial platform for discussing the importance and boundaries of women's sexual identities (Haynes, 2016).

Historically, African societies have defined female sexuality within restrictive boundaries linked to familial honor, cultural values, and patriarchal authority (Amadiume, 1997). Nollywood films frequently perpetuate these notions by assigning women roles that emphasize purity, motherhood, or moral prudence. Women exhibiting sexual agency are typically labelled as wayward, spoilt, or dangerous, and their narratives often culminate in punishment or moral retribution. Films from the 1990s, such as *Domitilla* (1996), dramatized the lives of sex workers to impart moral lessons regarding the perils of promiscuity, rather than examining the structural and emotional complexities of female desire. This aligns with Mulvey's (1975) notion of the "male gaze", in which women's sexuality is often depicted for the pleasure or scrutiny of male viewers, therefore undermining their subjectivity.

Nollywood's representation of female sexuality is complex. Filmmakers have begun to interrogate and contest conventional representations as the industry has evolved. Contemporary films, particularly those helmed by female directors such as Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart* (2018) and Jade Osiberu's *Isoken* (2017), have depicted intricate female characters whose love and sexual decisions are integral to their identities, rather than mere cautionary narratives. Although these films may not explicitly revolve around sexuality, they transform discourse by prioritizing women's empowerment, creativity, and self-expression within a cultural industry predominantly centered on male narratives (Okome, 2001). The global dissemination of Nollywood films has amplified discourse on African femininity, sexuality, and ethics.

Individuals in the diaspora frequently critique Nollywood for endorsing conservative perspectives on female desire, while others commend it for its

ability to blend cultural authenticity with contemporary storytelling (Ogunleye, 2003). Nollywood's theatrical approach frequently reflects the concerns of Nigerians about the rapid transformation of the country and the erosion of traditional values. Female sexuality functions as a symbolic domain for overarching disputes on identity, modernity, and morality (Haynes, 2016). The interplay of sexuality with class, religion, and culture further complicates Nollywood's representations. Women of higher socio-economic status are occasionally seen as more liberated or indulgent, whereas the sexuality of working-class women is linked to survival or moral evaluation. Religious films, a significant subgenre in Nollywood, often reinforce conventional Christian beliefs, portraying female sexuality as a temptation that requires supervision (Okome, 2001). This dichotomy underscores the function of female sexuality in Nollywood as both an instrument of patriarchal dominance and a potential means for resistance and self-identification.

The depiction of women in cinema has emerged as a focal point of academic discussion for several decades. This is especially true in terms of how media constructs and influences societal views on gender roles and power dynamics. Film serves as a medium through which cultural values are reinforced, contested, or transformed, making it an essential tool for analysing the portrayal of female sexuality and power (Omoera & Emwinromwankhoe, 2024). In Nollywood (Africa's largest film industry), female characters have often been depicted through perspectives that fluctuate between empowerment and subjugation. The representation of women in Nollywood has evolved over the years, reflecting broader societal changes. Early Nollywood films in the 1990s and early 2000s often depicted women in stereotypical roles—either as submissive housewives, temptresses, or victims (Alola & Alola, 2020). However, recent years have witnessed shifts, with filmmakers increasingly crafting narratives that challenge traditional gender roles (Ofori, 2024). Although these portrayals are influenced by various social, cultural and economic factors, they play a significant role in molding public attitudes towards gender identity, sexuality and power.

This evolution has been accelerated by the emergence of digital streaming platforms and international collaborations, which allow filmmakers to delve into themes of female empowerment and sexuality with increasing creative liberty. Although these advancements are noteworthy, lingering questions persist regarding whether such portrayals truly subvert entrenched stereotypes or merely repackage them in a contemporary format. The interplay of sex, power and cinema in Nollywood bears significant weight, particularly against the backdrop of the global feminist movement and the growing calls for gender equality within African societies. Because films reach expansive audiences, the

industry wields considerable influence, possessing the capacity to either sustain or dismantle damaging stereotypes. From the early days of Nollywood in the 1990s to the present, the industry has undergone significant transformations. Initially dominated by storylines that reinforced patriarchal ideologies—depicting women as subservient wives, victims of abuse, or femme fatales—the industry has, in recent years, evolved to include more diverse narratives that challenge traditional gender norms.

The increased involvement of female directors and producers has significantly influenced how women are depicted in Nollywood films. Pioneers like Genevieve Nnaji (*Lionheart*) and Kemi Adetiba (*King of Boys*) have introduced narratives that portray women as strong, independent, and complex characters, thereby challenging existing stereotypes (Okibe, 2024). This shift underscores the importance of female creatives in fostering gender-inclusive storytelling. Global movements such as the Millennium Development Goal No. 3 and Sustainable Development Goal No. 5 have spurred conversations around gender equality and women's empowerment, prompting Nollywood to reflect these ideals in its storytelling (Ogwezzy-Ndisika et al., 2023). The depiction of women in Nollywood has long been subjected to criticism for perpetuating gender stereotypes that constrain women's agency in both fictional narratives and real life. Some scholars contend that, while female characters may seem independent and self-assertive, they are frequently still ensnared in narratives that conflate female empowerment with hypersexuality, materialism, or revenge against men (Adam, 2021).

This study seeks to explore whether select Nollywood films released between 2020 and 2024 promote the empowerment of women by presenting them as intricate, multidimensional individuals, or if they persist in perpetuating restrictive stereotypes. Therefore, the study sought to answer these research questions including: How has female sexuality been depicted in Nollywood films released between 2020 and 2024? To what extent do these portrayals reinforce or challenge existing gender stereotypes? Do Nollywood films' portrayals of female empowerment progressive? What are the audience perceptions of the representation of female sexuality and empowerment in Nollywood? How has Nollywood's representation of sex and female sexuality evolved over time?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The portrayal of female sexuality and power in Nollywood films operates within a nuanced framework of cultural, social, and economic influences that have significantly shaped the Nigerian film industry since its inception. To grasp this representation, it is essential to analyse key concepts such as gender constructs,

power dynamics, and media portrayals. Nollywood's representation of women tends to oscillate between two extremes: on one hand, they are presented as sexual objects intended for male satisfaction, but on the other, they are depicted as rebellious figures who defy societal norms (Uchendu, 2023). This dichotomous representation cultivates a limiting environment where female characters find it challenging to discover meaningful, multidimensional roles outside these stereotypes.

Shifting Depictions of Female Sexuality and Power in Nollywood

Historically, Nollywood has depicted women through limited archetypes: submissive wives, temptresses, or victims of patriarchal oppression. However, the past decade has witnessed a gradual evolution in how female sexuality and empowerment are represented. According to Ofori (2024), earlier Nollywood films often framed female sexuality within a moralistic lens, portraying women who embraced their sexuality as doomed figures. Over time, particularly with the rise of streaming platforms and the influence of global feminist movements, newer narratives have emerged that allow for more nuanced depictions of female autonomy. Films such as *King of Boys* (2018/2021) and *Citation* (2020) challenge traditional norms by presenting women as politically and intellectually powerful. However, as Uchendu (2023) argue, this shift is uneven, while some films explore female agency, others continue to sexualise women under the guise of empowerment. This reflects a larger struggle within Nollywood to reconcile commercial interests with progressive gender representation, as filmmakers must balance audience expectations, patriarchal cultural norms, and evolving feminist ideals.

The objectification of women continues to be a pervasive theme in Nollywood. Ejem (2022) notes that, despite technical advancements in the industry, including enhanced scripting, cinematography, and the incorporation of female professionals, women are still predominantly depicted as sexual objects. This indicates that structural issues within content creation significantly affect the representation of female sexuality. Power and sexuality are intricately linked in Nollywood films. Alola and Alola (2020) identify various prevalent female stereotypes, including the femme fatale, career woman, trophy wife, and nurturing carer. However, these portrayals often reduce complex characters to simplistic roles. Although there has been progress, the persistence of such stereotypes suggests a deeper systemic issue. This is troubling because it undermines the potential for more nuanced representations of women in film.

The Intersection of Class, Culture, and Female Representation in Nollywood

The portrayal of female sexuality and empowerment in Nollywood is not monolithic; it varies significantly based on social class, culture, and setting. Omoera and Emwinromwankhoe (2024) observe that urban-centered films tend to depict career-driven women navigating male-dominated spaces, while rural-set films often reinforce conservative gender norms. Similarly, Ogunbola, Adebayo, Akin-Odukoya, and Etimiri (2024) highlight that wealthier female characters in Nollywood are often portrayed as having greater sexual autonomy, whereas working-class women are frequently depicted as victims of exploitation. This reflects broader societal attitudes toward class and gender where female independence is sometimes seen as a privilege rather than a fundamental right. Intersectionality, as a concept, is crucial for understanding these representations, as it reveals how factors like economic status, tradition, and religious influence shape the narratives surrounding women in film. For example, Osakpolor (2021) argues that female sexuality in Nollywood is often framed through a moral vs. immoral lens, where financially independent women are sometimes depicted as morally questionable, reinforcing societal biases against women who deviate from traditional roles.

The representations in these films frequently reaffirm traditional power dynamics, employing female sexuality as either a means of empowerment or, conversely, as a mechanism for subjugation. However, these films seldom delve into the nuanced expressions of female sexual agency. Recent transformations within the industry (2024) indicate a challenge to these entrenched norms. Ofori underscores the growing significance of female-led narratives, which aim to dismantle stereotypes and promote a broader range of representations of women in cinema. This shift is in alignment with global gender equality objectives, particularly Millennium Development Goal No. 3 and Sustainable Development Goal No. 5, which underscore female empowerment and equitable representation. Although progress has been made, gender disparities continue to exist. Omoera and Emwinromwankhoe (2024) contend that the considerable gap in the portrayals of male and female characters demands ongoing examination. The conceptual framework articulated herein offers a perspective through which we can critically evaluate Nollywood films produced between 2020 and 2024, determining whether they reinforce or contest historical stereotypes.

Filmic Representation of Female Sexuality and Power

The representation of sex, power, and female sexuality is among the most contentious topics in film studies. Historically and contemporarily, women's

bodies and sexualities have served as sites of fascination, regulation, defiance, and negotiation. The techniques employed by filmmakers to convey and disseminate these concepts reveal the power dynamics and societal anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality. Women have frequently been shown from the male perspective since the emergence of classical Hollywood cinema, a concept adeptly expressed by Laura Mulvey (1975). Mulvey asserts that mainstream cinema directs the camera and consequently the audience to adopt a heterosexual male viewpoint, depicting women as passive objects of visual pleasure rather than active contributors to narrative development. This relationship often reduces female sexuality to a mere commodity designed to satisfy male desire, hence maintaining patriarchal values.

Sexuality as a Wellspring of Empowerment and Defiance

Historically, films frequently depicted women as either menacing or subservient in relation to sexuality. Feminist cinema theory and contemporary filmmaking have begun to perceive sex as a domain of power and agency. Films such as *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013) explore women's desires and intimacy from their own perspectives, challenging patriarchal narratives that seek to define or regulate female sexuality. McRobbie (2009) asserts that the shift towards more empowered depictions of sexuality indicates a broader feminist impact in media and culture, where women's sexual decisions are represented as expressions of autonomy rather than subordination. Critics warn that empowerment narratives may be co-opted by neoliberal ideology, leading to superficial representations that celebrate sexual agency while maintaining patriarchal structures (Gill, 2007).

Power Dynamics and Intersectionality

The depiction of sex and sexuality in cinema is intrinsically connected to broader power relations, including race, class, and colonialism. Black feminist scholars, such as bell hooks (1992), have condemned mainstream cinema for its marginalization or hypertextualization of women of color, contending that their sexuality is often depicted in manners that serve white, patriarchal interests. The clichés of exotic or savage attributed to Black and Latina women in Hollywood films perpetuate preconceptions and obfuscate the complexities of their sexual identities.

Queer cinema has played a crucial role in dismantling power structures predicated on heterosexuality. Films such as *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) and *Pariah* (2011) foreground queer female desire in their narratives,

deliberately eschewing the masculine gaze. They depict sexuality in a manner that is profoundly intimate and politically subversive (Rich, 1981).

Contemporary Trends: Shifting from Object to Subject

Contemporary films increasingly depict women's sexuality as intricate and self-determined. Directors such as Céline Sciamma, Greta Gerwig, and Emerald Fennell have crafted narratives in which women's sexual lives significantly contribute to their identities, yet do not solely define them. These images indicate a shift from the traditional binary of women as either virgins or vamps to more nuanced portrayals that reflect genuine experiences of sexuality, authority, and desire. The emergence of streaming services and independent filmmaking has enabled a broader spectrum of voices, including women, queer creators, and filmmakers of color, to challenge prevailing visual norms and craft narratives that avoid objectifying individuals (Tasker & Negra, 2007).

The cinematic representation of sex, power, and female sexuality is not static; it is a dynamic realm that reflects significant cultural tensions around gender, identity, and autonomy. Historically, films predominantly depicted women as either objects of desire or obstacles to patriarchal authority. Contemporary films depict women as multifaceted sexual entities capable of making decisions, wielding power, and redefining the concept of desire. These portrayals remain contentious, highlighting the enduring effect of patriarchal structures and the ongoing need for critical analysis of the interplay between cinema and gendered power dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

Social Constructivist Theory

Social Constructivist Theory posits that gender roles and sexuality are not biologically predetermined but are socially and culturally produced through continuous interaction, representation, and institutional reinforcement. Rooted in the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), the theory emphasizes that societal norms, including those surrounding femininity, masculinity, and sexuality, are constructed through shared meanings and sustained through media, religion, and other social institutions. In the context of Nollywood, this perspective is particularly relevant, as film serves as a powerful site for the production and circulation of social meanings. As Alola and Alola (2020) argue, Nollywood narratives often reinforce culturally embedded ideologies such as female dependency, moralized sexuality, and male dominance. These representations do not merely reflect reality; they actively participate in constructing it by normalizing specific gender expectations and behavioural patterns.

The persistence of certain narrative tropes such as the “virtuous woman,” the “fallen woman,” or the “powerful but morally ambiguous female figure” can thus be understood as products of social construction. Even as Nigerian society undergoes shifts in gender norms, these cinematic representations evolve slowly, revealing the tension between traditional values and emerging social realities. This study adopts Social Constructivist Theory to interrogate how Nollywood films construct and reproduce meanings around female sexuality, agency, and power. It provides a framework for analysing how cultural narratives shape audience perceptions and sustain particular gender ideologies over time.

Sexual Fluidity Theory (SFT)

Sexual Fluidity Theory, developed by Lisa Diamond, challenges the essentialist view that sexuality is fixed, stable, and biologically determined. Instead, the theory posits that sexuality, particularly female sexuality, is dynamic, context-dependent, and capable of evolving in response to emotional, relational, and socio-cultural influences. Central to SFT are several key propositions. First, the variability of desire suggests that women’s sexual preferences are not rigidly confined to a single orientation but may shift depending on context and experience. Second, contextual flexibility highlights the influence of social, cultural, and economic conditions in shaping sexual expression. Third, the distinction between identity and behaviour underscores that how individuals identify may not always align with their actions or desires. Finally, non-linearity emphasizes that sexual identity develops in fluid and sometimes contradictory ways over time.

Within Nollywood, Sexual Fluidity Theory offers a critical lens for understanding how female characters navigate sexuality under varying structural constraints. For instance, films such as *Domitilla* and *Glamour Girls* depict women’s sexual agency as largely transactional, reflecting socio-economic pressures rather than intrinsic desire. Similarly, *Òlòtūrè* portrays sexuality within coercive trafficking systems, where behaviour is shaped by survival rather than personal identity. Conversely, films like *King of Boys* and *Lionheart* complicate traditional representations. In *King of Boys*, Eniola Salami’s power is detached from sexual expression, suggesting an alternative articulation of femininity grounded in political authority. In *Lionheart*, Adaeze’s character is notably desexualized, with emphasis placed on competence and leadership, indicating a shift toward more flexible and non-traditional gender representations. SFT is particularly useful in this study because it allows for a nuanced interpretation of these portrayals, moving beyond binary understandings of sexuality. It highlights how Nollywood narratives reflect broader socio-cultural negotiations in which women’s identities

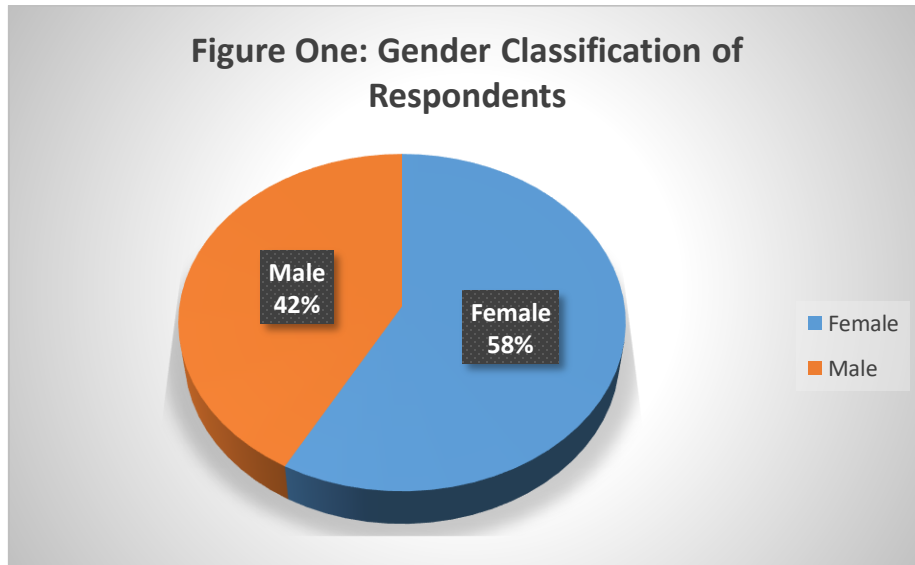
are shaped by a combination of personal agency, structural constraints, and evolving cultural norms.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative content analysis of select Nollywood films and the survey to examine audience perceptions. The study focuses on two populations: Analysis of four Nollywood films released between 2020 and 2024 that prominently featured themes of female sexuality and empowerment. *Oloture* (2024, relevant due to thematic focus), *King of Boys* (2021), *Citation* (2020), and *The Smart Money Woman* (2023). In the population for the survey, we adopted Ebigieson (2024), estimation of Nollywood’s total audience at 15 million in Nigeria, where 11% concentrated in Anambra State, located in the South-East, Nigeria, with the audience population of approximately 1.65 million. Through the application of Comrey & Lee’s (1992) recommendation, stating that: 50–very poor, 100–poor, 200–fair, 300–good, 500–very good, and 1,000+ –excellent when considering the adequacy of a sample size, this study adopted a sample size of 200 classified as ‘fair.’ The purposive and haphazard sampling techniques were applied in the selection of the samples, which enabled the researchers to select those who have knowledge of the subject matter.

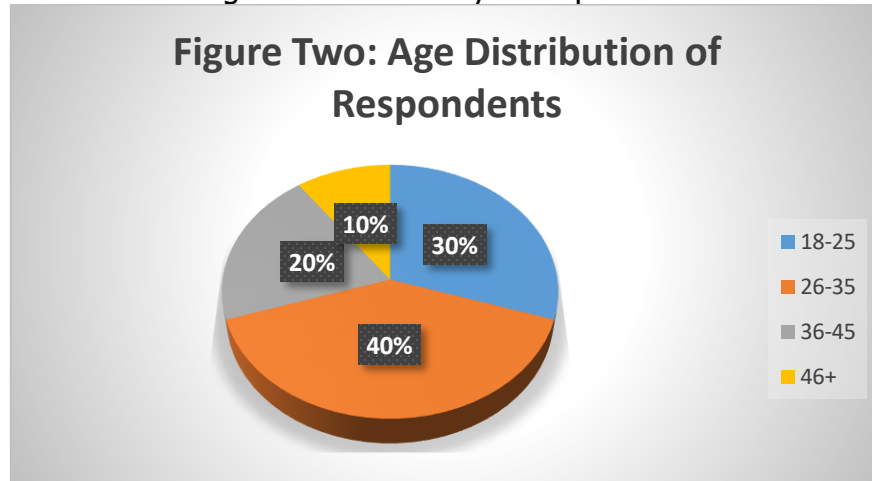
Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The demographic data for the study indicated that, out of the 200 respondents, 84 were male and 116 were female.



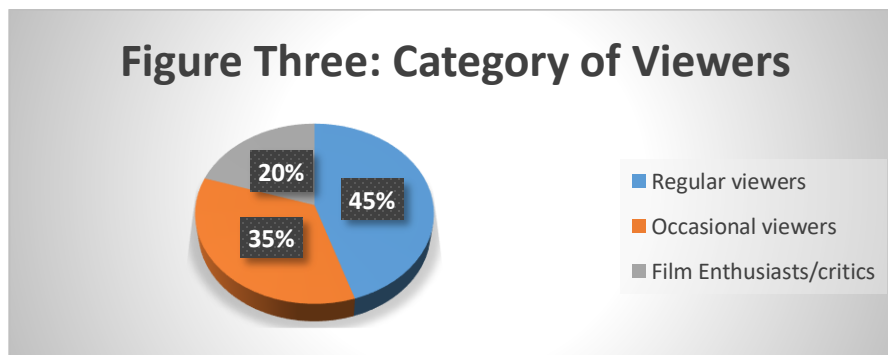
Source: The researchers’ Survey, 2026

The percentage of the data for the gender classification is presented in the chart above and the slight female majority at 58%, suggesting a balanced gender perspective in the findings from the surveyed respondents.



Source: The Researchers' survey 2026

The data indicated that 80 respondents were within the ages of 26-35, whereas, 60 respondents were in the ages of 18-25, while 40 respondents were in the ages of 36-45 and 10 respondents were in the ages of 46 and above. The percentage of each of the age brackets has been presented in the chart above. Meanwhile, the implication of the preponderance of the respondents in the ages of 26-35 could be because they are more of younger people who are in their early careers and have enough time for movies.



Source: The Researchers' survey 2026

The viewing frequency breakdown presented above demonstrates that most respondents (65%) are either regular viewers or film enthusiasts/critics, lending credibility to their observations and opinions about Nollywood content. The high proportion of regular viewers (45%) suggests the findings are based on sustained engagement with Nollywood films.

Findings on the Depiction of Female Sexuality in Nollywood (RQ1)

The study examined films such as

- *King of Boys: The Return of the King* (2021)
- *Citation* (2020)
- *The Smart Money Woman* (2021)
- *Shanty Town* (2023)
- *Anikulapo* (2022)

Analysis revealed two major trends in the depiction of female sexuality: Objectification vs. Agency: While earlier Nollywood films presented women primarily as objects of male desire, contemporary productions show a more complex portrayal of female sexuality. However, the hyper sexualization of women remains prevalent, particularly in crime and urban drama genres (*Shanty Town, Oloture*).

- ◆ Sexuality as a Power Tool: In *King of Boys* and *Shanty Town*, female characters use sexuality as a survival or revenge strategy, reinforcing the idea that female power is inseparable from sexual manipulation. This aligns with Theory, which suggests that female characters are often constructed in ways that prioritize their desirability over agency (Ejem, 2022).
- ◆ Breaking Traditional Boundaries: Films like *Citation* and *The Smart Money Woman* challenge past stereotypes by portraying women who derive power from intelligence, career success, and activism rather than sexuality. These representations suggest an emerging shift towards progressive gender roles, consistent with Feminist Film Theory (Osakpolor, 2021).

The Extent to Which Nollywood Reinforces or Challenges Gender Stereotypes (RQ2)

Comparing Reinforcement vs. Subversion of Stereotypes

A thematic analysis uncovered four dominant gender stereotypes in Nollywood films:

- ◆ Reinforcement of Stereotypes: In many films, female agency remains linked to suffering. The femme fatale trope (seen in *Shanty Town*) suggests that women who use their sexuality for power ultimately face downfall. Similarly, *Anikulapo* depicts female sexuality as dangerous and manipulative, reinforcing traditional gender biases (Alola & Alola, 2020).
- ◆ Challenging Stereotypes: Films like *Citation* depict women as intelligent and assertive, moving beyond sexualized roles. However, Osakpolor (2021) argues

that while these portrayals are promising, they often coexist with conventional stereotypes, limiting their transformative impact.

The Nature of Female Empowerment in Nollywood (RQ3)

The representation of female empowerment in Nollywood films is evolving but remains contested.

- ◆ Genuine Empowerment vs. Superficial Portrayals:
 - *King of Boys* portrays a strong female protagonist (Eniola Salami) who dominates a male-dominated space, but her power is defined by aggression and survival tactics traits traditionally coded as masculine (Ofori, 2024).
 - *The Smart Money Woman* presents women as financially independent, shifting away from traditional dependency narratives.
- ◆ Empowerment Still Linked to Hardship:
 - *Citation* highlights a woman’s fight against sexual harassment, reinforcing the idea that empowerment comes through resistance to male oppression rather than intrinsic power (Omoera & Emwinromwankhoe, 2024).

The findings indicate that Nollywood is evolving, but female empowerment is often portrayed within rigid structures, either as aggressive power (*King of Boys*) or victimhood leading to strength (*Citation*). While some films challenge perceptions of Female Sexuality in Nollywood Films (2020–2025)

Audience Perception of Female Representation in Nollywood (RQ4)

The study surveyed 200 Nollywood viewers, film critics, and industry professionals.

- ◆ Key Takeaways:
 - 80% of respondents acknowledged that recent Nollywood films feature stronger female characters, but 78% also felt that sexual objectification remains prevalent.
 - This contradiction aligns with Ejem (2022), who found that Nollywood’s evolution is gradual rather than revolutionary—progress is being made, but stereotypes persist.

Table One: Audience Perceptions and Survey Results

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Nollywood films reinforce gender stereotypes	72%	18%	10%
Female Sexuality is often portrayed as a source of power	65%	20%	15%
More Recent films depict strong independent female characters	80%	10%	10%

Sexual Objectification of women in Nollywood is still a major issue	78%	12%	10%
Female-Led Nollywood films challenge traditional gender roles	75%	15%	10%

Source: The Researchers' survey, 2026

The survey results indicate a complex landscape of gender representation in contemporary Nollywood. The high agreement rates (72-80%) across multiple questions suggest strong consensus about both ongoing issues and recent improvements. Particularly notable is the 80% agreement about strong, independent female characters in recent films, indicating significant progress. However, the similarly high agreement (78%) about persistent sexual objectification reveals that progress is uneven. The relatively low disagreement percentages (10-20%) across all questions suggest these perceptions are widely shared among viewers.

Audience Perspectives on Female Empowerment Positive Feedback: Respondents praised recent films for introducing empowered female characters who challenge traditional roles (Citation, *The Smart Money Woman*).

Negative Criticism: Many participants felt that hypertextualization remains widespread, with women often portrayed through the lens of male desire rather than as fully realized characters (*Shanty Town*).

Shifting Perceptions: A significant number of respondents acknowledged that women in Nollywood are now given stronger roles, but female sexuality is still frequently commodified.

Analysis of Representation in Nollywood Cinema (2020–2025)

The initial graphic contrasts the average representation ratings of several films. It suggests that sexualization is not the predominant representation of women, yet it remains present. In general, agency and systemic critique performed far better. Nollywood filmmakers are contextualizing women's narratives within broader themes such as corruption, patriarchy, and globalization. *Shanty Town* illustrates women ensnared in cycles of sexual exploitation while simultaneously revealing their efforts to combat systemic abuse. *Adire* employs the sexual lives of its female characters to explore themes of independence, tradition, and modernity. It transforms our perception of sex from a standpoint of failure to one of negotiation.

The scatterplot illustrating sexualization and empowerment reflects Nollywood's perspective on both concepts. You and *Adire*, conversely, believe that sexual expression can contribute to moderate empowerment. They prompt us to

reconsider female sexuality, presenting it as neither solely detrimental nor entirely liberating. Conversely, Shanty Town illustrates that heightened sexualization frequently correlates with disempowerment, ensnaring women in cycles of exploitation with limited avenues for escape. In contrast, King of Boys and Lionheart emphasize empowerment rather than sexuality. This suggests that Nollywood is exploring diverse narratives in which women obtain their strength from intellect, ambition, and leadership instead of sexuality (Onifade, 2020; Doghudje, 2019).

The third image illustrates how various films employ both systemic and agency critique. In King of Boys, Eniola Salami is a political figure whose ascent and decline underscore the deficiencies of Nigeria's political system. Adire similarly intertwines women's emotional and sexual experiences with broader grievances like economic inequity and patriarchy. Conversely, lighter dramas such as Love Spice or Odds of Love exhibit less agency and societal critique. This reflects historical patterns wherein women's concerns predominantly pertain to domestic spheres or romantic relationships rather than systemic inequalities. This dual inclination indicates that Nollywood continues to produce classic romance narratives, although its most significant films are increasingly incorporating women's stories as elements of broader critiques of power.

Theoretical Connections

The results strongly correspond with sexual script theory, social constructionism, and feminist film theory. Sexual Script Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1984) posits that sexuality is influenced by cultural scripts that dictate conventional behaviors. Earlier Nollywood films predominantly adhered to rigid sexual narratives that punished women for transgressing societal norms. This pattern is disrupted by contemporary films. Adire presents sexuality as a contentious domain rather than a moral failing, while King of Boys completely removes sexuality as a foundation for female strength, positioning Eniola's power inside political aspirations (Onifade, 2020). This illustrates Nollywood's ability to alter prevailing narratives and underscores the theory's focus on the cultural adaptation of sexual standards.

Social constructionism posits that gender and sexuality are not inherent traits but rather creations shaped by cultural, political, and historical influences. The variety of representations in the examined films substantiates this assertion. In Òlòtūrè, women's bodies serve as focal points for global trafficking networks and patriarchal brutality, illustrating the impact of systematic exploitation on sexuality (NWMag, 2024). In Lionheart, women's empowerment derives from their occupations and familial roles, rather than their sexual identity (Doghudje, 2019).

These disparities indicate that Nollywood is an essential platform for discussing and transforming perceptions of women's sexuality.

Feminist Film Theory (Mulvey, 1975) attacks the dominance of the male gaze, which generally depicts women as passive objects of spectacle. The dataset indicates that Nollywood is undergoing great transformations. *Shanty Town* risks becoming a voyeuristic spectacle if it excessively emphasizes women's physiques. Conversely, *Adire* and *King of Boys* center women's subjectivity in the narrative, granting them agency (Osakpolor, 2021). *Lionheart* intensifies the discomfort by depicting a lady whose narrative is unrelated to sexualization. This indicates that Nollywood's cinematic language is evolving from objectification to subjectivity and from spectacle to agency.

Comparative Analysis of Findings

To assess how Nollywood portrays female sexuality and empowerment, this section compares the study's findings with past research, audience perceptions, and theoretical frameworks.

Key Findings from this Study

Nollywood still objectifies women, and this aligns with Ejem's (2022) findings, 78% of viewers agree that sexual objectification remains a major issue in Nollywood. Also, more films depict strong female leads this also aligns with the findings of Okibe (2024).

80% of respondents acknowledge stronger female characters in recent films, which aligns with Feminist Film Theory: *King of Boys* and *Citation* promote female agency.

Progress is more visible in certain genres, which aligns with Omoera & Emwinromwankhoe (2024), viewers noted that progressive female portrayals are mostly in drama/romance genres.

Social Constructivist Theory: Gender roles in Nollywood reflect societal norms rather than challenge them. Older audiences resist progressive portrayals, which corroborates with Uchendu (2023). 35+ audience groups were less receptive to feminist narratives. These findings support the Social Constructivist Theory. Audience reception is shaped by cultural beliefs, female-led films are more progressive, which is consistent with Osakpolor (2021). Lastly 75% of respondents agreed that female-led films challenge gender norms, which supports, Feminist Film Theory: Women behind the camera drive authentic female narratives.

Analysis of Trends in Nollywood's Gender Representation

- Films like *Citation* and *The Smart Money Woman* depict women as intelligent and independent, aligning with feminist film theory.
- However, crime and thriller genres (*Shanty Town*, *Anikutapo*) still frame women as objects of male desire, confirming Male Gaze Theory (Ejem, 2022).
- Older viewers were less accepting of progressive female characters, aligning with Social Constructivist Theory, which suggests media representations mirror cultural expectations (Uchendu, 2023).

Findings

Persistent Gender Stereotypes: Although Nollywood has made strides in representing strong, independent women, the stereotypical portrayals of female sexuality continue to persist. Women are often relegated to binary roles such as the femme fatale, the victim, the career woman, or the mother figure. This aligns with Alola and Alola (2020), who found that while Nollywood films increasingly feature female protagonists, their narratives remain structured around patriarchal expectations, limiting the complexity of these characters. Similarly, Omoera and Emwinromwankhoe (2024) identified dominant gendered frames in Nollywood, including the persistent portrayal of women as either weak or dependent or as manipulative seductresses, reinforcing binary gender stereotypes. These studies confirm that Nollywood's progress in gender representation is uneven and constrained by commercial and cultural factors.

Sexuality as a Power Tool: Many female characters (like those in *King of Boys* and *Shanty Town*) are depicted as leveraging their sexuality as a means of power; this reinforces the notion that women's strength is linked to their sexual influence rather than their intelligence or leadership capabilities. This pattern is well-documented in Ejem (2022), who found that women in Nollywood are still primarily portrayed as objects of male desire, with their narratives structured around their sexual appeal rather than their ambitions or intellect. Similarly, Osakpolor (2021) examined how class influences portrayals of female sexuality in Nollywood, noting that while wealthy female characters are often depicted as having greater autonomy, working-class women are frequently shown as victims of sexual exploitation, reinforcing a troubling power imbalance. These findings highlight that, while Nollywood may be diversifying its female characters, sexuality remains a central and often limiting theme in women's narratives.

Shifting Narratives: Recent films, including *Citation* and *The Smart Money Woman*, introduce female characters who confront patriarchal structures and

advocate for women's agency in both career and education. This transition is supported by Ofori (2024), who found that recent Nollywood films are increasingly exploring female-led narratives where women are decision-makers and challengers of societal norms rather than passive participants. However, as Uchendu (2023) argue, while these portrayals represent progress, they still coexist with traditional gender stereotypes, limiting the depth of empowerment narratives. Their findings indicate that Nollywood's approach to female empowerment is still largely reactive, where women gain power by overcoming oppression rather than simply being empowered from the outset. This suggests that while Nollywood is moving forward, there is still a need to broaden the scope of female empowerment beyond the context of struggle.

Hypersexualisation vs. Empowerment: Some Nollywood productions (for instance, *Shanty Town* and *Oloture*) highlight issues of sexual exploitation; however, they tend to portray women as passive victims instead of as agents of change. This aligns with findings from Ogwezy-Ndisika et al. (2023), whose survey revealed that 72% of Nollywood viewers believe that gender stereotypes remain prevalent, despite industry efforts to introduce more progressive characters. Likewise, Ejem (2022) found that while Nollywood audiences appreciate the inclusion of empowered female protagonists, they remain critical of the ways in which these characters are often hypersexualized or defined in relation to men. These studies reinforce the idea that Nollywood's progress in female representation is recognized by audiences but remains hindered by longstanding industry tropes.

Audience Perception: Survey results suggest that audiences acknowledge Nollywood's attempts to depict female empowerment, but many also believe that sexual objectification continues to be a significant problem. The importance of increasing female participation behind the camera is emphasized by Okibe (2024), who found that films directed by women, such as *Lionheart* (2018) and *King of Boys* (2018/2021), tend to offer more authentic and multifaceted portrayals of female agency than those directed by men. Similarly, Omoera and Emwinromwankhoe (2024) recommend that Nollywood minimize the excessive sexualization of female characters and instead focus on depicting women in leadership, innovation, and decision-making roles. These studies confirm that industry-wide change is necessary for Nollywood to fully break away from restrictive gender portrayals and foster a more equitable storytelling landscape. Overall, although Nollywood has started to reshape gender narratives, deep-seated biases (which persist) continue to influence the depiction of female sexuality and power. However, this influence is significant because it complicates the progress being made. The industry, while evolving, still faces challenges.

Conclusion

The data presented in this study unequivocally indicate that Nollywood's portrayal of sex and female sexuality has undergone a significant transformation. Historically, films often confined women to moralistic archetypes. Conversely, films released between 2018 and 2025 present more intricate and contentious narratives. Certain works reassert sexuality as a form of liberation (Adire), but others expose it as a domain of exploitation (Òlòtūrè, Shanty Town). Some entirely eradicate it to demonstrate the formidable influence of women in politics and business (King of Boys, Lionheart). These modifications indicate that Nollywood is becoming essential to discussions on gender and empowerment. Cultural industries both reflect and contradict the evolving role of women in Nigerian society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

1. Nollywood Film producers should diversify female roles in movies: They should transcend simplistic stereotypes, which often limit representation, by developing complex female characters imbued with agency, ambition, and emotional depth, showcasing women as leaders and innovators or change-makers.
2. Nollywood Film policymakers should promote women-centric storytelling in Nollywood: there should be inclusion of additional female directors, writers, and producers to shape narratives that are informed by women's perspectives.
3. There should be funding and training initiatives for women in Nollywood; this is essential to expand diverse storytelling.
4. Over-Sexualization or excessive sexual imagery, which can often detract from meaningful narratives, should be avoided, and there should be empowering stories that illustrate female strength in non-sexualized settings.
5. Education and Sensitization of Industry Stakeholders: There should be workshops and sensitization programmes for filmmakers on proper gender representation.

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Chika Nnabuife initiated the idea of this paper and wrote the first draft; coordinated the data gathering; did the proofreading, and also reworked the paper based on the comments from the reviewers. Nankyen Zitta also took part in data gathering and proof reading, while Munachi Hycienth-Nwannah also contributed to data gathering and proof reading.

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There was no conflict of interest with any sources or persons from the beginning of this paper to the end.

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