

MEDIA AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR X-RAYING SOCIETAL ILLS: A STUDY OF SELECTED NOLLYWOOD FILMS

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Abstract

*The importance of media as a platform for societal interaction and communication is growing. Several researchers have for instance, opined that repeated viewings of films with violence instill violent attitudes in the minds of the viewers. For instance, viewers, including women, become more callous in the face of film portrayals of violence towards women. The continuous rise in cases of domestic abuse in countries like Nigeria precipitates the need for this research inquiry. Indeed, there are so many ways the efficacy of film can work against the cause and more often than not, violence against women in movies are gratuitously portrayed to draw and titillate audiences. The aim of this research is to investigate how film as a medium helps in exposing societal issues. The researcher employed the qualitative research method which entails the analysis of text, online journals and handbooks for proper and objective content analysis and appreciation. The researcher also analyzed two Nollywood films; that is *Scream* and *Wanted*. Hence, the research work explores violence against women and children as evident in the two video films.*

Key Words: *Film, Media, Violence, Society, Women*

Introduction

The increased presence of film and filmic activities in the people's everyday lives as well as institutional practices and public environments means researchers often have access to 'naturally occurring' film data. Film is increasingly the data collection tool of choice for researchers interested in the multimodal character of

social interaction. The use of film has also been expanded by increased access through the low cost of video cameras and high quality video facilities on mobile phones. According to Heath; Researchers have used video (and before that film) for many years particularly in workplace studies.

There is increasing recognition given to the importance of media and its positive and negative potential in relation to researching societal issues, there is relatively little accessible evidence on what works, guidance for practitioners, or attention from donors.

In recent years, the importance of a free, professional and plural media in contributing to good governance in a society has gained traction in the international development community. A vibrant media gives people free flowing access to information, enables dialogue, encourages people to express their views, prompts greater political participation and encourages accountability. Media is evolving in such an unprecedented and definitive manner that the common description super-highway seems inadequate to capture the ramifications and possibilities of this technologically driven and all important human endeavour. As W. Russel Neuman puts it;

We are witnessing the evolution of a universal interconnected network of audio, video and electronic text communications that will blur the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and between public and private communication. (39)

New media has been described as on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content. Furthermore, there is the democratization of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content which generation is unregulated and real time. While film contents, television programs, magazines,

books or paper-based publications in their primal forms cannot be included in new media, where they employ digital technology that enable digital accessibility and interaction, they can be grouped among new media.

For the purposes of this research, the term media refers to both ‘traditional’ mass media (newspapers, TV, radio, film) and social media (online blogs, facebook, Twitter, instagram etc). The two have become ‘intimately intertwined,’ with both used as sources of news and information and tweets used as sound bites. “Media and journalism should be understood as part of a wider ‘communication ecology’ that includes a wide range of stakeholders and practices” (Allen, 10). It is on this premise that this study seeks to examine media as an instrument of researching societal issues with its attendant new media features including user-generated content and the likely demands on the communication professional and practitioner to devise some form of control mechanism in a rapidly evolving industry.

Media Influence, Violence and Society

Each media activity must be understood in the context of its own political, social and cultural context in addition to its specific system if we are to understand the best media practices to pursue. Violence today is, in many cases, more complex and multidimensional than ever before. (Ross, 56) Violence is less likely to be resolved through traditional political settlements due mainly to the emergence of disagreement that tends to undermine its legitimacy. Most people would rapidly agree that what we see, read or hear via the media influences and does produce a response in us. For example, watching a violent film can make one violent, a television sitcom or comedy can tickle us to laughter and a disturbing news report can make us feel afraid, worried or angry. For instance, the meteorological predictions of heavier rainfall and in effect worse flooding for the year 2013 had some Nigerians worried after the massive flood disaster of the previous year. It is

the power which the media wields over the society that advertisers exploit. Groups, organizations and people would not, otherwise pay over half a million naira to place a spot advert on national television.

At one time, the media bound people culturally, especially early radio and television networks. People across the nation, whether diverse or otherwise heard the same broadcast- comedy, drama, music, news and sports. In Nigeria the early radio and television stations WNBC, the FRCN and NTA had the monopoly. The result was a strong cultural cohesion where the children could tell the moral lessons culled from ‘Tales by Moonlight’ and the adults could swap stories about the recalcitrant, mean and moody Uncle Gaga of ‘Cockcrow at Dawn’ or the antics of Chief Zebrudaya (Okoroigwe Nwogbo) alias four-thirty.

Media as an Agent of Peace

The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) developed a holistic framework consisting of eight pillars of peace that are both inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing, such that improvements in one factor would tend to strengthen others and vice versa. (89) One of these pillars is the free flow of information, which covers how easily citizens can gain access to information, whether the media is free and independent, as well as the extent to which citizens are informed and engaged in the political process. A recent rapid evidence assessment commissioned by DFID suggests that film, radio, TV programming and digital media can positively affect people’s attitudes towards others thereby improving social cohesion. However, the report notes, the transition from attitudinal change to behaviour is left unexplored in the body of evidence and it is unclear whether such changes are durable, or can be readily reversed if conflict returns. Some research assessments conclude there is not yet sufficient empirical evidence to confirm or reject claims that media promotes or prevents conflict and there is a

reliance on anecdotal evidence to illustrate the media's positive impact on democracy, governance and accountability.

There is also a lack of data showing how many conflicts have been averted and what methods work best because metrics of success for conflict prevention are notoriously hard to come by given that the optimal outcome, the absence of conflict could hypothetically have been achieved without any intervention at all. James Deane of BBC Media Action argues that;

Media and communication increasingly matter in fragile states, in different ways according to the country. But he acknowledges that while media and communication sectors sometimes create the conditions for sustainable political settlements, at other times they undermine the chances of them. (4)

Gender Theme(s) in Media

Women are often *underrepresented* whether as media practitioners, objects of news coverage or other subject matter that is termed important such as politics or finance. This underrepresentation creates a picture of no importance as they do not hold positions that are termed important in media houses such as news editor or media director nor are their success stories given prominence. Women are often placed in non-visible positions and this enforces the cultural belief that men are more important and should get more attention and exalted positions in the workplace and be objects of news coverage. Also reflecting this underrepresentation is the news selection criteria which tend to push topics relevant to women to the margins of the news. Thus, this suggests that what is of interest to women is less important than that which interest men. Peters further explained that; one contributing factor to this underrepresentation of women as top media officers is the cultural definition of who should be the head. (42) In a patriarchal society such as Nigeria, it is culturally expected that

women be reverential, subservient and subordinates to men. Little wonder then that women's stories are not given prominence in mainstream media since they may not be the ones to call the shots or champion and write stories. It is important therefore to have enough women in positions of power in the media ecosystem. Gross argued that; "women capable of acknowledging that every story is a potential gender story will be an instrumental factor in creating the conditions that will ensure equality of coverage" (29). In support of this argument, Mill (as cited in Wood) stated that more women occupying executive positions of authority would "offer more positive portrayals of women" (32).

Objectification Theory and Stereotype Content Model Theory

Objectification refers to the act of viewing and treating a person as an object or thing. The word "object" in this sense can only be considered by another as such without any value of its own except that bestowed upon it by the viewer (Heflick & Goldenberg, 599). Succinctly, objectification is the act of viewing a person as though their body is "capable of representing them" (Heflick & Goldenberg, 598). Further, Nussbaum stated that objectification entails making into a thing, "something that is really not a thing" (218). In predominately heterosexual cultures, women, when objectified, are reduced to mere instruments existing solely for the "use and pleasure of others" (Frederickson & Roberts, 175). Research has provided considerable discussion on the psychological consequences of objectification as well as the perception of women (Frederickson & Roberts; Heflick & Goldenberg). These consequences as Nussbaum speculated include valuing women solely on appearance; minimizing the capabilities and competence of women; "denying that their feelings and experiences matter and having less concern when they are physically or emotionally harmed" (Heflick & Goldenberg, 98).

In Nollywood films, women are often objectified and presented as merely objects to be viewed through the male gaze.

Consequently, their values rest on their appearance, how well they can meet societal expectations as wives, mothers, sex objects, and the acceptance of the men in their lives.

As Nussbaum further stated, this minimization of women's worth downplays their capabilities and strengthens the narrative that women are lesser beings belonging to an insignificant gender group. Nollywood objectifies women limiting their abilities and capabilities to physical characteristics such as how beautiful or sexy a woman is; their childbearing or nurturing abilities; and by tagging them as someone's (usually a man's) property, thereby depicting them as incapable of being individuals without the tag of their 'owners.'

Then the Stereotype Content Model is a psychological definition of the social perception of warmth and competence (Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2008). The SCM model postulates that perception of warmth and competence as well as the interactions are dependent on competition and status. Although women are typically stereotyped as warm, the SCM posits that they will be perceived as warm only if they are not competitive or ambitious. Nollywood presents women as warm only when they are content being wives or mothers without the ambition of having a career outside the traditional role of housewife. Gender stereotypes fall into quadrants with male stereotypes in high competence/low warmth quadrant and female stereotypes in low competence/high warmth. However, this changes for the female who is career driven (and competing for the same resources – work – as the male). Such female then falls into the high competence/low warmth quadrant as she is perceived to be cold.

Synopsis of *Scream* and *Wanted*

In the film *Scream* directed by Abraham Okonkwo, three wealthy couples living in different places have domestic violence as their common predicament. The three men; Ken, Leon and Kelvin are so selfish and wicked that their wives are void of love and full

of fight and, disagreements. The wives are beaten and raped at the slightest provocation even though it does not call for such ill-treatment. They are sexually molested and they do not have a say in the affairs of their families. They become prisoners of violence and not protective of their husbands. Leon and Ken are best of friends and always talking on how to subjugate their wives, giving credence to the saying that ‘birds of a feather flock together’. These men have the same ideology about women. Sandra, a marriage and relationship councilor whom the other two women look up to for help willingly finds herself a victim of what she preaches against. The women coincidentally become friends and join forces to liberate themselves and say ‘No’ to domestic violence. Justice is finally served to the husbands respectively even though one of the wives, Esther die fighting.

In *Wanted* on the other hand, a film directed by Adams Umar. A middle-class married couple Femi and Folake and their daughter (Ifeoluwa) respectively, have a life that is marred by domestic violence. The husband (Femi) is such an animalistic and callous human who finds and drives pleasures in beating his wife (Folake) unjustifiably. Folake tries to be a better wife to him and mother to their daughter. Her mother-in-law threatens to kill her son if he lays his hand on the wife again but unrepentantly, Femi ignores his mother’s threat and beats his wife again. The maltreatment melted on the wife affects their daughter psychologically, emotionally and academically that she begins to drop in her academic activities. Femi out of anger that his wife found a hidden bag with guns under the drawer kills her. His daughter who witnesses the incident as her father pulls the trigger on the mother reports to the police and Femi is finally apprehended and made to face the consequences of his actions.

Violence against Women and Children in *Scream* and *Wanted*

The film narrative in *Scream* presented three women with contrasting spouses. These three families have domestic violence as

the ‘watch word’. They suffer and experience domestic violence in different dimensions. The researcher categorized these families into A, B, and C respectively for clarity. The family A in which Ken, Esther and their daughters are bedeviled with domestic violence. Ken is so overbearing and domineering that his wife Esther does not have a say in anything in the family as her opinion does not matter as far as her husband is concerned. This is a typical example of patriarchal dominance. Her opinion is not considered important and her husband’s desires and wishes come first in everything. This is discernible in the following dialogue.

Ken: (angrily) Go and make me another breakfast.

Esther: Please, the kids are running late for school and you should have told me earlier that you no longer eat noodles. What is wrong with the food?

Ken: You ask me what is wrong with the food. You made me a stone meal and you are asking me what is wrong with the food.

Esther: you always like your noodles like this. What happen now?

Ken: Because I am a man and my preferences can change anytime.

Esther: But you should relate the changes to me next time. I am not a soothsayer to know when your desires change.

Ken: Go in there and make me a fresh meal.

Esther: What can I make in two minutes? The kids are running late for school.

Ken: That is your business. My desires come first. You have 10minutes and your time starts now.

The other families suffer different but similar acts of violence domestically. Later the women coincidentally meet at a mini mart. Serah who calls herself a relationship and marriage councilor advises them in her office but on getting home that very day; she gets the beating of her life and sustains bruises. She becomes so weak and discouraged as she becomes the victim of what she preaches against. She lacks the zeal and power to counsel the two other women. Sandra is raped by her husband at the slightest

provocation and subjected to a full house wife. Subsequently, the husbands are remanded in prison for domestic violence against the women. Unfortunately, Esther died fighting the cause.

Wanted on the other hand is a film narrative that portrayse abuse in marriage using high level domestic violence, incessant battering and acts of violence. Femi, the husband to Folake is very inhumane, temperamental and believes in the patriarchal system which makes him the man of the house whose authority and words supersedes that of his wife. This is actually the system that is dominant in the cultural setting where a woman has no say in any matter even though it has to do with her. Femi always gets very angry at the slightest provocation and ends up beating his wife. The incessant quarrels and fights obviously affect their only daughter (Ifeoluwa) negatively because it was established that their daughter became hostile especially towards the male counterparts and that she also dropped in her academic performance. It affected her psychologically, academically and emotionally.

Folake who is subjected to a housewife by her husband, does everything humanly possible to love her husband and care for him but her efforts are not appreciated and her world shatters into pieces. Ifeoluwa, their only daughter runs away on witnessing her father kill her mother and she reports the incident to the police and finally her father gets the legal punishment for his action. This shows that whoever does anything unlawful must face the wrath of the law.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The advancement in science and technology of media has quickened global changes and has placed great responsibility of enormous dimensions on today's media. According to Aliede; multiplicity of compelling challenges stare communication professionals in the face. (317). Media, especially digital media may be a nascent phenomenon in this part of the world but it is also one which from all indications does not promise a short life span. It

popularity speaks volumes. The onus lies on professional practitioners to harness the potentials of some films to mold character and ethics while propagating right cultural values.

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