

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON FILM PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND EXHIBITION IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

The corona virus, a pathogenic viral infectious disease otherwise known as Covid-19 is an appalling catastrophic pandemic. Since its emergence in 2019, the disease has spread like wildfire across the world. The pandemic has ravaged almost every sphere of human endeavour-socially, economically, culturally, religiously, politically and otherwise. There is no continent in the world that the disease has not touched. Covid-19 has become a cliché and buzzword of the decade that has transmuted man's way of thinking and reasoning. With its attendant health challenges, film production activities are at its lowest ebb. This paper sets out to examine the praxis of motion picture production, distribution and exhibition as practiced in Nigerian vis-à-vis the coronavirus pandemic era. The paper also examines social distancing which negates the collaborative environment film enjoys as an art form. The Nigerian experience is no different from other film producing nations of the world. The Nigerian film industry popularly known as Nollywood has reduced its production capacity drastically causing unemployment and loss of millions of naira in earnings. Qualitative method of research was adopted, using published documents and interviews of stakeholders. The paper critically examines the numerous challenges film producers are facing worldwide and the search for creative means to surmount the problems of social distancing and how to curtail the spread of the disease on a shooting location. The paper concludes that coronavirus has negatively affected film industry in the area of production distribution and exhibition around the world including Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic, Collaboration, Social Distancing, Lockdown, Production.

## **Introduction**

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China, with its spread all over the world has had adverse effects on global economics (Omoera and Ogoke 145). Adgate, an independent media consultant, notes that, in 2020, the global pandemic impacted the theatrical and home/mobile entertainment as movies theatres and production studios temporarily closed, as millions quarantined viewers were forced to stay home for their video entertainment

(par. 1). The pandemic has affected the global motion picture industry bringing to a halt in film production activity around the world and the closure of cinema theatres. Hall reckons that the movies are a massive value creator which have generated global box office revenues totalled at \$42 billion in 2019, an all-time high contributing almost one - third of the estimated \$136 billion in the value of worldwide movie production and distribution (Adgate par.1).

The movie industries support millions of jobs across the continents. Unfortunately, Covid-19 pandemic has hit so hard on major film production industries across the world including Nigeria that the Federal Government had to impose a total lockdown of activities nationwide. As a result, film operations were shelved indefinitely while cinema complexes were locked down prompting job losses within the country. With the lockdown affecting every aspect of the Nigerian economy, its effects on the motion picture industry was equally devastating as movies shot must first be exhibited in cinemas after which they are sold in open markets. Besides, the shutdown has crippled work on all film locations and as a result, the industry has lost millions of naira. This has made life difficult for filmmakers, artists and artisans whose main source of livelihood depends largely on the film industry. Adeolu, a Yoruba actor of great repute cited by Aguoye in *Premium Times* lamented that, as a celebrity, people were always flocking to his house to ask for money and food. Because he knew these things affect them as actors, he did his best for them. People will see them on the road and expect them to drop something; whereas they (actors) too were not making any money at the moment (1). The Nigerian experience was not different from what was obtained in other parts of the world. All over the world, film production industries have suffered massive blows because of Covid-19. Many productions came to a halt, cinema houses became locked. The total production lockdown not only resulted to actors, technical and production crew being out of work but also disappointed fans who were unable to get entertainment. The virus dealt a deadly blow to the motion picture industry the world over. Writing on how corona virus has drastically altered the face of the film industry, Atkinson and Kennedy note that:

It was a tough time for the global film industry for which the pandemic represents a disruption of seismic proportions. All movie production spaces have officially “locked down” and all talent - whether in front or behind the camera - has been quarantined. Film festivals have all been cancelled or moved online, cinemas were closed, and the industry faced an uncertain economic future. (1)

Hollywood and Bollywood, which are major film production industries in the world, have their own share of crisis in the production, distribution and

exhibition of films because of the coronavirus pandemic. Whiting posits that the effects of the virus have taken a greater toll on America and India, turning many sectors of their economies upside down including their popular entertainment industries. In the United States of America, the major film production studios: Warner Bros, Walt Disney, 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, Sony and Universal Studios have experienced a significant drop in the number of films produced during the pandemic period resulting to a low number of film releases most of which were on Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) service (1). Other entertainment services like Netflix, HBO, Amazon, etc., acquired movies from the major studios and released them directly to consumers at home. The spectacular Bollywood, Indian film industry like others is a tale of woes as film production activities have come to a standstill resulting to loss of jobs and income because production studios and cinema theatres were shut down. Bloomberg television on its programme Business Lines lamented that *Gulabo Sitabo*, a Bollywood film starring Indian Legend Amitabh Bachchan was to engage millions of viewers to cinema halls across India in the spring season, but it debuted on Amazon.com Inc.'s prime streaming service as a result of the impact of the virus (1).

### **The Collaborative Art of Filmmaking in the Pandemic Era.**

Filmmaking by its nature is a collaborative art that demands social interaction at each point of production from pre-production to distribution and exhibition in cinema theatres (Omoera 37). Motion picture also known as film or movie originates from the writer's imagination. It is the writer who creates the characters and these amazing plot twists delight the audiences. The witty dialogue spoken by the actors, the dramatic action and the performance that thrill the viewers are the inventions of a creative writer. The writer, therefore, builds the foundation upon which the entire film rests. It is only after he has finished this work that the director and other artisans begin theirs. The production of a successful is a major enterprise that requires artisans, construction of elaborate sets, state of the art technology and other expensive production values. The production crew is made up of both the above and below the line personnel; those involved in the creative development of the film and those responsible for the day-to-day filmmaking covering the pre-production, production and post-production stages. It is impossible to individuate the elements of a film because the director, cinematographer, art director, writer, actors, crew and others work in collaboration with each other to actualize the director's vision for a film.

Travis looks at collaboration as a journey where in the film production, team members share a common vision but are willing to challenge and be challenged with the keen awareness that the result can far exceed the efforts of

any one individual (134). This is in contrast with the auteur film theory, which submits that a director's over bearing influences coupled with his individual style makes him the author of a film. Pramaggorie and Willis in a question-and-answer session with independent filmmaker, Courneyer state that when you see credits like "a so and so film" or "a film by so and so", you are seeing an ego parade, nothing more (370). To be laboured, the obvious, filmmaking is a collaborative enterprise. The collaborative theory accounts for the contribution each artist or artisan makes to the film including above the line; directors, producers and leading extras (41). Wordland concurs that, everyone involved in the production of a film including the production designer who delegates set construction, costume and make-up designers to the necessary departments ensure that everything is done in line with the director's vision for the film (10).

From the foregoing, we can deduce that the success of any film is very much dependent on how much collaboration there is within the entire production team. Actors and technicians have an enormous amount to contribute as no single individual has the monopoly of knowledge. According to Grant, a motion picture's personality can be linked to its major creators, directors, producers, leading actors and all those who play a part in its nuances to affect the audience's reaction to what they see on the screen (80). Filmmaking is the most collaborative environment ever invented by humanity to create art. To make a certain kind of film, you need to know how to get others on the same page. The filmmaking process involves a number of complex and discrete stages requiring people from diverse professions working seamlessly together as a team to achieve a common goal. Gocsik and Barsam reckon that;

Film is a collaborative medium. It is important to understand that no one person can control the product. The Director of Photography (DOP), the screenwriters (often many), the wardrobe and make-up people, the head of the studio - all these and others have a hand in determining the final product. (11)

Collaborative art as it applies to filmmaking focuses on each person's contributions in significant ways to achieve the desired result. It demands the creative involvement of everyone working as a team and that is what filmmaking is all about. While collaboration is important in filmmaking is that no single individual has the monopoly of knowledge and with shared experiences, knowledge and craft, better results would be achieved. By working with a team, you are able to focus on a specific aspect of the production; when you collaborate, you are able to rely on others to perform tasks that you otherwise would have had to take care of. Therefore, an

exposition into the filmmaking process will enable us appreciate the power of collaboration towards the realization of the director's vision for a film which today has been rudely truncated by Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Working with the Cast and Crew**

Filmmaking is about collaboration. On every production set, it is normal to see people responsible to perform different functions. It is a thing never heard of in the film world and it is most unprofessional for anyone to be doing everything by himself. Even with smaller crews, it is in order to figure out and assign responsibilities to production personnel right at the pre-production stage. The director of photography (DOP) also known as the cinematographer is the lighting cameraman responsible for the technical aspects of images as well as the mise-en-scene. He professionally carries out the film director's instructions with a firm and creative commitment that the director's aesthetic and artistic vision of the film is indeed achieved. He is the film director's main visual collaborator

Giannetti contends that in the cause of making creative and interpretative decisions, the director of photography who is in charge of the camera, grips and lighting crews performs management and logistical organization. All these functions involve constant close interaction with crew members (people) for the success of the production (66). Seasoned, creative result-oriented film directors have realised overtime that the performances of actors during the shoot largely determine the success or failure of film. Directors, therefore, treat actors and actresses as creative partners. By creating an atmosphere that says "we are a team" is very conducive for creative physical interaction devoid of social distancing. Such an atmosphere gives room for personal and group social interactions, words of encouragement and motivation, which in most cases reduces tension and energizes those that are stressed and in need of support.

It is often said, "patience is a virtue", it is most apt in this circumstance as patience and extra attention to members of the cast and crew can exude that great confidence that will culminate to cathartic performance. On most shoots, film directors gain confidence, support, and team dynamic and attain that spirit of camaraderie by socializing a bit on location with actors outside the confines of a rehearsal and successful shooting session. Besides relaxation, such social activities assure every participant in the group the oneness in the creative spirit of production, as everyone is willing to discuss and exchange creative ideas. Effective communication between the director, cast and crew is one of the key factors to a successful collaboration during a shoot. Physical contacts like hugging, handshakes, smiles and other affectionate means express feelings, warmth and oneness that make one feel good with a willing

spirit to put up his or her best performance. The above tips on collaboration for effective filmmaking without any handicap is a negation to Covid-19 pandemic protocols, which the motion picture practitioners are making efforts to stay alive and at the same time provide movie entertainment to their audience.

Reluga posits that social distancing refers to the adoption of behaviours by individuals in a community that reduces those individuals' risk from becoming infected, by limiting their contacts with other individuals or reducing the transmission risks during each contacts (2). Social distancing is the hardest part during production, whether in the studio or on location because the entire nature of filmmaking is collaborative. How possible is it for a director to be talking to an artist or a crew member metres away? On some sets in Hollywood, production executives incurred additional expenses hiring extra persons to enforce the order of keeping people at a distance not more than an arm's length. Rubin, Jackson and Tangcay recount their experience on a Hollywood movie set lamenting that shooting movies has become more expensive and more time consuming and that is not likely to change (2).

### **Nollywood and the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The Nigerian film industry popularly known as Nollywood is a multibillion-dollar industry that produces movies and television programmes more than Hollywood of the United States of America and second place to Bollywood of India in terms of the quantity of movies produced in a year. The ingenuity and inventiveness of Nigerian filmmakers who from a shaky homemade movie on VHS cameras is now the second most prolific film industry in the world. It is estimated that Nollywood employs more than one million people, produces about 50 films weekly. The outbreak of Covid-19 has dealt a deadly blow to movie industries across the globe leading to a closure of businesses forcing the world population to stay at home and maintain social distancing. Mbamalu observes that when restrictions were introduced in Nigeria, Nollywood filmmakers bore the brunt. Filming stopped and Africa's biggest movie industry grounded to a painfully slow halt (1). An interview with Patrick Lee Chairman, Cinema Exhibitors Association of Nigeria, he lamented the enormous financial loss suffered by the Nigerian Film Industry due to the continue suspension of cinema operations and the theatre in general as a result of the lockdown (Telephone interview, 7 May 2022).

In the same vein, the Operations Manager of Mees Palace Cinema in Jos, Plateau state Brian Oyemike recounted the huge loss they encountered during the pandemic. According to him Covid-19 really affected the business at MEES Palace cinema. You know very well that without viewers at the cinema there will be no revenue. The total lockdown affected our business in

many ways. Our equipment which are very sensitive were not used for quite a long time resulting to huge sum of money for repairs and maintenance. Besides, the closure of the cinema caused a lot of damage to the seats and walls as rodents caused massive destructions to our facilities due to none activity at the venue. You can imagine what happens to your furniture and electronics when your house is locked up for a period of one year! There was even no way to generate revenue, so all our staff were sent home in compliance with the government's lockdown directive. Today, we are faced with high maintenance cost of equipment and physical facilities to meet the entertainment needs of our numerous viewers (Interviewed 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2022.).

The Federal Ministry of Health recorded the first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria on Feb 27, 2020 with a subsequent lockdown by Lagos state in March a month later. The nation had to enforce strict protocols to curtail the spread of the disease. Restriction of movements was enforced, as there was lockdown of movement and social activities, which directly affected cinemas, cutting off income for filmmakers and marketers. Mbamalu of *This is Africa* reports that when restrictions were introduced, a Nigerian indie filmmaker Umoren was in the middle of shooting his TV series; Channel 77 in his studio with a crew of over 70 people which included main actors, extras, his crew and cleaners, had to stop filming and not shoot for another eight months (1).

Nollywood film budgets included corona virus related expenses as well as production insurance cover. Prior to the outbreak of the corona virus disease, getting supporting actors, background actors to create an atmosphere of cameo appearance tagged "waka pass" in Nigerian parlance took only a day's notice. At the hit of the pandemic, the situation was different. Actors were mandated to undergo three tests for which they were expected to test negative before allowing them to participate in production. If someone among the cast or crew tested positive, the person would be immediately excluded from the team. The overhead cost for production during the pandemic was alarming. You can just imagine how much a production budget goes into Covid-19 tests per person at three consecutive times for a cast and crew of approximately one hundred people. The economic loss by cinema theatres in Nigeria during the outbreak and lockdown are expressively captured by Ishola, Ityonzughur and Gbamwuan:

Cinema and pay television broadcast operators were the most hit in the content distribution chain. By observing the social distancing guidelines, cinemas were closed, families had no option but to stay at home and with limited content in circulation, while pay-television broadcast operators were forced to repeat programmes across their channels. Take for instance, sports contents like football is enjoyed mostly by Nigerians. However, due to the outbreak of the virus,

organizers were forced to cancel their games until the situation subsided. This in earnest was a great loss to even local cinema shows halls across the country arising from the fact that they were also forced to shut down their businesses. (70)

It is not an understatement to say that thousands of workers including entertainers, makeup artists, set designers, carpenters and backstage dancers have been seriously affected. The lockdown of movement and the prohibition of people gathering in open and enclosures have not only crippled film production activities but also brought untold hardship to many who were engaged to work and earn a livelihood from Nollywood productions. With the lockdown of cinema theatres in Nigeria, several film producers have gone in search of cinema alternatives by opting to release their films on streaming platforms.

### **Production Challenges of Nollywood Film Practitioners**

Many Nigerian filmmakers suffered different kind of hardships during the lockdown. Examples abound of those who could hardly conclude their production and distribution works before they were caught in the web of the lockdown. Mbamalu posted in a tweet that Umoren an independent filmmaker who had earlier directed a hugely successful film “Children of Mud” was confined at home using his laptop to edit a video project he directed. Similarly, Cinematographer Igbekele who had just finished a shoot and getting ready for another production could not proceed because Lagos State announced a lockdown. (Tweeted 18th March 2020)

There was no interstate movement, no further productions over a period of months, which forced his cast and crew to find other means of survival. Even when the lockdown was relaxed, Covid-19 posed challenges and restrictions on the film sets. Taylor, the pioneer producer of *Comedy in Nollywood*, shows how he created the position of a chief Covid-19 officer on the film sets whose responsibility was to enforce the World Health Organization (WHO) Covid-19 guidelines. He reduced the number of people on the set to the least possible. The tests were carried out on each crew member at a cost between \$110 and \$130 which inadvertently led to an increase in his production budget. (Mbamalu 3). In order to avoid conveying cast and crew in a crowded bus in keeping with social distancing, it became necessary to rent two buses. Due to the severe enforcement of curfew, not much exterior scenes were shot including night scenes. The people on location were made to wear gloves, nose masks, frequent use of sanitizers as many people complained that their hands were sweaty and with the face masks on, it was difficult to hear each other clearly when speaking. The restriction of the curfew made it

difficult to shoot into the night as night scenes were also shifted for daytime shooting (3).

Okhai, President *Directors Guild of Nigeria* in an interviewed posited that, a few productions were taking place underground, people could not really go out to express themselves in terms of big budget movies or going out to cinemas as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the entertainment industry. (Interviewed 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2022). Similarly, Gyang of *Cinema Kpatakpata* in an interviewed said that he experienced limited verbal communication on the set wearing mask all the time, the artists used to make up themselves and Covid -19 tests were carried out every 10 days which negatively affected their budgets and the entire production (Interview, 6 May 2022). Ogunshina, a Nollywood filmmaker wrote a movie script full of emotion and intimate love scenes. With the outbreak of the pandemic in Nigeria, Ogunshina in a chat with Timileyin Omilana narrated his ordeal on how he quickly rewrote his script to incorporate creative distancing into the love scenes. Ogunshina stressed the point that COVID-19 had delivered a kiss of death to his script. In his words, “we have to keep pushing because it is a love story but we cannot bring two lovers together at this time. I cannot bring people together on set for a movie where they have to kiss; it does not make any sense. So I have started reworking the script and thinking of another angle” (2). This narrative is very apt as this simple act of kissing by two lovers is totally out of sync with the pandemic era when social distancing is the norm in line with safety guidelines.

Idiagbonya the director of *TV Series Meadows* expressed his sadness to Abraham Achirga and Alexis Akwagyiram of *Reuters* at the resumption of his production in Abuja after a period of total lockdown for two months. He had to cut down the number of cast and crew to a manageable number of seven while he also doubled as a lighting cameraman. Regular temperature checks, wearing of face masks and maintenance of social distance was strictly enforced as the actors delivered their lines. A former president of the *Directors Guild of Nigeria* (DGN) Amata condemned social distancing which according to him would make scripts unworkable. His justification is based on the premise that Nollywood films are famed for tales of romance and witchcraft, which often depict lavish social gatherings that are the bedrock of Nigerian life (2).

### **Film Exhibition during Covid-19**

In Nigeria, commercial movie theatres like Silver Bird Cinemas, Octopus Cinema Hall, Ozone Cinemas, Film House Imax Lekki, Kada Cinemas and several others constitute theatrical exhibition sites. Films first make their debut in theatrical screening. This is a launching pad that determines how successful the film will be in other markets. Giwa submits that:

The distribution and screening of Nollywood films range from watching through DVDS, in theatres and on internet. The Nollywood audience has access to Nigerian movies through several platforms regardless of where they are in the world. The need for the expanding diaspora is due to the migration of over 400,000 Nigerians to other countries like the United States and the United Kingdom amongst others. With the widespread movement of Nigerians expanding, the need for access in multiple platforms is necessary and convenient. (3)

Most film releases in Nigeria are exhibited in cinema theatres. With the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, theatres were all closed across the nation. The ticket sales in theatres contribute greatly to the revenue a film generates. With the closure of cinemas theatre workers had to stay safe at home, so also the audience which has led to a loss of revenue and a lot of workers being laid off from their jobs. The business ventures of film marketers have also suffered a big loss due to the effects of the pandemic. Odiete, the CEO of Blue Pictures which distributes films across West Africa for the past fifteen years disclosed to Mbamalu that she lost over 60 million naira during the COVID-19 pandemic. Odiete has now pivoted her business towards Video on Demand (VOD) as she does not need a lot of money for marketing, unlike cinemas where the filmmaker has to consider huge marketing budget (3).

### **Exploring New Alternatives**

For every problem, there has always been a creative need and effort to solve the problem hence the popular well-known proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention” which is very apt in this circumstance of the coronavirus impediments. Atkinson and Kennedy note that: since digital technologies were introduced into film production, one of their primary benefits has been to make economic savings such as reducing the need for expensive international travel. So, for example, ‘automatic dialogue replacement’ is one of the final post production processes where actors can record replacement dialogue remotely in one studio which can be dubbed over the live action footage in another. So, films can now be made in virtualised environments devoid of corona virus protocols (2). In continuation, Atkinson and Kennedy confirm the use of virtual production by citing the recent remake of *Lion King* thus:

*Lion King* remake was made using an entirely virtual set. A virtual set enables a range of creative production personnel, including directors and performers to see the composition of photorealistic computer animated imagery on the screens around them. Actors are able to perform live within the digital environment... Similarly, in the Oscar

winning film *Gravity*, the only real action were the faces of the principal actors, everything else was computer generated. Virtual production also means that the production team does not have to be in the same physical space. Creative team can continue to collaborate despite being in different places. (2)

The new initiative by Enderby Entertainment to team up with Draganfly's Safe Set Solutions is the latest development in technology that would enable film and television producers work comfortably without fear of contacting the deadly coronavirus. The Safe Set Solution is a ground-based technology that uses symptom pre-screening, elevated body temperature measurement, and social distancing digital display to help ensure that crew and casts are safe on set. Alessandro explains that: Safe Set Solution is a healthy and respiratory measurement platform used as a pre-screening tool to help identify possible infections and respiratory conditions for the safety of film crew and workforces; as well as areas where the people congregate such as airports, schools, shopping malls and other high traffic locations. The system is used to understand patterns and help global film production companies make better decisions and react quicker to mitigate potential health threats (1).

This technology as expected would surely enable crew to get back on production sets that have experienced total lockdown for several months due to the pandemic. It will also guarantee safety as the cast and crew will be more relaxed because the stipulated health guidelines have been complied with as they go about their business. Okhai further stressed that in the area of film distribution and exhibition, many YouTube channels were opened at the time to serve as alternative channels for self-distribution which opened avenues for film producers to do short movies and distribute them across social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook.

Today as Nigerian filmmakers are gradually turning to the digital technology, a lot of movie content is now available because people with smart phones and internet connectivity can produce content and stream online. This has indeed increased customer sophistication as they can now have a wide variety of content to choose from. It therefore implies that players must constantly innovate and be relevant so as to retain attention of customers. It is on record that film producer Charles Okpaleke in partnership with local cinema chains like Genesis and Silverbird Cinemas have launched open air Drive-in cinema exhibition facilities. The Drive-in cinema made a debut in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city in late May 2020. This successful outing was not just inspiring, but it saw all tickets sell out within the recorded time with viewers flocking in to watch the film *Living in Bondage Breaking Free* (2019) comfortably in their cars. Other film producers and directors are now

exploring ways and means of releasing their films on online streaming services like Netflix and VOD. The set back by the pandemic has created a financially viable platform as more drive-in cinema theatres are now established in the country in compliance with the social distancing order.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Covid-19 pandemic had a horrific impact on world economies and the motion picture industry was not an exception. Production of films have suffered indefinite postponement occasioned by total lockdown of movement and social distancing. While the pandemic lasts, the industry faced a future of uncertainty. The production cost for shooting movies has become prohibitive due to the numerous tests carried out on cast and crew to ascertain their wellness on location. The ferocious spread of the disease called for use of masks, social distancing and lockdown which not only affected production but also loss of revenue accrued to cinema theatres. From the foregoing, we can deduce that thousands of people have become jobless with no means of livelihood. The major losses the industry passed through due to the closure of theatres is easing up gradually as new exhibition platforms have been discovered to be financially beneficial. These include streaming media service platforms known as over-the-top (OTT) which have turned into the “new big screen”. Although some people still yearn for the cinematic experience in cinema theatres, people have turned this adversity into advantage as people also watch movies on their phones.

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