

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON NOLLYWOOD

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Abstract

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic and the attendant lockdown that grounded activities in all spheres of life globally, the Nigerian film industry christened 'Nollywood' was gradually overcoming the hydra-headed problem of piracy through revival of cinema culture. This is evidenced in reversal to exhibition in cinema halls like celluloid film days before the production into home videos. Closely aligned to this is the evolution of digital streaming platforms (DSP) to checkmate activities of fraudulent marketers and distributors. However, these new strategies of exhibition, distribution and marketing that is making filmmakers to smile to the bank was disrupted by the sudden shutdown of economic activities to stem the tidal wave of corona virus ravaging the world. Subsequently, to mitigate the spread of the pandemic which has had devastating effects on arts, culture and entertainment sector including the film industry lockdown (otherwise known as sit-at-home policy) was introduced. This was characterized in truncating of film sets, and postponement of ongoing and planned shoots with attendant financial losses. Despite these setbacks, Covid-19 also presented opportunities for the filmmakers to channel their creativity to alternative sources of production, distribution and exhibition. These are typified in film production targeted at online distribution and exhibition. This article examines the adversities and opportunities induced by the Covid-19, using documentary method of data collection and globalisation as theoretical framework. Among other findings, downturn of return on investment (ROI) for filmmakers during the lockdown forced them to intensify the usage of DSP that commenced before the pandemic for distribution and exhibition as the appetite of Nigerian DSP subscribers surges.

Keywords: Covid-19, Adversities, Opportunities, Nollywood, ROI, Nigerian DSP subscribers.

Introduction

Before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, Nollywood was gradually checkmating the hydra-headed problem of piracy through the revival of the cinema culture. While the producers toil day and night to produce movies, the pirates sit and wait for a movie to be released, duplicate it and smile to the bank afterwards. The broadcast of films on satellite television has also drastically reduced the high patronage of video cassettes of 1990s to the early 2000. While battling piracy through agitation and enlightenment campaigns

for implementation of copyright laws, another strategy to checkmate activities of pirates and collaborators among marketers and distributors evolved, that is, Digital Streaming Platforms (DSPs). However, this new strategy of exhibition, distribution and marketing are still on before the sudden outbreak of covid-19. Subsequently, this compelled shutting down of economic activities to mitigate its spread globally.

For the film producers on location, shooting have to be suspended. Production money was subsequently diverted to meeting other costs since cast and crew members could not return to their abode due to lockdown and Covid-19 precautionary policies. The setback occasioned by the restrictions was also very devastating for the actors and other artists in the industry in terms of regular source of income. In few cases, where producers strive to defy the odds to shoot, Covid-19 restrictions come with its challenges on film set. Practicality of the guidelines on production are more difficult than imagined. This entailed, slashing the numbers of people on set to the barest minimum, compulsory testing of films crew for Covid-19 at a high cost and reduction of shooting of exterior and night scenes among others.

Impact of the pandemic has been significantly tough in the filmmaking industry in Nigeria and globally. The adversities of the period is typified in closure of cinema halls, closure of sets, postponement of ongoing and planned shoots implied huge lose to filmmakers. Redundancy of actors, directors and other artists in the industry represented big loss. Postponement of premieres was equally frustrating. The setbacks, however, avail creative filmmakers opportunities of channelling their creativity to alternative sources of production, distribution and exhibition to overcome Covid-19 induced meltdown in production and marketing of films.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on theoretical plane of globalisation. Globalisation is a system whereby the lives of individuals and local communities are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate world-wide. In effect, it is the process of the world becoming a single place. Globalisation is the perception of the world as a function or result of the processes of globalisation upon local communities. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 100). The term according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin gained prominence over the world's 'international' and 'international relations' in the mid-1980s (100). The rise of the world international itself is traced to 18th century to describe growing importance of territorial states in organising social relations and its consequences on global perspective of European imperialism. Subsequently, with the domination of one nation by the other, "nation begun to have a decreasingly importance as individuals and communities gain access

to globally disseminated knowledge and culture, and are affected by economic realities that bypass boundaries of the state.” Relevance of globalisation to this exploration on adversities and opportunities of Covid-19 on Nollywood lies in the global phenomenon of the pandemic. Like the global film industry has greatly influenced activities in the Nigerian Film Industry, the spread of the pandemic in its early stage and peak period was global. In the same vein, sources of alternative platforms to mitigate the devastating effects of covid-19 on the filmmakers was borrowed and imbibed from the global film blocs of Hollywood and Bollywood.

Corona virus: Conceptual Clarification

Etymologically, corona virus according to Almeida et al. is derived from the latin word corona which means crown. The nomenclature was based on microscopic attributes and appearance of the virus with a fringe of large, bulbous surface projection creating an image similar to solar corona or halo(63). Fergin and Cherry elucidate that, corona viruses are clusters of Ribonucleic Acid (RNA) viruses that causes diseases in mammals and birds. In human and birds, they cause respiratory tract infections that can vary from mild to fatal one. Mild illness in human include some cases of common cold, while more deadly types can cause Covid- 19.(10). Corona virus is therefore a new disease that affect the respiratory system of the victims especially the aged and sometimes leading to their death.

Nollywood

Nollywood is the coinage used to describe video films produced in Nigeria. It takes after the other two film blocs in the world, Hollywood for American films and Bollywood for Indian films. Foreign origin of the word attests to the global status of Nigerian film industry as “what the industry is now called was apparently first used in 2003 in *New York Times* by Malt Steinglass who for what of name for emerging video film industry simply used ‘N’ to connote Nigeria and called it Nollywood” (Oni 163). Other coinage for other segments of the industry include Yorubawood for Yoruba video films and Kannywood for Hausa films from Kano, Kaduna and Jos axis.

However, the coinage and its relevance to different cultures that made up the Nigeria Film Industry that has been very controversial. While Jonathan Haynes, like Oni, traced the coinage to Matt Steinglass in an article he wrote for the *New York Times* in 2002, another source linked the invention of the brand name to a Japanese American by the name Norimitsu Onishi, in article he wrote for the *New York Times* in 2002, entitled “Step Aside, Los Angeles, Bombay for Nollywood”, culled and published in *The Guardian* Nigeria on

Thursday, October 3, 2002 (Shaka 53). The debate on who coined the brand name was further compounded by Olusola Oladele Adenugba who averred that, Nick Moran, a BBC reporter, who was in Nigeria to shoot a documentary on the “get-rich-quick-video came up with it” (Adenugba 2). Aside this controversy over the coinage, criticism of the coinage has to do with its neo-colonialist tendencies. One of such reactions as Adenugba attests is that:

The term implies that Nollywood is an imitation of Hollywood and Bollywood rather than something in itself, something original and uniquely African. Many are opposed to the appellation because according to them, it is a form of neo-colonization, another western propaganda. They wonder why the only film culture that has built itself by itself must be labelled after Hollywood.(1)

Beyond the debates and criticism, we align with the submission of Adenugba that, the term covers the diversity of Nigeria Film Productions in terms of culture and language in the same way Bollywood covers the production of India Films in Tamil, Bengali, Telegu and others languages beside Hindi, in other parts of the huge country (Adenugba 1). This same conviction informed the coinage Kannywood and Yorubawood for linguistic and cultural identification.

Over the years, from its early days of mid 1980s to early 1990s, massive growth without development in structure and content of the Nigerian video film industry changed with time and more patronage. The Nigerian video repertoire expanded beyond the genres of mundane issues to contemporary social, political and economic issues. Recent phase of the development is the emergency of ‘New Nollywood’. It is the banner under which independent producers/directors are charting a new direction in production, distribution and exhibition of films. The thrust of the crusade of the new generation of filmmakers to take Nollywood to the next level is characterised in training and professional background, passion for better films with bigger budgets, films that can meet the aesthetics and technical challenges of being projected on big screens in cinema rather than being released on VCDs and DVDs for home consumption.

Global Perspective of Covid-19 Pandemic

Our exposition on adversities of Covid-19 pandemic on Nigerian film industry is foregrounded with global overview of its devastating effects on different spheres of life. The effect of Covid-19 is not only limited to health of the people but also has a huge impact on the socio-political and economic sector of the world. An economy downfall has been noticed in the global economy after outbreak of Covid-19. Critical reviews of the impact of the lock

down on social, political and economic activities, affirm that, an economy downfall was notice in the global economy after outbreak of Covid 19. The preventive policies adopted by the government to mitigate its scourge such as lockdown, quarantine, social distancing grounded production and consumption activities. Side by side with this, the international as well as national trades and commerce, air service, railway service, road transport and other transport services were also suspended. Closely aligned to this, was the closing down of industries, shopping malls and educational institutions for uncertain period of time. (Patha 284)

Subsequently, tourism which is the backbone of global economy was also badly affected by Covid-19 pandemic. The world tourism organization recorded the decline of 58 to 78 percent in world tourism output because of Covid-19.: Drastic change was also observed in the GDP of around 170 developed and developing countries across the globe”. Duffin (qtd. in Pathak 2840). National and international politics also had its fair share of Covid-19 pandemic induced backlash. Review of global political scene reveals that, “the government of ruling parties of some countries seems to be highly worried, while government of some other countries used the pandemic as an opportunity for their political gain. The democratically elected leaders of some countries become autocratic in period of emergency. (Quiraishi 3). In the same vein, the Covid-19 also impacted the elections of various countries across the world. The International Foundation for Electoral System (IFES) recorded that, 61 countries and eight territories postponed their elections and a total of 106 elections was postponed because of Covid-19 (IFES 5).

In international relations and diplomacy, outbreak of covid-19 created serious tension. The war like situation was enacted in the allegation and counter allegation between America and China. While the United States of America criticized the Chinese Government and blamed it for the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese vehemently denied the allegation by President Trump and in turn blamed America for the pandemic. Johnny(qtd in Pathak 8). In spite of the denials by the Chinese government, President Trump derogatorily described corona virus as Chinese virus and threatened to seek compensation for the havoc wrecked by the pandemic.

In the entertainment world, global film industry had its own share of the adversities occasioned by the pandemic as “Covid-19 has had a game-changing effect on industries across the globe, but large scale events-especially those taken place indoors-have almost completely ground to a halt in 2020 that include cinemas, which spent most the year closed due to the corona virus”. (Pearce 2). This was to sustain the preventive protocol of social distancing to mitigate the contamination of Covid-19. Equally, devastating was release schedule which was suspended or postponed due to the pandemic. Major

producers and marketers foreseeing challenges of releasing new films have to delay or in some cases, cancelled exhibition plans, leaving the cinema devoid of big money options.

Covid-19's Setback on Nollywood

Before the sudden lockdown of economic activities to mitigate the spread of corona virus, Nigerian filmmakers targeting international audience normally schedule their release, exhibition and distribution to conform to global film calendar. On account of Covid-19, most international film festivals and markets that would have afforded them the opportunity raise funds, awareness and critical acclaim from March, 2020 to the end of the year were cancelled. In the same vein, some local and foreign films already scheduled for release were rescheduled. The wave of cancellations and rescheduling had a knock-on-effect on Nigerian film industry, including widening the gap between Nigerian filmmakers and the much needed financing.

The general lull in film financing means several filmmakers will struggle with production and may have to devise new ways of funding. Filmmakers who were able to secure funding before the pandemic may also have to suspend production or postpone theatrical release on account of new rules on social distancing and restrictions on human movement. At the home front, the setback experienced by Nigerian filmmakers during the peak period of the pandemic is captured in these flashbacks. On February 27, 2020 first confirmed case corona virus in Nigeria was recorded by the Federal Ministry of Health. About a month later, in Lagos state a lockdown which included ban on gatherings of over 25 people was imposed. This ban directly affected cinemas, cutting off income for filmmakers and marketers. (Ishola, Ityonzuahul, Gbamwuan 62).

Reports in *This is Africa* revealed how some Nigerian filmmakers bore the brunt of having to stop productions midway due to the pandemic (2). Nigerian India filmmaker, Imoh Umore was heavily indebted due to the lockdown of December, 2020. Umore who directed the hugely successful 2017 film, *Children of Mud*, the report indicates "was confined to his house working on his laptop putting final edits to a video, which was part of a project he directed. When the lockdown was announced". He was also in the middle of shooting his TV series with a crew of over 70 which he had to stop and wait for another eight months. In the same vein, Emmanuel Igbekele, a cinematographer, *this is Africa* (3) recalls that:

He was just wrapping up a production and just like Umoren, he was also preparing for another production when the lockdown in Lagos state was announced. The production activities, which involved inter-state travel were indefinitely postponed. During the first two weeks of

lockdown, Igbekele started doing post-production work hoping he will get back to work after two weeks. When the lockdown was extended to more than three months, in which he was just home doing nothing,

Igbekele told *This is Africa*, “I was concerned because I had family to take care of my budget was running low and I began to panic. Money was not coming in and I started spending from my savings”. In those months, Igbekele lost income. Effects of the pandemic on the marketing and film promotion are captured in the reflection of Joy Odiete, a film marketer and distributor with experience spanning 15 years. As a marketer, she recalls that, she lost over 60 million naira (\$158,151) during the Covid-19 pandemic. To make up for the low patronage of films induced by the restriction of indoor activities and movements, filmmakers and marketers in Nigeria had to explore Video on Demand (VOD) (*This is Africa* 5).

In the same measure, actors and actresses variously complained about the lockdown and social distance policy adopted by the government as a control measure for the pandemic. Corroborating this scenario, a Yoruba actor, Funsho Adeolu as quoted in (Ishola, Ityonzughul and Gbamwuan 71) lamented that ...as celebrity, people are always flocking into our house to ask for money and food. Because I know these things affect us in varying degrees, I do my best for them. People will see you on the road and expect you to drop something, whereas, we are not even making any money at the moment. While the low patronage of the cinemas was a boom to viewership at different homes, it has the negative effect of exposing children and teenagers to obscenities of crime and sexuality which can influence the impressionable minds. This is evidenced in upsurge in cybercrime and teenage pregnancy recorded during the period.

Opportunities Presented by Covid-19

Social distancing and restriction of movement that led to low patronage of cinemas during the pandemic compelled the intensification of digital streaming platforms (DSP). The growing popularity of DSPs has thus queried the necessity for the exclusive cinema interval between theatrical release and film availability. The unprecedented large demand/rental of foreign films released solely on DSPs during the Covid-19 days’ attest to its viability for distribution and exhibition. Platforms such as Netflix and Showmax have also notably gained more viewership.

Closely related to this, was the increase in audiences for African films. According to Okoth, “during the Covid-19 pandemic, the audiences were able to congregate and to watch more African films in their living rooms on phones, laptops and tablets” (2). The availability of time increased viewership on

online platforms. Prior to this period, time has been a rare commodity for the working class in Africa as the pressure to focus in creating wealth has been high. The multiplier effect of the high patronage of Digital Streaming Platforms for health and security reasons is the possibility of attracting more investment into local DSPs. Some Nigerian Telecommunication companies and financial institutions are beginning to consider establishment of more local DSPs, the latest being DSP designed by Telco and which does not require subscription. It is expected that, more local DSPs will be designed as more Nigerians adapt to digital streaming culture and data price further crashing down.

Another fallout of the lockdown induced by Covid-19 pandemic was the emergence of Northflix; a digital streaming platform (DSP) in Kano during the period. Northflix formerly used pay-per-view system, but quickly switched to flat rate subscription after the virus emerged in Asia and Europe. The fee is just N1, 500 (\$4) a month in addition to subscriber's smart phone and internet cases. (Aljazeera 4). The platform is an alternative market for film producers with DVD shops shot. Subscribers have stuck to the platform despite the easing of lockdown because of the convenience it offers as well as the fact that DVD can no longer be found on the streets. Another morale booster for filmmaker during this period of stagnation and loss of revenue was the palliative in form of funding internationally and nationally. Governments in Europe provided covid-19 funding to cushion artist during the pandemic. While such palliatives in cash and kind are well publicised in Nigeria, beneficiaries cannot be ascertained, Kenya however exemplified this trend in Africa. In Kenya, the government's film commission provided artists with two funding opportunities. The first one was the artist's stimulus package, which saw 85,000 Euros distributed variably to the production of 20 short films on covid-19, which were regarded as work for pay. The second funding was the empowerment fund, in which government granted amounts ranging from 15,000 Euros to 40,000 Euros to 10 film production companies totalling 250,000 Euros to produce feature films and documentaries (Okoth 4).

Conclusion

In this exploration of adversities and opportunities of covid-19 on Nollywood, observation and documentation of the period of focus revealed a mixed blessing of loses and gains. Loses manifested in closure of cinema halls, suspension of shooting and premiers and stoppage of income for individual producers, directors and actors. On the other hand, the stagnation presented opportunities to sustain the industry beyond the pandemic period. This is typified in intensification of Digital Streaming Platforms (DSPs) for exhibition and distribution of films. Close related to this, is the upsurge in viewership off Nigerian and African films without the stress of going to the cinemas. Digital

Streaming has also relieved the filmmakers to certain extent the menace of pirates, who have been their nightmare before the lockdown. In the same vein, paucity of funds for survival and financing production in pre and post lockdown period engendered new sources of funding. In addition to expected returns from box office, efforts are geared towards crowd funding in collaboration with corporate organisations and international agencies.

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