

**PORTRAYAL OF GENDER ROLE STEREOTYPES IN
NOLLYWOOD FILMS AND AUDIENCE PERCEPTION IN
SOUTHEAST NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This study examined the portrayal of gender-role stereotypes in Nollywood films and audience perception in Southeast Nigeria. The study focused on the extent of viewers' exposure to gender-stereotyped portrayals, their awareness of gender-role stereotypes, the influence of such portrayals on perceptions of gender roles in society, the relationship between exposure and attitudes towards gender equality, and the factors influencing viewers' acceptance or rejection of gender stereotypes. The study was anchored on Cultivation Theory and Framing Theory. A survey research design was adopted, with 400 respondents selected from Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation and inferential statistics at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings indicated a high level of exposure to gender-stereotyped portrayals and a high level of awareness of gender stereotypes among respondents. The findings further showed that gender portrayals in Nollywood influence viewers' perceptions of gender roles, including beliefs about household leadership, domestic responsibilities, relationships and occupational roles. Exposure to stereotyped portrayals was also associated with respondents' attitudes towards gender equality. Cultural background, education, peer influence, entertainment value and personal beliefs were identified as factors influencing the acceptance or rejection of gender-role stereotypes. The study concludes that Nollywood remains an important cultural medium capable of both reproducing existing gender expectations and challenging traditional stereotypes. It recommends gender-sensitive storytelling, increased

participation of women in film production and stronger media-literacy programmes to promote balanced representations of men and women.

Keywords: Nollywood; gender stereotypes; gender roles; audience perception; gender equality; Southeast Nigeria; media representation.

Introduction

Film is both a cultural product and a socializing institution. Through repeated stories, characters, dialogue and visual conventions, films can communicate ideas about what is normal, desirable or unacceptable in social life. Gender is particularly susceptible to such representation because audiences encounter recurring images of masculinity and femininity across entertainment platforms. Stereotypical portrayals can position men as authoritative providers and women as dependent caregivers, thereby reinforcing established expectations about power, work, relationships and family responsibilities (Alola & Alola, 2020; Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya, & Osunkunle, 2019).

Nollywood has become a particularly important site for these processes. From the video-film era to contemporary cinema and streaming, Nigerian films have expanded their reach while retaining strong links with local cultural values. The industry does not merely entertain; it also provides narratives through which audiences interpret family life, morality, social status and gender relations. Recent scholarship suggests that contemporary Nollywood contains both continuity and change: some productions continue to reproduce patriarchal stereotypes, while others present women as leaders, entrepreneurs and agents of social change (Akudinobi, 2017; Adejunmobi, 2022; Olayiwola, 2023).

The Southeast provides an important context for examining these representations. The region comprises Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States and has a strong Igbo cultural heritage. Traditional expectations concerning family authority, inheritance, marriage and domestic responsibilities may interact with media representations in complex ways. At the same time, urbanization, education, social media and global streaming have exposed audiences to alternative ideas about gender equality. Audience perception therefore cannot be assumed to be uniform: viewers may accept, negotiate or resist the meanings presented by films.

The research gap addressed by the study concerns the relationship between what Nollywood portrays and how audiences in Southeast Nigeria interpret those portrayals. Earlier studies have often concentrated on content analysis, while reception-oriented work has been less extensive and frequently focused on particular films, locations or demographic groups. The present study therefore brings audience evidence into the discussion by examining exposure, awareness, perception, attitudes and the factors associated with acceptance or rejection of gender stereotypes. This focus is consistent with the source manuscript's argument that understanding audience reception is necessary for assessing whether changing portrayals in

contemporary Nollywood are actually accompanied by changing social perceptions.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growth and professionalization of Nollywood, stereotypical representations of gender remain visible in many Nigerian films. Women may be represented as submissive wives, domestic caregivers, victims, objects of desire or characters whose success depends on men, while men may be represented as providers, decision-makers, aggressors or natural leaders. Such patterns matter because repeated media representations may contribute to the normalization of unequal expectations.

The problem is especially important when audiences recognize stereotypes but continue to encounter them frequently. Awareness alone may not produce resistance if portrayals resonate with existing cultural beliefs or are embedded in entertaining and familiar storylines. The source study reports that Southeast viewers recognized many gender stereotypes while also acknowledging cultural, educational, peer and entertainment-related factors in their responses. The central problem, therefore, is not simply the existence of stereotypes but the interaction between media portrayals and audience interpretation.

The study sought to:

1. Determine the extent to which viewers are exposed to gender-stereotyped portrayals in Nollywood movies.
2. Assess viewers' awareness of gender-role stereotypes in Nollywood movies.
3. Examine how gender-role portrayals in Nollywood influence viewers' perceptions of gender roles in society.
4. Investigate the relationship between exposure to gender-stereotyped portrayals and viewers' attitudes toward gender equality.
5. Identify factors that influence viewers' acceptance or rejection of gender-role stereotypes in Nollywood films.

Research Questions

1. To what extent are viewers exposed to gender-stereotyped portrayals in Nollywood movies?
2. What is the level of viewers' awareness of gender-role stereotypes in Nollywood movies?
3. How do gender portrayals in Nollywood influence viewers' perceptions of gender roles in society?
4. What is the relationship between exposure to gender-stereotyped portrayals and viewers' attitudes toward gender equality?
5. What factors influence viewers' acceptance or rejection of gender-role stereotypes in Nollywood films?

Research Hypotheses

H01: There is no significant extent to which Southeast viewers are exposed to gender-stereotyped portrayals in selected Nollywood movies.

H02: There is no significant difference in the level of awareness of gender-role stereotypes among Southeast viewers.

H03: There is no significant relationship between gender-role portrayals in Nollywood movies and viewers' perceptions of societal gender roles.

H04: There is no significant association between exposure to gender-stereotyped portrayals and changes in viewers' attitudes.

H05: There are no significant factors, including age, education, gender and frequency of viewing, that influence Southeast viewers' acceptance or rejection of gender-role stereotypes in selected Nollywood films.

Significance of the Study

The study is relevant to communication scholarship because it connects media representation with audience reception in a specific Nigerian cultural setting. For filmmakers and scriptwriters, the findings identify stereotypes that audiences readily recognize and provide evidence for developing more balanced characters. For regulators, educators and civil-society organizations, the findings support media-literacy initiatives that help viewers critically interpret gendered messages. The study also contributes regional evidence to the wider debate on gender representation in African screen media.

Theoretically, the study is relevant to Cultivation Theory because it examines whether repeated exposure is associated with perceptions and attitudes. It is also relevant to Framing Theory because gender roles are not communicated only through frequency but through the ways characters, actions and relationships are selected and emphasized. The source manuscript specifically argues that audience members may accept, negotiate or reject such frames depending on their experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Scope of the Study

The study is geographically limited to Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. Conceptually, it focuses on gender-role stereotyping and audience perception in selected Nollywood movies. The source manuscript identifies *Lionheart*, *My Wife and I*, *Wives on Strike*, *King of Boys*, *Isoken*, *Chief Daddy*, *The Wedding Party*, *30 Days in Atlanta*, *Mr and Mrs*, and *Games Women Play* as the selected films.

Definition of Terms

Gender: socially constructed roles, behaviours, expectations and attributes associated with males and females.

Gender roles: socially and culturally prescribed responsibilities and behaviours assigned to individuals based on gender.

Gender-role stereotyping: repetitive and simplified portrayals that place males and females in fixed, traditional or exaggerated roles.

Audience perception: the way viewers interpret, evaluate and respond to gender representations in films.

Nollywood movies: films produced within Nigeria's film industry and reflecting Nigerian cultural, social and everyday experiences.

Related Literature and Theoretical Foundation

Nollywood developed from Nigeria's theatrical and television traditions into a large-scale video-film industry and later into a more professional cinema and streaming sector. Its cultural significance extends beyond production volume because films circulate ideas about family, morality, success and identity. Research reviewed in the source manuscript shows that women have historically been represented in domestic and subordinate positions, although newer productions increasingly introduce female agency and more complex characters (Onyenakeya et al., 2019; Olayiwola, 2023).

Gender stereotypes are generalized assumptions about the characteristics and appropriate roles of men and women. In media, they may appear through dialogue, occupation, family authority, costume, visual emphasis and narrative consequences. Cultivation-oriented scholarship suggests that repeated exposure can make mediated representations appear familiar and socially normal, while audience-reception perspectives emphasize that viewers interpret messages through culture, education and personal experience. The source manuscript similarly reports that cultural background, education, peer influence, entertainment value and personal beliefs shape acceptance or rejection of stereotyped portrayals.

The films identified in the source manuscript illustrate different representational tendencies. *Lionheart* and *Isoken* provide examples of women with professional ambition and agency, whereas other popular titles may combine progressive elements with conventional expectations about marriage, family authority and femininity. The point is not that every film communicates one uniform message, but that contemporary Nollywood contains competing frames of gender: some challenge traditional roles while others reproduce them.

Gender perceptions in Southeast Nigeria emerge from the interaction of cultural traditions and modern social change. The source literature describes patriarchal expectations concerning male authority and female domesticity, but also notes women's participation in commerce, community organizations and decision-making. Education, urbanization, Christianity, globalization and digital media have contributed to changing expectations. Consequently, viewers may recognize a portrayal as stereotypical without necessarily rejecting it.

Repeated exposure to media representations can influence beliefs about leadership, family responsibility, relationships and appropriate occupations. The study's questionnaire directly measured such perceptions. For example,

respondents reported high agreement that movies shape beliefs about how men and women should behave ($M=4.42$, $SD=0.90$) and that movie roles can influence beliefs about men as household heads ($M=4.55$, $SD=0.89$).

Existing empirical work reviewed in the source manuscript shows persistent stereotypes alongside gradual change. Onyenankeya et al. (2019) identified continuing sexism and gender profiling in Nollywood. Osakpolor (2021) examined representations of women and noted that strong female characters can still be framed within patriarchal structures. Adejunmobi (2022) emphasizes newer voices and female agency, while Olayiwola (2023) discusses the emergence of a female gaze. More recent studies cited in the manuscript, including Worlu and Harcourt-Whyte (2025), Martins et al. (2025) and Obasi et al. (2025), provide further evidence that gender representation remains contested.

The major gap is methodological and geographical. Much of the literature emphasizes film content, while fewer studies connect specific patterns of representation to audience responses across all five Southeast states. The present study addresses that gap through a 400-person audience survey and by relating exposure to perceptions, attitudes and acceptance/rejection factors.

Cultivation Theory, associated with Gerbner, proposes that sustained exposure to recurring media patterns can shape viewers' conceptions of social reality. Applied to gender, repeated portrayals of men as dominant providers and women as submissive caregivers may contribute to perceptions that these roles are natural or expected. The source manuscript identifies mainstreaming and resonance as relevant ideas: viewers may develop shared perceptions through repeated exposure, especially when media portrayals resonate with existing cultural experience.

Framing Theory explains how media select, emphasize and organize aspects of reality so that audiences are encouraged to interpret events in particular ways (Entman, 1993). In Nollywood, gender can be framed through character roles, dialogue, narrative outcomes and visual emphasis. A woman who challenges a traditional expectation may be framed as admirable, rebellious or problematic; the frame can therefore influence the meaning attached to the same behaviour.

The study is anchored on Cultivation Theory and Framing Theory. Cultivation provides the exposure-based explanation, while Framing provides the message-construction explanation. Together, they permit examination of both the recurrence of gender stereotypes and the meanings attached to those stereotypes. The combination is appropriate because the study is concerned with both repeated exposure and audience interpretation. The source manuscript explicitly identifies these two theories as its theoretical foundation.

Research Methods

Research Design

The source manuscript describes the study as a mixed-method research design comprising survey research and interviews. The survey used a structured questionnaire to assess viewers' attitudes, perceptions and responses. However, the results reported in the supplied manuscript are predominantly quantitative; separate interview findings are not presented. This journal version therefore reports the questionnaire-based findings while retaining the original mixed-method description.

Population of the Study

The population comprised adult residents of the five Southeast states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The source manuscript gives a combined population estimate of 21,955,414 based on National Population Commission data.

Sample Size

The study used a sample of 400 respondents. The source manuscript reports a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error and indicates that 420 questionnaires were distributed to obtain the target sample after accounting for possible non-response or incomplete returns.

Sampling Technique

A multistage procedure was reported. The five states were treated as strata; one capital city was selected in each state; and 80 respondents were selected within each city. The allocation was equal across the five states to facilitate comparison.

Instrument for Data Collection

A self-administered structured questionnaire was used, supported in the original design by a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics and items corresponding to the five research questions. The source manuscript reports face-to-face administration with the assistance of trained research assistants.

Validation of the Instrument

The instrument was subjected to face validation by communication scholars in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to ensure alignment between the questionnaire items, study objectives and information required.

Reliability of the Instrument

The source manuscript reports a test-retest procedure involving 30 respondents in Enugu State, with re-administration after two weeks, and also states that Cronbach's alpha would be used. The manuscript does not provide the resulting reliability coefficient; this should be inserted from the verified reliability output before journal submission.

Method of Data Collection

Questionnaires were administered face-to-face in selected capital cities. The manuscript reports that respondents were informed about the study and consent was obtained. Four research assistants were involved in administration.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics comprised frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Inferential testing was conducted at the 0.05 level of significance. The source manuscript reports the use of SPSS Version 22. It contains inconsistent labels for some inferential tests (some tables are described as chi-square tests while reporting t-statistics); the present article reports the statistics exactly as supplied rather than silently changing them.

Step 12: Conclusion and recommendations. The study concludes that Nollywood can reproduce as well as challenge gender expectations and recommends more balanced storytelling, stronger participation of women in production, gender-sensitive themes and media-literacy programmes.

Step 11: Interpretation of findings. Findings were interpreted in relation to the research questions and the two theoretical foundations: Cultivation Theory and Framing Theory. The discussion connects exposure and audience interpretation with existing scholarship on gender representation in Nollywood.

Step 10: Hypothesis testing. The five null hypotheses were reported as rejected at $p < .001$. Because some supplied tables contain inconsistent labels for inferential procedures, the statistics should be cross-checked against the original SPSS output before publication.

Step 9: Data preparation and analysis. Completed questionnaires were coded and analysed with SPSS Version 22. Descriptive statistics included frequency counts, percentages, means and standard deviations. Inferential decisions were made at the 0.05 level of significance.

Step 8: Field administration. Questionnaires were administered face-to-face in the selected capital cities with the assistance of trained research assistants. Respondents were informed about the study and consent was obtained.

Step 7: Reliability procedure. The source manuscript reports a test-retest procedure involving 30 respondents in Enugu State with a two-week interval and also refers to Cronbach's alpha. The numerical reliability coefficient was not supplied in the source material and should be inserted from the verified reliability output before submission.

Step 6: Validation of instrument. The questionnaire was subjected to face validation by communication scholars in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to establish alignment with the objectives and research questions.

Step 5: Instrument development. A self-administered structured questionnaire was used, supported by a semi-structured interview guide.

Questionnaire items covered demographic characteristics, exposure, awareness, perceptions, attitudes and factors affecting acceptance or rejection of gender-role stereotypes.

Step 4: Sampling procedure. The study used a multistage procedure. The five Southeast states were treated as strata; one capital city was selected from each state; and 80 respondents were selected in each city, producing the target sample of 400.

Step 3: Sample size determination. A target sample of 400 respondents was used. The source manuscript reports that 420 questionnaires were distributed to accommodate possible non-response or incomplete returns.

Step 2: Study population. The population comprised adult residents of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States, with the source manuscript reporting a combined population estimate of 21,955,414.

Step 1: Research design. A mixed-method research design was reported, combining a questionnaire survey with interviews. The quantitative findings reported in the manuscript are presented in journal form, while the mixed-method description is retained from the source study.

Study Procedure

Analysis/ Result

The results of this study were presented taking into consideration the following research questions:

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 400)

A total of 400 respondents were represented in the reported dataset. Female respondents constituted 58% (n=232), while males constituted 42% (n=168). The largest age group was 18–25 years (29.25%), followed by 26–35 years (25.75%) and 36–45 years (22.25%). Respondents with tertiary education formed the largest educational category (45.25%).

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	168	42.0
	Female	232	58.0
Age	18–25	117	29.25
	26–35	103	25.75
	36–45	89	22.25
	46–55	31	7.75
Education	No formal	99	24.75
	Primary	33	8.25
	Secondary	69	17.25
	Tertiary	181	45.25
	Postgraduate	18	4.50

Source: Survey data.

Research Question 1: Exposure to Gender-Stereotyped Portrayals

Respondents reported substantial exposure to gender stereotypes. The highest item means included the portrayal of men as aggressive (M=4.11,

SD=0.94), men as family decision-makers (M=4.09, SD=0.92), female dependence on men (M=4.03, SD=0.89), and movies reinforcing gender stereotypes (M=4.02, SD=0.98). The results indicate that conventional representations remain visible to viewers.

Table 2: Exposure to gender-stereotyped portrayals in Nollywood films

Selected exposure indicator	M	SD
Movies reinforce gender stereotypes	4.02	.98
Men as family decision-makers	4.09	.92
Female characters dependent on men	4.03	.89
Men portrayed as aggressive	4.11	.94
Women emotional/submissive	3.92	.88
Career-driven women portrayed negatively	3.78	.69

Source: Survey data.

Research Question 2: Awareness of Gender-Role Stereotypes

Awareness was also high. Respondents reported that they could identify gender stereotypes (M=3.54, SD=0.76), distinguish gender portrayal from stereotyping (M=3.91, SD=0.89), recognize stereotypes associated with cultural expectations (M=3.61, SD=0.76), and identify the portrayal of women as overly emotional or irrational (M=4.11, SD=0.86). The results suggest that recognition of stereotypes is widespread among the surveyed viewers.

Research Question 3: Influence on Perceptions of Gender Roles

The reported means show that respondents perceived Nollywood as influential in shaping gender-role expectations. Particularly high scores were recorded for the belief that movies shape ideas about how men and women should behave (M=4.42, SD=0.90), that movies can make men appear to be household heads (M=4.55, SD=0.89), and that Nollywood has changed respondents' thinking about gender equality (M=4.41, SD=0.91).

Research Question 4: Exposure and Attitudes Toward Gender Equality

The reported results indicate that exposure was associated with attitudes toward gender equality. Respondents reported being less likely to challenge gender norms (M=3.98, SD=0.87), being less supportive of equal opportunities for men and women (M=3.79, SD=0.62), and having their views about women in leadership affected by portrayals (M=4.01, SD=0.97).

Research Question 5: Factors Influencing Acceptance or Rejection

Cultural background, education, peer influence, entertainment value and personal beliefs were reported as important factors. Respondents particularly agreed that realistic portrayals could be accepted (M=4.03, SD=0.86), harmful stereotypes were rejected (M=4.10, SD=0.88), and education influenced acceptance or rejection (M=3.88, SD=0.76).

Test of Hypotheses

The source manuscript reports rejection of all five null hypotheses at the 0.05 level. Because the supplied tables use mixed terminology for the

inferential procedure, the statistics below are reproduced as reported and should be checked against the original SPSS output before submission.

Table 3: Summary of reported hypothesis decisions

Hypothesis	Reported statistic	p-value	Decision
H0 ₁ : Exposure	M=4.12; SD=.88; t=11.45; df=34	<.001	Reject H0 ₁
H0 ₂ : Awareness	M=3.95; SD=.92; t=10.26; df=349	<.001	Reject H0 ₂
H0 ₃ : Perception	High exposure M=4.05 vs. low exposure M=3.42; t=6.68; df=3.45	<.001	Reject H0 ₃
H0 ₄ : Attitudes	High exposure M=3.98 vs. low exposure M=3.31; df=348	<.001	Reject H0 ₄
H0 ₅ : Acceptance	Male M=3.68 vs. female M=3.22; t=4.71; df=348	<.001	Reject H0 ₅

Source: Survey data.

For H0₁, the reported mean exposure score of 4.12 ($p < .001$) indicates significantly high exposure. H0₂ was rejected on the basis of a mean awareness score of 3.95 ($p < .001$). H0₃ was rejected because the high-exposure group reported a higher perception score than the low-exposure group (4.05 versus 3.42; $p < .001$). H0₄ was rejected because the high-exposure group reported a higher attitude score than the low-exposure group (3.98 versus 3.31; $p < .001$). H0₅ was rejected because male respondents recorded a higher acceptance score than female respondents (3.68 versus 3.22; $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

The first finding is that stereotyped gender portrayals are highly visible to Southeast viewers. The repeated identification of dominant male characters, domestic female characters, financially superior men and dependent women suggests that conventional gender frames remain salient. This finding is consistent with Onyenankaya et al. (2019), who documented persistent sexism and gender profiling in Nollywood, and with Doghudje (2019), who linked stereotyped role allocation to audience expectations.

The second finding is the coexistence of high awareness and continued exposure. Respondents can identify stereotypes, discuss them and distinguish stereotyping from general portrayal, yet they remain frequently exposed to the same conventions. This supports the importance of combining Cultivation Theory with Framing Theory: awareness may identify the frame, but repeated exposure and cultural resonance may still make the frame influential.

Third, the study reports that portrayals influence perceptions of family authority, leadership, relationships and occupational roles. This finding supports the source manuscript's argument that media representations may

function both as mirrors of existing cultural expectations and as agents that reproduce them. The high means for household leadership and gender behaviour indicate that the perceived influence extends beyond entertainment to everyday social expectations.

Fourth, exposure was associated with attitudes toward gender equality. The reported relationship between higher exposure and stronger alignment with portrayed roles is compatible with a cultivation interpretation. At the same time, the finding should not be interpreted as proving that film exposure alone causes attitudes, because the study is observational and the supplied inferential tables require verification.

Finally, acceptance and rejection were not uniform. Cultural background, education, peer influence, entertainment value and personal beliefs all emerged as relevant. The finding that viewers can reject harmful stereotypes while accepting realistic or entertaining ones demonstrates audience agency and supports the framing perspective that audiences actively interpret mediated meanings rather than simply receiving them.

CONCLUSION

The study examined Southeast Nigerian viewers' perception of gender-role stereotyping in selected Nollywood films. It addressed exposure, awareness, perceptual influence, attitudes toward gender equality and factors influencing acceptance or rejection. The reported results show high exposure and awareness, significant differences between higher- and lower-exposure groups, and significant demographic differences. The source manuscript therefore concludes that Nollywood continues to operate as both a mirror of existing gender norms and a medium capable of reinforcing or challenging them.

The evidence reported in the manuscript indicates that stereotypical gender portrayals remain influential among the surveyed Southeast viewers. Although viewers demonstrate considerable awareness of stereotypes, awareness does not automatically produce rejection. Cultural familiarity, education, entertainment value and personal beliefs affect how portrayals are interpreted. The study therefore concludes that meaningful change requires both improved media representation and improved audience media literacy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Nollywood filmmakers should develop multidimensional female and male characters that move beyond rigid provider/submissive-caregiver stereotypes.
2. Female directors, producers and writers should be more strongly represented in creative decision-making and script development.
3. Gender-equality themes should be integrated into storylines in ways that remain culturally relevant and artistically engaging.

4. Media-literacy programmes should teach viewers, especially young audiences, how to identify and critically evaluate gender stereotypes.
5. Government agencies, regulators, civil-society organizations and industry stakeholders should support training, funding and incentives for productions that promote balanced gender representation.

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