Audience Readings and Meaning Negotiation in the Film Viewing Space: An Ethnographic Study of Nollywood’s Viewing Center Audiences

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Abstract
This research aims to investigate the social experiences of Nigerian film audiences in viewing centers to examine the possibility that social experiences are a potent influencer of the meaning construction process in the film viewing space. This study was conducted among other existing studies of the Nigerian film audience and it took on a performative approach. It involved the use of ethnography and unstructured interviews. The study examined Nollywood viewing center audiences during their shared practice of film viewing. Observing these audiences revealed several ways in which audiences negotiate meanings within the viewing center space from film texts based on their social identity and actual social experiences. It majorly revealed that viewers develop interpersonal understanding of each other’s similar relevant social situations through self-identification and then use this understanding in the interpretive process of meaning production.

Keywords
film, audiences, Nollywood, social identification, viewing centers, social experiences, meaning production/negotiation, Nigeria

Introduction
The first experience in film screening for Nigerian audiences was in 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall, and the audience was deeply fascinated (Uchegbu, 1992). Film was introduced to Nigeria by a European merchant. However, it was a combination of the efforts of both the colonial government and the church that sustained the film industry (Ekwuazi, 1987). For many years, film in Nigeria has been measured as more than just an art. It has been a medium for telling historical stories or modern stories that advocate against certain social problems, reiterate cultural values, mirror individual experiences within society, and project contemporary sociocultural adaptations. The Nigerian film industry has created a niche for repeated storylines and publicly relatable narratives designed solely for its audience.

It is not very easy to effectively categorize Nigerian films as a result of the need to assemble many genres in one film to create a wider diversity of audience engagement. Most Nollywood films are perceived to investigate the existing conflicts between the need for cultural preservation and the difficulties of modern living (Krings & Okome, 2013). They feature the diversities existing between urban and rural living, lack, and affluence. In entirety, they project the disparities in diverse value systems which may offer the viewer a choice in line with changing certain occurrences within the society (Jedlowski, 2011). A lot of the industry filmmakers and directors are caught in between a genuine desire to articulate real-life experiences with the ideologies around which film stories are created because they face the challenge of ambiguous relativity within the popular cinema industry while they stay genuinely affirming the global success of “Nollywood” (Haynes, 2011). The industry has over the years witnessed an evolution through technological and innovative changes which have brought the final film consumer closer to media messages (McCall, 2004, p. 103).

More research in media studies has highlighted the importance of the relationship that exists between active media audiences and media texts. Emphasis on audiences as “active consumers” was established as a response to media effects studies (McQuail, 1997). Hall’s (1980) work on the decoding of media messages was significant in transmitting emphasis from the effects of media to the audiences’ autonomy in being able to produce meaning that differs from that which was encoded in texts. This, therefore, led to various studies
which included the audiences’ sociocultural background as an important key player influencing the production of meaning (Morley, 1980). After this, came the idea that media texts are prone to several readings or interpretations (Liebes & Katz, 1990) where audiences were perceived as “interpretive communities” (Radway, 1985).

Many studies have observed how audiences receive Nollywood. Some of these studies include audiences’ attitudes toward Nollywood movies (Akpabio, 2007); study of Nollywood audiences online (Obiaya, 2010); production systems and audience reactions to Nollywood films (Esan, 2008); study of how Kenyan audiences perceive witchcraft in Nollywood movies (Walialula, 2014); Nollywood viewership, its audiences, and various sites of consumption (Okome, 2007); Nollywood audience perceptions of the movies; Nollywood audience reactions to Benin-language films (Omoera, 2014); how Nigerian audiences react to the different aspects of Nollywood films (Onuzulike, 2016); how Nollywood audiences of Africa Magic have contributed toward the growth of Nollywood.

Nichols (2001) and Shafik (2007) suggested the importance of studying popular cinema. Nichols distinguished between documentary film and feature film (make-believe representations of wishes, dreams, and experiences). He claimed that the feature film “offers a sense of what our wishes or fears of reality may be” (Nichols, 2001) in comparison with what it really is. Shafik’s observation was similar to Nichols’s in his statement. It is no surprise that popular cinema gains stronger patronage when compared with avant-garde films. This is as a result of popular cinema’s repeated dramatic occurrences, fantasy performances, and controversial stereotypical representations (Shafik, 2007). Both authors’ ideas are useful in presenting audiences’ interpretive processes in their interaction with Nollywood cinema.

As many reception studies have given consideration to active receivers, this present study aims to do so as well, but in a different way by analyzing how Nollywood audiences of viewing centers respond to, and produce meaning from Nollywood films on the basis of their social experiences and identification as members of the same social group. This study acknowledges this existing gap in the literature and therefore intends to fill it to either repudiate or substantiate existing studies. For, as Lewis observed, if we are concerned with the meaning and importance of popular culture in our modern society, we need to recognize not just media texts, but also how audiences understand or receive them. Subsequently, beyond the viewing center audiences’ reception of Nollywood films, this present work goes deeper to investigate the viewing center space of reception and the social dynamics that develop within it. In doing so, focus is placed on how the viewers incorporate their everyday social experience of life into similar experiences they see on the screen.

It is also useful to note that viewing center audiences’ negotiation of meanings from these films would reveal how these films inform their identities and interpretations of who they are as well as how they relate with each other. This understanding could help in predicting how media images affect audience behavior and provide a basis for analyzing media theories, especially as they relate to audiences’ interpretations of film scenes. Therefore, this work intends to expand on Nollywood audience literature by particularly studying viewing center audiences at a location in Lagos, Nigeria. It is significant because of the need to explore the phenomenon of meaning making based on an individual or group’s understanding of their place within society as well as their deep-seated desire for change on certain levels and forms of social relations (Onuzulike, 2014). Its exploration into the potency of storytelling to individual perceptions of self as well as the unassuming position attained when meanings are attributed independently of the nature of a text and somewhat dependently on the consistent social experiences of individuals or groups makes it a relevant study.

Theoretical Framework of Study

This study combines two theories in properly analyzing the ways in which Nollywood audiences read film texts and produce meaning on the basis of their social identification and their daily social experiences. These theories are the social identity theory and the audience reception theory.

Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory was employed in this study due to its description of the relationship between processes of perception formation and social identity, and how social identity influences behavior. This theory was introduced by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s (Turner & Reynolds, 2010). The theory is sometimes used to refer to holistic social humans (Haslam et al., 2010) hypothesized by some scholars (Brown & Zagefka, 2006). The perception, however, is that its scope was limited and needed expansion. Hence, the authors formulated a sister theory called “self-categorization theory” (Haslam, 2001) which draws insight from the social identity theory to create a more holistic account of self and group processes (Turner, 1999). As this research takes on a performative approach, that is, focuses on audience actions (meaning negotiation) as an offshoot of social identification, the social identity theory seemed more appropriate.

It is the claim within this research that the social experiences of viewers and the immediate social conditions that advance the viewing centers can be considered factors that affect the negotiation of meaning at the point of reception of films, and the negotiated meanings themselves. As such, a theory which focuses on the sociocultural factors, that is, the shaped social arrangements within society which both
emanate from and regulate the action of individuals (in this case, meaning production) as well as the varying forms of this action, is proposed. The social identity theory fits in here. The main focus of the social identity theory here is how social identity influences audience behavior.

**Audience Reception Theory**

The development of the audience reception theory was to understand people’s ability to read meanings into cultural texts, and Stuart Hall’s (1973) encoding/decoding model fits in here. He introduced the encoding/decoding model which is built on the concept of semiotics (Hall, 1973). In the encoding process, codes are usually embedded into media texts for interpretation by the audience. During the decoding process, several factors come into play, which influence the meanings that audiences produce in response to the messages they receive. Coding works specifically as a semiotic process where codes function significantly to produce strings of meanings, creating links between each code (Grossberg et al., 2006). For instance, when viewing a film, audiences can easily identify signifiers within the film, for example, the “race code” which can easily be identified with signifiers such as color of skin, shape of nose, dress codes, and so on. However, audiences might not attribute meanings in the decoding process exactly as they were intended in the encoding process by the producer of the text. “Encoded codes and decoded codes may not be in perfect alignment” (Hall, 1970).

As Ott and Mack (2010) put it, “codes never play an undecided role, they are not meaning in themselves but they function as representations of meaning” (p. 18).

In the literal meaning, reception can simply be described as “receiving” which in the context of media and communication means receiving media contents (Ross, 2003, p. 55). The most important focus of reception theory is how audiences receive media contents. The meanings attributed to media messages are produced on the basis of encoding, transmission, and understanding according to the state of the decoders. The process of making meaning from media messages by the audience is also based on their social daily lived experiences within the spaces where they consume such media messages (Schroder et al., 2003, p. 122).

There is also the emphasis on the active participation of the audience in their consumption of media contents. Audiences choose, react to, and give thought to the media messages which are introduced to them (Ross, 2003, p. 67). When Hall (1973) introduces the encoding/decoding model which is built on the concept of semiotics, he is showing clearly the connection between audience and reception. He mentioned that the systems of meanings that form a great part of the process of meaning production are not ultimately the same with the systems of meanings that are negotiated at the point of consumption. Hence, he projected three types of readings.

“Preferred/dominant reading” which particularly implies that when audiences accept connotated meanings which are subject to the producers’ intended meaning without restructuring that meaning, then a dominant reading has taken place (Hall, 1973); “negotiated reading” which particularly takes place when media messages reach audience members and cause them to either wholly accept or reject the encoded meanings within the messages (Hall, 1973). In this case, audiences have the ability to thoroughly scrutinize these messages and possibly change or restructure them based on their sociocultural backgrounds and lived experiences (Hall, 1980).

The main focus of the audience reception theory in this study is on the process of interpretation and meaning negotiation which audiences usually partake in when they come in contact with media texts (Ott & Mack, 2010). The important consideration in this study is that in as much as media producers encode meanings within media texts, it is the audiences who ultimately negotiate what the texts mean to them based on how these texts relate to their everyday lived experiences and how they socially identify.

**Reception analysis.** The reception analysis forms part of the basis for this research as it aids with understanding how meanings are attributed to Nollywood films by audience members. Reception analysis, which was developed in the 1980s (Ang, 1989; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1992), represents “how audiences produce meanings out of media texts” (Ang, 1991). A basic understanding that has been set according to Ang (1995) is that media texts bear no meanings on their own. Rather they acquire meanings at the instant they are received, that is, at the point of reception which is the moment that these texts are either watched, read, or heard. Based on this analysis, audience members are perceived as meaning creators and not just passive consumers of content. Ang further creates the arguments that audience members attribute meanings to film contents based on their personal social experiences, cultural affiliations, and the everyday events they encounter with relation to these experiences. (Ang, 1995, p. 6).

Ang (1995) accredited Radway’s argument that the term “interpretive communities” is employed by some researchers to indicate groups of people who produce shared readings of a text. Ang used subcultures to back up his statement. A subculture bears a resemblance to a culture in that it typically involves a fairly small number of people, that exist within dominant cultures and are often centered around socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or geographic region. (Jandt, 2013, p. 8). It is sure that not all Nigerian Nollywood audiences interpret films in the exact same way. It must be taken into consideration that subcultures within the Nigerian society would interpret films differently because of the differing practices that are associated with every culture and subgroup within the country.
With reception analysis, it becomes clearer that people “would debate texts only as much as they can make sense of them based on their social and cultural stance” (Ang, 1991). There exist diverse groups, communities, socioeconomic classes, and ethnicities within Nigeria. According to Ang, reception researchers employ more small-scale qualitative methods like group interviews and individual interviews to try to understand how a small group of viewers produce meaning from media texts (Ang, 1995, p. 7). This fits seamlessly in this study as it employs small-scale groups of Nollywood viewers to comprehend how they make meaning at the time of their reception of Nollywood films.

Methodology

To obtain detailed accounts of audiences’ negotiating meaning during the process of film viewing, and to avoid culturally ingenuous generalizations, data were collected through active participant observation and unstructured interviews during the process of film viewing in a viewing center. I chose to collect the data using the ethnography research methodology. According to Angrosino (2007), ethnographers look for probable patterns which appear in everyday lived experiences by attentively and painstakingly observing and participating in the lives of the study group. Ethnography describes the behaviors and relationships that define communities (Loftland, 2002). Hence my intention in using this methodology was to describe the actual social experiences of audiences viewing films in a viewing center.

Ethnographic Description

**Participant observation and unstructured interviews.** There were two A4 diaries in total where data were recorded. Journal records were read multiple times before summarization. Data recorded from unstructured interviews were also transcribed by me and read multiple times before compression and then summarization. The analysis began by first reading the scripts. I read each script at least six times before I was able to gain general insight into the data. After this, I read the journal notes of the participant observation all over again. My journal served to keep my subjective experiences in check to prevent these experiences from affecting the data. I got some excerpts from the data which were selected as key themes (Srinivas, 1998) and tended to accurately represent the everyday social experiences of the viewing center audiences. The data were presented as ethnographic description. Using narratives, I identified key themes during the field work which helped to foster understanding of the social world of the viewing center audiences. These narratives were used to represent the shared values, relationships, and behaviors that exist among audience members. According to Angrosino (2007), narratives can be described as “a reshaped way of looking at life experiences.” My narrative within the scope of this ethnographic description is a reflection of my experiences with the participants (audiences) within the viewing spaces.

The primary advantage of an ethnographic study is the rich data obtained (La Pastina, 2005). Morley and Silverstone (1991) suggested there are benefits of studying media messages using ethnography, stating that the method provides a critical examination of diverse contexts of reactions with the goal of creating results that thoroughly represent the lived experiences of the subjects being researched (p. 149–150). This research presents a circumstantial description of the meaning production process of viewing center audiences, which I present as a narrative. The intent is to draw the reader into the social behavior of the audiences of viewing centers. To be able to do this, I was an active participant in the viewing center setting and was able to make descriptions on the basis of my participation with the group of audiences.

Summary

As part of this research, one study was conducted (see Table 1 below). It examined viewing center audiences which comprised mainly middle-aged men. The study involved a brief period of participant observation and also involved some short unstructured interviews. It had only one phase and lasted 3 months.

Participants and Context

I was immersed among a group of people living in one of the biggest communities in Ogba, Lagos for 3 months. This location was chosen because Ogba is largely known for its clustered nature, its energetic and industrious climate, and its strong magnetism to local film lovers who constantly patronize the local film centers in the area for recently released local films. As this area is heavily laden with film viewing centers, it was a good place to study the social behavior of viewing center audiences. My journal notes signify that my perception of the viewing center space was that it was really simple with no particular esthetic attraction and the setting could generally be described as old (July 9, 2018). The setting of this particular space bore a slight resemblance to the setting of a home living room with a long old couch, two small couches, a few plastic chairs placed

### Table 1. Summary of Methodology.

| Study | Location          | Participants                                | Data collection | Analysis                      |
|-------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Study I | Viewing center in Ogba | Small varying subgroups of middle-aged men (and one interpreter) | Participant observation | Ethnography (La Pastina, 2005) |

Note. Time frame: July to September (3 months).
strategically at different corners of the room. There was a medium-sized television and disk player which was adjacent to the entrance door. On many of the days, I and the gatekeeper would get to the location before any member had come and whenever the members started arriving, they arrived mostly in groups of twos or threes. They would often greet us, order drinks, and sit to chat with the center owner or with us.

In the viewing center setting, whenever viewers come into the center, they look through the film CDs available and decide which film they want to watch. This decision is usually based on a majority vote or a unanimous agreement among viewers about the preferred film to be shown. The CD of the chosen film is then inserted into the disk player by the viewing center owner for viewers to watch. On a few occasions, audience members would request for the viewing center owner to change the film to another film they are more interested in watching and they would sit through the film from beginning to end. Some of the viewers had become frequent at the viewing center and were now familiar with each other. However, from time to time, newcomers showed up at the viewing center. This was a group built on the satisfaction derived from the shared practice of film viewing. I thought the best way to represent their daily social life was by using a narrative (Angrosino, 2007). As I earlier on signified, I chose this style of presentation to creatively and properly represent the daily social lives of the audiences.

Throughout the months of being inserted in this community, the major discoveries surrounding the observation of audiences’ social behaviors within the film viewing space were birthed from understanding the socioeconomic status of many members within the community. I spent between 6 and 8 hr daily observing the participants of viewing centers who had differing situations based on variables like age, gender, and ethnicity. Their ages ranged between 21 and 50 years, they were of different ethnicities, and they were mostly men. These audiences were largely manual workers (who did daily paid menial jobs) or small-scale business owners (traders, tailors, commercial transporters).

I had no prior connection to the audiences of the viewing center apart from a young adult man, possibly in his mid-20s. Prior to the period of the research, I had known him through the automechanical service he was known to provide. The young man (whose name is Nonso) agreed to serve as a gatekeeper and interpreter. The main challenge with embarking on fieldwork from an outsider stance was trying to foster and build relationships with participants by finding certain shared values which required a lot of patience. However, an insider stance very quickly advanced relationships between myself and the participants (Loflin et al., 2006).

Data Collection

Participant observation and unstructured interviews. I spent as much time as possible within the environment of the viewing center. The data were collected to gain deeper insight into the social experiences of audiences of these viewing spaces. Participant observations of and contact with the audience members were recorded in a journal daily. As an active participant, I continuously assessed my relationship with participants and applied this to advance an understanding of the social world of the audience members (Unger, 2005). My relationship with the audience members strengthened over the weeks as they grew accustomed to seeing me and would often ask me questions about my life, my family, and my time with them. As I answered their questions, I often introduced questions of mine and they equally answered. Throughout this period, Nonso was always present to clarify some of the questions or serve as an interpreter, especially in cases where ethnic dialects were used in place of the English language. There were times when some members of the group would ask favors of me; however, this did not happen very often. I was beginning to feel a deeper relationship build between myself and the participants. It felt fulfilling to be able to assist group members with their requests, as this gave me a sense of belonging (Burgess, 1991).

Study: Viewing center audiences. As earlier on stated, the audiences of a viewing center located in Ogba, Lagos were studied. I spent the first day trying to meet as many of the consistent viewing center members as possible. Nonso, the gatekeeper served as liaison between myself and the viewing center owner. He also played the role of interpreter during some of the few unstructured interviews which were held with participants.

The unstructured interviews allowed as much as possible for participants to direct the conversations in whatever way they liked (Wilkinson, 2003). Nonso was loved in the vicinity, and this made it easy for me to be accepted when he introduced me. He introduced me as his “madam from obodo oyibo,” a Nigerian “pidgin” phrase that means his “female boss who has just returned from overseas.” I was neither his boss nor his superior, but he chose to refer to me in that manner, perhaps owing to my goodwill toward him in previous times. However, this endearment paved the way for a smooth acceptance of me by the members of the community. Nonso, who was at the time still running an undergraduate degree, briefly explained to the viewing center owner about my intentions to which the owner replied “no problem, she is welcome.” When the audience members started showing up, both Nonso and the viewing center owner introduced me to the members and hinted them on my intentions while admonishing them to be as free as they have always been, stating that there was no formality or danger.

Approval was obtained before unstructured interviews. Sometimes, I began by asking participants about their names, their residences, their current school or job situations, or at other times, their families. None of the interview questions were premeditated. The questions asked were usually dependent on factors like depth of interaction, on-going
discussions, and depth of relations; hence, I strived to make the atmosphere as relaxed as possible in order for audience members to express themselves freely during the interviews. This approach was consistent with the daily social experiences of the audience members within the film viewing center space.

**Member Checking and Author’s Position**

After I analyzed the data and wrote down the findings, I sought to discuss the findings with members of the study group. These members were selected primarily based on willingness. During this process, the participants corroborated the findings and, in some cases, highlighted some errors and oversights. Some participants sought confidentiality, whereas others did not mind, but generally, corrections were made and changes were effected eventually.

As the author and researcher of these ethnographic findings, I should introduce my position in the study group. I was called sister, madam, omoge (a Yoruba name of endearment meaning “pretty lady”), or “omalicha” (which is an Igbo name of endearment meaning “beautiful”). As much as I tried to get members of the group to address me by my name, it seemed a futile mission as they remained resolved to address me with any of the above-mentioned titles. Having spent three months visiting these audiences every day, I was opportune to represent them in few characters. I have carefully combined field notes of interactions with the participants and also allowed them corroborate my findings.

**Data Analysis**

The data obtained from participant observations and unstructured interviews were analyzed, and this analysis was informed by both the social identity and audience reception theories which specify how audiences read films and produce/negotiate meanings based on how they identify themselves as members of a group due to similarities in their social experiences. Analyzing the ethnographic data highlighted the social practice of meaning negotiation shared by members of their film viewing space. Discussions relating to socioeconomic status were particularly commented on. As earlier on mentioned, these comments and discussions offered insight into how these audiences “know” and “be,” and the ideas that foster their interactions with others (Collins, 2003). The audience members negotiated meanings from the films in relation to their everyday social experiences (Castoradiis, 1997).

Data collected through unstructured interviews and participant observation were analyzed together through the combination of unfolding themes, interpretations, and ideologies (Huberman & Miles, 2002). This created a chance to synthesize the key components of meaning production based on social variables suitable to the audiences. The findings of the data were taken through a process of fact-checking with the gatekeeper who served to highlight any insights that might have been overlooked, and this was indeed helpful in achieving the study outcome. Important aspects of the data were emphasized. The discussions that prevailed during the participant observations were used as a broad foundation for the discussions that were revealed during the unstructured interviews. Therefore, through a combined analysis, the final findings were suited to every member of the viewing center. The unstructured interviews provided an atmosphere that allowed audience members discuss issues pertinent to their personal lives and beliefs, topics which were largely similar to those discussed during participant observation. My relationship to the members of the viewing spaces was helpful in this regard.

**Discussion of Findings**

A very important observation in this study is the ease of accomplishing shared experience. Audience members did not view the films as isolated entities but as a collective group sharing a social practice. Even though all the viewers did not express the same opinions and interpretations to film contents, the feeling of solidarity to each other seemed really palpable. As viewers employed their daily experiences and daily living to both interpret the film and make it personally relatable, their interpretations exposed the struggle of achieving interpersonal understanding of daily living.

The viewing center audiences in this study expressed displeasure on the juxtaposition they perceived between the fantasy world in the films they watched and their real daily lives, which according to Koestler (1964) creates a dichotomy of meanings which are sometimes decided both collectively and independently. One major contribution of this study has been to highlight and illustrate the direct link between the social experiences of Nollywood film audiences (in viewing centers) and the process of negotiating meaning on the basis of their social conditions. Based on the findings of this research, audience members invest controlled emotions to be able to participate in their social world. According to Katz (1996), emotions are “personal experiences . . . of being tossed and hauled by the world . . . which exhibit a physical appreciation of a recognized juxtaposition” (p. 34).

Another key observation in this study was that members of the viewing center relished coming together not just for the sake of viewing films but also for the gratification of sharing similar experiences. Ade, one of the viewing center audiences, stated that even though sometimes he came to the viewing centers to have some personal time, he ended up engaging in conversations with other viewers while the films were being played. In his words,

it’s like we are all neighbours, as if we all know each other even though we have not met before—everybody is free, there is no discrimination—Ade (28-year-old male)
Ade’s comment highlights the importance of the film viewing space to its audience as a site for communal viewing that encourages sharing real-life experiences without discrimination. With respect to his comment, it is possible that this communal viewing serves to bridge the gap that exists between the reality of their situation and the reality they hope for. Sometimes, the best gratification they might get from striking off conversations in a shared setting like that is the feeling of inclusion. The comments below support this.

I like this place because we are all happy when we come here. We just come and relax here and we talk about life—DJ (34-year-old male)

The truth is when we come here, we can talk about our problem. We don’t tire for this country my sister. Government does not care for people like us—Baba D (50-year-old male)

All of us here, we are trying for better life. It’s not easy, true. Sometimes when we watch films, we wish everything can be good like it is in the film. For example, we should have light every day, we should have good roads to reduce accident. At least if we have that one, it will be okay—Ade (28-year-old male)

The comments above support Ade’s previous comments about the significance of the film viewing space as a channel for the formation of social interactions. Audiences identify socially on the basis of their daily experiences and rising hopes for change in their underprivileged conditions. This identifying process among viewing center audiences revealed existing similarities in the ways they produced meanings. Some of the viewing center audiences even confirmed that they mostly came to the viewing centers not just for the films but for the company. It was something they looked forward to every day. According to Onuzulike (2016), to participate is to build relationships on socially defined practices which foster individuals’ understanding and assessment of their social environment and how they fit within it. This plays a very important role in ascertaining how people contribute to the practice of film viewing and meaning negotiation and thus opens one’s eyes to the peculiarity of the social position occupied by these audiences within the film viewing space. Within the viewing center space, audiences of this study created an atmosphere that allowed for liberty to not just discuss how their real-life experiences relate to those which they saw on the screen but also to exhibit performative expressions in conjunction with film characters they identified with. This was usually complemented by commentary among viewers as they shared social similarities during film viewing.

**Audience Commentary, Responses, and Actions Within the Viewing Center**

During this study, it was observed that viewing center audiences largely participated mentally with images within the film text and tried to examine these images while constructing meanings based on how daily lived practices shape their reality (Grossberg et al., 2006). Rather than seeing audiences as people who expose themselves to media, one can imagine their consumption practices to be the outcome of the state of their socioeconomic and cultural situations (Schroder et al., 2003). As earlier established, audience reception is greatly influenced by the understandings and generic background of the audience and can also differ based on the diversity and sometimes similarity of audiences’ backgrounds.

During the film “Onome” which featured a struggling young girl who had to go through so much hardship to make ends meet for herself and her younger siblings even though she had a wealthy family member who could help but refused to offer any help, I observed a viewer closely and noticed he was really emotional about the film. So, I asked him why he seemed really affected by the film and he responded.

Sometimes in the films, we can see ourselves, we can see our life exactly the same as it is, we can even see how we want our life to be but it’s not that easy. If you have money, why can’t you help people? Rich men don’t like helping people. Why? If I was rich, I will always help because nobody knows how tomorrow will be like—Ade (28-year-old male)

In Ade’s case, his perception about his low economic reality and the projected abundant economic reality in films seem to influence his interpretation of these films. This perception was also observed in the other audiences’ process of intimating me with their experiences and expectations which often revealed that their economic capacities did not match up to the life they desired to have. During our conversations, comments like “na we dey suffer” (which means “It’s people like us that suffer”), “if to say life better” (which means “if only life was good”), and “we the poor masses” were quite recurrent. With phrases like the ones above, I noticed the audience seemed to accept each other as members of a marginalized group.

On one of the days during the study, a film titled “Jenifa’s Diary” was showing and there was a scene where a group of people living within the same neighborhood had experienced failed power supply for many months, so they came together to organize a protest at the electricity company responsible for supplying power to that location. As audience members watched this scene, discussions sprang up with some saying “protest na waste of time, who go listen to us wey dey for dis small small areas” (which translates to “if unimportant people like us organize a protest, no one will pay us any attention”). One particular audience member said, “dem go fit listen if say evehbodi go join mouth; No be say some people go come, some no go come” (which translates to “it is possible for us to get necessary attention if only everybody will be entirely co-operative”).

With the comment above, one can observe the audience members themselves who produce meanings on the basis of differing life experiences and expectations, which principally
stem from how they relate their experiences with the films. In this light, it is important to take into account the different ways that viewing center audiences in this study interacted with films that they watched within the viewing center spaces. The following paragraphs will give insight into audience commentary, responses, and actions in the process of film viewing in the viewing center space.

Viewers were sometimes observed standing and applauding certain scenes. In the film, “The Game,” when one of the leading characters walks into a meeting organized by his younger brother months after his brother had planned to have him murdered, the character makes a speech about the importance of always having an escape plan which saved his life and gave him a chance to face his murderer. At this point, viewers in the viewing center stood up and began shouting and clapping, “osheey!” and “ghen ghen” which are Nigerian slangs that indicate excitement.

However, at other times, viewers may reveal their connection to a character by a personal demonstration. One viewer was observed walking toward the television in a comic attempt to try shaking the hand of one of the film characters through the television screen. Other times, viewers may express appreciation for a scene by attempting to revisit the moment or replay the moment. On two separate occasions, viewers demonstrated this. One was observed making a video of a wedding scene in the film “knocking on heaven’s door,” while another viewer was observed taking a phone snapshot of a Mercedes-Benz car in the film titled “unteachable liars.” When asked why he did that, he responded by saying “that car is my dream car o, I pray I will have money to buy it one day.”

In the context of film viewing, whether a viewer’s action may appear associative seems to be based on how viewers respond to scenes which they can relate their lives to (Katz, 1996) and scenes which they disconnect themselves from. This is probably why laughing or jesting at scenes in a film may reveal a disconnect between viewers and the films they watch. Responses like clapping or whistling which may indicate appreciation of the film can also be used divergently, for instance, as indicators to fellow audience members on the degree of one’s participation, one’s status, or group association. There may even be a practical component to such an act. Viewers may whistle, hiss, or shout when they want to express displeasure about a scene getting cut off, a poor display or sound quality, or when the power goes off.

Sometimes viewers show disapproval of certain characters and their actions within the film. Viewers may connect obstructively with characters in a film or with the broader understanding of right and wrong in the real world. For example, in the film “Mr & Mrs.,” the lead male character maltreats his wife verbally and otherwise for many years of their marriage; his wife (the lead female character), however, treats him well and caters to his feeding and wellbeing. After constantly abusing her, she decides to reinvent herself into this self-sufficient, strong female; she changes her hair, wardrobe, and attitude and decides to live life on her own terms. By the time her husband realizes this change in his wife, he begins to improve in the way he speaks or reacts to her and begins to respect her more. At this point, some viewers shout “nonsense” and “show am” (which means “deal with him”) followed by “stupid man!” and “ode” (which means fool). These comments are followed by (collective) laughter and loud applause from other viewers. Here, the comments reveal the viewers’ connections with the female lead character, but still, these comments may express detachment from understanding the original intentions for that scene.

At other times, viewers may decide to applaud a favorite villain in a film. This was observed when they watched the film “King of Azara.” The villain which was played by a veteran actor, Chiwetalu Agu, was applauded by audience members due to his unique use of cultural phrases whenever he expressed surprise, anger, sadness, and other emotions. Viewers found this very funny and would often clap or say these phrases in conjunction with the actor. Here, viewers may be connecting to the comic and not the moral side of the story, expressing support for the art of an esteemed actor. Many actors have been recognized for their acting styles or their popularity among the audience. This, however, is not the only point, as viewers could also be connecting with the villain’s actions, showing him in control.

The process of viewers associating and dissociating themselves from different scenic representations in films signifies that while viewers produce meanings from films according to everyday life, they also have the ability to appreciate artistic parts of the fantasy world of film. I offer a cautious modification of the process of viewers’ participation with the “fantasy” world of the film. Viewers seem to switch back and forth between the real world and that of film. This switch suggests that viewers see films as both real and unreal, fantasy and reality. An added indication that viewers see films as both fantasy and reality can be observed in audiences’ reactions. For instance, viewers looking at a scene may bother more on where it is located: “This house is fine o,” “where is this place?” Other remarks may stem from an awareness of the actor’s personal life or career growth: “This lady is now so fat, what is she eating?” or “I don’t like when he or she (the lead actor) acts this kind of role in films.” Srinivas (1998) states that “the film that is objectively given to the viewer may be subjectively received in diverse ways not only as a whole, but also in fragments.” In the various examples given, viewers reveal that such diversified manners of participation are achieved.

Audience members may produce similar readings from a film but do so with different emotions. One audience member reported being angered by the representation of wealth in the film because of his poor financial status, while another audience member reported being saddened by it because of the same reason. Commenting on a scene allows a viewer to change the emotions a scene aims to create, not only for
himself but possibly for other viewers. In changing the emotions of fellow film viewers, audience members are actually transforming the film text and challenging the meanings encoded within it. On the discussion surrounding emotions, transformation could take place on a different level. For instance, audiences making mocking comments about fantasy realities in films can transform sophisticated stories to sarcasm. When viewers can find a scene relatable, they may respond with amusement that is conspicuously collective (Katz, 1996). At other times, viewers may ridicule the film, express anger toward film characters, or laugh unduly at a somber scene, which in the process distances them from the emotions the scene intends to evoke. Through such reactions, viewers become the “entertainers” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 172) taking over the role of filmmakers.

Commentary provides a means by which a viewer not only controls the text for that moment but also is able to lure fellow viewers to accept his or her interpretation. Through commentary, viewers dive into a conflict of diverse meanings with the text and, by extension, with the producers of the text. This conflict may be perceived as an exhibition of a struggle between adapted film viewing culture and filmmaking culture. As observed, commentary is interactive. What one hears and who they sit next to has the power to alter the intended meaning of a scene, improve or impair the nature of the shared social experience, and divide or unite viewers. The irony of commentary is that it possibly causes viewers to resist the text, while actively inserting themselves in it, either knowingly or unknowingly. Although this is a practice where viewers have to be crafty in accepting the opportunities provided of space and time, one should not consider it “transient” as de Certeau (1984) symbolizes it. The audiences’ activity attains permanence as it becomes fixated in the shared experience other viewers have of the text (Jenkins, 1992).

**Harmony in Viewing; Augmenting Similarity**

This study revealed that watching films in a viewing center seems to offer an experience that similarizes viewers. After all, films are intended to offer and augment shared experiences. Viewers come to the same space and focus on the same sound and visuals shown on the screen. Unlike Hollywood movies which may divide the market, Nollywood films very rarely comprise precise movies that are suited to particular demographic sections like age, ethnicity, gender, or social background. Instead, they accommodate a wide-ranging variety of viewers who might be different but share similar experiences and social identity. Rather than differentiating viewers, the viewing center highlighted similarities among them. My observation of the viewing center audiences shows that in watching films as an instinctive group, viewers identify the similarities that exist among them on the basis of their daily lived social experiences. Audience members pay attention to different parts of a film and then produce similar meanings based on how the film relates to their individual or group experiences within the society. A particular scene might initiate conversations among different audience members about similar personal issues identical to the one they see on screen.

During the viewing of the film “House of Gold,” there is a scene where the children of a deceased business mogul return home for the funeral rites of their father. Viewers seemed to pay more attention to the big mansion and cars owned by the deceased character, rather than the return of his children mourning his loss. As viewers focused on the assets that the deceased wealthy character owned before his demise, they discussed their poor financial situations which made it difficult for them to meet basic needs within their various social environments. Some were overheard commenting on the low value of the naira, others lamented the high price of foodstuff. One particular viewer said, “How can we even think of living in a big house like this when we have not even eaten. If we can’t buy food, how can we buy house.”

On a different note, while audience members exercised their desire to be able to live life in comfort and with the means to cater to their needs, they exhibited their belief in getting wealth the “right way.” While watching the film titled “The Billionaires,” it was interesting to witness audience members air their opinions about acquiring wealth through “evil” means; the film featured a group of poor men who desperately wanted to get rich and, as a result, visited a ritualist for help. As a requirement, the ritualist had asked them to murder any member of their respective families and drink the person’s blood. He (the ritualist) promised them that after they did that, they will get instantly wealthy. They did as he said and instantly became rich and influential within society. All audience members disapproved of the scene and condemned achieving wealth through such an evil means. Many of them claimed that getting rich through such means always had grave consequences for the individual and their descendants. Emmanuel said,

> E better for person to be poor than to get this kain blood money. Money is good o but this kind of money is curse. I want to be rich o but not like this. I want peace of mind in my life—Emmanuel (24-year-old male)

The first part of Emmanuel’s comment translates to “it is better for a person to be poor than to get money by murdering someone.”

Another audience member, Akinlabi, said,

> This kind of money that someone will not be able to enjoy in peace. Abeg na jeje life be. Small small God will bless all of us—Akinlabi (30-year-old male)

Akinlabi’s comment above translates to “this is the kind of money that a person cannot peacefully enjoy. Life is in stages and it is all about patience. God will bless all of us gradually.”
The statements of Akinlabi and Emmanuel expose the belief of people in the dichotomy of good and evil. Sometimes viewers show disapproval of certain characters and their actions within the film and they may disconnect obstructively from characters in a film or with the broader understanding of events in reality. This illustrates how audiences process information; it shows that there may be no homogeneity in the way they make sense of the media (Esan, 2008), but through discussions of similar social experiences, they can arrive at some agreement of what the films mean. They are selective in what they attend to, and they are able to negotiate the meaning of these according to their reference groups and social experiences. By so doing, audiences of this study managed to prove that meanings are unhindered products of one’s experiential view of their social world.

Viewers sometimes put emphasis on their similarities with a character or characters within the movie. In one of the discussions with a viewing member named Ade, during the viewing of the film “Maami” which is a story of a poor single mother who desperately wanted to help her only child achieve his dream of becoming a footballer, I asked him what he felt about the film and he said,

> When I see people that are hungry in film and they don’t have food, I understand because sometime, I don’t have food to feed myself and my family. I really wish we can have better life and the government can do something for us. I like this type of films because they are not hiding the real problem in the society. They are showing that eh, people are hungry, people are dying and suffering on the street with no good house to live in and no money for going to good school. The way that we see these problems showing in film sometimes can help us think of how to change our situation—Ade (28-year-old male)

Importantly, Ade’s response above reveals a sense of identity that viewers can have to the film characters whose experiences within the films bear resemblance to their own real-life experiences. This evidently relates to how people identify to film characters whose social experiences appear similar to theirs. Therefore, when discussions arose among members of the viewing centre, one could see the efforts of each person to create a connection between the film characters and themselves. Sometimes, these discussions graduated into deep conversations that centralized their individual hardships.

Alternatively, audience members may react to different elements of the same scene but still end up augmenting the similarities they share with each other. For instance, while some viewers may focus on the mansion or cars in a scene, others may focus on something else like the clothing or accessories of the film characters but still end up making sense of the scene in similar ways as it relates to their individual situations. These images within films, using the example of the mansion, cars, and clothes above, serve as signifiers of affluence and wealth which in the case of viewing center audiences reveal a need for them to make comparisons between their social lives and those of the characters on the screen. Audiences uttered phrases like “chah see house wey one man get” (look at the house that belongs to just one person), “mhen money good o” (money is good), “Baba God pick my call” (God please answer my prayer), and “I dey pray say make I enjoy this kind life” (I pray I get to enjoy a life like this). These phrases as well as a few others show the unhindered connection that exists between audience members across their different levels of social, political, and economic conditions while projecting similarities with each other across the same levels.

There were also different forms of collective whistling, hissing, and sighing in viewing centers which revealed a sense of “community” in expression. This communal appreciation of films in viewing centers appears to be connected to the ease of achieving shared experience. Audience members did not watch films as secluded entities but as an interactive social community. As viewers used their experiences of everyday life and their social identification to both read the films and make them personally relevant, readings revealed the effort it took to achieve interpersonal understanding of each other’s relevant social situations.

**Conclusion**

This study showed that audiences’ negotiations of meaning were birthed from their perception of their social world and the relationships fostered among them as members of the same social group. This study of Nollywood viewing center audiences allowed the film–audience relationship to move past direct abstraction. Not only do viewers participate with and interpret films on the basis of their social situation, they use interactions in the viewing setting and their discussions with other viewers as mirrors through which to understand both the film and themselves. Both the viewing setting and the films become instruments through which viewers position themselves and others within the society. Viewers produce and partake in a public tradition of viewership where the viewing setting serves as a public medium for the expression of cultural differences and similarities.

Active viewing examines the impartiality of the viewing practice. Even though viewers were seen to be watching the same film, they were in fact watching several exposés of it and giving different interpretations to it. Their diverse experiences while watching the films were also dependent on the actions of fellow viewers. In doing so, viewers situated themselves in-between the real world of daily living and the fantasy world of the film thereby using their experiences of everyday life to connect with the films, to expound on them, and to alter their meanings.

Based on the findings of this research, audiences’ negotiations of meaning were birthed from their perception of their social world and the relationships fostered among them as members of the same social group.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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