



Child Rights Advocacy Efforts and Nigerian Film Industry: An Analysis of Select Movies

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian film industry, particularly Nollywood, has a significant impact on societal attitudes and norms, but there is a lack of comprehensive studies on how it promotes children's rights. This study aimed to examine the intersection of child rights advocacy efforts in Nigeria and the Nigerian movie industry, focusing on the portrayal of child rights issues in films. The research, which used Social Representation Theory, found that child trafficking, child labor, child battering, child molestation, child rape, child marriage, and deprivation of education were prominent issues depicted in the films. The study also recommended increased collaboration between child rights advocacy organizations like UNICEF and Nigerian filmmakers to ensure accurate and impactful messages about child rights are portrayed in movies.

INTRODUCTION

Millions of children in Nigeria are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect, making child rights advocacy a crucial issue. Nollywood, the name given to the Nigerian film industry, is widely known to have a significant influence on public opinion and social norms. As a result, it is a well-established fact that the country's films provide a viewpoint for enhancing moral and social consciousness and promoting changes in attitudes toward children's rights (Onyejelem and Nwokeocha 2024, p. 439).

Many nations and people are now concerned about the rights of the children. This is because issues affecting children also affect societal development. Onyido and Vareba (2019) argue that children are critical to the future of any society as the extent their welfare is protected reflects to a significant degree the future development fortune of such society. For instance, with many children out of school, especially in northern Nigeria, the country's ability to nurture - intellectually and character wise - individuals who will in future drive her development in the political, economic, social and other aspects is being compromised (Odusile, 2019; Governor, et al, 2024).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines the inalienable rights of the child to include right to life, identity, expression, thought, education, healthcare, dignity, privacy, family life, among numerous others. Article 19 of the Convention, requires all state parties to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

Although the concern for children's rights is a global phenomenon and many developing countries are advancing the course, in the developing nations, however, the issue is still being treated with disdain (Onyejelem, et al, 2023). In the Sub-Saharan Africa, the child has remained vulnerable to all manner of difficulties and deprivations (United Nations Organisation, UNO, 2020). For instance, while almost 52 million children are reported to be in danger of dying before the age of five between the year 2019 and the year 2030, children in the Sub-Saharan Africa are 16 times more likely to be affected by such premature deaths. It has also been stated that nine out of every 10 children in the Sub-Saharan region of the world live in extreme poverty, even as the region equally accounts for more than a half of the 60 million children (of primary school age) that will be out of school worldwide between 2019 and 2030 (UNO, 2020).

Scholars are of the view that in Nigeria child's right abuse remains a huge concern (Okooboh, 2016; Onyido and Vareba, 2019, Msughter et al, 2020; Onyejelem, 2020, Vitalis, et al, 2024). These include child battering, child labour, child marriage, child sexual abuse, child neglect, deprivation of education, emotional torture, and female genital mutilation, malnutrition, among others (Obada et al, 2021). Onyido and Vareba (2019) succinctly note that about 15 million children are estimated to be victims of child labour in Nigeria, while UNICEF (2018) submits that over 10 million are suffering educational

deprivation in Nigeria. Similarly, Odusile (2019) asserts that about seven million are being sexually abused every year in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the crisis in the northeast Nigeria has seriously worsened the travails of children in the country with children accounting for 60% of the 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region. This means that over 1.1 million children have been internally displayed with one in every four of them under the age five (UNICEF, 2020a). The recruitment of about 2000 children by the Boko Haram terrorists has compounded the problem (Aderemi, 2017).

Amid this, the role of communication in the quest to protect the rights of the child cannot be overemphasised (UNO, 2020; Odusile, 2019; Onyejelem, 2023). This is based on the perceived power of communication in fostering ideological and attitudinal change as well as building of a new culture in society (Baran, 2010; Moemeka, 1991; Gambo, et al, 2021). The conscious deployment of communication for this purpose is what is professionally termed behaviour change communication or development communication (Mefalopulos, 2008; Moemeka, 1991). Among the various mass communication channels that are perceived to be effective in this respect is the nation's film industry given its popularity as a means of entertainment among the populace (Asogwa, Ibe & Ojih, 2015; Onuzulike, 2009; Onyejelem, 2018). Known as Nollywood, the film industry in Nigeria, which received impetus in 1992 with the release of the blockbuster *Living in Bondage* as produced by Kenneth Nnebue, has gathered momentum over the last two decades, and is today a force to reckon with globally (Onyejelem, et al, 2023). According to Nnabude (2018), Nollywood is the third most prolific of its kind after Hollywood (America) and Bollywood (India). Given this background, the study sought to examine the potency and otherwise of the indigenous film industry as viable vehicle for promoting the rights of the Nigerian child.

Statement of the Problem

Due to the problem of child right's abuse and its impact on sustainable development, the United Nations Organisation (UNO), has factored welfare of children into the implementation mechanism of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, efforts are being made to ensure that children are captured in all measures geared towards achieving the SDGs particularly in the areas of ending poverty and hunger, ensuring good access to quality health care, education, gender equality and preservation of the environment (UNO, 2020).

Amid this situation, child's right abuse in Nigeria remains pervasive. This has become more worrisome because persistent campaign that has gone on against the situation has not been able to quell it (Onyejelem, et al, 2021). Thus, the questions become: what may be responsible for the seeming unsatisfactory effect of these communication campaigns? Is it possible that certain variables exist that hinder positive communication effect in this regard? The problem of this study lies in the foregoing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

One theory is used for this study. The theory is Social Representation Theory. Social representation theory is an attempt to explain the construction in any medium (especially the mass media) of aspects of 'reality' such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts. Such representations may be in speech or writing as well as still or moving pictures (Media Representation, 2013). Discussing the theory, Griffiths (2010) *notes that representation refers to the way any aspect life is constructed in any medium, particularly mass media. Such aspects of life include people, objects, events, places, cultural/religious identities and similar abstract categories. Representations connote both the processes involved in this construction and the product of the processes itself. For instance, in respect identity markers like age, gender, ethnicity and class, representation stands for both the identity established and the process that birthed the establishment. A very important feature of representation is that what is represented is made to appear natural or normal, thus concealing its constructed nature. The bottom line is that all texts, irrespective of how much natural or commonsensical they may appear, are socially constructed; they are an interpretation as against pure reflection of reality.*

In other words, representation theory points to how identities (such as gender, age and race) are framed in the communication process as well as how they are produced and accepted by individuals and groups in the course of social interaction. The theory, in its application to the media, affirms that the media do not simply reflect/mirror reality, rather tcreate or re-present a new reality.

Within the framework of the social representation theory, Nollywood films, given the representation of a significant proportion of Nigerians believes and culture in audio-visual contents (films), the tendency of relying on such platforms for escape is not in doubt (Asogwa *et al.*, 2017; Adesanya, 2018), as they will likely influence their understanding and perception regarding child's right issues in the country.

The child

A child is a person that has not attained the age of 18 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008). For centuries, the Nigerian child has been considered as an instrument or property with no absolute privilege of its own. In the traditional African society there was the conviction that children should only be seen and not heard. Children were not allowed to listen to adults' discussions/conversation let alone make contributions (Wanjohi, 2012; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans, Kranenburg, Alink & IJzendoorn, 2014). A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. (UN Convention on the Rights of Children Part 1, Article 1).

Rights of the child

Under the Nigeria's Child's Rights Act 2003, a child is entitled to the right to survival and growth, right to a name, right to freedom of association and peaceful gathering, right to freedom of religion, thought and conscience, right to private and family life, right to freedom from discrimination, right to freedom of movement, right to dignity of human person, right to leisure, recreation and cultural engagements, right to good health and health care, right to parental care, protection and maintenance, and right to free, compulsory and universal basic education (Child's right Act 2003, s.3 - 20).

To efficiently play these roles, children therefore ought to be seen as possessing certain rights that must be safeguarded and not infringed upon or alienated (Wanjohi, 2012). According to Nuhu (2017), both the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the National Policy on Children recognise some basic rights and entitlements of children and which must be safeguarded.

Abuse of the rights of the child

In the views of Nuhu (2017), Nigerian society is bedevilled by cases of child abuse by way of child trafficking, child labour, child marriage, child maltreatment, child sexual abuse, child prostitution and child neglect. The impacts of these abuses are many and come in various forms. These include teenage pregnancy and childbirth, restiveness and violence on the part of the youth, cult activities, decadence, unemployment, armed robbery, molestations, and increase in number of young persons dropping out of school, among others (Onyejelem, et al, 2023).

According to Gelles (2009), child abuse entails acts, whether intended or unintended, that put at risk the welfare of a child physically, emotionally, intellectually or morally. Child abuse may be viewed as any deed or omission that amounts to mistreatment of a child, physically or psychologically, by the parents, guardian, caregiver or any other adult and which may jeopardise the child's overall welfare and development. Based on this definition, it would amount to child abuse if a person maltreats a child or selfishly makes an unfair use of a child's services. Child abuse may be committed not just by a parent or guardian, but by any adult who for any reason may have one thing or the other to do with a child. Such a person may include teachers, day care workers, healthcare personnel, etc. (Umobong, 2007; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008; Nuhu, 2017).

Child rights advocacy and Nollywood films

It is believed that film as medium of mass communication could serve as a powerful agent of social change because of the unique manner of presenting issues that reflect the society, through its audio-visual nature that gives realism to mere stage performance. Agbanu (2014, p.38) concurs with this assertion by stressing that "there are so many home videos that help to either promote or condemn some social, religious or cultural practices". Citing McQuail (2005, p.32). After the 9/11 attacks, the US government met with the heads of the film industry to discuss how movies could support the fight against terrorism,

according to Agbanu (2014). This was because movies are thought to provide social change.

According to Kenechukwu (2014), "people derive various satisfaction from watching films for entertainment, relaxation, education, mirroring the society or even for psychological escape" (p.123) because of the intrinsic functions of film in society. According to Onyejelem & Nwokeocha (2024, p.435), studies indicate that Nigeria's film industry, with its widespread appeal as a form of entertainment among the general public, is one of the numerous mass communication platforms that could be effective in showcasing the promoting the rights of children. Considering movies as a genuine means of bringing about social change According to Owuamalam and Owuamalam (2018), a film presents information that could influence a particular decision, much like forensic evidence is presented in court. It can narrate a development story. It can also support the growth of both individuals and communities (p.1). The effectiveness of film as a tool for social change is demonstrated by its status as a mass communication medium that appeals to all societal segments, covers a wide range of topics, and appeals to a broad audience (Oboko & Onyejelem, 2024). Many viewers use movies to decompress and relieve mental or emotional tension (Onyejelem & Ndolo, 2018). Messages can also be stored for later retrieval using this equally viable method (Bittner, 1989, p. 378; Kenechukwu, 2014, p. 2).

Empirical Review

A study by Ebekue and Arinze-Umobi (2016) titled "Film as an agent of Human Rights advancement in Nigeria with focus on two selected films – *Bloody Night* and *Somewhere in Africa*" x-rayed portrayal of human rights issues in films. The research adopted a qualitative design involving textual analysis of films and two focus group discussion (FGD) sessions involving students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka who were randomly selected. Results indicated that both *Bloody Night* and *Somewhere in Africa* clearly portrayed the general poor human rights culture in Nigeria and proffered a philosophical alternative which sees human rights as inalienable. Ndangam (2003) also studied the dominant messages in the British newspapers' reportage of sexual violence against children. The study aimed at describing, via quantitative and qualitative content analysis, the content of press coverage of issues related to child sexual abuse, as well as explaining this content in the context of the meaning-producing role of journalism. The study employed simple percentages for analysis of the quantitative data and critical discourse analysis (CDA) for the qualitative data. Findings revealed that reportage of child sexual abuse in British newspapers focused predominantly on the criminality of such acts. Emphasis was more on the offenders than the child victims.

Omoera, Edemode and Aihevba (2017) investigated the impact of Nollywood films on the lives of children, and the possible behavioural implications of emergent visual misrepresentations on African society. Anchored on the perception/ representation model of 'NoSRA theory on Gaze Setting' to explain the perceptions of Nigerian (African) children about the films

they watch. The survey found Nollywood films such as *Ultimate Warrior*, *Issakaba*, *The Destroyer*, *Cain and Abel*, *Ukwa*, *Crazy Twins 1*, *Beyond Sin*, *Aki and Popo*, *Black Arrow*, *1&2*, and *Yahoo Boys* interesting and entertaining, a content analysis of the films showed presence of negative tropes that are at variance with cherished values of the Nigerian/African culture. The study established a strong connection between the objectionable and violent images which the children are regularly exposed to via Nollywood movies and their adoption of anti-social behaviours like regular use of swear and abusive language, indiscriminate use of deadly weapons like guns, knives and joining of secret cults and gang groups.

Nollywood movies' contribution to the advancement of children's rights in Nigeria was investigated by Onyejelem and Nwokeocha (2024). The study examined 5 locally produced films and 663 respondents using the theories of development media and social representation. According to the research, a number of child rights issues, such as neglect, child labor, emotional abuse, child battering, sexual abuse, gender discrimination, kidnapping, child trafficking, and moral abuse, are portrayed in Nigerian films. The study came to the conclusion that Nigerian films offer a national viewpoint for fostering changes in attitudes toward child rights and fortifying moral and social consciousness.

METHODOLOGY

In-depth interview was adopted for this study. In-depth interview helped in extracting information from filmmakers regarding their portrayal of child's rights in their productions.

The study was carried out within a five-year period of 2013 to 2017. This means that questions were asked based on five films produced locally in Nigeria by Nollywood filmmakers in order to determine their potency as instruments for promotion of child's right in Nigerian. Six respondents comprising two producers (Anene Stanley Obodoeze and Joseph Oguejiofor), two directors (Ifeyanyi Azodo and Edward Ukah), and two scriptwriters (Chibuikwe Dim and Christopher Mbamalu), formed the population of the study who were interviewed. These respondents were purposively selected based on two major criteria. One, the person must have been involved with filmmaking for not less than 10 years. Two, he must have been involved with not less than 10 film productions. The researcher adopted these criteria to ensure that the respondents really possessed the experience to competently provide answers to the questions raised in the interview sessions. The researcher designed an in-depth interview guide for the interviews. The guide contained five major questions and their respective probes. Data analysis was done qualitatively.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Data Presentation and Analysis

In-Depth Interview Analysis

Six respondents comprising two producers (Anene Stanley Obodoeze and Joseph Oguejiofor), two directors (Ifeanyi Azodo and Edward Ukah), and two scriptwriters (Chibuike Dim and Christopher Mbamalu) were interviewed. The researcher critically read the interview transcripts to isolate the emerging themes as follows: attitude to child's rights, featuring of child's rights in films, and narrative/thematic patterns of child rights-related films.

Attitude to Child's Rights

Beliefs, ideologies and biases of gatekeepers inevitably influence the messages they encode for audience consumption (Potter, 2012). The six filmmakers interviewed expressed sentiments that point to their abhorrence of child's rights abuse. They all saw it as something that is inherently negative and should not be tolerated. Mbamalu, for instance, stated: "A child must be protected...They need to be loved they need every possible help you can give them at those tender ages so that they can become whatever they want to be." He was particularly emphatic on child labour especially sending out children to hawk goods on the street as well as child sexual abuse by way of rape, which he said he has personally fought against. Obodoeze was similarly concerned about child street hawking as a form of child abuse. He saw this as something that should never be condoned given the harm it exposes the child to. According to him:

If you give your children things to sell or hawk when others are in school, you know you are not training the child because anything that you teach a child the person will grow up with it. I hate that act (hawking) because you are killing the children. I want to feature it in my films to teach them that education is very important.

Oguejiofor was similarly categorical in condemning the evil of child's rights abuse. In his words: "Totally I condemn child abuse because it can ruin the person. If it is a girl, she may be raped or she may encounter accident and other things like that."

Interestingly, the interviewees were mainly concerned about abuse of non-biological children. They were apparently of the view that abuse of rights of children often occurs in situations where a child is being fostered by a non-biological parent (i.e. a guardian). Instructively, a look at the films *Emotional & Physical Neglect*, *Make a Move* and *Ito* revealed storylines that are rooted in the sentiment that children are more vulnerable when put under the care of non-biological parents. On the whole, the responses of the six respondents reveal that they are positively disposed to the fight against abuse of child's rights in all its manifestations.

Featuring of Child's Rights in Films

The respondents all admitted that they have featured issues of child's rights in their previous works. Obodoeze informed that the problem of child abuse has become so pervasive in society that many filmmakers, including him, now feature it in their films. On his part, Azodo, said he has been involved with films focusing on child's rights "countlessly". For him, it is a matter of routine to direct films that have their themes around child abuse and protection. Oguejiofor claimed that most of the films he produced were aimed at addressing social ills including child's rights abuse. According to him, child's rights are "very important. People should be taught about that. I try to do that through my movies. I believe I should use my movies to educate people on issues like that. That is what I do."

Interestingly, the two scriptwriters interviewed, Mbamalu and Dim, said they have written scripts focusing on child abuse. According to Dim, "I have written about two or three of such stories where child abuse was the main theme. I can also recall having co-authored a script which, though the major theme was another thing, still featured a sub-theme on child abuse." On his part, Mbamalu, having noted his personal involvement with child's rights-related films, observed that Nollywood filmmakers generally have done creditably in this respect:

The filmmakers are doing well. Nollywood people are trying to make sure that child's right is recognized, respected, protected in the society. If you see most of our films when the child is suffering, at the end of the day, the child gets glory. So I think that Nollywood has done a lot to pass the message across. Film is like a church of its own, we evangelize through filmmaking. So I believe a lot of issues of child's right have gone through "Nollywood evangelism". So I give Kudos to Nollywood and most a times you go on a channel on DSTV African Magic Family, you see where they show films on child's right protection. So, I think Nollywood has done a lot to send a message to people on child's right protection.

The above views, in summary, show that there is the willingness on the part of the filmmakers to include child's rights-related themes in their production. This willingness appears to have translated to actual production and release of films that treat these issues.

Narrative/Thematic Patterns of Child Rights-Related Films

The responses of the interviewees revealed a number of patterns regarding the storylines and themes of the child's rights-related films they have been involved with. On the whole, it could be observed that themes the interviewees have continuously engaged with in the course of their film career include child trafficking, child labour, child battering, child molestation, child rape, child marriage, and deprivation of education. Ukah, for instance, mentioned his film, *Prisoner 48*, which focused on child molestation; a story he

derived from his own personal experience as a victim of molestation. He also mentioned *Class 21*, another film where he dwelt on the theme of child's right to quality education based on his experience in a town where he had gone to do an earlier movie. In the same vein, Azodo informed about a film of his which central theme was child battering. A very prominent and recurring narrative/thematic pattern is that child's right abuses occur mainly in regard to non-biological children i.e. children who are under the care of their non-biological parents. Such children, many a time, are used as house helps. Ukah equally shared a similar experience in regard to his film, *Hotel Chico*. In the film, he tried to drive home the need for people to love and care for children irrespective of whether they are their biological offspring or not.

There is also a thematic bias towards the girl child as an especially vulnerable species. In other words, the filmmakers, in their works, tend to infuse in their narratives the sentiment that the girl child is particularly endangered. Another narrative/thematic pattern emerging from the responses of the interviewees regarding their representation of child's rights issues in movies is the idea that child abuse has wider social consequences. In other words, apart from affecting the welfare of the child as an individual, the society as a whole ultimately suffers from such deprivation of rights of a child.

Obodoeze, who looked at it from the positive perspective, observed that when children are well cared for, society will benefit. However, Oguejiofor, on his part, noted that while representing child rights-related issues, he is also always concerned with projecting the evil consequences awaiting individuals who abuse child's rights. Thus, the filmmakers considered child's right abuse an evil that must not only be condoned but appropriately sanctioned.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Film as a medium of communication and the Nollywood as an industry have positioned themselves as platforms for social reengineering and promotion of values that align with the African culture. Consequently, we conclude that Nigerian film makers have consciously used movies to the fight against child abuse in all its manifestations. This is reflected in the following themes and ideological frames which manifested in the movies: child trafficking, child labour, child battering, child molestation, child rape, child marriage, and deprivation of education; and that child abuse, with the girl child identified as the major victim, has wider social consequences. This spirit, if maintained will help in bringing about the well-being of children which is in line with goal 3 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals initiative. In the long run, this will contribute to the development of Nigeria as today's children are the future leaders. Thus, they deserve to be treated in manner that will bring out the best talents in them.

Based on the analysis of select movies from the Nigerian film industry in relation to child rights advocacy efforts, the following recommendations were made:

1. Nigerian filmmakers should continue to promote children's rights at the current pace. When doing this, it is important to emphasize that both boys and girls, regardless of gender, have the right to be treated with respect as children because they are all victims of abuse, particularly in Africa (including Nigeria).
2. Enhanced collaboration between Nigerian filmmakers and child rights advocacy groups such as UNICEF is necessary to guarantee truthful and influential portrayals of child rights in films.
3. To guarantee that they have a deeper comprehension of the significance of advancing children's rights in their work, filmmakers ought to undergo training on child rights issues.
4. To enable the necessary adjustments and improvements in future movies productions, mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of films on child rights advocacy initiatives in Nigeria should be established.

The Nigerian film industry can contribute significantly to the country's culture of respect and child protection by putting these suggestions into practice and fighting for the rights of children.

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