*Full Length Research Paper*

# Audience perception of portrayals of women in Nigerian home video films

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**This study investigates how Nigerians, particularly women, interpret the meanings of the representations of women in Nigerian films. It aims at understanding how Nigerian audience interpret the meanings of the images of women in Nigerian films, with a focus on investigating whether or not there is a marked difference in the ways different individuals and groups interpret the representations. To achieve the objectives of this study, three sessions of focus group discussion involving a representative sample of viewers of Nigerian video films, from different socio-economic groups were undertaken. The participants ranged according to age, sex, ethnicity and educational level. The study finds that there is a marked difference in the ways women and men interpret the meanings embedded in the representations of women in Nigerian films. It also concludes that there is a marked difference in the ways women, with high education and those with little or no education, perceive the representations of women in Nigerian films. The difference is related to the way each group of women understands and identifies or dis-identifies with the meanings of the images of the films. On this basis, this study proposes a new model for understanding how women in Nigeria interpret popular culture.**

**Key words:** Media audiences, interpret reappropriation, oppositional reading, agitative reading, preferred/dominant reading, conformist reading, home video films.

## INTRODUCTION

Several textual and discourse analysis of Nigerian films (Okunna, 1996; Ogunleye, 2003; Ezeigbo, 1996; Azeez, 2008) have argued that Nigerian films portray and position Nigerian women stereotypically and negatively. In line with a feminist ideological perspective of the media then, the films position women at the bottom of the power hierarchy in a way that reinforces their domination and suppression.

Using discourse theory, the representations of women in Nigerian films also appear to be subtle images that negotiate and create "normal" gender identity for women by repetitively representing women as inferior subjects and as 'immoral' people that are morally corrupt. Specifically, the representations of women in Nigerian films are similar to those constructed in soap opera (Modleski, 1982). Modleski notes that soap operas reinforce the work traditionally associated with women, that is, the function of nurturing relationships and holding the family together (1982: 92). Through the various studies on the portrayal of women in Nigerian films, it has been argued that Nigerian films do not only limit representations of women to passive and subordinate housewives, but

also portray them as evil people, who are wicked, vindictive and unfaithful.

However, in line with the discourse theory, which has been the principle underpinning this study, a second element that emphasizes the power of women to resist and reject such negative representations has been put forward as an important construct of this study; although the representations of women in Nigerian films, appear to exercise discursive power through their propensity to present dominant gender subjectivity and/or gender positions with which women are supposed to identify. Women audiences have significant power to negotiate with or distance themselves from these positions, identities or meanings created in the films. In other words, they can re-appropriate and interpret the meanings that are being imposed on them by the films from a set of other situated identities.

## STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH

This study investigates how Nigerians, particularly

women, receive Nigerian films in terms of their interpretation of the representations of women and the meanings of the representations in films. The attempt to verify how Nigerian films are received by Nigerian audiences, in relation to the portrayal of women in Nigerian home video films was inspired by the observations of Lewis (1990) and Van Zoonen (1994), that if we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in our contemporary society, with how culture or media work ideologically, we need to understand not only media texts, but also how they are received and understood by their audiences.

Therefore, such understanding could help in predicting the influence of the images of women in the media, on gender identity and behaviours of female audiences. The understanding will also provide a basis for analysis against theories of media and gender identity formations, particularly as they are related to how Nigerian audiences interpret the images of women in Nigerian home video films.

## OBJECTIVES

The fundamental objectives of this study are clarified as follows:

(1) To investigate how the Nigerian audience receive and interpret the images of women in Nigerian films.
(2) To investigate whether or not there is any difference in the ways different individual audience interpret the representations of women in Nigerian films.
(3) To determine factors that influence how the audience interpret the meanings in the representations of women in Nigerian films.

## Research questions

Based on the aforementioned objectives, the study endeavours to answer the following key questions:
(1) How does the Nigerian audience, particularly women, interpret the portrayals of women in Nigerian films?
(2) Is there any marked differences in the way individuals or groups of audience interpret the representations of women in Nigerian films?
(3) Are the audience's interpretation pattern influenced by their age, sex, religion, ethnicity or educational background?

## METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives of this study, three sessions of focus group discussion involving a representative sample of viewers of Nigerian video films from different socio-economic groups were undertaken. The participants ranged according to age, sex, ethnicity and educational level, and they particularly varied in terms of their educational levels. Thus, the participants in the first group

(26 - 34 years), which is the first session, were postgraduate students studying at "masters' level" on a part time basis at the University of Lagos. The second group (18 – 25 years), which is the second session, consisted of participants who were in the third and fourth year of their first degree also at the University of Lagos. The participants in the third group (35 to 45 years), which is the third session, were predominantly less educated people including artisans, market women, shop owners and lower-cadre civil servants. The highest level of education among this group was primary school, which is equivalent to 'standard six' in the Nigerian system and which means they were not only predominantly illiterate, but were less exposed than the first two groups.

Although selecting samples or participants for this kind of qualitative research should not necessarily be through probability techniques, the participants in the first and second groups were selected through systematic and cluster random sampling techniques respectively. The aim of using these techniques was not to achieve statistical representation, but was rather meant to ensure that diversity was inherent in the composition of the groups. The participants in the third group were selected through a non-probability sampling technique (purposively) from markets and streets in Ibadan, Oyo State in the South-western part of Nigeria.

Having been exposed to two Nigerian films as stimulus, the participants were asked on how they perceived the representations of women in the films, whether they perceived the representations as the reality of women and if so, how their perception affect the way they see themselves. They were particularly asked on how they read or consumed the representations. Their answers were critically interrogated in the study's analysis, alongside a discussion of the literature and theories pertinent to the discussion.

## Analysis

Responses from both the male and female audience members in this study, conform to the idea of mass culture, agreeing that Nigerian films, as a form of culture industry, are devoted to controlling and dominating women and they do this in such a way as to make the control and domination seem natural and given, but with the power to propel women to internalize their objectives. So, they serve men and serve the purpose of sustaining the cultures and discourses that provide women negative subject positions.

Therefore, If ideology is the "way in which signification serves to sustain relations of domination" (Thompson, 1984: 13), then the meaning embedded in the representations of women in Nigerian films serve the interests of men. In other words, if ideology has to do with representations and Nigerian films function as ideological state apparatuses (as suggested by Althusser, 1971), Nigerian films, inevitably, will be supported by the dominant cultural and patriarchal ideology. Nigerian films are ideological apparatuses or devices that perpetuate the images, myths, ideas, concepts or discourses that aim at fixing women in negative/lower positions in their relationship with men and in their actual life conditions. Feminist media studies that have been drawn from Althusser's approach, such as McRobbie's study (1978) on Jackie, have come to this same conclusion.

However, this study draws its concepts from discourse theory and incorporates Gramsci's (1971) hegemony theory, which is the framework within which cultural analysis operates, to explain dissent and resistance to the manipulative power of Nigerian films on women. Therefore, one factor the study is looking for are responses that negate the impression of all-powerful Nigerian films that serve the patriarchal interests of men. It finds that Nigerian women, particularly more educated women, are aware that Nigerian films represent hegemonic interests and thus they do not receive their messages passively, but actively negotiate with their moral and manipulating messages. In other words, they have the personal abilities to re-appropriate or reject the positions being imposed on

them by the films. This pattern of reading the films is the focus of the analysis in this paper, but it is interesting to set the tone with this response:

> "I cannot be deceived. I know when films show a woman cooing over a man, saying 'yes, sir' to him, always on her knees before him, cringingly serving him food. I know that the men who produce the films would like me to do the same to my husband. They present it as if it is the reality for which all women are created, but I just look at the images and take them as the particular case of the woman in the films. I do not buy into it, though that is what our society takes as normal for women, but I will respect my husband, because I do not want to be socially sanctioned. However, all the same, there is something in me that prays for resistance or a change of the cultural practices to which we are bound (Nike from the first group)".

**How women interpret the meaning of the messages in the representations of women in Nigerian films**

The quote from a female viewer provides a framework for the attitude of Nigerian women and how they interpret the films and whether or not their gender identity is influenced by them. Indeed, the issue of the "effects" (influence) of the films on women's identity as a result of how they read the films, forms part of the core interpretative analysis of this study, which of course could not be presented here, as a result of limited space.

One significant point which this study identifies is that, whichever way media audiences see their representations in the media, such representations usually trigger reactions. With regard to films in particular, viewers might actually find pleasure in what comes across to them in a film, but they know that it is a representation. Specifically, a large number of female viewers of Nigerian films, as they are represented in the groups of participants in this study, know that their representation in films do not reflect the reality of how they live their lives.

Nevertheless, they watch the films but see them as evidence and a weapon to fight the injustice in the cultural notions and discourses from which the representations in the films are drawn. Most men see the films as didactic, as a means of stimulating women to change their ways of life. However, this perception contradicts their position that they like the films because they work to perpetuate their domination, which they do not want to be changed. On the other hand, women do not see the films as didactic, as being designed to produce changes in their morals, as men take it to be. The films, to women, can be a type of revolutionary weapon, which can be used to reject the image and positions being sold to them, as Fiske (1989b) seems to suggest, and a means to change the culture and discourses that define their lives. This is clearly stated in the last sentence of Nike's observation, previously quoted. In another comment, she explicitly confirms the kind of resistant reaction the films trigger in her by saying "they do have an effect on me, but the effect is that they make me angry…" This means the films have the opposite effect from the intentions of the film producers. Thus, they can actually call into being a critical consciousness because of the gap between the representations of women and women's 'real' lives.

Therefore, in whatever way women perceive the films, the most important thing is that they sensitize them for an action. This makes sense if we look at Hall's (1970) model of encoding and decoding. The sensitization for action and the subjectivity, which the exposure to the films brings about in the audience, are an active way of interpreting the films. The active interpretation enables women to take a degree of psychological distance from what they see, as pointed out by the woman previously quoted, and so, they can exit or enter the position being presented to them. This is the core proposition of the active audience perspective, whether we look at it from the point of view of Hall's encoding and decoding model or from the extreme version of revisionist populism.

Essentially, the viewers of Nigerian films particularly produce what is called productive or active reception, ("producer reading", Fiske 1989a: 105), although there is a variation in the degree to which the female viewers reject their images. The finding about the active reception, which enables women to reapporiate or interpret the meanings in the Nigerian films, needs to be emphasized. As it is established in Nike's observation, women are not deceived nor manipulated, but they know that the reality portrayed about them in the films is created by filmmakers against their interest, and not the reality of how they experience their lives. Despite emotional involvement in the films, the women do not lose their abilities to reject or resist their meanings. Thus, the proposition, which is presented by the critique of popular culture, as exemplified by the Frankfurt school, fails to stand. In contradiction with the ideal of mass culture, women both enjoyed the films, whilst simultaneously rejecting their preferred meanings, although their consumption of the films is a form of complicity because it re-produces further similar products which confirm their market. More importantly, however, with the individual personal ability to re-interpret the meanings in the representation of women in Nigerian films, women are able to take their ideological indoctrination with a "dose [pinch] of salt" as Nike again put it.

> "Most times, I take it with a large dose [pinch] of salt. Sometimes, I consider that, yes, this can happen, but I filter it out most times. They do have an effect on me, but the effect is that they make me angry. What form my identity are not the portrayals (Nike, from the first group)".

This, somehow, confirms Zizek's (1994) point that the audience know what they are doing but do it anyway. Thus, although women in Nigerian films are normally silenced and made to pay for their cultural transgression, they also serve as points of resistance to the viewers through active interpretation. The female audiences of Nigerian films, particularly those that have the kind of knowledgability and symbolic creativity mentioned by Willis (1990) and McGuigan (1992) respectively, by virtue of the fact that they are highly educated, create their own different meaning or actively read or consume the films. As one of such women observed;

> "I know that, sometimes, these films indirectly or directly affect us as individuals. They help us work out opinions about our lives and they also help us to say 'No, this is not what I am going to accept'. You interpret the images as it suits you and as you would like it to be (Ngozi, from the first group)".

But how actually do the female viewers in particular interpret the meanings in Nigerian films? Hall (1970) identifies three types of reading, which Morley (1978) and Bobo (1988) evidenced from their studies of 'nationwide' audience and black women's reading of 'the purple colour' respectively. The three types of reading, according to Hall, are dominant/preferred, oppositional and negotiated readings. Most of the female viewers, represented in this study, affirmed that they read/interpret Nigerian films oppositionally. However, their reading seems to be more than oppositional, it is more of what could be described as 'agitative' reading; that is, a reading that is not only oppositional but is also provocative, fiercely antagonistic and radically meant to change or challenge the system of representations that position women in an exploitative trap, and which degrades them. This kind of interpretation, which was common for the more educated female viewers, is exemplified in this observation:

> "I support the last two speakers. I do not believe most of what they show in the films about women, and I do not think that

these things happen in real life. What I do, is pick and choose the portrayals that are real and act on them in my own life. If I see a negative portrayal which is meant to make a change about my thinking about certain practices and discourses like widowhood in Ibo land, where if a young woman's husband dies, she is accused of killing her husband and they wash her husband's corpse and make the woman drink the water in the belief that if you survive for seven days, then, you are free of his death. As if that is not enough, you are locked up with the corpse and have to sleep with the corpse [overnight] alone. They can even come and say after the burial that you should move out [subsequently forced to leave the family home after the burial]. They share the husband's property without considering that she has children. If I am watching a film where a woman in such a situation rose up and said, 'No, over my dead body' with all the arrogance you can think of, I would shout and say, 'yes, this is my hero [heroine]' and I would copy her. That is the kind of thing I adore and take up. I interpret the films to suit my beliefs and thinking and so, I take parts of them up (Jane, from the first group)".

Jane's quote exemplifies the direction of the attitudes of Nigerian educated women and how they interpret Nigerian films. The response particularly shed light on how women (educated women) identify with characters in the films and how the characters influence their gender identities.. In the meantime, it could be suggested that the responses the films draw from Nigerian women, as Taylor and Willis (1999: 186) earlier observed, are "based on their actual life experiences". Indeed, Nike's observation, also earlier quoted, that "… I filter it [the films] most times; they do have effect on me, but the effect is that they make me angry", further demonstrates not only that the representations of women in Nigerian films are read oppositionally by educated women, but that the negative representations also make them angry.

Discussing the influence of the films on audience identity, Oluwatomi (Second group) demonstrated the oppositional, 'agitative' and radical reading of Nigerian films by Nigerian educated women in this way.

"For me, the influence of the portrayals on me is that they make me angry and give me reason to fight against the domination of women. I rarely identify with any of the women they show in the films especially the ones that are shown in a negative way. Instead of identifying with them, they make me angry and I wish to fight with those who produce these negative portrayals of women and wish to change the culture on which I think such negative portrayals are based (Oluwatomi, from the second group)".

Chizima, who was the most agitative among the female participants in group two, demonstrated her provocative perception and interpretation of Nigerian films like this:

"It is just unfortunate that African women are too fearful; they do not have high self-esteem. And that is why the films can get away with all their denigration of women. For me, I reject them, but even though I can reject them, they still have an effect on the image of women generally, and that is why we must not only see them as rubbish or just entertainment, as most of us want to see them. We must reject them entirely and let the men who are producing them for their own purposes know that we do not like the way they portray us. We should let them know that we have our own self-esteem. It is only a woman that has low self-esteem that will look to a man for her confidence. I do not need a man to hold my hand to cross the street; I do not need a man to feel good. I do not need him to be confident. I might need him as a husband and it ends there".

These quotes clearly demonstrate that the female viewers, who are more educated, do not accept the ideals and dominant discourses being transmitted in Nigerian films. Therefore, though the films are ideological and discursively powerful enough to influence women to imbibe the social or stereotypical roles and to accept the exploitative positions created for women in the films, such as devoted mothers, submissive wives, sexual slaves to men and so on; at the same time, they cannot overcome resistant readings by the educated audience.

Thus, the main point this study intends to emphasise is that the reading of Nigerian films by female viewers, as it is demonstrated in several well-educated women's responses, is not only in a form of oppositional reading designed to maximize their viewing pleasure, but is also tailored towards the realization of a deeper sense of pleasure from "justice" for women by rejecting and agitating for an end to the exploitative and negative meanings about women the films carry. What is interesting about the agitation of educated women is that the more negative meanings the films carry about women, the more radicalised they are. Thus, the cultural or semiotic democracy, envisioned by the revisionists, such as Fiske (1989) is not only defined in terms of the capabilities of women's viewers to accept or reject the films' meanings but, additionally, in the case of Nigerian female viewers, to change them. That is, it can be defined in terms of their capabilities to re-produce the meanings as a form of agitation to change the representations that impose such meanings. So, the most important finding with respect to how educated women read Nigerian films is that their interpretations of the films overturn the producers' intended effect, in that their interpretations produce opposite effects not only in terms of resistance to the meanings the films carry about women, but also in terms of producing possibilities of political action to change their representations in the films.

Therefore, the myth of the "audience as zombie" propounded by writers like Winn (1977), who noted that television forces women to adopt familial ideology, does not apply to the female viewers of Nigerian films. As Root (1986) observed, audience, like Nigerian female viewers, can be empowered not only to sift or reject representations in the films that naturalize sexist discourses, but are also motivated by such representations to fight against them. This is illustrated by some quotes from more than 80% of the more educated women that participated in this study.

In contrast however, men unsurprisingly, adopt preferred readings/ interpretations of Nigerian films. Many male participants in this study (more than 99% of them) are even annoyed that their women counterparts are too agitated in their opposition. Their responses on every issue raised in this study clearly demonstrated that they approve of the ways women are being represented in Nigerian films and that they subscribe to the films' discourse with a preferred or 'conformist' reading position. Such reading reflects their patriarchal tendencies as well as a deep sense of cultural nationalism, as shown in the following response:

"Are you saying we should actually dance to the tune of another world, which wants women to be equal to men, or we should Africanize our media to truly show who we are and how we think our women are in our continent? I go for the latter. We should prize our beliefs and discourses including those we hold about our women and if our media, like our films, are already doing this, then whatever they give to us about women is correct and acceptable (Abdullah, from the first group)".

This kind of observation, which was reflected in the responses of all the men in this study, irrespective of their educational level, could be interpreted as a demonstration of cultural nationalism or what Narayan (1997: 402) called "shared insistence on the 'otherness' of other cultures". This insistence, according to Narayan, has its root in Third World nations' struggle against colonial rule in which they

"rejected not only the legitimacy of Western colonial rule, but often constructed a nationalist political identity by contrasting indigenous values and cultural practices to those of the West, calling for a rejection of the latter" (Narayan, 1997: 401). Women and issues pertaining to their roles and sexuality are embroiled in this political and discursive struggle that has become even more passionate in the postcolonial era as a result of continuous economic and political domination of many African countries by the West and resultant feeling that African traditional culture is under threat.

Ang (1985) sees this kind of feeling as an unacceptable justification for criticism of cultural imperialism under which national elites, particularly in Africa, seek to preserve their declining national cultures. Women in Africa, therefore, are nowadays in a difficult situation that demands them to support and preserve national culture that pertains to their lives. Thus, educated women who contest and seek to change discourses that are detrimental to women's lives are labelled as "Westernised" and are therefore often characterised as alien, "traitors to their communities" and "betrayers of their nation or of their communities of identity" (Narayan, 1997; Kumar, 1994). This kind of castigation, which Narayan (1997: 411) describes as strategies of dismissal, was explicit in Lawrence's (Second group) observation about the female protagonist in Legend (2005). Noting that the way the character (Marlan) behaves in the film is contradictory to the traditional values about women, he said:

"…the pictures in most Nigerian films [those that are produced in English Language] are copies of Western culture, and so they intend to westernise our women. And my fear is that our women, particularly the educated ones, have indeed become 'westernised African women', and as such, we have lost our identity. So my opinion is that we should not judge the women we see in our films with the standard of African culture, but rather we should see them as the representation of alien Western women".

As supported by more than 90% of the men in his group, Lawrence believes that it is an abomination in the African cultural system for a woman to sleep with her daughter's boyfriend, even if she has dated him in the past, as is represented in Legend. To the majority of men that participated in this study, such shameful behaviour is not so uncommon or unacceptable in the Western world. This is because, unlike Africa where the cultural system is embedded with strict discursive discipline that produces or associates a high sense of shame with any form of immorality, modern Western women enjoy too much freedom and have therefore, according to the men, lost their sense of shame. As a result, in the real sense of 'the African way of life', this strong sense of shame should have overridden Marlan's (the protagonist in the film) emotional weakness, and she should never have allowed herself to sleep with her daughter's boyfriend.

According to the opinion of the men in this study, if educated women see nothing wrong in Marlan's behaviour, as most of them argued, then they have lost their sense of shame just like the women in the West. This assumed loss of sense of shame, to them, is probably a result of their exposure to Western ways of life, which they (the women) have accepted as superior to the strict moral milieu in which they were brought up. This argument is part of the men's demonstration of cultural nationalism with which they denounce any kind of feminism in Africa.

Lawrence's fear that Africa has lost its identity is a clear reflection of African men's disposition to the renegotiation of their national cultures that devalue and oppress women. Such disposition is a manifestation of what Narayan (1971) again called the "Idea of Venerability", that is, "disposition that stresses continuities of tradition over adaptations, renegotiations or changes". However, the study's analysis of Nigerian films establishes that such fear from men, as Lawrence expresses it, is indeed unwarranted because the films, as men want it, are actually reinforcing traditional discourses

about women in Nigeria. Although educated women are not averse to the preservation of traditional culture, they want the media to be selective in the aspects of traditional culture they preserve. As Nike (First group) put it, "the media [Nigerian films] should reinforce the good cultural heritage and discourses that position women positively and not the bad ones that relegate or subjugate and stereotype women". What is more interesting about the labelling of the educated women as 'westernised' as a result of their agitation for a change in the national culture and discourse that relegate them, is that it gives the impression that they are able to question the discourse because they have been intoxicated, demonised and contaminated with ideas they acquire from Western education. This impression could explain why, until recently, girls education was not encouraged among all the major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

From the two different ways men and women perceive and interpret the images of women in Nigerian films, it can then be concluded in line with Taylor and Willis' (1999: 26) suggestion that "the social position of the reader, arising out of the factors such as class, gender, sexuality, race, education and occupation, creates an impact on the kinds of reading produced".

## Limitations of the ability of Nigerian women to resist or re-interpret the meanings in the images of women in Nigerian films

Essentially, however, women's ability to resist the meanings inherent in the representations of women in Nigerian films is limited for two reasons. Firstly, it does not change how men perceive them, as it is already established from the previous discussion. On this basis, many scholars have begun to question the power attributed to media audiences and have wondered if the active audience perspective, or its most extreme version, revisionist populism, has not oversimplified matters. According to McGuigan (1992:130), the problem with an active audience position "has to do with whether the audience member is to be conceived of as a free-wheeling individualist or as a social individual, roughly between psychologism (the usual criticism of uses and gratifications research) and sociologism (a tendency, in spite of disclaimers, contrary to the encoding and decoding model)".

If we take the viewers as isolated individuals, who consume media products in their private viewing context, empowered by their personal beliefs and expectations, then we cannot doubt the strength of the individual's potential to reject or re-produce messages embedded in the media products, but, if on the contrary, we perceive media audiences as a social group, the power of the individual members of the audience might have been exaggerated. Indeed, positioning the media representations or significations (which is entirely ineffectual and indeterminate), as simply iconographic acts that can be waved aside by each individual of the social group through his or her ability to reject or remake the intended meanings of the media messages, is seen in this study as flawed. The limitation of many audience studies that support the power of the audience to reject and remake media meanings is that they focus and interpret their findings on the basis of individual responses, and this has undermined the possibility of the general effects, media representations may have on social understanding rather than on individual perceptions. This study aimed to counter this dichotomy by exploring the responses of differently situated women and men. As Chizima (Second group) put it:

"…So, even if we can interpret all the bad portrayals about women in the films as rubbish and having no significance to us and so cannot influence how we behave and see ourselves, what about the negative identity and image they are creating for all women?"

With such response as that from Chizima, a very radical and

intelligent young woman, it is established that Nigerian educated women are free and have the ability to reject the messages in Nigerian films but they are still positioned in relation to the messages and meanings in the films by others, particularly by men. Chizima supported this with her experience. She was once called Domitila (the prostitute film character in an early film in 2000) by men on the street because she wore a short skirt and a low cut top. Chizima's experience demonstrates that men are likely not to differentiate between the image in the films and the actual image of the individual women in real life, and so, the general effects the representations in Nigerian films have on social understanding about Nigerian women in general rather than on individual perceptions must be a concern to women.

As a result, Nigerian films might not have been totally successful in positioning individual female viewers, in particular, in the desired way they represent women, but they may have been surreptitiously successful in creating a negative image for all women as a group, so that each of them experiences her daily existence and interactions in society in accordance with this image, as it is hinted by Chizima's experience (from which, it seems, none of them can easily exempt herself).

## Factors that influence the different interpretation patterns among Nigerian film audience

This study found that the relative proportion of capabilities for different interpretations of Nigerian films is mainly influenced by sex and educational background, rather than by ethnicity or class. In terms of gender differences, this study found that there is a remark-able difference in the way men and women read the meanings in Nigerian films. Men tend not to see anything significantly wrong with the representations of women in the films; thereby they adopt dominant or preferred readings of their meanings. They accept the representations in the films as the reality of Nigerian women and wish such representations to continue unmodified for the reinforcement of Nigerian culture. This is not surprising because, as it has been repeatedly suggested, the films serve their patriarchal interests. Women, particularly those that are more educated, contrarily perceive the ways Nigerian films portray women as negative, irritating, ideological and derogatory.

In terms of the differences in educational background, there is also a profound difference in the way women, as a group, interpret meanings of their representations in the films. While educated women interpret the films oppositionally and 'agitatively', less or uneducated women tend to have preferred interpretations, or what is called conformist interpretations of the films. They tend to accept and assimilate the prescriptive rules and positions created for women and the reality created about them in the films. They see little or no reason to reject such representations or even to agitate to change the representations in the films and the clear ideological meanings they carry. This kind of 'conformist' decoding is manifested in the way most of them berate and reprimand the transgressing female characters (in the films they had watched) that crossed the line of social discourses and cultural beliefs set out for women's identity and behaviour.

Such negative attitude of the less educated women to the female characters in Nigerian films is illustrated by Modinat's (Third group) observation that "in fact, we enjoy the films more when a cultural deviant is made to pay for her violation of cultural rules". Therefore, going back again to Zizek's (1994) point, they know they are being manipulated, but they surrender themselves to the manipulation anyway. However, their voluntary capitulation to the manipulative meanings of the films is a result or an interpretation of their capitulation to the pressure of the demands and prescriptions of their social values and discourses. It is an interpretation of their 'pragmatic acceptance', thinking that they cannot change their social position. However, this study is more inclined to see their

capitulation and subsequent conformist readings of the meanings embedded in the films as a result of their lack of a conceptual framework and knowledge of alternative discourse and this is exactly what differentiates their reading from that of their counterparts who are more educated. Thus they legitimatize the patriarchal ideology that exploits and degrades them. It can be suggested that they decode the films in this preferred and 'conformist' manner, resulting in their legitimization of the patriarchal ideology, because they feel the films are enacting what is known as the proper and normal life of a true Nigerian or African woman.

As it can be deduced from Muyibat's view that the films do not give women too many options, it is not that the less or uneducated women do not see the representations in the films as oppressive. They do, but their capability to resist the representations is over-ridden by the pressure of the cultural prescriptions. Not that they do not have knowledge that the films are derogatory and ideological, but they just accept them as representing what is normal for a true African woman. What makes their readings of the films different from that of the educated women is the fact that they lack conceptual frameworks like feminism, or what has been referred to as counter discourses, that could lead them to reject or resist their secondary positions or derogatory identity being created by the films about women. The following observation, which encapsulates the views of all market women in the third group of the study's focus discussion, illuminates further, the attitude of less or uneducated women with regard to how they interpret Nigerian films.

"I do not see anything out of order in the representations of women in our films [the indigenous Yoruba films]. They only remind us of our culture and the position in which we are placed. And any true African woman will see herself in the reflection of the images in the films and will try to correct and adapt herself according to the prescription laid down in the films. I do really enjoy it when an erring woman who wants to become a man is punished or when a woman who con-travenes our culture is punished in the end. Like the film we have just watched (Amope Olowosibi), why should a woman try to be in a position which our society does not place her by casting a spell on her husband and turning him into a moron [She uses African magic to make her husband lose his capability to think right, and so becomes subordinate to her]. Such a woman makes proper African women feel bad because of her over-ambition and selfishness. The fact that women should submit to men is a matter of our culture and if I see anything contrary, I distance myself from it because it will not end well. To me, in this society, we women can become what we want without trying to take the place of men, because they are in charge and we must respect that. Therefore, we will feel happier if we accept the position we are placed in our cultural setting. We get more respect for ourselves when we respect our position and respect men's position. Even our religions mandate us women to be submissive to men. It is for orderliness. If we do not, then we will cause chaos in our society (Latifat, from the third group)".

This response illustrates the 'conformist' interpretations taken by the majority of women with little or no education and it demon-strates the feeling of "resignation" or "fate" (pragmatic acceptance) which is common to rural and less-educated/ uneducated women in Africa. Indeed, the limitation of being a woman in African societies is ingrained in the consciousness of every African woman within the family and educational system, in that every institution reminds her of her "natural" role as a wife and a mother, a faithful and dedicated servant to her husband. However, with high levels of education and exposure to alternative or feminist discourses, educated women have been able to achieve a critical distance from this ideological consciousness, and that is why they, unlike uneducated women,
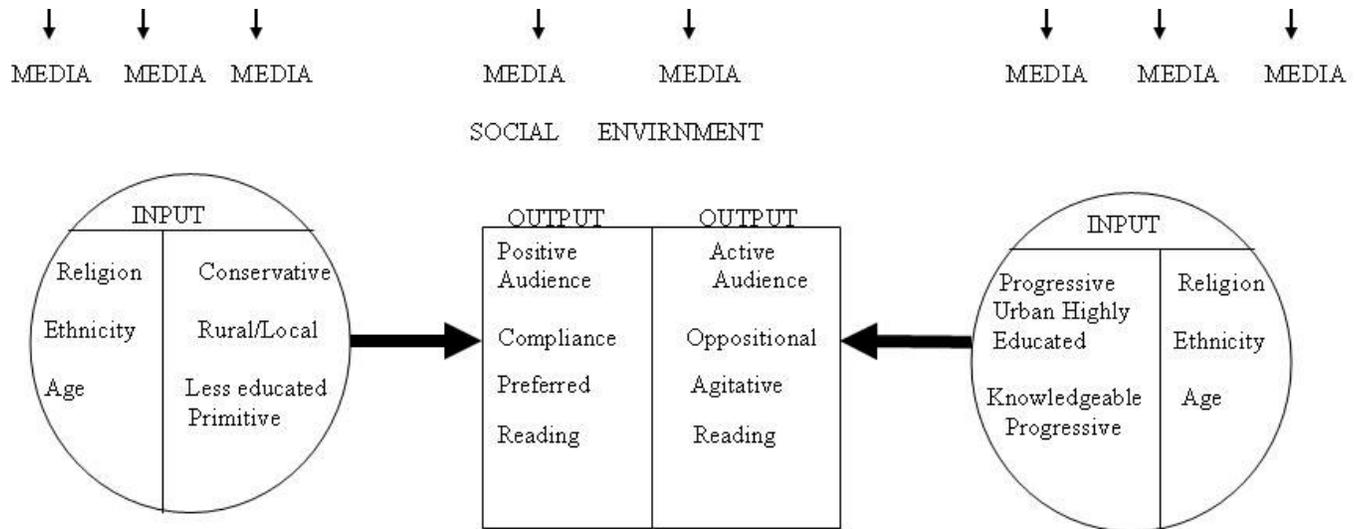
**Figure 1.** The dynamics of women's reception and reading of their representation in the media.

agitate for a change in the system of representations in the films, and in the general social structure that devalues women.

The difference in the way more-educated and less-educated women read the meanings in Nigerian films support Morley's (1978) claim that the knowledge or worldview or what Fiske called "extra textual experience and attitude" (1987: 39), which different people bring into their exposure to media messages, does significantly determine how they differently interpret the media messages. Unfortunately, however, the revisionist idea of unlimited power, which is said to be common to all media audiences, except perhaps, children, does not adequately take into account these differences in the knowledge level of people with different backgrounds.

**Modification of the active audience perspective**

The concern, which the divergence of interpretations among women as a group brings to the fore, and which forms the basis of the point this study is making, is that the active audience perspective, especially as it is envisioned by the extreme view of the revisionists, is not adequate to explain the reception of popular culture by women (as a group of people), particularly in Nigeria.

As it is manifested in the divergent ways that more-educated and less-educated women in Nigeria interpret the meanings in the representations of women in Nigerian films, it is difficult to accept the active audience perspective that assumes everybody has equal power to reject and remake meanings in the media as an overarching theory to explain the reception of media by women in Nigeria. If we accept it as adequately explaining the reception of media by women from different backgrounds, then it means we cannot account for the passive reading of the less-educated women, who accept and submit, conditionally or unconditionally, to the ideological, cultural and discursive manipulations of the representations of women: who see the images of women in the films as the true reality with which true and normal Nigerian women should experience themselves, who do not want to negotiate with the positions created for women in the films and who find pleasure in the terrible ends of female characters that cross the line already drawn by Nigerian/African cultural notions of women.

As a result, the perspective needs some modification, particularly, as it relates to Nigerian or perhaps African women. This

modification needs to take into consideration as McGuigan's (1992: 134) proposed "for a more thorough going ethnography of audiences unweighed down by the pre-suppositional baggage of the original encoding and decoding model", and which is dispensed completely with such global value systems that obscure social differences of age, ethnicity, educational level and level of exposure. The modification, as McGuigan further suggests, needs "to consider the relations between textual genres as framework of meaning and the audience sub groups in the interdiscursive contexts of everyday life" (1992: 3).

Based on all the various factors, ranging from educational background, worldview and sex, that influence the different reading of Nigerian films by female audiences, a model for a modified way of understanding how women in Nigeria receive and interpret the meanings in the messages of the popular culture/media is recommended, as shown in the figure given in this study (Figure 1).

The model establishes that, with respect to the representations of women in the media, factors such as ethnicity, religion and age are not important dynamics or mechanics of the reception and interpretations of the meanings of the representations by Nigerian/African women. The factors that significantly determine how an individual woman interprets the meanings of women's representations in the media are her level of education and level of her exposure to alternative or critical discourses. If she is less educated and thereby less exposed to alternative discourses, she will be a passive viewer of the media and will, therefore, have a compliant or preferred interpretation of the representations of women in the media. If she is more-educated, therefore, knowledgeable and highly exposed and thus, 'progressive', she is more likely to be an active viewer of the media, who interpret the meanings in the representations of women in the media 'oppositionally' and 'agitatively'.

**RESUTLTS AND CONCLUSION**

Nigerian audience, particularly female viewers, perceive, receive and interpret the images or representations of women in Nigerian home video films differently. While men and less educated women interpret the repre-sentations in conformist manner, having the preferred

meanings of the ideological meanings embedded in the representation, educated women interpret the representations 'oppositionally' and 'agitatively'. In other words, they rework the meanings, and the reworking is not only a form of remaking to gain pleasure from the films, but also to effect a change in their negative representations. Nevertheless, their power to reinterpret the meanings does not translate into total change in the image the society has about women. This is one of the limitations of the active audience perspective of the media. The limitation is vitalized by the conformist reading of many less educated women, who prefer to accept negative meanings being represented in Nigerian films as a result of their less exposure and belief that they cannot change their subordinated conditions. Since the concept of active audience is not pervasive or general, but restricted to the few more educated women who have knowledge and discourse tools to read aberrantly, it is not adequate to explain the reception and reading of popular culture by women in Nigeria. As a result, the perspective needs some modifications that should consider the differences in the level of knowledge and exposure to alternative discourses of the different individual women, as proposed in a model derived from the findings of this study.

## RECOMMENDATION

It is desirable to change the negative portrayals of women in Nigerian home video films, and this could be achieved effectively through a revolutionary change in the discourse and culture that devalue and denigrate women. While this is set in motion, the audience should be exposed to means of interpreting media meanings critically through extensive media literacy.

Further studies on the specific aspects of Nigerian home video films that relate to different categories of audiences, local and international, are recommended. Such studies should attempt to examine why the films are popular among women. The studies should also attempt to examine why a celebrity cult is built around the actresses that play the roles of subjugated and degraded women in Nigerian films.

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