The Meme Led Me Here:
The Impact of Nollywood Memes on Global Interest in Nigerian Films

by
Rita Omonya Odey

B.Sc., Covenant University, 2017

Extended Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

in the School of Communication (Dual Degree Program in Global Communication)
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

© Rita Omonya Odey 2020
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Summer 2020
Approval

Name: Rita Omonya Odey
Degree: Master of Arts
Title: The Meme Led Me Here: The Impact of Nollywood Memes on Global Interest in Nigerian Films
Program Director: Katherine Reilly

Martin Laba
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor

Katherine Reilly
Program Director
Associate Professor

Date Approved: August 31, 2020
Abstract

Memes are seen as digital elements that incite laughter and the politics and cultural influence embedded is largely ignored. The effects of globalization are not absent in the production of memes and a large number of memes used worldwide are created from Western cultural vehicles. Nigeria’s film industry Nollywood, one of the largest in the world in terms of output, boasts of its dominance in Africa. However, it has not garnered the same audience globally as Hollywood and Bollywood have. The introduction and consequent virality of Nollywood memes in 2016 have put Nollywood in worldview. On YouTube, Nollywood films containing popular memes record millions of views. Using viral Nollywood memes as cases, I studied the impact of Nollywood memes on Nigerian films previously unknown outside Africa and if they have led to global interest in Nollywood. I presented a framework that emerged from this study that not only points to interest in the films but charts the path from memes to interest.

Keywords: nollywood; memes; relatability; digital media; instructions
Acknowledgements

I acknowledge that I could not have carried out this study without the immense help of the Holy Spirit of God. I acknowledge His divine wisdom, favor and abundant grace at work in my life.

I appreciate my family and friends for supporting me in every way and at every step. I hope this work makes you proud.

Finally, many thanks to my senior supervisor Martin Laba, Katherine Reilly and Adel Iskandar for their immense support and input in this paper. This paper has meaning because you all made sure I found the meaning in it.
# Table of Contents

Approval .......................................................................................................................... ii
Abstract ........................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. v
List of Tables .................................................................................................................. vi
List of Figures ................................................................................................................. vi

**Chapter 1. Introduction** .................................................................................................. 1

**Chapter 2. Literature Review** ....................................................................................... 5
2.1. Themes ....................................................................................................................... 5
2.2. Analysis of Content ................................................................................................... 12

**Chapter 3. Methodology and Analysis** ......................................................................... 16
3.1. Methodology ............................................................................................................. 16
3.2. Analysis .................................................................................................................... 17
3.3. CTMI Framework ..................................................................................................... 23
  3.3.1. Context: ............................................................................................................ 24
  3.3.2. Transfer: ............................................................................................................ 24
  3.3.3. Meaning: .......................................................................................................... 25
  3.3.4. Interest: .............................................................................................................. 25

**Chapter 4. Conclusion** .................................................................................................. 27
  Limitations and Recommendations .................................................................................. 28

**References** .................................................................................................................. 30
List of Tables

Table 3.1. Data Set .................................................................................................................. 17

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. The first Nollywood meme from the film Intelligent Students, 2008. It shows a child crying and is used to express childlike emotions. ............ 2
Figure 2.1. A meme from a Nollywood film Back from South (2013). ....................... 11
Figure 2.2. A scene from the film Birdbox that is premised on lack of sight was used by the creator to give meaning to the context. ................................. 14
Figure 3.1. A snapshot of the five memes analyzed in this study. They are mostly used in GIF format. ............................................................... 20
Chapter 1.

Introduction

Memes. That’s it. That’s the tweet. An avid user of the microblogging and social networking site, Twitter will have recognised the insertion of a popular meme above. Although current popular discourse surrounding memes and meme culture focuses on the digital space, the term ‘meme’ was formed prior to the digital era. The term was coined by ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkin to mean pieces of cultural information that move from person to person and gradually become a shared phenomenon, taking on uniform meaning. (Dawkins, 2006, pp 192). Memes can take on any form as long as it can be imitated. Today, the word meme is more often than not used to describe internet memes which are shareable digital items generated from cultural vehicles and circulated and replicated on the internet. These cultural vehicles are the elements of culture that memes are taken from. They can be anything from popular catchphrases to films and can exist in the format of an image, video or GIF.

The concept of Internet memes began with the term proposed by a lawyer, Mike Godwin ("Internet meme," n.d.). He formed a glib statement called Godwin’s law of Nazi Analogies that said, “As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one”. He put this comment on any discussion or newsgroups where anything relating to the Nazi was mentioned and before long the idea was replicated over and over (Godwin, 1994). This is referred to by some as the first meme, however internet memes, while commonplace in online subcultures, did not gain popularity in mainstream social media until 2011 when more people began to take an interest in memes. Google trend searches show the peak of curiosity in internet memes was in February 2012 with the United States leading the search history ("Google Trends," n.d.). Subcultures however are often viewed negatively and Gelder explains that the common narratives around subcultures posit them as anti-normal and dissenting (2007, pp3). A subculture is a group built around a lifestyle that is not universally subscribed to. Internet subcultures are formed around a similar ideal and involve people who consider their lifestyle different enough to warrant its own space on the internet. Subculture sites like 4chan, Reddit and Tumblr, mostly avoided by the
“normies” or dominant group, housed users whose created memes of inner jokes that would be misunderstood or frowned upon by the general public. These subculture sites in their early days were responsible for the constant flow of memes (Shifman, 2014). Today, memes are commonplace on mainstream social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and are created and used by different subcultures. One of such subcultures is Black Twitter. This comprises of the users of Twitter who are mainly Black and are familiar with African American culture. In 2016, Brazilian woman Nicole posted a meme from a Nigerian film and it quickly gained virality on Twitter, especially on Black Twitter (Adikwu, 2019). Since then, the phenomenon of Nollywood memes has transcended the subculture to become firmly stamped in dominant internet culture.

![Meme Image]

*Figure 1.1.* The first Nollywood meme from the film Intelligent Students, 2008. It shows a child crying and is used to express childlike emotions. Retrieved from [https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1542580-african-kid-crying-with-a-knife_kid_crying_meme_1_1](https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1542580-african-kid-crying-with-a-knife_kid_crying_meme_1_1)
Nollywood is the name given to the Nigerian film industry by a New York Times journalist, Norimitsu Onishi in 2002. He decided that the blossoming film industry was to Nigeria what Hollywood was to the United States (Onishi, 2016). In this study, I explore Nollywood and its influence within and without Africa. Although seen as a hegemon in Africa, Nollywood has not extended its influence on a global audience and lacks the international following that Hollywood and Bollywood have. Many have criticized the poor video and audio quality as the reason for its lack of fame among Western audiences. This study however seeks to find out if the presence of Nollywood memes has given Nollywood films some new eyes.

As this is an understudied research area, literature on Nollywood memes and the relatability of memes are quite elusive. The word meme will be used in this paper to refer to internet memes, that is digitally transmitted elements of culture. The focus of this paper will be on memes from Nollywood films and the cultural vehicles they are taken from on YouTube. This research will set a precedent by providing a framework that both academia and digital culture and communications can make use of. Nollywood films do not hold a position of awareness in the global north, but with the growing global use of Nollywood memes, this is changing. Many non-Africans from countries like India and Bali can name at least two Nollywood actors- usually the comic duo Aki and Pawpaw (Sarkar, 2019). In this study, I question whether these viral Nollywood memes have impacted global interest in Nigerian films. After analyzing the YouTube comments from five viral Nollywood memes, a major finding is that Nollywood memes contain relatable content and are used in contexts that increases its shareability which leads users to seek out the cultural vehicles they are created from that have piqued their interest.

Memes and the phenomenon of virality on the internet have become so commonplace that we fail to look into the effects they might have outside the internet. What is the power that virality holds over the original content of these memes? Do the conversations these memes spark end on twitter or do they transcend the online space? This project will inform internet culture studies by showing the correlation between memes and increased interest in the originating cultural vehicle. The aim of this project is to understand Nollywood memes and their impact on the Nigerian film industry to see how memes have driven the popularity of Nollywood globally. I will analyze five viral memes to see how the originating Nollywood films themselves have been impacted by the international attention. I will do this by analyzing the comments under the films on
YouTube, the country of origin of these comments and the common themes of interest in Nollywood from the memes. The expected output of this project is the evidence of a correlation between Nollywood memes and increased foreign viewership of the films as well as a show of interest in them.

This work has four chapters. In the next chapter, I thematically examine literature on the topic of Nollywood and memes presenting the history of both Nollywood and memes and the confluence of both today. In the third chapter, I outline my methodology, analyze the data gathered and answer my research question with a discussion of the result of my research, the CTMI framework. In the final chapter, I conclude the paper with by stating the parties who stand to benefit from this research as well as limitations and recommendations for future studies.
Chapter 2.

Literature Review

What are internet memes? Internet memes are often anonymously created, shareable and replicable digital elements used to convey and express meaning on the internet. They are commonly in form of visual/audiovisual content, catchphrases and snippets etc. Huntington (2017) explains that internet memes more often than not are comedic in nature and may also allude to pop culture. Kariko and Anasih (2019, p. 1) describe memes as “cultural aspects responsible for the flow of rumors, catchphrases, melodies and even fashion trends within any community”. They are crowd sourced and require little effort to create since many are taken from existing cultural vehicles. While on the surface, memes might appear as mere jokes, internet memes are one form of user-generated, digital media content that may have real world effects on those who view them (Huntington, 2017). According to Nissenbaum and Shifman (2015), they are distinctive pointers to culture especially digital culture and Henry Jenkins (2006) adds that these memes are products of participatory culture. Memes point to a concept of communal belonging on social media sites because creators, sharers and re-sharers must know the general meaning and idea contained in the meme and share it to show understanding and affirmation. Linguistically, there must be understanding to engage in a conversation using any language. This concept also applies to internet memes and social media users who do not understand the memes cannot use them and thus are excluded from the discourse. In this review of literature, I will discuss six key themes that inform this study.

2.1. Themes

Relatability of Memes

I have argued that memes carry within them an idea, regardless of whether it’s a joke, a slang or political commentary. Viewers can either relate to the concept, that is the general idea the meme represents, or the context, that is the specific way it has been used in or captioned or both. A community of people who all relate to similar concepts and contexts of memes can belong to a particular subculture. A good example is Black
Twitter, where ideas around blackness are shared. Sharing experiences such as parents who discipline kids, cookouts and dancing are common because members of the subculture can relate to those experiences. When memes are created using these concept or specific contexts, the common knowledge allows for easy transfer of meaning. Amelia Tait (2017) explains that meme culture is essential to forming community bonds on the internet. This is due to like-minded individuals relating to the same memes. Sociologists Kariko and Anasih (2019) add that memes are given context by the creators, but it is its inherent relatability that makes it go viral. A major conclusion from a survey they carried out on college students in Jakarta was that meme users used self-reflective memes because they provided the most relatability. Victoria Storm (2019) affirms that internet culture is governed by the rule of relatability. Without relatability, ideas cannot be propagated and meaning cannot be passed across on the internet.

There is no meme without a meaning, as the concept of memetics is based on the replication and transfer of meaning, in similar fashion to the transfer of genes, as propagated by Richard Dawkins. Before the transfer of meaning from the meme to the user can occur, the meaning of the meme must be fully understood. This is the concept of relatability; that the viewer comes in contact with the meme and based on personal experience, previous knowledge of the feeling evoked or a host of other factors, the idea inherent in the meme speaks to something in the viewer. For a meme to gain an audience, it must be relatable. It must carry a general idea or express an emotion that the audience is familiar with, even though they may have never related with the meme vehicle. Users can either relate to the content, the context or both.

Meme-Where is it from?

Imbalances in the production and distribution of knowledge on the internet have created a majorly one-way flow of information from the global north to the global south. Renee´ Sylvain (2005) points out that globalization, instead of creating a level playing field has formed one-way hegemons, with local resistance opposite it. As world economies developed, goods, services and labour migrated from place to place and cultures moved with them. The effects of colonialism led to the global south relying heavily on importation despite large supply of raw materials. The global north became the main exporter and western culture moved at a greater rate into the global south in tangible form like media, food, dressing and intangible form like accents, religion and ideologies. This was theorized as globalization, the world becoming one, not with various
cultures represented, but resembling the culture of the hegemon. (Munoz, 2015). Globalization ensures that culture is transferred horizontally from society to society as opposed to vertically, from one generation to the next in a society (Nwegbu et al., 2011).

Cultural globalization used power as its weapon and took on a new meaning as globalized culture came to be seen as the Americanisation of the world and how ‘civilized’ the world could become (Kraidy, 2005). Kema Irogbe (2014) states that a globalized culture is homogenous in the favor of the hegemon. Internet and meme culture tell the same story. The globalization of culture translates to the internet where most of the social media platforms and knowledge base sites are products of the United States, affirming the power imbalances. Meme production resides majorly in the global north. The position for the first internet meme is a heavily contested one, but all the competitors were created in the United States. When the rest of the world caught wind of these social media sites, these memes and the subcultures that produced them were already present, forcing new users to assimilate to them. The pattern has always been the same: a meme portraying western culture in a western cultural vehicle would be introduced. It would be used by the rest of the world and eventually replicated but still keeping elements of the western culture. On a 2019 list of the 50 greatest memes of all time, all of them are from western cultural vehicles and contain American ideas (Gil, 2019., Mahan, 2019). We see that internet culture although with more flexible borders is not exempt from the effect of globalization of culture (Éigeartaigh and Berg, 2010).

According to one of its numerous definitions, globalization is the “developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals worldwide” (Limor Shifman, 2014, p. 152). Shifman goes on to describe memes as powerful yet, unseen agents of globalization (2014, p. 151). Worldwide travel and television programmes have arguably decreased many of the differences that existed in the past between cultures and make crossing borders an easier experience for the contemporary traveller who is bound to recognize some of the cultural rules and values encountered. However, in true globalization fashion, this often times is the experience of majorly the global south who are more likely to be aware of information from the global north. This is a result of the one-way flow of information, which is also present on social media and with memes.
The name Nollywood evokes different reactions in different groups of people. To some Nigerians, it’s a feeling of pride in Nigeria’s film industry, arguably one of the country’s biggest exports after crude oil. In others, it’s a dislike of the portmanteau of the name Nollywood, which comes from “Nigerian-Hollywood” and the postcolonial connotations it calls to mind. To Africans, it is childhood memories of films filled with witchcraft, family values and rich culture. To some in the global north, it is an untapped pool of talent and to others, it draws up a blank.

Film was introduced to the country in 1903 by the British colonialists and the industry was dominated by these foreign merchants. (Uchegbu, 1992 cited in Onyenankeya et al. 2017). Local film production was birthed out of the need to localize the stories and display cultures (Onyenankeya, 2013 cited in Onyenankeya et al. 2017). The film industry was birthed from several pre-existing theatre traditions among various ethnic groups of Nigeria. These traditions included the various dramatic presentations in traditional festivals and ritual ceremonies. Yoruba Travelling theatres that moved from rural and urban areas of the country also contributed to the early concept of Nollywood (Alabi, 2013). Theatres performances like Hubert Ogunde and Baba Sala’s were filmed and produced into celluloid features for resale by local producers in the 1970’s (Ajibade, 2013, p. 265). These were filmed to reach a wider audience than could physically be at the shows (Onyenankeya et al. 2017). The first “hit” out of the industry was Kenneth Nnebue’s blockbuster, Living in Bondage and the fame of this 1992 film led to the formation of the film industry with Nigerian movies being exported to other parts of Africa by 1998 (Onishi, 2002). The industry was christened Nollywood by Norimitsu Onishi in his New York Times article introducing the Western world to the new filmmaking capital (Onishi, 2016). Ajibade (2013) cites Ekwuazi who notes that in the late 80’s, Nigerian video films were not expected to survive because people were used to celluloid films. However, Nollywood video films did more than survive and today the industry produces 50 movies a week on the average (Moudio, 2013).
Nigeria’s biggest export to Africa

Onyenankeya et al. (2017) establishes that Nollywood films and stars are popular in most African countries and their study of South Africa supports this claim. They go on to say that the aesthetics and content may not appeal to the Global North, but Africa has definitely been interested. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (2013, p.1) describe Nollywood as “The most visible form of cultural machine on the African continent”. They go on to explain that in at least five African countries, Nollywood is the model of film production. Nollywood films are also dubbed in different languages suitable to other countries (Ajibade, 2013). A Ghanaian friend of mine informed me that she grew up on Nollywood films, going on to say that due to the influx of Nigerian films, the Ghanaian government had to place a ban on them to grow the Ghana film industry. Friends from Uganda, Burundi and Zambia echo the same comments. These friends can list more Nollywood actors than I, a born-and-bred Nigerian can. African film industries in other countries have begun to emerge like Ghallywood from Ghana, Bongowood from Tanzania, Collywood in Cameroon and Riverwood in Kenya, to name a few. Nollywood is a big deal in many parts of Africa. In Onyenankeya et al. (2017), one of the authors describe an experience at a South African friend’s house where he went visiting and was not acknowledged by anyone for an hour and thirty minutes—neither the friend, nor the parents or siblings—because they were engrossed in a Nollywood film. Haynes (2007) as cited in Onyenankeya et al. (2017) says that Nollywood films have also gained a large community of viewers with Africans in diaspora. A 2015 article by The World Weekly affirms that “it is in Africa that Nollywood has had the greatest impact” and that to the African audience, the rise of a familiar film industry in opposition to the constant influx of Western films is important (“Nollywood, Nigeria’s answer to Hollywood”, 2015).

Not So Much the World

However, the name Nollywood does not hold its own among majority of international audiences unlike Hollywood and Bollywood. This is not to say that Nollywood movies are not available in the global north or are not purchased by non-Africans. Ajibade (2013) explains that Nigerian producers and merchants believe that foreigners purchasing the films points to interest and viewership of Nigerian films, but he argues otherwise. He distinguishes between a Western audience and audience in the West and he comments that video producers and merchants do not differentiate the
audience. Nollywood films can be purchased by foreigners for research purposes as the amount of research interest in the industry increases. However, an informal study showed that in the two years that Nollywood titles were available in the library at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the University of Basel, Switzerland, library records did not show that non-Africans were borrowing them. (Ajibade, 2013). He concludes that Nollywood films are viewed in academic circles in the global north, but it has not caught on with the rest of the population. He chalks this up to differences in telling stories, with the West using captivating imagery that require full attention and Nollywood relying on descriptive dialogue that can be retold over and over. One of the top Nollywood producers, Kunle Afolayan stated that the essential players in the global film industry knew very little about Nollywood and what it stood for (“Nollywood, Nigeria’s answer to Hollywood”, 2015). He insinuated that the art was not on par with what the global world had become used to looking at Hollywood. The conversation around what is up to par with international standards and what does not meet the standard is a necessary conversation to this research project. This is because the Nollywood memes that have achieved virality have mostly been from “Old Nollywood”. Moradewun Adejunmobi (2015) describes this old/new Nollywood phenomenon as waves, where the new wave of filmmaking distinguishes itself from the old.

The Old vs New Nollywood argument is one that has roped in producers, viewers and the global film industry. Old Nollywood is characterized with everything bad about Nollywood films: paltry budgets, rapid production, laughable video effects, and straight-to-video marketing to make as much money as possible before notorious film pirates can reproduce them. The stars of these movies are household names today. Basically, they are old school Nigerian movies. The narratives were also very familiar: Traditional religions, Family Rivalry, Royalty, Romance (usually with the male love interest having arrived from outside Nigeria with a pinched “American” accent). New Nollywood encompasses directors making higher quality films that are readily available on international platforms like Netflix (Nollywood, Nigeria’s answer to Hollywood, 2015). Haynes (2014, cited in Adejunmobi, 2015) states that new Nollywood took off after 2010. It is known for its younger cast and directors, increased special effects, international locations, cinema premieres and an overall sense of proving that Nollywood movies can share the stage with Hollywood. But, as if in negation to the “globalized” feel of New Nollywood, the viral memes that resonate with global audiences are old Nollywood
memes. All of the four films studied in this project are classified under Old Nollywood; marked with low quality productions that on no level compete with Hollywood movies from the same time.


Old Nollywood has left the global north largely unaware, underwhelmed and uninterested. One can easily chalk it up to shoddy productions, little technical know-how or vastly different cultures. Nonetheless, this study shows that in recent times, global interest in Nollywood has increased, despite the inherent factors working against it. Even though the memes contain elements that keep Nollywood “local”, somehow the stories and the meanings in them have been able to transcend continental borders and resonate with non-Africans. It is important to note that although, these memes lead to instant interest in the vehicles they are taken out of, which happen to be old Nollywood, they ultimately lead to interest in Nollywood as whole, whether old or new.

Common Themes and Narratives and the Relatability of These Narratives

Babson Ajibade (2013) explains that a reason for the widespread fame and success of Nollywood can be ascribed to the narratives employed that resonate strongly
with Nigerians. I go a step further to say that these narratives resonate with the African audience just as strongly. Old Nollywood films were marked with narratives around spirituality, morality and the evils of immorality, migration, debauchery, success stories and a lot of comedy. New Nollywood according to Adejunmobi (2015) is set in a neoliberal Africa. It is cosmopolitan, modern and globalized; one might even call it Americanized. This is however largely a generalization as there are New Nollywood movies that borrow narratives from old Nollywood like Ramsey Noah’s remake of the classic, Living in Bondage and Genevieve Nnaji’s Lionheart.

Old Nollywood gained a cult-like following—myself included—because its stories were either so close to home that it felt like one was a character in the film, or so hilarious that it was hard to stop watching. Old Nollywood existed at a time when Nigeria was going through economic and political hardship and laughter was much needed. Emily Witt (2017) says that Nollywood was born out of an economic recession and the inability to import foreign movies led Nigerians to tell their own stories. Nigeria is also a very religious society and as religion is tied to the occultic, society could relate to these narratives. The narratives of the four films sampled include Back from South, which follows the main character’s return from South Africa; Pretty Liars that tells the story of women and morality; Village Boys, a comedy about two young men who cause a nuisance in their small village and go to the metropolitan city in search for wealth and Intelligent student, which follows the lives of two boys who face poverty daily. Africans who have grown up on the continent and witnessed the political, socio-economic and spiritual influences in real life will relate to the films. However, this study seeks to find out if non-Africans get it as well. Do they relate to the scenes taken out of these films? Do they relate to Old Nollywood? What is the relatability of Nollywood movies?

2.2. Analysis of Content

Situations where Nollywood films have broken out of Africa

There have been some cases where Nollywood films have broken out of Africa and received global recognition. Genevieve Nnaji’s Lionheart was the first Nigerian movie to be purchased by Netflix, making it the first Nigerian Netflix original. Lionheart however retains its old Nollywood flavor, even casting veteran actors. It was nominated and then disqualified from the Oscars for being shot in Nigeria’s official language which
is English and for not being indigenous enough (Buckley, 2019). The Wedding Party, a Kemi Adetiba film was the highest grossing Nigerian film until its sequel took the spot. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and was quickly snapped up by Netflix. However, these have not gained wide international audiences, so it is safe to say that Nigerian films on global platforms are still not being viewed by a sizable population of the West.

Memes, virality and offline interest/activity

Some internet memes have such a high degree of relatability and command such degrees of interest that they are able to transition from the online space into our physical world. This is further enhanced by the virality of the memes. Memes go viral when they garner increasing amounts of attention, views, comments and shares. A viral meme is a meme that has spread very widely, on and off social media, much like a viral disease. These memes manage to break through subcultures and geographic boundaries on the internet and become widely used by a large population. A great example is the Don’t Leave Me Challenge, which was started by Nigerian Comedian, Josh2Funny in June 2020 (Salaudeen, 2020). This meme gained attention for its clever use of word puns and a comic running scene at the end. The meme grew beyond the subculture of Nigerian Twitter and became a Twitter and TikTok sensation, with replicators coming from all parts of the world and even being covered by major news outlets like CNN and BuzzFeed. This was a mainstream viral meme, but some memes gain virality only in specific subcultures. The Birdbox meme is one of them.
In 2018, the Netflix original film Birdbox was released and images and clips from the film of the characters blindfolded and navigating life began to circulate on social media. It became a meme as more viewers gave it context. As it was gaining popularity on twitter, it led to more people streaming it on Netflix. This was a good instance of memes going offline and into the users daily life. Soon, users began to upload videos of themselves blindfolded as they went about their daily lives. The internet meme quickly evolved into a real-world occurrence. It went viral online but offline interest was majorly from the global north. So, we see that viral memes have the power to evolve into affecting our daily lives, so this is not novel. However, what is novel, and a focus of this study is how Nollywood memes, which are taken from cultural vehicles that are unappealing outside Africa go viral within and outside the subculture of Nigerian Twitter and affect users daily lives by leading them to watch the films.

Figure 2.2. A scene from the film Birdbox that is premised on lack of sight was used by the creator to give meaning to the context.
Summary

I have discussed memes and their inherent capability to transfer meaning. I looked at how the Nigerian film industry unlike Hollywood and Bollywood has not garnered global interest due to its style of filming and the disconnect with global standards. I have also seen that some memes have the power to affect behavior offline. However, the reality on social media today is that memes from Nollywood films have become a viral phenomenon, used by people from around the world. This study seeks to find out if these memes are doing what Nollywood could not do on its own. In this situation of a relatively obscure movie industry’s memes gaining popularity, and not from the global north, are these memes doing what the industry hasn’t been able to do on its own, create global interest in Nigerian films outside Africa?
Chapter 3.
Methodology and Analysis

3.1. Methodology

This research project took the format of an observed study. I looked at Nollywood memes and its effect on Nollywood films. To answer my research question, I had the choice of either questioning social media users though surveys and interviews or observing their behavior. I chose to go with the latter. This study focuses on 5 Nollywood memes that went viral and transcended their subcultures on social media between the years 2016-2020 and the originating films/clips posted on YouTube. I chose to analyze the memes and the films on YouTube for some reasons. Firstly, YouTube is a free video streaming platform available globally, whether legally or by VPN. It is therefore accessible to the majority of the world’s population. Secondly, the internet culture of commenting is one that greatly benefits this study. Therefore, a platform where users could watch videos and leave comments like YouTube fits perfectly into this study. Leaving comments or replies on social media is a main feature of participatory culture. Commenting on social media is favored because the users can hold on to anonymity and are more likely to say exactly what they feel.

I made use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods in analyzing the data. I gathered a list of Nollywood memes popular on Twitter and Vine and found the full films and clips containing the memes on YouTube. After taking into consideration the uploaders that allowed viewers the option to comment on YouTube and excluding those that didn’t, I chose the films with the highest number of views and comments. I settled on five memes from four films and downloaded the comments into excel sheets with Exportgram. With Exportgram, I could download up to 5000 comments per video and only one video had more than 5000 comments. For this particular video, I could only gather 5000 out of the 37,000 comments. In total I collected 10877 comments from 9 videos consisting of full films and clips. I began a manual data analysis process of organizing the data. Using my research objective and question as guides, I created six codes with which I sorted the data. I analyzed the data manually to determine interest evidenced by:
• Viewers coming to see the memes having seen or heard about them elsewhere. These viewers seek out the film either to look at the bigger picture to grasp the meaning of the meme or they are viewers who already understand the meme and are led to the film by their interest. Either ways the meme led them there.

• Viewers showing interest in understanding the films and the culture by requesting subtitles, translations and clarification of cultural elements.

• Viewers requesting the names of the films to seek them out (under shortened clips).

• Viewers engaging with the films in the comments by creating new contexts for the memes. They show understanding and relatability of the material.

• Viewers showing affection for the films, actors, Nollywood and the country.

• Non-English comments.

Table 3.1. Data Set

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEME</th>
<th>FILM, DIRECTOR, YEAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why are you running?</td>
<td>Pretty Liars 1-Tchidi Chikere, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama tell him o</td>
<td>Intelligent Students-Ugo Ugbor, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerrarahere</td>
<td>Back from South-Evans Orji, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kid with calculator</td>
<td>Village boys-Chika Onu, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids drinking beer</td>
<td>Village boys-Chika Onu, 2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Analysis

I will be analyzing the films individually as well as wholly, interchanging as needed. I will be discussing the findings according to the codes I employed in gathering the data.

Viewers coming to Nollywood films to see the memes having seen or heard about them elsewhere.

The first code used to gather data was comments from viewers who came to the YouTube films for the memes. Included in this are viewers who came to see the memes having seen or heard about them elsewhere. This could be from any social media
platform or messaging sites and a few viewers mention where they first encountered the memes. Some viewers seek out the films either to see the bigger picture and grasp the meaning of the meme while other viewers who already understand the meme are led to the video by their interest. Having interacted with the memes and established relatability, they seek out the cultural vehicles the memes are taken out from due to interest in them. These viewers will also create time stamps, that is point out the exact time in the film where the meme occurs to guide others who come in search of them. Viewers who seek out the memes will usually have the word meme in their comments to show that they know the meme is here and they relate to it.

Came here cause of #TwitterMomentsOfTheDecade - Esperanza Katola; (Back from South; YouTube)

Vines brought me here 😂😂 2019 - sio sidon hii ni sidonyo (Back from South; YouTube)

1:28:30 you’re looking for this - Arpit Patel (Intelligent Students, YouTube)

Who came here after seeing their memes in India 😇😇😇😇😇😇😇😇, ??please like. -Suraj Bedia (Village Boys)

For the film Intelligent Students, out of 226 comments, 61 were from viewers stating that they came for the meme and viewers creating timestamps for others to find the memes. Intelligent students had 99 related comments out of 3308. Pretty Liars had 1123 comments out of 5000. Village boys had 101 comments out of 1129 and 104 related comments on the shortened clip. Based on these comments, we can see that viewers sought out the films on YouTube to see the meme, either with prior understanding or to gain clarity.

Viewers showing interest in understanding the films and the culture by requesting subtitles, translations and clarification of cultural elements.

Viewers in the comment section under the films requested translations and subtitles for the films. However, it is important to note that two out of the five memes are spoken in English language and both are very short and clear sentences:

"Why are you running? Why are you running?" (Pretty Liars, 2010)

"Mama tell him! If he doesn’t... O my god" (Intelligent Students, 2008)
In the comments from these two films, 61 viewers requested subtitles. Two memes from the film Village boys (2005) are a display of different actions, the first, of two young men eating and drinking, with one assisting the other pour out his drink. The second meme is a young man adding up numbers with a calculator. These do not need translations or subtitles to explain the scenes. However, 165 comments are from viewers requesting subtitles. Although some requests for subtitles came from viewers whose first language was not English as their comments were in their first languages, other requests came from those who spoke English.

Please give subtitles in English- VJ ANAND B (Village Boys)

Give an Indonesian translation greetings from Indonesia 🙏 - Andi LontongG (Village Boys)

ESPAÑOL POR FAVOR ESPAÑOL POR FAVOR ESPAÑOL POR FAVOR 🅰️ (Translation: Spanish Please) Mauricio Covarrubias (Intelligent Students)

Furthermore, since four of the memes contained either easy-to-understand speech for English speakers or no dialogue at all, I draw a connection between the request for subtitles and interest in the films themselves. Viewers request for subtitles because large portions of the films contain indigenous Nigerian languages and are not subtitled on YouTube. This is a marker of interest in the films beyond the memes. It is important to note that all five memes are taken from old Nollywood movies, and international viewership was not on the mind of the producers. Majority of the non-English requests for subtitles came from Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and Hindi speakers.

Viewers requesting the names of the films to seek them out (under shortened clips).

The data set for this study included the full-length films from which the memes were cut and shortened clips that contained the scenes preceding and succeeding the memes. This means that viewers would gain full understanding of the meme scene simply by watching them. For this reason, there was need to note if viewers after seeing the memes and the context surrounding it still showed interest in the films. Data showed that the meme clip from the movie Back from South had 94 comments from viewers.
asking for the title of the film. Pretty Liars had 21 of such comments, and the two meme clips from the film Village boys had a total of 48 requests for the movie title.

Lmao what movie is this from? - Channel of Kool (Back from South)

What movie is this from I need to see it - Ganzel Variety (Back from South)

By asking for the title of the films, viewers display interest in the films spurred by the memes. One can clearly attribute the interest in the films to the memes they have watched.

Figure 3.1. A snapshot of the five memes analyzed in this study. They are mostly used in GIF format.

Viewers engaging with the films in the comments by creating new contexts for the memes.

The contextualization of memes is of utmost importance to meme culture. It is how users display their understanding of the meme being used. A context is a situation that the viewer creates to justify the meaning inherent in the meme. It is essential to understand the meme to relate to the context it is used in. The relatability of memes plays an important role in contextualization as the user must relate to the meaning contained in the meme to use it in appropriate context. Even with understanding of the meme, without relatability, it is only information to the user, and it cannot be
contextualized. The relatability lies in the meaning embedded in the meme and its relationship with the personal experiences or sum of knowledge the user has acquired.

0:50 Me: Running Away from The Spider on My Wall 0:55 The Spider: Why Are You Running—ツツ King (Pretty Liars)

A relatable meme contains elements that the viewer not only knows about but connects to. This means that users cannot relate to every meme. By way of an example, as I do not cycle, I cannot relate to memes about cycling. This does not mean that I do not grasp the information that they pass, but that my experiences and lifestyle do not equip me to use such memes because I have no connection to them.

From the data analysis, I found that under the film Pretty liars, of 5000 comments analyzed, 459 comments were from viewers giving context to the memes or creating scenarios where the portrayed emotion is needed, that is creating new memes in the comments. This means that although Nollywood and especially old Nollywood has been decried as being polarizing to Western audiences, there is relatability to these memes. The audience understands the meme and relates to the point of giving it new context in which that meme would apply. In the meme from the film Pretty Liars, we see a woman running from a man she is indebted to, screaming and looking back at him. The camera cuts to show the man stepping out of a car, shouting at her saying “Why are you running? Why are you running?” The meme has gained over 4 million views on social media platforms and the clip chosen had over 37,000 comments. The other films had a total of 63 comments giving new contexts to them memes.

Further in this analysis, I will introduce a framework that emerged from this study which shows how the relatability of memes leads to interest. The creation of contexts around memes is essential to the Context-Transfer-Meaning-Interest (CTMI) framework.

Viewers showing affection for the films, actors, Nollywood and the Nigeria.

Literature reviewed in the previous chapter has shown that the Nollywood style of filming and the films themselves are not desirable to the non-African audience, dare I say even some African audience. The audio-visual quality, the settings and the language might be deterrents. However, the stories resound. In my data analysis, I gathered comments that relayed affinity for the film, actors, the industry and the country at large. This showed that Nollywood movies themselves could lead to interest in the Nigerian
culture as seen in African countries. A total of 559 comments from all five memes analyzed professed affection for the films, the actors and the industry.

I like this two boy. From India❤- Silpa Kaayum Doley(Village Boys)

Nigeria places looks amazing nature friendly like to visit Cricket Bat -Village Boys)

I love Nigerians 😊 Backyard Farming (Back from South)

I love African cinema- JollyGrapefruit (Pretty Liars)

I swear without Nigeria we would barely have any memes- Belize Spearfishing (Back from South)

Viewers gain interest in the films on YouTube from the memes they come across and, in some cases, the viewers develop affinity for the films and characters. To a viewer who has had no prior contact with the Nigerian film industry, we can see how the relatability of Nollywood memes leads to interest in the films and beyond. In my analysis, I came across hundreds of comments professing the renowned fame of two Nollywood actors Osita Iheme and Chinedu Ikedieze also known as Aki and Pawpaw in India, Bali, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Brazil. Viewers came across them in the memes and went in search of more content from them. They star in the movies Intelligent Students and Village Boys.

Non-English comments:

In my data collection process, I gathered 631 non-English comments. Languages like Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, French, Finnish and Korean were among the many that were represented in my data set. Relying on Google Translate for accurate English translations, I sorted the comments into the codes above. However, I also decided to code them separately to point out that these non-English speakers are most likely non-African. These comments were usually from viewers asking for subtitles for the films or stating the popularity of the actors in their home countries. In the Nollywood films and memes chosen, the language used in 4 out of 5 memes is English but with variations of the Nigerian accent. To Nigerians, this is very easily understood. To foreign listeners with a keen ear, the accent is somewhat understandable. However, the language of the memes and the entirety of the films to non-English speakers sounds like a different language. Viewers in the comments on YouTube requested subtitles and translations.
This is a pointer to the degree of interest in the films, enough to desire understanding of it.

To further show that this interest extends beyond the memes to the films, memes from the films Village Boys and Intelligent Students were both in non-accented English. In the former, the character punches digits into a calculator while repeating the amount to himself. At the end, he screams excitedly “I’m Rich!”. In the latter, the character is seen crying and picks up a machete and declares “Mama tell him. If he doesn’t bring… O my god”. However, in the respective comments sections, the former had 40 comments requesting subtitles and the latter had 44. In the comment sections of a different meme of the film Village boys, 125 viewers requested subtitles, however as noted previously, this was in reference to the rest of the film and not the meme.

The simple relatability of Nollywood stories makes the memes very effective in gaining a large following and neither English language nor indigenous Nigerian languages deter viewers from understanding the emotions portrayed in the memes. Perhaps it is because Nigerians are very reactive and act with exaggerated movements.

3.3. CTMI Framework

In the course of analyzing the data to determine the impact that Nollywood memes have on the global interest in Nigerian films, it was revealed that Nollywood memes contain relatable content that spark the interest of social media users and lead them in search of the cultural vehicle the meme is taken from. This can be for a number of reasons. One of such is the desire to fully understand the meme and make better use of it on social media while engaging in meme culture. Another reason is the desire to simply engage further with the meme and the cultural vehicle it is taken from.

In trying to understand the correlation between memes and interest, no framework or theories were found to support or inform the process. However, a framework does emerge from my study and that is the Context-Transfer-Meaning-Interest (CTMI) framework. The data analysis revealed a four-step process of how memes move from being uploaded on the internet to creating interest in the cultural vehicle they are extracted from. This framework serves as the result of my study. It
answers the research question of if Nollywood memes lead to interest in the films and it explains how this happens.

3.3.1. Context:

As earlier discussed, the context of a meme is the situation in which it functions. Memes in themselves carry meaning, but this meaning is fully realized when the meme is applied in a befitting context. Memes can be used on their own, but in those instances they only function as elements of digital media (if audio-visual) or mere statements (if text or phrase). However, when memes are given context by users, they become an element of language, spoken and understood by the subculture the meme arises from. On social media platforms, users give context to a meme by providing scenarios or situations where the meaning inherent in the meme is most applicable. The meme gives rise to the context and in turn, the context further displays the meaning contained in the meme. When a meme is posted on social media, it is captioned or given context by a user.

3.3.2. Transfer:

The transfer of memes is the movement of memes within a context by social media users. Transfer describes every action that moves the meme from the creator to that other social media users. This encapsulates actions like retweeting, liking and sharing, which allows the sharer’s followers and friends to see the meme that has been engaged with. The transfer of memes is what allows for the virality of memes, as the more a meme is shared, more people are exposed to it and if they relate to it, they also share it. Rapid transfer of memes and increased interest in it leads to virality. As all the memes analyzed in this study are viral memes, we can conclude that they were transferred extensively. Social media users transfer content to allow others see what they think is worth seeing.

When a captioned meme is posted by the creator, followers and friends transfer the meme if the meme and context are relatable. The more social media timelines it is shared to, the higher the chance of being seen and transferred to others.
3.3.3. Meaning:

Every meme has inherent meaning, and without meaning, memes cannot be useful. Just like words in any language, every meme must pass across a message. When a meme is viewed, the meaning is received by the viewer if there are no hindering factors like language and personal experiences to name a few.

As the memes are transferred on social media, users who relate to them and understand the meaning gain interest in the source of the meme for various reasons. They either want to see more of the meme or want to see the cultural vehicle itself. They trace the meme to the cultural vehicle on YouTube and use the comment section to engage with the meme and express its appeal for them which could be the actors, the culture, the humour, or an encounter with the meme itself. Users who do not understand the meaning behind the meme also have some interest in the source, but for a different reason. They also go in search for the full videos on YouTube to further understand the meme so as not to be excluded from engaging in the language of the internet. Their interest is piqued, and they go in search of meaning. Either ways, meaning or the lack thereof is an important process in developing interest in the cultural vehicle memes are taken from.

3.3.4. Interest:

Interest can be expressed in so many ways but at the depth of it is a desire and intention to engage. In search for the meaning of memes, users exhibit a desire and willingness to engage with the memes and the cultural vehicle they are taken from. When the meaning behind the memes are gained, users who relate to them display a desire to see more of the memes especially when they are extremely pleased with them.

I started watching the movies by memes-Rahul Gowda (Village boys, YouTube)

Summary:

In this chapter, I have presented the data gathered and the result of the study. Using 6 codes, I analysed the comments gathered and from this analysis extracted the framework that is the result of the study. The CTMI framework affirms that Nollywood
memes lead to interest in Nigerian films and lays out this process. Using the comments as evidence, I have shown the validity of this study.
Chapter 4.

Conclusion

This research project has explored Nollywood as an Afrocentric film industry with a slowly increasing presence among global social media audiences. I looked at memes and the impact they have on viewer behavior. As a case study, I presented memes created from Nollywood films and how they led to interest in the films they were taken from among non-Nigerian viewers.

Using the CTMI framework to study the life of a meme, it was revealed that some viewers came in search of the films to further understand the context of the meme they had come across on social media while some came after seeing the memes on social media to engage with them further by viewing the films. Both scenarios show interest in Nollywood films brought on by the meme and outline the process of the CTMI framework from contextualization to interest. This study concludes that Nollywood memes lead to interest in Nigerian films among audiences who would usually not go in search of a Nigerian film without having been led by a meme. It also provides a framework that shows how internet memes lead to interest in their originating cultural vehicle.

The major discovery of this research is the CTMI framework which explains that context around the meme makes it relatable which in turn leads to virality of the meme. The relatability of the context of the meme impacts the viewers interest in the meme and the cultural vehicle it is taken from. This chain reaction ends with interest in the originating cultural vehicle. This framework explains that both high and low levels of relatability lead to interest in the cultural vehicles from different perspectives. High levels of relatability lead to interest in the cultural vehicle fueled by the need to see more of the meme and to affirm understanding of the meme. Low levels of relatability of a viral meme leads to interest fueled by the fear of social exclusion and curiosity.

This framework is of use to and can be applied by different groups of people. For one, Nollywood producers and marketers. According to Ajibade (2013, pp 267), Nollywood producers believe that Western audiences show a demand for their films. However, he goes on to say that these producers have not been able to distinguish between the Western audience and an audience in the West. This explains that the
audience in the West is mostly the African diaspora, with the exception of foreign academic viewers. Nollywood films are usually not top of mind for people who have no business with Nollywood or Nigeria. However, this research has shown that Nollywood memes are changing this. Therefore, Nollywood producers and marketers can carry out meme-focused digital campaigns that showcase relatable memes in relatable contexts to specific audiences with the goal of driving interest in their films. Of course, it goes without saying that these memes should be as organic as possible, that is without the obvious feel of a promotional material. This is a highly recommended path as the CTMI framework maps out the end result of this course of action.

Secondly, Digital Communications as an industry stands to benefit from the results of this research. This framework can be applied to cultural vehicles outside Nollywood and film which makes it an essential tool for digital communications professionals. Since memes have been shown to create interest in originating vehicles, organically derived memes can be used as a link to the product or service being advertised. Taking into consideration the demographics, memes can be contextualized and deployed on relevant social networks to resonate with the target audience and lead to virality and interest.

This framework also benefits the academic community by way of information. While carrying out this research, I did not come across any framework or theory that spoke to the process of how memes led to interest and I am certain that this will come in handy to support research on internet culture, memetics, digital media and Nollywood. The production of this work is a valuable addition to digital media studies. This framework equips communications professionals with a tool to impact human behavior. However, individuals can also use the framework to interrogate their engagements with memes and the products and services they point to. Knowledge of the CTMI framework will help individuals be aware of how the memes they engage with impact their behavior and who benefits from this engagement.

**Limitations and Recommendations**

As with all research, the following issues are limitations to this study. Firstly, the data gathered could be described as secondary as it was not collected directly from the viewers. For this reason, further questions for clarifications to truly map out their
behavior could not be asked of the viewers. Secondly, the study presents no theories or frameworks in critique of its position which might come across as biased. However, this is because of a lack of theories and material in general on the impact of memes.

For further studies on the use and impact of memes, future research design should focus on surveys and interviews to collect the data first-hand from respondents so as to understand viewer behavior. Open ended questions will help researchers chart out the exact behavior of the viewers of the films on YouTube and see if that has led to long lasting change in behavior. Also, the phenomenon of transfer and virality of digital elements, its causes and its impact on social media should be further studied as the concept was introduced in relation to the CTMI framework but not fully delved into.

Finally, this framework will be subject to further testing and critique to solidify its place as digital communications theory.
References


**Filmography**


[Nigerian Comedy Skits]. (2019, September 1). *See the big chicken this small boy carry* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdfrZb3YZpc


[Nigerian Comedy Skits]. (2019, September 1). *This small boys drinking beer* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8yyFaXmmnY