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Nollywood online: Between the individual consumption and communal reception of Nigerian films among African diaspora

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Abstract

Various video-on-demand (VOD) platforms streaming Nigerian films have popped up on the Internet since 2011. These VOD platforms facilitate the consumption of Nigerian films among African diaspora. Despite an increasing academic interest for Nollywood audiences, these new modes of viewing Nigerian films online have yet to be explored. In this article, we will therefore give attention to the consumption and reception of Nigerian films on the Internet among African diaspora of Nigerian, Ghanaian and Cameroonian origin in the cities of Antwerp and Ghent, Belgium. In this study, we adopted a media ethnographic approach, including fieldwork and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Although scholars have suggested that the Internet fragments and individualizes film viewing, the results of this study show that indeed online Nigerian films are most often watched individually by the respondents, yet the reception of the films remains a social practice of shared meaning-making.

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Keywords

Nollywood

African diaspora

online films

video-on-demand

audience research

African popular culture

Introduction

With 997 feature films produced in 2011 (UNESCO 2013), Nollywood not only booms on its domestic market, but also attracts audiences worldwide. From a grocery store in Texas (Abah 2011) to a street vendor in St. Lucia (Cartelli 2007) or a video shop in London (Esan 2008), today Nollywood films can be easily purchased in most parts of the world. In addition, since 2011, their availability and accessibility has expanded following the emergence of Nollywood video-on-demand (VOD) platforms. Sites such as iROKOtv, IbakaTv, Watch Nigerian Movies Online (WNMO), BuniTV and even YouTube stream thousands of films for free, subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) or freemium (providing both free-to-view and paid-for films). These VOD platforms particularly appeal to African diaspora audiences, for whom films on physical formats, such as VCD and DVD, have often become more difficult to access than online films. Hence, the Internet not only changes the distribution of Nollywood films, but also Nollywood's audiences and, as we will see in this study, their consumption and reception patterns.

Despite a lack of scholarly research on African audiences (Ambler 2002; Barber 1997a), there has been considerable attention for Nollywood audiences (see e.g. Abah 2011;

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Akpabio 2007; Becker 2013; Esan 2008; Obiaya 2010; Okome 2007; Shivers 2010). The online consumption of Nigerian films, however, has not been explored in these studies, most likely because Nollywood VOD platforms have emerged only since 2011.¹

Nigerian films have often been understood as a form of popular culture (Adejunmobi 2002; Bisschoff and Overbergh 2012; Haynes 2011; McCall 2012). Following Karen Barber's (1997b) definition on 'African popular culture', Abah envisages the popularity of Nollywood as follows:

'Popular' is used, not solely in the sense of the most common Western use of the term, in which it denotes a separation of the elite from the common folk, but more in the sense of what is popular in the African context. This usage connotes a combination of that which functions in the interest of the masses as used by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1997) in his study of women participation in African theatre, and the usage of the term as described by Barber (1997[b]), as 'common concerns' and people naming their struggles, endurance and hope. (2009: 732-33)

Nigerian films can be considered popular culture because they portray 'Afrocentric' images of 'daily lived experiences' or the 'common concerns' of most Nigerians and Africans, and in addition, offer people a platform 'to express opinions and commentaries on the society' (Abah 2009: 733). Nollywood audiences gather in video parlours and engage in vivid discussions about the stories and the events in the films, and such conversations allow people to relate their everyday lives to the films, but also to create public discussions of critical enquiry on Nigerian and African societies. This clearly comes to the fore in Okome's highly interesting observance of the public spaces of collective viewing of Nollywood films in Nigeria:

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‘Street corners’ and video parlours provide alternatives to the orthodox space of cinematic spectatorship. While they announce the material poverty of its audiences, these venues are open and the debates that go on in them are unfettered, unrestrained, and sometimes very vociferous. [...] It is the possibilities that popular video films provide as a way of escape and as a platform for critical judgment on social conditions that recommend the massive patronage, which Nollywood enjoys in these site of seeing. (2007: 18)

This ‘way of escape’ can be understood as an escape from, as well as a contesting of, the postcolonial state of existence of Nigeria and Africa (Okome 2007; Okoye 2007). Nigerian films ‘function as a postcolonial system of decolonization’ and hence make room for the formulation of a contemporary African independent identity (Okoye 2007: 26). Furthermore, McCall (2007: 94) also suggests that Nollywood films are ‘pan-African’ since they form ‘a primary catalyst in an emergent continent-wide popular discourse about what it means to be African’.

This popular discourse, as this study will illustrate, extends beyond the continent and includes African diaspora audiences. Consequently, this raises several questions that will be addressed in this article. Watching Nollywood films in Nigeria implies a social and public practice, providing audiences the opportunity to contemplate their daily lives in Nigeria’s postcolonial state, but how do African audiences relate to these Afrocentric stories in the diaspora context? What meanings do they attribute to the films and how do they engage socially with them? These questions are particularly pertinent in light of the respondents’ shift of viewing films on physical formats (VHS, VCD and DVD) to online viewing. As this article

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will outline, scholars suggest that online film consumption is rather fragmented and individualized. Hence, does a shift to watching Nigerian films on the Internet go hand in hand with an individualization of film consumption among African diaspora audiences, and if so, what are the implications for watching Nigerian films as practices of collective and social engagement?

Watching films on the Internet: Towards an individualized consumer

Since people increasingly watch films online (Tryon 2013), the Internet has come to play a significant role in the distribution and consumption of films. According to Zhu (2001: 274), ‘households will eventually adopt the Internet as one of the primary means of film watching’. Countless VOD and SVOD platforms, streaming films for free or for paid subscription, have emerged on the Internet (Cunningham and Silver 2013; Tryon 2013). Given that the ‘conditions of distribution are crucial in determining how audiences read films’ (Lobato 2007: 116), the impact of these new modes of accessing films on the ways people watch and engage with films should be explored.

VOD platforms on the Internet allow people to download or stream films directly on their laptops, mobile devices, tablets, gaming consoles, etc. VOD platforms thus not only provide new modes of accessing films, via the Internet, but also enable audiences to engage in new ways with films by watching them on different screen devices. This flexibility in accessing and viewing films has been termed ‘platform mobility’ (Tryon 2013: 60), comprising ‘the idea that movies and television shows can move seamlessly between one device and another without minimal interruption’. Platform mobility thus provides the freedom to watch films at different places and at all times. Holt and Sanson (2014: 7) suggest that such contemporary media use is characterized by a form of ‘connected viewing’, offering an ‘expanding array of opportunities for audiences to reconnect with one another, and to

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engage with media content'. Since users can decide when, where and how they want to watch films, VOD platforms generate the creation of 'personalized media environments' (Holt and Sanson 2014; Tryon 2013), and film audiences are hence granted more control over their viewing practices (Tryon 2013; Van den Broeck et al. 2007; Zhu 2001). Online film consumption thus not only seems to expand the availability of and access to films, but also audiences' user control.

However, Tryon (2013) also underlines how VOD platforms are constrained, for example by streaming rights, digital ownership and geo-blocking (a disparate availability of media content in different countries). The political economy of media (see e.g. Graham and Marvin 2002; Mosco 2009; Murdock 2004) shapes the availability of and content on VOD platforms (Holt and Sanson 2014). Scholars have also stressed how access to the Internet is unequal, involving a digital divide (Gillespie and Robins 1989; Papacharissi 2002). Technological and material requirements (available connection, subscription prices and technological means), but also social factors (computer literacy, class, race, ethnicity, gender, etc.), determine people's ability to connect to and use the Internet (DiMaggio et al. 2001). Integral to the Internet, access to VOD platforms is thus also restricted. Despite utopian celebrations of a democratization of media access following the advent of the Internet (for a critique see Mosco 2004), the online 'models of [film] delivery may not fulfil every promise of access, convenience and affordability' (Tryon 2013: 19).

However, platform mobility not only alters the distribution of films and the modes of watching films, but also changes the audiences' engagement with and practices of viewing films. According to Tryon (2013: 60), online film consumption has resulted in 'a more fragmented, individualized notion of spectatorship [...], one that is associated with active and engaged, but often solitary, viewing'. Hence, VOD consumption is believed to bring about an individual experience of film consumption and reception, as opposed to, for example,

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television watching, which rather implies a social activity (Van den Broeck et al. 2007). In this article, we will, however, show that online film consumption may result in more individual consumption of Nigerian films among African diaspora audiences, yet the reception of the films still involves social practices.

Studying Nigerian film culture in Antwerp and Ghent

We adopted a media ethnographic approach (Morley [1992] 2004) for the study of diasporic film cultures (see e.g. Smets et al. 2011, 2013). We included participatory fieldwork, and fifteen semi-structured interviews with people of Nigerian, Ghanaian and Cameroonian origin, living in Antwerp and Ghent. Both demographically diverse cities are located in the northern, Flemish region of Belgium and count about 500,000 and 250,000 inhabitants, respectively.

Respondents were contacted via Nigerian diaspora Facebook groups, Ghanaian and Nigerian organizations in Belgium, Belgian Dutch-language organizations with an interest in Africa, personal contacts and snowball sampling. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A checklist of key themes concerning the respondents' migration history, (social) living context, film consumption and viewing practices was used during the interviews. Key themes and subthemes were determined by an analytical reading of the transcripts until a saturated thematic framework was accomplished. All respondents are quoted with pseudonyms.

The sample of respondents includes five women and ten men between the age of 26 and 64. Respondents originate from Nigeria (eight), Ghana (four) and Cameroon (three) and have been living in Belgium for between four and 33 years. Five respondents are students, one respondent is a retiree and nearly all other respondents are employed. Eleven out of the

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fifteen respondents have children. The children of two of these respondents are living in Africa.

We began this study with an interest in analysing Nollywood film culture among African diaspora. Given that the reception of films is shaped by distribution patterns and the political economy of media (as sketched above), we started out with an analysis of the distribution patterns of Nigerian films in Antwerp and Ghent. We observed various ways in which Nigerian films are distributed and circulate within these cities. African diaspora members buy or rent films from African shops; exchange films among friends, family and other African diaspora members; watch films on African satellite television channels; purchase films when travelling to Africa; or request someone in Africa to send films via post. With the exception of satellite television, these means to obtain films all involve physical media formats such as VHS, VCD and DVD. Despite these various distribution and circulation patterns, today the Internet is the most prominent mode of accessing Nigerian films for the respondents. They no longer buy or rent films, which is considered too costly (prices range from three to ten euros per DVD), and only two respondents watch Nigerian films via African satellite television channels such as Voxafrica and BEN TV. This article therefore focuses on the consumption of online Nigerian films, yet attention is also paid to the shift from consuming films on physical formats to online viewing.

However, a caveat needs to be made here. Although the respondents no longer buy films, Nollywood VCDs and DVDs are still marketed in African shops in both cities. This raises the following questions: who buys films in these shops when Nigerian films are freely available on the Internet? and Could unequal access to the Internet, such as the economic inability to pay for monthly Internet services, play a role for consumers of these shops? Hence, is there a digital divide, separating online audiences and DVD Nollywood audiences? If so, which different reception patterns can be found? While these particular questions

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require more future research, it is important to highlight that the respondents of our study form a specific audience group. Nearly all respondents are fully employed or working part time, and they are residing regularly in Belgium. Their economic status allows them to pay for Internet services, while their regular status enables them to subscribe to legitimate Internet providers. Hence, they may access Nollywood VOD platforms due to their economic and regular status.

VCD and DVD: Exchanging films and collective viewing

In the first period after their arrival, the respondents watched films on physical formats (on VCD and later on DVD). Initially, the respondents received films via post from family members and friends in Nigeria and Ghana or they purchased films when travelling to Africa themselves. Sarah (Nigeria, aged 38) recalls, ‘My elder sister was still alive, she would buy them and package and send them to me. She was doing it on a monthly basis and any new movie that comes out she just sent them to me’. Respondents also called people in Africa to request the most recent and popular Nollywood films. Transnational communication thus allowed this diaspora audience to remain informed about and engage with Nollywood film culture. Nigerian films started being sold in African shops around 2004–2005, but they were considered too expensive and respondents rarely bought them.

The exchange of Nigerian films, on the other hand, became important. A longer presence in Belgium and an integration into African communities facilitated most respondents’ communication and exchange of Nigerian films with other African diaspora members, and this often resulted in the collective viewing of films. Communal and social practices were significant to these gatherings. Films were vividly discussed, and similar to public viewings in Nigeria, related to the viewers’ everyday lived experiences. Such collective viewings were particularly popular among African students:

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I was living in home Boudewijn so other African students, when they come, they say: 'oh'. East Africans and I don't know because many of them didn't know that there was an African movie, home videos like that. Because they all seem so strange to see that. (Sarah, Nigeria, 38)

As Sarah reveals, students from East Africa were present in these gatherings. However, nearly all respondents know Nollywood consumers from various African countries such as Zimbabwe, Congo, Guinea, Togo, Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia and South Africa. Akin to Nollywood's widespread distribution and consumption in Africa (see e.g. Krings and Okome 2013), Nigerian films thus also seem to be highly popular among African diaspora members from diverse national origins. The diasporic context particularly, and perhaps even only, brings about the formation of such a cross-national African Nollywood audience. Furthermore, even non-African diaspora members were, and are still, included in this audience. Becca (Nigeria, 38), for example, told us about her friend from Jamaica who is keen on Nigerian films, often asking her to explain the cultural and social meanings in the films: 'she was asking me some time ago why do they do voodoo a lot, the voodoo does it really exist?'. Nollywood's diaspora film culture, as observed in this study, thus entails a shared consumption, meaning-making and cultural understanding of Nigerian films among African diaspora, from various national origins, as well as non-African diaspora members.

Nollywood's Afrocentrism and the representation of everyday life

The popularity of Nigerian films among the respondents can be largely explained by the Afrocentric character of the films. The settings, characters and stories of Nigerian films do not so much represent Nigeria, but are rather believed to portray an image of 'Africa'.

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I think the image they are portraying in Nollywood is Africa in general. There is nothing that you see here that is about Nigeria that you cannot find in other African countries [...] So it portrays African tradition in general and what is happening in the African continent. (Sarah, Nigeria, 38)

The stories was the key to the success of Nollywood today. Because the stories have some connection with a lot of people. Especially Africans, whether you are Nigerian or South African or East African or you're Kenyan, you can relate to the stories. (Samuel, Nigeria, 52)

As Samuel explains, Afrocentric stories enable African diaspora audiences of various national origins to relate to Nigerian films. However, all respondents also stressed how the representation of everyday lived experiences in Nollywood films, considered absent in most European and Hollywood films, facilitates their identification with and ability to relate their own lived experiences to the films. Consequently, Nollywood films also provide the respondents guidance on how to cope with various problems in their everyday lives regarding family life, work, relationships, etc. Watching Nigerian films therefore involves a significant act of learning for the respondents.

People have learnt to understand that western films, either they are talking about love or they are talking about fighting... But now people tend to really look at the African films because it is mostly about the culture. They actually portray the African culture. (John, Cameroon, 40)

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That's why people love it because, you know, people learn a lot of things from there. Because every situation in Africa is a difficult one. Maybe culturally, socially, morally, everything so and those films help to shape people's ideas. Yes, these problems are there, but you can always come up with it on a good side... You can relate to what happens and you can use it to solve the problem. [...] Because you don't also watch a film because you want to watch a film. You know film is an act, it's something that you, it's like a teacher standing in front of you, lecturing you. At the end of the day it's like any other student you want to go back home with something from the lecturer. So that is the way I look at film. (Emmanuel, Cameroon, 42)

Conclusively, in our study we found strong similarities between the reception of Nigerian films among audiences in Nigeria and in the diaspora context, both audiences perceiving Nigerian films as representations of Afrocentric everyday lived experiences.

Nollywood online: User control and personalizing film consumption

Today, for the respondents, Nollywood VOD platforms are the most important mode for accessing Nigerian films. Films are no longer sent from Africa and are rarely purchased when respondents travel to Africa. The respondents usually watch films on iROKOTv, followed by BuniTV and the Nollywood channel on YouTube. Although iROKOTv, for example, offers freemium streaming (providing both free-to-view and subscribed films), most respondents do not subscribe to any website, as they find the number of films available through free streaming largely sufficient.

When we asked the respondents about their preferences for accessing and watching Nigerian films on the Internet, they summed up several factors. First, the availability of free

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streaming is crucial. Next, the opportunity to watch films anytime, anyplace (or the possibility to time-shift content allowing media consumers to create their own viewing schedule) is significant. Furthermore, the respondents stressed how VOD platforms facilitate their selection of films according to their preferences and film tastes. iROKOTv, for example, contains viewer selection options for genre, actors, popularity and release date. These options coincide with the respondents' preferred selection of Nigerian films according to their title, storyline or actors, the latter being the most important criterion. Nollywood stardom, a crucial marketing asset in Nigeria, also determines the popularity of Nigerian films among the diaspora audiences. Just as in Nigeria, actors such as Mercy Johnson, Tonto Dikeh, Ramsey Nouah, Nkem Owoh, Patience Ozokwor, Jim Iyke and Ini Edo are very popular. Though the respondents came to know most of these actors before migrating to Europe, the Internet is now also actively used to stay informed about the shifting popularities of Nollywood stars. Hence, online film consumption facilitates African diaspora audiences' consumption of preferred Nollywood films, and allows them to create 'personalized media environments' (Tryon 2013).

Lastly, we interviewed the respondents about their cinema-going practices. Most respondents have been visiting Belgian cinemas once or twice at most. The main reasons stated for not going to the movies were the lack of time, the price of the tickets, the lack of someone to go with, and a personal preference for watching films individually. This is remarkable, given that the respondents, when they were living in Africa, regularly attended film screenings (sometimes even several times a week) in video clubs and cinema halls. Particularly the respondents from Nigeria and Cameroon recounted numerous joyful and nostalgic memories of viewing (Nigerian) films in these places. Thus, for the respondents, going to the movies in Belgium rather seems to involve an individual film engagement than a social practice and hence it no longer appeals to them.

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Towards an individualized Nollywood consumer?

The emergence of Nollywood VOD platforms not only changed the availability of and access to Nigerian films, but has also brought forth different viewing practices. Exchanging films and collective viewing practices seem to have significantly diminished. However, we observed that this trend is not only a consequence of the shift towards online film consumption, but also relates to the everyday diasporic living context of the respondents.

Most respondents stress that, since they have been living in Belgium, their everyday lives have come to be restricted by obligations and time constraints. Work, studies, family life, Dutch-language learning, church-going and gatherings of African community members leave little room for leisure activities. Over time, increasing time constraints have limited the respondents' ability to engage in collective film viewings, as they had done in the first period after their arrival in Belgium.

It's only in Cameroon that you can organize with friends ok now let's watch this because we have limited activities. But here when I'm free to watch maybe someone has to go somewhere or go with friends or somebody.
(Chris, Cameroon, 31)

The frequency of consuming films has also diminished (although the respondents still watch films on a daily to weekly basis), and has become lower than in Africa. Although we need to keep in mind that increasing time constraints cannot be solely explained by the diasporic living context (most respondents were young, childless and were students when living in Africa, which may explain they had more time for watching films), the significance of everyday living contexts in structuring film consumption cannot be ignored. Likewise, there is

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a decline of film consumption, despite the respondents' facilitated access to Nigerian films via the Internet. Hence, the film consumption of African diaspora audiences is not only determined by the ability to access the Internet, but their everyday media use and living contexts should also be taken into consideration, and 'media connectivity' should be understood beyond mere material availability and technological access.

Collective viewings of Nigerian films have thus become rare and spontaneous rather than involving organized activities. Yet, this is not regretted by all respondents, and some even prefer to watch films individually. As we emphasized already, viewing Nigerian films involves an act of learning for the respondents, demanding strong concentration.

I preferably see it at home and watch it quietly because I know here I will understand better than if I go to the cinema. Maybe some noise might distract me from actually concentrating. Because when I want to watch a film I take up all my time and I sit there and I watch it. Maybe even to go out and ease myself is sometimes difficult. Because I really take time to see what is in the film. I listen to every bit of everything they are saying. There are some of these things, some of these words they use, they are just like, you can put it in quotations. And I learn a lot from some of those words. And if you watch a film and you miss one of those things, you might actually miss the whole film. So that is what I think and that is the way I like to watch my films here. (John, Cameroon, 40)

In spite of a decline of collective viewing practices, however, the reception of Nigerian films is still a shared social practice among African diaspora members. The respondents meet or call other African or non-African diaspora members, and the storylines, actors' appearances

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and acting skills, moral lessons and settings of Nigerian films are thoroughly discussed. Films are also frequently recommended. Nigerian films may hence no longer be watched together, but the meaning-making of the films is still constituted through social interaction and communication, or what Gillespie (2002) has termed 'talking spaces'. Furthermore, the Internet and VOD platforms facilitate this shared meaning-making and reception. Given that most respondents watch Nigerian films on the same VOD platforms (mostly iROKOTv), film consumption becomes easily shared. The Internet is also used for synchronized shared viewing, implying a simultaneous viewing of the same films without actually being together and yet at the same time discussing the films through phone communication, for example.

I call a friend. Have you seen this film? Watch it now. And if he's at home, wait, what happened? Because there is always maybe one particular actor or actress. What they say or what they do makes us to say you have to see the film? Have you seen what Mama G did in that film? You have to see. Go and see what Mama G do. That is what we do. And at times if we are together, we watch together. But because there is almost no time for such, we just call ourselves on phone and say you have to watch this film. Go and see it. (Joy, Nigeria, 34)

Furthermore, this shared meaning-making and reception extends beyond the diaspora context and also includes transnational 'talking spaces'. John, who resides temporarily in Belgium to study, often phones his 10-year-old daughter in Cameroon:

When I call her she will tell me: 'Ah daddy, I'm watching a film'. And she will start telling me the film. Maybe when she tells me now I will look for it

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and see what she's watching... She knows the names of these actors more than I do. She goes there directly herself and put it and watches it with her brother... Like especially now with the Internet that I have in my house [in Cameroon]. I'm not there to control what they are watching, but I know.
(John, Cameroon, 40)

Although John is not able to control the films his children are watching and cannot share their viewing practices, VOD platforms (facilitating the ability for audiences to consume the same films) provide him a sense of proximity to his children as he can partake in their meaning-making of Nigerian films. Often John discusses the films with his children over the phone. Hence, VOD platforms offering Nigerian films enable African diaspora audiences to engage with and form part of various Nigerian film cultures, within both diasporic and transnational contexts.

Conclusion

This article has offered insight into the consumption and reception of online Nigerian films among African diaspora audiences. We first explored the popularity, reception and practices of viewing Nollywood films in Nigeria, as described by various scholars. Studies have emphasized the popular and Afrocentric character of Nigerian films, as well as the social and public importance of collective viewing practices of Nollywood films in Nigeria.

Next, we sketched out the implications of online film consumption for audiences' engagement with and viewing practices of films. Despite increased scholarly attention, the reception of online films has been only limitedly explored. Some scholars have suggested that online film consumption generates an active and engaged, yet often solitary and individualized, film consumer.

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This study indeed confirms that a shift from consuming films on physical formats such as VHS, VCD and DVD to online film consumption has resulted in more individual viewing practices among the Nollywood diaspora audience. However, the reception of the films or meaning-making still involves a shared social practice and is constituted through new talking spaces, in which audiences thoroughly discuss various aspects of Nigerian films, despite the absence of a shared film consumption.

Furthermore, we have also made clear that everyday living contexts may structure, and even constrain, Nollywood diaspora audiences' consumption of films. Although the respondents would prefer to watch films more often, time constraints and obligations, which have increased since they migrated to Belgium, have prevented them from doing so. Hence, their ability to access the Internet and an increased availability of Nigerian films via VOD platforms on the Internet may not just result in an increase in the consumption of Nigerian films among diaspora audiences; media use is also constructed by everyday living contexts.

To conclude, we wish to stress that a shift to and the increase of online film consumption may change audiences' engagement with films and viewing practices, yet these changes are highly complex and context dependent, and may not as such impact the reception of films.

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¹ iROKOTv was founded in 2011 and is, to the best of our knowledge, the first VOD platform entirely devoted to streaming Nigerian films.