

NOLLYWOOD AND NIGERIA'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE: SOFT POWER, STEREOTYPE AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

The Nigerian government has often cited Nollywood as a soft power tool, and it is Africa's largest film industry. However, in the domestic debate, critics maintain that its use of ethnic and gender stereotypes affects the nation's image in the international arena. This study does not measure foreign perceptions directly; rather, it examines the discursive gap between two elite clusters: (1) state and diplomatic actors who champion Nollywood as cultural diplomacy, and (2) critical cultural elites (academics and media commentators) who cast the industry as a source of representational failure. A manual thematic analysis of government statements, industry information, and media coverage from 2021 to 2026 yields three findings. State and diplomatic actors deliberately position Nollywood as a cultural diplomacy tool, emphasising its economic power and the transnational propagation of the film industry. Although the industry cites these as examples of good practice, critics argue that its representational patterns erode nation branding. The paper shows that this antagonism is structurally produced by resentment among profit motives, melodrama, postcolonial narratives, narratives of official success, and certain genres, all in relation to the triumphant narratives sought by officialdom. The image's effects are inconsistent. They depend on the audience's positionality and the type of representation consumed, and are therefore not simply the state's prerogative but rather a space of contestation.

Keywords: Nollywood; Nigeria; soft power; nation branding; cultural diplomacy; elite narratives; postcolonial media

1. Introduction

Whether Nollywood has come a long way in a few decades is debatable, but it has gone from a chaotic video economy to the world's second most prolific film industry, churning out more than 2,500 movies annually and streaming to audiences across Africa, from Accra to Atlanta (ThisDay, 2025; Adebajo, 2017). The Nigerian State is desperate to break its reliance on oil and has placed great expectations on the creative sector. The Creative Economy Development Fund (CEDF) is a significant initiative that leverages citizens' creativity in industries such as film, music, and fashion to advance economic diversification, support job creation, and strengthen Nigeria's cultural influence worldwide (Federal Ministry of Information, 2025). In 2025, West African cinemas generated N15.6 billion in revenues, while Nollywood accounted for 49.4 per cent of the market compared to Hollywood's 48.8 per cent share (Businessday, 2026; Nairametrics, 2026). Officially, when The

Black Book (2023) was cited as the top Netflix title on the global chart, with 5.6 million views in just a week, it was not only seen as a commercial success but also as a diplomatic instrument (Nairametrics, 2023). Nollywood was now being redefined as a medium for change in the policy landscape to rebrand Nigeria.

There has been less scholarly and critical response than has been triumphal. Some view the industry as a channel for intercultural dialogue, whereas others see it as a factory for perpetuating the very stereotypes that nation-branding campaigns aim to eradicate (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Endong, 2018; Tella, 2021; Adesemoye, 2023; Afolabi, 2024; Haynes, 2021). It is not the academic tension in the strict sense. It unfolds in the speeches of politicians, in newspaper editorials, and in the statements of cultural commentators. How is it possible that the same movies can be both a diplomatic jewel and a disgrace to a country?

While the picture effects of Nollywood are discussed somewhat controversially in existing scholarship, the more significant schism is discursive. The industry has frequently been promoted as a means of soft power and nation branding; however, scholarly discourse often highlights the dominance of certain historical phases, particularly the video boom era, and raises concerns about recurring stereotypes, variable production quality, and cultural distortion in contemporary Nigerian cinema (Ezepue, 2020). The question is not whether or not Nollywood films objectively improved Nigeria's reputation. The mystery is how political elites and cultural critics have come to hold such divergent views on the industry's global importance. The focus of the inquiry on elite discourse entails an empirical limitation and, at the same time, directs attention to a theoretical question better suited to study by secondary sources.

Three questions organise the investigation:

1. How do Nigerian government actors and international partners construct Nollywood as a soft power asset?
2. How do Nigerian film critics and scholars construct Nollywood as a source of representational failure?
3. What explains the stark divergence between these narratives?

The study correspondingly maps official statements and diplomatic events to identify the framing of positive image effects, analyses scholarly and media critiques to capture how negative outcomes are articulated, and explains the resulting disjuncture by examining market pressures, postcolonial identity dynamics, and genre conventions. Out of that explanation emerges a conditional framework for understanding when Nollywood's image effects might be positive or negative.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study sits at the intersection of three conceptual domains: the political economy of Nollywood as a market-driven cultural industry, the contested politics of its representation, and the state's appropriation of the industry for soft-power purposes. The following review synthesises each domain, identifies the theoretical problems they raise, and constructs an integrated framework to structure the analysis.

2.1 Political Economy and the Melodramatic Imperative

There can be no account of Nollywood's form and circulation without Jonathan Haynes' *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (2016). Haynes maps out the key genres and shows how melodrama "infiltrates" other genres, emerging as a structural condition rather than a peripheral one (Haynes, 2016, pp. 1, 75-76). *Global Nollywood* (Krings & Okome, 2013) broadens the focus, charting the industry's associations with Africa and beyond. But there is a tension in any soft-power calculation: while the language employed to appeal to the international audience may bleed the local specificity that makes Nollywood unique. Adesokan (2011) sets the scene in postcolonial cultural production, focusing on the conflict between art and the market. Matthew H. Brown (2021) examines how the direct-to-video archive of Nollywood reflects local production practices, uncovering a constant negotiation between local address and global aspiration. In 2021, Haynes revisited the topic, mapping out how Nigerian Pidgin, a language of the masses, has been used to express a Nigerian nationalism from below, unleashing grassroots energies beyond the state's branding machine (Haynes, 2021).

The economic statistics are well known: Nollywood produces more than 2,500 films annually, making it one of the world's major producers (PwC Nigeria, 2024). Nigerian artists earned over N58 billion (\$38 million) in royalties in 2024, more than double the amount received in 2023 (Onikoyi, 2025). Nigerian cinemas reported N11.5 billion from revenue in 2024, with Funke Akindele's *Everybody Loves Jenifa* grossing over N1 billion in 19 days (Businessday, 2025a).

This reach has been amplified by digital platforms: *The Black Book* (2023) is leading the global Netflix charts (Nairametrics, 2023). Nollywood has been put on the streaming map by Afolabi (2024), who examines Netflix offerings and demonstrates how streaming has remoulded representation strategies. The reception picture is completed by diaspora studies. Ekperuoh (2021) found that Nigerians living in Montreal use films to construct their identity, and Uchenunu (2025) noted the same in the UK. Olakunbi-Black (2025) concluded that New Nollywood "engages diasporic communities, challenges stereotypes and offers multifaceted representations of African identity", whilst also claiming that the cultural work being carried out is complex. According to Tella

(2021), Nollywood is part of a broader African soft-power landscape that can simultaneously disseminate modernity and tradition.

2.2 Representational Contestations and the Image Abroad

A parallel literature catalogues representational damage with equal energy. The gender criticism is long-lasting. Two decades of films were studied by Onyenankaya, Onyenankaya, and Osunkunle (2019) observed that critics, particularly gender activists, have challenged Nollywood for its predominant, if not exclusive, portrayal of women in narrowly traditional occupational and domestic roles and images (Onyenankaya et al., 2019). Ethnic stereotyping receives the same kind of criticism.

In the context of cultivation theory, research has demonstrated that Nollywood films often misrepresent indigenous Igbo culture and traditional values, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of negative identity stereotypes (Obi-Ani et al., 2024).

With the controversy surrounding *The Herd* (2025), these academic critiques came into the public spotlight. The film, which centres on kidnapping by herdsmen, drew reactions and grievances from the Arewa community, who emphasised that it perpetuates stereotypes against the Muslim community (Vanguard, 2025). Vitalis, Amadi, and White (2024) captured the tension in their concept of a “dual character” as Nollywood reproduced ethnocentric and patriarchal ideologies while simultaneously serving as a medium for cultural preservation and resistance. Ike (2025) also added the psychological weight; he captured the effects of misrepresenting Igbo culture on the personal development and mental health of young adults. Foreign audience studies provide support for the domestic critique. The study by Endong (2025) revealed that Nigerian students’ perceptions of watching selected Nollywood films were mainly negative. In their study of Nigerian students’ perceptions of Nollywood as a cultural ambassador, Adesemoye (2023) observed that many of them do not automatically exhibit cultural allegiance to Nollywood films.

2.3 Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, and the Postcolonial Condition

The third conceptual domain concerns how Nollywood is discursively mobilised as a diplomatic asset. Joseph Nye (2008) defines soft power as a country’s capacity to attract rather than coerce through its culture, values, and policies. That formulation has not been taken for granted by universalist assumptions. Janice Bially Mattern (2005) showed that the effect of representational force and sociolinguistic construction on attraction is not a benign property. Craig Hayden (2012) demonstrated how Nye’s idea evolves to become context-oriented strategies. However, Ivan Bakalov (2019) traced the fractures of soft-power scholarship as having “drifted into separate streams: concept-driven and case-centered studies.” Recently, Simon Anholt (2007) combined the three concepts of branding, public diplomacy, and economic policy in his book *Competitive Identity*,

highlighting the close relationship between public diplomacy and a nation's external image and its ability to market its self-image. In light of soft power theory, Mariano Zamorano (2016) redefined cultural diplomacy as the instrumentalization of culture, a concept that can be directly applied to Nigeria's use of Nollywood.

The application to Nigeria is growing. Tella (2021) positions Nollywood within a pan-African soft power landscape that can simultaneously project modernity and tradition. Ibrahim et al. (2025) offer a comparative analysis showing that Nollywood's soft power is "real but uneven," moderated by audience media literacy and cultural proximity. Asani (2026) enumerates structural barriers but still considers Nollywood among the most influential cultural industries of the Global South. Onwuliri (2022) treats Nollywood films as "sustainable tools for nation branding," while Ndu (2025) analyses the reconstruction of Nigerian identity through storytelling. Official rhetoric intensifies these framings: presidential spokesperson Ajayi calls film "a veritable means of cultural identity, cultural decolonization, and most of all, diplomacy" (Voice of Nigeria, 2025b), and a 2025 symposium at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs directly linked Nollywood's success to changing a narrative "tainted by stereotypes of scams, corruption, voodoo and conflict" (Businessday, 2025b). The discursive operation in these statements is the same: economic visibility is conflated with reputational gain, and the content of the films is bracketed.

The postcolonial critique of soft power makes visible what this official discourse elides. A culture exported from a nation already marked by negative stereotypes does not arrive on neutral ground; pre-existing Western media frames act as filters (Mattern, 2005; Hayden, 2012). When the state demands that Nollywood reverse these stereotypes, it places an impossible burden on filmmakers who operate within a market system that frequently rewards the very narratives the state wants erased. Moreover, because Nollywood is not subject to external gatekeepers, it exercises narrative sovereignty over its own internal hierarchies which then become internationally visible. The postcolonial condition, as Adesokan (2011) theorises it, is one where the conflict between art and the market is exacerbated by the weight of external perception. This insight yields a theoretical tension that the existing literature does not fully resolve: soft power, when pursued through a market-driven, postcolonial cultural industry, is not a state possession but a field of contestation between official ambition and autonomous production.

2.4. Synthesis: Incidental Soft Power as an Integrated Framework

The three domains reviewed above have developed largely in isolation. Political economy scholarship explains why Nollywood produces melodramatic, conflict-driven content, but does not ask how this output interacts with state branding efforts. Representational critique catalogues the image damage that such content may inflict, but rarely engages with soft power theory or with the

conditional nature of audience reception. Soft power and cultural diplomacy literature takes official discourse largely at face value or measures audience effects without examining the domestic elite contestation that shapes what “Nollywood” means as a diplomatic object.

To bridge these separations, this paper advances the concept of incidental soft power. Incidental soft power refers to the positive or negative reputational externalities generated by an autonomous cultural industry that the state seeks to appropriate for diplomatic ends but cannot control. Unlike Nye’s state-centric soft power, incidental soft power is not a resource to be deployed; it is a by-product of market-driven cultural production that may align with or contradict official branding narratives, depending on the content produced and the audiences who consume it. This concept is built from three theoretical commitments that emerge directly from the literature reviewed above.

First, market mechanisms: Nollywood’s commercial structure (Haynes, 2016, 2018) ensures that melodrama, conflict, and recognisable character types are more reliably profitable than positive national narratives, creating a structural misalignment between the state’s demands and the industry’s output (Afolabi & Oyero, 2017). Second, postcolonial identity dynamics: The narrative sovereignty Nollywood enjoys exposes internal ethnic and gender hierarchies to external audiences (Vitalis et al., 2024; Vanguard, 2025). Domestic contestations over representation become international reputational signals, without the state’s mediation. Third, genre conventions: The aesthetic logic of melodrama (suffering, betrayal, moral extremes) is fundamentally incompatible with the celebratory aesthetic of nation branding. A filmmaker faced with these competing logics will, on balance, follow the market. Together, these three mechanisms constitute the structural collision that keeps state and critical elite narratives in a permanent state of tension.

The framework yields a set of conditional expectations, not universal predictions. Nollywood’s image effects should depend on the interaction between audience positionality (diaspora vs. foreign unfamiliar vs. foreign expert) and representation type (stereotypical conflict vs. positive nuanced). This is not a hypothesis tested in the present study but an analytical product of the framework that future audience-centred research can operationalise. By focusing on how state and critical elites narrate Nollywood’s international image, the paper treats soft power not as an objective effect to be measured but as a discursive field to be mapped. The methodology that follows operationalises this approach.

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study design is employed in this paper because the subject (Nollywood) serves as an instrumental case that can reveal more about the processes of cultural production and national image formation in a postcolonial, non-Western context.

The study is exclusively of secondary data. Academic sources (Google Scholar and Scopus) and news archives, such as government portals, were consulted for the search using the keywords: Nollywood soft power, Nigerian film image, and cultural diplomacy in Nigeria. For empirical elite narratives, inclusion entailed a publication date of 2021–2026, peer-reviewed status, explicit claims regarding Nollywood's effects on its international image, and publication by a government source, an industry source, or a media organisation. To provide a historical and theoretical basis, foundational pre-2021 scholarship was added. The final collection included peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, government documents, media articles, and scholarly books, selected to maximise diversity of perspectives among official, critical, and diaspora voices.

Analysis was conducted manually, without software, to maintain interpretive sensitivity. During the first phase, every document was carefully read, and descriptive codes, such as positive image claim, negative image claim, economic statistic, ethnic stereotype, gender stereotype, government praise, critical condemnation, and diaspora engagement, were established. These codes recorded the content of the elite messages. For the second phase, codes were grouped into four emergent themes: Economic scale and global reach; Soft power and nation branding; Diaspora engagement and transnational audiences; Critiques and contradictions. The sources of utterances were recorded to trace narrative alignment. The third step was selective coding, which examined relationships among themes. These were dominated by government voices in the first two themes, a mixed picture in the third, and clear voices from the diaspora in the fourth. The three explanatory mechanisms surfaced as a result of sorting out what critics found to be problematic back to the structural conditions that have given rise to them: the commercial logic as visible in the economic theme, the internal diversity as visible in ethnic and gender critiques, and the formal constraints as visible in genre scholarship.

Elite discourse, not foreign audience attitudes, is the unit of analysis. Secondary sources cannot assess causal image effects; they can analyse what elites say about image effects, but not the effects per se. The information is subject to change as the streaming landscape evolves. This focus on a single country restricts the generalisability of this approach, but it is designed to be applicable to similar contexts.

4 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Nollywood as Soft Power: Government and Diplomatic Narratives

Government and industry sources regard Nollywood as an economic and diplomatic success. The commercial figures for the 2025 West African box office of N15.6 billion and Nollywood's 49.4 percent are trotted out as if they were a testament to soft power. (Businessday, 2026) Netflix's 2023 global bestseller, *The Black Book* (2023), has the same rhetorical aspect (Nairametrics, 2023). There is currently no empirical evidence of a relationship between these metrics and the actual change in

foreign perception. It is not an analytical inference, but rather a discursive operation, from this box office success to this reputational gain. The kind of visibility that is being asked for is a proxy for attraction – one that avoids the question of what is in the films.

The goal of the official script is evident. According to the presidential spokesman, film has become “a veritable tool for cultural identity, cultural decolonization, and most of all, for diplomacy” (Voice of Nigeria, 2025b). Scholars have noted that Nigeria increasingly leverages Nollywood to project soft power globally (Asani, 2026). The narrative of stereotypes could “change” by Nollywood, Idowu said (Businessday, 2025b). Film, in the words of the Chinese Consul General, Yan Yuqing, is “a universal language that transcends borders” (Guardian, 2025a). In all these claims, one idea remains constant: cultural visibility equals reputational gain, so the nature of the films is either feted as a subject of contemplation or swept under the rug. In encouraging film-makers to follow in the footsteps of Bollywood and Hollywood, Ajayi taps into the now-debated soft power impact of those industries. The official story is non-propositional. It is aspirational; it’s creating a version of Nollywood for diplomatic needs, not critical evaluation.

4.2 Nollywood as Embarrassment: Critical Elite Narratives

The crucial decisions are their reverse. Ndu-Udeji (2025) concluded that Nollywood’s portrayal doesn’t meet the standards of simple functionalism and social learning theory, and that it condones behaviour through codes that hurt the Nation’s image. This critique was given a tangible referent in the Herd controversy. The Guardian’s report on Bashir Ahmad’s assertion that “portraying all herders as kidnappers reinforces harmful stereotypes” (Guardian, 2025b) was followed up by a Vanguard report of northern views that the film was “a compendium of ethnic slights” (Vanguard, 2025). Former government officials were present during the episode, making the case that representational conflicts in Nigeria don’t confine themselves to Nigeria. They are readable internationally as soon as they are reported.

Ike (2025) furthered the criticism by revealing the psychological impact of the misrepresentation of Igbo culture on young adults. Worlu and Harcourt-Whyte (2025) reiterated the gender criticism, urging a diversification of female representations. Onyenakeya et al. (2019) followed a “predominant, if not exclusive” depiction of “traditional domestic roles” in women over the past twenty years. These are not peripheral academic grievances. They come from within the Nigerian academy and target a local audience, and make for the misreading that content from Nollywood is a disgrace to Nigeria.

There is some empirical evidence supporting the critical narrative among foreign audiences. Endong (2025) reported that students in Cameroon were exposed to selected Nollywood movies and developed a negative perception of Nigeria due to frequent portrayals of corruption and violence, as

well as obscure elements in the movies. The study by Adesemoye (2023) revealed that Nigerian students are not in favor of either type of movie; there is a swing and sway between local and foreign cinema in Nigeria, making it difficult to assume automatic cultural loyalty. Hanmakyugh (2020) has shown that the ritual-culture phenomenon in Igbo films helps replicate the stereotypes that external critics use in their analyses of the films. The problem is complicated, but cannot be solved by diaspora reception. According to Olakunbi-Black (2025), New Nollywood is engaging and challenging diaspora communities. Ekperuoh (2021) demonstrated that Nigerians in Montreal use films to sustain their identity. This same material, which might affirm diaspora identity, can, however, reinforce stereotypes among foreign viewers without context. The critical elite narrative is not monolithic, but its dominant inflexion remains one of embarrassment, grounded in the conviction that Nollywood's representational patterns undercut Nigeria's global standing.

4.3 Explaining the Disconnect

These tales are not constructed out of various pieces of information or out of different rhetorical techniques. It is a product of three structural mechanisms that emerged during the coding process.

The forces of the market act in a simple way. The equations for a film's success are set: there is melodrama, there is conflict, and there are recognisable character types that attract larger audiences in a commercial workplace. Established formulas are commercially successful, as evidenced by "Everybody Loves Jenifa," which generated over N1 billion at the Nigerian box office in 19 days (Udugba, 2024). However, narratives that envision progress for the nation rarely achieve the same box-office popularity. The performance of positive portrayals is consistently sacrificed to profit motives, as shown in studies (Afolabi & Oyero, 2017). Haynes' (2018) analysis underscores that melodrama functions as a structural element across Nollywood, emerging from its origins in the informal sector of the Nigerian economy, rather than being peripheral or genre-specific. As a funding instrument rather than a script committee, the CEDF avoids content decisions, creating a tension between the state's branding aspirations and an industry that profits directly from this distinctive mode (Haynes, 2016).

The generated content is always read in different ways, owing to postcolonial identity dynamics. While narrative sovereignty is a real feat, it is not a resulting "Nigerian story." There is diversity among the industry's sub-segments, which reinforces ethnic and gender inequalities and generates internal criticism that external actors may interpret as evidence of backsliding. This dual aspect of Nollywood, as both a mirror and a catalytic agent, was captured by Vitalis et al. (2024). The Herd fiasco is a classic example. After domestic groups protested the film's portrayal of Fulani herders, the protest itself turned into an international incident, and propagated the stereotypes that the government was trying to eliminate. The diaspora also overwrote the signal, as viewers outside the

country may find it authentic, while those inside may find it alienating. However, the field of global markets is promoting the homogenization of its content, to the detriment of authentic satisfaction and diplomatic utility (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Afolabi, 2024).

These dynamics get set through genre conventions. The elements of melodrama, crime, and romance rely on conflict, transgression, and extremes of morality. Haynes (2016) has demonstrated that melodrama is not an episodic genre but rather the aesthetic underpinning the industry. These conventions are not at odds with the State's demand that films "highlight Nigeria's shared history and achievements" (Voice of Nigeria, 2025b), as quoted by Ajayi. The aesthetic logic of melodrama is that of suffering and betrayal; the aesthetic logic of nation branding is that of unity and progress. A filmmaker torn between these demands will probably follow the market; the market will become their livelihood.

Together, these mechanisms imply that the image effect is contingent on positioning and representations consumed. The paper proposes the following analytical expectations.

Table 1. Conditional Framework of Nollywood's Image Effects

Audience Type	Representation Type	Expected Image Effect
Diaspora / African	Stereotypical conflict	Mixed: affirmation with critical distancing
	Positive, nuanced	Positive: identity affirmation
Foreign, unfamiliar (low knowledge)	Stereotypical conflict	Negative: stereotype reinforcement
	Positive, nuanced	Positive: improved perceptions
Foreign, familiar (e.g., scholars)	Any	Context-dependent critical engagement

Source: Author's analysis.

Rather than serving as conclusions, these propositions indicate that Nollywood's image effects occur only when a film presents specific content to an audience with the precise background knowledge needed to interpret it. They might be tested in the future by operationalising audience categories, selecting extended film excerpts that vary in the degree of stereotyping, and directly assessing perceptual outcomes.

4.4 Conceptual Implications

The implications of the evidence and mechanisms presented above are direct for theorising soft power/cultural diplomacy. However, Nollywood complicates Nye's framework by demonstrating the restrictions of state-centric attraction. Nigeria is racing to reap goodwill from an industry it cannot control. The same forces that enable Nollywood's export also generate the criticism that harms it. It is not a lack of soft power; it's just a disconnect between the drive to brand and the intrinsic logic of cultural production.

Incidental soft power captures the reality that the impacts of good and bad reputations stemming from nonstate agency actions are often quite independent of one another. The insight for public diplomacy is that state messages about cultural exports exist apart from their reception. The former can be studied even though the latter cannot be measured directly. As previously discussed, the assertion that Nollywood's soft power is "real but uneven" (Ibrahim et al., 2025) suggests that cultural attraction depends on specific contexts rather than being a resource that government policies can mandate. The Nigerian case underscores the challenges and limitations of using cultural influence as a tool of soft power (Tella, 2017). The measure of influence is box office and streaming. Whether they do imply better foreign perceptions is a whole other empirical matter. This is a cautionary counterpoint because when Endong (2025) conducted a study with Cameroonian students, they were exposed to a high amount of Nollywood, which, not only by the standards of the Nigerian commentators, did not produce admiration for Nigeria but also promulgated negative ideas: that is because the materials had lots of the negative stereotypes that the Nigerian critics have been railing against. Such a policy dialogue, based on economic indicators that serve as proxies for soft power, is prone to equating output with outcome.

The idea of influence and power is not an academic one. It has real-world implications for the application of states' cultural diplomacy policies. Official declarations and speculation regarding the transformation of Nigeria's image through the so-called Nollywood effect are difficult to substantiate with concrete evidence. Nevertheless, persistent structural disparities continue to shape postcolonial cultural diplomacy, as demonstrated by the ways African states engage in culturally resonant strategies that challenge Eurocentric dominance (Tella, 2021).

There are pre-existing stereotypes in Western media that serve as filters rather than neutral channels. Branding by the state that ignores those filters can result not only in the propagation of the very messages it was trying to challenge, but also in the creation of new ones. Requesting Nollywood to fight against the world's perception of corruption and violence is putting undue pressure on filmmakers, who work in an environment that might even reward them for the very same thing. A Postcolonial cultural industry such as Nollywood may be fundamentally shaped by the persistent

disjunction between state-led efforts at cultural diplomacy and the perspectives of critical elites, resulting in a constant negotiation between commercial viability, identity projection, and domestic representation. To acknowledge this fault analytically is to accept the existence of this disconnect, not necessarily to resolve it (Asani, 2026). Subsequent studies could explore the possibility of continued dynamics in other postcolonial cultural industries where state branding aspirations and commercial logics cohabit.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to examine the divergent perceptions amongst the Nigerian elite that arise when the international image of Nollywood is discussed. The divide between those who extol the industry as soft power and those who view it as a reputational liability is created by three intersecting mechanisms: market pressures that elicit melodramatic responses to conflict, postcolonial identity contestations that expose internal hierarchies abroad, and genre conventions that will not readily yield to celebratory narratives the government would like to have told. The image effects that follow are not generalizable, as they depend on both the people watching and the content they are watching; these expectations form analytical specifications that can be tested.

The study adds a new theoretical perspective by demonstrating that, in a postcolonial, market-driven environment, soft power operates more as a field of discourse than as a state-manipulated tool. It is empirically the first systematic charting of a divergent elite narrative that underpins the cultural diplomacy narrative among Nigerians, encompassing recent studies of film audiences (Endong, 2025; Adesemoye, 2023) that provide little direct evidence of the mixed reception of Nollywood films in Nigeria. Methodologically, it shows that analytically fruitful insights can be gained through the secondary analysis of elite discourse, even when the audience is not directly available.

Policy implications are only suggestive and not prescriptive. The marketing of Nollywood films as vehicles to boost Nigeria's tourism product and potential could be achieved through a Nollywood-Nigeria Tourism Council, per Ajayi (Voice of Nigeria, 2025b). The CEDF could be adapted to support diaspora-focused productions by encouraging nuanced scripts and facilitating export, thereby prioritizing positive representation over purely market-driven approaches; however, research by Ezepue (2020) indicates that the broader implications of professionalization for filmmapping prioritising positive representation over purely market-driven approaches; however, research by Ezepue (2020) indicates that the broader implications of professionalisationking practices, content, and audiences in the industry remain underexplored, with heavy-handed censorship. Such an intervention must be respectful of creativity, and overly prescriptive regulations may lead to bland propaganda that will not appeal to anyone. Negative perceptions could be avoided through investment in post-production infrastructure, co-production treaties, technical exchanges, and

partnerships in animation, soundstage construction, and community cinemas. These are point-in-time discussions and not formulaic suggestions. They would have to be demonstrated through proof of practice.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources rather than direct audience data, its single-country focus, and the inability to establish inter-coder reliability. To test the analytical hypotheses outlined in Section 5.3, future research should utilise experimental or survey-based methods to measure how specific foreign audiences react to controlled variations in Nollywood film representations. The broader questions raised in the literature regarding the portrayal of identity through film, the long-term impact of Nollywood films, and the balancing of commerce and authenticity remain critical. The three-mechanism schema could be tested by comparative analysis with other emerging film industries. To understand the impact of state interventions on representational patterns, a longitudinal study of the evolving effects of government policies could be conducted. The influence of Nollywood on Nigeria's global image will extend beyond official calls and requests and will also shape the dynamic evolution of the market, the genre, and the audience's positionality.

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