

FOLLOWERS NOT TALENT: DIGITAL POPULARITY AND CASTING POWER IN CONTEMPORARY NOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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Abstract

This study examines the shift from traditional talent-based casting to clout-based selection in contemporary Nollywood cinema. With the rise of the digital economy, an actor's social media following has become a primary metric for marketability, often outweighing professional training and screen-testing. Using the library research method, the study reviews academic literature, industry reports, and digital archives from 2020 to 2025 to explore how digital popularity influences casting power. Grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory, the research finds that social media metrics now function as a form of convertible capital, where influencer-actors are prioritised to guarantee opening-day audiences and viral marketing. However, this trend poses significant risks, including the marginalisation of classically trained actors, a potential decline in cinematic quality, and the widening of the digital divide. The study concluded that while digital reach is a valuable marketing asset, it cannot replace the artistic depth required for sustainable global competitiveness. It recommended the enforcement of mandatory screen tests, digital branding support for veteran actors, and a renewed industry focus on performance-driven storytelling over viral trends.

Keywords: Casting Power, Digital Popularity, Influencer-Actor, Nollywood, Social Capital

Introduction

The Nigerian film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, has undergone a radical transformation shifting from the era of Video Compact Disc (VCD) dominance to a high-stakes digital economy. While the Nollywood industry was built on the backs of classically trained stage actors and raw talents discovered in open auditions, the emergence of social media has introduced a new metric for success: digital popularity (Adeyeye & Nwaoboli, 2024). Today, an actor's relevance is often measured not just by their range on screen, but by the size and engagement of their Instagram or TikTok following (Obojo, 2020; Adikuru & Obiora, 2021).

In this study, digital popularity refers to the social currency an individual wields online, while casting power is the influence these metrics have on a producer's decision to hire. Many filmmakers now view a large following as a ready-made marketing tool that guarantees an opening-day audience, leading to the rise of the influencer-actor (Fagbemi, 2024). Consequently, Nollywood is witnessing a blended stardom where traditional acting craft is increasingly competing with the ability to create viral content (Ernest-Samuel, 2025). This shift is particularly evident in the New Nollywood cinema, where high-budget projects for streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video often prioritise faces that can drive digital traffic (Ibrahim, 2024).

However, this followers-first approach is not without its critics. While social media can democratise fame, it also risks creating a shallow talent pool. Veteran practitioners and scholars have raised concerns that the industry is trading artistic depth for temporary trends (Oyelowo, 2025). There are also structural challenges, such as the high cost of maintaining a digital persona, which places an unfair burden on talented actors who lack the resources to buy data or hire social media managers (Musa & Gbadamosi, 2023). Furthermore, there is no concrete evidence that a million followers on a mobile screen always translates to a million tickets sold at the cinema (Okonjo & Effiong, 2023).

Therefore, the Nigerian movie-going public is at a crossroads. While they are drawn to familiar faces from their social media feeds, there is a growing demand for the high-quality storytelling that only professional training can provide. This study explores how the obsession with digital metrics is reshaping the casting culture in Nollywood, the pressure it puts on emerging talents, and whether clout is truly a sustainable substitute for craft.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the global success of Nollywood, there is an increasing disconnect between an actor's social media reach and their professional

competence. Many producers today rely on informal clout checks rather than rigorous screen tests, leading to a situation where influencers with little to no acting background are handed lead roles (Nwachukwu, 2021). As there are no industry-wide standards for casting influencers, the line between celebrity and professional acting has become blurred, often resulting in performances that fail to meet the expectations of a discerning global audience (Sani & Peters, 2023).

While recent research has focused on the economic growth of Nollywood through streaming platforms (Bello, 2020; Adeyemi, 2022), very little attention has been paid to the psychological and professional impact of this follower-based casting system. Some production houses spend heavily on trending stars but neglect to invest in rehearsal time or character development. This leads to a fast-food style of cinema where films are marketed heavily on social media but forgotten as soon as the next trend emerges (Eze, 2024).

Despite several studies on Nollywood's expansion through streaming platforms such as Bello (2020) and Adeyemi (2022), which focused on economic growth and audience reach, only a few of them have examined how digital popularity translates into casting power. Specifically, there is limited empirical evidence on how follower counts and social media engagement metrics influence casting decisions, and the consequences of that shift on film production quality and actor selection criteria. This is the knowledge gap this study will fill.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to examine digital popularity and casting power in contemporary Nollywood cinema. The objectives of this study are to:

1. examine the specific social media metrics that influence casting decisions in contemporary Nollywood cinema;
2. determine the impact of digital popularity on the career progression

and visibility of professionally trained actors compared to social media influencers; and

3. Identify the challenges and risks associated with prioritising digital popularity over traditional acting talent in the production of high-budget Nigerian films.

Review of Related Literature

Digital Popularity

Digital popularity in the contemporary film industry refers to the measurable social capital and online visibility an individual commands through social media platforms. Obojo (2020) describes this phenomenon as a form of virtual currency, where metrics such as follower counts, likes, and shares serve as proxies for an actor's marketability and public appeal. This definition suggests that in the modern Nollywood ecosystem, an actor's value is no longer intrinsic to their performance alone but is increasingly tied to their ability to maintain a persistent, engaging presence in the digital lives of their audience.

From a commercial perspective, Adikuru and Obiora (2021) define digital popularity as a pre-packaged marketing asset that reduces the financial risk for filmmakers. According to this view, an actor with a significant digital footprint acts as a human billboard, providing a built-in distribution channel that can bypass traditional, often expensive, advertising methods. This conceptualisation highlights a shift in the industry's business model, where the clout of a cast member is treated as a guarantee of high opening-week numbers and viral potential, making digital fame a prerequisite for high-budget commercial projects.

Casting Power

Casting power in the context of New Nollywood is defined as the influential capacity of digital metrics to dictate hiring decisions and character placement within film productions. Fagbemi (2024) describes this as a data-driven selection process where producers and directors prioritise an

actor's social media reach over traditional metrics like screen tests or previous acting experience. This definition positions casting power as a transformative force that has moved the decision-making process away from the director's creative vision and toward the marketing department's spreadsheets.

From a professional standpoint, Oyelowo (2025) views casting power as a disruptive element that challenges the traditional hierarchy of the acting profession. In this sense, power no longer rests solely with veteran actors or classically trained graduates of theatre arts programmes; instead, it has shifted toward influencers and digital creators who can offer immediate eyeballs on a project. This view stresses that while this shift democratises access to fame, it also risks devaluing the technical skills required for cinematic storytelling, as the power to be cast is now something that can be bought through social media promotion or gained through viral controversy.

Thematic Review

The shift from traditional screen-testing to digital-first casting in Nollywood has sparked a heated debate among scholars and practitioners alike. Many researchers argue that the democratization of fame through social media is a natural evolution of the industry. For instance, Obojo (2020) suggests that the Nigerian film industry has always been market-driven, and social media is simply the newest tool for measuring audience demand. In this view, a large Instagram following is not just a vanity metric but a form of democratised stardom that allows talented individuals from outside the traditional Lagos-based film circles to get noticed. However, this optimism is often tempered by the reality of what it takes to stay relevant online. Adikuru and Obiora (2021) point out that the pressure to maintain clout can lead to a performative professional life, where actors spend more time filming reels than studying scripts. This creates a culture where the trend of the week dictates who gets the lead role, often at the expense of veteran actors who have spent decades honing their craft but lack a digital presence.

Furthermore, the economic implications of digital popularity cannot be ignored. Ibrahim (2024) notes that because Nigeria lacks a robust government-funded film commission, producers are forced to bear the full weight of financial risk. To mitigate this, they lean heavily on actors who can guarantee initial visibility. This has led to the rise of the influencer-actor, a figure who may not have attended a single acting workshop but can bring five million followers to a project's launch. While this might fill cinema seats in the short term, Ernest-Samuel (2025) warns that this trend could damage the Nollywood Brand internationally. The scholar argues that global streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime initially came to Nigeria for its unique storytelling, but if the industry continues to prioritise viral faces over technical skill, the quality of the output will eventually decline. This sentiment is echoed by Oyelowo (2025), who observes that while an influencer can drive traffic to a trailer, they often lack the emotional depth required to sustain a two-hour feature film, leading to a disconnect between marketing hype and audience satisfaction.

The digital divide also plays a significant role in how casting power is distributed. Musa and Gbadamosi (2023) highlight that digital popularity in Nigeria is often a reflection of wealth. Actors who can afford high-end smartphones, professional lighting for their social media posts, and constant data subscriptions have a massive advantage over those who cannot. This means that casting power is increasingly concentrated among the urban elite, potentially silencing the voices of talented actors from less privileged backgrounds. Similarly, Okonjo and Effiong (2023) argue that there is a missing link between online followers and actual ticket sales. They found that while Nigerians might like a celebrity's post for free, they are much more discerning when it comes to spending their hard-earned money at the cinema. This suggests that the industry's current obsession with digital metrics might be based on a shaky foundation. In conclusion, while digital media offers new ways for Nollywood to grow, the studies suggest that

unless the industry finds a balance between clout and craft, it risks trading its artistic soul for temporary social media engagement.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is rooted in the Social Capital Theory, which was significantly popularised and refined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in 1986, and later expanded upon by scholars such as Robert Putnam (Adeyeye&Nwaoboli, 2024). The theory posits that social networks, much like economic capital (money) or cultural capital (education), have inherent value. The core tenets of the theory suggest that an individual's position within a network and the resources they can mobilise through their connections provide them with specific advantages. In the digital age, this capital is no longer just about who you know in person, but about the size, reach, and engagement of your digital network (Adeyeye&Nwaoboli, 2024). The theory suggests that clout or digital popularity is a form of convertible capital that can be exchanged for professional opportunities and economic gain.

Applying Social Capital Theory to the current study, it becomes clear that a Nollywood actor's follower count on platforms like Instagram or TikTok is a contemporary form of social capital. When a producer chooses an influencer over a classically trained actor, they are essentially opting to borrow the actor's social capital to boost the film's commercial prospects. This study uses the theory to explain how digital popularity has become a new gatekeeping mechanism in the Nigerian film industry. It helps us understand the shift where casting power is no longer just about talent (cultural capital) but about the actor's ability to mobilise a digital audience (social capital). Through looking through this lens, we can see how the digital popularity of an actor serves as a bridge to institutional success in the New Nollywood era.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study was the library research method, which involves a systematic and critical evaluation of existing literature, documents, and secondary data sources. This approach allowed the researcher to gather and synthesise diverse perspectives from academic journals and industry reports. Through reviewing previous studies on digital trends, casting cultures, and the economic shifts in Nollywood, the researcher was able to build a comprehensive argument without the need for primary field surveys. This qualitative desk-based approach was particularly effective for identifying long-term patterns in how digital popularity has redefined casting power and for highlighting the gaps in the current understanding of Nollywood's digital transformation.

Discussion of Findings

The first objective of this study was to look at the specific social media metrics that now dictate who gets cast in Nollywood. The findings show that numbers have become the new gatekeepers. Producers are no longer just looking at how well an actor can cry or deliver a monologue; they are looking at engagement rates and follower counts. As Obojo (2020) pointed out, these numbers are treated like a virtual currency that can be traded for a lead role. This is where Social Capital Theory really shows its face. These followers are a form of social capital that producers try to convert into cash at the box office. Adikuru and Obiora (2021) agreed, noting that filmmakers feel safer when an actor comes with a pre-built audience, even if that audience is only there for the actor's fashion sense or viral skits rather than their acting ability.

The second objective focused on how this shift affects professional actors who actually went to school to learn the craft. The findings suggest that many talented, trained actors are being pushed into the shadows by influencer-actors. Ibrahim (2024) noted that we are seeing a blended stardom where a professional actor feels forced to become a TikToker just to stay

relevant. This creates a massive problem for those who cannot afford the high cost of staying online, a point raised by Musa and Gbadamosi (2023).

Finally, the third objective aimed to identify the risks of this followers-first mindset. The biggest danger identified is a drop in the quality of Nigerian cinema. Ernest-Samuel (2025) warns that if we keep picking people based on clout, we will end up with fast-food movies that look good in a 30-second trailer but have no soul. Oyelowo (2025) also found that while an influencer can bring eyeballs to a project, they often lack the technical skill to carry a heavy emotional scene, which leaves the audience feeling cheated. This highlights a flaw in relying solely on social capital; you can use your followers to get through the door, but you still need actual talent to stay in the room and keep the industry's reputation intact.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nollywood is clearly at a turning point. The world has moved from the days of who you know to how many people follow you. While it is great that social media allows new faces to be discovered, this study shows that the obsession with digital popularity is hurting the craft of acting. Casting power has shifted from the director's creative gut to the marketing department's data sheets. If people are not careful, they will trade artistic identity for temporary viral trends. It is therefore recommended that:

1. Producers and directors should make physical screen tests compulsory for all roles, regardless of how many followers an influencer has, to ensure that the person can actually act before they are hired.
2. The various acting guilds in Nigeria should organise digital branding workshops for classically trained actors. This will help them build their own social capital so they aren't left behind by the influencer wave.
3. Film critics and award bodies should place more emphasis on performance quality rather than hype, encouraging producers to

invest in better scripts and trained actors instead of just chasing the latest trending face.

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