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Non-Linear Storytelling of Nollywood Tragedy Films: Its Impact among Women in Preserving Cultural Heritage: A Study of Women in Bida, Niger State

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Abstract

This study examines women's engagement with non-linear tragedy films in Bida, Niger State, with emphasis on awareness, understanding, and cultural relevance. The study adopted survey research method, using questionnaire as the instrument to get responses from 380 respondents which is the sample size determined using Krejcie and Morgan method. Findings revealed that engagement is moderate, as 54.7% of the respondents occasionally watch such films, however awareness remains relatively low, indicating limited familiarity. In terms of perception, 42.1% of respondents easily understand non-linear tragedy films, but 40.3% feels less emotionally connected to the characters in the film. This suggests that the narrative style may be understood, but may not always lead to emotional involvement expected in non-linear tragedy films. The study also highlights the cultural value of non-linear storytelling, with 41.8% of respondents acknowledging its role in preserving cultural heritage and reflecting societal values, particularly regarding gender activities. Despite these benefits, there is still preference for traditional linear storytelling with 36.1%. The researcher therefore recommends amongst others that Nollywood industry should increase the frequency of non-linear storytelling film distribution, marketing and consumption in Bida, Niger State. The content of non-linear storytelling should be made easy to understand as this will impact on preservation of cultural heritage, enhance societal values among women.

Keywords: Non-linear storytelling, Nollywood, tragedy films, audience perception, emotional engagement, cultural heritage.



Introduction

The Nigerian film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, has transformed into a significant cultural and traditional platform, producing films that reflect diverse experiences and narratives of the Nigerian populace. Among the various categories of films, tragedy films have emerged as a powerful medium for exploring human emotions and societal issues. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift towards nonlinear storytelling in Nollywood tragedy films, a narrative practice that presents events out of chronological order to enhance thematic depth and audience engagement. Nonlinear storytelling, characterised by the non-chronological arrangement of events has become a significant narrative technique in Nollywood tragedy films. This approach allows filmmakers to explore complex themes such as fate, memory, and trauma, providing audiences with a multifaceted understanding of the characters' journeys. Film like *Eyimofe (This Is My Desire)* exemplify the effective use of nonlinear editing, creating suspense and deepening the emotional impact of the narrative (Kabiru, 2023).

Adoption of nonlinear storytelling in Nollywood tragedy films reflects a broader trend towards innovative narrative techniques that challenge conventional storytelling norms. By presenting events out of order, filmmakers can highlight the connection between characters' experiences and the recurrent nature of tragedy, enhancing the thematic depth of the narrative. This approach not only engages the audience intellectually but also emotionally, as it encourages a deeper connection with the characters' struggles and triumphs in life (Umeaka & Bashir, 2020). Non-linear storytelling in Nollywood tragedy films requires a nuanced understanding of both cinematic techniques and cultural contexts. The fragmented narrative structure mirrors the disjointed experiences of the characters, often reflecting the societal and personal confusions they endure.

This storytelling method challenges the audience to actively engage with the narrative, mending together the fragmented events to form a coherent understanding of the story. In doing so, nonlinear storytelling fosters a more immersive and participatory viewing experience, inviting audiences to reflect on the intricacies of human existence and the impact of societal forces on individual lives (Onyenanke et al., 2019). The growing shift in Nollywood toward non-linear storytelling and the need to understand its implications for audience engagement and cultural communication, particularly among women have become an area of interest. As Nollywood continues to serve as a vital medium for preserving and projecting Nigerian cultural heritage, it becomes important to examine whether the mode of narration promotes or alters cultural values. Women, as key consumers and interpreters of film content, play a significant role in shaping and sustaining cultural values; therefore, their perceptions, engagements and interpretations of non-linear tragedy films deserves attention. Despite the growing experiments with narrative techniques in Nollywood, particularly the adoption of non-linear storytelling, there still remains limited empirical understanding of how such narrative structures influence audience engagement and cultural preservation, especially among women.

Nollywood films have long served as important vehicles for reflecting and preserving Nigerian cultural values and social realities (Haynes, 2016; Krings & Okome, 2013), yet the shift from traditional linear narratives to more complex, non-linear formats raises concerns about audience comprehension and emotional connection. Studies have shown that while non-linear storytelling can enhance creativity and depth, it may also challenge viewers' ability to fully interpret and relate to film content, thereby affecting its overall impact (Bordwell, 2017). However, there is a



noticeable gap in context-specific research examining how women in local settings, such as Bida in Niger State, engage with and interpret non-linear Nollywood tragedy films and whether these narratives meaningfully contribute to cultural values and societal norms. This gap underscores the need for this study, which seeks to investigate the impact of non-linear storytelling on women's engagement and its implications for the preservation of cultural heritage.

Objectives

This paper examines nonlinear tragedy story-telling in Nollywood films, focusing on the impact in projecting cultural heritage preservation, challenges of watching and understanding it, as they portray complex regional and gender-specific narratives. The paper highlights the following objectives;

1. Examine the frequency and awareness, of women from Bida Niger State in watching Nollywood films
2. Evaluates nonlinear story-telling in Nollywood tragedy films impact on the preservation of cultural heritage.
3. The research work investigates the challenges women from Bida, Niger State encounters in watching non-linear tragedy Nollywood films.

Theoretical Framework

Reception Theory

Using Stuart Hall's Reception Theory as a theoretical lens, the study examines how women in Bida LGA make sense of cultural heritage preservation and meaning within non-linear Nollywood tragedy films. Reception Theory, initially posited by Hall (1973) who developed it in the encoding/decoding model, argues that through the lens of their own culture, social group, and living experience, audiences actively engage with media texts rather than passively consume them. This framework subverts previous effects-based theories that have assumed a continuous response with audiences by acknowledging that audiences interpret media in various ways and differ in reading the same texts. Hall (1980) distinguished three decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic position, the acceptance by the audience (the production), negotiated position, which the audience accepts (the production) message partially, depending on specific context), and oppositional position, wherein the audiences reject the intended message to which alternative meanings are constructed according to opposing frames.

For this analysis of women's enjoyment of Nollywood films, Reception Theory offers some analytical tools to shed light on how, among Nupe women viewers of Bida LGA, who are heavily influenced by Nupe cultural practices, Islamic piety, gender socialisation, and educational attainment, they interpret messages about cultural inheritance within a non-linear and complex narrative. Reception Theory resonates with the study in the preservation of cultural heritage by analyzing the ways in which audiences collect, internalize, and enact cultural



knowledge represented by films. Viewers of films for women can adopt the dominant readings that regard cultural messages of films as education, use negotiated readings to include and/or contradict other traditional practices, and use oppositional readings to reject movies as inauthentic or idealized.

Method

The research adopts a quantitative research study design using the survey method to explore the influence of non-linear storytelling in Nollywood tragedy films on cultural heritage preservation among women in Bida LGA, Niger State. This quantitative model allows obtaining data in a systematic manner from a sample of large numbers of people, and assists with statistical analysis to explore patterns, relations, and generalization of population. The structured questionnaire method of the questionnaire in the survey design provides standardized assessment of women's film consumption habits, comprehension of stories, perceived cultural influence and preservation of heritage, thus providing insights through standardized methods. The sample is women living at the Bida Local Government Area, Niger State, Nigeria. The female population of Bida LGA is 128,879 (National Bureau of Statistics 2025).

A cluster sampling and simple random sampling method was used to select 384 respondents. In the first phase, cluster sampling was used for the divisions of Bida LGA into its 14 administrative wards, each separate ward treated as a cluster with different geographical and demographic characteristics. According to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for the determination of sample size based on known populations, the researchers conducted a sampling of 384 respondents from the total female population of 128,879 in Bida LGA. This sample size yields a confidence level of 95% along with a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$ which is considered the usual standard for the task of conducting a quantitative social research. Of 384 questionnaires administered in the 14 wards, 380 were returned i.e. 98.96% response rate.

The primary instrument used for this study was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of four parts (A-D) which were used to systematically obtain necessary information. The questionnaire had close-ended questions in line with the study objectives to produce useful responses for analysis. The validity of the questionnaire is confirmed by content validation after expert review and pilot test. These insights resulted in changes in the wording of items, to removing ambiguous questions, and to adding specific cultural contexts that apply to the lived experiences of Nupe women.

The reliability of the questionnaire was established via a pilot survey which had 40 respondents taken from a related population in Katcha LGA, Niger State, which exhibits demographic and cultural attributes like Bida LGA but was not present in the sample for the study. The pilot-test data were also examined by Cronbach's alpha testing for reliability, and the scores (0.82 and 0.86) are higher than Nunnally and Bernstein's (1994) recommendation of 0.70 as indicative of acceptable reliability in social science. The questionnaire was administered via online and personal administration and the respondents provided informed consent. The questionnaire was completed during four weeks of study. Data from 380 returned questionnaires were organized and coded and entered in frequency distributions. Demographic variables and opinions to consumption patterns, attitudes towards non-linear narratives and perceptions of cultural impact were all systematically analyzed.



Findings

In this study, 380 questionnaire copies were returned i.e. 98.96% response rate of 384 copies of questionnaire administered. Analysis of obtained data is shown below;

Table 1: Frequency of Watching Non-Linear Tragedy Films

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	58	15.3%
Occasionally	208	54.7%
Rarely	114	30%
Never	-	-
Total	380	100%

Field Survey, 2026

Table 1 above represents the frequencies and percentages on how often participant's watches non-linear tragedy films. Results revealed a higher frequencies and percentages of those who occasionally watch non-linear tragedy films with 208 and 54.7%.

Table 2: Awareness Level of Films Using Non-Linear Storytelling

Response	Frequency	Percentage
High	149	39.2%
Moderate	131	34.5%
Low	100	26.3%
Total	380	100%

Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 above represents the frequencies and percentages on the awareness of films that use non-linear story-telling. Results revealed that 39% of the respondents are aware. This means that a greater number of the respondents are aware of films that use non-linear story-telling.

Table 3: Preferred Storytelling Technique in Nollywood Films

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Linear	137	36.1%
Non-Linear	75	19.7%
Both	69	18.2%
No Preference	99	26.1%
Total	380	100%

Field Survey, 2026



Table 3 above is the preference of Story-Telling Technique in Nollywood Film Findings revealed 137 (36.1%) preference for linear. This implies that a greater number of the respondents prefer linear storytelling technique in Nollywood films.

Table 4: Emotional Connection to Characters in Non-Linear Tragedy Films

Response	Frequency	Percentage
More Connected	112	29.5%
Less Connected	153	40.3%
No Difference	70	18.4%
Not Sure	45	11.8%
Total	380	100%

Field Survey, 2026

Table 4 displays the emotionally connection of characters in non-linear tragedy films to traditional (linear) ones. Results revealed 153 (40.3%) respondents as less connected. Hence, we deduced that a greater number of the respondents are not connected to characters in non-linear Nollywood tragedy films.

Table 5: Non-Linear Storytelling's Impact on Cultural Heritage Messages

Response	Frequency	Percentage
More Cultural Heritage	159	41.8%
More Confusing	69	18.2%
No Effect	53	13.9%
Not Sure	99	26.1%
Total	380	100%

Field Survey, 2026

Table 5 is the results of how non-linear story-telling makes the tragedy message of the film project more on cultural heritage. Findings revealed 159 (41.8%) believed messages are more cultural heritage. Therefore, we can say that tragedy film carries more cultural messages.

Table 6: Most Difficult Aspects of Non-Linear Stories to Understand

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Time Jumps	42	11.1
Character stories	82	21.6%
Flashbacks	47	12.4%
Shifting Between Past and Present	96	25.3%



None	113	29.7%
Total	380	100%

Field Survey, 2026

Table 6 on the aspect of non-linear stories that is usually find hardest to understand. Results revealed 113 (29.7%) as no aspect is hard. Therefore, we deduced that 70 % of the respondents pointed the listed items in the above table as being the hardest part of non-linear films which are difficult to understand.

Discussion

Data obtained from this study indicates intricate interconnections of women's engagement in and interpretation of non-linear Nollywood tragedy films and non-linear narratives in Bida LGA and their implications for understanding their practices through the framework of Reception Theory and comparing their empirical evidence with previous research findings.

Data show that moderate engagement exists with non-linear tragedy films, with 54.7% of respondents viewing them occasionally and 15.3% very often. This trend is consistent with Abdullahi and Mohammed (2022) who highlights that exposure to non-linear narration necessitates watching it again and again in order to develop a favorable view. That relatively low regular viewers may stem from a lack of presence of those types film in Northern Nigeria or inclination to prefer more accessible linear storytelling. There is a revealing distribution of awareness: 39.2% reports high levels of awareness, while 26.3% indicate low levels, indicating a significant variation in media access across Bida's urban and rural wards. This is consistent with Okafor and Emeka (2021) observation that women in semi-urban communities differ in their exposure to contemporary Nollywood productions by means of their technological access and social networks. As Hall (1980) observed, decoding positions are shaped through frequency and context of exposures, so these viewing patterns are important from a Reception Theory approach. Women who sometimes watch non-linear films may only learn this narrative convention in passing so they will not be able to devise their own highly sophisticated interpretive styles, potentially even increasing confusion instead of involvement. One avenue to explain that limited exposure with shared experiences in a group is a case with Bida, where women watch together as an example of a community-based way of viewing. The Northern Nigerian sample of Abdullahi and Mohammed (2022) demonstrated this practice of the collective sense-making to a large extent.

The high preference for linear storytelling (36.1%) versus non-linear narrative (19.7%) displays cognitive and cultural perspectives. In Table 6, we find that 70.3% of respondents experience difficulty with parts particular of non-linear narratives and the temporal difference between past and present is the most painful part (25.3%). This comprehension challenge is consonant with Abdullahi and Mohammed's (2022) observation that narrative complexity triggers initial confusion, in particular among viewers with lower educational level and whose exposure to nuanced narrative structures might have not been built through education and widespread media consumption. Reception Theory offers explanatory power here: the "preferred reading" encoded by filmmakers using non-linear structures presupposes that audiences have cultural capital and media education sufficient to manage temporal fragmentation (Morley, 2019). Yet for those Bida women there is likely no such presumed competence and the result is frustration rather than intellectual curiosity. The fact that 21.6% have problems with introducing character backstories indicates that non-linear revelation of character information (a device designed to stimulate a sense of suspense and retrospective comprehension) may cause confusion when



viewers are unable to link different, sometimes fragmented, narrative threads into coherent character identities.

In culturally important ways there are serious implications from knowing 40.3% feel less emotionally connected with characters on movies which do not follow linear logic than linear narratives. Emotionally identifying with characters is another way that audiences receive messaging in the story, including cultural values (Radway 2020). When narrative fragmentation stifles empathic connectedness, viewers cognitively relate to the story but emotionally are distanced from it, which may diminish the films' persuasive implications for cultural heritage preservation. This emotional disconnection could express what Hall (1980) called an "oppositional reading"—not in a political or ideological sense, but structural. Instead of purposely rejecting the film's cultural messages, audiences might feel emotionally blocked from those messages by the narrative delivery system. Of those 29.5% who feel more connected, they also seem to suggest that while non-linear narratives can be effective in engaging visually, decoding them can serve to amplify emotional engagement via techniques like delayed revelation and retrospective empathy (Abdullahi & Mohammed 2022), as demonstrated through viewers attaining familiarity with the form.

Despite the obstacles to comprehend, and lack of emotional connection in the film, 41.8% of respondents consider non-linear tragedy films conveying stronger cultural heritage messages than its linear counterpart. This paradoxical result — that films that baffle viewers while minimizing emotional connections will still be viewed as culturally productive — illuminates complex phenomena of reception that Reception Theory aims to help clarify. Hall (1980) describes this pattern in that "negotiated reading," whereby Bida women deal with narrative mechanics and at the same time pull out and value cultural content embedded in the narrative device. They negotiate between the form (confusing them with the idea) and the content (educating them), getting the cultural messages while critiquing the delivery method itself or struggling with the medium itself. The 26.1% who are unsure ("Not Sure") further highlights the complexity of reception — these consumers may know cultural content, but are left ambivalent on whether non-linear presentation enhances or obfuscates it.

The discovery that non-linear films may have cultural value regardless of accessibility means that narrative complexity may be a form of cultural authenticity or seriousness among viewers. Just as Nupe oral traditions make use of elaborate narrative techniques such as prolepsis, analepsis and embedded stories (Okpoko & Okpoko, 2018), non-linear narratives in film may well find favor with indigenous storytelling cultures, which favor thematic richness above linearity when it comes to narratives. Women acquainted with traditional narratives - where, narratively, the narrator frequently shifts between frames to deliver moralistic messages - may find non-linear cinema culturally appealing regardless of its cognitive challenge.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper then examined Nollywood tragedy films on the impact that non-linear storytelling has on women's cultural heritage preservation in Bida Local Government Area, Niger State. The uneven reception patterns highlighted the mixed results of this approach. These reveal potential but limitations as well for innovative narrative techniques with which to transmit culture into people. The results illustrate that Bida women view the non-linear tragedy films at moderate frequency at 54.7% who only occasionally watch but 15.3% who watch frequently. The level of awareness about this mode of storytelling is still quite uneven, with 39.2% of respondents declaring high awareness and 26.3% low awareness, indicating a large divide in level of



exposure between urban and rural populations of the LGA. This moderation of engagement indicates the low rate of exposure to non-linear movies in Northern Nigeria and the enduring fondness for established linear narratives congruent with traditional narrative expectations.

Within the Reception Theory framework, the research confirms the audience to become interpreters themselves, whose decoding is informed by education level, media literacy, context and cultural framework. Non-linear Nollywood tragedy films have real potential for keeping cultural heritage alive for Bida women when narrative richness enriches cultural topics, including those of the novel but not merely obscuring them, finds the study. Realizing its promise necessitates, however, some level of awareness to audience accessibility, education in media readiness cultivation, creative narrative architecture, and a balance between novelty and comprehensibility. The films serve their audience best not as substitutes for straightforward stories but rather as adjunct elements presenting unique possibilities for looks and themes that interest culturally-minded audiences.

Drawing upon the investigation with respect to non-linear storytelling in Nollywood tragedy film and heritage culture conservation among Bida women, the following recommendations are deemed necessary by researcher;

1. If they want to survive in this new world, Nollywood-led producers and directors must pursue mixed narrative styles with non-linear elements but enough structural certainty to not estrange audiences who've never been exposed to complex temporal disjunct. Strategically deployed visual cues, speaking lines, or intertitles conveying time-shifts can be strategically applied to help the spectator smoothly maneuver through non-linear frameworks without losing the story-telling craft.
2. Broaden character development in non-linear stories by bringing together fragmented character information and ultimately crystallizing it into coherent, emotionally accessible characters. With 40.3% of all filmgoers saying they feel less attached to characters on the non-linear cinema world, it is vital that design of characters is purposeful that allows them to be empathetically identified whilst temporally fragmented.
3. Media literacy and cultural projects should consider planning a community based media literacy program focusing on non-linear comprehension of narratives in particular the language of non-compliance with the gender bias with women with less formal education. These courses should teach such storytelling devices as flashbacks in tandem with parallel stories, and non-chronological sequencing through culturally resonant examples, perhaps making an allusion to non-linear elements in traditional Nupe oral storytelling. Cultural heritage actors should collaborate with Nollywood producers to make films that deliberately incorporate non-linear techniques in an effort to underscore the continuity and transformation of cultural practice through the contrast of traditional narratives during separate life periods. Such an approach may highlight the connection between the past and the present with applications to maintain heritage.

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