



From Nollywood to New Media: The Transformation of Cultural Narratives in Nigeria's Digital Communication Landscape

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Abstract

The digital transformation of Nigeria's Nollywood industry reflects significant changes in how cultural narratives are produced, distributed, and interpreted, yet existing scholarship has largely failed to provide a comprehensive analysis of how digital media reshapes cultural narratives, power relations, and identity in the Nigerian context. This study aims to analyze how digital media reshapes cultural narratives as well as power relations and identity within Nigerian society. Employing a qualitative thematic literature review, the study synthesizes scholarly works, reports, and digital campaigns related to cultural narratives in Nigeria's digital landscape. Theoretically, this study adopts Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework (1980; 1990) to explain that meaning is not fixed but actively negotiated between producers and audiences within diverse socio-cultural contexts. Three main findings emerge. First, Nollywood's digital transformation occurs through processes of adaptation, resistance, and reinterpretation of local values. Second, digitalization expands the space for expression and global distribution while reinforcing digital inequalities and the dominance of global platforms. Third, digital cultural narratives become dynamic arenas of meaning contestation, where local values interact with global influences through encoding and decoding practices. The study concludes that the integration of technology, digital literacy, and local values is key to building an inclusive and sustainable digital cultural ecosystem in Nigeria, with implications for policymakers, cultural practitioners, and platform developers.

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Introduction

The development of digital technology in Nigeria demonstrates a significant transformation in the ways culture is produced, distributed, and consumed, particularly within the Nollywood industry, which has long represented African cultural identity (Adesemoye, 2023; Simon, 2021, 2024). However, this technological revolution does not always align with the ideal of elevating



humanity as an inclusive and equitable space for cultural expression. In practice, the social and cultural life of society often contrasts with the logic of technology, which tends to prioritize efficiency, commercialization, and globalization (Miriam Akinpelu, 2021; Okeke & Nwosu, 2021). Digital technology, largely developed outside local contexts, is often perceived as “imported” and not fully compatible with traditional Nigerian values (Favour et al., 2023; Lucia Akim et al., 2024; Ochinanwata et al., 2024). In general, technology introduces new values that in some cases are seen as conflicting with cultural norms, such as changes in gender representation, lifestyles, and social relations portrayed in digital media (Korkmazer et al., 2022; Lucia Akim et al., 2024; Manago & McKenzie, 2022). Moreover, technological penetration is not always accompanied by adequate digital literacy, creating challenges for communities in understanding and managing the content they consume (Ashley et al., 2017; Dedebeali, 2020). At the same time, social readiness to integrate technology into everyday life varies, influenced by economic, educational, and infrastructural factors (Abdulhamid et al., 2020). Thus, the presence of digital technology in Nigeria’s communication landscape is not entirely compatible with local societal characteristics, but instead generates complex dynamics of adaptation, resistance, and transformation in cultural narratives.

So far, studies on Nollywood’s transformation in the digital era tend to approach the phenomenon in a linear manner, particularly in terms of industry growth and global expansion. Many studies highlight Nollywood’s success as one of the largest film industries in the world in leveraging digital technology to expand its audience reach (Endong, 2022; Hanmakyugh, 2024; Idyo & Methuselah, 2024). On the other hand, some research emphasizes the negative impacts of digitalization, such as excessive commercialization, declining narrative quality, and cultural homogenization (Chandrashekeran & Keele, 2024; Michailidou & Trenz, 2023). Additionally, several studies focus on digital literacy and the capacity of society to access and utilize new communication technologies (B. Ngenget, 2022). Nevertheless, these perspectives have not fully explained the deeper relationship between digital technology, changes in cultural narratives, and the social characteristics of Nigerian society. In a society marked by strong ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, the transformation of cultural narratives cannot be understood merely as a result of technological adoption, but rather as a process of negotiation between local values and global influences. Therefore, an important gap remains in the literature, particularly in understanding how social and cultural characteristics shape the ways technology is used to produce and represent cultural narratives in the digital era.

This study aims to address this gap by analyzing more deeply how the transformation from Nollywood to digital media reshapes cultural narratives in Nigeria. In this context, it is important to recognize that technological adoption is not solely a technical matter, but also involves social, cultural, and ideological factors that influence how people interpret and use technology (Elayah, 2025; Gousse et al., 2024; Wong, 2025). Accordingly, this study formulates three main research questions. First, how prepared is Nigeria's digital infrastructure in supporting the transformation of the cultural industry from traditional to digital media? Second, how do social characteristics and inequalities influence access, production, and consumption of digital content? Third, how do local cultural values shape processes of adaptation, reinterpretation, and transformation of cultural narratives in the digital era? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic relationship between technology, culture, and society. Furthermore, the findings are expected to inform the development of cultural policies and communication strategies that are more sensitive to local contexts in the face of digital globalization.

This study is grounded in the argument that the transformation of cultural narratives from Nollywood to digital media in Nigeria cannot be understood as a purely linear or deterministic process. Rather, it is the result of complex interactions among technology, market forces, and socio-cultural characteristics. Nigerian society maintains strong orientations toward community, tradition, and collective identity, which in many ways may conflict with the individualistic and efficiency-driven logic of digital technology (Favour et al., 2023; Ochinanwata et al., 2024; Okpara, 2023). However, society is not passive; it actively negotiates technology through adaptation and reinterpretation of cultural values within digital content. Digital technology also creates new opportunities for producing more diverse and inclusive alternative narratives, while simultaneously facing challenges such as unequal access and the dominance of global platforms. Therefore, the success of cultural transformation in the digital era depends not only on technological availability, but also on social readiness, digital literacy capacity, and the ability to integrate local values into digital practices. In this sense, technology should be understood as part of a dynamic process of social engineering in shaping the future of culture.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative thematic literature review to examine the transformation of cultural narratives in Nigeria's digital communication landscape. This approach is appropriate because the study aims to develop a

conceptual understanding of how digital media reshape cultural identity, representation, and meaning-making rather than to measure causal relationships empirically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A thematic literature review enables the critical synthesis of diverse scholarly perspectives while identifying recurring patterns, theoretical debates, and conceptual gaps concerning digital media, Nollywood, and cultural transformation in Nigeria (Snyder, 2019). As a document-based inquiry, this approach facilitates the integration of existing scholarship to construct a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the interaction between technological change, cultural production, and social dynamics (Bowen, 2009). The analysis is guided by Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory, which serves as the principal analytical framework for interpreting how cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and negotiated within Nigeria's digital communication environment.

The literature search was conducted systematically using three major academic databases, Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Search terms included combinations of *Nollywood digital transformation*, *Nigerian digital media*, *cultural narratives Nigeria*, *encoding/decoding theory*, *digital inequality Africa*, and *digital communication Nigeria*. To ensure both scholarly quality and contemporary relevance, the review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and institutional publications produced between 2000 and 2025, while also including Hall's seminal works (1980; 1990) because of their theoretical significance. Sources were selected based on four inclusion criteria: (1) discussing Nollywood or digital media in Nigeria; (2) examining cultural narratives, identity, or power relations in digital contexts; (3) originating from reputable academic or institutional publications; and (4) being published in English. Publications lacking academic credibility or unrelated to the Nigerian context were excluded from the analysis.

The selected literature was analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis consisted of three stages. First, data reduction involved identifying and coding literature relevant to the research objectives. Second, data display organized the coded findings into four analytical themes: (1) Digital Infrastructure and Nollywood Transformation; (2) Social Inequality and Digital Media Differentiation; (3) Negotiating Local Culture in the Digital Era; and (4) Encoding, Decoding, and the Contestation of Cultural Meaning. Finally, conclusion drawing involved interpreting relationships among these themes through Hall's Encoding/Decoding framework to explain how technological development, cultural values, and power relations shape the transformation of digital cultural narratives in Nigeria.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, this study applied source triangulation by comparing evidence from journal articles, books, and institutional reports, as well as theoretical triangulation by integrating Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory with broader scholarship on digital inequality, cultural globalization, and media studies. Rather than serving merely as a conceptual reference, Hall's theory was operationalized as the principal analytical lens for interpreting the interaction between media production, audience reception, and cultural negotiation. Through this methodological approach, the study provides a theoretically grounded understanding of how digital communication has transformed cultural narratives in Nigeria while identifying broader implications for identity formation, media representation, and socio-cultural change.

Table 1
Data Analysis Procedures

Stage	Analytical Process	Application in This Study
Data Reduction	Literature identification and coding	Selecting literature on Nollywood, digital communication, cultural identity, digital inequality, and Encoding/Decoding Theory
Data Display	Theme development	Organizing findings into four themes: (1) Digital Infrastructure and Nollywood Transformation; (2) Social Inequality and Digital Media Differentiation; (3) Negotiating Local Culture; (4) Encoding, Decoding, and Meaning Contestation
Conclusion Drawing	Critical interpretation	Explaining how digital media, political power, and cultural values transform cultural narratives in Nigeria through Hall's analytical framework
Trustworthiness	Source and theoretical triangulation	Comparing multiple scholarly sources and integrating Hall's theory with digital media and cultural studies literature

Source: Developed by the authors based on [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), [Snyder \(2019\)](#), and [Hall \(1980, 1990\)](#).

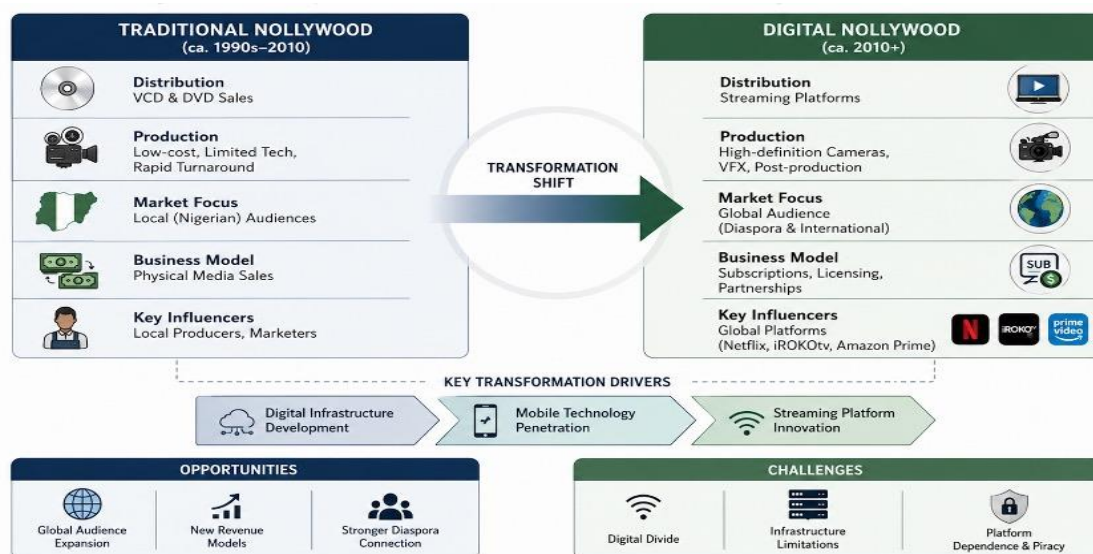
Table 1 summarizes the analytical procedures adopted in this study. The first stage focuses on identifying and coding literature relevant to the research objectives. The second stage organizes the coded data into four interrelated themes that structure the analysis. The final stage interprets these themes through Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory to explain how digital technologies, cultural values, and power relations reshape cultural narratives in Nigeria. The application of source and theoretical triangulation strengthens the credibility of the findings by integrating evidence from multiple scholarly sources and theoretical perspectives.

Digital Infrastructure and the Transformation of the Nollywood Industry in Nigeria

Nigeria's film industry, Nollywood, is one of Africa's most influential cultural and economic sectors and ranks among the world's largest film industries by production volume. Since emerging in the 1990s, Nollywood has relied on low-cost production and physical distribution through VCDs and DVDs. Over the past two decades, however, the industry has experienced a major transformation driven by the expansion of digital infrastructure, particularly internet connectivity and mobile technologies. This transition has reshaped production systems, distribution models, audience consumption, and the industry's position within the global media economy.

Digitalization has transformed Nollywood from informal distribution into a platform-based industry with greater efficiency and global reach. The expansion of smartphones and mobile internet has accelerated access to digital content, while streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and iROKOTv have connected Nollywood with international audiences, especially the African diaspora. According to Lobato (2019), these platforms create new market opportunities and improve production standards. Digital technologies, including advanced cameras and editing software, have also enhanced film quality while reducing production costs. As Haynes (2016) argues, Nollywood's ability to adapt to technological change has strengthened its position in the global digital media industry.

Figure 1
Nollywood Transformation in the Digital Era



Source: Developed by the author based on Vasilescu et al. (2020), Lobato (2019), Haynes (2016), Cunningham & Craig (2019), and Puig et al. (2021).

Figure 1 above provides a simple visual summary of Nollywood's transformation. The first section compares traditional and digital Nollywood across five dimensions: distribution, production, market, business model, and power structure. The middle section identifies the three interconnected drivers: digital infrastructure (internet), mobile technology (smartphones), and streaming platforms. The bottom section summarizes opportunities (global reach, improved quality, new revenue) and challenges (digital divide, platform dependence, infrastructure limits, piracy).

However, Nollywood's digital transformation faces structural challenges. One major barrier is the limitation of ICT infrastructure in Nigeria, particularly unstable internet access and unreliable electricity supply. [Dele-Ajayi et al. \(2021\)](#) highlight that power instability and weak connectivity remain major obstacles to digital technology adoption across sectors. Additionally, relatively high internet costs limit public access to streaming services, contributing to a digital divide between those who can access digital technologies and those who cannot. This divide is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where infrastructure lags behind urban centers. This digital divide risks reinforcing socio-economic inequalities. [Vasilescu et al. \(2020\)](#) describe this as the emergence of "digitally vulnerable groups", communities with limited access and technological skills. In Nollywood, this disparity is evident between large production companies that can fully leverage digital platforms and independent filmmakers who still rely on traditional distribution methods. The gap between those who can afford high-quality digital equipment and those who cannot may create a two-tier industry where only well-funded productions compete globally.

From a political economy perspective, Nollywood's transformation represents the integration of local cultural industries into the global digital capitalist system. Global streaming platforms function not only as distributors but as powerful actors influencing content production. Cunningham and Craig (2019) argue that digital platforms create new power structures where control over distribution and monetization is centralized among major technology companies. Nollywood faces a dilemma between embracing global opportunities and maintaining autonomy over local cultural production. Digitalization has also significantly altered audience consumption patterns. Smartphones and mobile internet enable viewers to access content anytime, fostering flexible media consumption. Okome (2007) emphasizes that Nollywood audiences are dynamic and adaptive, evolving alongside technological changes. Interaction between producers and audiences has intensified through social media, allowing direct feedback and the formation of online fan communities.

Economically, digital transformation has created new revenue models. Nollywood now generates revenue from streaming subscriptions, content licensing, and global digital distribution rather than VCD/DVD sales. Uwah (2020) notes that digitalization has introduced more sustainable business models, though challenges in fair monetization remain. The role of government is crucial in supporting this transformation through policies on digital infrastructure, copyright protection, and creative industry support. Puig et al. (2021) argue that investment in digital infrastructure is a key prerequisite for economic growth in developing countries. Despite advancements, Nollywood faces serious challenges including digital piracy, unequal technology access, and dependence on global platforms. Dodoo et al. (2021) identify infrastructure costs and maintenance as major barriers to digital adoption. Therefore, a comprehensive and sustainable approach is needed. The transformation of Nollywood is a complex and multidimensional process offering significant opportunities for global expansion, improved production quality, and business innovation, while also bringing challenges related to digital inequality, infrastructural limitations, and shifting power dynamics. Success depends on the ability of government, industry stakeholders, and society to manage change inclusively and sustainably. Thus, Nollywood's future is determined not only by technological advancements but also by public policy, human resource capacity, and the industry's ability to adapt to global dynamics. Digital transformation must be managed wisely to maximize its contribution to Nigeria's economic and cultural development.

Social Inequality and the Differentiation of Digital Media Production and Consumption

The digital era has fundamentally transformed how cultural narratives are produced, accessed, and consumed worldwide. In Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, this transformation is uneven and shaped by intersecting structural inequalities. Social class, education level, urban-rural disparities, and digital literacy are key factors determining who can participate in the digital cultural economy as producers, who can access it as consumers, and who remains marginalized. With rapid urbanization and the expansion of digital platforms, these inequalities have become increasingly significant in shaping Nigeria's digital cultural landscape (Onwujekwe et al., 2021). Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing inclusive digital policies that ensure equitable participation in the digital economy.

Social class functions as an initial "gateway" to digital participation. Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have limited access to information and communication technologies (ICT), which serve as the

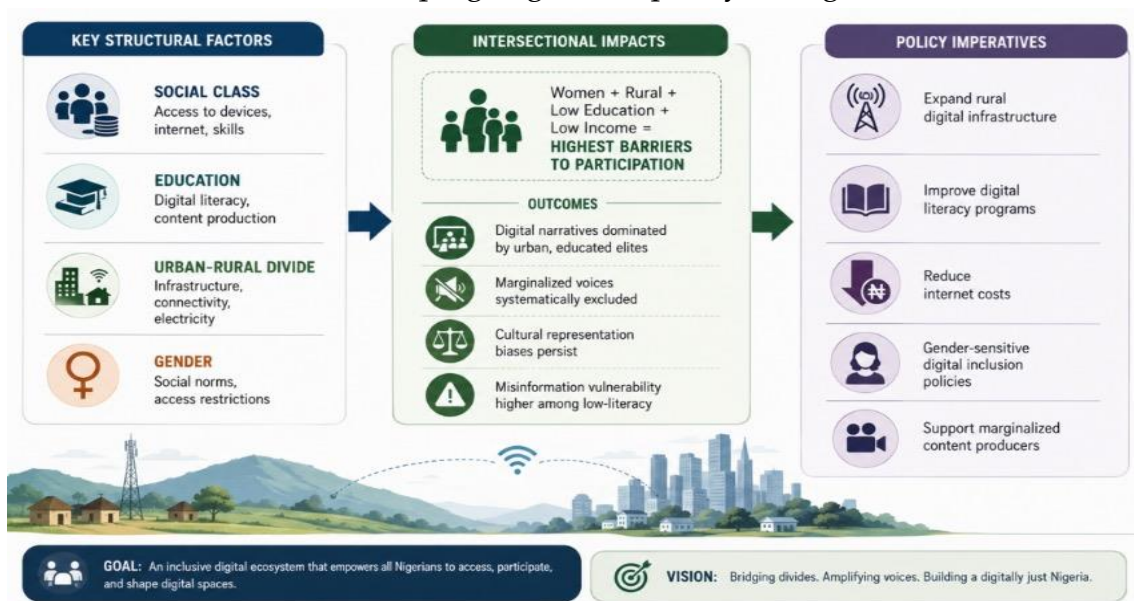
primary infrastructure for producing and distributing digital narratives (Cheng et al., 2020). In Nigeria, socio-economic inequality is highly visible, even in urban areas where many still lack access to basic services (Onwujekwe et al., 2021). Beyond device ownership, social class influences the ability to afford internet connectivity, acquire quality devices, and sustain long-term digital engagement. Studies in developing countries show that while device ownership has increased, digital usage remains unequal due to economic and educational constraints (Ahmed et al., 2020). In this context, social class is closely linked to cultural capital. Individuals with higher economic resources typically have better access to education and digital literacy, allowing them to dominate digital public narratives (Baum et al., 2021). This concentration of cultural capital among privileged groups perpetuates a cycle where dominant narratives reflect urban, middle-class, and elite perspectives, while marginalized voices remain systematically excluded.

Education plays a central role in shaping digital engagement and participation in contemporary media environments. Individuals with higher levels of education generally possess better access to digital technologies, stronger information-seeking abilities, and higher levels of digital literacy, enabling them to engage more effectively with online platforms (Guo et al., 2021). Empirical evidence shows that university-educated individuals are significantly more active in creating, sharing, and evaluating digital content than those with only primary or secondary education (Miyawaki et al., 2021). In Nigeria, however, educational opportunities remain unevenly distributed across socioeconomic status, gender, and geographic location, reinforcing existing patterns of digital inequality. Individuals with lower educational attainment often experience limited access to technology and face greater difficulties in critically assessing online information, increasing their vulnerability to misinformation and digital exclusion (Jaafar et al., 2021). Furthermore, producing digital cultural narratives requires not only technical expertise but also analytical, communicative, and creative competencies. Consequently, digital content production in Nigeria is largely dominated by educated urban middle- and upper-class groups, whose perspectives shape public discourse and cultural representation, while less-educated populations remain primarily passive consumers of digital media (Wicht et al., 2021).

The urban-rural divide is one of the most visible barriers to digital participation. Rural areas in Africa generally face weak infrastructure, limited internet access, and unstable electricity supply (Gunnlaugsson et al., 2020). Consequently, rural populations have significantly less access to digital technologies compared to urban populations. In Nigeria, major cities such as

Lagos and Abuja enjoy better connectivity, while rural communities encounter structural barriers in accessing digital platforms. Even when access exists, factors such as income and education continue to limit effective participation (Miyawaki et al., 2021). As a result, digital cultural production and consumption are concentrated in urban areas, leading to representation biases where urban experiences dominate while rural perspectives are often marginalized. This urban-centric bias in digital narratives not only silences rural voices but also perpetuates stereotypes about rural life, reinforcing cultural hierarchies that privilege urban modernity over rural traditions.

Figure 2
Factors Shaping Digital Inequality in Nigeria



Source: Developed by the author based on Onwujekwe et al. (2021), Cheng et al. (2020), Ahmed et al. (2020), Baum et al. (2021), Guo et al. (2021), and Gunlaugsson et al. (2020).

Figure 2 above provides a visual summary of the key factors shaping digital inequality in Nigeria. The top section identifies four interconnected factors: social class, education, urban-rural divide, and gender. Social class determines access to devices, internet, and digital skills. Education shapes digital literacy and the capacity for content production. The urban-rural divide reflects infrastructure and connectivity gaps. Gender influences access through social norms and cultural restrictions. The middle section shows how these factors intersect, creating compounded barriers for those at the intersection of multiple disadvantages, particularly women in rural areas with low education and income. The bottom section outlines policy imperatives to address these inequalities.

Digital literacy encompasses not only the ability to use technological devices but also the capacity to access, evaluate, and produce digital information. In Nigeria, the digital divide operates on two levels: access to technology and the ability to use it effectively (Hassankhani et al., 2021). Individuals with low digital literacy often struggle to interpret online information and are more susceptible to misinformation (Guo et al., 2021). The spread of false information through platforms such as WhatsApp highlights the importance of digital literacy in shaping cultural narratives. Furthermore, content production requires higher levels of literacy than content consumption. Those with advanced digital skills are more active in shaping narratives, while individuals with limited literacy tend to remain passive consumers or are excluded from digital participation altogether (Wicht et al., 2021). This dual divide, between access and skills, means that even when marginalized groups gain connectivity, they may still lack the competencies to participate meaningfully in digital cultural production.

Gender also plays a significant role in shaping digital access and participation. In many developing countries, women have lower access to technology than men, particularly in rural areas (Gunnlaugsson et al., 2020). Social and cultural norms often restrict women's use of technology, reinforcing gender-based digital inequalities. In Nigeria, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds and rural areas face compounded barriers, including limited access to technology and restrictive social norms, resulting in lower representation in digital content production. This gender gap in digital participation not only limits women's economic opportunities but also silences their voices in public discourse, perpetuating patriarchal narratives that marginalize women's experiences and perspectives. These factors, social class, education, geography, and gender, do not operate independently but interact and reinforce one another. Individuals in marginalized positions, such as women with low education living in rural areas, face significantly greater barriers to accessing and producing digital narratives (Campbell et al., 2020). In such contexts, social mediators like family or community can facilitate access to technology (Ahmed et al., 2020), though reliance on these mediators may also limit individual autonomy in cultural expression. The intersectional nature of digital inequality requires comprehensive and targeted interventions that address the multiple, overlapping barriers faced by different groups rather than treating each factor in isolation.

Addressing digital inequality in Nigeria requires comprehensive policy interventions. Expanding digital infrastructure in rural areas is essential but insufficient on its own. Efforts must also include improving digital literacy, expanding access to education, and reducing internet costs (Hassankhani et al.,

2021). Policies should incorporate gender sensitivity and social inclusion to ensure marginalized groups can participate in the digital economy. Urban development planning should also integrate equitable access to digital services (Onwujekwe et al., 2021). Moreover, supporting local content creation in indigenous languages and from marginalized communities can help diversify digital narratives and ensure that cultural representation reflects Nigeria's rich diversity rather than being dominated by urban, elite perspectives. Ultimately, addressing digital inequality requires a coordinated effort across government, civil society, and the private sector to create an inclusive digital ecosystem where all Nigerians can participate in shaping cultural narratives.

Social class, education, urban-rural disparities, and digital literacy are interconnected structural factors shaping participation in Nigeria's digital cultural economy. Digital transformation does not automatically lead to inclusion; rather, it risks reinforcing existing inequalities. Digital cultural narratives are currently dominated by urban, educated, and economically privileged groups, while marginalized communities continue to face significant barriers. Therefore, targeted policy interventions are necessary to ensure that digital transformation becomes an inclusive and sustainable tool for empowerment. Without such interventions, the digital divide will persist, and Nigeria's digital cultural landscape will remain a reflection of existing social hierarchies rather than a space for diverse voices and perspectives.

Negotiating Local Culture: Adaptation, Reinterpretation, and Narrative Transformation in the Digital Era

The development of digital technology has significantly transformed how societies construct, disseminate, and negotiate cultural meanings. In Nigeria, marked by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, digital platforms function not only as communication tools but also as cultural arenas where local values interact with global flows. This transformation is not linear; rather, it unfolds through complex negotiations between the continuity of tradition and digital innovation. Cultural narratives are not merely reproduced but are continuously adapted, reinterpreted, and transformed within evolving social and technological contexts. Understanding this dynamic is essential for comprehending how Nigerian communities navigate the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing digital modernity.

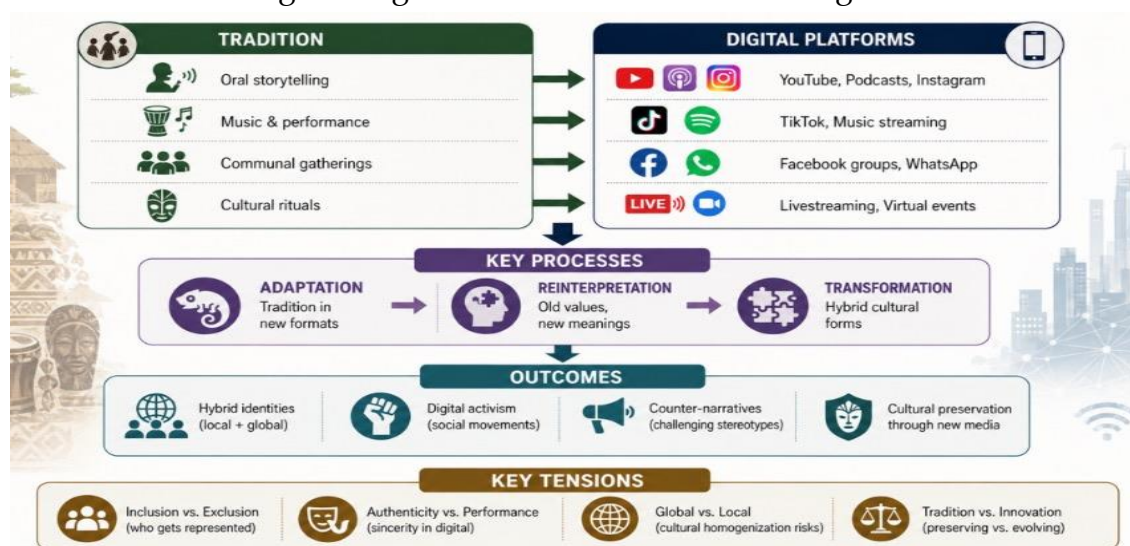
A key aspect of this dynamic is the role of tradition as the foundation of cultural narratives. Artistic communication practices such as storytelling, music, and performance have long served as primary media for transmitting values and

knowledge in Sub-Saharan Africa. These practices persist in the digital era by migrating to online platforms and adapting in form while retaining their cultural essence (Bunn et al., 2020). This indicates that digitalization does not erase tradition but expands its expressive space. In Nigeria, traditional oral storytelling has found new life on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, where storytellers adapt age-old tales into short videos, podcasts, and visual narratives. This migration demonstrates the resilience of cultural practices and their ability to evolve with changing technologies while maintaining their core meanings and functions.

Digital storytelling has transformed Nigeria's oral traditions into multimodal content that combines text, audio, and visuals, allowing individuals and communities to express their identities more widely and interactively (Carter et al., 2020). Through platforms such as Instagram, Nigerian creators share culturally grounded narratives that challenge Western stereotypes and present more diverse representations of contemporary Nigerian society. These digital spaces not only preserve local values but also reinterpret them for global audiences. Social media also plays a key role in strengthening collective identity and supporting digital activism. Platforms such as Twitter and Instagram facilitate the rapid spread of information and public engagement (Li et al., 2020). The #EndSARS movement demonstrated how digital media connected Nigerians across ethnic and religious boundaries, amplifying demands for police reform and social justice while bringing local issues to international

Figure 3

Digital Negotiation of Local Culture in Nigeria



Source: Developed by the author based on Bunn et al. (2020), Carter et al. (2020), Li et al. (2020), Petersen et al. (2020), and Walker et al. (2021).

Figure 3 above provides a visual summary of how local culture is negotiated in Nigeria's digital era. The top section shows the migration of traditional cultural practices, oral storytelling, music, communal gatherings, and rituals, onto digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp. The middle section identifies three key processes: adaptation (tradition in new formats), reinterpretation (old values acquiring new meanings), and transformation (emergence of hybrid cultural forms). The bottom section outlines outcomes including hybrid identities, digital activism, counter-narratives, and cultural preservation. The final section highlights key tensions: inclusion vs. exclusion, authenticity vs. performance, global vs. local, and tradition vs. innovation.

However, digital transformation also introduces new complexities in identity formation. Individuals express their identities differently depending on generational experiences and technological exposure (Mayer et al., 2020). Younger generations in Nigeria often blend local cultural elements with global communication styles, producing hybrid identities that reflect ongoing negotiation between locality and globalization. This underscores that digital identity is dynamic and continuously shaped through interaction. A Nigerian youth might combine traditional proverbs with internet memes, or dress in both indigenous attire and global streetwear, creating identities that are simultaneously local and global. These hybrid identities challenge rigid categorizations of culture, demonstrating that cultural identity in the digital age is fluid, contextual, and continuously evolving.

At the same time, engagement with digital media is inherently ambivalent. While digital platforms can strengthen social connections and community identity, they may also generate tensions and contradictions. Users often experience both inclusion and exclusion, particularly when traditional values intersect with global norms (Petersen et al., 2020). In Nigeria, this tension drives processes of reinterpretation that are not always harmonious. For example, discussions about gender roles, sexuality, or religious practices on social media often reveal deep divisions between traditionalists and progressives, reflecting broader societal debates about identity and morality. These digital debates, while sometimes contentious, also create spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding across different perspectives.

Digital narratives also shape social experiences through personal storytelling, including broader forms of lived-experience narratives. Such narratives contribute to collective understanding and social solidarity by transforming private experiences into public discourse (Rushforth et al., 2021). However, cultural norms and social stigma still influence how individuals express themselves online. Sensitive topics often remain constrained, although

the flexibility and anonymity of digital platforms can enable alternative narratives that challenge dominant norms (Snijder et al., 2021). In Nigeria, stories about mental health, domestic violence, or LGBTQ+ experiences that might be silenced in offline spaces find expression online, creating communities of support and advocacy that challenge stigma and promote social change. These counter-narratives demonstrate the emancipatory potential of digital media for marginalized voices.

Visual storytelling has become increasingly dominant in digital culture. The use of images, videos, and symbols enables powerful cross-cultural communication and supports the creation of counter-narratives advocating social justice (Spiegel et al., 2020). In Nigeria, visual representations of local culture serve both to preserve identity and to challenge global stereotypes. Nigerian photographers and videographers use platforms like Instagram to showcase the richness and diversity of Nigerian life, countering one-dimensional portrayals of Africa in Western media. These visual narratives not only affirm Nigerian identity but also educate global audiences about the complexity and vibrancy of Nigerian culture, contributing to a more nuanced global understanding of Africa. Nevertheless, unequal access to digital technology continues to shape participation in cultural production. Digital inequality limits the representation of marginalized groups, particularly rural communities (Walker et al., 2021). Although mobile technology has expanded access and participation, structural disparities remain. The negotiation of local culture in Nigeria's digital era reflects a dialectical relationship between tradition and technology. Local values persist as the foundation for cultural innovation, while adaptation, reinterpretation, and transformation function as interconnected processes. Digital culture in Nigeria thus emerges as a dynamic interplay between continuity and change, where individuals actively negotiate meaning, identity, and representation within an evolving global landscape. Ultimately, the future of Nigerian digital culture depends on the capacity of communities to harness digital technologies while preserving the cultural values that define their collective identity.

From Encoding to Decoding: Contestation of Meaning, Power, and Identity in Nigeria's Digital Cultural Narratives

The encoding/decoding framework developed by Stuart Hall (1980) provides a strong analytical foundation for understanding how digital cultural narratives in Nigeria are produced, distributed, and interpreted within complex local value systems. From this perspective, meaning is never fixed or singular; it is encoded

by message producers through particular ideological structures, yet remains open to negotiation, resistance, or transformation by audiences through the process of decoding. Thus, Nigeria's digital space can be understood as a discursive arena where various actors, content creators, religious leaders, and social media users, actively engage in the production and contestation of meaning rooted in tradition, religion, and ethnic identity. This framework illuminates how power relations operate in digital communication, revealing that meaning-making is always a site of struggle between dominant ideologies and alternative interpretations.

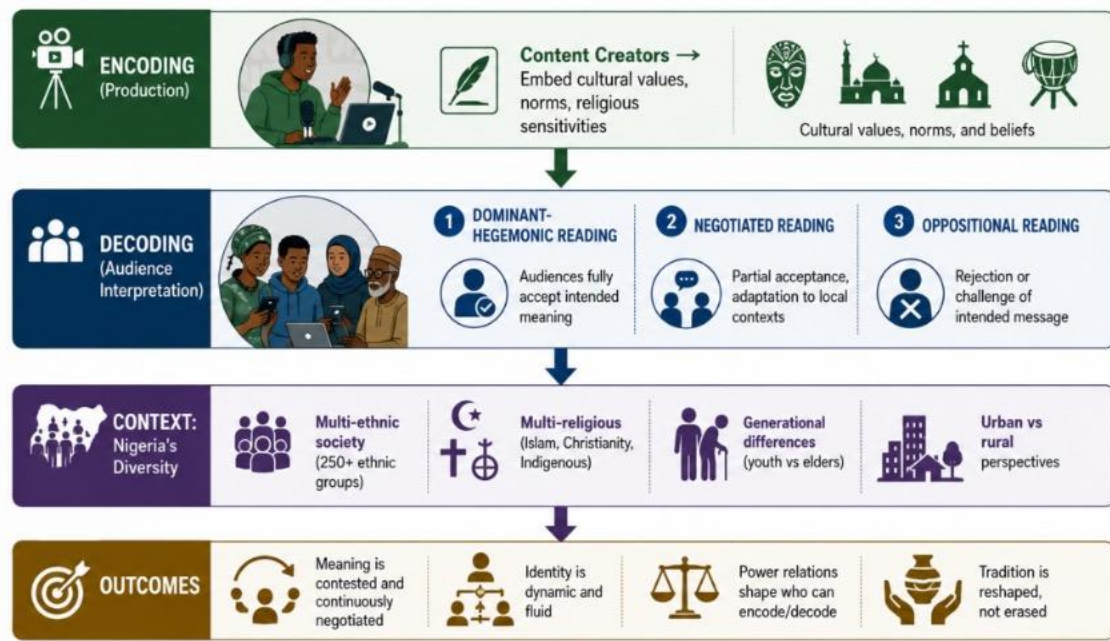
At the encoding stage, digital cultural narratives in Nigeria are profoundly shaped by long-standing cultural values, religious traditions, and social norms. These elements function not merely as contextual backgrounds but as active frameworks that influence how messages are constructed, framed, and communicated. Religious beliefs, in particular, play a significant role in determining which issues are considered appropriate for public discussion and how they are represented in digital spaces ([Bunn et al., 2020](#)). Consequently, digital content creators often encode their messages by taking into account religious sensitivities, moral expectations, and community values to ensure that their narratives are socially acceptable and culturally meaningful. This process demonstrates that encoding is never neutral but is embedded within broader cultural structures and power relations that shape communication practices. At the same time, content creators may strategically negotiate these cultural constraints by incorporating subtle critiques, alternative interpretations, or progressive perspectives without directly challenging dominant norms. However, as Hall argues, meaning is not fixed during production but continues to evolve through audience interpretation. At the decoding stage, audiences actively interpret digital narratives according to their social experiences, educational backgrounds, cultural identities, and ideological positions. Given Nigeria's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, the same digital content may generate dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings among different audience groups. This dynamic illustrates that digital communication is an interactive process in which meaning is continuously negotiated between producers and audiences rather than simply transmitted from one to another.

Hall identifies three primary reading positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. In the dominant reading, audiences accept the intended meaning; in the negotiated reading, they partially accept it while adapting it to local contexts; and in the oppositional reading, they reject or challenge the intended message. This dynamic is evident in Nigeria's digital culture. Content addressing sensitive issues such as gender, sexuality, or mental

health often generates varied interpretations depending on the audience's cultural background. While social norms may constrain acceptance of certain narratives (Snijder et al., 2021), digital media also provides space for oppositional readings. In particular, younger generations use digital platforms to challenge traditional norms and propose alternative interpretations of social reality. For example, discussions about women's rights or LGBTQ+ issues on Nigerian social media often reveal a spectrum of responses, from full endorsement of progressive views to negotiated acceptance with cultural modifications to outright rejection based on religious or traditional beliefs.

Figure 4

Encoding/Decoding in Nigeria's Digital Cultural Narratives



Source: Developed by the author based on Hall (1980; 1990), Bunn et al. (2020), Snijder et al. (2021), and Li et al. (2020).

Figure 4 above provides a visual summary of the encoding/decoding process in Nigeria's digital cultural narratives. The top section shows the encoding stage, where content creators embed cultural values, norms, and religious sensitivities into their messages. The middle section illustrates Hall's three reading positions: dominant-hegemonic (full acceptance), negotiated (partial acceptance with adaptation), and oppositional (rejection or challenge). The lower section highlights the context of Nigeria's diversity, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, generational differences, and urban-rural divides, which shapes decoding practices. The bottom section shows outcomes: meaning is contested and

negotiated, identity is dynamic, power relations shape participation, and tradition is reshaped rather than erased.

Moreover, encoding/decoding dynamics in Nigeria's digital context are closely linked to the characteristics of digital technology itself. Digital media enables interactivity, participation, and decentralized content production, blurring the boundaries between producers and consumers. Social media users are not only consumers but also active producers and distributors of their own narratives (Li et al., 2020). In Hall's framework, this suggests that encoding and decoding occur simultaneously and recursively, creating continuous cycles of meaning production. Unlike traditional broadcast media where encoding and decoding are separated in time and space, digital media collapses these distinctions. A Nigerian user might consume content, reinterpret it, and immediately produce their own version, contributing to an ongoing, fluid conversation about cultural meaning. This recursive process democratizes meaning-making while also complicating it, as multiple interpretations circulate simultaneously, often in tension with one another.

Digital storytelling further illustrates this process. By combining audio, visual, textual, and personal elements, it produces rich and multidimensional narratives (Carter et al., 2020; Mayer et al., 2020). In Nigeria, such practices are used to represent ethnic identity, religious experiences, and local values in ways that resonate with global audiences. However, these representations are never ideologically neutral; they reflect particular positions and remain open to multiple interpretations. A digital story about Igbo cultural practices, for instance, may be viewed as authentic cultural preservation by some, as essentialist stereotyping by others, and as a hybrid adaptation by still others. This multiplicity of interpretations reflects the diversity of Nigerian society and the contested nature of cultural representation in digital spaces. Hall's concept of cultural identity also provides important insights into how identity is negotiated in digital spaces. Identity is not fixed but continuously constructed through representation (Hall, 1990). In Nigeria, ethnic and religious identities are not passively reproduced but actively reconstructed through digital interactions. Digital media can both strengthen community belonging and enable reinterpretation of identity (Petersen et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2021). Thus, Nigeria's digital identity emerges as a dynamic outcome of ongoing negotiations between local values and global influences.

Importantly, these processes occur within conditions of structural inequality. Access to digital technology in Nigeria remains uneven, shaped by economic, infrastructural, and geographical factors (Torrance et al., 2021). This inequality affects who has the capacity to encode narratives and who remains

primarily in the position of audience. From Hall's perspective, meaning production is always tied to power relations, where not all voices have equal opportunities to be heard. Those with limited digital access or literacy are more likely to be consumers rather than producers of cultural narratives, limiting their ability to shape public discourse. Conversely, those with greater resources and skills dominate the encoding process, shaping the narratives that circulate widely. This asymmetry reinforces existing social hierarchies, as dominant groups maintain their influence over cultural representation while marginalized voices struggle to be heard.

The application of encoding/decoding theory demonstrates that digital cultural narratives in Nigeria are not static products but the result of complex negotiations between producers and audiences, between local values and global influences, and between structures of power and individual agency. Digitalization does not erase tradition; rather, it reshapes how traditions are represented, contested, and reinterpreted. In this sense, meaning remains open, contested, and dependent on the socio-cultural positions of those engaged in communication processes. The encoding/decoding framework thus provides a powerful lens for understanding the dynamic and contested nature of cultural production in Nigeria's digital landscape, revealing that meaning is always a site of struggle where multiple voices compete for recognition and influence.

Conclusion

The transformation of digital cultural narratives in Nigeria reflects a complex and dynamic process shaped by the interaction between technology, local values, and social structures. Cultural narratives are not merely transferred into digital spaces but are continuously negotiated through processes of encoding and decoding involving multiple actors. Meaning is produced, contested, and reinterpreted in relation to religious beliefs, ethnic identities, and social norms that remain deeply embedded in Nigerian society. This study concludes that digital media does not replace tradition but reconfigures it into new forms of expression that are more adaptive and participatory. Audiences play an active role in shaping meaning, resulting in diverse interpretations ranging from acceptance to resistance. However, these processes are not free from structural constraints. Inequalities in access to technology continue to shape participation and influence whose voices are represented in digital narratives.

Therefore, the development of an inclusive digital ecosystem is essential to ensure balanced representation and sustainable cultural transformation in Nigeria. This study contributes to the literature by extending Hall's encoding/decoding framework to the Nigerian digital context, analyzing

structural inequalities that shape digital participation, and offering insights into how local values are negotiated in digital spaces. The findings have practical implications for policymakers, cultural practitioners, and platform developers. Future research should address the study's limitations through empirical investigations, including ethnographic studies of digital audiences and comparative analysis across African countries. Ultimately, the integration of technology, digital literacy, and local values is key to building an inclusive and sustainable digital cultural ecosystem in Nigeria.

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Ethical Approval

This study is a literature review based exclusively on secondary data from published academic journals, official reports, and policy documents. It does not involve primary data collection from human subjects, animals, or any form of direct intervention. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this research.

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