Video in the Lives of Nigerian Children: Some Socio-Cultural Implications

by Innocent Okoye*

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the social and cultural implications of the new culture of video watching in the lives of Lagos children (those below 16 years) against the background of Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis.

The new media that have assumed positions of importance in Lagos are home video (hence the present interest in it), computers, facsimile and satellite dish. An analysis of some of the favourite video films in vogue shows that they are foreign, mostly American, popular entertainment two-hour films with little to offer for the proper development of the Nigerian child. The writer argues that this does not augur well for the preservation of Nigerian culture.

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La Video dans la Vie des Enfants Nigérians

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Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude est d'examiner les implications sociales et culturelles de la nouvelle culture de la vidéo dans la vie des enfants (de moins de 16 ans) sur la toile de fond de l'hypothèse de cultivation de Gebner.

Les nouvelles média qui ont acquis de l'importance à Lagos sont la vidéo de plus en plus utilisées dans les domiciles (raison pour laquelle cette étude s'y intéresse), les ordinateurs, le fax et l'antenne hyperbolique. Une étude de quelques unes des films-vidéo favoris parmi ceux qui étaient en vogue à l'époque de l'étude a montré qu'il s'agissait de films de divertissement pur et simple, d'origine étrangère, plus généralement de provenance américaine, d'une durée de deux heures qui n'avaient rien à offrir en ce qui concerne le développement de l'enfant nigérian.

L'avis de l'auteur est que cela ne présage rien de bon sur le plan dela préservation de la culture nigériane.

Introduction

Soon after Sony of Japan made the first home video in 1975 the new technology found its way into Nigeria. It is hardly surprising, since Nigerians are known to be great users of mass communication technology, owning and consuming more media messages than all of black Africa combined (Salama, 1978). The country's 88.5 million population is served by about 300 regular publications, 89 per cent own radios and 12.4 million homes own television sets (RMS, 1990). Today, less than two decades after its invention, home video has become a regular feature of middle class homes in Lagos and other urban areas in Nigeria. This follows a well-known pattern that mass media are both elitist and urban-based in most of the developing countries (McNelly and Deutschmann, 1963; Carter and Supulveda, 1964; Mishra, 1970; Lowenstein, 1970; Nwuneli, 1984).

The Problem

Ownership of a video cassette recorder (VCR) enables the user to dictate and select the entertainment material he wants and the time of exposure, which is not usual with normal television watching. At the same time, the viewer enjoys a privacy which is absent in the case of public TV or cinema. Other advantages of video include the ability to play back programmes and the ability to relay action in slow motion. In many Lagos homes, the video has become rival of local TV, what with the poor quality programmes shown on TV. Kinner (1988) captures the situation most appropriately:

> ... the video cassette has become a substitute for television. In fact, the VCR trade has become big business in Nigeria. Rather than establish an independent programme outfit, it seems more lucrative to create a video duplicating service. In such a situation of high demand, copyright enforcement is not just hard, it is almost futile.

In Lagos commercial video dubbing centres are all over the place. For a little fee of ₦5 any film on video can be dubbed for a patron. Already dubbed tapes are readily available for between ₦40 to ₦60 depending on the quality of the tape. Also video rental services are available at almost every street corner. Some centres provide such services to registered members only mostly youths and adults who rent them for their wards.

Consequently, many non-working class Lagosians, especially children and the youth, have embraced video as a favourite source of

entertainment and passing time and become addicted to the new technology. The children seem to be taking undue advantage of the following characteristics of home video:

(a) It affords the children more freedom to select their own material and choose their viewing time.
(b) More privacy is afforded by video, hence children can watch programmes alone or with their peers when adults are away from home.
(c) In the absence of adults to guide viewers, the children become their own counsellors, interpreting and misinterpreting the contents as they deem fit.

Yet the Cinematograph (Film Censorship) Regulations (1964), still in operation, places all films to be shown in Nigeria into three broad ratings or classifications, namely,

(a) A-rated films, approved for exhibition to children under 16 only when accompanied by an adult.
(b) U-rated films, approved for universal exhibition.
(c) X-rated, approved for exhibition when no child under 16 is present.

Ekwuazi (1987) notes that all local films made (as at 1986) were U-rated. This means that Nigeria's film Censors Committee tries to ensure that films approved for exhibition to children are suitable for their proper development. But then, how many video films now being watched by Nigerian children can pass the censors Committee's acid test? Most of the video films are imported commercial productions pirated by local hawkers who are not concerned with who watches them. Many Nigerian children on their own buy or borrow and watch video films meant for adults only. This state of affairs naturally raises a number of social, cultural, political and economic problems.

The purpose of this study is to examine the social and cultural implications of the new culture of video watching in the lives of Lagos children (below 16 years).

This is an exploratory study prompted by the observed trend in many middle class homes in the Lagos area. Youngsters now stay long hours at home alone watching video while their mums and house maids toil away in the kitchen.

It is hoped that the points raised can be developed into full-blown empirical studies leading to explanations of various aspects of the uses of the so-called new communication technologies or new media. The new media that have assured positions of importance in Lagos are home video, computers, fascimile and satellite dish. But it is assumed

that the one most accessible to Nigerian children as yet is home video, hence the present interest in it.

Theoretical Orientation

For more than half a century now, there has been growing concern about the social influence of the mass media. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) suggested four reasons why the public and social critics are worried about the impact of the mass media:

(a) alarm over the ubiquity of the mass media and their alleged power to manipulate people;
(b) fear that the power elite in a society will use the mass media to reinforce the status quo;
(c) belief that mass entertainment lowers aesthetic tastes and standards for popular culture in its effort to attract and hold the largest possible audiences; and
(d) belief that mass media entertainment wastes our leisure time that could be better spent on self-improvement or on other worthy activities.

Consequently, numerous studies have been undertaken on the effects of various media contents, particularly sex, crime and violence, on children and adolescents. With time, research interest shifted temporarily to the different motives for media use and the gratifications derived by so doing.

Herta Herzogs classical study (1942) titled "What do we really know about daytime serial listeners", is one of the earliest enquiries in the so-called uses and gratifications approach. In the face of continued public fear that "bad" media content, particularly via television, could adversely affect the behaviour of young people, governmental bodies have had to commission studies to ascertain if such fears were justified. In the U.S., for example, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare authorised the formation of a Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behaviour to investigate scientifically the harmful effects, if any, of televised crime and violence, particularly in leading to antisocial behaviour and especially by children. The summary of the finding of the committee published in 1972 is that "any such causal relation operates only on some children (who are predisposed to be aggressive); and an indication that it operates only in some environmental contexts". Wright (1986) says that this report generated a lot of other studies, noting that by 1982 more than 2,500 research publications had appeared on television's influence on behaviour. The number of studies may have doubled to date. Some

important things about the studies on the effect of mass mediated messages must be pointed out at this stage.

(a) Most of them are psychologically based, being interested in the individual.
(b) Most of the studies were undertaken in the U.S. and Western Europe. There are very few studies, if any (even replications of the American studies) on the effects of mass communication in the developing countries. Against the backdrop of cultural differences, replication of those American studies in Nigeria becomes inevitable before general conclusions can be arrived at.
(c) More importantly, there is no agreement among researchers as to whether the media can be held responsible for certain suspected adverse effects, the problem that gave rise to most of the enquiries, in the first place.
(d) One conclusion which is shared by many researchers is that, if there are any effects at all, they will vary among different groups of people. The inconclusiveness of the "effects" studies naturally gave rise to other models of looking at the relationship between television and its young audience. One of these models is the cultivation hypothesis.

The Cultivation Hypothesis

A phenomenal content analysis of over 1,600 programmes and 14,000 characters of American prime television drama was conducted by George Gerbner and his associates between 1967 and 1982. These series of studies which became known as Studies of Cultural Indicators resulted in a new way of looking at television effects called the cultivation hypothesis or cultivation theory. According to this theory, heavy television viewers would tend to take the social reality portrayed by television as the same as real life. If light viewers and heavy viewers were asked questions about any aspect of life constantly portrayed on television, heavy viewers would give television answers to those questions of life, implying that they have adopted the television portrayal of life as reality.

According to Gerbner *et al.* (1982), one of the implications of this is that heavy viewers would tend to over-estimate such matters as the rate of crimes and violence in real life and the chances of the viewer becoming a victim of crime. Critics of the cultivation theory insist that many research findings have failed to replicate the theory. Others point at methodological inconsistencies and both external and internal validity as some of the weaknesses of the theory. However, Gerbner and his associates insist that the theory has stood the test of critical verification over a long period of time.

Although Gerbner's cultivation theory is based on findings using American television drama and its audience, it has implications for Lagos video watchers since most of the video films watched here are American. It is our conjecture that the implications for Nigeria may be more serious since the video reality internalised by the Nigerian audience may be unrelated to the Nigerian reality. Serious problems may now arise if the Nigerian child is made to see reality from the American point of view. This may result in the creation of a "double pseudo-reality", with adverse consequences for national development.

An Analysis of Favourite Video Films

The films listed below may be analysed and classified in terms of their country of origin, content, duration and their suitability for the development of the Nigerian child. One finds that most of them are American, with contents portraying American life styles and values. They are also mostly violence-oriented with the kind of action-packed scenes typical of popular movies. An overwhelming majority of the heroes and heroines are white, with black men still playing undignified roles. In "The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin", for example, a former black president is portrayed with crudity and disrespect. In "The Wild Geese" a small band of white men beats the entire security system of a black country and escapes with the most wanted man. Most of the black men in the movies are indeed carricatures of characters who repudiate Africaness and blackness and try to imitate the white man in speech and behaviour. None of the films attempt to recreate any aspect of the African folklore nor emphasise any typically African values. Success in the films is defined largely as accidental and irrational and there is excessive normlessness about the proper way to succeed in life. Most of the heroes and heroines indeed shortcircuit the process of success, thereby making a mockery of honest labour. The plots of the stories are pedestrian as the aim of the film maker is not to task the brain but rather to offer cheap leisure and show off new consumer items which the viewer is thereby urged to acquire.

In terms of suitability to the development of children, only very few of the films such as "The Sound of Music", "The Karate Kid", "B.L. Striker," "Auntie Sue" and "Problem Child" can scale the hurdle of strict censorship. Yet all these films without exception, are watched daily by children of all ages. It must be pointed in fairness to the producers that some of these movies are clearly marked "18", with a warning that those below 18 years of age should not watch them. But who heeds these warnings?

The following films were found in the collection of a resident of

Festac Town, Lagos:

	Name of Film	Kind of film	Country of Origin	Duration (hrs)
1.	The Devil Obsession	Horror	America	2
2.	The Wild Geese	War	America	2
3.	Too Young to die	Documentary	America	2
4.	Go kill and come back	Western	America	2
5.	Rocky Seven	Comedy	Hong Kong	2
6.	A bridge too far	War	British	3
7.	Freedom Fighters	War	British	2
8.	Gang Star Wars I	Magic	US	2
9.	Boncave and Perfect hero	Horror	British	2
10.	The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin	Documentary	British	2
11.	Gang Star Wars II	Magic	US	2
12.	BL Striker: Auntie Sue	Mafia	British	2
13.	Erotic dates	Erotica	US	1.5
14.	Don't go in the House	Horror	British	2
15.	Lionman and Witch Queen	Documentary	British	2
16.	Problem Child II	Comedy	US	2
17	Revenge of Ironfisted Maiden	Action	Hong Kong	2
16.	Problem Child I	Comedy	US	2
17.	The Sound of Music	Musical	British	3
18.	The Story of Jesus	Religious		3
19.	Splash I	Comedy	US	2
20.	The Karate Kid	Comedy	US	2
21.	Quo Vadis	Religious	British	2
23.	Scar Face (Mafia)	Mafia	US	3
24.	Project 'A' Part I	Comedy	Hong Kong	2
25.	From Africa With Love	Animal	British	2
26.	Samson and Delila	Religious	British	2
27.	Thief of Bagdad	Documentary	British	2
28.	Death Wish	Mafia	US	2
29.	Brenda Fasie Share	Musical	South Africa	2
30.	Shinamania (Liveplay latest)	Musical	Nigeria	2
31.	Dodge City	Western	US	2
32.	Striker Action	War	US	2
33.	Terminator 2	War	US	2
34.	Moses	Religious	US	2

Some Socio-Cultural Implications of the Video Culture

A situation whereby growing children watch all kinds of foreign films all day long unaccompanied by adults is bound to have serious socio-cultural implications. Lets now consider some of these implications.

Hitherto television watching was an evening affair, as most stations in the country begin their day's broadcast about 3.30 p.m. with programmes designed especially for children. But video watching begins much earlier in the day, as soon as the children return from school on work days and as early as 8 a.m. on Saturdays and during the holidays. Indeed, video watching is now the dominant pastime, relegating to the background other activities such as playing and home studies. Perhaps with time heavy video viewers will start performing poorly at school as they no longer devote enough time to their home work. It is also possible that future generations of Nigerian children will become more individualistic than their fathers as they now quarantine themselves in their living rooms watching video instead of socialising with their peers in the neighbourhood.

Furthermore, heavy viewers of home video will become victims of the commonality of outlooks which Gerbner et al. (1982) called mainstreaming. Mainstreaming is one of the two effects in TV's influencing of reality whereby heavy viewers of various social strata acquire the same perceptions of the world, i.e., differences between usually heterogeneous social categories disappear. It has already been pointed out that television reality is false reality even in situations where television portrays local happenings. What happens where foreign cultures and values are constantly on display? It is conjectured that heavy video viewers will be further alienated from the local surroundings, thereby making them strangers in their own country. Things like water scarcity, desert encroachment, erosion and the other problems suffered by ruralites will continue to sound strange to the Lagos video viewer because they are subject matters which are never ever addressed by the video films. Moreover, heavy video watchers may show a marked disinclination to watch local television whose programmes are poorly produced and local. They will therefore be more ignorant about current news than light viewers who balance video watching with local television watching.

It is almost certain that the video culture will create Nigerians who will completely repudiate their cultural heritage, thereby complicating further the problem of national development. They are not heeding M'Bow's (1977) warning that "in order to develop, a society must remain true to itself, draw its strength from its own culture and ways of thought and action and set itself objectives consonant with its

values and felt needs".

An underlying factor in the production of American entertainment software is consumerism (Schiller, 1969). All those constantly exposed to them will learn of new ways of life and the new products that go with them. The resultant enhancement of tastes without a corresponding improvement of the means of satisfying them would create a situation of rising expectation and rising frustration. With the recent massive devaluation of the Naira and the double digit inflation in Nigeria it is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy the taste for foreign goods. The rising incidents of drug trafficking, armed robbery and "advance fee frauds" may well be an indirect consequence of the video culture.

Other implications of the video culture include the increase of copyright violations with it adverse effect on artistic creativity and the erosion of moral standards by "low brow" entertainment and erotica.

Summary and Recommendations

This paper has examined the socio-cultural implications of the current video culture in Lagos, against the background of Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis. An analysis of some of the favourite video films in vogue shows that they are foreign, mostly American, popular two-hour films with little to offer for the proper development of the Nigerian child. Heavy viewership of video may create a Nigerian child who may be more individualistic and more ignorant about Nigeria than his father, and who may have low moral standards and acquire elevated taste which his resources cannot support, in other words, a more frustrated and alienated citizen. Furthermore, there will be a commonality of outlooks which Gerbner et al. (1982) say will result if everybody watches the same programme across social and cultural boundaries. This will not augur well for national development as the preservation of our folklore is essential to the development process. The following recommendations are suggested:

(1) The film censorship committee should make an effort to ensure that video films sold in the country meet the stipulated standards.
(2) Parents should be educated on the proper films for children and why children must be accompanied by adults when watching certain films.
(3) Parents should be told that video watching is not necessarily superior to other forms of leisure as some parents erroneously believe. Nor should there be an overdose of foreign material if video must be watched. More Nigerian films should be shown in order to teach Nigerian values.
(4) There should also be a balance between video watching and local

television watching. Entertainment should not be at the expense of news and current affairs.

(5) Empirical studies should be conducted on various aspects of the video culture such as the effects of violent fare on children's behaviour, whether there is a relationship between the video culture and crime and the implications of the video culture for copyright and artistic performance. This is necessary in order to remedy the current near total absence of quantitative and qualitative data on the new technology in Nigeria. As Sobowale (1988) puts it, "each stride in technology has been accompanied by a change in the status quo". It behoves communication scholars to find out how and to what extent the status quo has been so changed.

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