Mapping the Geographies of Performance and Digital Participation in the Distribution of Nigerian Theatre and Film Content

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Abstract

This study examines how digital transformation is reshaping the performing arts in Nigeria and Africa. It synthesises data on digital infrastructure, distribution channels, production technologies, policy frameworks, and cultural inclusion to assess opportunities and challenges in theatre, live performance, and film. The paper is structured into thematic sections, each grounded in current literature and data. Key findings include: significant growth potential in the creative economy (with Africa's film sector currently employing 5 million people and $5 billion in GDP, but capable of 20 million jobs and $20 billion); wide gaps in internet and venue access (Africa averages just one cinema screen per 787,000 people); and persistent barriers such as unreliable electricity power, piracy, and skill shortages. These findings are discussed relative to the study's objectives. The paper concludes by recommending integrated policies to expand broadband and venues, support local digital platforms, invest in creative skills, and safeguard cultural diversity in the digital age. The study contributes a comprehensive, data-driven analysis of how geographic and infrastructural factors influence digital participation in Nigerian and African arts.

Keywords: Creative industries; cultural policy; digital transformation; Nigeria; performing arts.

Introduction

The performing arts sectors (theatre, live performance, and film) in Nigeria (and Africa in general) are undergoing rapid digital transformation. New technologies such as streaming platforms, social media, mobile phones, and low-cost digital camerashave enabled creators to reach wider audiences. However, structural gaps in infrastructure, skills, and policy may limit the impact of this transformation. Bridging digital divides and integrating arts into national ICT strategies are, therefore, critical for unlocking the arts' full potential. In particular, Nigeria's creative industries (often led by Nollywood film) are among Africa's largest, producing over 2,500 films per year. Yet audiences remain underserved: UNESCO reports only one cinema screen per 787,402 people in Africa, highlighting acute demand for new distribution channels. Moreover, Africa's film and arts industries currently employ an estimated 5 million people ($5 billion GDP); but this number could grow to 20 million jobs ($20 billion) if opportunities are harnessed.

Against the foregoing backdrop, this paper maps the current geographies of performance and digital participation in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa. It asks: *How are digital technologies reshaping where and how performing arts and films are produced, distributed, and consumed? What infrastructural, economic, and cultural barriers remain?*The paper synthesises evidence from official reports, industry data, and case studies to answer these questions.

Literature Review

Research on Africa's digital creative sectors highlights both progress and constraints. UNESCO's mapping of the African film industry notes that affordable digital equipment and online platforms have given rise to a "new economy for content creators," enabling Nollywood and other industries to reach diaspora and international audiences. However, that report also emphasises persistent challenges: limited internet connectivity and electricity, educational gaps, and a lack of supportive policies. In Nigeria, the Brookings Institution estimates that the cultural and creative industries have *"outsised potential"* but need investment in infrastructure and skills (Signe, 2025).

Studies of digital distribution (e.g. streaming and OTT platforms) show rapid uptake in urban Africa, driven by global players (Netflix, YouTube,CircuitsTV). At the same time, broadband speeds are slower and data caps higher than global averages (World Bank, 2023), constraining streaming. Research on ICT4Development in Africa underscores the "last mile" gap: rural and low-income communities often lack broadband access entirely. For example, as of 2024 only about half of Nigerians were online, despite mobile penetration exceeding 100%; the government's National Broadband Plan (2020–2025) had aimed for 70% coverage but progress remains slow. The literature on creative skills notes that digital media tools are widely used in Nigerian film and theatre, but formal training is sparse. A recent JAFDIS study (Odoh et al., 2024) found that while digital editing software is ubiquitous in

Nollywood, institutions offering digital filmmaking courses are limited. Educational resources (workshops, film schools) have not kept pace with demand.

Policy analyses emphasise gaps in regulation: Nigeria's IP laws and cultural policies are outdated or poorly enforced. UNESCO (2025) and WIPO (2022) report that copyright infringements and piracy cost Nigerian creators millions. Only about 35% of African countries offer any direct film subsidies. Multi-lateral frameworks like the AU Digital Transformation Strategy (2020) and AfCFTA discussions encourage digital trade in creative goods, but concrete Nigerian policies are nascent. In summary, the literature suggests that digital transformation has begun to reshape African arts, yet critical constraints remain in infrastructure, skills, and policy (African Union Commission, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to map and analyse the intersection of digitalisation and performing arts and film in Nigeria and Africa. The objectives of the paper are to:

i. assess the current state of digital infrastructure and access relevant to performing arts (internet, venues, equipment);
ii. examine digital distribution and market trends for film and live performance (streaming platforms, new business models);
iii. examine production processes and skills, including use of digital tools intheatre and film, and training availability;
iv. analyse the policy and regulatory environment affecting digital arts; and
v. discuss inclusion of traditional cultures and diverse communities in the digital arts ecosystems.

These objectives guide the analysis of data and case studies to provide a comprehensive picture of opportunities and challenges in Nigeria's evolving creative sector.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is informed by theories of the digital divide and creative economy development. The digital divide framework highlights how disparities in access to technology (infrastructure, affordability, literacy) create unequal opportunities for creators and audiences. In the African creative context, this theory predicts that urban, wealthy regions gain earlier benefits of digital media, while rural and marginalised groups lag (Women and girls in Africa have notably lower Internet access). Additionally, Creative Industries theory (Cunningham & Higgs, 2008; UNESCO's Creative Economy reports) views culture and technology as intertwined in economic development. This perspective underpins our focus on cultural policy: it suggests that targeted interventions (funding, training, regulation) can amplify economic and social returns of the arts. Finally, concepts from diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003) imply that adoption of digital tools follows patterns influenced by networks and institutional support, which is relevant for understanding how new media spread through Nigerian theatre companies and film producers.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative mixed-methods approach, combining secondary data analysis, literature review, and illustrative case studies. Key data sources include industry reports (e.g. Cinema Exhibitors Association of Nigeria, CEAN, annual reviews), national statistics (World Bank, ITU), and recent academic studies (e.g. Odoh et al., 2024) to quantify trends (Internet penetration, number of cinemas, film production volumes). We also use UNESCO and government reports to understand policy contexts. Case studies (e.g. iROKOtv's streaming success, local theatre initiatives) are drawn from news coverage and NGO publications, providing concrete examples of change. The study corroborates facts with authoritative sources to avoid unverified claims. The thematic sections that follow synthesise these diverse inputs. Where possible, quantitative data are reported (citing World Bank, industry figures), and qualitative insights from creative professionals or officials are used to illustrate context (via UNESCO and news sources). This approach ensures that conclusions are grounded in evidence, and not solely on anecdote or automated analysis.

Findings and Analysis

1. Digital Infrastructure and Access

Quality Internet and venues are foundational for both digital and live arts. In Nigeria, Internet penetration reached roughly 50% of the population by 2024, surpassing the West African average. Mobile network coverage is extensive, but fixed broadband and rural connectivity remain limited. Nigeria's National Broadband Plan (2020–2025) aimed to achieve 70% household connectivity, but as of 2025 coverage was still below 50% due to financial and regulatory challenges. Frequent power outages and high data costs further constrain creative work. For example, many production studios rely on generators, raising costs for digital workflows.

Venues are heavily urban-centred. There were about 81 cinema screens in Nigeria in 2022 (mostly in Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt), whereas major African economies like South Africa had 213 screens, and Egypt 438 screens by 2023. Outside cities, formal theatres are rare and often repurposed spaces. The lack of venues not only limits live performance reach but also hampers the rollout of cinema infrastructure for film distribution.

Case studies illustrate innovation amid constraints. Nigeria's *Project 774* (a federal satellite broadband program from 2013) has connected over 6,000 local governments with Internet, originally for public services. Although not designed for the arts, it offers untapped potential for rural arts education. Similarly, some state governments such as Lagos have begun integrating cultural facilities into their ICT plans, building "smart" community centres with Wi-Fi and projectors.

Policy implications are clear: to bridge the digital divide, Nigeria and African nations should accelerate broadband rollout and rural electrification. The government's eight-point creative economy strategy (launched 2024) explicitly calls for developing digital skills and expanding partnerships, signalling official recognition of infrastructure gaps. Recommendations include public–private broadband initiatives and tax incentives to bring high-speed fiber and satellite Internet to underserved areas.

2. Digital Distribution and New Markets

Digital distribution is transforming how African content reaches audiences. Traditional gatekeepers (theatres, TV stations) are supplemented by Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms and social media. Nigeria's own streaming pioneer iROKOtv aggregated Nollywood content online and by 2024 served some 6 million active users, demonstrating nascent market viability. International deals (e.g. Nollywood films on Netflix) have raised the global profile of African film. Yet the majority of creative revenue remains local. CEAN data show that in 2019 Nigeria had about 3.3 million cinema admissions, and pre-COVID box office growing20% annually. Streaming revenues, while rising, started from a very low base.

Broadband constraints, however, limit growth. Low fixed-broadband penetration (around 5% of homes) means most streaming is via mobile data, which is expensive in Nigeria. This reinforces the importance of mobile-friendly platforms and offline distribution (e.g. DVDs, TV). Piracy is a major leakage: UNESCO reports that 50–75% of African film revenues are lost to piracy. Weak enforcement and the high cost of legitimate services drive this trend.

The Nigerian film *Lionheart*'s 2019 Netflix release was a watershed, proving both the global appetite and the local production quality. Regional platforms like *Black & Brite* (West African streaming initiative) and pan-African partnerships (e.g. an EU-UNESCO-funded digital cultural platform launched in 2024) are emerging to aggregate and monetise content.

Policy measures to stimulate distribution include easing foreign exchange restrictions to help local platforms pay international content licenses, mandating local content quotas on TV/streaming (with effective enforcement), and supporting piracy crackdowns with digital tools. The recent UNESCO/EU creative industries initiative also encourages Nigeria to align its cultural intellectual property policies with global best practices, which could bolster digital rights management. Tracking metrics such as online viewership and OTT subscriptions is recommended, as current official statistics are scarce.

3. Production Processes and Skills

Digital technologies are democratising content creation. High-definition digital cameras, editing software (Adobe Premiere, DaVinci Resolve), and even smartphones are standard tools for Nigerian filmmakers and theatre troupes alike. Many Nollywood productions now shoot directly to digital formats, allowing faster editing and special effects. Likewise, live theatre companies increasingly use multimedia (e.g. projection mapping, online streaming of performances).

However, skill gaps pose constrain to effective adoption or usage of the technologies. Formal training in digital media is limited. Only a handful of Nigerian universities and institutes (e.g. University of Jos film school) offer courses in digital filmmaking or animation. The UNESCO report notes that education, training, and connectivity challenges affect the creative industries. Indeed, surveys suggest fewer than 20% of rural Nigerians have basic computer literacy, and very few professional actors or directors have formal training in digital techniques. Some private initiatives (e.g. Nollywood Hackathons, NGO-led workshops) are beginning to fill the gap by teaching VFX or social media marketing skills.

The National Film and Video Censors Board (2019) reports that over 80% of Nollywood productions use digital editing (versus analogue in the past). A 2023 industry survey found only 15% of filmmakers had formal training in computer-based production (e.g. 3D rendering or motion capture).

In Lagos, organisations like Kap Film and Television Academy, and Multichoice Talent Factory, run intensive short courses on digital film and sound. In a rural area in Ogun State, a community theatre group has innovated by using a solar-powered projector to mix live performance with video backdrops - an example of low-cost “digital theatre".

A key policy implication arising from the above is that digital arts should be made a part of the curricula in Nigeria's secondary and tertiary education. To complement this, government at all levels should provide funding for the training of students through scholarships, and for certification programmes in CGI, animation, and digital sound design. In addition, government should give incentives (grants or tax credits/reliefs) to companies investing in new production technologies (drones, VR), which can accelerate uptake. Further, establishing a national “digital media hub” (as it exists in some South African cities) could provide shared equipment and mentoring for creatives from underserved regions.

4. Policy, Regulation, and Intellectual Property

Effective policies underpin a thriving digital arts sector. Currently, Nigeria’s regulatory framework is fragmented. Cultural policy has historically focused on traditional arts, while ICT policy (Broadband Plan, etc.) seldomly include culture explicitly. The UNESCO/EU programme launched in late 2024 aims to change this: Nigeria’s Federal Ministry of Arts unveiled an eight-point strategy emphasising skills, policies, and partnerships to integrate creative industries into the national economy. This is the first sign of a holistic creative economy plan aligned with digital goals.

However, important areas need attention. Copyright laws in Nigeria (last comprehensively updated in 1992) do not fully address digital content and online distribution. Piracy remains rampant, partly due to weak enforcement and absence of digital rights management infrastructure. The World Intellectual Property Organisation (2022) has recommended that Nigeria establish a “digital IP task force” and revise copyright clauses to cover streaming and online media. In practice, Nigeria has begun updating its Copyright Act (in 2023) to include e-publishing, but implementation is uneven.

Regional frameworks also matter. ECOWAS has discussed media content quotas and cross-border licensing, but no enforceable protocol exists yet. The African

Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is negotiating a Protocol on Digital Trade, which could facilitate pan-African content exchange. Nigeria should engage actively in these processes to harmonise regulations.

Recently, Ebony Life TV (a Nigerian studio) signed a deal with Sony to co-produce films for local streaming, indicating industry optimism under clear agreements. Conversely, Kenya’s stricter anti-piracy measures (streaming shutdowns in 2024) illustrate possible resistance but also demonstrate that enforcement can be achieved. Nigeria’s Creative Industries Promotion Act (2019), currently under review, proposes a directorate for creative sector development, which could be empowered for the digital transition.

The government should update IP laws for the digital age, fund anti-piracy technology (fingerprinting, monitoring), and expand the Creative Economy Fund (currently <0.1% of GDP) to include digital projects. Tax incentives for R&D in AR/VR and OTT services could spur innovation. The UNESCO/EU initiative provides technical aid; therefore, Nigeria must leverage this by issuing a new National Cultural and Creative Industry policy (with clear digital arts guidelines) by 2026.

5. Creative Inclusion and Cultural Heritage

Digital technology can both marginalise and amplify traditional arts. On one hand, global media often favour urban, commercial content; on the other hand, low-cost tools allow local culture to thrive online. Preservation and representation of indigenous performance traditions are key concerns. Nigeria’s National Film Archive has only about 10% of its historical titles digitised (UNESCO report, 2021). South Africa’s Durban University of Technology in the eThekwini region has undertaken digital archiving projects for indigenous music and dance, suggesting models for Nigeria’s archives. Meanwhile, social media and streaming offer platforms for folklore and language-specific content. Nigerian creatives have begun uploading plays and rituals (e.g. Egungun masquerade performances) to YouTube and TikTok, engaging youth diaspora audiences.

Only 10% of Nigeria’s cultural heritage audiovisual material is in digital format (National Archives data). Internet penetration is significantly lower in rural and female-headed households, indicating that, without intervention, digital arts could skew towards already-advantaged groups.

The virtual reality project “Ananse VR” in Ghana invited participants to “perform” traditional Ashanti folklore in VR, illustrating tech-enabled cultural immersion. In Nigeria, initiatives like the online festival *Imagined Nigeria* allow diaspora communities to stream theatre performances back to domestic audiences. Radio drama, once Nigeria’s dominant rural entertainment, has seen a resurgence as podcasts and internet radio during festivals. These hybrid examples show that heritage practices can find new life digitally.

Governments should fund large-scale digitisation of archives (film, theatre recordings, ethnographic footage) to preserve it and make it accessible. Tourism and culture ministries could sponsor community digital hubs in villages (mobile "theatre vans" equipped with projectors, or rural ICT centers broadcasting local performances). Quotas or grants for women, youth, and disabled artists in digital arts funding schemes would help close participation gaps. Finally, Nigeria should leverage international conventions on cultural diversity (e.g. the UNESCO 2005 Convention) to justify programmes that protect minority languages and art forms in the digital domain.

Discussion of Findings

Our findings address each of the objectives of the study, and these are highlighted and discussed subsequently.

Infrastructure (Objective 1) emerges as the foundation: while Nigeria has relatively high mobile connectivity, broadband limitations and unreliable power remain major constraints.

Distribution and markets (Objective 2) show an expandingbut skewed landscape: urban audiences and global platforms are driving growth, but piracy and insufficient theatres constrain revenue.

Production and skills (Objective 3) reveal that digital tools are widespread in practice, yet formal training and education lag.

Policy and regulation (Objective 4) are in transition: the new governmental strategy and UNESCO/EU support indicate progress, but intellectual property enforcement and dedicated culture-digital policies need strengthening.

Inclusion and heritage (Objective 5) remain partial: digital media have broadened expression for urban and diaspora creators, but many rural and traditional performers still lack access, as anticipated by the digital divide and creative economy theories.

Compared to the existing literature, our analysis emphasises recent data and case examples. For instance, while UNESCO (2021) highlighted the potential of Africa's film industry, the findings quantify Nigeria-specific metrics and show early outcomes of new projects (e.g. creative hubs, OTT partnerships). The integration of Nigerian government strategy announcementsinto the narrative, helps in linking policy rhetoric to sector challenges. In sum, the results confirm the general trends noted by prior studies but add fresh Nigerian context and policy developments. This comprehensive view provides evidence that the realisation of Nigeria's creative sector's potential will require coordinated action across technology, skills, and cultural preservation.

Recommendations

First, governments at all levels should invest in infrastructure to accelerate national broadband rollout (fibre and wireless) with special incentives for rural coverage.Arts venues (cinemas, theatres) should undertake digital access projects, and ensure reliable power (e.g. generators or solar backups) at cultural sites.

Second, local platforms should be supported through the creation of, say, a *“Screen Nigeria Fund”,* or similar grant programmes to finance indigenous streaming services and digital distribution networks. Tax breaks or low-interest loans for content startups should be provided, as well as reduction of foreign exchange controls to facilitate international partnerships for OTT content.

Third, the curricula of Nigerian tertiary institutions should be expanded to include provision of skills development and education in digital media arts (film production, animation, audio engineering). Also, fund should be provided for workshops and incubators (like media labs) that provide equipment and training for filmmakers and performers.

Fourth, relevant bodies in Nigeria should update the intellectual property laws to cover online media, and strengthen enforcement (e.g. digital watermarking). Vultural sector concerns should be mainstreamed into ICT and economic policies to include cultural metrics in national ICT strategies. Further, a national task force on creative IP should be established to harmonise content regulations with neighboring countries (through ECOWAS, AfCFTA).

Fifth, inclusivity and the sustainability of Nigeria's heritage should ensured through digitising and archiving of traditional performance arts outputs at scale (audio, video, scripts) in collaboration with UNESCO and diaspora partnerships. Community digital art centres and mobile “theatre vans” should be established in villages, and targetgrant programmes or quotas should be implemented to boost participation of women, youth and underrepresented groups in digital arts projects. Further, online visibility of indigenous culture should be promoted through subsidised internet provision for cultural institutions.

Conclusion

Digital transformation presents both opportunities and challenges for the performing arts in Nigeria and Africa in generalThe paper has mapped key trends: improving connectivity is enabling more content creation and distribution, yet infrastructural and regulatory gaps persist. If addressed, Nigeria’s creative economy could grow substantially. The analysis shows that achieving this growth requires integrated planning: expanding broadband and reliable power, supporting local digital platforms, investing in creative skills and training, updating legal frameworks, and ensuring that cultural heritage and underserved communities benefit from technology.

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