The reception of Cameroon Films and home videos in student residential areas: the case of Bambili – Cameroon

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Abstract

Film, as a medium of communication, uses visual and auditory signs between senders and receivers. It is considered as one of the most influential areas of media. The art form in Cameroon is valorised more through the home video system caused principally by the closure of theatre halls and the advent of cable TV channels dedicated to the broadcasting of movies for home consumption and the emergence of new media. This study looks at the reception of these home videos particularly in the student residential area of Bambili, Cameroon. A total number of 500 students served as sample for the study whose results show that a majority of viewers choose films according to different criteria but mostly influenced by their horizons of expectations.
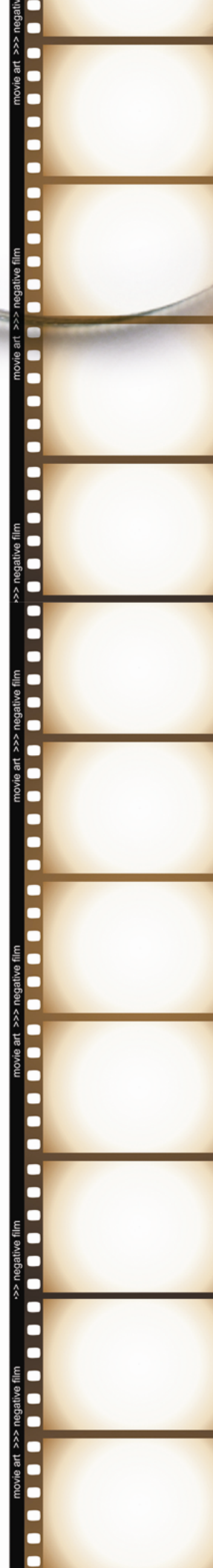
Keywords: film reception; communication; horizon of expectation; home videos; audience

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Introduction

Film is a communicative act in which filmmakers and filmgoers share particular conventions or codes that structure a movie and make it intelligible. Film viewers are not just blank screens upon which films are projected. They view films with expectations: created by publicity, reviews, previously viewed films, genre conventions and others. The understanding of the film can be made from two perspectives: the intrinsic study of the film text and the reception discourse from viewers. This study focuses on the later while taking into consideration Peirce's (1958) observation that a sign is always a sign for somebody, the interpretation of this sign is considered as part of the sign itself. Film uses these signs to communicate to the viewers and the understanding of the film is based on the understanding of these signs. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to analyse the movie-viewing audience in Bambili, Cameroon[1] and to see what motivates them to watch particular movies in their homes. In this way, it differs from studies examining audiences that watch movies in theatres because there is none in the entire North West Region of Cameroon. Audiences are bound to watch movies in their homes, most at times provided by the cable network channels, satellite channels and DVDs. This is considered as a

change in film reception because film audiences in Cameroon now watch films on devices other than the theatres.

It is important to get inside the mind of the spectator, to understand the nature of the selection: why one chooses to see a particular film and not the other. It is important to note that, previous studies have examined the socio-economic aspects of movies goers such as looking at income levels and leisure activities in order to see the impacts of movie watching on society in general. Barbara Klinger (1997), in *Film history terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies* for instance, states that reception scholars almost exclusively come to terms with a film's meaning by considering the impact that its original conditions had on its social significance. Klinger points out the presence of contextual analyses which hope to reveal the impact of discursive and social situations on the film, and they examine a network of relationships between a film and filmic element with intertextual fields such as censorship, exhibition practices, star publicity and reviews and the dominant or alternative ideologies of the society at a particular time. This present study is different in that it focuses only on the choices made by the audience in watching a particular movie and how information about the movie gets to them. Despite the unavailability of Cameroon films to the audience, some still strive to watch the few that are released to the market. In order to understand, therefore, how these movies are appreciated by the audience, it is important to look at the concept of reception theory.

Reception theory

Reception theory developed in the United Kingdom headed by cultural researcher, Stuart Hall. This occurred during a period marked by a considerable focus on audience-centred theory in the United States. It is considered by Holub (1984, p.xii) as "*a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader*" and reflects a paradigm shift in the history of literature and a revolutionary approach to contemporary literary criticism. Applied in the context of a film, the function of the reader is replaced here by that of the. This by implication points to the fact that any given film is viewed in the dialectical process of production and reception. If we consider Hans Jauss' (1982, p.15) statement that "*... literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject – through the interaction of author and public*" as true, then this assertion can as well be applicable to film reception. Just as in literature, reception theory in any film occurs in the act of either watching or taking part in that production. The production, therefore, is incomplete if there is no reception. This by implication signifies that the two exist concomitantly and thus difficult to separate thereby confirming Helbo's (1981) view that the distinction between them is purely pedagogical.

It is worth noting that this theoretical approach was developed mainly by literary critics.

Its application here in film studies attempts to apply these principles to a field whose meaning is

not achieved except there is the presence of a viewer, be it implicit or explicit. Wolfgang Iser

(1974) in a phenomenological approach to reception theory decontextualises and de-historicises

the text and the reader(Thomas Albrecht and Celine Surprenant 2016). This phenomenon of text

and reader can be replaced here with the production and the viewer or film and audience.

Meaning in a film can only be achieved during the reception process. In a like manner as the

convergence of the text and the reader brings a literary work into existence, production and

reception brings a film into existence since a film can only be legitimised when viewed.

In a film as mentioned earlier, the viewer/receiver can either be implied or explicit/actual.

An implied viewer/receiver as used here can refer to the film crew who takes part in the

production or postproduction process. As for the explicit or actual viewer/receiver, this is the

person who sits back to watch the final film track that has been produced and who might not

have been part of the film crew. This is the category of receivers that are examined in this

present study. As such, a film's interaction with the viewer/receiver can be examined from the

point of view of Jauss' (1982) horizon of expectations.

Described as "*an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a system of references or a mind-set that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text"* (Holub 1984, p.59), Hans Jauss explains how the horizon of expectations is constructed in a text. To him:

A literary work [work of art], even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read [seen], bring the reader [viewer] to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the "middle and end," which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading [viewing/experiencing] according to specific rules of the genre or type of text. (Jauss 1982, p.23)

This assertion is true to a literary work as it is to any work of art, film inclusive. The constitution of the horizon of expectations therefore is from the viewers' life experience, customs and understanding of the world and the society, which will in turn have an effect on his social behaviour. By this, the social function of a film can only be genuinely made manifest if the viewing experience of the viewer encounters his/her horizon of expectations. This is so because it is the horizon of expectations that enables a work of art to be connected with the society.

A further justification of the application of reception theory in the analysis of this work is supported by its capacity to converge the product (art work) and the viewer in a collective experience and production of meaning. I hold that the essence of reception theory is to locate the attribution and construction of meaning with the receiver. The polysemic nature of messages vehicled in a work of art cannot be interpreted distantly from the context and cultural milieu of the receiver. According to Stuart Hall (1993), messages are passed on from the sender to the receiver and possibly interpreted through various stages. These stages are drawn from the basic principles of structuralism and semiology which presumes that any message is constructed from a sign which can have *denotative and connotative meanings,* depending on the choices made by an encoder. In this regard, some elements of semiology are incorporated to his approach of reception theory based principally on two criterions.

- In the first position, a communicator chooses to encode a message and by so doing, the purpose ties with 'who' the encoder is as well as the manipulation of the language and media to meet those ends.

- Secondly, those who are supposedly the receivers (decoders) are not obliged to accept messages as sent but can and do resist any ideological influence by applying *variant or oppositional* readings/understandings, according to their own experience and outlook.

Focus on how various types of audience members make sense of the specific forms of content is a central feature of reception theory or analysis. A text, as presented to the viewers/readers is constituted of signs which are structured in a specific way to make sense. Reading a text or interpreting a film text and making meaning from it requires one to be capable of interpreting the signs and structures therein.

In reception analysis, therefore, it is not unusual to find different analysis of the same text or message though there is generally a preferred or dominant interpretation intended by the producers or encoders of a message in Hall's (1993) opinion. Alternate interpretations by the audience are possible in the same production as well as disagreement or misinterpretation of the message. It is considered that the audiences of a film often comprise "interpretative communities" which share much of the same experience, forms of discourse and frameworks for making sense of media. They are never passive, nor are they all equal but they learn from the experiences of others in the same transformational process. In reception perspective, the media text (film) has no inherent meaning in and of itself. This implies, meaning is created in the interaction between spectator and text or better still, meaning is created as the viewer watches and processes the film. This study recognises that contextual factors influence the way the spectator views the film. It argues that within the Bambili student residential area, factors such as

the viewer's identity, circumstances under which the film is viewed, preconceived notions on the film, genre and even social aspects influence film viewing. To exemplify this, a designed questionnaire was addressed to a random selection of 500 students, living in the Bambili student residential area in Cameroon.

Sample and sampling technique

This quantitative study was conducted in 2018 among students resident in Bambili, Cameroon. The choice was informed by the fact that, in 2015, the University of Bamenda opened the Faculty of Arts in which there is the Department of Performing and Visual Arts. In this department, the students are trained in filmmaking. Though relatively few, compared with the other high number of students in the other departments and schools, the filmmaking students created an impact in their residential areas by always having an activity to shoot a film or two in a semester. This brought a kind of rebirth of enthusiasm amongst students to start seeking to know more about Cameroon movies. The choice of university students as sample is in regard of ownership or access to television, video sets and/or mobile media in their rooms which exposes them to home videos. A sample size of 500 out of a student population of 17000 was based on Taro Yamane's (1967) formula for computing sample size. This size was also rounded-off for statistical convenience in accordance with studies dealing with a population. Randomisation was achieved through a computer generated table of random numbers.

The formula is given as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N\,(e)^2}$$

Where n = the sample size

N = the size of the population

e = the level of significance (or tolerable error)

1 = unity (a constant)

Thus, the sample was determined using the above formula:

$$n = \frac{17000}{1 + 17000\,(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{17000}{1 + 42.5}$$

$$n = \frac{17000}{43.5}$$

$$n = 390.80$$

$$n = 400$$

Therefore, the sample is 400.

For the purpose of compensating for persons that might not be reachable, I added 100 more students to this sample making it 500. The sampling technique used for drawing the sample from the population is the purposive sampling. Only students residing in Bambili were chosen in the study because they will better exemplify the research question which is on student residential

areas. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire. Considering that the study intended

to gather quantitative data, structured questionnaires which are more direct and require specific

information were preferred to open-ended questions which would have been broad. Distributed

to respondents by hand, this method of data collection was judged to be reliable counting on the

fact that if the same measure was repeated using the same subjects under the same conditions;

the results would be the same.

Presentation, analysis and discussion

This study is based on findings from the analysed data obtained from a representative

sample of 500 respondents randomly selected from the student population in Bambili. The results

permitted a gamut of discussion to be developed.

The study reveals that all of respondents have access to home video-films either directly

or indirectly. A majority of them are exposed to films through mobile devices such as android

and smart phones, tablets and laptops and to a lesser extent, through television and video/mobile

DVD sets. The respondents were exposed to questions that sought to determine their access to

home videos, the level of exposure and film preference. From the data gathered and analysed

using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 2.0, table 1 shows that 30 percent of the

respondents were male and 70 percent female.

Table 1: Total number of Respondents per sex

Variable	Number
Male	150
Female	350
Total	500

This sample was based on the relatively high number of female students in the University of Bamenda over male students. Of this, 80 percent of the female students watch Cameroon films while 30 percent of the male students watch the films. From the study, it was revealed that girls are more connected to love stories than boys. Considering that a majority of Cameroon films especially of English expression are replicas or near replicas of Nigerian films (which are predominantly love-related), the girls who also happen to be following Nigerian films and telenovelas are attracted to the films more than boys. The boys on their part are more attracted to action movies. To them, a show of their masculinity is better incarnated in action movies which unfortunately are not common in the African film industry. They, therefore, watch more western movies than Cameroon films.

Article I. Table 2: the Number of Respondents interested or not in Cameroonian films.

Variable	Number	Watches Cameroon films	Does not watch Cameroon films
Boys	150	45	105
Girls	350	280	70
Total	500	325	175

In table 2, it is seen that 45 boys out of 150 watch Cameroon films while 280 out of 350 girls watch the local films. This corroborates the affirmation that more girls watch Cameroon films than boys with a percentage of 80 percent for girls and only 30 percent from the boys. On the scale of the sample size, a majority therefore watch Cameroon films (65 percent) and only 35 percent do not watch for various reasons. This is represented in table 3.

Article II.   Table 3: Percentage of Respondents interested or not in Cameroon films

Variable	Number	Percentage
Watch Cameroon films	325	65
Do not watch Cameroon films	175	35
Total	500	100

Article III.   Table 4: Positive impressions on Cameroon films

Variable	Percentage
Entertaining	5
Spreading of Cameroon culture and tradition	10
Educative	30
Production in diverse language	10
Informative	30
No comments	15
Total	100

As shown in table 4, a majority of respondents are of the opinion that Cameroon films are

predominantly educative and informative while some think such films will help entertain the

audience. Amongst, them, 10 percent believe that Cameroon films are meant to spread Cameroon

culture and tradition while 15 percent fail to find entertainment in the films.

Article IV.   Table 5: Negative impressions on Cameroon films

Variable	Percentage
Displacements of unrealistic effects	22
No origin of storyline	20

Unrealistic acting	18
Prolonged scenes	8
Reflection of foreign culture and tradition	32
Total	100

Conversely, in figure 5, some respondents criticised Cameroon films that they are reflecting more of foreign culture and tradition than local cultures with a percentage of 32, while some held that Cameroon films have unrealistic acting of up to 18 percent. In a similar view, 8 percent of the respondents purported that the films are unnecessarily prolonged. Based on individual differences, in terms of acquired experiences or horizons of expectations and other factors that are largely sociological and physiological, the respondents had varied dispositions after watching Cameroon films. As mentioned earlier, preconceived information on the film and the present socio-political context in Bambili are also influential material on film reception. These can cause a respondent to either like or dislike a film.

In a similar view as preconceived information, elements of a film can propel an audience member to like or dislike a film. Although film language is a combination of visual and audio materials brought to the audience through the film realm made up of shots, camera angles, lighting, sound or better still cinematography, this study does not go into the technicalities of

film to evaluate reception. This is a very technical aspect that non-film scholars will find difficult to use to judge a film. Rather, the study takes into account culture-related elements of film communication that can be more easily understood by a lay film viewer. In this light, the investigation showed that 40 percent of the respondents enjoy the way Cameroon films use their setting, costume and language. They also like the stories that focus on heroic accomplishment of Cameroon legends, love, romance, Cameroon welfare, comedy, docu-drama, political issues, adventures and exploits. It is worth noting here that, a majority of female respondents manifested their interest more on love stories than any other theme. In a similar view, 30 percent indicated that the films are pedagogic materials for moral education and 15 percent felt the films are a source of entertainment only. The remaining 15 percent were interested on issues of culture portrayed in the films as presented in table 6.

Article V.   Table 6: What Cameroonians like about Cameroonian films

Variable	Percentage
Aesthetics, setting, costumes, and language, story	40
Comedy	15
Modernizing Cameroon culture	8
Projection of Cameroon culture and tradition	7

Educative and teaching morals	30
Total	100

It goes without doubt that if a film does not please an audience, something must have caused it. In table 7, the respondents indicated that unnecessary prolongation of the story and scenes is present in most of the films amounting to around 40 percent.

Article VI. Table 7: What do Cameroonian film audience dislike about Cameroonian films?

Variable	Percentage
Unnecessary prolongation and unrealistic scenes	40
Immoral scenes or nudity	10
Poor (copy and paste) accent	20
Promotion of western culture	20
Rituals, horror and violent scenes	10
Total	100

This technique is used by filmmakers who do not have much to show and resolve to turn around the same issue over and over. As a result, the quality of the film reduces. Even in some cases when the filmmakers do try to avoid repetition, they fall short of exploring local cultural values. They valorise more of western culture than theirs. In this light, the respondents highlighted that 20 percent of the films they have watched are classified under this category.

Another accountable factor for the dislike of Cameroon films by the respondents is the accent

which the actors use representing 20 percent. It is noted that in films acted in English language,

the actors are likely to try to imitate Nigerian accents or American accents while those in French

language tilt towards the assimilatory French accent. This copy and paste tendency leaves one to

think that there is no particular accent that is purely Cameroonian which is not true. Filmmakers

are hereby encouraged to use local accents so as to permit the audience identify with the heroes

of the story. The remaining 20 percent dislike is attributed to immoral scenes or nudity, rituals,

horrors and violence. It should be noted that as a researcher, I stayed clear of personal evaluation

of the films. The criteria to like or dislike a film are an aspect of film reception which viewers

exert on any media that do not meet their horizons of expectations (Hall, 1993). This is basically

the premise that propels Helbo (1981) to postulate that the distinction between production and

reception is purely pedagogic thereby requiring the producers to consider their viewers before

producing their works of art.

Table 8: Respondents with access to Cameroon films

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	500	100

Table 9: Respondents with access to home video devices (it was required of the respondent to choose only one even if he/she had more than one)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Laptop	100	20
Smart or android phone	350	70
Portable DVD	05	1
Television and Video set	45	9
Total	500	100

Table 10: Respondents who watch home videos with any of the listed devices

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
No	05	1
Yes	495	99
Total	**500**	**100**

It is important to note that, this study was based on the premise that student population in

Bambili, constitute an age group that is likely to have access to movies in various formats. In this

light, tables 8, 9 and 10 present the number of respondents who have access to Cameroon films,

access to home video devices and effectively use them to watch the videos. By and large, after a

careful examination, there is fear of generalising that most Cameroon filmmakers are not

conscious of their spectators' horizons of expectations before producing their films. Films are

produced without prior knowledge of a potential audience. Only after producing do they start searching for audience to watch the films.

The study also points to the fact that there are some filmmakers in Cameroon who lack creativity, formal training in filmmaking and film culture; and a majority of them are lacking expertise thereby becoming imitators of western or Nigerian movies. Every Tom and Dick can be called a filmmaker because he/she has a camera, can call one or two friends, put them in a room and say action and at the end, they have a film. Filmmaking should go beyond amateurism and it is for the Cameroon film industry to promote it by ensuring quality productions.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Cameroonians watch their films contrary to popular opinion that Cameroon films are not watched back home. Increasingly, many youths are beginning to like their films and it is the place of filmmakers to consolidate this new audience by even exploring new avenues for film exploitation such as the new media. The film industry in Cameroon since 2009 witnessed a drastic blow with the shutting down of the last cinema halls in Cameroon: Abbia, Le Wouri and Empire (Animbom 2018, p.190). From this period, filmmakers have been trying to get ways of making the audience interested in watching films again. Home-videos as examined in this study came in as a timely intervention to avoid the death of cinema in

Cameroon. Distributed mostly through cable network televisions, DVDs and other mobile devices, the student population in Bambili, Cameroon is one of the cluster areas where movie viewing is on-going. The students, dominated by girls watch films on laptops, smart and android phone and to a lesser extent, on television sets. Various elements attract them to film viewing ranging from entertainment to education. The study shows that a majority of respondents do watch Cameroon films and find them useful. This notwithstanding, the filmmakers still have a heavy task of producing films that meet the horizons of expectations of the audiences. This is a daunting task which they have in order to attract even the boys who are still reluctant in becoming lovers of Cameroon films. The filmmakers are also encouraged to make their films available to the Cameroonian audience through various distribution channels.As illustrated in this study, the target audience of each film actually understand the themes treated which justifies their positions to either like or dislike them. It stands to be corrected that reception occurs to an individual as both a psychological and a sociological experience thereby permitting multiple understandings of the same text.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The editor acknowledges previous work on Cameroon cinema audiences through the work of Omoera, O.S. & Anyanwu, C. (2020) and Omoera, O.S. (2014).