

# Learning to Drink in Nigeria: Tales from Hollywood and Nollywood

by LESLEY HENDERSON AND EMEKA W DUMBILI May 17, 2017



Image: Shutterstock

In Nigeria, there is no concept of ‘counting your units’ nor are there nationally co-ordinated public health campaigns to challenge the normalisation of drinking alcohol ‘to excess’. With little or no regulation of the alcohol industry, transnational drinks companies are free to target students living on University campuses through promotions at sporting and social events. These activities link drinking to attractiveness and fun. Recent figures show that increasing numbers of young Nigerians are drinking large quantities of alcohol and this may have significant health implications. Here we ask, what role might popular media in Nigeria play in normalising drinking to excess?

Our recent paper explores how young people on a campus at a South-Eastern Nigerian University connect with alcohol and media messages. We asked students about their use of media and their alcohol consumption. Those who watched Hollywood movies and reality TV and also reported drinking large quantities of alcohol associated heavy alcohol consumption with a range of positive factors. These included high social prestige, economic independence and gender equality. Hollywood movies such as the *High School Musical* movie franchise were incredibly popular on campus. Young people linked these films with the normalisation of intoxication. As our participants explained:

For you to be recognized as a strong guy you need to be a ‘good alcoholic’. In any party, there must be beer and the girls drink beer like boys, as in freely and also in large quantities just to get drunk

High School movies are just about fun and their fun cannot be without alcohol... we want to have fun like the whites.

The young students who watched ‘High School’ movies, accepted that heavy drinking was a key factor in bonding with your peers and this could be achieved best through drinking games such as ‘the first to drink and drop the bottle’. Many could recount specific scenes from movies in some detail.









Despite drinking alcohol being taboo in Nigeria, especially amongst young women, these imported Hollywood series were regularly referenced as important by male and female participants. One woman remembers watching a *High School* movie where “I saw it for the first time that you could drink alcohol without removing the bottle from your mouth”.

In movies and imported popular reality television, series such as *America’s Next Top Model*, were associated with sophisticated aspirational drinking. The consumption of wine was singled out as a specific marker of high social status. Young women spoke of television scenes involving unfamiliar activities such as wine-tasting where potential models competed to differentiate between French and American wines.






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Others noted that drinking wine in movies is associated with being “more professional” and “mature” with characters frequently declaring, “this calls for wine”. Wine is thus embedded in the everyday ‘onscreen’ lives of characters and reality show contestants and appears to engender a powerful image of typical ‘western’ life:

Outsiders [foreigners] take red wine all the time. Like even if they are just eating ...you’ll see them pour a glass.

Participants also seemed to engage with the way characters and reality contestants drink ‘on screen’. For example, some said they admired how characters carry themselves at conferences or meetings by queuing up patiently or sitting down quietly to be served by waiters, “as they are talking they sip, and they drop [the glass] it’s very clean and classic”. This contrasts with drinking culture in Nigeria, where no one queues and most young people drink directly from the bottle.

Some young women also believed that alcohol had considerable health benefits. One believed consuming wine to be healthy because as a fictional character in a movie explained, “it helps pump blood to the heart”. She said, “I have not really asked a doctor, but since then, I just started taking it”. There was also a popular idea from local media that certain brands, such as ‘Guinness stout’, should be consumed when menstruating (‘it cleanses out the rubbish in our stomachs, gives blood and energy’).

Of course, a belief in the health benefits of alcohol is not specific to Nigeria. Yet it seems that there may be a specific cultural context where aspirational representations of alcohol connect strongly with Nigerian youth. Drinking alcohol in television and film is also associated with female independence. Witnessing characters drinking without any apparent negative effects, helped create powerful associations of freedom for young women.

In Nigerian films, alcohol use among young people is kind of restricted ... I see Nigeria as a more of a religious kind of country ...most Janded [foreign] movies I watch, they tend to drink alcohol, especially the New Yorkers

In contrast to imported popular media Nollywood films featuring alcohol tend to be constructed as moral tales, designed to show the error of excess consumption.

In Nigerian movies, alcohol is taken when a guy is going through some hard times; when you want to do something bad...In foreign movies, you’ll just see someone taking drinking with friends and laughing. They drink at parties, have fun [...] In Nigerian movies, someone will take alcohol, then come home and beat his wife.

Most male participants expressed a preference for Hollywood rather than Nollywood movies. They mentioned poor production values and overstating alcohol harm. Paradoxically, however, it seemed that these local movies do play a role in shaping positive perceptions of alcohol. For example, some participants talked about alcohol helping to lift one’s mood following relationship problems:

If somebody breaks your heart you’ll think over it and get rid of it, but if you are watching those videos where they normally create the impression that when people are depressed or heartbroken they prefer to drink, you will do that.

Another described hearing from local movies that alcohol can help alleviate depression “I discovered that it worked for me ...so now I have formed the habit of taking alcohol when I am depressed”.

The growing globalisation of Hollywood movies and Western television amongst young Nigerians means that audiences in Nigeria are living in a saturated media landscape. This, in turn, affects their drinking behaviour. Currently, Nigeria has no serious regulations around how alcohol may be represented on television. How young people talk about alcohol and popular media in everyday life can reveal important ways in which people attach meanings to their drinking practices. Any attempts to develop wider public health campaigns and policies concerning alcohol in Nigeria would do well to take audiences engagement with popular media into account. Harm reduction strategies should be linked directly to media literacy programmes if they are to succeed.

About the Authors: Emeka W Dumbili is an independent researcher based in Nigeria. His interests centre on alcohol policy, gender and sexuality and the alcohol industry’s marketing strategies. Lesley Henderson is an editor on the Cost of Living Blog

## 2 COMMENTS

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RACHEL BRADBY on May 28, 2017

[Reply](#)

Thanks. Interesting.

In 1975 drinking was a different sort of problem.

During the months of social and political turbulence leading up to the military coup (July 1975) and overthrow of General Gowon, many liquids were frequently in short supply, or unavailable – including water from the taps, fuel from the petrol pumps, and especially Star beer.

'All gone done finish' was the stallholders' resigned reply when asked if they had any Star due in.

Coco-Cola continued to be available almost everywhere.

(reminder of 'All gone done finish' supplied by Hannah, then too young to regret the shortage of Star).

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EMEKA DUMBILI on May 31, 2017

[Reply](#)

Many thanks Rachel for your interesting comment. Sure, things are not the same in contemporary Nigeria. The effects of globalization, the pressure from drinks industry to recoup the profit margin lost in countries where regulations are strict, and the lack of regulation are some of the causes of these extant changes in Nigeria.

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