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# Cultural Specificity in Nollywood comedy films

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# ABSTRACT

In his seminal work on humor, Noel Carroll suggests that comedy is deeply rooted in the cultural context in which it originates, and its resonance may be confined to specific societies, struggling to transcend national boundaries. This paper explores Carroll's assertion within the context of Nollywood, Nigeria's vibrant and diverse film industry. With over 250 ethnic groups, numerous languages, and a wide range of comedic sensibilities, Nollywood offers a compelling case study for investigating the cultural specificity of comedy. This study focuses on two Nollywood films, The Wedding Party Part One (2016) and Aki and Pawpaw (2021), to examine how certain comedic elements, such as set pieces, gags, jokes, wordplay, and characters, adhere to or transcend the cultural specificity Carroll describes. By analyzing these films, this paper seeks to understand how Nollywood's diversity shapes its comedy and whether certain comedic themes can resonate beyond Nigeria's borders.

Key Words: Cultural Specificity, Comedy, Humor, Cross-Cultural Appeal, Comedic Elements, Nollywood.

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

Comedy, according to philosopher Noel Carroll, is inextricably tied to the cultural milieu in which it is created. In his exploration of humor, Carroll argues that its effectiveness and appeal are often confined to the societies that produce it, suggesting that comedy may struggle to transcend national and cultural boundaries. This perspective invites a closer examination of Nollywood, Nigeria's expansive and dynamic film industry. As one of the largest film industries globally, Nollywood produces an astounding number of films each year, incorporating a broad spectrum of comedic styles and narratives. The diversity within Nigeria, with its over 250 ethnic groups, multiple languages, and a variety of cultural traditions, adds a further layer of complexity to Nollywood's comedic productions.

Given the significant role comedy plays within Nollywood films, it becomes essential to investigate whether its humor aligns with Carroll's argument on cultural specificity. With its vast output and diverse audience—spanning various ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds—Nollywood presents an ideal platform for this exploration. This paper specifically focuses on two Nollywood comedies, *The Wedding Party Part One* (2016) and *Aki and Pawpaw* (2021), to probe how comedic elements in these films resonate with Nigerian audiences while also questioning whether some of these elements can transcend cultural boundaries. By analyzing set pieces, gags, jokes, wordplay, and character types, this study seeks to uncover how cultural specificity manifests in Nollywood comedies and whether certain comedic narratives can reach beyond the borders of Nigeria.

# 2. THE CONCEPT OF HUMOR

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *humor* as "that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun." Humor has been the subject of research in various disciplines, including the psychological field (Freud, 1960), semiotics (Dorfles, 1968), and linguistics (Raskin, 1985; Atardo & Raskin, 1991). Freud says humor can be utilized to reduce psychological tension caused by depression. However, the empirical study of humor holds many exciting surprises. Although it is essentially a type of mental play involving a lighthearted, non-serious attitude toward ideas and events, humor serves several social, severe, emotional, and

cognitive functions, making it a fascinating and rewarding topic of scientific investigation. Simpson and Weiner, psychologists known for their research on humor and laughter, posit that humor is "the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject" (486). Humor also refers to the tendency to experience or express what is amusing, which is always accompanied by an emotional response and vocal-behavioral expressions such as laughter and smiling, according to Chen and Martin, scholars in clinical psychology. Hadiati, a linguistic scholar, defines *humor* as "anything that makes people laugh or is amusing, or the capacity to recognize what is funny about a situation or person; anything that invites laughter can be considered humor" (2).

Carroll asserts in his book *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* that the word 'humor' comes from the Latin' Humor,' which means liquid or fluid, including bodily fluids (16). He sees humor as the object of comic amusement, implying that humor contained within a joke or comedic situation is what elicits amusement from the audience. Essentially, 'humor' refers to the comedic elements, such as wit, irony, or absurdity that provoke laughter or amusement in individuals. When someone experiences comic amusement, they react to the humorous aspects presented to them. While humor is commonly associated with laughter and is assumed to be interdependent, there can also be laughter without humor, just as there can be humor without laughter, according to Sciama in her book *Humor, Comedy, and Laughter* (2). Also, humor may produce other reactions besides laughter, and laughter may not always be a sign of amusement. However, humor suggests funny, amusing, and jocular situations in character and temperament. Hence, this paper will dissect the humor that produces laughter in two Nigerian comedy films and its cultural specificity.

# **3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN HUMOR USAGE**

Noël Carroll, in his work on humor, delves into the idea that comedy is closely linked to the cultural context in which it arises. He suggests that the impact of comedy may be limited to particular societies and face challenges in crossing national borders. This concept highlights the complex relationship between humor and the social environment in which it is expressed, indicating that what is amusing in one culture may not necessarily translate effectively to another. This paper draws upon Carroll's argument, delving into how humor becomes geographically tied to particular cultures. It highlights instances where communicative contexts are unique or culturally specific, posing challenges to interpretation or transferability. Such acts may struggle to traverse linguistic or cultural boundaries, as there might not exist corresponding situations or concepts in the target language or culture. The notion of 'funny' is inherently elusive and subjective, heavily contingent upon personal experiences, contextual cues, and cultural norms. Consequently, many jokes, sarcastic remarks, or ironic expressions deeply rooted in cultural nuances may go unnoticed, be misinterpreted, or even be deemed offensive outside their original cultural context. Humor is a universal feature across all human cultures (Fry 9) but is also culturally tinted.

Renowned comedian Rowan Atkinson, famous for his portrayal of Mr. Bean, proposes that "objects or people can become funny in three distinct ways: by behaving unusually, being in an unusual location, or being the wrong size. This formula constitutes a fundamental and widely accepted approach to generating sight gags or slapstick humor" (as quoted by Reimann, 27). This type of humor is versatile and transcends cultural boundaries, provided that the objects, artifacts, or characters are familiar enough to be perceived as logical or commonsensical in their representation, appearance, and use. In other words, the comedic effect relies on the audience's recognition and understanding of the context, allowing for a shared appreciation of the humor regardless of cultural background.

More so, comedy during the silent era was indeed more universally comprehensible, regardless of cultural background, because physical humor was central to silent era films. Physical humor relies on visual actions, gestures, and expressions to evoke laughter without the need for words. This type of comedy transcends language and cultural barriers because it appeals to basic human instincts and emotions. As a result, silent-era comic actors such as the Three Stooges, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster Keaton enjoyed widespread popularity because the humor they portrayed was universally relatable. However, when sound was introduced to the film, the idea of verbal humor became a thing. Verbal humor often relies on linguistic nuances, idioms, and wordplay that may not have direct equivalents in other

languages. Translating these elements while preserving the humor and intended meaning can be complex, leading to a loss of context or comedic impact. The complexity of language, cultural references, social context, and linguistic nuances involved in verbal humor makes it challenging to transcend other cultures without significant adaptation and localization. While some elements of verbal humor may resonate across cultures, achieving universal appeal often requires careful consideration of linguistic and cultural differences and creative adaptation to ensure that the humor translates effectively to diverse audiences.

Consider the case of American actor Jerry Lewis, whose films gained immense popularity in France, largely thanks to the talent of French actor Jacques Dynam, Lewis's dub artist. In France, the art of dubbing American movies was elevated to an art form, with artists like Dynam skillfully revising scripts to cater to French audiences. Dynam's adaptations transformed Jerry Lewis's films into what could be considered 'French comedies,' tailored to French viewers' tastes. Humor often struggles to translate seamlessly between languages, and French actors approached their work with diligence, revising dialogue to ensure it resonated with French culture. These adaptations sometimes strayed significantly from the original American screenplay, resulting in uniquely French humor. In his article, *The French Really Do Love Jerry Lewis, Call Him 'Akin to Godard'—But Why?*, Handy explores why French audiences adore Lewis's comedy while Americans may hold it in contempt. Equally, the New York Times points out that Americans may be missing out on uproariously funny movies that exist only in their adapted French versions. This discrepancy in appreciation highlights the importance of cultural context in humor and the challenges of translating comedic content between languages.

In Japan, for instance, humor is highly complex, multi-dimensional, and carefully planned, making it more of an art form than a spontaneous vehicle for diversion. Pulvers, an author and playwright, describes Japanese humor as "harmless fun seldom at the expense of others, refraining from exploiting or exposing taboos, the sacred or the profane. Dirty jokes are usually avoided, and most preferences involve a "comedy of manners" or social indiscretions traditionally involving an unassuming country yoke" (28). In China, Confucianism has devalued humor. Chinese self-actualization denigrates humor while stressing restriction and seriousness (Bond, 1996; Liao, 1998, 2007; Yue, 2010). Chinese are reluctant to admit they are humorous out of fear of jeopardizing their social status. Chinese do not think that humor is a desirable personality trait (Rudowicz and Yue, 2002; Yue, 2011). India and Hong Kong, with cultures prizing collectivism, use more affiliate and self-enhancing humor than aggressive and self-defeating humor, which is said to be more aggressive than the Chinese.

In contrast, American Humor tends to be "more individualistic and places emphasis on performance, overstating, and exaggerating through hyperbole or silly antics," as noted by Rourke in his American Humor. On the other hand, British Humor tends to be more deeply ingrained in language, culture, and society and is highly ironic and satirical. "The stereotype of dry British wit characteristic of Oscar Wilde, Monty Python, Benny Hill, the two Ronnies, or Ricky Gervais is often difficult to comprehend as it is deeply veiled in rhetoric and innuendo. Britain's do indeed enjoy slapstick and silliness" (Reimann 27). Canadian humor is a hybrid of British and American styles, perhaps due to its colonial history and geographic location. According to Reimann, in his text on Intercultural Communication and the Essence of Humor, he states that "the default humor or communication strategy for most Canadians is satire. Whether it is the vast geographic distances, linguistic diversity, or multicultural differences, as a shared identity, Canadians like to make fun of everything as a coping mechanism, and nothing and no one is off limits. This often causes problems in the international sphere, as Canada has been rebuked in the past for ridiculing dignitaries and heads of state" (27). He adds that "Canadian humor can also be very dark and cynical, to the extent that it is often difficult to distinguish serious comments from sarcastic wit. This can be a difficult cultural obstacle, as such utterances are often perceived as rude, crass, or insincere" (27). These cultural differences in humor reflect each society's unique values, sensibilities, and social dynamics. Each society's unique history, values, and social norms shape what is considered funny and how humor is expressed and appreciated.

Although some may argue that, in our increasingly interrelated world, the lines between these different styles can be blurred as cross-cultural influences and global media reshape the comedy landscape, there is still some form of humor that cannot go beyond its origin, geographical location, or society. Nigeria, for instance, exemplifies this phenomenon. Like Japan, America, and Britain, Nigerian Humour is intricately tied to the country's rich cultural heritage, language diversity, and social dynamics, and some of the humor may not transcend Nigerian and Nigerians. Nigerians are known to refer to their comic films as funny. When a Nigerian says he wants to see a comedy, they expect to be entertained with laughter, not necessarily that the film has to end happily, as exemplified by Aristotle. Nigerian humor reflects different lifestyles and offers commentary on society. It is typically based on a class theme and a parody of that class, with no emotional catharsis, with the ultimate goal of the comedy being to distract. Therefore, Nigerian comedies are known to generate their humor from issues broadly ranging from political corruption, economic hardship, poverty, failed or deficient infrastructure, immorality, insecurity, official brigandage, the hypocrisy of church ministers, the lives of celebrities, and crucially, the representation of ethnocultural categories and the politics that undergird it. Nigeria is a conglomeration of languages and cultures. The total number of Nigerian languages is believed to be 550 (Blench vi). This makes Nigeria a linguistic melting pot. The bewildering assortment of cultures and ethnicities represents what Mazrui and Mazrui refer to as a tower of Babel, a linguistic laboratory (1). Each of these cultures and ethnicities has peculiar traits that often necessitate the construction of stereotypes about them, which are carried over into comic films.

# 4. ASSESSING NOLLYWOOD COMEDY FILMS

# 4.1 Cultural Nuances and Humor in the Wedding Part, Part One (2016)

The romantic comedy-drama released in 2016 and directed by Kemi Adetiba centers around the union of two families, one from the Igbo tribe and the other from the Yoruba tribe, who come together through the marriage of their children. At the plot's core lies the wedding party, the events that precipitated the union, and the celebration itself. Adunni, played by Adesuwa Etomi, a Yoruba woman, becomes the wife of Dozie, played by Bankole Wellington, an Igbo man. The central conflict arises when Obianuju, Dozie's mother, played by Ireti Doyle, strongly opposes the marriage. She holds the belief that her son could have made a better choice in a life partner in terms of class, not tribe.

Consequently, she participates in the wedding as the groom's mother and not as an enthusiastic mother-in-law. The film unfolds the challenges faced by Adunni and Dozie's love, triumphing over hurdles such as the awkward moment of a tong in Dozie's pocket on the way to the reception and the unexpected airing of a bachelor's party video during the reception. This film was selected because it is the state of the art in Nigerian film entertainment, a colorful rom-com with a social comedy heart. It became the highest-grossing film when it was released in 2016, and as a comedy, this was remarkable. It also streams on Netflix.

This film effectively utilizes cultural references and stereotypes to create humor and engage its Nigerian audience. One such example is the portrayal of the entrance of the parents of the bride and groom, which reflects a common practice in Nigerian weddings where the parents are given significant attention and sometimes even overshadow the couple themselves. This cultural norm is exaggerated in the film, leading to laughter among viewers who can relate to the spectacle of parents being welcomed as if they were the event's main focus.

The film also plays on the cultural rivalry and banter between different ethnic groups in Nigeria, particularly the Igbo and Yoruba tribes. The debate over which tribe is the 'life of the party' is a common theme in Nigerian social discourse, and the film reinforces this by showcasing the contrasting styles of the Igbo and Yoruba families during the wedding celebrations. The humorous argument over which parent should be called first adds to the comedic effect and sets the stage for the comedic contrast between the two families. The entrance of the bride's family, characterized by their dance, gestures, music, and expressions, further emphasizes the cultural differences and generates laughter through its exaggerated portrayal. The film cleverly exploits these cultural nuances to create entertaining scenes that resonate with Nigerian audiences and evoke a sense of shared experience.

Humor is derived from satirizing cultural norms surrounding religious figures in a scene depicting prophets or pastors in Nigeria. The character of the prophet, played by Emmanuel Edunjobi, exaggerates gestures, expressions, and prayers commonly associated with some religious leaders in Nigerian society. This scene critiques the phenomenon of exaggerated religious practices while adding comedic value. However, the humor may not resonate with audiences unfamiliar with these cultural references and stereotypes, highlighting the importance of cultural understanding in interpreting humor.

Another scene involves a mishap during a photo session outside the bride's family home, where someone accidentally steps on the bride's gown, tearing the veil. Amidst the chaos, the driver, Harrison, played by Frank Donga, humorously suggests calling his tailor to fix the torn veil. This scene is humorous to Nigerian viewers because it plays on social hierarchies and the idea that a driver would not typically have a tailor, let alone be able to call one. Additionally, Harrison's attire, which features the counterfeit brand "Ghucee," adds to the comedic effect by highlighting his attempt to appear affluent despite his actual status.

Another comedic moment occurs during the journey to the reception, where Bambam, the groom's father, portrayed by Ali Baba, reacts comically when their driver hits a pothole. His wife, played by Shola Sobowale, jokingly warns the driver not to spill her 'panla stew', a traditional local Nigerian dish, indicating that even wealthy individuals appreciate and consume local delicacies. This scene adds humor by subverting expectations of the lifestyles of the rich and highlighting the relatability of enjoying simple pleasures regardless of social status.

Although this film is primarily in English, it includes interjections of native languages and Pidgin English, a form of simplified English commonly used in Nigeria. Pidgin English is often associated with the working class in Nigeria, but in this film, it is used by characters from both the working class and the middle class. While Pidgin English is widely understood in Nigeria, it may not be as easily comprehensible to audiences from other geographical locations. The scenes in which Pidgin English is used contribute to the comedic amusement and add to the overall humor of the film. For example, Harrison, the driver, frequently uses Pidgin English, adding authenticity to his portrayal.

Additionally, Wonu, the high-class wedding planner played by Zainab Balogun, drops her posh, comes off her high horse and put-on accent, and goes on her knees to beg Iya Michael to stay on and cater to the guests at the wedding reception in what is truly one of the hilarious lines of dialogue in a movie stuffed to overflow with them: '*Iya Michael e joo. Mo fi Olohun oba be yin', meaning Iya Michael, please, I beg you in the name of God.* The line that closes the movie is uttered after Wonu smells her wig and goes, 'Hmph, wig, oni wig. The phrase means she was tired of wearing her wig to look posh. Although subtitles were provided for these lines, the full impact is lost when viewers are unfamiliar with the dialect used. Subtitles can translate the dialogue, but they may not capture the original language's nuances, tone, and delivery. As a result, the comedic effect may be diminished for non-Nigerian audiences because it is not just the words that are considered funny but also how they were said. While including Pidgin English enriches the authenticity of the film's portrayal of Nigerian culture, it also poses a challenge regarding accessibility for viewers outside of Nigeria.

Also, the running joke that Nigerian society refuses to be managed is showcased in this film. Wonu gets no respect and is easily brushed aside by imperious matrons. The invitations have embedded chips as a security feature. However, one goes badly astray before the opening credits, and a sly provincial character quickly demonstrates that the reception's security perimeter can be breached if one speaks Yoruba in a blue streak and moves deftly. *The wedding party* is saturated with Nigerian culture and society's self-understanding. There is a framing sense of Nigerian society as a hot mess, bubbling with chaotic eruptions, waywardness, jealousies, pickpocketing, and drunken accidents. While these elements may be humorous to those familiar with Nigerian culture, individuals unfamiliar with it may not find the representation amusing.

4.2 The Cultural Specificity of Comedy in Aki and Pawpaw (2021)

The film *Aki and Pawpaw* is a Nollywood comedy released in 2021 and directed by Biodun Stephen. The film centers on two troublesome brothers, Aki, played by Chinedu Ikedieze, and Pawpaw, played by Osita Iheme, who live in Lagos with their uncle, played by Charles Inojie. The boys were employed in a pepper soup joint owned by Mama Nki (played by Toyin Abraham). Their lives take an unexpected turn when they encounter Samantha (played by Chioma Okafor), who captures one of their tricks and shares it online, propelling them to instant social media stardom. As they amass wealth, they are confronted with the challenges, betrayals, and complexities that come with fame and fortune. This film is a remake of the popular Nigerian comic films *Aki and Ukwa*, where the persona of *Aki and Pawpaw* was created in 2003. Fast forward twenty years and Aki and Pawpaw are released. There was anticipation as the duo had not acted together in a long time; Nigerians came out to the cinema to see the film when it was released.

Nigerians know lheme and Ikedieze as a dynamic duo. Their fame stems from a blend of physical comedy and their petite stature, often leading them to be mistaken for youngsters despite being in their late thirties and early forties. This contrast between their appearance and age adds to the comedic charm that surrounds them. Their on-screen partnership is another critical factor in their popularity. They effortlessly portray inseparable friends, brothers, or partners in various comedic adventures, creating a bond that resonates with audiences. Their chemistry, mannerisms, spontaneity, and comedic improvisation contribute to making their style unforgettable. In their films, even the mere mention of their names or appearance on-screen can elicit anticipation and laughter from the audience. Their comedy, while sometimes universal because it has elements of physical comedy, often carries cultural nuances in the verbal humor that might be culturally specific and thus adds to the enjoyment for Nigerian viewers.

In the film *Aki and Pawpaw*, there is a scene where the duo attempts to steal money from their boss; Aki's clever distraction by pretending to spot a snake in the shop while Pawpaw seizes the opportunity to steal the cash is a classic example of their comedic antics. Such moments showcase their talent for delivering laughs through physical humor and clever wit. In that scene, Aki ran out of the store screaming, "Snake, snake, there is a snake in the shop." The other workers ran out, too. This allowed Pawpaw to steal their boss's money. When the boss found out her money was missing, she was not shocked and almost did not react much. That scene was funny because there was an incident in Nigeria in 2018 where a government official claimed that a snake swallowed 36 million naira. Months later, a senator also claimed that a monkey swallowed 70 million naira. In 2019, a finance officer at a Zoological Garden claimed that a gorilla crept into their offices, stole, and consumed 6.8 million naira. When Nigerians watched this scene, it created a comic amusement because it went to show how we can be too gullible to believe that animals could swallow money when this is the action of corrupt people, who thus blame it on animals who cannot defend themselves.

In the final scene, Pawpaw finds himself on the brink of signing a contract with a company that turns out to be fraudulent and unknown to him. His brother Aki, along with Samantha, finds ways to prevent Pawpaw from making a grave mistake. As tension rises, an unexpected ally emerges in the form of their former boss, who arrives with her workers armed not with conventional weapons but with kitchen utensils. The humor in this scene arises from the situation's absurdity and the unexpected use of everyday objects as makeshift weapons. The cultural specificity comes into play as the characters resort to a humorous yet resourceful tactic rooted in Nigerian ingenuity and resilience. The image of individuals armed with kitchen spoons and spatulas facing off against security guards adds a touch of comedic irony to the scene. Instead of depicting a traditional fight scene, the film employs intertitles such as 'gbos', 'gbas', and 'Knock Knock' to suggest the outcome of the confrontation without showing explicit violence. This creative approach adds to the humor and allows the scene to maintain a lighthearted tone while conveying the characters' triumph over adversity. The scene exemplifies Nigerian comedy's cultural specificity by blending humor with uniquely Nigerian characteristics and values.

Also, including their native dialect, in this case the Igbo language, added an element of comic relief, although this was subtitled. However, it loses its significance when not spoken in the native dialect; phrases like "Ta gbafuo, toloto, isi e ana re awo ncha," when translated, mean, "Get out, a turkey whose hair does not produce soap." Another phrase is "amadioha gbabuo gi," meaning "a diety strike you." Other expressions like err, ahn, Mmm, emmm, ehnn, and kai

were employed in the film; the instances in which they were used generated some form of laughter for Nigerians but might be confusing for non-indigenous people. These phrases can be complicated for people from different ethnic groups within Nigeria to understand, creating another cultural barrier. Nigeria has over 555 languages, although there are three major ethnic groups: Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo. Films in these languages might not easily appeal to everyone due to language differences. This film is in English, but many comic films in Nigeria include their native languages, which can make it hard for non-speakers to understand. Therefore, if this could create a cultural barrier in Nigeria, it certainly will create one outside Nigeria.

Further experimentation involved playing scenes from *Aki and Pawpaw* and *The Wedding Party* to audiences from American, Mexican, and Asian backgrounds. The audiences found it challenging to perceive the comic amusement in the scenes, which contrasted sharply with the reception in Nigeria, where the same scenes were regarded as the funniest moments in the films. This highlighted the cultural boundaries embedded within the films.

# **5. CONCLUSION**

This paper cannot fully state that all Nigerian humor cannot be understood outside the country because, as mentioned earlier, physical humor is widely relatable across cultures. This also applies to some Nigerian humor, as physical comedy is a key feature of Nigerian comedy films. Additionally, not all verbal jokes are limited to the specific regions they originate from. Some Nigerian skits, for example, have gained global popularity, showing that humor can transcend geographical boundaries. However, there has yet to be research to confirm whether the global audience for Nigerian entertainment consists mainly of Nigerians living abroad or international viewers.

One factor that may limit Nigerian comedy's global reach is its frequent use of Pidgin English, which can be difficult for non-native speakers to understand. Many Nigerian comedians struggle to tell jokes without using Pidgin English, but those who avoid it often find more success internationally. Nevertheless, Nigeria's rich cultural diversity is a significant aspect of its entertainment, and this cultural nuance may not always translate well outside Nigeria. While some Nigerian humor can be understood globally, language barriers and cultural nuances may hinder certain aspects of Nigerian comedy from resonating with international audiences. Reimann states, "For humor to be successfully understood and enjoyed across the cultural divide, not only must the purveyor be aware of the previously mentioned social conventions, but also adept at communication, selecting content, sensing an opportunity, and spinning a good yarn." (24). Achieving this can be challenging, as it often requires comedians or filmmakers to provide context and explanations about their comedic style to ensure comprehension across diverse audiences. Consequently, certain comedic expressions may remain tied to their geographic origins, reflecting the unique cultural nuances from which they originated.

Further research is needed to determine how much Nigerian humor is accepted globally. It is essential to investigate whether international audiences consist mainly of Nigerians, Africans, or Western viewers, as this can provide valuable insights into the global reception of Nigerian comedy.

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