FILMMAKING, YOUTH LIVELIHOODS, AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF KANNYWOOD IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of filmmaking, youth livelihoods, and the political economy of Kannywood, the Hausa-language film industry in Kano, Northern Nigeria. Although culturally significant, Kannywood has received limited scholarly attention as a site of socio-economic opportunity. In response to persistent youth unemployment, the paper explores how the industry functions as an informal arena of work, identity formation, and social mobility for young people excluded from formal labor markets. Guided by the Political Economy of Culture (PEC) and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), the analysis examines how power relations, moral regulation, and informal networks shape creative labor. Using a qualitative design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, documentary analysis, and an embedded case study of youth livelihoods in Kano. Findings reveal that while Kannywood generates employment and skills, it remains characterized by informality, gender inequality, and restrictive censorship. The paper concludes that the industry embodies both opportunity and precarity, holding untapped potential for inclusive development. Policy recommendations include strengthening institutional frameworks, improving access to finance, and reforming censorship to position creative industries as drivers of youth empowerment.

***Keywords*:** Kannywood, youth livelihoods, filmmaking, creative economy, Northern Nigeria

1.0 Introduction

Nigeria's demographic profile, with more than 60% of its population under the age of 25, underscores the urgency of addressing youth unemployment and underemployment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Many young Nigerians experience "waithood," a prolonged transitional stage between dependence and secure adulthood (Honwana, 2022). In Northern Nigeria, this condition is intensified by educational disadvantages, limited access to formal employment, and structural economic decline, pushing youth toward informal livelihood strategies.

Within this context, creative industries have emerged as alternative spaces for economic participation. While Nollywood's growth has been extensively documented (Haynes, 2016; Krings &Okome, 2023), Kannywood — the Hausa-language film industry based in Kano — remains underexplored despite its cultural and economic significance. Kannywood provides employment, skills acquisition, and social visibility for thousands of young people, functioning as both a site of cultural production and an informal labor market (Adamu, 2019).

However, the opportunity structure within Kannywood is fragile. It is shaped by informal financing, restrictive censorship, and moral regulation influenced by Sharia law (Larkin, 2008; Yakubu, 2023). These dynamics situate Kannywood within a broader political economy of culture, where religious authority, state regulation, and patronage networks determine access to resources, creative expression, and livelihood outcomes. For youth, participation in Kannywood represents both empowerment and precarity: it offers income, skills, and symbolic capital, yet exposes them to irregular pay, piracy, and gendered exclusion.

This paper therefore foregrounds the intersection of Kannywood, political economy, and youth livelihoods to examine how cultural industries function as both sites of opportunity and structural constraint. Specifically, it aims to (1) analyze how Kannywood generates and restricts youth livelihood opportunities, (2) explore the political-economic forces including censorship, religious regulation, and informal capital flows that shape creative labour, and (3) assess the implications for inclusive development in Northern Nigeria. By situating Kannywood within debates on youth agency and precarity, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of creative economies as both engines of aspiration and arenas of vulnerability.

2.0 Literature Review

Youth Employment and Livelihood Strategies

Scholarship on African youth employment increasingly emphasizes agency, portraying young people as innovators navigating structural uncertainty (Resnick & Thurlow, 2022; Oosterom, 2023). While this perspective challenges earlier depictions of youth as passive victims, it risks romanticizing precarious realities. Honwana's (2022) concept of "waithood" captures the prolonged liminality between dependence and adulthood, yet it does not fully explain how creative sectors mediate this condition. Much of the literature celebrates youth entrepreneurship but neglects the structural violence that makes such entrepreneurship a necessity rather than a choice.

Informality accounts for more than 80% of new jobs in Sub-Saharan Africa (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). While creative industries are often framed as adaptive livelihood strategies (De Beukelaer, 2022), this framing can obscure exploitation and the absence of state protection. The

distinction between survivalist hustling and organized informal entrepreneurship remains underexplored, particularly in Northern Nigeria. This gap underscores the need to examine how creative economies like Kannywood both enable mobility and reproduce precarity.

Nollywood, Kannywood, and the Creative Economy

Nollywood scholarship has matured, moving from celebratory accounts of grassroots entrepreneurship to critical analyses of informal capitalism, digital transformation and diaspora markets (Haynes, 2016; Krings &Okome, 2023; Adejunmobi, 2024). However, this Nollywood-centric focus reproduces Nigeria's internal cultural hierarchies, privileging southern expressions while marginalizing northern industries. When Kannywood is discussed, it is often framed through religious controversy or moral panic rather than as a legitimate site of creative labor (Adamu, 2019; Balogun, 2022).

This marginalization reflects both intellectual and political biases. Adamu's (2019) work on transnational Hausa video films highlights cultural circulation but pays limited attention to material conditions of production. Thus, Kannywood remains peripheral in global film studies and Nigerian cultural scholarship. Addressing this gap requires a political economy approach that situates Kannywood as a site of production, labor relations and livelihood strategies, not merely cultural texts.

Political Economy of Cultural Production

The political economy of culture tradition (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Mosco, 2021) provides tools for analyzing how cultural production is shaped by power and capital. Yet these frameworks, developed in Western contexts, assume institutional structures welfare states, intellectual property regimes, formal labour markets that do not apply in Northern Nigeria. Applying them uncritically risks deficit comparisons.

More relevant are approaches that foreground culture as both commodity and moral domain. Larkin's (2008) work on media infrastructure in Northern Nigeria demonstrates how technology, religion and politics intersect in shaping cultural circulation. Building on this, scholars such as Yakubu (2023) and Balogun (2022) show how Sharia law and censorship boards regulate not only content but also access to creative work. Thus, Kannywood's political economy is defined by fragmented networks of patronage, religious authority and informal capital flows, which collectively determine youth livelihood opportunities.

Livelihoods and Precarity in Creative Work

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (Scoones, 1998; De Haan & Zoomers, 2021) emphasizes how individuals mobilize assets such as human, social and financial to navigate vulnerability. However, its descriptive focus requires adaptation for urban creative economies. In Kannywood, apprenticeship networks

(social capital) substitute for formal training institutions, but reliance on patronage reproduces inequality. Standing's (2023) notion of the "precariat" highlights insecure labour, yet in African contexts precariousness is not a fall from stability but the historical norm.

De Beukelaer's (2022) concept of "multi-activity survivalism" captures the portfolio livelihoods of creative workers, but risks naturalizing precarity. Ndlela (2021) advances the idea of "communities of precarious creativity," showing how informal institutions enable survival while reproducing vulnerability. In Kannywood, precarity is differentiated by gender, access to patronage and ability to navigate moral regulation, underscoring the need for a nuanced analysis.

Gender, Religion, and Creative Labour

Scholarship on gender and media in Africa has expanded, yet Kannywood remains undertheorized. Mahmood's (2005) concept of "pious agency" is useful for understanding how women exercise agency within moral norms rather than against them. In Kannywood, female practitioners negotiate creative aspirations with expectations of modesty, often working behind the scenes or leveraging digital platforms (Adebanwi, 2023).

However, symbolic negotiation must be connected to material labour conditions. Women's exclusion from leadership roles translates into lower earnings, limited career progression and reduced industry diversity. Gendered constraints thus reflect the intersection of patriarchal norms, religious regulation and structural inequalities, shaping differentiated livelihood outcomes.

Digital Transformations and Platform Labour

The digital turn in African screen media has reshaped distribution and audience engagement (Jedlowski, 2021; Adejunmobi, 2024). Platforms enable youth to bypass traditional gatekeepers, yet they also introduce algorithmic control, unpredictable monetization and intensified competition. Fuchs's (2023) concept of the "platform precariat" highlights how digital labor reproduces insecurity.

For Kannywood, digital platforms present both opportunity and vulnerability. They expand transnational reach but expose creators to piracy and volatile income systems. Importantly, platformization intersects with existing structures of censorship and patronage, creating hybrid regimes of regulation. This underscores the need to analyze digital transformations not as liberatory shifts but as extensions of precarious creative economies.

Synthesis

Taken together, the literature reveals a critical gap: while African youth are increasingly studied as agents of informal creativity, the structural constraints of political economy remain underexplored in Northern Nigeria. Nollywood scholarship dominates, marginalizing Kannywood as a site of labor and livelihood. Existing

frameworks such as political economy, SLA, precarity, gender and digitalization each offer insights but require integration. This paper addresses these gaps by centering Kannywood as a case study to examine how youth livelihoods are shaped by the interplay of political economy, moral regulation and digital transformation. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on creative economies as both engines of aspiration and arenas of precarity.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates the Political Economy of Culture (PEC) with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) to capture both structural forces and individual agency in Kannywood. PEC emphasizes how cultural production is shaped by power relations, regulation, and capital flows, situating Kannywood within a governance landscape where culture functions simultaneously as an economic commodity and a domain of moral control (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Mosco, 2021). SLA complements this by focusing on how individuals mobilize assets including human, social and financial capital to sustain livelihoods in contexts of vulnerability (Scoones, 1998; De Haan & Zoomers, 2021).

Operationalizing SLA in Kannywood:

Human capital refers to technical skills such as acting, editing, camera work, and scriptwriting, often acquired through informal apprenticeship rather than formal training.

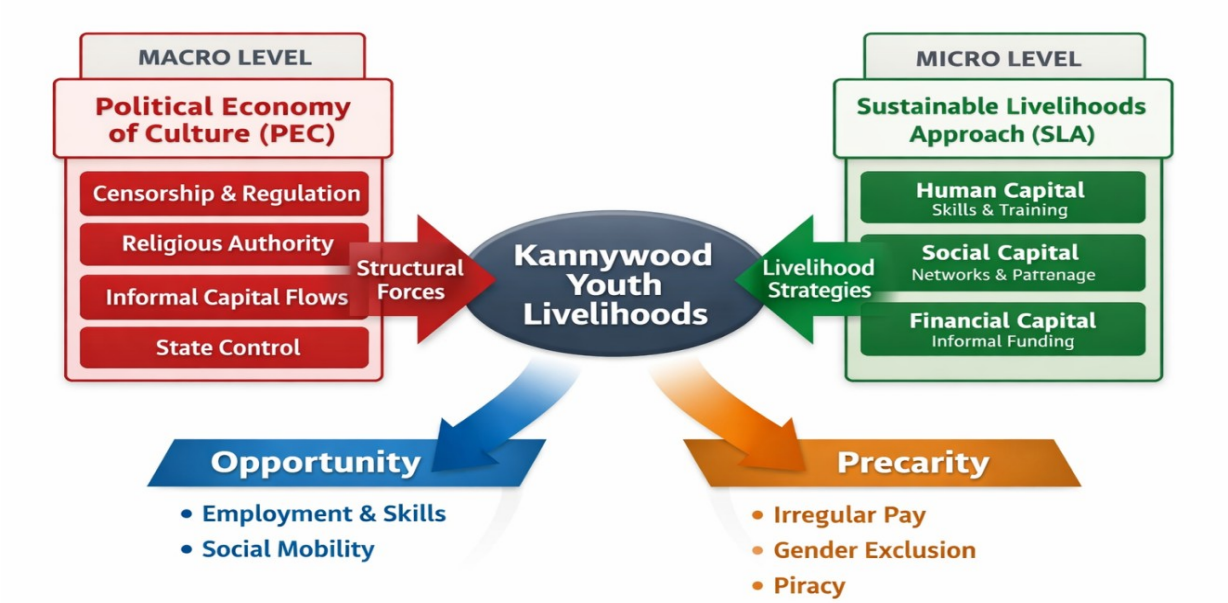
Social capital is embodied in apprenticeship networks, patronage ties, and guild affiliations that provide access to opportunities and protection in the absence of formal contracts.

Financial capital is mobilized through pooled savings, informal loans, and patron sponsorship, as formal credit institutions often deem the sector too risky.

These capitals illustrate how youth navigate precarity by leveraging skills, networks, and informal financing. However, SLA alone risks presenting these strategies as adaptive without interrogating the structural constraints that make them necessary.

Integrating PEC and SLA:

PEC strengthens SLA by revealing how censorship, religious regulation, and informal capital flows shape the distribution and conversion of livelihood assets. For example, while SLA identifies apprenticeship as social capital, PEC highlights how patronage networks reproduce inequality by privileging those with political or religious connections. Conversely, SLA strengthens PEC by grounding structural analysis in the lived experiences of youth, showing how individuals mobilize limited assets to sustain livelihoods despite systemic exclusion. Together, these frameworks provide a holistic lens: PEC explains the structural conditions of precarity, while SLA illuminates the agency and strategies of youth within those constraints. The integrated framework can be visualized as follows:



This conceptual model underscores the suitability of combining PEC and SLA: it demonstrates that youth livelihoods in Kannywood cannot be understood solely through individual strategies or structural analysis, but through their dynamic interplay.

3.0 Methodology

The study employed a qualitative, interpretive case study design focused on Kano, the hub of Kannywood's production activities. This approach was chosen because the research questions — exploring how Kannywood creates and constrains youth livelihood opportunities and how structural and gendered forces shape these dynamics — required deep engagement with participants' lived experiences and informal work practices. Data were collected between 2022 and 2023 through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and an embedded case study of production clusters such as Zoo Road, Gidan Dan Hausa, Farm Centre and Tarauni. These methods collectively allowed triangulation and contextual understanding of creative labour within the industry's informal economy.

Thirty participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across occupational categories and gender. The sample included actors, directors, producers, editors, scriptwriters, and guild officials drawn from the Motion Picture Practitioners Association of Nigeria (MOPPAN) and the Kannywood Guild of Actors and Directors. Guild officials were included as key stakeholders responsible for regulating professional standards and mediating between practitioners and the state censorship board. The distribution of participants reflected the industry's structure, ensuring that insights captured the perspectives of both creative

workers and institutional actors. The number of interviews corresponded directly to the number of respondents, maintaining internal consistency.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Bayero University, Kano, under the Faculty of Social and Management Sciences. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary participation and withdrawal. Written consent was secured, pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and data were stored securely. The ethical justification for the study lies in its potential to inform inclusive policy interventions for youth empowerment while safeguarding participants' dignity and confidentiality. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 12, combining inductive and deductive coding to connect individual narratives to broader political-economic structures.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

Youth Opportunities in Kannywood

The first research question asked: *How does Kannywood create livelihood opportunities for youth in Northern Nigeria?* Evidence shows that Kannywood functions as a crucial informal economy, offering both direct and indirect employment. Apprenticeship emerged as the primary mode of skill acquisition, with young people learning editing, camera work, and scriptwriting directly on set. One young editor explained: *"I never went to film school. I learned everything by watching others at Zoo Road. Now people call me for jobs because they know I can deliver."*

Beyond core production, ancillary services such as costume design, catering, and equipment rental generate secondary livelihoods. A studio manager noted: *"Whenever we are shooting, the whole street becomes active — street hawkers, tailors, food sellers, transporters. Everyone benefits."* This illustrates Kannywood's multiplier effect, sustaining a micro-economy that extends beyond the film set. Participation also confers symbolic capital, with youth gaining prestige across Hausa-speaking West Africa, particularly through YouTube distribution.

Challenges and Precarities

The second research question asked: *What structural and gendered forces constrain youth livelihoods in Kannywood?* Findings reveal that informality and economic insecurity are pervasive. Most work is verbal, with payment contingent on project success. As one producer lamented: *"A film can be rejected for a small thing if the message is seen as critical. That means months of work and no pay."* Piracy further undermines profits, leaving workers vulnerable to irregular income.

Censorship and religious regulation exert significant influence. Scripts are scrutinized for moral content, leading to delays or outright bans. Many youth internalize self-censorship to avoid rejection. Gendered constraints are particularly acute: female respondents described reputational risks and moral

policing. One actress shared: *"My family warned me that acting would bring shame. I had to stop appearing on screen and now only work as a makeup artist."* This reflects Mahmood's (2005) notion of "pious agency," where women navigate creative aspirations within moral norms, but it also underscores material exclusion from leadership and higher-paying roles.

Political Economy of Kannywood

The third research question asked: *How does the political economy shape youth livelihoods in Kannywood?* The industry is defined by the interplay of state regulation, religious authority, and informal capital. Financing relies heavily on pooled savings and patron loans, as formal institutions perceive the sector as high-risk. This limits production quality and scalability. At the same time, the state acts as both regulator and political patron, censoring films while co-opting stars for election campaigns. Religious authority sets ideological boundaries, influencing portrayals of gender and family, and creating a distinct aesthetic of modesty.

Digital platforms are reshaping this landscape by decentralizing gatekeeping, but they introduce new vulnerabilities such as algorithmic visibility and digital piracy. A young YouTube content creator explained: *"Online gives us freedom from the censorship board, but the money is unpredictable. Sometimes you get paid, sometimes nothing."* This highlights the emergence of a "platform precariat" (Fuchs, 2023), where digital innovation coexists with intensified insecurity.

Case Study: Youth Livelihoods in Kano

The integrated case study of Zoo Road and Farm Centre illustrates how Kannywood sustains distributed livelihoods. Three dominant entry pathways were identified: apprenticeship, social networks, and digital self-financing. Income levels vary: crew members earn ₦10,000–₦30,000 per production, while mid-level professionals may earn up to ₦120,000. Yet most youths combine filmmaking with other hustles, reflecting De Beukelaer's (2022) "multi-activity survivalism."

One scriptwriter reflected: *"Now people know me as a writer. Even if the money is small, I feel proud. It gives me dignity."* This pursuit of recognition transforms marginal conditions into sites of self-realization. However, sustainability is threatened by piracy and inadequate financing. The case study confirms that Kannywood functions as both an economic safety net and a symbolic resource, but its potential remains untapped without targeted policy support.

Analytical Contribution

The findings demonstrate that Kannywood embodies a dual reality: it is simultaneously a space of opportunity and precarity. Youth participation reflects adaptive agency within structural exclusion, sustaining dignity amid uncertainty. Yet systemic fragility such as censorship, piracy, gender inequality and lack of institutional support constrain its developmental potential.

By foregrounding direct narratives and lived experiences, this study contributes to knowledge by showing how political economy and livelihood strategies intersect in creative industries. It challenges celebratory accounts of entrepreneurship by revealing the structural power relations that determine outcomes. Kannywood thus exemplifies the contradictions of Africa's creative economy: cultural innovation coexists with moral regulation, digital possibility with platform precarity and youth aspiration with systemic neglect.

5.0 Discussion

Kannywood as Precarious Livelihood

The findings confirm that Kannywood operates as both an economic lifeline and a site of precarity for Northern Nigerian youth. Apprenticeship networks and informal financing provide entry points into creative work, but the absence of contracts, irregular pay, and piracy perpetuate insecurity. This dual reality reflects the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA): youth mobilize human capital (skills), social capital (networks) and financial capital (informal funding) to sustain themselves. Yet, as the Political Economy of Culture (PEC) highlights, these assets are constrained by censorship, religious regulation, and patronage systems. Thus, while SLA explains how youth adapt, PEC reveals why adaptation is necessary — structural exclusion and institutional weakness shape the very conditions of survival.

Gender and Moral Regulation

Gendered constraints illustrate the intersection of symbolic and material economies. Women's participation is mediated by moral discourses of modesty and reputational risk, consistent with Mahmood's (2005) concept of "pious agency." However, empirical evidence shows that symbolic negotiation translates into material exclusion: women are relegated to auxiliary roles such as makeup artists or digital content creators, limiting their earnings and career progression. PEC strengthens this analysis by showing how patriarchal norms and religious authority regulate access to creative labor, while SLA highlights how women mobilize alternative assets such as digital platforms to carve out livelihoods. Together, these frameworks reveal that gender inequality in Kannywood is not merely cultural but deeply embedded in the political economy of creative work.

Digital Transformations and Platform Precarity

Digitalization offers new pathways for youth to bypass traditional gatekeepers, expand audiences and gain symbolic capital. Yet, findings show that digital platforms reproduce precarity through unpredictable monetization and algorithmic control. As one YouTube creator explained: *"Online gives us freedom from the censorship board, but the money is unpredictable. Sometimes you get paid, sometimes nothing."* This reflects Fuchs's (2023) notion of the "platform precariat." SLA captures how youth mobilize digital skills (human

capital) and online networks (social capital), but PEC reveals how platform economies are embedded in global structures of control and exploitation. The integration of both frameworks demonstrates that digital innovation does not eliminate precarity; rather, it reconfigures it.

Contribution to Knowledge

Synthesizing PEC and SLA provides a more comprehensive understanding of Kannywood's dual reality. SLA illuminates youth agency and adaptive strategies, while PEC situates these within broader structures of censorship, religious authority, and informal capital flows. At points of intersection, PEC strengthens SLA by exposing the limits of asset mobilization under structural constraints, while SLA strengthens PEC by grounding abstract power relations in lived experiences. This integrated lens advances scholarship by moving beyond celebratory accounts of creative entrepreneurship to reveal the contradictions of Africa's creative economy: aspiration coexists with exploitation, innovation with insecurity and cultural production with moral regulation.

Broader Implications

The analysis underscores that creative industries like Kannywood cannot be understood solely as engines of cultural expression or entrepreneurship. They are embedded in political economies that shape who participates, under what conditions, and with what outcomes. For policy, this means that interventions must go beyond skill training to address structural barriers: reforming censorship, expanding access to finance, and promoting gender equity. For scholarship, the study demonstrates the value of integrating PEC and SLA to analyze creative economies in contexts where informality, religion and state power converge. Kannywood thus serves as a critical case for rethinking youth livelihoods in Africa's creative sectors.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Kannywood functions as both a site of opportunity and precarity for youth in Northern Nigeria. Apprenticeship networks, informal financing, and digital platforms provide entry points into creative work, enabling skill acquisition, employment, and social mobility. Yet systemic challenges like censorship, piracy, irregular pay and gendered exclusion constrain its developmental potential.

By integrating the Political Economy of Culture (PEC) with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), the study demonstrates that youth livelihoods in Kannywood cannot be understood solely through individual strategies or structural analysis, but through their dynamic interplay. SLA illuminates how youth mobilize human, social, and financial capital, while PEC reveals how these assets are shaped and limited by regulation, religious authority and patronage. Together, these frameworks advance theoretical understanding of creative economies as spaces where agency and constraints coexist.

For film scholarship, the findings underscore the need to move beyond Nollywood-centric narratives and recognize Kannywood as a critical case for analyzing Africa's creative economy. The study contributes to knowledge by foregrounding how cultural industries in contexts of informality and moral regulation generate both livelihoods and vulnerabilities. More broadly, it highlights the importance of policy interventions that address structural barriers such as censorship reform, financing access and gender equity, if creative industries are to fulfill their potential as engines of inclusive development.

Policy Recommendations

Government:

1. Reform censorship practices to balance cultural sensitivity with creative freedom.
2. Establish a Creative Industries Fund through the Bank of Industry to support youth-led productions.
3. Strengthen anti-piracy enforcement to stabilize income streams and protect intellectual property.
4. Integrate creative industry training into vocational and educational programmes to enhance human capital.

Guilds and Industry Bodies

1. Expand guild roles (e.g., MOPPAN, Kannywood Guild of Actors/Directors) to include capacity building, collective bargaining and welfare provision.
2. Develop standardized contracts and codes of practice to reduce exploitation and ensure fair remuneration.
3. Promote gender equity through mentorship programmes and representation of women in leadership positions.
4. Collaborate with digital platforms to negotiate fairer monetization terms and protect members from algorithmic precarity.

Development Partners

1. Fund training initiatives, digital literacy programs and infrastructure development for creative workers.
2. Partner with UNESCO, African Development Bank and other agencies to facilitate regional exchanges and market access.
3. Support research and policy advocacy to highlight the role of creative industries in youth empowerment and inclusive growth.
4. Ensure interventions are context-sensitive, recognizing the interplay of religion, politics and informality in shaping livelihoods.

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