

Ludenism and Stephenson's play theory: Illuminating notions of mass entertainment

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Received 23rd July 2024; Accepted 23rd September 2024

ABSTRACT: Communication plays a vital role in human existence, because of the importance and effects of communication on the interrelationship of man and its environment, attempts have been made by scholars and philosophers to explain the effects and roles of communication on various man's activities, phenomena and events. And this has resulted in theories and postulations cutting across different eras'. These include mass society era, limited effect, scientific perspective, cultural era theories, and now technological/digital age era. This study conducted an inquiry into this phenomenon by using qualitative research, case study analysis and secondary qualitative data as methods for capturing data. Qualitative research methods allowed the researcher to examine how a kind of phenomenon structures and gives meaning to its occurrence. This kind of research signals an investigative enquiry that involves the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. For this work, the captured data have been analysed and interpreted by observing what effect Ludenism and Stephenson's play theory have on mass entertainment in Nigeria. This study is a critique of William Stephenson's play theory of mass communication. His view that people use mass media mostly for play - that is, entertainment, pleasure and self-satisfaction rather than work (information and improvement) was true to some extent in the traditional society where the need of the people was small and their level of education low. For instance, more newspaper readers give more attention to comics, cartoons, sport pages, fashion columns, human angle stories and so on than they do to hard news and public service materials. Stephenson's philosophies are one, that life is centred on two major activities - work and play; thereby leaving out death. Two; that people use mass media for pleasure and entertainment rather than for information and improvement. This translates to the fact that the more media you have, the more of entertainment and pleasurable life becomes. To explain the theory, Stephenson used a data gathering procedure called Q-sort in his research on how different audiences, expressed as typical individuals, feel about the mass media.

Keywords: Illuminating, ludenism, mass entertainment, notions, Stephenson's Play Theory,

INTRODUCTION

The word "Ludenism," derived from the Latin word 'ludere' which means 'to play' is a concept that emphasises the intrinsic value and fundamental nature of play in human culture and society. Play is not merely a recreational activity but a vital aspect of human development, creativity, and social interaction. Historically, play has been a subject of philosophical inquiry and psychological study, with various theorists examining its

role in shaping human behaviour and societal norms. One prominent framework within the study of play is "Stephenson's Play Theory". This theory, developed by William Stephenson in the mid-20th century, posits that play is an essential mode of communication and a crucial element in the formation of human personality and social structures. According to Stephenson, play is a form of non-instrumental communication that allows individuals to

explore, express, and share their inner thoughts and emotions in a liberated manner, free from the constraints of conventional social roles and expectations (Stephenson, 1967).

The Play Theory of Mass Communication has been developed by social scientist William Stephenson based on the precedent work of J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, and of the Hungarian psychiatrist T.S. Szasz. The concept has been explained in his 1967 book "The Play Theory of Mass Communication" University of Chicago Press, United States. The author developed the concept to contrast those who argued about the harmful effects of the mass media and the information-based vision of media. Play theory is based on the idea that media cannot have harmful effects because the audience uses them primarily for entertainment, rather than as serious sources of information. Play Theory of Mass Communication is a theory that holds the first function of mass media is to provide entertainment (Folarin, 2002).

Stephenson's Play Theory underscores the significance of play in both individual and collective contexts. It highlights the idea that play serves as a medium through which people can engage with each other and the world around them in a more profound and meaningful way. This engagement fosters creativity, innovation, and a deeper understanding of oneself and others, ultimately contributing to the enrichment of human life and culture (Stephenson, 1967). The interaction of ludenism and Stephenson's Play Theory offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the multifaceted nature of play. Ludenism recognises play as a fundamental human activity that transcends mere entertainment, while Stephenson's theory provides a structured approach to understanding how play operates as a communicative and expressive act. Together, these perspectives enable a richer exploration of how play influences and is influenced by various aspects of human existence, including psychological well-being, social cohesion, and cultural expression (Saundra and Richard, 2004).

Play is an activity pursued for pleasure. The daily withdrawal of people into the mass media in their after-hours is a matter of subjectivity. The effect of mass communication is neither escapism nor seducing the masses. Rather it is seen as anti-anxiety producing and is regarded as communication-pleasure. Regarding the newspapers, Stephenson developed and defended the Ludenic Theory of News reading. Here he argues they are read to provide pleasure and relaxation instead of information and illumination, as mistakenly believed so far by many media authors and readers. Media, in general, are aimed at providing communication pleasure and their activity is often focused on turning certain conditions into positive ones which would otherwise create concern. People of any national culture require something to talk about to satisfy their need for entertainment, play and enjoyment. Mass communication in this perspective can

serve two purposes. Firstly, maximising the communication pleasure in the world; and secondly, to show the extent of autonomy achievable from an individual with respect to the social control performed by his socio-cultural system.

What makes Stephenson's research unique is the innovative methodology. This has to do with analysing how communication processes are received by individuals. He studied mass communication from a subjective and psychological standpoint, rather than an objective and sociological one as his predecessors did. Although much of media research and scholarship has been focused on media effects in a socially negative way such as violence, misogyny, racism and sexual objectification, there have been many in the research communities who have studied media consumption from an audience perspective. Often working with different iterations of uses and gratifications theory, several scholars have put forth frameworks to help understand why we consume media.

William Stephenson's Play Theory, which suggests that our interaction with various forms of mass communication helps us create and enhance our identities, is one of the older and better-known examples of such work. In 1967, Stephenson published his audience-centric theory in, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* (Stephenson, 1967). Stephenson introduced the Play Theory with the words, "The media have been looked at through the ideas of morality, when, instead, what is required is a fresh glance at people existing in their own right for the first time." Although the most powerful implications of this theory relate to the individual. Stephenson's perspective on the value of play is rooted in the work of Johan Huizinga, whose theories dealt with the broad cultural value of play. Stephenson credits Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which was published in 1938, as marking the beginning of modern thinking about the play (Huizinga, 1955). Stephenson suggests that before Huizinga's work, play was viewed as a frivolous activity, whereas following *Homo Ludens*, play began to be recognised as a process that gave rise to useful conventions that permit culture to evolve and stabilise (Worsford, 2007).

The first step in understanding Play Theory is to understand Stephenson's notion of play. Extending Freud's position, Stephenson grounds his theory along a continuum with pain placed on one side and pleasure on the other. In this model, work leans toward pain, while play leans toward pleasure. Stephenson argues that work is anything to do with reality, with earning a living, and with production, while play is a time for recreation, hobbies, or self-cultivation that is "largely unproductive except for the self-satisfaction it provides (Frost *et al.*, 2012). Stephenson next places the functions of the mass media on his continuum of pain and pleasure. He notes that the media can be associated with both pain, through its capacity to support work, and pleasure, through its capacity to entertain. It is in defining what constitutes work-related media consumption and play-related media

consumption that one first encounters the ambiguity of Play Theory. Stephenson suggests that mass communication dealing with work consists of matters of reality such as the weather, shipping news, and farming information.

Conversely, play-related mass communication deals with leisure-time pursuits, which would presumably include the arts, sporting events, and travel information. However, in this categorisation, one cannot help but point out that what constitutes work and play varies from person to person. Thus, when one is applying play theory, one must first gauge the subject's definition of the two terms. Play Theory is concerned solely with play-related media consumption. Stephenson's model suggests that pleasure is derived from two distinct forms of media play. Davis and Baran have built on Stephenson's framework and classified these forms as participatory and elite-dominated communication play (Worsford, 2007).

Participatory play occurs when communicators are free to alter interactions to achieve their goals. Under this form of play, participants are able to express themselves on equal terms. According to him, people used mass communication more as play than as work more for pleasure and entertainment than for information and improvement. For instance, more newspaper readers give more attention to comics, cartoons, sports pages, fashion columns, human angle stories and so on than they do to hard news which is factual, timely reports on significant events, such as politics, crime, economics, and disasters, typically focusing on objective information rather than opinions or features and public service materials. Stephenson's philosophies are one, that life is centred on two major activities which include work and play; thereby leaving out death; two; that people use mass media for pleasure and entertainment rather than for information and improvement. This translates to the fact that the more media you have, the more entertaining and pleasurable life becomes. To explain the theory, Stephenson used a data-gathering procedure called Q-sort in his research on how different audiences, expressed as typical individuals, feel about the media. The present paper aims to delve into the intricate relationship between ludenism and Stephenson's Play Theory, examining how these concepts interrelate and contribute to the understanding of play in contemporary society. This paper seeks to shed light on the enduring importance of play as a dynamic and transformative force in human life and provide how the theory illuminates the notion of mass entertainment.

Assumptions of Ludenism and Stephenson's Play Theory

Play Theory hinges on one primary assumption, which relates to the audience's active involvement in the media consumption process. Stephenson asserts his belief in audience involvement by commenting, I do not think of

media consumption as mere entertainment in a non-ego-involving sense, but at its best as a highly developed form of subjective play. While today's popular view, which is influenced by modes of mass communication such as the 24-hour-a-day news channel, holds that audiences sit passively in the media's unrelenting stream, Play Theory assumes that audiences are extremely active and engaged in the media consumption process. This absorption and the decreasing self-consciousness that it inspires are in fact vital to achieving the individual development that characterises communications play.

Although, Stephenson positions Play Theory as a model applicable to mass communication in general, the bulk of his discussion is centred on newspaper reading and he makes little mention of either television or radio-based media consumption. Perhaps Stephenson intended this failure to assess a greater spectrum of media as a tacit indication that Play Theory was still a work in progress (Worsford, 2007). Stephenson offers several criteria on what constitutes play. For instance, he argues that play is secluded, taking place in a particular place set off for the purpose in time or space - it has a beginning and an end.

In simple terms, the postulates of Ludenism and Stephenson's play theory can be viewed from the perspectives firstly, play is distinguishable from work – that is self-sufficient, an interlude from work and work is not an interlude; it produces goods and services. Secondly, communication-pain is a command for work and action, production, education, and development of skills whereas communication-pleasure is enjoyment, contentment, and delight as found in entertainment. Third, much work and play is subject to social control and some is a matter of convergent selectivity. Social control is the way in which cultures function from involuntary categorical imperatives, whereas convergent selectivity is relative freedom from social control, tending toward individuality of choice in behaviour. Fourth, people are differently involved in conditions of social control and convergent selectivity. In situations of social control people develop self-attitude and stature but in convergent selectivity people exist for themselves; the mass media offer opportunities for convergent selectivity.

Reacting to Stephenson's methodology, Anaeto *et al.* (2008) suggest that Stephenson's technique could be used for a direct examination of people's attitudes towards the media and be able to demonstrate such that within any single, democratically defined audience group, several attitudes or "taste" groups exist; and more so, similar taste groups exist within other cases. However, they contend that Stephenson failed to move beyond an individualistic description. While the importance of audience commitment is understood, his concern with finding a methodological demonstration of his argument leads his audience to be conceived as only a conglomeration of individuals.

Like environmental theory, the play theory has also been quite controversial. Critics have said that we cannot afford

to use those expensive media for luxury alone, but we should use it for self-development. Some other critics acknowledged it can lay claim to experiential support at the least. For instance, Wilbur Schramm as quoted by Folarin (2002) believes that the play theory, for whatever it is worth, presents a better justification for prevailing media than does Marshall McLuhan's "global village concept".

The purpose of this work is to explore and understand the reasons why Ludenism and Stephenson's Play Theory illuminate the notions of mass entertainment.

METHODOLOGY

There are factors influencing these illuminations and this informs the need to conduct an inquiry into this phenomenon by using a qualitative research approach, case study analysis and secondary qualitative data as methods for capturing data. The qualitative research method according to Hox and Boeije (2005) allows the researcher to examine how a kind of phenomenon structures and gives meaning to its occurrence. This kind of research signals an investigative enquiry that involves the collection, analysis and interpretation of data (Boodhoo and Purmessur 2009). For this work, the captured data have been analysed and interpreted by observing what effect Ludenism and Stephenson's Play Theory have on mass entertainment in Nigeria. The researcher used a case study to get a better understanding of the subject study. For this research, Nigeria was used as the case study and the analysis drawn from the case study will be useful in gaining insights on the work.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical underpinning and practical implications of play

The concept of play has been a significant subject of study across various disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, and sociology. The theoretical underpinnings of play are rooted in its perceived role in human development, socialisation, and cultural expression. **Huizinga's Homo Ludens:** one of the foundational theories in the study of play is in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga argues that play is a primary and fundamental activity that is central to the development of culture. Huizinga posits that play precedes culture and is integral to the formation of societies and their institutions. According to Huizinga, play is characterised by its voluntary nature, intrinsic motivation, and separation from ordinary life (Huizinga, 1955). **Stephenson's Play Theory:** William Stephenson's Play Theory further explores the communicative and expressive dimensions of play. Stephenson contends that play is a form of communi-

cation that allows individuals to engage in self-expression and creativity without the constraints of practical purposes or societal expectations. This form of communication is non-instrumental, meaning it is done for its own sake, providing intrinsic satisfaction and joy (Stephenson, 1967).

Piaget and Vygotsky on Play: Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, both prominent figures in developmental psychology, have also significantly contributed to the theoretical understanding of play. Piaget views play as a vital component of cognitive development, particularly in the way children assimilate and accommodate new information. Through play, children experiment and learn about their environment, enhancing their cognitive abilities and problem-solving skills (Piaget, 1962). Vygotsky, on the other hand, emphasises the social and cultural aspects of play. Vygotsky argues that play is a critical mechanism for the internalisation of societal norms and the development of higher mental functions. Through play, children learn to navigate social roles and rules, thus facilitating their socialisation and cultural adaptation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Practical implications of play

The theoretical foundations of play highlight its multifaceted role in human life, which has numerous practical implications in various fields such as education, therapy, and organisational management. **Educational Implications:** In educational settings, play is recognised as a powerful pedagogical tool. Play-based learning environments encourage creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. By incorporating play into the curriculum, educators can create engaging and dynamic learning experiences that promote holistic development. Playful activities help children develop social skills, emotional regulation, and cognitive abilities, fostering a well-rounded educational experience (Frost *et al.*, 2012). **Therapeutic Applications:** Play therapy is a well-established therapeutic approach used to help children express their emotions, resolve conflicts, and develop coping mechanisms. Through play, therapists can gain insights into a child's inner world and address psychological issues in a non-threatening and supportive manner. Play therapy is particularly effective in treating trauma, anxiety, and behavioural disorders (Landreth, 2012). **Organisational and Management Strategies:** in organisational contexts, incorporating elements of play can enhance creativity, innovation, and team cohesion. Playful activities and environments can reduce stress, improve morale, and foster a positive workplace culture. Companies like Google and LEGO have successfully integrated playful principles into their workplaces, encouraging employees to think creatively and collaboratively (West, 2014). The theoretical underpinnings of play, as elucidated by scholars like Huizinga, Stephenson, Piaget, and Vygotsky, underscore its fundamental role in

human development and socialisation. The practical implications of play extend across various domains, highlighting its value in education, therapy, and organisational management. By recognising and harnessing the power of play, individuals and institutions can foster environments that promote creativity, learning, and well-being.

The enduring importance of play as a dynamic and transformative force in human life

The play holds enduring importance as a dynamic and transformative force in human life, offering benefits that extend beyond childhood and influence various stages of development and aspects of well-being. It fosters creativity, problem-solving skills, and social interactions, serving as a crucial component of cognitive and emotional growth. According to Brown and Vaughan (2009), play is not merely a recreational activity but a fundamental human drive that is essential for healthy brain development. It facilitates learning by allowing individuals to experiment, explore, and understand the world around them in a safe and enjoyable context.

Moreover, play is a powerful tool for stress relief and emotional resilience. As highlighted by Ginsburg (2007), engaging in playful activities can significantly reduce stress, enhance mood, and improve overall mental health. This is particularly relevant in the context of modern life, where stress levels are high and opportunities for genuine relaxation and enjoyment are often limited. Through play, individuals can reconnect with a sense of joy and spontaneity, which can mitigate the adverse effects of a high-pressure environment.

In the realm of social development, play serves as a critical mechanism for building relationships and fostering empathy. Through cooperative games and shared playful experiences, individuals learn to communicate, negotiate, and empathise with others, which are vital skills for forming and maintaining healthy relationships (Pellegrini, 2009). This social aspect of play underscores its role in community building and social cohesion, highlighting its significance beyond the individual to the broader societal level.

Furthermore, the transformative power of play is evident in its application across various therapeutic contexts. Play therapy, for instance, leverages the natural tendency of children to exercise themselves through play to help them process emotions and trauma, demonstrating the profound healing potential of play (Landreth, 2012). This therapeutic use of play extends to adults as well, where activities such as art therapy, dance, and recreational sports are employed to address psychological issues and promote well-being. Play is an indispensable and transformative force in human life, contributing to cognitive development, emotional well-being, social skills, and therapeutic healing.

Its benefits are extensive and multifaceted, underscoring the necessity of integrating play into daily life at all stages of development.

Application of Ludenism and Stephenson's theory in illuminating the notions of mass entertainment in Nigerian society

Ludenism encompasses the study of play and games as crucial components of human culture and societal interaction. It posits that play is not merely a form of entertainment but a vital aspect of human expression and social structure. Neal Stephenson's theory of ludenism, particularly as it intersects with mass entertainment, provides a framework for understanding how modern media and entertainment forms impact society. Stephenson argues that the convergence of technology and narrative play generates immersive environments where users are not passive consumers but active participants in the creation and evolution of cultural narratives (Stephenson, 1999).

In Nigerian society, the application of Stephenson's ludenism theory sheds light on the pervasive influence of mass entertainment, particularly through Nollywood, music, and digital media. Nollywood, Nigeria's prolific film industry, exemplifies this blend of narrative and play, producing content that resonates deeply with the local audience's cultural and social realities. The interactive nature of Nollywood, where viewers often engage in discussions and even fan fiction, illustrates Stephenson's notion of active participation. This engagement is further amplified by social media platforms, which allow for immediate feedback and collaborative storytelling, thereby blurring the lines between creators and consumers (Okome, 2013). Stephenson's ludenism theory provides a robust lens through which to examine the dynamic and participatory nature of mass entertainment in Nigerian society. By recognising the active role of audiences in shaping cultural narratives through interactive media, people gain a deeper understanding of how entertainment functions as a vital component of social structure and cultural expression in Nigeria.

Nigerian music, especially the Afrobeats genre, encapsulates the essence of ludenism by transforming traditional narratives and rhythms into modern forms that invite global participation. The viral nature of music videos and dance challenges on platforms like TikTok and Instagram exemplifies show that mass entertainment in Nigeria is not a passive experience but a dynamic and interactive one. This aligns with Stephenson's view that technology facilitates a participatory culture, where audiences become co-creators (Stephenson, 1999).

One does not have to go far to find experiential support for the Play Theory. For example, one constant criticism of television in Nigeria is that it is used more as an entertain-

ment medium than for development ends, apart from the fact that the general functions of information, education and entertainment usually ascribed to it (and to the mass media generally) are too vague to provide effective working guidelines to its handlers in developing countries. A scholar like Folarin (2002) espouses the development functions of national integration, socio-economic, modernisation and cultural creativity as more meaningful for development broadcasting. In fact, there is a general feeling that developing countries cannot afford to use the expensive medium of television as a "baby-sitter" as is done in the more developed and more stable societies of the West – developed nations.

On our TV stations, (private stations inclusive), it would appear that obituaries and reports of funeral wake ceremonies are now competing with entertainment as television fare. Of course, there are ways in which obituaries and wake-keep ceremonies may be seen as extensions of entertainment, on Nigerian television stations. Folarin (2002) observed that the obituary becomes a general, collective invitation to well-wishers and sympathisers as well as to "socialites" who will make the social wake-keep ceremony a memorable occasion. As such it is spiced with snippets of real or constructed earlier ceremonies, and of the greatness of the deceased and his/her family, with an implied forecast of how much is likely to be invested in the ceremony. The longer the list of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren announced in the obituary, the greater the number of lawyers, doctors and "business tycoons" among them; and the greater the number of them who are resident in the United Kingdom, the United States and other hard currency controlling nations - (especially in the unifying exchange situation currently obtaining in Nigeria); the more earth-shaking and more inviting the occasion is likely to be, the more the number of famous and costly orchestras that will entertain the guests and keep them awake till dawn the more money will be sprayed at the occasion, the greater the number of cows that will be slaughtered, the more drinks will be guzzled and of course the more confused the scene will appear to an uninitiated beholder.

However, the video covering the occasion (from which the television report of the ceremony proper is excerpted) takes care to emphasise all the scenes that emphasise the greatness of the occasion. Thus, it is the entertainment value, not the funeral aspects (rites), of obituaries and wake-keep ceremonies that arrest viewers' attention. Yet these are called "news of social importance" (NSI), and they occupy the greater portions of the "commercial" slots as well as slots contiguous to prime-time news. It is also true of course, that they fetch these television stations substantial proportions of their annual revenues. It must also be emphasised that just as we celebrate the death of very important personalities through the media, Nigerians also celebrate "life" through the mass media – vice-versa.

This is reflected in different programmes on Nigerian television stations that are exclusively devoted to the coverage of social events such as marriage, conferment of chieftaincy titles in villages and cities, and honorary degrees on deserving citizens, during various tertiary institutions' convocations, various cultural festivals and so on. Sometimes these programmes are transmitted live. Of particular examples are Bisi Olatilo show on African Independent Television (AIT), Channels Metro Life, Lagos Television City Scene and Nigerian Television Authority's Saturday Life to mention a few (Ridwan, 2007). Thus, the Play Theory has considerable supporting material in Obituaries and reports on wake-keep, marriage, conferment of chieftaincy titles and honorary degree ceremonies in Nigeria, especially since these reports never fail to attract audience attention.

Moreover, the coming of new media such as cable and satellite TVs as well as the Internet and Global System of Mobile Communication (GSM) in the mid-90s has further led credence to Stephenson's play theory assertion that people use mass media more for entertainment and pleasure than for information and improvement. The interactive nature and globalisation of the new media have afforded people to use the mass media more for entertainment, as they are now accessible to international programmes, most of which are entertainment in form or content. For example, most Nigerians are becoming increasingly fanatical about and addicted to European leagues as well as Latin American films.

Surprisingly, this has no regard for the level of education, income, status or sex of the audience involved. In addition, studies have shown that about 60% to 70% of the programmes on our broadcasting stations are entertainment in nature contrary to the National Broadcasting Commission's recommendation of 30% to 40% entertainment and 60% - 70% development-based issues programmes (Adeyemi, 2006). The print media industry is also not left out of this entertainment-based content that the media seem to be turning to. As a matter of fact, more human interest or soft-sell magazines and newspapers are springing up on a daily basis as opposed to serious/hard news/magazines/newspapers.

Jimoh and Olatunji (2008) posit that soft sell or human interest papers are the periodicals focusing on issues that the reader can relate to his/her own life, or those issues he/she recognises as universal to human experience; love, death, triumph, defeat, self-sacrifice and hardship are universal to human experience. Speaking in the same vein, they said that human interest issues refer to a set of news stories or formats that focus on personal actions and consequences employ dramatic, humorous or narrative styles and usually deal with matters close to everyday emotions and experiences.

However, Jimoh and Olatunji (2008) give prominence to issues of life that stimulate readers' amusement or amazement: depression or dislike; empathy or sympathy.

Even though Nigerian critics call this genre of publications "junk", "gossip", "sensational", "gutter", or "jaundiced periodicals", their existence cannot be wished away and it seems they are waxing stronger as even new publications of this kind are springing up more and more today. The trend is so worrisome that in advertisements, films and books, pornography washes over us like a great wave of sewage. It corrupts the body and numbs the wound and senses. So overwhelming is this tide that nobody, (including myself), a practising psychoanalyst can remain untouched by it.

This is understandable because, in spite of gender, racial, national, cultural and religious differences, there are certain universal truths about human nature. Issues such as love, death, success, failure, scandals, defeat, triumph et cetera are universal to human experience. Much more significantly, when these issues refer to or relate to other persons, they often provoke the "interest" or attention of most readers. Jimoh and Olatunji (2008) say everybody is usually curious about what somebody else is looking at. Corroborating the above, it is no secret that most of us deserve a certain pleasure from vicarious experience. We like to look into other people's lives, to share in their victories and defeats. Even talking about serious/hard publications, they devote a sizeable portion of their editorial content to sensational stories of murder, fraud, sex and so forth to attract a wider readership. Of course, it must be stressed that this development is historical as it took its roots from Europe. For example, Britain which was once referred to as the "workshop of Europe" because of its industrial revolution also pioneered "Gossip" publications. According to the proliferation of human interest magazines in Britain, these magazines contained gossip which is pursued with industry and effrontery to satisfy prominent tastes and "spread the details of sexual revelations" (Jimoh and Olatunji, 2008).

Similarly, in the United States before the birth of yellow journalism in the 1890s, a sprinkling of yellow reports had invaded the serious newspapers (Jimoh and Olatunji, 2008). Benjamin Harris who had been housed out of London for publishing pamphlets considered anti-crown arrived in Boston in 1686. Four years later, it started public occurrences, which contained an "item alleging an affair between the king of France and his son's wife" (Dominick, 1996). Moreover, the low mortality rate of soft-sell newspapers/magazines compared to the high mortality rate of hard news or serious magazines confirms their acceptability and patronage by the generality of society. For example, despite the high cost of such magazines as *Ovation*, *Reality* and other celebrities or fashion magazines, they enjoy a lot of patronage than the hard/serious newspapers or magazines.

It is also true that sports and entertainment rank next to sensational stories of murder, "419" and so on. in providing attraction to newspaper readers generally. All the aforementioned confirmed the universal nature of human

beings, their preferences in terms of media content and usage and by extension the relevance of Stephenson's play theory. Another factor that may further lend credence to Stephenson's play theory is that using the mass media for pleasure and relaxation does not involve much media literacy; evaluation and interpretation of mass media contents or messages. Media literacy according to Weaver and Hybels (2004) is the ability of the reader, viewer, listener or user of mass media to comprehend, evaluate and interpret mass media messages. Because consuming the mass media content purely for entertainment or play as propounded by Stephenson does not involve any intellectual stimulation, most media consumers feel at ease using the mass media to satisfy this particular need.

Weaknesses of Ludenism and Stephenson's play theory as illuminating the notions of mass entertainment

While ludenism and Stephenson's theory of play provide valuable insights into the participatory nature of mass entertainment, several weaknesses limit their applicability and explanatory power. One key limitation is the overly optimistic view of audience participation and empowerment. While these theories suggest that digital platforms and interactive media democratise content creation and consumption, they often overlook the significant control exerted by large corporations and algorithm-driven platforms. For instance, social media companies and streaming services like YouTube and Netflix wield considerable influence over what content becomes visible and popular, often prioritising profit over genuine cultural exchange (van Dijk, 2015). This corporate gatekeeping can undermine the supposed democratising effect of participatory media by marginalising less commercial voices and reinforcing existing power dynamics.

Additionally, the focus on the playful and interactive aspects of media consumption can sometimes ignore the more passive and potentially harmful dimensions of mass entertainment. For example, the addictive nature of certain digital games and social media platforms can lead to excessive screen time and negative impacts on mental health (Gentile *et al.*, 2017). By emphasising the positive aspects of play and interaction, ludenism and Stephenson's theory may inadvertently downplay these risks and the need for media consumption. Furthermore, the theories often assume a level of digital literacy and access that is not universally available, particularly in developing contexts like Nigeria. Despite the growing penetration of smartphones and Internet access, significant portions of the population still face barriers to fully participating in digital cultures due to economic, infrastructural, and educational disparities (Hinson *et al.* 2021). This digital divide can exacerbate existing inequalities and limit the reach and impact of participatory media, calling

into question the universal applicability of ludenism and play theory in understanding mass entertainment.

Play Theory is most significantly limited in its ability to explain people's use of less interactive media such as radio or television. From a web perspective, once one establishes an acceptable definition of online play, Stephenson's theory is limited by its failure to account for those who have access to the web, but who do not actively use it. Besides, this is also true of other media; there are people who do not derive pleasure from newspapers because they are not literate or because they do not have access to papers either because it is not affordable or because it is not distributed to their locality. Also, Stephenson's generalisation that people use mass media more for entertainment or pleasure than for information or improvement is not only erroneous but also not common sense. People use mass media for different purposes as attested to by the Uses and Gratification theory, which states that media consumers choose any mass media to meet their own needs which, could vary from information, education, entertainment and so forth.

Furthermore, the theory also assumes that all human beings are the same philosophically and psychologically. It fails to recognise the uniqueness of individuals and the peculiarities of cultures and nations as attested to by individual difference theory. The use of mass media is a function of who you are in terms of age, gender, education, cultural background and religion. Studies have shown that younger people (youth and adolescents and people with low levels of education and females generally) use mass media for entertainment more than for information and education and men generally use the mass media more for education and information. Also, the theory failed to indicate that different mediums serve different purposes. Even though the theory was futuristic in terms of society becoming more inclined towards entertainment and pleasure rather than intellectually tasking assignments, it failed to see the globalisation of information through technology.

The coming of the Internet has opened a lot of opportunities across international borders both in terms of wealth creation and data transfer. And since globally, the world's economy and politics are knowledge-based and information-driven, to be relevant one has to key in through the information superhighway (Internet) and GSM. This accounts for why most people use the Internet and GSM more for education and information than for pleasure and relaxation. The theory also failed to distinguish between mass media producers and mass media consumers. The purpose to which one is using the mass media is a function of the role one is performing at any point in time. Another strong weakness of Stephenson's assertion is that it does not take into consideration that the world is dynamic and that the only thing that is permanent in life is change.

Since the era of mass society to which the theory belongs, the world has moved to the era of the scientific

perspectives then limited effects theory, cultural theory, the global village of Marshal McLuhan and finally to the digital age. The movement from the eras to the global bedroom (Akinfeleye, 2008) and currently to the digital age has not only redefined the way we use mass media but has completely changed it. Moreover, Stephenson failed to define in concrete terms what he meant by work and play. Since there is no universal meaning ascribed to the two keywords ("work and play") taking into consideration the cultural differences, Stephenson's assertion has failed a universal application or generalization. Of course, this is a key weakness of social scientific theories of which play theory is one.

CONCLUSION

William Stephenson's play theory postulated that people use mass media more for pleasure and entertainment than for information and improvement which may be true to some extent in the traditional society as reflected in the use of traditional mass media (radio and TV in particular). This was so, due to the low level of education, as well as the limited needs of the people then. However, the modern mass media otherwise called the new media coupled with the globalisation of information dissemination exchange has made society to be information-driven and knowledge-based as people can only be empowered economically and politically based on the quantity and quality of the information at their disposal.

The use of mass media now tends to emphasise education and information whether at the individual, corporate or country level. Since you cannot grow beyond what you know and knowledge is a function of exposure to information, people now use mass media, particularly the interactive ones (Internet and GSM) for education and information besides pleasure and entertainment. The comprehensive examination of play's theoretical underpinnings and practical implications underscores its vital role in human development, socialisation, and cultural expression, highlighting the necessity of embracing play in both individual and collective contexts.

Play is a vital and transformative element of human life that supports cognitive, emotional, and social development while offering significant therapeutic benefits. The exploration of ludenism and Stephenson's theory in the context of Nigerian mass entertainment highlights the transformative power of play and interactive media in shaping cultural narratives. Nollywood and the Afrobeats music scene exemplify how modern technology and participatory culture enable audiences to engage actively with context, thereby, reinforcing the notion that mass entertainment in Nigeria is a dynamic and collaborative process. Stephenson's insights provide a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of this cultural phenomenon, illustrating that entertainment is not merely

a form of escapism but a crucial aspect of societal interaction and cultural identity.

Recommendations

In view of the study, the following recommendations have been made:

1. Nigerians should give prominence to issues of life that stimulate audiences' amusement or amazement, and the existence of sensational should not be wished away.
2. Integrating play into various aspects of education, therapy, and organisational management is essential for fostering creativity, well-being and holistic development.
3. It is recommended that individuals of all ages prioritise and incorporate play into their daily routines, schools, workplaces, and community settings to harness its extensive benefits for personal well-being and societal cohesion.
4. Encourage the development of interactive digital platforms to enhance audience engagement and cultural expression in Nigerian entertainment.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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