

## NIGERIAN WOMEN NEGOTIATING BEAUTY, POWER, AND LOVE IN THE ROMANTIC WEB SERIES *SKINNY GIRL IN TRANSIT*<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Although Nigerians have historically been reputed for appreciating large body size, the increasing influence Western beauty standards has changed the social construction of plus-size bodies (Fausat and Ayodele, 2017). In light of debates regarding the representations of non-normative bodies in contemporary romantic narratives, this paper explores the tension between customary and contemporary perceptions of large bodies by exploring the predicaments of the «plus sized» heroine of the Nigerian romantic web series *Skinny Girl in Transit* (2015-present). Tiwa's efforts to lose weight reflect her quest for romantic stability, as she negotiates contradictory constructions of body size. Tiwa strives to maintain the fragile equilibrium between following customary laws and fulfilling new expectations regarding beauty. *Skinny Girl in Transit* engages its viewers in this discussion through direct interpellations and, indirectly, through Tiwa's radio program, *The Gist*, where she discusses work, family and love. Through *The Gist*, Tiwa voices how cultural contradictions regarding body size affect not only Nigerian women's self-esteem but also their professional opportunities when it comes to promoting or being hired. Tiwa's sharing of her personal experience will be explored as a form of mentorship in which her interactive audience learns to share their worries with their fellow Nigerians. I seek to demonstrate that Tiwa's discussion of her private anxieties in the public sphere fosters a sense of «participatory culture» (Jenkins, 2009: xi) among her audience. *The Gist* will be read as a safe space promoting a sense of comradeship and social connection which ultimately prompts critical thinking towards Nigerian customary laws and the practices that undermine Nigerian women's rights.

**KEYWORDS:** Nigeria, beauty, tradition, plus-size romance, participatory culture

## MUJERES NIGERIANAS NEGOCIANDO IDEALES DE BELLEZA, PODER Y AMOR EN LA SERIE WEB *SKINNY GIRL IN TRANSIT*

**RESUMEN:** A pesar de que históricamente diferentes culturas africanas se han caracterizado por apreciar los cuerpos voluminosos, la creciente influencia de los estándares de belleza occidentales ha cambiado la percepción colectiva de los cuerpos de talla grande (Fausat y Ayodele, 2017). A la luz de diversos debates sobre las representaciones de cuerpos no normativos en las narrativas románticas contemporáneas, este artículo explora la tensión entre las percepciones habituales y contemporáneas de dichos cuerpos al explorar los conflictos de la heroína «de talla grande» de la serie web romántica nigeriana *Skinny Girl in Transit* (2015-presente). Los esfuerzos de Tiwa por perder peso reflejan su búsqueda de estabilidad romántica, mientras negocia

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construcciones contradictorias sobre su cuerpo. Tiwa representa el frágil equilibrio entre seguir las leyes tradicionales y cumplir nuevas expectativas en materia de belleza para mantener a un hombre a su lado. *Skinny Girl in Transit* involucra a sus espectadores en esta discusión a través de interpelaciones directas e, indirectamente, a través de su programa de radio, *The Gist*, donde habla sobre el trabajo, la familia y el amor. A través de *The Gist*, Tiwa expresa cómo las contradicciones culturales con respecto al tamaño corporal afectan no solo la autoestima de las mujeres nigerianas sino también sus oportunidades profesionales a la hora de promocionar o ser contratadas. El hecho de que Tiwa comparta su experiencia personal se explorará como un símbolo de su rol de mentora con el que su audiencia interactiva aprende a compartir sus preocupaciones con sus compatriotas nigerianas. De esta forma, el objetivo es demostrar que la discusión de Tiwa sobre sus ansiedades personales en la esfera pública fomenta un sentido de «participatory culture» (Jenkins, 2009: xi) entre su audiencia. *The Gist* se analizará como un espacio seguro que fomenta un sentido de camaradería y conexión social que, en última instancia, impulsa un pensamiento crítico hacia las leyes sociales nigerianas y las prácticas que socavan los derechos de las mujeres del país.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Nigeria, belleza, tradición, romance *plus-size*, cultura participativa

## INTRODUCTION

As the fight against size-ism or fat-ism (van Amsterdam, 2012: 8) has consolidated in the form of a cultural movement, «plus-size romances» have become a well-established sub-genre that «challenge[s] social expectations regarding women’s body sizes and weight to advance the acceptance of real women’s bodies that are larger than the current slender ideal» (Brown, 2011: 2). That this sub-genre emphasizes the validity of plus-size heroines as «romantic subjects [...] typically ignored in popular media» (2) can in turn prompt the question of «what is plus-size?» and the realization that it is indeed a context-dependent notion. This movement is especially prominent in the US, where TV series featuring plus-size black characters in different romantic scenarios have proliferated since the 2000s in series such as *Glee* (2009-2015), *Empire* (2015), *Insecure* (2016-present), *Shrill* (2019-2021), *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019-present), and *Survival of the Thickest* (2023). Similarly, black romance novels with African-American protagonists have become increasingly popular with titles such as Robbie Renee’s *A Beautiful Surprise: The Davenport Dynasty* (2022), Kimberly Brown’s *It’s Gotta Be You* (2022), Chencia C. Higgins’ *D’Vaughn and Kris Plan a Wedding* (2022). But what about contexts in which, historically, large bodies were not only accepted but praised?

In African countries such as Nigeria, historical and cultural symbolism has traditionally conferred positive value upon the «full» female body. In Nigeria, pre-colonial beauty standards associated large female bodies with «wealth, fitness of clothing, feminine marital well-being, [...] physical strength, better sexual enjoyment, and leadership» (Ibrahim and Jegede, 2017: 6). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there is a global influence of Western media imposing neocolonial beauty standards upon black women, since «the West has required the ideological erasure of both blackness and fatness as a means of gaining aesthetic acceptability» (Shaw, 2006: 2). In fact, during the last two decades, the imposition of Western beauty standards has run parallel to an «increased publicity and awareness of the implications of obesity» (Duru, 2017: 119). Such a change in Nigeria runs in parallel to a global policing of fatness and fat bodies which «have become a target of intensifying biopolitical control and neoliberal governing in the 2000s»

(Harjunen, 2021: 69). As a result, plus-size bodies are represented and perceived as «ill, over-consuming, unproductive, and morally wanting» (69). This idea is spread and validated through Nollywood, Nigeria's major cinematographic industry, where only 1% of the actresses are plus-size (Onyenakeya et al., 2019: 80). Curiously enough, such 1% of plus-size actresses are hired to embody the role of mothers-in-law, thus engaging in a stereotypical portrayal of elder Nigerian women as fat and wicked (80). The consequence is that such inputs on new beauty standards must be negotiated against the background and requirements of precolonial beauty ideals. Hence, cultural representations of the fat black woman suggest that her body primarily functions as a site of resistance to both gendered and racialized oppression» (Shaw, 2006: 2). How is the presence of positive representations of plus-sized heroines in Nigerian web and TV series to be analyzed in this context? Can these representations instill a message of self-love that counters fatism?

Visibilizing these cultural conflicts, *Skinny Girl in Transit* aired in 2015 as a web series that combines comedy with the social and feminist components of plus-size romances. Produced by Ndani TV and available on YouTube, this romantic comedy has taken upon itself the task of visibilizing and discussing the ambivalence that the large female body arises in contemporary Nigeria. The show follows the life of Tiwa, a self-declared overweight twenty-eight-year-old living in Lagos. As head of a radio program called *The Gist*, Tiwa discusses her struggles regarding love and self-acceptance with an interactive Nigerian audience. With its seventh season in the making, *Skinny Girl in Transit* has become a consolidated show which has been praised for visibilizing specific concerns of Nigerian women (Makinde, 2020). This is because, as I discuss in reference to the first season of the show, although Tiwa is a popular on-air celebrity in Lagos, she lives in a constant negotiation of traditional and modern cultural inputs about her image.

In the first section of this paper, I underline the particularities of Tiwa's cultural negotiation first analyzing how she is perceived by women, especially by her mother and sister, and then by her male suitors. I argue that, in the same manner in which Nigerian female writers<sup>2</sup> reappropriated popular romance in the 1990s as an acceptable «feminine form to address the contested issue of women's role in contemporary Nigeria» (Bryce, 2012: 78), *Skinny Girl in Transit* deploys features of plus-size romances to bear witness to the difficulties of juggling with Western and Nigerian beauty standards. In the second section, the focus is on Tiwa's radio program, *The Gist*. I posit that the show functions as a meta-device of cosmopolitical cultural citizenship (Burgess and Green, 2009: 79) depending upon «participatory culture» (Jenkins, 2009: xi) to question not only gendered beauty standards in Nigeria but also customary laws and prejudices regulating relationships and even the Nigerian nation. My ultimate claim is that, through *The Gist*, *Skinny Girl in Transit* exposes Nigerian women's struggles in the public and private spheres.

#### «SKINNY IS THE NEW FAT»: TRADITIONAL AND MODERN NIGERIAN BEAUTY STANDARDS

In the very first episode of the show, Mama Tiwa, Tiwa's mother, voices the cultural contradictions and ambivalence that influence Tiwa in her journey towards self-love. The series starts as Mama Tiwa comically wakes up her daughter and explains her revelation: «I was praying this morning, and the holy spirit ministered to me that I should

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of such works are Helen Obviagele's *Evbu My Love* (1992); Hope Byram's *Shadow of a Dream* (1991); Ifeoma Okoye's *Chimere* (1992); Rosina Umelo's *Love Letters* (1995); and Titilayo Shoneyin *Woman in Her Season* (1997).

tell you that you should start losing weight [...]. From there you'll find a husband» (s1 ep1). These words reveal Mama Tiwa to be a very religious woman who is in turn influenced by neocolonial perceptions of beauty. Looking straight at the camera, Tiwa ironically tells the audience that her mother is taking advantage of spiritualism to speak her voice and impose a diet on her. Through these direct addresses to her audience, Tiwa clearly explains her internal dilemmas regarding love and her body and reveals the struggles she is experiencing in trying to juggle customary and modern expectations of her body. Ultimately, Tiwa agrees to diet because her ex-boyfriend, Kola, has just broken up with her, and she believes this is the result of her having gained weight.

Tiwa's decision is not only encouraged by her mother but by her sister, Shalewa, who refers to Tiwa as an «orobo», a Yoruba term that originally referred to a «sexy plump/thick woman»<sup>3</sup> (Onyeakagbu, 2023), but progressively changed its original positive connotation to a derogatory term for «fat» (Onyeakagbu, 2023). Mocking Tiwa, Shalewa states: «can't you see that skinny is the new fat?» (s1 ep1). Shalewa's statement perfectly encapsulates the idea that «though there are antecedents of traditional veneration of a large body, the [contemporary Nigerian] culture invokes frames of references that impose limitations on such veneration» (Ibrahim and Jegede, 2017: 1). A study on the effect of media on female Nigerian adolescents underscores that Nigerians are «under pressure in relation to the ideal body size and appearances as a result of the influence of Euro-American cultures as portrayed in the televisions, magazines and billboards» (Amazue, 2014: 6113). It is not simply that Shalewa mocks her plump sister; Shalewa seems to be perfectly aware of such antecedents of beauty standards and happily embraces the new imperatives because her slim figure would have previously placed her in a precarious position, as «small body size oppositely denote[d] financial incapability, food insecurity, and laziness» (Ibrahim and Jegede, 2017: 7). The new beauty standards are as much a burden for Tiwa as the traditional ones are for Shalewa. Not only her family but also her friends and co-workers encourage Tiwa to lose weight as they are exercising and struggling with diets themselves. Their attitude echoes the results of Ejike's study on body-shape dissatisfaction among Nigerians, where «43.3% of the female [participants] thought they were heavier than they actually were (2015: 4) and 71% of the female participants confessed to having body-shape dissatisfaction (6). Ejike sees these results as revealing a situation of «normative discontent [...] driven by mass media emphasis on weight loss» (2).

Despite the generalized perception of Tiwa's body as fat among her female acquaintances, she appears to be irresistible to virtually all men featured in the web series. From this, it can be perceived that women have internalized such oppressive messages at a deeper level, while men appear to adhere to certain traditional beauty standards. However, the men that feature in the series present substantially different views on customary laws and beauty standards. Tiwa's interactions with such men help her to shape both her body image and her perception of traditional beauty. One of her first interactions in the dating field after her breakup with Kola is a blind date with a man who claims to love «orobo». His adherence to the association of big bodies and wealth is evident as soon as they meet, since he immediately tells Tiwa «this restaurant is very expensive but you can order anything you want. My pocket is fat, just like you» (s1 ep3). He soon starts talking about marriage, interrupting Tiwa several times during the conversation. When Tiwa complains about this, he claims: «the woman I marry must give me respect» (s1 ep3). He then proceeds to give Tiwa an unwanted review of her body as he claims to like

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<sup>3</sup> This definition appears in «10 Slangs Only a Nigerian Can Understand», published by the Nigerian magazine *Pulse*.

«big girls in the front and also behind», but also that her tummy is not acceptable, concluding: «you'll have to reduce» (s1 ep3). His views and expectations regarding his wife-to-be clearly combine neocolonial and traditional notions of beauty. He wants his wife not only silent and obedient but willing to work on a beauty ideal that combines a full or large female body with Western-beauty tinges of worked-out stomachs. This translates into being big, but only in the right places. Clearly opposing such imperatives, Tiwa tells him he is rude, pays for the whole meal, and leaves without even finishing. Hence, she rejects his food offer in the same way in which she refuses to abide by his chauvinist expectations, which combine the worse of both worlds. Right after this, through her radio program, *The Gist*, Tiwa asks her listeners to share with her good and bad experiences involving blind dates.

Tiwa's main romantic plot in season one develops hand in hand with the beginning of her exercise routine. To exercise away from Shalewa's mockery, Tiwa decides to run across one of Lagos' bridges but because of her poor shape she almost faints. Tiwa is rescued by Femi, the first hint for spectators that working out is to bring her love. Yet, when she is alone at home, Tiwa looks to the camera and states: «I needn't lose weight to get Kola to like me. I needed to get comfortable in my own skin. Life is way too short to be with someone who does not want to be with you» (s1 ep5). With this statement, Tiwa steers away from one of the most common disappointing features found in plus-size romances: the implication that the heroine must «diet her way to her Happily Ever After, or HEA, which undercuts the idea that a 'plus size' woman can have one» (Brown, 2011: 1). Although she has agreed to diet and exercise, what really matters is her feeling comfortable in her own skin.

As soon as Mama Tiwa identifies Femi as a suitor, she conveys a series of contradictory messages which make Tiwa struggle with her diet. First, she compels Tiwa to cook for Femi when he visits her to check on her health. The purpose of such a petition is to prove her wifely skills. Thus, Tiwa must complementarily adhere to new beauty standards and fulfill culinary expectations that shall, in her mother's view, secure her the love of a man. After her mother extends Femi a dinner invitation, confused and uncomfortable, Tiwa tells the audience: «I know you wonder why I don't like him. But imagine what his presence does. [...] Can you see what is happening? Can you imagine this rubbish? Very soon I will cook him dinner» (s1 ep4). These remarks show that it is not Femi she does not want, but her mother's imposition of customary laws.

Mama Tiwa's behavior proves that Nigerian heritage associates cooking with «the production, reproduction and sustenance of identity» (Duru, 2017: 104). Despite her acceptance of Western beauty standards, Mama Tiwa wants to preserve a notion of courtship linked to cooking and food sharing. Being able to cook national dishes is «an important aspect of [femininity]» (111). The consequence is that «a woman who cannot cook is portrayed as an embarrassment and an object of shame» (111). In this line, Mama Tiwa's role in her daughter's romantic endeavors evinces that elder generations come to perceive romantic love as a Western influence (Obiechina, 1973: 32) which must never overpower traditional cultural practices. Courtship and marriage are matters traditionally «subordinated to familial and community interests» (34). Smith's study demonstrates that even for Nigerian couples who consider themselves «modern, [...] values of the extended family system [and] ties to kin and community remain strong» (2016: 47). Thus, Tiwa must choose whether to continue with her diet or to engage in the customary interplay that her mother has just initiated. In this case, Tiwa does not cook, as she complains about being on a diet and tells her audience how tired she is of her mother's pressure. With this act, Tiwa makes evident to Femi that she does not intend to cook for a husband upon request. Far from being offended, Femi jokingly teases Tiwa for having forced him to go

to her house and ask her mum's permission to date her. His remarks reveal not only his awareness of customary protocols but also his flexibility towards them, as he is not offended but rather amused by Tiwa's denial to cook for him. Tiwa likes Femi and comes to occupy an in-between ground amid customary practices and new roles in relationships in which women are not necessarily linked to the household. Although Mama Tiwa is proud of Tiwa for her cooking abilities, Shalewa is praised for her beauty and thinness but repeatedly scolded for her inefficiency in the kitchen, which in her view makes Shalewa unable to bring home a stable boyfriend. This situation exposes how unreachable the combination of Western and African impositions upon women is, as neither of her daughters can fully satisfy their mother.

When Femi becomes her official boyfriend, Mama Tiwa starts preparing culinary treats for Tiwa, thus jeopardizing her diet. With this act, Mama Tiwa is following the cultural practice of fattening young women before a wedding or sending them to so-called «fattening houses», which are «socio-cultural storehouses that impart tradition and endurance skills to prepare these girls for adulthood [and marriage]» (Shaw, 2006: 7). Although this practice is progressively disappearing, the idea behind it is to prove «that the parents of the girl are wealthy enough to give their daughter a good life» (Facts.Ng, 2023). In a contemporary context, their living in the city of Lagos and the fact that Tiwa is the voice of a popular radio show already discards the possibility of sending Tiwa to a fattening house for several weeks. Yet, Mama Tiwa adheres to the belief that «mothers are held morally and legally responsible for the body size of their children, because it is considered their gendered responsibility to provide food and care for their family» (van Amsterdam, 2012: 5). Thus, after having finally lost some weight, Tiwa must fight the temptation of eating her mother's treats. Contradictorily, that very same day Mama Tiwa encourages Tiwa to lose some more weight because she is afraid of Femi changing his mind. This contradictory behavior is in tune with neo-liberal discourses which claim that «the fat body has become emblematic of failure in the embodied performance of control and responsibility in today's society» (Harjunen, 2021: 69). This entails that one is responsible for her own body and those who do not exercise and diet are to be blamed for being fat. Her beliefs compel Mama Tiwa to feed her daughter, but having internalized neoliberal beauty paradigms she sees her daughter as responsible for her failed body. In this manner, the dilemma of having to respect or not customary laws turns Tiwa into a skinny girl in transit, for she struggles not to disdain her mother's praise in the form of food as she tries not to regain the weight she has lost.

Contrastively, Femi constantly reassures Tiwa by telling her that she does not need to get thinner and bringing her treats like cupcakes and cookies as part of their courtship. This very same pattern of action is followed by suitors featured in different seasons of the show, such as Mide and Nathan, and reflects yet another traditional cultural practice: as part of the courtship, it is expected that Nigerian men provide their potential partners with gifts ranging from food and jewelry to electronic appliances and shoes (Smith, 2001: 142). When Tiwa accepts Femi's culinary gifts, Mama Tiwa censures the fact that what Tiwa is getting is non-traditional Nigerian food and blames it as the cause of her increase in weight. Similarly, she does not allow Tiwa to order Chinese food or only does so when she knows that Tiwa is really sad. This correlates with the belief that «creating a national cuisine is most relevant to the producing and reproduction of ethnic identities and national ideologies» (Duru, 2017: 101). In this manner, encouraging Tiwa to learn both to cook and enjoy Nigerian dishes becomes part of Mama Tiwa passing of customary practices that become part of Tiwa's identity.

Yet, Femi is not meant to be simply identified with Western food, as he cooks Nigerian food for Tiwa. As her first chosen partner in the series, Femi is presented as

reinforcing Tiwa's healthy habits. Femi's role in the kitchen exemplifies Duru's claim that «with shifting economic expectations and more opportunities for women, their economic independence means that, in some food-related roles, changes are bound to occur» (2017: 110). Whereas in a conservative relationship, Tiwa would have been in charge of the kitchen, the series prioritizes the depiction of her professional career at the radio station. In turn, that Femi cooks a combination of national and healthy dishes bears witness to how «the Nigerian kitchen can be used to reflect the merging of the traditional and the modern, which is an integral part of Nigerian society» (102). The purpose is not to lose weight but embrace her body through a new lifestyle. This is why Tiwa and Femi's affective relationship is not merely dependent on the interchange of food but on establishing a balance of cultural interchange and healthy habits. As her first encounter with Femi hints, exercise becomes a fundamental part of their relationship. Rejecting the neoliberal idea of a plus-size body as a failed body, Tiwa embraces her figure as she learns to like a training routine with her partner without renouncing the enjoyment of food. In this manner, *Skinny Girl in Transit* presents a heroine who is happy in spite of not having completely transformed her body. This message is directly conveyed to her audience: «I am in a happy space right now. I let go of the past. Lost a few pounds. Gained my confidence. And I feel great, I am happy. What could possibly go wrong?» (s1 ep11).

Tiwa's romantic endeavors become the perfect tool to expose the tensions between traditional and modern discourses on beauty in Nigeria and criticize the stigma attached to plus-size bodies. As Tiwa is pulled from different cultural and symbolic strings, her courtship and later relationship with Femi serve to visibilize that Tiwa embraces those traditional Nigerian practices that empower and nurture her. For instance, she chooses to learn to cook Nigerian food, which is indeed her favorite food, but does not become a housewife to fulfill her mother's wishes. In turn, Tiwa rejects both Western and Nigerian imperatives of beauty. She turns simple dieting into reaching a healthy lifestyle, not expecting to lose a certain number of pounds. At a romantic level, African traditional praise of fuller bodies prevails, for despite the stigma of disease that fatness carries, Femi continually reassures Tiwa that she does not need to lose weight. This suggests that a certain amount of weight is not only desirable but preferred. Although Femi turns out not to be her one and only, this very same pattern of courtship is portrayed in seasons two and three, when Nathan and Mide are presented as new suitors. This bears witness to how *Skinny Girl in Transit* advocates for the possibility of combining heritage practices and self-love.

#### *THE GIST*: COSMOPOLITAN CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP THROUGH PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

This section revolves around the relevance of *The Gist*, Tiwa's radio program, as a platform to question customary laws and the gendered power relations they foster. Through *The Gist*, Tiwa voices concerns affecting contemporary Nigerian women ranging from blind dates, dating apps, and dealing with infidelities to problems about conceiving and professional opportunities. I seek to demonstrate that Tiwa's discussion of her private dilemmas in the public sphere fosters a sense of «participatory culture» (Jenkins, 2009: xi). I explore Tiwa's sharing of her personal experience as a form of mentorship that encourages her interactive audience to publicly discuss their anxieties with their fellow Nigerians. To unravel the full revolutionary potential of *The Gist*, I focus on some of the main topics that Tiwa tackles in the radio program through the six seasons of *Skinny Girl in Transit* and present the potential of *The Gist* as double-folded. Although it is introduced as a social platform to share personal doubts, insecurities, and practices to secure a healthy romantic relationship, the show turns into a forum to encourage critical

thinking towards Nigerian traditions, customary laws, and social practices that undermine Nigerian women's rights.

To understand the socio-political potential of *The Gist*, it is fundamental to underline the relevance of Tiwa as a plus-size woman head of a radio program. Tiwa's professional role is emphasized from the very beginning of the show, as she is already a successful OAP (on-air-personality) when the series starts. This contrasts with how Nigerian women are often depicted in television content «as sex objects, men dependent, domestic workers and incompetent in leadership tasks rather than as professionals or members of the society that contribute to national development» (Ojomo and Adekusibe, 2020: 1). As a person who endures the clash between traditional and new beauty standards brought about by media, Tiwa deploys *The Gist* as a counter-discursive media platform to visibilize and denounce issues concerning Nigerian women.

The first season explicitly evinces such potential when, despite her status as an OAP, Tiwa suffers cyberbullying in the second episode of the web series after some photos of her attendance to an event are posted in a blog and she is repeatedly called fat in different online forums. Similarly, towards the end of the first season, despite her on-air success, she is denied the possibility of becoming a TV star because of her physical appearance. Tiwa starts this episode by asking her audience of *The Gist*: «do you think looks matter when it comes to getting your dream job?» (s1 ep8). The discussion is interconnected with beauty and race when a listener calls and says that she knows someone who was promoted after bleaching her skin, concluding that «nobody even cares if you got talent or not» (s1 ep8). Tiwa's experience can be read in the context of ongoing protests in Nigeria involving women's movements such as «Arise Nigerian Woman Foundation, Kudirat Initiative for Democracy, [and] Nigerian Women Trust Fund, [which] have challenged media representations and cultural practices that are derogatory to Nigerian women while insisting on essential transformation on issues relating to gender» (Ojomo and Adekusibe, 2020: 1). After being rejected, Tiwa declares in *The Gist* that «in Nigeria when people are hired, for example a girl, they are hired based on her looks» (s1 ep8). In this respect, the mechanics and values of the Nigerian public sphere are criticized as not valuing professionalism. Still, she empowers her audience and advises them to «chest up» in spite of the rejection because their talent will «end up shining» (s1 ep8). This demonstrates that *Skinny Girl in Transit* steers away from idealizing Tiwa's role as an OAP and her public acceptance and proves that *The Gist* is a platform for honest and sincere interchange of ideas and fears not based on the privilege of the presenter.

Tiwa voices her concerns while she asks for the opinion of her interactive audience, which points at *The Gist* as a space of «participatory culture» with «relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship» (Jenkins, 2009: xi). Tiwa becomes a mentor-like figure who presents herself as a guide but is also open to her listeners' advice and opinions. Complementarily, her program empowers her female listeners to gain agency in the dating field with statements such as «you have to get the bull by the horns. If you like a guy, ask him out. [...] At least you'll know you've tried» (s1 ep6). Answering Tiwa's open questions, participants in *The Gist* experience a fundamental aspect of participatory culture: «believ[ing that] their contributions matter and feel[ing] some degree of social connection with one another» (Jenkins, 2009: xi). In this respect, the participants in *The Gist* can be read as metonymically representing the multiplicity of voices and socio-cultural realities of Nigerian women.

One of the main topics of discussion is romantic relationships. When dealing with romance, courtship, and relationships in *The Gist*, Tiwa reinforces the afore-discussed



message that traditions must not be followed at all costs. Thus, the focus is on communication and negotiating tensions instead of being on fantasy and moralities associated with Nigerian traditional practices. The first two seasons of the web series correspond with the period in which Tiwa dates different boyfriends before finding her husband-to-be, Mide. In this context, the topics tackled in *The Gist* revolve mostly around dating and the early stages of a relationship, and Tiwa asks her listeners questions such as: «have you ever been on a blind date?» (s1 ep3); «how do you get over an ex?» (s1 ep10); «have you had a crush you work with it at the office?» (s2 ep9); «How long should you wait before your start dating again?»; «does the timing really matter if you find the right person?» (s2 ep10). Yet, from the third season onwards, Tiwa has a new romantic status which brings topic changes related to relationships such as: «How long should you wait until you decide you are exclusively dating someone?» (s3 ep2); «are we aware of our insecurities?»; «do we know how they reflect on our behavior towards other people?» (s4 ep4); «do you tell your current partner about your dirty little secrets from the past?» (s4 ep5); «do you have to talk about everything that happened with your ex to your new partner?» (s5 ep8). Instead of romanticizing her relationship with Mide, Tiwa voices her concerns about jealousy and communication. The focus is thus progressively placed on how modern Nigerian courtship confers importance to «the nature of personal relationship[s] and is negotiated through interpersonal intimacy of love» (Smith, 2001: 132). A clear instance of this is her steering away from the romanticization of jealousy when she asks her audience: «what do you do when you have a loving yet jealous partner? when does being jealous become borderline obsessive? when does it become unsafe?» (s4 ep3). Such discussions present *The Gist* as «a site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship» (2009: 79), since much of its material stems from «the everyday lives of ordinary citizens» (81).

As aforementioned, listeners identify and relate to Tiwa's ordinary experience as a Nigerian woman in the romantic field, engaging in the participatory cultural nature of *The Gist*. This model of participation recalls Burges and Green's model of «cosmopolitan cultural citizenship» as «a revived model of the public sphere, based on the promotion of sustained opportunities for participation and dialogue, requiring the genuine negotiation of complexity and difference» (2009: 79). As a site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship, the questions posited in *The Gist* prompt Tiwa's listeners to be aware and critical of oppression in any given form. In this manner, listeners' engagement in participatory culture prompts Tiwa to tackle issues that transcend the personal sphere. In other words, the introduction of personal dilemmas is the prelude to discussions on the nature of Nigerian customary laws, leading to critical thinking and common reflection in breaking taboo issues which become open to discussion in this site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship.

Correspondingly, the topics featured in *The Gist* from the third season of the web series onwards transcend romantic issues and engage in concerns about the functioning of Nigeria at a socio-cultural level such as women's problems renting a flat if they are single; finding opposition to adopt if they are not married; job privileges given to men; and Nigeria's faulty administration. The first instance occurs when Tiwa asks her listeners «have you guys been frustrated with Nigeria's administration?» (s3 ep5). Tiwa specifically refers to her trying to renew her passport turning into a situation in which she is requested a bribe to speed the process. Her personal situation evidences that today, from «paying policemen at highway checkpoints to bribing public officials for legitimate or falsified documents, Nigerians deal with corruption on a daily basis» (Falola and Heaton, 2008: 240). Hence, fraudulence and nepotism have become normalized items in everyday Nigerian societies. She openly denounces the corruption which rules the country

and claims: «sometimes I think Nigeria is just here to tear down every humane in you» (s3 ep5). Asking her fellow citizens to share episodes in which the Nigerian administration or political system has failed them, *The Gist* becomes a safe space fostering a sense of comradeship and social connection which ultimately prompts critical thinking. She not only encourages her listeners to be confident in the dating sphere but also encourages them not to «let [their] country or economy kill [their] pride on who [they] are» (s3 ep5). Similarly, Tiwa denounces women's lack of finances to move out on their own (s3 ep9). She asks her listeners to give their opinions on whether they think that single girls do not want or cannot move out and become independent. With this question, she bears witness Nigerian landlords not wanting to rent to single women because of their prejudices towards their use of the flat to throw parties and also due to suspicions of single women moving out alone being lesbians.

A key controversial topic dealt with in *The Gist* is that of how adoption is perceived in the country. Recent studies underline that there is resistance towards the idea of adoption in contemporary Nigeria (Agbo, 2014; Chiamaka Nwaka and Winifred Osuji, 2022; Oladoku et al., 2009). It is generally believed that «it is hard to take such a child as if the child is one's biological child» and that «the environment is not conducive», as the community would perceive that child as «a bastard» who would eventually «ask for his biological parents» (Oladoku et al., 2009: 85-86). Another factor contributing to the negative perception of adoption is the sense of unshared ethnic identity between parents and child (Chiamaka Nwaka and Winifred Osuji, 2022: 1). Such a breach is believed to lead to loss of tradition, as children from a different ethnic group are not considered part of «the tradition and culture of the land» (Agbo, 2014: 90) and thus certain traditional practices are not meant to be passed onto them. This prejudice is related to a «preference of preserving cultural norms and beliefs related to bonding through blood ties (91), which leads to questioning whether adopted children should inherit material goods (91). In turn, women tend to believe that considering adoption entails accepting a role as failed women who cannot bear children (90). Consequently, women participating in Oladoku et al.'s study declared «that adoption does not remove the stigma of being barren or childless» (2009: 85).

*The Gist* visibilizes, discusses, and fights against the stigma of adopting children. A member of the adoption agency Doctor Children participates in *The Gist* and exposes that their agency is stigmatized and referred to as a disease that opposes tradition (s5 ep4). Tiwa's guest refutes «the myth that parents cannot love an adopted child as much as they can love their biological child» (s5 ep4) and emphasizes the relevance and intensity of emotional bonding over blood ties. Once *The Gist* has consolidated a safe space of participatory culture, Tiwa introduces a new mentor figure that is presented as an authority on the topic, someone capable of guiding listeners and voicing aspects that are silenced at a national level. Proof of such silencing is that Nigeria does not have «a uniform national guideline/protocol for the child adoption process including a law» (Oladoku et al., 2009: 81). By bringing a guest to the program, Tiwa recognizes the need for a plurality of perspectives and voices, which contrast with the practice of blindly following customary laws. *The Gist's* counter-discursive strategy proves effective, as callers join the program to talk about their positive experiences during the adoption process. As the prejudices against adoption focus on tradition and belongingness, Tiwa's guest and the caller place the emphasis on love, emotions, and personal bonding. This recalls *Skinny Girl in Transit's* critical perspective towards tradition when it comes to beauty standards. Now, through its meta-device, the show encourages its audience to steer away from blindly following customary laws and practices and to reconsidered certain

socially accepted beliefs such as the rejection of adoptions or the need to bride public servants.

Intertwining romantic and socio-political issues, *The Gist* becomes a meta-device that makes explicitly evident for the audience of *Skinny Girl in Transit* the potential of dialogue, participation, and the interchange of multiple and honest opinions. Burges and Green refer to YouTube as a site of cosmopolitical cultural citizenship because «so much of the symbolic material mediated via YouTube originates in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, or is evaluated, discussed, and curated by them» (2009: 79). According to Alice, web series, with their «immediate distribution» grant writers and producers «creative autonomy to experiment with form and aesthetic» (2016: 59). *Skinny Girl in Transit* introduces *The Gist* as an innovative device to underline the relevance of public discussion in a web series which is available on YouTube and thus already reflects «the collective creativity and communication of [YouTube's] users and audiences» (Burgess and Green, 2009: 75). Such a strategy is possible as a result of the introduction of personal episodes, related to relationships, which are subsequently intertwined with socio-political discussions affecting Nigerian citizens, especially women. In this case, *The Gist* functions as a device to make the argument of such discussion much more powerful. The incorporation of such topics, without leaving relationships aside, questions the view of romantic plots as too dependent upon «interpersonal dramas within the feminized private sphere», and as «ill fitted to grand statements about social and political concerns» (Illouz, 2013: 64).

In this manner, the insertion of national and social concerns as part of romantic discussion forbids the audience from «escaping their reality», a function Radway claims romances are meant to fulfill (1991: 87). The national and gender-controversial discourses that permeate the show do not allow such an escape. As a result, there is a constant deferral from the feeling of pleasure which comes with the happy ending, in the same manner in which there is a constant deferral from functioning models of the Nigerian nation. For the protagonist, such a situation entails a need to continue questioning the nature of her relationship. Even if she is in love with Mide, she is open to uncomfortable discussions and negotiations with her partner as a metaphor for the advocacy for different national alternatives. Tiwa's life, like the Nigerian nation, is thus far from idealized. In turn, Tiwa's self-love as a plus-size heroine turns into a force to inspire her listeners through this national radio platform which, very much like *Skinny Girl in Transit*, constitutes a transgressive tool of female empowerment.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have analyzed the romantic web series *Skinny Girl in Transit* as a platform that denounces the stigma surrounding plus-size bodies in Nigeria. I have argued that its protagonist, Tiwa, embodies the tension between traditional Nigerian beauty standards venerating fuller bodies and neocolonial perceptions influenced by Western ideals of beauty associated with thinness. I have presented Tiwa's actions and decisions as challenging the idea that self-worth is determined by physical appearance. In turn, Tiwa's romantic choices in her relationship with Femi suggest that a balance between traditional practices and self-love is indeed possible. Such a balance depends on Tiwa's feeling comfortable in her own skin and embracing a healthier lifestyle rather than exclusively focusing on conforming to beauty standards.

The series transcends discussions of beauty and appearance and moves away from the conventional romantic plot. As I have explained, *Skinny Girl in Transits* highlights the role of Tiwa as a plus-size Nigerian woman in a prominent position as head of the

radio program: *The Gist*. Her role as an OAP challenges traditional depictions of women in Nigerian media. Her sharing of personal experiences on *The Gist* serves as a form of mentorship that encourages discussions among a Nigerian interactive audience. This is the result of Tiwa's personal experiences becoming relatable and empowering for her audience, thus creating a dynamic that encourages listeners to openly discuss their anxieties and share their own experiences. Sharing romantic experiences progressively gives way to sharing more public opinions and concerns affecting Nigerian citizens such as: corruption in Nigeria, challenges faced by single women in finding housing, and the stigma surrounding adoption. The development and format of the show fosters a sense of «participatory culture» among its audience. In this manner, by means of intertwining romantic and socio-political issues, *The Gist* turns into a space of «cosmopolitan cultural citizenship» which serves as a meta-device highlighting the power of open dialogue and discussion.

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