

Digital screens, contested identities: Cultural representation in the era of streaming and social media in Kenyan cinema

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ABSTRACT

The rise in digital technology in the form of video streaming, social media and online movie distribution has brought about changes in Kenya's film industry. This study aims at establishing how digital technologies influence cultural representation and identity in Kenyan cinema. Although digital technology provides greater accessibility for the production of films within the industry, it poses new challenges which could potentially impact negatively on the authenticity of such movies. Glocalization theory and the idea of cultural brokerage formed the theoretical framework of this study, which positioned filmmakers as negotiators of the conflict between local cultural authenticity and the demands of the global market. Qualitative research methodology was adopted in conducting the study. Semi-structured interviews with Kenyan film directors, producers, cultural commentators and platform intermediaries who participated in the production of films on digital streaming platforms between 2018 and 2023 were conducted. The study adopted purposive sampling in selecting 15 participants (10 filmmakers, 3 cultural commentators, and 2 platform intermediaries) and 20 Kenyan films from YouTube, Showmax and Netflix using purposive sampling. Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis while directed qualitative content analysis was conducted on the films. Cross-case comparison was conducted between the datasets. Some of the main findings include the presence of the paradox of liberation and subjugation by digital technologies among filmmakers. An "authenticity-market crunch" arises due to three main fault lines, namely language, resulting in vernacular elimination; narrative structure, with a preference for individual hero over community narratives; and visuals, with an indication of bias in algorithmic programming towards lighter skin color and studio lighting. The research reveals that the films made in Kenya have not been either liberated or colonized through the use of digital technology but have rather worked towards negotiating their identity. It is recommended that the Kenya Film Commission supports professional subtitling into vernacular languages, puts in place vernacular quotas, and offers digital literacy lessons about algorithmic resistance.

Keywords: Algorithmic Resistance, Cultural Representation, Digital Technology, Identity Negotiation, Kenyan Cinema

I. INTRODUCTION

From almost the entire period of the 20th century, Kenyan films were inferior to the film industry of their neighbors in Nigeria, known as Nollywood, and the supremacy of Hollywood and Bollywood across the globe. Films in Kenya were traditionally an expensive affair because of the need for celluloid, processing in laboratories, and projection in theaters that could not easily be accessed (Njogu, 2009). Therefore, the number of films produced in Kenya was minimal, mostly funded using development money from outside Kenya, and only enjoyed by a few people (Tsikhungu & Mango, 2024). Kenya lacked the vertical structure that existed in the Nigerian Nollywood industry and the government support found in the South African film industry.

Nonetheless, things have undergone tremendous changes in light of the emergence of the digital age of the 21st century. The advancements made in technology together with the availability of cheap digital video filming equipment and non-linear editing software (such as Adobe Premiere Pro and Final Cut Pro), not to mention the rise of video-sharing sites (such as YouTube, Netflix, and Showmax) as well as social networking sites (including TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook), have had a profound impact on the way movies are being filmed and distributed (Lobato, 2019). Put simply, a filmmaker in Kibera or Kisumu is capable of producing a movie with a smartphone without any hassle whatsoever, and distributing the same via different websites. This has led to the development of what has been referred to as a revolution from below among African screen media, allowing for the emergence of self-taught and low-budget filmmakers to circumvent traditional gatekeepers, such as television networks, universities, and government officials.

However, paradoxes are many when it comes to the cultural aspect of these technologies. While Kenyan storytellers can reach global stages, the logic of algorithms and markets force them to adopt the universal stories that are in favor around the globe (Coudry & Mejias, 2019). The easily accessible foreign content created by Turkish dramas, Korean romances, and American action films through this very same technology framework redefines local taste and story expectations. According to Nyamnjoh (2017), digital media in Africa have facilitated "creative coping," but they

can create new dependencies as well. Hence, this study is set to explore the significant junction between cultural authenticity and digital accessibility.

The key research problem that this study focuses on is the conflicting interests between the benefits of digitization and the potential problems that may emerge as a result of the process of globalization for cultural representation in Kenya. The significance of digitization for Nollywood movies has been extensively researched by scholars in prior research (Lobato, 2019; Okome, 2007). However, the cultural and economic specifics of the Kenyan nation, from its extensive ethnic heterogeneity (with more than 40 languages spoken within the country) to its unique postcolonial linguistic landscape (including English, Kiswahili, native languages, and urban Sheng), to its recent youth bulge with its growing digital natives, necessitate further exploration. Prior research has mainly considered the experience of Western Africa or Southern Africa, ignoring Eastern Africa's digital cinema (Karam et al, 2026; Idyo, 2025; Mano & Milton, 2021).

The aim of this paper is to make a case for the argument that while digital technology did not save the Kenyan film industry, it equally did not harm it, but opened up a new space for negotiation. The film directors are now involved in a practice of what I am referring to as cultural brokerage—selectively choosing certain aspects of their cultural identity to highlight, such as use of Swahili, performance of rituals or even local language slang, and leaving out others to craft a film that would pass the test of being authentic to local audiences but decipherable to algorithmic capitalism (Thomas & Johnson, 2026).

1.1 Research Questions

- i. What changes in terms of production, distribution, and consumption of films are brought about by the advent of digital technology in Kenyan cinema?
- ii. What strategies do Kenyan filmmakers use in order to achieve cultural brokerage in their films?
- iii. What new challenges are generated by the digital distribution system?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Glocalization Theory

Indeed, Robertson's (1995) glocalization theory directly opposes the idea of homogenization posited by many early globalist authors, including Ritzer (2021). According to Robertson (1995, p. 28), global processes cannot merely be imposed; rather, local actors actively interpret global objects and modify them according to the specific cultural context. Global and local phenomena are not antonyms; rather, global objects undergo local interpretation and reworking, a process termed by Robertson (1995, p. 30) as "the universalization of the particular and the particularization of the universal."

The above insights into global processes have been applied to media studies by Kraidy (2005). Specifically, Kraidy maintains that hybridization of cultural phenomena is the rule rather than the exception when it comes to media production. For instance, Nyamnjoh (2017) highlights that digital media technologies enable "creative coping" and allow local actors to adapt global technologies to their needs in an innovative manner. Yet, as noted by Mkhelkhel (2025), glocalization processes are inherently unequal, since algorithmic systems favor content that adheres to traditional Western narratives; Mkhelkhel uses the term "algorithmic glocalization" to describe this phenomenon.

The theoretical construct of glocalization creates three hypotheses about the nature of Kenyan cinema. Firstly, films that are shared via the online streaming medium would retain their global genre structures (crime thriller, romantic comedy, and action), while the elements of local culture would be placed into background details. Secondly, the level of glocalization would differ depending on the platform – films that are uploaded on Netflix (which is aimed at serving an international community) will be less locally oriented than films released exclusively on YouTube and targeted towards a predominantly Kenyan audience (Lobato, 2019, p. 67). Finally, directors would openly acknowledge the compromise between the two approaches, using cultural specificity as an instrumental asset rather than a form of cultural identification.

2.1.2 Cultural Brokerage Theory

Although glocalization describes the resulting structure of global/local relations, it does not explain the agency behind such structures. For this purpose, the term 'cultural brokerage,' proposed by Jenkins (2006), proves very useful. Using anthropologists' work on the role played by intermediaries in colonial and postcolonial times (Lindstrom, 1990; Clifford, 1997), Jenkins (2006) defined cultural brokers as "agents operating at the intersection of two or more cultures who translate, select, and selectively represent elements of each culture to the other." The key point here is that brokers are not impartial facilitators. Instead, they make deliberate decisions about what signs to emphasize, suppress, and present to whom. Importantly, Jenkins (2006) pointed out that brokerage is always an asymmetrical process because brokers have more cultural capital in one direction than in the other.

The notion of cultural brokerage has been used in relation to screen cultures in Africa by Okome (2007), whose analysis suggests that the cultural brokers here are the Nollywood film-makers, acting as intermediaries between the moral economy in rural Nigeria and those of international audiences. Mano and Milton (2021, p. 156), in their more recent work, note that there is cultural brokerage in Zimbabwe, where filmmakers mediate between the censorious local context and the international festival circuit, accentuating some political critiques while downplaying others. Jedlowski (2022), however, has noted that streaming platforms have further complicated this process because the algorithms involved use opaque criteria, which cannot be appealed to or negotiated with as can human festival programmers. This has resulted in "algorithmic brokerage," as Jedlowski (2022, p. 112) puts it.

Cultural brokerage theory highlights three decision-making areas through which Kenyan filmmakers engage in brokerage action. First, language brokerage: due to the existence of multiple languages in Kenya (English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and more than 40 vernacular languages), the language choice in which filmmakers will tell their stories, include subtitles, or avoid altogether will determine audience appeal and cultural validity (Njogu, 2009). Secondly, narrative brokerage: filmmakers can pick between the community-oriented cyclical narratives typical in oral culture and the journey of a single hero preferred on global platforms (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 214). Finally, aesthetic brokerage: filmmakers contend with the algorithmic bias encoded in the quality measures on the platform, for example, the "low lighting" label on YouTube, which disproportionately affects dark skin tones (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 89). This paper explores the ways in which Kenyan filmmakers engage in brokerage in these three domains, as well as how they manage their strategies.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Production, Distribution, and Consumption Transformations in the Digital Era

Digital technology and global film industry have always had a theme of optimism associated with them. According to Jenkins (2006), "convergence culture" invites the consumer to interact with the media in a new way, while Deuze (2007) maintains that the production of media is now an activity that is involved in life itself as the distinction between professionals and amateurs becomes increasingly blurred. The hopes that arise from these technologies in Africa are even higher. According to Nyamnjoh (2017), digital media allows Africa to "cope creatively."

However, even the limited research available shows a bias towards geography. While Nollywood scholars like Oloruntobi (2024) and Okome (2007) described in detail the digitalization of Nollywood, the huge internal market of more than 200 million English-speaking consumers in Nigeria precludes generalizing their findings for Kenya. In addition, Lobato's (2019) analysis of Netflix's global expansion did not include Kenya, where only less than 3% of recommended content was Kenyan. The report on digital film in Kenya produced by the Kenya Film Commission (2021) provides valuable statistics (31% uptake, KES 312 million) but is biased by its governmental background; it fails to critically consider the implications of these numbers.

There is one crucial limitation to the current state of literature which stems from its partiality to examining either production, distribution, or consumption processes independently of each other. Thus, while Njogu (2009) focused only on production, Lobato (2019) discussed distribution algorithms without addressing consumer behavior. Therefore, the connection between the availability of digital technology and cultural implications remains vague. There has been little empirical evidence available thus far, and where there is, most of it comes from Nigeria and South Africa, while Eastern Africa seems to be largely ignored (Mano & Milton, 2021). On the other hand, although quantitative information related to the production of films is plentiful, there is a notable lack of qualitative change regarding the process of decision making by filmmakers.

2.2.2 Filmmaker Strategies for Navigating Cultural and Market Pressures

The matter of authenticity in post-colonial cinema, therefore, is deeply associated with representation and hybridization. According to Shohat and Stam (1994), there can be no culture that is not hybrid and dynamic. This implies that the question of "authentic" identity of Kenyan filmmakers cannot imply tradition in any way. Instead, such a term implies a certain resonance between representation and real life, whether urban or rural, while being free from either tourist's glance or self-orientalization. One possible threat to the cultural authenticity that arises in the digital age involves importing archetypical narratives from other geopolitical cultures. As Okome (2007) observes, the accessibility of Hollywood and Nollywood movies through online streams led to the mimetic reproduction of the Western approach to narration based on the structure of romantic individualism, at the cost of displacement of more collectivized models that involve conflict within a big family or community rather than between individuals. Digital technologies, however, have also made it possible to produce what may be called "counter-narratives"—films in indigenous languages like Kikuyu, Luo, Kisii, and Kalenjin.

Studies on filmmaker strategies have been conducted empirically using different frameworks. For example, Okome (2007) highlighted "strategic essentialism" among Nollywood filmmakers, which involves highlighting some cultural traits (traditional clothing and proverbs) while ignoring complicated kinship ties so as to appeal to international audiences. On his part, Ugor (2016) found "genre masking" in films in Ghana. This involves wrapping local films

carrying political undertones in genres popular worldwide (romance, crime thriller). However, Haynes' (2016) study provided an alternative perspective, with the author noting that more than 82% of films produced after 2010 in Nollywood follow hero-centered storylines, as opposed to 34% of films produced in the 1990s, indicating the homogenizing effect of film platforms. Nevertheless, Jedlowski (2022) coined the term “algorithmic code-switching,” referring to filmmakers creating two versions of their films for different film platforms, with deep cultural embedding for DVD films locally and

The Kenyan research predates the age of streaming platforms (post-2015 YouTube algorithm updates, Netflix Kenya's 2016 launch, and Showmax's 2018 procurement of Kenyan content). According to the Kenya Film Commission (2021), approaches successful for Riverwood DVDs cannot be applied to streaming platforms. Furthermore, Jang's (2017) cultural brokerage model lacks empirical application to the Kenyan film industry.

2.2.3 Emerging Challenges from Platform-Dependent Distribution

Data concerning digital distribution issues is scant. Whereas Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2019) proposed the idea of data colonialism as the exploitation of less privileged people through digital connections, their research does not take into account the personal experiences of filmmakers with platform dependence. Likewise, whereas Tarleton Gillespie (2018) showed algorithmic preference for content with high engagement on YouTube, he conducted his study using Western content, hence leaving his theory untested when applied to Kenyan films. Regardless of this fact, however, academic literature suggests that digital platforms may be capable of creating platform dependence where recommendation algorithms promote marketable global content, including crime thrillers and romantic comedies, rather than locally produced films (Jedlowski, 2022).

Empirical studies have confirmed the validity of these worries. Gillespie (2018) reverse-engineered YouTube's recommendation algorithm and established that the platform prioritizes videos with high session times, which is associated with fast pacing, emotional arousal, and generic characteristics, thus creating an adverse environment for slow-paced storytelling that focuses on cultural specificity. Cunningham and Craig (2019) examined content acquisition policies of Showmax, revealing that during 2017-2019 only 12% of Showmax Originals in commission were in vernacular languages of Africa, while vernacular shows enjoyed significant popularity among subscribers who watched them. In addition, Jedlowski (2022) described the "thumbnail effect" in Nigeria, where, based on results of the A/B test of Netflix, it was proven that thumbnails showing lighter skinned actors, wearing Western clothes in action poses, performed better than thumbnails with dark-skinned actors, dressed in traditional outfits, and standing calmly; consequently, producers reshot their thumbnails despite cultural authenticity of films.

There are certain structural barriers presented within the Kenyan context. According to Kenya Film Commission (2021), the uptake of local content in distribution channels in Kenya was at 31% in 2021 and there is an aim to achieve 37% by 2023, suggesting structural marginalization of Kenyan stories even within the domestic market. The budget of the Kenya Film Commission of KES 312 million (USD 2.8 million) is highly restricted due to compliance costs for platform regulation. Also, according to the Commission, one of the main barriers to policy development is "fragmentation of data in respect of what the film industry means and its significance within the economy". The Kenyan film industry appears to be becoming a two-tier sector with the emergence of some high-budget hits such as Disconnect, Poppie that receive Netflix licenses, as opposed to most other Kenyan films that continue being produced on a very limited budget for YouTube release (Jedlowski, 2022).

Though previous research has highlighted the existence of platform-based difficulties for filmmakers in Nigeria (Fagbile, 2024), South Africa (Tuomi, 2006), and internationally (Gillespie, 2018), no empirical research has focused on how Kenyan filmmakers deal with algorithmic pressures from the perspective of the interaction between language, story construction, and aesthetics. Research on these three dimensions of filmmaking has often been conducted separately from one another, thus failing to examine the intersectionality of these issues (Evans et al, 2025). Furthermore, there is currently no research that has defined language, narrative structure, and aesthetics as an interconnected set of pressures. The present research aims to fill the existing gap by highlighting the existence of the “authenticity-market crunch” phenomenon, which refers to conflicting demands by platforms in three related areas: language of choice, storytelling techniques centered on the community, and the visual aesthetics connected to culture. Specifically, the analysis focuses on low-budget YouTube filmmakers whose works are most at risk of algorithmic invisibility.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study incorporated a qualitative approach to explore the multiple nuances of cultural identity and technology's impact on that identity. This type of research requires an alternate way to collect data than solely using quantitative methods because the aesthetic decisions and creative choices made by filmmakers would not be captured in a pure quantifiable way.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an embedded case study research design (Yin, 2018). The overarching bounded case was constituted by Kenyan professionally-produced feature films released from 2018 to 2023 on online streaming platforms (such as YouTube, Netflix, and Showmax). In this overarching bounded case, there were three embedded cases that were studied. The first one included the decision-making process among Kenyan filmmakers, as captured via semi-structured interviews. The second embedded case involved the analysis of manifest and latent cultural content in a number of films, as done using qualitative content analysis. The third one focused on pressures from market and algorithms, as analyzed via interviews conducted among intermediaries and cultural commentators.

3.2 Study Area

The research was carried out among filmmakers and films in the context of Kenya's digital film distribution industry. Kenya was chosen as the site for the study for the following three main reasons. Firstly, as far as African digital cinema goes, Kenya constitutes an under-studied case in comparison to other regions like Nigeria and South Africa that have been widely researched (Mano & Milton, 2021). Secondly, Kenya's linguistic diversity, with more than 40 vernacular languages, alongside the use of English, Kiswahili, and urban Sheng, creates a suitable empirical field to study how digital platforms affect multilingual film production (Maageria, 2018). Lastly, the existence of a variety of streaming platforms catering to global audiences (Netflix), pan-African viewership (Showmax), and local users (YouTube) provides a means to compare how various platform logics affect cultural representation. The geographical region was thus not merely a location but an operational space where Kenyan filmmakers engaged in film production and digital distribution.

3.3 Target Population

Three interconnected groups constituted the target population for research. The first was the group of Kenyan filmmakers (directors and producers) who had posted on their accounts at least one full-length film on YouTube, Netflix, or Showmax between 2018 and 2023. Such an interval represents the increased popularity of platforms among Kenyans when comparing to the previous Riverwood DVD period (Kenya Film Commission, 2021). Selections in the group were conducted according to the ability of filmmakers to have an impact on production factors such as language, narration, and casting. The second population entailed cultural commentators and film reviewers that published analyses of Kenyan digital films either in mainstream media or academic literature and served as members of the jury in film festivals evaluating the quality of Kenyan films.

In addition, Kenyan narrative films of the period under consideration satisfying the selection criteria were analyzed. According to estimates, there could be about 300–400 movies, 150–200 filmmakers, 15–20 commentators, and less than 10 platform intermediaries (Kenya Film Commission, 2021).

3.4 Sampling and sample size

Purposeful sampling was used for the selection of rich information sources. For the participant sample, there were 15 participants. Ten of the participants were film directors/ producers who had made at least one film within the period of 2018–2023 that was available on YouTube, Netflix, and Showmax. Three participants were cultural analysts whose work involved analyzing Kenyan films uploaded digitally online. Finally, two participants were platform intermediaries who were responsible for curating and acquiring the films on the platform. For the film sample, there were 20 films that were purposively selected from YouTube (N=12, minimum views: 50,000), Showmax (N=5), and Netflix (N=3).

3.5 Data collection tools and procedure

Data were gathered through three interconnected processes. Firstly, semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45 and 90 minutes each were carried out with all fifteen participants mainly online using Zoom software, although two interviews were done face-to-face in Nairobi. Interviews were recorded, and those carried out in part in Swahili were professionally translated into English. Data saturation was achieved when interviews no longer yielded any additional codes associated with the theme of authenticity and the market. Secondly, directed qualitative content analysis was undertaken of the twenty sampled films through a coding framework that consisted of four categories: language, culture, story, and aesthetics; an independent coder also analyzed 20 percent of the films, attaining 82–91 percent inter-coder agreement. Thirdly, documentary sources such as the YouTube Creator Academy rules, Kenya Film Commission annual reports (2019–2023), and media articles in *The Nation* and *The Standard* newspapers (2018–2024) were gathered.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analyses took place simultaneously with data collection through two different but interrelated methods. Interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which entailed the processes of coding, theme

generation, and cross-case comparison and resulted in three themes: creativity vs. algorithms; authenticity vs. market, and hybridity. The films were subjected to directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Theory-based codes for analysis came from glocalization and cultural brokerage theoretical perspectives, along with the possibility of developing emergent codes. Cross-case comparison took place between interviews' themes and films' codes.

3.7 Ethical Concerns

As an independent researcher, no IRB (institutional review board) was available due to lack of institutional affiliation. Nevertheless, the research followed the ethical standards of the American Anthropological Association [AAA] of 2012 very carefully, especially the key values of "do no harm," informed consent, anonymity, and transparency. All participants gave written informed consent having been given full details of the purpose of the study, including the option to withdraw at any point within 30 days. All participants were given pseudonyms (P1-P10 for the filmmakers, C1-C3 for the commentators, and I1-I2 for intermediaries). All film titles were also given pseudonyms (F1-F20). All audio interviews, transcriptions, and coding worksheets were held in a password-protected university computer and would be kept on file for five years following publication.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The findings from 15 semi-structured interviews, 20 films, and additional documentary material are organized around the three research questions guiding this study. The first section addresses changes in production, distribution, and consumption brought by digital technology. The second section examines the specific challenges generated by digital distribution systems. The third section identifies the strategies filmmakers employ to achieve cultural brokerage.

4.1.1 What changes in terms of production, distribution, and consumption of films are brought about by the advent of digital technology in Kenyan cinema?

One thing which becomes clear from all interviews is the fact that there has been an evolution in film-making in Kenya through digital technology that has made it possible for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to be involved. Film-making has moved from times when prohibitively expensive costs allowed filming to be done only by those connected to state television networks or those sponsored by foreign countries. Due to low-cost 4K smartphone cameras and editing software like DaVinci Resolve and Capcut, filmmakers do not have to know anyone anymore. As one Kenyan director (P4) based in Nairobi put it:

"In 2005, you had to have connections with KBC to borrow a camera. Now, my phone takes 4K shots. My last short was cut in a matatu on my way to town." (Kenyan Director, P4, 7/3/2026).

The technological revolution has created democratization of production across different demographic segments. Technology has facilitated production by those who were excluded from the state-controlled broadcasting system in Kenya like female film makers, young film makers below 25 years, and film makers from smaller cities such as Kisumu, Nakuru, and Eldoret. There have also been changes in distribution practices. Where distribution was through theater screenings and DVDs in the Riverwood period, technology now facilitates direct audience access to content through digital platforms. As P1 explained:

"Before, you made a film and prayed someone at KBC or a DVD vendor would pick it up. Now, I upload to YouTube at 6 PM and by 8 PM I can see who is watching in Brazil." (Director, P1, 03/03/2026)

There has been a decisive shift in consumption trends toward mobile viewing. Several filmmakers observed that their data analysis showed that most people watch movies from 9 PM onwards until midnight using their mobile phones, rarely watching full films in one sitting. This led some filmmakers to adapt their storytelling pace, with a few saying that they now make movies in such a way that there are hooks every five to seven minutes in order to hold viewer interest. But this revolution is not entirely positive.

4.1.2 What new challenges are generated by the digital distribution system?

According to the present research, the freedom of creation granted by the possibilities of digital creation is heavily limited by the "god of algorithms" as stated by the participants. Whereas theatrical movies could allow for meaning-making through film festivals, movie reviews, and word of mouth, the algorithmic approach of digital technology is aimed at maximizing engagement and creates heavy pressure towards sensational and rapid visuals. As P3 put it poignantly:

"YouTube doesn't care about your Luo cultural metaphor. It cares about your click-through rate. If a thumbnail with a Caucasian woman in a miniskirt attracts more clicks than an African kiondo [woven basket], then you can be sure that I will have to use it." (Female, 28, comedy creator, 7/3/2026).

This effect is instant and measurable. Several directors who had begun their careers producing videos exclusively for YouTube have spoken about putting away projects that involved aspects of local rituals and storytelling

because of the poor response their initial uploads received. One director creating a drama based in rural Kiambu, whose work had been selected for streaming on Netflix, has mentioned that according to statistics provided by the platform, the majority of international viewers lost interest anytime a scene featuring the *Kiama Kia Ma* (Kikuyu Council of Elders) came into play. "It was too slow for international audiences," he quoted them saying. "However, the council was the conscience of the movie. We did cut it but our numbers did improve."

Apart from the effect of the algorithm itself, there are at least three clear-cut issues that emerge.

Fault Line 1: Language. Nearly all filmmakers confirmed that the current Kenya is a multilingual country where switching constantly takes place from English to Kiswahili to vernacular languages like Kikuyu, Dholuo, Luhya, Kamba, and Sheng. But the digital medium always favors monolingualism or, at most, bilingualism where English is dominant. Movies with high proportions of local languages were tagged as "too tribal" for national streaming via Showmax and "unsubtitled" for YouTube. As P6 commented,

"There was a scene in the script where the elder cursed his grandson using Kikuyu. Powerful scene. But the streamer said, 'We will have to translate into four different languages for Kenya. English less than other languages.'" (Male, 41, 9/3/2026).

This curse carried with it a number of Kikuyu proverbs and tone that could not be translated without losing its moral strength. Content analysis showed that among 20 movies sampled, three contained more than 10% vernacular languages and also recorded least viewership on YouTube.

Fault Line 2: Narrative Structure. The three-act format with an individual protagonist whose motivations are psychologically based goes against traditional storytelling styles practiced in Kenya that emphasize community themes and cycles of tragedy. In her interview, P9 expressed her views on this matter in the following way:

"There was a family story about their land, without a hero. It got rejected by the buyer in a streaming company from Europe because he said that there 'is no hero here.' I had to change that, and that changed the story completely." (Female, 37, director of a rural drama, 17/3/2026).

Initially, her film was built around a theme of land division among several generations, using the principle of ensemble casts. However, the new version introduced a heroine saving her family that does not relate to their experience of land conflicts. Additionally, many interviewees complained about being forced to replace tragic or ambiguous endings with "happy" endings.

Fault Line 3: Visual Aesthetics and Body Representation. There is also a fault line that is the least visible but the most pervasive one, and that is with regard to the way in which digital photography influences the portrayal of the Kenyan body on screen. This is due to the fact that contemporary high-definition cameras, computer programs for color correction, and even social media quality metrics like the "low light" metric on YouTube all come with a built-in bias against dark complexions, good lighting, and European face structure. As casting director P11 explained:

"My film trailer of my dark-skinned actresses in their real rural environment was tagged by YouTube as 'low lighting.' It is not explicitly racial bias but its effect is that it downgrades my real portrayal while elevating the other lighter-skinned portrayals." (Female, 29, 19/3/2026).

It turns out that statistically, movies featuring dark-skinned actors in natural lighting were 40% less viewed than those depicting light-skinned actors in artificial settings.

4.1.3 What strategies do Kenyan filmmakers use in order to achieve cultural brokerage in their films?

Despite the pressures documented above, this study found that Kenyan filmmakers are not passive agents who accept platform logics uncritically. Rather, they intentionally practice cultural brokerage—simultaneously serving local audiences seeking cultural resonance and algorithms demanding high engagement. Three major strategies emerged.

Strategy 1: The "Ethnic Easter Egg." Filmmakers deliberately embed authentic cultural elements as hidden rewards for local audiences while keeping the main narrative legible to international viewers. Film F7 (40 Sticks), a heist thriller, exemplifies this strategy. The plot—criminals plan a robbery, encounter obstacles, reach resolution—is globally comprehensible. However, the background includes taarab music (understood primarily by coastal Kenyans), untranslated Swahili proverbs, and references to mbao (a local wood-fetching cooperative). Local audiences appreciate these insider references; international viewers enjoy the thriller without noticing anything "foreign." As P4 explained:

"The algorithm cannot penalize what it does not detect. The Easter eggs are invisible to the platform but visible to my people." (Male, 45, 7/3/2026).

Strategy 2: Genre Infusion. The method includes the wrapping of culturally-specific critique in globally loved genres. The participant number two (P2, male, 33 years old, 3/3/2026) made a science fiction film F12 that was set in Nairobi 2050 and focused on land grabbing, corruption, and ethnic preferences. According to him, "Science fiction allowed me the space to express my Luo culture and my visions of the future without being labeled with making a 'cultural documentary.' It allowed me space." Thus, the integration of politically relevant themes in a globally recognized genre helped P2 reach a global audience that would not have been interested in watching "an African cultural film."

Strategy 3: The YouTube Trailer A/B Test. In this strategy, "fooling" the algorithm occurs through deliberate decoupling of promotional material from the actual film.

"I made two trailers for the same film, one was a serious one showing the rural life and culture. In the other trailer, I showed some fighting and kissing. Second trailer got ten times more views. It's not my film but I made it just like that to preserve authenticity in my film, and that second trailer brought viewers. People who came for fights stayed for stories." P7 (M, 26, YouTube creator, 10/3/2026):

This form of A/B testing allows filmmakers to fulfill algorithmic requirements for provocative thumbnails and sensational trailers without betraying their film's cultural values. This method of A/B testing ensures that the filmmaker can comply with algorithmic requirements for click-bait-like thumbnails and trailers while keeping the integrity of his/her film intact. In all of these methods, there is one key theme that emerges: filmmakers are able to recognize the distinction between what can be seen by the algorithm and what cannot. Brokerage here entails optimizing what can be seen and preserving the rest.

4.2 Discussion

The aim of the present paper was to analyze how digital technologies affect cultural representations and identity in movies produced in Kenya. The findings obtained through this study demonstrate that there is some kind of paradox in terms of using digital technologies for representing culture, as, although such tools allowed democratizing the filmmaking process, they simultaneously monitor Kenyan filmmakers by means of algorithms. In this regard, the analysis takes into account such notions as glocalization (Robertson, 1995) and cultural brokerage (Jang, 2017).

The revelation that digital technology has dramatically reduced the barriers to the production of films in Kenya supports the "accessibility thesis" postulated by optimists of digital media use in Africa. The assertion by Jenkins (2006) on "convergence culture" and by Deuze (2007) that media production has become an intrinsic part of life finds empirical support in the case of Kenya. The testimonies of filmmakers editing their films in matatus using their smartphones could not be imagined back in 2005 when access to a KBC camera involved connections. It is consistent with the idea of "creative coping" proposed by Nyamnjoh (2017), whereby digital media enables African producers to overcome the structural inequalities in global media flows. Nevertheless, the findings bring complexity into this optimistic narrative; while media production has been democratized, distribution has not been. Whereas any individual can produce films today, seeing those films still requires negotiating opaque algorithmic gatekeepers. As Couldry and Mejias (2019) describe it, it is akin to "data colonialism"—a process through which cultural value is extracted from disadvantaged producers without reciprocity. Unlike old gatekeepers (KBC staff, DVD sellers), algorithms cannot be negotiated with. This study agrees with the argument put forward by Jedlowski (2022).

These fault lines—the language, structure, and aesthetic aspects—provide the particular mechanisms that demonstrate how algorithmic pressure is exerted on cultural content. The disappearance of vernacular language supports Okome's (2007) worry about "mimetic reproduction," where the local story is squeezed into a Western mold. Yet this study illustrates something more insidious—a relegation rather than an obliteration. Vernacular language surfaces as part of "ethnic Easter eggs"—details visible only to the human eye but not to the algorithm. This means that Kenyan filmmakers have figured out what could be described as "algorithmic code-switching." They know what makes their work be marked down by the algorithm, such as vernacular speech, a slower pace, and darker skin in natural light. Hence, they move such characteristics into a space inaccessible for the algorithm.

However, the discussion of language brings to light the inability of extant theories to explain certain issues adequately. According to Shohat and Stam (1994), authenticity in postcolonial films refers to a correspondence with life, not maintenance of tradition. This is what Kenyan film-makers are not giving up on but are converting to something more algorithmically comprehensible. In substituting a curse in the Kikuyu language for English lines, a film-maker is sacrificing the cultural gravitas of the curse, while maintaining its narrative importance. The resolution of this issue lies within the theoretical framework adopted by one.

These strategic practices of ethnic Easter eggs, genre infusion, and A/B trailer testing show that Kenyan filmmakers are neither victims of deterministic algorithmicity nor romantic resisters. Instead, they are what Jang (2017) terms cultural brokers: actors who strategically select translation processes between cultures. This finding contradicts both the pessimism of Haynes' (2016) analysis of homogenization via platforms and the optimism of Jedlowski's (2022) agentic reading of algorithmic code-switching. The Kenyan example illustrates that such brokerage takes place on different levels at once: in the film itself (with Easter eggs), in its marketing process (via A/B testing), and in choosing genres (by infusion). What's more important, however, is that brokerage does not happen outside of the limits of platforms; it takes place in response to their constraints. When a filmmaker designs a trailer for her film in order to create sensations and increase clicks to the authentic movie, she is not outsmarting the algorithm; she is learning how to satisfy its needs while keeping those she deems most important.

The final point that comes from the Kenyan case concerns the nature of small-language markets in the era of streaming platforms. While the immense domestic viewership in Nigeria gives local films an advantage compared to their Kenyan counterparts, it means that there is also a greater risk associated with the global market. As can be seen from the statement made by Kenya Film Commission (2021), which claims that the local content adoption rate amounts

to only 31%, platform capitalism is a force that cannot be overcome. What future work needs to focus on is making the costs of different hybrids visible and supporting the aspects of culture most prone to neglect.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study sought to determine the impact of digital technology on representation and identity in Kenyan film. The solution, as evidenced by the research findings, does not come from the deterministic perspective or the romantic resistance approach to technology, but rather from the idea that digital technologies and social media streaming services have produced a dialectical relationship wherein unfettered access is accompanied by new constraints, invisible yet pervasive.

There are three key contributions this research makes. First, this study empirically establishes the "authenticity-market crunch": a three-part crisis of language (vernacular erasure), storytelling (individual heroes trump community narrative) and aesthetics (algorithm bias favoring light skin and studio lighting). Secondly, it defines the practice of cultural brokerage within which Kenyan filmmakers are negotiating their way through these challenges—strategically resisting the market forces using practices such as ethnic Easter eggs, genre infusion, and trailer A/B testing. Finally, it generates empirical evidence for policy makers that platform algorithms have an adverse effect on small language markets such as those in Kenya, and that targeted intervention measures such as subsidizing subtitles and vernacular quotas are both feasible and necessary.

Theoretically, this research presents an alternative to both the techno-optimism of early convergence culture studies and the more cynical data colonialism perspective. Kenya's film industry stands in a paradoxical position because neither complete liberation nor colonization seems to accurately describe their work. Instead, their output involves novel, hybrid representations of 21st-century Kenyan identity: urban, digitally-savvy, multilingual, and global, challenging notions of "authentic" vs. "inauthentic" cultures. Technology is not the issue, it is the secrecy surrounding it. Algorithmic processes that lack transparency and filmmaker self-censorship that occurs without full understanding results in a form of cultural assimilation that relies not on violence, but on slow optimization.

There are certain limitations related to this study that should be noted. Firstly, although the sample used for this research is a deliberately narrow one, it still consists of only 15 respondents and 20 films. Secondly, the experiences of filmmakers who have such a strong connection with the local culture that their works cannot achieve even minimal algorithmic visibility were not considered. Finally, this study did not focus on audiences' perceptions of hybrid films, which is also an important topic. The need for future research should include longitudinal quantitative analysis of YouTube Kenyan content, comparative research with Tanzanian Bongo Movie and Ugandan cinema, and audience reception studies focused on Kenyan viewers' views.

In essence, a smartphone is only a tool. However, the network in which it exists is certainly not neutral. They encompass the histories and biases of global capitalism, the aesthetics of postcolonialism, and the discrimination embedded in algorithms. Digital cinema in Kenya is a tale of a community discovering its way of storytelling in a mirror hall constructed by another, slowly learning to negotiate through and within the confines of the mirror. As Kenyan filmmakers forge their way between the specificity of their culture and visibility through algorithms, their approaches may serve as a model for other peripheral cinemas around the world.

5.2 Recommendations

Kenya Film Commission (KFC) needs to create a Vernacular Subtitling Fund to reimburse filmmakers who subtitle their work in Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, and Kamba languages. In parallel, the Ministry of Sports, Culture, and Heritage ought to enforce a requirement for streaming platforms (Netflix Kenya, Showmax) to ensure that there is a minimum of 25% vernacular-language content in their Kenya-specific catalogs by the end of 2026.

The Ministry of Sports, Culture, and Heritage should reallocate 30% of its current annual budget for filmmaking (KES 312 million)—that is KES 93.6 million—from production costs to localization costs (subtitling, dubbing, culturally relevant film promotion). All government-sponsored filmmakers will be obliged to undergo mandatory algorithmic literacy training "Algorithmic Literacy for Cultural Filmmakers."

The Communications Authority of Kenya shall oblige all streaming platforms to develop clear algorithmic guidelines for Kenyan filmmakers. Netflix Kenya and Showmax should allocate KES 50 million annually towards commissioning or purchasing films from Kenya that incorporate at least 40% vernacular language. Finally, the Kenya Film Commission together with the University of Nairobi is to establish an Algorithmic Transparency Observatory to annually audit platform recommendation algorithms and publish transparency reports of biases in recommendation algorithms for Kenyan filmmakers.

Declaration of Interest

The author declares that he does not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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