

**AUDIENCE FOCUS IN THEATRE GENERIC CHOICE; THE CASE OF KENYA
UNIVERSITIES PERFORMING ARTS ASSOCIATION (KUPAA)**

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**A Research Thesis Submitted to the Board of Post-Graduate Studies in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Award of Degree of Master of Arts in Literature in
the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of Languages, Linguistics and
Literature of Kisii University.**

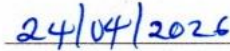
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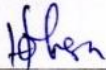
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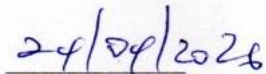
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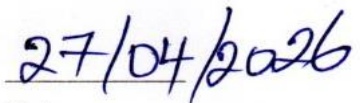
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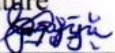
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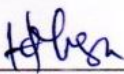
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my father, Moses Kelvin Kerage whose unwavering support and encouragement has been my greatest strength. To my mentors and peers, for their guidance and inspiration throughout this journey. And to all those thespians striving to make a difference, may this effort contribute to meaningful progress.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the dynamic relationship between audience engagement and the evolution of theatrical genres, focusing on the critical role the audience plays in Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA). The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the role of the audience in the formation of KUPAA. The study was guided by three objectives: to evaluate how audience feedback and engagement led to the emergence of KUPAA, to evaluate contemporary trends in audience engagement and their implications for genre development, and to examine KUPAA's strategies in audience engagement for generic diversity. They formed the research questions of this study. The study limited itself to KUPAA and its productions. This study was grounded in qualitative research methodology and guided by the reception theory framework. The research examined how audience feedback and participatory practices had influenced KUPAA's emergence as a significant cultural and academic institution. Literature review for this study was done objectively, and the material was arranged from global to local. The target population of the study was largely the KUPAA officials and audience of the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association(KUPAA). Data collection methods included interviews with stakeholders, analysis of archival materials, and observation. This study employed document and content analysis to analyze data collected from the field and secondary data sources. By emphasizing the interpretative interplay between audience reception and artistic production, this study demonstrated the critical role of audiences in shaping the trajectory of theatrical expression and genre diversity. The findings provided nuanced insights into how KUPAA's strategies align with evolving audience expectations, contributing to the broader discourse on the sustainability and adaptability of performing arts in Kenya.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

KUPAA	Kenya Universities Performing Arts & Film Association
K M F	Kenya Music Festival
KNDF	Kenya National Drama Festival
PUEA	Presbyterian University of East Africa
KUTT	Kenyatta University Travelling Theatre
KSCDF	Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival
NACOSTI	National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation
MCK	Media Council of Kenya
TUM	Technical University of Mombasa
TUK	Technical University of Kenya
MMUST	Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology
MMU	Multimedia university
JOUST	Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology
GLUKS	Great Lakes University of Kenya
TYA	Theatre for Young Audiences

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

Audience:	In this study, the audience referred to the people who watch, listen to, and engage with a live or recorded performance. They influence and are influenced by the performance through their reactions, expectations, and interpretations.
Shadow plays:	In this study, <i>shadow plays</i> refer to a form of theatrical performance where characters, objects, and scenery are represented through the manipulation of silhouettes cast onto a screen or surface using a light source. The performance typically involves the use of cut-out figures, puppetry, or live actors behind a translucent screen, where movement, voice-over narration, sound effects, and music are integrated to convey narrative and emotion.
Engagement:	In this study, engagement referred to the various ways in which audiences interact with, influence, and participate in university-based performing arts, particularly within the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA)
Genre:	In this study it refers to the classification of a performance based on its themes, structure, style, and audience expectations. In this proposed study, genre will refer to various categories of items performed during KUPAA Festivals.
Mashup plays:	Hybrid productions blend multiple texts, genres, cultural references, and performance styles into a single cohesive experience, creating layered meanings and challenging conventional structures.
Feedback:	In this study, it was defined as the reactions and responses from the audience during and after a performance, which provide insight into their emotional engagement, interpretation, and overall experience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION AND APPROVAL	ii
PLAGIARISM DECLARATION	iii
DECLARATION OF NUMBER OF WORDS FOR MASTERS/PROJECT/PHD THESIS.....	iii
COPYRIGHT	v
DEDICATION.....	vi
ACKNOWLEDEMENT.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS.....	ix
OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS.....	x
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
LIST OF APPENDICES	xv
CHAPTER ONE	
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background to the Study	1
1.2 Statement of the problem	6
1.3 Purpose of the study.....	7
1.4. Specific objectives	7
1.5 Research questions.....	7
1.6 Research Assumptions	8
1.7 Significance of the Study	8
1.8 Justification of the study	9
1.9 Scope and Limitations of the Study	11
1.10 Theoretical framework	12
CHAPTER TWO	
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	17
2.1 Introduction	17
2.2 Audience Feedback and Genre Evolution in Theatre	17
2.3 Contemporary Trends in Audience Engagement.....	28

2.4 Strategies in Audience Engagement	35
CHAPTER THREE	
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	44
3.0 Introduction	44
3.1 Research Design	44
3.2 Target population.....	44
3.3 Sampling Technique	45
3.4 Sample size	46
3.5 Data collection procedures and instruments.....	46
3.6 Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments.....	47
3.7 Data Analysis.....	48
3.8 Ethical Considerations	49
CHAPTER FOUR	
FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATIONS	50
4.1 Overview	50
4.1.1 Evolution of Kenyan Theatre and Drama Festivals	50
4.2 The Role of the Audience in the Formation of KUPAA.....	54
4.2.1 Demographic Divides and the Reorientation of University Theatre in Kenya	56
4.2.2 Calendar Clashes and Temporal Realignment in University Theatre	58
4.2.3 Reclaiming Narrative Agency through Participatory Scripting.....	60
4.2.4 Production Design and Technical Sophistication	62
4.2.5 Costume Design as Aesthetic and Participatory Practice.....	64
4.2.6 Genre Evolution and Audience-Centered Theatre Practice.....	65
4.2.7 Research-based dialogue	68
4.3 Contemporary trends in audience engagement and their implications for genre development.....	71
4.3.1 Historical plays	73

4.3.2 Mashup Play	75
4.3.3 Shadow Play	78
4.3.4 Pageantry	81
4.3.5 Street dance.....	83
4.3.6 Legislative plays	85
4.3.7 Musical Plays	88
4.3.8 Conclusion	91
4.4 Strategies Used by KUPAA to Engage Audiences for Generic Diversity	92
4.4.1 National Workshops as Instruments of Exposure and Interaction.....	92
4.4.2 KUPAA Syllabus as a Tool for Structured Diversity	94
4.4.3 Direct Audience Engagement Techniques	96
4.4.4 Aligning Content with Audience Preferences	98
4.4.5 Sustained Research and Data-Driven Strategy	100
4.4.6 Collaborative Creation and Genre-Fluid Performance.....	102
4.4.7 Integration of Intertextual and Cross-Genre Elements.....	104
4.4.8 Conclusion	105
CHAPTER FIVE	
SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	106
5.1 Introduction	106
5.2 Summary	106
5.3 Conclusion.....	109
5.4 Recommendations.....	109
5.5 Suggestion for Further Research	110
REFERENCES	112
APPENDICES	123

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 KUPAA National Festival poster.	60
Figure 2 Historical play being staged during KUPAA festival at Egerton university 2024.	74
Figure 3 MMU crew performing a Mashup play during the 2022 KUPAA festivals at JOUST.....	77
Figure 4 Officials, audience posing for a further after a shadow play during the 2024 festivals.	79
Figure 5 Winners of the KUPAA beauty pageantry competition (2022) pose for a photo at the 2022 festival that was held at JOUST.	82
Figure 6 Moi university crew performing a Legislative play during the 2022 festivals at JOUST.....	88
Figure 7 Pwani University drama crew performing a musical play during the 2022 KUPAA Festivals	90

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	123
APPENDIX II: Research permit.....	125
APPENDIX III: Authority letter.....	126
APPENDIX IV: List of plates.....	127
APPENDIX V: KUPAA 2025 Audience Feedback Survey.....	138
APPENDIX VI: KUPAA 2024 Festival Survey.....	141
APPENDIX VII: Oral sources.....	157
APPENDIX VIII: Publication.....	160
APPENDIX IX: Plagiarism Report.....	161

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The role of the audience in theatrical performance has evolved across global theatre traditions, shifting from a passive observer to an active participant who shapes the creative process. Traditionally seen as recipients of a production, audiences are now recognized as co-creators whose reactions, whether applause, laughter, or silence, directly influence the energy and flow of a performance. Heim (2016) encapsulates this shift, asserting that audiences are “co-creators rather than mere observers,” contributing to the interactive and ephemeral nature of live theatre. This dynamic is particularly noticeable in multicultural festivals, where the varied makeup of the audience encourages artists to adapt and experiment, fostering a vibrant and continually evolving artistic scene.

In the field of composition and rhetoric, Ede and Lunsford (1984) highlight the evaluative authority of the audience, noting that the success of a theatrical work is often measured by audience reaction, where “good” is equated with “effective” and “bad” with “ineffective.” This insight reflects a broader paradigm shift in theatre studies, where audiences are increasingly recognized as active agents in validating and redefining theatrical genres. On a global scale, this redefinition has fostered a more inclusive conceptualization of theatrical success, prioritizing audience

reception and cultural relevance as central evaluative metrics. As a result, both scholars and practitioners have come to regard audience feedback as a pivotal factor, not only shaping the immediate outcomes of performances but also influencing the long-term evolution of specific theatrical forms.

The role of audiences is particularly important in theatre festivals, where a wide range of genres and styles is showcased to cater to diverse tastes and expectations. Bennett (1988) notes that audiences bring their own cultural backgrounds and perspectives, which influence how they interpret and respond to performances. Festivals provide a unique space to explore the relationship between audience preferences and the development of theatrical genres, as different groups shape the cultural landscape through their participation. This dynamic is especially evident in multicultural festivals, where the diversity of audiences pushes artists to adapt and innovate, creating a thriving and ever-evolving artistic environment.

Reason (2004) reinforces this view by emphasizing the emotional and intellectual investment of audiences in live performance, arguing that their reactions not only validate but also co-create the theatrical experience. Similarly, Freshwater (2009) challenges the notion of the audience as a homogenous body, highlighting the plurality of audience responses and the need for theatre-makers to consider complex and layered spectatorial engagements.

Studies on younger theatre audiences reveal that even younger demographics can play a key role in driving innovation in theatrical presentation. Morris (2008) points out that younger viewers, often first exposed to theater through educational or

outreach programs, bring fresh perspectives that encourage creators to explore new approaches and include themes that resonate with their experiences. Although Morris's research focuses on theatre for young audiences, it illustrates a broader trend in which various demographic factors, such as age, cultural background, and social interests, shape the direction of theatrical genres. This trend pushes theatre companies to blend traditional narratives with modern, accessible forms that appeal to diverse audiences.

In the African context, Baroka (2001) asserts that festivals function as social mirrors, allowing communities to see their struggles and triumphs reflected on stage, while simultaneously engaging in critical discourse. His work on Nigerian performance festivals highlights the dialogic nature of theatre, where audiences influence narrative structure and performance aesthetics through immediate response and cultural expectations. Finnegan (1970), in her seminal work on African oral literature, also documents the participatory role of audiences in shaping storytelling and

performance dynamics, noting that audience interjections, praise, or criticism often affect the pacing, tone, and even content of a live piece.

In Kenya, theatre has long evolved through a dynamic dialogue between performance and audience, with platforms such as the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) and Kenya Music Festival (KMF) offering valuable insights into genre trends shaped by audience urgency. Scholars such as Kawive (2021) have demonstrated that popular theatre in Kenya serves not only as entertainment but

also as a vehicle for civic education, often adapting content to meet the expectations and pressing concerns of audiences. These changes are frequently informed by themes such as governance, youth identity, gender, and social justice, that is issues that have increasingly dominated festival performances.

Similarly, Mirichii (2021) emphasizes the return of indigenous languages and traditional aesthetics in Kenyan performances, a shift encouraged by audiences' desire for culturally rooted narratives.

Interactive and participatory approaches, championed by theatre makers like Ogutu Muraya (2021), further reflect a reconfiguration of performance to accommodate a more involved and responsive audience. As noted by Komu (2023), the audience is no longer a passive observer but a critical agent in shaping genre, structure, and thematic content in Kenyan theatre.

Building on this, the Ministry of Culture and the Arts (MCK, 2018) highlights that evolving audience preferences, particularly in local theatre festivals they are increasingly shaping the direction of performance content. The report reveals that younger audiences are especially drawn to genres that combine entertainment with pointed socio-political critique, prompting performers to move beyond conventional formats in favour of more contemporary and experimental styles. It further underscores the importance of establishing policy frameworks that formally integrate audience feedback as a foundational element in cultural planning and the long-term sustainability of performance arts in Kenya.

Osiako, Alembi, Barasa, and Khaemba (2004) chronicle how the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) began foregrounding the needs of child spectators after recognizing that many plays ignored children's developmental realities. They report Dr. Ezekiel Alembi's critique of scripts that treated pupils as miniature adults, a stance that sharpened the festival's audience-sensitive agenda (Osiako et al., 2004). In response, organizers institutionalized child-centered staging practices that have since deepened the artistic and pedagogical impact of KNDF performances (Osiako et al., 2004; Shikuku, 2008). Nonetheless, this sustained preference for young viewers has left university-level audiences largely unexplored. KUPAA, embedded in Kenyan universities, engages spectators whose cognitive maturity and cultural capital position them to drive distinctive generic experimentation.

Even though KNDF and KMF offer institutional frameworks for analyzing audience influence, there remains a notable gap in scholarly attention directed at university-level theatre collectives, particularly the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA). KUPAA has emerged as a unique space for creative experimentation among university students, distinct from the adjudicated formats of KNDF and KMF. Yet, unlike these national festivals, little academic work has been done to interrogate how audience urgency in KUPAA contexts influences genre choice and narrative construction.

Whereas KNDF performances are competition-oriented, KUPAA performances are typically more fluid, peer-oriented, and less constrained by curricular or

competitive adjudication structures. This gives performers the freedom to explore a wide range of genres, satire, mashup plays, musical plays, shadow theatre, spoken word, post-dramatic theatre and musical theatre. Yet it also raises questions about how genre choices are being influenced in the absence of formalized audience feedback systems like those in KNDF or KMF.

This study, therefore, sought to fill that gap by examining the extent to which audience urgency and expectations shape theatrical genre choices within KUPAA performances. Unlike in KNDF and KMF, where audience focus is often mediated by institutional adjudication, KUPAA presented an open platform where audience-performer dynamics may be more direct, spontaneous, and innovative. Investigating this relationship can offer fresh insights into how younger, university-based theatre makers interpret and respond to their audiences in shaping genre, and whether a new aesthetic logic is emerging within university-based Kenyan theatre.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Audience engagement plays a crucial role in shaping the performing arts by influencing artistic direction, performance content, and institutional development. While university-based performing arts in Kenya serve as cultural and educational platforms, the impact of audience feedback and participation in the formation of structured associations like the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) remains underexplored. Existing studies on audiences such as Wagumba (2020), explore audience engagement patterns and the factors influencing viewership of Kenyan theatre. While Muriuki (2013) examines

audience characteristics, overlooking how audience engagement has influenced the institutionalization of university performing arts. There is scant scholarship that seeks to examine how audience focus shaped genre choices, specifically in KUPAA. This study explores and analyzes the role of the audience in the formation of the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA), thereby bridging this critical gap.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the role of the audience in the formation of

Kenya Universities Performing Arts and Film Association.

1.4. Specific objectives

- i. To assess how audience feedback and engagement led to the emergence of Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA).
- ii. To examine contemporary trends in audience engagement and their implications for genre development.
- iii. To evaluate KUPAA's strategies in audience engagement for generic diversity.

1.5 Research questions

This study answered the following research questions

- i. How did demographic factors influence the emergence of KUPAA?

- ii. How do contemporary trends impact the development of genres in KUPAA?
- iii. What strategies does KUPAA employ in genre development to satisfy audience demands?

1.6 Research Assumptions

The study was premised on the following assumptions

- i. Audiences significantly influenced the selection and evolution of theatre genres through their preferences and attendance patterns.
- ii. Different demographic groups had distinct preferences for specific genres, impacting festival programming decisions.
- iii. Higher levels of audience engagement correlated with a greater influence on the types of genres presented at the festival.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on audience-centered approaches in theatre by offering an in-depth analysis of audience focus in generic choices, with particular reference to the KUPAA festivals. By drawing on real-life examples from KUPAA, the research expands the discourse surrounding audience engagement and highlights how contemporary African theatre festivals navigate and respond to diverse audience expectations. This nuanced examination enriches academic understandings of genre evolution and underscores the importance of audience agency in shaping performative forms and narrative conventions.

Furthermore, the study advances theoretical and methodological discussions in performance studies by advocating for the study of theatre audiences as a distinct and valuable area of inquiry. It foregrounds the KUPAA audience as a dynamic interpretive community, thereby challenging traditional, text-centered approaches to theatre criticism. This reconceptualization not only positions audiences as co-creators of meaning but also calls for their recognition within literary and cultural studies as legitimate subjects of scholarly analysis. In doing so, the research encourages a rethinking of audience studies as a potential genre in its own right, worthy of focused academic attention.

In practical terms, the findings of this study have implications for theatre practitioners, educators, and curriculum developers. By identifying patterns in audience preferences and responses, the research offers a framework that can guide creative decision-making and pedagogical strategies. The integration of reception theory into performance analysis serves as a valuable tool for both artists and scholars, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the theatre-making process. This interdisciplinary approach fosters a productive dialogue between theory and practice, ultimately enhancing the quality and relevance of contemporary theatre production and education.

1.8 Justification of the study

Although various scholars such as Shikuku (2008), Wagumba (2020), Muriuki (2013), Komu (2023), Van der Smit (2007), Ekdale (2014), Overbergh (2014), Mumma (1997), and Njogu (2019) have explored dimensions of audience focus and

the urgency of audience engagement in theatre, there remains a notable gap in research regarding how these factors influence genre selection in university-based theatrical platforms. Specifically, the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) remains under-examined as a forum where audience preferences directly inform creative and structural decisions. This study addresses this oversight by analyzing KUPAA as a case through which audience dynamics contribute to the evolution and institutionalization of performance genres in academic settings.

The dominant trend in theatre research has focused on textual analysis, performance aesthetics, and artistic innovation, often marginalizing the role of the audience as a critical agent in the creative process. This study redirects scholarly attention toward audience behavior, interpretation, and feedback as central components in genre determination and theatrical success. By foregrounding audience engagement as a determining factor in shaping theatrical content, the research responds to a growing need for frameworks that account for audience-centered theatre-making, particularly in educational and developmental contexts.

Moreover, the study is justified by the limited academic engagement with university-based theatre audiences in Kenya. KUPAA serves a unique demographic of students, young creatives, and emerging practitioners, which are groups whose tastes, preferences, and cultural expectations remain insufficiently explored in theatre scholarship. This study provides a valuable opportunity to examine how these audiences influence the selection of genres and modes of performance,

thereby offering insights that can inform both artistic creation and institutional support for university theatre initiatives.

KUPAA's emergence as a consistent and collaborative performance platform among Kenyan universities presents fertile ground for investigating new trajectories in audience-driven theatre. Its structure and programming reflect a shift toward inclusive, responsive, and participatory artistic practices. This study is therefore timely and necessary, not only to document and analyze this transformation but also to contribute to the discourse on how theatre can be shaped from the bottom up, by the audiences it seeks to serve. In doing so, it offers critical knowledge for practitioners, scholars, and policymakers interested in sustainable models of theatre development within academic institutions.

1.9 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study limited itself to KUPAA and its productions. Thus, focusing on examining the relationship between theatrical genres and audience engagement within the context of KUPAA. The research analyzed how different genres affect audience focus, emotional response, and overall reception. By limiting its scope to KUPAA's productions and their target audiences, it allowed for a detailed investigation of how genre-specific elements influenced viewer preferences and experiences.

This study had a few limitations, such as findings that are context-specific to KUPAA, limiting their generalizability to other theatrical settings or cultural contexts. The reliance on subjective data, such as interviews, may have introduced

personal biases, while the genres analyzed were confined to KUPAA's repertoire, potentially excluding broader genre diversity. Additionally, resource and time limitations could restrict data collection and analysis.

1.10 Theoretical framework

This study was anchored on Reception Theory, which focused on how audiences engage with, interpret, and influence artistic productions. Developed primarily by Hans Robert Jauss (1982), Wolfgang Iser (1978), and Stuart Hall (1980), this theory provided a framework for understanding how the reception and feedback of theatre audiences shaped genre choices and performance structures. Reception Theory challenges the notion that meaning is fixed within a text or performance, arguing instead that meaning is actively constructed by the audience based on their cultural background, experiences, and societal context. Given that the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) exists within a dynamic university environment where audience engagement is crucial, this theory was particularly relevant in explaining how KUPAA's theatre productions evolve in response to audience reception.

Reception Theory is built upon several tenets that are directly related to the objectives of this study. Firstly, the theory emphasizes active audience participation, which was essential in understanding how audience feedback and engagement led to the formation of KUPAA. University audiences are not passive consumers of theatre; rather, they actively engage with performances through feedback, critiques, and participation. This aligns with Jauss's (1982) concept of

Horizon of Expectations, which suggests that audiences interpret theatre based on their cultural experiences, prior knowledge, and societal influences. In the case of KUPAA, its emergence was examined in light of how shifting audience expectations necessitated a structured approach to university theatre, leading to the creation of an association dedicated to performing arts. Additionally, the context-dependent nature of interpretation supported the argument that KUPAA was formed in response to the specific social, political, and academic environments of Kenyan universities, which shape audience engagement in theatre.

This theory further provided a framework for analyzing contemporary trends in audience engagement and their implications for genre development. The polysemic nature of texts (Iser, 1978) suggests that different audiences derive varying meanings from the same performance, thereby influencing the types of genres that thrive in university theatre. Theatre productions are often designed with interpretative gaps that audiences must fill, meaning their responses and interpretations actively shape future performances. KUPAA's choice of genres is therefore informed by audience preferences, contemporary social issues, and trends in artistic expression.

Intertextuality, another key tenet, explains how audiences relate performances to other theatre performances in different festivals they have previously attended, further influencing their expectations and reception of different theatre genres (Kristeva, 1980). In the case of KUPAA, university audiences often draw on their prior exposure to performances from earlier stages of their education, particularly

those encountered in the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) and KMF. Having experienced genre conventions, performance aesthetics, and thematic patterns shaped by the adjudication frameworks of KNDF, these audiences arrive at KUPAA performances with certain interpretive habits and expectations. However, KUPAA departs from KNDF's structured model, offering a more fluid and experimental space where genre boundaries are frequently blurred. This intertextual layering creates a dynamic tension: KUPAA audiences both recall and resist the narrative and stylistic norms of KNDF, influencing how they engage with innovation in performance. Understanding this inter-festival dialogue is crucial for assessing how audience familiarity and memory shape the reception and evolution of theatrical genres within university-based performance contexts.

Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model (Hall, 1980) was particularly useful in analyzing how different audiences accept, negotiate, or reject theatre genres presented by KUPAA. Audiences may accept the intended meaning and artistic choices of the performers (dominant reading), while others may reinterpret the performance in a way that aligns with their own perspectives (negotiated reading), or even reject it entirely (oppositional reading). This helped explain why KUPAA adopted different engagement strategies to cater for diverse audience interpretations. Additionally, Hall's view of media as a site of ideological struggle was relevant in understanding how theatre productions reflect social realities, identity politics, and cultural tensions, which in turn shape the genres that KUPAA prioritizes.

Lastly, temporal variability, a critical tenet of Reception Theory, highlights how audience preferences shift over time, necessitating genre evolution. This aligns with the changing trends in university theatre, where new artistic expressions emerge to cater for evolving cultural dynamics. This proposed study therefore examined how KUPAA strategically diversifies its theatre genres to maintain audience engagement and relevance.

However, reception theory is criticized for giving too much agency to the audience in the process of meaning making. While audiences interpret media through their own experiences and social contexts, media producers often use techniques and strategies to shape how a text is understood, which can limit interpretation. The theory underestimates the influence of producers and institutions in guiding the audience's understanding, suggesting that meaning is co-constructed between the audience and the creators rather than solely created by the audience (McQuaid, 2010).

Despite critiques of overemphasizing audience power, reception theory remained valuable for this study as it shifted the focus from a one-dimensional view to a more nuanced understanding of how audiences actively engage with and interpret media. By applying Reception Theory, this study gained an analytical framework to investigate how audience engagement had influenced KUPAA's formation, genre selection, and performance strategies. This theoretical lens provided insight into the reciprocal relationship between theatre producers and their audiences,

demonstrating how audience reception shapes and transforms artistic expression within Kenyan university theatre.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This literature review examined existing scholarship relevant to audience focus on theatrical genres, focusing specifically on studies that informed this study on audience choice within Kenyan university performing arts associations. The review progressed objectively, exploring key concepts in audience reception, feedback engagement and trends in different contexts chronologically from global to local.

2.2 Audience Feedback and Genre Evolution in Theatre

The relationship between audiences and the stage has been extensively examined in global scholarship, offering insights into how genres adapt to shifting societal and cultural contexts. In Europe, Bennett (1997) explores the interplay between audience reception and theatrical form, emphasizing how cultural expectations influence genre evolution. Carlson (2001) expands on this by examining audience feedback within historical and cultural contexts, arguing that such mechanisms are essential for sustaining theatrical diversity. While their focus was on Western theatre, audience engagement is equally critical in the Kenyan performing arts scene, where it shapes the development of artistic institutions. This work was significant to this study as it highlighted the role of audience reception in influencing theatrical structures and sustainability. However, their research primarily examined how feedback affects performance styles and genre shifts rather

than how it contributed to the formation of institutional bodies. Their work was important in understanding how audience engagement had directly led to the emergence of organizations such as the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA).

McConachie (2008) applies cognitive science frameworks to examine how emotional and cultural connections shape audience preferences. He argues that genres aligning with shared cultural narratives thrive, while those lacking resonance fade. His study emphasizes cultural expectations as key determinants of theatrical success. However, his research primarily focuses on how cultural narratives influence genre popularity rather than how audience feedback directly contributed to the development of artistic institutions. This left a gap in understanding how audience engagement fosters the formation of structured organizations, such as the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA).

Understanding audience demographics is essential for tailoring performances to suit different age groups, from children to adults. This approach underscores the value of audience awareness in performance design. While Reason (2010) effectively highlights this significance through demographic profiling, the study primarily concentrates on segmentation rather than exploring how active audience engagement contributes to the evolution of artistic institutions. As a result, a gap remains in understanding the role of audience feedback, not just as data points, but as a dynamic force in shaping the structural development of performing arts organizations.

The transformative power of audience participation in theatre can reshape genres to reflect pressing political and social realities, demonstrating that feedback from spectators can serve purposes far beyond entertainment. This perspective is strongly reflected in the principles of Theatre of the Oppressed, which emphasize theatre as a tool for activism and societal change. While Taylor (2003) underscores this potential, the focus remains on how audience engagement influences broader political discourse rather than examining its role in the formation of artistic institutions. Consequently, a gap persisted in understanding how feedback within the theatre environment itself can contribute to the development of structured organizations.

Bojar (2016) examines how urban Indian theatre has evolved through audience interactions, highlighting how contemporary folk dramas and urban realist plays emerged in response to shifting audience demographics and preferences in metropolitan areas. The study demonstrates the crucial role of audience engagement in shaping theatrical genres. However, her focus was primarily on how audience composition influences performance styles rather than how sustained audience feedback contributed to the formation of artistic institutions. This study built on this work by exploring how audience engagement not only shapes performances but also drives the creation of structured organizations like the KUPAA.

Chen et al. (2018) investigates the influence of audience feedback on traditional Chinese opera, revealing that shifts in viewing habits led to modern adaptations that blend traditional forms with popular culture. The study highlighted how audience engagement drives the evolution of performance styles. However, the focus

remained on traditional genres rather than how audience feedback contributed to the formation of artistic institutions. This study extended the insights by examining how audience engagement not only influenced performance adaptations but also play a role in the establishment of structured organizations such as the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA).

Audience aesthetics play a pivotal role in shaping genre preferences, as they reflect the cultural and social values that inform audience expectations and reception. In the context of Kuwait, Al- Omir (2007) investigates how these aesthetic sensibilities influence theatrical choices, focusing on variables such as cultural background and social norms. His study reveals how audience characteristics directly impact genre selection, though his primary emphasis is on film audiences and the effects of theatrical variables on film genres. While his work centers more on cinema than live performance, it offers important insights into the factors that influence audience decisions. These are insights that this study extends by examining how similar dynamics operate in university theatre and contribute to the institutionalization of platforms like the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA).

Pickering (2014) explores the role of Indigenous storytelling in Australian theatre, highlighting how audience demand for authentic narratives has contributed to the resurgence of traditional genres. The study demonstrated how audience engagement influenced the preservation and adaptation of cultural heritage within a modern theatrical context. However, the focus was primarily on how feedback

aids cultural reclamation rather than how it facilitated the formation of artistic institutions. The work was valuable to this study in investigating how audience engagement goes beyond shaping artistic expression to actively contributing to the establishment of structured organizations like the KUPAA.

In Africa, Banham et al. (1999) examine how postcolonial African theatre evolved to meet local audience needs, highlighting the emergence of popular genres such as Yoruba traveling theatre in Nigeria. The study demonstrated how audience preferences influenced performance styles by incorporating music, dance, and storytelling to enhance engagement. However, the focus remained on how audience tastes shaped theatrical content rather than how sustained engagement contributed to the formation of artistic institutions. This study applied their insights to investigate how audience feedback goes beyond shaping performance styles to actively influencing the establishment of KUPAA.

Duka (2014) explores how grassroots theatre initiatives in Ghana incorporate audience feedback to create performances that address local challenges, blending traditional elements with innovative approaches. The study highlighted the role of audience engagement in shaping community theatre by ensuring that performances remain relevant to societal needs. However, the focus was primarily on the impact of audience feedback within informal, community-driven theatre rather than its role in the formation of structured artistic institutions. This created a gap in understanding how audience engagement contributed to the establishment and growth of theatre organizations, such as the KUPAA. While Duka's work

emphasizes localized community theatre, further research was needed to explore how sustained audience feedback influences the institutionalization of performing arts within structured settings like university theatre in Kenya.

Losambe and Sarinjeive (2001), in the introduction to *Colonial and Post-Colonial Drama and Theatre in Africa*, discussed the transformative journey of African theatre from colonial repression to post-colonial expression. They emphasized how African theatre evolved as a site of resistance, cultural affirmation, and community dialogue. The introduction highlighted the role of audience engagement in reclaiming indigenous performance forms and shaping post-colonial narratives. However, it focused largely on continental trends and ideological shifts, without addressing how audience interaction influenced the emergence of specific institutional frameworks like KUPAA.

Tanzanian audiences reveal complex dynamics shaped by demographic factors, genre preferences, and the interplay between local and international production influences. Athumani (2010) examined these relationships, offering valuable insights into how such variables affect audience reception and theatrical trends. While his study sheds light on the cultural and industrial forces that inform viewing preferences, it primarily concentrates on audience composition rather than the role of engagement in institutional development. As a result, a gap remains in understanding how sustained audience feedback moves beyond content influence to actively shape the formation of structured theatre organizations, an area this study addresses through the lens of KUPAA's emergence.

Similarly, Mlama (2005) examined participatory theatre in Tanzania, where audience engagement directly informed the thematic and structural aspects of performances addressing social issues.

Building on these foundations, Nogueira (2002) analyzed *Theatre for Development* initiatives in Uganda. Their studies helped in demonstrating how interactive methods fostered audience ownership of performances and influenced genre innovation. Even so, their interest was on audience ownership to theatrical material through cultural relevance.

Kamiriithu stands as a seminal example of audience-centered theatre in Kenya, where community participation was integral to both the creative process and the performance itself. S.A. Van der Smit (2007) offers an in-depth analysis of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Kamiriithu theatre, emphasizing how the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, established in 1976, enabled villagers to collaboratively develop plays that addressed pressing social and political issues. This model fostered a powerful connection between performers and their audience, effectively transforming spectators into co-creators. Van der Smit illustrates how such grassroots engagement empowered the community and heightened the impact of performance.

However, the study falls short of examining how these audience-driven practices could be adapted or institutionalized within formal settings like universities. This study extends that conversation by exploring how similar participatory principles

have informed the development of structured platforms such as the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA).

Karanja (2011), in her master's dissertation, analyzed the use of tragicomic techniques in selected plays by David Mulwa, focusing on how these techniques enhance audience engagement through emotional contrast and layered meaning. She demonstrated that the blending of tragedy and comedy made complex social themes more accessible and relatable to diverse audiences. The study acknowledged the importance of audience response in shaping performance impact, particularly in educational and community settings. However, it did not explore how such engagement influenced broader institutional or organizational developments in Kenyan theatre, such as the formation of KUPAA.

Mumma (1994) explores the theory and practice of educational drama in Kenya, emphasizing its potential as a transformative tool in both learning and social development. The study highlighted how such interactive practices could lay the foundation for a uniquely Kenyan theatrical form rooted in community needs and experiences. However, it did not explicitly trace how audience engagement evolved into organized movements or institutions such as KUPAA. This left a gap that the current study addressed by evaluating how audience feedback and participation influenced the formation and direction of KUPAA within Kenyan university theatre.

Osotsi (1990), in *The Theatre in Independent Kenya*, examined the development of Kenyan theatre in the post-independence era, highlighting its role in reflecting and

shaping national identity. Osotsi noted that audience engagement played a role in shaping content and performance styles, particularly as theatre practitioners responded to public reception. However, the work did not delve into how sustained audience interaction contributed to institutional developments like the emergence of KUPAA. The present study filled this gap by evaluating how audience feedback and engagement influenced the formation of KUPAA as a collective response to evolving artistic and societal needs in Kenya.

Komu (2016) provided a comprehensive historical account of Kenyan theatre, tracing its evolution through the intersections of culture and politics. The study examined how theatre in Kenya has often responded to shifting political climates and cultural transformations, particularly within institutional and educational settings. Komu noted that the university theatre served as a critical space for artistic experimentation and political expression, influenced in part by student and community engagement. However, while the study acknowledged the presence of audience interaction, it did not deeply analyze how sustained audience feedback directly influenced institutional developments like the formation of KUPAA. This revealed a gap in understanding the role of audience agency in shaping structural and organizational shifts within Kenyan university theatre. The current study addressed this gap by evaluating how audience feedback and engagement contributed to the emergence of KUPAA as a response to evolving artistic and societal demands.

Tsikhungu's "Changing Spectres" (2020) offered a critical examination of how local theatre reflected shifting social, political, and cultural landscapes. Tsikhungu highlighted the evolving relationship between audiences and theatrical forms in postcolonial Kenya, where changes in public discourse and social values have led to the emergence of new genres. This study underscored how Kenyan theatre, including platforms like Kenya National Drama Festivals and Kenya Music Festival, navigate these transformations by actively integrating young audience perspectives into their creative processes.

Similarly, Muriuki (2013), observed that diverse audience characteristics like different cultural backgrounds could impact genre preference. His research on Kenyatta University Cultural week underscored the importance of a festival presenting genres that resonated with people. However, their studies were limited to Kenyatta University, KMF and KNDF contexts, this study focused on a different case study-KUPAA.

Tully and Ekdale (2014) explore how *The Team*, a Kenyan TV series, used social media to foster audience co-creation and engagement, transforming viewers into active participants. Their study highlighted the power of interactive media in shaping narratives that reflect audience values. However, their focus was on digital entertainment rather than live or institutional theatre. This created a gap in understanding how physical, educational theatre, such as university drama, could similarly center audiences.

Shikuku (2008) provides a crucial foundation by highlighting how performance content often fails to reflect the needs and perspectives of its intended audience, in his case, children in school festivals. He emphasized aligning theatrical content with audience identity, underscoring the importance of audience-centered theatres. Although his work did not extend to university settings, it set a precedent for examining audience relevance in performance. His study informed this study on how university audiences within KUPAA similarly influenced genre and performance choices. This study built on his approach by shifting the focus to adult student audiences in higher learning institutions.

Wagumba (2020) contends that viewership enriches this perspective, which explores audience engagement patterns and the factors influencing viewership of Kenyan theatre productions. Wagumba identified critical aspects such as accessibility, cultural relatability, and the role of digital media in shaping contemporary theatre viewership trends. Recent studies, such as Ritchie et al. (2021), which explore factors like character identification and moral resonance, complement these local insights by highlighting how audience perceptions and feedback shape genre preferences. However, these scholars were interested in engagement patterns rather than audience focus on genres that this study was interested in.

Despite extensive scholarship on audience engagement in theatre, existing studies largely foreground performance outcomes rather than interrogating audience feedback as a generative force in institutional formation. Moreover, much of the

literature is situated in global or professional contexts, with limited attention to the specific dynamics of Kenyan university theatre and its participatory cultures. There is also an inadequate analysis of the mechanisms through which audience responses are mediated, interpreted, and translated into structural developments such as the formation of KUPAA.

2.3 Contemporary Trends in Audience Engagement

Globally, research by Bay-Cheng et al. (2010) underscores the preferences of younger audiences for genres that embrace technological innovation, such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) performances. However, the study focused more on young audiences leaving the young adult demographics unattended, creating a gap. Even so, their study was instrumental to this study in discerning different tastes and preferences for different demographics.

Similarly, in Europe, Eckersall et al. (2019) discuss the rise of "post-dramatic" theatre, where digital interactivity is used to challenge traditional narrative structures, enabling audiences to co- create performances. The study explored traditional trends, specifically leaving out contemporary genre trends. However, the work was valuable in demonstrating how modern and traditional genres can be incorporated to create new genres that align with contemporary issues.

The influence of social media platforms on the contemporary theatre landscape has become increasingly prominent, with platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube serving as vital spaces for audience interaction, feedback, and promotional strategies. This evolution is explored in detail by Balme (2014), who

examines the integration of traditional and digital feedback mechanisms across diverse European theatrical contexts. While the focus is primarily on European theatre, the insights provided contribute to a broader understanding of the shifting dynamics of audience participation in the digital age and enable comparative analysis of global trends in audience engagement.

Chapple and Kattenbelt (2006) examine how the integration of multimedia in theatre has led to hybrid genres that appeal to digital-native audiences. The work underscores the transformative impact of technology on performance and audience interaction. However, the study focused primarily on Euro-American contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how such strategies function in localized settings like KUPAA. This gap was critical, as KUPAA employs unique audience engagement techniques to foster generational diversity. Therefore, the study provided a useful theoretical base, which this research extended by analyzing contemporary trends in KUPAA's audience engagement within its specific cultural context.

Real-time digital feedback has been shown to enhance audience immersion and satisfaction during performances, with innovations such as live-streaming and on-demand access expanding the theatre's reach to geographically dispersed audiences. McKinney (2018) highlighted these developments as marking a significant shift in how theatre is experienced and consumed. Although the analysis centered on technologically advanced, Western contexts, the insights remain valuable.

Building on this, the present study extends McKinney's findings by exploring how KUPAA has adapted similar digital strategies to engage audiences and promote generic diversity.

Pine and Gilmore (2011) highlight how the "experience economy" compelled theatre companies to prioritize personalized and interactive experiences to maintain audience interest. Their work emphasized the economic value of creating memorable and engaging theatrical encounters. The study primarily explores how audience experience could be commodified within commercial performance settings. However, the analysis did not consider how such strategies were adapted in non-commercial, university-based theatre models like KUPAA. This study built on their framework by exploring how KUPAA employed personalized engagement to sustain audience interest and support generic diversity.

Similarly, Chen et al. (2018) explore how traditional forms such as Peking opera were revitalized through digital platforms and gamification, enabling younger audiences to engage with them in innovative ways. Their study highlighted the role of digital media in preserving and transforming heritage performance. However, the focus remained on digital adaptation within established institutional frameworks in China. The study did not explore how such strategies support genre diversity through community-driven audience engagement models, a gap that is addressed by this study.

Participatory theatre forms that blend low-tech and high-tech tools have been recognized for their role in enhancing audience engagement and fostering

immersive experiences. Banham et al. (1999) emphasize the importance of interactivity and technological integration in performance. However, the analysis remains rooted in Western performance traditions and overlooks how such tools are utilized within culturally embedded, university-led frameworks. This study addresses that gap by examining how participatory strategies within KUPAA contribute to genre diversification in localized theatre movements.

Igweonu (2011) examines the rise of applied and community theatre in contemporary African performance, emphasizing how these practices foster deeper audience involvement and responsiveness. His analysis focuses on the blending of genres and participatory structures that redefine performer-spectator relationships, though his scope spans broader African theatrical movements rather than KUPAA specifically. Even so, his work provided valuable insights into how theatre practitioners engage diverse audiences through genre fluidity and community-driven narratives. It also facilitates a broader understanding of how contemporary African theatre navigates cultural and social contexts to enhance audience relevance. This perspective was instrumental in situating KUPAA's use of shadow play, mashups, and historical reconstructions within wider continental trends in audience engagement.

The dynamic and evolving nature of modern African theatre is often attributed to its continuous adaptation to shifting societal conditions. Asagba (2014) underscores this fluidity, emphasizing that theatrical trends are shaped more by political, cultural, and social transformations than by rigid conventions. Although the study

takes a broad view of the African context, its focus on adaptability aligns closely with KUPAA's strategic deployment of genre variation to maintain audience engagement and cultural relevance. This reinforces the notion that genre innovation functions not just as an aesthetic choice but as a necessary response to contemporary realities, an approach central to KUPAA's context-awareness performance practices.

Kotchy (1984) investigates the development of Ivorian theatre between 1972 and 1983, identifying emerging trends that reflect broader societal shifts in post-independence Ivory Coast. Kotchy's study highlights a growing emphasis on indigenous expression, political commentary, and the blending of traditional and modern performance styles. Although the analysis is specific to the Ivorian context, it illustrates how theatre can serve as a responsive medium to cultural and political change. This approach parallels KUPAA's use of hybrid forms such as mashups and historical reconstructions to articulate localized narratives while addressing contemporary concerns.

Kotchy's work thus contributes to a broader understanding of how African theatres evolve to remain relevant and resonant within their communities.

In Nigeria, Akinwale (2017) examines how social media and online streaming platforms were used to amplify the reach of Nollywood-inspired theatre. The study highlighted how digital media expanded access and visibility for theatrical productions. However, the focus was primarily on the amplification and distribution of theatre, rather than on evolving trends in audience engagement.

It did not consider how audience interaction through these platforms influenced genre development or diversity.

Chifunyise (1990) explores post-independence developments in Zimbabwean theatre, highlighting the influence of grassroots movements in shaping the theatrical landscape. The study emphasizes the emergence of full-time theatre groups largely composed of school leavers, which marked a shift toward professionalized and socially engaged performance. These groups often adopted community-focused themes and accessible performance styles, reflecting a commitment to audience relevance and participation. While the study focuses specifically on Zimbabwe, it offers important parallels to KUPAA's strategies in nurturing genre diversity and audience responsiveness. His insights helped contextualize KUPAA's engagement with grassroots aesthetics, participatory methods, and youth-driven performance models within Kenyan theatre trends.

Digital technology and audience engagement have significantly influenced film genres in Kenya and Tanzania, especially through mobile screenings, online distribution, and informal viewing spaces. Overbergh (2014) highlights how audience feedback has shaped serialized storytelling and driven the creation of hybrid genres that blend traditional and contemporary cinematic elements. Although her analysis offers valuable insight into the broader East African film landscape, it does not delve into the specific strategies adopted by individual production companies. This study builds on her work by examining how KUPAA

employs similar audience-driven approaches to foster genre innovation within a localized theatrical context.

Media Council of Kenya (MCK) 2018 report and subsequent studies provided valuable insights into the shifting patterns of media consumption among Kenyan audiences, particularly the migration from traditional to digital platforms. These surveys primarily focused on news, entertainment, and general media trust across platforms such as television, radio, and social media. The reports effectively mapped audience preferences in media but overlooked live performance arts, especially theatre, which had its distinct modes of audience engagement.

Sanga et al. (2021) discuss how participatory models like Magnet Theatre are increasingly integrating digital storytelling to broaden their audience reach. They emphasize how the rise in smartphone usage and internet accessibility in Kenya has facilitated this transition, enabling more dynamic forms of community engagement. However, the study centered on theatrical performance and does not delve into film production practices or the pursuit of genre diversity. Nonetheless, their insights into digital engagement provided valuable context for understanding the technological shifts influencing creative expression in Kenya.

Auta (2021) emphasizes the critical role of audience preferences in shaping genre choices, highlighting feedback loops between creators and viewers that drive innovation in production. The study illustrates how audience engagement directly influences content direction, encouraging producers to experiment with new formats and hybrid styles. However, Auta's work largely examined these dynamics

in a general or global context, without focusing on specific production houses or Kenya's university-based theatre platforms such as KUPAA. Still, Auta's analysis provided a theoretical basis for understanding the audience-producer relationship in contemporary content creation.

Existing scholarship on audience engagement is largely descriptive and offers limited insight into how contemporary participatory practices shape genre development. It also privileges global contexts, with insufficient focus on localized settings such as Kenyan university theatre. Moreover, the link between specific engagement trends and genre transformation remains underexplored. This study addressed this gap by examining how contemporary audience practices influence genre development within the university theatre context.

2.4 Strategies in Audience Engagement

Globally, enhancing audience engagement in theatre has involved promoting inclusivity, cultural relevance, and the use of technology. Participatory theatre has become central to this effort, encouraging direct involvement from audiences and breaking traditional performance boundaries. Guzman and Heintzman (2024) explored how community advisory boards support participatory narratives that reflect local identities, emphasizing co-creation as a tool for deeper audience connection. However, their study focused mainly on community-driven participation without addressing how such engagement strategies affect genre selection or audience diversity. This left a gap in understanding the link between participatory practices and generic development in theatre. The current study filled

this gap by examining KUPAA's audience engagement strategies and how they have fostered generic diversity in the Kenyan theatrical context.

Mergen and Güven (2025) examined the importance of diversifying the creative workforce as a strategy for increasing authenticity and relatability in theatrical productions. Their study emphasized that diverse creative teams bring varied perspectives that resonate with broader audiences, thereby deepening engagement. They argued that inclusivity behind the scenes is as crucial as onstage representation in fostering meaningful audience connections. However, their focus remained on production dynamics rather than on how such diversity influences genre variety or audience reach. This created a gap in understanding the relationship between workforce diversity and the strategic use of genre to attract diverse audiences. The present study addressed this gap by investigating how KUPAA's strategies in audience engagement have contributed to generic diversity within Kenyan theatre.

Educational initiatives have played a significant role in promoting diversity within theatre, particularly through workshops that encourage intergenerational and multiethnic storytelling. SchmittCerna et al. (2024) demonstrate how such programs foster inclusive spaces that enhance both narrative richness and audience experience. While their study effectively highlights the educational and narrative dimensions of diversity, it does not explore how these efforts influence genre development or audience segmentation. Addressing this gap, the present study

examines KUPAA's audience engagement strategies and their role in driving generic diversity within the Kenyan performance landscape.

Pronyshyn (2022) explores the marginalization of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) within Canada's professional theatre landscape, history, and discourse. The study revealed how TYA has often been excluded from mainstream recognition despite its cultural and educational significance. Pronyshyn argued that such marginalization limits both creative innovation and audience development in the broader theatre ecosystem. However, the research focused largely on institutional and historical neglect, without addressing how marginalized theatre, such as KUPAA and TYA, can be leveraged strategically to diversify audience engagement. This left a gap in understanding how genre inclusion contributes to audience reach and theatrical innovation. The present study addressed this gap by examining KUPAA's audience engagement strategies and their role in fostering generic diversity within Kenyan theatre.

Mobile applications and interactive storytelling have emerged as effective strategies for attracting tech-savvy audiences in urban theatre contexts. Dharwadkar (2016) illustrates how digital tools were integrated into performances to enhance interactivity and maintain relevance for modern viewers. Her analysis, however, is centered on urban Indian environments with well-established digital cultures, leaving out how such strategies are adapted in culturally rooted, university-led frameworks. This study builds on her insights by exploring how KUPAA harnesses

digital tools to engage contemporary audiences and drive genre innovation within the Kenyan theatre scene.

Alnasser et al. (2023) highlight personalized communication and co-creation activities as key strategies for audience engagement in arts organizations. They emphasize how fostering meaningful relationships and enabling audience participation in the creative process enhances loyalty. Their study underscores the importance of tailoring experiences to individual preferences while encouraging collaborative involvement. This was pertinent to this study as it provided insights into effective engagement methods that sustain audience interest. However, their focus was on arts organizations broadly, leaving a gap in analyzing how these strategies apply specifically to theatre and its diverse audience segments.

Meier and Kraus (2018) emphasize storytelling as a powerful tool for audience engagement, particularly in post-truth digital journalism. Their study highlights how compelling narratives, supported by data analytics, capture audience attention and foster deeper connections. While their focus was on journalism, storytelling is equally essential in theatre, where it shapes audience experiences and emotional resonance. This was significant to this study as it underscored the role of narrative in sustaining audience involvement. Their work examined storytelling in digital media, leaving a gap in analyzing how theatrical festivals can adapt it across different genres to engage diverse audiences.

Broersma (2019) explores the importance of cultivating audience relationships through feedback and interactive engagement, advocating for a participatory model

to foster deeper connections. While his focus was on journalism, these principles are equally relevant to theatre, where audience interaction is central to engagement. His study highlights how feedback mechanisms and active participation can create more immersive and collaborative experiences. This was relevant to this proposed study as it emphasized engagement strategies that sustain audience interest. His work examined participatory models in media, leaving a gap in analyzing how interactive engagement shapes audience diversity in theatre.

Theatre's adaptation to changing audience demographics has increasingly relied on innovative engagement strategies such as participatory theatre, digital outreach, and community-driven storytelling. Schneider and Nawa (2019) emphasize these methods as vital for fostering inclusivity and cultural responsiveness in performance. Their analysis offers a useful framework for understanding how audience diversity can be expanded through intentional engagement. While this perspective was instrumental to the present study, their focus remained largely theoretical, without examining practical strategies tailored to specific audience groups. This research addresses that gap by analyzing how KUPAA implements targeted audience engagement to support generic diversity in a localized context.

Community theatres have increasingly addressed social issues like inequality and health crises by integrating audience feedback into script development, thereby enhancing the relevance and impact of their narratives within local contexts. Kruger (2018) highlights this participatory approach as a key factor in strengthening the social function of theatre. While the study provides valuable insights into narrative

development, it does not explore how such participatory practices contribute to genre variety or influence audience segmentation. This gap is addressed in the current study by analyzing how KUPAA's engagement strategies have fostered the development of diverse theatrical genres within the Kenyan performance landscape.

Ogunbiyi (2020) examined how Nigerian theatre incorporates indigenous dance, music, and folklore to reinforce community identities. The study showed that these cultural elements deepen audience connection by reflecting shared heritage and values on stage. Ogunbiyi emphasized that grounding performances in local traditions enhances cultural pride and continuity. However, the analysis focused primarily on cultural preservation and identity formation, without exploring how such traditional elements influence the diversification of theatrical genres or audience reach. This created a gap in understanding the strategic use of cultural forms to expand genre and engage varied audiences. The present study addressed this gap by investigating how KUPAA's audience engagement strategies have supported generic diversity in Kenyan theatre.

Ad-Theatre techniques in Kenya's radio landscape have effectively engaged audiences by incorporating motifs of orality and elements of popular culture. Njogu (2019) demonstrates how the use of familiar cultural forms such as proverbs, songs, and humor, enhanced audience connection and participation, even within mediated formats like radio. While the study offers important insights into genre blending as a strategy for audience engagement, its focus remains confined to audio media and

does not explore applications within live theatre or institutional settings like KUPAA. This study responds to that gap by examining how similar culturally resonant strategies are adapted in live performance contexts to promote generic diversity.

Kimokoti (2025) emphasized the role of community participation in Kenyan theatre, particularly in promoting peace and social cohesion. The study highlighted how local performances often center on themes such as conflict resolution and health awareness, using accessible storytelling to engage audiences. Kimokoti demonstrated that community-driven content fosters dialogue and collective problem-solving within society. However, the research focused mainly on thematic content and social impact, without addressing how participatory approaches influence genre diversity or audience segmentation. This revealed a gap in understanding the connection between community engagement and strategic genre development.

Njogu (2019) explores how radio advertisements in Kenya use techniques rooted in orality and popular culture, such as storytelling, humor, and vernacular expression to effectively engage audiences. These ad-theatre strategies demonstrate how culturally familiar motifs are adapted for mass communication and persuasion within the audio medium. However, Njogu's study was limited to radio and did not examine how such strategies translated into live theatre performance or how they impact genre evolution. This presented a significant gap regarding live audience interaction and theatrical creativity. This study builds on this by analyzing how

KUPAA strategically employs similar motifs of orality and cultural familiarity to engage audiences in live settings, thereby contributing to the diversification and growth of theatre genres in Kenya.

Odhiambo (2005) investigated Theatre for Development (TfD) in Kenya, with a focus on identifying effective procedures and methodologies for community engagement. The study emphasized participatory approaches, where audiences were directly involved in shaping narratives, thus enhancing the relevance and impact of performances. Odhiambo illustrated how

TfD facilitates dialogue and collective problem-solving, particularly in marginalized communities. However, while the research offered deep insights into participatory theatre for social change, it did not explore how such engagement strategies are applied within institutional frameworks like KUPAA to support generic diversity.

Diang'a and Kebaya (2015) examined community theatre and development practices in the Nyanza region of Kenya, highlighting how theatre serves as a participatory tool for addressing local issues. Their study demonstrated that involving community members in performance creation fosters ownership, relevance, and sustained engagement. They emphasized the effectiveness of community theatre in promoting awareness and dialogue on development challenges. However, the research was largely focused on grassroots, community-based theatre and did not investigate how similar participatory strategies are utilized within institutional settings like KUPAA to support generic diversity.

Namayi (2021) explored the dramaturgies of female representation in selected Kenyan drama, focusing on how gendered narratives are constructed and performed on stage. The study highlighted how playwrights and directors use character development, thematic emphasis, and performance styles to challenge stereotypes and elevate women's voices in theatre. Namayi underscored the importance of audience reception in shaping the effectiveness of these representations. However, the research centered primarily on gender discourse and did not examine how strategies of audience engagement contribute to genre variation or institutional practices like those seen in KUPAA. This created a gap in understanding how engagement strategies intersect with efforts to diversify theatrical genres.

Kebaya (2016) investigated the invention and (re)configuration of space in selected Kenyan television dramas, analyzing how spatial dynamics contribute to narrative structure and audience perception. The study demonstrated that the manipulation of physical and symbolic space plays a critical role in shaping meaning and enhancing audience engagement. Kebaya showed how space is used creatively to reflect cultural, political, and social realities within televised performances. However, the research focused on television as a medium and did not address how spatial and engagement strategies translate into live performance contexts, particularly within institutional frameworks like KUPAA. This revealed a gap in understanding how spatial innovation and audience interaction support genre diversity in live theatre.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This section contains research design, site of the study, target population, sampling technique and sample size. It also encompasses data collection instruments, data collection procedure, reliability and validity. Lastly, it also comprises of analysis of data, data management and ethical consideration.

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a case study research design and adopted a qualitative approach. The case study design was appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth examination of KUPAA within its real- life context, focusing on how audience engagement influenced genre development. The qualitative approach facilitated a rich, descriptive analysis through the collection of detailed data from relevant sources, enabling the researcher to explore the complex interactions between audience preferences and theatrical expression in university-based theatre.

3.2 Target population

Sekaran and Bougie (2009) observes that a target population must be clearly outlined based on its elements, location, and time frame. This clarity ensures alignment between the study's objectives and the population being studied. This study targeted key stakeholders in audience engagement within the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA), who included KUPAA

officials, university drama patrons, KUPAA audience and theatre directors. Audience that had attended previous KUPAA Festivals provided insights into feedback and participation trends, while officials, patrons and directors offered perspectives on KUPAA's formation and engagement strategies. Greater representation was given to audience that had attended previous KNDF, KMF, and KUPAA festivals, as their experiences would help trace audience engagement trends over time.

3.3 Sampling Technique

The researcher used purposive sampling was to attain key informants with specific information who included KUPAA officials. The key informants referred the researcher to more general informants through snowballing, the process continued until a saturation point was reached, and at this point the researcher had engaged 27 general informants. Parker, Scott, and Geddes (2019) explain that snowball sampling is effective in the accessing of hard-to-reach participants. In this study it enabled the identification of informants through chain referral who were knowledgeable on the role of audience in the emergence of KUPAA, trends and strategies used in KUPAA. The criteria for selecting informants required them to have participated in at least two KUPAA festivals and to be a university student or attended university since 2018.

3.4 Sample size

The sample size for this study was guided by the principle of saturation. Oral interviews continued until repeated themes emerged and no new or distinct information was being provided concerning audience focus in theatrical genres. Saturation marks a key point in qualitative research, signifying that further data collection is unlikely to yield additional insights and thus supports ending the process. As Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) assert, saturation is a commonly accepted criterion for determining adequate sample size in qualitative studies, especially when the goal is to capture the full range of perspectives. In this study, it was confirmed that the sample was adequate and effectively addressed the research objectives by encompassing diverse viewpoints. The final sample included thirty-seven informants, reached at the point of saturation.

3.5 Data collection procedures and instruments

Before the study, the researcher sought and obtained an introductory letter from Kisii University to support the application for a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). The study drew upon both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data included oral interviews and archival materials. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher consulted records from KUPAA's inaugural minutes, workshop notes, and syllabus, focusing on data related to the development of university-based theatre, government involvement in arts policy, and records of past KUPAA festivals.

These archival sources provided valuable historical context for understanding the institutional evolution and audience orientation of KUPAA.

Oral interviews were then conducted to supplement the archival data, offering insights from practitioners, organizers, and audience members directly involved in KUPAA. Interviews were scheduled in advance, and the researcher established rapport with respondents while adhering to a set timeline. Depending on the participant's language preference, interviews were conducted in Kiswahili, Sheng, or English. Responses were recorded using a mobile voice recorder and promptly transcribed to maintain accuracy and prevent misinterpretation or loss of data. Thematic analysis was used to organize data based on trends in audience engagement and genre development. In cases of conflicting responses, the researcher employed corroboration techniques to resolve inconsistencies.

Secondary data was obtained from a variety of sources, including scholarly articles, theses, dissertations, newspapers, seminar and conference papers, and both published and unpublished works. These sources enriched the study by providing broader regional, national, and global perspectives on theatre audience studies and genre development, particularly about institutionalized festivals such as KUPAA.

3.6 Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

The validity of the research was assessed based on the accuracy and actual occurrence of the studied phenomena. Open-ended questions were employed during oral interviews to elicit comprehensive responses and facilitate deeper

exploration of the informants' experiences. To safeguard against data loss and enhance reliability, interviews were recorded using both mobile phones and laptops, enabling precise transcription and thorough analysis. A pilot study involving multiple interview formats was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the data collection tools in capturing reliable information. Consistent testing was carried out to reduce errors and implement necessary adjustments. Follow-up questions at the end of the interviews encouraged participants to reflect further, enhancing the depth of responses. The study's reliability was reinforced when repeated results produced consistent findings, and any inaccuracies identified in participant responses were addressed to uphold data accuracy and integrity.

3.7 Data Analysis

Once all the data had been collected, the interview transcripts, archival notes, and secondary sources were organized, analyzed, interpreted, and discussed about existing literature on audience studies and theatre genres. The research employed in-depth qualitative analysis to examine how audience focus influenced the development of theatrical genres within KUPAA. Guided by Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) assertion that qualitative researchers aim to preserve and analyze the contextual form, content, and experience of social action rather than reduce it to statistical data, this study focused on the narratives and patterns that emerged from interviews and archival materials.

Upon collecting both primary and secondary data, the researcher conducted a thorough analysis to assess its accuracy. Primary data collected from oral

interviews, recorded using a mobile voice recorder, were promptly transcribed to prevent misinterpretation. Editing procedures were applied to ensure the data's accuracy, completeness, and consistency, removing irrelevant information and redundant content. The data was then carefully reviewed and analyzed to identify key issues, which were organized into clear, coherent themes. Secondary sources underwent content analysis and were integrated with the primary data to achieve the study's objectives. Thematic analysis enabled the structuring of the study into chapters, each addressing a specific objective aligned with the historical periods of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial contexts.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with approval from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), following an introductory letter from Kisii University. Participants were informed of the academic purpose of the research and their voluntary involvement. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality of participants' identities and information was ensured. All sources were properly cited in APA (6th edition) format, and the final thesis was screened for plagiarism using Plagiarism Checker X (2020). Any flagged content was revised to ensure originality. The data collected from KUPAA and MCK documents was solely for academic purposes, with no commercial intent. Their inclusion serves to analyze cultural expressions and audience dynamics.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATIONS

4.1 Overview

Before examining the role of the audience in the emergence of the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA), it was necessary to first trace the historical and structural developments within Kenyan university theatre. This involved addressing long-standing issues within the university theatre landscape, situating it within the broader Kenyan theatre context, and exploring its evolution over time. Building on this foundation, the chapter presents the findings of the study, which investigates the centrality of audience focus in contemporary Kenyan university theatre, particularly about genre selection and the significant role of audience engagement in the establishment of KUPAA. The study further explores how audience feedback and involvement influenced KUPAA's formation, examines contemporary trends in audience engagement, and evaluates KUPAA's strategies for fostering both active audience participation and genre diversity.

4.1.1 Evolution of Kenyan Theatre and Drama Festivals

Theatre in Kenya has evolved as a dynamic and contested space shaped by indigenous traditions, colonial impositions, and postcolonial sociopolitical transformations. Before colonial contact, Kenyan communities practiced integrated performance traditions blending storytelling, song, dance, and ritual, serving functions of moral instruction, social cohesion, and cultural memory (Komu, 2016).

According to Komu, the advent of British colonial rule in the early 20th century disrupted these traditions, introducing European theatrical models that marginalized African expression. Institutions such as the Donovan Maule Theatre and the Kenya National Theatre catered primarily to settler and expatriate communities, reinforcing colonial cultural hierarchies while relegating indigenous art to folkloric displays (Komu, 2016).

Kenya's independence in 1963 marked a critical moment for the reclamation of theatre as a site of resistance and cultural affirmation. Kenyan intellectuals and artists, notably Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩĩ, spearheaded efforts to decolonize theatre by centering indigenous languages, local narratives, and participatory performance styles. This was exemplified by the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in the mid-1970s, which staged open-air performances encouraging audience interaction and collective creation (Vandersmit, 2007; Komu, 2016). It is worth noting that these interventions challenged the Eurocentric legacy and redefined theatre as a medium for political engagement and community empowerment.

Despite its growing significance, politically engaged theatre faced increasing repression under the regimes of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi. Productions that critiqued state authority or addressed social injustice were frequently censored, and artists were subjected to surveillance and harassment (Komu, 2016). This repression intensified in the 1980s, constraining the growth of critical theatre in the country.

Within this broader theatrical context, formal drama festivals emerged as important cultural platforms. The Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival (KSCDF) was founded in 1959, initially catering to European and Asian students, with minimal African participation. Mumma (1997) notes that its structure and storytelling formats mirrored the British Drama Festival. African schools only began participating significantly after independence, with a milestone in 1971 when Olkejuado Secondary School became the first indigenous institution to win the play category, symbolizing African entry into this previously exclusive space.

Colleges and tertiary institutions remained excluded until 1979, and universities continued to operate separately from the festival structure (Otieno, 2013; Mumma, 1997). During this time, universities developed independent theatrical practices, influenced by the Makerere traveling theatre model. The University of Nairobi pioneered university-based touring theatre groups, then later, Kenyatta University formed its own, aimed at educating rural adult audiences (Vandersmit, 2007). An oral source indicated that the university travelling troupes mostly conveyed to the audience contemporary themes such as multipartyism which provoked the then leadership of Daniel Moi's one-party state.

The 1980s witnessed a downturn in theatre due to state censorship, but a structural consolidation occurred when Wasambo Were, then Head of Languages in African schools, merged drama festivals for primary, secondary, and college levels. Universities, however, remained outside the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) framework (Mumma, 1997). It should be noted that university theatres

were not widely considered for par, participation in KNDF because of the complexity of the themes they explored. Themes that KNDF and KMF seem not to advocate for, as validated by Shikuku (2008).

With the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in 1992, the university theatre experienced a revival. Troupes like the Kenyatta University Travelling Theatre, led by Walter Mong'are, gained prominence, though their momentum was later stifled by financial constraints (Smith, 2007). Institutional support for university theatre began to emerge in 2003, when universities like Moi began offering academic programs in creative and performing arts. This shift laid the foundation for a broader resurgence of university theatre in the early 2000s, with several institutions establishing dedicated departments for theatre, film, and performing arts (Komu, 2016).

Despite this progress, the KNDF maintained a predominantly learner-centered approach, focusing on younger audiences and marginalizing the distinct needs of mature university theatre (Nzomo, 2016; Shikuku, 2008). In 2012, universities were formally included in KNDF. However, as noted by Komu (2016), the inclusion did not translate into equitable recognition, with university theatre sidelined within the student-focused framework.

That year, in response to ongoing challenges, the Kenya Universities Deans of Students Association (KUDSA) convened at Bontana Hotel in Nakuru to discuss a more suitable platform for university theatre. This meeting led to the conceptualization of the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association

(KUPAA), which was officially registered in 2018 under the Ministry of Sports, Culture, and Heritage. KUPAA hosted its inaugural national drama and film festival at the Presbyterian University of Eastern Africa (PUEA) in 2018, establishing an independent avenue for addressing the artistic, educational, and audience needs of university-based performance.

4.2 The Role of the Audience in the Formation of KUPAA

Since their incorporation into the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) in 2012, university audiences remained largely marginalized, with limited influence on the festival's theatrical offerings. The festival continued to prioritize primary and secondary school audiences, while audience feedback, particularly that from mature university participants, was not regarded as a critical component in shaping the festival's content or direction. Tony, KUPAA student council, secretary general, noted:

“We were just participants and audience members at KNDF, nothing more. Nobody could listen to what we wanted as a mature audience. Nobody asked what our genre tastes were. We were just static to what the KNDF officials considered appropriate. It felt like we were there to fill seats, not to be heard or valued. Our preferences, ideas, or creative input didn't matter. It was a one-way engagement, and over time, that became frustrating because we knew we had more to offer to the theatrical conversation” (Tony, personal communication, June 05, 2025).

This implies that the university audience was not involved in generic choices at KNDF, and their feedback was not considered. This indicated the little importance the University audience was accorded in KNDF. An oral source affirmed that there was no feedback channel in KNDF and KMF, through audience needs could be captured. This approach by KNDF contradicts Susan Kattwinkel (2003), who underscores the importance of audience feedback in shaping the dramaturgical process.

In KUPAA, audience engagement functioned as a catalyst for institutional transformation. During the association's formative stages, deliberate efforts were made to establish feedback mechanisms that could capture the preferences and concerns of university audiences. This aligns with Autumn's (1991) analysis of the success of Kamiriithu and other Theatre for Development initiatives, which he attributed to community-centered decision-making and local funding structures, rather than externally imposed directives. Similarly, Asiago, a KUPAA audience member from TUK, noted that it was through sustained audience engagement and feedback that KUPAA was able to identify the challenges university audiences faced within the frameworks of the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) and the Kenya Music Festival (personal communication, June 6, 2025).

4.2.1 Demographic Divides and the Reorientation of University Theatre in Kenya

For much of its existence, university theatre in Kenya received limited institutional recognition, with its demographic distinctiveness largely overlooked. It was not until 2012 that universities were formally incorporated into the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), which, since its inception in 1959, had predominantly catered for primary and secondary school audiences (Mumma, 1999). Although this inclusion marked a step toward broader participation, it failed to address the fundamental demographic disparities between mature university students and the younger learners KNDF traditionally served, as Dr. Austin, a regular theatre festival audience member, observed (Dr. Austin, personal communication, June 7, 2025).

The demographic focus of KNDF remained child-centered, reflecting its dominant participant base. Nzomo (2016) confirms that primary and secondary schools constitute the majority of KNDF and KMF participants, while Shikuku (2008) underscores the festival's commitment to producing age-appropriate content for young audiences. Consequently, university participants were expected to engage with material that did not reflect their intellectual or artistic maturity, resulting in a growing disconnect. As noted by Ogotu, KUPAA's secretary general, this mismatch led to

dissatisfaction among university audiences, who sought theatre that aligned with their cognitive, ideological, and creative expectations (P. Ogotu, personal communication, June 7, 2025).

Thiong'o (1986) asserts that universities are critical spaces of radical imagination and ideological contestation, dimensions rarely addressed within the KNDF framework. University audiences thus required more nuanced, socially relevant narratives that resonated with their lived realities, rather than the simplified themes designed for younger students. Okemwa, former KUPAA regional coordinator, validated this by stating, "University students are not just here to laugh or be entertained; they want to see themselves, their struggles, and their politics on stage. That's why we couldn't remain under KNDF. We needed our own space" (Okemwa, personal communication, June 7, 2025)

This indicates that the growing demand for thematically sophisticated and ideologically resonant content was a driving force behind the establishment of the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA). Faith, a KUPAA festival attendee from Kenyatta university, noted that the association liberated university theatre from the constraints of KNDF's child-focused content, creating a space for thematic boldness and creative experimentation (O. Faith, personal communication, June 7, 2025). Performance studies theory, which particularly Reason (2010) emphasizes on aligning performance with audience sensibilities, supports this shift. KUPAA's model, therefore, represents a strategic realignment of theatrical practice with the developmental and ideological needs of its audience, an essential evolution in the landscape of university theatre in Kenya.

4.2.2 Calendar Clashes and Temporal Realignment in University Theatre

Prior to their incorporation into the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) in 2012, university theatre troupes operated independently, free from rigid scheduling constraints. This flexibility allowed them to engage audiences across diverse locations at their convenience. Smith (2007) highlights how groups such as the Kenyatta University Travelling Theatre (KUTT) performed in local markets and community centers, using theatre as a tool for education and social engagement. However, post-2012, university theatre was required to conform to the KNDF calendar one originally structured around the academic schedules of primary, secondary schools, and teacher training colleges. Pauline, African Nazarene university drama patron noted:

“We were always trying to fit KNDF into our university calendar, but it never really worked. We’d either be in exams or on break when the festivals were happening. KNDF happens mostly in April, this is when most universities have end-of-semester exams. So, a student had to choose between exams and the festival. It was exhausting and unsustainable” (Pauline, personal communication,

June 7, 2025)

This indicates that, temporal misalignment disrupted university participation, forcing students to prioritize either academic obligations or artistic pursuits, often compromising both. According to a KUPAA director, this conflict placed undue

stress on university artists, whose work required rigorous research, rehearsal, and critical reflection, processes incompatible with compressed, externally imposed schedules.

KUPAA emerged in response to this structural incompatibility. Unlike KNDF, its organizational framework was deliberately aligned with the university academic calendar. This synchronization enabled strategic planning, consistent rehearsals, and optimal audience attendance. Ongaga, KUPAA regional coordinator, explained that because KUPAA works with the university calendar, they can plan everything without sacrificing academic performance or artistic quality. It's theatre on the audience's terms" (Ongaga, personal communication, June 6, 2025)

This alignment not only facilitated greater artistic freedom but also reinforced KUPAA's broader goal of creating an academically integrated and contextually appropriate platform for university theatre. The structural compatibility improved logistical feasibility, enriched artistic output, and encouraged institutional support. As McCarthy et al. (2001) observe, successful arts ecosystems are those attuned to the operational rhythms of their participants.

Thus, KUPAA's emergence addressed more than thematic and demographic mismatches; it resolved a longstanding temporal disjuncture that had undermined university engagement in national drama platforms. By reclaiming control over their theatrical timelines, universities were able to cultivate a more sustainable and professionally grounded performance culture; one that fully embraced the intellectual and institutional identity of higher education theatre. Figure 1 below

illustrates how KUPAA strategically aligns its timelines with the Semester One academic calendars of all universities, a move that sets it apart from the Kenya National Drama and Film Festival (KNDF). This synchronization enables uniform audience attendance across institutions, ensuring that all participating universities engage with performances within the same academic period.

Figure 1

KUPAA National Festival poster.



Source: KUPAA.

4.2.3 Reclaiming Narrative Agency through Participatory Scripting

Precolonial African storytelling traditions were inherently participatory, characterized by collective authorship and dynamic audience engagement.

However, the establishment of colonial and later postcolonial theatrical institutions, including the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), introduced rigid scripting conventions that marginalized this communal approach. According to Nyangwono, a KUPAA official, these rigid formats have persisted, often privileging structure over substance (Nyangw'ono, personal communication, June 8, 2025). Shikuku (2008) validates this argument with his observation that KNDF scripting frameworks were largely designed to suit younger audiences, necessitating sanitized, non-confrontational narratives. It should be noted that such protocols imposed strict limitations, discouraging experimentation and thematic depth, particularly for university-level productions.

In contrast, KUPAA represents a deliberate departure from these constraints by embracing collaborative scripting grounded in lived experience and audience relevance. As Deborah, the vice chairperson for KUPAA student council, observed, "Audience members wanted stories that resonated with them, rather than generic narratives written to fit adjudication criteria" (Deborah, personal communication, June 7, 2025). This sentiment reflects a broader dissatisfaction with prescriptive scripting models that inhibited creative autonomy and silenced pressing social concerns.

KUPAA's participatory scripting model advances a more inclusive and dialogic process that foregrounds the audience as co-creators of meaning. This approach resonates with Miller's (2006) observation that while humor has wide appeal, it is not universally effective; scripters must remain attuned to the varied expectations

and sensibilities of their audiences to truly amuse (p. 570). By centering the voices of performers and audiences, university theatre under KUPAA has reclaimed its capacity for critical engagement, enabling scripts to confront complex identities, sociopolitical tensions, and marginal narratives without institutional censorship. In this context, scripting becomes not only a creative exercise but also an act of cultural and intellectual resistance, restoring theatre's transformative function within academic spaces.

4.2.4 Production Design and Technical Sophistication

Theatrical production for mature audiences necessitates intellectual complexity, symbolic nuance, and aesthetic rigor, mirroring the tradition of classical forms such as Greek tragedy (Davidson, 2005). In the 20th century, prior to their inclusion in the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), university theatres, such as those from Kenyatta University Travelling Troupes and the University of Nairobi Travelling Theatre, embraced this standard. Their productions engaged deeply with sociopolitical realities, fostering critical reflection among audiences, as noted by one Nyamwaka, a regular theatre festival attendee (E. Nyamwaka, personal communication, June 7, 2025). However, the integration of university theatre into KNDF in 2012 marked a significant shift, requiring alignment with a framework designed primarily for younger participants.

KNDF's emphasis on clarity, moral didacticism, and simplified themes, as observed by Shikuku (2008), prioritized accessibility over complexity, guided by aesthetic models that catered to the limited cognitive and interpretive capacities of

child audiences (Klein, 2005; Reason, 2010). Kiptoo, a KUPAA audience member from Bomet University, confirmed that under KNDF, technical production elements were often subordinated to regulatory or thematic conformity (Kiptoo, personal communication, June 7, 2025). Nzomo (2016) similarly notes that many schools within KNDF lacked the financial resources to meet even basic production needs, often resorting to improvisation for costumes, props, and set design. Consequently, production quality remained modest, constrained by institutional capitation and minimal investment in theatrical infrastructure. In contrast, universities possessed more substantial financial and technical capacities, supported by established theatre departments and professional training programs. As Williat, KUPAA

official stated,

“Universities have theatre departments and courses where artists from there come in as professionals, equipped with both theoretical grounding and practical skills. You can’t compete with your student, because they are learning from experts, engaging in research, and constantly exposed to new artistic methods that push the boundaries of performance.” (Willy, personal communication, June 4, 2025)

This comment highlights the structural disparity within KNDF, where university-level productions, often led by experienced directors and technically skilled crews, stood in stark contrast to those from resource-limited primary and secondary

schools. Such disparities undermined the spirit of fair artistic competition. KUPAA emerged as a corrective platform, one that offered a level playing field for institutions with comparable artistic and logistical resources. It enabled university theatre practitioners to explore stagecraft without bureaucratic limitations, fostering a space for technical experimentation and refinement. Nyangwono, KUPAA official, affirmed that this freedom led to significant enhancements: “We learned that audiences appreciate well-thought-out productions. Their feedback encouraged us to improve the technical aspects of performances, from better sound design to more immersive set pieces” (Nyangwono, personal communication, June 8, 2025)

This audience-practitioner feedback loop became central to the evolution of university theatre under KUPAA. Rather than passive reception, audience critique actively informed production decisions, reinforcing a culture of continuous improvement. As Carlson (1993) and Shikuku (2020) assert, audience response can serve as a vital evaluative mechanism, prompting artists to refine their aesthetic strategies for greater communicative and sensory impact. Within the KUPAA framework, this dynamic catalyzed the rise of technically sophisticated productions, making stage design, lighting, sound, and visual storytelling integral to the overall artistic experience rather than peripheral concerns.

4.2.5 Costume Design as Aesthetic and Participatory Practice

Within the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA), costume design emerged as a crucial site for artistic expression and audience engagement. Crabtree and Beudert (2005) underscore the costume’s role in embodying character

and narrative, while Pavis (1998) emphasizes its impact on audience perception. In contrast, Nzomo (2016) notes that participants in the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), particularly at the primary and secondary school levels, frequently relied on improvised costumes due to financial limitations. Baraka, Kisii University student director, confirmed that KNDF's standardized and resource-constrained environment often compromised the artistic integrity of costume design (Baraka, personal communication, June 9, 2025).

KUPAA, however, offered a more enabling framework. With greater institutional and financial autonomy, universities could align costume aesthetics with thematic and historical contexts, enhancing the depth and coherence of performances. This shift allowed for more deliberate and expressive costume choices, contributing to narrative authenticity as noted by Centrine, former vice chairperson of KUPAA student leadership (Centrine, personal communication, June 9, 2025). KUPAA encouraged audience input in the design process, fostering a participatory aesthetic culture. This engagement not only heightened audience investment but also cultivated a more equitable competitive space, described by respondents as “a league of equals” where artistic merit took precedence over resource disparities.

4.2.6 Genre Evolution and Audience-Centered Theatre Practice

Since its inception, the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) primarily catered for European and Asian audiences, prompting the adoption of Eurocentric genres, particularly the English play, marked by foreign content, form, and language (Mummah, 1997). According to Baraka, KUPAA student director, the festival's

structure remained resistant to change over the years, even as audience preferences evolved (A. Baraka, personal communication, June 9, 2025). Osiako and Alembi et al. (2004) further reinforce this rigidity by advocating for policies that center the child within KNDF's theatre model, thus institutionalizing learner-focused content. Consequently, contemporary social and political themes were largely omitted, as the Kenya National Drama and Film Festival (KNDF) adhered to a curriculum-driven and moralistic framework tailored to primary and secondary school learners. An analysis of the KNDF 2025 syllabus reveals a pronounced emphasis on child-centered pedagogy (see Appendix, Plate 3).

For university audiences, however, this narrow genre selection proved limiting. As Debbie, a KUPAA festivals actor from Cooperative University, observed, "Surely English plays and Swahili plays yearly are boring for us as mature artists. We need more complex genres, something that needs more creativity. Something that demonstrates artistic maturity" (personal communication, June 4, 2025). This sentiment reflects a broader frustration with KNDF's repetitive and didactic framework, which offered little space for genre innovation or nuanced storytelling. The prescriptive nature of the festival thus constrained artistic development and suppressed alternative narrative forms.

In contrast, the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) emerged as a platform that privileged genre diversity and thematic complexity. Freed from the rigid structural expectations of KNDF, KUPAA enabled genres to evolve in direct response to audience demands and cultural shifts. As Ogutu,

KUPAA's secretary general, remarked, "Audiences wanted a variety of performances beyond the conventional set pieces. Analysis of the KUPAA inaugural syllabus (2018) reveals a deliberate embrace of genre diversity and innovation in theatrical expression. One prominent theme is the expansion of dramatic forms, evident in the inclusion of genres such as absurd theatre, historical drama, and experimental formats like mashup plays (see Appendices, plate 7).

Structuring of dramatic categories to accommodate linguistic and performative diversity emerges as a central theme in the KUPAA inaugural syllabus. KUPAA 2018 syllabus outlines ten drama categories, with the play category further divided into eight subcategories: English and Swahili main plays, along with special formats such as legislative plays, mashup, shadow, historical, one- performer, and musical plays (see Appendix Plate 6). This structuring reflects KUPAA's intentional effort to foster creative plurality and broaden audience engagement through a diverse and inclusive range of dramatic genres. It is worth noting that since its inception, KUPAA has expanded its drama genre line-up from 10 to 22 categories, reflecting not only its continual growth but also its responsiveness to audience feedback, participation, and evolving preferences (see Appendices, Plates 7 and 8).

These shifts underscore a broader move toward dialogic theatre where genre is co-constructed between performer and audience in a dynamic feedback loop. This aligns with Fischer-Lichte's (2008) argument that the evolution of theatrical genres often necessitates a departure from canonical forms, allowing for creative

experimentation rooted in contemporary relevance. In this regard, KUPAA represented not just a structural alternative, but a philosophical reorientation toward theatre that reflects the intellectual and socio-cultural sensibilities of its university audience.

Analysis of KUPAA's development reveals that audience feedback and engagement have been pivotal, not only in its formation but also in its sustained growth. This participatory approach has significantly contributed to the association's appeal, as reflected in membership expansion from 11 universities in 2018 to 37 public and private institutions by 2024 (KUPAA Festival Records & Survey, 2024). The consistent use of feedback mechanisms is evident in successive evaluations, including the 2024 Festival Survey and the 2025 Audience Survey (see Appendix IV and V). These data sources highlight how audience-centered strategies have played a crucial role in enhancing organizational relevance and fostering institutional growth.

4.2.7 Research-based dialogue

The rise of the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) is closely tied to a demographic and institutional shift from a festival culture grounded in school-based performance in KNDF to one rooted in the research-oriented environment of universities. Ombija, KUPAA student council's chairman, affirmed that, while KNDF primarily draws from primary and secondary schools, where learners follow structured curricula and syllabus-bound drama activities, KUPAA is driven by students in institutions of higher learning, where inquiry, critical

thinking, and independent research are core pedagogical values (Ombija, T, personal communication, June 10, 2025). It should be noted that this academic grounding has enabled the emergence of theatre that is not only more ideologically complex, but also socially reflective and intellectually engaging.

University students bring with them the ethos of research: the questioning of norms, the exploration of multiple perspectives, and the drive to innovate. Informants confirmed this contrast, emphasizing that KUPAA audiences and creators are trained in environments that encourage thematic experimentation. As Sylvia, a participant from JOUST, explained that genres such as puppetry, mashup theatre, and musical plays have been introduced in response to audience input and critical engagement, something rarely seen in KNDF, where productions are simplified to suit younger, cognitively developing learners (personal communication, June 10, 2025). This is validated by Nzomo (2016)'s observation that majority of KNDF's participants were made of young primary and secondary school demographics.

Analysis of KUPAA productions indicates a deliberate fusion of academic orientation and artistic expression, resulting in plays that extend beyond performance to critical inquiry. Student-created works frequently incorporate research-driven themes, demonstrating a reflective engagement with societal issues. The 2024 Festival Survey further affirms this trend, showing that audience-based research significantly informs the development of performances, with creators responding directly to audience interests and concerns considering audience feedback (see Appendix IV). This evidences a structured approach within

KUPAA where content creation is shaped by both academic insight and audience feedback, reinforcing the association's commitment to relevance and responsiveness in its artistic programming.

This connection between academia and theatre is evident in the content analysis of KUPAA performances, which frequently tackle socio-political themes such as state accountability, gender and class dynamics, and youth agency. Such issues require a level of cognitive and emotional engagement more aligned with a university audience. As Ndagala (2014) asserts, university theatre in East Africa often functions as a hybrid of scholarship and artistry that is, a “talk matters” space where research feeds performance, and performance in turn generates new questions and knowledge. KUPAA thus represents not just a shift in performance style but a transformation in the purpose and power of student theatre.

Moreover, the institutional freedom within universities allows for a departure from KNDF's competition-oriented framework. KNDF's emphasis on trophies and syllabus alignment often constrains innovation. In contrast, KUPAA offers a platform where emerging artists are encouraged to experiment without the fear of disqualification. Mbugua, a theatre director at

Karatina University, emphasized that the open-ended nature of KUPAA allows students to “test new ideas, confront real issues, and reflect the consciousness of an adult academic audience” (Mbugua, personal communication, June 9, 2025). Supporting this, reviews from the 2024 KUPAA Festival note that performances are often followed by post-show forums and critical discussions, which is an

extension of classroom discourse into the creative realm (KUPAA Festival Survey, 2024).

The demographic and institutional nature of KUPAA's participants, adult learners in research-driven universities, has allowed the festival to evolve into a forum for both artistic expression and academic inquiry. Unlike KNDF, where plays often serve instructional or competitive purposes, KUPAA productions are grounded in intellectual engagement and a desire to examine society through performance. This aligns with Kershaw's (1999) assertion that performance is not only an artistic practice but also a means through which societies think, reflect, and debate. Within the research-intensive university context of KUPAA, performance becomes a site of inquiry, what

Kershaw would call "theatre as thinking," enabled by the demographic shift toward critically aware, research-trained student participants.

4.3 Contemporary trends in audience engagement and their implications for genre development.

Contemporary audience engagement patterns are increasingly shaped by evolving social, cultural, and technological contexts, necessitating ongoing innovation in theatrical genres (Smith, 2020). As with other cultural institutions, theatre must continuously adapt to meet the changing tastes and preferences of its audiences. Scholars such as Jones (2018) emphasize that audience-centered programming is central to maintaining relevance and fostering sustained engagement.

The Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), however, demonstrates limited responsiveness to these shifts. A review of the KNDF syllabus over multiple years

reveals a consistent stagnation in genre offerings, with little variation or expansion to reflect emerging trends. Njeru, Vice Chairperson of the KUPAA leadership, noted, “For all those years I participated in KNDF, I only saw eight genres for the university category drama that were repeated annually, nothing new” (P. Njeru, personal communication, June 10, 2025). This observation highlights a critical disconnect between audience expectations and institutional programming, suggesting that KNDF’s rigid genre framework limits its capacity to appeal to contemporary tastes. Notably, the latest KNDF syllabus (2025) designates eleven drama genres exclusively for university participants, reflecting a slight increase from the nine genres listed in 2018 (see Appendices, Plates 5 and 8). While this numerical growth may suggest progress, it appears largely incremental. More importantly, it lacks clear indicators of qualitative innovation or deliberate alignment with the shifting artistic expressions and societal narratives that contemporary audiences increasingly value.

In contrast, the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) has adopted a more flexible and innovative approach. KUPAA regularly integrates both traditional and contemporary genres, creating a hybrid repertoire that resonates with diverse audiences across generational lines. This is evident in the KUPAA syllabus, which has expanded its genre categories annually since its inception in 2018, growing from 10 drama genres (KUPAA Inaugural Notes, 2018) to its current 22 drama genres (see appendices plate 8). This strategy reflects the recommendations

of cultural theorists such as Hall (2019), who advocate for genre evolution as a means of reflecting the dynamic nature of society and its artistic expressions.

KUPAA's adaptive model illustrates a more effective alignment with audience preferences and supports the broader understanding that genre development must be a reflective and iterative process. This responsiveness has positioned KUPAA as a progressive platform that nurtures both artistic expression and audience satisfaction in ways that KNDF has yet to fully realize. Some of the trends that have been incorporated to KUPAA are such as Mashup play, street dances, pageantry, historical plays, shadow plays, and musical plays.

4.3.1 Historical plays

In recent years, experimental theatrical genres such as historical theatre and site-specific performance have emerged, marked by an emphasis on audience feedback, a blending of traditional and contemporary forms, and the integration of digital platforms for engagement.

Historical plays, in particular, draw on Kenya's colonial, pre-colonial, and post-independence histories, using real or imagined events to address contemporary socio-political issues. Despite the potential of this genre, its adoption across mainstream theatrical institutions remains limited.

Figure 2

Historical play being staged during KUPAA festival at Egerton university 2024.



31

Source: KUPAA.

While the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) has traditionally favored conventional English and Swahili plays, often characterized by softer themes suitable for younger audiences, university- level platforms such as the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) have taken a divergent path. According to Masakha, KUPAA's Student Council's Secretary General, the association has increasingly embraced historical drama, a genre that demands higher levels of artistic depth and audience engagement (B. Masakha, personal communication, June 8, 2025). These plays not only require greater intellectual and emotional investment but also assume a more mature, contextually informed

viewership. As Isalambo, KUPAA Chairperson, notes, "Historical plays need more research and understanding because they dig deeper into Kenyan history, hence need more time, resources, and expertise to develop" (P. Isalambo, personal communication, June 9, 2025). This reflects a conscious shift in pedagogical and performative priorities away from didactic simplicity toward intellectually layered narratives that challenge both performer and audience.

This strategic turn towards historical dramatization reveals KUPAA's nuanced understanding of its audience, which often comprises individuals with direct or inherited connections to the historical episodes being portrayed. Such engagement aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1981) conception of historical theatre as a form of cultural resistance, one that mobilizes collective memory to articulate marginalized voices. Wafula (2005) similarly argues that historical reconstruction in drama plays a vital role in shaping public consciousness and identity. KUPAA's approach exemplifies this by reframing national history not as static content, but as a dynamic narrative space for political critique and cultural reclamation. Through rigorous research, artistic complexity, and historical authenticity, KUPAA's productions contribute substantively to the evolving discourse on postcolonial theatre, highlighting the transformative potential of drama as both an academic and activist tool.

4.3.2 Mashup Play

The repetitive presentation of similar genres in annual theatre festivals has contributed to audience fatigue and a stagnation of theatrical innovation. To sustain

audience interest and ensure the continued relevance of such festivals, it is essential to reconceptualize spectators not as passive consumers but as active agents capable of redefining aesthetic preferences and influencing genre evolution. KUPAA exemplifies this shift by fostering collaborative processes that empower audiences to co-create new hybrid forms, most notably the mashup play. These productions merge multiple texts, genres, cultural references, and performance styles into a unified aesthetic, generating layered meanings that challenge the conventional linear narratives traditionally favoured in the KNDF. As Ombija, chairperson KUPAA student council, explained, “The mashup plays responds to the complexity of our audiences, they are not just watching for entertainment, they are decoding, interpreting, and often seeing their fragmented realities reflected on stage” (T. Ombija, personal communication, June 10, 2025). This approach not only revitalizes performative expression but also aligns with contemporary cultural dynamics, where multiplicity and hybridity are central to meaning-making in postmodern performance.

Shikuku (2008) observed that plays presented at the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) are often simplified to suit child audiences, a practice that inherently restricts the adoption of complex, hybrid forms such as mashup plays. This institutional preference for child-centered content is further evidenced in the adjudication criteria, which emphasize developmental appropriateness and pedagogical alignment over artistic experimentation (see Appendix, Plate 4). Such formal constraints reinforce a creative framework that prioritizes accessibility for

younger audiences at the expense of innovation, thereby limiting the festival's capacity to evolve in tandem with broader theatrical and cultural shifts.

Figure 3

MMU crew performing a Mashup play during the 2022 KUPAA festivals at JOUST.



Source: KUPAA.

In contrast, KUPAA's context has enabled the development of genre-defying performances that reflect a more mature and engaged audience base. This shift illustrates a broader transformation in audience engagement, where spectators are no longer passive recipients but active co-creators of meaning. The mashup aesthetic not only provides entertainment but also critiques dominant ideologies, offering new pedagogical and cultural perspectives. This aligns with Hutcheon's (2006) notion of "adaptation as repetition without replication," wherein familiar material is recontextualized to produce new interpretations. Productions such as

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) and *An Octoroon* exemplify this trend, using parody,

metatheatricality, and genre blending to interrogate issues like race, identity, and colonial legacies.

Green (1999) and Marshall (2010) observe that mashup theatre destabilizes traditional narrative boundaries and generates new modes of audience engagement.

Sofia, KUPAA student council's organizing secretary, noted; 'these plays encourage viewers to interpret intertextual references, navigate ambiguity, and rethink the nature of performance itself' (N. Sofia, personal communication, June 9, 2025). This implies that, genre's fluidity in contemporary theatre thrives not on rigid formal conventions, but on innovative fusions that mirror the complexity of modern identities and lived realities.

4.3.3 Shadow Play

Shadow play has emerged as a distinctive artistic trend within KUPAA, functioning not merely as a visual device but as a potent medium for metaphorical and metonymic storytelling. Eschewing physical presence, these performances rely on silhouettes, abstraction, and fragmented imagery to evoke emotional resonance and symbolic interpretation. This aesthetic aligns with Victor Stoichita's (1997) assertion that shadows embody both presence and absence, symbolizing the invisible, the repressed, and the unsaid. By privileging suggestion over direct representation, shadow play disrupts conventional theatrical realism and invites active audience participation in the construction of meaning.

This mode of engagement mirrors Matsuda's (2001) study of Parisian shadow theatre, where non-human forms subverted performer-centric norms and enabled layered visual narratives. Similarly, Cohen (2017) argues that the removal of physical co-presence in shadow theatre compels spectators to generate meaning through the gaps and silences. Washira, 2024 KUPAA festival plays adjudicator reinforced this view, describing shadow work as "transformative," offering moments of ambiguity that challenge audiences to interpret rather than passively consume (W. Washira, personal communication, June 10, 2025).

Figure 4

Officials, audience posing for a further after a shadow play during the 2024 festivals.



Source: KUPAA.

Such practices resonate strongly with reception theory, which positions the audience as co-creators of meaning. They also reflect indigenous African performance traditions grounded in symbolism, indirectness, and communal

interpretation, as articulated by Micere Githae Mugo (1982) and Opiyo Mumma (2003). In a similar context, Banjoko and Ogunyemi (2019) identify the use of shadow and silhouette in Nigerian theatre as a means of exploring memory and postcolonial identity, affirming the form's broader Pan-African relevance.

KUPAA's incorporation of shadow play distinguishes its repertoire from that of KNDF, offering audiences a more intellectually and artistically mature theatrical experience. Far from diminishing clarity, this embrace of abstraction functions as a deliberate strategy to reimagine performance boundaries and foster deeper audience engagement. The shadow aesthetic facilitates genre fluidity, blending elements of poetry, ritual, visual art, and performance in ways that challenge rigid classification. As Khisa, KUPAA student council's treasurer noted:

“We're not trying to replicate theatre but trying to disrupt it.

Shadows help us do that. We must understand that if we don't embrace new trends, drama will stagnate. Next year, there will be many plays that follow the styles of this year's winners” (C. Khisa, personal communication, June 1, 2025)

KUPAA's adoption of shadow play illustrates how abstraction can catalyze genre innovation and enhance theatrical relevance. By moving beyond literal representation, such forms promote deeper audience engagement and interpretive freedom. This aligns with Carlson's (2004) view that abstraction in performance expands semiotic possibilities and challenges normative aesthetics. Thus, KUPAA exemplifies how formal experimentation can drive contemporary theatrical evolution.

4.3.4 Pageantry

Pageantry in KUPAA functions not merely as visual embellishment but as a revitalized dramaturgical strategy that fosters critical engagement and cultural reflection. This trend affirms Green's (1999) reading of Shakespearean revivals, particularly the second tetralogy where spectacle served not only to captivate but to interrogate political authority and historical narrative.

Similarly, Muthii, KUPAA's 2024 beauty pageantry judge, affirmed that, KUPAA employs stylized rituals, elaborate costuming, symbolic choreography, and evocative music to produce immersive, emotionally charged performances that foreground themes such as socio-political critique, identity, and fashion (Eng. Muthii, personal communication, June 10, 2025).

However, these themes were deemed unsuitable for the younger audiences prioritized in KNDF, as argued by Osiako and Alembe et al. (2004), who advocated for child-centered policies within KNDF's theatrical model. Consequently, KNDF's rigidity excludes such visually and thematically rich performances, limiting access to more contemporary and critical genres for university audiences. In contrast, KUPAA's open framework allows for the evolution of pageantry into a powerful vehicle for aesthetic innovation and ideological expression.

The reflective use of spectacle in KUPAA draws from indigenous African performance traditions while integrating contemporary dramaturgical practices. This echoes Essin's (2016) view of theatre as a form of labor embedded in cultural meaning-making. In this context, visual excess operates meta-theatrically,

transforming symbolic details into communicative tools that invite the audience to interpret meaning beyond surface appeal. Such spectacle resists passive spectatorship by demanding cognitive engagement, thereby positioning the audience as co-creators of meaning.

This dynamic interplay reinforces theatre's potential as a site of epistemological negotiation and cultural resistance.

Figure 5

Winners of the KUPAA beauty pageantry competition (2022) pose for a photo at the 2022 festival that was held at JOUST.



Source: KUPAA

Schweitzer's (2009) analysis of Broadway theatre underscores the intersection of fashion and performance as a means of shaping cultural discourse. In a similar vein, KUPAA's use of visual pageantry constructs layered critiques grounded in Kenyan sociopolitical realities as Kidero, KUPAA audience member notes (Kidero, personal communication, June 5, 2025). Costume and spectacle, far from serving

as mere ornamentation, become critical instruments of narrative and ideological transmission.

This approach aligns with Latham (1995) and Schoonover (1955), who observe that pageantry historically served both as entertainment and as social commentary, particularly in how it framed the body and public identity. In KUPAA, the performing body is both symbol and site, clothed in historical memory, mythology, and resistance, offering audiences a space for self-reflection. Vaughn's (2016) exploration of pageantry in war and empire further supports the genre's capacity to stage collective memory, a role echoed in KUPAA's strategic use of ritual and political symbolism.

KUPAA reclaims pageantry not as spectacle for its own sake, but as a deliberate narrative strategy. It reimagines grandeur as a medium of cultural specificity and ideological depth, aligning with global theatrical trends that increasingly use visual storytelling as a reflective and generative force. Through this, KUPAA expands the interpretive possibilities of African theatre while challenging reductive models of spectacle.

4.3.5 Street dance

Modern theatre festivals have increasingly recognized and embraced experimental genres such as street dance within academic and cultural contexts. Defined by dynamic physicality, improvisational roots, and strong connections to urban identity and socio-political resistance, street dance is more than a stylistic expression. As Guarato (2021) explains, it functions as a performative tactic for

preserving and negotiating cultural meaning in constantly evolving societal contexts. Within the Kenyan theatre scene, the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) has embraced street dance as a legitimate and innovative genre, setting itself apart from more traditional institutions like the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) and Kenya Music Festival (KMF), which continue to emphasize conventional forms such as folk dances, cultural creative dances, and modern dances.

Historically associated with informal and underground spaces, street dance has been re- contextualized by KUPAA to explore contemporary themes such as identity, resistance, and social justice. Bell (2019) highlights how street dance serves as a form of embodied activism, allowing performers to communicate personal and collective struggles through movement. Ongaga, KUPAA official noted, “Street dance was initially dismissed as ‘informal’ or ‘non-serious,’ while cultural creative dances and folk dances were considered more educative to learners” (Ongaga, personal communication, June 6, 2026). This reflects the resistance in some mainstream festivals to diversify genres in favor of preserving established formats. However, street dance has recently emerged as one of the most anticipated genres within KUPAA, with students using it to engage with critical issues such as inequality, mental health, and political exclusion.

This shift illustrates the broader recognition of street dance as a form of public discourse, aligning with Guzman-Sanchez’s (2012) argument that street dance pioneers are cultural historians whose embodied practices preserve community

narratives. KUPAA's strategic approach includes incorporating street dance into formal performance categories, hosting national workshops led by experienced practitioners, and encouraging research-informed choreography that ensures thematic and artistic depth. Through these efforts, KUPAA not only legitimizes street dance within academic and theatrical frameworks but also affirms its potential as a tool for democratizing performance and fostering cultural dialogue.

4.3.6 Legislative plays

Legislative plays have emerged as a distinct and influential trend within KUPAA, reflecting a theatre movement increasingly invested in interrogating systems of governance, law, and civic responsibility. Rooted in the interplay between dramaturgy and democratic discourse, this genre demonstrates how contemporary audience engagement is shaped not only by entertainment value but also by intellectual and ideological resonance. Legislative plays mirror the concerns of a critically aware university audience, one that is not merely receptive but reflective, demanding performances that speak directly to lived realities and institutional structures. Dorothy, a KUPAA audience member from Kibabii university noted that, in doing so, they substitute the Swahili and English plays typically presented in the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), which often feature less complex themes intended for a younger primary school audience (Dorothy, Personal communication, June 10, 2025).

This genre thrives within the KUPAA environment, where the theatre is not divorced from societal struggles but rather embedded within them. Thematically,

legislative plays navigate contentious terrains: corruption, constitutionalism, political accountability, and legal reform. Their staging often incorporates courtroom settings, parliamentary debates, and civic dialogue, transforming the theatrical space into a microcosm of public governance. As such, these plays invite audiences to assume not only the role of spectators but also that of citizens engaged in deliberative processes.

Ouma, student actor from Baraton university, emphasized the participatory power of the genre:

" It should be noted that legislative plays address real and pressing societal issues such as corruption, justice, and the process of lawmaking. These performances go beyond mere entertainment, prompting audiences to engage critically with the themes presented. Rather than remaining passive observers, viewers are invited to participate in a broader national dialogue. This form of theatre serves a meaningful purpose, it is not simply a performance, but a catalyst for reflection and conversation'' (Ouma, E, personal communication, June 2, 2025).

This comment reveals how legislative plays disrupt the passive consumption of theatre and reframes performance as a space of political awakening. They offer a dramaturgical language through which both creators and audiences articulate concerns, critique policy, and imagine alternatives. In KUPAA, the audience is not a distant observer but a vital agent in the meaning- making process but an idea

central to reception theory, which posits the viewer as an active participant in the construction of meaning (Jauss, 1982; Bennett, 1997).

The relevance of legislative plays to KUPAA lies in their capacity to reflect the sociopolitical awareness of a university-based audience. Unlike KNDF, whose demographic largely comprises primary and secondary school students and therefore tends toward didactic and accessible themes (Shikuku 2008), KUPAA accommodates thematic complexity and formal experimentation. Legislative plays challenge rigid genre boundaries, blending satire, realism, policy critique, and oratorical drama into hybrid forms that reflect the fluidity of contemporary civic discourse.

Moreover, the genre's development is reflective of a broader trend in African performance cultures, where theatre functions as a medium of resistance, advocacy, and public education. Mugo (1982) asserts that African theatre has historically served as a mirror of society and a site of political agency, a view echoed by Banjoko and Ogunyemi (2019), who document the use of performance in Nigerian contexts to challenge authority and mobilize public thought. Legislative plays within KUPAA thus position themselves within a Pan-African tradition of socially engaged theatre, reinforcing genre evolution through culturally embedded modes of address.

Figure 6

Moi university crew performing a Legislative play during the 2022 festivals at JOUST



Source: KUPAA.

4.3.7 Musical Plays

The incorporation of musical plays within KUPAA marks a significant evolution in contemporary university theatre practice in Kenya. Unlike traditional forms-Swahili and English plays, presented at the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), musical plays in KUPAA exemplify a deliberate artistic shift. One that merges music and dramaturgy to form a hybrid genre capable of carrying complex narratives. This creative reinvention signals not only artistic maturity but also an ideological break from the simpler, more linear performance forms typically produced for younger audiences in the KNDF circuit. The younger demographic, largely composed of primary and secondary school students, necessitates a pedagogical approach that privileges clarity and didacticism over experimentation and aesthetic complexity.

Sly, a theatre director at Multimedia University, explains that musical plays in KUPAA are not merely performances enhanced with song, but rather fully dramatized narratives constructed through musical composition and lyrical storytelling. “These plays are written as scripts where music functions as plot and dialogue,” She observed, adding that such productions require audiences who can interpret symbolic, abstract, and intertextual elements (Personal communication, June 1, 2025). This emphasizes that this level of genre manipulation and critical engagement is better suited for university contexts, where students are more intellectually equipped to decode layered artistic messages.

Further reinforcing this perspective, Nyamwaka, a dramaturg and lecturer at Kisii University, emphasizes the intertextuality inherent in KUPAA’s musical plays, which frequently incorporate elements from contemporary music, folklore, and political discourse (Nyamwaka, personal communication, May 30, 2025). These performances function as acts of cultural citation, blending multiple narrative and aesthetic forms into a unified dramatic expression. Such complexity underscores the genre’s intellectual and creative demands, characteristics that are often at odds with the evaluative frameworks of the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF). The KNDF adjudication sheets (see Appendix, Plates 3 and 4), which prioritize clarity, moral instruction, and child-centered linguistic accessibility, illustrate the institutional preference for simplified, didactic content. Consequently, KUPAA’s approach reveals the limitations of mainstream festival structures in embracing more experimental and culturally resonant forms of performance.

Figure 7

Pwani University drama crew performing a musical play during the 2022 KUPAA Festivals



Source: KUPAA.

Onyango, a student director at Kenyatta University, highlights how musical plays within KUPAA democratize theatrical expression by merging popular and academic art forms (Onyango, personal communication, June 3, 2025). This genre fosters broader audience engagement without sacrificing thematic complexity, offering a platform for diverse cultural narratives. In contrast,

KNDF's evaluative criteria emphasize moral clarity, structural conformity, and child-centered messaging, limiting space for such hybrid experimentation (see Appendix, Plates 3 and 4). As a result, innovative genres like the musical play are often excluded from mainstream recognition.

This divide reflects what Rancière (2009) terms the “distribution of the sensible,” where institutions control what forms of art are validated or marginalized.

KUPAA's openness to aesthetic hybridity challenges this control, promoting a more inclusive and progressive model of cultural production. Musical plays, therefore, not only introduce formal innovation but also serve a strategic function: it disrupts the monotony of conventional Swahili and English plays that dominate the KNDF repertoire. As Shikuku (2008), affirms that KNDF's preference for straightforward narratives limits the possibility of genre hybridity. In contrast, KUPAA's musical plays reflect an evolving theatrical culture that values creative risk, intellectual complexity, and aesthetic plurality. The genre's success within the university context underscores its potential as a legitimate mode of political, cultural, and artistic expression.

4.3.8 Conclusion

The emerging trends in KUPAA; historical plays, mashup theatre, shadow play, and pageantry demonstrate a dynamic reconfiguration of audience engagement. These forms shift spectators from passive observers to active interpreters, co-constructing meaning through layered aesthetics and cultural resonance. By embracing complexity, abstraction, and hybridity, KUPAA challenges conventional theatrical boundaries. This evolution reflects a growing demand for artistic maturity and socio-political relevance among contemporary audiences. KUPAA's innovations position audience agency at the core of genre development and theatrical renewal.

4.4 Strategies Used by KUPAA to Engage Audiences for Generic Diversity

In recent years, the landscape of theatrical performance has undergone significant transformation, largely driven by changing audience expectations and the demand for more diverse and dynamic genre offerings. Scholars such as Reason (2010) and Bennett (2013) argue that audience engagement is no longer a passive encounter but a co-creative process in which audiences influence not only reception but also content and form. In Kenya, theatre institutions must continuously adapt to maintain cultural relevance.

The Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) exemplifies such adaptability by deliberately employing strategies that broaden genre diversity to appeal to a wide spectrum of audiences. Unlike its predecessors, KUPAA actively integrates traditional, contemporary, and experimental genres to reflect evolving social narratives and artistic expressions. Nyangwono, a KUPAA official, noted that this is achieved through a combination of national workshops that foster creative exchange, a structured syllabus that guides innovation, targeted audience engagement initiatives, a commitment to aligning performances with audience preferences, and sustained research that informs ongoing genre development (Nyangwono, personal communication, June 8, 2025).

4.4.1 National Workshops as Instruments of Exposure and Interaction

Festivals that rely on school-based audiences such as KUPAA, KNDF, and KMF inevitably face constant shifts in audience composition due to student graduations

and new admissions. This necessitates structured forums, such as workshops, to induct and orient new audiences. Odhiambo (2008) and Nyairo (2014) assert that incorporating audiences through workshop settings strengthens communal identity and broadens genre appreciation, particularly among younger and first-time viewers. Although workshops existed within KMF and KNDF, their effectiveness was limited by the exclusion of student participants, as highlighted by Dan, Gretsá university student:

"Students are mostly not part and parcel of the KNDF and KMF national workshops. The officials mostly attend them and the student audience get feedback on what transpired. It's the students who perform, why can't we be at the deciding table on what suits us?" (Dan, personal communication, June 4, 2025)

This testimony underscores the marginalization of student audiences in key developmental processes, raising concerns about the role of audience participation in shaping genre innovation and festival aesthetics. In contrast, KUPAA workshops are intentionally inclusive, functioning not only as developmental platforms for performers and administrators but also as pedagogical and cultural tools that actively shape how audiences engage with and interpret artistic genres. This model fosters a sustainable cultural ecosystem in which the audience is continually educated, involved, and inspired. Yende (2023) affirms the efficacy of similar approaches in South Africa, particularly in opera and classical music circles, where

inclusive workshops have been used to dismantle socio-cultural barriers and re-engage marginalized audiences.

At KUPAA, workshops include representatives from participating universities, ensuring that audience perspectives are directly incorporated into festival planning and genre selection. Lydia, a student director at Lukenya university, remarked, “Yearly we have new genres that are added during workshops. It was my university that advocated for the addition of Mashup plays. This made us feel important in decision making”(Lydia, personal communication, June 10, 2025).

Such testimonies illustrate that KUPAA’s workshops are genuinely audience-centered, resulting in a greater sense of ownership and satisfaction.

This study found that KUPAA’s national workshops are not merely procedural gatherings but serve as dynamic, transformative platforms where students, trainers, adjudicators, cultural scholars, and practitioners collaboratively shape the festival’s artistic direction. Through practical demonstrations, dialogic feedback sessions, and inter-university showcases, these workshops foster an environment conducive to both artistic innovation and knowledge exchange.

4.4.2 KUPAA Syllabus as a Tool for Structured Diversity

Far from being a mere academic document, the KUPAA syllabus functions as a cultural blueprint, intentionally crafted to encompass a broad spectrum of performance genres. These range from traditional African forms such as cultural dances and folk songs to contemporary urban expressions like shadow plays and mashup plays, which integrate both modern and traditional elements. It also

includes musical theatre (e.g., karaoke and musical plays), poetic forms such as choral dramatized verse, and experimental narrative structures. Odhiambo (2008) and Barasa (2019) affirm that curricular standardization within cultural festivals and academic institutions has played a pivotal role in genre innovation, particularly by advocating for the integration of marginalized indigenous forms alongside mainstream content.

What sets the KUPAA syllabus apart is its participatory design, that allows not only officials but also audience representatives to contribute to decisions on genre inclusion and exclusion. This level of democratization was notably absent in the KNDF and KMF syllabi, which primarily reflected administrative priorities. Thus, the KUPAA syllabus transcends its pedagogical function, operating as a strategic tool for cultural inclusion. It facilitates access to a diverse creative repertoire for both performers and audiences, fostering a collective performance culture across participating institutions.

This inclusive framework has enhanced KUPAA's appeal, drawing increased participation from universities nationwide. It also equips trainers and students with the capacity to explore a range of genre-specific techniques, aesthetic principles, and cultural themes. Cliff, a Maseno university student, noted, "The syllabus provides a roadmap that ensures we don't just stick to what we know but explore and present a variety of genres to our audiences" (Cliff, personal communication June 4, 2025). His observation underscores how the syllabus not only cultivates artistic versatility but also prepares performers to engage with increasingly

heterogeneous audiences. This aligns with Davis (1983) and Kawashima (2000), who highlight how structured exposure to multiple artistic genres fosters “taste cultivation,” shaping audience preferences and encouraging openness to less familiar forms. Similarly, Essien (2020) confirms that theatre programs employing genre-diverse syllabi tend to sustain audience interest over time by continuously introducing new stylistic and cultural narratives.

Collectively, these insights affirm that while syllabi should offer structural guidance, they must also remain adaptive and inclusive to reflect evolving artistic landscapes and audience expectations. A rigid, one-size-fits-all approach risks stifling creativity and excluding emerging forms of expression. Flexibility in curriculum design allows educators and artists to respond to contemporary issues, cultural shifts, and the diverse interests of learners and audiences alike.

4.4.3 Direct Audience Engagement Techniques

KUPAA redefines the audience not as passive observers but as active co-creators and critical stakeholders in the artistic process. Its engagement model is multifaceted, incorporating post-performance feedback sessions, interactive forums, and participatory discussions on thematic and aesthetic choices. These platforms serve not only as sites for critique but also as affirmations of the audience’s intellectual and emotional investment in the performance experience.

A distinguishing feature of KUPAA’s operational model is its strategic integration of digital platforms such as online surveys, livestream interactions, WhatsApp groups, and YouTube channels, to capture audience sentiments and extend

engagement beyond physical performance spaces. This digital engagement framework is validated by findings from the 2024 and 2025 online audience surveys, which confirm the effectiveness of these tools in fostering sustained interaction and feedback (KUPAA Online Surveys, 2024, 2025).

Digital interface significantly expands the festival's reach while cultivating a virtual community, particularly among younger, tech-savvy audiences. Orina, a KUPAA audience member, noted that:

“Being part of the discussion after the performance made me feel valued. It's not just about watching; it's about contributing” (Orina.T, personal communication, June 5, 2025). This statement underscores the broader cultural shift towards valuing audience voice as integral to fostering loyalty, enthusiasm, and cultural relevance. Unlike its predecessors, KNDF and KMF where audience interaction was limited, KUPAA has intentionally embraced audience inclusion as a strategic response to historical gaps in participatory engagement. As confirmed by oral testimonies, this shift reflects a deliberate effort to reposition the audience as an essential component of the creative ecosystem.

KUPAA's participatory ethos aligns with global trends in the performing arts, where audience collaboration is increasingly recognized as central to meaning-making and artistic innovation (Kaushik, 2020). It also draws on the historical legacy of community theatre in Kenya, which has long treated performance as a dialogic and transformative space for collective reflection (African Journal of Inclusive Societies, 2021). Comparable audience-centered models in East Africa

such as Uganda’s “Theatre for Development” workshops and Tanzania’s village drama initiatives, further validate this approach (Banham, 2004; Kisekka-Ntale, 2013).

These case studies affirm that audience engagement is not a mere adjunct to artistic production, but a strategic cultural intervention. In KUPAA, these techniques are not procedural formalities; they are deliberate cultural practices that democratize art-making, ensure thematic and aesthetic relevance, and cultivate lasting relationships between institutions and the communities they serve.

4.4.4 Aligning Content with Audience Preferences

In KUPAA audience engagement is a dynamic process of continuously monitoring and integrating audience preferences into its programming as a strategy for ensuring generic diversity. This strategy is achieved through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including post-show surveys, digital feedback tools, and an analysis of attendance trends. Ogutu, KUPAA’s secretary general noted that such data-driven approaches allow KUPAA to tailor its content in ways that remain both relevant and resonant (P. Ogutu, personal communication June 7, 2025).

This indicates that KUPAA’s programming decisions are not merely reactive but are part of a larger, intentional strategy; to align performances with audience expectations while carefully curating opportunities to introduce new, and sometimes experimental, genres. This strategy distinguishes KUPAA from its predecessors. KNDF and KMF are stuck with genres for long periods often remaining rigid to addressing change of audience preferences and tastes over time.

However, in KUPAA, as supported by most of the participants, they affirmed this strategy as the best strategy which has brought a bigger impact and distinction in the festival.

Sylvia, noted;

“Some of the theatre genres currently featured in the KUPAA festivals have been introduced through a process of actively engaging the audience. Organizers have taken the initiative to ask us, the audience, what we would actually like to see on stage. As a result, unique and creative genres such as puppetry theatre, experimental forms like mashup performances, and musical plays have found their way into the lineup. These are not just traditional scripted plays; they challenge the conventional boundaries of performance and invite new modes of storytelling. This kind of audience-driven innovation is something that is distinctive to KUPAA and rarely seen in other student theatre festivals” (Sylvia, personal communication, June 10, 2025).

This demonstrates the balancing act between familiarity and innovation, which reflects what O'Sullivan et al. (2021) describe as "adaptive curation" a model in which cultural producers remain sensitive to audience desires while gradually expanding their artistic boundaries. KUPAA's strategy aligns with broader audience development theories, which emphasize the importance of cultural institutions being responsive, yet also educational and exploratory (Brown & Ratzkin, 2011). Alnasser and Yi (2023) emphasize further that successful audience

retention and growth are closely tied to an organization's ability to reflect its audience's evolving cultural interests.

Comparable models are evident in other African contexts; cultural festivals in South Africa have effectively diversified their lineups, offering everything from traditional storytelling to contemporary dance as a way of attracting broader, intergenerational audiences (Tafer Journal, 2023). These festivals have emphasized accessibility and relevance without sacrificing artistic integrity, a philosophy that closely mirrors KUPAA's ethos. Mogaka, a director at Kaimosi University, asserted, "I appreciate that the KUPAA performances reflect what we enjoy, but also introduce us to new and exciting genres that are contemporary (Mogaka, personal communication, June 05, 2025).

This remark reflects a broader trend in reception theory, which underscores the co-creative role of audiences in shaping artistic meaning (Jauss, 1982). Rather than being passive recipients, audiences at KUPAA are treated as cultural partners, that is, active participants in the ongoing dialogue between tradition and innovation.

4.4.5 Sustained Research and Data-Driven Strategy

KUPAA's programming and strategic development are anchored in continuous, evidence-based research. Through demographic analysis, cultural trend monitoring, and systematic collection of audience feedback via traditional and digital platforms, the organization ensures that its artistic and administrative decisions are grounded in empirical data. These research processes inform not only festival content and genre selection but also broader curricular decisions, reinforcing

KUPAA's commitment to relevance and responsiveness in a shifting cultural landscape. This approach reflects observations by Alnasser and Yi (2023), who assert that cultural institutions that consistently integrate data into their planning processes are better positioned to sustain audience engagement and foster long-term loyalty.

Institutional research capacity is further enhanced by the presence of performing arts and theatre departments within member universities. These academic units contribute expertise in both practical and theoretical domains, embedding research into the creative process. Ogutu, KUPAA's secretary general, emphasized this scholarly rigor:

“Most university performers are also directors in training. At this level, your work must be research-driven; you're not just entertaining; you're showcasing skills that could attract future employers. The competition is intense, especially with genres like historical plays that demand extensive research. Without that, you'll bring poor-quality work to the stage (P. Ogutu, personal communication, June, 7, 2025).

This statement highlights the dual function of KUPAA as both an artistic and professional development platform, where research becomes essential to both creative excellence and employability. The festival's research-centric model aligns with broader trends in African creative industries. In the contemporary theatrical setting, the use of audience analytics and digital metrics has become instrumental

in expanding theatrical reach, particularly in urban contexts marked by intense competition for cultural attention (Mark, 2023).

KUPAA's research-driven ethos extends beyond operational efficiency; it represents a form of institutional reflexivity that prioritizes informed, adaptive leadership. This aligns with John Holden's (2006) framework of "cultural value," which positions cultural institutions as not merely producers of artistic content but as active contributors to societal dialogue through evidence-based engagement. In this light, KUPAA exemplifies a model of cultural stewardship that is methodical, responsive, and forward-looking.

4.4.6 Collaborative Creation and Genre-Fluid Performance

Historically, Kenyan university theatre under institutional frameworks such as the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) and Kenya Music Festival (KMF) operated within rigid, director-centered models that prioritized scripted, genre-specific performances. These productions typically emphasized presentational aesthetics with minimal audience interaction. As Sumba, a theatre practitioner, observed, "it was a matter of presenting to the audience, not with them" (Sumba S. personal communication, June 1, 2025). This illustrates the passive role historically assigned to spectators.

KUPAA marks a significant departure from this tradition by embracing a collaborative creation model that redefines the roles of performers, directors, and audiences as co-authors in the creative process. Through workshop-based development, improvisation, and live adaptation, performances become dialogic,

responsive, and contextually grounded. This participatory approach has facilitated the emergence of genre-fluid forms such as mashup plays and pageantry, which have since been integrated into KUPAA's official genre repertoire (see Appendix III, plate 7). This shift aligns with broader audience trends identified by the Media Council of Kenya (2018), which reported an increasing demand for content that is participatory, locally resonant, and emotionally engaging. The report notes that audiences gravitate toward performances that reflect their lived experiences and invite their involvement. KUPAA's genre-fluid model responds to this call by blending diverse artistic forms such as music, ritual, storytelling, spoken word, and digital media into culturally hybrid performances. As Khisa, KUPAA student council's treasurer, noted,

“the story can shift, depending on the space and the people,” underscoring the adaptive and co-creative nature of these productions (Khisa, personal communication, June 1, 2025).

Such an approach not only expands the aesthetic boundaries of Kenyan theatre but also deepens audience engagement by transforming spectators into collaborators. In doing so, KUPAA fosters a dynamic performance culture that is both innovative and socially embedded, thereby enhancing the expressive potential and cultural relevance of contemporary Kenyan theatre.

4.4.7 Integration of Intertextual and Cross-Genre Elements

Blending genres in performance often introduces new aesthetic experiences for audiences, breaking monotony and refreshing engagement with theatre. KUPAA productions frequently integrate diverse forms such as spoken word, applied theatre satire, musical theatre, and post-dramatic techniques, which are interwoven with references to popular culture and prior festival performances, notably from the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF). This approach aligns with Kristeva's (1980) theory of intertextuality, which posits that texts derive meaning through their connections to other texts, thereby enhancing audience recognition, participation, and interpretation.

The prevalence of mashup plays in KUPAA, which is characterized by the fusion of creative dance, choral verse, mime, and other styles, illustrates how genre hybridity appeals to the heterogeneous tastes of university audiences. As Kevin, KUPAA student council member, explained, "You know mashups have genres like creative dance, choral verses, and even mimes, so you get to enjoy your preferred genre within the mashup. It caters for diverse tastes and preferences" (Kevin, personal communication, June 3, 2025). This reflects the strategic importance of genre integration as a response to the diversity of audience expectations in KUPAA settings.

Festivals formats limit performance time, necessitating the use of smart artistic strategies to explore multiple genres efficiently. Finnegan (1992) notes that in performance-centered cultures, time constraints often stimulate innovation in form

and presentation to maximize thematic and aesthetic impact. Unlike KNDF, where strict adjudication structures often confine performances to singular, linear formats, KUPAA benefits from the artistic maturity of university performers and the creative input of peer audiences who actively contribute ideas during rehearsals and development phases. This collaborative culture aligns with Fischer-Lichte's (2008) notion of performance as an interactive and co-creative process, where meaning emerges through dynamic exchanges between performers and spectators. As Jomo, KUPAA student council's assistant secretary general, confirmed, "Our audience isn't just watching; they are part of the creative process. They suggest things during our festivals, they react instantly during performance, and that energy shapes the choices we make on stage" (Jomo, personal communication, June 2, 2025). Such fluid interaction between form, genre, and audience contribution underscores the unique aesthetic logic emerging within university theatre spaces.

4.4.8 Conclusion

KUPAA's strategic approach is anchored in a participatory syllabus, inclusive workshops, and direct audience engagement, all of which promote genre diversity and cultural relevance. By positioning the audience as co-creators rather than passive spectators, the festival fosters a more meaningful and responsive artistic environment. The workshops function as collaborative spaces for dialogue, learning, and innovation across institutions. Collectively, these strategies establish KUPAA as a dynamic and forward-looking model of audience-centered theatre practice.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive synthesis of the major findings of this research, culminating in a set of evidence-based conclusions and practical recommendations aimed at enhancing the practice and scholarship of university theatre audiences in Kenya. Central to this study was an exploration of the relationship between audience orientation and the evolution of theatrical genres, with the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) serving as a critical case study.

5.2 Summary

This study aimed to look at audience focus in theatre generic choice using the university audience specifically in KUPAA. The research limited itself within KUPAA and its productions; however, KNDF and KMF were used as backdrops of this study. The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the role of the audience in the formation of Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association. Accordingly, the investigation was guided by three principal objectives, each of which generated significant insights into the interdependence between audience engagement and theatrical genre innovation within KUPAA.

Chapter one of this study examined the background of the study and this section revealed that studies on audience focus in theatre generic choice specifically on

KUPAA and general Kenyan university theatre are scant. In the same chapter the study objectives, questions and limitations were plainly outlined. In the limitation section, the researcher provided the challenges of the study, the solutions pursued to delimit the limitations. Finally, the theoretical framework of the study was provided on which the study was anchored.

Chapter two of this study looked at the related scholarship to this study. The review was done objectively, offering insights from global to local. While reviewing the research revealed existing gaps in methodology, theoretical frameworks, and case studies. These gaps justified the gaps this study sought to fill. Chapter three entailed the methodology that was used in this research. The study presented KUPAA officials, directors, audience and frequent theatre goers as the target population of this study. while the last section in chapter three addressed the specific audience ethnography methods that were used for data collection in the settings. These methods are: interviews, documents, and content analysis. Chapter four presented findings, analysis and interpretation.

Given research objective one, the findings underscore that audience feedback functioned as a foundational impetus for the formation and evolution of KUPAA. University theatre audiences consistently expressed a need for performances, genres, genre content and productions that were reflective of their demographics, such as socio-cultural realities, lived experiences, and identity frameworks. These demands, communicated through audience engagement, formal feedback channels and informal audience discourse, prompted the creation of KUPAA as an institutional mechanism for standardizing and elevating theatrical practice within

the university context. Audience-driven preferences for thematic resonance, cultural representation, and authentic storytelling directly influenced the organization's foundational values and operational principles, confirming the agency of audiences in institutional and artistic development.

The second objective identified a transformative shift in audience engagement dynamics, significantly shaped by digital media, real-time feedback mechanisms, and social networking platforms. These developments have repositioned the audience from passive recipients to interactive contributors within the theatrical process. As a result, genres that exhibit adaptability, immediacy, and resonance with current societal issues such as historical play, shadow play, and pageantry, have witnessed increased prominence. These genres appeal to contemporary aesthetic sensibilities and facilitate immersive, participatory audience experiences. This shift reflects broader trends in performance where theatrical content is increasingly shaped by digital discourse and audience interactivity.

On objective three, the findings revealed that KUPAA's genre development and audience engagement were driven by four interrelated strategies that ensured both artistic coherence and cultural relevance. The implementation of a structured syllabus provided a unified training framework, fostering consistency in genre creation. National workshops offered collaborative spaces for artists to innovate and refine performances through shared insights and audience feedback. Sustained research into audience reception and performance trends enabled ongoing adaptation to cultural shifts. Most significantly, aligning genre content with

audience preferences ensured that performances remained accessible, resonant, and engaging. These strategies collectively contributed to the evolution and sustainability of KUPAA's diverse genre expressions.

5.3 Conclusion

The study affirms that audience orientation is a decisive factor in determining the trajectory of genre development in Kenyan university theatre. KUPAA's success in nurturing relevant, diverse, and innovative performances is attributed to its intentional engagement with evolving audience expectations and cultural contexts. When audiences are acknowledged as active participants rather than passive observers, theatrical forms become more vibrant, adaptive, and reflective of contemporary social realities. The integration of audience agency into the structural and creative domains of theatre production creates a dialogic performance space, that is shaped as much by those who watch as by those who perform. This study thus positions audience engagement not merely as a supplementary consideration, but as a central force in the evolution of performance practice within academic settings.

5.4 Recommendations

From the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations have been put forward. Most of these recommendations were presented by the university audience and supported by the findings reported in this study.

From the findings, the researcher recommends that the government support university-based theatres such as KUPAA and other university theatre troupes in Kenya. Additionally, there is a need for the establishment of a state department for university theatre arts to house university- based theatres. Further, it is high time that the university audience be given a theatre environment that stretches their creativity and does not limit them to organizations that have mixed tastes and demographics that restrict artistic maturity.

The university audience recommended that institutional and financial support should be extended to artists and student performers exploring innovative genre combinations, particularly those integrating indigenous African performance traditions with contemporary global styles.

The researcher further recommends the institutionalization and continuous audience research. KUPAA and allied theatre institutions should formalize processes for regular audience analysis to track shifting preferences, interpretative frameworks, and socio-cultural dynamics that influence genre reception.

5.5 Suggestion for Further Research

Further research could explore emerging thematic trends within KUPAA festivals. Scholars may also examine innovative production techniques that are reshaping performance practices in this context. Such studies would deepen understanding of KUPAA's evolving aesthetic and narrative strategies. Additionally, they could reveal how these innovations reflect broader shifts in university-based theatre in Kenya.

The researcher felt that the field of university-based audiences and theatres in Kenya has not been fully exhausted. The research therefore suggested further research in such areas, such as: the future of the university theatres, the focus of young adult audiences in Kenya and East Africa, and tastes and preferences of diverse audience demographics in the Kenyan theatre festivals and larger Kenyan theatre context.

Further research could explore comparative reception analysis of traditional versus contemporary

KUPAA performances. This study would explore how audiences respond differently to earlier KUPAA forms, such as historical or didactic plays, in contrast to modern innovations like mashups, multimedia, and shadow plays. The aim would be to uncover generational, technological, and cultural shifts in audience expectations and engagement. By examining these variances through reception theory, the research could offer critical insights into how KUPAA adapts to changing social dynamics and aesthetic tastes.

Another valuable direction could be to explore the impact of digital platforms on audience engagement in popular theatre. With the rise of YouTube, TikTok, and other social media as performance and feedback spaces, this study would investigate how digitalization reshapes audience behavior, feedback cycles, and performance conventions. It would explore whether online audiences mirror live ones in terms of focus and participation, or if entirely new modes of reception are emerging. This research would situate KUPAA within the broader discourse of digital performance and cultural production.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Section A: General Information

1. Name (Optional):
2. Role in KUPAA / Theatre Industry: (e.g., Performer, Director, Audience Member, Official, Critic)
3. Did you ever participate in KNDF and KMF? If so how?

Section B: Audience Feedback and the Emergence of KUPAA

4. What was your experience in KMF and KNDF?
5. In your own view what factors led to the formation of KUPAA?
6. In your view were the audience involved in selection of genres for KMF and KNDF
7. In your opinion what were the main channels for gathering audience feedback during KUPAA's formation?
8. In your view how has audience feedback influenced the development of KUPAA?
9. Can you share any specific instances where audience reactions shaped KUPAA's activities?
10. In your own view which role did university theatre audiences play in the formalization of KUPAA?

Section C: Contemporary Trends in Audience Engagement and Genre Development

8. Are you aware of any contemporary trends in theatre?
9. In your view did KMF and KNDF have ways of incorporating contemporary trends in their genres?
10. In your opinion how does audience engagement influence the choice of genres or performance styles in KUPAA
11. How many genres were present in KMF AND KNDF then? And who decided the choice of genres?
12. According to your own observation what difference is there in genre number and type in

KUPAA

13. Did you ever observe changes in audience preferences over time in KMF and KNDF? If so what were they? How were they handled?
14. What trends have you observed in audience preferences for different theatrical genres in KUPAA?
15. In your view has does KUPAA handle changing audience preferences overtime?
16. In your opinion has social media or digital platforms changed audience engagement in KUPAA? If so, how?
17. In your view how have emerging audience expectations influenced8 the evolution of theatre genres in university performances?

Section D: KUPAA's Strategies in Audience Engagement for Generic Diversity

13. According to your observations were there any strategies in KMF and KNDF that ensured generic diversity?
14. What measures have you observed in KUPAA that ensure generic diversity?
15. During your time in KMF and KNDF was audience feedback collected? If yes how?
16. In your opinion how does KUPAA collect and analyze audience feedback?
17. Are there specific genres that receive more attention from audiences? If yes, why?
18. What initiatives has KUPAA implemented to encourage audience participation in theatre?
19. How does KUPAA balance artistic innovation with audience preferences?
20. What challenges does KUPAA face in ensuring a diverse theatre experience for audiences?

Section E: Conclusion

19. In your opinion, how can KUPAA improve audience engagement strategies?
20. What recommendations do you have for enhancing genre diversity in university theatre?
21. Any additional thoughts on the role of audience focus in shaping university theatre?

APPENDIX II: RESEARCH PERMIT

 REPUBLIC OF KENYA	 NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION
Ref No: 704705	Date of Issue: 30/May/2025
RESEARCH LICENSE	
	
This is to Certify that Mr.. JOSEPHAT NEHEMIA NYANGOGA of Kisii University, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Kisii, Kisumu, Migori, Nairobi, Nyamira on the topic: AUDIENCE FOCUS IN THEATRE GENERIC CHOICE; THE CASE OF KENYA UNIVERSITY PERFORMING ARTS ASSOCIATION for the period ending : 30/May/2026.	
License No: NACOSTI/P/25/417886	
704705 Applicant Identification Number	 Director General NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION
	Verification QR Code 
NOTE: This is a computer generated License. To verify the authenticity of this document, Scan the QR Code using QR scanner application.	
See overleaf for conditions	

APPENDIX III: AUTHORITY LETTER



KISII UNIVERSITY

Telephone: +254 0202610479
Email: research@kisiiuniversity.ac.ke

P O BOX 408 -- 40200, KISII
www.kisiiuniversity.ac.ke

OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR RESEARCH, EXTENSION, INNOVATION, AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

REF: KSU/REIRM/140

DATE: 9th May, 2025

The Head, Research Coordination
National Council for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI)
Utalii House, 8th Floor, Uhuru Highway
P. O. Box 30623- 00100
NAIROBI - KENYA

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: JOSEPHAT NEHEMIA NYANGOGA: MAS12/00003/24

The above-mentioned is a student of Kisii University currently pursuing a Masters Degree in the School of Arts and Social Sciences. His research topic is "Audience Focus in Theatre Generic Choice; the Case of Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA)."

We are kindly asking you to assist the student acquire a research permit to enable him carry out the research, upon getting ethical clearance by an accredited Scientific and Ethics Review Committee.

Thank you.

Prof. Christopher Ngacho, PhD
AG. REGISTRAR, (REIRM)

CT: Director Postgraduate Studies

CN/bm



Kisii University is ISO 9001:2015 certified

APPENDIX IV: LIST PLATES



PLATE 1: KNDFF 2025
SYLLABUS

SOURCE: KNDFF 2025
SYLLABUS.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
KENYA NATIONAL DRAMA AND FILM FESTIVAL
ADJUDICATION SCHEME AND COMMENTS
CULTURAL CREATIVE DANCE: (SECONDARY) SPECIAL
NEEDS (V.I)

INSTITUTION _____

SCRIPT WRITER _____

TITLE _____

CHOREOGRAPHER _____

TIME: START _____ PRODUCER _____

STOP _____ DURATION _____

1. SCRIPTING AND CHOICE OF DANCE: 20%

Theme: Is it relevant? Is it entertaining? Does it have a cultural source? Is it educative?

2. CHOREOGRAPHY: 70% as Follows

(i) **Music: 30%** Relevance of song, use of musical instruments/ accompaniments. Harmony of songs, Soloist, chorus, instrumentation and audibility.

(ii) **Dance: 15%** Manageable dance steps, formations and patterns, originality.

PLATE 2: ADJUDICATION SHEET FOR CULTURAL CREATIVE

SOURCE: KNDF 2025 SYLLABUS.

3. **DELIVERY: 30%**
Confidence of the cast in articulation, intonation and expression; Flow of delivery in terms of pitching, tone, stress, tempo, pace and uniformity (in choral); Clarity and vividness of words in recitation.
4. **PRODUCTION: 15%**
Setting – creative (not flamboyant) establishment of the scenery; effective use of the stage and set; imaginative and novel use of supportive stage devices (light, music and other sounds); variety & discipline.
5. **COSTUME AND DÉCOR -10%**
Backdrop, dress, and make-up that is cost-effective in enhancing mood and clarity of verse. Emphasis should be on the use of conventional drama stage and scenic costume that is relevant. NO marks for gadgetry – verse by design invites symbolic rather than real objects.
6. **ACHIEVEMENT: 10%**
Overall worth of the verse in terms of edutainment; Value of the verse to the cast, audience and other learners; Contribution of all aspects of the poem in sharing the message; Impact of the verse as an artistic performance. Consider the entire communicative value and success of the performance.

TOTAL SCORE _____

ADJUDICATOR'S NAME	SIGN	DATE
1 _____	_____	_____
2 _____	_____	_____
3 _____	_____	_____

128

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
KENYA NATIONAL DRAMA AND FILM FESTIVAL
ADJUDICATION SCHEME AND COMMENTS
DRAMATISED VERSE (SOLO SNE)

INSTITUTION _____
SCRIPT WRITER _____
TITLE _____
CHOREOGRAPHER _____
TIME: START _____ PRODUCER _____
STOP _____ DURATION _____

TYPE OF VERSE (SOLO) : _____

7. **CHOICE OF POEM & POETIC STRUCTURE: 20%**
Relevance of subject matter and learner suitability; Quality of script in terms of features of verse, poetic structure and language use; and suitability of verse as solo.
8. **PERFORMANCE: 15%**
Suitability of characterisation as representatives of the persona (e); Versatility of the individual; exploitation of body language – expressions, pace, pauses, movement and manageable gestures where possible, distance, contact; mood, intensity; avoidance of undue exaggeration & distraction.

129

PLATE 3: DRAMATISED VERSE [SOLO SNE] ADJUDICATION SHEET.

SOURCE: KNDF 2025 SYLLABUS.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
KENYA NATIONAL DRAMA AND FILM FESTIVAL
ADJUDICATION SCHEME AND COMMENTS
CULTURAL CREATIVE DANCE: (PRIMARY) SPECIAL
NEEDS (H.I)

INSTITUTION _____
 SCRIPT WRITER _____
 TITLE _____
 CHOREOGRAPHER _____
 TIME: START _____ PRODUCER _____
 STOP _____ DURATION _____

1. SCRIPTING AND CHOICE OF DANCE: 20%

Theme: Is it relevant? Is it entertaining? Does it have a cultural source? Is it child centred and educative?

2. CHOREOGRAPHY: 70% as Follows

(i) **Music: 10%** Use of musical instruments/accompaniments.
 Harmony of instrumentation and audibility of instruments.

(ii) **Dance: 20%** Manageable dance steps, uniformity and variety of formations and patterns, involvement and originality.

PLATE 4: CULTURAL CREATIVE DANCE:(PRIMARY) SPECIAL NEEDS (H.I)

ADJUDICATION SHEET.

SOURCE: KNDF 2025 SYLLABUS.

Category D: Colleges (PTTCs, DTTCs, and TVETS)

- E1 - Play
- E2 - Cultural Creative Dance
- E3 - Modern Creative Dance
- E4 - Dramatized Verse (Solo)
- E5 - Dramatized Verse (Choral)
- E6 - The Spoken Word
- E7 - Narrative
- E8 - Film
- E9 - Play in Kenyan Sign Language (Special Needs Institutions)
- E10 - Dramatized Dance (Special Needs Institutions)
- E11 - Stand-up Comedy
- E12 - solo dance
- E13 - Mime

Category F: Universities.

- F1 - Play
- F2 - Cultural Creative Dance
- F3 - Modern Creative Dance
- F4 - Dramatized Verse (Solo)
- F5 - Dramatized Verse (Choral)
- F6 - The Spoken Word
- F7 - Narrative
- F8 - Film
- F9 - Mime
- F10 - Stand-up Comedy
- F11 - Solo dance

NOTE:

- i. The film categories include the short film, screen dance, screen narrative, screen verse (Solo and Choral), advert, documentary and docu-drama.
- ii. Special needs institutions are encouraged to integrate and participate fully in the festival

PLATE 5: UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES KNDFD DRAMA GENRES CATEGORY.

SOURCE: KNDFD 2025 SYLLABUS.

2.1.1 GENRES FOR STAGED PERFORMANCES

The genres for staged performances are as follows: play, historical play based on host region, legislative theatre, one performer play, improvisational theatre, musical theatre, cultural creative dance, modern creative dance, stand-up comedy, parody comedy, puppet theatre, mime, narrative, dramatized solo verse, dramatized choral verse, spoken word poetry and experimental theatre-mashup. The following is description of the genres and sub-genres of staged performances and the performance time and cast:

GENRE	DESCRIPTION	PERFORMANCE TIME & CAST
1 PLAY	Play based on any theatrical movements, genre, style or philosophical underpinnings with relevant theme. It should be original, unpublished full-length plays written in English, Kiswahili or any local language. The play must be written for the stage for more than one actor with a running time of not more than one hour.	35 minutes -1hour Cast- not more than 30
2 PLAY-SPECIAL CATEGORY	The special category genres purpose is to enhance the role of Universities in preservation of heritage, participation in the legislative making processes and develop thespians full potential on stage. The following are some examples:	
(a). Historical play	Play based on a historical narrative- an enactment of a historical event or legendary personality from the host region or an adaptation of the	35 minutes -1 hour Cast not more than -30

5 COMEDY	Comedy should be devoid of ethnic stereotyping that profiles members of communities but humour that enlivens and stimulates audience to reflect on their lives. The humour should confront societal issues, be a change agent rather than intensifying and foregrounding ethnic stereotypes and prejudices or art for its own sake.	
Stand-up Comedy	A comic style in which a comedian performs in front of a live audience	5 Minutes Cast 1-2
Parody	Imitation of individuals or a piece of work or genre exaggerating deliberately to produce comic effect.	5 minutes
6 PUPPET THEATRE	This performance involves manipulation of puppets – objects often resembling some	10 Minutes
7 NARRATIVE	type of human or animal figure that are animated or manipulated by a puppeteer to tell a story. There are various types of puppets for example:- finger, rod, shadow, body, hands, gloves and marionettes or string puppets. The performance is rendered through a single narrator or group of narrators.	10 Minutes Cast not more than -5
8 MIME	Theatre performance which involves acting out a story through movements, gestures and facial expressions, without the use of speech. It is also	10 Minutes Cast =1

PLATE 6: UNIVERSITY DRAMA GENRES 2018 KUPAA FESTIVALS

KUPAA NATIONAL DRAMA, RADIO THEATRE, FILM, BEAUTY PAGEANTRY AND VISUAL ARTS FESTIVAL-2024

VENUE: EGERTON UNIVERSITY-NJORO



A. DRAMA AND STAGE PERFORMANCES

8TH NOVEMBER 2024 DAY ONE-FRIDAY

KILIMO HALL

MORNING SESSION			
TIME	ITEM	INSTITUTION	
8:00 AM ARRIVAL AND REGISTRATION			
9:00 AM-1:00 PM	FESTIVAL ORIENTATION FESTIVAL RULES AND REGULATIONS DRESS REHEARSALS	KUPAA CHAIRMAN KUDSA REP KUDSA CHAIRMAN	
1:00PM-5:00PM	SITE VISITS -LOCATIONS ENCLOSED		

9TH NOVEMBER 2024 DAY TWO-SATURDAY

KILIMO HALL

MORNING SESSION			
8:00 AM ARRIVAL AND REGISTRATION			
9:00 AM-1:00 PM	POST-MORTEM REPORTS FOR THE 2023 NATIONAL FESTIVAL STAGE PERFORMANCES RADIO FILM BEAUTY PAGEANTRY VISUAL ARTS	KUPAA DRAMA SG	ENG PATRICK OGUTU
1:00PM-5:00PM	SITE VISITS -LOCATIONS ENCLOSED		

10TH NOVEMBER 2024 DAY THREE-SUNDAY

12 TH NOVEMBER 2024 DAY FIVE-TUESDAY			
EDUCATION THEATRE II			
MORNING SESSION			
TIME	ITEM	INSTITUTION	TITLE OF THE ITEM
08:00AM	NATIONAL ANTHEM	MASENO	"NATIONAL ANTHEM"
08:05AM	ONE PERSON PLAY	MASENO	"ADIOS"
08:25AM	PRAISE POETRY	KEMU	"RADIANT GLOW"S
08:35AM	PARODY	MMU	"MOTHER OF ALL DEMOS"
08:55AM	MIME	EGERTON	"THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW"
09:05AM	SOLO POETRY SHOW	UOE	"TIKITAKA"
TIME	ITEM	INSTITUTION	TITLE OF THE ITEM
09:10AM	PARODY	LUKENYA	"TEACHER WANJIKU"
09:30AM	ONE PERSON PLAY	CUK	"KOVU"
09:50AM	SOLO POETRY SHOW	KU	"THE REQUIEM MASS"
09:55AM	CHORAL POETRY SHOW	UOK	"VYETI TATA"
10:00AM	MIME	MAASAI MARA	"TIKTOK"
10:10AM	LEGISLATIVE PLAY (2)	MASENO	"SERPENT SHADOW"
10:40AM	SPOKEN WORD	EGERTON	"MASK OFF"
10:50AM	SOLO POETRY SHOW	CUEA	"THE ATELIER"
10:55AM	LEGISLATIVE PLAY	TTU	"KEVIN LUSALA"
11:25AM	SPOKEN WORD	KEMU	"THE MAGNANIMOUS"
11:35AM	NARRATIVE	LUKENYA	"MR. APIKO"
11:45AM	ONE PERSON PLAY	CUEA	"THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA"
12:05PM	CHORAL POETRY SHOW	TTU	"MAZOEZI"
12:10PM	SOLO POETRY SHOW (F)	MASENO	"LESPOIR"
12:15PM	MIME	MMUST	"BRICKS TO CLICK"
12:25PM	SOLO POETRY SHOW	LUKENYA	"KUMEKUJWOO"
12:30PM	PUPPETRY	TUK	"WOLVES IN SHEEP CLOTHING"
12:40PM	SOLO POETRY SHOW	MMUST	"WEeping MILLIONAIRE"
12:45PM	STAND-UP COMEDY	LUKENYA	"MR RICHMAN"
12:55PM	NARATIVE	KU	
AFTERNOON SESSION			
TIME	ITEM	INSTITUTION	TITLE OF THE ITEM
02:00PM	SPOKEN WORD	MASENO	"A BOOK NEVER READ"
02:10PM	PUPPETRY	UOE	"SASHA CHRONICLES"
02:20PM	NARRATIVE	KAFU	"MY SISTER"
02:30PM	SPOKEN WORD	KISII	"HABARI"
02:40PM	ONE PERSON PLAY	UOK	"CHAI TEA"
03:00PM	SOLO POETRY SHOW	MMUST	"WEeping MILLIONAIRE"
03:05PM	PUPPETRY	CUK	"UNSPOKEN AFFECTION"-
03:15PM	CHORAL POETRY SHOW	MURANGA	"PARADISO"
03:25PM	PUPPETRY	MMU	"ANIMAL FARM"
03:35PM	PARODY	MASENO	"PRIME KENYA"
03:55PM	PARODY	EGERTON	"MENS CONFERENCE"
04:15PM	MIME	GLUK	"MIRROR OF LIFE"
04:25PM	PRAISE POETRY	CUK	"CONJESTINA"
04:35PM	SOLO POETRY SHOW (F)	TUK	"À L'UNIVERSITÉ DE RÊVE"
04:40PM	ONE PERSON PLAY	KAFU	"TRANSGRESSION"
04:50PM	CHORAL POETRY SHOW	TUK	"CARRY YOUR CROSS"
12 TH NOVEMBER 2024 DAY FIVE-TUESDAY			

PLATE 7: 2024 KUPAA FESTIVAL SCHEDULE.

SOURCE: KUPAA 2024 FESTIVAL PROGRAM.

KENYA UNIVERSITIES PERFORMING ARTS AND FILM ASSOCIATION

CS MOE PRESENTATION
KUPAA



MEMBERS OF KUPAA

Specifically, *Thirty Seven* (37) universities participated in this festival:

S/N O.	UNIVERSITY	S/N O.	UNIVERSITY
1	African Nazarene University	21	Kisii University
2	Dedan Kimathi University of Technology	22	Kenya Methodist University
3	Cooperative University	23	Karatina University
4	Multi Media University	24	Kenyatta University
5	KCA University (Nairobi)	25	Technical University of Mombasa
6	Technical University of Kenya	26	Machakos University
7	University of Eldoret	27	Maseno University
8	University of Kabianga	28	Bomet University
9	University of Embu	29	Rongo University
10	Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology	30	Taita Taveta University
11	Jaramogi Oginga Odinga Uni of Science & Technology	31	University of Eastern Africa Baraton
12	Moi University (Main Campus)	32	Kaimosi Friends University
13	Moi University (Annex)	33	Pwani University
14	Great Lakes University of Kenya	34	Uzima University
15	Tharaka University	35	Catholic University of East Africa
16	Lukenya University	36	Meru University
17	Gretsa University	37	South Eastern Kenya University
18	KCA University (Kisumu)		
19	Murang'a University		
20	Kibabii University		

PLATE 8: KUPAA MEMBERS.

SOURCE: KUPAA 2024 FESTIVAL NOTES.



REPUBLIC OF KENYA

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Kenya National Drama & Film Festival



RULES & REGULATIONS

Category F: Universities.

- F1 - Play
- F2 - Cultural Creative Dance
- F3 - Modern Creative Dance
- F4 - Dramatized Verse (Solo)
- F5 - Dramatized Verse (Choral)
- F6 - The Spoken Word
- F7 - Narrative
- F8 - Film
- F9 - Mime
- F10 - Stand-up Comedy

NOTE:

- i. The film categories include the feature film, screen dance, screen narrative, screen verse (Solo and Choral), advert documentary and docu-drama;
- ii. Special needs institutions are encouraged to integrate and participate fully in the festival;
- iii. The age bracket for the pre-primary performers should be four (4) to five (5) years.

11.0 ENTRY

- 11.1 Participating institutions shall submit entries on official forms duly filled by the trainer(s) who are bona fide teachers registered by the TSC/lecturers employed by a recognised institution. The form should be duly signed by the head of the institution. (Entry form A);

PLATE 9: UNIVERSITY DRAMA GENRES (2018).

SOURCE: KNDF 2018 SYLLABUS.

APPENDIX V: KUPAA 2025 AUDIENCE SURVEY

KENYA UNIVERSITIES PERFORMING ARTS ASSOCIATION

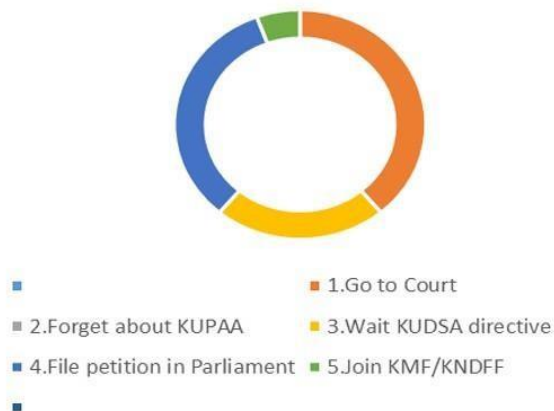


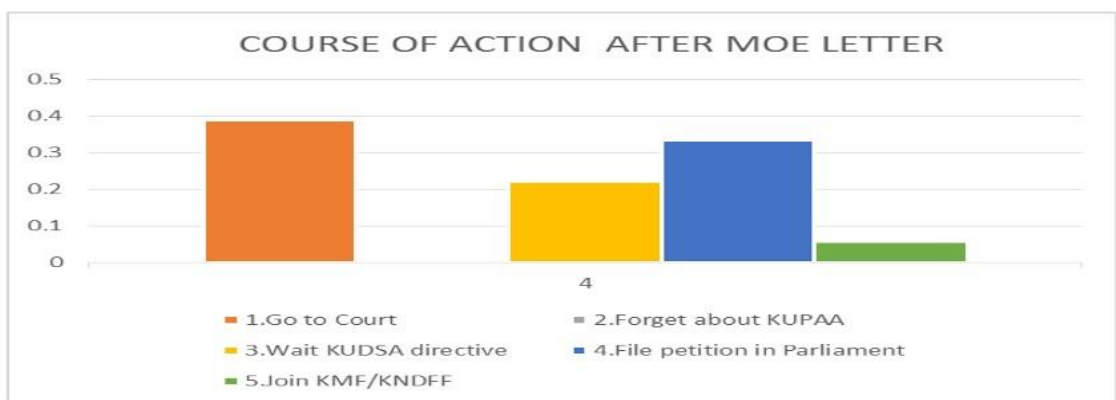
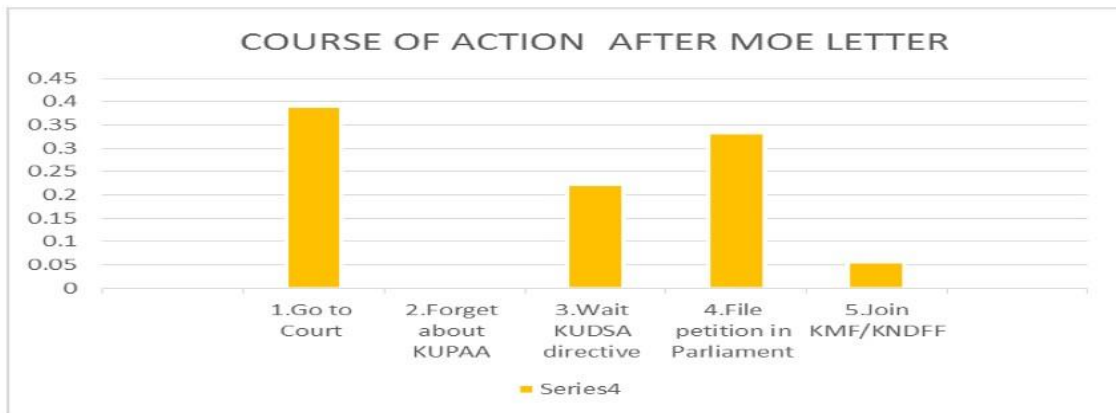
KUPAA SURVEY RESULTS

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 1. ANU | |
| 2. GLUK | |
| 3. EGERTON | |
| 4. KISII | |
| 5. KU | |
| 6. MACHAKOS | |
| 7. MMU | |
| 8. RONGO | |
| 9. TUK | |
| 10. UOK | |
| 11. THARAKA | |
| 12. MURANG'A | |
| 13. MMUST | |
| 14. LUKENYA | |
| 15. KIRINYAGA | |
| 16. KEMU | |
| 17. GTRETSA | |
| 18. UOE | |

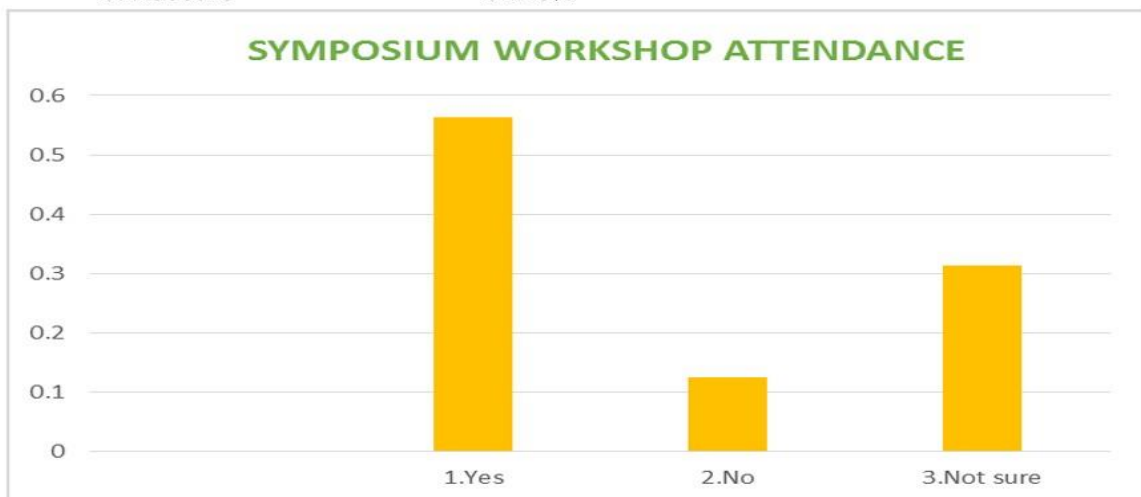
Action	Percentage
1. Go to Court	38.9
2. Forget about KUPAA	0
3. Wait KUDSA directive	22.2
4. File petition in Parliament	33.3
5. Join KMF/KNDF	5.6

COURSE OF ACTION AFTER MOE LETTER

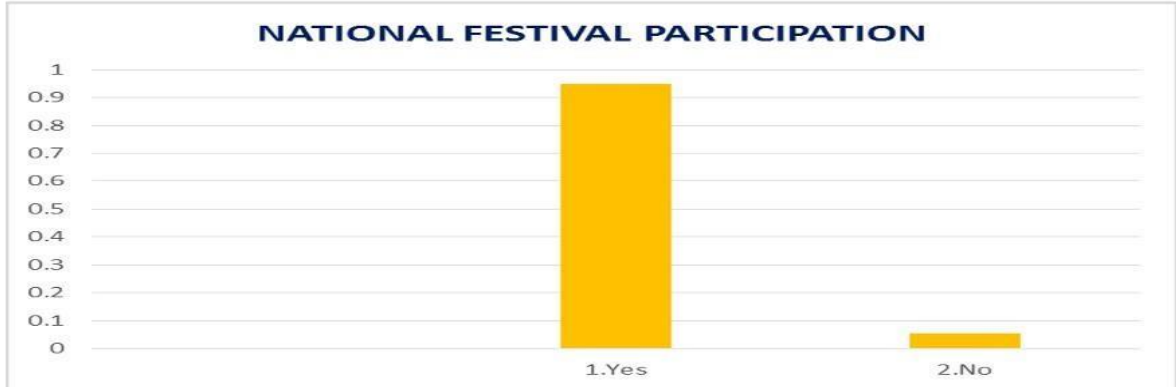




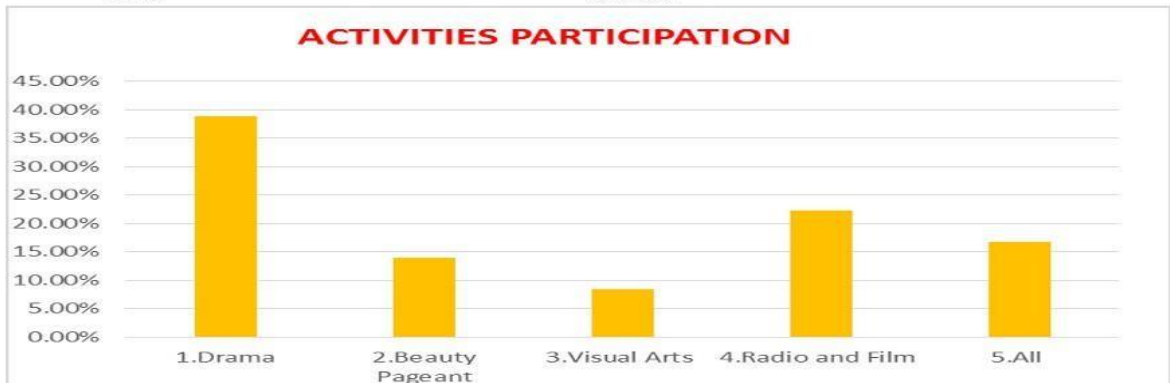
Action	Percentage
1. Yes	56.25%
2. No	12.50%
3. Not sure	31.25%



Action	Percentage
1. Yes	94.73%
2. No	5.27%



Action	Percentage
1.Drama	38.89%
2. Beauty Pageant	13.89%
3. Visual Arts	8.33%
4. Radio and Film	22.22%
5. All	16.67%



CONCLUSION

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Course of Action after MOE letter | 38.9 % Going to Court has majority |
| 2. Symposium Workshop Attendance | 56.25 % will attend the workshop |
| 3. National Festival Participation | 94.73% will attend the Festival |
| 4. Activities Choice | 38.89% will take part in Drama as majority |

Eng Patrick Ogutu-SG KUPAA Drama
©2025 KUPAA

APPENDIX VI: KUPAA 2024 SURVEY

11/28/24, 2:24 PM

2024 KUPAA Drama Festival Evaluation Survey

2024 KUPAA Drama Festival Evaluation Survey

69 responses

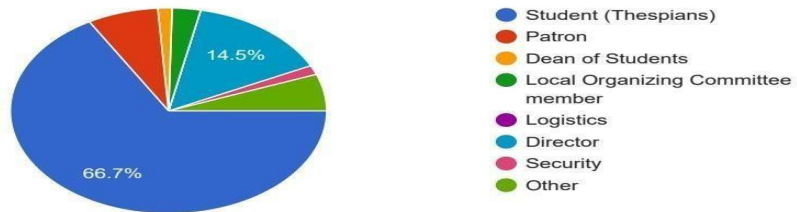
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BIO DATA

What role did you play in 2024 KUPAA Drama Festivals?

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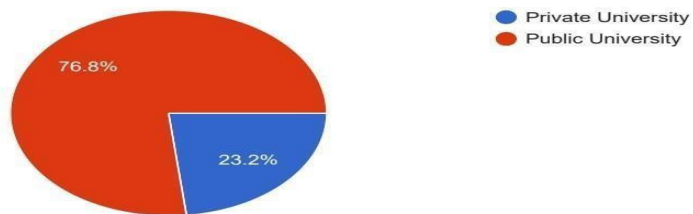
69 responses



How would you describe your University?

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69 responses



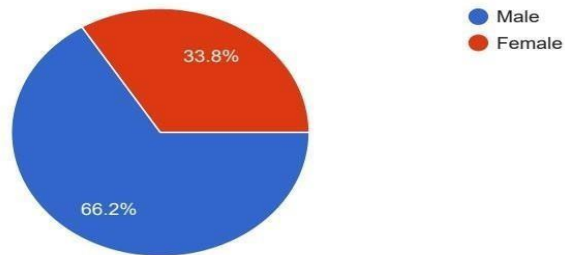
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Select your gender

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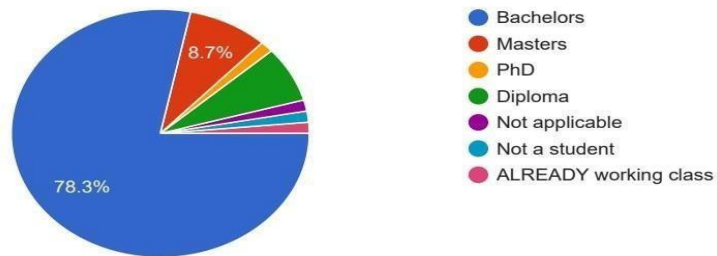
68 responses



Which is Your level of study

Copy

69 responses

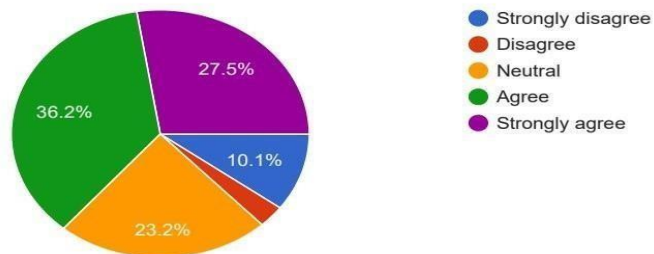


Choice of Host Questions

Was Egerton University an appropriate choice for hosting the National KUPAA Drama Festivals?

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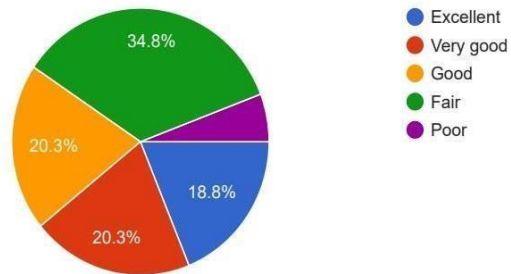
69 responses



How would you rate the facilities provided by the host

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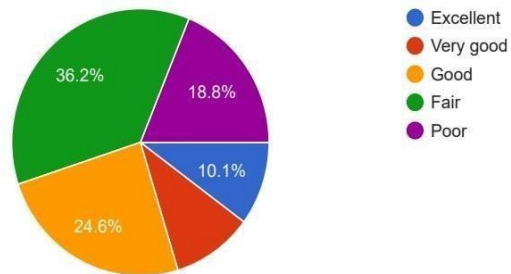
69 responses



Were the stages (Kilimo Hall and Education Theatre II) adequate in terms of size and technical facilities?

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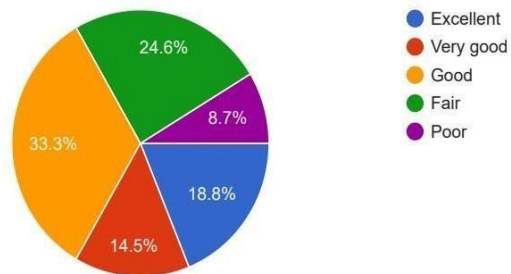
69 responses



Were the stages easily accessible to participants and organizers?

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69 responses



What suggestions do you have for improving the hosting experience during future festivals?

57 responses

Improve rostrums and deco

Cleanliness especially the washrooms

Get a school that has good meals, and sanitation

Water

Consult trainers on the stages to be used for performance

Early preparation of the venue so that we can kick start the event early. And bigger stage not like the one we had in Education theater II

We need more adjudicators in the festivals for quality results and they should both be fair

They Should consider adding Adjudicators, and also consider time of performing . Performance should stop at 6pm in the evening not late at night around 2pm ,it's tiresome and the Adjudicators also get tired.

To behave like hosts

Provide accomodation facility that are cheaper

The halls should have adequate down stage space especially the hall two it was hard for choral verses downstage

Enough space at the hall

Do not let students adjudicate especially in modeling

Cheaper sleeping areas to accommodate students.

Improve on technicals like audible sounds

All items should be in one stage just like the festivals in kisumu 2022

Close town and we should not perform on lecture hall and look for standard hall

More public participation by Patrons on issues to do with festivals in advance

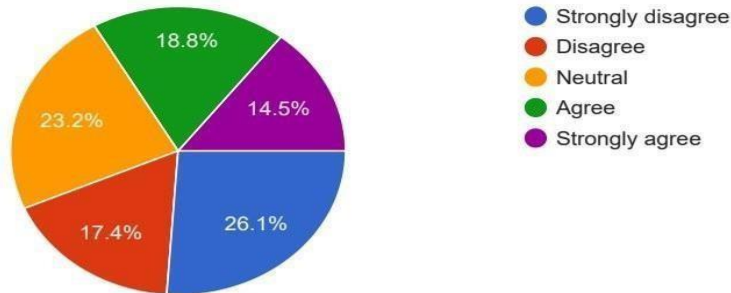
Venues with better halls

ADJUDICATION

Was the adjudication process fair and transparent?

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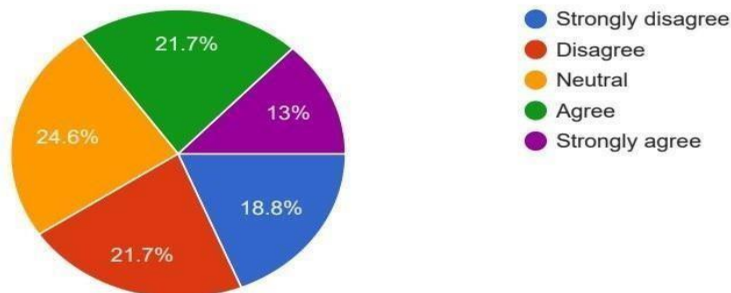
69 responses



Did the adjudicators demonstrate sufficient expertise in the various genres presented?

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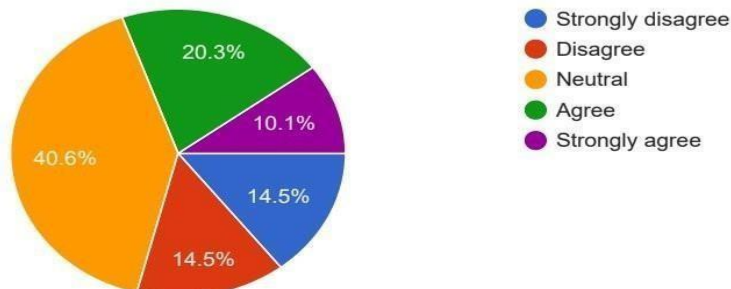
69 responses



Were the adjudication guidelines clear and consistently applied?

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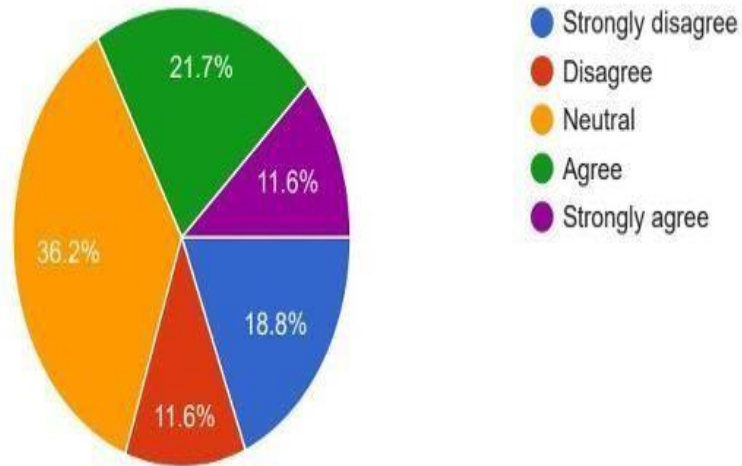
69 responses



How would you rate the feedback provided by the adjudication panel?

 Copy

69 responses



Suggest adjudication measures you would wish are incorporated in the future festivals

69 responses

Results to be published on KUPAA website

One adjudicator who have always been on the bench seem to be focused on metro teams

Provide atleast 4 adjudicators in each hall

One hall three adjudicators

Get 3 adjudicators for every hall

Number to be increased

Next time we would wish different adjudicators on the adjudication bench, no two adjudicators on that bench for a whole festival

Let it be a 4 man panel and each of the adjudicators should have a genre he has specialized into. 2 man panel is exhausting the adjudicators making them sleep even making them not adjudicate the items properly

We should not have two adjudicators adjudicating all the kenyan universities because they will tire and end up giving quier results we need more than 4 adjudicators. Diffrent group for plays another one for modern dance and the other items

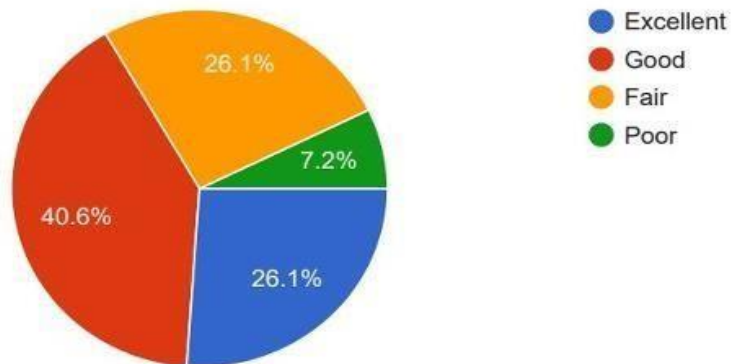
The Adjudicators should be honest with the results.

Adjudicators should not try to balance out the results

Management of KUPAA Festivals

How would you rate the overall management and coordination of the festival?

69 responses



Get specialized adjudicators for specialized items. Preferably professionals in the field. This year's adjudicators were limited in terms of variety. Also, more performance halls could help handle theatre heavy items

The adjudicators should have more experience in the field of art. Education wise. There should be guidelines to follow on adjudicating each category. Items should be awarded basing on their performance and not just to balance regions. An adjudicator should not be allowed to direct any institution

Following all the rules discussed in workshop, and awarding items based on the performance and content.

Adjudicators should be more than two especially in the main hall

Should be fair next time

Avoid same adjudicators

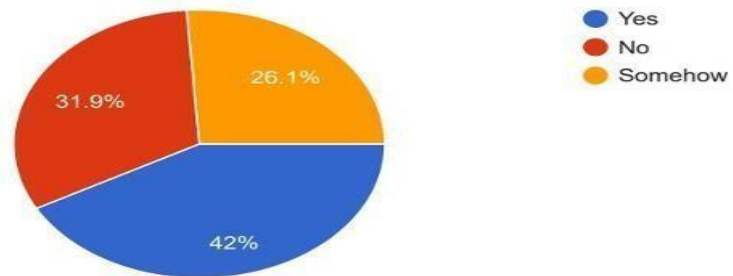
Have nothing

More adjudicator to be added to ensures for results

Give each character's compliments and comments

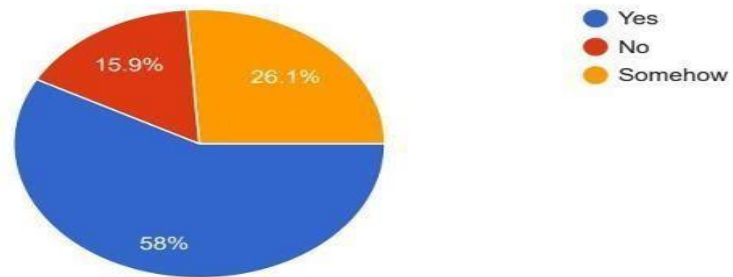
Were the schedules communicated clearly and adhered to effectively?

69 responses



Was the registration process smooth and efficient?

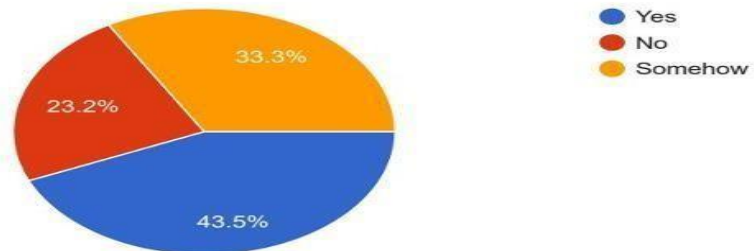
69 responses



Distribution of Roles During KUPAA Festivals

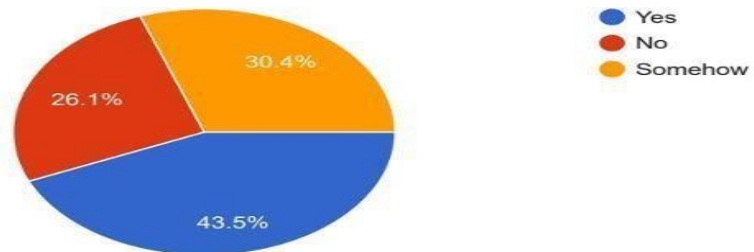
Were the roles and responsibilities of KUPAA officials, host institution staff, and volunteers clearly defined and executed?

69 responses



Did the role distribution ensure efficiency and minimize overlaps or conflicts?

69 responses



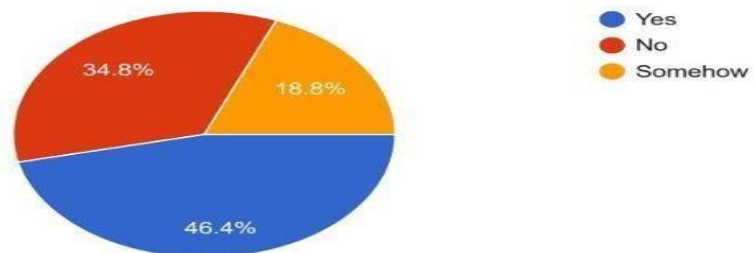
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2:24 PM

2024 KUPAA Drama Festival Evaluation Survey

Were there enough personnel to handle logistics, technical needs, and participant support?

69 responses



What suggestions do you have for improving the distribution of roles in future festivals?

69 responses

None

Those involved in running the festivals should be trained on their roles and there should be review meetings everyday before breaking for the day

Give roles and specify

Don't choose ignorant officials

Assign roles openly to all universities

Delegate and respect that delegation. KUPAA should not be a one man show.

Members to be assigned roles before the festivals

Each university to have their representatives so as they can air out their matters

Let every university be represented ndio kukuwe na easy coordination.

All institutions should be given a chance to participate in various roles like curtain opening

No suggestion.

Vetting of the officials

Non so far

Good

Incorporate students

Idk

Directors should ensure every talented student gets a chance in the participation

It was a good progress

It was good

Give at least one person per university a task and see the outcome

s.google.com/forms/d/10x0rVL-aj0Wrt4wUAhknycbOVf2Q3CzjVv8SS0-HA/viewanalytics

2:24 PM

2024 KUPAA Drama Festival Evaluation Survey

Delegate duties for smooth running of the festival.

-

Best

Hird me

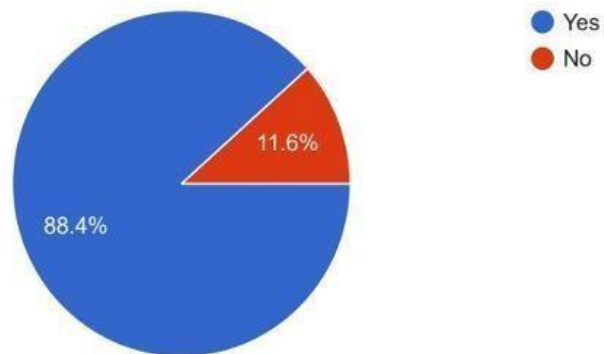
None

The number of the parties to be increased

Early preparation and equitable delegation of duties across all university patrons, directors and students based on merit and festival experience.

Would you participate in or recommend the KUPAA Festivals in the future?

69 responses



What areas need significant improvement?

59 responses

Adjudication

Adjudication

Communication, role allocation, media coverage,

Balancing of performance in the two halls, take Mashups to the other hall

Time allocated for the beauty pageantry

Beauty pageantry

Make regional festivals matter. Cut items. Let all items be performed in one hall. We need to watch items and enjoy the festival.

Halls

Adjudication, security

Adjudicators bench. And the management should give award to university that deserves the award. A university that produces a substandard item should not be entertaining because you are promoting laziness and nurturing bad directors and actors in the industry

Adjudication sector

Adjudication area, should be honest not corrupt

The adjudication

Adjudication. There should be professional judges in these fields for maximum report

Street dance adjudication

Space in halls

Adjudicating

Hygiene of the school

All

Tagdev



Musical productions . Participation in visual arts. Treatment of adjudicators to one level. Universities to fully own participation of their students by giving necessary requirements

Communication

Adjudication

No

Having a workshop

Number of the Adjudication panel

Choice of halls, adjudicators and a theatrical standards set: A professional proscenium stage with wings and a back end.

Pageantry should honestly be on the last night of the festival, before the day of the Gala.

Mcees, consider making the program sensible. You simply cannot have same items of the same institution on different days yet what they performed because it's according to the program. This makes some institutions end up going back without having all their items performed.

Awards allocation

Film department

Sponsorship and management

Visual arts and film theatre

Please share any specific suggestions or feedback that could help improve future KUPAA festivals.

69 responses

N/A

Start planning early, get more awards to universities such as trophies to universitiessch

Results are important, all universities are winners, when other teams go without a trophy, what would be the future? Awards only went to big names others are mere participants.

Timing. Ensure that results are given during the day so that travelling becomes easier

Connect us with the job market

Non KNDF adjudication bench would be a nice start.

Consult on the venues for items to be participate so as to get a clear scope

Workshops to be done when all the representatives are around, both students and staff

There is a KUPAA group where students are sharing their thoughts kindly listen to their suggestions and implement them

Something has to be done in tje ranking of films.most of the films we wrongly classified as other institutions submitted short films and they were ranked in silent films also some got adjudication sheets without marks

Add more days as genres are many

None

Keep on doing what you are doing. Everyday is a learning lesson

Involve Ministry of Higher Learning and have marketing committee

First all university should come before the commencement of the events

Create guidelines on cost of scripting, training and stage guidance for universities

Work with honesty and truth

Nil

Inclusivity

Be serious and pay your drama members to improve their attitude

More partners should be roped in so that we can have cash awards

The security were underpaid during the event in reference to the work.. especially the hostsecu

Check on your Time management

Work with the numbers

The pageantry to be well ventilated and lighted ,thank you

Adjudicators should understand the items they're judging,fairness and honesty should be observed,no balancing of results

Ensure they adhere to the majority of the people's feedback from this survey.

Reduce number of performances on the last days

Fairness in adjudication,also Kupaa should be student centered. Kupaa should focus on growing talents rather than competition.

Nope

Adjudication should be fair and done by knowledgeable and experienced judges

Arrange for workshops at least a month before festivals.

Avoid biasness in adjudication

Appendix VII: Oral sources

The materials include key informant interviews, and individual narratives. They have been organized according to the individuals providing the information. However, the names used here are pseudonyms for the confidentiality of the respondents.

Name	Age	Role	University	Period
1. Tony G	22	Audience	Pwani	05/06/2025
2. Asiago	21	audience	TUK	06/06/2025
3. Dr. Austin	52	Thespian	Maseno	07/07/2025
4. P. Ogutu	51	official	MMU	07/06/2025
5. Okemwa	55	official	Kisii	07/06/2025
6. O. Faith	20	Audience	Kenyatta	07/06/2025
7. Pauline	30	Director	MMU	07/06/2025
8. Ongaga	57	official	Kisii	08/06/2025
9. Nyangiono	26	official	Rongo	08/06/2025
10. Deborah	21	Student official	Co-operative	08/06/2025
11. Nyamwaka	53	Thespian	Kisii	08/06/2025
12. Kiptoo	20	audince	Bomet university	08/06/2025
13. Baraka. S	23	director	Kisii/Rongo/MMU	09/06/2025

14. Centrine	22	Student official	Kisii university	09/06/2025
15. Ombija	21	Student official	Rongo university	10/06/2025
16. Slyvia T.	24	audience	JOUST	10/06/2025
17. Mbugua H	21	audience	Karatina univ.	09/06/2025
18. Njeru P.	41	official	African Nazarene	10/06/2025
19. Masakha	19	Student official	Kabianga univ.	08/06/2025
20. Isalambo	49	official	KUPAA chairman	09/06/2025
21. Sofia	20	audience	TUM	09/06/2025
22. Washira W.	39	Judge/adjudicator	freelance	10/06/2025
23. Eng. Muthii	38	Judge/adjudicator		10/06/2025
24. Dorothy G.	19	audience	Kibabii University	10/06/2025
25. Ouma K.	22	audience	Baraton university	10/06/2025
26. Sly	22	audience	MMUST	11/06/2025
27. Onyango	20	audience	Moi university	03/06/2025

28. Dan O.	22	audience	Grestsa university	04/06/2025
29. Lydia O.	23	audience	Lukenya univ.	10/06/2025
30. Cliff	25	audience	Maseno university	05/06/2025
31. Orina E.	24	audience	GLUK	05/06/2025
32. Mogaka V.	31	director	Kaimosi university	05/06/2025
33. Khisa	22	audience	MMUST	01/06/2025
34. Sumba S.	22	Audience/Thespian	Freelance	01/06/2025
35. Jomo	20	audince	Murang'a univ.	05/06/2025
36. Mumbi	21	Audience/actor	Catholic univ.	05/06/2025
37. Williat	30	official	MMUST	07/06/2025

APPENDIX VIII: PUBLICATION

East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2025

Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.3258>



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EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
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Original Article

Contemporary Trends in Audience Engagement and Their Implications for Genre Development in KUPAA

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Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

03 July 2025

Keywords:

*Audience
Engagement,
Theatre Genres,
Digital Theatre,
Immersive
Performance,
Kenya Universities
Performing Arts
Association,
University-based
theatre.*

Theatre, as a dynamic and responsive art form, continually evolves in response to shifts in audience engagement. In recent years, contemporary spectatorship has moved beyond passive observation toward active participation, significantly influencing both performance aesthetics and the evolution of theatrical genres. This paper examines contemporary trends in audience engagement and their implications for genre development within the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA). Grounded in reception theory, the study investigates how audience interaction informs creative direction and genre diversification in university theatre. The research adopted a qualitative methodology, targeting KUPAA officials, directors, performers, and audiences. Data was collected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques and analysed through thematic and document analysis. Findings revealed that emerging trends such as mashup plays, shadow performance, legislative theatre, and activist-driven content are reshaping genre boundaries and performance strategies. These innovations reflect a deliberate shift towards complexity, interactivity, and social relevance, with audiences actively co-constructing meaning rather than passively consuming content. This study is justified by the need to understand how evolving audience agency influences theatre-making within academic institutions. Its findings are particularly significant for Kenyan practitioners, offering practical insights into the creation of performances that resonate with intellectually engaged audiences. In the wider African context, where storytelling traditions and ritual forms intersect with modern theatre, the study contributes to scholarship on genre hybridity and cultural responsiveness. Globally, it engages with contemporary discourse on participatory and postmodern performance, affirming the role of the audience as a vital co-creator in the theatrical process. The paper concludes by calling for further research into digital theatre, indigenous forms, and policy influences that continue to shape the future of genre in both local and international theatre landscapes.

APPENDIX VIII: PLAGIARISM REPORT



Page 1 of 164 - Cover Page

Submission ID trn:oid::1:3539642690

School Of Postgraduate

AUDIENCE FOCUS IN THEATRE GENERIC CHOICE; THE CASE OF KENYA UNIVERSITIES PERFORMING ARTS ASSOCIATION (...)

AUDIENCE FOCUS IN THEATRE GENERIC CHOICE; THE CASE OF KENYA UNIVERSITIES PERFORMING ARTS ASSOCIATION (KUPAA)
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