

Re-Visiting TV Soap Opera Viewership in a Changing Broadcasting Dispensation in Nairobi

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ABSTRACT

This study rekindles the soap opera audience viewing debate in a digital broadcast environment within the Kenyan television programming context. In a mixed-method approach, 415 participants were interviewed on their preferences of 22 regularly scheduled soap operas in 5 leading Free to air TV stations in Kenya. Within the same participants, 57 were purposively identified for FGDs. The study employed the uses and gratification framework. The findings are that even with a new broadcast dispensation and a myriad of programming, the selection and viewing of soap operas are still paramount. The viewers select to watch soap operas with storylines and performances they perceive as believable and genuine. The domestic audience is attracted to watch foreign soap operas over the local productions because of their better storytelling styles and characterization. The study recommends refocused training on scripting for the domestic producers and creating acting centres of excellence. There is also a need to tweak the 60% local content quota policy to incorporate creative aspects. Regular promos of the domestic soap operas within the broadcast schedules would also boost their uptake.

Keywords: Soap Opera, Viewers, Selection, Attraction, Digital broadcast

I. INTRODUCTION

The television serial drama fiction or the soap opera is a popular programme genre among audiences. The attraction is in realism, escapism and connection with the actors (Livingstone,1988). The concept of the serial drama broadcast was to target the female gender, riding on advertising products of food and detergents (Lavin, 1995; Porto, 2001). Modleski (1994) further argues that women audiences sometimes derive episodic meanings and pleasure from the soaps by identifying with the overwhelming villainess characters in the programme; as a way of exerting fictional revenge on a social system that belittle women power, work, and social contributions. The soap opera has attracted and shaped several scholarly debates on TV viewership in the western hemisphere (Livingston 1988, Ang,1985) However, despite this recognition, there are still murmurs doubting its full acceptance as a cultural representation worthy of critical appraisal (Bielby,2011). Nevertheless, in a changing digital broadcast environment with multiple stations and a wide choice of soap opera programming; rekindling the viewership debate especially in the African context is significant. More so, Willems & Mano (2016) adds that there is still a need for critical empirical media studies in Africa, and thus this research is a worthy quest towards such realization.

In the Kenyan context, the programming and viewership of soap operas took root at the inception of the first TV station in 1962 (Natesh,1964). This has continued even with the changing liberalized digital dispensation with the leading free to air (FTAs) TV stations scheduling the programmes within their prime hours. However, there is a concern within the Kenyan film industry (which include all kinds of broadcast content) on how to whittle down foreign programming influence and develop and build sustainable local content. In this respect, the Communication Authority of Kenya (CA) has developed a licensing policy to incentivize domestic content consumption. The policy requires all free to air (FTA) broadcast stations to cascade their local content programming quota to 60% within their fourth year of broadcast (CA, 2016).

This study seeks to deepen the serial drama fiction debate by finding out how the audience engages with the genre in the five leading free to air TV stations in Kenya, namely; Citizen TV, NTV, KTN home, K24 and KBC with an accumulative national audience share of 64% (KARF, Oct-Dec 2019). To comprehend the viewers' reception to these programmes the study borrows from the uses and gratification framework which focuses on how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs (Blumler, & Katz 1974; Abelman, & Atkin, 2011). The study is seeking to find out the audience favorite programmes among the screened soap operas. What entertains them in the programmes and why do they dislike others? In this study, the soap opera refers to a TV drama, with a serialized or the continuation of storylines and the consistency of themes throughout episodes, which reoccur at regular and usually reliable intervals of a TV channel's schedule (Creeber, 2001). Thus, the terms soap opera or serial drama are used interchangeably but mean the same thing.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The audience engagement with soap operas*

Various reasons have been advanced to explain why specific categories of people watch soap operas. In comparing gender tastes, more women than men watch soap operas (Ang, 1985; Livingstone, 1988). However, in Southern American regions like Brazil, the Telenovelas are a family affair patronized even by men (Lopez, 1991). In the Kenyan context, a myriad of soap operas offering in the free to air TV stations (FTS) has been amplified with the liberalization of the media since 1989 and the digital migration (Nyabuga, & Booker, 2013). Nonetheless, the domestic productions have been minuscule in comparison to the foreign offerings. However, at some point, one local pro-social, edutainment known as '*Tushauriane*' (Let's Discuss) screened on KBC in 1989 stood out in reception. The audience mood and perception at the time were well captured by a newspaper columnist thus;

Nothing can be said to absolve the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation from blame over the Tushauriane..., the absolute fanatical enthusiasm, which Kenyans from all over the country watched, debated and imbibed the drama in this superb programme? (Muchiri, 1989)

Though the observation is anecdotal, it gives a glimpse of the extent of the domestic audience involvement in an attractive serial drama fiction. Scholarly debates on the domestic audience engagement with soap operas are starting to pick pace. Mueni (2014) conducted comparative research on the representation of womanhood in local and foreign soap operas. The study concludes that soap operas can play a critical role in the development of gender identities. However, it did not delve into the other critical areas like the audience reception of local and foreign serials or their selectivity trend under the uses and gratification framework in a changing Digital broadcasting environment. Thus, the viewers' engagement and selectivity of soap operas scheduled in the 5 leading TV stations would give further insights and continue to shape the debates on the genre.

B. *The pleasure of soap operas*

Wilson (2008, p.75) argues that the viewing pleasure in a TV serial drama fiction is the constant delay of a narrative resolution. She references nineteenth-century British serial writer Willkie Collins in saying: "Make them cry... make them laugh...and make them wait". That good writing for TV fictional serial drama includes a deliberate and structural style to delay unfolding stories in the drama- carefully incorporating suspense. According to Fiske (1987), for a storyline to gain an interest in an audience, they must 'experience' it and share a cultural platform with the story world. A study by Ang (1985) on the viewers of *Dallas* soap opera in the Netherlands found that they interpreted the drama as 'real' heightening their watching pleasure. Kim et al. (2009) conducted a mixed-method study on the influence, attraction and perception of a popular South Korean Soap Opera-*Winter Sonata* among Japanese audiences. The findings were that the overall popularity and quality of *Winter Sonata* was grounded in realism, narrative coherence and emotional appeal.

In the Kenyan context, there is attendance concern on how the stories are deployed. Wekesa (2013) a film critic argues that the local TV drama scripts are poorly structured and the characters do not develop. He illustrates this with the long-running TV drama- *Papa Shirandula* on Citizen Television. He argues that the characters lack motivation, and the story is typical with no growth. Gerald Langiri (2017) an accomplished Film/TV drama actor and casting director, observes that finding good actors is an uphill task. These sentiments converge into a dominant concern on the quality and consumption of the locally produced content (KFC, 2013; CA, 2016). Thus, the uses and gratification (UGT) framework would delve into the reasons on what entertains the audience in the serial drama fiction they choose to watch and what elements they dislike in such programming.

III. METHODS

A. *Data Collection Procedure*

This study is a mixed-method approach where quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed in different phases. The participants were part of a wider study on television drama viewership in Nairobi where 422 questionnaires were administered in 17 constituencies determined by Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) population size framework. However, out of the larger study; this article is confined to the audience reception of 22 soap opera dramas programmed and scheduled in the following FTA TV stations; *NTV, KTN, Citizen TV, KBC* and *K24*. The stations were purposively selected for their consistent dominance in audience market share of 87% (Ipsos-Synovate, 2015) at the period of study. The respondents were asked to mark whether they regularly, occasionally or never watched the 22 selected serials scheduled at the stations between May 2014 and May 2016 as captured;

The Promise, Avida, La Sombre Del Passado, La Gata, Carousel, New Beginning, Skandal Kibao, Dear Mother, Moyo, Santalal, Two Wives, I don't trust men any more, Pray and Prey, Pendo, The Hostel, Mali, Beats of Love, The Tussle, Tabasamu, Bridges of Love, La Malquarida, Corazon Indomable (Wild at Heart).

The second level of the study involved FGDs, 57 participants were purposively identified from the quantitative data (422 processed to 415) for their knowledge and interest in serial drama fiction. 9 FGDs of between 5-7 respondents were conducted using semi-structured, unstructured and direct observation techniques. However, to set off and stimulate the discussion, short segments of selected serials were played back to them at the beginning of each session. The data was first logged according to the dates and time, the place where they were conducted, and the persons with whom they were gathered. After the transcription, thematic coding was used as suggested by Hansen et al. (1998) and Silverman (2003), categories and patterns on the data started to come out. The thematic areas were derived from the theoretical framework. The quantitative and qualitative data were then triangulated at the reporting stage. Pseudonyms have been used to identify participants for confidentiality and anonymity.

IV. RESULTS

A. The audience engagement with soap operas

1.0 Gender respondents

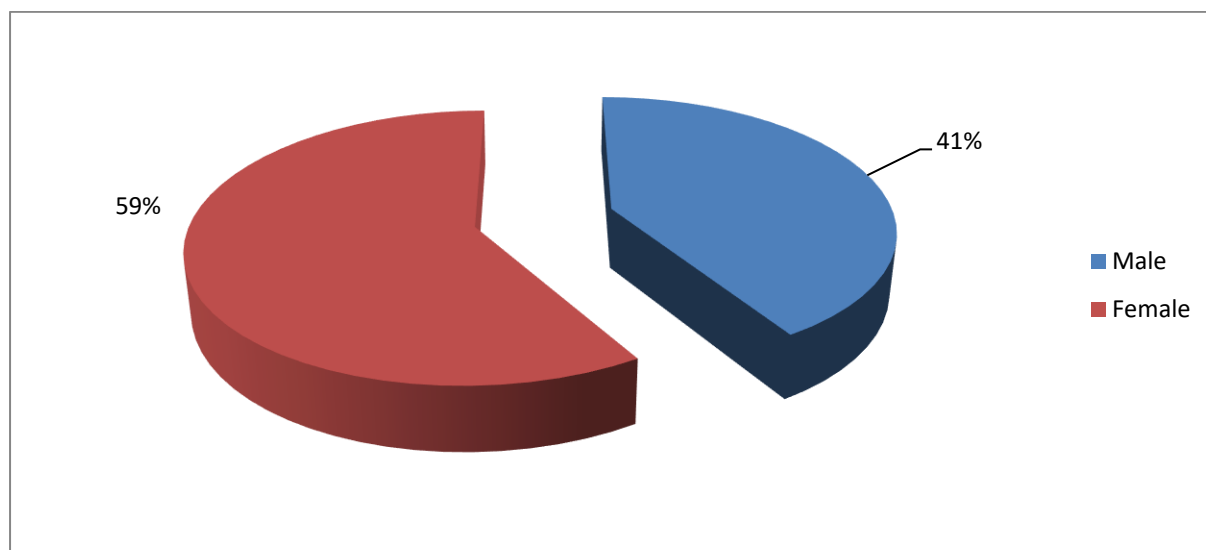


Figure 1.0: Gender of respondents
Source: Research Data 2020

Figure 1.0 above indicates the respondents' gender. It was essential to understand the backgrounds of the participants for further insights. The study found that the majority (59%) of the respondents were female and 41% male. However, historically, the broadcast serial drama fiction from its inception in the 1930s was targeted at the female audience (Lavin, 1995). In the discussion forums, the gender issue also featured prominently and was expressed in various perspectives:

A3: *Hivi vipindi sana sana nizawanawake....unaona hawo ndiyo huwa wengi kwa hizo mchezo (These programmes are meant for women...you see they are the majority as casts)*

A5: *Na watch sana jioni...ama mchana saa zile kazi za nyumba hazijakuwa mingi...na kama sina job, pengine umetembelea marafiki zako.. kuna zile ziko na mafundisho vile kuishi na shida za watu (I watch them in the evening or day when the house chores are still minimal or when I don't have a job...at times I do this when with friends...some of them teach us how to live with others and highlight other people's problems)*

In FGDs, the study found that women were a more active audience for the TV serial drama fiction in comparison to their male counterparts. While watching the previews, observations revealed that females concentrated more and whispered to each other often, unlike some of the males who showed less interest and even answered cell phones. This concurs with Modleski (1994) and Ang's (1985) arguments that the soap opera is designed to appeal to feminine sensibilities.

1.1 The TV serial drama viewing preferences

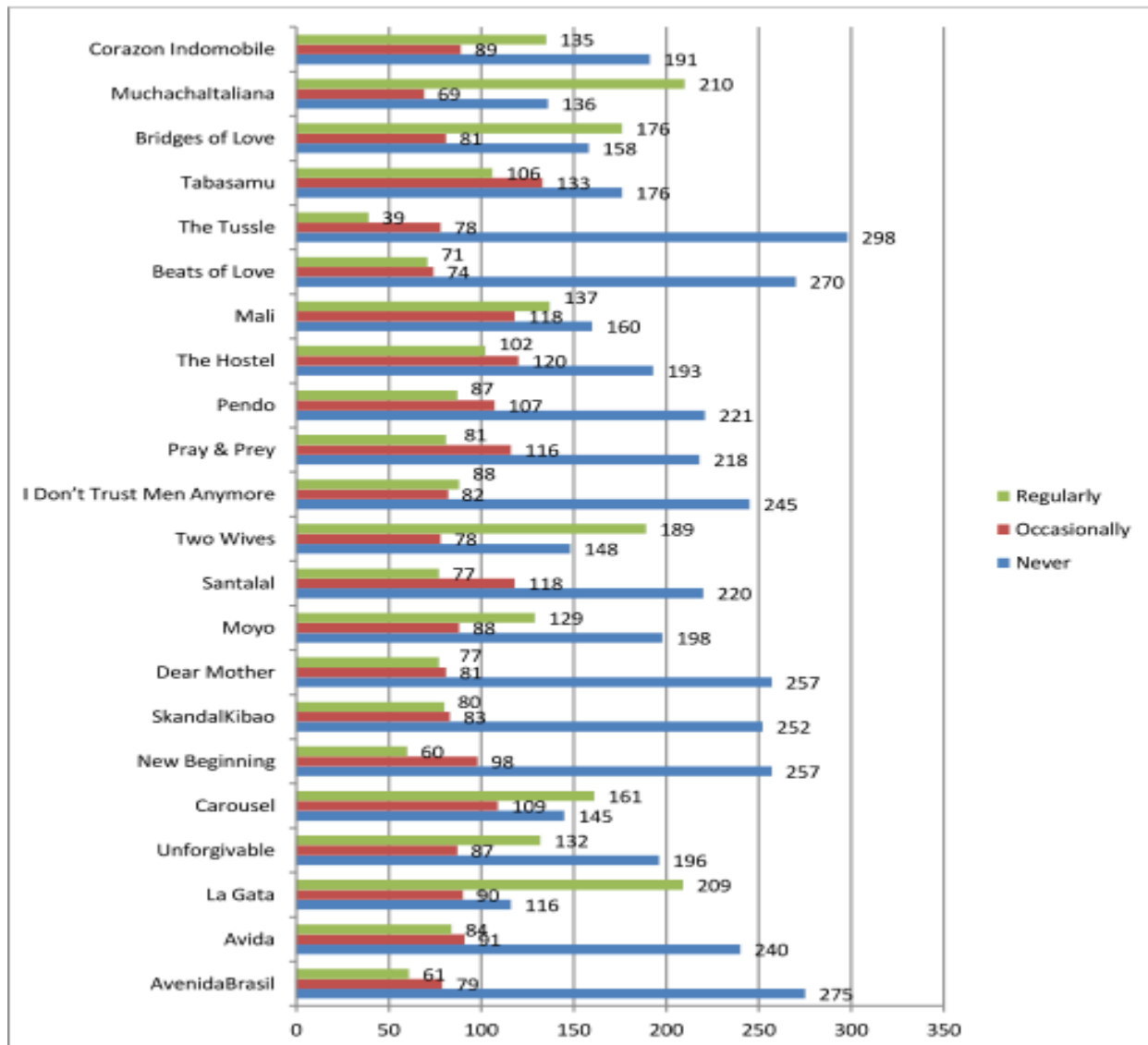


Figure 1.1: TV serial dramas viewing preferences

Source: Research Data 2020

Figure 1.1, indicates the serial drama audience viewing preferences. The listed programmes are a mix of local and foreign dramas scheduled at the five free to air TV stations (Citizen TV, KTN, NTV, KBC and K24). The show themes are recurrent and the stories revolve around community/family issues (love, hate revenge, wealth & poverty). In addition, they are scheduled between 6.00 pm - 10 pm on various days of the week. The context of their consumption could give us a deeper understanding of the audience's viewing choices. The finding indicates that the viewers have a preference for foreign-produced soap operas. The participants responded that they regularly watched *La Gata* (209 or 50.4%) *Muchacha Italiana* (210 or 50.6%), *Two Wives* (189 or 45.5), *Carousel* (161 or 38.8%) and *Bridges of love* (176 or 42.4%). These are all foreign-produced soap operas. The domestic produced serial dramas had their preference as follows: *Mali* (137 or 34%), *Moyo* (129 or 31.1%) *Tabasamu* (106 or 25.5%), *Pendo* (87 or 21%), *Prey & Pray* (81 or 19.5%) and *The Tussle* (39 or 9.4%).

To further deepen this understanding, a focus group discussion on programming was conducted with some of the participants. Their reception is revealed in the ensuing conversations.

A4: *Sana sana hizi ma soaps tu ni za wanawake...lakini there is a time when you can't avoid especially when you come to the house and is what they are watching. Alafu pia zina promotiwa all the time (These soaps are liked by women...and you can't avoid when you come to the house and find everyone watching. They are also given much publicity on TV)*

D3: *The programmes we have just watched the one's I know are mostly those from Mexico...some of them because all the time they are advertised so you remember to watch at times...and when they start you just know.*

By observation, during the viewing, more attention/interest was paid to the Mexican clip. There would be silences, murmured exchanges and concentration, unlike the local dramas segment sessions. The finding also reinforces the foundation of the soap operas as targeted at the female audience (Lavin, 1995). Responses like '... *These soaps are liked by women...and you can't avoid...*'. Nonetheless, the level of publicity also plays a role in a programme preference. The popularity of some of the foreign soap operas could be attributed to their screen visibility as expressed by a discussant.

B. The pleasure of the soap operas

There is a preference for foreign-produced TV serial dramas over local productions as indicated by the quantitative findings in the study. However, a deeper introspection is revealed by the FGDs as captured in the discussions:

G4: *I watch the Mexicans and even the Philippines'... even just what we have watched and you compare... they are real... they know how to tell a story... not like us there are those acting... we can't do. in La Gata...simple story but you feel sorry for the character...and learn that some of this this thing happens around us...and you know what to do under such experiences.... following the episodes.*

D2 *Mali iko sawa...but its high end in away...mambo zao siyo za kawaida (their issues are not regular) the way they fight about the property...they are things which happen to those who have...they act well but too high...*

The viewers suggest that the foreign serials have a deeper sense of good storytelling and acting, more believable in comparison to the domestic productions which they consider basic and has not changed over the years. Further to that, the aspect of uses and gratification-personal identity is stronger in the foreign serial productions than it is in the domestic productions and the audiences like it. Nonetheless, the audience selectivity in serial drama fiction is further driven by the level of professionalism, as enumerated by some of the participants:

E2: *Ningumu to know KBC programmes like hiyo ume show...(giggle from others) uwa hawa promote na ikohapotu...as much as you would like to promote your own...they don't do things professionally picture zao zinaonekana old siokama zingine...hizo zawa zungu are very serious.(It is difficult to know their programmes because they don't publicize them ..like the one we have watched it has no excitement and even if you would like to promote local programming they are not as professional as the foreign programmes...)*

The participants' talk of lack of professionalism at KBC, and compares it to other competing commercial stations like *Citizen TV*, *NTV* and *KTN* which have a better broadcast signal quality which translates into richer, crisp pictures at the reception, unlike the dull KBC output quality. And this affects all manner of productions at the station including serial dramas. Therefore, the technical performance of the broadcast equipment is a drawback to likeable serial dramas

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION(S)

In this study, re-visiting TV soap opera viewership in a changing broadcasting dispensation, rekindle the audience debate among Nairobi viewers in a period of evolving digital broadcast experiences.

The Nairobi audiences prefer to watch foreign-produced soap operas over domestic productions. Despite a robust digital broadcast production and programming environment, the audience choice of what to watch remain intact, thus demonstrating the continuing relevance of the uses and gratification framework even within a changing competitive broadcast environment. They perceive the foreign soaps to be more believable and genuine in the story portrayal in comparison to the local productions. The audiences are drawn to nuances like the 'life like' screen performance acting style, which is better executed in foreign soap operas in comparison to the local productions. Further, though the government introduced the 60% local content quota to encourage more domestic programming and build attraction around them, the audience continued engagement with the foreign serials demonstrates that such interventions should be incremental but leverage on content quality and technical upgrades.

In a competitive digital programming environment, publicity is critical. Some of the participants even cite the lackluster programming promotion approaches at KBC as a drawback to some of its serial drama fiction performances. The Nairobi urban soap opera viewers are attracted to well-scripted stories and acting perceived as believable and genuine. The study recommends refocused training on scripting and acting leveraging on successful production regions like the Latin American countries and also creating centers of Film/TV drama excellence.

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