

Kenyan Audience Reception of *The Hostel*: A Ugandan Soap Opera: Programming beyond Borders

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Abstract: Programming foreign television soap operas on free to air TV stations in East Africa is a common feature. However, an interesting phenomenon is developing where regionally produced serial dramas are increasingly consumed across borders; drawing good audience share. A case in point is 'The Hostel' - a Ugandan soap opera aired weekly on both NTV Uganda and NTV Kenya. What could be the cross cutting attraction of this programme on the Kenyan audience where similar genres have not performed as well? Using the audience reception theory, the study conducted 8 FGDs in two university campuses. An in-depth interview was also conducted with the NTV station programme coordinator. The findings revealed a favourable reception towards the programme but with character identity, accent and story realism as strong indicators for its attraction. Though the findings cannot be generalized, it is an insight for those who intend to produce such drama across the East African region.

Keywords: Soap Opera, audience reception, story realism, TV Producer.

INTRODUCTION

Successful television programmes are mainly *Telenovelas* from Mexico, Brazil, India and the Philippines. The reception of imports from these countries, and especially in Kenya is beyond the local equivalence. The centrality of local programming to the two countries, and individual TV stations cannot be gainsaid and any programme that exhibit resilience is a plus to the industry. The free to air TV stations in both countries are struggling to adhere to their government licensing demands.

The Ugandan communication commission (UCC) require the stations to allocate 70% of local content programming during primetime, and 50% of these should be made up of drama. Kenya has a similar requirement, though not specific to the programme genre. The Communication Authority of Kenya (CA) prescribes a 40% local content on the free to air stations.

Understanding soap opera reception and its meaning making moments to viewers continue to be of interest to scholars. Although this information is well established in the western hemisphere, in East Africa there is a gap for further study. Further to that, the youth audiences' in Kenya are difficult to satisfy in regular programming and it is argued that they have a 'high taste for foreign programming from Australia, Britain and America'. It is important therefore to explore their reception of *The Hostel*, which typically targets them.

In East Africa, many are familiar with ubiquitous South American soaps such as *The Storm*, *Wild at Heart* and *La Gata*; just to mention a few. Despite the popularity of these South American *Telenovelas*, regionally produced similar genre like *The*

Hostel, (Uganda) and *Mali*, (Kenya) are beginning to hold their own. According to Turow and Gans [1], TV dramas may even be more powerful than news programmes, in terms of their impact on viewers. Studies on local television audience preference has continued to show a liking for soap operas, that as much as the TV stations allocate it minimal broadcast time of 6% the *Soapie* lovers spent 19% of their viewing time watching their favourite soaps [2]. A survey on popular Kenya TV programmes in the month of January 2016 captured *La Gata* a Mexican soap opera scheduled on Citizen TV as the most popular even above the evening primetime news [3]. The station programmes a mix of local and foreign soap operas, and has continued to command the largest audience share among the free to air TV stations in the country [4].

The Hostel is among many of the serial dramas scheduled at NTV Kenya since 2011. The study was confined to its first two seasons of programming. It is one of the few television soaps produced in Uganda that found audience in Kenya, courtesy of NTV and for the rest of Africa, courtesy of DSTV. The comedy-drama is based on the pressures and challenges of young university students residing in a 'hostel'. The themes

revolve around relationships, marriage, money, class, parties etc spiced with divergent characters, the comedian 'Odochi', the Wanabe, 'Patra', the saved 'Hope', the geek 'Twine' among others. In season one, the production enjoyed a 'cult' following in Uganda [5] and was even sold online at US\$ 1.99 [6], which did not seem to be the case in the third season.

In Kenya, the fact that reference would be made to it even among business executives and marketing circles [7] reveals the extent of its familiarity with the Kenyan audience. At one of the popular active social sites at Capital FM radio, *The Hostel*, was compared to a similar campus drama (*Higher Learning*) produced in Kenyan (currently off air), where the author compared the production and the storyline and finally gave a verdict of 7/10 to *Higher Learning*, and 5/10 to *The Hostel*. However, the response and comments to the site overwhelmingly voted in favour of 'The Hostel'. Other Kenyan online publications also positively commented on it. 'The show is really well done with the main characters; Patra, Hope, Gilo, Arach and a bunch of others keeping me in stitches whenever I watch the show'. (<http://www.nairobiliving.com/category/tv/>)

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to explore the reception of *The Hostel* a television drama serial among selected university students. By answering the following questions:

- What makes them watch the drama and not any other programme at the scheduled time
- As burgeoning 'producers' what approach would they have had with the programme

The Hostel is a Uganda drama created from Ugandan cultural background. What then, is its reception among the Kenya university students' participants? They are from different traditions, cultures, urban to rural upbringing, which could influence the reception and perception of the programme.

Theoretical framework

To appreciate the TV drama viewing, this study took two theoretical approaches: the audience watching and interpretation of the drama and producer's conceptualization and expectations of their audience. Earlier research conceptualised the audience as composed of a large mass of unknown individuals; this normative paradigm is often referred to as the 'hypodermic model' [8], where audiences absorbed everything given by media without question. The audience was conceived as being a body of passive individuals [9], willing recipients and highly susceptible to influence by media messages. The emphasis is placed on the text itself and its power to directly influence the audience. Part of criticism of this theory is that it

underestimates the power and right of individuals to freely choose what media material they consume.

Cognitive approach later took centre stage in trying to understand how the audiences' use the media. The audience was no longer waiting to be 'influenced' but was seeking out the media. The uses and gratification [10] explained why people chose a certain media over the other or for example why they would select to watch a certain television soap opera. This model stems from the idea that audiences are a complex mixture of individuals who select media texts that best suits their needs. Uses and gratification has been criticised in its approach that it tends to view media in mainly positive ways and as incapable of meeting audience needs. That it should endeavour to discover the meaning and interpretations as produced by the audience [11].

Television Soap Opera

What is currently popularly referred to as 'Soaps or Soapie' on television is a pervasive genre in television programming across the world. It originated in the USA in the 1930's. Companies such as Proctor and Gamble created a captive audience on radio for product placements and mainly targeted women at home [12]. The programme later found its way into television. What is a soap opera? A general definition is that it is a broadcast serial drama fiction. However, there has been endless debates by various scholars on how best to define the genre, here are their varied approaches on what they believe constitute the genre:

Soap opera narrative work now places less emphasis on the lack of an ending and instead defines the form by its extended, complex and interweaving stories. a wide range of characters, allowing for different kinds of identification; the delineation of an identifiable community, paying attention to domestic and familial relationships; and an emphasis, often expressed, melodramatically on the working through of good and evil forces within a family or community [13]

Tania Modleski [14] definition is that,

Soap operas are set in small towns and involve two or three families intimately connected to one another. Families are often composed of several generations, and the proliferation of generations is accelerated by the propensity of soap opera characters to mature at an incredibly rapid rate... Sometimes on a soap opera one of the families will be fairly well to do and another somewhat lower on the social scale though still, as a rule, identifiably middleclass.

Other definitive description is that, it is a TV drama with a continuous middle with no promise of a definite end or resolution [15]. Alternatively, that a soap opera is a dramatic serial broadcast that is mainly

intended to entertain [16]. The definitions might not capture the variety of soap opera versions created across the globe, like the *Telenovelas*, which are mostly produced in South American countries and play to a 'resolution or an end' to the story. To their critics, *Telenovelas* and soap operas are a form of low art. A less meaningful and a 'less complex form of art', which hold purely entertainment and emotional value and 'which do not appeal to the mind'. In the technical television production jargon, there is usually a confusion in the precise definition of a 'series' or 'serials', in what Henderson [17] terms as production hybridity. It is argued that the producers who work in the two drama genres would occasionally cross into the elements of the other. In the series, the storyline on regular characters starts and end within the episode. In serials, regular characters have a continuing thread of storylines; they change, develop and interact with the world in different episodes [18]. *The Hostel* is a serial drama and would occasionally follow a hybrid storyline format. Some examples of soap operas and *Telenovelas* aired on television over a period include *Dallas* (USA 1978), *The Rich Also Cry* (Mexico 1979), *Tushauriane* (Kenya, 1987), *The Bold and The Beautiful* (USA 1987), *Mali* (Kenya 2011), and *Generations* (South Africa, 1993).

Watching the Soaps

Kilborn [19] and Brunsdon [20] argue that the soap opera viewer must have the necessary knowledge, the convention and the competency to be able to enjoy the programme. One has to be enjoined in the story world, the plots, the characters and the community. Thereafter, soap fans form habits and would watch them for years and decades [21]. Television viewing could be gender specific [22]. In a study dubbed 'Family television'. Morley explored the domestic context of television viewing and discovered a pattern in how men and women watch television. The findings were that, men are very attentive when they watch or they do not watch at all, while women on the other hand see television viewing as a social act that is accompanied by conversation and other household activities. The soaps have been regarded as women programming and part of their pleasure is the conversations it triggers.

In the study of *Dallas* (1978) soap opera Liebes and Katz [23] revealed how different cultural and ethnic groups of Israeli, Arabs, Moroccan Jews, Israeli Russians, Kibbutz members and Americans - make their own sense out of the serial. There are differences among these groups concerning their critical distance and involvement with '*Dallas*'. Their conclusion was that the non-Americans considered the episode more real than the Americans, having little doubt that the episode is about 'America'; the Americans are less sure, and are altogether more playful in their attitudes towards the programme.

Oshea [24] in a study of the South African soap opera '*Generations*', to selected university students concluded that its attraction includes the respondents identifying with the characters, the communication it sparked in their residence common room and easy but gripping storyline. The suggestion is that, there is an approach if one wants to enjoy watching a serial drama or the soap, and that having knowledge of its working structure is the first step. There is also a difference in gender viewing patterns and the culture plays a role.

Television Drama Producer

A producer on a practical level is a competent facilitator, someone through whom things can flow efficiently and effectively- holding together deals and creating relationships (Hogg, 2011). The role of the producer is a complex one, juggling between his/her taste; the audience and coping with the market trend expectations. Newcomb and Alley [25] describes it thus, 'He walks a narrow bridge toward a dreamed-for success' (p.33).

The Television producer has also been described as a 'bricoluer', 'a creator who mixes and matches familiar and cultural elements to make new combinations to which he or she expects audience to respond favourably' [26]. In addition, to be a bricoluer in television, one must have amassed a great deal of power within the production organization. In most cases, the people who have done this are the writer-producer. 'As writers they create and solve dramatic problems of storytelling, and as producers they are in charge of the production, and can protect their stories from interference by the many people who are anxious to alter them'.

Fiske [27] uses the term '*Producerly*', where the production of meanings is 'delegated' to the viewer (p 63). In this way, Fiske argues that television offers flexible and "provocative spaces within which the viewer can use her or his already developed competencies" for interpretation, rather than a prescribed meaning or reading position. In regular television drama production, a producer will most likely have a preferred meaning of a text and might not be read the same way by the viewer [28].

In a study by Gray and Dennis [29], they considered a television drama as a product to be offered to the market. Upon empirical examination, it was revealed that television consumer behaviours (expectations, involvement and connectedness), and program performance emerge as the precursors to audience satisfaction, despite the audience creating their own meaning to a programme. Producers yearn for success- that their dramas are attractive, accepted and well received by the audience. However, they have to develop the skill of juggling the elements of production

to achieve the success. Producers' start from a predominant reading of the story and expect their audience to do the same. However, they could apply different interpretations and either like or disregard the story. To what extent then have the producers of *The Hostel* been able to meet these elements and how would the students' respondents interpret them? This study could bridge the gap between attractive and non-attractive TV drama treatment.

METHOD

This study took a qualitative approach to collect data. Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were employed in the data collection. Liebes and Katz [23] have used fGDs in similar broadcast studies. In Kenya, a TV drama audiences and producers study was carried out by Kingara [28] known as 'Imagining Audiences: The Production Practices in Kenya Television entertainment programmes,' which tested the watching and interpretation of local television dramas. This is the closest research to this study. His data collection included focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Qualitative in-depth interview was also used to gather data. It has been effectively used when targeting individual broadcast participants or experts. In-depth interviews have the potential to provide the opportunities for greater depth and inherent ability of meaning construction.

The study participants were drawn from two public universities in Kenya, Multimedia University of Kenya and the University of Nairobi Journalism and broadcast production students respectively. The participants were a mix of male (22) and female (39) university students. There were eight (8) FGDs, made up of eight (8) participants each for first 5 groups and 7 participants in the remaining 3 groups.

FINDINGS

This study was to examine the reception of *The Hostel* a television soap opera drama produced in Uganda and aired on NTV Kenya. The data sample was made-up of 61 university students. Although the study cannot be generalised as the perception of the whole university fraternity, it can offer an insight on the reception of such programmes.

Why watch and the attraction

Many of the participants expressed having watched the soap at some point; some were adherent fans and rarely skipped the episodes. However, there were those who had no time for the programme. The reasons for watching and the attraction were varied as captured in the verbatim reactions.

It is different and interesting, unlike anything, we produce. It is just a new and fresh idea because nobody has ever thought of something like that, at least here in

Kenya. However, for someone in East Africa to come up with something like that is very nice. (A4)

The first time I flipped to it just by chance and I saw this guys with funny accent...it was not Nigeria or anything so got interested just to find-out it's Uganda...it's funny the way they talk...you know these entertaining pieces...and there is this guy who hits on every lady(laugh) and thinks he is very smart. (B3)

I started watching it before I joined campus to catch a glimpse of what campus life is all about. You know it was different from... I think what we had here...was it 'Higher learning' which was not of our class....i thought i could learn something. (D8)

One, the Odochi character. There are characters like that in real life.... , he is the reason why people watch it, as evidenced on social media. his comics too (G4).

Odochi... is a character I cannot forget. He is a crazy man with a weird accent. (E5)

The Odochi guy, he might not have the looks but he is an interesting character. He makes you want to find out what he's up to...but I don't like him the way he treats ladies. (C 5)

Odochi. He is funny and brings out the whole hostel thing. All the drama is going on but him...he is in his own world. (B1)

They are simple; they don't try to be complicated. Some of our stories are good like Mali but feels to high to relate to yao (theirs) is regular. (A6)

I just like the combination, I know there are at least 4 characters I remember...odochi but I like Patra...you know they are this campus ladies...who want to live maisha ingine sio yao(They live fake life on campus)...and they are common we know some of them(giggle and laughter from the rest. (H2)

The findings indicate that many are aware and watch the drama, to the extent of recalling the characters. Some find the story approach refreshing away from what they are used to. The dialogue (accent) is also part of the attraction and others thought they could learn something about the university life through the programme, this was so by some of the participants who had not joined campus when programme commenced at NTV. The storyline is cited as simple and interesting. Finding the right mix of actors accentuate the production.

The other characters who were also regularly mentioned, were Patra, Makona, Hope Annete and Twine, though some referred to them by the roles they played like..yule dame sevdi (*The saved lady-Hope*).

However, in the discussion not everyone was excited about the programme as much as they were aware of it and had heard few occasions to watch it.

I don't 'feel' the programme and don't relate to it I watch other things instead. It is dragging and boring everything about it is slow some of them drag the way they talk. You know like counting words better the...Papa and inspekta mwala. (C2)

There are others of my favourite programmes on Citizen at the time it's screened, so I don't watch it. (H5)

Others stopped watching when some of the characters' were rested and replaced by new actors. This opinion was also corroborated by anecdote from in-depth interview by the programme coordinator at NTV Kenya.

The reason for my watching was Odoch and some few characters like Twiney when they took him out...that ended my hostel watching. (E4)

The hostel season 1-4 was really big after that they changed the cast and it was not the same we could see this from the audience feedback...why is the hostel not interesting anymore and staff like that people would ask. (J1).

Story Realism

The success of the long running British soap opera *East Enders* was partly pegged on storylines. 'The drama emphasised on the importance of strong stories born out of believable characters and good. In response to the question of how realistic is the storyline, many connected it with believability and used the two words interchangeably. Others explained it in terms of characters.

Very believable in terms of their storyline and most of the characters, typically it's what young people at that age would go through. (B3)

Yes I think you would believe the storyline, realistic in most of the acting and the characters like odochi and Patra...for me they are 'okay. (D5)

Partly, though it should be more dramatic. There is so much that happens within the hostel or students residents at campus.. that is not captured. As much as it's very realistic though there is a lot that can give them content that has been left out. (A8)

Makona is very believable; she brings out the Kenyan girl. I think Johnny is exaggerated. That is not how Christians really behave, Johnny is hope's baby daddy, I think they have hyped him too much, it does not come out nice. But Patra is very believable and Annette is so

comfortable in her skin you wouldn't notice she is acting. (C3)

Their content is quite believable. However, I failed to identify with the saved girl...you get into drug addiction without knowing...I don't think so. (F4)

There are also those who had a different reading of the episodes and doubted on the believability as depicted thus:

You will rightly notice that it is an acted piece. I do not think life in the hostel is very eventful. ... Not so in the hostels, people get busy at some point. I do not think all that happens. Though occasionally it does happen so, you cannot believe everything that they showcase. (F3)

Sometimes I feel it is exaggerated. It does not show the lives of those students outside the hostel, it is like they are confined there and their lives revolve around there. (F6)

Many of the participants pointed out that the stories are realistic and that certain occurrences on the drama reflect campus life. They are also cognizant of the good actors –executing their roles well. However, a few feel that there is need to incorporate variety of storylines, and inject vigour in the dramatics. Further to that, the presentation of certain plotlines and execution like the drug addiction needs to be improved.

Burgeoning Producers

The television producer is a facilitator [30] and they have to find a balance between their tastes, the audience and the market expectations. Producers create texts with a preferred meaning, but the viewer might not interpret it as expected. This could influence the reception of a programme. Many of the participants in this study were broadcast production students at the university. A number of them have expressed their interest in pursuing broadcast drama production in future. The interest was to test their approach as possible future producers.

It is ok the way it is for the market.... though I will make it to be very argumentative, If they'd have more content and also engage in an intellectual level other than arguing and fighting the whole time(A8). So far, I think they are doing a commendable job. I wouldn't change much of the story line, just advanced production, nice colouring, and interesting shots. (G5)

The technical part....there are some lighting problems, the characters could be changed. Not so much in terms of the story. Like the character who plays the lecturer part. (A3)

When you start with certain characters and then you change them it alters it. It changes because they are not

able to bring the storyline the way the others did. You may lose viewership. I would just stick with the same characters and the same storyline and with that, the viewership will increase. (F3)

I would make the stories more continuous, but without making them monotonous and create storylines which keep people expecting and look forward to the next episodes, I would also reduce the men which makes the set feel busy with them. (D2)

Majority of the respondents indicated that, if they were the producers they would not have changed much and could probably have stuck with the season one and two executions. Some would have tried to improve on technical aspect like lighting and create more story suspense in each episode.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study confirm and extend the literature in serial drama fiction production and the audience interpretation and reception of the genre. Character identity with actors like 'Odochi' seems to be part of the attraction of *The Hostel*. Oshea [24] studied 'Generations' a South African soap opera among Rhodes University students and the findings were that character identity seemed to be an attraction in the watching of the soap. Further, Uwah [31] adds that, the success of the Nigerian film industry is partly anchored in the audience identity with the environment, the stories and the characters.

This study reinforces the centrality of appropriate character auditions where the audience places the character in a referential mode to persons familiar to them in the community. However, the dialogue or the character accents are also a point of interest and the audience find them comical. The Kenyan viewers have for years been groomed on slapstick TV dramas Like *Vioja Mahakamani* and *Vitimbi* which have had over 30 years run at (Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation) KBC TV. Currently, there are limitations in almost all the licensed free to air TV stations. The Nigerian popular accents and pronunciations in their dramas for instance 'my brooder' for 'my brother' adds to this fun and familiarity. This levels up with Thompson [26] that the producer as a 'creator mixes and marches familiar cultural elements to make new combinations and expects the audience to respond favourably'.

Though the drama is made-up of fictional stories, many of the respondents found them realistic, believable and as a reflection of what happen at the university campus settings. The 'born again', the parties, unfulfilled relationships are common encounters. The characters like 'Odochi' 'Patra' and some mention 'Makona' playing a Kenyan role as typical characters. However, the audience are quick to

relate and identify with these if they find them realistic and familiar. They are also quick to note of exaggeration or unrealistic setting like the 'drug addiction' plotline. This finding supports Hobson [32] study of female soap opera viewers in Britain, who judged the British soaps as real and the Americans as fantasy. They further criticised the soaps when they fail to deliver on the authenticity they expect. The producers or directors should be keen on every minute aspect of the production and always consider how the audience would perceive it.

Though the participants might not be competent enough to judge a 'quality production', they have acquired some knowledge and skills as broadcast production students. They are able to point out some technical hitches although they are aware this is a 'fictional drama', but would make it more dramatic; probably as youthful audience with exposure to premium Hollywood productions, they are tempted to measure it up with such standards. Fiske [33] argues that producers' do not necessarily care for the meanings and pleasures the audience derive from shows they produce- their concern is with the share of audience who watch and their 'demographics'.

In conclusion, the *Telenovelas* continue to overwhelm the broadcast stations in East Africa; however, there is a glimmer of hope that cross boarder exchange of programmes and productions is feasible. The fact that a production has been able to attract attention and draw discussions even in the social media points to the possibility of replicating or experimenting to dethrone the *Telenovelas* from the local screens.

Shortcomings' of the research

This study may be limited by the fact that it is a qualitative reception study with FGDs and in-depth interview as data collection techniques. Such studies do not allow for easy generalization on a larger viewer populace. However, as Livingstone [34] argues that though such a method could be open to criticism on their reliability and representativeness because the individuals analysed are much smaller than those examined by quantitative researchers are. Qualitative methods 'have notable advantages in terms of sensitivity, richness and complexity' (Ibid, p.166). Ang [35] further suggests that the role of the researcher is not to find objective or scientific truth but it is one rather of constructing interpretation. This study has therefore tried to explore the reception of *The Hostels* among young Kenyan university viewers'

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