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Local or Foreign? Genesis of Preferring Foreign Productions over Local TV Serial Drama Fictions in Kenya

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Abstract:

This study explores the reasons why Nairobi urban audiences prefer to watch foreign serial dramas over domestic productions despite the existing government incentives to boost the intake of locally constituted productions. The study explores this phenomenon through two critical lenses in production. The storyline and characterisation. The study has been guided by the active audience theory and the cultural proximity theory. The research employed a mixed-method approach, which was conducted at two levels. The first level involved survey whereby 422 interview guide questionnaires were administered to respondents in three randomly selected constituencies of Nairobi. They included: Embakasi West, Makadara and Kibra. This was followed by 9 FGDs in the same localities. Survey questionnaires were finally analysed by SPSS and triangulated together with the qualitative results. The results indicate that the domestic audiences find more entertainment context in the foreign TV serial drama fictions than in the local productions because of their superior production treatment embedded in the appropriate choice of the storyline, creative dialogue development and depth of actors'. In contrast, the audience perceives the local productions as drab, uncreative with trite dialogue and poor screen performance. The study recommends the improvement of the local TV production infrastructure by refocusing on the training of producers', by deepening and emphasising on scripting classes/workshops and exposure to international practices.

Keywords: Entertainment value, television drama, serial drama fiction, production

1. Introduction

The popularity of television serial drama fiction cannot be overemphasised; various reasons have been advanced to explain why specific categories of people watch them. In comparing gender tastes, more women than men watch serials or better referred to as soap operas (Ang, 1985; Livingstone, 1988). However, in Southern American regions like Brazil, they are (known as Telenovelas) a family affair patronised even by men (Lopez, 1991). Other empirical studies indicate that television viewers are happier watching soap operas than any different kind of TV programming (Lu, & Argyle, 1993). The Kenyan viewers' experience with the genre, started right at the launch of the first TV station in 1962; The Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation, the precursor to Voice of Kenya (VOK). It scheduled programmes like Dr Kildare; I Love Lucy, and Jack Benny's (Natesh, 1964). The station broadcasted for five hours in English, Kiswahili and Hindustani. The majority of the audience were Europeans and Asians. It can be argued that, in the pre-colonial phase, the programmes on offer were none-indigenous (Natesh, 1964). Thus, the station programming did not reflect the cultural and traditional concerns of African audiences. After independence, between 1964 and 1989, there was a single television station, The Voice of Kenya (VOK), a department of the ministry of information and broadcasting (Heath, 1992). However, established foreign serial dramas like 'The Little House on The Prairie' and 'The Walton's' continued to dominate the primetime hours of 8 to 9 pm time slots. This was also a time of extensive government/political censorship and restrictive creation of local content productions (Kariithi, 2003; Heath, 1992; Kingara, 2013).

There are emerging debates on the prevailing viewing circumstances and consumption of television with the evolving technologies and digitalisation (Dhoest, & Simons, 2016). The current viewing patterns are different from the earlier years of broadcasting (Gray, & Lotz, 2012). The multi-platforms and cross-media consumptions are blurring how we watch television (Caldwell, 2008). The evolving technologies enable the viewer options of live view, recording the programme or download; Because of the several enabling technologies, the current viewers demand 'convenience' more than ever before as much as there are indications that many of them still prefer social viewing (Dhoest, & Simons, 2016, p.180). Thus, the study explores the lack of entertainment value in the Kenyan tv serial drama productions in comparison to foreign

productions. It seeks to deal with such questions as to how do the audiences perceive the local and foreign serial drama fiction stories and what entertains them in a story characterisation taking into consideration the proximity of a story.

2. Television and Myth

Silverstone (1981, p.23) argues that to understand television narrative and the audiences meaning-making moment and entertainment; then we have to recognise myths in television; He claims that myth and television occupy the same space of 'intimate distance'. Myths are traditional stories which are/were told in different societies to explain certain events and were critical to the societal existence; they could be true or not but they have entertained people for generations (Silverstone, 1981; Newcomb, & Alley, 1983). Myths try to resolve contradictions in our lives, and television takes a similar trajectory: 'It acts as a bridge between every day and the transcendent, the known and the unknown, the sacred and the profane' (Silverstone, 1981, p.70).

Therefore, a TV programme is a reflection of 'our lives' intricacies. For instance, a television drama like *Mother-in-law (Citizen TV)* and *Mali (NTV)* grapple with themes familiar in the Kenyan culture. The complicated relationship of a mother and a daughter-in-law is a well-established myth. The family's conflict over wealth, especially after the patriarch passes away is a well-known myth like in the local Kenyan television drama, *Mali*. Though the myth concept is relevant in developing a television narrative drama fiction, it does not guarantee automatic absolute audience response. This study argues that the audience's positive response to narrative fiction might not always be pegged on the familiar story theme alone, but there are other elements at play. For example, some foreign soap operas have enjoyed better audience reception in Kenya despite the storypeculiar culturalsetting. There is evidence in Kenya that, despite the genre's popularity, the local audience favour foreign serials over the domestic productions (Ipsos-Synovate, 2016). Similarly, the Kenyan viewers', describe the local TV content as 'low quality and boring'. The negative production perception is as a result of the choice of storyline, characterisation and the inappropriate deployment of technical production aspects like the camera, sound, makeup and other nuances (KFC, 2013) (CAK, 2016).

To gain more focus in the local content generation, the government set up the Kenya Film Commission (KFC) in 2005 to spur, promote and market the film industry locally and internationally. Besides, other government institutions like the Communication Authority of Kenya (CA) licensing regime, requires the free to air stations (FTA's) to allocate 40-60% of their programming airtime to domestic content. These are efforts to boost the local production intake. However, this policy is not clear on how these improvements on the productions should be carried out.

Several studies (Ligaga, 2005; Gathigi, 2009; Mogambi, 2010; Mwangi, 2011; Ochichi, 2014) have concentrated on grass-root radio audiences to the neglect of understanding television programming. The African Media Development Initiative- AMDI (AMDI-BBC Trust, 2007) and communication scholars, among them, Willems and Mano (2016) are advocating for a refocus to television audience studies, to build more empirical data in the area; which could perhaps shape frameworks for resolving such poor receptive programming. In line with this, Cohen (1999) argues that individual storylines and characters can have a higher impact on viewers than other production elements. The study observes that understanding the lack of entertainment value in the Kenyan TV serial drama productions in comparison to the foreign productions could herald a paradigm shift in their approach to production and programming in the country. The study interrogates the viewership of the serial drama fiction in relation to the choice of the storyline and characterization by audiences. Thus, the study broadens TV serial consumption knowledge as well as shade light on the scholarly silences on the context of their utilisation.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Reception Context of TV Serial Drama Fiction

The fundamental attraction to television serial drama viewing is in the construction of meaning (Silverstone, 1981; Livingstone, 1988). The medium operates in a cultural myth and creates a 'mirror image' of the society in what Silverstone refers to as 'intimate distance' (Silverstone, 1981, p 23). Other scholars also refer to the 'distance' metaphor in varied forms (Turner, 1979) (Fiske & Hartley, 2007). However, what it entails is that TV mimics and replicate common societal issues which we grapple with and a creative serial drama producer carefully tact's this in the narrative. Nonetheless, the serial drama storytelling style has also successfully been adopted and applied in social change communication fields (O'Sullivan, 1998; Singhal, & Rogers, 1999). For instance, televised narratives on HIV/AIDS prevention have been used to create awareness and prevent risky behaviour in communities (Brinson, & Brown, 1997; Eva, 1998; Galavotti et al., 2001). Additionally, many entertainment-education scholars have studied the effects and full adaptation of the narrative style to other social issues like gender equality, environmental conservation and adult literacy (Singhal, & Vasanti, 2005; Singhal et al., 2004; Vaughan et al., 2000).

3.2. Storyline Treatment

An excellent serial drama fiction should pay critical attention to visual, aural and text (Kim et al., 2009; Kim, & Wang, 2012). Besides, television narratives naturally have a 'heavy emphasis on character development and continuous storylines that flow between episodes of a series' (Porter, Larson, Harthcock, & Nellis, 2002, p.1). This study suggests that for a serial fiction producer/writer to be successful, he/she must understand what interest the viewer has in a storyline. There are attractive and non-attractive elements in story flow. Wilson (2008, p.75) argues that viewing pleasure in a TV serial drama fiction is the constant delay of a narrative resolution. She references nineteenth-century British serialist, 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 soap operas-meaning that there must be suspense. According to Fiske (1987), for a storyline to gain an interest in an audience, they must 'experience' it and share a social platform with the story world.

One of the characteristics of the TV serial drama fiction is that many of them have at least three to four different storylines running concurrently within an episode and with overlapping characters that are related either through birth, love or living in the same neighbourhood (Hayward, 1997). The stories could progress at different paces. The 'resolution' of one could lead to the picking up of another one. The stories are not resolved but are always in limbo and open to any new direction. For instance, a pregnancy plotline with one of the characters could either be true, false or does not exist and could continue for several months. The audience seeks to know what happens next, a critical notion flow of narrative pleasure. The disconnection in the storylines, where the plotlines are at various stages create gaps, but the joy is further heightened by the audiences who 'write'- contribute to the story by speculating what happens next in the storyline (Allen, 1992; Fiske, 2013). The viewer is invited to these spaces to participate in the construction and the enjoyment of the episodes.

Livingstone (1988) conducted a comparative study on the audience perception of the British and American soap operas. She discovered that the British preferred their soap operas, which they described as real and believable and dwell on contemporary community issues like rape, alcoholism and drugs. Further to that, elements such as romance, love, glamour and hate on equal measure attract the audiences. The soaps included: *The East Enders*, *Coronation Street* and *Brookside*. The British audiences regarded the American Soaps as less realistic and pandering to the viewer's unreachable fantasies (Livingstone, 1988). Enzeogu (2013) adds that the viewers of *Coronation Street* take pleasure from the reflective storylines of the genre. They can feel the uncertainty of life as portrayed by some of the character stories. She cites one of the viewer's reflections as 'its great thrill to hear local....' Also, the writer must cultivate to work in a team; creatively think of stories with a quick turnaround, understand the serial drama writing formula, poses a genuine interest in writing such scripts and one who is ready to tweak local gossips to suite the story context (Kennedy, 2012). Stott (2013), a script reader for BBC continuing dramas, shares the requirements of several script editors/producers to include; humour, intense emotions, contemporary stories with influential individual voices, and precise dialogue that is ordinary and captivating. American soaps characteristically promote extravagance and wealth (Ang, 1985). They may give viewers something to aspire to, envy or adorn. Kilborn (1992, p.79) observes that some American viewers have described *Dallas* and *Dynasty* as super-soaps, as they reach areas of their fantasy lives that other fictions do not. They regard them as 'out of this world'.

Uwah (2012, p.8) argues that proper story treatment tries to give an impression of 'reality'. He further observes that the *Naija Movies* peg their storylines on a rich tradition of storytelling which revolves around familiar African themes like corruption, the wicked mother-in-law, the king and their subjects. The idioms, proverbs, songs and even riddles enrich the stories (Uwah, 2008). Kim et al. (2009) conducted a mixed-method study on the influence and perception of a famous South Korean Soap Opera-*Winter Sonata* among the Japanese audience. He carried out a content analysis on published articles of the programme from the Korean and Japanese newspapers. The variables investigated included: The attractive aspects of *Winter Sonata* to the Japanese viewers; they also examined any evidence of media effects as a consequence of the programme. The findings were that the overall popularity and quality of *Winter Sonata* was grounded in the realism, narrative coherence and the emotional appeal. Kim et al. (2009) further argue that the way the audiences perceived *Winter Sonata* influenced their buying behaviour of *Winter Sonata* memorabilia. Television has a substantial impact on peoples' everyday lives (Kwak, Zinkhan, & Dominick 2002; Lee, 1989) and significantly influences our consumption (O'Guinn, & Shrum, 1997) Additionally, The *Winter Sonata* finding is reinforced by Fisher's (1987) observation that people identify with stories when they consider it consistent with their own lives. An excellent serial drama fiction should, therefore, pay critical attention to visual, aural and text (Kim et al., 2009; Kim, & Wang, 2012). The Korean dramas pursue comfortable themes like family value, love and controlled violence presented in an exciting way that resonates with the audience, an attribute to their success. The dramas are also unique and do not imitate any other successful western shows and are self-explanatory (Ariffin, 2016). However, the entertainment value in a serial drama could be triggered by perceptions and influenced by family, religion, culture, peers and even previous media experience (Moran, 2003).

In the Kenyan contexts, Mosongo (2015) in a newspaper article observes that; the local television scriptwriter's role of creation and bringing characters' to 'life' is not recognised and given the respect it deserves. In the same article, Abel Mutua, a renowned television actor and scriptwriter states that Kenya has weaknesses in churning out good scripts in comparisons to what comes out of Nigeria and Tanzania. He further says that many people want to act but not to write and that one has to have a deep passion for it. On several occasions, Abel has tried to train people on scriptwriting, but they have given up before they are halfway with the sessions. Patrick Oketch also a veteran actor and scriptwriter for the local TV drama series *Mother in Law*, in the same article, he reiterates similar sentiments as Mutua, that not many people want to take the challenge of writing a script but wants to act. Oketch further observes that there are local writers who create unrealistic storylines, for instance, one infuses stories on submarine or statehouse while the person lacks the grasp of such themes. Besides, the problem with numerous local TV drama scripts is that they are poorly structured and the characters do not develop, argues film critic Anderson Wekesa (2013). For example, the long-running drama like *Papa Shirandula* on Citizen Television, the characters lack motivation; they have never grown in their story trajectory, outfit and makeup.

For this reason, he says, the station managers have no option but to continue buying the foreign soap operas where the stories and characters are so developed. The *Mali* serial drama, which was commissioned by NTV, was commended for its production quality. However, some segments of its storyline and acting were singled out for lacking realism and therefore affecting its believability. A case in point is where a group of women are portrayed to be in a 'rural setup', they are reading a newspaper, and engaging in politics, but even their accent is noticeably unconvincing. According

to Ogolla (2012) another film/television drama critic argues that in reality, such gatherings are frequent with young men in an estate, in what he refers to as 'Mtaani' -neighbourhoods. Thus, an audience would identify with such a situation more than the women scene. The suggestion is that engaging storylines for a TV serial drama fiction should emanate and reflect familiar community stories targeted at them. Therefore, adherence to cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) is a critical factor in the story's acceptability. Further to that, there is a deliberate suspense element which creates gaps and apprehensions in the storyline, generating pleasure moments for the viewer.

3.3. Characterisation

Newcomb (2004, p.413) argues that television is a platform where 'human experiences are reconstructed' and reflected on the audience. The audience can identify with the familiar environments which encompass the characters. One of the most successful television drama serials 'Lost' co-creator Damon Lindel states that the drama "Is all about character, character, character...." which has to be in the service of the people.

Eder (2010) defines characters as "identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exist as communicatively constructed artefacts" - in other words, characters are triggered by the text, but come to life within our consumption of fiction and are best understood as constructs of real people, not merely images and sounds on a screen (Mittell, 2012). Characters and their complex relationships with each other serve as the connecting points between the various storylines. Individual performance and regularity of the serial fiction characters in our living rooms make them close to us (Logan, 2015).

Abu-Lughod (1997) argues that the longevity associated with serials gives rise to the development of a kind of attachment to the characters by soap audiences. According to Ang (1985, p.33), the role of characters in soap operas is to facilitate and establish audience involvement with viewers who often find themselves identifying with certain characters. Some are judged to be 'genuine' and held in high esteem and the unreal, not held in high regard. Identification is an essential element in character interpretation. An audience tends to become less aware of self as a viewer but instead imagining being one of the characters in the story. He/she adopts the values and perspective of the characters and in effect, feels 'with' rather than 'for' the character (Cohen, 1999). Thus, it is hard to imagine a television programme affecting one without identification (Cohen, 2001). Eder (2010) further says that we relate character models with the models we have of ourselves.

Ang (1985, p. 30) observes that the 'life-like' acting style minimises the distance between actor and character, which creates an illusion that one is dealing with a 'real person'; therefore, the viewer imagines the characters as active subjects. In the study of the *Dallas* soap opera, Ang (1985) reveals the audience relationship with the characters as illustrated by some of the letters. For instance, 'Sue Ellen is my favourite; she has a psychologically, believable character...' Other extract letters read as follows; '... then I find that all the actors and actresses act very well. So, well ...I find J.R a bastard or Sue Ellen, a frustrated lady' (Ang, 1985, p.33). Mato (2003, p.4) points out that in the various interviews he has held with authors and producers of *Telenovelas*, their success to a great deal depends upon the possibilities of the audience 'identification with the 'Actors and actresses'.

A study by Enzeogu (2013) on the long-running British serial drama *Coronation Street (1960)*, popularly referred to as '*Corrie*', reveals that the social reality storylines where characterisation takes precedence attributes to the audience pleasure and longevity of the soap opera. The characters are refreshed to reflect the changing social reality. The fans engage in scrutinising their favourite characters by enjoying the gossips in the show and talk about it with friends. Enzeogu (2013) adds that, there is a correlation between viewing soaps and gossips and that it creates a cultural meaning moment.

Shapiro (1988; one of the original publishers of *Soap Opera Digest*, observed that viewer loyalty might not be particularly directed to a show or an actor but the character. The feelings of empathy, friendship, similarity and liking of the characters denote identification with the characters (Cohen, 2001). There is an aspect of role clarification on the part of the viewer (Fiske, 1987). *Simplemente Maria (1969)*; a Peruvian telenovela enabled a vast number of women to identify with the main character '*Maria*' especially among poor working-class women. She represented a role model for upward social mobility (Khalid, & Ahmed, 2014). She encountered similar problems to what they faced and presented solutions that they found helpful. In Kenya: *Tushauriane (1987)*, an educational-entertainment soap opera, was more on a similar level. The audience identified with the character 'Denis and Esther'; this was one of the most popular television shows then (Muchiri, 1989) their effort to consummate their marriage was always replicate with hindrances.

Hoffner and Buchannan (2005) carried out a study on how young people engage with television, fictional characters. A total of 208 university students (78 men & 130 women) with an average age of 20 years were enrolled in the study. The respondents were to identify their favourite female and male fictional character and estimate the length of time they spent watching. The findings were that the participants identified more strongly with characters that they considered akin to themselves. Other scholars have made similar observations (Hoffner, 1996; McDonald, & Kim, 2001; Miller, & Reeves, 1976). However, respondents registered higher levels of wishful identification with characters of the same gender that they perceived to share in attitudes. Both genders identified more strongly with strong characters and admired characters of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, they differed on ideals that predicted their wishful identification with same-gender characters. Men acknowledged male characters that they observed as successful, intelligent and violent while women identified with female characters they perceived as successful, intelligent and attractive.

Tager's (1995) study of black South African women's identification and interpretation of 'The Bold and The Beautiful' found that the majority of the viewers identified with the female characters that strongly persisted against all the odds. O Shea (2004) pinpoints the attraction of the South African soap 'Generations' to selected university students as follows: 'it

seems to lie in the combination of identifying with characters, enjoying communication it sparks in the residence common room and in the programme's easy but gripping storyline. Van Der Merwe (2005) also studying 'Isindingo' found that the local nature of the programme, its true-to-life portrayals and the likeable characters were the centre of interest. When the audience fails to jell with a character in serial drama fiction, they could develop a dislike for the show. For instance, the FTA station, *Citizen television* inaugurated a domestic TV serial drama production- *Santalal* (2015). Within its second episode of screening, it elicited over 800 comments on social media most of them negative, castigating the choice of the main character as a poor representation of the doctor character role she portrayed in the show. Regarding this and the Kenyan serial drama context, Gerald Langiri (2017) an experienced Film/TV drama actor and casting director, observes that there are a few excellent actors in the country. From auditioning experience, he says that, out of a possible 1000 people, just about 10-30 will impress and stand out, while the majority will not excite. This study infers that characterisation is central to audience attraction to a TV serial drama fiction. The research further suggests that the audience actively interpret the character roles and determine their level of 'genuineness' in a given story. The refore, to answer the question on characterisation in the domestic and foreign serial dramas. The audience is active, perceives and interprets the performance of the actor.

4. Methodology

The study has taken into consideration two research paradigms (positivists and interpretivism) to give a deeper understanding of the serial drama fiction consumption in an urban setting. The study adopted a mixed-method approach with an aspect of guided questionnaire interviews (quantitative) and FGDs (qualitative). The study targeted three constituencies in Nairobi, with a total population of 394,450. This population was drawn from the following selected constituencies: Embakasi West (164,037), Kibra (114,860) and Makadara (115,553). The sample size consisted of 422 persons who were targeted to be interviewed. A simple random sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. In addition to collecting data through structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, audio-visual playbacks and direct observation were also used. SPSS was used for data analysis and to produce descriptive statistics and appropriate graphs. A pilot study was conducted in 15 households in South C and 10 in Mungoini wards, which are in Lang'ata constituency to ensure the validity and reliability of the research instruments.

5. Findings and Data Analysis

5.1. Understanding the Entertainment Value of Local and Foreign TV Serial Drama Fiction

The viewers have a choice of watching their favourite serial drama fiction at the five FTA stations (*Citizen TV, NTV, KTN, KBC* and *K24*). The schedules for most of them are within the primetime hours of 6 to 10 pm. It was, therefore, essential to examine how the viewers evaluate the entertainment value in local and foreign-produced dramas. However, it was also important to understand their language preference in drama fiction. Additionally, there were questions on their viewing habits (from a selection of serial dramas on television), whether they regularly watched, occasionally or never. These questions were analysed using SPSS and reported in percentages. Focused group discussions and interviews conducted were carefully cleaned, coded in thematic areas and also analysed to enrich the findings.

5.2. Language Preference in Watching TV Serial Drama Fiction

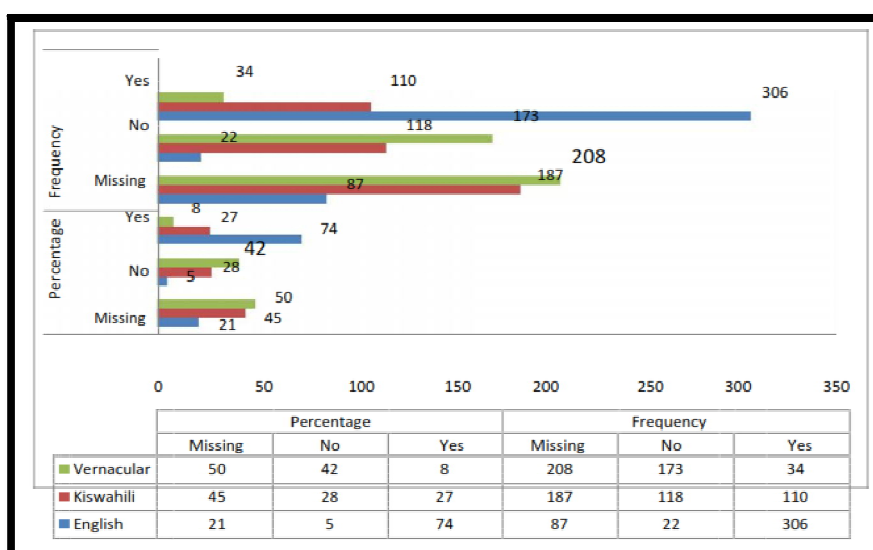


Figure 1: Preferred Languages of Viewing Serial Drama Fiction
Source: Research Data 2019

It was essential to understand the participant's language of preference in programming. The television productions in Kenya are recorded either in English, Kiswahili or Vernacular. It was important because it could inform future producers in the scripting of the genre. The findings indicate that 74% of the respondents prefer to watch their programmes in

English, while 27% would welcome TV drama serial fiction done in Kiswahili. A paltry 8% prefer watching their programmes in vernacular language. The FGDs reveals more insights into the participants' choice of language.

D1: *I think Kiswahili or English is okay. I know there are vernacular ones, but they are not as many...and some of us are used to sheng speaking proper mother tongue is not simple... (chuckle)...si unajua.*

E2: *I do watch the vernacular programmes, and they are very funny if you want to laugh...but you cannot do a serious movie...laugh...that you have romantic scenes hizo wachia soap operas*

F3: *I think all my life I speak English or Kiswahili or let me say sheng... actually, in our house, people don't speak Luhya. It's funny, and none of my brothers can speak it well...so I don't see how I would understand and enjoy a drama in mother tongue...it could sound funny (laugh)*

However, there are producers' who are taking the initiative to exploit the potential in vernacular television drama production and feels that it could be the future

H6: *I have done many scripts and dramas for Inooro...in fact I have an ongoing project and even Kameme TV. Vernacular is the future they understand the language and its nuances... at times actors struggle with English and Kiswahili, but one would be more at home in Kikuyu or even Kamba. So, I believe there are many takers to watch the dramas in the vernacular languages.*

Tragically, there is a strong perception among the serial fiction viewers that the drama is more enjoyable in English than in either Kiswahili or the vernacular language. For instance, **F3** statement that '*I think all my life I speak English or Kiswahili or let me say sheng... actually, in our house, people don't speak Luhya...*'. Such statements reinforce scholars like Mustapha (2014) arguments that the English language hegemony has its adverse effects in other world's languages. Thus, he argues for the support of local languages in Nigeria, and says that the enhanced use of regional dialects creates a well-balanced citizen that are educationally, culturally and socially well-grounded, further to that, it raises 'the functional usefulness, prestige and the social status of the language' (Mustapha, 2014, p. 95).

Regarding his arguments, in this study, the participant's statement that (**F2**) '*...you cannot do a serious movie...laugh...*' in vernacular, portrays the lower regard of the language over English. However, the '*chuckle*' could further mean that they are aware of the style, richness and connotations which these dialects hold; and an insightful producer could creatively fill this gap. There is a ray of hope that some TV drama producers are already creating scripts in the vernacular languages. Nevertheless, they need to be careful and first conduct ground studies to determine the magnitude of the vernacular audiences' especially in a cosmopolitan city setting. Many of the respondents here are young and have distanced themselves from vernacular dramas. There is also the notion of style and sophistication in the city where some might not want to be identified by the 'mother tongue' probably to fit in the cosmopolitan city life.

5.3. The TV Serial Drama Viewing Preferences

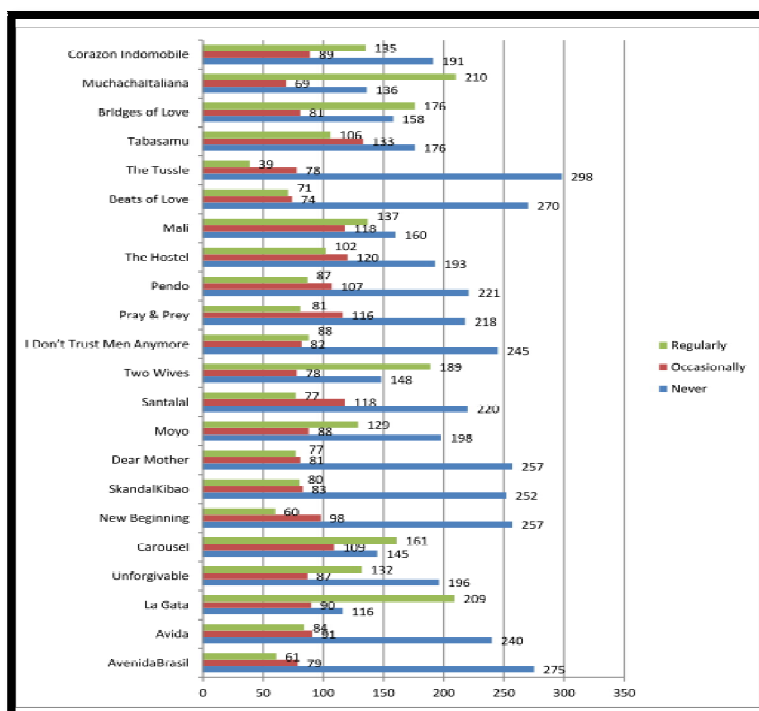


Figure 2: TV Serial Dramas Viewing Preferences
Source: Research Data 2019

Figure 2 indicates the serial drama audience's 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 a community/family issues (love, hate revenge, wealth and poverty). Also, they schedule them 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 perceptions towards them and their production styles.

The participants' responded that they regularly watched *La Gata* (50.4%) *Muchacha Italiana* (50.6%), *Two Wives* (45.5), *Carousel* (38.8%) and *Bridges of love* (42.4%). These are all foreign-produced soap operas. The domestic produced serial dramas had their preference as follows: *Mali* (34%), *Moyo* (31.1%) *Tabasamu* (25.5%), *Pendo* (21%), *Prey & Pray* (19.5%) and *The Tussle* (9.4%) A study by Synovate (2011) reinforces the popularity of the serial drama fiction programming among Kenyan TV audiences'. To further deepen this understanding, a focus group discussion on programming was conducted with some of the participants. Before the commencement of each FGD, a three-minute segment of *La Gata* a Mexican soap opera (Popular foreign), *Mali* (popular local) and *The Tussle* (least popular) dramas, were played back from a laptop to the participants. The intention was to assist in the recall, elicit discussions around the shows and to enrich the survey findings. These are some of the pertinent pointers at the discussions.

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 ones 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.*

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. You see, you can feel for an actor... like it's true... and the only stories we tell are simple jokes... so you just find yourself hooked...you see like in La Gata...simple story, but you feel sorry for the character...and learn that some of these things happen around us...and you know what to do under such experiences...following the episodes.*

D2 *Mali iko sawa(Mali is Okay) ...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...*

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. However, some of the male participants could occasionally walk out to answer phone calls and seemed to lose track of the shows.

There is a liking for foreign-produced TV serial dramas over the local productions as indicated by the quantitative findings in the three constituencies. A survey on popular TV programmes in January 2016 further illustrates this. It captured *La Gata's* popularity even above primetime news (Ipsos, January 2016). However, in the FGDs some of the viewers suggest that the seemingly overwhelming publicity given to the 'Mexican' soap operas remind them to watch which is at times at the expense of the domestic productions. Further to that, the viewers suggest that they have a more profound sense of good storytelling and acting, more believable in comparison to the local productions which they consider necessary and has not changed over the years. Statements capture these as follows;

'They are real; they know how to tell a story, not like us. There are those acting we can't do, and the only stories we tell are simple jokes...you see what the character goes through some of these things happens around us.'

The preceding discussion means that there is a problem in how the local producers concoct and treat their story version. They are 'real' here means, genuine, capture, flowlessness and identity with a story. The audiences' easily 'lose' themselves in the enjoyment of a show Allen (1995) brought out arguments like 'syntagmatic gaps' in good story structure where intuitively controlled gaps are maintained to create suspense and hold the audience's attention in watching a story. Further to that, the aspect of uses and gratification- character identity is stronger in foreign serial productions than it is in the domestic productions and the audiences like it. In analysing *Dallas* (1978) serial drama fiction, Ang (1985, p.45), cites one of the many letters from the programme fans on why she watches the drama as thus; 'there is suspense in it...it can also be romantic...there is sadness in it...and fear...also, happiness...' This is an audience capture which is well achieved by the foreign productions and lack in the local serial drama genres. It is a skill that is deliberately deployed both at technical and the story flow to create momentary suspense gaps for the viewing pleasure of the audience.

One of the previewed programmes- *The Tussle* has been in production at the KBC station for about ten years. In the survey findings, it was the least preferred serial drama at 9.4% and solicited various reactions.

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 publicise 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...their picture quality even look old in comparison to the others)

The participants' talk of lack of professionalism at *KBC*, and suggests it in contrast to other competing commercial stations like *Citizen TV*, *NTV* and *KTN* which have a better broadcast signal quality which translates into a more vibrant, crisp pictures at the reception, unlike the dull *KBC* output quality. Moreover, this affects all manner of productions at the station, including the serial dramas. Therefore, the technical performance of the broadcast equipment is a drawback to likeable serial dramas. The respondents mention the need to promote local programming at the station, a connotation of uninspiring productions and needs something close to affirmative action or empathy to boost their intake. Further to that, publicising a programme increases its awareness, this has been lukewarm at the *KBC* station-*The Tussle* one of the previewed short segments suffered from this. However, in an in-depth interview, the producer of the show shared his experiences.

H8: *We work under difficult circumstances, facilitation for the writers, artist and on top of that no one appreciates your work. People only contact you to castigate...so how do you compete with those Mexican soaps...but I think my programme was good enough...I could even get positive responses from people on the streets.*

The producer suggests that he works under challenging circumstances- poor motivation in the production processes (remuneration for scripts/actors) and lack of mentoring support from his office superiors. He acknowledges the superiority of the foreign-produced serial drama productions which he partly attributes to better financing. Therefore, under the prevailing circumstances, his production is good enough. This argument, thus, reinforces the respondents' observations when only 9.4% indicate likeability of *The Tussle* serial drama at the survey questionnaire. In further personal in-depth interviews with different producers, they expressed their opinion towards the foreign and the local serial productions.

H6: *There is a way the soap operas are told in a beautiful way, and one gets hooked to it...you know the love story...but they also have the money to create those expensive sets...the beautiful people and all that. It costs money...they also have very good scriptwriters.*

H4: *If we have the money we can do as well...though their stories are not my kind, but I do admire them...and I would as well like to make the kind of money they make given a chance.*

H3: *The response to the new Beginning has been good...I think it's doing well as much as we produce it under a very tight budget. We might not be able to compete like with the soaps from Mexico or other parts they are good sellers and promoters what we lack at times.*

The three constituencies have a preference for foreign-produced serial drama fictions over the local productions. There is a higher sense of realism in their stories and acting (*...You feel the character...we are only good in simple jokes...)* the audiences are not gratified with the local stories and acting when they compare them with the foreign productions. When this is extrapolated to the broader Kenyan film industry, it is not good news. The TV drama is universally critical to the television industry (Richardson, & Corner, 2012). The country has to find a way to build on or sustain what it already has. There is an increase in the local productions and some of the programmes like *Mali* fairly compete with foreign dramas. However, there is a feeling among some of the audiences that they are unable to fully embrace its story world which they regard as elite, while it is common to learn from some segments of a story like *La Gata*. The Kenya government has reiterated the importance of the film/TV industry as a focal point of job creation, especially to the youth (Wokabi, 2013). Thus, the preference of foreign productions over the locals is unwelcome news to the industry. The viewers have passed a verdict that the storytelling in the foreign dramas is superior in comparison to what the local industry churn. The local producers also acknowledge these grasps of the foreign creators, especially over their style of 'hooking' the audiences'.

However, this is reinforced by the perception that their productions are adequately financed and if they were to operate in a similar environment, they would produce similar good dramas. Though one might not fully support such an argument and the solution might not always be inadequate funding. The French Minister for Culture once referred to *Dallas* (1985) the popular American soap opera as the symbol of American cultural imperialism (Ang, 1985). As a first-world economy, with the capacity to create similar productions if not better, it felt the juggernaut of the programme on its audience.

5.4. Interest in Viewing TV Serial Drama Fiction

Questions	Options	Frequency	%
I find myself attracted to local soap operas comparable to the foreign ones	Strongly Agree	64	15.4
	Agree	57	13.7
	Neutral	39	9.4
	Disagree	139	33.5
	Strongly Disagree	69	16.6
	Missing System	47	11.3
	Total	415	100
The local stories are usually better scripted than the foreign ones	Strongly Agree	36	8.7
	Agree	61	14.7
	Neutral	70	16.9
	Disagree	141	34.0
	Strongly Disagree	59	14.2
	Missing System	48	11.6
	Total	415	100
I spend more time watching local soaps than foreign ones	Strongly Agree	45	10.8
	Agree	60	14.5
	Neutral	55	13.3
	Disagree	137	33.0
	Strongly Disagree	72	17.3
	Missing System	46	11.1
	Total	415	100
The local soaps are more realistic in comparison to the foreign ones	Strongly Agree	44	10.6
	Agree	106	25.5
	Neutral	82	19.8
	Disagree	106	25.5
	Strongly Disagree	30	7.2
	Missing System	47	11.3
	Total	415	100
The foreign soap operas reflect other people's culture, therefore, I don't enjoy watching them	Strongly Agree	39	9.4
	Agree	77	18.6
	Neutral	87	21.0
	Disagree	133	32.0
	Strongly Disagree	31	7.5
	Missing System	48	11.6
	Total	415	100
The suspense in the foreign serial dramas keeps me at the edge of my seat	Strongly Agree	116	28
	Agree	128	30.8
	Neutral	58	14
	Disagree	55	13.3
	Strongly Disagree	10	2.4
	Missing System	48	11.6
	Total	415	100
The actors in the local serial dramas are more accomplished and believable in their acting roles than foreign ones	Strongly Agree	35	8.4
	Agree	61	14.7
	Neutral	88	21.2
	Disagree	145	34.9
	Strongly Disagree	38	9.2
	Missing System	48	11.6
	Total	415	100
I sometimes wish I was the hero/heroine in the foreign serial dramas in comparison to the domestic productions	Strongly Agree	108	26
	Agree	89	21.4
	Neutral	55	13.3
	Disagree	100	24.1
	Strongly Disagree	16	3.9
	Missing System	47	11.3
	Total	415	

	Total		100
Questions	Options	Frequency	%
Given a choice, I would spend more time watching local serial dramas than the foreign ones	Strongly Agree	52	12.5
	Agree	69	16.6
	Neutral	65	15.7
	Disagree	133	32
	Strongly Disagree	44	10.6
	Missing System	52	12.5
	Total	415	100
The set design, i.e. furniture, clothes and fashion in the local serial drama productions are attractive to watch	Strongly Agree	61	14.7
	Agree	109	26.3
	Neutral	77	18.6
	Disagree	91	21.9
	Strongly Disagree	30	7.2
	Missing System	47	11.3
	Total	415	100
The set design, i.e. furniture, clothes and fashion in the foreign serial drama productions are attractive to watch	Strongly Agree	142	34.2
	Agree	144	34.7
	Neutral	44	10.6
	Disagree	23	5.5
	Strongly Disagree	16	3.9
	Missing System	46	11.1
	Total	415	100
I watch more local serial dramas than I do foreign ones	Strongly Agree	62	14.9
	Agree	74	17.8
	Neutral	46	11.1
	Disagree	128	30.8
	Strongly Disagree	57	13.7
	Missing System	48	11.6
	Total	415	100

Table1: Interest in Viewing TV Serial Drama Fiction

Source: Research Data 2019

The study further sought the experiences of viewing local versus foreign produced TV serial drama fiction (see table 4.7 above). The question used a Likert scale measurement where the respondents checked statements which best reflected their genre perception. If they marked '1' it meant that they strongly agreed with the statement, '2' agree, '3' neutral, '4' disagreed and '5' strongly disagreed. This was later analysed using SPSS software and the findings reported in percentage scores. A focused group discussion further added depth to the results.

Accumulatively, 50.1% (5 in10) of the participants disagree that they are more attracted to the domestic serial drama fiction in comparison to 29.1% (3 in 10) who agree that they are more appealing than the foreign productions. Another 50.3 % (5 in10) disagree that they spend more time watching the local serial dramas than foreign productions. However, 25.3% (2 in10) agree that they watch more local serial drama fiction programming than the foreign-produced. Further to that, 48.2% (5in 10) disagree that the local serial drama stories are better scripted than the foreign ones as opposed 23.4% (2 in 10) who agree that the domestic drama is better scripted. Besides, 36.1% (4 in 10) agree that the domestic serial shows were more authentic for the local communities in comparison to 29.1% (3 in 10) who disagree. The foreign serial dramas mainly portray other peoples' culture. Nonetheless, 39.5% (4 in 10) of the participants indicate that this does not negatively influence their perception towards them. However, foreign origin dissuades 28% (3 in 10) of the participants from enjoying watching them as much. Additionally, 58.8 % (6 in 10) of the participants regard the foreign serial drama fictions highly for their story suspense treatment. However, 15.7% (1 in 10) disagree with their suspense treatment. Further to that, 47.4% (5 in 10) of the participants highly regard acting roles in the foreign serial drama fictions than in the domestic productions. Majority of them, 68.9% (7 in 10) admire foreign set designs in comparison to 9.4% who believe the local sets are more attractive to view.

Uwah (2008) argues that the success and foundation of the Nigerian drama film industry are on the familiar story plots which the audience identify with the environment, settings and characters. The stories capture the people's daily struggles in the 'crooked cops', prostitution and trickery. There is excellent cultural proximity with their storylines and the setups. In a similar context, the Kenyan serial dramas are produced within familiar audience backgrounds just as the Nigerians or the Latin American. The survey findings indicate that the participants' share the popular universal serial drama genre story themes. There is an insignificant difference in story relevance (realism), whether it is local or foreign. Four in ten participants prefer realism in the local stories, while three in ten favour realism in the foreign stories. Nevertheless, it means that there is more to a strong story identity. Some other elements became explicit in the focused group discussions.

C1: *Kuna tuville hizo story huwa ziko real vile watu poor Uteseka lakini mwishoe anawin na ata huku unapata vitu kama hizo ufanyika...you can't know what will happen next..wako juu ville wana andika hizo ma soaps..ziko mingi lakini nisawa tu...hizi zahapa siombaya kitu kama comedy kama vitimbi tunaweza lakini kama soaps zinataka time Nama producers hapa nikama pegine hawana time (There is a way these stories are written they are real...the poor get trodden but in the end, they win.. They are advanced in the way they are written. They seem to require more time to write, which our producers might not have time for. However, we are good in comedies like Vitimbi)*

C2: *Umeona hiyo scene...yani jama anajiexpress ya ukweli atuwezi fanya love scene we cannot like say ...I love you on set kama hivyo(You have seen the scene...The man has expressed himself very well in that love scene we can'tsay I love you on set achieve that).. these people are experienced, and they put all their feelings in the acting...atu fanyagi hivyo(we don't accomplish such)*

E6: *In Kenya, it's obvious the way they act; you just know one is going to throw a punch...maybe we might not blame the actors alone those who direct them might have the problem they should visit Nigeria or even Mexico to learn, though dramas like Mali we are okay*

D5: *I can't remember how I spend my time on TV...but what does it mean when you switch on TV the 8 o'clock and even after news is all soaps...so sio rasi to know the Kenyan programmes ...obviously I would spend time watching them...at least pia zikona suspense sio kamahizi local*

D2: *Used to watch Two Wives..not sure whether K24 or KTN but this are common story...you come to know there is polygamy even kwa wazungu...but what I liked the way the two ladies behaved you just see what happens in such homes...so you learn something...they make the story so real...that even if its Philippines...you are with the story.*

The respondents indicate that they are more attracted to foreign-produced serial dramas than the domestic ones. They consider the foreign stories/scripts as professionally structured and appropriately styled with elements like suspense, unexpected twists and turns to the excitement of the viewers. Nevertheless, they seem to be aware of the intellectual input and enduring personal characteristics expected of the creator of such attractive scripts. In their conversation statements like: *'They seem to require more time to write which our producers might not have time for...'* This infers that the local serial drama producers' lacks the adeptness and determination in comparison to the foreign producers' in conceptualising and producing the soap operas. Serial drama fiction writing usually involves more than a single writer-it is teamwork (Kennedy, 2012). However, this is not the case in the Kenyan context; a few producers write or commission the writers. Therefore, there is a lack of 'team creative thinking'. Several concurrent plotlines excite and rejuvenate the story.

The participants have witnessed interesting and exciting scripts in foreign productions. They would wish to experience the same in the domestic ones. Allen (1995) argues that an excellent serial drama storyline should have syntagmatic gaps-these are carefully styled breaks (suspense) in the plotlines, which should invite the viewers to participate in the construction of meaning. Therefore, when a participant comments that *'In Kenya, it is obvious the way they act, you just know one is going to throw a punch...'* creates a blatant breach in story treatment- the expectations and predictions of future events in the story hold the audience attention (Livingstone, 1988). An actor is expected to be witty, innovative and can quickly tweak a dialogue to suit the circumstances (Stott, 2013). However, when the audiences can notice glimpses in a performance, it calls to question the auditioning of the character, they further agree that the suspense in the foreign drama could be a point of attraction. The implication is that there could be a shortage of good writers with capacity to weave suspense in stories or the local producers might be ignoring this critical element in their productions.

A sizable percentage of the respondents do not regard the local actors as accomplished performers, especially in comparison to those in the foreign TV drama serials. Their delivery is distinct; a source of pleasure to the participants. The auditioning for local roles, therefore, needs a rethink from the producers. Further to that, inferior performance perception might discourage upcoming talents. There is a need, thus, to either train or guide actors appropriately in the genre. Mittell (2012) argues that the audience perception of the actors' performance (believability) is central to enjoying the drama story- The discussant's opinions further illustrate this

F2: *We are still down in acting some of the actors need to be serious. They lack passion the way you would see Nigerians.... one can be a villager and looks like one and one time you see the person as a rich city guy... they are good in changing characters and roles.*

G3: *In Kenya, acting is not a profession as such...there are even acting schools in the developed countries, so they take it seriously...here it could be a job because your uncle is the producer...we want to see people acting well and can talk about them like some of those foreign ones.*

F5: *There are good actors like in school's drama.. then when they are out of school I don't know where they go to...we see same people in every kind of drama so they cannot give us anything different*

The discussants argue that acting has not been regarded as a profession by the actors themselves and industry leaders like the producers. Also, there is a need to learn from other countries. They can discern gaps in the actors' performance and compare it to the context of the story. For instance, in some of the domestic dramas, one notices the 'city features' of a character poorly transplanted to portray a villager. The Nigerian shows are better in the characterisation of such scenes. The viewer is smart enough to take note of what is unconvincing, real and genuine (Ang, 1985). Thus, the producers should be careful in auditioning characters for roles. Once again, there is a need to listen to the viewer, and it is a gone conclusion that Nigerian actors are considered believable, which makes their productions to be easily acceptable.

The respondents believe that the talent displayed in the school's drama festivals should translate to the broader industry. The implication is that there is a disconnect in nurturing and converting the good school's performance to the television screens. There is a need to worry, that the government cites the arts and performance industry as one of the pillars to drive the economy and absorb the deluge of schools and college graduates. It means that the acting job market suffers and could be one of the reasons why we cannot export many of the television dramas the way Nigeria, Mexico and even India have been able to do.

The audience can strongly identify and emulate a character - wanting to be like them. Newcomb (2004) refers to this as role verification. It means that the viewers are not convinced to strongly identify with the local stories the way they would do with the foreigners. In addition, it could also affect the full acceptance of dramas, where the locals are the heroes. Some serial dramas will employ expensive decor and create a fantasy in the viewer. Kilborn (1992) argues that, part of the success of some serial fiction depends on the fantasy world they create in the mind of the viewers. The success of Soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* is said to have rested on the deliberate fantasy world they created which other serial fiction had not tried (Kilborn, 1992). The decor is crucial to the success of serial drama fiction. There should be a deliberate effort by the Kenyan serial drama producers to work towards improving on their sets to attract the viewers or make the audience have a positive response towards the production.

The respondents regard the actors as 'amateurs' who are better at executing pure slapstick comedies but cannot engage in demanding storylines like in the foreign serial drama fiction productions. According to them, the local performers are yet to embrace acting as a profession, and a means to earn a decent living. They hail the school's drama performances, but unfortunately, it does not translate to the screens. The domestic producers alike acknowledge the superior production quality of the foreign dramas but attribute it to their better financial funding. The participants are looking for serial drama fiction, which would excite them; they want dynamism, innovation in the local stories. They can experience innovative story presentation and performance at the school's drama festivals. However, according to them, this is not replicated on television.

A commonality in many of the successful, long-running serial dramas like *Neighbours*, *Coronation Street*, and *East Enders* are stories which deal with common issues within the communities. The attempt to resolve the problems becomes meaningful in their genuine presentation (Ang, 1985; Holmwood, 2009; Enzeogu, 2013). The pleasure in viewing is, therefore derived from such circumstances. The participants share in the story themes of both foreign and domestic productions but differ in the reception of each because of the producer's approach to treatment. The respondents are not technical experts in the TV serial drama requirements however when they comment on a foreign drama like '*those people know how to write...*' or '*...you have seen how the man has expressed himself very well in that love scene we cannot achieve that...*' Ang (1985) argues that the pleasure in watching a serial drama is in the 'genuineness' in the portrayal of the narrative and the actors.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this study has examined the audience insight of foreign and domestically produced TV serial drama fiction, to understand their consumption patterns. In the interviews, the respondents show an inclination towards dramas done in English and Kiswahili languages. Thus, due to the colonisation legacy where the use of English was promoted over all other dialects. However, a deeper introspection indicates that a well written vernacular version and careful treatment of critical elements like the story realism and identifiable actors could suffice. The viewers' favour the foreign-produced serials in comparison to the domestic productions. Their storylines are considered to be current, dynamic and innovatively treated with an appropriate dose of suspense and intrigue. The acting is transformative, believable, and the respondents identify with some of the characters. The audiences indicate that they can '*enter*' the stories and learn- aided by their better treatment. Similarly, they are not receptive to the domestic serial dramas like '*The Tussle*' where there are weaknesses in the story treatment and acting. In other words, to be successful with the local serial shows, there is a need to focus on suitable script treatment relatable storylines, appropriate auditions and enhanced set designs.

7. Recommendations

The study recommends that systematic retraining of serial drama producers, be undertaken. The training should be led by selected and distinguished local and foreign serial drama production experts. Government film promotion institutions like the Kenya film commission should sponsor some of the producers to international exposure visits in well-known serial drama production destinations like Mexico and Brazil.

Additionally, the study recommends the setting and launching of TV drama acting classes, which should take place within the existing infrastructure. Some of the universities and colleges have established art and performance courses, and this should be the right level to start the TV drama acting classes. Experts drawn from within and international should train practical screen performances. In addition to that, emphasis should be placed on how to audition for roles in a

production, gestures like facial and eye movement on the screen. These are concerns raised by the audiences. Similarly, local serial drama producers have also substantiated the drawbacks of reorienting theatre performer artists into television actors.

The study also urges the government to enforce a policy akin to the 40% local content requirement, in this case, the FTA stations should be required to schedule at least a single vernacular drama programme in their stations. In South Africa, local dialects' drama programming is conventional in the mainstream broadcast stations. Besides that, the programmes should be given similar status to English and Kiswahili productions.

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