

Refracting the Local: How Digital Streaming Platforms Mediate and Redefine African Musical Identities

Kirui, Amon Kipyegon

Kabarak University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7906-7344>

kipnoma@gmail.com

Abstract

The rise of global music streaming platforms as a democratising force, is granting African artists unprecedented access to the international arena to share their music. However, this new digital space presents a paradox that is worth scrutinising. Despite these platforms creating pathways for globalisation, they also represent very deliberate and consequential mediators, 'The New Jim Code', that refract local musical identities through the competing forces of algorithmic biases, homogenisation and the economic infrastructure of digital colonialism. Anchored on Digital Colonialism, this mixed method study explores this dualism. A quantitative analysis, using Music Information Retrieval (MIR) tools, will assess the sonic features (e.g., tempo, harmonic complexity, instrumentation) of the top 20 songs from Spotify's 'African Heat' playlist for each of the past five years (n=100) to identify patterns of musical convergence. For the qualitative arm, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a purposive sample of approximately 12-15 Nairobi-based artists and producers with the final sample size being determined by the point of data saturation. Preliminary research analysis suggests that the curatorial nature of algorithms and playlists places pressure on artists to create a global by-passable, and, often homogenised, sound. This study proposes that these platforms are not just neutral conduits, but rather, neocolonial mediators that may continue to distort, misrepresent and invade how African musical creativity is constructed. This therefore necessitates a critical rethinking of the role of technology, culture, and economic power in the digital world. Given these potential risks that may arise, this paper recommends algorithmic transparency, the creation of digital cultural quotas, and creation of African artist-oriented digital platforms, that can better preserve and disseminate the multiplicity of African music in digital context.

Keyword: digital colonialism, African musicology, music streaming services, cultural homogenisation, platform studies.