

The Digital Transformation of Theatre: Investigating the Impact of AI and Social Media on Performance Practices in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media on performance practices within Nigeria's theatre industry, focusing on how digital technologies are reshaping theatrical production, aesthetics, and audience engagement. Theatre, which has long been rooted in Nigeria's cultural and political life, is transforming significantly as global digital tools become more integrated into creative industries. However, despite a large tech-savvy population and growing internet penetration, Nigerian theatre remains underexplored in structured digital adoption. This research aims to examine the extent of theatre practitioners' usage of AI and social media, evaluate how these technologies influence creative processes and cultural relevance, and identify key barriers and opportunities for sustainable integration. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study engaged 15 purposively selected theatre practitioners from Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, including directors, playwrights, producers, and digital media specialists. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which were analysed thematically using NVivo 12 software. Media convergence theory and technological determination guided the study in interpreting how digital technologies influence creative practice. Findings revealed that while Nigerian theatre practitioners are increasingly aware of the potential of AI and social media, adoption remains sporadic and largely experimental. Social media is widely used for promotion and audience interaction, while AI applications in stagecraft and dramaturgy are limited due to infrastructural and financial constraints. Integrating digital tools has sparked new aesthetic forms and fostered more participatory performance cultures. The study concludes that while digital technologies present transformative possibilities, their effective adoption requires targeted investment in training, infrastructure, and policy support. The findings contribute to contemporary discourses on the digital future of theatre and offer practical insights for cultural policymakers, practitioners, and educators seeking to revitalise Nigeria's performing arts through innovation. The study recommendations include establishing digital literacy programmes for practitioners, government and private sector collaboration to fund technological integration in the arts, and developing hybrid models that combine live and virtual theatre experiences.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Social Media, Nigerian Theatre, Digital Transformation, Performance Practices, audience engagement.*

Introduction

Theatre has long functioned not merely as entertainment but as a vital socio-cultural practice, deeply enmeshed in rituals, memory, resistance, and identity-making. In pre-colonial African societies, including present-day Nigeria, theatrical forms emerged organically through masquerades, oral storytelling, chants, and embodied rituals that mediated communal values, ancestral histories, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ogundele, 2007; Adedeji, 2003). Fluid, participatory, and often cyclical performance traditions conveyed moral codes while reinforcing communal cohesion. Following colonisation, Nigerian theatre evolved through interactions with Western dramaturgy and education, particularly through the works of Hubert Ogunde, Wole Soyinka, and the post-independence rise of university-based theatre. As Segun Yerima (2006) observes, Nigerian theatre became a critical mirror to the nation's identity politics, economic instabilities, and efforts at cultural decolonisation.

In the 21st century, the theatrical landscape in Nigeria, like elsewhere, is experiencing seismic shifts driven by digital innovation. The convergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media has begun to reshape performance practices, reconfiguring how theatre is made and consumed and how it is valued and remembered. These digital technologies are not passive tools but active agents in performance, transforming dramaturgical processes, audience reception, and artistic labour (McStay, 2018; Dixon, 2020). In advanced creative industries, AI supports everything from virtual set design and predictive audience analytics to real-time generative storytelling and actor augmentation (West, 2018). In parallel, social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) function as alternative performance venues, democratising access while fragmenting attention spans (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Baym, 2015).

This transformation raises fundamental questions about the future of theatre, especially in the Global South. While countries like South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana have witnessed the rise of digital theatre festivals and AI-assisted performance experiments (Akoh, 2017; Moyo, 2020), Nigeria's engagement remains piecemeal. Despite having one of the continent's largest tech-savvy populations and a burgeoning digital creative economy, Nigerian theatre grapples with infrastructural deficits, uneven digital literacy, and fragile state support (Okoye, 2019; Bamidele, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the precarity of relying solely on physical performance spaces, underlining the urgency of technological adaptation. This tension is most acute in Lagos, Nigeria's cultural epicentre: while digital opportunities abound, traditional theatre is increasingly sidelined in favour of more agile, online-first entertainment formats.

This study investigates how Nigerian theatre practitioners navigate this digital turn, particularly integrating AI and social media in theatrical production, design, and audience engagement. It argues that this integration is not merely a technical development but a redefinition of theatrical aesthetics, authorship, and cultural participation. In doing so, the study engages with critical questions posed by digital humanities scholars and performance theorists on how emerging technologies reconfigure embodiment, space, liveness, and performativity (Causey, 2019; Dixon, 2020; van Dijk, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). It also interrogates the creative tensions between preserving cultural authenticity and embracing innovation—a dilemma at the heart of Nigeria's cultural modernity.

Thus, this article contributes to broader discourses on digital performance in postcolonial contexts, offering empirical insight into how Nigerian theatre can evolve without eroding its traditional essence. The study aims to foreground a technologically informed, culturally grounded, and sustainably resilient theatre model through critical engagement with practitioners, digital artefacts, and production models.

Research Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology employed in investigating the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media on performance practices within the Nigerian theatre landscape. Given the complex and dynamic nature of the topic, a qualitative case study approach was adopted to enable an in-depth exploration of practitioners' experiences and technological adaptations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The chapter outlines the research design, approach and strategy, population and sampling techniques, research instruments, data collection procedures, analysis methods, theoretical framework, ethical considerations, reflexivity, and study limitations. The chosen methodology aims to ensure that the collected data meaningfully contributes to the discourse on digital innovation in contemporary Nigerian theatre.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A case study approach was deemed appropriate because it allows the researcher to examine complex interactions between technology and theatrical performance in real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). This design facilitated an understanding of how Nigerian theatre practitioners adapt to the pressures and possibilities introduced by AI and social media platforms.

Research Approach and Strategy

A multi-method qualitative strategy was used, combining semi-structured interviews, digital performance observations, and content analysis of social media theatre

campaigns. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to freely express their experiences while ensuring the research focused on key themes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Observing digital performances provided first-hand insight into technological applications in performance, while content analysis enabled the evaluation of how digital strategies influence audience engagement (Krippendorff, 2018). This triangulation enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings (Patton, 2015).

Population and Sampling Technique

The study population consisted of theatre practitioners actively involved in digital innovation in Nigeria, specifically between 2020 and 2024. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants based on clear eligibility criteria:

- (1) minimum of five years of professional theatre experience
- (2) demonstrable success, evidenced by awards, recognitions, or significant digital theatre productions; and
- (3) active use of AI technologies or social media in theatrical practice.

Fifteen (15) participants were purposively selected, including directors, playwrights, actors, and digital performance producers from Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. This approach ensured that only individuals with significant digital engagement and professional credibility contributed, addressing the reviewer's concern that merely being a practitioner was insufficient for inclusion.

Research Instruments

Primary data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide and a performance observation checklist.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions exploring practitioners' experiences with AI integration, social media strategies, audience engagement, and creative adaptations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The observation checklist was structured around key indicators such as the deployment of AI elements (e.g., virtual characters, intelligent lighting) and the extent of audience interactivity through social media platforms during performances. Both instruments were pilot-tested to enhance validity.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted from March to May 2024. Depending on logistical feasibility, interviews were scheduled physically or via Zoom, each lasting 35 minutes

to one hour. Participants were given informed consent forms before the interview, aligning with standard ethical procedures (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Interviews were recorded—with participant permission—and transcribed verbatim.

Digital performance observations were conducted by attending livestreamed events and accessing performances shared through Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Selection was based on the prominence of AI or social media features in the production (Flick, 2018).

Method of Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns within the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Interview transcripts and observation notes were manually coded to identify emerging themes relating to technological adaptation, creative processes, audience engagement, and challenges in the digital space. Data triangulation further strengthened the credibility of findings by cross-validating interview insights with observations and content analysis (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Ethical Considerations/ Reflexivity

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Nasarawa State University, Keffi. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of their confidentiality, which was in line with the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2020). Audio recordings were stored securely, and transcripts were anonymised using coding. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, ensuring autonomy and respect throughout the research process (Resnik, 2020).

Given the researcher's background in theatre, reflexivity was practised through maintaining a journal to document biases, assumptions, and positionality during data collection and analysis (Berger, 2015). Peer debriefing with scholars outside the theatre discipline was conducted to promote objectivity and guard against interpretative bias.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study is anchored in Media Convergence Theory by Henry Jenkins (2006) and Technological Determinism by Marshall McLuhan (1964). These theories provide a robust lens for examining how technological advancements, specifically Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media, are reshaping the structures, aesthetics, and audience dynamics of theatrical performance in Nigeria.

Media Convergence Theory

Initially proposed by Henry Jenkins (2006), Media Convergence Theory explains how

the boundaries between traditional and digital media have become increasingly blurred due to technological integration. This convergence is not limited to platforms but extends to how audiences interact with and influence media content. In the theatre context, this theory helps to interpret how digital platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram X, and WhatsApp, have become essential extensions of live performances in Nigeria. Today's audiences are not merely spectators but active participants who engage with content through sharing, commenting, and even reshaping narratives. Nigerian theatre practitioners adapt to this shift by using social media for promotions, real-time feedback, and audience-driven storytelling. Media Convergence Theory thus highlights the changing dynamics of theatrical engagement, where performance is no longer confined to a physical venue but is distributed, consumed, and even co-created in digital spaces.

Technological Determinism

Marshall McLuhan's theory of Technological Determinism (1964) offers a valuable perspective on how emerging technologies influence societal development and cultural expression. The theory suggests that introducing new technologies often leads to significant shifts in human behaviour and institutional structures. In theatre, integrating AI, such as intelligent lighting systems, performance-enhancing algorithms, and automated scripting, has redefined creative roles and the nature of live performance. Although challenges such as limited funding and technological infrastructure persist within the Nigerian setting, AI is gradually being introduced into theatrical practices, especially among experimental and urban theatre groups. McLuhan's theory supports the view that the tools used in communication and performance inevitably shape the form and content of the messages being conveyed. Hence, adopting AI is not just a technological upgrade but a transformation of the very nature of theatrical expression and experience.

Literature Review

The transformation of theatre through digital technologies has become a significant subject of scholarly discourse within media and performance studies. As digital tools evolve, they reshape how theatrical content is created, disseminated, and consumed. This literature review examines existing studies on the intersection of theatre, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and social media, explicitly emphasising global trends and the Nigerian context.

The Evolution of Theatre in the Digital Age

As both a cultural artefact and a performative tradition, theatre has consistently mirrored human society's sociopolitical and technological evolution. In Nigeria, theatre has long served as a vehicle for communal expression, cultural continuity, and

political resistance. Pioneering scholars such as Adedeji (2003) and Yerima (2006) emphasise that precolonial and postcolonial Nigerian theatre was deeply entrenched in oral traditions, ritual performances, masquerades, festivals, and community-centred dramaturgies. These performative practices functioned as entertainment and transmitted indigenous knowledge systems, moral instruction, and collective memory. Theatre was local, embodied, and immediate. The 21st century has ushered in a radical reconfiguration of theatrical modes through digital technologies. Digitalisation also redefined performance's spatial, temporal, and aesthetic boundaries, resulting in what some scholars term a “post-theatrical” condition (Causey, 2009). As Baym (2015) articulates, the digitised theatre space defies traditional limitations of presence and liveness, extending its reach beyond the proscenium arch into the global, networked agora. Performances now occur not only in auditoriums but on Instagram reels, YouTube livestreams, and AI-generated avatars, creating novel interfaces between performer, audience, and text.

This paradigmatic shift was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a migration of theatrical activities into virtual realms. Nigerian theatre practitioners responded with remarkable creativity and agility. For instance, the work of Segun Adefila and the Crown Troupe of Africa, as analysed by Mark and Smith (2021), illustrates how social media platforms were utilised to stage *Corona Palava*. This virtual performance recreated communal storytelling through Zoom-enabled interactions and shared digital props. This demonstrated the resilience of Nigerian theatre and initiated a broader discourse on hybridity, accessibility, and digital dramaturgy. The convergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and theatre presents a significant frontier in performance practice. Russell and Norvig (2020) discuss AI's capacity to process linguistic data, simulate conversational flow, and support predictive modelling—capabilities that have already begun to influence playwriting, scenography, and even casting processes. Theatre-makers now experiment with AI-generated scripts, interactive chatbots, and motion-capture technologies that redefine the notion of authorship and liveness. Such practices are particularly relevant in Nigeria, where youth-driven tech innovation grows despite infrastructural limitations.

McStay (2018) introduces the notion of “empathic media,” in which algorithms track user emotion and tailor content delivery accordingly. In theatrical terms, this translates into adaptive performances that respond to real-time audience input via sentiment analysis, biometric feedback, or interactive voting systems, thus complicating the traditional audience-performer binary. Though such technologies are not fully mainstreamed within Nigerian theatre, early explorations among urban youth collectives and digital arts festivals suggest an emergent trajectory. However, this digital evolution raises critical questions about access, equity, and authenticity. The digital divide in Nigeria remains significant, with many rural and low-income communities excluded from both the production and consumption of digital theatre. The increased emphasis on algorithms and machine learning in performance may also

risk erasing culturally specific, embodied practices that do not conform to data-driven logic. Therefore, there is a pressing need for a decolonial digital dramaturgy that balances technological advancement with indigenous epistemologies and performative aesthetics. As AI and social media continue to disrupt conventional theatrical structures, the future of Nigerian theatre lies in its ability to integrate innovation with tradition, algorithm with orality, and global technology with local storytelling.

Artificial Intelligence and Performance Practices

The increasing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into performance environments represents a paradigmatic shift in how theatre is conceived, produced, and received. As AI technologies become more sophisticated and pervasive, theatre, once perceived as a purely humanistic, live, and embodied art form, has adopted algorithmic logic, robotic interfaces, and machine-driven creativity as part of its evolving grammar. While more prevalent in technologically advanced regions, this transformation carries profound implications for the Nigerian performance context.

In Western theatre circuits, AI has already altered performance dynamics. West (2018) explains how AI is embedded in scriptwriting algorithms, automated lighting cues, robotic choreography, real-time audience sentiment analysis, and even AI-generated set designs. These interventions are not merely functional but are often positioned as co-creators in the theatrical process, blurring the traditional boundaries between playwright, director, performer, and machine. Such collaborations enable more efficient production workflows and open up experimental aesthetic possibilities, where a machine's logic meets human emotion in the crucible of the stage. Moyo (2020) examines a South African theatre production that integrated AI-enhanced visual projections to dramatise narratives around gender-based violence. His findings affirm the capacity of AI to enhance the dramaturgical impact of social issues by intensifying affective engagement and expanding the semiotic repertoire of the stage. AI does not displace traditional theatre functions but extends them, offering new tools for advocacy, healing, and collective reflection.

However, in Nigeria, the promise of AI in theatre remains largely aspirational, tempered by infrastructural, economic, and educational constraints. Okoye (2019) articulates these barriers in his critique of the digital performance landscape, highlighting the limited availability of high-speed internet, electricity instability, inadequate funding for the arts, and a dearth of localised training in AI programming and implementation. These limitations render most Nigerian theatre-makers technologically excluded, relying heavily on analogue forms even as global theatre ecosystems embrace automation and artificial intelligence. This technological asymmetry widens the performance gap between the Global North and South, with Nigerian creatives often left navigating innovation with minimal institutional support. A quiet digital renaissance is underway within the Nigerian theatre scene. Emerging

collectives of playwrights, directors, digital artists, and technologists are pioneering hybrid approaches that integrate AI tools into indigenous performative structures. Rather than replicate Euro-American models, these practitioners engage with AI through cultural specificity—embedding algorithmic interactivity within traditional storytelling methods such as *Ijala chants*, *Alarinjo* performance, *Nollywood-influenced dramaturgy*, and *community-based theatre*. For instance, some urban experimental theatres in Lagos and Abuja have begun exploring AI-generated voiceovers for multilingual performances. Others use basic machine learning models to simulate audience preferences in scripting alternative endings.

This emergent practice highlights a critical intersection of innovation and indigeneity. It is not merely about technological advancement but about reimagining AI as a co-performer within Nigeria's cultural and sociopolitical tapestry. In a nation grappling with issues ranging from insecurity and unemployment to youth agitation and identity politics, the fusion of AI with performance offers fertile ground for new modes of civic engagement and reflective storytelling. Here, AI becomes not a threat to artistic authenticity, but a potential amplifier of cultural expression.

Social Media and Audience Engagement

Integrating social media into theatre practice has fundamentally restructured the modalities of audience engagement. Jenkins et al. (2013) conceptualise this transformation through the lens of participatory culture, where audiences are no longer passive spectators but active co-creators and disseminators of meaning. This reconfiguration displaces the conventional top-down model of cultural production with more fluid, interactive, and horizontally structured communicative ecosystems. In the Nigerian theatrical landscape, scholars such as Akoh (2017) and Bamidele (2020) observe a growing reliance on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp as integral tools for marketing, community-building, and performance dissemination. Particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns, these digital platforms offered alternative performance spaces that maintained continuity and experimentation. Theatres adapted by streaming live performances, circulating teaser trailers, and hosting interactive Q&A sessions, thus ensuring that artistic work remained visible and socially resonant.

Mark and Smith (2021) provide further insight into this shift by analysing *Corona Palava*, a virtual performance by Nigerian theatre practitioner Segun Adefila. Their study illustrates how social media and online tools facilitated a new dramaturgical grammar, allowing productions to simulate spatial intimacy and ensemble dynamics through Zoom, camera angles, and identical props. They reference international models such as *The Show Must Go Online* and The Public Theatre's *Richard II* audio adaptation, noting that while these experiments do not constitute sustainable business models, they serve as critical testbeds for reimagining theatrical aesthetics in digital

spaces. The case of *Corona Palava* exemplifies how Nigerian theatre-makers have localised these global experiments to meet specific socio-technological realities.

Nonetheless, this transformation is not without critical tension. Baym (2015) raises caution about the commercial logics underpinning social media platforms, where algorithmic visibility is driven by virality, potentially privileging spectacle over dramaturgical depth. Bamidele (2020) echoes this concern within the Nigerian context, arguing that although digital platforms have democratised access, they have simultaneously deepened digital inequalities. Performers and audiences with limited access to high-speed internet, devices, or technical literacy remain marginalised. As social media becomes increasingly saturated with content, visibility becomes a commodity, and attention becomes an economic resource. Theatre practitioners must now engage in algorithmically informed branding practices, negotiate platform politics, and produce content that balances artistic intent with engagement metrics. This phenomenon introduces a new dramaturgical dilemma: to what extent should theatre bend to the performative logic of digital platforms?

The deployment of social media in contemporary Nigerian theatre has broadened the parameters of audience engagement, extending performance beyond physical venues into digital realms of co-creation and feedback. However, as scholars such as Mark and Smith (2021), Baym (2015), and Bamidele (2020) suggest, these innovations carry with them epistemological, ethical, and practical complexities that demand critical reflection.

Review of Empirical Studies

Mbede, A. U., Jacob, O. U., Andrew-Essien, E. H., and Enang, E. T. (2024) conducted an insightful study titled "Exploring Social Media as an Apparatus for Audience Engineering in the Nigerian Theatre Milieu," which examined how digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok can be used to enhance audience engagement within Nigeria's theatrical space. Using a mixed-method research design and drawing on theoretical frameworks like the Technology Acceptance Model, Diffusion of Innovation, and Social Media Engagement Theory, the study analysed selected experimental theatre productions across various Nigerian locations. The findings revealed that the strategic application of social media platforms significantly increased the visibility and reach of these productions, facilitated real-time interactions, and fostered community building among audiences. The study concluded that social media is a transformative tool capable of revitalising theatre attendance and engagement through deliberate audience engineering strategies.

While Mbede et al. (2024) study effectively demonstrated the value of social media in enhancing audience connection and theatre outreach, their study primarily focused on audience engagement and marketing dynamics. A critical gap remains regarding the

integration and impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on actual performance practices—including acting, directing, scenography, and content creation—within the Nigerian theatre industry. This gap is addressed by the current research, which seeks to go beyond audience interaction and examine how digital tools, especially AI, reshape theatre's creative and performative dimensions. It explores how emerging technologies influence production techniques, narrative structures, and performer-audience dynamics, thus offering a more holistic understanding of digital transformation within the theatre ecosystem.

Akoh and Ugwu (2023) examined “*The Viability of Social Media Theatre in Nigeria and the Proliferation of Actors and Audiences in the Cyberspace*,” a study critically explored the evolution of theatre practice within digital environments. Using Media Richness Theory as a theoretical lens, the authors investigated how social media has become a vibrant platform for theatrical performances, allowing individuals and non-traditional theatre practitioners to create and present content that resonates with various participatory audiences. Their research focused on notable Nigerian online performers such as Mr. Funny (Oga Sabinus), Mama Uka, and Brain Jotter, highlighting how these social media actors use platforms to engage audiences who actively respond through comments, likes, and shares. The study concluded that social media offers a viable and dynamic alternative to conventional theatre spaces, particularly by eradicating physical theatre venues' spatial and logistical limitations and encouraging a broader and more diverse reach.

While Akoh and Ugwu (2023) provided valuable insight into the rise of social media theatre and its role in expanding access and participation, their focus was primarily on *popular content creation and the participatory culture* emerging within cyberspace. Their study did not investigate how Artificial Intelligence (AI) influences the *core creative and performance processes* in the theatre domain. This omission highlights a significant gap that the current research seeks to fill. Unlike previous studies that focus solely on audience dynamics or digital content proliferation, this study evaluates the transformative impact of AI and digital technologies on performance creation, staging, direction, and dramaturgy.

Boh and Adoka (2024), in their study titled “Artistic Creativity, Digital Technologies and Theatrical Sustainability: Integrating New Media in Theatre Practice,” examined how digital technologies are shaping contemporary theatre practices. Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the study explored the influence of digital innovation on the development, performance, and dissemination of theatrical content to audiences. The authors argued that new media tools enable the creation of entirely new art forms and enhance traditional theatrical expressions by introducing multimedia features and interactive experiences. Their findings emphasised that digitalisation has empowered theatre practitioners to expand creative possibilities and access broader, often virtual, audiences. Furthermore, the study highlighted the need for Nigerian

theatre to embrace new media to sustain relevance in an increasingly digital and globalised world.

While Boh and Adoka (2024) offered valuable insights into the integration of digital media for enhancing artistic creativity and ensuring theatrical sustainability, their research primarily centred on general digital technologies and media platforms without a specific focus on the distinctive role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in shaping performance practices. This presents a critical research gap that the current study aims to address. The present research goes beyond the broader discourse on digitalisation by specifically interrogating how AI and social media are revolutionising performance techniques, creative processes, and audience engagement in Nigerian theatre.

Marka and Smith (2022), in their study titled “*Theatre on Social Media in Post-COVID-19 Nigeria: Segun Adefila's Corona Palava as a Virtual Performance*,” explored how Nigerian theatre adapted to the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic by using social media platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube, for theatrical productions. Employing the theory of *Intermediality* proposed by Hess-Lüttich (1999), the study examined the dynamics of merging different media platforms to present theatre in a virtual form. The researchers highlighted that, compared to YouTube, Facebook offered more interactive engagement between performers and audiences during the *COVID-19 pandemic streaming*. This approach enabled the continuity of performance culture during lockdowns and supported the educational role of theatre by reaching broader and more diverse audiences online.

While the study provides significant insight into how Nigerian theatre practitioners responded to the constraints of the COVID-19 era through virtual performances, its scope remains largely historical and platform-specific, focusing predominantly on adapting live theatre to social media platforms in a crisis context. The current research builds upon and extends this foundation by moving beyond crisis-induced adaptations to examine the deliberate and strategic integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into performance practices. This shift in focus addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship, which has yet to fully engage with the long-term implications of AI in theatre production, direction, script development, and audience interaction.

Scenes from the Field: A Presentation of Findings

This data unveils the empirical landscape shaped by the study's triangulated research methods: semi-structured interviews, digital performance observations, and content analysis of theatre campaigns on social media. These approaches interrogated the three core research objectives: (1) to explore the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Nigerian theatre; (2) to assess the role of social media in audience engagement; and (3) to examine how digital technologies are transforming aesthetics, production processes, and reception in performance. Thematic analysis was employed as the dramaturgical lens to distil patterns and tensions emerging from the field.

One of the most pronounced motifs emerging from the interviews and observations is the increasing, if experimental, incorporation of AI into Nigerian theatre's creative and technical spheres. Of the 15 theatre practitioners interviewed, 13 confirmed that they have directly employed AI technologies or witnessed their use within performance environments. These AI tools are most visible in lighting, scenography, sound modulation, and rehearsal streamlining. A Lagos-based director of entertainment candidly revealed:

We now use AI software to control the stage lights and visuals. In our recent play, "Echoes of Tomorrow," the background changed automatically depending on the actor's position. It was like the set was alive—it made everything feel more real and exciting.

— Respondent A, R03, Female, 47, HND Theatre Arts, Stage Director, Lagos, Interview, March 2025

This insight was corroborated by two prominent performance observations of *Echoes of Algorithms* (Lagos, 2023) and *Virtual Masquerade* (Port Harcourt, 2024), where AI managed scene transitions and dynamically adapted to audience real-time input into auditory effects. The seamless interaction between automation and dramaturgy in these productions validated Jenkins' (2006) convergence theory, which contends that digital media facilitates the hybridisation of storytelling methods.

From the wings of backstage to the spotlight on centre stage, AI was consistently described as an “invisible performer.” According to a theatre producer:

Before, we spent hours tweaking sound and lighting manually, but now AI handles most of that. It frees us to focus more on acting, rehearsals, and storytelling.

— Respondent B, R10, Male, 38, B.A. Theatre & Media Arts, Theatre Producer, Abuja, Interview, March 2025

This shift underscores a reallocation of creative energy from technical to performative dimensions, suggesting that AI is not merely a technological add-on but a co-directing force within contemporary Nigerian theatre.

Another dominant theme concerned the strategic use of social media to attract and sustain audience engagement. All 15 respondents acknowledged the commanding role of social media as both a stage and an amplifier. Platforms like Instagram, X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok have become vital to audience cultivation, transcending traditional promotional roles to become part of the performative space. A veteran actor from Abuja articulated:

Social media is no longer used just for adverts. It has become our backstage, front stage, and audience gallery. Most of our ticket sales come from campaigns on X and WhatsApp statuses.

— Respondent C, R15, Female, 33, B.Sc. Mass Communication, Artistic Director, Abuja, Interview, March 2025

Three major social media strategies emerged: teaser reels preceding performances, live-tweeting or streaming during performances, and post-performance audience interaction via polls and comment threads. The content analysis of three theatre campaigns—*Reboot Naija* (2022), *Digital Ancestry* (2023), and *Scripts and Screens* (2024)—demonstrated these tactics. These productions used interactive hashtags like #TheatreReboot and #AIONStage, shared behind-the-scenes content, and hosted post-show Q&A sessions, creating a feedback loop that informed subsequent performance decisions. This dynamic engagement illustrates McLuhan's (1964) notion of media as an extension of human interaction. Social media transformed audience members from passive observers to active co-creators of meaning and narrative.

Thematic analysis revealed a significant shift in performance aesthetics attributed to deploying AI and other digital technologies. Respondents noted a move away from linear, dialogue-driven narratives towards fragmented, multimedia-infused storytelling. This was evident in performances at the *Digital Pulse Theatre Festival 2024*, where visual and audio elements precede verbal exposition. A Port Harcourt-based playwright observed:

AI has altered our creative process. Now, I write scenes with cues for algorithmic sounds or AI-voiced narrators. It is almost like writing for a hybrid stage, a mix of live, digital, and imagined spaces.

— Respondent D, Playwright, Port Harcourt, Interview, March 2025

These insights highlight an emerging aesthetic paradigm where live performance, digital augmentation, and algorithmic intervention coalesce. AI-enabled production tools, such as voice command prompts, script reading bots, and digital scenography simulations, have altered rehearsal methodologies and reduced logistical barriers. Nevertheless, this transformation has not occurred without critique.

Ten respondents confirmed that AI tools actively influenced the rehearsal process. Typical applications included AI-generated voiceovers, automated prompt systems, and stage design simulations. These tools offered innovative ways to generate creative content and streamline production workflows. An academic theatre instructor noted:

*In our last workshop, **Digital Theatre and Story Innovation Lab**, we used ChatGPT to generate scene ideas. It gave the students an unexpected*

creative edge. While it does not replace dramaturgical thinking, it was a helpful tool.

— Respondent E, R11, Male, 52, PhD Theatre Studies, Theatre Lecturer, Lagos, Interview, March 2025

Performances such as *Voices from the Grid* and *Neo-Oriki* were observed employing intelligent lighting systems adapted to vocal pitch and actor movement, introducing temporal precision and spatial flexibility. These innovations enhanced the spatial dynamism and temporal precision of the performance space. Such findings align with the perspectives of Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), who advocate for including observational data in analysing nonverbal performance elements.

Despite the general optimism surrounding digital integration, some respondents voiced reservations about the overuse of AI in theatre. Four out of fifteen participants expressed concerns over artistic authenticity's potential erosion and algorithmic bias's dangers. A seasoned performer from Ibadan cautioned:

We must be careful not to allow machines to erase our essence. Theatre is about human emotion; sometimes AI lacks the depth of pain, joy, and nuance that only real performers can communicate.

— Respondent F, R06, Male, 32, M.A. Media Studies, Director & Scriptwriter, Lagos, Interview, March 2025

This sentiment reflects broader ideological tensions between techno-optimists and traditionalists in Nigerian theatre. It also resonates with McLuhan's (1964) cautionary insights on technological determinism that every new medium inevitably reconfigures cultural practice and perception, sometimes in ways that diminish the human element.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal a growing adoption of Artificial Intelligence in Nigeria's contemporary theatre practice, particularly in technical areas such as lighting, sound, and set design. Participants indicated that AI-enhanced automation now supports real-time scene changes and mood projections, significantly improving efficiency and the overall aesthetic of live performances. This development aligns with Russell and Norvig's (2020) assertion that AI possesses creative potential in storytelling and stagecraft through pattern recognition and predictive design. In addition, McStay's (2018) concept of “empathic media” finds relevance here, particularly in cases where AI visualised emotional shifts within a performance, enhancing dramatic expression.

However, this shift also challenges earlier conclusions by Okoye (2019), who cited infrastructural limitations as barriers to digital innovation in Nigerian theatre. The

evidence from this study suggests that while such barriers persist, a growing number of practitioners, particularly younger creatives, are actively overcoming these constraints through experimentation and hybrid practices, a trend also noted by Moyo (2020) in South African theatre. Although not yet widespread, the integration of AI marks a transformative moment in the evolution of Nigerian performance arts.

Another significant finding is the centrality of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp in audience engagement and visibility. Theatre practitioners actively use these platforms to promote productions, interact with followers, and cultivate online communities. The study affirms Jenkins et al.'s (2013) notion of participatory culture, as audiences are no longer passive spectators but co-creators who engage with content through feedback, sharing, and live interactions.

This trend supports the findings of Mbede et al. (2024), who argue that deliberate use of social media tools can revitalise audience interest and expand theatrical outreach in Nigeria. In addition, Akoh (2017) and Bamidele (2020) highlight how social media has enabled Nigerian theatre to adapt quickly, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, the study also echoes Baym's (2015) concern regarding the burden of algorithmic visibility. Practitioners expressed anxiety over the pressure to continuously create content to stay relevant, often at the cost of artistic focus. This reflects a growing tension between creative authenticity and digital visibility, which calls for new digital literacy strategies and institutional support for artists navigating this space.

The emergence of hybrid performances that merge live theatrical action with digital elements signifies a key transformation in Nigerian theatre practice. Respondents described instances where traditional stagecraft was integrated with components like projected screens, real-time virtual effects, and interactive audience mechanisms like live voting. This evolution supports Baym's (2015) assertion that digital technologies extend the spatial and temporal boundaries of performance, allowing for immersive and multi-layered experiences that transcend the physical limitations of conventional theatre spaces.

The findings aligned with Media Convergence Theory as proposed by Henry Jenkins (2006), which explains how digital platforms and participatory media environments reshape traditional content delivery and audience interaction. The Nigerian theatre landscape is converging, where social media, mobile technology, and digital projections are coalescing with live performance to create fluid, borderless, and participatory art forms. Audiences are no longer passive observers but are increasingly becoming co-creators of meaning, actively engaging in the performance process through social media commentary, real-time interaction, and online dissemination. Simultaneously, this shift is grounded in the Technological Determinism principles

articulated by Marshall McLuhan (1964), which posits that emerging technologies drive structural and cultural change. Adopting digital tools such as AI-enhanced lighting, virtual sets, and interactive media alters Nigerian theatre's visual aesthetics. It redefines the roles of actors, directors, and audiences within the performative space. The presence of digitally literate and experimental younger practitioners as pioneers of these hybrid forms reflects a generational transition, mirroring what West (2018) and Moyo (2020) describe as a move towards more participatory and technologically infused storytelling in African performance arts.

Despite the positive impact of AI and social media, the study reveals several systemic challenges, including the high cost of technology, lack of funding, and limited access to digital training. Respondents expressed frustration over the financial and technical demands of maintaining an effective online presence or incorporating AI into their productions.

These concerns validate Okoye's (2019) observations about infrastructural and economic barriers to digital adoption in Nigerian theatre. Similarly, Bamidele (2020) cautions that digital inequalities can exclude marginalised voices from the evolving theatre landscape.

Nonetheless, the prevailing sentiment among participants is hopeful. Many viewed the current phase of digital experimentation as a stepping stone towards a more inclusive and vibrant theatre culture. The study supports Mbede et al.'s (2024) conclusion that Nigeria's theatre can survive and flourish in the digital age with strategic investments in training and digital infrastructure.

Coclusion

This study firmly establishes that Artificial Intelligence and social media are redefining the landscape of Nigerian theatre. Integrating digital tools into scripting, production, and audience engagement marks a radical shift from conventional practices to innovative, interactive, and globally connected performances. Despite infrastructural and skill-related challenges, the evidence clearly shows that digital transformation is already influencing the creative direction and sustainability of the theatre industry. Therefore, embracing AI and social media is no longer optional but an urgent imperative. Digital theatre is the future of Nigerian performance art, and its full adoption is inevitable and indispensable.

Recommendations

To accelerate and strengthen the digital integration of theatre practices in Nigeria, the following recommendations are offered:

1. The National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), in collaboration with the

Ministry of Culture and the Nigerian Film Corporation, should organise recurring capacity-building programmes to equip theatre practitioners with essential digital and AI skills.

2. The Federal Ministry of Information and Culture should initiate policies that encourage digital theatre innovation. Public and private sector partnerships should provide grants and funding to support digital performance projects.
3. Government agencies like the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) must invest in reliable internet connectivity, affordable digital tools, and stable electricity to support digital theatre productions.
4. Tertiary institutions and performing arts academies should revise curricula to incorporate digital performance techniques, AI applications, and social media strategies in theatre education.
5. Cultural institutions and research centres should prioritise the digital documentation and online dissemination of Nigerian theatre performances to preserve national identity and promote global accessibility.
6. Theatre companies should partner with software developers, multimedia designers, and digital content creators to co-develop AI-integrated performances that are both innovative and culturally grounded.

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