

## Determining the Context of Television Serial Drama Viewership in Nairobi, Kenya.

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### Abstract

The study sought to determine the context of television serial drama fiction viewership in Nairobi, Kenya. Watching of television serial drama fiction/soap operas is popular among Nairobi audiences. The research is anchored on uses and gratification and cultural proximity theories. The study employed a mixed-method design approach and used simple random, purposive and systematic sampling techniques to determine the population sizes. The study is further organised at two levels. In the first phase, 422 interview guide questionnaires were administered to respondents in households in three randomly selected constituencies of Nairobi followed by nine FGDs. The constituencies were Embakasi West, Makadara and Kibra. The survey questionnaires were finally analysed by SPSS and triangulated together with the qualitative findings. There is an emerging digital divide in the context of television viewership due to the impact of digital technology. The study found that many of the audiences now pay to access the television signals which they perceive as a gain reversal. Thus, the 'free' television signal connection has acquired a different meaning where private institutions, as opposed to the public (a government body), are now in charge of signal distribution and charge a monthly fee for access. From the recommendation, the government should make digital TV accessible by zero-rating taxes to the distributors. In addition to that, they should come up with a policy change that the first four most popular FTA TV stations should be accessible to the audiences at all times even when other channels are switched off.

**Key terms:** Context of viewership, serial drama, access to television, Digital TV

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## INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, TV serial drama fiction is seen to be the most popular genre. They are a programming phenomenon attractive to sponsors and low in production cost (Brown, et al., 1989). Creeber (2001) observes that the term television serial or serialisation refers to the continuation of storylines and the consistency of themes throughout episodes, which reoccur at regular and usually reliable intervals of a TV channel's schedule. 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.

The programmes were mainly American imports, which was not unique to Kenya. Other developing countries which set up broadcast stations in the 1960s and 70s also relied on the American market (Nordenstrong, & Varis, 1973). It was also a period of limited operations and few programme offerings - described as an era of 'scarcity' (Ellis, 2000). The dominance of American programming on stations around the world was causing jitters even in established economies like France, which regarded it as American imperialism (Tracey, 1985). The foreign serials were among the cultural imports to be aired regularly to the Kenyan TV audiences. The serial drama fiction has created interest and spawned scholarly studies, mainly from Europe, USA and Latin America (Ang, 1985; Silverstone, 1988; Smith, & Holland, 1987; Georgiou, 2012; Morales, & Simelio, 2015). In Kenya, limited studies have been conducted. Jiwaji (2010) carried a survey of how young Nairobi women identified with a Mexican soap opera *Cuendo ses Mia* aired on Citizen Television. Similarly, Kingara (2010) conducted a study on two serial drama fictions *Reflections* (KBC) and *Wingu La Moto* (NTV) from

the producer's perspectives. Additionally, Mueni (2014) conducted a comparative study on the representation of womanhood on local and foreign serials/soap operas.

Though these studies, deepened the understanding of serial drama viewership in the Kenyan context, none of them engaged on the circumstances under which these serials are watched and more so within a multi-channel digital dispensation. This is further significant in that, there is a deficiency in the domestic content productions which spurred the government to set up the Kenya Film Commission (KFC) in 2005, partly to gain traction in local content generation. Besides, other government agencies like the Communication Authority of Kenya (CA) impose a 40-60% license requirement on local content programming to the free to air (FTAs) stations in Kenya. Understanding the context of the audience viewership would be significant to the producers/creators who would be interested in filling these domestic gaps, taking into consideration the popularity of the serial drama fiction genre.

To understand the viewers' contexts, the study borrows from the uses and gratification framework which focuses on how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs (Blumler, & Katz, 1974; Abelman, & Atkin, 2011). Further to that, the study also interrogates the viewers from the cultural proximity arguments. According to Straubhaar (2007), the audiences will prefer to watch programmes that are closest or directly relevant to them in cultural and linguistic terms. The Kenyan audience are exposed to both foreign and local serial drama fiction productions, and thus to what extent does the origin of a programme determine their viewing patterns. In this study, the term context of viewership is used to mean the circumstances under which the audiences engage to watch and draw meaning from a serial drama fiction programme.

Accordingly, the study sought to answer questions: 1) who watches the serial drama fiction in Nairobi? And 2) under what circumstances do they watch the serial drama fictions in the new digital broadcast dispensation?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The context of TV serial drama viewership

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). The impact of television can further be gleaned from La Ferrara et al. (2012) argument that the expansion and uptake of TV programmes in Brazilian rural communities have directly led to the population reduction within those jurisdictions as the audiences try to emulate the 'small family in the drama settings'.

The context of the TV serial drama fiction genre entails how the audience engages and interpret the story. From the historical perspective, the concept of the serial broadcast was to target the female gender, where the advertisers of food and detergents promoted their products (Lavin, 1995; Porto, 2001). The primal elements of the genre content usually gravitate towards issues such as love, family, intimate relationships and other domestic concerns (Porto, 2001). Female viewers, the bulk of its audience; have made the soap operas part of their lives, as a source of friendship, pleasure and networking (Modleski, 1984; Allen, 1985; Hobson, 1982). Modleski (1984) further argues that women audience sometimes derive episodic meanings and pleasure from the soaps, for instance, some of the female viewers identify with the overwhelming villainess characters in soap operas as a way of exerting fictional revenge on a social system that belittle women power, work, and social contributions.

Many of the soap opera setting and characterisation watched in the developing countries are associated with social-economic mobility, freedom and choices, a powerful model to the viewers. The main characters are portrayed to have smaller families, marry late and the actors work out of the homes (Della Vigna, & Eliana La Ferrara, 2015).

This can explain why the soap opera storytelling style has 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; Vaughan, et al., 2000).

The adoption of serial drama fiction storytelling style for social communication can best be illustrated in Kenya by *Tushauriane* (1987); considered one of the most successful domestic drama productions. The sponsor of the production was the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) - a government department with the mandate to mobilise, support population well-being, family planning and other related social issues. Though there are no available empirical studies on the audience reception or viewing circumstances, the response to the programme can be gleaned from the newspaper excerpts of the day.

In the *Tushauriane* television episodes, the strand of stories revolved around rural-urban, families, land problems, inter-tribal marriages and the burning issues of family planning (Odindo, 1987). The story revolved around the main character, Dennis, who has lost his ancestral land to a neighbour and is trying to claim it back. However, he has to

gather evidence to prove his case. Another parallel storyline is on intercultural courting and marriage. Dennis is also in love with Esther, who hails from a different tribe; and there is Joe who also has an interest in Esther. However, the production ended abruptly when the sponsor stopped paying the 60,000 shillings (\$600) weekly production cost to KBC for the episodes to continue. The newspaper columnist captured the mood of the country thus:

*When last Sunday thousands of fans who religiously awaited the show realised it was not coming, and might never, 'come again, their agony was the agony of a people whose passions are routinely overlooked by the very institutions that' are assigned to service them. This is the confounding irony of a country that prides itself with momentous development and erects impressive monuments to testify to this, and... yet cannot deliver the one programme its people really want to watch, a programme whose, stark relevance to their lives makes it something of a celebration... Yet this amount of money is a pittance when you think of the number of people to benefit. The cost comes to a fraction of a cent per every person who watches it. Indeed, many Kenyans would happily pay this if only to find out who between Joe and Dennis marries Esther. After all, this is Harambee country (Muchiri, 1989).*

The excerpt captures meaningful moments of the audience; they are familiar with the land disputes and intercultural relationships among other issues within the Kenyan context. The storyline seizes these subjects and needs to resolve them. *Tushauriane* was a typical telenovela story ascent and suspense; in fact, the producers had a short telenovela production training in Mexico (Bourgault, 1995). However, the argument is that the viewers could 'enter into' the story and construct meanings of their own lives from the drama. The issues of land, inter-tribal marriages are everyday issues which the Kenyan public deals with and are keen to find solutions.

Jiwaji (2010) was interested to understand how young women in Nairobi identify with some of the popular serials regularly screened on Kenyan FTA stations. She conducted a study on how these women in Nairobi shape their local identities in response to watching *Cuendo seas*, *Mia*; a Mexican serial drama/telenovela aired on Citizen Television. She concluded that the popularity of the genre is foremost attributable to their active rural-urban story themes. The young female participants were able to situate themselves within a similar setup. Though her study is insightful, this research would want to deepen this understanding by exploring the circumstances under which the audiences watch these programmes.

Kingara (2010), studied the producers' conceptualization level of their audiences on two TV serial drama productions - *Reflections* (KBC) and *Wingu La Moto* (NTV). He concluded that the producers of the shows conceived their audiences in 'mass' and regarded themselves (producers) as 'moral advocates'. They select, sanction and set the agenda on the 'moral lessons the audience should learn from the dramas. The producers' in this case have a background of public broadcasting (KBC).

In another study, Mueni (2014) conducted a comparative study of the representation of womanhood on local and foreign serials/soap operas. The study concluded that serial dramas/soap operas could play an essential role in the development of gender identities. Though this was a vital contribution to the Kenyan serial drama scene, it did not delve into the other critical areas like the audience viewership in a changing technological environment, like the digitalization of broadcast programming.

In the evolving digitalisation world, Karlson (2007) compares the soap opera convention and the female viewers to the blog readers' enthusiasts. Just like the TV soaps, the blogs are seen as deeply personal, emotionally

loaded and never-ending. The regular updates afford a sense of connectivity between reader and writer, the reader feels connected to the writers' life, the way the soap opera viewers would feel attached and connected to the ensuing story or the characters.

When gratification theory is used, the audience is active and selective on programmes and media choice. Despite the criticisms, scholars are acknowledging, the versatility, adaptability and currency of the UGT especially with the new digital media technology and innovation (Ruggiero, 2000; Sandar, & Limperos, 2013; David, 2016). Research in the internet use, mobile telephony, virtual reality, multiple channel platforms are the new favourable frontiers in what Ruggiero (2000, p.28) refers to as 'new dominion of human activity' with 'new dominion of U & G researchers'. This study also finds that UGT is the most appropriate to the questions it seeks to answer, like how do the audiences' select and engage with the serial drama fictions to watch among a multitude of programme choices? Also, what is the extent of gratification in a foreign and a domestic serial drama production?

### Watching TV serial drama fiction

Comstock et al. (1978) argue that women: the old, the young, the ill and housebound, unemployed, lonely members of lower social class and minority groups-watch TV more than average. Livingstone's (1988) further support this line of thought. In an empirical study, she found that those who are old and the unemployed generally watch much television.

The popularity of television serial drama fiction cannot be overemphasised; various reasons have been advanced to explain why specific categories of people watch soap operas. In comparing gender tastes, more women than men watch soap operas (Ang, 1985; Livingstone, 1988). However, in Southern American regions like Brazil, the Telenovelas are a family affair 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). When gratification theory is used, the audience is active and selective on programmes and media choice (Blumler, & Katz, 1974; Abelman, & Atkin, 2011). They select programmes which best satisfies them from a myriad of other programme offerings.

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 dwelt 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.

It is a practice in TV production and programming to determine one's viewers and to know when and how to deploy a programme for maximum impact. The regulatory authority could also require these details. In Kenya, for instance, the Communication Authority of Kenya (2016) regulations and licensing clause segment children's and adults programming requirements. Moran (2009) further observes that the operational standards for the producers and the station executives of television programming have an apparent gender and demographic demarcation of their targeted audiences. Television stations are further interested in audience numbers, which in effect depends on the quality of the programmes on offer (O'Donnell, 2015). The leading five free to air (FTA) TV stations in

Kenya, i.e. Citizen TV, KTN, NTV, KBC and K24 currently have accumulative audience share of 62% (Geo Poll, Q 1, 2017).

However, 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 (Caldwel, 2006). 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).

The suggestion in the above arguments is that television drama fiction has a broad audience base and mainly from those who are not economically engaged and housebound. Could this be the same in the Kenyan context that the least involved spend more time on television? These are some of the questions the study interrogated about the serial drama genre.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The study sought to determine the context of viewership of television serial drama fiction in Nairobi, Kenya. This research targeted the Nairobi urban households with television sets, according to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) Nairobi has a population of 3.1million (KNBS, 2009). Access to television is relatively high: 606,700 households or 78% of the county's population have television sets (2011, Socio-Economic Atlas of Kenya).

The sample size was determined by applying Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) sample size determination formula. They propose a figure of 384 for a population that exceeds 10,000 and an additional 10% to compensate for persons

that the researcher is unable to contact as suggested by Fischer et al. (1984). Thus, a total of 422 persons were targeted to be interviewed, further to that, the Nairobi constituencies were identified as an appropriate entry point because of their fairly equitable population distribution. Using the simple random technique, 3 constituencies with a total population of 394,450 (KNBS 2009) were selected from the 17 Nairobi constituencies. The constituencies included: Embakassi West (164,037), Kibra (114,860) and Makadara (115,553).

Using systematic sampling technique, the research assistant would start at a given household with a TV set, skip one, and to the next until the expected households (139), and the targeted respondents (422) were reached (extra-households were visited to compensate for those with less occupants). Gans (1968) and Livingstone (1999) argues that Television studies widely apply the use of households as the unit of analysis in determining viewers of a programme. Geraghty (1995) and Ang (1985) reinforces this observation by saying that television viewing is a family or group activity. The study, therefore, used the same perspective to settle on the households to draw the participants.

At the second level of the study, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. The respondents were purposively identified at the first level of survey interviews. The FGDs were meant to give an in-depth insight into the audience habits of the TV serial drama fictions viewership. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2004) proposes that at least three to six FGDs to draw any meaningful data. Johnson and Christensen (2004) propose a minimum of six participants per discussion group. Thus, the FGDs were organised from these scholars' understanding. Twenty-one participants were recruited from Embakasi West, from different wards of Umoja I, Umoja II and Kariobangi South Ward. In Kibra Constituency, a total of 17 respondents were recruited from the various administrative wards. Further to that, 19

participants were selected from Maringo/Hamza, Harambee, and Makongeni wards. A total of 9 FGDs were conducted with the participants.

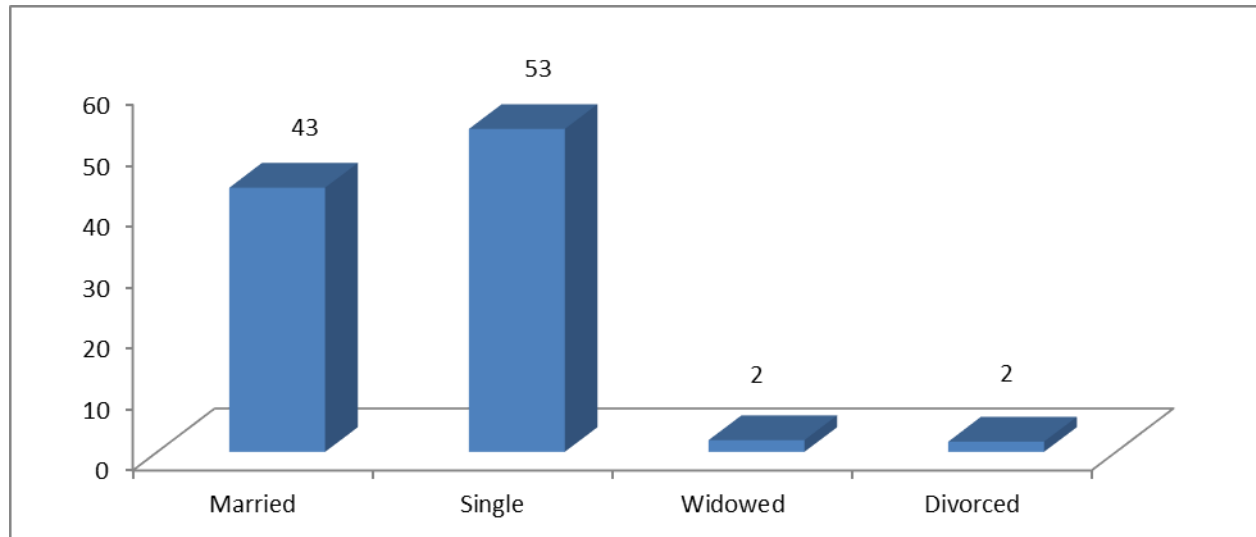
The study uses two data sets. The data was first cleaned for completeness, consistency and further converted to numerical form. SPSS was used for data analysis and to produce descriptive statistics and appropriate graphs. The second phase of the study involved qualitative. Patton (2002) observes that qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. The data was first logged according to the dates and time, the place where they were conducted, and

the persons with whom they were gathered. After the transcription, thematic coding was used as suggested by Hansen et al. (1998), and Silverman (2003), categories and patterns on the data started to come out.

The study ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained through the removal of any identifying characteristics before widespread dissemination of information. For anonymity, pseudo names have been used especially in the FGDs to identify the participants.

## RESULTS

### The Context of Viewership of TV Serial Drama Fiction Marital Status



**Figure 1: Marital status of viewers**

Source: Research Data 2020

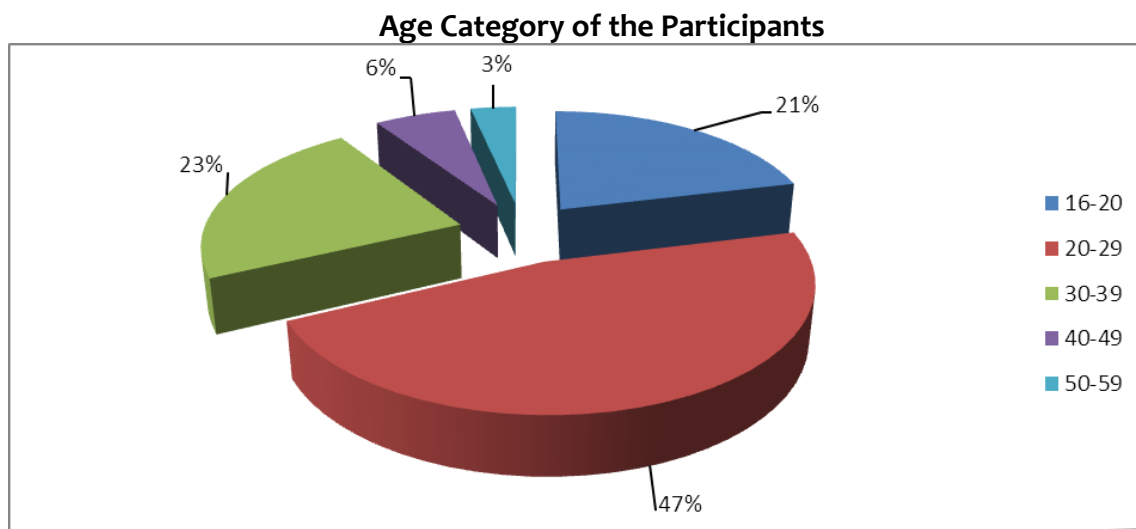
The above figure 1 indicates that 53 per cent of the respondents interviewed in the three constituencies are single, while 43 per cent of them indicate that they are married. There are 2 per cent who are widowed and a similar percentage that is divorced. This finding reflects the

KNBS (2009) survey data which reveals that Nairobi city, at 26.1 per cent has the highest number of single households in comparison to other cities in the country. The data imply that viewing of television serial drama in the three constituencies could be 'alone affair'. However, other

studies point out that the pleasure of serial drama viewing is associated with groupings and the ensuing conversations (Ang, 1985; Brown, 1994). Therefore the 53 per cent who indicate that they are single could be a reflection of the changing 'family television' arguments, that watching television is a family/household affair (Morley, 1999).

Nevertheless, it could also mirror many single households in Nairobi, a disadvantage to group formation and viewing.

However, the constituent of viewing might not matter; it is not just a matter of leisure but a deeper level of consumption, that some seek answers to their regular problems from the programmes. Statements from the FGDs like '*... some of them teach us how to live with others and highlight other people's problems...'*'. In line with this observation, Askwith (2007) argues that television stations no longer have the power to control when, where, or how audiences consume their programming.



**Figure 2: Age category of the participants**  
Source: Research Data 2020

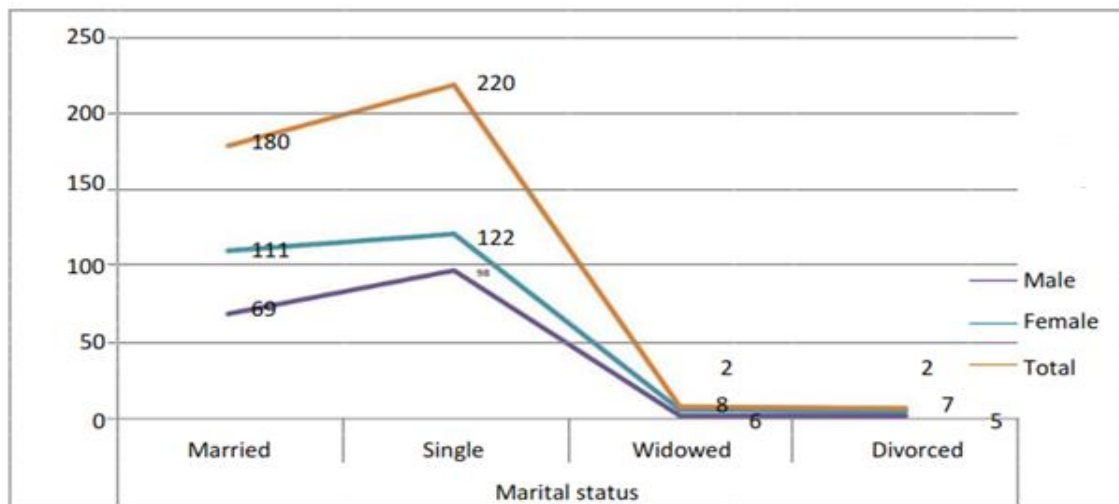
Figure 2 indicates that 47 per cent of the respondents are aged between 21-29 years. Another 23 per cent are aged between 30-39 years. As the age band increases, the percentage figures decrease to 6 per cent for those aged between 40-49 and 3 per cent for those who are 50-59 years. These could infer that TV viewership takes place under a relatively young population. Further to that, it reflects the general youthful nature of Nairobi population distribution (KNBS, 2009).

Additionally, this is in line with the broadcast industry practice, which mostly targets the 18-49 age brackets, the intimate group for many consumer product advertisers (Tunstall, 2008). These findings therefore further indicate that the three constituencies viewing patterns of the television drama serial are consistent with broadcast industry expectations where the programmes target a relatively young population. A further implication is that TV could still be an effective medium of choice in transmitting educational/critical



information to the relatively younger Kenyan population.

**Gender and Marital Status of the Respondents**



**Figure 3: Marital status of the respondents**  
Source: Research Data 2020

Figure 3 above indicates the gender and the marital status of the respondents. The findings show that of the 171 males, 69 (40%) are married, 98 (57.3%) are single, 2 (1.2%) were widowed, while 2 (1.2%) were divorced. On the other hand, out of 244 females who participated in this study, 111 (45.5%) were married, 122 (50%) were single, 6 (2.5%) were widowed while 5 (2%) were divorced. The majority of the viewers of the serial drama fictions are female, young and

single. The production context of serial drama fictions (soap operas) primarily targets the housewives (Ang, 1985). However, the findings increasingly indicate that most of the female audiences are single and not homemakers; a suggestion of the dynamism in TV serial drama programming and audiences. For better understanding, change the reference 'the housewife' to the serial drama programming.

**Respondents Level of Education**  
**Table 1: Educational level of the respondents**

	Frequency	Percent
No Education	4	1.0
Primary	35	8.5
Secondary	147	35.3
Collage	117	28.2
University	112	27.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>415</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Research Data 2020

Table 1 indicates that the majority of the respondents have received secondary to tertiary education with a combined percentage of 90.6 per cent. The high literacy level of the respondents is supported by similar ascendancy level of Embakasi West constituents where persons with secondary education and above stand at 63 per cent (KNBS-SID 2013).

Therefore, the viewership of television programmes is a highly literate population. These are persons who can discern and critique the quality of programming. Further to that, the programme producers should consider appropriate programme ideas to meet their high literacy needs.

**Table 2: Occupation of the Respondents**  
**Occupation of the Respondents**

	Frequency	%
Retail trade and restaurants	46	11
Sales or service workers	50	12
Production and factory workers	53	12.8
Clerical and related workers	20	4.8
Administration and managerial workers	26	6.3
Professionals	62	14.9
Mixed occupation	82	19.8
Housewife	123	32.1
	415	100

Source: Research Data 2020

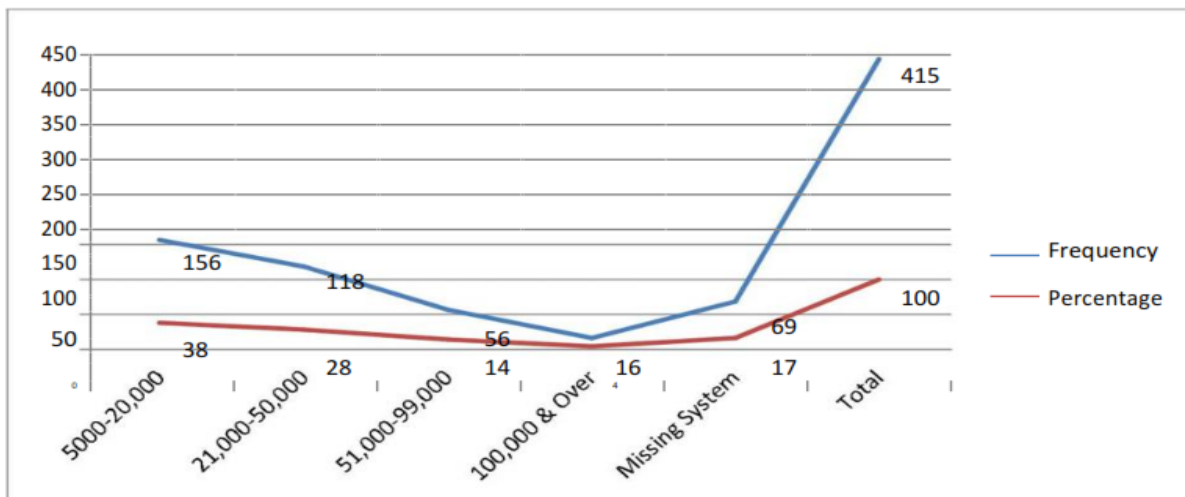
Table 2 indicates that 32.1 per cent of the respondents consider themselves housewives, however on a more in-depth interrogation at the FGDs reveals that, a sizable

number of them operate small vegetable kiosks, vend clothes, shoes, utensils and other small households' items. 12.8 per cent are engaged in production and factory related

activities, while 14.9 per cent of the participants in these areas regard themselves as professionals and in gainful formal employment. Thus this seems to reflect a new demographic employment status finding in Kenya where 16 per cent of the respondents indicate that they are either in

public or private employment (Ipsos-Synovate, 2015). We can infer that a more significant number of homemakers are predisposed to watching more television, which is in line with the underpinning argument of the serial drama that it targets the housewife (Lavin, 1995).

### Income Level of the Respondents



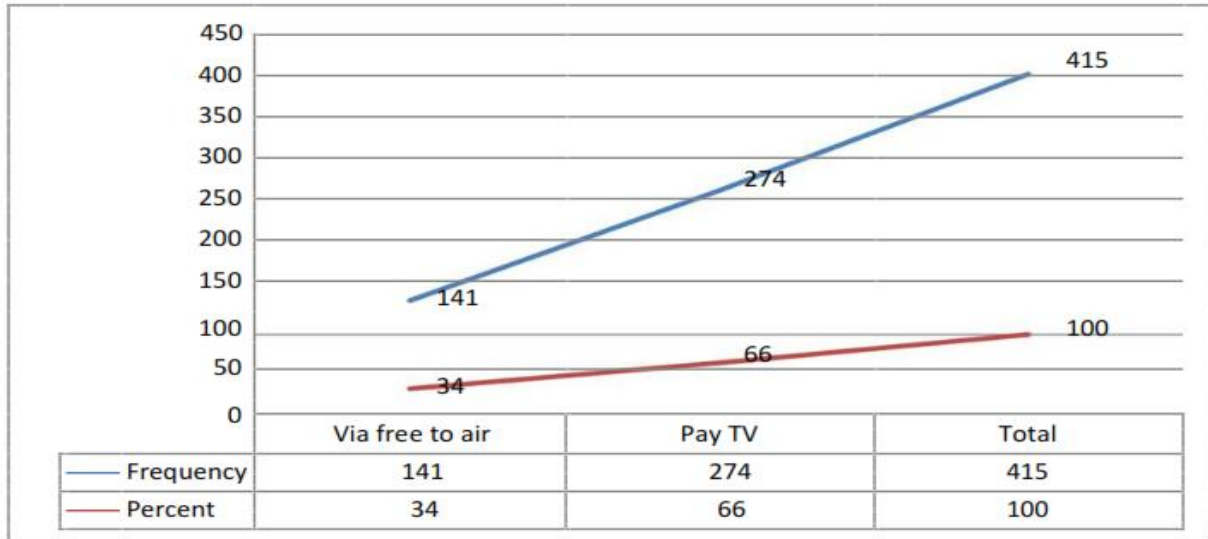
**Figure 4: Income levels of the respondents**

Source: Research Data 2020

The findings indicate that majority of the respondents 37.6 per cent earn between 5,000-20,000 Kenya shillings in a month (50-200\$). They are within the Nairobi monthly family expenditure of 7200 (72\$), which is the highest in the country (KNBS-SID, 2013). The implication is that the majority might not afford other kinds of leisure and subscribe to quality TV programming. The next section will show how the digital era has enhanced pay television

where even FTA has lost meaning to some viewers, as the majority of the signal distributors charge a monthly subscription ranging from 200-1000 shillings on average (CA, 2016). If these figures are juxtaposed with the monthly family expenditure income of 7200, it means that television is viewed under a family financial constraint which could defeat the 'entertainment and affection' audiences seek in television.

**TV Signals Distribution & Reception**



**Figure 5: TV signals reception**  
Source: Research Data 2020

Data in Figure 6 indicate that 66 per cent of the participants in Nairobi pay to receive their television signals, while 34 per cent of them receive their signal via free to air television stations. This study took place amid broadcast technological changes. Kenya is a member of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) which mandated all its member states to migrate to digital transmission platform by June 2015 (Oxford Business Group, 2014). In February 2015, the CA discontinued the analogue transmission to force all broadcasters to migrate to the digital platform. In protest, the three main popular TV stations, i.e. Citizen TV, KTN and NTV, with over 55 per cent of audience share (KARF, 2016) switched off their signals for a month.

The Communication Authority of Kenya indicates that the Digital Signal now covers 78 per cent of the Kenyan population (CA, June 2017). They further observe that the cumulative number of digital set-top boxes purchased as at

30th June 2017 stood at 729,477 for free-to-air set-top boxes (FTA-STBs) and 3,788,417 for pay-tv' (CA, June 2017). Other market studies seem to reinforce the changing trend in the broadcast industry. The ownership of set-top boxes (STB) now stands at 56 per cent countrywide, and two brands have the lion share-Go TV (35%) and Star times (33%) while the digital TV sets which do not necessarily require STBs now stands at 27 per cent (KARF tracker, September 2017). The participants raised the matter in the focus group discussions:

**G4:** TV ya free iliisha...lazima ulipie...the only station wanakuachia ni KBC (the free television ended, when you are late with your subscription the only station, they do not disconnect is KBC) KBC which I rarely watch

**C5:** The TV has become expensive in this country you pay for everything they say that there should be free stations like KTN, NTV Citizen but those are the first station they take and leave for you KBC... (Chuckle...)

**B6:** *There is no free to air TV because even the top box they say is not free even the ones you don't pay for every month... it's not easy to pay always so when you are broke it is the first thing you let go.*

The above findings infer that technological innovation and the digital transition enable viewers' access to multiple stations with a variety of content-but at a cost. What the viewers have popularly referred to as free to air television is blurred in the new technological lingo. As argued earlier, the broadcast model which gained traction in Kenya was

the public broadcasting approach as opposed to the American strong commercial concept. Many of the viewers are not comfortable paying for 'TV entertainment'. There is a, gain reversal; there are those who cannot afford the STB or service their monthly subscription fee. Additionally, as we have seen in the previous section, the majority of the viewer's survive on a low monthly income of between 5000-20,000 shillings. Ironically, the audiences now have choices which also expose the local serial drama producers to a competitive open broadcast market.

### Programme Preference

**Table 3: Respondents Programme Preferences**

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
News	F	204	59	31	33	19	11	17	41
	%	49	14	8	8	5	3	4	10
Soap Dramas	F	114	71	56	44	26	24	22	58
	%	28	17	14	11	6	6	5	14
Music Shows	F	125	78	56	41	25	23	19	48
	%	30	19	14	10	6	6	5	12
Documentaries	F	78	44	36	42	41	31	57	86
	%	19	11	9	10	10	8	14	21
Reality Shows	F	95	53	43	47	39	25	41	72
	%	23	13	10	11	9	6	10	17
Movies	F	209	67	36	30	13	10	23	27
	%	50	16	9	7	3	2	6	7
Sports	F	93	43	38	40	29	20	41	111
	%	22	10	9	10	7	5	10	27

Source: Research Data 2020

Television programmes are selected and scheduled to reflect audience preference (Tunstall, 2008). However, there are different genres and hybrids of the programmes. Table 3 above indicates that the majority of the respondents, (50%) with a frequency of 209 rank movies as their preferred kind of programming, (49%) rank news as their favourite choice of programming, 30 per cent of the

respondents rank listening and watching music programmes as their preferred choices. Likewise, 28 per cent prefer watching soap dramas over other kinds of programmes. Other preferences include; reality shows 23per cent sports 22 per cent, and documentaries 19 per cent a follow up a focused group discussion on their preferences revealed further insights:

**E3:** News nimuhimu unataka kujua vituzina happen zingineni kujifurahiya... kuna mambo nyingi za siasa na pengine hali ya maendeleo...na sana mi uwatch Citizen (News is important you want to be updated on whats happening other programmes are just for pure entertainment and usually I watch Citizen TV)

**D2:** At least I want to catch up with what happened in the day... I like to know about politics ... and other development issues... in job you don't have time and I scan through the stations if something is interesting then I wait for it.

**D3:** I watch movies though TV stations don't have many. At times from DVDs... It is how I relax

**C6:** Sana news ni muhimu... but I don't look forward to it there are the same things of what politicians did.

**E5:** I Watch news but not as much... I think I spend more time watching movies and may be documentaries kiasi.

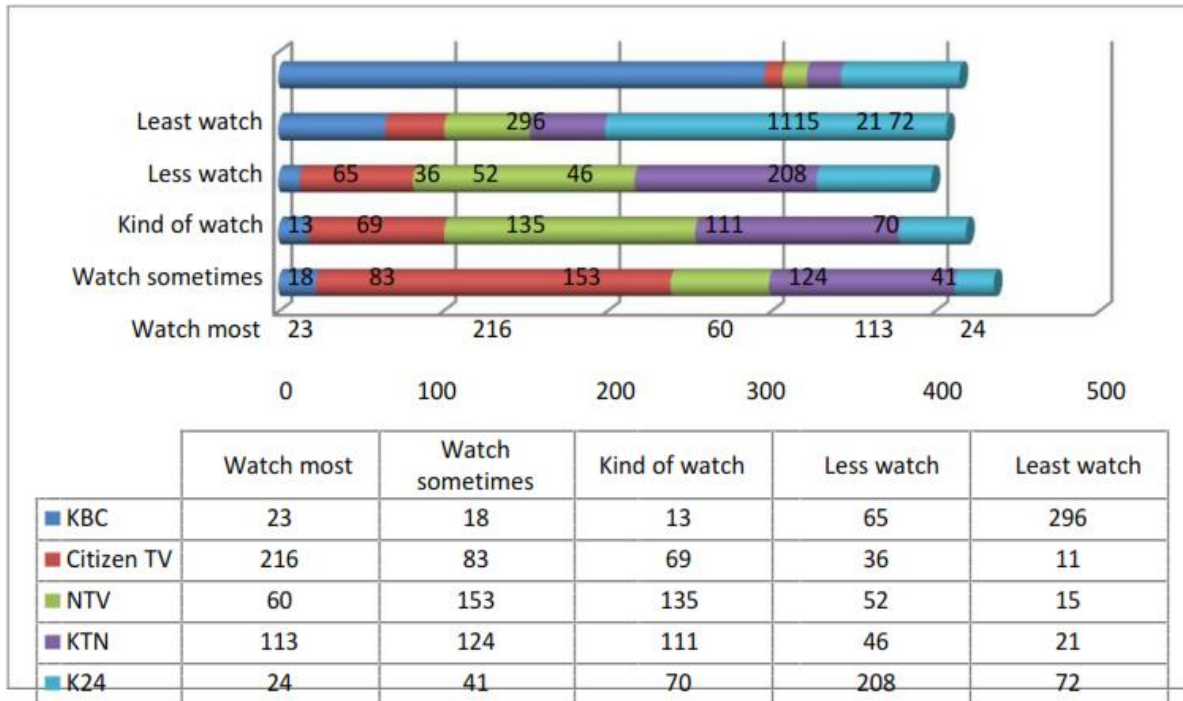
**C2:** mi huwatch hizo soaps za 6 ama 8pm kama siko busy unafollow kiasi zikona mambo u happen na unaenjoytu vile wana act...zakenya siombaya lakini huwezilinganisha na foreign (I watch the 6 o'clock soaps or the 8 o'clock ones when am not busy they depict reality issues and also I

*like the way they act... the Kenyan ones are not bad but you can't compare them with foreign ones)*

The respondents prefer to watch movies and the news. In the focus group discussions, they indicate that the movies 'relax them' meaning that their priority in TV programming is entertainment the male viewers prefer action movies while the female viewers prefer non-violent/family-based stories. Similarly, the male viewers' follow political and development news stories. This is in line with the uses and gratification arguments (Blumler, & Katz, 1974) that audiences are selective in media which suits their needs; in this case TV programming. The serial drama is closely linked to movies. It is only that the programming creed further divides them into genres, but basically, they consider them as acted dramas. It might therefore not be surprising that in the discussions, they mention the realism and characterisation as their critical reasons for watching serial drama fiction dramas. In a subsequent comparison study in January 2016, *La Gata*, a Mexican soap opera scheduled at 8.00pm on Citizen Television, was found to be the most popular programming by the viewers (KARF, 2016).

News is also popular with the audience and has almost similar trajectory as the movies. In fact, in the five studied stations, the audience numbers spike towards or at the news hours (KARF, 2017). The discussants' sentiments on the news suggest that the audiences acknowledge the centrality of continuously updated news to their wellbeing. Further indications are that the serial drama productions are essential to TV station programming and business model, and there is a need for more investment in them since they still attract sizable followers.

### Ranking of TV stations



**Figure 1: Ranking of TV stations**

Source: Research Data 2020

Generally, slightly more than half of the respondents in the three constituencies (See figure 7 above) indicate that *Citizen Television* is their favourite station among the five studied (*Citizen TV* 52%, *KTN* 27%, *NTV* 14.2%, *K24* 5.8% and *KBC* 5.5%). The finding generally reflects the dominance of the station among its commercial peers. It almost conforms to other independent survey outcomes in Nairobi as follows: *Citizen TV* 43per cent *KTN* home 12per cent, *NTV* 10per cent, *K24* 4per cent and *KBC* 1per cent (KARF tracker, July-September 2017), while this study was confined to the three constituencies of Embakasi West, Kibra and Makadara it mimics Nairobi and the broader National findings of the stations ranking. The focus group discussions elicited the following sentiments concerning the viewing patterns.

**A4:** *I just like the way they are organized the news, and the kind of programmes they give us... you know it feels local...na inapatia vijana job kuna wasee wamtaa hapo kwa Machachari inasaidia yenyewe (it employs young people and some of them like in Machachari are... our own.... familiar faces from the neighborhood)*

**D2:** *I don't know why but many a times my TV is just between Citizen and KTN especially for my favorite dramas, though when it is time for news, I would try to watch the 3 including NTV. However, citizen still has good news presenters and they have good programmes, both local and foreign.*

**D5:** *Citizen is full of commercial and soaps, so I prefer to watch news from NTV... and that is the reason why I don't like it at times... but it's a good station even for news and some dramas.*

**B4:** *I Watch KBC only when I have not renewed my Go TV subscription... it is the only channel they leave for me... (laughter) but inakaa hivyo hao watu ni wakitambo (it's just there and the staff looks old)*

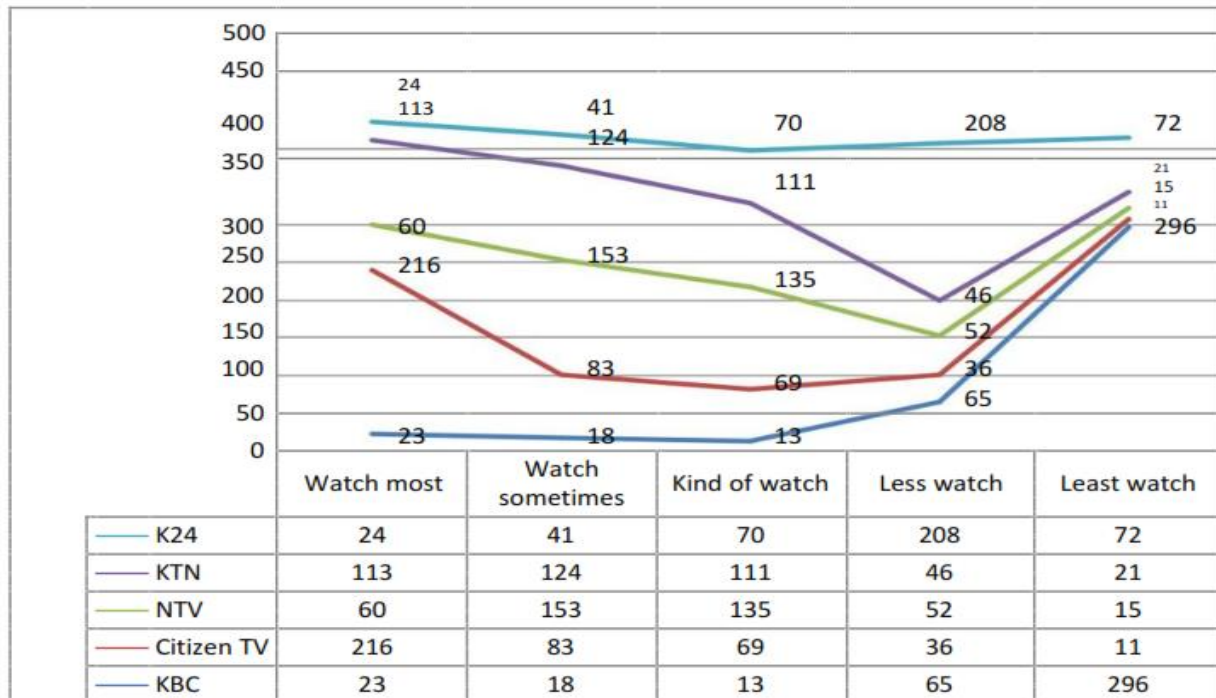
**E2:** *But we can't just dismiss KBC, most of the people who work in other media houses started there. It is good training ground.... you know it is government so it will always be there.*

The attraction of Citizen Television over the other stations stems from its programming mix of local and foreign. The viewer identifies with its strong aspect of cultural proximity where the viewers' regard the programmes as a reflection of their lives (Straubhaar, 1991) like when the discussants

(A4) respond that '*... it feels local...!*' and that some of the actors... '*are our own!*' It means that part of the station popularity is anchored on the audiences 'experiencing' the station as their own in comparison to other stations. However, in KBC, the viewers feel detached to their programming and only watch it as a last resort in the absence of other station signals. Therefore, a successful TV station has an aspect of audience identification with its programming. They 'see themselves' in the programme events. However, they would disengage if the programmes do not meet specific quality, like in the case of KBC. Tunstall (2008) adds that television programmes are selected and scheduled to reflect audience preferences. The context of viewership is that the programmes have to reflect on their environment and carry their hopes and aspirations, which deepens the understanding of cultural proximity.



**Preferred hours of TV viewing**



**Figure 2: Hours of viewing**  
Source: Research Data 2020

The study further aimed to investigate the viewers' time preference for watching Television. They were to select at least two-day parts in TV programming when they were likely to watch. As indicated in Figure 8 above. The majority of the respondents 86 per cent watched TV in the night hours from 8 pm to midnight, while 58 per cent watched in the evening hours from 4.00 pm to 8 pm. Meanwhile, 21 per cent watched their programmes during mid-morning hours from 10 am to 1.00 pm, while 19 per cent viewed their schedules in the afternoon hours from 1.00 pm to 4 pm, and another 15 per cent preferred to watch TV in the morning hours from 6 am to 10 am. Elis (2000) argues that the practice in broadcast television is to organise programmes on a daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly basis. According to Eastman and Ferguson (2010),

regarding the commercial broadcast stations, their ultimate goal is to deliver the programmes to the audience at the moment they are likely to watch and further deliver them to the advertisers in a manner that makes their advertising most likely to be effective. Television stations organise their programming in terms of dayparts where they refer to the famous viewing hours as primetime, and they would fall between 5 to 10 pm (KARF). Many stations schedule their best programmes within the primetime hours, which attract maximum exposure.

The findings suggest that the best time frames to schedule a TV serial drama within the five stations is between 4.00 pm to midnight when most viewers are likely to watch. TV programmers have mastered the audiences'

patterns/habits, and that they enjoy viewing when they are least engaged in any economic or social activities (Eastman, & Ferguson, 2013). There are few viewers' between 6 am-10 am, the possibility that many people are engaged in social or economic events. This further implies that producers' have to come up with exciting and outstanding programmes to warrant the limited prime hour slots.

The focus group discussions also delved into the viewing preferences of local and foreign-produced serial drama fiction programming. There is a bias in the audience preferences to select and watch foreign serial dramas over the domestic productions. This is premised on their presentation and production quality.

**C1** *(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.*

The mythical and emotional approach in television drama is a typical element in good storytelling as argued by Silverstone (1988). It is well observed within some of the viewers in Nairobi. Further excerpts reveals their perceptions.

**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 the news is all soaps...so sio raisi(not easy to identify)... to know the Kenyan programmes ...obviously I would spend time watching them...at least pia zikona suspense sio kamahizi(at least the foreign serials have suspense not like the local productions) local*

Some of the viewers feel that, the dominance of foreign programming serials within the primetime hours denies the local productions a good opportunity for publicity. However, the superior production aspects in the foreign

serials still make them attractive to the audience above the local genre as enumerated by one of the participants.

**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*

The approach to 'family viewing' debate (Ang 1985; Geraghty 1995; Morley 1999) of serial drama fictions, is brought into focus within the Nairobi audiences. There is indication that, the small family households in Nairobi and increased number of those who live alone is changing the viewing patterns as captured below.

**F5:** *I watch alone, when I have to since I stay alone...when friends come to spend they might want to watch a different programme so it has to be that.*

Further to that, females seems to take charge of viewership in a household in watching serials especially if they are fans. This is enumerated by one of the male participants.

**G4:** *women like these programmes so she would likely switch to it and I would go with that...I wouldn't want small quarrels over what to watch so I just go with it... she would even bring to date where the story is so far.*

There is also a general perception with some of the viewers that the serial dramas are 'adult programming', thus requires selectivity of whom to watch with. However, this is typical of serial drama fictions story themes which heavily dwells on romance (Tufte 2003) as captured in this anecdote.

**G1:** *sana sana kuna vipindi kamahizo uwezi watch na parents labda Watoto( there are soaps you can't watch along with your parents maybe children)...there are those I can watch with them... the once which come at 5 or 6 o'clock but those which are on at 8 or even 10 pm have a lot of scenes ... za(of) love and you wouldn't want those*

for your children or even watching with your parents.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

**Conclusion:** The study set out to explore the context of viewership of television serial drama fiction in Nairobi, Kenya. More so, within the changing digital dispensation. First, more female viewers prefer to watch the serial drama fiction in comparison to their male counterparts. Despite digitalization and multi-channel programming, the serial drama foundation as a female genre still holds (Lavin 1995). Majority of the viewers are young and of low income, where 37% earn between 5000-20000 Kenya shillings or 50-200\$ a month. The new digital broadcast dispensation requires new TV digital sets or a set-top box on regular TV sets, and a monthly subscription to access the TV signal. There is an emerging digital divide among the low-income earners who cannot regularly afford a monthly subscription to the distributor companies, thus their viewership is constrained. They consider digital migration as a 'gain reversal'. Though 66% of the viewers had digital reception facility 34% were yet to upgrade to enable them receive signals. The only station available to them without subscription was KBC. This finding limits the application of uses and gratification where the audience are believed to be selective in their media choice and use (Blumler, & Katz, 1974). However, with constrained income, one's selection and choices of programming are also limited. Another finding is that the Nairobi viewers prefer to watch the foreign serials over the domestic productions. They consider the foreign productions as realistic because of their storyline and characterization treatment, elements they find lacking in the domestic productions. These attractive aspects prepare them to 'learn... because they are things which happen in real life' (an extract from the FGDs). Therefore, the context of viewership is also premised on knowledge and power. Modleski (1984) observes that female audience of soaps sometimes derive meanings and pleasure by identifying with strong women

characters fighting a cause as a way of exerting fictional revenge on a social system that belittle women power, work, and social contributions. Within the domestic context and as argued in the literature review, *Tushauriane* (1987) was embraced because of its familiar themes of land, intertribal relation among others, and the great acting and the audience were ready to 'learn'. The final finding is that, among the many available FTAs, majority of the viewers prefer to watch their serials and other programmes on Citizen Television which attract 52% of the viewers. They describe it as more 'local' because of its familiar dramas with 'local faces they know'. The four other stations which closely compete with Citizen TV, ie KTN, NTV, K24 and KBC schedule almost similar programmes to Citizen TV. The viewers' perception of Citizen TV programming also answers to cultural proximity arguments. According to Straubhaar (2007), the audiences will prefer to watch programmes that are closest or directly relevant to them in cultural and linguistic terms, and this could be the appeal of local stars, local knowledge, the environment, clothing and even food. The appeal to a programme or station has to be element specific. The Nairobi audience uses the term 'local' to refer to Citizen TV, in comparison to the rest. Thus domestic station or programming does not automatically qualify to be likeable because of its origin but must contain familiar elements to the viewer, which could range from the story, actors or even packaging. This can also explain why foreign serials could be considered more real than their domestic production counterparts.

**Recommendation:** There is an emerging digital divide in the context of television viewership due to the impact of digital technology. Many of the audiences now pay to access the television signals which they perceive as a gain reversal. Thus, the 'free' television signal connection has acquired a different meaning where private agencies, as opposed to the public (a government body), are now in charge of signal distribution and charge a monthly fee for access. To the urban viewer, this is a paradigm shift. The

findings indicate that 37% of the audiences earn between 5000-20000 shillings (50-200\$) and constrain to support themselves as well as pay for monthly television access. The study recommends that the government should make digital TV accessible by zero-rating taxes to the distributors. In addition to that, they should come up with a policy change that the first four most popular FTA TV stations should be accessible to the audiences at all times even when other channels are switched off. The study has noted the changing television broadcast environment vis a vis the audiences' tastes and preferences, courtesy of the digital technology. It has implications on production turnaround time, the audiences' and their consumption

patterns. The study recommends for creative, adaptive and innovative producers'. For instance, one should map out a segment of the audience like teenagers aged 15-25 and create a programme to meet their individual changing consumption needs and distribute it through various platforms like smart-phones, internet, YouTube and the local start-up *Viusasa*. As has been discussed, what is referred to as the 'Family viewing time' is taking a new meaning; more persons stay alone within the urban settings thus need innovative programming approach to satisfy them.

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