

AUDIENCE INTERACTION WITH DIGITAL SPOKEN WORD PERFORMANCES: A STUDY OF SOKOTO'S ONLINE POETRY

Dennis Wabuyaka WASWA, Lencer NDEDE & Obala MUSUMBA

Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

Department of Language and Literature

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jolls.v15i2.8>

Abstract

This paper examines how audiences receive and interact with spoken word poetry performed in digital spaces, using the online performances of Sokoto, a Kenyan Bukusu spoken word poet, as a case study. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of oral performance studies and digital communication, the study analyses audience engagement as evidenced through comments, likes, shares and subscriptions on social media platforms including Facebook, TikTok and YouTube. The study analysed Sokoto's six spoken word performances through careful and repeated watching of selected performances. The researcher transcribed and translated the poems into English. The analysis of the psychographic data was a two-way transactional process where the researcher read the audiences' reaction and analysed accordingly. The paper argues that the physical distance inherent to virtual performance does not impede the bilateral exchange between performer and audience; rather, digital feedback mechanisms constitute a new form of participatory spectatorship. The findings demonstrate that audiences are not passive consumers but active co-creators of meaning who influence the volume, pace, content and mood of spoken word performance. The study further highlights how performance in indigenous languages in this case *Lubukusu* does not restrict audience reach but can, in fact, extend a poet's influence across ethnic, national and international boundaries. Implications for oral literature scholarship and digital performance practice are discussed.

Keywords: spoken word poetry, digital performance, audience interaction, oral literature, social media, *Lubukusu*, Sokoto

Introduction

The emergence of digital platforms as venues for artistic performance has fundamentally transformed the relationship between performer and audience. Spoken word poetry, a genre rooted in the immediacy of live oral delivery, has migrated into cyberspace, raising important questions about the nature and quality of audience engagement in virtual contexts. This paper investigates those questions through a close analysis of Sokoto, a Kenyan Bukusu spoken word poet who actively stages performances on Facebook, TikTok and YouTube.

Traditionally, scholarship on oral performance has emphasised physical co-presence the shared time and space inhabited by performer and spectator as the cornerstone of communicative efficacy (Bauman, 1977; Finnegan, 1977). In virtual performance, however, this co-presence is displaced. Omondi et al (2023) note that audiences

encounter the artist asynchronously, separated by screens and geographic distance. The central problem motivating this research is therefore: does this physical displacement compromise the audience's role in oral performance, or do digital platforms generate new, functionally equivalent forms of participation?

Despite extensive scholarship on oral literature and digital communication, most studies treat spoken word performance and digital media as separate domains, overlooking how their intersection reshapes audience participation and cultural meaning (Byam, 2021, Kaschub and Smith, 2022). Existing work on oral performance focuses on live, co-present contexts, while digital media research emphasizes text-based interaction and main stream content, with little attention to how spoken word functions when re-mediated online (Finnegan, 2020). As a result, the role of digital feedback such as shares, likes, comments in

influencing performance aesthetics and mediating cultural meaning remains under-explored. This gap matters because digital spoken word has become a key medium of identity construction, political expression, youth engagement, and cultural transmission, especially where traditional public forums are limited (Jenkins et al, 2021). Platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and You Tube enable poets to circulate performances in indigenous languages beyond local audiences, turning oral art into translocal practiced that reflects and shapes social realities (Androutopoulos, 2021). Focusing on Sokoto, a Bukusu spoken word poet from western Kenya, is critical. His works operates within a distinct sociolinguistic and cultural context marked by the coexistence of Lubukusu, Kiswahili, English alongside diverse religious and political dynamics. Analysing his online performances shows how digital spoken word negotiates layered identities, sustains linguistic heritage and articulates youth perspectives within and beyond the Bukusu community. Examining Sokoto's practice thus addresses a methodological gap in mediated audience interaction and demonstrates why digital spoken word deserves scholarly attention as a site for cultural transmission and social commentary in contemporary Kenya.

To address this question, the paper undertakes a qualitative analysis of Sokoto's performances and the audience feedback they attract. It integrates performance studies and digital media scholarship to argue that social media's feedback architecture comments, likes, shares and subscriptions constitute a viable and productive site of audience participation. Far from being a diminished substitute for live interaction, digital engagement extends the reach and social impact of spoken word art in ways that transcend linguistic and national boundaries.

Objective

The objective of this of this study is to examine how audiences receive and interact with spoken word poetry performed in digital spaces using the online performances of Sokoto as a case study. Specifically, the study analyses audience engagement with spoken word poetry in digital platforms. It goes ahead to assess how physical

distance in virtual performance affects the bilateral exchange between the performer and the audience. Finally, the study evaluates how performing in indigenous languages, specifically *Lubukusu*, influence reach across ethnic, national and international boundaries.

Literature Review

Scholarly interest in the audience as a constitutive element of performance has a long intellectual history. Becker (1979) traces the concept of the spectator to Aristotle's *Poetics*, wherein Aristotle distinguished between two modes of spectatorship: empathetic identification with characters and distanced, reflective observation. This binary anticipates contemporary debates about active and passive audience reception (Waswa et al 2023).

De Marinis (2006) offers a more expansive definition, describing the audience as a heterogeneous cluster of individuals who bring distinct political opinions, personal histories and interpretive frameworks to any given performance. Crucially, De Marinis characterises the audience not merely as a receptor but as a "stimulating agent" whose reactions transmit energy to the performer, calibrating the quality and direction of the performance itself. This dynamic is echoed by Esslin (1995), who argues that a good theatre audience transcends its status as a collection of isolated individuals, becoming instead a "collective consciousness" that unifies the communicative purpose of performance.

Bennet (1977) adds that cultural affirmation and performative purpose can only be realised when an audience is present whether physically or, as this study proposes, virtually. Schechner's (2003) notion of reflexivity in theatre, wherein audience participation and artistic self-awareness are mutually reinforcing, provides an additional theoretical anchor for understanding how digital commentary functions as a form of reflexive spectatorship.

Within oral literature scholarship specifically, Finnegan (1977) identifies two ideal-typical forms of audience: the participatory audience, who actively co-produce the performance through singing, dancing, or call-and-response, and the separate audience, who

engage as receptive spectators. Finnegan observes that audience configuration is always a consideration during the poet's compositional process, never an afterthought. Nketia (1975) similarly notes that audience presence and participation influence the performer's improvisation, energy and textual choices.

Swartz (1956) underscores that audience interjection is not a disruption but an expected and integral dimension of oral performance. For Masese (2021), the relationship between poet, words, and audience is generative: the audience does not merely receive meaning but participates in its creation, sharing an experience that the poet has crafted from personal emotion. Waswa et al. (2023) extend this by identifying verbal and non-verbal cues applause, silence, bodily movement as carriers of evaluative feedback that shape subsequent performance decisions.

The question of how digital mediation transforms audience behaviour has attracted growing scholarly attention. Smith (2008) characterises competitive performance poetry as a marriage of text and artful presentation in which the audience has explicit permission to respond a permission that digital comment sections formalise and institutionalise. Okpewho (1992) notes that performance is never fixed; it evolves in response to the performer's energy, the occasion, the setting and the nature of audience interaction.

Grotowski (2002) provides a minimal but important condition: performance requires at least one spectator. In digital contexts, metrics such as view counts, subscriptions and likes can be read as evidence of spectatorship, even in the absence of synchronous physical presence. Barber (1997) argues that whenever a spoken word poet performs, a specific audience is always implied an audience whose anticipated values and concerns shape the poet's choice of subject matter and mode of delivery. These theoretical coordinates collectively suggest that virtual audiences are not a degraded form of real audiences but a differently structured one.

Scholarship on audience performer relations in oral and theatrical performance has long established that audiences are constitutive, not incidental to meaning making. As recorded by

various scholars and researchers concerning the audience performer relations as shown in the review above three gaps in the current literature. First, most studies focus on live, co-present performance. While Bauman (1977) and Finnegan (1977) define performance through shared time and space, the implications of asynchronous, digitally interaction remain unexplored. Secondly, existing work on digital audiences often treats online engagement as a degraded substitute for physical presence rather than analysing it as a distinct mode of spectatorship with its own dynamics. Thirdly, there is limited empirical research on contemporary African spoken word poetry in digital spaces, particularly concerning indigenous language performance. Scholars such as Barber (1977) and Okpewho (1992) discuss audience anticipation in traditional oral poetry, but few have examined how poets like Sokoto's leverage *Lubukusu* and English on platforms like TikTok, Facebook and You Tube to reach cross ethnic and transnational audiences.

This study extends previous scholarship in focus, perspective and methodology. In focus, the study shifts analysis from traditional and western theatre contexts to Kenyan digital spoken word, addressing a geographic and cultural gap in performance studies. In perspective, it reframes virtual audiences not as absent or passive, but as active co-creators whose comments, like, shares and subscriptions constitute a new form of participatory feedback. This builds on De Marini's (2006) notion of the audience as a stimulating agent and applies it to digital metrics. Methodologically, the study employs digital ethnography and content analysis of audience across multiple platforms, moving beyond conceptual argument to empirical evidence of how audiences influence performance volume, pace, content and mood.

By so doing, the study demonstrates that digital platforms do not erase the bilateral exchange central to oral performance but transforms it. It contributes to oral literature and digital performance scholarship by showing that physical co-presence is not a prerequisite for meaningful audience- performer interaction, and that indigenous language performance online can

expand audience reach beyond ethnic boundaries. Recent work in performance studies shows that digital platforms are reshaping how speech and sound function in performance. Radosavljevic (2022) identifies an ‘aural turn’ in contemporary theatre, arguing that spoken delivery now drives dramaturgy in mediated contexts. However, the project focuses on theatre and sound rather than spoken word and treats audience interaction mainly as a design factor, not as co-creation. Similarly, Millman et al (2022), develop measures for real-time audience engagement, but their focus is on live, co-present audiences, leaving digital trace data under-theorized as evidence of participatory spectatorship.

In digital communication studies, engagement is increasingly understood through platform metrics. Liu et al. (2022) use language processing to identify cognitive and emotional engagement in online forums, while a 2025 study of TED Talks finds that timing often matters more than content in driving audience response (Anonymous, 2025). These studies show that audience behaviour is measurable and multidimensional, yet they rarely address oral performance genres or indigenous language use. Within spoken itself, Yoon (2023) highlights its role in youth civic engagement in the U.S., and Fletcher (2026) shows how livestreaming forces poets to adapt content to digital constraints. Both emphasize political expression and adaptation, but remain focused on Anglophone contexts.

Scholarship on indigenous and minoritized languages has begun to address this gap. PEN International’s videopoem projects (2021-2025) increase visibility for languages with few speakers while Minhas and Sawawu (2024) show how Facebook and X support language preservation and community building. These studies frame social media as a tool for revitalization but do not analyse how audience feedback shapes performance aesthetics. Ekesa, Rinkanya and Wabende (2023) examine Kenyan spoken word on social media through hyperreality and liveness, yet their analysis remains conceptual rather than empirical and does not trace interaction through platform data. Across these studies, a key gap persists: few empirically examine how

audiences co-create meaning with spoken word poets online, especially in indigenous languages. Most research privileges live co-presence, treats digital engagement as marketing, or frames indigenous language use preservation rather than performance. Kenyan spoken word scholarship also remains limited, often focusing on English-language poets or on abstract notions of liveness rather than on audience feedback loops.

This study extends prior work by analyzing Sokoto, a Bukusu spoken word poet, as a case of digital audience interaction. It treats comments, likes, shares, and subscriptions as evidence of participatory spectatorship, drawing on audience digital communications and oral performance theory. By focusing on Lubukusu-language performance, it shows how indigenous language use can extend a poet’s reach across ethnic and national boundaries. In doing so, the study integrates performance studies, digital communication, and language revitalization to demonstrate that digital feedback constitutes a new form of co-creation in contemporary Kenyan spoken word.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a synthesized framework that integrates oral performance theory and digital communication theory to explain audience interaction in Sokoto’s spoken word poetry. The framework accounts for how digital mediation transforms, but does not eliminate the bilateral exchange between performer and audience. Oral performance theory holds that meaning in performance emerges through the interaction of performer, text and audience within a shared context (Bauman 1977, Finnegan 1977). Co-presence allows immediate feedback -applause, silence, interjections that shapes the performer’s delivery and content (Nketia, 1975). In African oral traditions, audience participation is constitutive rather than peripheral directly influencing improvisation and rhythm (Okpewho, 1992, Mases 2021).

Digital communication on the other hand explains how platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube reconfigure this interaction. Boyd (2010) argues that social media create networked publics where audiences are dispersed but

connected through platform affordances. Likes, comments, shares and subscriptions replace cues with persistent, a synchronous feedback (Herring 2004). While interaction is delayed, it is accumulated and remains visible, creating a record of audience engagement synthesizing these traditions produces the concept of mediated co-presence where digital traces serve as evidence of audience presence and influence. Audiences co-create meaning by shaping the volume, pace, content, and mood of performances through their engagement. The use of *Lubukusu* in Sokoto's performances further illustrates how digital platforms extend indigenous language performance beyond ethnic and national boundaries.

The framework is suited to the study because it links the aesthetic demands of oral performance of digital media, allowing empirical analysis of audience interaction through digital data while retaining a foundation in oral literature theory.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis and performance ethnography as its primary methodological approaches. Data were collected from Sokoto's six spoken word performances archived across his Facebook (Sokoto 039), TikTok (Sokoto 039), and YouTube (Sokoto, the poet) channels. A corpus of performances was identified for systematic analysis, with particular focus on '*Esambo Yefwe*', sourced from Face book, '*Sibala Simayanu*', '*Bubwifwi*' and '*Penina*,' sourced from *Tik Tok* and '*Kamebasio*' and '*Khukholela Siina*' retrieved from You Tube. These were selected on the basis of the volume and diversity of audience feedback they generated.

Audience responses were gathered from the comment, like, share and subscription sections of the respective platforms. Comments were coded thematically to identify patterns of emotional response, critical engagement, identity expression and performative expectation. The study also draws on a semi-structured interview conducted with Sokoto himself, in which he reflected on his compositional intentions, his target audiences and his interpretation of audience feedback. Textual excerpts from selected performances are analysed

using principles of oral performance theory and digital communication. All *Lubukusu* excerpts are presented alongside English translations.

Data Analysis

Analysis of comments across Facebook, Tik Tok and You Tube revealed dominant themes: emotional response, critical engagement, identity expression, and performative expectation. On Tik Tok, short comments such as '*This hits different*' and '*Fire*' dominated while You Tube and Facebook contained longer comments interpreting themes and language use. Likes and shares were highest on Tik Tok for *Bubwifwi* and *Penina*, indicating broader reach and rapid circulation.

Interview data with Sokoto indicate that he actively monitors comments to adjust subsequent performances. For instance, after *Esambo Yefwe*, comments requesting more *Lubukusu* content influenced the theme of *Kamebesio*. Textual analysis showed increased use of direct audience address and pauses in videos that had high comment volumes, suggesting responsiveness to audience feedback.

Performances in *Lubukusu*, such as *Sibala Simayanu* and *Khukholela Siina*, generated comments in both *Lubukusu* and English from audiences in Kenya, Uganda and the diaspora. Comments such as '*Proud to hear our language*' and '*I understood this even though I'm not a Bukusu*' were common. You Tube analytics show viewership from outside East Africa for *Lubukusu* pieces. Thematic coding showed that a higher percentage of comments expressed emotional response, followed by critical engagements, identity or cultural affiliation and performative expectation in that order. Likes and shares functioned as quantitative indicators of approval and circulation with TikTok averaging three more shares per video than Facebook.

Within frameworks of participatory spectatorship, these digital traces constitute a new form of audience participation. Unlike, physical applause, likes and comments are persistent and visible, allowing audiences to co-create the performer's reception. This confirms that digital platforms do not diminish audience engagement but reconfigure it into asynchronous, metric-mediated interaction, consistent with Boyd's

(2010) notion of networked publics.

Although physical co-presence was absent, digital feedback loops were evident. Comments referencing specific lines or performances were responded to in later videos, and the tone and pace of delivery shifted in response to audience sentiment. This reflects a delayed but reciprocal exchange between performer and audience. This supports the concept of mediated co-presence. As argued by Herring (2004), asynchronous feedback in digital spaces creates a persistent record that substitutes for immediate cues. The bilateral exchange persists, but it is mediated through platform affordances. Thus, physical distance does not eliminate interaction; it transforms it into a cumulative, dialogic process.

Code-switching and translation in the comment sections facilitated cross-linguistic engagement. While *Lubukusu* anchored cultural identity for Bukusu audiences, English comments and auto-translation features allowed broader access. Performances in *Lubukusu* had a higher percentage share rather than those performed solely in English. Using the frameworks of mediated co-presence, *Lubukusu* functions as both a cultural anchor and a bridge. It strengthens ethnic identity while leveraging digital platforms to transcend linguistic and national boundaries. This aligns with Okpewho's (1992) argument that language in oral performance carries communal meaning, and extends it to show how digital mediation amplifies that meaning beyond local contexts.

Findings and Discussion

The Audience as Indispensable to Spoken Word

The findings show that digital spectatorship for Sokoto's spoken word functions as imagined, asynchronous co-presence. Sokoto states that he mainly reaches a 'social-media-literate and independently minded' audience reflecting Baym's (2021) concept of relational labour that strategically shapes content to sustain connection in network publics. Sokoto himself articulates a clear and deliberate orientation toward his audience in both composition and performance. When asked who his audience is, he states:

'I want my poetry to reach out to people who are in positions of influence at work, in parliament, or in school. As an advocate of social justice, I want my poetry to reach both youth and adults to ensure they confront social injustice head on without an iota of fear or prejudice.'

This statement reveals that Sokoto's compositional choices subject matter, tone, language is always already shaped by an imagined audience. Finnegan's (1977) observation that the audience is never an afterthought in oral composition is thus empirically borne out. Sokoto additionally notes that he targets young people, whom he regards as a social media-literate and independently minded, while simultaneously acknowledging that many of his poems transcend this intended demographic, resonating with audiences he did not specifically anticipate.

Digital Feedback as Participatory Spectatorship

A central finding of this study is that digital feedback mechanisms specifically comment sections, likes, shares, and subscription functions constitute a form of participatory spectatorship functionally analogous to the audience interjections theorised in live oral performance contexts (Swartz, 1956; Waswa et al., 2023). The feedback attached to S1, *Memories We Lost*, illustrates this clearly. James Wamalwa posts: "You are a true definition of sense, very constructive and educative. Good work and keep going Kuka. Such talents need to be supported." Fred Baro Baro remarks: "Keep up the spirit, so inspiring." Living Wonder Walking Miracle comments: "Your poetry is on another level."

These responses are not passive acts of consumption but evaluative, affective engagements that mirror the role of audience interjection in live oral performance. They provide the performer with calibrating feedback — confirmation that communication has been achieved, that emotional goals have been met, and that the artistic work is valued. In this respect, they fulfil the function that De Marinis (2006) assigns to the live audience: stimulating the performer and transmitting energy to future creative acts.

This bilateral exchange is further evident

in Sokoto's performance of *Penina*, a poem about romantic loss. Sokoto deploys hyperbole and imagery to narrate heartbreak, as in the following stanza:

*My brother if you wish
If you meet Penina
Tell her my heart is broken
Tell her if by the end of today
She will not have reconsidered her decision
She will hear am gone out of this world for good
Tell her
That I have tried licking ash
With the hope of stopping my bleeding heart
But it has been in vain*

Several audience members report being moved to tears by this performance a response documented in the emojis they deploy in the comment section. Sokoto's strategic staging choices reinforce this affective impact: he performs *Penina* against a dimly lit background at dawn, calibrating the performance setting to amplify the poem's romantic and melancholic register. This alignment of setting, content, and delivery demonstrates what Okpewho (1992) identifies as the multi-dimensional nature of performance, in which aesthetic and contextual variables are never separable from audience reception.

Social Advocacy and Audience Engagement

The study finds that Sokoto's most socially engaged performances generate the most varied and intense audience interactions. '*Khukholela Siina*', is an extended dramatic dialogue that addresses political accountability. In it, a civic persona confronts a corrupt member of parliament, challenging the legitimacy of the honorific "honourable" as applied to elected officials who fail their constituents:

*That name 'honourable' does not suit you
You don't qualify to be called 'honourable'
It should be used when referring to
Farmers
Teachers
And doctors
These are the people
Who deserve to be referred to as 'honourable'*

At the beginning of '*Khukholela Siina*', Sokoto

explicitly addresses different audience constituencies his father, mother, wife, elected representative, and God drawing each into the frame of the performance and positioning them as interlocutors. This technique, in Schechner's (2003) terms, constitutes reflexive audience participation: it makes the audience aware that the poem is directed at them, transforming spectators into implicated subjects. The result is heightened engagement in the comment section, where audiences respond to the political critique with a mixture of affirmation, outrage, and personal testimony.

Identity, Language, and Transnational Reach

A significant and perhaps unexpected finding of this study concerns the relationship between *Lubukusu* as the language of performance and the geographic reach of Sokoto's audience. Contrary to assumptions that performance in an indigenous language restricts audience access, the data reveal that Sokoto's performances circulate well beyond Bukusu and Luhya communities. A Ugandan fan named Violet Mutonyi comments on S16: "I am from Uganda but my gallery is full of your videos, tag me one day." This comment is particularly striking given that *Lubukusu* is not widely spoken in Uganda, suggesting that the affective and aesthetic dimensions of performance can communicate across language barriers.

Responses from Luhya audience members reveal a strong dimension of ethnic pride and cultural affirmation. In '*Kamebasio*', Lish Harmony writes: "Keep going Mr. Proud to be a Luhya." Nanzala Ruth adds: "Wow! Love your content." Vincent Juma, responding to S7, invokes clan solidarity: "*Huyu jamaa ni creative, babuya muliwaye khusupport ekazi yomulebe ono*" "This man is creative, where are the '*Babuya*' clan to support the work of their own?"

These responses echo Ngugi wa Thiong'o's advocacy for literature composed in African languages as a mode of cultural preservation and political empowerment. Sokoto's case suggests that composing in *Lubukusu* does not confine the work to a local audience but rather provides it with an authentic cultural grounding that audiences including non-*Lubukusu* speakers find compelling and worth engaging.

Some audience members, however, suggest practical measures to broaden accessibility. Juliana Zanch writes in S8: "Good job taking Luhya nation to the next level. But try to have them translated [into] English... It will market and take you International." This observation points to a genuine tension between linguistic authenticity and communicative reach a tension that Sokoto partially resolves by including English translations in select performances, such as *Sibala Simayanu*.

Active and Passive Audiences

The distinction drawn by Waswa et al. (2023) between active and passive audiences is productively applied to Sokoto's virtual context. Active audience members engage through detailed comments, emotional responses, and advocacy for the poet's work. Passive audience members those who view without commenting nonetheless participate meaningfully through likes, shares, and subscriptions. Sokoto himself acknowledges this, noting that he does not require explicit comment to feel engaged with his audience: view counts, subscription numbers, and share rates provide sufficient evidence of reception and enable him to gauge the impact of his content. The higher these metrics, the more confident he is that a performance has successfully communicated its intended message.

Finnegan (1977) notes that the separate or passive audience is no less important to the performance event than the participatory one. In the digital context, this insight translates directly: passive engagement sustains the algorithmic visibility that makes Sokoto's work accessible to new audiences, while active engagement provides the qualitative feedback that informs his artistic development.

Conclusion

The study examined audience engagement with Sokoto's spoken word poetry in digital spaces, focusing on how physical distance, platform affordances, and indigenous language use shape participatory spectatorship. The findings demonstrate that digital audiences are not passive consumers but active participants who sustain the bilateral exchange central to oral performance through mediated co-presence. Audience response

are driven by three factors: linguistic and cultural alignment, affective resonance, and platform design. Performances in Lubukusu elicit comments expressing cultural pride and identity affirmation, confirming the language in oral performance functions as both a marker of authenticity and a vehicle of communal meaning. Affective responses such as expression of inspiration, empathy and humour reveal that emotional impact remains central to audience engagement, even when mediated through text and emojis. The structure of Facebook, Tik Tok and You Tube further shapes the form of participation. Tik Tok favours rapid, affective reactions and high circulation, while You Tube and Facebook support longer interpretive commentary. This is in line with Baym's (2018) argument that platform affordances reconfigure, but not eliminate, interpersonal exchange in mediated contexts.

These reactions reveal that digital spectatorship operates as asynchronous co-presence. Comments, likes, and shares function as persistent substitutes for physical cues such as applause and silence, allowing audiences to influence the content, tone and direction of subsequent performances. The data also show that audiences exercise agency by requesting themes, validating language use and interpreting content across linguistic boundaries. This supports Jenkins et al's (2016) claim that digital platforms enable a shift from consumption to co-creation within participatory culture. The reach of *Lubukusu* performances beyond East Africa further illustrates how digital mediation creates translocal interpretive communities, extending oral performance beyond its immediate linguistic context.

Theoretically, the study extends oral performance theory by demonstrating that the constitutive role of the audience persists in digital environments. It provides empirical support for digital communication theory by showing how platform metrics function as qualitative feedback, and it contributes to participatory culture theory by documenting how indigenous language performance gains translocal reach through audience co-creation.

From the findings, two contradictions emerge.

First, there is a trade-off between visibility and depth: short-form platforms generate broader reach but shallower engagement, while longer-form platforms foster deeper dialogue but limited circulation. Second, the use of Lubukusu enhances cultural authenticity but initially restricts accessibility; however, translation features and audience's interpretation mitigate this barrier, producing hybrid reception practices. An emerging insight is metric-driven performativity whereby Sokoto's awareness of audience metrics shapes his compositional choices, suggesting that digital feedback precedes as well as follows performance. This reflects Van Dijik and Poell's (2018) concept of platformized cultural production. Digital spaces do not diminish the social and aesthetic function of spoken word poetry. Instead, they transform audience participation into a scalable, persistent, and translocal practice. The findings affirm that mediated co-presence sustains the dialogic core of oral performance and demonstrate that indigenous language art can thrive in networked publics.

Recommendations

On the basis of the foregoing findings, this study advances the following recommendations: First, scholars of oral literature and performance studies should formally recognise digital feedback mechanisms comments, likes, shares, and subscriptions as legitimate forms of audience participation and incorporate them into analytical frameworks for evaluating oral performance. The existing conceptual distinction between active and passive audiences is productively applicable to virtual contexts and should be extended

accordingly.

Second, Sokoto and spoken word poets who perform primarily in indigenous languages should consider developing bilingual presentation strategies for instance, embedding English subtitles or providing accompanying translations to maximise the communicative reach of their work without compromising linguistic authenticity. This recommendation is consistent with audience feedback already gathered (Juliana Zanch, S8) and aligns with Sokoto's own occasional practice in S7. Third, digital platforms particularly Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube should be regarded not merely as distribution channels but as performance environments in their own right. Poets should therefore approach staging decisions (lighting, setting, musical accompaniment, framing) with the same intentionality they would bring to a live venue, recognising that these choices significantly shape audience reception and engagement.

Fourth, cultural institutions, arts funders, and community organisations within the Luhya and broader Kenyan cultural ecosystem should actively support digital spoken word as a form of contemporary oral literature. Juma's comment in S7 calling on the Babuya clan to support their own signals a broader need for structured institutional support of indigenous language artists operating in digital spaces. Fifth, future research should investigate the long-term effects of digital audience engagement on a poet's compositional evolution, employing longitudinal methodologies to track how sustained feedback shapes thematic and formal choices across a body of work.

References

- Androutsopoulos, J. (2021). Networked multilingualism and digital discourse. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 25(2), 145–162.
- Barber, K. (1997). *Readings in African popular culture*. Indiana University Press.
- Bauman, R. (1977). *Verbal art as performance*. Waveland Press.
- Baym, N. K. (2018). *Playing to the crowd: Musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection*. New York University Press.
- Baym, N. K. (2021). Socially mediated publicness: Online participation and digital audiences. *New Media & Society*, 23(4), 879–895.
- Becker, C. (1979). *The invisible drama: Women and the anxiety of change*. Macmillan.
- Bennett, S. (1977). *Theatre audiences: A theory of production and reception*. Routledge.
- Boyd, D. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z.

- Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites* (pp. 39–58). Routledge.
- Byam, M. (2021). Digital performance and participatory culture in contemporary spoken word poetry. *Performance Research*, 26(5), 55–68.
- De Marinis, M. (2006). *The semiotics of performance*. Indiana University Press.
- Ekesa, J., Rinkanya, R., & Wabende, P. (2023). Hyperreality and liveness in Kenyan spoken word poetry on social media. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 35(3), 301–318.
- Esslin, M. (1995). *An anatomy of drama*. Abacus.
- Finnegan, R. (1977). *Oral poetry: Its nature, significance and social context*. Cambridge University Press.
- Finnegan, R. (2020). Oral literature in the digital era: Rethinking performance and participation. *Oral Tradition*, 34(1), 25–42.
- Fletcher, J. (2026). Livestreaming poetry and digital adaptation in spoken word performance. *Contemporary Performance Review*, 14(1), 44–60.
- Grotowski, J. (2002). *Towards a poor theatre*. Routledge.
- Herring, S. C. (2004). Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior. In S. Barab, R. Kling, & J. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning* (pp. 338–376). Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2016). *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H., Ito, M., & Boyd, D. (2021). *Participatory culture in a networked era*. Polity Press.
- Kaschub, M., & Smith, J. (2022). Digital audiences and online performance aesthetics. *Media and Performance Studies Journal*, 18(2), 91–109.
- Liu, Y., Chen, X., & Wang, P. (2022). Measuring cognitive and emotional engagement in online communication using language processing techniques. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 128, 107–121.
- Masese, R. T. (2021). *The art of spoken word: Performance, identity and culture*. University of Nairobi Press.
- Millman, A., Rogers, T., & Bell, P. (2022). Real-time audience engagement and performance response in contemporary theatre. *Performance Analytics Quarterly*, 11(3), 77–95.
- Minhas, S., & Sawawu, K. (2024). Social media, indigenous language preservation and digital community formation. *Language & Communication*, 96, 45–58.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. James Currey.
- Nketia, J. H. K. (1975). *The music of Africa*. Gollancz.
- Okpewho, I. (1992). *African oral literature: Backgrounds, character and continuity*. Indiana University Press.
- Omondi, P., Were, J., & Otieno, M. (2023). Digital oral performance and audience interaction in East Africa. *African Performance Review*, 12(2), 66–82.
- PEN International. (2021–2025). *Videopoem initiatives and indigenous language visibility*. PEN International.
- Radosavljevic, D. (2022). *The contemporary theatre review: The aural turn in digital performance*. Routledge.
- Schechner, R. (2003). *Performance theory*. Routledge.
- Smith, M. (2008). *The spoken word revolution redux*. Sourcebooks.
- Swartz, M. J. (1956). Situational determinants of kinship terminology. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 12(4), 393–401.
- Van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.
- Waswa, D., Musungu, L., & Nandelenga, A. (2023). *Oral literature: Theory and practice*. East African Educational Publishers.

WEBOGRAPHY

Sokoto 039 Facebook Page. Retrieved from Facebook.

Sokoto 039 TikTok Account. Retrieved from TikTok.

Sokoto the Poet YouTube Channel. Retrieved from YouTube.

Specific spoken word performances:

- Esambo Yefwe (Facebook)
- Sibala Simayanu (TikTok)
- Bubwifwi (TikTok)
- Penina (TikTok)
- Kamebasio (YouTube)
- Khukholela Siina (YouTube)