



# Cultural Capital and Market Forces: Navigating Music Production Dynamics in Kenya's Contemporary Music Industry

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## Abstract

This study examines the interplay between cultural capital and market dynamics in Kenya's contemporary music production industry, interrogating how digital platforms, genre hybridisation, and shifting audience preferences reshape the valuation and operationalisation of cultural capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, the research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, incorporating interviews with industry stakeholders, content analysis, and document review to explore tensions between cultural authenticity and commercial viability. Findings reveal that digital platforms like Boomplay and Mdundo act as gatekeepers, institutionalising cultural capital through metrics-driven validation while prioritising hybrid genres such as Gengetone and Afro Neo-Benga. These platforms create a feedback loop where streaming data influences production decisions, compelling artists to negotiate between local identity and global market demands. The study highlights a critical misalignment between formal music education and industry needs, exemplified by producers' struggles to integrate embodied cultural capital (e.g., traditional musical knowledge) with technical proficiency in global genres. The analysis underscores the dual role of cultural capital as both an artistic resource and market force, emphasising the need for curricula that bridge technical expertise with deep cultural literacy. This research contributes to broader debates on cultural commodification, digital intermediation, and the evolving role of cultural capital in Africa's creative economies.

## Introduction

On 10 July 2024, Mahugu (2024) published an article on the Standard Media Digital Newspaper revealing Spotify's first-ever Kenya Music Global Impact List. Featuring fifteen Kenyan songs that had captured international audiences, the list told a fascinating story: Arbantone, a genre barely known outside Kenya just years earlier, now dominated global streaming charts alongside Afro fusion and local R&B. Spotify's Head of Music for Sub-Saharan Africa, Phiona Okumu, described this as proof that streaming platforms could elevate local artists to worldwide stages, fundamentally transforming how Kenyan music reaches global audiences.



Yet beneath this celebration lay a more complex reality. This global recognition uncovered a tension reshaping Kenya's entire music ecosystem—the intricate interplay between preserving cultural identity and meeting the demands of an increasingly digitalised, metrics-driven marketplace. The genres achieving international success represented fusions of traditional Kenyan musical elements with contemporary global production techniques, raising crucial questions about how such cultural alchemy happens and who possesses the knowledge to create it. Consider the experiences of Kenya's music production graduates, who, theoretically, should be best positioned to navigate these cultural intersections. These graduates enter an industry where success increasingly depends on local cultural knowledge and global technical skills. Their stories reveal both the promises and limitations of formal education in preparing producers for an industry that values cultural resonance as much as technical proficiency. The contemporary Kenyan music industry represents a "cultural capital marketplace"—a space where traditional knowledge systems, technical expertise, and commercial imperatives intersect in complex ways. Digital platforms like Boomplay and Mdundo function not merely as distribution channels but as powerful institutional validators.

While existing scholarship has explored various aspects of Africa's music industries, the specific mechanisms through which market forces reshape cultural capital in music production remain under-examined. The present study addresses this gap by examining how market dynamics affect the valuation of cultural capital and how producers navigate the tensions between global market forces and local cultural identity.

### **Literature Review**

This review examines how digital transformation is altering the relationship between cultural capital and music production, necessitating new theoretical frameworks to understand contemporary creative industries.

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Understanding the relationship between cultural capital and music production requires examining how technological change intersects with theoretical frameworks about cultural value and artistic creation. Bourdieu's (1986) conception of cultural capital—encompassing embodied skills, institutionalised credentials, and objectified outputs—initially emerged from studying relatively stable cultural fields. However, contemporary music production operates within a different environment where digital technologies continuously reshape how cultural value is created and recognised, prompting scholars to reconsider how traditional cultural capital frameworks apply to digitalised creative industries. Scott (2012) identified a paradox that resonates with contemporary Kenyan music production: cultural entrepreneurs often lack economic capital, compelling them to leverage social, cultural, and symbolic resources to navigate markets. This dynamic becomes complex in emerging economies where producers must simultaneously master global production standards while maintaining identity within local cultural contexts. Similarly, Hesmondhalgh (2019) suggests that digitalisation has intensified these challenges, creating new forms of cultural intermediation that operate according to algorithmic rather than traditional cultural logics.

The transformation becomes pronounced when examining how digital platforms reshape cultural capital in African contexts. Kenyan hip-hop exemplifies these dynamics, as documented by Kidula (2012), blending global rap aesthetics with indigenous languages and musical structures.



Contemporary genres like Arbantone and Afro Neo-Benga represent a transformation of cultural capital, where traditional practices become hybridised cultural products designed to succeed within the digital marketplace.

Akuno's (2000) framework, describing music's tripartite role—as concept, object, and sociocultural activity—remains relevant, but digital technologies complicate these traditional categorisations. Producers now must understand not only music's communal and communicative functions but also how these functions translate into algorithmic visibility and platform-based validation.

Digital platforms have fundamentally altered how music reaches audiences, moving beyond traditional value chain disruption to create entirely new forms of cultural intermediation. Platforms like Boomplay and Mdundo don't simply distribute music—they actively shape cultural value through algorithmic curation, playlist placement, and metrics-driven feedback systems. This shift creates what Srnicek (2017) terms "platform capitalism" within cultural industries, where success increasingly depends on understanding algorithmic logics rather than traditional cultural gatekeepers. As Prey (2020) and Bonini and Gandini (2019) demonstrate, platforms now influence creative decisions through data analytics that reveal audience preferences in real-time, creating feedback loops that can either amplify cultural diversity or push producers toward algorithmic conformity. Beukelaer and Eisenberg (2015) document how mobile technologies and streaming platforms are transforming African music sectors, creating new opportunities while introducing forms of digital dependency that may constrain cultural expression.

The role of data analytics in shaping production decisions represents perhaps the most significant departure from traditional music-making processes. Where producers once relied primarily on artistic intuition and cultural knowledge, contemporary production increasingly incorporates streaming metrics, engagement data, and algorithmic feedback. This shift demonstrates how platforms don't simply reflect cultural preferences—they actively shape them through recommendation algorithms and engagement metrics. These technological changes intersect with ongoing efforts to maintain cultural authenticity within globalised markets. The emergence of successful hybrid genres in Kenya demonstrates that producers can navigate platform demands while preserving cultural distinctiveness. Still, this navigation requires an understanding of both traditional cultural forms and contemporary digital logics. These developments highlight significant challenges in preparing new talent for contemporary industry realities. Mochere's (2022) comprehensive analysis of Kenyan music production curricula reveal systematic disconnects between academic content and contemporary industry requirements, particularly in terms of cultural competency and navigating digital platforms. While formal education provides crucial technical foundations, it may not adequately prepare students for the cultural navigation required in contemporary markets.

The literature thus reveals a field in transition, where traditional frameworks for understanding cultural capital require significant revision to address digital realities. This transition presents both opportunities and challenges for producers, who must develop new strategies to convert cultural knowledge into commercial success while maintaining artistic integrity and cultural authenticity. Understanding these dynamics requires examining how industry stakeholders navigate these challenges in practice—the focus of the present study.

### **Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory (1986)**

Developed in 1986, the theory provides the context for understanding how knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies translate into social and economic power. However, its application to



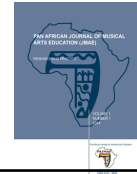
contemporary digital music production requires recognising how technological change has transformed its basic operations.

Bourdieu originally conceived cultural capital as operating through three interconnected forms. First, embodied cultural capital represents the deeply ingrained skills and dispositions that individuals develop through prolonged cultural immersion—in Kenya's music context, this might include an intuitive understanding of indigenous rhythms, familiarity with traditional call-and-response patterns, or the ability to recognise subtle linguistic nuances that resonate with local audiences. These skills develop through years of lived experience within specific cultural environments. Second, institutionalised cultural capital encompasses formal credentials and recognised qualifications that provide official validation of cultural competency. For Kenyan music producers, this traditionally meant diplomas from institutions like Kenyatta University or international certifications in audio engineering. However, the digital era has complicated this category dramatically. Platform-based validation—such as Spotify playlist inclusion or viral social media presence—now functions as a form of institutionalised capital that may carry more weight than traditional academic credentials. Third, objectified cultural capital manifests in tangible cultural products that require both technical skill and cultural literacy to create and appreciate. In Kenya's contemporary music scene, this includes Gengetone songs that successfully blend Sheng slang with modern production techniques, as well as Afro Neo-Benga tracks that integrate traditional instrumentation with global sound design principles.

What makes Kenya's music industry particularly fascinating is how digital platforms have altered the relationships between these three forms of capital. Streaming services like Boomplay and Mdundo function as powerful intermediaries that can amplify or diminish cultural capital depending on their algorithmic preferences. A producer with deep embodied knowledge of Kikuyu musical traditions might find their work marginalised if it doesn't align with platform-preferred genres. At the same time, artists who understand algorithmic logics might achieve visibility despite limited cultural grounding.

This creates platformised cultural capital—a hybrid form that emerges from the intersection of traditional cultural knowledge and digital platform requirements. Success in this environment requires not just cultural authenticity or technical proficiency, but also an understanding of how both operate within algorithmic systems that prioritise engagement metrics over cultural significance. A producer creating Arbantone—the genre that dominated Kenya's 2024 global impact list—must simultaneously demonstrate a deep knowledge of local musical traditions, mastery of contemporary production techniques, and an understanding of the elements that will generate streaming engagement. This triple requirement represents a fundamental shift from earlier eras when cultural capital and market success operated according to more distinct logics. The theory also helps explain why many formally trained producers struggle in Kenya's contemporary market. Traditional educational institutions primarily develop institutionalised cultural capital through credential systems that may not align with current industry valuations. Meanwhile, the embodied cultural capital that proves crucial for local market success often develops outside formal educational contexts.

Yet Kenya's music scene demonstrates the theory's continued relevance. Artists who successfully navigate contemporary challenges often do so by strategically converting between different forms of cultural capital, creating what Bourdieu termed "fields of struggle"—competitive spaces where various forms of capital compete for recognition and reward. In Kenya's music industry, these



struggles play out daily as producers navigate the tension between cultural authenticity, platform requirements, and commercial viability.

Understanding these theoretical dynamics provides the foundation for examining how industry stakeholders navigate these challenges. The present study explores these negotiations through two key research questions that emerged from this theoretical analysis:

1. How do market dynamics influence the valuation and operationalisation of cultural capital in Kenya's contemporary music production industry?
2. How do music producers navigate between global market forces and local cultural authenticity in production decisions?

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, aiming to explore the perspectives of key stakeholders within the Kenyan music production industry. The study was conducted in Nairobi County, Kenya's central hub for music production (Eisenberg, 2015), and aimed to gain insight into diverse perspectives on market dynamics and cultural capital in the music production industry. The initial target sample size for this study was established at 20 participants, selected from Kenya's music production ecosystem through purposive-snowball hybrid sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach targeted a population of active industry stakeholders, including music production graduates, producers, musicians, and influential auxiliary professionals. Nonetheless, data saturation—the point at which new interviews ceased to yield novel thematic insights (Braun & Clarke, 2019)—was not reached at the initial threshold. Consequently, iterative recruitment expanded the participant pool to 27 individuals, aligning with Kirui's (2023) observation that Kenyan music industry research requires "flexible sampling to capture digitally dispersed professionals". The participants included a) six music production graduates, b) five music producers and five artists actively engaged in content creation, and c) 11 industry professionals, including radio executives and DJs who influence music distribution and consumption patterns.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (Flick, 2022), supplemented by document and content analysis of industry reports, online media interviews with local producers, and academic curricula from tertiary institutions (Bowen, 2009). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) was applied through a six-phase iterative process (1. familiarization, 2. initial coding, 3. theme development, 4. theme review, 5. theme definition, 6. analysis), chosen for its capacity to identify cross-cutting patterns in experiential data while maintaining phenomenological depth. Data triangulation across all sources (interviews, documents, media, curricula) was systematically employed to enhance validity through convergence validation (Patton, 1999; Carter et al., 2014), mitigate researcher bias, and contextualise individual narratives within structural industry dynamics (Flick, 2018).

### **Findings and Discussion**

Data from the study revealed two predominant but interconnected themes influencing music production in Kenya: the influence of market dynamics on cultural capital valuation, and producers' navigation between global forces and local authenticity. These themes highlight the complexities faced by music producers as they operate within Kenya's evolving music industry landscape. The first theme examines how market dynamics shape the valuation and operationalisation of cultural capital in Kenya's music production industry. This encompasses the role of digital platforms as cultural



validators, the evolution of revenue models and their impact on cultural value, and the growing influence of data analytics in production decisions. The second theme examines how producers balance global market forces with local authenticity. This includes strategies for maintaining cultural distinctiveness while meeting international production standards, the development of hybrid genres, and the challenges of preserving cultural integrity in an increasingly globalised market.

### ***Market Dynamics and Cultural Capital Valuation in Kenya's Music Industry***

The key finding to emerge from industry stakeholder interviews is how digital platforms have fundamentally altered the relationship between cultural knowledge and commercial success. Agnes Opondo from Mdundo articulates this transformation clearly when she explains how platforms now "prioritise Kenyan content." Still, this prioritisation operates according to metrics-driven logics that don't always align with traditional cultural validation systems. This shift becomes evident when examining the experiences of recent graduates entering the industry. Barnabus Yuka's confession that he feels "very limited in knowing what the culture wants right now" reflects more than individual uncertainty – it reveals how rapidly platform-driven markets can outpace educational preparation. The "culture" he references isn't an abstract concept but rather the specific blend of traditional knowledge and contemporary market awareness that determines success on digital platforms. Additionally, Ian Akhuyo's observation that "the current music scene wasn't discussed that much in the system" provides crucial insight into how this misalignment develops. Educational institutions continue to operate according to established cultural capital frameworks that emphasise technical proficiency and formal musical knowledge. At the same time, contemporary markets increasingly value what might be termed "algorithmic cultural literacy" – the understanding of how traditional cultural elements can be successfully integrated into platform-friendly formats.

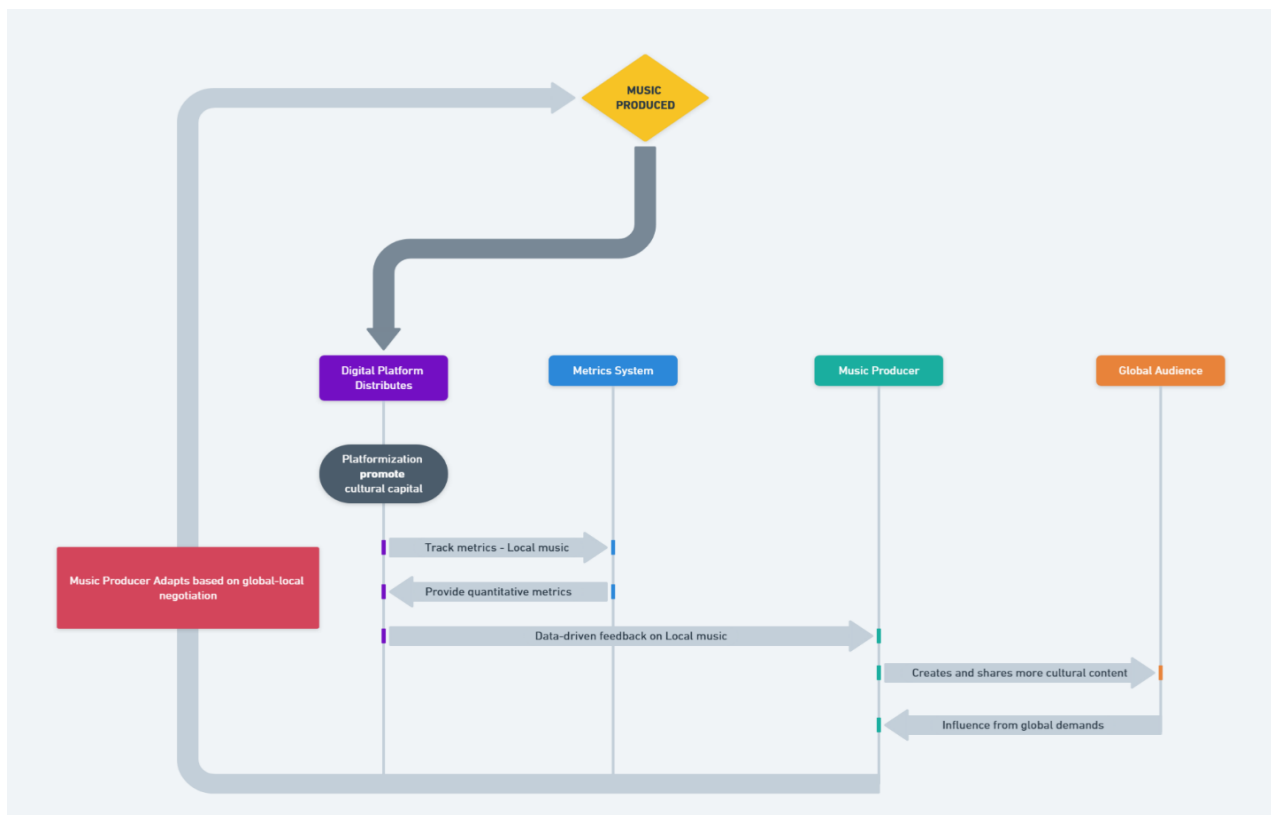
The experiences of established producers reveal how practitioners navigate these challenges. Melvin Mathenge's emphasis that graduates often "lack that local industry knowledge" highlights a specific form of embodied cultural capital that educational institutions struggle to impart. This knowledge encompasses not just an understanding of traditional musical forms but also an intuitive grasp of how these forms can be adapted for contemporary audiences and digital platform requirements. Eugene Otieno provides additional insight into these dynamics through his observations about how "global markets dictate local trends". At the same time, successful producers must "use their skills to elevate local sounds rather than simply imitating international trends." This perspective reveals the cultural navigation required in contemporary production: maintaining identity while adapting to platform preferences that often favour internationally recognisable elements.

What emerges from these collective experiences is a picture of cultural capital operating according to new rules that combine traditional knowledge with digital literacy. Platform algorithms don't simply reflect audience preferences – they actively shape them through recommendation systems that can amplify or marginalise different cultural expressions. Success requires understanding not just what resonates with local audiences, but also how that resonance can be translated into the engagement metrics that platforms prioritise. Charles Otieno from Urban Radio describes this dynamic as an "unconscious drift" toward commercially viable sounds, highlighting how platform pressures can influence creative decisions in ways that producers don't always recognise. This observation proves particularly significant because it suggests that cultural capital conversion now operates through subtle algorithmic influences rather than explicit market demands.



The collective experiences of platform executives, producers, and industry professionals reveal how this transformation creates both opportunities and constraints. Digital platforms enable Kenyan music to reach global audiences in unprecedented ways, as demonstrated by the international success of genres like Arbantone. However, this global reach comes with pressure to adapt local cultural expressions to platform requirements that may prioritise engagement over cultural significance.

Figure 1: An illustration of the extension of Bourdieu's theory representing how digital platforms, metrics systems, and the global audience collectively reshape cultural capital in the Kenyan music production industry. (Nyandieka, 2025)



At the initial stage, music production represents the creation of content that reflects Kenyan cultural elements like languages, and contemporary experiences. The produced music enters the digital ecosystem through platforms like Boomplay and Mdundo, which actively prioritise Kenyan content, demonstrating how platformisation promotes cultural capital. The metrics system found within these platforms tracks and quantifies cultural value through data analytics. This system provides crucial feedback that shapes production decisions, reflecting what industry professionals have noted: “consumer preferences and market demands have a huge influence sometimes in ways that aren't immediately obvious” (Charles Otieno, personal communication, August 2024). The metrics system creates a feedback loop between platforms and producers, offering quantitative insights into audience engagement and content performance. A critical element illustrated is the process of global-local negotiation. This negotiation process demonstrates how producers must continually balance local



cultural authenticity with global market demands, resulting in what successful companies like Ketebul Music describe as blending traditional sounds with contemporary genres to create a unique musical identity that reflects local culture. The diagram concludes by illustrating how producers create and share more cultural content in response to this complex interplay of metrics, market demands, and cultural identity. Indeed, the cyclical process demonstrates a successful navigation of both local cultural expression and global market requirements. Through these interconnected components and feedback loops, the diagram captures the essence of how cultural capital operates as both artistic resource and market force in Kenya's contemporary music industry, illustrating the complex negotiations between cultural identity and commercial viability in the digital age.

### *Navigating Global Forces and Local Identity*

The second central theme emerging from stakeholder narratives concerns the strategies that successful practitioners develop for maintaining cultural integrity while achieving commercial success. These strategies reveal cultural capital operating as both shield and currency, protecting cultural distinctiveness while enabling market participation.

Tito Bendihuru's approach to Afro-neo benga exemplifies these navigation strategies. His description of creating "a mixture of traditional benga sounds and contemporary music" might sound simple. Still, it represents complex cultural work that requires a deep, embodied knowledge of traditional forms, combined with an understanding of contemporary production techniques and market preferences. This integration doesn't happen automatically – it needs what Mark Murimi describes as the ability to "choose which one works best between street knowledge and formal knowledge." Mark's formulation proves particularly insightful because it recognises cultural capital as involving strategic choices rather than the automatic application of traditional knowledge. Successful producers don't simply apply conventional forms to contemporary contexts; they develop an understanding of when and how different forms of cultural knowledge prove most effective. The challenges faced by graduates reveal what happens when this strategic capability isn't fully developed. Emmanuel Barasa's observation that his education "was based on the classical side, but now when you are out here, you don't interact with classical pieces" illustrates how institutional cultural capital can become misaligned with industry requirements. The disconnect isn't simply between traditional and contemporary music – it's between different systems for organising and validating cultural knowledge.

Musicians provide additional perspective on how cultural identity operates within commercial contexts. Sy Adogo's insight that "talent can lead you to the best places, but when you know, you can go a bigger mileage" reveals how embodied cultural capital and institutional knowledge function as complementary rather than competing resources. Success requires the integration of intuitive cultural understanding with systematic knowledge that can be strategically deployed. In addition, Phyl-The-Kangogo's emphasis that "inherent musical ability is important because an authentic touch is what gives the art its signature" points to irreplaceable aspects of embodied cultural capital that can't be acquired through formal education alone. However, this "authentic touch" must be combined with technical proficiency and market awareness to achieve commercial success. DJ Dronz offers crucial insight into how this integration operates in practice, noting that "best producers are those who use their skills to enhance the natural flow of the song." This perspective reveals cultural capital operating through restraint as much as demonstration, knowing when technical capabilities should serve musical expression rather than dominating it.



Industry professionals describe increasingly sophisticated audience expectations that require producers to demonstrate both cultural fluency and technical mastery. Contemporary Kenyan audiences don't simply want traditional music or global sounds – they expect innovative integration that respects their cultural heritage while engaging contemporary sensibilities. Eugene Otieno's advocacy for producers who "use their technical skills to elevate local sounds rather than simply imitating international trends" articulates this expectation clearly. The emphasis on "elevation" rather than preservation suggests that successful cultural capital conversion requires active innovation rather than passive transmission of traditional forms.

These collective experiences reveal cultural capital operating through dynamic processes that require continuous adaptation and strategic thinking. Success depends not just on possessing cultural knowledge or technical skills, but on developing an understanding of how to combine these resources in ways that resonate with both local audiences and platform algorithms. The most successful practitioners appear to be those who develop what might be termed "cultural entrepreneurship" – the ability to identify opportunities for converting traditional knowledge into contemporary value while maintaining cultural integrity. This entrepreneurship operates through a strategic understanding of how different forms of cultural capital can be combined and deployed rather than through the simple application of established formulas.

#### ***Digital Feedback Loops and Cultural Evolution***

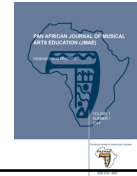
Perhaps most significantly, the study reveals how digital platforms create feedback loops that continuously reshape the operation of cultural capital. Streaming data, engagement metrics, and algorithmic recommendations don't simply reflect existing cultural preferences – they actively participate in cultural evolution by influencing production decisions and audience expectations.

Agnes Opondo's observation that "consumer preferences and market demands have huge influence sometimes in ways that aren't immediately obvious" captures this dynamic perfectly. Platform data provides producers with unprecedented insight into audience responses, but this information comes with interpretive challenges. High engagement might reflect genuine cultural resonance, but it might also indicate successful adaptation to algorithmic preferences that don't necessarily align with cultural significance. This creates what participants describe as ongoing negotiations between multiple forms of validation. Traditional cultural legitimacy remains vital for local credibility, but platform-based success increasingly determines commercial viability. Producers must develop strategies for achieving both forms of validation without compromising either.

The experiences documented in this study suggest that Kenya's music industry is developing new forms of cultural capital that integrate traditional knowledge with digital literacy in innovative ways. These developments have implications extending far beyond individual career success to encompass broader questions about cultural preservation, innovation, and evolution in digital contexts.

#### **Conclusion**

Kenya's contemporary music industry epitomises the complex negotiation between cultural capital and market forces in a digital age. The study demonstrates that digital platforms such as Boomplay and Mdundo have reconfigured cultural value systems, transforming Bourdieu's (1986) embodied, institutionalised, and objectified cultural capital into metrics-driven commodities. By prioritising hybrid genres like Gengetone and Afro Neo-Benga, these platforms validate content that balances local authenticity with global appeal, creating a dynamic feedback loop where streaming data dictates production strategy. However, this commodification risks homogenising Kenya's musical identity, as



artists unconsciously adapt to regional trends like Amapiano and Afrobeat to maintain visibility. The case of Melvin Mathenge underscores systemic gaps in music education, where institutionalised cultural capital (formal credentials) often fails to equip producers with the embodied knowledge necessary for local resonance. This misalignment calls for curricula that integrate technical mastery with immersive cultural training, fostering producers capable of navigating both global market demands and Kenya's rich musical heritage.

Furthermore, the study reveals the paradoxical empowerment and precarity introduced by platform capitalism: while digital distribution democratises access, it also entrenches dependency on algorithmic validation and uneven revenue models. Ultimately, the Kenyan music industry's evolution reflects a broader global narrative of cultural production, where digital intermediation redefines artistic legitimacy. Future research should explore policy interventions to safeguard cultural diversity and equitable monetisation, ensuring that Kenya's sonic identity thrives amid market pressures. By centring cultural capital as both a resource and a site of struggle, this study advances critical insights into the intersection of tradition, technology, and capital in Africa's creative economies.

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## Appendix I

### 2024 Kenya Music Global Impact List



1. **Mr.Tee, TENORBOY, prod.chacha** - DIGII III TRAILER
2. **Mr.Tee, TENORBOY, prod.chacha** - DIGII III
3. **NNAVY, Karun, Msaki, Hendrick Sam** - Let Me
4. **Blinky Bill, GoldLink** - Compare
5. **Jeff Kaale, soave lofi** - honey mint
6. **Nanku, Karun** - Capital
7. **Yammi, Lexsil, ZiiBeats** - Love Crazy
8. **Fully Focus, Sofiya Nzau** - Mwanake
9. **Jeff Kaale, eleven** - Euphorie
10. **Bien, Fally Ipupa** - Ma Cherie(Remix)
11. **Mr.Tee, sosatheprodigyy, o6ix\_june** - Digii ii
12. **Blinky Bill** - OH WAH (feat. NATURE)
13. **Otile Brown, Rayvanny** - Asante
14. **The Playah, Restrained, Karun, State of Anarchy**- State of Light
15. **Jeff Kaale, soave lofi** - Afternoon  
Cohiba