



The 'Plasticity' of the Algorithm: Affective Labour, Machine Inference, and the Defence of *Kibagenge* in Kenya's Creative Economy

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Abstract

While the global expansion of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen-AI) has produced heated debates about the use of personal data and rights to authorship; the current state of knowledge on Gen-AI's effects on 'Affective Labour', following Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour and Hardt's (1999) affective labour, used here to denote the relational and emotional dimensions of creative work; globally is still at an embryonic stage. This paper explores the theoretical tensions inherent in the epistemic difference between machine-learning and human intuition through a decolonial lens to the West-centric world of Affective Computing. It examines the implications of Gen-AI for East Africa's performative arts. We contend that Western algorithms are deficient relative to the realities of two interlocking East African relational constructs, *Kibagenge*, and *Utu*, in Kenya. Employing a thematic analysis of qualitative data from 16 Kenyan practitioners, our research highlights a large generational divide among participants in terms of how they navigate 'Synthetic Empathy.' Veterans identified AI's context blindness as being inherently 'plastic' (participants' vernacular term for inauthentic or synthetic, distinguished below from the technical sense of algorithmic 'plasticity' as adaptive capacity), and 'robotic' and therefore deliberately retreated to unrecorded, off-line spaces to preserve the shared spirit of their labour. Moreover, younger digitally native individuals employed a hybrid strategy using Gen-AI. They utilised a '50/50' practical hybrid workflow, using Gen-AI to manage the structural aspects of creating art while preserving their relational and intuitive affects. Our findings indicate that participants experienced this not as a mere technological 'reaction delay' but as what they described as an unbridgeable ontological void created by what we term the algorithmic 'reaction gap': the mismatch between a system's inferred emotional output and the affective cues it is responding to. We report this as a finding about participants' experience of current systems, rather than a claim about what machine inference can achieve in principle. Therefore, protecting the future of labour related to African performance will require transcending Western theories of discrete emotions and developing forms of

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technology governance that respect collective relational epistemologies.

Introduction

The rapidly evolving nature of generative artificial intelligence and Affective Computing platforms promises to dramatically transform the structural mechanics of the creative economy globally and at its emotional core. Within the technological discourse of contemporary technology, the quest for synthetic empathy is often described as the last boundary separating human and computer interaction (Haq & Faizan, 2025). Driven by Western paradigms of technology, predictive models are now boasting high levels of accuracy in generating highly realistic outputs and simulating human affect in real time. As Fabiano (2025) has observed, this transformation enables subjective emotional experiences to be converted into structured, machine processable data. Therefore, researchers are continually developing new neural network architectures to allow machines to seamlessly process sequential affective cues (Fu, 2025). Additionally, Chen (2025) observed that effective empathetic communication requires dynamic multimodal coordination rather than merely textual analysis. The increasing integration of smart sensing technologies further objectifies physiological responses into measurable variables within digital spaces (Hunter et al., 2026). Isazeni Solutions (2026) warns that monocultural systems often overlook profound contextual nuances, which can result in significant cross-cultural translation failures across diverse communicative domains globally.

A significant epistemological collision is occurring as algorithmic architectures expand into rapidly digitising creative sectors of East Africa. To understand the friction present between these two paradigms, researchers must critically interrogate the foundational logic of machine emotion. Specifically, Western affective computing fundamentally operates through inference entailing a reductionist process of breaking down subjective human experiences into discrete statistically measurable variables (Ahmed, 2026). Conversely, indigenous East African performative labour operates through un-mediated intuition rooted deep relational philosophies (Kirui et al., 2025). Cordina (2025) has noted that when Western platforms attempt to automate this communal process, they enforce Digital Colonialism by supplanting indigenous knowledge systems. Therefore, systemic extraction creates structural dependencies across African innovation hubs threatening local agency (Pollio, 2026). As a result, algorithmic systems trained on data extracted from African contexts without consent or benefit-sharing replicate colonial patterns of resource extraction, creating a severe disconnect in regional digital markets (Birhane, 2020). Ultimately, the affective deficit produced renders the algorithmic output hollow prompting significant resistance among digital workers navigating Kenya's growing gig-economy (Kemibaro, 2026). Ultimately, Parameshwara (2024) asserts that accurately modelling human affect requires transcending reductionist paradigms to capture relational dynamics.

Although the urgency of this ontological incompatibility is clear, current academic discourse remains largely fixated on extracting information economically. Critical media studies have predominantly framed digital disruption in the Global South via the lens of data colonisation focusing heavily on the exploitation of marginalised gig workers (Wasike, 2025). Although these structural critiques remain vital, they inadvertently obfuscate a deeper, more intimate crisis existing within local artistic environments. There is a glaring absence of empirical research addressing the affective impact of deploying reductionist algorithms within Performance cultures governed by complex relational synergies (Oyanibi, 2025). Lalot and Bertram (2025) underline that technological forecasting regularly neglects emotional metrics prioritising efficiency over empathy. Consequently, the field lacks a nuanced understanding of how African creatives experience, negotiate, and emotionally survive the integration of synthetic empathy into their daily workflows (Chen, 2025). Fabiano (2025) argued that accurately measuring subjective



experiences requires moving beyond obtrusive sensors to reliable capturing of dynamic community-based interactions. Furthermore, researchers must investigate how limited labelled data complicates dimensional affect estimation across diverse populations (Parameshwara, 2024).

The locally based affective crisis triggered a fractured, generationally based response within the Kenyan creative sector. For veteran custodians of the embodied archive, the failure of machine inference results in radical withdrawal to protect the relational integrity of their cultural performed activities. Recognizing the lack of genuine collective synergy in artificial intelligence systems, veterans actively create off-line sanctuaries and aggressively reject digital mediation (Haq & Faizan, 2025). Conversely, emerging digital-native creators navigate economic precarity via a locally developed ethos of radical improvisation (Kemibaro, 2026). Pollio (2026) observed that practitioners cleverly domesticate AI systems by outsourcing mechanical tasks while aggressively guarding their intuitive labour. This fragile equilibrium represents a highly strategic negotiation between survival and authenticity within a global data economy that treats human activity as raw material for extraction (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Moreover, Ahmed (2026) highlighted that resisting complete dependence on algorithms is essential for reclaiming educational and creative sovereignty. The Kenyan government's master plan for digital development strategically supports the transition toward this future, yet critics argue that imposed regulations stifle innovative processes led by indigenous communities (Cordina, 2025).

Furthermore, by examining both dualities, this paper seeks to decentre Western paradigms for Affective Computing and propose a relational blueprint for understanding digital creative labour in the Global South. Using thematic analysis of qualitative data from sixteen Kenyan practitioners, this study examines the epistemological friction between machine inference and human intuition. Fu (2025) emphasised that Global South knowledge systems must resist complete algorithmic dependency to ensure continued epistemic justice. Additionally, Parameshwara (2024) identified true affect estimation requires temporally rich modelling to authentically represent ongoing human experiences. Ultimately, we argue the reaction gap created by algorithms is not simply a technical lag, but an irreconcilable void based upon differences in ontology. Following this introduction, the paper reviews current literature on affective computing and the harsh realities of digital precarity (Wasike, 2025). Subsequently, it establishes a decolonial theoretical framework grounded in the East African relational philosophy of Utu (Mbiti, 1969; Metz, 2007; Mhlambi, 2020). Finally, the analysis details how Kenyan creators actively defend their cultural soul against the global expansion of algorithmic plasticity (Fabiano, 2025).

Affective Computing and the illusion of synthetic empathy

Current architectures in Affective Computing are designed to bridge the human-machine reaction gap by using high-speed multimodal fusion and deep learning networks to rapidly process complex physiological inputs and generate simulated empathetic responses. The pursuit of synthetic empathy is structurally founded in dominant Western paradigms, including Rosalind Picard's definition of Affective Computing as the computational measurement and synthesis of emotion (Picard, 1997) and Paul Ekman's basic emotion theory, which classifies dynamic human feelings into a rigid taxonomy of biologically universal discrete variables (Ekman, 1992). Parameshwara (2024) argued that this ongoing quest for synthetic empathy often results in significant algorithmic aversion, as users instinctively reject machine interactions that lack genuine sincerity and socio-cultural awareness. When algorithms mimic affective responses based only on statistical probabilities rather than on actual lived experiences, they produce a vacuous feeling of care that is readily distinguishable from genuine, human-provided care (Hunter et al., 2026). Current emotion AI has been argued to suffer from context blindness, reducing dynamic, socially situated human experience to individualised data points globally (Barrett et al., 2019). Therefore, this systematic objectification removes interactive performances from their vital nuances producing significant cross-cultural translation failures in various spaces (Ahmed, 2026). Pollio



(2026) concluded that accurate modelling of human affect requires going beyond these reductionist paradigms to capture continuous relational dynamics. Ultimately, developers should prioritise creating equitable digital environments rather than rapid expansion of algorithmic systems to prevent harmful consequences (Cordina, 2025).

African aesthetic paradigms of affect and Performance

Utu (rendered as Ubuntu in the Nguni languages) is the East African relational philosophy of personhood in which one's humanity is constituted through and inseparable from community. Mbiti's (1969, p. 106) formulation, 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am,' remains its most cited statement. Metz (2007) develops this into a more systematic moral theory, arguing that an action or relationship is right insofar as it honours harmony and mutual identification between persons, rather than treating persons as separable, self-contained units, a premise that stands in direct tension with the individuated, discrete-variable logic on which machine-learning systems operate. Mhlambi (2020) extends this framework explicitly to computational systems, arguing that automated decision-making built on a Western, rationality-based conception of personhood is structurally unable to recognise the relational basis on which Utu grounds human, and by extension communal, creative worth. This study uses Kibagenge as our term for the specific enactment of Utu within Kenyan creative and performative labour: the collective, co-authored synergy through which meaning is produced between performer, community, and audience in real time, rather than by any individual performer alone. Where Utu names the broader relational ontology of personhood, Kibagenge names its instantiation in the performative domain that is this study's empirical focus.

In contrast to individualised paradigms of Western Affective Computing, indigenous African Performance studies conceptualise emotions as being communally constructed (Kirui et al., 2025). Kemibaro (2026) argued that this communitarian worldview defines personhood entirely through interconnectedness, meaning art does not exist as an isolated artefact. Instead, the emotional resonance of a piece develops in the shared physical space between the performer and the audience, functioning as a cyclical vibration (Wasike, 2025). Chen (2025) observed that audiences do not act passively as consumers but dynamically alter the tempo and trajectory of a Performance through energy exchange with the performer. Therefore, navigating this extremely relational aesthetic requires immediate situational intuition that generative algorithms cannot replicate with any degree of consistency or accuracy (Haq & Faizan, 2025). Fabiano (2025) established that Western platforms rely primarily on obtrusive sensors and static datasets and therefore encounter a fundamental blind spot when attempting to parse such collective synergy. Ultimately, attempting to automate such deeply relational vernaculars results in the removal of vital context and meaning from the Performance (Isazeni Solutions, 2026).

Colonialism and youth precarity in Africa

Implementing Western algorithmic architectures into Africa cannot be separated from the aggressive expansion of global platforms, which critiques widespread modern Digital Colonialism. Fu (2025) defined this phenomenon as the systematic extraction of African data for training commercial models owned by Western monopolies. Therefore, this extractive structure directly fuels youth precarity, leading millions into sweatshop-like working conditions in which they process traumatic content under intense financial pressure (Parameshwara, 2024). Hunter et al. (2026) cautioned against viewing these marginalised creators merely as passive victims of imperialism, since digital hustle has become a primary source of livelihood for many young people living under conditions of unemployment and underdeveloped creative infrastructure. Given these conditions, Kenyan youth engage in radical improvisation, an informal form of resilience, to guard their intuitive labour from external influences (Kemibaro, 2026). Ahmed (2026) argued that to survive, these young creatives employ informal resilience to aggressively preserve their cultural authenticity. While algorithms produce structural dependency for creatives, indigenous



communities proactively "hack" these workflow processes to maintain control over their labour. Ultimately, this form of negotiation presents a necessary defence against structural extraction to preserve epistemic sovereignty globally (Cordina, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

Challenging Machine Inference

This study challenges the use of individualistic, Eurocentric, computing epistemologies in Global South contexts. Because affective computing reduces complex cultural expression to discrete variables, it uses mathematical inference to create a delayed statistical guessing game that requires separate threshold crossings to classify human emotions (Pollio, 2026). According to Pollio, the context-blind nature of this model, when applied to dynamic African performative spaces, is significant. An algorithm may successfully determine the acoustic frequency of a drumbeat or the geometric structure of an actor's face, but it will fundamentally fail to understand the rich social/cultural environment creating the emotive significance (Kemibaro, 2026). Thus, Wasike (2025) states that this systematisation of objectification results in frequent algorithmic rejection from users due to a lack of socio-cultural awareness. The machine inherently misidentifies the statistical data of the performance's spiritual soul (Fabiano, 2025). Chen (2025) further claims that when AI mimics emotion only as a function of probability, it creates a false impression. Overall, this artificial approach to emotion harms interpersonal trust (Haq & Faizan, 2025).

Proposing the African Alternative

To capture the emotional essence of Kenya's creative economy, this study proposes moving beyond discrete inference towards an African relational model. Indigenous aesthetic philosophies conceptualise personhood as entirely rooted in interconnectedness; therefore, human emotion is always created communally rather than as isolated biological outputs (Isazeni Solutions, 2026). Collective synergies and solidarities in local epistemologies denote a shared, dynamic energy that is generated cyclically in the sacred space among performers, audiences, and environments. Fu (2025) suggests that this un-mediated intuition is dependent upon tremendous situational awareness in reading the room for live interactive performances. When Western computing attempts to reduce this complex phenomenon to mere emotion, it fundamentally misunderstands the artist, who is actively drawing on collective vibrancy (Ahmed, 2026). Cordina (2025) established that since algorithms continue to compartmentalise excessively and reside completely outside of the communal web, they cannot calculate true relational affect. Therefore, generative AI produces an affective deficit, resulting in an art form that feels empty and plastic, consistent with broader critiques of the reliability of inferring emotion from surface behavioural signals alone (Barrett et al., 2019). Parameshwara (2024) ultimately confirmed that accurate emotional modelling requires recording these time-continual communal-dimensions.

Digital Jua Kali as the Protector of 'Kibagenge'

To theorise how Kenyan youth navigate this affective deficit within a precarious gig-economy, this study significantly extends the traditional concept of informal digital innovation. While previous research frames improvisational labour simply as an economic survival strategy, this study views radical improvisation in the digital space as an affective protection mechanism. Pollio (2026) states that due to threats posed by synthetic empathy and algorithmic efficiency, emerging creatives employ a strategic hybrid workflow to protect their affective labour. Emerging creatives outsource mechanical/inferential tasks to machines to circumvent gatekeepers of Western industries while maintaining ownership over their own intuitive labour. Wasike (2025) observes that by fiercely defending their local vernaculars and rhythms, emerging creatives resist digital colonialism each day. Through their street-level ingenuity, emerging creatives protect the cultural heart of their artistic expression, thereby retaining full sovereignty over it. Chen (2025) concludes that while



algorithms provide the structural framework for creation, indigenous creatives hold complete authority over the emotional essence of their artwork.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative and interpretivist research design anchored in a decolonial/affective paradigm. While Western research on affective computing typically utilises quantitative biometrics and facial-recognition metrics to assess AI, this methodology rejects the notion that human emotions can be analysed quantitatively by measuring symptoms in isolation. Aligning with the East African relational philosophy of Utu and the collective synergy of Kibagege, a qualitative approach was deliberately selected to prioritise narrative depth and situated knowledge, allowing participants to articulate the epistemological friction they experience when engaging with algorithmic inference. To examine the affective aspects of integrating AI into everyday life practices, this study employed thematic analysis, conducted with the help of NVivo, of qualitative data collected specifically for this study to investigate the affective deficit resulting from synthetic media and the intergenerational negotiations surrounding authentic emotional expression in Kenya's creative economy, and to answer research questions regarding algorithmic empathy and digital precarity.

Sampling strategy and participant profiles

This dataset contains sixteen participants (N = 16) operating in Kenya's informal creative economy, recruited via purposeful and snowball sampling procedures designed to produce high levels of theoretical depth across three distinct creative disciplines (film/music/theatre). To capture the generational divide regarding affective technology, the sample was strategically stratified into two cohorts:

- a. *Group 1: Veteran custodians and independent innovators of the embodied archive (n=8):* Seasoned physical theatre directors and grassroots filmmakers with over a decade of professional experience, whose work relies fundamentally on co-presence and live audience interaction, together with independent audio producers and vocalists actively utilizing generative AI tools within the informal digital gig-economy.
- b. *Group 2: The synthesis cohort (n=8):* A cross-disciplinary group of final-year undergraduate media, music, and theatre students from Kabarak University, representing the emerging generation of digital-native creators.

Data collection mechanisms

Data collection and subsequent thematic analysis for this study were conducted between February 5, 2026, and April 30, 2026. During this period, data was gathered through two distinct qualitative mechanisms, designed to foster deep relational trust and open dialogue:

- a. *Semi-structured in-depth interviews:* Eight individual interviews (45 to 60 minutes) were conducted with Group 1 participants. The interview guide probed the emotional dimensions of their creative process, their affective responses to AI-generated outputs, and their strategies for preserving the "spirit" of their work.
- b. *Focus group discussion (FGD):* A single cross-disciplinary FGD was conducted with the 8 Kabarak University students. This dynamic setting was intentionally designed to simulate *Kibagege*, encouraging debate between music, film, and theatre students regarding the pragmatic utilisation of AI versus the loss of cultural authenticity.

Informed consent

Informed consent for participation in the research was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from Group 1 participants (veteran custodians and independent digital innovators) who participated in the individual interviews. For Group 2



(the synthesis cohort) participating in the qualitative phase involving FGDs, verbal consent was obtained and recorded online at the beginning of each Zoom session. Instead of physical written consent, verbal consent was used due to the remote, cross-border nature of the virtual FGDs, which involved geographically dispersed participants. Since the FGDs took place entirely via Zoom, recording verbal consent directly on the platform provided secure, verifiable documentation. This eliminated the logistical obstacles of printing, signing, and scanning physical documents in an entirely virtual research setting. Furthermore, this method was deliberately chosen to align with the local performative paradigms and to foster a dynamic, informal setting that simulates Kibagenge. Requiring formal written documentation was deemed potentially disruptive to the relational trust necessary for open dialogue. All participants were adults; no minors were involved in this study.

Analytical Procedure

The data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The re-coding process was both deductive (informed by critiques of machine inference and the theory of *Utu*) and inductive (allowing localised strategies to emerge organically). Coding frame specifically coded affective vocabulary; tracked how participants described terms such as "plastic", "robotic", "authenticity", "feeling", "spirit", "energy". To illustrate this derivation: "robotic" and "plastic" were coded from Participant 002's description of AI characters as lacking "dynamics or dynamism... in terms of fluidity" and Participant 004's judgment that AI narration "is just plastic" because "there is that emotional aspect that is there that if a human being had participated... it could have felt better"; "authenticity" was coded from Participant 003's statement that "you cannot match the authenticity... the realness of the human bit"; "feeling" and "spirit" were coded from Participant 001's accounts of being "able to capture also their emotional... wellbeing" and of "uplifting the spiritual... the artist spirit, to embody the character"; and "energy" was coded from Participant 003's description of creating "that synergy and good energy in the room." These six codes were interpreted together as instantiating the higher-order affective deficit construct reported above. Kibagenge and *Utu* are the analysts' theoretical labels for this construct rather than terms used verbatim by participants; a full codebook extract, if available, would allow readers to verify this derivation. To prevent methodological reductionism, priority was placed on "preserving narratives": extended units of dialogue were analysed as whole entities, which ensured that relational context and localised vernacular remained intact in the final thematic structures. Coding proceeded iteratively and recursively across the dataset, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, until the themes reported below were judged to give a coherent and well-developed account of the coded material; we do not claim data saturation, a concept Braun and Clarke (2021) treat as incompatible with the reflexive, researcher-generated nature of theme development.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered strictly to the principles of relational ethics (*Utu*). As researchers positioned within both the East African academic and creative communities, our positionalities played an important role in facilitating this inquiry. Familiarity with both regional gig-economy precarity and indigenous performative paradigms facilitated sufficient relational trust to conduct this study without colonially appropriating the research. We also recognise that this same embeddedness, combined with a coding frame deductively informed by the theory of *Utu*, creates a risk of confirming pre-existing theoretical commitments; this risk was mitigated through member checking with participants. Recognising that informally employed creatives operate within precarious economic situations and possess a legitimate concern about commercial exploitation, participants were assured via formal agreement that their emotional reflections would be used solely for academic advocacy purposes and would never be uploaded to publicly accessible databases or any Large Language Models (LLMs) to be monetarily exploited by commercial interests. This assurance was made in the written data sovereignty and consent agreement



referenced above, which participants confirmed having read and agreed to before each interview and focus group session began; the brief oral confirmation captured on the interview recordings did not restate the full terms of that written agreement.

The research protocol, including the verbal consent procedure, was formally reviewed and granted ethical clearance by the Kabarak University Institutional Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: KUREC-070226) on 5th February 2026.

Findings and discussions

The affective deficit and the “plasticity” of machine inference

The foundational epistemological friction between Western affective computing and East African performative labour manifests most visibly in what participants identify as a profound ‘affective deficit.’ While generative AI models can mimic human emotions through rapidly fusing multimodal inputs (Fu, 2025), empirical results indicate that this structural imitation is grossly insufficient when compared against localised reality of Utu and Kibagenge. For both the veteran custodians and the emerging synthesis cohort, the algorithmic output is consistently characterised not by its technological prowess, but by an ontological hollowness. Participants across all demographics recognised statistically probable nature of machine inference as opposed to experienced communal knowledge. The reductionist perspective of affective computing reduces subjectively felt human experiences into individual components (Ahmed, 2026), producing art that is technically correct but devoid of spirit. Participant 002, a veteran theatre/film director, evaluated AI-generated characters, stating:

"I look they are so robotic they don't have dynamics or dynamism uh dynamics in terms of fluidity of the characters. So that's what I feel that is lacking uh in it." (Participant 002)

This observation aligns perfectly with Parameshwara's (2024) assertion that users instinctively reject machine interactions that lack genuine socio-cultural awareness. The 'fluidity' that Participant 002 found lacking in his machine-based interactions is the relational synergy that all Western models fail to model. The Digital Natives interviewed during the focus group discussions echoed the same sentiments. During a FGD regarding AI-generated music, a student stated he believes the machine lacked the ability to understand the un-mediated intuition that occurs with live art:

"Cause humans can like improvise... I feel like most AI music like doesn't have the, it sounds most... mechanical if I can say. Cause they have not you, they have not reached the maximum like, it will sound good, but it hasn't reached maximum potential like if, if it's an actual human being doing it." (FGD Participant)

Consistent with critiques of emotion AI's propensity to infer affect from surface signals without adequate contextual grounding (Barrett et al., 2019), the algorithmic performance lacks the subtle nuances of the performance. As such, both the students and the practitioners were extremely concerned that their performances embodied historical and cultural memory. Participant 004, a community theatre practitioner, explicitly questioned the validity of using AI-generated oral narratives to represent local trauma and/or joy:

"AI usually fails to capture that emotional experience, uh, cultural memory, whatever that is, as a human being you have gone through... There is an emotional aspect that is not there... Yeah. It is just plastic. Yeah. They are telling the story, but there is that emotional aspect that is there that if a human being had participated in telling that story, it could have felt better." (Participant 004)

The term ‘plastic’ serves as a vital localised diagnostic for synthetic empathy. It denotes an artificial replication that mirrors the surface aesthetics of African performance but lacks the internal,



relational vibration. Participant 004 further noted the violent reductionism inherent in Western affective computing architectures, stating that the AI process:

"...reduces uh that uh culture into just mere me data... Instead of that human experience that that human experience aspect. Oh. In the in the music." (Participant 004)

Within African Performance Studies, emotions are created in the shared physical space of the performer and the community (Wasike, 2025). Machines confuse the quantitative data representing the performance with its qualitative core (Fabiano, 2025). Participant 003 succinctly summarised this divide by articulating that while AI may attempt to reproduce elements of an East African performance, it cannot produce the truthfulness and realness of a performance created by a human:

"You cannot match the authenticity. You cannot match the realness of an East African performance. Like you have you this That's something about a human being something that AI can't replace. That's authenticity. So, I think that's what is missing. The realness of the human bit of it is I think what's missing..." (Participant 003)

This limitation on replicating authentic performance is even more pronounced when representing specific ethnic idioms. During the hypothetical scenario presented to the group, in which an AI-generated drumming sequence replaced a traditional Luo drummer due to cost concerns, the FGD participants who spoke to this scenario rejected the idea. Participants stated that local artistic expression encompasses not solely auditory output but also embodied expression and cultural identity. One student stated that:

"No, because... because, for example, you're looking for a local filmmaker, wants to film a Luo movie. And you need, so for that Luo film to happen, you need a Luo drummer. Because um, humans too have skills. So you need um, so if you know of a Luo who is a skilled drummer, you employ that Luo. Because when you use AI, uh, generally that one doesn't make sense." (FGD Participant)

This validates Pollio (2026) who warned against deploying Eurocentric computing systems within the Global South. The algorithmic 'plasticity' experienced by Kenyan creators is not simply a temporary glitch resulting from inadequate training data; it represents an ontological failure. By breaking down the dance, music and narrative into discrete data flows and generating new content from those flows, generative AI disassembles Kibagenge, leaving behind an aesthetically pleasing but emotionally barren artefact.

The veteran retreat and the defence of 'Kibagenge'

The epistemological friction between the two competing worldviews documented above results in a powerful counter-resistance from the veteran custodians of Kenya's embodied archives. These individuals realise that the design of global generative AI systems inherently reduces complex relational art forms into data streams that can be extracted and analysed. As a result, they deliberately resist creating digital artefacts of their creative labour; instead, they strategically avoid working digitally by retreating into physical spaces. To maintain the soul of their collective synergistic work based on Kibagenge (i.e., relational synergy), they seek refuge in unrecorded physical spaces. Indigenous East African performative labour is characterised by creating dynamic co-authorship of art forms with communities while performing together in real time. Kemibaro (2026) states that this worldview views performance as a harmonious vibration between the performer and community. The audience for veteran practitioners is not merely a passive observer of performance but rather the fundamental structure upon which all performances rely. Participant 004 clearly articulated this ontological necessity:

"...the audience was key. It is key to whatever thing that was performed in African traditions. For example, or oral storytelling or let's say circumcision ceremony or any ritual we must have an



audience first now to have that theatre. If there is no audience, then it's not there." (Participant 004)

This cyclical energy exchange is intensely spatial and physiological. Wasike (2025) notes that the emotional resonance of a piece relies on this un-mediated situational intuition. Participant 001 described how this physical co-presence dictates the structural mechanics of their directorial process:

"...the physical presence is super important and uh sometimes I'm able to capture also their emotional uh their emotional well wellbeing um that is majority of the performances that I've done before uh they able to capture their physical presence which also uh I allow audiences to sit in in positions that will guide them uh guide their emotion and their physical." (Participant 001)

The emergence of AI creates tremendous disruptions in this sacred physical arrangement. Implementing Western algorithmic frameworks in Africa enables indigenous data to be systematically extracted from its local contexts (Fu, 2025). Many of the veterans expressed serious concern about this structural dependence and perceived the digitisation of their physical performances as primarily facilitating copyright theft and cultural annihilation. Specifically, they believed that their relational labour is being harvested without consent to train proprietary commercial models owned by Western monopolies: Participant 002 concisely illustrated this drastic loss of creative agency:

"Once it's gone, it's gone. Uh that one I'll say with confidence because uh I've seen how work or a small idea uh put on paper with be generated and go gone out of your hands and there's nothing you can do uh about it." (Participant 002)

Confronted with the reality of modern-day digital colonisation (Cordina, 2025), some practitioners utilise a radical survival tactic, establishing online-free sanctum areas. By drastically modifying their workflow processes to remove digital mediation, these practitioners protect their relational labour and prevent Kibagege from becoming computable artefacts. Participant 002 described this deliberate retreat into the undocumented physical space:

"So, when I look at physical work uh, I say keep it small. keep uh technology off in terms of nobody records. Let them consume with their eyes. Do your work. Move on." (Participant 002)

Similar sentiments were expressed by Participant 003 as part of his broader philosophical imperative to restore tangible or non-networked mediums to defend against algorithmic harvesting of their embodied archives:

"Uh well, I would say what if we went back to the basics? What we actually went back to taking a book and writing these ideas that we have, or I don't know recording yourself and keeping it, you know how if it's possible to go back to not to have to depend on the well for distribution..." (Participant 003)

Of particular interest here is that this defensive tactic is not limited to older cohorts alone. Even young digital natives working under a gig-economy model recognise the existential threat of providing their cultural essence to machines and subsequently protecting their individual and cultural data from being analysed by machines via inference. One student in the cross-disciplinary FGD perfectly encapsulated the logic of this decolonial resistance, arguing that true survival requires safeguarding personal and cultural data from the inferential gaze of the machine:

"...the only way for artists like us to survive is making something that can't be made by AI and preventing AI from getting your information. So, protecting information being used to train the AI." (FGD Participant)



By fiercely guarding their localised vernaculars and keeping their communal rhythms completely off the grid, these practitioners enact a vital defence of epistemic sovereignty (Ahmed, 2026), ensuring the communal soul of Kenyan performance remains beyond the reach of synthetic empathy.

Digital Jua Kali and the '50/50' hybrid workflow

While veteran custodians are using a strategy of radical off-line withdrawal to protect their embodied archives from being recorded, Group 2 (the synthesis cohort) cannot completely boycott the generative AI. Thus, they are using a localised ethos of radical improvisation called Digital Jua Kali. Although traditionally framed as merely economic survival (Hunter et al. 2026), Digital Jua Kali is now functioning as a highly strategic affective defence mechanism. Using a domesticated version of the algorithm, young artists outsource the structural scaffolding of their art and aggressively defend their intuitive/emotional labour. Within under-funded creative infrastructure, the synthesis cohort (Group 2) has quickly adopted generative AI tools to bypass system bottlenecks. Participants in the FGD identified resource constraints as the major motivator for adopting AI. Specifically, one student detailed how they utilise AI to construct the mechanical skeleton of a performance:

"Okay, basically, um, I used it for, for generating a script, eh, to use in performing arts. Eh, like, it guided me on how to generate the script and how the context of the script itself, the scenes, the synopsis, and everything." (FGD Participant)

This utilitarian approach parallels Pollio's (2026) finding that emergent artists intentionally delegate mechanical or rather inferential tasks to machines. By depriving the AI of its claim to "creative genius" and instead viewing it as an administrative assistant for synopses and structural pacing, youth artists circumvent the resource gatekeepers of the traditional media industries. The most significant example of *Digital Jua Kali* is the explicit formulation of a hybrid workflow that would neutralise AI's affective deficit. Youth recognise that excessive dependence upon synthetic systems results in both cultural hollowness and algorithmic aversion (Wasike, 2025). As a result, youth propose a rigid separation of labour. One student synthesised this strategy perfectly, coining the '50/50' approach:

"So, my best suggestion is, you can use 50% of your hard work and 50% of AI. Then you combine them together, it creates, it creates a very um, beautiful music from its originality." (FGD Participant)

When pressed on whether over-reliance on the machine destroys this balance, the same participant clarified the boundary of epistemic sovereignty:

"Like I've said, you can't rely too much on AI. Because when you rely too much on AI, yeah, the music which you're creating lacks its originality." (FGD Participant)

This fragile equilibrium illustrates Chen's (2025) conclusion that while algorithms provide the structural scaffolding, indigenous creators unequivocally control the emotional truth. Participant 004, bridging the gap between veteran knowledge and youth adaptation, validated this exact approach, emphasising that AI is an unavoidable utility but a poor substitute for human reliance:

"At the same time, we can use uh these tools. We can't ignore them. We can use them to help us uh in our in our process. for our stories but we can't depend on them entirely." (Participant 004)

To protect the communal rhythms and localised vernaculars that constitute *Kibagenge*, these practitioners actively hack the intended use of Western generative models. They enforce strict conceptual limits on what the AI is allowed to generate. A recurring theme was the necessity of using AI purely for ideation rather than final output execution. Participant 003 echoed this intentionality:



"...know how best we can sort of like use it as a tool instead of using it to create our uh create stuff."
(Participant 003)

During the FGD, when challenged to design an ideal, culturally safe AI system, the youth consistently proposed architectures that restrict the machine's autonomy. They envisioned a tool that cannot finalise a piece of art, forcing the human to remain the ultimate arbiter of affect. One student articulated this desire for output limits:

"Uh, I think output limits... Like maybe it just, like giving you like the idea, like you'd prompt it and, but it won't like actually like create what you... 'cause, 'cause then it's not you who will have created what is, what will be brought out..." (FGD Participant)

Another participant redefined the desired human-computer interaction, stripping the AI of its authoritative, answer-giving posture and demanding a flatter, dialogic relationship that respects human sovereignty:

"I'll make it more of a something I can discuss with, not something that will give me its own answers. Something that won't extract what we have. But I'll, I'll like, I'll want to discuss with it and in the midst of that discussion I can get answers." (FGD Participant)

Through this *Digital Jua Kali* strategy, Kenyan creatives are resisting absolute extraction inherent in digital colonialism. By strictly defining the parameters of machine inference, Kenyan creatives ensure that the "50%" contributed by the human artist retains its role as the relational heart/soul of the performance.

The algorithmic 'reaction gap' as an ontological void

The preceding themes, the affective deficit, the veteran retreat into unrecorded sanctuaries, and the pragmatic '50/50' digital hustle, collectively point to a profound, underlying theoretical conclusion. Rather than being viewed by Western developers as a simple technical barrier ("the reaction gap") that can be overcome through larger training datasets and/or additional multimodal sensing (Fu 2025), this gap is viewed by many Kenyan youths through East African relational epistemology as an irreconcilable ontological void (Oyanibi 2025). Fundamentally different from Western affective computing approaches based upon compartmentalisation and inference (dissecting human expression into discrete data streams, e.g., text, audio, and video geometry), African performative aesthetics, built around *Kibagenge*, function via direct synthesis. Participant 004 emphasised the impracticality of attempting to apply a compartmentalised algorithmic logic to a unified African performance:

"Uh, I think, um, I've said in Western media they can separate it. Uh for them they can separate it but in in African performances it's hard to separate uh dance music and storytelling. It's so hard to separate them... because the rhythm influences the movement in that in that performance. Mhm... When all that is brought together is the theatre." (Participant 004)

When an algorithm deconstructs this synthesised web, it separates the rhythm from movement and eliminates the cyclical energy responsible for providing culture-specific significance to a performance. Any attempt at automating these highly relational vernaculars ultimately removes the performance from its vital contextual reference frame (Isazeni Solutions 2026). While machines may replicate output generated by an individual performance, they do not contribute to or participate in either side of the reciprocal energy exchange occurring in real time between participants and the audience within a sacred performance space. Technology forecasts often discount emotional measures if sufficient processing power exists, where machines will eventually develop an understanding of human affect (Lalot & Bertram 2025). However, this research indicates there are substantial differences between computational processing and relational understanding. During the FGD, one student clearly established a distinction between machines



developing quantitative/mathematical comprehension and human development of authentic embodied experience:

"So just as AI understands, uh, the surrounding, humans too understand the surrounding beyond AI. So since humans originally understand the surrounding, you have to bringing, you have to bring in your ideas, um, you have to bring in your ideas so that, um, you can create a music which, does not only, um, which does not only, uh, try to please people but can also, uh, bring in, uh, creativity and beauty." (FGD Participant)

Parameshwara (2024) argues that genuine affect estimation necessitates sophisticated temporal modelling to accurately reflect ongoing human experiences. Machines lack both physiological and historical contexts necessary to "originally understand" their surroundings. Consequently, as Participant 003 stated, the principal constraint is neither computational nor physical; it is existential:

"That's something about a human being something that AI can't replace. That's authenticity. So, I think that's what is missing... authenticity like the truthfulness of a human being." (Participant 003)

If synthetic empathy were simply a technical challenge, then attaining complete simulation would signify success for affective computing. Conversely, for these practitioners, achieving perfect simulation is precisely what negates art. Human creative labour value within global economies is directly correlated with human struggle/intention/experience involved in producing it. An FGD participant captured this sentiment, rejecting the efficiencies afforded by algorithmic generation while affirming the value of human effort:

"...an art is, is not, I don't think an art is something that's supposed to be able to be done by like everybody. Like, the beauty of like an art is when it's like, done by like specific people or yeah, or if people like actually work hard to get a result. But if everybody is able to like make music, like just through AI, like it lacks like its beauty and like its originality." (FGD Participant)

Ultimately, a proverb shared by another youth participant summarises the localised defence against Western digital colonialism:

"...my best starting a video which has a proverb like, 'not everything can be automated.' So not every movie you try to produce can be automated by AI or can be done by AI." (FGD Participant)

The algorithmic 'Reaction Gap' remains persistent because AI will always lack *Utu*. Acknowledging this ontological void represents a first step toward moving away from pursuing synthetic empathy as policymakers and developers seek epistemological justice for indigenous creative labour within the Global South.

Conclusion

The friction between Western affective computing and Kenya's creative economy, as these participants experienced it, exemplifies an epistemological difference that cannot be addressed simply by developing new technologies. The findings of this study demonstrate that, for these sixteen participants engaging with current commercial systems, the algorithmic "reaction gap" was not experienced as a matter of insufficient data alone; rather, participants described it as an ontological divide. We report this as a finding about lived experience and cultural meaning-making, not as a claim about what machine inference can achieve in principle; establishing the latter would require a different kind of argument than an interpretive study of sixteen participants can supply. The paradigm of generative AI is reductionist in that it has been unable to model the relational personhood of *Utu* and the collective synergy of Kibagenge. AI does this by breaking down dynamic performance aspects (e.g., rhythm, movement, narrative) into individual inferential data streams, thus depriving indigenous art of its communal essence. Therefore,



machine inference lacks significant affective content, resulting in culturally relevant outputs from local artists that are consistently described as empty, mechanical, and 'plastic'. The failure to reproduce un-mediated human intuition substantiates the notion that the quest for synthetic empathy is extremely context-insensitive. Thus, attempting to force whole indigenous aesthetic philosophies into hyper-individuated Western computational models constitutes a form of digital colonialism that brutally flattens the cultural authenticity and embodied memories present in all forms of live East African performance.

In response to this ontological void and the increasingly exploitative demands of global platforms, Kenyan creators are proactively creating unique affective defensive strategies to assert their creative autonomy. This study shows a divided yet strategically directed generation-wide opposition to reliance on algorithms. Knowing that all digital mediations represent extractive processes, older generations who serve as custodians of the embodied archive are consciously withdrawing into off-line spaces. In doing so, they deliberately deny machines access to cultural knowledge, thereby preserving communal synergy as an incomputable physical process. Younger generations who are economically pressured to engage in the gig-economy do not have the luxury of completely disengaging from digital environments. Rather, young people use a resilient 'Digital Jua Kali' approach, where they pragmatically employ a '50/50' hybrid workflow. They outsource the structural framework for their creative output to generative artificial intelligence while they maintain complete control over the emotional/affective centre. As both approaches, complete rejection of online/off-line existence and/or establishing of boundary conditions around AI, are crucial expressions of decolonial resistance, they affirm that the artistic human retains total control over the emotional truth of performance.

Data availability statement

Anonymised excerpts of the data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author for the purposes of academic peer review and non-commercial scholarly replication, subject to a written confidentiality and non-redistribution undertaking. The full dataset is not publicly deposited because participants consented, under an "Anti-Extraction Data Sovereignty Agreement", to their reflections being used solely for academic advocacy purposes and never uploaded to public databases or large language models; requests inconsistent with that undertaking cannot be honoured.

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