SYMBIOTIC INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THEATRE: A DELSU THEATRE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: This paper examines the interdependent relationship between dynamic social media and theatre with emphasis on the Delta State University, Abraka theatre. Anchored on the Social Media Engagement Theory and The Technology Acceptance Model, the study delves into how social media platforms are used to gain audience attention in DELSU Theatre. It also endeavours to establish the various challenges witnessed in the use of social media for the publicity of DELSU Theatre. The findings in the study portrays the use of social media platform such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter as means of publicizing theatrical performance in DELSU Theatre. These innovative means make it easy to reach out to the potential audience if compared to the traditional means of street publicity. On the basis of the findings, the study recommends that the beneficial relationship between social media and theatre should be encouraged more than ever as it has the potential to heighten the interest of audience in an urban environment such as Abraka, Delta State.

Keywords: Symbiotic integration, platform, audience engagement, DELSU, social media, theatre, theatrical production, digital, publicity

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Introduction

The digital era has transformed the ways and practices of man. People are now involved in the daily usage of the internet more than ever. Internet platforms like the social media hasbecome commonly accustomed to people's daily existence. Social media has penetrated every facet of life and the theatre is not excluded from this novel experience as it is widely used in theatre and drama for marketing, audience engagement, and as a medium for performance itself, and numerous other functions. According to Sadiku, Ashaolu, Ajayi-Majebi, and Musa Suleiman (15), we live in the modern society where social media has become a global phenomenon and where individuals are continuously connected through mobile devices. Thus, Unwana, Udofot, Esekong and Edenowo (104) conclude that technology as a driver that moves and nurtures the engine of human advancement has moved through to transpose other fields of human endeavours to meta-life, the nature and demands of post-postmodern theatre are stimulated by the use of multimedia elements in theatre practice. On the basis of these submissions, Monijesu (11) admonishes that theatre practitioners should endeavour to ensure the formidable does not happen by seeking other avenues of taking the theatre to people's doorsteps. This is in tandem with the assertion of Oscar Brockett that "Living as we do in an electronic age, it seems inevitable that theatre would exploit electronic devices" (265).

Social media is a term used to describe the interaction between individuals in which they produce, share, and sometimes exchange ideas, images, and videos over the Internet and in virtual communities. It is an online platform which people use to build social networks or social relations with other people who share similar personal or career interests. It is becoming increasingly clear that social networks have become part of people's lives. Modern social media, also known as social networking, include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram and Pinterest (Akram and Kumar 349). As socially inclined creatures, human beings have embraced technology that connects us with others. Every year, there is an increasing number of people signing up for and using social media. As of August 2023, 4.89 billion people use social media. Social media has gradually changed from being connection platform to an entertainment source (Sadiku, Kotteti and Sadiku 137).

The symbiotic relationship between theatre and the social media over the years has been well pronounced among the audience of both media as the social media has become a veritable source of information to the audience and the theatre has become a dependable means of entertainment to the social media audience. This reality has stretched to the institutions of learning where theatrical performances are not only streamed but also publicized to the audience even before it is performed. In some cases, a bit of the performance is displayed to the public to whet their appetite. For instance, Unwana, Udofot, Esekong and Edenowo (97)note that the use of social media as an apparatus to engineer audience members is explored in select productions, Beyond My Scars staged in the University of Uyo Model Theatre written by Ifure UffordAzorbo, PhD, The Gods are not to Blame written by Ola Rotimi staged at The Arena, Port Harcourt by Daniel Kpodoh and Diary of a Pastor's Wife written by VickyBon Uzuazor staged by Mbede at Pinnacle Theatre, Akwa Ibom State University.

Akpughe and Nnabuife (78), on the Interplay of Mass Media and Theatre Arts with emphasis on UNIBEN Theatre cited Drums of War and Rogbodiyan (produced by Ojo Bakare Rasaki) as theatrical performance that explores the media to enhance successful production in UNIBEN Theatre. These are evidence that a close relationship between social media and theatre exists to a high extent. Since the advent of the Internet, the traditional media is becoming more and more irrelevant with time. In the view of Kamath, "the traditional entertainment industry has been forced to cede significant power and influence to content creators, their fans, and subscribers. Internet availability made social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube more widely used" (201).

As a business, the administrative, technical and artistic experience of the theatre is specifically packaged to appeal, entertain, exhort, inform, educate, communicate and/or engender different layers or levels of discussions or interactions with and among its audiences. The whole theatre enterprise could collapse if there are no audiences at theatrical events. This implies that the audience occupies a prominent position in theatrical production. However, the lack of audiences, for whatever reasons, at theatrical events is considered anathematic to its existence. This has become a major threat facing the theatre in Nigeria. Essien explains that before several propositions have been conjectured to explain the slump or decline in

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audience attendances of theatrical events in Nigeria. These include poor infrastructure, poor theatre facilities, absence of regulatory standards and trained managers as well as the growing competition from other more accessible and less expensive forms of entertainment like home videos, cinema traditional festival and Pentecostal fellowship crusade (Awodiya 16) It is the job of the theatre manager to get the finished product to the audience by arts marketing. Ododo and Fosudo (19) believe that theatrical performances should be treated as products and marketed as such and theatre managers should not focus only on the management part of their job as is mostly the case. It is based on this fact that this study explores the relationship between the theatre and social media with regard to the publicity of theatrical production.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theories: Social Media Engagement Theory and The Technology Acceptance Model.

Social Media Engagement Theory

This communication theory was propounded by Paul M. Di Gangi and Molly Wasko and it refers to the concept that individuals engage with content on social media platforms through active participation and interaction. This can include features like "likes", "love", "comments", "shares", and other means of reaction that enable users to show their opinions and response about the content they are exposed to. "One key aspect of social media engagement theory is the idea that users have a sense of social presence or "connectedness" to the content and other users on the platform. This can lead to a sense of community and belonging among users, and can also foster a sense of trust and credibility in the information being shared" (Di Gangi and Wasko 1).

Another important aspect of social media engagement theory is the role of social influence. This is reflected in the spectacle where personalities are more likely to get involved with content that is popular or has been shared by others they trust. Other factors that can impact individual level of engagement on social media exist. Factors like the platform itself (e.g. Facebook vs. Twitter), the type of content being shared

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(e.g. text, images, video), and the user's personal characteristics and motivations (e.g. age, gender, interests).

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model is a theory that evaluates the usage of any specified technology and the level of acceptance within a particular society. "In the performing arts, technology has the power to idealize productions and improve the quality and delivery of messages" (Andrew-Essien 399). According to Davis et al. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that, "there are two factors that determine whether a computer system will be accepted by its potential users: (1) perceived usefulness, and (2) perceived ease of use. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (as illustrated in Figure 1) was introduced by Davis et al. in 1986 for his doctorate proposal as an adaptation of Theory of Reasonable Action, TAM is specifically tailored for modeling users' acceptance of information systems or technologies" (3). The main quality of this model is its consistent focus on the views of the prospective user. That is, while the creator of a given technology product may believe the product is useful and user-friendly, it will not be accepted by its potential users unless the users share those beliefs. This draws largely from Stelarc's Evolutionary Futurism, "which focuses attention to thehuman-machine interface; extending conversations from the robotic to the actorinteractive work which incorporates the web, sound, music, text, videos and other computer generated assistance through the concept of "Absent Bodies" where the actor is allowed to interface with his environment" (59).

Use of Social Media Platforms to Gain Audience Attention in DELSU Theatre

Delta State University, Abraka represents the symbiotic integration between social media and theatre in Nigeria. DELSU Theatre has been consistently involved in shunning out several productions over the years. The Theatre Arts Department of the institution has produced notable artists like AY (Ayo Makun) and Bovi (Ugboma Bovi), who are well known in the entertainment industry for their comedic performance and acting prowess. In the past, the department is known for reaching out to the public through street publicity as the students were usually dressed in different costumes and parade themselves in the street of Abraka as well as the other campuses with the aim of sensitizing the public about a new production. Most times

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they were dressed in costumes indicating the different characters in the publicized plays, while the drummers and flutists entertain the group with unreserved rendition. The advent of social media has however altered this occurrence, as the department now depend on social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp, Tiktok and YouTube to reach out to the public.

Methodology

The study adopted both qualitative and quantitative reach method. Qualitatively, the data were generated through observation as the researcher tries to find out the various social media used by DELSU Theatre to reach out to the public. The generated quantitative data were collated, presented and analyzed using mean score. The decision rule for the mean score is that the mean score below 2.5 falls in the rejection region, while the statement is accepted to be true if the mean score is 2.5 and above. These methods were used to enhance easy interpretation of data collated by the researcher and also enhance easy comprehension of the study. Interview was also used to elicit response for the study.

The population comprises all the communities in Abraka, Delta State and 400 sample size was drawn from the communities that make up Abraka through the purposive sampling technique. A questionnaire title: "Symbiotic Integration between Social Media and Theatre: A DELSU Theatre Experience" was constructed as research instrument to obtain data from the respondents.

Table 1: Data on Recent Production in DELSU

Title of Production	Director	Year of Production	Social Media Used
Iredi War (Written by Sam Ukala)	Anyanwu, B.C and Chinasa Fidelis Ossai-Uloku	2025	WhatsApp, Tiktok, Facebook, Instagram
Wrath of the Gods (Written by Anyanwu, B.C.)	Anyanwu, B.C	2025	YouTube, Tiktok, WhatsApp, Twitter
Kidnapped (Written by Peter Omoko)	Ejeke, Odiri Solomon	2025	Instagram,WhatsApp, Tiktok, Facebook, YouTube

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From the data presented above, it is evident that social media contributes to the success of theatrical production in DELSU as the media are used to reach out to the public. Recently, all the productions in the department rely on the social media to reach out to their target audience. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Tiktok, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are used as communication tools to the target audience. This is in line with the view that: "Theatre being one of the oldest art forms, has in times past survived every technological change witnessed in society, and in fact adapts to and adopts same for the improvement of theatre practice. This makes true the account that, theatre can be enriched by social media platforms with the viewer's interest in the live event and real-time interaction merged to forge a new theatrical experience (Sujata Pandey and Manoj Pandey 41)"

Table 2: How audience get informed about theatre production in DELSU

Items	SA	A	UD	D	SD	Total	X	Decision
You get informed about theatre production in DELSU through traditional media like television, radio and newspaper	24 120	20 80	35 105	131 262	190 190	400 757	1.89	Rejected
You get informed about theatre production in DELSU through social media like WhatsApp, Tiktok, Facebook and YouTube	236 1180	148 592	0 0	06 12	10 10	400 1794	4.48	Accepted
You get informed about theatre production in DELSU through friends	24 120	62 248	12 36	86 172	212 212	400 788	1.97	Rejected
You get informed about theatre production in DELSU through sharing of flyers	54 270	102 408	70 210	104 208	70 70	400 1166	2..91	Accepted

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You get informed about theatre production in DELSU through street publicity	90 450	112 448	46 138	94 188	58 58	400 1282	3.20	Accepted

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 2 confirms the view of the respondents on the means with which they get informed about theatre production in Delta State University, Abraka. While most of the respondents (384 out of the 400 respondents) admitted that they get informed about theatre production in DELSU through social media like WhatsApp, Tiktok, Facebook and YouTube; very few (44 respondents) submitted that get informed about theatre production in DELSU through traditional media like television, radio and newspaper. Similarly, 86 out of the 400 respondents were of the view that they get informed about theatre production in DELSU through friends while those that get informed about theatre production in DELSU through sharing of flyers were 156 respondents and 202 respondents get informed about theatre production in DELSU through street publicity.

The use of social media as part of theatrical production is soaring every day. So much has the media become essential that Craig and Cunningham note that; "There are no signs of social media and its importance going down anytime soon, if anything, the importance and dependence on social media are only predicted to increase as time passes" (124). Since the advent of the Internet, the traditional media is becoming more and more irrelevant with time. The traditional entertainment industry has been forced to cede significant power and influence to content creators, their fans, and subscribers (Ahuja 6).

Challenges of the use of Social Media in the Publicity of DELSU Theatre

The usage of social media to publicize theatrical production did not happen by accident. It is occasioned by the need for the managers of theatrical production to embrace the reality that social media has become part of human daily existence and the new media is far more accessible than the traditional media. This aligns with the view of Imiti (95) that the Nigerian theatre culture will not stand the test of emerging digital entertainment platforms and that theatre will be replaced by new and emerging media and technology unless it adapts to the trend(s) as well‖.

One of the most challenging problems for the theatre has been the reduction of audience presence to theatrical production; hence, the need for the use of social media for publicity. However, the usage of the social media for theatrical production cannot be disconnected from plethora of challenges. One of such challenges is low level of knowledge pertaining to the operation digital media, such as the social media, in Abraka. The downloading of most of the productions is usually very difficult for some of the users, especially the illiterate and semi-literate ones. Some of the very literate ones are not exempted from this reality. One of those interviewed, Paul Ogunne, who hails from Otorho, Abraka admitted thus: "many people in this locality usually finds it very difficult to download films on social media. I have been called to assist in the downloading of films for several people. Some even had to resort to phone repairers to help them to download. As for many, live streaming is an impossible occurrence."

Another challenge has been poor network service. There are some areas in the urban settlement where it is very difficult to gain access to network service. Some people had to go to the campus to be able to gain access to network service or even download films.

Poor infrastructure such as inadequate power supply is another major challenge. More often than not, people find it difficult to charge their phones. Sometimes they had to resort to "pay charge" centres to get their phone charged. Hence, it is very difficult to reach out to social media users at the right time for publicity sake. Ronald Okotie, a resident of Ugono- Abraka, in this regard said: "light is a problem. Worst still there is no pay charge in the community. So you can imagine how we charge our phone (s). As a graduate of Theatre Arts, I always wish to watch live play in DELSU Theatre but sometimes the live theatre must have been done before I get to know about it."

Conclusion

The relationship between social media and theatre is not only attractive but also beneficial to both the audience and the production team. In recent time, publicizing of films without the engagement of the social media can be likened to the building of house without a solid foundation. The existence of the social media is indeed a notable plus to the theatrical production in DELSU Theatre as they enhance the

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propagation of the production while the production itself serve as a veritable means of entertainment and information to the users. This beneficial relationship should be encouraged more than ever as it has the potential to heighten the interest of audience in an urban environment such as Abraka, Delta State. Also, the use of the social media for the propagation of theatre production is a plausible means of preserving such production

In this modern world in which the social media has penetrated the minds of many people, social media has become the straw that theatre must hold onto if it must continue to gain relevance, while theatre also form the basis of entertainment and education as well as information on the social media platforms. It is on this basis that this study will not only be of invaluable relevance to policy makers in the entertainment world but also be priceless to the government, entertainers and even researchers in areas related to this study.

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