



Stages of Survival: Reimagining Performance Spaces During COVID-19 in Nigerian Theatre

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The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges to Nigerian performing artists in 2020, disrupting artistic production, economic stability, and established modes of performance within an already fragile creative ecosystem. This study examines how Nigerian performing artists reimagined performance spaces during the pandemic by migrating artistic practices to digital and online platforms. Drawing on qualitative research methods, the study engages in-depth interviews with selected performing artists and conducts content analysis of digitally mediated performances across theatre, dance, and music during the lockdown period. Guided by resilience theory, the paper analyses the adaptive, coping, and transformative strategies adopted by artists in response to state-imposed restrictions and the suspension of physical gatherings. The findings reveal that digital platforms functioned not merely as temporary substitutes for live performance but as emergent spaces that reconfigured notions of liveness, audience engagement, and performance labour within Nigerian theatre practice. While these adaptations enabled artistic survival and visibility, they also exposed structural inequalities related to access, monetisation, and digital infrastructure. The paper argues that the pandemic accelerated an ongoing transformation in Nigerian performance culture, highlighting the need for sustainable policy frameworks and hybrid performance models that integrate digital practices beyond the crisis period.



Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 precipitated an unprecedented disruption across global social, economic, and cultural systems. In Nigeria, the performing arts sector was among the most severely affected, as government-imposed lockdowns, restrictions on public gatherings, and the closure of theatres and cultural venues brought live performance to an abrupt halt (WHO, 2020; Ozili, 2020). For many Nigerian performing artists, whose livelihoods depend largely on physical presence, audience interaction, and informal creative economies, the pandemic intensified pre-existing structural vulnerabilities within the creative industry. Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy explain that:

Performing artistes are people who communicate their perceptions, responses, and understanding of the world to themselves and to others (the audience). Since their first appearance thousands of years ago, the arts have been evolving continually, exhibiting the ability of human beings to intuit, symbolise, think, and express themselves through drama, dance, music, opera, theatre, and the visual arts. Each of the arts contains a distinct body of knowledge and skills that characterise the power of each to expand the perceptual, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

(2001: 56)

Accordingly, the performing artists have become societal 'watch dogs' that create awareness on any issues bothering the people. This is why in every society, people look forward to seeing new information and experience from performances, either on stage or in film. When any situation occurs, the performing artists begin to seek solution using their art and situate such performances in proper genres such as dance, opera, drama, pantomime and so on. This is to either call the attention of the people to the occurrence, or use their performances to create awareness that possibly gives birth to practical solutions. This was the case in Nigeria in the year 2020 when the global virus (COVID-19) broke out.

Prior to the pandemic, Nigerian theatre and performance practices were predominantly rooted in physical spaces such as theatres, cultural centres, open-air venues, and community performance grounds. These spaces functioned not only as sites of artistic expression but also as vital platforms for cultural transmission, social engagement, and economic sustenance (Adedeji, 1981; Yerima, 2012). The sudden loss of access to these spaces compelled artists to confront the challenge of sustaining creative practice and artistic visibility under conditions of spatial restriction and economic uncertainty.

In response to these disruptions, many Nigerian performing artists turned to digital and online platforms as alternative spaces for performance production and dissemination. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp emerged as key sites for artistic experimentation, enabling performers to present theatrical sketches, dance performances, music, and comedy skits to geographically dispersed audiences (Giannachi, 2021). These digital adaptations marked a significant shift in Nigerian performance practice, raising critical questions about liveness, embodiment, audience engagement, and the reconfiguration of performance space within digitally mediated environments (Auslander, 2008).

According to Mohamed El-Erian, ‘Genomic analysis revealed that, the SARS-CoV-2 is phylogenetically related to severe acute respiratory syndrome-like (SARS-like) bat viruses, therefore bats could be the possible primary reservoir. The intermediate source of origin and transfer to humans is not known, however, the rapid human to human transfer has been confirmed widely’ (2020: 5). More so, there is no clinically approved antiviral drug or vaccine available to be used against COVID-19. However, ‘few broad-spectrum antiviral drugs have been evaluated against COVID-19 in clinical trials, resulted in clinical recovery’ (Riou 2020: 25). Initially, the perception was that the COVID-19 pandemic would be localised in China only. It later spread across the world through the movement of people. According to Jason Horowitz:

The economic pain became severe as people were asked to stay at home, and the severity was felt with travel bans affecting the aviation industry, sporting event cancellations affecting the sports industry, the prohibition of mass gatherings affecting the events and entertainment industries’.

(2020: 47)

Consequently, it became imperative that different preventive measures would eventually be taken into consideration by local, state, and federal governments in Nigeria. Movement restrictions and the implementation of a lockdown caused months-long disruptions to the nation’s economy, businesses, socio-political activities, and religious activities. This forced people inside, which in and of itself caused a great deal of conflict in different households. To the performing artistes, things were never the same again and many embarked upon partial operations, but with limited capacity and social distancing measures in place. All of these however, make it nearly impossible for performing artistes to remain financially viable, this, of course, comes with retrenchments and job reductions. Nevertheless, despite the current crisis and deadly

virus out there, ‘the show must go on’. After reviewing a sample of policy and creative responses to these challenges, this research discovers that during the pandemic, performing artistes have tried, and are still trying, to transpose what is essentially a communal, live and embodied engagement to a cell phone or computer screen. Moving forward, Adegbite who examines how the professionals and freelance coped with the situation during the pandemic in Nigeria, states that:

Nonetheless, a few people and performers in the country created a number of brief sketches centred around the fearsome virus, covering topics like “fear,” “precaution,” “preventive measures,” and so forth, by capitalising on the dynamic nature of electronic and social media like YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp. They applied a variety of languages, including Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, many easily identify with the common pidgin-English as a medium for humorous performances.

(2021: 4)

Many local artists present monologues, solo dances or spoken word art on video casts, post recordings on YouTube or live-stream their work; writers and actors present live-streamed new work; digital media artists have collaborated with performing artists to develop a mode of performance more suitable for online viewing; and small-scale online festivals have popped up.

Although emerging scholarship has documented the broader impact of COVID-19 on global performance practices and cultural production, there remains limited empirical and contextual analysis of how Nigerian performing artists navigated this period of disruption within their specific socio-economic realities (Banks, 2020). Existing studies often focus on institutional theatres and Western performance infrastructures, leaving the adaptive strategies of artists operating within informal and precarious creative economies underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining how Nigerian performing artists reimaged performance spaces during the pandemic and how digital platforms functioned as mechanisms of artistic survival.

Guided by resilience theory, the study examines the ways in which artists adapted to crisis, coped with precarity, and transformed performance practices in response to disruption (Ungar, 2011). Rather than conceptualising digital performance solely as a temporary response to lockdown conditions, the paper considers its broader implications for the future of Nigerian theatre and performance culture, particularly in relation to sustainability, access, and post-pandemic hybridity.

Research Focus and Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. How did Nigerian performing artists adapt their performance practices in response to COVID-19 restrictions?
- ii. In what ways did digital and online platforms function as survival and resilience strategies for performing artists during the pandemic?
- iii. How did the shift to digital performance reconfigure notions of performance space, audience engagement, and artistic labour within Nigerian theatre practice?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in resilience theory as a conceptual framework for analysing how Nigerian performing artists responded to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Resilience theory is concerned with the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt, cope, and transform in the face of adversity, crisis, or systemic disruption (Egeland et al., 1993 and Werner, 1995). Within cultural and creative contexts, resilience provides a useful lens for understanding how artists navigate precarity, resource scarcity, and institutional instability while sustaining creative practice.

Resilience is not understood in this study as mere endurance or survival, but as a dynamic process involving adaptation, improvisation, and transformation. Scholars have emphasised that resilience operates within specific social, economic, and cultural conditions, shaping the strategies individuals adopt in response to crisis (Masten, 2014). In the context of the performing arts, resilience is often expressed through creative problem-solving, reconfiguration of practice, and the exploration of alternative modes of production and dissemination.

The COVID-19 pandemic created conditions that tested the resilience of Nigerian performing artists in profound ways. Resilience theory allows this study to examine how artists negotiated these challenges by mobilising available resources, including digital technologies, social networks, and personal creative capacities. Within this framework, resilience is understood to operate across three interrelated dimensions: adaptive, coping, and transformative responses. Adaptive responses refer to short-term adjustments made to sustain artistic activity under restrictive conditions, such as the migration of performances to online platforms. Coping responses involve strategies aimed at managing economic and psychological stress, including diversification of creative outputs and engagement with new audiences. Transformative responses extend beyond immediate survival, signalling longer-term shifts in artistic practice and the redefinition of performance spaces.

Therefore, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts of pandemic-related disruption to offer an analytical understanding of how Nigerian performing artists reimaged performance spaces under crisis conditions. The framework enables a critical examination of both the possibilities and limitations of digital adaptation, recognising resilience not as a uniform or universal experience, but as a context-dependent process shaped by access, infrastructure, and socio-economic positioning.

Performing Arts/Artists: Conceptual Clarifications

The performing arts constitute a collaborative field of creative practice that integrates voice, movement, bodily expression, and visual elements to communicate meaning within specific social and cultural contexts. Unlike static art forms, performing arts are fundamentally processual and relational, relying on the presence; physical or mediated of performers and audiences for their realisation. As Arsem observes: ‘the field of performing arts encompasses both live and recorded forms, including theatre, dance, music, film, television, and other electronically mediated performances’ (2011; 28). Scholars have consistently emphasised the embodied nature of performing arts practice. According to Charles Garoian:

Performing art is a performance scripted or unscripted body action that is displayed before a spectating audience. Performance art is traditionally interdisciplinary skill that involves live display of expertise in fine or media arts. The presentation of such performance may be done when the performers themselves are present or absent.

(1999: 123)

This embodiment situates performing arts as a mode of knowledge production through physical presence, gesture, voice, and spatial interaction. Similarly, Valerie Torrens argues that: ‘Performing arts rely on the human body as their primary material, enabling the articulation of ideas, emotions, and social commentary through performance’ (2014: 33). Hence, performing artists operate as both creators and interpreters of cultural meaning. They include composers, playwrights, choreographers, actors, musicians, dancers, and directors, who may function singularly or collaboratively within performance ecosystems (Alper and Wassall, 2000). In many contexts, particularly within African performance traditions, artists frequently assume multiple roles simultaneously, reflecting the fluidity and adaptability inherent in the field.

Within Nigerian theatre practice, performing artists have historically functioned as cultural mediators and social commentators, using performance to interrogate societal

issues, articulate collective anxieties, and foster communal reflection. Smith describes ‘performing artists as communicators who translate perceptions and responses to lived realities into symbolic forms accessible to audiences’ (2001: 55). This communicative function positions the performing artist as both observer and participant in social life. The performative encounter traditionally depends on audience presence, whether live or mediated. As Michael Miller notes, ‘the effectiveness of performance is closely tied to spectatorship, as meaning emerges through the interaction between performer and audience’ (2019: 14). This relational dynamic reflects the vulnerability of performing arts practice to disruptions that limit co-presence, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding performing arts as embodied, relational, and context-dependent provides a critical foundation for examining how performing artists navigated the constraints imposed by the pandemic. It also foregrounds the significance of spatial conditions; physical and digital in shaping artistic practice, a concern that becomes central in analysing performance adaptation during periods of crisis.

The Performing Artistes in the Pandemic Era

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the conditions under which performing artists operate, precipitating a global suspension of live performance and destabilising creative economies reliant on bodily co-presence and audience interaction. Scholars have observed that the performing arts were among the cultural sectors most immediately affected by containment measures, as performance venues, festivals, and rehearsal spaces were closed indefinitely (Comunian and England, 2020). These disruptions exposed the structural fragility of performance labour, particularly within contexts where artistic work is informal, episodic, and weakly supported by institutional frameworks.

Prior to the beginning of 2020, performing artistes around the world were living a life that had largely remained the same for decades. They were working in studios and performing at live shows with big plans for the coming year. Their usual mode of performance had always been an outdoor method. This implies that a lot of people (audiences) have to patronise different dance halls, clubs, event places or theatres and cinemas in order to get informed, enlightened and entertained. Then, the COVID-19 corona virus pandemic struck the world and changed everything. Following the lockdown of markets, schools, cinemas, clubs, offices, parks, churches, mosques and other public places in order to checkmate the community spread of the virus, performing artistes had to re-imagine their habits and reschedule their calendars for the foreseeable future (Alé-Chilet, Jorge et al., 2020).

Within the creative labour literature, the pandemic has been widely analysed as a moment that intensified existing precarity rather than creating entirely new conditions. Performing artists, who often work without long-term contracts or social protections, experienced sudden loss of income and professional visibility (Oakley and Banks, 2020). Studies have emphasised that such precarity is not incidental but constitutive of cultural labour, rendering artists especially vulnerable during periods of crisis (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). The pandemic therefore functioned as a stress test, revealing the limits of resilience within already marginal creative systems. Some artists lost a lot of job engagements, invite to feature in others films and stage performances, draining of their finances, and the resultant mental health issues became rampart and issues to contend seriously with by the performing artistes in this period (Palamar, 2020).

Beyond economic disruption, the suspension of live performance had significant implications for artistic identity and practice. Performance scholars have long stressed that performing arts derive meaning through embodied presence, shared temporality, and audience interaction (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). The sudden absence of these conditions during lockdown disrupted not only production but also performers' sense of professional purpose. As Reason argues, the erosion of co-presence during the pandemic prompted artists to reconsider what constitutes performance when traditional spatial and relational structures are unavailable (2020: 25). In response to these constraints, many performing artists turned to digital platforms as alternative spaces for creative expression and dissemination. Digital environments enabled the circulation of recorded and live-streamed performances, offering provisional solutions to spatial restriction. Scholars note, however, that this shift should not be understood as a seamless transition but as a contested reconfiguration of performance practice, shaped by technological access, platform governance, and uneven digital literacy (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015). Digital performance during the pandemic thus emerged as both an opportunity and a site of new exclusions.

Within African and Nigerian contexts, these challenges were further compounded by infrastructural limitations such as unstable internet connectivity, high data costs, and limited monetisation mechanisms. While social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp enabled Nigerian performing artists to maintain visibility and audience engagement, these platforms rarely offered sustainable economic returns. Scholars have cautioned that digital migration may reproduce existing inequalities within the creative sector, privileging artists with greater access to resources and technological capital (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Nevertheless, the pandemic period also revealed the adaptive capacities of performing artists operating

within constrained environments. Nigerian artists employed improvisational strategies, short-form content, and hybrid performance modes to navigate disruption, reflecting forms of creative resilience grounded in necessity rather than institutional support. These practices underscore the need to examine pandemic-era performance not simply as a temporary deviation from normative practice, but as a critical moment that reshaped relationships between performance, space, and labour.

Situating performing artistes within the pandemic era therefore requires an analytical framework attentive to both structural constraint and creative agency. This study builds on existing scholarship by foregrounding the experiences of Nigerian performing artists and examining how crisis conditions reconfigured performance spaces, artistic labour, and modes of audience engagement within a digitally mediated terrain.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how Nigerian performing artists reimaged performance spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on lived experience, creative adaptation, and meaning-making under conditions of disruption. Rather than quantifying artistic output, the research seeks to understand how artists interpreted and responded to the suspension of physical performance spaces and the constraints imposed by lockdown measures.

The study is situated within the context of Nigeria's nationwide lockdown period in 2020, when restrictions on movement and public gatherings significantly altered the conditions of artistic production and dissemination. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of artistic practice within a specific socio-cultural and historical moment.

Participants and Sampling

Participants consisted of Nigerian performing artists working across theatre, dance, music, and related performance practices. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select artists who remained creatively active during the lockdown period and who engaged, in varying ways, with alternative or digitally mediated performance spaces. This approach ensured that participants possessed experiential knowledge directly relevant to the study's research focus.

To further enhance the discourse, some artists works were examined and the engagement of a few numbers of performing artists in Ilorin (North-central, Nigeria) also aided the work.

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and analysis of pandemic-era performance outputs. Interviews were conducted remotely via telephone calls and online communication platforms due to mobility restrictions. This method allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while providing sufficient structure to explore key themes such as performance disruption, creative adaptation, economic challenges, and digital engagement. In addition to interviews, the study examined selected digital performance materials produced during the lockdown period. These included recorded performances, theatrical sketches, dance videos, musical performances, and comedy skits circulated via platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. These materials were treated as cultural texts, offering insight into how performance practices were reshaped within digitally mediated environments.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analytical approach, enabling patterns and recurring ideas to emerge across interview transcripts and performance materials. Data were reviewed iteratively, moving from initial descriptive coding to more interpretive thematic categorisation. Analytical attention was directed toward identifying adaptive strategies, negotiations of space, and shifts in artistic practice during the pandemic. The data used included some oral discussions with artistes, videos and personal experiences of the writers who were also engaged in different creative endeavours during the period in order to sensitise the people in their localities. For instance, one of the writers produced about 9-minute socio-religious comedy skit in Yoruba language titled 'Iberu Coro' (the fear of coronavirus) and was released on YouTube in a bid to help alleviate the tension and fear that gripped the populace then in Nigeria.

Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and consented to participation, with anonymity maintained where requested. The researcher's positionality as a practitioner within the Nigerian performing arts sector informed access and interpretation, while reflexivity was maintained to ensure analytical rigour.

Survival Strategies of Covid-19 Outbreak in the Nigerian Creative Industry

While the demand for performance and creative content throughout the lockdown period was high, digital access became more critical than ever before. The pandemic thus, serves as an opportunity in disguise, as well as an avenue for reflecting upon the

trends and developments of oft-neglected areas in the Nigerian creative industry. The COVID-19 pandemic has, amongst other things, exposed the linear revenue streams of the entertainment space, forcing most of the talents to start thinking of new ways of generating incomes beyond the traditional offerings in the industry. It was evident during the peak of the pandemic that live events and huge gatherings were not possible forcing most of the talents to look for creative ways to stay afloat and connect with fans. Individuals with multiple skill sets and creative minds used the opportunity to diversify into other creative sectors. While the pandemic constituted a critical rupture in Nigerian performance culture, it equally compelled artists to renegotiate the spatial, economic, and aesthetic foundations of their practice.

Traditionally, Nigerian performing arts have been anchored in physical co-presence, whether through theatre venues, festivals, comedy shows, or communal performance spaces. The abrupt suspension of these sites during lockdown destabilised long-standing performance economies and exposed the vulnerability of artists operating within largely informal and audience-dependent systems. However, rather than signalling artistic paralysis, the crisis precipitated an accelerated shift toward digitally mediated performance practices that redefined how performance space, audience interaction, and creative labour were conceived.

A notable feature of this digital turn was the rapid appropriation of social media platforms as performance environments. Nigerian performers did not merely transfer existing stage practices online; instead, they adapted their performance aesthetics to suit the affordances and constraints of digital platforms. Short-form comedy, spoken-word performance, dance, and musical content became dominant modes, reflecting the algorithmic preferences of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. This shift foregrounded intimacy, immediacy, and direct address, as performers increasingly engaged audiences through close camera framing and conversational performance styles. Several creative minds in Nigeria sprung to limelight with new strategies in every circumstance as the pandemic provided new opportunities for creativity. For instance, performing artistes like the Hip-pop award-winning artiste, Tu Face Idibia, in conjunction with the International Breweries PLC, makers of the Trophy Extra Stout, had an E-concert. The idea was to bring fun and hope to thousands of people in the comfort of their homes and was the first of its kind.

Prominent Nigerian comedians such as Broda Shaggi and Mr Macaroni exemplify how digital performance practices functioned as adaptive and transformative strategies during the pandemic. Their online skits, often produced within domestic spaces, drew on satire, political commentary, and everyday social experiences to maintain relevance during lockdown. These performances were not merely substitutes for live

shows but constituted new forms of performative engagement shaped by platform-specific conventions and audience expectations. The domestic setting, once considered a private space, was reconfigured into a performative site, blurring boundaries between personal and public spheres.

Similarly, female performers such as Taaoma leveraged digital platforms to sustain creative production during the pandemic. Her multi-character performances, often staged within home environments, demonstrate how digital performance enabled artists to assume multiple performative roles while maintaining narrative coherence and audience appeal. These practices illustrate how digital space facilitated experimentation with characterisation, editing, and narrative compression, thereby reshaping performance aesthetics within Nigerian popular culture.

Within dance practice, figures such as Kaffy, one of Nigeria's most prominent professional dancers and choreographers, exemplify this reorientation toward digitally mediated performance. During the lockdown period, Kaffy utilised platforms such as Instagram and YouTube to disseminate choreographic content, host dance challenges, and engage audiences through instructional and performative videos. These practices extended dance beyond conventional studio and stage environments, repositioning domestic and digital spaces as legitimate sites of choreographic production. Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, such digital performances also operated as modes of community-building and professional sustenance within a period of restricted mobility. There was also a wonderful innovation introduced by Ice Nweke for the virtual convention for dancers. The idea was to use professional dancers like Kaffy to train a generation of dancers online through creating numerous jobs and opportunities in that process.

Similarly, Nigerian popular musicians increasingly embraced digital platforms to maintain artistic presence and audience connection. Artists such as Wizkid and Burnaboy employed livestreamed performances, social media releases, and online interactions to compensate for the suspension of concerts and live shows. In a related development, another group of artistes Asa and Davido organised a show through music steaming platform Udu X live stream on 13th April 2020 and there was yet another major e-concert by popular musicians Flavour and Phyno which was hosted on Instagram live sessions. It was one way of overcoming the boredom created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, the viewers of DSTV Africa had a great time every Saturday enjoying the live show on television. The Nigerian 'Owambe' (Party) feeling was brought every Saturday to many homes of the viewers as a way of making them forget the challenges of the Coronavirus lockdown. The host of the show, Yaw was able to attract notable Nigerian artistes who performed with live bands on television and the people made the request

through various social media platforms. Bovi, one of the notable Nigerian comedians also hosted an E-Concert, called *Naira Win Verbal Concert*, during lockdown where viewers were exclusively entertained. These digital engagements reconfigured the relationship between performer and audience, privileging immediacy, intimacy, and accessibility over the scale and spectacle associated with live arena performances. In doing so, they disrupted traditional hierarchies of performance space, allowing audiences to encounter performers within mediated environments that collapsed geographical distance.

Similarly, the popular filmmaker Tunde Kelani during the lockdown was also able to release on YouTube the adaptation of the novel published in 1952 by Amos Tutuola titled the *Palmwine Drunkard*; uploaded on youtube May 3, 2020. It was one of those resilient steps taken by the artists in Nigeria to ensuring that the people, who are already devastated by the effects of the virus, are entertained by all means. This is in consonance with the popular saying in Nigerian theatre parlance that ‘no matter what, the show must go on’. Tunde Kelani, the producer, states that ‘the attempt was made for the viewers at that period to enjoy the tribute to the golden era of the classic Yoruba Travelling Theatre in this adaptation of folk-opera’ – by Kola Ogunmola and written originally by Amos Tutuola.

Many creative artists were forced onto the digital space as a result of the restrictive measures put in place across the nation. As live performance opportunities stopped, humorous performances were created by several artistes during the pandemic through the internet. This was created to engage people not to fall into depression and since laughter is a symbol of hope, it becomes one of the greatest needs of life during the time of the crisis. It served as a connection, for helping everyone in the nation feel a sense of togetherness that ‘we are in this together’ thereby educating and assuring the people that life will get back to normal again. It was also for defusing fear and anxiety, for helping everyone re-establish a sense of psychological control and a sense of social connection.

From a critical perspective, these digital practices reveal both the possibilities and limitations of performance migration. On one hand, the use of online platforms enabled continuity of creative labour and expanded audience reach beyond physical constraints. On the other hand, reliance on corporate-owned digital platforms raised questions about artistic autonomy, monetisation, and uneven access. While high-profile performers such as Kaffy and Davido possessed the social capital and technological resources to sustain digital visibility, less-established artists faced persistent barriers related to data costs, platform algorithms, and infrastructural instability. The pandemic thus exposed a stratification within Nigerian performance culture, where digital resilience

was unevenly distributed. This aligns with broader scholarly arguments that digital performance should not be understood as a neutral or universally accessible solution, but as a contested space shaped by power, capital, and technological mediation (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). The digital turn, while enabling creative survival, also reproduced existing inequalities within the cultural sector.

From a performance studies lens, these digital practices challenge conventional notions of liveness and spectatorship. While traditional theatre scholarship often emphasises co-presence as a defining feature of performance, pandemic-era digital performances reveal alternative forms of relationality grounded in mediated interaction (Auslander, 2008). Audience engagement during this period was sustained through comments, shares, and algorithmic circulation, producing forms of asynchronous participation that reconfigured the temporal dynamics of performance reception. This suggests that liveness, rather than being extinguished, was rearticulated within digitally networked environments.

However, the turn to digital performance also exposed structural inequalities within Nigeria's creative sector. Access to stable internet connectivity, recording equipment, and monetisation mechanisms remained uneven, privileging performers with greater technological and social capital. While high-profile artists were able to translate online visibility into economic gain through brand endorsements and platform monetisation, many lesser-known performers remained marginalised within saturated digital spaces. This uneven distribution of opportunity underscores the limitations of digital resilience and cautions against viewing online performance as a universally empowering solution (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Nevertheless, initiatives such as Iberu Coro demonstrate how collective digital performance functioned as a form of artistic solidarity during crisis. Through facilitating collaborative performance across dispersed locations, such initiatives reimaged performance space as a networked environment sustained through shared creative intent rather than physical proximity. These practices resonate with resilience theory's emphasis on adaptive and relational processes, highlighting how artists mobilised existing networks to sustain creative production under constraint.

Notably, the pandemic-era digital turn has implications beyond crisis management. The sustained popularity of online performance formats after the easing of lockdown restrictions suggests that digital mediation has become an enduring component of Nigerian performance culture. Rather than replacing live performance, digital platforms now operate alongside physical venues, expanding the spatial ecology of performance practice. This hybridisation challenges rigid distinctions between live and mediated performance and calls for renewed scholarly attention to how digital technologies

continue to shape artistic labour, audience engagement, and cultural production in post-pandemic Nigeria. More so, the reconfiguration of performance space during the pandemic did not signify a wholesale abandonment of live performance traditions. Rather, it prompted a temporary yet consequential expansion of what constitutes performance space within Nigerian theatre and popular performance cultures. The practices adopted by prominent performers illustrate how digital platforms functioned as adaptive spaces through which performance could persist under crisis conditions, while simultaneously reshaping aesthetic choices, modes of address, and audience engagement.

In this sense, the pandemic did not merely interrupt Nigerian performance practice; it accelerated existing trends toward digitalisation while exposing structural constraints within the creative economy. The experiences of Nigerian performing artists suggest that digital performance practices developed during the lockdown may continue to influence post-pandemic performance sphere, not as replacements for live performance but as integrated extensions of artistic practice. Examining these developments through a critical lens reveals how crisis conditions catalysed new configurations of performance space, while also foregrounding the structural constraints that continue to shape artistic labour within digitally mediated environments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined how Nigerian performing artists navigated the profound disruptions occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic through reimagining performance spaces within digitally mediated environments. Against the backdrop of prolonged lockdowns and the suspension of physical performance venues, the research demonstrates that digital platforms did not merely function as temporary substitutes for live performance, but became critical sites through which artistic practice, visibility, and audience engagement were renegotiated.

The findings reveal that Nigerian performers mobilised digital technologies in ways that were shaped by existing creative cultures and infrastructural constraints. This practice illuminates how performance space was reconceptualised not as a fixed physical location but as a fluid, networked construct shaped by technology, audience interaction, and creative necessity. At the same time, the study highlights that digital migration was neither seamless nor uniformly empowering. While online platforms enabled continuity of practice and expanded audience reach for some artists, they also exposed persistent inequalities related to access, monetisation, and digital infrastructure. The reliance on social media as performance space often reproduced existing forms of precarity, particularly for artists operating outside established

networks or without sufficient technological resources. This reinforces the argument that digital performance during the pandemic must be understood as a context-dependent response shaped by structural conditions rather than as an unequivocal marker of innovation.

Situating Nigerian performing artists' pandemic-era practices within resilience theory, this study has demonstrated that artistic adaptation operated across multiple dimensions; short-term survival, coping strategies, and emerging transformations in performance practice. Initiatives such as *Iberu Coro* illustrate how collective creativity and digital collaboration functioned as mechanisms for sustaining artistic communities under crisis conditions. These practices reveal resilience not as an individual attribute but as a relational and socially embedded process.

In contributing to scholarship on performance, space, and digital mediation, this article argues that the pandemic catalysed a reconfiguration of performance space that continues to influence contemporary artistic practice beyond the immediate crisis. While the return to physical venues has reasserted the significance of co-present performance, the persistence of digital and hybrid practices suggests that the boundaries between live and mediated performance have been permanently unsettled.

As a way forward, this study recommends the need for continued critical engagement with how performance adapts under conditions of crisis, particularly within contexts marked by infrastructural fragility and creative precarity. Future performance research should also move beyond crisis framing to critically examine how digital and physical performance spaces might coexist, intersect, and inform new hybrid modes of artistic production. Equally, cultural policy and institutional support structures must recognise the realities of creative labour within digitally mediated environments, addressing infrastructural inequities and supporting sustainable artistic practice. In doing so, Nigerian performing arts can move from reactive adaptation toward more deliberate and equitable reimagining of performance space in an increasingly digital world.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Informations

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