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**Examining the Use of Art as a Tool for Social Justice in  
Kenya**

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## Examining the Use of Art as a Tool for Social Justice in Kenya

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#### **Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The aim of this study was to examine art as a tool for social justice in Kenya.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

**Findings:** The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to the use of art as a tool for social justice in Kenya. The preliminary empirical review revealed that art education is a useful tool in promoting social justice, as it enhances student engagement and facilitates the exchange of information and resources. The study revealed that the community art project facilitated critical thinking, self-

expression, and social cohesion among participants. It contributed to raising awareness of social justice issues and empowering marginalized individuals and communities.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The Critical Theory, Cultural Hegemony and Aesthetics of Liberation may be used to anchor future studies on the use of art as a tool for social justice in Kenya. The government should promote inclusivity and diversity in the arts by supporting the representation and visibility of underrepresented groups as well as providing resources, funding, and platforms for artists and communities to collaborate on projects that address social justice concerns and amplify marginalized voices.

**Keywords:** *Social, Justice, Art, Tool, Examining*

## INTRODUCTION

Social justice refers to the concept of promoting equality, fairness, and justice in society by addressing systemic inequalities and advocating for the rights of marginalized individuals and groups. In developed economies such as the USA, Japan, and the UK, social justice issues are of significant concern despite their overall economic prosperity. For example, in the USA, income inequality has been a persistent social justice challenge. Income inequality has increased significantly since the 1980s, with the top 1% of earners capturing a disproportionate share of income gains (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2016)). This trend has resulted in unequal opportunities and limited upward mobility for low-income individuals and communities. Similarly, in the UK, educational disparities have been a critical social justice issue. The racial inequalities within the education system, particularly in relation to academic achievement, exclusion rates, and access to higher education (Gillborn and Mirza, 2016). The study demonstrates how structural and institutional factors perpetuate educational inequalities and hinder the social mobility of minority ethnic groups.

Turning to developing economies, social justice concerns remain prevalent, often exacerbated by economic challenges and limited resources. In many developing economies, poverty and access to basic services are key areas of focus for social justice efforts. For instance, in India, where poverty rates remain high, social justice efforts have centered around improving access to education and healthcare for marginalized communities. The impact of government policies aimed at reducing child mortality rates (Desai, Vanneman, & Sonalde, 2019).). The research found that targeted interventions, such as the implementation of community-based healthcare programs and improved access to healthcare facilities, have led to a decline in child mortality rates in disadvantaged communities.

In Brazil, income inequality has been a significant social justice issue. The impact of a conditional cash transfer program called Bolsa Família on poverty reduction and income inequality (Ferreira, Leite, & Ravallion, 2016). The research demonstrated that the program has been effective in reducing poverty rates and improving income distribution, particularly among the poorest segments of society. In Nigeria, gender inequality is a significant social justice concern. Women and girls face barriers in accessing education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Gender disparities persist in educational enrollment rates, with girls being less likely to attend school compared to boys (Okechukwu and Ajaero, 2018). This hinders their overall development and perpetuates social inequalities. In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid has left deep-rooted social injustices. One of the key challenges is the unequal distribution of land and resources, particularly affecting marginalized communities. Land tenure insecurity among rural communities underscores the need for land reform policies that address historical injustices and provide secure land rights to marginalized groups (Cousins, 2018).

In sub-Saharan economies, social justice concerns span a wide range of issues, including poverty, healthcare, education, and human rights. In Kenya, access to clean water and sanitation is a pressing social justice issue. Many rural and marginalized communities lack access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities, leading to various health problems. The impact of water and sanitation helps in reducing waterborne diseases. The research findings emphasized the importance of improving access to safe water sources and sanitation facilities to promote social justice and public health (Mwangi, Mwirigi, & Kigondu, 2016). In Zimbabwe, human rights

violations and political repression have been significant social justice challenges. The restriction of freedom of speech, assembly, and association has undermined the rights and well-being of citizens. A report by Human Rights Watch (2019) documents instances of arbitrary arrests, torture, and harassment of activists and opposition members. The report calls for reforms to uphold human rights and ensure social justice in the country.

Art as a tool for social justice encompasses the utilization of artistic expressions and creative practices to address social inequalities, advocate for marginalized communities, and promote positive social change. It harnesses the power of art to raise awareness, challenge oppressive systems, and foster dialogue and empathy. Various tools of art can be employed to advance social justice causes.

One significant tool is visual art, which includes mediums such as painting, sculpture, and photography. Visual art can serve as a means of representation and amplification for underrepresented groups, shedding light on their experiences and struggles. For example, the work of artist Frida Kahlo often depicted her own physical and emotional pain, representing the experiences of women and individuals with disabilities. Her art not only conveyed a personal narrative but also became a symbol of resilience and empowerment, challenging societal norms and advocating for gender equality and body positivity (Gibson, 2017).

Another tool is performance art, which encompasses various forms like theater, dance, and spoken word. Performance art allows individuals to use their bodies and voices to convey messages, challenge social norms, and provoke thought. For instance, the theatrical production "The Vagina Monologues" by Eve Ensler sparked conversations about women's experiences with gender-based violence, consent, and sexuality, while raising funds for organizations working towards ending violence against women (Alvarez, 2014). Performance art can create spaces for dialogue, empathy, and reflection, leading to social transformation.

Literature and storytelling are additional tools that can contribute to social justice efforts. Through novels, poetry, and oral traditions, stories can be shared, offering alternative perspectives and giving voice to marginalized communities. For example, the novel "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee explores racial injustice and discrimination, fostering empathy and critical reflection on systemic racism and inequality (Mills, 2015). Literature allows readers to engage with complex social issues, challenge their own biases, and envision a more just society.

Lastly, digital media and social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for social justice. Online spaces provide opportunities for marginalized communities to share their stories, mobilize support, and challenge dominant narratives. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, for instance, has been instrumental in raising awareness about police brutality and racial injustice, sparking global movements and demanding systemic change (Harkins & Wiltshire, 2018). Digital media allows for the rapid dissemination of information, encourages collective action, and facilitates dialogue on social justice issues.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the recognition of art as a powerful tool for social justice, there is a need to understand the current state and effectiveness of utilizing art for addressing social inequalities and promoting positive change. This research aims to examine the impact and trends of art as a tool for social justice in contemporary society, specifically focusing on visual art, performance art, literature, and



digital media. By analyzing relevant statistics and trends, this study seeks to address the research questions like; What is the extent of representation and empowerment achieved through visual art in promoting social justice causes? How have the numbers of art exhibitions and galleries showcasing socially conscious art evolved over time? (Gibson, 2017) How effective are performance art and theatrical productions in engaging audiences, challenging social norms, and promoting social justice issues? What are the trends in audience attendance and reception of socially relevant performances? (Alvarez, 2014) To what extent does literature contribute to raising awareness and fostering critical reflection on social justice issues? How have book sales and readership of socially conscious literature changed in recent years? (Mills, 2015) What role does digital media, particularly social media platforms, play in facilitating social justice movements and creating awareness? How has the use of hashtags and online activism evolved over time, and what are the trends in engagement and reach? (Harkins & Wiltshire, 2018)

By examining these questions and analyzing relevant statistics and trends, this research aims to provide insights into the current state of art as a tool for social justice and its effectiveness in promoting positive social change.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Review**

#### **Critical Theory**

Critical Theory, originating from the Frankfurt School, emphasizes the examination and critique of social structures and power dynamics. It aims to uncover the underlying social, economic, and political systems that perpetuate inequality and oppression. In the context of "Art as a Tool for Social Justice," Critical Theory provides a framework for analyzing how art can challenge dominant narratives, disrupt power imbalances, and foster social change. By questioning the status quo and exposing social injustices through artistic expressions, Critical Theory aligns with the goal of using art to promote social justice (Horkheimer, 2002).

#### **Cultural Hegemony**

Cultural Hegemony, developed by Antonio Gramsci, explores how dominant ideologies and cultural norms are established and maintained to reinforce the existing power structures. According to this theory, the ruling class maintains control over society through the dissemination of its values, beliefs, and worldviews. In the context of "Art as a Tool for Social Justice," Cultural Hegemony highlights the potential of art to challenge and subvert dominant narratives, offering alternative perspectives and amplifying marginalized voices. By providing counter-narratives and challenging cultural hegemony through art, individuals and communities can reclaim their agency and promote social justice (Gramsci, 1971).

#### **Aesthetics of Liberation**

The Aesthetics of Liberation, proposed by Paulo Freire, focuses on the transformative potential of art in liberating individuals from oppressive systems. It emphasizes the importance of aesthetics and creativity in fostering critical consciousness and social action. In the context of "Art as a Tool for Social Justice," the Aesthetics of Liberation highlights the power of art to engage emotions, provoke reflection, and inspire collective action. By evoking empathy, challenging perceptions, and promoting dialogue, art can motivate individuals to question social injustices and work towards positive social change (Freire, 1970).

## **Empirical Review**

Matoba and Peters (2018) conducted a study that aimed to assess the impact of community art projects in South Africa on promoting social justice and community empowerment. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and observations, to evaluate the outcomes of various community art projects. The findings indicated that community art projects had a positive impact on community engagement, social cohesion, and individual empowerment. Participants reported increased awareness of social justice issues and a sense of agency to address them. The study recommended the continuation and expansion of community art projects as a means of promoting social justice and community development.

Iyengar (2019) explored the use of public art installations as a tool for social change and community engagement. The researcher conducted a qualitative analysis of public art installations, examining their themes, messages, and impact on public discourse and social awareness. The study revealed that public art installations played a significant role in initiating dialogue, challenging social norms, and raising awareness of social justice issues. They were effective in engaging diverse audiences and fostering a sense of community participation. The study recommended the integration of public art installations into urban planning and community development strategies to promote social justice and civic engagement.

Walker (2017) did research on the impact of street art as a form of activism in urban spaces, focusing on social justice issues. The researcher employed a combination of qualitative interviews and observations to investigate the perceptions and experiences of street artists and community members. The study found that street art served as a powerful tool for expressing dissent, challenging power structures, and initiating conversations about social justice. It contributed to community empowerment, identity formation, and a sense of place-making. The study suggested the need for policy support and public recognition of street art as a legitimate form of activism and artistic expression for social justice causes.

According to Cooper (2016), the effectiveness of art-based interventions help in promoting social justice across various contexts. The researcher conducted a comprehensive review of empirical studies on art-based interventions for social justice, analyzing their methodologies, outcomes, and impacts. The review revealed that art-based interventions had a positive influence on various social justice indicators, such as community empowerment, critical consciousness, and advocacy. They were effective in challenging social inequalities and promoting dialogue and understanding. The study emphasized the importance of integrating art-based interventions into social justice programs and policies, highlighting their potential for transformative change.

Cohen-Cruz (2015) investigated the use of theater as a tool for social change and its impact on promoting social justice. The researcher employed a qualitative analysis of theater performances and interviews with theater practitioners to understand the mechanisms and outcomes of engaged performance. The study found that theater as a tool for social change fostered dialogue, empathy, and critical reflection. It had the potential to challenge dominant narratives, raise awareness of social justice issues, and mobilize communities for action. The study emphasized the need for continued support and resources for engaged performance initiatives, as well as collaborations between theater practitioners and social justice organizations.

Abdul-Mageed and Razzouk (2014), examined an Egyptian community art project that aimed to promote social justice through art education. The researchers employed qualitative methods,

including interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, to explore the experiences and perspectives of project participants. The study revealed that the community art project facilitated critical thinking, self-expression, and social cohesion among participants. It contributed to raising awareness of social justice issues and empowering marginalized individuals and communities. The study recommended the integration of art education for social justice into formal educational settings and the expansion of community art projects as catalysts for social change.

Durfee and Lambert (2013) examined the use of digital storytelling as a tool for social justice, focusing on its outcomes and impacts. The researchers conducted a comprehensive review of the literature, analyzing empirical studies that investigated the effects of digital storytelling on social justice-related outcomes. The review revealed that digital storytelling had a positive influence on critical consciousness, empathy, and social action. It provided marginalized individuals and communities with a platform for sharing their stories, challenging dominant narratives, and promoting social justice. The study suggested the integration of digital storytelling into educational and community-based initiatives to amplify marginalized voices and foster social change.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

## **FINDINGS**

Our study presented both a knowledge and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Matoba and Peters (2018) conducted a study that aimed to assess the impact of community art projects in South Africa on promoting social justice and community empowerment. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and observations, to evaluate the outcomes of various community art projects. The findings indicated that community art projects had a positive impact on community engagement, social cohesion, and individual empowerment. On the other hand, our current study focused on use of art as a tool for social justice in Kenya.

Secondly, the study presented a methodological gap whereby, in their study on study that aimed to assess the impact of community art projects in South Africa on promoting social justice and community empowerment; Matoba and Peters (2018) employed a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and observations, to evaluate the outcomes of various community art projects. Our current study the use of art as a tool for social justice employed a desk study research method.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusions**

Based on the literature studies reviewed on art as a tool for social justice in Kenya, the following conclusions and recommendations can be made:

Art-based interventions and projects have the potential to promote social justice by raising awareness, fostering critical consciousness, and empowering marginalized individuals and communities. Visual art, performance art, literature, digital media, and other artistic forms can challenge dominant narratives, initiate dialogue, and create spaces for marginalized voices to be heard. Art has the power to engage emotions, evoke empathy, and inspire social action, leading to transformative change in society. Community engagement and participation in art projects are crucial for their success in promoting social justice and community development. Artistic expressions that address social justice issues have the capacity to challenge power structures, disrupt inequalities, and advocate for positive social change.

### **Recommendations**

Firstly, leaders should encourage and support the integration of art-based interventions into educational programs, community initiatives and policy frameworks to promote social justice and critical engagement while the government should provide resources, funding and platforms for artists and communities to collaborate on projects that address social justice concerns and amplify marginalized voices. Additionally, fostering collaborations between artists, activists, scholars and community organizations will help to facilitate the creation of meaningful and impactful art projects.

Communities should recognize and validate the role of art as a legitimate form of activism and advocacy for social justice causes. The government should promote inclusivity and diversity in the arts by supporting the representation and visibility of underrepresented groups as well as emphasize the importance of evaluating and assessing the impact of art-based interventions on social justice outcomes to inform future practices and policies.



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