

## Influence of Marketing and Distribution Strategies on The Success of Kenyan Films

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### Abstract

Film marketing and distribution are fundamental to the success of the Kenyan film industry. Marketing involves promotional strategies that create awareness and generate audience interest, while distribution ensures that films reach their target viewers through various channels. However, despite the industry's growth, Kenyan filmmakers face significant challenges, including limited funding, piracy, inadequate cinema infrastructure, and difficulties in accessing international markets. This study explores the roles and functions of marketing and distribution in Kenya, focusing on the contributions of key institutions such as the Kenya Film Commission (KFC) and the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB). Independent filmmakers often rely on alternative strategies such as social media promotion, film festivals, and digital marketing agencies due to financial constraints. The study's objectives include analyzing film marketing strategies, examining distribution channels, assessing the challenges affecting film marketing and distribution, and exploring the impact of digital platforms on film accessibility. Using a document analysis methodology, data were collected from academic sources, industry reports, and policy documents to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. The findings indicate that technological advancements have reshaped film distribution, with streaming services such as Netflix, Showmax, and Viusasa offering new revenue generation and audience expansion opportunities. However, issues such as digital piracy, inadequate government support, and weak enforcement of intellectual property rights remain significant barriers. The study concludes that strengthening institutional support, fostering public-private collaborations, and enhancing digital marketing strategies are essential for creating a sustainable and competitive Kenyan film industry. Understanding these evolving trends is crucial for industry stakeholders to develop effective strategies for marketing and distributing Kenyan films both locally and internationally.

**Keywords:** *Film marketing and distribution, independent filmmakers, technological advancements, Kenyan film industry, Digital platforms*

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## 1. Introduction

Film marketing and distribution are two critical components of the film industry that ensure a film's visibility and commercial success. Film marketing involves various promotional activities such as advertising, public relations, and digital campaigns aimed at attracting audiences. Film distribution, on the other hand, refers to the process of making a film available to audiences through different platforms such as cinemas, DVDs, television, and online streaming services. The effectiveness of both marketing and distribution determines how well a film performs in the market.

In Kenya, film marketing and distribution have evolved significantly over the years. Initially, marketing relied heavily on traditional media such as television, radio, and print advertisements. However, with the rise of digital technologies and social media platforms, filmmakers now have more cost-effective ways to promote their work. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook have become crucial tools for independent filmmakers who may not have large budgets for advertising. Despite these opportunities, challenges such as limited access to funding and inadequate marketing infrastructure still hinder the widespread promotion of Kenyan films. Film distribution in Kenya has also undergone notable transformations. Traditionally, films were distributed through cinemas and DVD sales, but the emergence of online streaming platforms has changed the landscape. Today, filmmakers can distribute their content via platforms such as Netflix, Showmax, and Viusasa, reaching a broader audience beyond Kenya's borders. While these strategies offer numerous benefits, independent filmmakers must navigate challenges such as limited budgets, market saturation, and rapidly changing digital landscapes. It is crucial to stay informed about current trends, audience preferences, and technological advancements to adapt marketing strategies accordingly. Continuous learning and flexibility are key to overcoming obstacles and maximizing the potential of marketing efforts in the independent film sector (Zeng, 2024).

However, issues such as piracy and unauthorized distribution continue to threaten revenue generation, making it difficult for filmmakers to profit from their work. This study focuses on the dynamics of film marketing and distribution in Kenya, highlighting the strategies used by both mainstream and independent filmmakers, the challenges they face, and the emerging trends shaping the industry. By analyzing these aspects, the study aims to provide insights that can help improve the efficiency and profitability of the Kenyan film industry. The Kenyan film industry has witnessed significant growth in recent years, driven by an increase in local productions and the expansion of digital distribution channels. The industry has produced films that have gained international recognition, such as *Supa Modo*, *Nairobi Half Life*, and *Rafiki*. Despite these successes, the industry still faces numerous challenges, including limited funding, piracy, and inadequate infrastructure for marketing and distribution. Historically, film marketing and distribution in Kenya were largely dependent on traditional media channels such as radio, television, and newspaper advertisements. Before the digital revolution, filmmakers relied heavily on physical distribution through cinemas and DVD sales. However, limited cinema infrastructure and the high cost of film production meant that only a few films reached a broad audience. Additionally, the lack of a well-structured marketing strategy often resulted in poor audience engagement and low returns on investment. Platforms like YouTube, Tubi, and Pluto TV exemplify the Advertising Video on Demand (AVOD) model, offering a wide range of content supported by ad revenue. Recent studies suggest that AVOD services are gaining traction, with viewers increasingly accepting advertisements in exchange for free content access. This trend

indicates a shift towards ad-supported models, especially in markets where consumers are more price-sensitive (McKenzie et al., 2024).

The Kenya Film Commission (KFC) and the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) play crucial roles in the development of the Kenyan film industry. KFC is responsible for promoting the industry, facilitating funding opportunities, and providing resources for local filmmakers. It also works to position Kenya as a global filming destination by marketing the country's diverse shooting locations. KFCB, on the other hand, regulates film content and ensures compliance with national and international standards. It oversees film classification, licensing, and distribution to safeguard cultural and moral values while supporting the growth of the industry. With the rise of digital platforms, film distribution in Kenya is transitioning towards online streaming services, allowing local filmmakers to reach wider audiences. The availability of high-speed internet and affordable smartphones has facilitated access to video-on-demand (VOD) services such as Netflix, Showmax, and Viusasa. While this shift presents new opportunities for content creators, it also introduces challenges such as digital piracy and monetization difficulties. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative effort between the government, industry stakeholders, and filmmakers to develop sustainable marketing and distribution strategies.

### **1.1. Problem Statement**

Despite the growth of the Kenyan film industry, marketing and distribution remain significant challenges. Many filmmakers struggle to secure adequate funding for marketing campaigns, limiting their ability to reach wider audiences. Additionally, piracy continues to be a major issue, with unauthorized copies of films circulating both online and in physical markets, leading to revenue losses. The transition from traditional to digital distribution has also introduced challenges, as filmmakers must navigate new technologies and competition from international content. Another challenge is the lack of sufficient cinema infrastructure in Kenya, which limits theatrical releases and reduces audience engagement. Many filmmakers have turned to online streaming platforms to distribute their content, but monetization remains a concern, as revenues from streaming services may not always be sufficient to sustain film production. Furthermore, the absence of comprehensive marketing strategies means that many Kenyan films do not achieve the recognition they deserve, both locally and internationally. This study is relevant as it seeks to explore these challenges in depth, providing insights that can help improve film marketing and distribution in Kenya. By understanding the barriers faced by filmmakers and identifying effective strategies, the study aims to contribute to the development of a more sustainable and profitable film industry.

### **1.2 Research Objective**

To evaluate the influence of marketing and distribution strategies on the success of Kenyan films.

## **2. Literature Review**

In examining the landscape of film marketing and distribution, several theoretical frameworks provide insight into how films reach and engage audiences. One such framework is the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, which explores how new ideas and technologies spread within a society. This theory has been applied to understand the adoption patterns of new films, suggesting that early adopters influence subsequent viewers through word-of-mouth and social networks (Lane & Husemann, 2004). Another pertinent framework is the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that audiences actively seek out media that meet

their specific needs, such as entertainment or information. This perspective emphasizes the importance of targeted marketing strategies that align film content with audience desires.

Empirical studies have highlighted the impact of marketing strategies on audience reach and engagement. For instance, research indicates that digital marketing, particularly through social media platforms, significantly enhances audience awareness and interest in films. A study on Nollywood films demonstrated that leveraging platforms like Facebook and YouTube effectively increased viewership and audience interaction (Ayakoroma, 2021). Additionally, the strategic use of product placements within films has been shown to influence audience recall and brand perception, thereby serving as a dual tool for marketing both the film and associated products (Wiles & Danielova, 2009).

Comparative analyses between different film industries offer valuable insights into diverse marketing and distribution practices. For example, the Nigerian film industry, known as Nollywood, has traditionally relied on direct-to-video distribution and informal marketing channels. However, recent shifts towards online streaming platforms have expanded their global reach, mirroring trends observed in Hollywood (Lobato, 2010). In contrast, Hollywood's extensive use of high-budget marketing campaigns and wide theatrical releases underscores the role of substantial financial investment in achieving international distribution and audience penetration. These comparisons highlight how varying economic and cultural contexts shape distinct approaches to film marketing and distribution.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

##### **4.1 KFC's role in promoting films**

The Kenya Film Commission (KFC) plays a pivotal role in promoting the Kenyan film industry both locally and internationally. Established in 2005, KFC operates under the Ministry of Youth Affairs, Creative Economy, and Sports, aiming to position Kenya as a premier filming destination and to nurture local talent within the industry. One of KFC's primary functions is to provide comprehensive support to filmmakers by offering facilities for screenings, assisting with licensing procedures, and facilitating interactions between filmmakers and various government departments. This support structure is designed to streamline the filmmaking process, making it more accessible and efficient for both local and international productions (Kenya Film Classification Board, 2012).

In its efforts to market Kenyan films, KFC organizes the annual Kalasha Film and TV Awards, an event that recognizes and celebrates excellence in the country's film and television sectors. The awards encompass various categories, including Best Feature Film, Best Director, and Best Actor/Actress, thereby acknowledging the diverse talents contributing to the industry. This initiative not only honors outstanding achievements but also serves to elevate the profile of Kenyan films on both national and international stages. By highlighting exemplary works, the Kalasha Awards inspire higher standards of creativity and production quality among Kenyan filmmakers.

Beyond award ceremonies, KFC is instrumental in fostering business opportunities within the film sector through events like the Kalasha International TV and Film Market (Kenya Film Classification Board, 2024). This trade fair convenes industry stakeholders, including producers, directors, scriptwriters, and distributors from across the globe to discuss collaborations, share insights, and explore new ventures. The market features workshops, pitching sessions, and exhibitions, providing a platform for filmmakers to showcase their projects and attract potential investors. Such events are crucial for the growth of the Kenyan

film industry, as they facilitate networking and open avenues for co-productions and distribution deals. KFC also places a strong emphasis on capacity building by organizing educational workshops and training programs aimed at enhancing the skills of local filmmakers. These programs cover various aspects of film production, including scriptwriting, cinematography, editing, and sound design. By equipping filmmakers with the necessary expertise, KFC ensures that Kenyan productions meet international standards, thereby increasing their competitiveness in the global market. This commitment to education and skill development is vital for sustaining the industry's growth and for fostering a new generation of filmmakers who can contribute to Kenya's cultural and economic landscape.

In addition to these initiatives, KFC actively promotes Kenya as a filming destination by providing detailed information on diverse locations suitable for various film projects. The commission assists international filmmakers with location scouting and offers liaison services to navigate governmental procedures, including immigration and licensing. By streamlining these processes, KFC makes it more attractive for foreign productions to choose Kenya as their filming location, which in turn boosts local employment and showcases the country's scenic landscapes to a global audience. This strategy not only brings economic benefits but also enhances Kenya's cultural visibility worldwide. Through these multifaceted efforts, the Kenya Film Commission significantly contributes to the development and promotion of the Kenyan film industry. By supporting local talent, facilitating international collaborations, and advocating for the country's potential as a prime filming location, KFC plays an essential role in positioning Kenya as a vibrant hub for cinematic arts. The commission's initiatives have laid a strong foundation for the industry's future growth, ensuring that Kenyan stories continue to reach audiences both at home and around the world (Kenya Film Classification Board, 2024).

#### **4.1.1 Independent filmmakers' marketing strategies**

Independent filmmakers often employ a multidimensional approach to marketing, leveraging various platforms to reach and engage their target audiences effectively. Social media has become an indispensable tool for independent filmmakers, offering cost-effective avenues to promote their work and connect with audiences. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube enable filmmakers to share trailers, behind-the-scenes content, and updates, fostering a community around their projects. This direct engagement not only builds anticipation but also encourages audience investment in the film's success. Studies have shown that strategic use of social media can significantly enhance audience reach and engagement for independent films (O'Keefe-Smith, 2023). Participating in film festivals is another critical strategy for independent filmmakers. Festivals provide a platform to showcase films to industry professionals, critics, and potential distributors, often serving as a launchpad for wider distribution opportunities. Moreover, festivals offer networking opportunities, allowing filmmakers to connect with peers and mentors, which can be invaluable for career development. Research indicates that festival screenings can substantially increase a film's visibility and credibility, leading to enhanced distribution prospects (Carroll, 2017). Collaborating with digital marketing agencies allows independent filmmakers to craft targeted marketing campaigns that leverage data analytics and market research. These agencies can assist in identifying and reaching specific audience demographics, optimizing online presence, and managing advertising budgets effectively. By utilizing the expertise of digital marketers, filmmakers can navigate the complexities of online promotion, ensuring their films stand out in a crowded digital marketplace. The



strategic partnership with digital marketing professionals has been shown to enhance the discoverability and commercial success of independent films (Marpe, 2022).

An integrated marketing approach that combines social media engagement, festival participation, and professional digital marketing can amplify the impact of each strategy. For instance, buzz generated from a successful festival premiere can be sustained and expanded through social media campaigns and targeted online advertising. This synergy ensures a cohesive and far-reaching promotional effort, maximizing audience reach and engagement. Studies highlight that such a holistic marketing strategy is particularly effective for independent filmmakers operating with limited budgets (Barnwell, 2018). Several independent films have successfully employed these marketing strategies. For example, the film "Paranormal Activity" utilized social media campaigns to build grassroots support, leading to widespread theatrical release and commercial success. Similarly, "The Blair Witch Project" leveraged film festival buzz and online forums to create anticipation, resulting in significant box office returns. These cases exemplify how independent filmmakers can effectively use a combination of social media, festival participation, and digital marketing to achieve substantial audience reach and financial success (Puspitasari et al., 2018).

## **4.2 Film Distribution in Kenya**

### **4.2.1 KFCB's regulatory role in distribution**

The Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) serves as the principal regulatory authority overseeing the distribution of films within Kenya. Established under the Films and Stage Plays Act, Cap 222, KFCB is mandated to regulate the creation, broadcasting, possession, distribution, and exhibition of films to ensure that content aligns with Kenya's cultural values and moral standards. This regulatory framework is designed to protect audiences, particularly children and vulnerable groups, from exposure to inappropriate or harmful content (Kenya Film Classification Board, 2012).

One of the roles of the KFCB is Film Classification and Rating. A core function of KFCB is the examination and classification of films prior to public distribution. The Board assesses each film's content, assigning ratings that guide suitable audience age groups. The classification categories include:

- General Exhibition (GE): Content suitable for all ages.
- Parental Guidance (PG): Content that may require parental guidance for viewers under a certain age.
- Age-Specific Ratings (16, 18): Content restricted to viewers above the specified age due to mature themes, explicit content, or intense scenes.

These classifications are intended to inform viewers and help guardians make appropriate viewing choices for minors. The detailed guidelines for these classifications are outlined in the KFCB Film Classification Guidelines.

Another role is the Licensing of Distributors and Exhibitors. Beyond classification, KFCB is responsible for licensing individuals and entities involved in the distribution and exhibition of films. This includes issuing licenses to film distributors, video libraries, and cinema operators. The licensing process ensures that all film distribution channels comply with national content standards and legal requirements. By regulating these entities, KFCB maintains oversight of the films entering the Kenyan market, thereby safeguarding the public from unclassified or unauthorized content. KFCB is also responsible for the Enforcement and

Compliance of the film distribution. KFCB actively monitors film distribution channels to enforce compliance with established regulations. This involves routine inspections of video stores, cinemas, and broadcast stations to ensure adherence to classification decisions and licensing conditions. The Board has the authority to impose penalties, revoke licenses, or take legal action against entities that violate the Films and Stage Plays Act. Such enforcement measures are crucial in deterring the distribution of prohibited content and upholding the integrity of Kenya's film industry. Despite its comprehensive mandate, KFCB faces challenges in regulating film distribution, particularly with the advent of digital media and online streaming platforms. The ease of accessing unregulated content online poses a significant hurdle to content regulation. Additionally, balancing censorship with creative freedom remains a contentious issue, as seen in debates over films addressing sensitive topics. KFCB continues to adapt its strategies to address these challenges, including proposing updates to existing laws and engaging with stakeholders to foster a responsible film industry. KFCB collaborates with other government agencies, industry stakeholders, and international bodies to enhance its regulatory effectiveness. Partnerships with organizations such as the Kenya Copyright Board and law enforcement agencies facilitate coordinated efforts in combating piracy and unauthorized distribution. Through public awareness campaigns and stakeholder engagement forums, KFCB educates the public and industry players about the importance of content regulation and the role of classification in protecting societal values (Kenya Film Classification Board, 2024).

#### **4.3 Emerging Trends in Film Distribution**

Film piracy significantly undermines the distribution and profitability of the film industry by diverting potential revenue and disrupting traditional distribution channels. Unauthorized reproduction and distribution of films lead to substantial financial losses for content creators and distributors. The Motion Picture Association (MPA) reported that American studios lost approximately \$2.373 billion in 2005 due to piracy, representing a significant portion of the industry's revenue (Holm, 2003). The advent of digital technologies and the internet has exacerbated the issue, making it easier for pirated content to be disseminated globally. Peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing networks and streaming websites have become prevalent platforms for distributing unauthorized copies of films. This widespread availability of pirated content diminishes the demand for legitimate copies, adversely affecting box office sales, DVD purchases, and subscriptions to legal streaming services (Holm, 2003). Piracy also impacts the broader economy by affecting employment within the film industry. Reduced revenues can lead to decreased investment in new productions, resulting in fewer job opportunities for actors, crew members, and other industry professionals. Moreover, governments lose tax revenues from the legitimate sales of films, which can affect public services and economic growth. Efforts to combat film piracy include legal actions against infringers, public awareness campaigns, and the development of more accessible and affordable legal alternatives. For instance, the rise of subscription-based streaming services has provided consumers with convenient access to a vast library of content, potentially reducing the incentive to engage in piracy. However, the effectiveness of these measures varies, and piracy remains a persistent challenge for the film industry. The film distribution landscape has undergone a significant transformation with the advent of Video-on-Demand (VOD) services, which offer viewers flexible access to content. VOD models are primarily categorized into Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD), Transactional Video on Demand

(TVOD), and Advertising Video on Demand (AVOD), each presenting unique approaches to content delivery and monetization.

**Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD)** platforms operate on a subscription-based model, where users pay a recurring fee monthly or annually for unlimited access to a library of content. This model has gained immense popularity due to its convenience and cost-effectiveness. Services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ exemplify this approach, offering extensive catalogs that cater to diverse viewer preferences. The success of SVOD platforms is attributed to their ability to provide ad-free viewing experiences and exclusive content, fostering subscriber loyalty and sustained engagement. Research indicates that the SVOD market is projected to continue its growth trajectory, driven by increasing consumer demand for on-demand content (Kaushal, 2018).

**Transactional Video on Demand (TVOD)**, or pay-per-view, allows consumers to purchase or rent content on a per-item basis. This model is particularly appealing for viewers interested in accessing specific titles without committing to a subscription. Platforms such as Apple iTunes and Google Play utilize the TVOD approach, enabling users to rent or buy individual movies or episodes. While TVOD offers flexibility, its success heavily depends on the exclusivity and timeliness of the content provided. Studies have shown that consumers are willing to engage with TVOD services for premium or newly released content that is not yet available on subscription-based platforms. Advertising Video on Demand (AVOD) services provide free access to content, monetized through advertisements. This model lowers the barrier to entry for consumers, making it accessible to a broader audience. The evolving market dynamics have led to the emergence of hybrid models that combine elements of SVOD, TVOD, and AVOD. For instance, some platforms offer free content with ads while providing an option to subscribe for an ad-free experience. This approach caters to diverse consumer preferences, allowing users to choose between free, ad-supported content and premium, ad-free subscriptions. The flexibility of hybrid models enables platforms to maximize their audience reach and revenue potential by appealing to both cost-conscious viewers and those willing to pay for an enhanced viewing experience (BlendVision, 2024). The diversification of VOD models reflects the industry's response to varying consumer demands and monetization strategies. As the digital content landscape becomes increasingly competitive, platforms must continuously adapt by offering flexible pricing, exclusive content, and personalized user experiences.

#### 4.4 Summary of key findings

The Kenyan film industry is undergoing a transformative phase, marked by significant achievements and persistent challenges. This study delves into the critical aspects of film marketing and distribution within Kenya, offering insights into the strategies employed, the obstacles encountered, and the emerging trends shaping the industry's future. One of the main findings was the Marketing Strategies and Institutional Support.

The Kenya Film Commission (KFC) plays a pivotal role in promoting local films by organizing events such as the Kalasha Film and TV Awards and the Kalasha International TV and Film Market. These initiatives aim to recognize talent and provide platforms for filmmakers to showcase their work, thereby enhancing the visibility of Kenyan cinema. Independent filmmakers predominantly utilize social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, to market their films. This approach facilitates direct



engagement with audiences, fostering communities around their projects and generating grassroots support.

Another finding was the Distribution Channels and Regulatory Framework. The Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) is responsible for regulating film content and distribution, ensuring that films align with national cultural values and moral standards. The Board's mandate includes classifying films and licensing distributors and exhibitors to maintain industry standards. Despite regulatory efforts, filmmakers face challenges in distribution, notably the limited number of cinemas willing to screen local productions. This scarcity restricts audience access and hampers the commercial viability of Kenyan films.

It was also noted that the industry has Challenges in Marketing and Distribution. A significant hurdle in the industry is the lack of funding, which impedes the ability of filmmakers to produce and market their films effectively. Many productions rely on government grants or crowdfunding, and there is a limited pool of private investors. Piracy remains a pervasive issue, with unauthorized distribution leading to substantial revenue losses. The ease of accessing pirated content undermines legitimate sales and diminishes the financial returns for creators.

The findings indicate an Impact of Digital Platforms. The rise of digital platforms has revolutionized film distribution in Kenya. Online streaming services, both local and international, have become vital channels for filmmakers to reach broader audiences. This shift offers new opportunities for revenue generation and audience engagement. However, the digital landscape also presents challenges, including increased competition and the need for effective digital marketing strategies to stand out in a crowded marketplace.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, while the Kenyan film industry exhibits remarkable potential, addressing the challenges in marketing and distribution is crucial for its sustained growth. Strengthening institutional support, enhancing funding mechanisms, combating piracy, and leveraging digital platforms effectively are essential steps toward a thriving film sector in Kenya.

Identifying areas for future research in film marketing and distribution within the Kenyan context is essential for the industry's growth and global competitiveness. One critical area is the impact of digital streaming platforms on local content consumption. With the rise of services like Netflix, Showmax, and Viusasa, understanding how these platforms influence audience preferences and the accessibility of Kenyan films is paramount. Research could explore the extent to which these platforms affect traditional cinema attendance and how they can be leveraged to promote local content effectively. Another pertinent area is the effectiveness of social media marketing strategies for independent filmmakers. Social media platforms offer cost-effective avenues for promotion, yet the specific strategies that yield the highest engagement and conversion rates in the Kenyan market remain underexplored. Studies could examine which platforms and content types resonate most with local audiences, providing filmmakers with data-driven insights to enhance their marketing efforts.

The role of film festivals in the distribution and recognition of Kenyan films also warrants further investigation. While festivals can serve as launchpads for wider distribution, the actual impact on a film's commercial success and international reach is not well-documented. Research could assess the outcomes of festival participation, identifying factors that contribute to successful distribution deals and increased viewership. Additionally, examining the challenges posed by piracy and the enforcement of intellectual property rights in Kenya

is crucial. Piracy undermines revenue generation and the sustainability of the film industry. Future studies could analyze the effectiveness of current anti-piracy measures, propose new strategies for protecting content, and assess the legal frameworks governing intellectual property in the Kenyan context. Finally, examining the audience reception of Kenyan films in international markets can provide valuable insights into cross-cultural appeal and marketability. Understanding how Kenyan narratives are perceived abroad can inform filmmakers' creative and marketing strategies, potentially leading to increased global presence and revenue. Research in this area could involve audience surveys, box office analysis, and case studies of successful international releases. Addressing these research areas can equip stakeholders with the knowledge to navigate the evolving landscape of film marketing and distribution in Kenya, fostering a more robust and globally competitive industry.

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