

Invisible Exports: Shagalla TikTok Performances and Kenya's Transnational Creative Economy

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Abstract

This paper is interested in the digital activities of the “Shagalla”, a term popularly employed to describe a domestic worker based in the Gulf (Arabian countries). The paper observes that the Shagalla, from Kenya, have employed TikTok to create an online community, complete with its own language and grammar, through which they can humanize themselves, particularly in view of the ambiguity of their identities. The shagallas occupy that uncomfortable in-between space where they are neither accepted as “family” by their host employers nor repulsed as complete outsiders in these private spaces, even when they live in foreign lands, with national languages far removed from Kiswahili and English. The paper argues that the digital world has given the shagallas space where they can enact, or perform, their identities, or even show defiance in the face of their daily struggles. Artificial Intelligence then becomes essential in mapping out, or even sustaining, their audience through algorithmic intervention.

Keywords: Shagalla, TikTok performance, feminized digital labour, transnational creative economy, algorithmic labour

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Introduction

Kenyan domestic workers in the Gulf are rarely imagined as participants in the country's performing arts sector. They are typically understood as people whose economic contribution lies in the remittances they send home. Yet every day, thousands of these women produce performances on TikTok that attract audiences, circulate across borders, generate cultural value, and, in some cases, produce income through platform economies.

Over the last decade, the creative economy has emerged as a significant component of national development strategies across Africa. Governments, policy makers, and international development agencies have promoted cultural and creative industries as sources of employment and economic growth. As Yúdice (2003) observes, culture has increasingly come to function as a resource mobilized for economic and developmental objectives. Consequently, organizations such as UNESCO (2022) and UNCTAD (2018) have promoted cultural and creative industries as important contributors to sustainable development and job creation. Cultural production is therefore no longer understood solely in aesthetic terms but also as an economic resource capable of generating income and contributing to national development agendas.

In Kenya, this orientation has gained renewed momentum under the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA). BETA identifies the creative economy as a strategic pillar for economic growth and wealth creation. The performing arts sector, in particular, is positioned as an important contributor to employment creation. Existing policy discussions emphasize on the commercialization, formalization, and market expansion of creative productions. At the same time, the rapid expansion of digital platforms has transformed the conditions under which performance is created and experienced. Platforms such as TikTok have enabled new forms of cultural production that emerge outside conventional artistic institutions, allowing creators to produce and circulate performances through algorithmically mediated networks of visibility and audience engagement. In these environments, performance is no longer confined to theatres, concert halls, or festival stages but increasingly unfolds within everyday spaces and through ordinary practices. Consequently, digital platforms invite renewed attention to the changing relationship between performance, space, audience, and cultural value.

Among the most visible yet understudied participants in these emerging performance ecologies are Kenyan Shagallas. Many of these women engage in sustained forms of digital performance on TikTok. Through dance

challenges, comedic skits, lip-sync performances, storytelling, and everyday self-representation, they transform domestic work environments into stages for cultural production. Their performances circulate across transnational audiences generating visibility, engagement, and in some cases, economic returns. Despite the growing visibility of these digital performances, they remain largely absent from scholarly and policy discussions. Scholarship on Kenyan labour migration has examined migrant domestic workers primarily through the lenses of precarity, exploitation, care work, and remittance economies, with limited attention to their simultaneous production of digital performances as forms of cultural labour. Conversely, studies of Kenya's creative economy have focused predominantly on formal cultural industries and institutionalised artistic production, leaving platform-based performances by migrant workers conceptually underexamined. This paper brings these two bodies of scholarship into conversation by examining Shagalla TikTok performances, not simply as social media content, but as forms of transnational cultural production that complicate prevailing understandings of performance, creative labour, and the creative economy.

Performance Beyond the Stage: Reconceptualizing Digital Performance

Performance has traditionally been associated with theatre, dance, music, and other forms of staged artistic expression performed before physically co-present audiences. Such understandings privilege designated performance spaces, professional performers, and clearly demarcated distinctions between actors and spectators. Within this classical framing, performance is generally conceived as an aesthetic event that unfolds within institutional settings such as theatres, concert halls, or festival stages. While this understanding remains foundational to the performing arts, the emergence of performance studies as an interdisciplinary field has significantly broadened both the meaning and analytical scope of performance.

Rather than treating performance as an event confined to theatrical institutions, performance scholars increasingly conceptualise it as a mode of social action through which identities, relationships, and cultural meanings are continuously enacted, negotiated, and contested. This shift represents one of the defining interventions of performance studies, relocating analytical attention from performance as an artistic product to performance as a social process.

Among the most influential contributors to this reconceptualisation is Richard Schechner (2002), whose notion of *restored behaviour* fundamentally

challenges the assumption that performance is limited to artistic spectacle. Schechner argues that performances consist of repeated, learned, and re-enacted behaviours that circulate across diverse domains of social life. These include ritual, political demonstrations, sports, everyday interactions, and popular culture. Performance, therefore, is not determined by the existence of a physical stage but by the repeated enactment of embodied practices before an audience. This perspective dissolves rigid distinctions between art and everyday life, suggesting that performance functions as a broader cultural process through which societies rehearse, reproduce, and transform social realities.

A complementary perspective is offered by Victor Turner (1982), who locates performance within processes of social drama and cultural reflexivity. For Turner, performances do not merely represent society; they provide spaces through which communities reflect upon themselves, negotiate conflict, and imagine alternative social possibilities. Performance thus becomes a site where collective meanings are contested and renewed. Together, Schechner and Turner reposition performance beyond theatrical institutions, demonstrating that performative practices permeate everyday social life and serve as important mechanisms through which cultures construct and communicate meaning.

The expansion of performance studies is further reinforced by sociological approaches to everyday interaction. Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis, conceptualises social life itself as inherently performative, arguing that individuals continually manage impressions through carefully staged presentations of self before different audiences. Identity, from this perspective, is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing accomplishment produced through interaction. Everyday encounters therefore become performances in which individuals negotiate credibility, authority, belonging, and social recognition.

Similarly, Marvin Carlson (2004) argues that performance cannot be restricted to theatrical institutions because its meanings emerge through repetition, embodiment, memory, and audience recognition across diverse cultural contexts. Performance is therefore distinguished less by where it occurs than by how actions become recognisable, repeatable, and meaningful within particular social worlds.

Collectively, these perspectives fundamentally destabilise conventional distinctions between theatrical performance and everyday life. They invite scholars to recognise performance as an embodied and relational practice through which individuals continually produce identities, negotiate social relationships, and generate cultural meaning. This expanded understanding provides an important conceptual foundation for examining contemporary forms of mediated self-

representation that increasingly unfold within digitally networked environments rather than conventional theatrical spaces.

As performance migrates onto digital platforms, however, new questions emerge concerning how technological infrastructure reshapes the production, circulation, and recognition of performance itself.

This expanded understanding provides an important conceptual foundation for examining contemporary forms of mediated self-representation that increasingly unfold within digitally networked environments rather than conventional theatrical spaces. As performance migrates onto digital platforms, however, questions extend beyond the simple relocation of performance from physical stages to digital screens. They invite renewed attention to how technological infrastructure shapes the production, circulation, and recognition of performance itself. More importantly, this shift raises fundamental questions about recognition: whose performances become visible, whose creative labour acquires value, and which forms of cultural production are acknowledged within national understandings of the creative economy. These questions provide the conceptual bridge to contemporary debates on digital and platformed performance.

From Digital Performance to Platformed Performance

The migration of performance into digital environments has fundamentally transformed not only where performances occur but also how they are produced, circulated, and experienced. Digital technologies have destabilised the long-standing distinction between live and mediated performance, prompting scholars to reconsider the relationship between embodiment, presence, audiences, and performance itself. Rather than functioning as secondary representations of live events, digital mediums have increasingly become primary sites of performance, where cultural expression is created, consumed, and continually reconfigured through networked interaction.

Philip Auslander (2008) was among the first scholars to challenge the presumed opposition between live and mediated performance. He argues that contemporary performance cannot be understood through a simple binary in which live performance is regarded as authentic and mediated performance as derivative. Instead, digital technologies have become integral to the production of liveness itself, reshaping how performances are staged, experienced, and authenticated.

Mediation therefore does not diminish performance; it constitutes one of the conditions through which contemporary performance is produced and recognised. Auslander's intervention is particularly significant for understanding social media performances, where visibility, participation, and audience engagement are inseparable from digital mediation.

As performance increasingly unfolds within networked environments, digital platforms become more than technological channels for communication. José van Dijck (2013) argues that platforms are socio-technical ecosystems that organise cultural participation through programmable architectures of connectivity and visibility. They do not merely host content; they structure the conditions under which cultural production occurs by privileging particular forms of interaction, circulation, and engagement. Consequently, performance on platforms such as TikTok is shaped not only by the intentions of creators but also by computational systems that organise discoverability, recommendation, and audience formation.

This platformed environment also transforms the relationship between performers and audiences. Nancy Baym (2018) demonstrates that digital creators increasingly perform relational labour by cultivating sustained interactions with followers through authenticity, intimacy, responsiveness, and affective engagement. Audiences are no longer passive spectators but active participants whose comments, shares, remixes, and interactions contribute to the production of performance itself. Performance on TikTok therefore becomes serial, iterative, and relational rather than singular or temporally bounded. Through features such as duets, stitches, livestreams, hashtags, and trending sounds, performances continually evolve through collaborative participation, creating dynamic performance ecologies that extend far beyond individual videos.

Yet the circulation of digital performances is not determined solely by creators and audiences. Platform studies have demonstrated that digital platforms actively participate in organising cultural production through algorithmic systems that govern visibility, relevance, and value. Tarleton Gillespie (2018) argues that platforms function as powerful intermediaries that curate public discourse by shaping the conditions under which content becomes visible, searchable, and culturally significant. Rather than serving as neutral intermediaries, platforms exercise considerable power over the circulation of culture by embedding editorial decisions within seemingly technical processes of algorithmic recommendation and moderation.

Similarly, Taina Bucher (2018) argues that algorithms are not passive computational tools but social actors that configure the possibilities of

participation by making some forms of expression more visible than others. Algorithmic visibility is therefore neither automatic nor neutral. Instead, creators continually negotiate platform logics by adapting their performances to anticipated algorithmic preferences, audience metrics, and emerging platform trends. Visibility becomes a product of ongoing interaction between creators, audiences, and computational infrastructures rather than an inherent quality of performance itself.

Nick Couldry's (2004; 2012) work on media as practice provides an important bridge between performance studies and platform studies. Rather than viewing media as technological objects, Couldry argues that scholarship should focus on what people do with media in the course of everyday life. Media practices are socially organised activities through which individuals construct identities, negotiate relationships, and participate in wider cultural worlds. From this perspective, TikTok performances are not merely digital artefacts but routine cultural practices embedded within everyday life. Kenyan migrant domestic workers are therefore not simply users of a platform; they are participants in media practices through which labour, migration, identity and belonging are continuously narrated and performed.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that digital performance is best understood as platformed performance. Performance no longer occurs simply on digital media; it is co-produced through the interaction of embodied creativity, participatory audiences, and algorithmically organised infrastructures that shape visibility, circulation, and value. The platform becomes an active participant in the production of performance, while creators simultaneously negotiate technological affordances, audience expectations, and platform logics in the construction of public identities. Understanding this shift from digital to platformed performance provides the conceptual basis for examining Shagalla TikTok creators as cultural producers whose performances generate value within transnational platform economies.

From Platformed Performance to Creative Labour

Taken together, the foregoing perspectives demonstrate that contemporary performance can no longer be understood solely as an artistic event located within conventional performance spaces. Rather, performance emerges through the interaction of embodied practice, participatory audiences, and the digital infrastructure that organises visibility, circulation, and engagement. Recognising this shift from theatrical to platformed performance has important implications

for understanding the creative practices of Kenyan migrant domestic workers on TikTok. Their videos are not simply instances of online self-expression, nor are they reducible to personal documentation of migration. They are sustained performances produced within platform environments that reward visibility, consistency, audience engagement, and continuous creative production.

Understanding these performances through the lens of platformed performance also necessitates a reconsideration of creative labour. Within feminist political economy, labour extends beyond formal employment to include forms of productive activity that generate economic, social, and cultural value. The creative work undertaken by Shagalla TikTok creators occupies this space. While their primary occupation is domestic work within transnational economies, their sustained production of digital performances simultaneously generates audiences, and, in some instances, creates opportunities for platform-based income. Their creative activity therefore cannot be dismissed as incidental leisure or casual social media use; it constitutes an ongoing process of cultural production embedded within digital platform economies.

Conceptualising Shagalla TikTok creators as creative workers also challenges the institutional boundaries through which Kenya's creative economy is commonly imagined. Existing policy frameworks continue to privilege formal artistic industries, professional performers, and nationally situated cultural production. Such understandings leave little room for recognising migrant domestic workers whose creative practices emerge within domestic workplaces, circulate through global digital platforms, and reach audiences beyond the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. Yet these performances undeniably participate in Kenya's cultural economy by producing, circulating, and exporting cultural meanings across transnational networks.

It is within this context that this paper proposes the concept of co-infrastructure. I use this term to describe alternative systems of cultural production that operate alongside formal creative industries, generating cultural, social, and economic value without corresponding institutional recognition or policy support. Rather than existing outside Kenya's creative economy, Shagalla TikTok performances constitute a parallel infrastructure through which creative labour is organised, circulated, and valued. Recognising this co-infrastructure not only expands the category of performance; it also challenges the assumptions through which creative work, cultural production, and artistic legitimacy have traditionally been understood within the national creative economy discourse.

Shagalla TikTok Performances as Transnational Cultural Production

One of the most striking features of Shagalla TikTok is the emergence of a performance culture that transforms the routines of migrant domestic work into shared cultural narratives. Across the corpus, creators draw on humour, dramatic storytelling, music, dance, and satire to reinterpret experiences that are otherwise framed almost exclusively through the language of exploitation, remittances, and labour migration. Rather than treating TikTok as a platform for documenting everyday life, they use it to reimagine that life through performance. Domestic spaces become theatrical settings, employer-employee relationships become dramatic plots, and ordinary incidents become stories that invite laughter, recognition, and debate. Read collectively, these performances constitute a cultural repertoire through which geographically dispersed women narrate themselves into being as a community.

This repertoire is sustained by a distinctive linguistic world. Throughout the corpus, female employers are referred to as *Waiguru*, male employers as *Waititu*, while the creators frequently identify themselves as *Gaidi*, a playful appropriation of the Sheng word for “terrorist.” These expressions rename the social world of migration from the perspective of those who inhabit it. Their meanings are rarely explained because explanation is unnecessary; the performances assume an audience already familiar with this vocabulary. Language therefore becomes performative. It does not merely describe relationships but actively produces a shared symbolic universe through which migrant workers recognise one another across national borders. The following screenshots were taken from two performances which form the basis of my analysis.



*Post by Emma the gap teeth girl,
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSC16nbW5/>*



Post by Risper Owate <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSC16nbW5/>

Emma the Gap Teeth Girl's performance demonstrates how this shared vocabulary is mobilised to produce comedy from the ambiguities of domestic labour. The narrative begins conventionally enough: Waiguru and Waititu have divorced, and Waiguru is preparing to return to her parents' home. Yet the expected focus on marital conflict is immediately disrupted when Waititu instructs her not to "forget to take your ugly Shagalla with you." In that moment, the domestic worker becomes the narrative's unexpected centre. Although she has played no role in the couple's separation, she is suddenly treated as though she forms part of the household to be allocated after the divorce. The humour lies precisely in this displacement. A conflict between husband and wife is redirected onto the only character who has done nothing to produce it.

Beneath the comedy lies a more unsettling commentary on domestic labour. The Shagalla occupies an ambiguous position within the household. She is neither a family member nor a complete outsider. She lives inside the home while remaining socially peripheral to it. The joke exposes this instability by imagining a situation in which her future is determined entirely by decisions made between employer and spouse. Her bewildered question, "*What did I do wrong?*", does not seek an answer. It exposes the irrationality of becoming implicated in conflicts that are not her own. The performance therefore converts structural precarity into comic theatre, allowing audiences to laugh while simultaneously recognising the vulnerability that makes the joke intelligible.

The performance continues long after Emma finishes speaking. At the time of analysis, it had attracted approximately 2,600 likes and 140 shares. These interactions are analytically significant because they reveal that the performance

acquires a social life beyond its initial production. While likes register recognition, shares extend the narrative into new digital networks, allowing audiences to become participants in its circulation. The performance is therefore continually reproduced through viewing, sharing, commenting, and reinterpretation. Its cultural significance lies not only in what Emma performs but also in what audiences subsequently do with the performance.

If Emma employs comedy to expose the precarious social position of the Shagalla, Risper Owate turns to narrative reversal as a mode of resistance. Her performance constructs the story of a domestic worker who tells Waiguru and Waititu that she is travelling to Kenya briefly before returning to work. Believing her, the employers purchase her ticket, shop for her, accompany her to the airport, and bid her farewell. Only after she arrives safely at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport does the narrative disclose its real ending. The Shagalla sends a final text message instructing her employers to “learn how to treat Shagallas humanely” before severing contact. The power of the performance lies not in whether this event actually occurred but in the way it imaginatively reorganises labour relations. Throughout most of the story the employers appear to control the narrative; the final message abruptly transfers that authority to the domestic worker, who claims the last word.

This reversal is intensified through sound. Rather than employing a trending dance track or comic soundtrack, Risper accompanies the narrative with audio of a man angrily swearing in Arabic and referring to Kenyans as shetan (devils). The soundtrack performs more than atmosphere. It acoustically evokes the linguistic environment within which many migrant domestic workers negotiate everyday life, allowing hostility to be heard rather than merely described. The final message therefore resonates against an already established soundscape of domination, making the Shagalla's refusal appear less as an isolated act of rebellion than as an imagined response to a wider structure of everyday inequality.

Like Emma's performance, Risper's narrative extends beyond individual expression through its circulation. At the time of analysis, the performance had attracted approximately 6,500 likes and 1,400 shares. The exceptionally high number of shares suggests that audiences recognised the narrative as one worth carrying into other digital spaces. In this sense, the creator produces more than a TikTok video. She produces a story that others choose to circulate because it speaks to experiences, frustrations, and aspirations that exceed the individual performer. Storytelling thus becomes a collective cultural practice through which migrant workers continually reinterpret the meanings of labour, mobility, and dignity.

Taken together, these performances reveal that Shagalla creators are engaged in far more than digital self-expression. They construct dramatic narratives, develop a shared vernacular, transform humour into social critique, and cultivate audiences whose participation enables performances to circulate across transnational networks. This ongoing production of stories, language, audiences, and cultural meanings constitutes what I describe as a co-infrastructure of Kenya's creative economy. It operates without theatres, arts councils, or formal institutional support, yet it nevertheless performs many of the functions commonly associated with recognised cultural industries: it creates cultural texts, assembles audiences, generates circulation, and sustains communities of interpretation. The invisibility of this creative infrastructure is therefore not a consequence of its absence, but of the conceptual limits through which the creative economy continues to recognise artistic labour.

Although this discussion has focused on two representative performances, they illustrate broader patterns observable across the corpus. Shagalla creators repeatedly employ humour, dramatic narration, shared vernacular, and multimodal storytelling to reinterpret the everyday realities of migrant domestic labour. Emma the Gap Teeth Girl foregrounds comedy and linguistic world-building, while Risper Owate mobilises narrative reversal and sound to imagine moments of agency and moral redress. Considered together, these performances demonstrate that Shagalla TikTok is not simply a repository of user-generated content but an evolving performance culture through which migrant domestic workers collectively produce stories, audiences, and shared meanings across transnational digital networks.

The significance of these performances lies not only in their aesthetic form but also in the infrastructure they sustain. Their continued circulation through viewing, sharing, commenting, and reinterpretation reveals an alternative ecology of cultural production operating beyond the institutional boundaries of Kenya's formal creative industries. It is this ecology that I conceptualise as a co-infrastructure: an informal yet productive system through which creators generate cultural value, assemble audiences, circulate narratives, and sustain communities of interpretation despite remaining largely absent from dominant policy understandings of the creative economy.

Conclusion

Kenyan migrant domestic workers are typically represented within public discourse as providers of care, remittance earners, or victims of labour

exploitation. This paper has argued that such representations overlook another significant dimension of their transnational lives: their role as cultural producers. Through TikTok, Shagalla creators transform everyday labour into dramatic narratives, shared humour, digital vernaculars, and multimodal performances that circulate across geographically dispersed audiences. Their creative work demonstrates that performance is no longer confined to theatres or formal artistic institutions but increasingly emerges within the ordinary spaces of everyday life and the algorithmically organised environments of digital platforms.

Recognising these performances as creative labour requires a corresponding reconsideration of Kenya's creative economy. The performances analysed in this paper generate audiences, circulate cultural meanings, sustain interpretive communities, and create measurable forms of cultural value despite remaining largely absent from official accounts of the performing arts sector. Rather than existing outside the creative economy, they constitute an unrecognised co-infrastructure through which culture is continuously produced, circulated, and reimaged beyond institutional boundaries.

The contribution of this paper therefore extends beyond the study of Shagalla TikTok. It invites a broader reconsideration of where performance takes place, who counts as a cultural producer, and how creative economies might be reconceptualised in an era when significant forms of artistic production increasingly emerge from the margins of formal cultural institutions.

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