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A STUDY ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE

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ABSTRACT

The Kochi-Mzuri's Biennale (KMB) is one of India's most significant contemporary art exhibitions, integrating art, heritage, and public participation. This study compares the 2023 and 2025 editions of the Biennale to examine differences in public engagement and cultural impact. A mixed-method research design was employed, combining primary data from a Google Forms survey administered to 100 respondents with secondary data from journal articles, reports, and institutional publications. The findings indicate that respondents perceived the 2025 edition as more engaging, accessible, and socially relevant than the 2023 edition. Improvements were particularly noted in thematic clarity, audience interaction, and educational value. The study concludes that the Kochi-Mzuri's Biennale plays a vital role in promoting cultural awareness, tourism, community participation, and creative dialogue in Kerala and beyond.

Keywords: Kochi-Mzuri's Biennale, Public Engagement, Cultural Impact, Audience Participation, Tourism

INTRODUCTION

The Kochi-Mzuri's Biennale, established in 2012 in Kochi, Kerala, is the largest contemporary art exhibition in India and among the most influential cultural events in South Asia. It brings together artists, curators, scholars, and visitors from around the world through exhibitions, workshops, performances, and educational programmes. Beyond displaying art, the Biennale transforms heritage spaces into sites of dialogue, learning, and social interaction.

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of the 2023 and 2025 editions to understand how public engagement and cultural impact have evolved over time. By examining audience perceptions, satisfaction, and participation, the study assesses the Biennale's effectiveness as a platform for cultural communication and community involvement.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To compare public interest in the 2023 and 2025 editions of the Kochi-Mzuri's Biennale.
- 2) To examine whether geographical location influences awareness of the Biennale.
- 3) To analyse audience satisfaction and willingness to recommend the Biennale.
- 4) To understand the Biennale's contribution to cultural learning and participation.

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The current study looks at various aspects of audience engagement and perception of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. It aims to compare public interest between the 2023 and 2025 editions of the biennale to identify differences in audience attention and participation over time. The study will also explore whether geographical location affects awareness of the biennale among people. This will help us understand how location influences audience reach and accessibility. Additionally, the study plans to assess audience satisfaction levels and their likelihood of recommending the biennale to others. These factors will serve as indicators of the overall visitor experience and perception. Lastly, the study seeks to understand how the biennale contributes to cultural learning and participation by examining how audiences interact with the artistic experiences and cultural activities available through the event.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant because it examines the evolving role of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale as a major platform for contemporary art, public discourse, and social engagement in India. By comparing the 2023 and 2025 editions, the research highlights how the Biennale has responded to important issues such as identity, memory, climate change, sustainability, and technological transformation.

The study demonstrates how contemporary art functions beyond aesthetic display, serving as a medium for education, activism, and cultural diplomacy. Through installations, performances, workshops, and public discussions, the Biennale encourages active audience participation and promotes critical awareness among diverse communities.

This research is also important because it explores how different generations engage with contemporary art. Younger audiences are more attracted to interactive and technology-based works, while middle-aged visitors tend to value heritage, education, and civic themes. These findings show the Biennale's ability to connect with a wide range of viewers.

In addition, the study reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the integration of digital platforms and ecological concerns in artistic practice. The 2025 edition illustrates this shift through increased digital engagement and sustainability-focused artworks.

Finally, the study contributes to existing literature on participatory art by drawing on the theories of Claire Bishop and Nina Simon. It shows that the Kochi-Muziris Biennale is not only an art exhibition but also a catalyst for cultural awareness, tourism, heritage preservation, and meaningful public engagement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Previous studies indicate that international biennales serve as important spaces for cultural exchange and civic participation. The international biennales are really good at getting people from cultures and places to talk about art and work together. These events let people see and talk about the art and share their thoughts and ideas. [Bishop \(2012\)](#) argues that when people are part of making the art it changes the way they think about art and makes them more than people looking at it. This way of doing things helps people understand the art better and makes them feel like they are part of creating something valuable. Bishop also said that when people work together on art it helps the community and makes the art world a fairer and more welcoming place.

[Simon \(2010\)](#) emphasises that museums and art places should focus on what the visitors want and need. She thinks that when visitors are encouraged to share their thoughts and take part in the experience it makes the whole thing more meaningful and fun. Her work shows that when people are part of the experience, they are happier learn more and feel a connection to the art and the place.

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale has done a lot of good for the culture of Kerala. It has helped Kerala become a part of the conversation about modern art and has brought people from all over the world to the area. This has also helped the economy and made people more aware of the art. The biennale has also helped people learn about and appreciate types of art that they may not have known about before.

Even though a lot of people have studied the Kochi-Muziris Biennale not many have looked at how people think about it from one year, to the next. Most of the studies have looked at the picture like how much money it makes and how it affects the culture but not many have looked at how people's thoughts and feelings change over time. So, we need to do research to see how people think about the biennale and how it can get more people involved in the art world. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is an event and we should keep studying it to see how it can be improved and how it can help people appreciate art more.

Research on the Kochi-Muziris Biennale suggests that the event has strengthened Kerala's cultural identity, enhanced tourism, and increased public exposure to contemporary art. However, limited comparative research has been conducted on audience perceptions across different editions of the Biennale.

RESEARCH GAP

Although the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has attracted considerable attention through descriptive studies and media coverage, there is limited systematic academic research focusing on audience perspectives and comparative analysis. Most existing studies

emphasize curatorial themes and artistic content, while giving less attention to public engagement and the Biennale's broader cultural impact.

In addition, few studies compare different editions of the Biennale to examine how audience participation, curatorial practices, and cultural relevance evolve over time. This research addresses this gap by providing an audience-centered comparative study of the 2023 and 2025 editions of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the Uses and Gratification Theory. This theory suggests that people actively choose and engage with various forms of media, communication channels, and cultural experiences to meet specific needs and expectations. Unlike traditional media theories, which see audiences as passive receivers of information, this theory highlights that audiences are active participants. They make choices based on their interests, preferences, and desired outcomes. People consume media and join cultural activities to satisfy a range of psychological and social needs, such as seeking information, enjoying entertainment, interacting socially, forming personal identities, finding emotional satisfaction, and pursuing self-development. The theory points out that audience members have different motivations and therefore gain different levels of satisfaction from the same experience. In the case of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, the Uses and Gratification Theory helps us understand visitor behavior and engagement. The Biennale is more than just an exhibition space for contemporary art; it is also a cultural platform that promotes learning, creativity, interaction, and cultural exchange. Visitors come to the Biennale with various expectations and motivations. Some may come to learn more about contemporary art, history, and cultural expressions. Others might be driven by curiosity, a desire for entertainment, aesthetic enjoyment, or the chance to experience a unique cultural event. Additionally, many visitors look for opportunities to socialize, engage with the community, and share experiences through exhibitions, discussions, workshops, performances, and public programs that are part of the Biennale. The theory also helps explain the different patterns of audience participation and levels of satisfaction among visitors. Since people have various personal interests and expectations, their experiences and the gratifications they gain from the Biennale can vary widely. Some visitors may find intellectual stimulation and cultural enrichment, while others may seek emotional satisfaction, inspiration, or opportunities for social networking and personal reflection. Therefore, this theory provides a useful framework for examining how and why audiences engage with the Biennale and what benefits they see in their participation. In summary, the Uses and Gratification Theory is fitting for this study because it offers a clear understanding of audience motivation, participation, engagement, and satisfaction in the context of cultural events. It helps analyze the relationship between visitor expectations and the experiences they gain from attending the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, contributing to a greater understanding of audience behavior in modern cultural settings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study used a mixed method approach as the research design to better understand the topic by combining both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to collect, analyze, and integrate different types of data, which improves the depth and reliability of the findings. The study used both survey and secondary data analysis methods. The survey gathered primary data directly from respondents, while secondary data analysis involved reviewing existing literature, reports, articles, journals, official publications, and other relevant sources. Combining these methods provided a broader perspective and strengthened the overall research framework. The study focused on individuals who were aware of or had participated in the Kochi Muziris Biennale. Since the goal was to understand perceptions, experiences, and awareness levels among participants and those familiar with the event, selecting this population was appropriate for the research objectives. Convenience sampling and snowball sampling were used to select respondents. Convenience sampling gathered data from individuals who were easily accessible and willing to participate, while snowball sampling helped identify additional respondents through referrals from initial participants. These techniques were chosen for their practicality and effectiveness in reaching individuals relevant to the study. The sample size included 100 respondents, which was enough to gather relevant information and conduct meaningful analysis within the research's scope. Data collection relied on a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms, allowing efficient responses from participants in different locations while ensuring convenience and accessibility. The questionnaire included structured questions designed to gather specific information relevant to the study's objectives. The collected data were systematically organized and analysed using various techniques. Descriptive statistics summarized and presented the information in a useful way. Percentages and graphical representations, like charts and graphs, simplified the interpretation of quantitative data and provided visual clarity of the findings. Thematic analysis was also used to evaluate qualitative responses by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and insights from the data. Using these analysis techniques helped draw conclusions and present the research findings clearly and systematically.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The majority of respondents belonged to the 18–25 age group, indicating strong interest among young adults. Most participants reported that the 2025 edition was more engaging than the 2023 edition. Respondents highlighted improved accessibility, clearer curatorial themes, and enhanced opportunities for interaction.

The survey also revealed that participants associated the Biennale with cultural learning, creative inspiration, and tourism promotion. A high proportion indicated that they would recommend the event to others, suggesting positive overall satisfaction. These findings demonstrate that the Biennale has evolved into an inclusive cultural platform that effectively connects art with public experience.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly support the Uses and Gratification Theory. This theory says that people actively look for and engage with media and cultural experiences to satisfy their social needs.

The results show that people who attended the biennale did not just come to watch art. They came as participants seeking various forms of fulfilment such as information, aesthetic experiences and social connections.

- People wanted to learn about art, cultural stories, social issues and different artistic views.
- The biennale helped them learn and understand art and culture in ways.
- People enjoyed the emotional experiences of interacting with artworks, installations and performances.
- They also connected with others, including visitors, artists, researchers and local communities.

So, the findings suggest that people attend the biennale for a mix of emotional and social reasons. The study also found that people were more engaged in the 2025 edition of the biennale compared to the 2023 edition. This could be because of improvements in planning and execution. These improvements may have included exhibition arrangements more effective promotion and more interactive programmes. As a result, visitors had an engaging and meaningful experience. These results match studies that highlight the importance of participatory art and audience-centred approaches.

For example, [Bishop \(2012\)](#) says that participatory art makes people contributors to the artistic experience. [Simon \(2010\)](#) also stresses the need for audience-centred experiences in institutions.

The Kochi-Mzuri's Biennale is more than a temporary art exhibition. It brings people from backgrounds together to discuss and exchange ideas. The event promotes understanding and connects local experiences with global perspectives. The biennale also helps preserve and revitalise heritage spaces.

By using locations as exhibition venues, it contributes to their conservation and public appreciation. This not preserves their relevance but also raises public awareness about their historical and cultural significance.

In addition, the biennale boosts Kerala's economy and tourism sector. It attracts visitors from regions and countries generating economic opportunities for local communities and businesses.

The event also strengthens Kerala's identity, as a destination and enhances its visibility nationally and internationally. So the biennale is not an artistic event. It is a socio-cultural and economic phenomenon that contributes to cultural development, community engagement, heritage preservation and regional growth.

CONCLUSION

The Kochi-Mzuri's Biennale functions not only as an art exhibition but also as a transformative cultural movement. The comparative analysis of the 2023 and 2025 editions indicates that the 2025 edition achieved higher levels of public engagement, accessibility, and perceived relevance.

The study demonstrates that the Biennale contributes significantly to cultural awareness, artistic appreciation, tourism, and community participation. Future editions should focus on expanding outreach to diverse audiences, strengthening accessibility measures, and integrating digital engagement strategies. Further research may employ larger samples and longitudinal approaches to assess the Biennale's long-term cultural and economic impact.

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