

Enhancing Theatre Business Through Social Media: A Case Study of Nallur Drama Nights

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Abstract

This study explores the transformative role of social media in revitalizing community theatre through a case study of the "Nallur Drama Nights" initiative in Northern Sri Lanka. The project, addresses the creative and emotional needs of children in a post-conflict region while providing sustainable income opportunities for local artists. The key objectives are to assess how digital platforms influence audience engagement and attendance and examine the economic impact of social media marketing on local theatre sustainability. It also identify best practices for integrating digital tools into community arts promotion. Employing platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, the initiative demonstrates how grassroots theatre can leverage digital tools for marketing, engagement, and sustainability. Through a mixed-methods approach, quantitative audience data and qualitative insights from stakeholders reveal the impact of targeted social media strategies, including dynamic content and community-driven communication. The study was conducted between June 5 and October 7, 2024, encompassing 18 theatre events during this period. The findings underscore the potential of digital marketing to enhance visibility, increase attendance, and support financial stability in theatre programs. However, challenges such as inconsistent engagement highlight the need for strategic planning and optimization. This research provides actionable recommendations for integrating social media into the promotion and operational frameworks of theatre businesses, emphasizing the balance between artistic integrity and economic viability.

Keywords: *Digital engagement, Nallur Drama Nights, Post-conflict cultural initiatives, Facebook marketing, Digital marketing strategy.*

1. Introduction

Theatre has historically served as a vital medium for cultural expression, storytelling, and community engagement, offering a platform for audiences to connect deeply with artistic narratives. In the context of Northern Sri Lanka, the "Nallur Drama Nights" initiative is a prime example of how theatre can be revitalized to address modern societal challenges while preserving its traditional essence. Spearheaded by Dr. T. Thevananth, a noted dramatist and communications scholar, this program seeks to balance the educational focus prevalent in Sri Lankan Tamil communities with opportunities for creative expression and emotional development among children.

Sri Lankan Tamils are globally recognized for their academic achievements, often placing significant emphasis on education. However, this focus has, in recent years, come at the cost of play and leisure activities, especially in post-civil war Northern Sri Lanka. Organized activities fostering creativity and joy for children are nearly non-existent, creating a pressing need for initiatives like "Nallur Drama Nights." This program offers children a unique space to engage in activities such as chalk drawing, traditional games, dance, and drumming, alongside live performances including puppet shows and theatrical plays. Studies have shown that such activities contribute to improved emotional expression, stress reduction, and social bonding, making them essential for holistic development (Sternberg, 2003; Harland et al., 2000).

One of the core objectives of the program is to provide local artists with an avenue for earning a sustainable income while serving the community. Theatre artists, like many in the performing arts, often face economic challenges, particularly in smaller communities. By creating a recurring event that involves both local talent and external theatre groups, "Nallur Drama Nights" not only nurtures the local arts scene but also addresses the financial instability commonly associated with the profession (Brown et al., 2002). To ensure long-term sustainability, the initiative has prioritized cost-effective methods of promotion, focusing heavily on digital platforms.

Social media has become a transformative tool for marketing in the performing arts, offering significant advantages in cost and reach. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have been the primary advertising channels for "Nallur Drama Nights," reflecting the increasing reliance on digital-first strategies among grassroots arts initiatives. Facebook's ability to facilitate niche targeting allows event organizers to reach specific audiences based on location, interests, and demographic profiles, enhancing engagement and attendance (Kaur, 2020). WhatsApp groups, on the other hand, foster intimate and community-driven communication, which has been found to be highly effective in promoting local events (Church & De Oliveira, 2013). Studies further indicate that social media campaigns are particularly successful in creating word-of-mouth promotion, a critical factor in attracting new audiences and retaining existing ones in community-focused initiatives (Kapoor et al., 2018).



Figure 1: Weekly advertisement for Saturday drama night

Despite its successes, the initiative faces the challenge of achieving financial sustainability without compromising on quality. While digital tools have minimized costs compared to traditional advertising methods, such as newspaper ads and mobile announcements, there is room for optimization; see figure 1. Research suggests that integrating more dynamic content strategies, such as video trailers, behind-the-scenes footage, and interactive posts, can significantly enhance audience engagement and ticket sales (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Moreover, leveraging advanced analytics provided by platforms like Facebook can help organizers better understand audience behavior and refine their marketing efforts (Kingsnorth, 2019).

The "Nallur Drama Nights" initiative serves as a case study in the intersection of traditional theatre and modern marketing techniques, demonstrating how grassroots artistic projects can thrive in the digital age. By examining the application of social media strategies through the lens of Church and De Oliveira's (2013) framework, this research aims to provide actionable insights for enhancing the visibility, engagement, and profitability of theatre initiatives. As digital marketing continues to evolve, its potential to support and sustain the performing arts, particularly in under-resourced communities, remains a promising avenue for exploration.

2. Literature Review

The integration of digital marketing strategies in the performing arts sector has been extensively studied as a means to address the challenges of sustainability and audience engagement. Scholars have highlighted the shift from traditional marketing methods, such as print and broadcast advertisements, to more cost-effective and interactive digital platforms. Facebook and WhatsApp, for instance, have been recognized for their ability to foster community engagement and promote events through niche targeting and interpersonal communication (Church & De Oliveira, 2013; Kaur, 2020). This is particularly relevant in the context of smaller-scale, community-driven initiatives, where budgets for

marketing are often constrained. Social media tools enable organizers to reach specific demographics, enhance visibility, and build sustained relationships with audiences.

Research by Kapoor et al. (2018) emphasizes the role of social media in creating and disseminating word-of-mouth promotions, a critical factor in ensuring the success of local theatre programs. Platforms like Facebook allow event organizers to design campaigns that resonate with target audiences, leveraging features such as event pages, sponsored posts, and user-generated content to enhance outreach. Similarly, WhatsApp is noted for its capacity to create tightly-knit communication networks, enabling direct engagement with community members and fostering grassroots support (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

In the performing arts, digital marketing strategies are particularly effective in driving engagement and attendance. Brown et al. (2002) argue that the personalization and immediacy offered by social media platforms contribute to increased audience loyalty. This is supported by Ashley and Tuten (2015), who highlight the importance of dynamic content, such as videos, photos, and interactive posts, in building stronger connections between artists and audiences. Video trailers and behind-the-scenes content, for example, provide audiences with an intimate look at the creative process, thereby enhancing their emotional investment in the program.

Economic sustainability in the arts is another recurring theme in literature. Studies indicate that digital platforms not only reduce marketing costs but also generate significant returns by optimizing resource allocation and expanding audience reach. Kingsnorth (2019) underscores the value of analytics tools in refining marketing strategies, enabling organizers to identify trends, understand audience preferences, and adjust campaigns accordingly. These insights are crucial for initiatives like "Nallur Drama Nights," where maximizing limited resources is a priority.

The cultural and emotional impact of theatre programs is well-documented, with scholars emphasizing their role in fostering community cohesion and personal development. Harland et al. (2000) note that participation in arts-based activities enhances emotional expression, teamwork, and cognitive skills, making them vital for holistic development. The inclusion of storytelling, dance, and traditional games in theatre programs aligns with findings by Sternberg (2003), who highlights the therapeutic and educational benefits of such activities, particularly for children in post-conflict settings.

While the use of social media in promoting theatre has proven effective, challenges remain in optimizing its potential. Research by Kaur (2020) and Kapoor et al. (2018) suggests that a multifaceted approach, combining social media with offline strategies such as community partnerships and local collaborations, can further enhance the impact of theatre programs. These findings provide a robust theoretical framework for understanding how initiatives like "Nallur Drama Nights" can leverage digital marketing to achieve both artistic and economic sustainability.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore how social media can be optimized to enhance the sustainability and profitability of community-based theatre initiatives, using "Nallur Drama Nights" as a case study. Quantitative methods include data collection on audience demographics, ticket sales, and engagement metrics from social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. Metrics such as post reach, impressions, likes, shares, and event attendance data are analyzed to assess the effectiveness of digital marketing efforts. These data are collected using platform analytics tools, such as Facebook Insights and WhatsApp activity trackers, to provide measurable insights into audience behavior and campaign performance.

Qualitative methods involve semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders, including event organizers, artists, and attendees. Interviews with organizers and artists explore their perspectives on the challenges and benefits of using social media for promotion, as well as their strategies for content creation and audience engagement. Focus groups with attendees aim to understand their motivations for participation, their perceptions of the initiative, and the role social media played in their decision to attend. This qualitative data provides a nuanced understanding of how social media influences both the operational and experiential aspects of the program.

Additionally, a content analysis of the social media posts, event pages, and promotional materials used in "Nallur Drama Nights" is conducted to identify patterns in messaging, visual appeal, and user interaction. This analysis examines how different types of content—such as videos, images, and textual posts—perform in terms of engagement and reach. The findings from this analysis are compared with existing literature on digital marketing in the performing arts to identify best practices and areas for improvement.

To complement the primary data, secondary data sources such as reports, prior studies, and academic literature on social media marketing and theatre sustainability are reviewed. These sources provide a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between digital marketing and community-based theatre initiatives, grounding the findings in established scholarship.

The study also incorporates an experimental component by implementing targeted social media campaigns during the project's second phase. Different content strategies, including video trailers, live streaming, and interactive posts, are tested to determine their impact on engagement and ticket sales. The results from these campaigns are compared with baseline data from the initial phase to assess improvements and draw actionable recommendations.

By integrating quantitative metrics, qualitative insights, and experimental approaches, the methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media strategies can be optimized to support the sustainability of theatre programs like "Nallur Drama Nights".

4. Data Presenting & Discussion

The Nallur Drama Nights program, which began on June 5th, concluded its first phase on October 7th with its 18th event, ending due to the onset of the rainy season. During the initial phase, both traditional and social media advertising methods were utilized to promote the program. A total of 1,000 flyers were printed and distributed across eight local schools. These flyers were handed out to parents during school closing hours and shared with school administrations through the support of school principals. Additionally, announcements were made in neighboring villages via loudspeakers mounted on motorcycles.



Figure 2 : Engaging Video Publicity for Saturday Drama Night Activities – Achieves 2.6K Plays



Figure 3 : Viral Media Publicity: Children's Stage Dance gets 1.2 K Facebook Views

Promotional banners were placed outside five prominent schools, and with the cooperation of school authorities, the program was shared within class-specific WhatsApp groups; see figure 2. It was also

circulated in various artistic WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages, targeting broader audiences. Efforts were made to establish a recognizable brand identity for Nallur Drama Nights, using a consistent logo across weekly events while diversifying the event themes and promotional colors to create visual variety. These weekly variations aimed to draw increased attention and engagement from the public. Post-event videos and images were shared online, with videos receiving notable traction, garnering approximately 1.2 k views; see figure 3. Additionally, a brief note on the program shared by a prominent figure from the film industry was widely distributed by about 215 individuals. The program's official Facebook page, with 5 million followers, recorded significant engagement, further amplifying the reach of the promotions.

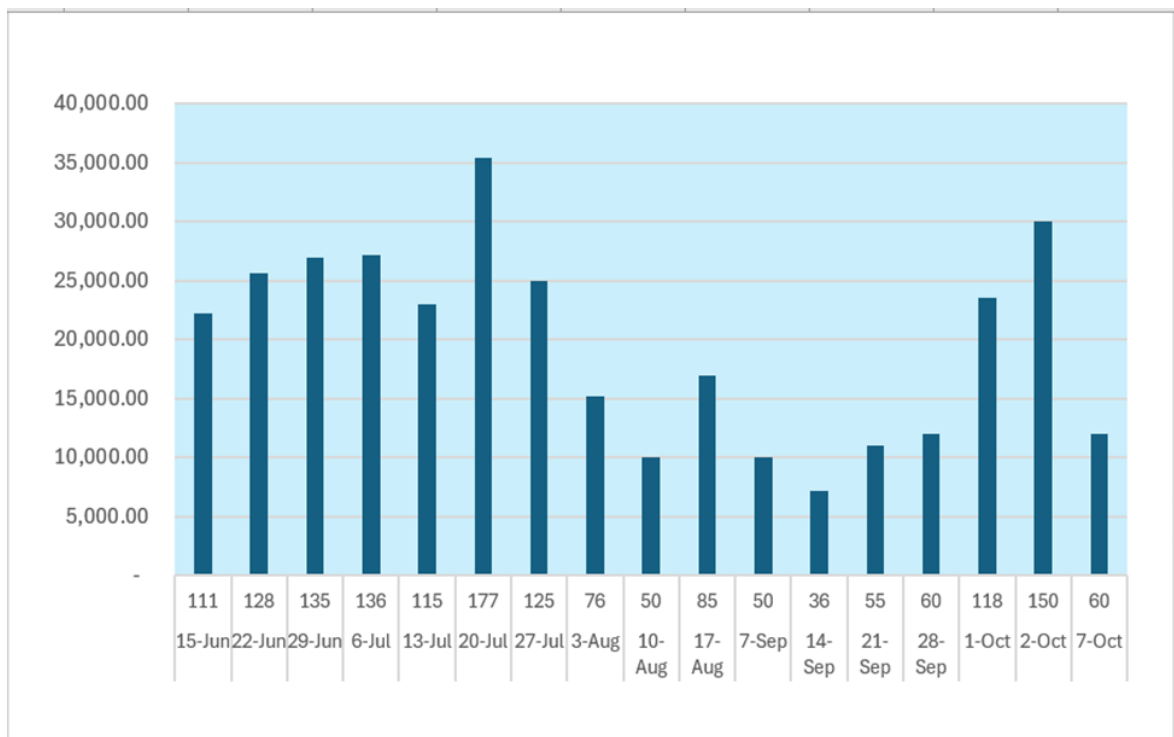


Figure 4 : Income generation from 15th June -7th October 2024

The provided bar chart (Figure 4) illustrates audience attendance figures (or another related metric) across multiple dates for the Nallur Drama Nights events. Here's the detailed analysis and interpretation based on the data presented.

1. Initial Growth Phase:

- From June 15th to July 13th, there is a noticeable upward trend in attendance figures. Starting at 20,000 on June 15th, attendance steadily increased, reaching around 25,000–30,000 by late June and early July. This indicates strong initial interest, likely due to effective promotional efforts during the launch phase.

2. Peak Attendance:

- The highest attendance was recorded on July 20th (around 35,000), indicating a peak in the program's popularity. This could be attributed to intensified promotional activities or a particularly appealing event during this week.

3. Decline in August:

- Attendance dropped significantly after July 27th, with figures falling to around 7,000–10,000 during the first half of August. This decline could suggest waning audience interest, external factors such as weather or competing events, or reduced promotional effectiveness during this period.

4. Stabilization in September:

- Attendance figures stabilized during September, fluctuating between 5,000 and 10,000. Although lower than the initial phase, this plateau indicates a consistent, albeit reduced, audience base.

5. Renewed Interest in October:

- October shows a resurgence in attendance, with figures peaking again at 30,000 on October 2nd before dropping to 10,000 on October 7th. The sharp increase in early October suggests successful promotional efforts or a particularly engaging event.

6. Key Observations:

- There are fluctuations throughout the timeline, indicating variability in audience engagement. Peaks and troughs likely correspond to changes in marketing strategies, event content, or external factors influencing attendance.
- The consistent audience base in September, albeit at lower levels, suggests loyal engagement from a core demographic despite the overall decline.
- October's peak highlights the potential for strategic planning, such as focused promotions or special events, to rejuvenate audience interest.

The pie chart (Figure 5) shows the distribution of expenditures in a theatre business, highlighting key areas of spending and opportunities for financial sustainability. The largest portion of expenses is allocated to honorariums for artists and facilitators, demonstrating the theatre's emphasis on quality talent to enhance its performances. Investments in sound and lighting constitute the second largest expense, ensuring an enriched audience experience and providing potential for higher ticket prices or venue rental income. Venue maintenance, while a moderate cost, is critical for creating a professional and inviting space. Strategic partnerships or sponsorships could help offset these expenses.

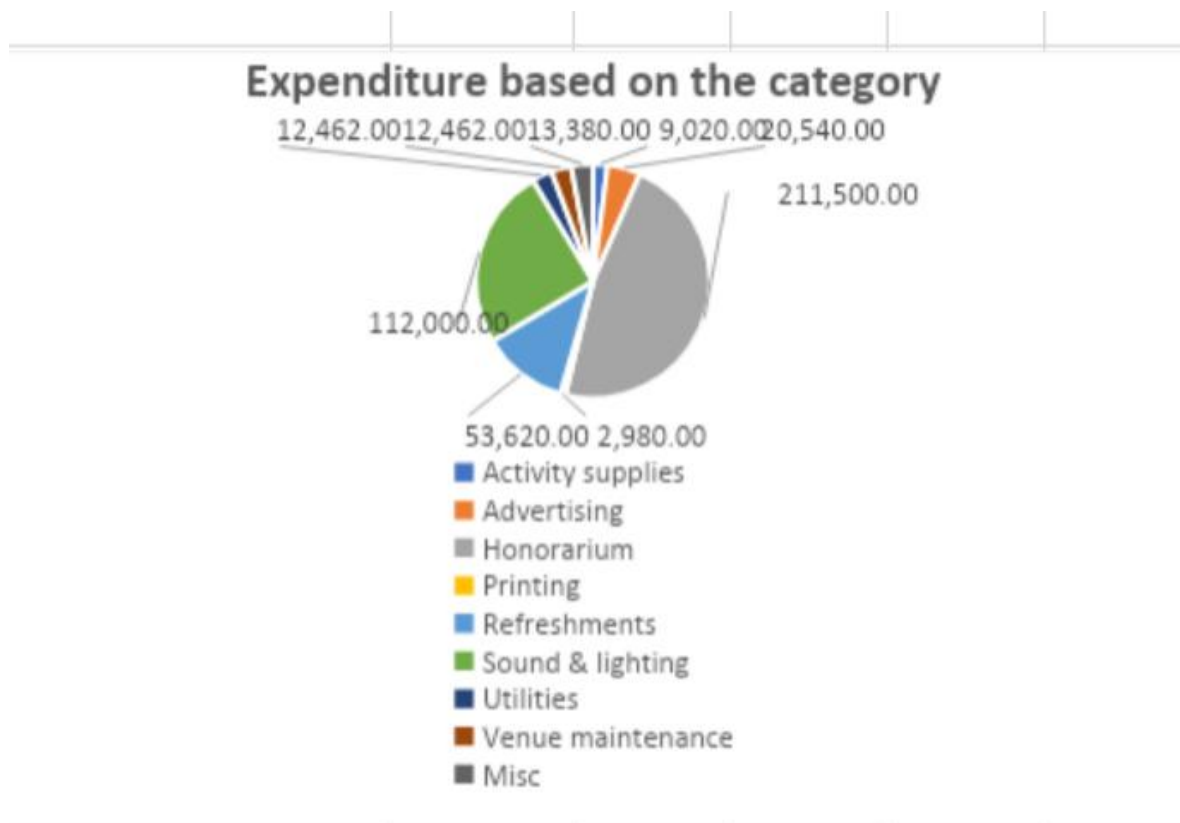


Figure 5 : Expenditure based on the different categories

Smaller categories like activity supplies, advertising, utilities, printing, refreshments, and miscellaneous costs, though relatively minor, offer room for optimization. For example, leveraging digital marketing could reduce advertising and printing expenses, while energy-efficient solutions could lower utility bills. Refreshments could be turned into a revenue stream by offering premium options during events.

The theatre has significant business potential by enhancing revenue through premium ticket pricing, venue rentals, and concessions. Partnerships with local businesses and organizations, along with seeking grants and government funding, could provide additional support for operational and capital costs. Engaging audiences with interactive activities like workshops or live-streaming performances could drive repeat attendance and expand reach. However, balancing high fixed costs like sound, lighting, and honorariums with consistent ticket sales will be crucial. Strategic cost management, combined with innovative revenue generation, can ensure the theatre's growth and sustainability.

5. Conclusion

Despite these efforts, the program's reliance on social media advertising has shown inconsistent results, with peaks and dips in audience engagement. Some schools, motivated by individual connections,

organized special screenings of the event, resulting in higher participation among children. However, the overall growth through social media remained uneven, suggesting a lack of sustained momentum in leveraging these platforms effectively.

Visual storytelling remains a key strength of Nallur Drama Nights, presenting significant potential for social media advertising. To maximize this, regular updates and content schedules should be established, ensuring monthly programming announcements and consistency in online presence. The engagement rate among the 5 million Facebook followers remains a challenge, as many followers do not actively interact with posts. Frequent posts, interactive updates, and community feedback solicitation are essential for overcoming this issue. Notably, two high-quality video recordings featuring valued messages from physicians demonstrated a strong positive reception, highlighting the importance of well-edited, visually appealing, and engaging content.

Additionally, paid advertisements should be considered to boost visibility and attract new audiences. Combining this with strategic partnerships with digital content creators and leveraging other platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube, could diversify outreach efforts. By investing in these areas, the Nallur Drama Nights program can improve its sustainability and establish a more robust presence in the community, ensuring stable growth and lasting impact for its theatre business.

To maintain consistent attendance, the organizers could analyze the factors contributing to peaks (such as July 20th and October 2nd) and replicate those strategies. Efforts should focus on understanding the reasons behind audience drop-offs in August and September and addressing those challenges, such as improving content appeal or enhancing promotional activities.

STEADY STATE PROJECTIONS

STEADY STATE RUNNING COSTS (in 2 years)

Category	Item	Cost	Total
Income	Ticket sales	50,000	+50,000
Expenses	Honorariums	39,000	-50,000
	Venue	10,000	
	Supplies	1,000	
TOTAL			0

- Target 250 ticket sales/event at Rs. 200/ticket on a regular basis
- Pay skilled artists and facilitators fairly at Rs. 3,000/event + refreshments + make -up
- Venue maintenance and utility costs
- To keep costs within a Rs. 50,000 limit per show, we seek grant funding to cover capital costs that will reduce our rental expenditure

CAPITAL INVESTMENT NEEDS

Category	Item	Unit cost	No.	Total
Content	New plays	75,000	10	750,000
Marketing	Banners	7,000	10	70,000
	Payments (school Visit)	3,500	10	35,000.00
	Megaphone	30,000	1	30,000
Equipment	Sound	90,000	1	90,000
	Lighting	100,000	1	100,000
	Catering	15,000	1	15,000
	Chairs	2,200	100	220,000
	TOTAL			1,275,000

- Maintain regular audience interest by producing 10 new plays (rehearsals, costumes, props)
- Decrease rental costs by repairing existing equipment and purchasing additional items
- Increase audience capacity by purchasing chairs (theatre has 150 chairs)

Figure 6: Steady state projection

The steady-state projections (Figure 6) are aimed at achieving financial and operational stability over a two-year period while ensuring consistent audience engagement and sustainable growth in theatre activities. This plan outlines both running costs and capital investment needs:

The theatre business plan provides a detailed roadmap for achieving operational sustainability and long-term growth. Steady-state running costs project balanced financial management, with income from ticket sales matching the necessary expenses for artist compensation, venue maintenance, and operational supplies. Specifically, ticket sales aim to generate Rs. 50,000 per event by selling 250 tickets at Rs. 200 each, while Rs. 39,000 per event is allocated for paying skilled artists and facilitators, including refreshments and make-up. Venue maintenance and utility costs are budgeted at Rs. 10,000, with an additional Rs. 1,000 allocated for operational supplies, resulting in a break-even scenario that ensures ongoing operations without financial strain.

To address growth and audience engagement, capital investments totaling Rs. 1,275,000 are planned. The majority of this funding, Rs. 750,000, is designated for the production of 10 new plays, covering rehearsal costs, costumes, and props to maintain audience interest and diversify the theatre's offerings. Marketing investments, including Rs. 70,000 for banners and Rs. 35,000 for school visits, aim to enhance visibility and ticket sales. Significant equipment upgrades are planned, such as Rs. 30,000 for a megaphone, Rs. 90,000 for a sound system, Rs. 100,000 for lighting equipment, Rs. 15,000 for catering services, and Rs. 220,000 for additional chairs to increase seating capacity from the current 150 chairs. These investments not only improve operational efficiency but also reduce recurring rental costs in the long term.

The plan incorporates strategic initiatives to grow the audience base and enhance cost efficiency. The production of diverse new plays and marketing efforts will keep the audience engaged while reaching new demographics. Pursuing grant funding to cover capital expenditures will limit operational costs to Rs. 50,000 per event, mitigating financial risks. Operational enhancements, such as consistent social media engagement and investing in seating and sound systems, aim to improve audience experience, ensuring satisfaction and repeat attendance.

This comprehensive strategy combines immediate operational management with forward-looking investments, fostering both sustainability and growth. By prioritizing quality cultural experiences and efficient resource management, the theatre is positioned to thrive and deliver significant cultural value to its community.

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