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Negotiating Integrity: Nakuru Journalists' Perceptions of 'Brown Envelopes' and Freebies under Kenya's Media Code of Conduct

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Abstract

This study examined the perception of Kenyan journalists in Nakuru County towards 'brown envelopes' and freebies in relation to the Media Council of Kenya's Code of Conduct governing the media profession. The study was conducted in Nakuru County, where a purposive sampling method was used to identify five bureau heads and 10 reporters. Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) method was employed to sample other respondents. The data collection tools were questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). This study was hinged on the Social Responsibility theory as espoused by Robert Maynard Hutchins in 1947. It argues that the media has a responsibility to inform the public without bias. Quantitative research method was used here to obtain numerical data that was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while the qualitative research method was used to obtain data on experts' perceptions, reasons, and opinions and was analysed using the content analysis method. Quantitative and qualitative data were compared using a triangulation design. The findings from this study revealed a complex ethical landscape in the media industry in Kenya, where journalists know that accepting 'brown envelopes' and freebies is unethical. They are, however, candid about accepting it due to economic pressures. This calls on media house managers to improve pay for journalists to ensure financial security. This could reduce economic vulnerability and increase resistance to these unethical practices. It also calls on media scholars to reinforce capacity building through media ethics training in order to emphasise ethical conduct among journalists. It emphasises the need for ethical practice among journalists.

Key words: Applied ethics, bribery, 'brown envelope' journalism, corruption, freebies.



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INTRODUCTION

Journalism is a veritable tool for information dissemination, social mobilisation, control and a means of public education and sensitisation on important issues affecting the lives of people (Okoro & Onuoha, 2013). For a successful profession, journalists must adhere to their code of ethics. According to the Media Council of Kenya, a media regulatory body, gratification of journalists by news sources in the form of 'brown envelopes' and freebies goes against the code of ethics for the practice of journalism in Kenya. Several articles have been written in the Kenyan context. However, few research studies have been carried out on this topic. It therefore called for this research.

'Brown envelope' journalism (BEJ) is a term used to identify the activity that involves the offering of monetary rewards from news sources to journalists. This is meant to persuade them to cover and report in a manner that suits the party offering the reward. The term 'brown envelope' came about because of the use of envelopes to hold cash bribes given to journalists as tokens of appreciation for attending a press conference. According to Forbes (2005), the term originated in the United Kingdom in the 1990s.

Pointing out the existence of BEJ, Skjerdal (2010) stated that 'brown envelope' is applied to denote a corrupt practice which involves a transfer of various types of rewards from news sources to journalists. According to this statement, the result of BEJ is the neglect of the ethical requirements of journalism, which affects news reporting. The media plays an important role in society, where gathering and disseminating news is concerned, and once the credibility of the media is lost, its watchdog role is lost.

Journalism is a profession that is guided by ethics, and journalists are always required to conduct their duties within the ethical principles of journalism. In the African continent, there are at least 17 known national codes of ethics for journalists. They include that of Kenya, South Africa, Benin, Botswana, Congo, Ghana, Ethiopia, Somaliland, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia and Malawi (Ndangam, 2006; Nyamnjoh, 2005). The responsibility of journalists in news reporting demands accuracy and fairness, objectivity, truthfulness, integrity and balance. In the local context, the Kenyan code of ethics for the practice of journalism demands that journalists should report

fairly, accurately and without bias. They should defend their independence by reporting without fear or favour and resisting influence from external forces. These forces include powerful sources, special interest groups, story subjects and those who would buy or politically influence news content. Mudhai (2007) argued that despite the existence of the Media Council of Kenya (MCK), concerns have been raised regarding the conduct of the Kenyan Press and the adherence of journalists to the code of ethics.

Journalists ought to practice integrity by observing common decency, avoiding a real or perceived conflict of interest and avoid making payments to news sources that have vested interest in a story. They should also avoid soliciting gifts, favors or compensation from those who might influence news stories and compromise their independence.

According to Park (2020), the media has a great influence on shaping public opinion. Based on this, journalists ought to educate, entertain and create awareness among the public. Taylor (2018) agreed with this and added that journalists are instruments for disseminating truth, good messages and values that promote respect or well-tempered dialogue and discussion. A journalist is accountable for their actions to the public, the profession and themselves, thus required to conduct their work ethically. In business ethics, Mare and Brand (2010) argued that these codes contain sections on conflict of interest, which focus on the acceptance of gifts and the share ownership by journalists. Locally, the Nation Media, which owns the Business Daily newspaper, outlines the general code of ethics, which requires journalists to desist from accepting gifts. According to the Media Council of Kenya (2021), there were 5,837 active journalists registered in Kenya. MCK's Kenya State of the Media Survey, 2024, shows results that reflect on the current state of media houses/outlets in Kenya.

Additionally, research in BEJ has shown that there is a divergence between ideal ethical standards in journalism and actual practice, which thus calls for different explanations. Several types of research have shown that different individual journalists have different attitudes towards this practice (Berhanu & Skjerdal, 2009). This area of research has not been well explored in Kenya. Skjerdal (2010) addressed BEJ globally but lacked focus on Kenya's unique media landscape. Mudhai (2007)

looked at the conduct of the Kenyan journalists in relation to the profession. This study of Mudha, however, failed to examine the perception of journalists towards BEJ and freebies.

Mare and Brand (2010) focused on only one media house. The objective of this research was to compare ethical policies and probe how editors and journalists put them into operation. It did not examine the perception of journalists towards BEJ and freebies. On the other hand, Hasty's (2005) study, based on qualitative interviews, may not have captured broader journalists' attitudes, unlike this study's mixed-methods approach. Mare and Brand's (2010) study employed document analysis and semi-structured interviews for reporters and editors. It could have possibly yielded more if a mixed methods approach had been used.

These gaps in literature highlighted the need for this research which sought to establish the perception of Kenyan journalists in Nakuru County towards 'brown envelopes' and freebies. This is in relation to the Media Council of Kenya's Code of conduct governing the media profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Presentation of 'brown envelopes' and freebies from sources to journalists has caused journalism scholars and researchers to ponder on what journalists think about the practice. The researchers described the practice as problematic, unethical and likely to affect news coverage and presentation in one way or another. However, different researchers differed on whether this act constituted bribery and corruption.

BEJ and Freebies as Bribery and Appreciation

BEJ has brought about debates around questions such as: Do journalists feel guilty about the practice, or do they just find it okay? Has practice become so common that it has become part of their daily life? Does this act really constitute bribery? Agbanu (2009) in his study alluded that bribery in journalism is an act which involves voluntariness and negotiation between the source and the journalist over the kind of money or gift to be offered, while 'brown envelopes' and freebies are not bargained and are offered with what seems to be without 'strings' attached. In defining what a 'brown envelope' is, Skjerdal (2010) stated that this term denotes a corrupt practice involving a transfer of various types of rewards from sources to journalists. Retief (2002) also came out

straight against this practice and maintained that it "boils down to bribery". He asked journalists never to use their poor pay as an excuse for practising BEJ and receiving freebies.

On the other hand, Hasty (2005) brought out in his research on Ghanaian private press instances in which some respondents accentuated that acceptance of 'brown envelopes' not as an act of bribery but one of the ways a source appreciates or compensates the journalist for their time and risk. Other researchers warned against the use of the term "bribery" to denote BEJ because they thought it would lead to a negative judgment from Western media ethics on African journalism practice.

Lodamo (2009) carried out research to find out what Ethiopian journalists thought about BEJ. He asked 70 journalists, all from the state media, if they never minded if they were paid additional per diem and pocket money after covering a workshop. Seventy-one per cent of the respondents responded "agree" or "strongly agree". From the results, most journalists saw no problem at all as far as the gratification of journalists is concerned.

Apart from the Swahili term *mshiko* used to denote 'brown envelopes' by Tanzanian journalists, "sitting fee" or "sitting allowance" is used (Mfumbusa, 2006). This comes very close to the term *ndalamayamatako* used in Zambia which literally means "allowance for the buttock". With this in consideration, journalists consider the gratification of the event organisers as their rightful share of attending the press conference or seminar and "patiently" enduring to the end.

BEJ and Freebies as Economic Justification

Wasserman (2008) argued in his study that instead of labelling the practice as bribery and going ahead to condemn it, there should be what he termed as a "hybrid ethical framework" in analysing the practice. He argued that this framework upholds global ethical notions, credibility, and truth-telling at the same time, acknowledging the socio-economic conditions under which African journalists are operating. This is in consideration of the monthly payment most African journalists receive from their employers, which in most cases is not sufficient to cater for their needs.

Omenugha and Oji (2010) recounted how the issue of BEJ came up in a workshop organised by the State Ministry of Information for working journalists in

Anambra State, Nigeria. They reported that the journalists never pretended when it came to receiving forms of payment for themselves and their media houses to publish stories. The journalists defended their actions due to the poor and irregular salaries they received from their employers. They stated that some media houses had no proper salary systems and that their survival depended on news sources. Others defended their actions based on the corrupt nature of the country. They said it was hard for them to be ethical in an “unethical world” such as Nigeria. They also gave an account of the frustration they received from publishers who denied them their due wages, with the excuse that the cost of publishing was high. The kind of economic situation these journalists were under led them to defend their actions with such statements: if you don’t eat, you won’t stop them from eating; if you don’t eat, you starve; if you can’t beat them, join them; eat or you will be eaten, etc. The above shows that journalists encouraged themselves to obtain rewards from sources without feeling guilty or considering it wrongdoing, thus propagating BEJ.

Ladamo and Skjerdal (2009) claimed that those who participated in this activity knew well that it was unethical. However, this act has always been justified by the sources as a way of offering financial support to journalists to cater for their upkeep, including transport in the course of their work. Journalists, therefore, could easily be compelled to accept rewards from sources if their needs have not been met, yet they have a minimum amount of cash to cater for their economic situation. While examining African economics journals, Nyamjoh (2005) stated that many media organisations operated on tight budgets, thus poorly remunerating their employees.

BEJ and Freebies as Justification of Patronage Systems

Evaluating BEJ considering the conditions in the extended society, Yusha’u (2009) argued that journalism cannot be practised outside the culture and political system in which it is practised. This implied that in cases such as those in Nigeria where there are strong traditional patronage, journalists and sources tend to nurture ties for the benefit of the two, the reporter for financial benefit and the source for a status benefit. In his research on journalism practice in Cameroon, Ndangam (2006, 2009) agreed with Yusha’u (2009) that to understand BEJ, one must take into consideration the country’s patronage system and culture. Here, the giver always expects certain favour from the receiver, thus the prevalence of

the practice. Based on the studies mentioned above, there was a need to find out Kenyan journalists’ perception towards ‘brown envelopes’ and freebies, thus necessitating this research.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory of the press as espoused by Robert Maynard Hutchins (head of the Commission on Freedom of the Press in the United States) in 1947 and developed by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm in 1956. The theory postulates that the press has a responsibility to the public and that, as much as it should be accorded freedom, it should act responsibly as it carries out the vital functions of mass communication. They point out that: The power and near-monopoly position of the media impose on them an obligation to be socially responsible; to see that in reporting, all sides are fairly represented, and that the public has enough information.

Ward (2005) indicated that this theory has been described as a 20th Century development and critique of the libertarian theory which attempts to balance the liberal stress on the freedom of the press. Merrill and Lowenstein (1979), while making a distinction between media ownership and press philosophies, displayed different types of press philosophies compared to the original *Four Theories of the press* referred to by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956). These included (i) Authoritarian with negative government controls, (ii) Social centralist with positive government controls, (iii) Libertarian, without any government controls and (iv) Social Libertarian with minimal government controls.

Nerone (1995) revisited Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm’s *Four Theories of the Press* by closely reviewing its relevance in a post-Cold War world. He indicated that the *Four Theories of the Press* do not offer four theories; instead, they offer one theory with four examples. He expounded that in the mid-20th Century, when the *Four Theories of the press* were written, Liberalism had reached what he termed a philosophical impasse. It was believed to have been brought about by what he pointed out as politics becoming the stuff of institutions rather than of individuals. He emphasised that the press had become an institution separate from the people and that it was much better to talk about the rights of the public; the right to know and the right to free expression rather than the rights of the press. This means that the press has responsibilities while the public has

rights. The basic tenets of the Social Responsibility Theory, according to McQuail (2005), are as follows: (i) the media are obligated to society’s interests. (ii) The media ought to adhere to certain stipulated codes of conduct which guide it ethically. (iii) The media ought to report freely but be self-regulated.

The social responsibility of a journalist calls for adherence to journalistic codes of conduct, which include independence, accuracy and fairness, integrity and accountability in news gathering and reporting. Journalists should always play a watchdog role and use the media to further public interests. They must not use their power or that of their organisation for selfish or unworthy interests. Instead, they should use the position to inform, educate and socialise the audience without bias or interruption from outside forces, which include news sources.

Asogwa and Asemah (2012) stated that when journalists enjoy press freedom, they ought to remember that freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility, thus demanding that a journalist should be socially accountable to the audience. Middleton (2009) pointed out that responsibility is the acknowledged obligation for action or behaviour within frameworks of roles and morals. In this sense, the obligation is for proper custody,

care and safekeeping of one’s audience. Social responsibility entails the necessity for journalists to keep society’s interests as a top priority.

The Social Responsibility Theory was the best theory for this study because it argues that social responsibilities ought to balance the freedoms of a powerful news media and that it is the duty of journalists to provide well-contextualised news in a comprehensive manner. It is their duty to provide a diverse forum of views and values by going beyond the news that favours a section of people and providing a core of in-depth analysis on every issue affecting the entire society.

It is with the view that the media has an obligation to conduct its activities with the welfare of the society at heart and act as its watchdog that this research sought to examine how Kenyan journalists handle the profession’s ethics in news gathering and reporting in relation to acceptance of freebies and ‘brown envelopes’. This was made possible at the analysis stage by creating categories based on the theory’s tenets, thus looking into how independence, accuracy, fairness, integrity and accountability are affected.

Conceptual Framework

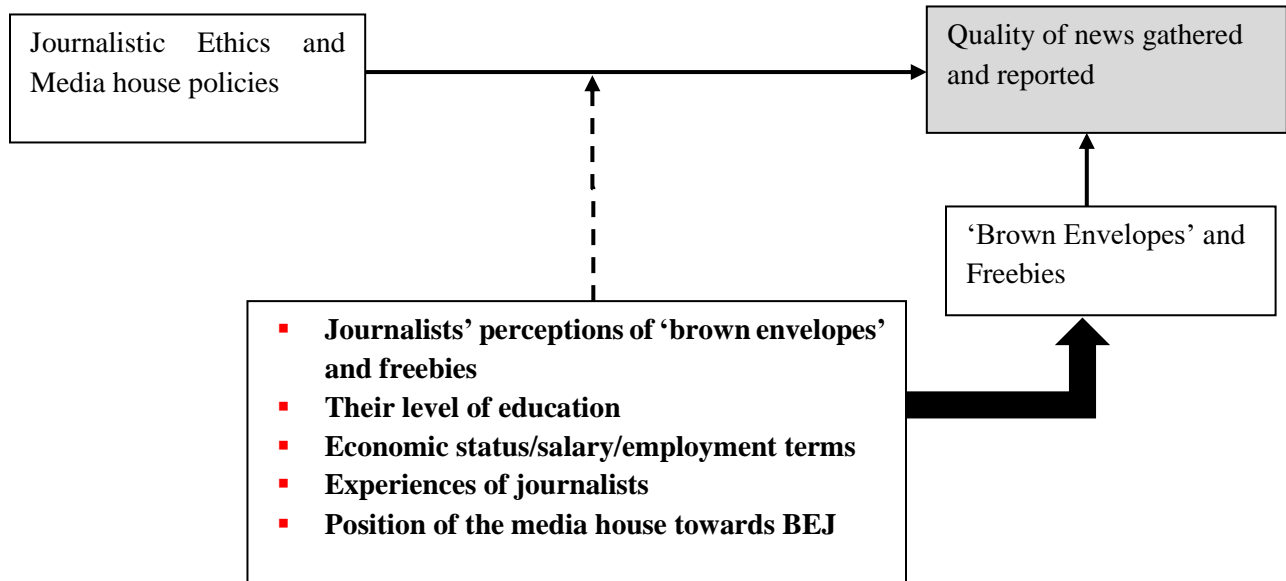


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Nakuru County. The choice of Nakuru County as the research location was informed by data from the Media Council of Kenya. It indicated that several media bureaus are established in this region, thus a clear indication that the county is a news hub with several news occurrences to report on. For instance, it indicates that there are 23 media houses operating in Nakuru County. This, therefore, enabled ease of accessibility to information from journalists who have frequently reported on issues which might have led them to accept rewards from news sources, depending on the kind of news they reported.

Research Design and Data Collection

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques, as recommended by Hammarberg et al. (2016), to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Kenyan journalists consider ethics in news gathering and reporting. A cross-sectional survey design was used, which allowed data collection from respondents at a single point in time (Hemed, 2015). This design was appropriate because it enabled the analysis of multiple characteristics, including income, and education level, while providing a numeric description of trends, opinions, and attitudes through questionnaires and structured interviews (Fowler, 2008).

Study Population and Sampling

The study targeted professional journalists, including reporters and bureau heads, from five media houses in Nakuru County: Nation Media Group, The Standard Media Group, Royal Media Services, Media Max Services, and Kass FM International. From an estimated population of 100 journalists, 37 respondents were sampled.

In addition to the survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with 8 journalists and 2 local politicians, selected purposively for their insights on the prevalence and perceptions of 'brown envelopes' and freebies. Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS), a structured form of snowball sampling, was used to recruit respondents from the population. RDS leverages social networks to recruit additional participants while allowing for structured data collection and analysis (Heckathorn, 1997; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using questionnaires administered to reporters and bureau heads. Reporters' questionnaires contained 16 questions focusing on the prevalence of 'brown envelopes' and freebies, factors influencing acceptance, perceptions of journalists and stakeholders, impacts on news gathering, and strategies for mitigation. Bureau heads' questionnaires had 9 questions exploring similar themes, including media house policies, penalties, and perceptions of the impact on the profession.

Qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with key informants using an interview schedule of 10 questions aligned with the questionnaire themes. Interviews were recorded and notes taken. Participants were informed two weeks in advance to allow preparation, and appointments were scheduled accordingly. Focus group discussion was another data collection tool where pre-determined questions were administered to respondents. Here, notes were taken as well as recording of the discussions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency, and inferential statistics, specifically chi-square tests, to examine relationships between variables (Best & Kahn, 2003). Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, coding recurrent themes from questionnaires, focus group discussions, and interview schedules. Transcriptions were compiled into a casebook of related themes, with the assistance of NVivo software.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure participant safety and dignity. Informed consent was obtained prior to administering questionnaires, conducting interviews, and facilitating focus group discussions. Privacy and confidentiality were prioritised throughout the research process, and no participant was exposed to harm.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Media House Policy on Rewards and Gifts for Journalists

Figure 2 below provides the findings on whether the media houses of the surveyed journalists have a policy that guides them in receiving gifts or rewards. The

findings indicate that more than two-thirds of journalists work in media organisations that lack formal policies governing the acceptance of gifts or rewards (70%). Only 30 per cent of the respondents reported that their organisations have formal policies on accepting gifts or rewards. The lack of policy suggests a substantial gap in institutional ethical frameworks regarding journalistic independence and integrity.

This finding corroborates another study conducted in Kenya (Ileri, 2016). This study also reported a high percentage of organisations without formal gift policies. Ileri (2016) termed this the “formalisation gap” in media ethics—where ethical principles are acknowledged but not codified into organisational policies. Ileri reported that while ethical awareness exists, formal policies lag, particularly in areas like gift acceptance. The findings further corroborate the findings by Skjerdal (2010) on

“freebies” and journalism. In his study in Ethiopia, Skjerdal (2010) reported that only (25%) of organisations had explicit gift policies and ‘brown envelope’ practices were widely acknowledged as problematic.

The low rate of policy availability (30%) is below the global standards, where gift policy rates average 58 per cent across 67 countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Wasserman (2015) linked the low policy practice on gifts in Global South contexts to cultural contexts where gift-giving has different social meanings in the Global South as compared to North American and European newsrooms with no cultural connotations. The policy gap’s implication highlights the burden the individual journalists bear in making ethical decisions about gifts and rewards. This can create inconsistent standards within the industry and thus complicate accountability mechanisms.

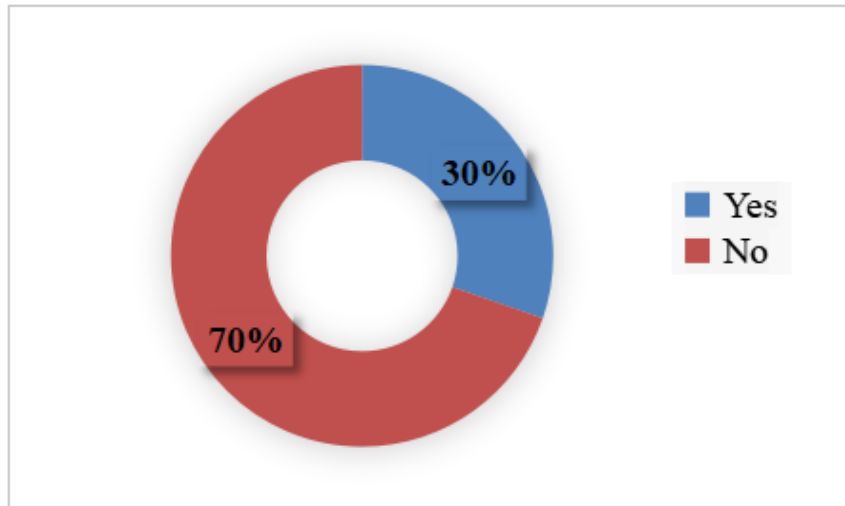


Figure 2: Does your Media House Have a Policy on Rewards and Gifts for Journalists?

Respondents’ Level of Education

Figure 3 below shows the education level of respondents. The findings indicate that most (59%) of journalists attained bachelor’s degrees, and a significant proportion (41%) have diploma-level qualifications. Notably, no respondents have qualifications below diploma level or above bachelor’s level (such as master’s or doctoral

degrees). This finding corroborates Ileri (2016), who also reported that 60 per cent of journalists in Kenya have bachelor’s degrees. In comparison to global statistics, this rate is above the global average of 51 per cent (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) but lower than countries like the US (92%), Brazil (73%), and South Korea (85%).

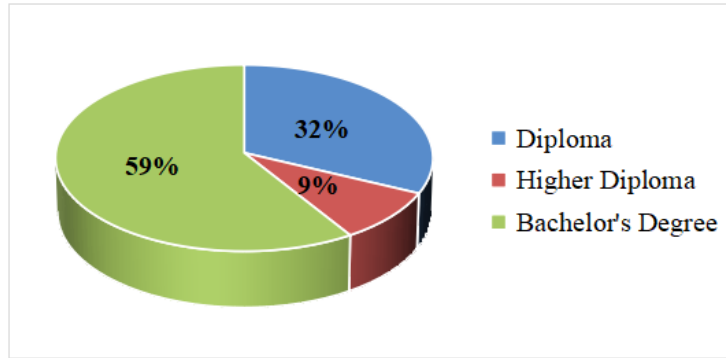


Figure 3: Shows the Level of Education of Journalists

Salary Range of the Respondents

Figure 4 below shows the salary distribution. The findings reveal a bimodal distribution of two distinct categories. The majority are lower-middle range (KSh 20,000-29,000) and Ksh 10000-19000, representing (26%) and (23%), respectively, and the upper-middle range (KSh 50,000-59,000) at (19%). The lower-income tier (Below KSh 30,000) represents (59%) of journalists, the Middle-income tier (KSh 30,000-49,000) represents (13%) of journalists, and the higher-income tier (KSh 50,000 and above) represents (29%) of journalists. These

findings corroborate with Ileri (2016), who reported that most journalists (52%) earned below KSh 40,000 monthly, with the predominance of journalists with salaries lower than KSh 30,000. Wasserman (2006) reported that economic pressures can significantly impact resistance to external influence, the pursuit of investigative journalism, editorial independence, adherence to professional standards and willingness to challenge powerful interests such as freebies and ‘brown envelopes’.

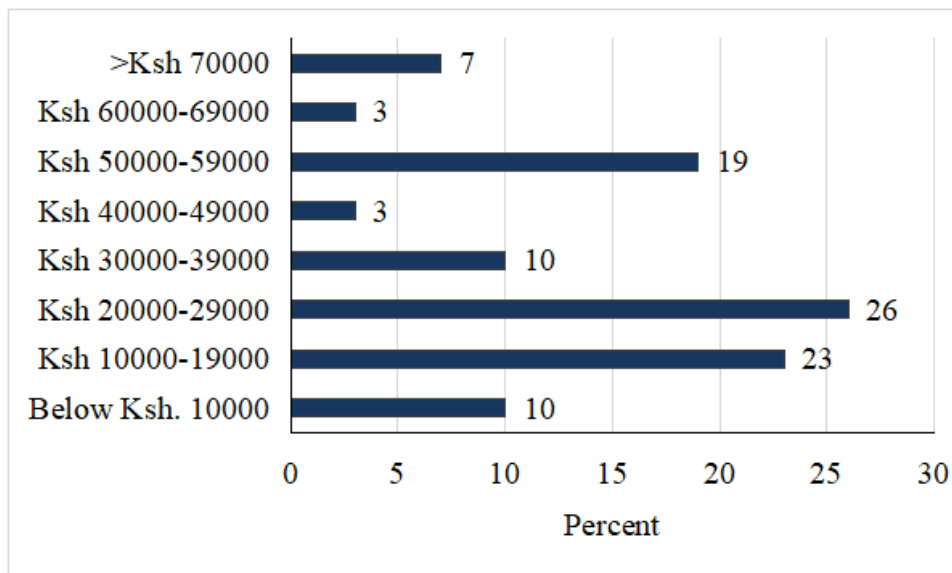


Figure 4. The Range of Journalists' Monthly Salary

Journalists' Perception towards 'Brown Envelopes' and Freebies

Table 1 below shows the journalist's perception of freebies and 'brown envelopes'. Most respondents agree that receiving 'brown envelopes' was right (47%), while 41 per cent disagree. Similarly, the majority perceive 'brown envelopes' as a form of appreciation for work

done (59%). This assertion suggests that many journalists rationalise the practice as a reward rather than a bribe. A notable (47%) disagree that 'brown envelopes' are bribes, while (36%) consider them as such. This highlights a lack of consensus on the ethical framing of the practice.

Table 1: Respondents’ Perception of ‘Brown Envelopes’ and Freebies

Perception of the statement	Statistic	SA	A	UN	D	SD	Total
Accepting rewards from news sources is right	Freq	5	11	4	10	4	34
	(%)	15%	32%	12%	29%	12%	100%
The ‘brown envelopes’ act as an appreciation for the work done	Freq	5	15	1	6	7	34
	(%)	15%	44%	3%	18%	21%	100%
Brown envelopes and freebies are bribes and should be termed as such	Freq	5	7	6	12	4	34
	(%)	15%	21%	18%	35%	12%	100%

While most of the respondents (47%) perceive that it is right for journalists to be given freebies and ‘brown envelopes’, this highlights the economic challenges. Journalists often justify accepting ‘brown envelopes’ due to low pay. Low wages drive journalists to rely on unofficial payments, leading to ethical compromises. This finding corroborates Acheampong and Babangida (2017), who highlighted how financial instability in the media industry normalised the acceptance of bribes in Ghana.

Most participants disagree that freebies and ‘brown envelopes’ are bribes (47%), reflecting the industry’s everyday practice. On the other hand, the high acceptance of ‘brown envelopes’ as a form of appreciation for journalists (59%) aligns with Akabogu (2017), who posits that media practitioners often frame bribes as “tokens of appreciation” to avoid the stigma of corruption. In another perspective, Plaisance (2013) opined that such practices are considered culturally acceptable rather than unethical in some societies. This normalisation highlights journalists’ ethical dilemma, where accepting incentives can compromise objectivity and professional integrity, but it is seen as a form of appreciation in other views.

Summary

Most respondents perceive the practice of receiving ‘brown envelopes’ as right. Similarly, the majority perceive ‘brown envelopes’ as a form of appreciation for the work done. This assertion suggests that many journalists rationalise the practice as a reward rather than a bribe and could highlight a lack of consensus on the ethical framing of the practice. Journalists often justify accepting ‘brown envelopes’ due to low pay.

The journalists’ acceptance of ‘brown envelopes’ negatively impacts the quality and integrity of the reported news. For example, brown envelopes’ influence journalism practice negatively, where some important issues are downplayed while unimportant ones are exaggerated to satisfy the givers of these ‘brown envelopes’. The practice could also compromise the freedom of the press in the long run and eventually become an avenue for biased narratives. The consequence of this is apathy, where the public no longer believes or trusts information being broadcast on media platforms or channels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Journalists’ perceptions of ‘brown envelopes’ and freebies are predominantly negative. While acknowledging the unethical nature of the practice, many described their participation as a reluctant response to survival imperatives, thus reflecting an ongoing ethical dilemma. The most significant consequence of these practices is the erosion of journalistic integrity, with direct implications for the credibility of news content, public trust in the media, and the ability of the press to function as a democratic watchdog. The distortion of editorial independence due to financial inducements compromises the authenticity of information and narrows the scope of investigative journalism.

To mitigate this ethical crisis, respondents emphasised the need for systemic reforms. Chief among the proposed solutions is the implementation of better pay structures that ensure financial security for journalists. Such reforms could reduce economic vulnerability and increase resistance to unethical practices. Additionally, capacity-building through ethical training was recommended to reinforce professional conduct



concerning gift and reward acceptance. Interestingly, punitive measures such as sanctions or public shaming of journalists were largely dismissed by participants, suggesting that reform efforts grounded solely in enforcement may be ineffective unless accompanied by structural and economic changes.

Recommendations: Journalism associations, training institutions, and media houses should embed ethical education into ongoing professional development programs. These efforts should go beyond theoretical codes to engage real-life ethical dilemmas, promoting a shared culture of integrity and accountability within

newsrooms. The normalisation of unethical practices must be tackled at a systemic level. This includes reforming the incentive structures and relationships between media houses, advertisers, political actors, and journalists. Based on the findings of this study, future studies are needed to examine how media owners and senior editorial staff influence the prevalence of ‘brown envelopes’. This could reveal systemic pressures from the top and provide insights into institutional complicity in unethical practices. Investigate how audiences perceive the integrity of news content when they are aware of these practices.

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