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Media and Ethnicity: An Assessment of Media Constructions on Politics and Ethnicity in Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine media constructions of politics and ethnicity in Kenya, with particular focus on the relationship between media, ethnicity, and electoral conflicts; the influence of new media on political tensions; and the role of media in de-escalating ethnic-based violence. In Kenya's multi-ethnic political environment, mainstream and digital media significantly shape public opinion, political perceptions, and electoral discourse. However, concerns persist regarding the extent to which media platforms reinforce ethnic stereotypes, political polarisation, hate speech, and electoral conflicts during competitive political periods. The rapid expansion of new media technologies has further transformed political communication by creating opportunities for democratic participation while simultaneously facilitating misinformation and ethnic incitement. This study employed a qualitative research design based on a systematic literature review. Data were collected from scholarly journal articles, books, official reports, newspapers, and credible online publications related to media, ethnicity, political conflicts, and new media in Kenya. The selected sources were analysed thematically to identify dominant concepts, patterns, and perspectives relevant to the study objectives. The findings reveal that media constructions significantly influence ethnic identities and political attitudes, particularly during elections. Mainstream and social media platforms frequently amplify ethnic narratives, political propaganda, and misinformation that intensify electoral tensions. However, the study also found that media can positively contribute to peace-building through ethical journalism, conflict-sensitive reporting, civic education, and inclusive national dialogue. The study concludes that the media remains a powerful actor in both escalating and de-escalating ethnic-based political conflicts in Kenya. It recommends strengthening ethical journalism, digital media literacy, and responsible media regulation to promote democratic stability, peaceful electoral processes, and national cohesion.

Key words: Ethnicity, media, new media, political conflicts, stereotype.



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INTRODUCTION

Media constructions of ethnicity and political conflict remain a major concern in Kenya's democratic and social landscape because media narratives significantly influence public perception, political mobilisation, and interethnic relations. In politically polarised societies, media representations may either promote national cohesion or reinforce ethnic divisions that contribute to electoral tensions and violence. In the Kenyan context, where ethnic identity has historically shaped political competition, media discourse surrounding elections has frequently attracted scholarly and public attention due to its potential to influence conflict dynamics. The recurrent episodes of electoral unrest, particularly during disputed elections, demonstrate the importance of examining how media institutions construct ethnicity and political narratives within a multi-ethnic society.

Media refers to communication channels and institutions used to disseminate information, ideas, and interpretations to the public through print, broadcast, and digital platforms (McQuail, 2010). Beyond transmitting information, media shapes public opinion through framing, agenda-setting, and representation of social realities. Ethnicity refers to a social identity based on shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, traditions, and historical experiences (Eriksen, 2010). In Kenya, ethnicity remains closely linked to political affiliation, resource allocation, and electoral competition.

Stereotypes are generalised and simplified assumptions about particular groups that may reproduce prejudice, discrimination, or social exclusion. Within political communication, ethnic stereotypes are often embedded in media narratives that portray communities as politically dominant, violent, marginalised, or loyal to specific political interests. Political conflict refers to struggles among groups competing for political power, influence, or resources, frequently manifesting during electoral processes through contestation, polarisation, or violence (Galtung, 1996). New media, on the other hand, encompasses internet-based and digital communication platforms such as social networking sites, blogs, online news portals, and mobile communication technologies that facilitate rapid and decentralised information exchange (Lister et al., 2009).

Notably, the interaction between media, ethnicity, and political conflict in Kenya has become increasingly significant because electoral politics has often been

interpreted through ethnic lenses. Political campaigns and public debates frequently mobilise ethnic identities, while media coverage sometimes reproduces divisive narratives that deepen mistrust among communities. During electoral periods, media framing can shape how citizens interpret political events, opponents, and national identity. While traditional media institutions such as radio, television, and newspapers have historically influenced political discourse, the expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed the production and circulation of political narratives. Social media platforms now provide immediate spaces for political engagement, citizen journalism, misinformation, and ethnic mobilisation, thereby altering the dynamics of electoral communication.

The 2007–2008 post-election violence in Kenya particularly demonstrated the capacity of media communication to influence ethnic relations and political stability. Certain vernacular radio stations and politically aligned media narratives were criticised for amplifying ethnic hostility and inflammatory political rhetoric, while other media institutions promoted peace messaging and reconciliation initiatives. This duality highlighted the contradictory role of media as both a potential catalyst for violence and an instrument for conflict mitigation. Since then, concerns regarding hate speech, disinformation, online propaganda, and politically motivated ethnic messaging have continued to shape debates surrounding media responsibility during elections.

Despite growing scholarship on Kenyan media and politics, several critical issues remain insufficiently addressed. Existing studies have largely concentrated on media freedom, electoral reporting, and political communication without adequately examining how media constructions normalise ethnic stereotypes and reinforce political polarisation across both traditional and digital platforms. Furthermore, although research has explored the relationship between media and electoral violence, limited attention has been given to the specific communicative mechanisms through which media narratives contribute to ethnicised political identities and conflict escalation.

Similarly, the expanding influence of new media in reshaping electoral conflicts through viral content, online mobilisation, and digital misinformation remains inadequately integrated into broader discussions of media

and ethnicity in Kenya. In addition, previous studies have not sufficiently evaluated how media institutions can strategically contribute to de-escalating ethnic tensions through peace journalism, ethical reporting, and conflict-sensitive communication practices.

This study, therefore, addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between media, ethnicity, and electoral conflicts in Kenya while assessing the influence of new media technologies on conflict dynamics and evaluating the media's role in promoting peace and national cohesion. The paper argues that media constructions are central to understanding the persistence and transformation of ethnic politics in Kenya's electoral processes. By analysing how political narratives are framed and circulated across traditional and digital media spaces, the study contributes to broader debates on media responsibility, democratic communication, and conflict management in multi-ethnic societies. The paper specifically explores the relationship between media, ethnicity, and electoral conflict; investigates the impact of new media on electoral tensions; and evaluates the role of media in de-escalating ethnic-based violence in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between media, ethnicity, and political conflict has generated extensive scholarly debate because media institutions play a central role in shaping public opinion, political participation, and social identities. In ethnically diverse societies, media representations often influence how citizens perceive political actors, interpret electoral competition, and relate to other communities. Consequently, media constructions may either reinforce social cohesion or intensify ethnic polarisation and conflict. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that the media is not a neutral transmitter of information but rather an active participant in constructing political realities through framing, priming, and selective representation (van Dijk, 2017). This perspective is particularly relevant to Kenya, where electoral politics has historically been intertwined with ethnic identity and media discourse.

From a global perspective, studies on media and ethnicity demonstrate that political communication frequently reproduces dominant ideological narratives that shape intergroup relations. According to van Dijk (2017), media discourse often legitimises existing power structures by portraying minority or marginalised groups

through stereotypical narratives that influence public perception and social attitudes. This argument is significant because it explains how repeated media framing can normalise ethnic biases and influence political judgments. However, van Dijk's analysis predominantly focuses on Western societies and mainstream journalism, offering limited engagement with electoral conflicts in postcolonial African states where ethnicity functions as a major political organising principle. This limitation creates a contextual gap that the current study addresses by examining how Kenyan media constructions shape ethnicised political perceptions during electoral periods.

Similarly, global conflict communication studies reveal that media can become an instrument for political violence when communication systems are manipulated for ethnic mobilisation. Thompson (2007), in his analysis of the 1994 Rwanda genocide, demonstrates how radio broadcasting was strategically used to construct ethnic hatred, disseminate propaganda, and legitimise violence against the Tutsi population. The study illustrates the dangerous capacity of media narratives to transform political tensions into mass violence. Nevertheless, Thompson's work primarily concentrates on direct propaganda and hate speech during genocide, leaving insufficient analysis of subtle contemporary forms of ethnic framing and digital political communication that characterise modern electoral conflicts. This gap is particularly relevant to Kenya, where ethnic polarisation is often reinforced not through explicit incitement alone but through symbolic narratives, partisan framing, and selective political representation.

In contrast, studies conducted in post-conflict societies illustrate the constructive role media can play in peace-building and national reconciliation. Wasserman (2010) argues that post-apartheid media in South Africa contributed to democratic transformation by promoting inclusive narratives and fostering national identity beyond racial divisions. Likewise, Bosch (2013) demonstrates that community radio stations in South Africa created participatory communication spaces that amplified marginalised voices and strengthened intercultural dialogue. These studies are important because they reveal that media institutions can support reconciliation and democratic participation when guided by ethical and inclusive communication frameworks. However, both studies largely focus on institutional reform and participatory journalism while giving limited

attention to the disruptive influence of digital media platforms, misinformation, and online political manipulation. The current study, therefore, extends this scholarship by examining how both traditional and new media simultaneously function as spaces for ethnic mobilisation and peace-building within Kenya's electoral environment.

Moreover, the expansion of digital communication technologies has further transformed global debates concerning media and political conflict. Social media platforms have decentralised information production by enabling citizens to create, distribute, and engage with political content in real time. Castells (2015) argues that although digital media broadens democratic participation, it also reproduces ideological divisions and political inequalities embedded in broader social structures. Similarly, Vosoughi et al. (2018) observe that misinformation and emotionally charged political content spread rapidly through online networks because digital algorithms amplify sensational and polarising narratives. These studies demonstrate that new media significantly influence political communication and public discourse. Nonetheless, much of the existing scholarship focuses on Western democracies and generalised misinformation rather than examining how digital communication specifically shapes ethnicised electoral conflicts in African societies. This creates an important research gap because social media has increasingly become central to political mobilisation, ethnic discourse, and electoral contestation in Kenya.

Within the African context, studies on media and ethnicity consistently show that political elites often manipulate ethnic identities through communication systems to maintain political and economic dominance. Ekanola (2006) argues that many African states are characterised by elite-controlled political and media systems where ethnic loyalties frequently overshadow national identity. According to the study, the concentration of political and media power among ethnic elites weakens democratic legitimacy and contributes to intergroup tensions. Although this structural analysis explains the persistence of ethnic politics in Africa, it provides a limited examination of how audiences interpret and internalise ethnic media narratives during electoral periods. Consequently, the communicative mechanisms through which media constructions shape political attitudes remain insufficiently explored.

The relationship between media and ethnic violence in Africa is further illustrated through the Rwanda genocide, where Kellow and Steeves (1998) demonstrate that media propaganda intensified ethnic hostility by repeatedly constructing the Tutsi population as enemies of the state. Their study provides critical evidence regarding the role of media in legitimising violence and shaping collective hostility. However, the study focuses predominantly on state-controlled broadcasting and does not sufficiently address contemporary decentralised communication environments characterised by social media interaction and citizen-generated political content. This limitation is particularly relevant to the Kenyan case, where online communication platforms have become major sites of political engagement and ethnic mobilisation.

African scholarship on digital communication also reveals the increasing significance of social media in shaping political participation and electoral processes. Mare (2014) argues that social media platforms in Africa simultaneously facilitate democratic engagement and accelerate the spread of hate speech, misinformation, and populist political narratives. While the study highlights the democratic potential and risks associated with digital communication, it mainly emphasises political activism and citizen participation rather than examining how digital discourse reinforces ethnic identities and electoral conflict. The current study addresses this gap by critically assessing how new media influences ethnicised political narratives and electoral tensions in Kenya.

In the Kenyan context, the intersection between media, ethnicity, and electoral conflict has received significant scholarly attention, particularly following the 2007–2008 post-election violence. Nyabuga (2014) argues that political elites in Kenya have historically manipulated ethnicity as a strategy for political mobilisation, while sections of the media have reinforced these divisions through ethnically aligned reporting and partisan political narratives. The study demonstrates that weak institutions, historical injustices, and political competition create conditions under which media constructions intensify ethnic polarisation. However, Nyabuga's analysis primarily concentrates on mainstream media institutions and gives limited consideration to the influence of social media and digital political communication in contemporary elections. This limitation is significant because Kenya's political communication environment

has increasingly shifted toward online and mobile-based platforms.

Similarly, Maweu (2022) contends that both mainstream and new media play a critical role in shaping electoral conflict dynamics in Kenya. His study highlights how political misinformation, sensational reporting, and online mobilisation contribute to polarisation during elections. Although Maweu acknowledges the growing significance of social media, the study pays limited attention to the theoretical processes through which repeated media exposure shapes ethnic identities and political perceptions among audiences. The present study, therefore, extends this scholarship by integrating media effects theories to explain how media constructions influence public interpretation of politics and ethnicity.

The analytical foundation of this study is further strengthened through the integration of Priming Theory and Social Identity Theory. Priming Theory explains how repeated media emphasis on particular issues influences the standards audiences use to evaluate political events and social groups (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Through selective emphasis and repetition, media narratives can condition audiences to interpret politics through ethnic considerations rather than policy issues or democratic principles. In Kenya, election reporting frequently highlights ethnic alliances, regional voting blocs, and communal rivalries, thereby priming citizens to associate political legitimacy with ethnic affiliation.

Dixon (2006) argues that media priming significantly influences audience perception by increasing the salience of specific social categories and political narratives. Likewise, Dixon et al. (2010) and Ouma (2022) demonstrate that repeated ethnic framing during election periods shapes voter attitudes and deepens political polarisation. While previous applications of Priming Theory largely focus on traditional media effects, this study expands the theory by examining how digital communication platforms and algorithm-driven media environments amplify ethnicised political narratives during elections.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), further explains how individuals derive their identity and self-worth from group affiliations such as ethnicity, religion, or political association. According to the theory, individuals categorise themselves into “in-

groups” and “out-groups,” often resulting in favouritism toward one group and prejudice toward others. In the Kenyan political environment, media constructions frequently frame electoral competition through ethnic categories, thereby reinforcing perceptions of communal political interests and rivalries. Such representations may intensify stereotypes, legitimise exclusionary politics, and heighten intergroup tensions during elections. At the same time, the theory also explains how media can contribute to national cohesion by promoting inclusive narratives that transcend ethnic divisions. Turner (2011) argues that social identities are dynamic and can be reshaped through communication and social interaction. This perspective is important because it positions media as both a potential source of division and an instrument for peace-building. The present study, therefore, applies Social Identity Theory to evaluate how media constructions influence ethnic consciousness, political mobilisation, and conflict de-escalation in Kenya’s electoral context.

Overall, the reviewed literature reveals three major gaps that justify this study. First, existing scholarship inadequately examines how both mainstream and digital media normalise ethnic stereotypes and shape political identities in Kenya. Second, limited studies critically analyse the communicative mechanisms through which new media transform electoral conflict dynamics and political mobilisation. Third, insufficient attention has been given to the role of media in de-escalating ethnic tensions through ethical journalism, peace communication, and conflict-sensitive reporting. By integrating Priming Theory and Social Identity Theory, this study provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding how media constructions influence ethnicity, electoral conflict, and peace-building in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design based on a systematic literature review to critically examine existing scholarship on media constructions of politics and ethnicity in Kenya. A systematic literature review was considered appropriate because it enables the structured identification, evaluation, and synthesis of scholarly evidence related to a specific research problem while minimising selection bias and improving analytical rigour (Booth et al., 2016). The design was particularly suitable for this study because the research objectives required an in-depth examination of the relationship

between media, ethnicity, electoral conflicts, and the emerging role of new media in Kenya.

Data collection involved the retrieval of secondary data from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, official reports, newspapers, conference papers, and reputable online publications. Electronic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online were used to identify relevant materials published between 2006 and 2025. The search process employed keywords and Boolean combinations such as “media and ethnicity,” “electoral conflict in Kenya,” “new media and political violence,” “media framing,” and “ethnic polarization.”

Purposive sampling was used to select studies that directly addressed media representations, ethnicity, political conflict, elections, and peace-building in Kenya and comparable African contexts. A total of 85 scholarly sources were initially identified, after which screening procedures based on relevance, credibility, publication quality, and alignment with the study objectives reduced the final sample to 42 sources. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed and authoritative publications written in English and directly related to media and ethnic politics.

Data extraction involved systematically reviewing selected sources to identify recurring concepts, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and empirical findings relevant to the study objectives. The extracted data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed six stages: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition of themes, and interpretation of findings. This process enabled the study to identify dominant themes such as ethnic framing, media priming, digital misinformation, electoral violence, and peace journalism. Thematic analysis was selected because it allows for the interpretation of patterns and relationships within qualitative data while providing flexibility in analysing complex socio-political communication issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Relationship Between Media, Ethnicity, and Electoral Conflicts in Kenya

The findings reveal that media constructions in Kenya significantly influence the relationship between ethnicity and electoral conflict, particularly during highly

contested elections. The analysis demonstrates that both mainstream and digital media frequently frame political competition through ethnic identities, thereby reinforcing communal divisions and political polarisation. This finding directly responds to the first objective of the study, which sought to establish the relationship between media, ethnicity, and electoral conflicts in Kenya.

Findings also indicate that Kenyan media plays a dual role during elections by functioning simultaneously as a public information platform and a political actor capable of shaping public perceptions and interethnic relations. According to Ogenga (2008), electoral violence in many African countries is often intensified by media narratives that sensationalise political competition and emphasise ethnic divisions. In Kenya, this trend became particularly visible during the 2007–2008 post-election violence, where sections of the media were criticised for prioritising politically dramatic narratives while underreporting the growing ethnic tensions in violence-prone regions such as Kuresoi and Kisii (Kamau, 2009). The findings suggest that selective reporting and inadequate contextualization of ethnic grievances contributed to the escalation of mistrust and hostility among communities.

From the perspective of Priming Theory, repeated media emphasis on ethnic alliances, political rivalries, and regional voting blocs conditioned audiences to interpret electoral competition primarily through ethnic identities rather than policy issues. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) argue that media priming influences the criteria audiences use to evaluate political events. In the Kenyan context, the persistent framing of elections as contests between ethnic communities strengthened communal political consciousness and deepened polarisation. This finding supports Ouma’s (2022) argument that election coverage in Kenya often reproduces ethnicised political narratives that shape voter perceptions and public discourse.

The findings further indicate that political elites strategically exploit media platforms to reinforce ethnic loyalties and mobilise support. Nyabuga (2014) argues that ethnicity in Kenya has historically been manipulated by political actors seeking electoral advantage, while sections of the media amplify these narratives through partisan reporting. This study found that media constructions frequently portray political leaders as representatives of ethnic communities rather than

national leaders, thereby legitimising exclusionary political identities. Such framing aligns with Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals categorise themselves into “in-groups” and “out-groups” based on shared identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Consequently, media narratives intensify ethnic consciousness and reinforce perceptions of political competition as a struggle between communities.

The findings also reveal that the international media significantly shaped public understanding of the 2007 post-election violence. International broadcasters such as BBC News, CNN, and Al Jazeera provided extensive global coverage after restrictions were imposed on local live broadcasting (Kamau, 2009; Maweu, 2022). While international media helped sustain information flow during the crisis, the findings indicate that some reports exaggerated the scale of ethnic violence through the use of terms such as “genocide,” “tribalism,” and “ethnic cleansing” (Nyabuga, 2014). The use of such language amplified fear and uncertainty while oversimplifying the complex political and historical factors underlying the conflict. These findings demonstrate that media framing significantly influences public interpretation of political crises and may either intensify or reduce tensions depending on the narratives employed.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that media representations during the International Criminal Court (ICC) processes also reinforced ethnic divisions. Ogenga (2013) observes that political leaders facing charges at The Hague often relied on ethnic solidarity narratives to frame themselves as victims representing entire communities rather than individuals accused of crimes. The media’s personalisation of these narratives contributed to collective ethnic identification with accused political figures. This finding illustrates how media constructions can normalise ethnicised interpretations of justice and accountability, thereby undermining national cohesion and institutional legitimacy.

Overall, the findings establish that media constructions in Kenya significantly influence electoral conflict dynamics by shaping ethnic perceptions, legitimising political polarisation, and reinforcing communal political identities. The study therefore demonstrates that the media is not merely a passive observer during elections but an active participant in constructing political and ethnic realities.

Impact of New Media in Shaping the Dynamics of Electoral Conflicts in Kenya

The second objective of the study sought to identify the impact of new media in shaping the dynamics of electoral conflicts in Kenya. The findings reveal that new media technologies have transformed political communication by expanding citizen participation while simultaneously accelerating the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and ethnic polarisation.

The emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) has significantly altered how political narratives are produced and disseminated in Kenya. Kirea et al. (2018) argue that digital technologies have democratised communication by enabling citizens, bloggers, and independent journalists to participate directly in political discourse. The findings support this argument by demonstrating that social media platforms have expanded access to political information and reduced reliance on traditional media institutions. Through mobile phones, blogs, and online networks, citizens now actively shape electoral narratives and mobilise political support.

However, the findings further reveal that the participatory nature of new media has also intensified ethnicised political communication. During election periods, social media platforms frequently become spaces for the circulation of inflammatory narratives, stereotypes, propaganda, and misinformation targeting particular ethnic communities (Kirea et al., 2018). This finding aligns with Castells’ (2015) argument that digital media reproduces existing social and political inequalities rather than eliminating them. Instead of fostering entirely democratic communication, online platforms often amplify divisive political narratives because emotionally charged content spreads rapidly through digital algorithms and networked interactions.

The study particularly found that vernacular and ethnically coded communication became widespread on online platforms during elections. Njoroge et al. (2011) observe that the Kenyan online platform “Mashada” became saturated with ethnically hostile messages during periods of political tension. The use of local languages made hate speech difficult to regulate and allowed politically motivated actors to target specific ethnic audiences more effectively. These findings demonstrate that digital communication technologies have transformed ethnic mobilisation strategies by enabling

rapid and decentralised dissemination of political content.

The findings further indicate that social media intensified political polarisation before and after the 2013 and 2017 general elections. According to Kireia et al. (2018), online platforms became spaces for propaganda, hate speech, and verbal conflicts between supporters of competing political coalitions. Political actors increasingly relied on organised “digital teams” to influence public opinion, spread political messaging, and attack opponents online. This finding reflects Priming Theory because repeated exposure to ethnically framed political content conditioned audiences to interpret electoral competition through communal loyalties rather than democratic principles.

Moreover, the findings show that digital political communication in Kenya increasingly relies on visual culture, memes, and satirical content to influence public opinion. Mukhongo (2020) notes that the 2017 Kenyan elections were widely described as the “elections of memes” because political supporters used humour, satire, and visual propaganda extensively on social media platforms. While memes often appeared humorous and entertaining, many contained ethnic stereotypes and partisan political messaging that reinforced communal divisions. These findings suggest that online political humour functions not merely as entertainment but as a powerful instrument of political persuasion and identity construction.

The study also found that new media simultaneously provide opportunities for democratic participation and risks for electoral instability. On one hand, social media has enabled marginalised groups and ordinary citizens to engage directly in political discussions, challenge dominant narratives, and access diverse viewpoints. On the other hand, the absence of effective regulation and digital literacy has facilitated the spread of misinformation and inflammatory political discourse. Vosoughi et al. (2018) argue that false political information spreads rapidly online because sensational narratives generate higher engagement than factual content. This finding is particularly relevant to Kenya, where emotionally charged ethnic narratives often dominate digital political communication during elections.

Overall, the findings establish that new media significantly shape electoral conflict dynamics in Kenya by expanding political participation while simultaneously intensifying ethnic polarisation, misinformation, and online hostility. The study therefore demonstrates that digital communication technologies are central to understanding contemporary electoral conflicts in Kenya.

Media’s Role in De-Escalating Ethnic-Based Violence

The third objective of the study sought to evaluate the role of media in de-escalating ethnic-based violence in Kenya. The findings reveal that despite its contribution to political polarisation, the media also play an important role in promoting peace, reconciliation, and conflict-sensitive communication during electoral periods.

The findings indicate that after the 2007–2008 post-election violence, Kenyan media institutions increasingly adopted peace-oriented reporting strategies aimed at preventing further conflict. Onyebadi and Oyedeji (2012) found that major newspapers such as the Daily Nation and The Standard allocated substantial front-page coverage to peace initiatives, reconciliation campaigns, and national unity messages during the crisis period. This study found that such reporting helped create public awareness regarding the urgency of ending violence and restoring national stability.

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, peace-oriented media narratives can reduce intergroup hostility by promoting shared national identity rather than ethnic exclusivity. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that social identities are socially constructed and can be reshaped through communication and collective experiences. In Kenya, media campaigns emphasising peace, coexistence, and national unity contributed to reframing political discourse beyond ethnic divisions. These findings suggest that the media possesses the capacity to construct inclusive national narratives capable of reducing political tensions.

The findings further show that media institutions played a significant role in early warning and conflict monitoring mechanisms during the 2013 elections. Gustafsson (2016) argues that Kenyan media deliberately prioritised peace journalism and conflict-sensitive reporting to prevent a recurrence of the 2007 violence. Journalists and editors avoided inflammatory language, encouraged restraint among political actors, and promoted civic education concerning peaceful electoral

participation. This finding demonstrates that media institutions can actively contribute to conflict prevention when guided by ethical journalism principles.

However, the findings also reveal criticisms regarding the limitations of peace-oriented reporting. Kenny and Ahere (2017) argue that the Kenyan media's emphasis on peace during elections sometimes prioritised stability at the expense of critical political scrutiny. In certain cases, journalists avoided discussing structural injustices, electoral irregularities, and ethnic inequalities for fear of triggering tensions. Consequently, "peace" was occasionally framed merely as the absence of visible violence rather than the presence of justice, accountability, and reconciliation. This finding suggests that while peace journalism is important, excessive self-censorship may weaken democratic accountability and public debate.

The study further found that televised presidential debates during the 2013 and 2017 elections contributed to issue-based political engagement and reduced emphasis on ethnic mobilisation. Ahere (2019) and Sharra (2023) argue that live televised debates provided candidates with opportunities to discuss policy issues, governance, and development agendas in a national forum. This shifted political communication away from purely ethnic rhetoric toward issue-oriented discourse. The findings therefore suggest that media platforms can facilitate democratic deliberation and peaceful political engagement when structured around inclusivity and accountability.

Overall, the findings establish that the media in Kenya possesses significant potential to de-escalate ethnic-based violence through peace journalism, civic education, ethical reporting, and inclusive political dialogue. However, the study also demonstrates that sustainable peace requires balancing conflict-sensitive reporting with critical democratic accountability. Media institutions must therefore move beyond superficial peace narratives and actively promote justice, inclusion, and responsible political communication.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study examined the relationship between media, ethnicity, and electoral conflicts in Kenya, the influence of new media in shaping electoral conflict dynamics, and the role of media in de-escalating ethnic-based violence. The findings demonstrate that

media constructions significantly influence political perceptions, ethnic identities, and electoral behaviour in Kenya. Both mainstream and digital media platforms have frequently framed political competition through ethnic lenses, thereby reinforcing communal divisions, stereotypes, and political polarisation during election periods. Through agenda-setting, framing, and priming processes, media narratives often shape how citizens interpret political events and identify with political actors.

The study further established that new media technologies have transformed political communication in Kenya by democratizing access to information and expanding citizen participation in political discourse. However, social media platforms have also intensified the spread of misinformation, hate speech, propaganda, and ethnically charged political narratives. The decentralised and interactive nature of digital platforms has enabled political actors, bloggers, and online communities to rapidly circulate divisive content capable of escalating tensions during elections. Consequently, new media have become both a space for democratic engagement and a catalyst for political polarisation.

Despite these challenges, the study found that the media also possesses substantial potential for peace-building and conflict de-escalation. Through peace journalism, civic education, televised debates, and conflict-sensitive reporting, media institutions can promote national cohesion, dialogue, and nonviolent political participation. Nevertheless, sustainable peace requires balancing peace-oriented communication with critical democratic accountability to ensure that structural injustices and political grievances are not ignored in the name of stability. Overall, the study concludes that the media in Kenya function as both a driver of ethnicized political conflict and a strategic instrument for reconciliation and democratic consolidation.

Recommendations: The study recommends that media institutions strengthen ethical journalism practices by adopting conflict-sensitive reporting frameworks that discourage ethnic stereotyping, inflammatory political narratives, and sensationalised electoral coverage. Journalists and editors should prioritise issue-based political reporting that emphasises governance, development, and national cohesion rather than ethnic divisions.

The study further recommends enhanced digital media regulation and public media literacy programs to address the growing spread of misinformation, hate speech, and online political manipulation. Government institutions, civil society organisations, and technology companies should collaborate in developing mechanisms for monitoring harmful online content while protecting freedom of expression and democratic participation.

In addition, media organisations should expand peace-building initiatives such as civic education campaigns, interethnic dialogue programs, and inclusive political debates aimed at fostering national identity and democratic tolerance during electoral periods.

Future research should examine the role of artificial intelligence algorithms, political microtargeting, and automated disinformation in shaping ethnic political communication in Kenya. Further studies should also investigate the influence of vernacular digital platforms, influencers, and online political communities on youth political mobilisation and electoral violence. Additionally, comparative studies exploring media constructions of ethnicity across different African democracies would provide broader insights into the relationship between media, identity politics, and conflict transformation in multi-ethnic societies.

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