

Representations of Gender Based Violence in Kenyan Soaps and their Reverberation on Audience attitudes, perceptions and Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This research study employed an analytical design to examine six major GBV forms in Kenyan soap operas, their framing, character dynamics, and consequences as well as their impact on viewer attitudes, perceptions, and behavior. Grounded in media representation, framing theory, and social constructivism, the study utilized content analysis and focus group discussions to unveil patterns, themes, and underlying messages related to GBV in *Makutano Junction* and *Mother-in-law*. Findings reveal patterns of gender discrimination, male dominance, and victimization, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Overrepresentation of male characters and underrepresentation of specific GBV forms normalize unequal power dynamics. Realistic consequences for perpetrators are lacking, trivializing severity of violence. In light of these findings, the study suggests a set of recommendations to guide media policy, enhance social intervention strategies, and develop audience engagement approaches that foster critical thinking and proactive action against GBV. This study significantly contributes to the discourse on media's role in shaping societal attitudes and behavior, providing a solid foundation for interventions aimed at countering harmful portrayals and promoting positive change. The implications include a call for media policy changes and audience engagement strategies. Additionally, responsible portrayals can challenge norms and promote gender equality. Moreover, collaboration between media, regulators, and policymakers is vital. Importantly, education and support services should address GBV. Soap operas emerged as powerful tools for violence prevention and cultural change. They foster empathy, support survivors, and contribute to a more equitable society. In conclusion, accurate media portrayal is crucial for addressing GBV, empowering audiences to challenge harmful beliefs, and foster a safer society.

Keywords: Audience attitudes, behavior change, Cultural change, Gender Based Violence portrayals, gender norms, media representation, soap operas.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive issue in societies worldwide (Klugman et al., 2014), posing significant challenges to the well-being and equality of individuals (UN Women, 2020). Within the realm of media, particularly soap operas, representations of GBV have the potential to shape viewer attitudes, perceptions, and behavior (Greitemeyer, 2019a). However, in the context of Kenyan soap operas, there is a noticeable gap in research that specifically examines the representations of GBV and their reverberation on viewer attitudes, perceptions, and behavior. The present study aimed to address this gap by using an analytical research design to explore and analyze the portrayal of GBV in Kenyan soap operas and shed light on their potential influence on the audience. The justification for this study lies in the crucial need to understand the impact of media representations of GBV in the Kenyan context.

Television dramas, such as soap operas, hold considerable influence over the public and play a significant role in shaping societal perceptions and norms (Livingstone, 2019). Thus, understanding how GBV is depicted in these influential media platforms becomes imperative for fostering positive social change, raising awareness, and developing effective interventions. To provide a comprehensive framework, this study drew upon media representation, framing theory and social constructivism which offer valuable insights into the complex construction of GBV in the media. These theoretical foundations provide a robust framework for understanding the nuanced interplay between media representations of GBV and viewer attitudes and behavior.

The study's objectives encompassed a multi-faceted approach. Firstly, a content analysis of selected Kenyan soap operas was conducted, aiming to discern underlying patterns, themes, and messages concerning GBV. Second, the study delved into the identification of the specific forms and sub-forms of GBV depicted in the long-running series, *Mother-in-law* and *Makutano Junction*, dating back to 2007. Third, the research sought to establish a clear understanding of how violence was framed and characterized in these soap operas, including an exploration of the agents perpetrating these acts. Furthermore, the study ventured into examining how these portrayals might influence the behavior and actions of viewers, emphasizing the media's potential to shape real-world attitudes and actions. Lastly, the research delved into the nuanced realm of viewer attitudes, perceptions, and interpretations of GBV representations through the avenue of focus group discussions.

Gender based violence constitutes a pressing concern that transcends global societies, engendering multifaceted challenges to individual well-being and equitable social structures (UN Women, 2020). It encompasses a wide range of harmful behaviors and practices that are inflicted upon individuals based on their gender, leading to physical, psychological, and socio-economic consequences (Heise et al., 2019; Johnson, 2008). GBV is often driven by unequal power dynamics between men and women, as well as cultural norms and stereotypes that perpetuate harmful behaviors (Jewkes et al., 2015; Connell, 2012). Positioned within the media landscape, particularly within the realm of soap operas, the portrayal of GBV emerges as a potential influencer of audience attitudes, perceptions, and behavior (Greitemeyer, 2019b). Addressing this dynamic in the Kenyan context necessitates an exploration of the intricate connections between media representations and societal responses, emphasizing the importance of discerning portrayals of GBV and their implications for audience engagement.

Media, as a powerful agent of socialization, is instrumental in constructing and disseminating cultural narratives. GBV, portrayed in the media, provides a lens through which audiences perceive and interpret social norms and behaviors. These portrayals, as argued by Christensen (2013), transcend mere reflection and actively contribute to the framing of societal issues. The selection, framing, and context of media content, as discussed by Kitzinger (2004), influence how audiences comprehend and engage with complex topics like GBV. Media's influence extends beyond entertainment, shaping individual worldviews and societal values. McRobbie (2008) emphasizes media's role in shaping cultural meanings and norms, thereby influencing attitudes and behaviors. Media portrayals of GBV, depending on their nature, can either perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes or challenge them (Dines & Humez, 2011). The interplay between media representations and real-world attitudes highlights the complex relationship that influences societal perceptions.

The media plays a significant role in perpetuating or challenging gender stereotypes. These stereotypes, as highlighted by Jhally (2009), often frame the portrayal of characters and their interactions, shaping perceptions of what is considered normal or acceptable behavior. Such stereotypes can influence audience attitudes toward GBV, either reinforcing the status quo or prompting critical reflection. Studies have shown that media representation significantly influences societal views on gender roles and norms (Chandra & Goswami, 2019), as well as a strong connection between media portrayals and real-world attitudes and behaviors (Christensen et al., 2019). Media has the power to shape the perception of masculinity and femininity, reinforcing certain traits and behaviors as acceptable within those constructs (Chandra & Goswami, 2019). Moreover, media representations not only reflect societal norms but also contribute to their construction. Gauntlett (2008) posits that media serve as both mirrors and makers of culture, perpetuating or challenging existing gender norms.

Audiences exposed to diverse and complex portrayals of GBV may develop a more nuanced understanding of the issue, subsequently influencing their attitudes and behaviors. Hence, media can shape perceptions of GBV, impact understanding of consent, and influence responses to violence (Christensen et al., 2019). Therefore, recognizing media narratives' influence is crucial for fostering responsible storytelling, challenging calcified gender stereotypes, and driving positive social change. Soap operas, with their widespread popularity and accessibility, possess the potential to catalyze societal change. Their storytelling format allows for the exploration of nuanced social issues over time, enabling the audience to engage deeply with characters and their challenges. Kavoori & Punathambekar (2008) argue that soap operas can serve as vehicles for social commentary and transformative storytelling, promoting conversations around sensitive topics like GBV. By harnessing their potential as platforms for meaningful discourse, they can be used by media creators to reshape societal norms and advance gender equality.

Media representation theory highlights the role of specific portrayals in either reinforcing or challenging prevailing societal norms, attitudes and beliefs (van, 2020). Framing theory, on the other hand, examines the selective presentation of information that influences public perception (Entman, 2012). These frameworks offer insights into the intricate interplay between media depictions of GBV and audience interpretations. In this study, these theories directly guided the exploration of the portrayal of various forms of GBV in Kenyan soap operas and how they align or deviate from prevailing norms.

By explicitly connecting these theories to the research objectives, the researchers aimed to analyze how the framing of GBV in these narratives influences viewer perceptions and attitudes. This would enable a comprehensive assessment of how these theories underpin and shape the portrayal of GBV and its effects within the soap opera context.

Social constructivism provides a lens to examine the role of societal norms and beliefs in shaping individual behaviors (Gergen, 2015). This lens is relevant for examining how media narratives intersect with prevailing perceptions, potentially reinforcing or contesting established attitudes and behaviors. By explicitly connecting social constructivism to the research objectives, the researchers sought to assess how GBV depictions in *Makutano Junction* and *Mother-in-law* influence viewers' perceptions and responses to GBV. This lens would facilitate a comprehensive understanding of how the interplay between media narratives and societal norms impacts the potential for positive attitude shifts and behavioral change among audiences.

II. METHODOLOGY

Analytical research design was utilized to systematically analyze the content and its impact on the audience. The researchers applied triangulation to enhance the robustness of the conclusions. Qualitative insights garnered from the FGDs were used to augment the quantitative findings gathered through content analysis. The study was conducted at Kenyatta University and Presbyterian University of East Africa. These institutions were selected for their diverse cultural environments, enabling the collection of comprehensive and culturally rich data. The study employed content analysis, analyzing all episodes of *Makutano Junction* and *Mother-in-law* up to December 2019 which totaled 1673 episodes. These soap operas were selected based on Ipsos Synovate and Geopoll Survey data from 2015 and their consistent recognition in the Kalasha Awards by the Kenya Film Commission since 2010.

The focus group discussions, respondents were purposively sampled to match the study's characteristics. The study focused on 24% of Nairobi County's soap opera audience, equivalent to 1,055,297 viewers, as indicated in the 2020 Status of the Media Report by the Media Council of Kenya. This selection aimed to balance participant numbers while ensuring manageable group sizes for meaningful discussions. The choice of 24% as a representative sample size considered practicality and the goal of gathering substantial qualitative insights. While no sample can perfectly represent an entire population, this approach aimed to capture diverse viewpoints on GBV portrayals, address intersectionality, promote inclusivity, account for Nairobi County's cultural and socioeconomic diversity, and capture a wide attitudinal spectrum.

Probability sampling was used for content analysis, systematically selecting 24 episodes of *Makutano Junction* and 114 episodes of 7 ½ minutes each for *Mother-in-law*. For FGDs, purposive sampling gathered six groups of 8 participants each. Of the six, three were male and three, female. Content analysis utilized a coding manual and structured coding sheet, while FGDs used a semi-structured interview guide. Content analysis involved observing and recording GBV instances using the structured coding sheet then cleaning and transcribing data. FGDs entailed recruiting participants, conducting discussions, and recording responses.

Content analysis data was analyzed using SPSS for descriptive and inferential analysis, as well as thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes. FGD data underwent transcription, coding, and NVivo software analysis for narrative and discourse analysis.

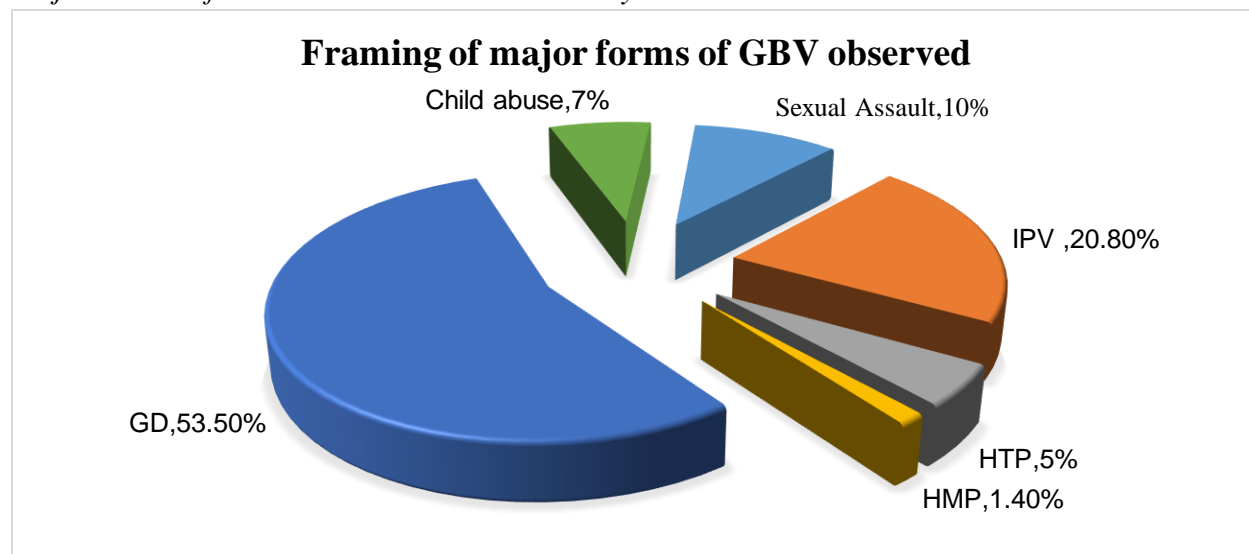
The researchers obtained ethical permits (No. P624/07/2021) from KNH-UoN ERC and research approval No. NACOSTI/1/P/22/15220 from NACOSTI) adhering to international codes. Informed consent ensured participant rights, anonymity, and confidentiality. Data integrity, copyright, and intellectual property were safeguarded. Sources were securely encrypted, stored, and backed up. Personal identifiers were promptly removed. The detailed approaches and materials used in data collection ensured the interpretation and enabled replication of the study's results. The methodology used in data collection was meticulously considered to ensure a comprehensive and rigorous analysis.

III. RESULTS

The analysis focused on six major GBV forms: Gender discrimination (GD), sexual assault, intimate partner violence (IPV), child abuse, harmful traditional practices, and harmful modern practices. This aligns with existing literature on the multifaceted nature of gendered violence and the need for a comprehensive examination of its manifestations (Connell, 2002). Gender discrimination accounted for 58% of incidents in *Mother-in-law* and 51% in *Makutano Junction*. IPV was the second most observed, accounting for 20.8% and 17% respectively.

Figure 1:

Major Forms of Gender-Based Violence Portrayed



Participants commented that most Kenyan soaps in general feature similar plots, same characterization and the audience can predict what will happen. A participant commented:

‘They lack content na wanaanza kuongeza tu watu show ikifika katikati’¹.

¹The shows lack content/ originality and only start adding more characters in the middle of the show

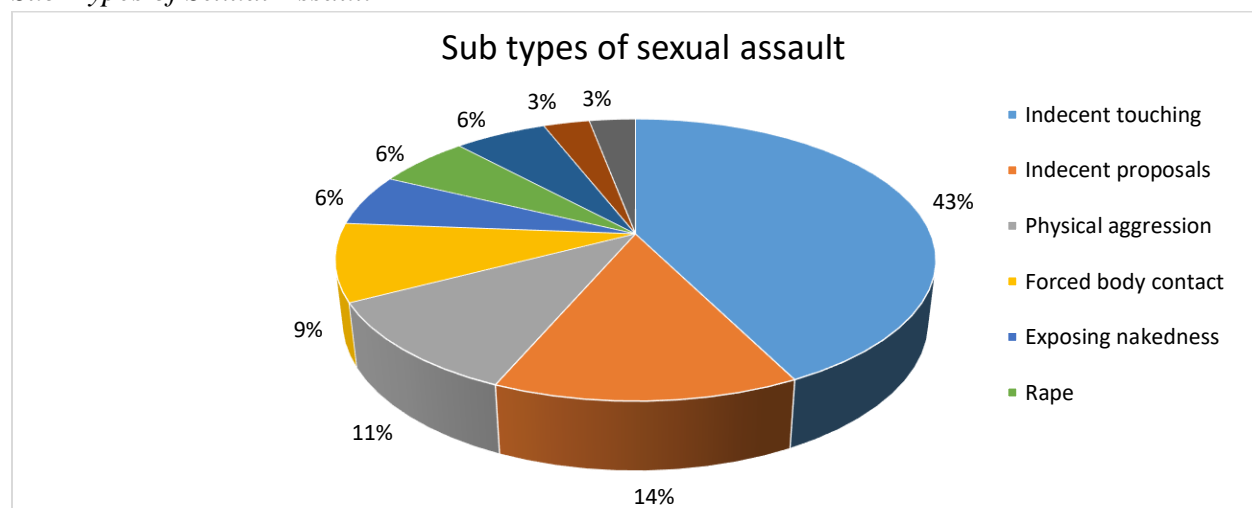
This observation reveals a lack of narrative depth and diversity which resonates with the concept of *narrative conformity*, wherein media content tends to perpetuate familiar storylines to cater to audience expectations (Nagel, 2001). Such narrative predictability might hinder the emotional impact of GBV scenes and could contribute to shaping audience attitudes by underscoring a trivialized perception of GBV incidents. Audiences might also view GBV storylines as attempts to generate drama rather than meaningfully address the issue.

The perception might also impact the depiction of empowerment themes which, if diluted dissuade audiences from adopting proactive attitudes toward addressing GBV. Lastly, lack of effort in crafting fresh narratives could lead to negative attitudes regarding the show's overall quality and diminished audience engagement. To note, however, is that Casting directors often reinforce stereotypes and draw from a limited talent pool, rather than representing the diversity of our real world (Smith, Neff, & Pieper, 2023).

The subtypes of gender discrimination were hostile environment, sexual harassment, gender intimidation, sexual humiliation, economic discrimination, vulgar language, social exclusion, educating girls and rating woman's attractiveness. Of the 128 cases of gender discrimination portrayed, hostile environment had 51 instances (39.8%), while sexual harassment had 20 (15.6%). The least portrayed were not educating girls and rating woman's attractiveness. The identification of various subtypes within each major GBV form offers an opportunity to integrate social theories that emphasize intersectionality, recognizing that individuals may experience multiple forms of violence simultaneously (Crenshaw, 2013).

The portrayal of gender discrimination subtypes, such as hostile environments and economic discrimination, aligns with broader discussions on the complex ways in which different forms of discrimination intersect and reinforce one another (Hancock, 2016). The subtypes were indecent touching, indecent proposals, physical aggression, forced body contact, rape, voyeurism, femicide, and intimidation. Of the 35 instances of sexual assault, the majority involved indecent touching, 15 (42.9%) and indecent proposals (14.3%). A summary of the results is in figure 2 below.

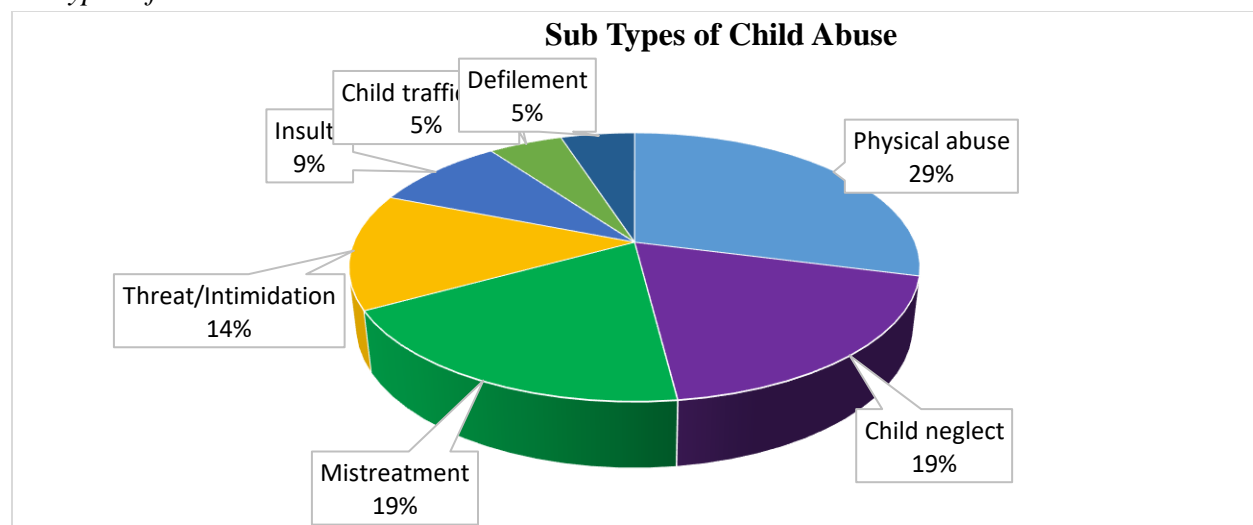
Figure 2:
Sub-Types of Sexual Assault



The IPV subtypes were physical violence, psychological harm, controlling behavior, social isolation, gas-lighting, negligence, threats, and more. Of the 43 instances of IPV portrayed, physical violence and psychological harm had 20.9% each. Controlling behavior was displayed 14% of the time, while social, physical, and financial isolation occurred 9.3% of the time. Cases of gas lighting, negligence of duties and threats accounted for 7% instances each. In addition, verbal insults, femicide and deprivation of food and other rights were witnessed in one instance each.

Depicted instances were physical abuse at 28.6%, child neglect at 19%), mistreatment at 19% and threats/ intimidation at 14.3%. The soap portrayed minimal scenes of other sub types. The summary is in figure 3 below.

Figure 3:
Subtypes of Child Abuse



The most depicted subtypes were pressure to marry and portrayal of traditional opinion of women (like homemakers) which occurred 23.1% of the time each. Other forms like FGM did not feature. Participants consistently avoided FGM in the discussions and omitted them from the themes they've watched in soaps. The most depicted subtype was lack of social education at 62.5%. Elder abuse accounted for 25% while children blackmailing parents occurred once accounting for 12.5%. The exclusion or underrepresentation of significant GBV forms, including harmful traditional practices and child abuse, resonates with the concept of symbolic annihilation, which refers to the marginalization of certain social issues in media narratives (Tuchman, 1978). This portrayal may distort audience perceptions regarding the prevalence and significance of these forms of violence, influencing their attitudes and beliefs. By acknowledging this limited portrayal, the study underscores the role of media in shaping public understanding of GBV, aligning with the tenets of cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002).

The substantial under-representation uncovered in the analysis mirrors the way audiences perceive, comprehend, and react to these forms of violence within Kenya, as illuminated by the insights from the focus group discussions.

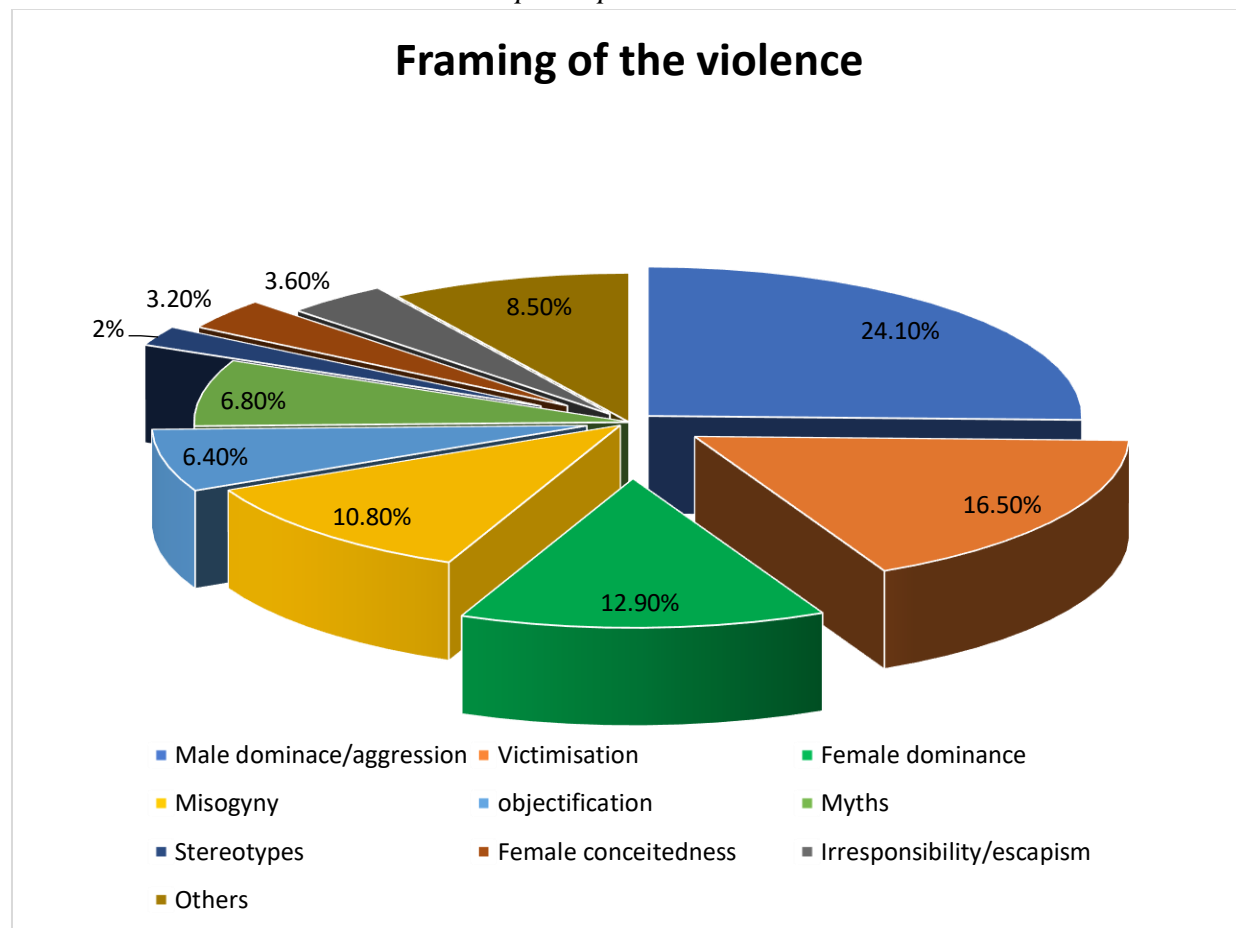
Participants astutely pointed out that these practices tend to remain obscured within public discourse, highlighting a prevalent underestimation of their prevalence and the gravity of their impact on Kenyan society. These revelations align with cultivation theory, suggesting that media portrayals can significantly influence public perceptions and beliefs about the prevalence of GBV issues (Gerbner et al., 2002).

Some participants also expressed that these forms of violence were considered less pressing compared to others depicted in the soap operas. This discrepancy highlights a distortion of reality, as statistics reveal that approximately half of Kenyan children experience violence (UNICEF, 2019), and the prevalence of FGM in Kenya is reported to be 15% (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS] & ICF, 2023). The resulting distorted reality can lead to misinformed attitudes and beliefs among the audience. Furthermore, this limited portrayal skews the audience's perception of the problem's complexity and magnitude. Additionally, this analysis illustrates the importance of broadening the representation of GBV forms in soap operas.

Male dominance and victimization were the most frequent frames (20.9% and 16.5% respectively). A summary is in figure 4 below.

Figure 4:

How Violence Was Framed in The Sampled Episodes



The portrayal of male dominance and victimization within these soap operas seamlessly intersects with well-established gender theories, particularly Connell's framework which underscores the significance of power dynamics between genders (1987). This portrayal operates not only to perpetuate traditional gender roles but also to cultivate victim-blaming attitudes among viewers, echoing the findings of research on the *just world hypothesis* (Lerner & Miller, 1978). This hypothesis posits that individuals tend to perceive victims as deserving of their suffering. By grounding these portrayals in robust theoretical concepts, this study illuminates the media's role in reinforcing and perpetuating entrenched beliefs and attitudes about GBV and gender dynamics. Moreover, by linking these portrayals to psychological theories, the study unveils the potential role of media in perpetuating certain attitudes and perceptions regarding GBV incidents. This attitude was evident in male participants who blamed the victims for the violence. A male participant observed:

*'Unawork under pressure juu yao,coz' if you cannot keep her, another man will. Wengine wanatumiza ndio wanachapwa'*²

Citing feminist media theories, the depiction of objectification and stereotyping in the soap operas reinforces traditional gender norms and roles (Kilbourne, 1999). The observation that women's worth is linked to their appearance and conformity to stereotypes reflects broader discussions on the objectification and commodification of women's bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Participants noted that many Kenyan soap opera plots adhere to stereotypes, exemplified by the portrayal of women like Celina in *Mother-in-law*, who are objectified. This portrayal further ingrains the belief that a woman's value is tied to her physical appearance and conformity to certain stereotypes. Consequently, this portrayal influences audience attitudes towards acceptable gender roles and behaviors, perpetuating traditional views of femininity. Conversely, when audiences recognize these problematic portrayals, it can stimulate group discussions and activism.

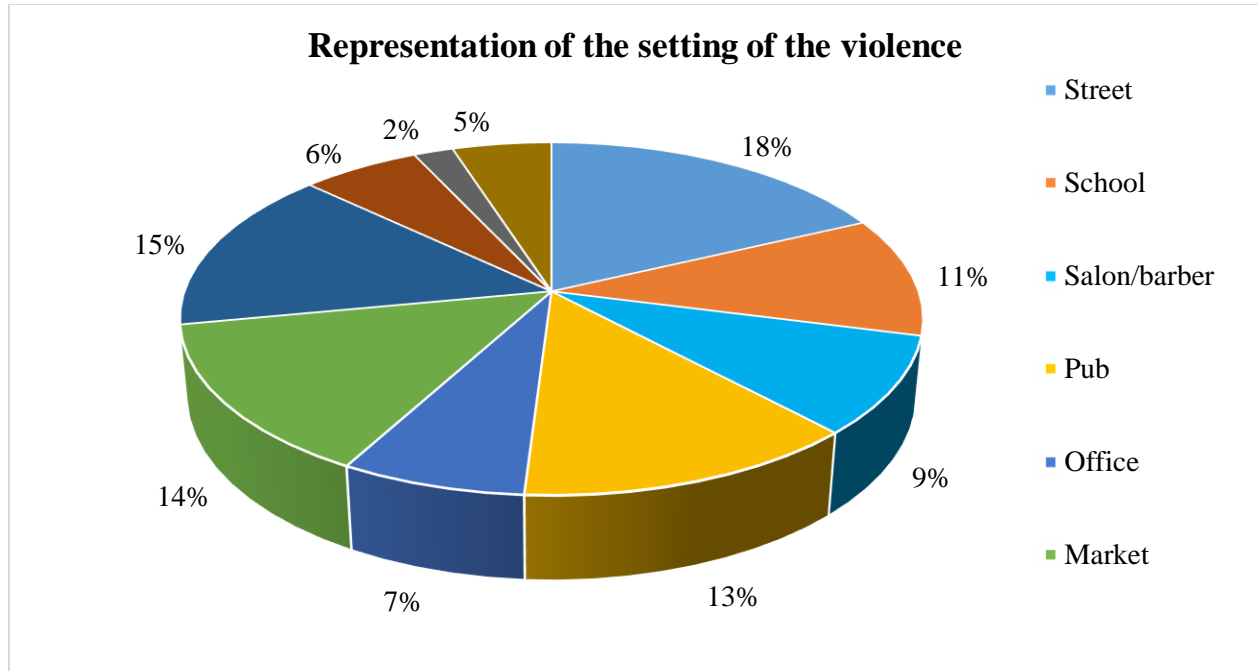
Another participant highlighted that the objectification of women in narratives has contributed to the emergence of voluptuous video vixens in music videos and the culture of *sponsors* (Wababas) in Kenya. This indicates that viewers have internalized the gender roles and stereotypes presented in the soap operas. These observations underscore the significant impact of traditional gender norms on the depiction of GBV in soap operas, emphasizing the need to examine how media reinforces harmful narratives related to male dominance, victimization, female objectification, and misogyny. Particularly, the victimization of female characters has the potential to perpetuate the perception of passive and helpless victims, which could foster victim-blaming attitudes.

² You work under pressure because of a woman. The reason is, if you cannot keep her, another man will. Some make us suffer mental torture that's why they're beaten up

The street and the home were most common violence settings (18.2% and 13.6%). Figure 5 below has the illustration.

Figure 5:

Representation of the Setting of Violence



The portrayal of common settings like the street and home as contexts for gender-based violence connects with studies on *symbolic geography*, where certain locations are linked to specific social meanings (Mitchell, 2000). This portrayal shapes audience perceptions by normalizing these settings as contexts for gender-based violence, thus influencing attitudes and beliefs about the acceptability and prevalence of such incidents in real life.

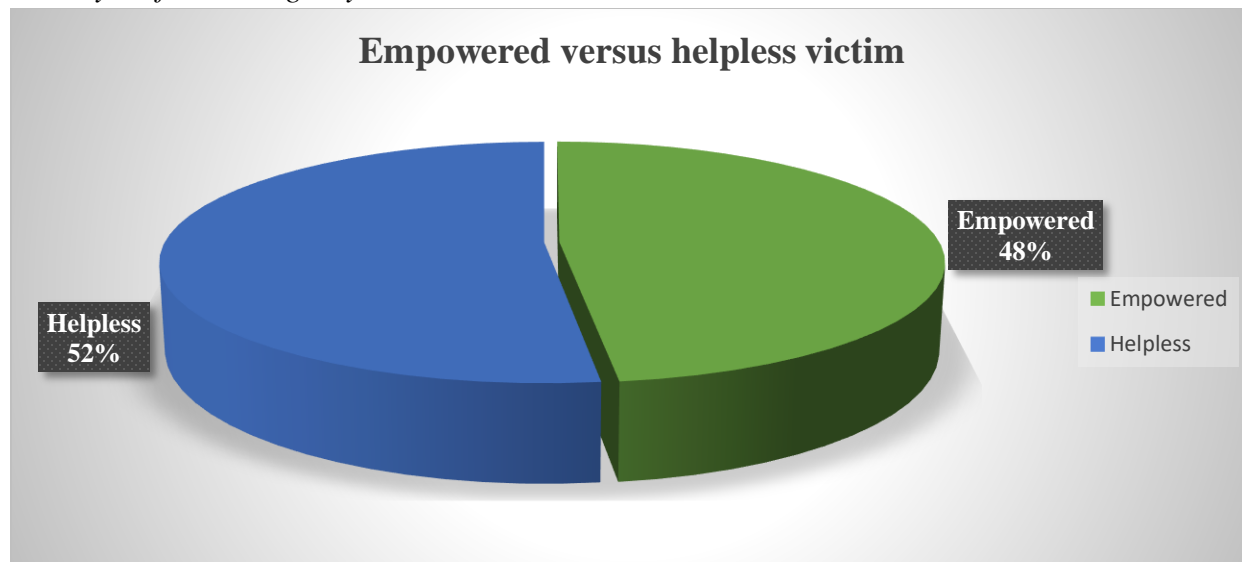
Characteristics of Perpetrators and Victims

Regarding perpetrator gender, males accounted for 45% and females for 53%, with variations across GBV subtypes. For instance, child abuse and intimate partner violence were predominantly committed by males, whereas gender discrimination, harmful traditional practices, and sexual assault had over 50% of their perpetrators identified as females. In terms of victim gender, females were victims 56% of the time, while males comprised 42%. The soaps predominantly depicted victims as helpless, with *Makutano Junction* portraying 60.1% of victims as helpless and *Mother-in-law* portraying 54.8% as empowered. The portrayal of female victims as helpless and the variations in victim empowerment across different soap operas correlate with social cognitive theory, suggesting that viewers learn behaviors and attitudes through observation (Bandura, 1986). This could lead to varying levels of empathy and identification with characters. Moreover, the normalization of victimization and the absence of consequences in some cases might inadvertently contribute to desensitization to GBV incidents, reinforcing the perception that such behaviors have few repercussions.

These portrayals can shape audience attitudes and behaviors by presenting role models or relatable characters that influence viewers' perceptions of agency and empowerment.

Figure 6:

Portrayal of Victim Agency



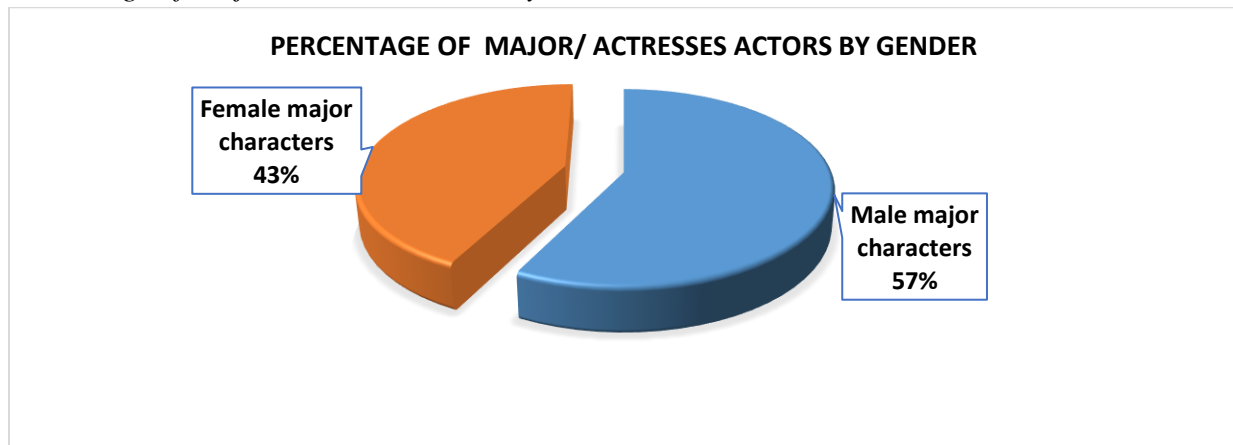
They also noted that soaps often conceal victims of gendered violence who only disclose the violation years later, a concept echoed by Crenshaw (2013). For instance, in *Mother-in-law*, Betty revealed her rape when her son, Alpha, was a teenager, while in *Maria*, Lona didn't report the rape by Victor. They, further, highlighted instances where rape is trivialized as victims reconcile, fall in love, and marry their violators, which contrasts with the exception rather than reality. According to a participant:

*'Mtu anakurape then unampenda. Mbona unampenda na amekurape?'*³

The participant's comment underscores the worry that portraying victims who form relationships with perpetrators can normalize harmful dynamics, impacting audience attitudes by blurring love and abuse distinctions. Repeat exposure might skew views on healthy relationships, possibly accepting abusive behaviors. The comment critiques the disparity between soap opera portrayals and real-life responses, suggesting audience recognition of this gap. Yet, such portrayals subtly affect perceptions, fostering doubt about victim-perpetrator dynamics. The query demonstrates potential for heightened audience awareness, spurring dialogue, advocating against GBV, and countering harmful narratives. The soaps also portrayed stereotypes of men and women. There were more male major characters (57.3%) than females (42.6%).

³ Someone has raped you yet you love them. Why should you love your rapist?

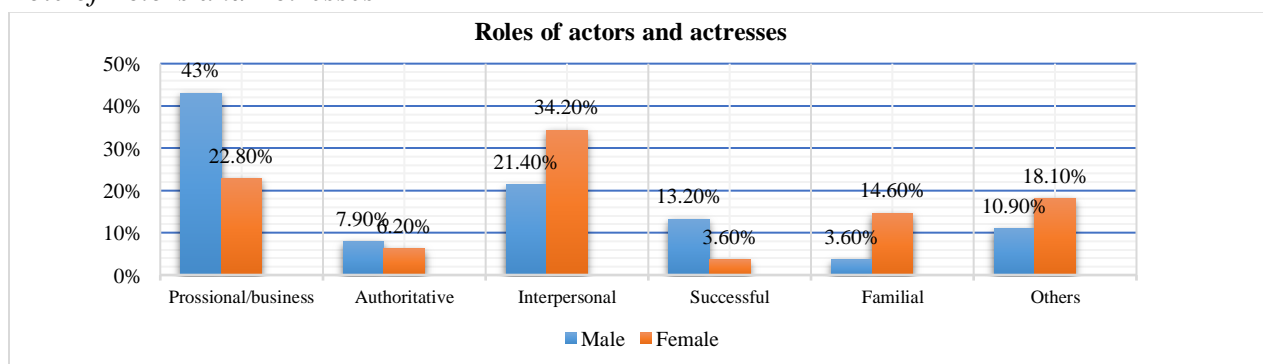
Figure 7:
Percentage of Major Actors/ Actresses by Gender



The overrepresentation of male major characters and the concurrent underrepresentation of female major characters resonate with scholarly conversations surrounding the glass ceiling and gender representation in media (Butler & Paisley, 2016). This portrayal normalizes traditional gender roles and reinforces existing power imbalances within society. By linking these findings to relevant literature, the study underscores the significance of media in perpetuating gender disparities in both on-screen and real-world contexts.

Depicting victims as helpless could contribute to accepting such roles in real-life situations, while variations in victim empowerment across different soaps can shape audience interpretations of power dynamics and responses to violence. Participants concurred, emphasizing the need for supportive characters like influential justice advocates, highlighting the role of empathy and understanding. The prevalence of male major characters may reinforce conventional gender roles, affecting audience perceptions of power dynamics and relationship roles as well as normalizing unequal power relations. In contrast, the scarcity of female major characters might sustain perceptions of women's subordination and their capacity to address violence. As pointed out earlier, Female characters were allocated interpersonal and subordinate roles while actors were allocated professional and authoritative ones. Minor characters were mainly female at 50.1% while males were 49.8%. Figure 8 below illustrates.

Figure 8:
Role of Actors and Actresses



The overrepresentation of successful male characters in professional roles compared to their female counterparts reinforces gender-based hierarchies. Female characters frequently assume interpersonal and familial roles, while males are portrayed as accomplished professionals. Participants noted that these portrayals perpetuate male superiority, implying women's dependence on men for financial support and opportunities, justifying rape as a means of asserting dominance. Participants added that many soaps portray two women fighting over one man therefore portraying the man as superior like Joyce and Celina fighting over Charlie in *Mother-in-law*, Maria and Sophie fight over Louis in *Maria*, and in the same soap, Maggie and Stephanie are fighting over Cyrus. The portrayal of women competing for one man further reinforces traditional gender hierarchies, normalizing unequal power dynamics and shaping audience perceptions of men's superiority in relationships.

Merely 4% of violent acts portrayed in the soap operas exhibited physical injuries, trivializing the severity of GBV and fostering perceptions of painlessness and insignificance. The portrayal of violent acts, often devoid of physical injuries, presents a nuanced challenge, diminishing the gravity of GBV within the soap opera context. This phenomenon finds resonance with prior research on media censorship and cultural sensitivity, which illuminates the delicate balance between representing violence realistically and adhering to cultural norms and societal comfort levels (Johnson, 2020; Kamau et al., 2019).

These portrayals might also reflect broader discourses concerning the depiction of violence in Kenyan media, echoing discussions on the responsible portrayal of sensitive topics within the national context (Ochieng, 2019). Additionally, only 4% of these acts showed any legal consequences, reflecting a portrayal that diverges from real-world accountability. Focus group participants highlighted how these portrayals impacted their beliefs and reactions. The normalization of certain forms of violence, along with the absence of depictions showcasing suffering and the enduring trauma faced by survivors, immediately affected their perceptions of GBV's seriousness. This omission could lead to downplaying the severity of the issue in real life. The portrayal of physical consequences and legal accountability within the soap operas aligns with well-established research on the just world hypothesis and the media's presentation of violence (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982). These portrayals, or the lack thereof, influence audiences to perceive GBV as less severe or less likely to lead to real-world consequences. By grounding this finding in psychological theory, the study emphasizes the role of media in shaping audience attitudes and beliefs about the consequences of GBV incidents.

Moreover, participants observed that the absence of justice for victims and the lack of consequences for perpetrators in soap operas contribute to the trivialization of GBV. Examples like Kwame escaping punishment for killing Alma in *Maria* and Mandiba conveniently passing away in *Zora* were cited. This absence perpetuates misconceptions and obstructs a comprehensive understanding of victims' experiences. The portrayal of impunity in the soap opera narratives also influences perceptions of justice and accountability, with some participants suggesting that it reflects real-life scenarios where perpetrators often evade punishment.

The soaps often portray intoxicated men as confident and assertive like Charlie in *Mother-in-law*. This portrayal can normalize associating these traits with being drunk and skew perceptions of acceptable behavior. The soaps also depict men committing sexual assault while intoxicated or targeting inebriated women. This portrayal shifts blame to alcohol or drugs, absolving perpetrators of legal responsibility. Some participants found this justification resonating, affecting their views on culpability. For instance, in *Maria*, Victor rapes Lornah while drunk, and in *Zora*, Fera assaults Alma under similar circumstances. However, real-life violence perpetrators are diverse, and not all sexual assault cases involve intoxicated individuals.

The researchers underscore that there is no justification for violence whatsoever, and their focus was solely on how the soaps depicted violence without endorsing real-life justifications for such acts. The prevalence of unjustified GBV cases (85%) among the observed instances of violence in the soaps could distort audience perceptions, presenting a skewed view of real-life violence justifications. The overabundance of unjustified violence portrayals might overly simplify motives, possibly impacting audience attitudes by downplaying the complex factors behind violence. This portrayal might influence how audiences perceive the frequency and reasons for GBV, possibly leading to a less nuanced understanding and diminished empathy for victims and their experiences.

These discoveries align harmoniously with the wealth of previous research in the realms of media psychology and communication studies. For instance, the work of Christensen et al. (2019) and McRobbie (2008) resoundingly demonstrates that media representations wield considerable influence, inciting significant shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors among audiences. By integrating these findings into the broader discourse of media effects, this study firmly situates its own research within a well-established academic context.

The study's findings offer a compelling glimpse into the multifaceted consequences of GBV portrayals within Kenyan soap operas. These portrayals, while serving as a mirror reflecting societal attitudes and norms, simultaneously raise critical questions regarding their influence on viewers. In considering the wider implications of these findings, it becomes apparent that media representations possess the capacity to both reinforce existing beliefs and challenge them, a phenomenon underscored by the dynamics of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986).

IV. DISCUSSION

The research objectives were firstly, to discern underlying patterns, themes and messages using content analysis. Secondly, identify specific forms and sub forms of GBV depicted in *Mother-in-law* and *Makutano Junction* since 2007, thirdly, establish how violence was framed and characterized in these soaps and lastly, examine how these portrayals might influence the perceptions and behavior of audiences. This study drew upon media representation and framing theories, as well as social constructivism, to provide a robust framework for understanding the complex interplay between media depictions of GBV and audience interpretations.

The analysis of GBV portrayals in Kenyan soap operas has revealed several key patterns and themes. These patterns encompass the forms and subtypes of GBV, framing techniques, characteristics of violence and its agents, as well as the settings and consequences depicted in these portrayals. The findings indicate that the soap operas predominantly focused on six major forms of GBV: gender discrimination, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, child abuse, harmful traditional practices, and harmful modern practices. Among these, gender discrimination emerged as the most frequently portrayed form, followed by intimate partner violence.

The framing of GBV scenes within these soap operas varied significantly. While some adhered to traditional gender roles and victimization narratives, others challenged these norms by portraying characters with agency and challenging the dominance of male characters. These framing techniques often influenced how viewers perceived the seriousness of GBV incidents.

Male dominance and victimization were the most frequent frames in the soap operas, aligning with prevailing gender theories. However, variations were observed across different soap operas, reflecting the complexity of character portrayals. The common settings for GBV within the soap operas were the street and the home. Notably, the portrayal of violent acts often lacked physical injuries, potentially trivializing the severity of GBV. This omission may be influenced by cultural norms and sensitivity in depicting graphic violence on screen.

In light of the research objectives and the theoretical framework, it is essential to consider how these identified patterns and themes align with or deviate from the expectations based on media representation and framing theories. Some of the identified patterns align closely with the expectations of media representation and framing theories. For instance, the portrayal of gender discrimination and intimate partner violence resonates with the multifaceted nature of GBV highlighted in the literature. This suggests that the soap operas effectively portrayed the complexity of GBV, as theorized by media representation scholars. However, deviations from the expected patterns outlined in media representation and framing theories were also observed. One notable deviation was the variation in framing techniques across different soap operas. Some challenged traditional gender roles by portraying female characters with agency, indicating that soap operas have the potential to subvert established gender dynamics.

These patterns and deviations in GBV portrayals carry significant implications for how viewers may perceive and respond to GBV. Soap operas have the power to reinforce existing beliefs or challenge societal norms, depending on the framing and characterization choices. When soap operas challenge traditional gender roles, they may contribute to changing audience attitudes by providing alternative narratives that challenge established norms. The findings of this study have direct implications for media policy in Kenya and beyond. Responsible media representation of GBV is essential for fostering a society that prioritizes gender equality and violence prevention. Therefore, media policies should consider collaborations with regulators and media houses to establish clear content guidelines that promote responsible GBV portrayals while respecting artistic freedom. These guidelines should emphasize the importance of nuanced storytelling that challenges stereotypes and norms.

Moreover, media professionals should undergo training on GBV sensitivity and its portrayal to ensure that they are equipped to handle this delicate subject matter with care.

Additionally, regular monitoring and assessment of soap opera content should be conducted to ensure compliance with established guidelines. Accountability mechanisms should be in place to address violations. NGOs and government agencies can leverage these findings to develop awareness campaigns targeting both media professionals and viewers. These campaigns can highlight the potential impact of GBV portrayals and provide resources for those affected by GBV. Another dynamic is counseling and support where social interventions can include the establishment of support systems and counseling services for viewers who may be emotionally affected by GBV portrayals. Viewer education can be initiated by Soap operas to educate viewers about GBV, its consequences, and available support services. Engaging and educational storylines can help break the cycle of violence by raising awareness and encouraging positive behavior change. Additionally, media houses should embrace established feedback mechanisms to allow viewers to voice concerns about GBV portrayals. This can create a dialogue between content creators and the audience, leading to more responsible content.

Responsible media representation has the power to challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes. By portraying strong, empowered female characters who resist victimization, soap operas can influence societal perceptions of gender roles. This can contribute to greater gender equality in society, encouraging women to seek independence and self-empowerment. Responsible GBV portrayals can serve as a powerful tool for violence prevention. By depicting the consequences of GBV and showcasing alternatives to violent behavior, soap operas can contribute to a reduction in real-world violence. Viewers may be inspired to intervene or seek help in situations of violence, ultimately contributing to safer communities. Moreover, media representation can foster empathy among viewers, helping them better understand the experiences of GBV survivors. This empathy can lead to increased support for survivors, both individually and within the community. Lastly, responsible media representation can contribute to a cultural shift in how society views and responds to GBV. By challenging harmful stereotypes and norms, soap operas can help create a more inclusive and equitable culture.

Conclusion

In summation, this study's findings intricately unveil the dynamic interaction between media depictions and audience perceptions. The analysis has accentuated the resonance of GBV representations in *Makutano Junction* and *Mother-in-law* with prevailing gender norms and stereotypes. It has demonstrated that the portrayal of GBV within soap operas bears the power to either reinforce detrimental mindsets or counteract them by means of deliberate and conscientious narrative craftsmanship. To galvanize a positive societal transformation, it becomes paramount for media creators to acknowledge their influential role and ardently strive to depict GBV in a manner that cultivates consciousness, compassion, and empowerment.

Recommendations

The researchers fervently advocate for responsible storytelling, emphasizing the need for content creators to avoid normalizing harmful dynamics. Diversifying GBV portrayals is pivotal for a more comprehensive understanding. A central element of this transformation involves challenging archaic gender roles and stereotypes. By spotlighting empowered characters and relationships as potent counteragents to harmful norms, soaps can foster powerful emotional connections with audiences. Simultaneously, the researchers emphasize the visceral and legal repercussions of GBV, amplifying awareness and accountability for perpetrators.

Furthermore, a resolute rejection of violence rationalizations compels the media to delve into the intricate underpinnings of GBV, deepening audiences' insight into its foundational roots.

In the realm of soap operas, the researchers recognize the potential to ignite discourse on GBV. This potential can be harnessed by seamlessly integrating pragmatic solutions, survivor narratives, and transformative interventions into soap opera storylines. To realize this vision, they call upon media entities, activists, and policymakers to engage in public dialogue and champion media literacy programs. These endeavors empower audiences to critically analyze media portrayals of GBV. Additionally, collaboration with GBV advocacy groups, gender experts, and survivors can further equip content creators to deliver responsible and authentic GBV depictions. This collaborative effort holds the promise of lasting societal change and progress in the realm of GBV.

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