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Artificial Intelligence and the battle for authenticity: safeguarding truth in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming election campaigns globally and in Kenya through chatbots, predictive modeling, and data-driven targeting. While these tools improve efficiency and voter engagement, they also raise ethical concerns, including misinformation, deepfakes, privacy violations, and algorithmic bias, which may undermine public trust in electoral processes. This study examines AI's role in Kenyan election campaigns, identifies ethical challenges, and evaluates their implications for democratic integrity. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining surveys with 40 youths, key informant interviews, and content analysis of digital campaign materials. Findings reveal that although AI enhances strategic communication and voter outreach, it also facilitates the spread of disinformation and threatens electoral credibility. The study concludes that regulatory oversight, media literacy, and ethical AI use are necessary to safeguard trust in elections. These insights underscore the urgency of developing context-specific policies that balance technological innovation with accountability. Strengthening transparency, fairness, and ethical practices in digital campaigning is vital for sustaining voter confidence and protecting Kenya's democratic processes. By highlighting both the opportunities and risks of AI, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on digital democracy and provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, electoral bodies, and campaign strategists in Kenya.

Keywords: *Intelligence, Campaigns, Ethics, Kenya, Public Trust*

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly transforming electoral processes across the world, with profound implications for how political campaigns are designed and executed. In many democracies, AI tools such as predictive analytics, machine learning algorithms, chatbots, and deepfake technologies have been adopted to enhance voter targeting, streamline campaign communication, and forecast electoral outcomes (Woolley & Howard, 2019; Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; Chesney & Citron, 2019). In Kenya, similar trends have emerged, as political actors embrace digital tools to influence voter perceptions and mobilize support. While these innovations improve campaign efficiency, they also raise concerns about fairness, transparency, and accountability in the electoral process (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2021).

The growing use of AI in Kenyan election campaigns highlights a significant gap in research and practice. Although global cases such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal exposed the dangers of voter micro-targeting and data misuse (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018), limited scholarly work has focused on how these ethical dilemmas manifest in Kenya. The country's electoral history already faces challenges of misinformation, political polarization, and contested credibility of electoral bodies (Nadler et al., 2018). The rapid integration of AI tools into campaign strategies, without adequate regulation or ethical frameworks, risks deepening mistrust in democratic institutions. This gap underscores the need for empirical research that interrogates how AI is shaping electoral integrity in Kenya and what safeguards are necessary to protect public trust.

The importance of this study lies in its attempt to provide both theoretical and practical insights into AI's role in political campaigns. Ethical challenges such as privacy violations, deepfake propaganda, algorithmic bias, and the spread of misinformation directly affect voters' confidence in electoral outcomes (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Hosanagar, 2019; Pariser, 2011). Understanding these risks is crucial, not only for strengthening Kenya's democratic processes but also for informing policy debates in other African democracies undergoing similar transitions. By addressing these issues, the study seeks to guide policymakers, electoral bodies, and political actors in developing ethical frameworks that ensure AI serves as a tool for democratic participation rather than manipulation.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of AI in Kenyan election campaign strategies, identify the ethical challenges it poses, and assess its impact on public trust in the electoral process. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how AI-driven strategies such as micro-targeting, automated content, and predictive modeling are applied in Kenya; to evaluate the ethical concerns that emerge from these applications; and to determine the extent to which AI affects voters' perceptions of electoral credibility. Through these objectives, the study not only fills a scholarly gap but also contributes actionable recommendations for fostering ethical, transparent, and trustworthy elections in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, which combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mixed methods were appropriate because they allowed for the collection of measurable data while also providing deeper insights into participant experiences and expert opinions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative component focused on generating statistical data on awareness and perceptions of AI in election campaigns, while the qualitative component provided interpretive depth on ethical challenges and implications for public trust. Integrating both approaches enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings through triangulation of data sources (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

The study was conducted at Kabarak University in Nakuru County, Kenya. The institution was selected because it represents a diverse youth population from varied socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, making it an appropriate site for exploring perceptions of AI-driven political campaigns. The target population comprised Kenyan youth aged between 18 and 35 years, a demographic identified as highly active on digital and social media platforms and therefore most likely to encounter AI-generated political content (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2019).

A sample size of 40 respondents was determined as sufficient to provide insights while remaining manageable within the study's scope. A combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques was employed. Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents who were active users of digital platforms, while random sampling ensured fairness and minimized bias in participant selection (Polit & Beck, 2017).

Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, and content analysis. The questionnaires captured demographic data, awareness of AI in elections, exposure to AI-generated misinformation, and perceptions of electoral trust. Key informant interviews were conducted with election officials, political strategists, and digital communication experts to gain expert perspectives, while content analysis of AI-driven campaign materials on social media provided empirical evidence of misinformation and voter targeting (Krippendorff, 2019).

Data collection procedures followed a systematic approach. Questionnaires were distributed both physically and through online forms to enhance accessibility and participation. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and virtually, depending on respondent availability, and were recorded with informed consent. The content analysis involved reviewing selected campaign materials and coding them according to categories aligned with the study objectives (Neuendorf, 2017).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study adhered strictly to ethical principles to protect both participants and researchers from harm. Approval was first obtained from the Department of Mass Communication at Kabarak

Ombwak & Muchiri

University to ensure compliance with institutional standards and safeguard research integrity (Resnik, 2020). Informed consent was obtained after participants were briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. They were assured of voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any time without penalty, in line with the ethical principle of autonomy (Polit & Beck, 2017). Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by coding responses, omitting personal identifiers, and securely storing data in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

To minimize potential psychological, social, or physical harm, questions were designed with sensitivity, and participants' boundaries were respected throughout the study. Researchers declared no conflict of interest to maintain objectivity and fairness. By upholding institutional approval, informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data management, the study maintained both academic integrity and participant safety.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study, organized according to the stated objectives. Data is summarized using descriptive statistics and is supported by figures and tables where relevant. A brief narrative precedes each presentation to highlight key patterns.

Awareness of AI in Election Campaigns

The first objective was to analyze the role of AI in election campaign strategies in Kenya by assessing awareness levels among respondents. The findings show that a large majority of participants (91.2%) were aware of the use of AI in election campaigns, while only 8.8% reported no awareness. This indicates that knowledge of AI applications in politics is widespread among the youth.

Table 1. Awareness of AI Usage In Election Campaigns

Awareness	Frequency	Percentage
Aware	31	91.2%
Not aware	3	8.8%

Note. N = 34 respondents.

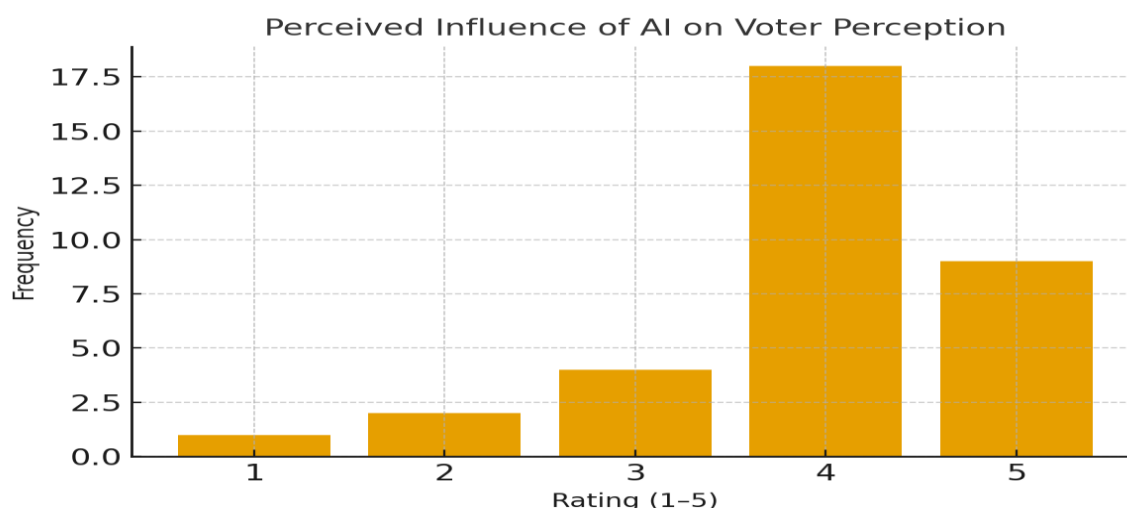
Respondents were also asked about specific AI tools they had encountered in campaigns. The most commonly mentioned tools were chatbots and automated content generation, followed by predictive analytics. Additionally, 84.8% reported having encountered AI-generated political content, highlighting the penetration of AI-driven digital campaigns.

Influence of AI on Public Trust

Ombwak & Muchiri

The second objective focused on the influence of AI-driven campaign strategies on public trust. The findings reveal that respondents rated AI's influence on voter perception highly, with most assigning it a 4 out of 5 rating. However, many respondents also believed that AI contributes to a lack of transparency in elections.

Figure 1. Perceived Influence Of AI On Voter Perception (Rating Scale 1–5)



Furthermore, findings show that AI-driven campaigns tend to decrease trust in political candidates. A large proportion of participants (91.2%) expressed concerns over the authenticity of political content, particularly due to AI-generated misinformation.

Ethical Concerns in AI Use

The third objective sought to identify ethical challenges arising from the use of AI in election campaigns. Respondents highlighted misinformation and fake news as the most pressing concern, followed by manipulation of public opinion and breaches of data privacy.

Table 2. Ethical concerns reported by respondents

Ethical Concern	Frequency	Percentage
Misinformation and fake news	20	58.8%

Ombwak & Muchiri

Manipulation of public opinion	9	26.5%
Data privacy concerns	5	14.7%

Note. Respondents could identify multiple concerns.

When asked about regulation, most respondents supported independent oversight and public involvement in regulating AI use in elections. Additionally, 94.1% agreed that AI use in political campaigns should be limited to reduce ethical risks.

Additional Insights

Participants provided additional comments, noting that while AI can improve voter engagement, its misuse for spreading misinformation undermines trust. Many emphasized the importance of media literacy and stronger regulatory frameworks to ensure ethical AI use in future campaigns.

DISCUSSION

Comparison with Prior Research

These findings align with international research showing that AI has reshaped political communication by enabling micro-targeting and enhancing voter outreach (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; Howard & Woolley, 2017). Similar to global trends, Kenyan respondents expressed concerns about algorithmic bias, misinformation, and data privacy, consistent with prior local studies. For example, Macharia and Ong'ong'a (2024) found that youth in Kiambu County frequently engage in political discussions on social media but are skeptical about the reliability of information due to widespread misinformation. Moreover, the report *Kenya: Tackling Misinformation is Critical for Electoral Integrity* (ARTICLE 19, 2022) documented numerous false claims spread during the 2022 elections via social media and fake news outlets. Unlike studies in Western democracies where AI-driven political advertising is highly institutionalized, the Kenyan context shows stronger public distrust in electoral institutions and a lower level of formal regulation, as seen in *MCK, IEBC sign MoU to strengthen media oversight ahead of 2027 General Election* (Eastleigh Voice, 2025).

Implications for Public Trust and Democracy

These local cases emphasize that beyond just awareness, the **regulatory environment and public media literacy** in Kenya are under stress. The amplification of political rhetoric during the 2022 general elections, documented by Mohamed (2024), showed how digital platforms can rapidly escalate polarization. Studies like Obare (2013) and Kamau (2013) further show that while social media increases engagement among youth, it also contributes to misinformation, polarization, and sometimes distrust. Our findings build on this by showing that AI-based tools may intensify these dynamics, unless oversight, transparency and ethical standards are enforced.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in Kenyan election campaigns, focusing on its ethical implications and the level of public trust it generates. Findings show that while AI enhances efficiency in voter targeting, data analysis, and campaign messaging, it also raises significant concerns about privacy, misinformation, manipulation, and transparency. These ethical challenges directly influence citizens' confidence in electoral processes. The results suggest that building public trust requires not only robust regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines but also continuous civic education to ensure AI tools are used responsibly. Ultimately, the responsible application of AI in election campaigns can strengthen democratic participation, provided ethical standards are upheld.

Recommendation (s)

- **Strengthen Regulatory Frameworks:** The government and electoral bodies should establish clear policies and laws governing the ethical use of AI in election campaigns.
- **Promote Transparency:** Political actors must disclose when and how AI tools are used in voter engagement to reduce suspicion and enhance accountability.
- **Enhance Civic Education:** Public awareness programs should be developed to educate citizens on AI-driven campaign practices, their benefits, and potential risks.
- **Protect Data Privacy:** Strict measures should be implemented to safeguard voter information against misuse, unauthorized access, or manipulation.
- **Encourage Multi-stakeholder Collaboration:** Regulators, technology developers, civil society, and political actors should work together to ensure AI is applied responsibly in election processes.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Licensing Statement

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Ombwak & Muchiri

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