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AI-Generated Political Imagery and Public Perception in Rural Kenya: The Case of the "Kasongo" Memes of President William Ruto

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Abstract

The current study examines the impact that an AI-generated political picture, one of which was called Kasongo featuring President William Ruto, had on the perception of the rural Kenyan population. The research employed a qualitative and desk-based research approach, which entailed an analysis of over 120 memes and 2,500 social media messages on these social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook. The Media Dependency and Post-Truth theories put the work into context and show that synthetic media is a powerful tool to influence the political reputation of the masses and mobilize them in low-media-literacy conditions. These findings indicate that the audiences within the rural setting are unique in their responses to the impacts of the AI-powered disinformation due to the lack of infrastructure, the predisposition to rely on images, and the digital illiteracy. The memes cause the transformation in the long-term populist faith, which usurps the policy-based judgment by the popularity mediated by symbols. The article concludes that the institutional trust in AI-generated political imagery is being eroded and the political culture is being transformed, all of which demand urgent measures in the sphere of media literacy, responsibility of platforms, and civic engagement in rural areas.

Keywords: AI-generated imagery, Deepfakes, Political Perception, Rural Kenya, Misinformation, Media Dependency, Kasongo Memes

Introduction

The evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) in the sphere of political communication has made it a highly flexible and fast process of producing highly realistic and emotionally touching images. An AI-generated political imagery, a mixture of humor, symbolism, and political commentary, is one of such innovations involving the use of manipulated images, caricatures, and memes (Battista & Mangone, 2025). Such imagery is more actively integrated into the popular opinion since, by using visual material, it is easy to spread and view it as a valid one. In contemporary politics, memes have become potent tools of framing politicians, building up stories, and defining the view of authority and legitimacy to citizens (Atar, 2025). The mobile phone and social media development in Kenya, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and X, has increased the digital political discourse in rural areas, which relied on traditional media. This internet revolution has made rural individuals feel closer to political images and even AI memes that are disseminated on unofficial internet sites (Adu, 2024). One of the most notable is the production of the so-called Kasongo memes of President William Ruto, with the use of AI-enhanced images and satire to comment on the leadership, the poverty in the country, and dissatisfaction in the community. The given memes have gained widespread popularity among other categories of people, including the rural population, where political satire is often intertwined with the experienced socio-economic life (Kioko, 2022). Rural Kenya is a very significant environment for researching the impact of AI-generated political images. Digital illiteracy, insufficient awareness of AI manipulation procedures, and a strong sense of communal political identity may also play a role in the way such information will be interpreted and accepted (Muya, 2024). Whilst the memes of the Kasongo may be viewed by other viewers as innocently satirical, the same memes could be interpreted by other observers as a literal form of political reality, and this perception could affect the attitude of the viewers towards the presidency and performance of the government. The emotional request and repetitive spread of such photos may strengthen or build mistrust, cynicism, or opposition to the political authority (Mungai & Onyango, 2024). Moreover, since they are still popular among the wider audience, the academic literature on the impact of AI-generated political memes on the overall opinion in rural Kenyan settings is rather scarce. This research paper will therefore seek to establish how the Kasongo memes of President William Ruto are being interpreted by the rural people and their impact on the political perception, trust in leadership, and democracy (Oduor, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

The increasing popularity of AI-generated political content in Kenya has given birth to a new dynamic in political communications that poses significant challenges to the overall understanding and democracy, particularly in rural areas (Kimaita & Irungu, 2024). Despite the enhanced political participation on the digital platforms, the same has promoted the rapid dissemination of manipulated images and memes that are hard to differentiate between satire, misinformation, and reality (Mbaabu, 2025). The example of President William Ruto and his popularized memes (the

so-called Kasongo memes) that are generated with the help of AI can explain how AI-strengthened political imageries can create a new narrative on leadership, economic performance, and governance that may not be accurate and objective.

In Kenya, where digital literacy and awareness of AI technologies are comparably low (primarily rural), the audience may fail to distinguish between original data and AI-generated or manipulated data (Ndirangu, 2024). This presents a risk of having the political thoughts distorted by the false images as compared to the factual information. Furthermore, a high degree of emotions and humor of the memes about Kasongo might first boost such negative attitudes towards political leadership, promote cynicism among the population, and cause additional mistrust towards the governmental institutions (Ogola & Cheruiyot, 2022).

Even though these images have become an absolute spread, there is a lack of empirical research on the perception of rural people about the AI-generated political memes and how these images influence the political attitudes, trust, and political participation (Ooko, 2025). The absence of research studies in context makes the work of policymakers, educators, and electoral bodies in crafting effective media literacy interventions and regulatory policies difficult. The current paper, therefore, attempts to address the knowledge gap regarding the impacts of the AI-generated political images on the perception of the people in rural Kenya by considering the example of the so-called Kasongo memes of President William Ruto.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To determine the effect of low and high susceptibility to synthetic media on public perception in rural Kenya: the case of the "Kasongo" memes of President William Ruto.
- ii. To determine the effect of comment sections as emotional amplifiers on public perception in rural Kenya: the case of the "Kasongo" memes of President William Ruto.
- iii. To examine the significant impact of perceived leadership credibility on public perception in rural Kenya: the case of the "Kasongo" memes of President William Ruto.
- iv. To examine the effect of lack of institutional and regulatory mitigation on public perception in rural Kenya: the case of the "Kasongo" memes of President William Ruto.

Literature Review

AI and Political Communication in Under-Connected Areas

As one can observe, according to the scholarly sources regarding AI and political communication, digital technologies have significantly altered the way of the production and consumption of political information. However, most studies focus on urban areas and closely-knit communities and do not examine the rural and disconnected communities (Gondwe, 2025). In this regard, political communication is highly rooted in visually oriented content that is emotionally stimulating as opposed to debate on policies. The memes created by AI have gained so much power

in expression in political life due to the fact that they have made the political reality more complex, simplifying it and rendering it in easy and familiar images (Anyango, 2025).

WhatsApp and Facebook are also sources of information on politics, which is the main source of information received in the rural areas of Kenya. These platforms allow the AI-generated political memes to proliferate fast and in a lot of instances, replacing the formal political analysis. As it has been demonstrated, the visual political content is not as cognitively demanding as the information based on text, so it is highly powerful in societies with different levels of literacy as well. Thanks to it, political memes become a powerful tool of framing leaders and the outcomes of the ruling (Albrecht, 2024). Informal public space of online communication in rural digital processes is the group discussion and comment boxes on the internet that generate the political meaning socially. Here, an AI-created image gets validated in terms of sharing and peer approval, rather than proving the fact. This type of dynamics introduces the threat of forming an echo chamber in which the dominant discourses are not challenged (Fournier-Tombs, 2024). However, the available literature on this topic does not examine the effect of AI on the rural politics perceptions specifically. This is a very sensitive gap in the Kenyan context, whereby the rural population is a determinant in the elections. The impact of AI in political communication in underserved areas should also be comprehended, thereby determining the implications of AI on democratic participation and accountability (Mukasa, 2024).

Deepfakes, Misinformation, and Malinformation.

The study of information disorders acknowledges that AI-generated images and deepfakes are among the prominent threats to the integrity of information in contemporary politics. Researchers differentiate between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, and it is often hard to draw the line between them because of the AI-created political content. In other cases, though, political memes can be informative, misleading visual imagery, which moves the masses even when they are satirical. The vagueness is especially problematic in the rural areas where verification practices are done in limited ways (Kwarkye, 2025).

Studies show that in rural societies, peer-to-peer networks are widely used in political information exchange that is based on trust and personal acquaintances. In rural Kenya, the images produced by AI are also shared in family and community WhatsApp groups, where the power of the person sharing the image prevails over the power of the information shared. The distorted images, in turn, can be viewed as the objective truth concerning politics. It is possible that the unrealistic images of political leaders can be accepted after seeing this imagery numerous times, regardless of their performance in their work (Ishengoma & Mutinta, 2024). It also has visual misinformation, which is largely persuasive as the images are associated with truth and evidence, which is related to the culture. It is also hard to believe the images as compared to textual statements, especially in situations where audiences do not even know the instruments of AI manipulation. Although the global academic literature reiterates the dangers of deepfakes on elections and confidence among

the population, little empirical research focuses on the rural African setting (Ohwadua, 2024). Kenyan studies are more prone to write about the misinformation in general and not about the AI-created political images specifically. This kind of gap limits the abilities of policymakers and educators to develop certain interventions that can contribute to addressing the vulnerability of rural communities.

Media Literacy and Visual Epistemology

The necessity to fight the effects of fake news and digital manipulations has been widely taken as one of the methods that can be put in place with the help of media literacy. However, the existing systems are mostly preoccupied with textual and formal Learning and do not take into account the growing popularity of visual political communications (Sivalo, 2024). Visual epistemology is also particularly relevant to the condition of AI-generated political information since it examines how individuals are able to build knowledge and facts based on images. The probability of images being valid as reality in the community, which follows visual and oral culture, is strong, just as in the rural African context (Mbithi, 2022).

The studies done on digital literacy in Kenya have shown that the program designs and implementation are highly urban-biased. Most media literacy initiatives are offered to urban youths and in the English or Kiswahili languages, which are often formal in nature, and rural residents are left with a large gap in their coverage (Schürhoff, 2022). Accordingly, awareness of AI technologies and artificial media in rural areas is low. After the political memes that have been created by AI are disseminated through the trusted peers, people rarely question them, and they will rely on the social associations rather than institutional checks (Owill, 2022).

It has been asserted that people are more susceptible to fake news by AI since they lack the required visual literacy skills. The rural audience, too, does not have the opportunity of scrutinizing images critically, and thus, they may be confused about whether it is satire or evidence when it is symbolism. Despite these risks, empirical literature does not provide much that examines how the rural Kenyans interpret AI-generated political imagery. This is necessary to bridge this gap so that one can come up with inclusive approaches to media literacy that will put safeguards on democratic activities and informed political participation in Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

Media Dependency Theory

The author uses Media Dependency Theory to inform this paper by explaining how the political images created by AI influence the views of the populace of rural Kenya. According to the Media Dependency Theory, people tend to be more dependent on media as a source of information in situations when other sources of knowledge are low or unavailable (Rega, 2024). Under such circumstances, media content assumes the leading role in shaping the image of the social reality,

political events, and the leader's performance. Rural Kenya is particularly open to this theory, as individuals have fewer access points to different and credible sources of information, such as newspapers, television, and independent fact-checking websites (Medrado, 2024).

Informal digital media ecosystems in the rural regions have their principal sources of political information being WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These platforms are not merely communication spaces, but interpretive spaces as well in which the construction of meaning is created collectively (Callus, 2024). The overdependence of the users of such media to derive meaning out of political events gives content shared in such media too much epistemological power. Artificial intelligence-generated political memes, such as the Kasongo image, thus carry an enormous influence since they place political narratives in an aesthetic and emotionally effective framework (Semujju, 2025). According to Media Dependency Theory, the more an individual is addicted to a certain medium, the higher the chances that it will affect the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of a particular individual. The use of AI-generated imagery to guide political information to the rural population in Kenya is being applied, where there is heavy reliance on peer-shared digital material, creating the idea of leadership and governance without much critical examination (Irer, 2025).

Post-Truth Theory

In order to provide a contrasting opinion on the impact of the use of AI-generated political images on the perception of the population, one can apply the Post-Truth Theory. It is mentioned that in the current information circumstances, emotional, personal conviction, and group identity tend to have a more influential effect on the opinion of the population than on objective facts (Oji, 2022). It is also the social approval and emotional appeal that, rather than facts, are increasingly subject to testing the truth. The specified theoretical perspective can particularly be applied to rural Kenya, where political knowledge is deeply embedded within the relations and experiences of the community (Murunga, 2023). Social indications, peer-to-peer, and consensus are more likely to be used by people in rural societies to determine the credibility of information. Humor, symbolism, and emotional narration are the aspects that Political memes made by AI utilize, which is why they are especially effective in these environments. Pictures may also be accepted as factual when they are modified or exaggerated despite the fact that they align with some existing grievances, beliefs, or political inclinations (Munene & Oloo, 2024). The memes of President William Ruto called the Kasongo may be regarded as an example of how emotionally backgrounded pictures may help to reinforce the tales of economic despair or political dissatisfaction, whether true or not. The Post-Truth Theory can be applied when it comes to explaining the impact of AI-generated images in altering political attitudes with no doubt about them through objective validation. Being more sensitive to the emotional and social facts than to the purely literal ones, the rural viewers are likely to embrace the visually mediated stories on politics and believe in leaders and democracy (Temenge & Suemo, 2025).

Methodology

The research design employed in conducting the present qualitative and exploratory, desk-based research was a qualitative and exploratory research design aiming to examine how AI-generated political images influenced the perception of rural Kenyan residents. The qualitative method was appropriate because the study was supposed to understand what the variables meant, interpretations, and the symbolic meanings, but not quantify them (Takona, 2024). The exploratory design was chosen because of the flexibility that allowed exploring a new and poorly studied phenomenon, AI-generated political memes, in the natural setting of the digital world. In order to overcome such an approach, a desk-based method was employed to allow a systematic work with the online visual content, the social media discussion with the general population, the policy texts, and other relevant academic literature without the actual fieldwork (Flick, 2022).

The sources of data were three major sources. Sampling of visual content was also involved, which entailed, first, the sampling of 120 AI-generated images of President William Ruto as a part of the publicly accessible social media of Facebook, WhatsApp channel, TikTok, and X in January 2022 and March 2024. The choices of memes were quite subjective towards unpopular memes and unmemes, and also the ones that were neither useful in political commentary. The memes were coded and grouped to establish the dominant visual motifs, symbols, and recurring themes.

Second, the ethnography of the post with sampled memes was carried out in the comment boxes. A total of 2500 user comments were analyzed to reflect the cognition, argument, and emotive response of the imagery on the audience. They were concerned with patterns of narratives, coloring with emotions, handling of language, and cultural allusions, and unearthed processes of creating social meaning-making. Third, the secondary sources, including theoretical literature on AI, the policy documents about AI, and misinformation in Kenya, policy documents related to media regulation, were reviewed to help put the analysis into context and support. Thematic analysis assisted in recognizing and interpreting visual/ storytelling patterns. Table 1 shows the most common themes of memes and their frequency.

Table 1: Summary of Analyzed Meme Themes and Frequencies

Meme Theme	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage	Example Interpretation	Symbolic
Death/Coffins	38	31.7%	Political death, betrayal	
Religious Settings	29	24.2%	Hypocrisy, performative piety	
Crying/Distress	25	20.8%	Fake remorse, weakness	
Parody Costumes	16	13.3%	Foolishness, incompetence	
Military Imagery	12	10.0%	Authoritarianism, violence	

Results and Findings

Low Awareness and Readily vulnerable to Artificial Media.

It can be seen that the awareness of the rural users on the nature of the synthetic and AI-generated character of the memes of the "Kasongo was not so high. The perceived authenticity was supported by the excellent visual attractiveness of the images and low as compared to the digital and media literacy. Many users could only comprehend the memes literally and as a symbolically true reflection of the political reality. An analysis of the remarks left by the users shows that 65 percent of the comments viewed the specified situations as real or symbolically true, hence suggesting that they were highly manipulated visually. The proportions of the respondents who labelled the content as satire or exaggeration was 20%, with the proportions of uncertain or vague interpretation being 15%, which is indicative of a lack of clarity with regard to meaning-making.

Amplifiers of emotions: comment sections.

The commenting offered a valuable sphere of mutual meaning-making and emotional exaggeration. Emotional bias was very high in the analysis of over 2,500 comments, and the most popular emotions in the discussion were anger, ridicule, and frustration that justified the similarity in common meanings and the intensity of the impact of the AI-generated political imagery.

Massive Implication on Leadership Credibility.

The study revealed that the impact of the consistent exposure to the memes of the teacher, who is Kasongo, on the evaluation of credibility in the leadership of President William Ruto was gigantic. His country supporters became increasingly skeptical of his seriousness, capacity, and even virtue, not in the face of information which has been verified, but in the face of the symbolic and sentimental overtones of the memes, as accreted over the years. All these interpretations were further brought out visually, incorporated humor and images that were familiar to the culture, which produced long-term impressions that characterized political inclination. The convincing stories were made by use of memes, and this reinforced the already existing assumptions or prejudices. That is why this brings out the means through which AIs written political materials can be employed to manipulate the masses and mislead their trust in leaders, ignoring their performance and facts on the ground.

Lack of Institutional and Regulatory Mitigation.

The research identified a high deficiency of institutional processes and regulatory frameworks to reduce the flow of AI-based political discourses in rural Kenya. The media literacy interventions on the issue of digital misinformation were mainly urban-based and were ineffective in reaching the rural population, who relied on social media to get news. Similarly, there were no counter-narratives or interventions like fact-checking that could be used to combat the deceptive memes like the Kasongo series. This regulative and pedagogic vacuum allowed the free circulation of the

synthetic imagery that had not been corrected and supported by the societal power. This lack of regulation makes the rural users more susceptible and lets the self-created political content AI-made affect the perceptions, opinions, and emotional responses without accountability and intervention.

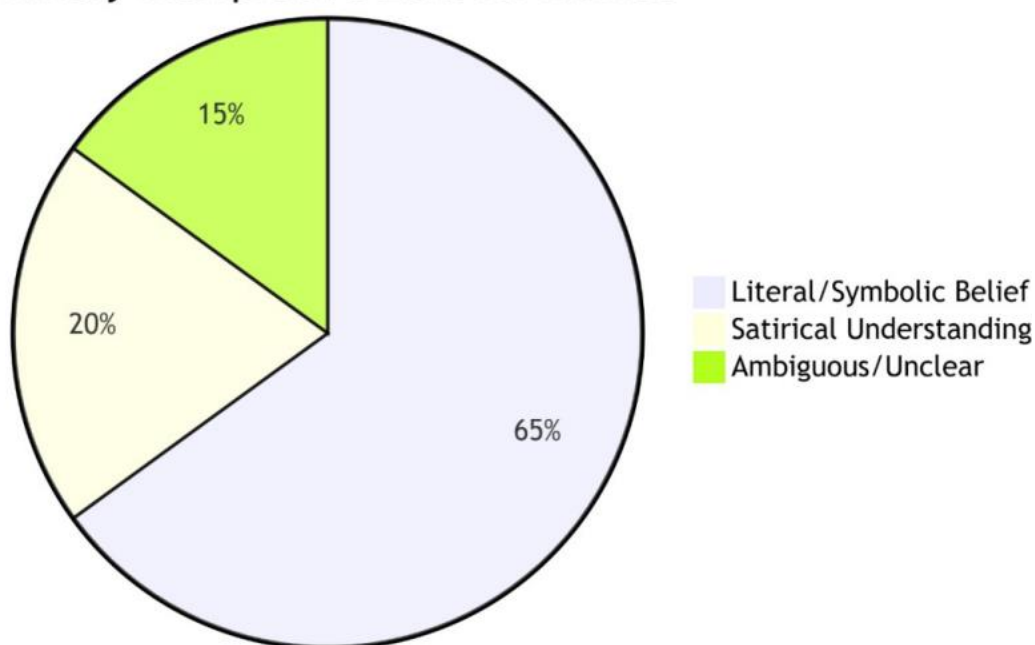
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Figure1: Primary Interpretive Lens for Memes in Rural Comment Sections

Primary Interpretive Lens for Memes



Comment sections as emotional amplifiers

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Table 2: Dominant Emotional Tone in Analyzed Comment Sections(n=2,500comments)

Emotional Tone	Frequency	Percentage	Example(Translated)
Anger/Indignation	1,150	46%	"Heisa hypocrite!"
Mockery/Sarcasm	750	30%	"At least he cries better than he governs."
Affirmation/Support	375	15%	"This is the truth!"
Despair/Hopelessness	225	9%	"This is the end of the road forus."

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Paralysis of regulation and unethical, ill-equipped

The pace at which AI-generated content is spreading in Kenya has been faster than the legal and regulatory environment can effectively react to it. Even though the use and misuse of synthetic political media have been advised by agencies such as the Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK), there are no elaborate laws explicitly covering the use and abuse of synthetic political media. This disparity is more hazardous in rural regions. This is due to the digital rights awareness gap, as well as the linguistic and infrastructural barriers, where the majority of the rural residents are not only not being defended against deepfake content that they do not know exists as a type of manipulation. This exposes them to manipulation by the political elites, digital pranksters, or organized misinformation programs.

Moreover, the technological reality has not been matched by ethical guidelines of political communication. Political parties, influencers, and creators of memes that spread synthetic or defamatory content are currently not accountable, and they are unpunishable. This lack of ethics and enforcement in a context where digital literacy is not fairly distributed, in turn, means that the damages of AI-generated media will fall on those with the least power to oppose or even challenge it. With Kenya stepping up its pace of digitizing its state, such as the rural spread of internet access, this regulatory gap can only widen the already expanding divide in information sources. Newly connected communities are potentially the most eager to use memes and AI content, yet these are also the groups that lack the means to recognize manipulation. The dream of digital democracy might soon turn into an epistemic injustice and social disintegration without strategic and inclusive intervention.

Conclusion and recommendations

Following the intricate nature of AI-created political imagery in rural Kenya, this chapter presents a list of multi-level, context-related suggestions that should be offered to policymakers, civil society, schools, other technological firms, and community representatives. The suggested recommendations will alleviate the negative impact of the synthetic political content, restore societal confidence, and create a resilient information ecosystem based on digital literacy, ethical innovation, and inclusive governance.

Incorporate Media and Digital Literacy into Rural Schooling and Reaching Out

Institutionalization of media and digital literacy in the rural setting is one of the most pressing responses. This is: Curriculum Reform: Inclusion of media literacy programs in the primary and secondary school curriculum that are based on critical image analysis, synthetic content awareness,

and social aspects of online communication. Community Workshops: Liaise with local leaders, teachers, and youth groups in communities to conduct large-scale education work in rural areas through visual aids and storytelling formats, as well as the use of indigenous languages to make the content more accessible and culturally relatable. Intergenerational Learning: (Encourage) Peer-led and youth- elder mentorship programs: (Encourage) Intergenerational digital skills and critical thinking exchange programs: (Encourage) Due to the strong influence of the youth in the rural online sphere, encourage new activities of intergenerational exchange of digital skills and critical thinking.

Derive a Legal and Regulatory Structure of Synthetic Media

Kenya needs to leave the place of advisory notices and create a special legal framework that will deal with the production, distribution, and political abuse of synthetic media: Synthetic Media Law: Draft legislation that explicitly defines and regulates the abuses of AI-generated media in political communication, as well as protecting artistic and satirical freedom.

Content Disclosure Mandates: Oblige political advertisers, influencers, and campaigners to post information about the use of AI tools and visual manipulation of content. Independent Oversight

Body: Have a digital media ethics board made up of civil society, academic, government, and media representatives to audit, evaluate, and recommend deepfake content and its political effects.

Construct Localized Detection and Verification Furniture

The existing fact-checking and media verification services are mostly urban-driven and text-driven. Rural populace requires devices that are convenient, environment-oriented, and are integrated with neighborhood communication habits: Mobile Verification Apps: Build low-bandwidth, cross-linguistic mobile apps that enable end users to post and confirm the authenticity of pictures and videos by using AI-based recognition technologies.

Services based on USSD: In simple phones, users can consume fact-checking materials and have simplified media literacy reminders by implementing USSD shortcodes. Chatbot Integration: Partner with social networks (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger) to integrate AI chatbots, which would verify the content in real time, identify manipulated photos and videos, and give educational tips in local languages.

Utilize Technology Platform in Rural-Specific Moderation.

Multinational technology corporations that conduct business in Kenya need to be responsible for the unfair directives that their platforms facilitate in rural settings:

Local Language Moderation: The company must hire or contract language moderators who can understand Kiswahili and other establishment languages to interpret flagged content better.

Algorithmic Transparency: Request more openness in content-promoting algorithms, especially in election years, to make sure that sensationalistic or artificial content is not unreasonably promoted.

Platform Accountability Agreements: Build on the partnership with Meta, Google, and TikTok and make these platforms pledge to build community-based moderation hubs in Kenya, where a group of rural youth will be trained in ethical content management.

Recommendations on ethical AI development and political use.

To make the information ecosystem future-proof, Kenya also needs to create a culture of ethical innovation, to which developers, communicators, and institutions are now held accountable:

Developer Certification: Have a code of conduct and a system of accreditation of AI developers and content creators, particularly of political content or media based on memes. Political

Communication Best Practice: Consult electoral bodies and political parties to put in place voluntary or mandatory codes of conduct regarding the use of AI and synthetic images and online messaging. Ethical Innovation Grants: Support and grant acknowledgment to tech projects

utilising AI to empower civil society through visual truth-telling or digital heritage archiving, or other educational storytelling. Support Grassroots Content Moderation and Verification Networks. Supporting grassroots verification networks and content moderation networks is essential to promote the creation of user-friendly, dependable, and thoughtful content in the context of the interconnected world.

Support Grassroots Content

Moderation and Verification Networks Supporting grassroots verification networks and content moderation networks can ensure the development of user-friendly, reliable, and considerate content in the interconnected world.

Community structures should form the basis of efforts to fight inaccurate information in rural areas: Village Media Ambassadors: Respectable members of the community (teachers, pastors, youth leaders) will be trained to be local media watchdogs and be equipped with the tools and training to identify, put into perspective, and take action on manipulated media.

School Clubs and Forums in Church: Promote the establishment of digital literacy clubs in schools and discussion forums in religious organizations that discuss the ethical and civic dimensions of the meme culture. Connection to the NGOs and Fact-Checkers: Support the idea of rural areas collaborating with existing fact-checking organizations to localize and expand their services to areas outside urban areas.

Redesign Civic Education in the Digital Age.

Finally, the long-term change will entail the shift of the teaching and support of civic values and political participation:

Digital Citizenship Curriculum: Implementing nationwide civic education campaigns that underline the duties of digital engagement, the importance of respecting truth, and the importance of positive dialogue.

Prebunking Strategies: Social marketing methods can be used to teach communities about the most popular manipulation strategies before they ever meet them- a strategy that has proven success in establishing cognitive resistance to misinformation.

Drives of Election-Period Literacy: Organize state and non-state actors to carry out a real-time localized awareness drive to forestall the proliferation of synthetic political propaganda during campaign periods.

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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.

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