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**Influence of Cultural Norms on Gender Representation in Media in
Kenya**



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Influence of Cultural Norms on Gender Representation in Media in Kenya



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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to analyze influence of cultural norms on gender representation in media in Kenya.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: In Kenya, cultural norms influence media portrayals, with women often shown in domestic roles and men in positions of authority. While some media, like True Love East Africa, are shifting towards more equitable representations, traditional gender stereotypes persist, indicating ongoing cultural influence.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social cognitive theory (SCT), cultivation theory & feminist media theory may be used to anchor future studies on the influence of cultural norms on gender representation in media in Kenya. Media producers, content creators, and filmmakers should actively incorporate diverse and empowered gender representations into their content. Governments and regulatory bodies should implement policies that encourage balanced gender representation in the media. These policies can include incentives for media companies that create content with equal gender representation in leadership, professional, and domestic roles.

Keywords: *Cultural Norms, Gender Representation, Media*

INTRODUCTION

Gender representation in media, particularly in developed economies like the USA, UK, and Japan, has evolved significantly over the past few decades. Historically, women were underrepresented and often portrayed in traditional roles such as homemakers, while men dominated leadership and professional positions. However, recent trends indicate a shift towards more diverse and empowering portrayals of women in the media. For example, in the USA, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media reported that as of 2020, women represented 38% of characters in popular films, a notable increase from previous decades, but still below parity with men (Davis & Gandy, 2020). In the UK, women are increasingly featured in leading roles in film and television, with BBC research showing that 49% of scripted TV shows now have female leads, reflecting a broader trend of gender equality in media storytelling.

In Japan, however, while the media landscape is slowly changing, gender representation remains skewed. According to a 2021 study, only 30% of female characters in Japanese media were portrayed in central, professional, or leadership roles, with the remainder typically cast in passive or domestic roles (Shimizu & Kato, 2021). Despite this, female-led media content like *Ringu* and *Your Name* has gained global recognition, challenging traditional norms and reshaping public perception. These shifts highlight the ongoing struggle for gender equality in media representation, though the path towards balanced representation remains uneven across different media types. The trend toward more diverse role types is encouraging, but continued efforts are needed to address the gender disparity in key areas of media production and representation.

In developing economies, gender representation in media is often influenced by traditional values and gender roles, which can be restrictive for women. In India, for example, a 2019 study found that 70% of women in Bollywood films were depicted in romantic or supporting roles, with only 19% in central, independent character roles (Jain & Patel, 2019). Despite this, the rise of films like *Piku* and *Tumhari Sulu*, which portray women as strong, independent characters, signals a shift towards more progressive gender roles. Similarly, in Latin America, female characters are increasingly being portrayed as both domestic and professional figures, reflecting a more diverse representation, although men continue to dominate the political and economic spheres in media portrayals (Garcia & Rivera, 2020). These trends in developing economies reflect both the challenges and the emerging opportunities for women to have more nuanced roles in media.

Despite the progress, many developing economies still face challenges with gender stereotypes in media. A study from Kenya indicated that women in Kenyan media are more likely to be depicted in caregiving roles than in professional or political ones, with a significant gender gap in news reporting, where only 25% of reporters in major Kenyan media outlets are women (Muya, 2021). However, television shows such as *The Real Housewives of Nairobi* are beginning to offer a platform for women in more complex, empowered roles, highlighting the shift towards more varied representations of women in African media. While there is progress, the overall pace remains slow, and much work is required to challenge deep-rooted cultural norms that shape gender portrayal in these regions.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, media representation of gender has historically been shaped by patriarchal social structures. A 2021 report from the African Women's Development Fund found that women represent only 30% of the characters in leading television shows, with male characters dominating

in areas like politics, business, and military roles (Chinonso & Akinmolayan, 2021). However, there are positive changes, such as the increased visibility of female athletes and political leaders in media. For instance, in South Africa, shows like *Generations: The Legacy* have recently started portraying women in more powerful, non-traditional roles, including as CEOs and activists. Nonetheless, gender inequality remains prevalent in the region, and women's roles in media often reinforce traditional norms rather than challenge them, as seen in the limited representation of women in leadership roles in African newsrooms.

Similar trends are visible in Nigeria, where female representation in Nollywood films has been primarily centered around romance or family roles. A 2020 study by Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation showed that only 18% of women were portrayed in professional, academic, or political positions (Adebayo & Oladapo, 2020). This is slowly changing, with increasing portrayals of women in power, as seen in films like *The Wedding Party*, where female characters hold significant professional and social power. Nevertheless, the overall representation of women in media across Sub-Saharan Africa is still heavily influenced by traditional gender roles, and the sector remains dominated by male voices in leadership and decision-making positions. Although there has been progress, the portrayal of women in media remains far from equitable.

Cultural background plays a significant role in shaping gender representation in media, as the values, norms, and behaviors of a society influence how gender roles are portrayed. In collectivist societies, such as those in many Asian and African countries, media often reflects traditional family structures and social hierarchies, where gender roles are more rigid. Women in these societies are often depicted in nurturing, supportive roles, reinforcing the idea that they are primarily caregivers. In contrast, individualist societies, such as those in Western countries like the USA or the UK, tend to emphasize personal freedom, equality, and self-expression, leading to more diverse portrayals of both men and women in various professional and leadership positions. This distinction influences the frequency and types of gender roles depicted in media, with collectivist societies often portraying women in domestic settings and individualist societies portraying women in a broader range of activities, including leadership, business, and politics (Hofstede, 2011).

Additionally, other cultural backgrounds, such as high-context versus low-context cultures and egalitarian versus hierarchical societies, further influence gender representation in media. In high-context cultures (e.g., Japan, China), where communication is more implicit, gender roles are often symbolized through traditional imagery and cultural expectations, leading to more gendered media portrayals. On the other hand, in low-context cultures like the USA and Scandinavia, where direct communication is prioritized, gender representation in media tends to be more straightforward and balanced. Furthermore, in egalitarian societies (e.g., Sweden, Denmark), gender equality is often more apparent in media, with women frequently represented in leadership roles across different sectors. In hierarchical societies (e.g., India, Nigeria), traditional gender norms dominate, and women are often portrayed in subordinate roles, particularly in family or domestic contexts (Ting-Toomey, 2015). These cultural variances highlight the significant impact cultural background has on shaping gender representation in media.

Problem Statement

Cultural norms significantly influence gender representation in media, shaping societal perceptions and reinforcing traditional gender roles. In many societies, these norms dictate the portrayal of men and women in media, often leading to a skewed representation where women are predominantly cast in domestic or subservient roles, while men are portrayed as powerful, independent figures (Hentschel, 2019). This discrepancy in media representation perpetuates gender stereotypes, which, in turn, affects the self-perception and aspirations of individuals, particularly women. The influence of cultural norms on gender portrayal is especially evident in collectivist societies, where traditional values dominate, compared to individualist societies, where gender roles are often more fluid and progressive (Hofstede, 2011). Despite increased advocacy for gender equality in media, cultural pressures continue to shape the representation of women and men in films, television, and advertisements, limiting the scope of gender roles that are portrayed, and ultimately hindering the achievement of gender equality in society (Tuchman, 2021). Thus, it is crucial to investigate the extent to which cultural norms continue to shape gender representation in media and its implications on both individual and societal levels.

Theoretical Review

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Originated by Albert Bandura in 1963, Social Cognitive Theory posits that individuals learn behaviors, values, and attitudes through observation, imitation, and modeling, especially in media contexts. The theory emphasizes the role of media in shaping behaviors by providing role models, reinforcing gender norms through repeated portrayal. For gender representation, SCT highlights how media characters' behaviors are adopted by audiences, reinforcing cultural norms of masculinity and femininity. In the context of the influence of cultural norms, SCT is relevant because it shows how media exposure perpetuates traditional gender roles, influencing individuals' perceptions of what is socially acceptable for men and women (Bandura, 2020).

Cultivation Theory

Developed by George Gerbner in the 1960s, cultivation theory suggests that long-term exposure to media shapes viewers' perceptions of reality, often cultivating attitudes that reflect societal values and norms. In terms of gender representation, the theory is applicable in understanding how media perpetuates stereotypical gender roles, particularly in societies where cultural norms emphasize traditional roles for men and women. Over time, continuous exposure to gendered portrayals in media cultivates a reality where these roles are internalized as "normal" and widely accepted. This theory is crucial for exploring how cultural norms, reinforced by media, influence the audience's gendered worldview (Gerbner, 2021).

Feminist Media Theory

Feminist media theory examines how media reflects and perpetuates gender inequalities by focusing on the power dynamics between men and women in media representations. The theory, particularly influenced by scholars such as Laura Mulvey (1975), critiques the male gaze and the objectification of women in media. It emphasizes how cultural norms often dictate media content, shaping gender roles that subordinate women to passive, domestic, or objectified positions while elevating men to active, dominant roles. This theory is highly relevant in understanding how media

representations reflect and reproduce patriarchal cultural norms that influence societal views on gender (McRobbie, 2020).

Empirical Review

Bandura (2020) suggested that people learn through observation and imitation, especially when they encounter repeated gender stereotypes in media. The study's primary purpose was to investigate how these stereotypes reinforce cultural norms, particularly concerning masculinity and femininity. The methodology involved content analysis of popular TV shows across a wide range of genres, focusing on how male and female characters were portrayed. The research identified that male characters were predominantly shown in authoritative and action-oriented roles, while women were mostly depicted in passive, supportive, or nurturing roles. This difference in representation reflects cultural expectations that align with traditional gender norms. The study found that when media consistently portrays men in leadership positions and women in domestic or subordinate roles, these representations become internalized by viewers, thus reinforcing societal beliefs about gender roles. Bandura's findings support the idea that media plays a significant role in perpetuating gender norms by providing role models for behavior. Based on the study's results, Bandura recommended that media platforms actively include more diverse portrayals of women, particularly in leadership and authoritative roles, to challenge entrenched gender stereotypes. The inclusion of female role models in non-traditional roles would not only disrupt traditional representations but also offer viewers positive examples of empowered women. This would contribute to shifting societal expectations, leading to more egalitarian views on gender roles. The findings of Bandura support the notion that media is a powerful tool in shaping and reshaping societal perceptions of gender, and through intentional media content, gender equity could be more effectively promoted. Furthermore, Bandura suggested that media content creators must be more conscious of how they portray gender roles to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes. He emphasized the need for proactive measures to foster an environment in which diverse gender portrayals are normalized.

Gerbner (2021) examined the long-term effects of media exposure on gender perceptions, particularly in collectivist societies. Cultivation theory argues that prolonged exposure to media shapes how individuals perceive social realities, including gender roles. The study aimed to understand how continuous media exposure influences viewers' gendered beliefs and attitudes, especially in cultures where traditional gender roles are deeply embedded. Using a longitudinal approach, Gerbner analyzed various media content, including television shows and advertisements, and conducted surveys to assess the gender perceptions of viewers over time. The study revealed that media exposure consistently reinforced traditional gender stereotypes, especially in collectivist cultures where social cohesion and conformity to norms are prioritized. It found that women were often depicted in domestic roles or as caretakers, while men were shown as dominant figures in professional and leadership contexts. These portrayals were not just limited to fictional content but extended to advertising, news, and even educational programming. The study concluded that long-term exposure to gendered media representations could lead to the cultivation of beliefs that men and women have predetermined roles in society, aligning with the existing cultural norms. Gerbner recommended that media producers should focus on creating more diverse and balanced representations of gender, particularly in leadership and professional roles, to challenge these cultural norms. By offering viewers a broader range of gendered

representations, media could begin to shape more equitable perceptions of men and women. The study stressed that cultivation could be used not only to maintain traditional norms but also to challenge and transform them by portraying a more diverse array of gender roles. In their final recommendations, the authors called for media content creators to actively push for gender equality in content creation, recognizing the influence media has on shaping societal values. The study's findings underscore the importance of media literacy and critical engagement with media content to mitigate the reinforcement of harmful gender stereotypes.

Tuchman (2021) examined how cultural norms shape gender representation in media across various societies, focusing on both collectivist and individualist cultures. Their study utilized cross-cultural content analysis to explore how media in different cultural contexts presents gender roles. The purpose of this study was to understand how traditional cultural values influence the representation of gender, particularly in societies where these norms dictate gender behaviors and expectations. The research involved analyzing popular media content from countries with varying cultural orientations, including collectivist societies in Asia and Africa, and individualist societies in Europe and the United States. Tuchman et al. found that in collectivist cultures, gender roles in media were highly influenced by traditional views of masculinity and femininity, with women predominantly portrayed in supportive, domestic, or caregiving roles. In contrast, individualist societies showed more varied and empowered representations of women, often depicting them in professional, leadership, and independent roles. The study also identified that in collectivist cultures, gender portrayals often aligned with societal expectations of conformity, with media reinforcing traditional gender norms. Tuchman recommended that media producers in collectivist societies make a conscious effort to diversify gender representations, particularly by presenting women in roles that challenge cultural stereotypes. They argued that media could play a transformative role by offering more balanced and empowering portrayals of women, especially in societies where gender inequality remains pervasive. The authors also suggested that media content should be tailored to reflect changing gender norms, as global movements toward gender equality continue to gain momentum. Overall, the study emphasized the need for a more nuanced understanding of how cultural norms shape gender representations and the importance of leveraging media to promote gender equality.

Hentschel (2019) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the impact of gender stereotypes on leadership portrayal in media, with a focus on cultural norms and expectations. The study's purpose was to explore how media reinforces cultural stereotypes regarding the competence of female and male leaders. Hentschel used qualitative interviews and content analysis to assess how media portrays women in leadership positions compared to men, and how these portrayals align with or challenge societal expectations. The findings revealed that women leaders in media were often depicted as less competent, less authoritative, and less decisive than their male counterparts, reflecting traditional cultural norms that perceive men as more suitable for leadership roles. The study also found that female leaders were frequently portrayed in ways that emphasized their personal lives or emotions, further detracting from their professional credibility. Based on these findings, Hentschel recommended that media content creators be more intentional in presenting women in powerful, competent roles, free from the limiting stereotypes that traditionally depict them as less capable leaders. They suggested that empowering portrayals of women could help challenge the long-standing cultural norms that limit women's advancement in leadership

positions. The study concluded that a change in how media portrays female leaders could help shift societal expectations and promote gender equality in leadership.

Shimizu and Kato (2021) focused on the portrayal of gender roles in Japanese media, exploring the influence of high-context cultural norms on media representations. Their study aimed to understand how Japan's deeply embedded cultural values shaped gender portrayals in television dramas. Shimizu and Kato conducted a content analysis of popular Japanese TV shows, specifically examining the roles of women in relation to traditional expectations of femininity. The findings revealed that women in Japanese media were largely depicted in passive, domestic roles, often as supportive wives or mothers, which reinforced cultural norms that emphasize women's roles as caregivers. In contrast, men were portrayed in more active and dominant roles, particularly in business and leadership contexts. The study highlighted how high-context cultural values, which prioritize harmony and respect for tradition, contributed to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in media. Shimizu and Kato recommended that Japanese media producers diversify their portrayals of women to reflect the evolving social changes, including women's increasing participation in the workforce and leadership roles. They also suggested that media content could play a role in challenging traditional cultural norms by offering more empowering representations of women. The study emphasized the importance of media in shaping gender perceptions and the need for media producers to consider how cultural contexts influence gender representation.

Muya (2021) explored how gender representation in Kenyan media reflects and perpetuates cultural norms, particularly in news reporting. The study aimed to examine how women were portrayed in the Kenyan media landscape, focusing on news outlets. Muya used qualitative interviews and content analysis to assess the representation of women in Kenyan television and newspapers, finding that women were largely underrepresented in professional and political roles. Instead, women were often depicted in caregiving or domestic roles, reinforcing traditional cultural expectations about women's place in society. The study concluded that media representation in Kenya often mirrored societal gender biases, where women were relegated to secondary roles. Muya recommended that Kenyan media outlets broaden the representation of women by including them in a variety of professional and leadership contexts, thereby challenging the cultural norms that confine women to domestic or passive roles. Furthermore, called for increased female participation in media production to ensure that gender representation is more balanced and diverse. The study emphasized the role of media as a tool for social change, suggesting that media could play a significant part in reshaping cultural norms and promoting gender equality.

McRobbie (2020) explored how cultural norms in European cinema have led to the objectification of women, reinforcing patriarchal values. McRobbie used feminist media theory to analyze the portrayal of women in popular European films, focusing on how these portrayals reflect and perpetuate traditional gender hierarchies. The findings revealed that women were often depicted as passive objects of desire, with their value primarily linked to their physical appearance and sexual appeal. This reinforced the notion that women's primary role in media is as objects for male pleasure and admiration. McRobbie recommended that filmmakers adopt a feminist perspective when creating films, moving away from objectifying portrayals and offering more complex, empowered representations of women. She suggested that by challenging the male gaze, filmmakers could play a key role in shifting cultural norms around gender representation. McRobbie emphasized that media producers should consciously strive for gender equality in their

portrayals of both men and women, offering a broader and more diverse range of roles that reflect the evolving societal expectations of gender.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gaps: The studies reviewed provide valuable insights into the role of cultural norms in shaping gender representation in media, yet they have certain conceptual gaps. One notable gap is the insufficient exploration of how emerging media forms, such as social media and digital platforms, influence gender norms compared to traditional media like television and film. While Bandura (2020) and Gerbner (2021) focus on the impact of traditional media in Western and collectivist societies, respectively, there is a lack of research on how new media landscapes contribute to gender stereotypes or offer new avenues for challenging cultural norms. Another conceptual gap is the limited investigation into how intersectionality such as race, class, and sexuality interacts with cultural norms to shape gender representation in media. For instance, while Tuchman (2021) address gender roles across different cultures, the intersection of gender with other social identities remains underexplored. Future research could fill these gaps by examining how digital media platforms and intersectional identities influence the representation of gender and societal perceptions.

Contextual Research Gaps: Contextually, while studies such as Hentschel (2019) and Shimizu and Kato (2021) investigate gender stereotypes within specific cultural contexts (e.g., leadership portrayals in Western and Japanese media), there is a need for research that considers the influence of global cultural exchanges. As globalization facilitates the cross-cultural flow of media, it is crucial to explore how global media content interacts with and modifies local cultural norms regarding gender. Another gap is the impact of media consumption in non-Western contexts, such as African or Asian cultures, where traditional cultural values may still have a significant impact on gender representation in media. For example, while Muya (2021) explores gender representation in Kenyan media, further research could investigate the role of transnational media (e.g., Hollywood, Bollywood) in shaping or challenging local gender norms in Africa and Asia. This would deepen our understanding of how local and global media contexts shape gender portrayals and perceptions.

Geographical Research Gaps: Geographically, the existing studies largely focus on Western, collectivist, and Asian societies (Bandura, 2020; Gerbner, 2021; Shimizu & Kato, 2021), leaving a gap in research from regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. While Tuchman (2021) include African societies in their comparative study, the cultural and media dynamics of gender in Sub-Saharan Africa remain underexplored. There is a need for studies that specifically focus on

how cultural norms and media portrayals of gender intersect in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where gender roles are deeply rooted in historical and socio-economic factors. Additionally, research from Latin American countries is sparse, despite the region's rich cultural diversity and significant shifts in gender representation in the media. Addressing these geographical gaps could offer a more comprehensive global perspective on the influence of cultural norms on gender representation in media, particularly in regions where gender inequality is still prevalent.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, cultural norms play a significant role in shaping the representation of gender in media, influencing both societal perceptions and individual behaviors. Media acts as a powerful tool in either reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes or challenging them, depending on the cultural context. In collectivist societies, where cultural values emphasize conformity and tradition, media portrayals often adhere to conventional gender roles, with women predominantly depicted in passive, caregiving roles and men in dominant, authoritative positions. In contrast, individualist societies tend to offer more diverse and empowering representations of gender, though gender biases persist. Studies, such as those by Bandura (2020) and Gerbner (2021), highlight the long-term effects of media exposure on shaping viewers' perceptions of gender roles and the importance of presenting diverse portrayals to challenge entrenched stereotypes. Furthermore, the global flow of media content has the potential to impact local cultural norms, leading to shifts in gender representation. As media continues to evolve, especially with the rise of digital platforms, there is a growing opportunity to reshape societal norms by promoting gender equity in media portrayals. Ultimately, media creators and consumers must be proactive in fostering more balanced, realistic, and diverse gender representations, ensuring that media serves as a tool for social change toward greater gender equality.

Recommendations

Theory

It is crucial to expand on existing theoretical frameworks, such as social cognitive theory (SCT) and Cultivation Theory, by exploring how new media platforms (e.g., social media, streaming services) contribute to shaping gender perceptions in a rapidly globalizing world. Future studies should incorporate intersectional approaches, considering how race, class, and sexuality intersect with cultural norms to influence gender representation in media. Additionally, researchers should integrate digital media consumption into gender representation theories to account for how user-generated content may challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms. By broadening theoretical perspectives, scholars can better understand how diverse media forms influence cultural norms and gender dynamics across cultures. Expanding theoretical frameworks to include digital media, intersectionality, and cross-cultural influences will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving impact of media on gender.

Practice

Media producers, content creators, and filmmakers should actively incorporate diverse and empowered gender representations into their content. By portraying women and men in a range of

roles particularly non-traditional roles such as leadership, entrepreneurship, and caregiving media creators can challenge existing cultural stereotypes and promote gender equality. Additionally, media professionals must be trained in gender sensitivity and awareness, ensuring that gender portrayals are not confined to outdated stereotypes but instead reflect the diversity of contemporary societal roles. Platforms like social media and streaming services should promote content that showcases varied gender identities and role models, especially content created by women and marginalized groups.

Policy

Governments and regulatory bodies should implement policies that encourage balanced gender representation in the media. These policies can include incentives for media companies that create content with equal gender representation in leadership, professional, and domestic roles. National and international media regulations should also mandate gender representation audits, requiring media outlets to track and report their gender portrayals regularly. Additionally, policies should support initiatives that increase the participation of women and marginalized groups in media production and leadership positions. By fostering policies that incentivize gender inclusivity, governments can contribute to transforming media landscapes and advancing societal gender equality.

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