INFLUENCE OF FRAMING OF THE HASHTAG ON PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION ON SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES IN KENYA

IPRJB
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED
JOURNALS AND BOOK PUBLISHERS

INFLUENCE OF FRAMING OF THE HASHTAG ON PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION ON SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES IN KENYA

1* Anne Wangari Munuku

PhD Candidate, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya

*Corresponding Author's Email: amunuku@yahoo.com

2* Prof. Hellen Mberia

Lecturer, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology

3*Dr. John Ndavula

ST. Paul's University, Kenya.

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to establish the influence of framing of the hashtag on public opinion formation on socio-political issues in Kenya.

Methodology: The study adopted the descriptive qualitative research design. The study population consisted of the hashtags generated by Kenyans in the period between January 2014 and December 2016, journalists from 5 local television stations and members of public involved in hashtag development outside the media fraternity. Purposive sampling was used to select the 35 hashtags and snowball sampling was used to select the hashtag developers and respondents from the public and selected media houses.

Results: The findings that the framing of the hashtag is done by both the media and the public and the higher percentage of hashtags are done by the public. The study found that 60% of the hash tags were non-ordered in terms of the grammatical structure. Findings revealed that the English language dominates the hashtags formulated with a few having a mixture of Kiswahili and English. Internet lingo was preferred to normal grammar. The selection of words was a key factor in the framing of hashtags. The wording of the hashtag mattered while the syntax did not. In conclusion, the framing of a hashtag was found to have a significant influence on public opinion formation but the grammatical structure of the hashtag did not matter.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: The media framing theory describes faming as the process of the media packaging information in a way that tells the public how to think about it. The study concurs with the framing theory's argument that the way a message is framed will have an influence on the opinion formed by the respondent. Most of the respondents prefer short, concise hashtags that address immediate issues in the society. The results reveal that there is a paradigm shift in the framing theory in this form of synchronous computer mediated discourse. The ordinary citizens in Kenya frame 80% of the hashtags and only a small percentage of trending hashtags are formulated by media practitioners.

Key words: *framing, Hashtag, public opinion, opinion formation*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The world has witnessed an unprecedented growth of the global information society in the last few decades. This information society relies heavily on information transmitted mostly through the mass media, both traditional and modern to survive (Norris, 2001). The emergence of social media from the year 2003 has changed the way the citizens of the world communicate. A lot of platforms have come up and have turned the world into a global village with no boundaries of time and space. People connect globally through social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and many others. One method that is being used to enhance conversations online is the use of hashtags that can be used across different social media sites. Hashtags allow people to debate an issue and express their opinions on it. Social media have also been embraced by politicians during campaigns around the world especially presidential candidates. Many countries have adopted social media as a campaign tool. They use it to sway public opinions on candidates and key political issues. For instance, the social networks used by Obama in the 2012 elections included Twitter, Google+, Tumblr, Facebook and Pinterst. These campaigns are done through issue framing on social media where the public then engages in debate, opinion expression and formation and finally change. In Kenya, almost all politicians resorted to social media during the 2013 and the 2017 election campaigns. President Kenyatta engaged many social media sites in his campaign including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and Flickr.

The key role of the media is to keep the public informed about issues. Media plays an important role in keeping societies informed that in turn stabilizes them in all areas, be they political, social, cultural, economic or technological. Through the use of mass media the public gains knowledge of events and issues that enable them to form their own opinions or support those of others. Mass media can therefore be viewed as the avenue through which the public replicates and follows as well as accumulates opinions and decisions via the information provided. This is affirmed by Megha (2014) who describes the media as the 'mirror' and 'moulder' of public opinion. It is the mirror because people can look at their society through media. It is through the media, that the nation's schema is set where the public is made to focus on crucial issues that the media chooses (moulding public opinion). People do not only obtain information about public matters from the news media but the viewers and readers also pick up how much prominence to assign to a subject on the basis of the highlighting done on it in the news (Megha, 2014). This relates to the concepts of framing, priming and agenda setting in mass communication research. This study looked at the framing of hashtags and how that determines how successful the hashtag becomes in influencing public opinion formation among online users of Twitter network in Kenya.

Framing in the social sciences is associated with how groups or individuals organize, perceive and communicate about reality. It involves the social construction of a social phenomenon by mass media sources, political or social movements, political leaders and so on (Entman, 1993). Framing is therefore a process of selective influence over an individual's perception of the meaning attributed to words or phrases. Jensen (2012) explains that the concept of a frame suggests that an item of information whether arising from one's perception of the environment, from other people or from media technologies only makes sense when placed in a particular context. When information is collected from endless masses of information and bracketed in a certain way, it becomes a frame. Quoting Newman (1992), Jensen (2012) explains that audiences rely on

categories that are largely derived from personal experiences to make sense of frequently unfamiliar events and issues in news media. These are interpretive frames that are different from those that journalists rely on. Jensen (2012) contends that audiences employ generalized and common sense super themes to establish meaningful links between the world of news and that of everyday life. Audiences mostly rely on interpretive frames that are always being shaped and reshaped. Scheufele (1999) says that framing relies a lot on wording and syntax.

This research analyzed these issues of framing with regard to language choice, wording (lexical choices), types of frames identified and the general framing of the Twitter hashtags in relation to the social aspect of framing. According to Carragee and Roefs (2004), power is an important aspect of framing as frames are cognitive and hegemonic constructs that serve distinct social interests. Hashtags have been used by Kenyans to address social and political issues such as gender violence, poor governance, unemployment, tribalism, illiteracy, terrorism, workers' strikes, immorality, diplomatic relationships, and poverty among others. These hashtags are framed in a particular way to enable them gain the interest of online audience. This study seeks to show that the way a hashtag is framed influences its ability to shape online public opinion. Hashtags formulated and responded to by Kenyans were sampled for the study. This aspect of framing was investigated using the CDA approach in data analysis under the social context and discursive practice aspects of Fairclough 1989 model of critical discourse analysis.

1.2 Research Problem

Social media tools have therefore been increasingly used to shape political opinion especially during elections. This is done through the use of Facebook, Twitter and other platforms (Michaelson 2011; Makinen & Kuira, 2008). Kenya as a country has embraced the use of ICT in greater measure and has a large population connected to the internet through Faiba network and the mobile phone network companies. More than half the population own mobile phones as per the ICT Report 2014. This translates to a large portion of the population being able to access social media sites. In the 2015 Report by Communication Authority of Kenya, between July and September 2015, mobile subscribers rose to 37.8 million with a mobile penetration of 88.1%. Internet subscriptions hit 21.6million meaning a penetration of 74.2%. This indicates that a large portion of the population can access internet through the mobile phone.

Access to the internet has led many Kenyans to keep in touch with the world. Many have embraced social media especially Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram. This research looked at the use of Twitter hashtags and how they influence public opinion formation in social and political issues of national importance in Kenya. The use of hashtags is a new global phenomenon through which citizens are voicing their issues and entertaining themselves. Studies on hashtag use and influence have mainly been in other parts of the world and have been based on political mobilization and revolts (see Michaelson, 2011; Meghar 2014). Others like Sherice, Gearhart and Kang (2015), looked at the influences of social network sites comments on quality and credibility of journalism during news. Valenzuela (2013) examined the use of social media in general in enhancing political participation and activism. Most studies done on opinion formation have looked at political issues and have mostly been about the media framing issues or setting the agenda for the public to pick and evaluate (Gearhart & Zhang, 2013; Choi, 2014; Gazza, 2013).

This research focused on the formation of the Twitter hashtags by the media and by the public on the other hand. This is a new trend in framing and agenda setting in Kenya. It can be viewed as a paradigm shift since the media have always set the agenda for the public in news dissemination. Currently the public is coming up with hashtags and counter hashtags to address issues thus bringing to question the media's role in deciding the news of the day. It is necessary to examine whether the public is taking over the role of framing issues for the media and if so, how it does that through the hashtag. An examination of whether the roles are reversed or shared is crucial. These hashtags are being formulated on a daily basis by both the public and the media. This has been the trend for the past two years and counting. These hashtags have been on political, social, cultural and even economic aspects. Examples of these hashtags are #ObamaReturns, #KideroGrass, #UhuruIsInTheCountry, #BankRates, #RogueDoctor and many others. All these hashtags elicited national debate and in all the cases there was a response from the government and media houses. This research addressed this by investigating the role of hashtag framing on public opinion formation. The study sought to answer the questions: how are these hashtags formulated? Who formulates them? In which circumstances are they formulated (framed)? What factors are considered when formulating the hashtag? The study sought to establish the influence of framing of the hashtag on public opinion formation on socio-political issues in Kenya.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

Media framing theory is a communication theory that holds that the media decide what people think about by framing issues in a particular way. Conceptually, framing borrows from different theories such as attribution theory by Fritz Heider, 1958; Frame analysis by Goffman, 1974; and cognitive science theories formulated by Lakoff and Johnson, 1980 and 1999 (Jensen, 2012). Agenda setting and framing are interrelated though they are different. As a matter of fact, framing is the second level of agenda setting as put by McCombs (2004). Agenda setting influences 'what' we think about while framing influences 'how' we think about it. Power is an important aspect of framing. Different frames represent and serve different power interests. Jensen (2012) explains the difference between agenda setting and framing in relation to effect on one's mental state. He argues that agenda setting produces a temporary set of activities while framing represents a more permanent orientation or disposition. This is directly related to opinion formation as an opinion must start from the mind. Frames of thought are shaped by the frames of communication. Frames are mental and social categories that show the outcome of both interpretation and interaction. Frames can therefore help us to see how media and society are coupled in communication and how framing messages influences the opinions formed by the target audience.

Baran and Davis (2009), state that the framing theory examines how media focuses attention on certain events and places them within a field of meaning where people make sense of them. The issues are everyday occurrences. In this case, the media practitioners select topics that they want the public to think about basically setting the agenda for them. As they set the issue of the day they also influence public thinking by presenting the issue in a particular way (framing) so that eventually people will look at the issue the way the media prefers. In this theory, a frame is the way media practitioners and gatekeepers present an issue to their audience. The frames presented determined how an audience interprets the issue of the day. The framing theory looks at frames as abstract notions that serve to organize meanings. Frames influence audience's perception and therefore it is not just about what to think about but how to think about it. Thus, the media has the

ability, according to the theory, to persuade the audience to accept or prefer one concept over another through framing (Baran & Davis, 2009).

Jensen (2012) explains that a frame is a result of taking an item of information, packaging it in a particular way and placing it in some context. These frames are both mental and social. They are mental because they rely on interpretation and social because they emanate from people's interaction with others and their environment. A frame represents a more permanent orientation or disposition compared to agenda-setting that is basically temporary in practice. Frames connect media and society in communication. Entman (1993), the proponent of the theory, explains that to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicate text such that a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, recommendation and treatment is promoted. This means that frames are derived from real or perceived issues within the larger societal system. Chong and Druckman (2007) while explaining the tenets of framing theory, say that framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking of an issue. Framing can be considered in two forms; frames of thought (consisting of the mental representations, interpretations and simplifications of reality) and frames of communication

Frames can also be described as structures that draw boundaries, set up categories, define some ideas out and others in and put together related ideas in the final version of a communicative piece (Resse, 2007). This is the same view held by Severin and Tankard (2010) who defines a frame as a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what issue is to be made salient through selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration.

Entman (1993) states that media frames perform four key functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgment and suggesting remedies. These functions can be identified in text. Traditionally, the framing theory explains how the media form frames on the news for the public thus setting the agenda. Thus, it gives the media prominence in terms of deciding the content that the audience consumes. The study seeks to prove through online communication research that the public can also set the agenda by coming up with news items conveyed through twitter hashtags. Thus the focus of the study was to find out if framing is done by the public and the media concurrently or apart when it comes to online agenda. The hashtags were examined in terms of the source and this may show that framing may not necessarily be made by the media. This is more the case during an 'issue regime', which refers to a period during which a news story is so huge that it takes a large chunk of media coverage and attention. The hashtags under investigation were those that come up during issue regimes. According to Entman (2004), frames originating from administrators shape the frames used by other elites, media outlets and the public. However, the public reaction to the initial frame feeds back to the media and other elites and eventually influences the administration's view. This is an issue that was investigated in the Kenyan scenario.

Research on framing is very closely related to public opinion research. Chong and Druckman (2007) say that the phenomenon of framing effects in public opinion research is important. They explain framing effects as occurring when often small changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce sometimes large changes of opinions. Framing is perceived here as being situated within a larger democratic process that links politicians and other opinion leaders to the public especially through the mass media. One's frame of thought is seen to have an impact on one's overall opinion besides the frames of communication. For instance, politicians mobilize voters

using particular policies by encouraging them to think about those policies along particular lines. This is invoking a frame in communication through wording that eventually makes the individual think in a particular way (frames of thought). Eventually, the opinion of the individual is swayed.

Chong and Druckman (2007) argue that frames are not just done by the media but have other formulators as well. For instance, politicians often adopt communication frames used by other politicians, the media or citizens. Media frames sometimes mimic those used by politicians, social activists, other media outlets or ordinary citizens. Most research in communication has been on how the frames of the elite groups like media and politicians influence citizens' frames of thought, attitudes and opinions, which is basically framing effects. This study was investigating the source of the hashtags which may not always be the media or politicians as already shown by past hashtags in different parts of the world. These hashtags framing was investigated to see if it has any effect on how influential the hashtag becomes on opinion formation. Framing in communication and media studies refers to the way an issue is presented to the public or target audience. In this study the hashtag was investigated in terms of how the hashtag is formulated, specifically, lexicon choices, language choice (in this case English, Sheng' or Kiswahili), code choice in terms of normal grammar or internet lingo and also grammatical structure, in consideration to word arrangements. This is referred to as frames of communication which in turn will portray the frames of thought.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive qualitative research design. The study population consisted of the hashtags generated by Kenyans in the period between January 2014 and December 2016 and the local television stations and members of public involved in hashtag development outside the media fraternity. The sampling frame was obtained from the Communication Authority 2015 report, the Kenya Advertisers Association website and the Twitter database. Purposive sampling was used to select the 35 hashtags and snowball sampling was used to select the hashtag developers and the journalists since not many journalists were involved in hashtag formation or even social media journalism.. A total of five television stations were investigated where 22 media personalities in the digital media or online departments were interviewed. 10 Kenyans on Twitter (KOTs) were also interviewed. The researcher also interviewed two independent hashtag developers. A total of 35 hashtags were investigated. The selected hashtags were those that had more than 100,000 mentions and had trended for more than three days so as to filter out hashtags that had no major influence on public opinion. The media personalities interviewed were only those directly involved with social media. The media houses variously referred them as online journalists, digital media experts and digital journalists. Qualitative data was collected through interviews and the streaming of tweets under the selected hashtags using Survey Monkey and Twitter API tools. The data collected was coded using determined themes and analyzed using content analysis and critical discourse analysis.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISUSSIONS

The framing of the hashtags was analyzed by investigating the way the text, which in this case was the hashtag, was formulated in terms of lexicon choice, language choice, syntax or grammatical structure and the code adopted (internet lingo or normal grammar). To understand these aspects

better, respondents were asked different questions including the factors they put into consideration when formulating a hashtag.

4.1 Lexicon Choice of Hash tag

The words that a person chooses in passing a particular message determine the meaning that the respondent interprets. Respondents were asked to indicate the factors that they consider when framing a hashtag. Some of the responses given by journalists were:

Respondent 1: *The words must be simple with very few characters. This will help to capture the message.*

Respondent 2: *The hashtag must be short. It must also be original, not from another media house. The words must be able to give emotional appeal and be informative. Also no vulgar language is used.*

Respondent 3: *The topic informs the words. Words must also show objectivity and adhere to journalists' code of conduct.*

Respondent 4: *We consider the length of the hashtag and its appeal to the audience.*

Respondent 5: *The wording must be unique and have clarity.*

The researcher also sought to know if the KOT's developed hashtags even as they consumed the ones already formulated and trending and what factors they put into consideration when framing a hashtag. The answers given by the respondents included:

Respondent 1: *The wording has to be simple so that the general public can remember it. The words must also create an impact to the people.*

Respondent 2: *I consider factors like the number of responses am likely to get; the influence the hashtag can cause; what is trending on Twitter at the moment; and the number of people it will affect.*

Respondent 3: *I take into consideration the popularity of the theme message to be taken across; current issues; publicity for the event or course; and my followers ability to understand it.*

The independent hashtag developers were also asked to give factors they consider when coming up with a hashtag. They responded as follows:

Respondent 1: *The most important thing is to create interest. Do not reveal too much in the hashtag. Lead the user on to learn more and participate. It also has to be short and memorable. It is important to remember that the online user has a very short concentration span. This makes the whole idea of creating hashtags very memorable. Stand out.*

Respondent 2: *The words must be catchy and emotive. The hashtag should be short and concise. The words must also be about current affairs to create interest.*

From these responses it is clear that the choice of words for a hashtag takes centre stage. The respondents agree on some factors like the clarity and simplicity of hashtags to capture interest of the majority of online users. Another common factor is the emotional appeal which some respondents are referring to as words being catchy. It is also noted that the topic dictates the choice of words.

The KOT's were asked what made them respond to a hashtag. Their responses were:

Respondent 1: *I react to a hashtag depending on the topic; if it relates to my personal life; if the hashtag is likely to affect me, friends or relatives; and when I want to get information on issues affecting the country.*

Respondent 2: I *react if it affects me personally even indirectly. Also depends on how popular it is.*

Respondent 3: *The relevance of that hashtag to me.*

Respondent 4: *Repetition. Retweets create more interest. Also if it is made into a meme within my social grouping like WhatsApp or Instagram, it's more captivating. Also for Issue awareness. That is if it is about something I know or is within my knowledge scope.*

Respondent 5: *I respond to hashtags that I feel are beneficial like missing persons e.g. #BringBackOurGirls. Also, those that are for entertainment and creating awareness such as #ALSChallenge. ALS is a rare but dangerous disease.*

The respondents were also asked what kind of hashtags they do not respond to and why. The responses included:

Respondent 1: *Highly politicized ones. I have no care for politics of division.*

Respondent 2: *Those that have a monotonous title; are beyond my knowledge scope; those irrelevant to my life; and those that are too long.*

Respondent 3: *Political ones especially those that have redundant themes like speaking of change that never is.*

Respondent 4: *I do not respond to topics that do not pick my interest e.g. #WengerOut.I hate soccer*

Respondent 5: I *do not respond to hashtags that sound trivial and any with negative or hatred nuances. I view them as inciting.*

The theme of the hashtag is deduced from the wording or choice of lexicon. The topic to be discussed through tweets is in the hashtag. This is what would make one respond or not respond depending on whether the words raise interest or not. From these responses it is apparent that the choice of words is directly related to the level of response towards a hashtag. The consumers of hashtags seem to prefer moderately worded hashtags in terms of simplicity and neutrality of opinions. For instance, negatively worded hashtags do not seem to capture interest as compared to those that appeal for a common human course like illness. This is in agreement with Chong and Druckman (2007) who contend that frames in communication organize everyday reality by providing meaning to an unfolding strip of events and promoting particular interpretation of issues.

4.2 Language Choice of Hash tag

The respondents were asked to indicate the language choice of hash tags. The results in Figure 1 revealed that most hash tags, that is 83%, were in English while only 17% which were in other languages. 'Other' in this context refers to hashtags in Kiswahili or a mixture of Kiswahili and English.This implies that most hashtags are in English language. Twitter being an online social media platform is associated with the elite. It is from the onset a news platform and not purely centred on entertainment. Most of the users of hashtags around the world use the international

lingua franca, English. From the results, it is clear that Kenya is no exception. However, Kiswahili is quickly catching up in the hashtag culture especially in politics and business. Examples of such hashtags are #LipaKamaTender that was used by doctors to push the government to pay them; #UhuruNiWetu (Uhuru is our son) and #WaremboNaUhuru (Women for Uhuru), for the 2017 presidential campaign; #LipaDeni (Pay your debt) that was developed for a local firm to show the need for people to pay loans. The respondents who gave these examples argued that these hashtags are meant to have a wider reach as Kiswahili is the unifying language in Kenya and the whole of East Africa.

Though the most consumers and producers of hashtags are youths, Sheng' (a local language that is a mixture of Kiswahili, English and indigenous languages used mostly by the youth) does not appear to be a code that is preferred in the production of hashtags. This code is widespread in urban areas in Kenya. The researcher found no hashtag that was coded in Sheng'. The absence of this code again indicates that hashtags are constructed and used in line with the international code. Another finding of the study was the tendency of code-mixing in Kenyan hashtags where Kiswahili and English are used in one hashtag. An example is #TwendeTukavote (Gloss: Let us go vote). This is also in the hashtags #BabaWhileYouWereAway, #LipaKamaTender (Pay as you pay the tenderpreneurs) and #PambazukaNationalLottery (Pambazuka means to dawn). The emerging issue here is that Kiswahili language is rarely used alone. The hashtag seems to adopt code mixing as a linguistic feature. Framing the hashtag this way seems to give Kiswahili a place. The use of code switching, henceforth CS, in communication seems to play certain roles such as message qualification as is the case with #BabaWhileYouWereAway. It also serves to emphasize a point and reiterate the same. In cases of highly emotive discussions CS indicates these emotions as is the case with #LipaKamaTender that revealed doctors' frustrations in being ignored by a government that rewards business partners and tenderpreneurs.
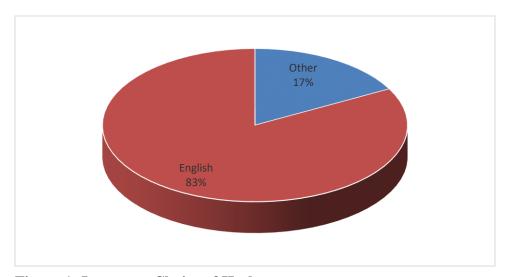

Figure 1: Language Choice of Hash tag

On being asked about language use, one respondent, an independent hashtag developer responded:

"The use of Kiswahili in hashtags is rare as hashtags are predominantly not a Kenyan thing. However there is a new trend of customers choosing Kiswahili to have a wider reach. This is the reason we came up with hashtags #LipaDeni (pay your debt), #MamasSpecial and #PambazukaNationalLottery"

English language dominance in the internet has been studied by scholars especially in relation to users who may not speak English as a first language. This agrees with a study by Yate, 1996b looked at the dominance of the English language on the internet and the possible effects of this dominance on the global spread of U.S. values and cultural practices. The language chosen by speakers and their attitude towards it shows the position the other languages may hold in the minds and practice of speakers. Paolillo (1996) explains that local languages would fare better in the internet if computer networks were located within the locality and if the concerned country had no colonial ties with the dominating country. The use of English by Kenyans is in line with the findings of this research. Kenya has colonial ties with Britain, an English-speaking country. According to Yoon (2001), young people in Korea accepted the dominance and importance of English without question due to the fact that the symbolic power of technology fueled by commercially driven mass media is associated with the English language. Therefore, the English language is hegemoniously approved in the internet and Kenya is no exception.

4.3 Grammatical Structure of Hash tag

This concept refers to the syntactic structure of a hashtag in reference to the arrangement of words, their functional relationships and coherence for in passing the intended meaning. The results in Figure 2 revealed that most hash tags which were 60% were syntactically non-ordered while only 40% were ordered. This implies that most hash tags are non-ordered. The hashtags that showed some grammatical order include: #HotBedOfTerror; #BabaWhileYouWereAway; #147IsNotJustANumber;#IStandWithKDF;#StopTheDrunkPresident;and#IfMatiangiWasPresident. One of the grammatical features of a hashtag the world over, is that it does not follow the normal order of words in a sentence, for instance the markers of speech are usually missing. Also the subject verb object agreement may be missing. Examples are: #DepotRutoPilot; #MyDressMyChoice; #UhuruDabChallenge. These hashtags, just like observed in hashtags formed elsewhere, do not obey punctuation rules. For example every word is capitalized and there is no spacing between words. This grammatical structure of hashtags therefore, follows the universal structure that has come to distinguish this genre. A study by Das (2013) shows that SM texts exhibit many challenges in language use such as a high percentage of typing errors, creative spellings like *gr8 for great,* phonetic typing and word play such as *soooo saaaad* for *so sad,* abbreviations like LoL (laugh out loud) and ION. (in other news), as well as metatags like URLs and hashtags (#).
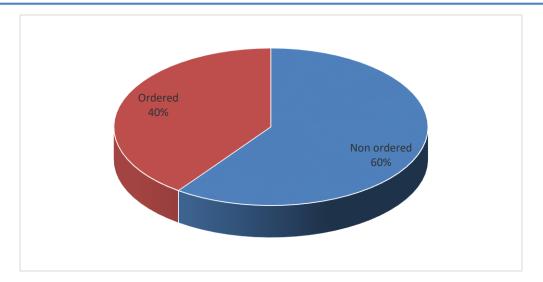
Figure 2: Grammatical Structure of Hash tag

The results above indicate that the language used in this form of discourse portrays a lot of grammatical errors. Herring (2015) says that research has revealed that Computer Mediated Language (CML) is sensitive to a variety of technical and even situational factors making it more complex. The popular perception is that CML is less correct and coherent. Baron (1984) predicted that participants in computer conferences would use fewer subordinate clauses and a narrower range of vocabulary and as result the expressive functions of language could be diminished. This study refutes these claims as most of the tweets exhibit coherence and proper language command. The absence of punctuation and grammatical markers does not seem to affect the delivery of meaning or the uptake of the hashtags among online users. The use of short forms in the hashtags seems to obey the conventions of online discourse where the number of characters allowed in a post may be less than the fully expressive sentence. This finding is in agreement with Herring (2015) who says that although CML may contain non-standard features only a relatively small percentage of such features are a result of lack attention or knowledge of the standard forms. Majority of these errors are a deliberate choice meant to minimize typing time and effort, mimic spoken language features or express them creatively. Hashtags exhibit the characteristic of textual representation of auditory information such as prosody laughter, facial expressions and other paralinguistic features. One practical example is the presentation of laughter in the following tweet:

3 retweets 4 likes

☐ ☐ **Ahmed Mohamed @asmali77** May 15

HaHaHa. Nani huyo? Wetangula is the **#BungomaJamesBond**?

☐ ☐ **Prometheus MBS @Kenribs** 29 Oct 2014

Hahahaha, ati Omondi the Artist has found himself in **#DeadbeatKenya**

4.4 Code of the Hashtag

The respondents were asked to indicate the code of the hash tag. The results in Figure 3 show that most hash tags that is 69% were framed using internet lingo while only 31% were framed in normal grammar. Internet lingo in this case refers to shortened and unordered forms where word choice is based on the objective of capturing interest. Hashtags seem to totally ignore the use of punctuation, lexicon arrangement and interaction while focusing on key words that capture interest of social media users quickly. An example is #RapeDoctor, #DeportRutoPilot. The hashtags have no spacing in between words neither are there conjunctions or other grammatical markers. Some hashtags however follow the normal grammatical rules though the words are few and easy to grasp. For instance, #IStandWithKDF and #147IsNotJustANumber
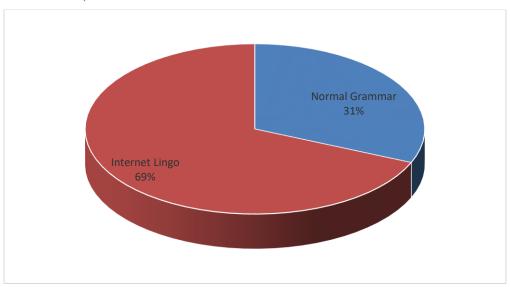

Figure 3: Code of Hash tag

The hashtag developers were also asked to indicate some of the hash tags they have formulated as an individual or organization. The following are some of the responses

Respondent 1: *'As a marketing organization, we represent a diverse set of clientele on the social media space and as such we have come up with several hashtags campaigns over the years. Most recently #MamasSpecial during mothers' day where one of our clients encouraged users to share 'Why they love their mamas'. One of the most popular one was for Safaricom and dubbed #RiseForKenya – this was around celebrating Kenyans athletes who were going to represent Kenya at the Rio Olympics. It was so successful such that we had the presidents, first lady and a couple of other government officials share tweets using the hashtag.'*

Respondent 2: *'#ThePlotKe (get people aware of the event), #ItsBig (Pambazuka National Lottery), #LipaDeni (Credit Bureau) –associate loans with credit score. All of them were successful.'*

The respondents were also asked to indicate what factors they consider when formulating hash tags. The hashtag developers raised factors like the choice of words, length of the statement making the hashtag and use of emotive forms so that the hashtag becomes memorable. These words had to be presented in a particular language and for some the hashtag reached more ordinary Kenyans if it was in Kiswahili. This is what informed the choice of language in #LipaKamaTender. The doctors wanted more Kenyans to understand their plea. That a non-emergency issue, like paying tender cartels, was given priority yet the doctor who treats the ordinary Kenyan had been ignored.

Respondent 1: *'Has to be short and memorable. It is also important to remember that the online user has a very short attention span making it very competitive'*

Respondent 2: *'Target audience (How do they speak? What everyone can relate to. If you want to make it trend think of how many ways you can use.*

-Choice of Lingo –think audience for example Kiswahili penetrates better

For example #ItsBig –lottery for all Kenyans –what is big? It's coming? What is it?'

The respondents were asked to indicate whether it matters who formulates the hashtag as far as its popularity rating is concerned. The following were the responses

Respondent 1: *'Partly. If one is popular then it takes a shorter time to get people to participate in your cause. Otherwise, if it is a matter close to the hearts of many Kenyans, then it doesn't matter who starts it, for example #WestgateAttack or #RIPSaitoti. In this case, the first person to share it creates the breaking news and from there the communication goes viral. However, if the campaign is leaning towards commercial objectives, then you need someone (or a team) with considerable influence to drive your message.'*

Respondent 2*: 'Yes, the source matters.' If one does not have a large following, it won't pick up. E.g are your followers followed. Retweeting is important*.'

The respondents were asked to indicate whether media houses always formulate the hashtags or are there times when the journalists have adopted hashtags formulated by members of the public. Majority of the respondents indicated that there are times the journalists have adopted hashtags formulated by members of the public. The following are some of the responses

Respondent 1: *'Not always .sometimes media houses adopt other hashtags from the public. Eg #Lipakamatender'*

Respondent 2: *'Yes. When media houses need to verify certain breaking news, they may adopt hashtags from the public.'*

Respondent 3: *'I am not sure'*

Respondent 4: *'Sometimes'*

Media personalities interviewed were of the opinion that even though Kenyans create hashtags over issues that find their way into news rooms sometimes, the public still relies on media for verification.

The respondents (media personalities) were further asked to indicate the hashtags they have formulated and which in their opinion have been successful.

The following are some of the responses.

Respondent1*: '#HurumaTragedy#ManderaAttack.#StateoftheNation.#SpeaktoDpRuto(Public really criticized the media for that)'*

Respondent 2: *'#BizInsight-for our weekly business news program.#ProjectGalana- for a documentary I did on Galana irrigation scheme.#KDFourHeroes-for celebration of KDF day.#TeamWorshipWednesday-My weekly inspiration sesseion(Wednesday'*

Respondent 4:*'I haven't really formulated hashtags but I use them. #WengerOut is one of them'*

Respondent 6: *'#FreeJoyDoreen was useful in ensuring business journalist Joy Doreen was from jail in Uganda.'*

Respondent8:*'#RioFiasco. This happened in 2016 when Kenyans athletes were deprived of allowances and uniforms as they represented the country in the Rio, Brazil Olympics.'*

The Rio scandal was about Kenyan athletes being denied proper accommodation and even outfits as organizers used their money to travel with relatives and friends to Rio Olympics. Kenyans demanded answers to the fiasco.

The respondents, who in this case were independent hashtag developers, were also asked to indicate the purpose Kenyans are using hashtag. The following are some of the responses.

Respondent 1*: 'To come together virtually. To share opinions and be heard. -If you are concerned with the economy, you simply go to the twitter and start discussion using hashtag #EconomyKenya and people with similar interests are likely to join and start sharing and as more tweets are shared so does the topic become popular and start trending.'*

Respondents 2*: 'they were invented for penetration. For instance, a photo on Instagram with a # reaches more people. Hashtags are trendy (in touch with the world). Social activism e.g #TakeKenyaBack(K.O.T)'*

From these responses, it is clear the the hashtag developers concentrate on other factors other than the correctness of a hashtag's grammar. The use of incomplete sentences was taken as a communication strategy to raise curiosity and capture interest other than an indicator of low language competence on the part of the hashtag formulator as is the case in #ItsBig discussed above. The use of short clauses or single words as a way of simplifying communication is supported by the findings of Zappavigna (2017) who looked at the linguistic functions of hashtags in tweets and found that tweeps embed metadata in posts through tagging to allow one to find out what people are talking about in real time. The study says that hashtags emerged via micro blogging, the practice of publishing short, character-constrained posts to ambient audiences before spreading to other media. Moreover, the choice of words, sentence structure and the length of the hashtag determine how influential the hashtag is to the public. This is the character portrayed by Kenyan hashtags.

This study agrees with Halliday (1978) about linguistic metafunctions of a hashtag such as marking experiential topics, enacting interpersonal relationships and organizing text. Some hashtags

however follow the normal grammatical rules though the words are few and easy to grasp. For instance, #IStandWithKDF and #147IsNotJustANumber. These findings are in agreement with those of Kehoe and Gee, 2014, who see hashtags as topic markers indicating the aboutness of a social media text. For instance, #KenyansVsZimbabweans already indicates the direction of the online conversations. In collaboration, Brock (2012) says that the existence of a hashtagged message via twitter actively invites audiences' attention by setting parameters for embedded discourse.

5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

The objective of the study was to establish the influence of framing of the hashtag on public opinion formation on socio-political issues in Kenya. The results revealed that 83% of the hash tags were in English. In addition the results revealed that there was a significant effect between language choice and public opinion formation on socio-political issues in Kenya. This implies that hash tags framed in English forms a high public opinion compared to other languages. Another finding was that hashtags that used Kiswahili had the feature of code mixing where English was inserted. Therefore, English hashtags were preferred and they trended more.

Strongly worded or emotive hashtags had more influence on opinion formation. Most respondents argued that catchy words are the ones that got more attention. The study found that 60% of the hash tags were non-ordered. In addition the study found that an insignificant effect between grammatical structure and public opinion formation on socio-political issues in Kenya. The results also revealed that 69% of the hash tags were internet lingo.

Every respondent interviewed revealed that they put specific factors into consideration more especially the topic or issue regime, timing and the wording. These findings suggest that the hashtags are not formulated without taking into consideration the frames of communication (how the hashtag will communicate the message) and the frames of thought (how the target audience will interpret the message). The frames of communication were identifiable in the lexicon choice, grammatical structure, language choice and code of hashtags. The frames of thought can only be inferred from the tweets that the respondents post under the hashtags which eventually show their opinion about social and political issues at hand. These findings concur with Chong and Druckman (2007) who say that a strong frame is one that emerges from public discussions as the best rationale for contending positions on the issue because these are the frames that strike opinion leaders and audiences as being more compelling than alternative arguments. Thus the formulation of a hashtag must capture the public's attention so that there is online discussion of the issue at hand and therefore an opinion about it may be propagated on the same platform. Another finding is that hashtags are framed by ordinary citizens as well as the media personalities. Thus framing is being done by both the public and the media hence creating contesting frames in the form of hashtags.

5.2 Conclusions

Based on the research findings, the study concluded that language choice of the hash tag and code of the hash tag has a significant effect on public opinion formation. However grammatical structure has no significant effect on public opinion formation. In addition Hash tags formulated in English form a higher public opinion. This is an indicator that hashtags and the use of social media is mostly done by people who have some knowledge of English language. In Kenya this is the

educated group referred to as the elite. Uneducated Kenyans would respond more to hashtags in Kiswahili or Sheng. In addition the study found that a significant effect between code of hash tag and public opinion formation on socio-political issues in Kenya. The internet lingo was preferred to normal grammatical forms during formulation of hashtags for purposes of capturing interest and in adherence to the Twitter convention of 140 characters per tweet.

5.3 Recommendations

The study recommends that the hash tag formulators should look at the relevance of the hash tag to the general public that is the audience, before formulating it. The framing of the hashtag is crucial in determining its success online.

REFERENCES

Baran, S. J., & Davis, D. K. (2009). *Mass communication theory: foundations, ferment and future* (5[th]ed.). Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Baron & Naomi, S. (1984). "Computer Mediated Communication as a force in Language Change" *Visible Language*, XV112 118-41

Carragee, K. M. & Roefs, W. (2004). "The neglect of Power in Recent Framing Research" In *Journal of Communication* (54) 2: 214-233.

Chong, D. & Druckman, J. N. (2007). "A Theory of Framing and Opinion Formation in Competitive Elite Environments" In, Journal of Communication 57, 2007, pp99-118.

Das, A. (2013). Code-Mixing in Social Media Text: The Last Language Identification Frontier? In Norwegian University of Science and Technology, TAL Vol. 54-no. 3/2013 pp 41-64.

Entman, M. R. (1993). "Framing: Towards clarification of a Fractured Paradigm". In, Journal of Communication, 43(4)

Gazza, N. (2013). "The role of social media in the formation of public opinion towards Islamists: A content analysis." In, Journal of Arab and Muslim media Research, March 2013, Vol. 6, Issue I.

Gearhart, S. & Zhang, W. (2013). "Gay Bulling and Online Opinion Expression: Testing Spiral of Silence in the Social Media Environment" In, Social Science Computer Review 2014, Vol. 32(1) 18-36

Grant, A. (2015). "#discrimination": The Online Response to a Case of a Breastfeeding Mother Being Ejected from a UK Retail Premises" In, Journal of Human Lactation 1-11, Sage Publishers.

Herring, S. (2015) "Computer Mediated Discourse" In, Tannen, D., Heidi, e. Schiffrin, D. *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis, 2nd Edition*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Jensen, K.B. (ed.) (2012). *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research, 2nd edition: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies.*

Makinen, M. & Kuira, M. (2007).Social Media and Post-Election Crisis in Kenya. *Information & Communication Technology-Africa, (1-1-2008),* Retrieved from: Scholarly Commons. http://repository,upenn.edu/ictarica/13.

McCombs, M. (2004). *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion.* UK: Polity Press

Megha, H. (2014). "Role of media public opinion formation." In, Masters International Journal of Management Research & Development; March 2014, Vol. II Issue III

Michaelson, M. (2011).*New Media Vs Old politics: The Internet, social media and democratization in Pakistan*. Berlin:Friedrich – Ebert – Stiftung.

Norris, P. (2001). *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in post-industrial democracies.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Paolillo, J.C. (1996). "Language Choice on Social Culture Punjab." In *Electronic Journal of Communication* 6(3) htttp://www.cios.org

Resse, S.D. (2007). The framing project: A Bridging model for media research revisited. *Journal of Communication*. (57).1:148-154.

Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a Theory of Media Effects. *Journal of Communication 49(1):103-122*

Severin, J.W. & Tankard, J.W. (2001).*Communication Theories: Origins, Methods and Uses in the Mass Media.* New York: Longman.

Snow, D.A., Rochoford, E.B., Worden, S.K. & Benford, R.D. (1988)." Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization and Movement Participation" In American Sociological Review 51: 464

Valenzuela, S. (2013) "Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism" In *American Behavioral Scientist* 57(7) 920-942, Sage Publications

Yates, S.J. (1996). "English in Cyberspace". In, Goodman, S. & Graddol, D. (eds) *Redesigning English: New Texts, New Identities.* Pp106-40 London: Routledge.

Yoon, S. (2001). "Internet Discourse and the Habitus of Korea's New Generation". In, Ess, C. & Sudweeks F. (eds) *Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an International Communication.* Abany: SUNY Press.

Zappavigna, M. (2017). *Searchable Talk: Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse.* London: Bloomsbury.