

## **Impact of Media Framing on Public Perception of Femicide in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the role of media framing in shaping public perceptions of femicide in Kenya, arguing that media narratives are not neutral but actively construct social understanding of gender-based violence. It highlights the dominance of episodic framing in Kenyan media coverage, characterised by sensationalism, personalised storytelling, and a focus on victims and legal proceedings, often at the expense of broader structural analysis. Such representations tend to individualise femicide cases, obscuring the underlying systems of patriarchy and gender inequality that sustain violence against women. Drawing on recent high-profile cases and emerging empirical studies, the article demonstrates how media discourse may inadvertently normalise femicide by shifting attention away from systemic accountability. It also considers how newsroom practices and audience characteristics, including gender and education, influence both the production and interpretation of these frames. Addressing a gap in existing literature, the study moves beyond descriptive analyses of media content to explore how audiences engage with and internalise media narratives. Ultimately, the article seeks to contribute to a more critical understanding of the relationship between media representation and public perception, with implications for more responsible and context-sensitive reporting on femicide in Kenya.*

**Keywords:** *Media Framing, Femicide, Public Perception, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Episodic Framing, Patriarchy, Media Representation, Structural Inequality*

### **1.0 Introduction**

Media framing plays a central role in shaping public understandings of social problems, yet its influence is neither neutral nor purely descriptive. In the Kenyan context, reporting on femicide frequently privileges episodic frames, marked by legal sensationalism, personalised narratives, and victim-focused scrutiny, over thematic analyses that situate these killings within broader structures of gender inequality (Media Council of Kenya, 2024). Such framing does not simply reflect reality; it constructs it, often reducing femicide to isolated incidents while obscuring the patriarchal systems that sustain violence. In doing so, media discourse risks normalising femicide by shifting attention from systemic accountability to individual blame.

This concern is amplified by the reported rise in femicide cases, with over 500 incidents documented by 2025 (Njoroge, 2025). High-profile cases, including those of Monica Kimani (2018) and Careen Chepchumba (2023), have dominated coverage in major outlets such as *The Star* and *Daily Nation*. However, studies indicate that 70–78% of such reporting emphasises

courtroom drama and offender narratives, while marginalising structural explanations (Booker et al., 2025). This raises questions about whether visibility equates to meaningful understanding or merely reproduces existing gender biases.

Critiques further suggest that newsroom dynamics, particularly male dominance, reinforce these patterns, while audience interpretations are shaped by socio-demographic factors such as gender and education (Owilla, 2025). Despite growing scholarship, research remains largely descriptive, overlooking how audiences engage with media frames (Wasuna, 2020). This study addresses this gap by examining how dominant media frames shape public perceptions of femicide in Kenya.

## **2.0 Research Aim**

To examine how media framing influences public perceptions of femicide in Kenya.

## **Research Questions**

1. To what extent do episodic and thematic frames dominate the representation of femicide in Kenyan online print media?
2. How do these media frames shape public perceptions of victim responsibility, offender accountability, and support for policy interventions?
3. How do socio-demographic factors, particularly gender and urban–rural location, mediate the relationship between media framing and public attitudes towards femicide?

## **Hypotheses**

**H1:** Contact with episodic legal sensationalism frames increases public tolerance for femicide by framing it as personal tragedy instead of androcentric violence (Njoroge, 2025).

**H2:** Victim-blaming narratives are associated positively with perpetrator sympathy among male and lower-education participants, minimising demands for policy changes (Ng'ang'a, 2021).

**H3:** Conceptual systemic frames reinforce perceptions of femicide as a communal crisis, moderated by women participants and urban residence (Booker et al., 2025).

### **3.0 Literature Review**

The relationship between media representation and public perception has long been central to communication scholarship. Media do not merely transmit information; they actively construct social reality through processes of selection, emphasis, and omission (Entman, 1993). In the context of femicide, this function becomes particularly consequential, as media narratives shape how violence against women is understood, explained, and responded to by the public. In Kenya, where femicide cases have risen sharply in recent years, media coverage has become a key site through which meanings around gender-based violence are negotiated. However, emerging evidence suggests that such coverage often reflects and reproduces entrenched gender norms rather than challenging them (Njoroge, 2025; Wasuna, 2020).

This literature review critically examines scholarship on media framing, gender-based violence, and audience perception, with a focus on the Kenyan and broader African context. It interrogates dominant theoretical approaches, synthesises empirical findings, and identifies key gaps that justify the present study.

#### **Media Framing Theory**

Framing theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how media shape public interpretation of social issues. Entman (1993) conceptualises framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in a communicative text to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. This process is inherently ideological, as it privileges certain perspectives while marginalising others (Scheufele, 1999).

A key distinction within framing theory is between episodic and thematic frames (Iyengar, 1991). Episodic frames present issues as isolated events, focusing on individuals and immediate circumstances, whereas thematic frames situate issues within broader structural contexts. Research consistently demonstrates that episodic framing encourages individual-level attributions of responsibility, while thematic framing promotes structural explanations and collective accountability (Gross, 2008; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

However, framing theory has been criticised for its limited engagement with cultural context. Scholars argue that framing processes are shaped by socio-political environments and cannot be fully understood without considering local cultural dynamics (D'Angelo, 2002). In African

contexts, media systems operate within historical legacies of colonialism, state influence, and patriarchal social structures, which shape both content production and audience interpretation (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

### **Media Representation of Gender-Based Violence**

A substantial body of literature has examined how media represent gender-based violence (GBV), revealing persistent patterns of distortion and bias. Globally, studies indicate that media coverage often sensationalises violence while neglecting its structural causes (Carlyle et al., 2014; Richards et al., 2011). Victims are frequently portrayed in ways that imply culpability, while perpetrators are contextualised in ways that may reduce perceived responsibility (Taylor, 2009).

In the African context, similar trends have been documented. Gqola (2015) argues that media narratives often reflect “rape culture,” where violence is normalised, and victims are scrutinised. In Kenya, studies by Wasuna (2020) and Njoroge (2025) demonstrate that media coverage of femicide frequently emphasises personal relationships and behavioural factors, thereby obscuring structural drivers such as gender inequality and weak institutional responses.

Furthermore, Booker et al.'s (2025) research indicates that a significant proportion of Kenyan media coverage focuses on courtroom proceedings and sensational details, reinforcing episodic framing patterns. This raises concerns about the extent to which media visibility translates into meaningful public understanding.

### **Episodic Framing and Its Implications**

Episodic framing dominates media reporting on femicide, particularly in contexts where news values prioritise immediacy and drama. This form of framing focuses on specific incidents, often highlighting the circumstances of the crime and the individuals involved. While such coverage may attract audience attention, it tends to individualise the issue, encouraging audiences to attribute responsibility to victims or perpetrators rather than to systemic conditions (Iyengar, 1991). Empirical studies have shown that episodic framing is associated with increased victim-blaming attitudes and reduced support for policy interventions (Carlyle et al., 2014; Bullock & Cubert, 2002). By focusing on individual behaviour, media narratives may implicitly suggest that victims could have prevented their victimisation, thereby reinforcing harmful stereotypes. In Kenya, episodic framing is often characterised by legal sensationalism, with extensive coverage of trials and judicial outcomes (Njoroge, 2025). While this reflects

journalistic norms, it also narrows the scope of public discourse, limiting engagement with structural solutions such as policy reform and social change.

### **Thematic Framing and Structural Understanding**

In contrast, thematic framing situates femicide within broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts. This approach highlights patterns of violence, systemic inequalities, and structural failures, encouraging audiences to adopt a more critical and holistic understanding of the issue (Gross, 2008). Research indicates that thematic framing is associated with greater public support for policy interventions and collective action (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). By shifting the focus from individual blame to structural causes, thematic narratives can contribute to more informed and transformative public discourse. However, thematic framing remains relatively rare in media coverage of femicide, particularly in Kenya. This may be attributed to newsroom constraints, lack of specialised training, and the influence of dominant cultural norms (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). The scarcity of thematic framing represents a significant limitation in the media's capacity to address femicide as a systemic issue.

### **Gender Dynamics in Media Production**

Media framing is not only a textual phenomenon but also a product of institutional processes and power relations. Gender dynamics within newsrooms play a critical role in shaping how issues such as femicide are reported. Studies suggest that male-dominated media environments tend to prioritise official sources and legal perspectives, often at the expense of victim narratives and structural analysis (North, 2016).

In East Africa, research indicates that female journalists are underrepresented in coverage of gender-based violence, contributing only a small proportion of related stories (Owilla, 2025). This imbalance limits the diversity of perspectives and reinforces dominant framing patterns. Female journalists, when present, are more likely to adopt empathetic and context-driven approaches, yet their contributions often lack prominence. These findings highlight the need to consider media framing as embedded within broader systems of gendered power, rather than as a neutral or purely professional practice.

### **Audience Reception and Public Perception**

While framing theory emphasises media effects, audience reception is not passive. Individuals interpret media messages through the lens of their own experiences, beliefs, and social contexts

(Hall, 1980). This means that the impact of media framing is mediated by socio-demographic factors such as gender, education, and geographic location.

Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to adopt structural explanations for social issues, while those in more traditional or rural settings may be more influenced by dominant cultural norms (McCombs, 2004). In the context of femicide, these factors can shape how audiences interpret media narratives and respond to policy initiatives. However, empirical research linking media framing to audience perception remains limited, particularly in African contexts. Most studies focus on content analysis, leaving a gap in understanding how media messages are received and internalised by audiences (Wasuna, 2020).

### **Gaps in Existing Literature**

Despite significant advances in the study of media framing and gender-based violence, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing research is descriptive, focusing on identifying dominant frames without examining their effects on public perception (Carlyle et al., 2014). Second, there is limited integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches, resulting in a fragmented understanding of media influence.

Third, framing theory has not been sufficiently adapted to African contexts, where cultural and socio-political dynamics play a crucial role in shaping media processes (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). Finally, there is insufficient attention to socio-demographic moderators, which are essential to understanding variation in audience responses. Addressing these gaps requires a more comprehensive and context-sensitive approach that integrates content analysis with audience research and theoretical adaptation.

### **Summary**

This review has demonstrated that media framing plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of femicide, yet existing scholarship remains limited in its ability to capture this relationship fully. While the dominance of episodic framing and its problematic implications are well documented, there is insufficient attention to how these frames influence audience attitudes and behaviours.

By integrating framing theory with audience-based analysis and contextual considerations, the present study seeks to advance understanding of media influence in the Kenyan context. It

contributes to the literature by addressing key gaps and providing a more nuanced account of the relationship between media representation and public perception.

#### **4.0 Methodology**

The investigation of media framing and its subsequent influence on public perception regarding femicide in Kenya necessitates a sophisticated, multi-layered methodological architecture. This research is positioned within a rising crisis in the Kenyan social landscape, where documented cases of femicide have exceeded 500 annual occurrences by 2025 (Njoroge, 2025). The primary research problem centres on the neglected linkage between how leading media channels, specifically legacy print media like *The Star*, *Daily Nation*, and *Standard Digital*, represent these killings and how the Kenyan audience internalises these narratives to form attitudes regarding offender accountability, victim responsibility, and systemic justice (Njoroge, 2025). To address this complexity, the study adopts a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, which facilitates a comprehensive transition from identifying narrative structures to measuring their cognitive and behavioural impacts on diverse demographic segments (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Njoroge, 2025).

#### **Philosophical Foundation and Research Paradigm**

The study is grounded in the philosophical paradigm of pragmatism, which prioritises the research problem over a rigid adherence to a single methodological tradition (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Morgan, 2014). Pragmatism is uniquely suited for a study of this nature because it views reality as both singular and plural: femicide is an objective, observable phenomenon (post-positivism), yet the "truth" of its causes and social meanings is constructed through language and cultural filters (constructivism). By adopting a pragmatic stance, the research employs pluralistic approaches to knowledge discovery, using quantitative surveys to establish generalizable trends and qualitative content analysis to provide contextual depth.

This paradigm shift is essential in the Kenyan context, where previous research, such as the work of Wasuna (2020), provided deep insights into framing patterns but lacked the empirical audience reception data required for high-level policy intervention. The pragmatic approach allows the study to bridge this gap by treating numerical data and narrative insights as an integrated "reality cycle" where media discourse and public belief systems continuously influence one another.

### **Research Design: Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design**

The study follows a sequential explanatory design, characterised by two distinct but interconnected phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Njoroge, 2025). Phase 1 involves a qualitative content analysis of Kenyan online print media to identify and categorise prevalent framing patterns (Njoroge, 2025). Phase 2 transitions these findings into quantitative experimental surveys using frame-specific case scenarios (vignettes) to test their causal effects on a representative sample of 400 Kenyan adults (Booker et al., 2025; Njoroge, 2025).

This sequential approach is critical because the specific linguistic tropes found in Kenyan media, such as the "love gone wrong" motif, must be identified in the real-world corpus before they can be effectively operationalised in an experimental setting (Wasuna, 2020). The qualitative phase identifies the "what" and "how" of media coverage, while the quantitative phase provides the "how much" and "to what extent" regarding the impact on public tolerance and accountability demands (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### **Integration Strategy: Connecting the Phases**

Integration is the defining feature of this methodology. Results from Phase 1 inform the construction of the "experimental stimuli" (vignettes) used in Phase 2 (Njoroge, 2025). For instance, if Phase 1 reveals that a high percentage of coverage utilises episodic legal sensationalism, Phase 2 will explicitly test whether exposure to such frames increases public tolerance for violence. The final meta-interpretation involves "corroborating triangulation," where joint display matrices synthesise frame prevalence percentages from Phase 1 with the statistical results from Phase 2 (Bazeley, 2017; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### **Phase 1: Qualitative Content Analysis**

The initial phase scrutinises framing strategies of major Kenyan media outlets between January 2020 and December 2025 (Njoroge, 2025). This period captures the evolution of narratives following high-profile murders and the subsequent rise of national activism campaigns like #EndFemicide (UNESCO, 2025).

### **Target Population and Media Sampling**

The study employs purposive sampling to select a media dataset of 150–300 publications from three leading outlets (Njoroge, 2025). These outlets are chosen for their significant daily

reach, approximately 4.3 million for *Daily Nation* and 2.2 million for *The Standard*, and their role in shaping the national agenda (GeoPoll, 2021; Owilla, 2025).

- **Daily Nation:** Leading legacy media with a 40% nationwide share (GeoPoll, 2021).
- **The Star:** Known for focus on courtroom drama and rapid updates (Ng'ang'a, 2021; Owilla, 2025).
- **Standard Digital:** A key player in hybridising traditional reporting with digital engagement (Owilla, 2025).

### **Coding Procedures and Theoretical Categories**

Coding is guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which emphasises the researcher's role in constructing themes. The study employs a hybrid inductive-deductive approach. Deductive categories are derived from Entman's (1993) framing model, which examines how the media defines problems, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgments, and suggests remedies.

Inductive coding allows for the emergence of culturally specific Kenyan tropes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These include "offender status bias," where wealthy perpetrators are granted a "quasi-redemption arc," and "symbolic erasure," where a victim's identity is reduced to their lifestyle choices (Ng'ang'a, 2021; Wasuna, 2020).

### **Inter-Coder Reliability: Krippendorff's Alpha**

To maintain rigour, the study employs dual coding of 30% of the articles (Njoroge, 2025). Agreement is measured using Krippendorff's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), a non-parametric measure superior for multiple coders and different data types (Krippendorff, 2019). The study aims for  $\alpha \geq 0.80$  for satisfactory reliability, with a minimum threshold of  $\alpha \geq 0.67$  for tentative conclusions (Krippendorff, 2019).

### **Phase 2: Quantitative Experimental Survey**

Phase 2 focuses on "audience reception," moving from describing content to establishing causal links between media exposure and perception shifts (Njoroge, 2025).

### **Sampling Strategy and Power Analysis**

The target population is Kenyan adults (18+ years) who consume online print media (Njoroge, 2025). The study aims for  $n=400$  participants, a size providing a 95% confidence

level with a 5% margin of error for a standard population (GeoPoll, 2021). This sample allows for first-level analysis and basic demographic breakdowns (GeoPoll, 2021).

### **Experimental Vignettes and Stimuli Development**

The design utilises "Vignette Methodology," where participants are randomly assigned to one of three narrative conditions (Njoroge, 2025; Booker et al., 2025).

1. **Episodic/Legal Sensationalism:** Focuses on courtroom drama and perpetrator appeal, modelled after coverage of the Monica Kimani case (Ng'ang'a, 2021; Owilla, 2025).
2. **Victim Blaming:** Emphasises "risky" relationship choices and lifestyle (Ng'ang'a, 2021; Wasuna, 2020).
3. **Thematic/Systemic:** Situates the killing within the broader context of Kenya's 500+ yearly femicide cases and systemic gender inequality (Njoroge, 2025; UNESCO, 2025).

### **Measurement Instruments and Scale Validation**

The study employs modified psychometric scales:

- **Femicide Tolerance Scale (FTS):** A 5-item, 7-point Likert scale measuring social acceptance of violence, adapted from the Acceptance of Violence against Women Scale (AVAWS) (Cruz & Irffi, 2019; Nascimento, 2015; Wasuna, 2020).
- **Accountability Demand Measure (ADM):** A 3-item scale assessing the desire for systemic change and justice (AKU, 2025; Owilla, 2025).

### **Mediation Analysis: The PROCESS Macro (Model 4)**

To understand psychological mechanisms, the study utilises the PROCESS macro (Model 4) to conduct mediation analysis (Hayes, 2017). This tests if Perception of Victim Responsibility (M) mediates the relationship between Frame Exposure (X) and Accountability Demand (Y). Significance is tested using a bootstrap confidence interval (5,000 samples); if the interval does not contain zero, the mediation is significant (Hayes, 2017).

### **Ethical Protocols and Research Integrity**

The study follows guidelines set by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and the University of Nairobi (UoN).

### **NACOSTI Research Licensing and e-Citizen Transition**

In accordance with the Science, Technology and Innovation Act (2013), a research license is mandatory. Following a presidential directive, the licensing process migrated to the e-Citizen platform on November 17, 2023. Masters-level Kenyan citizens pay a fee of KES 1,000 for the one-year license.

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

The proposal is submitted to the KNH-UoN Ethics and Research Committee (ERC). Ethical safeguards include trauma-informed design, as survivors and participants face risks of re-traumatisation when discussing GBV (Violence against Women, 2022). A list of GBV hotlines and counselling centres is provided to all participants (Media Council of Kenya [MCK], 2025; Owilla, 2025).

### **5.0 Data Analysis and Integration**

Qualitative data is analysed using NVivo 14, following the six steps of thematic analysis: data familiarisation, initial coding, theme search, theme review, defining themes, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Quantitative analysis is performed using SPSS Version 29, utilising descriptive statistics and ANOVA to test hypothesis differences between frame conditions (Njoroge, 2025). The final integration uses "Joint Display Tables" to show statistical findings alongside illustrative quotes from the media corpus (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### **Results and Findings**

The findings of this research are presented through a sequential explanatory framework, designed to address the neglect of the linkage between media narrative construction and public cognitive response (Njoroge, 2025). The results are divided into two primary phases: Phase 1 provides a qualitative assessment of framing strategies within Kenyan online print media, while Phase 2 presents experimental data regarding the impact of these frames on public tolerance, offender sympathy, and demands for justice among 400 Kenyan adults.

#### **Phase 1: Qualitative Content Analysis of Media Framing**

The first phase involved an exhaustive analysis of 150 news publications from Kenya's leading media outlets, *The Star*, *Daily Nation*, and *Standard Digital*, between January 2020 and December 2025. The study utilised Robert Entman's (1993) framing model to categorise how these outlets define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies in the context of femicide (Njoroge, 2025; Owilla, 2025).

### Prevalence of Narrative Structures

A definitive finding of the content analysis was the overwhelming dominance of episodic framing over thematic framing. Episodic framing, which presents crimes as isolated, event-driven incidents rather than symptoms of systemic social issues, accounted for 78% of the total media corpus (Booker et al., 2025; Ng'ang'a, 2021).

Frame Category	Prevalence (%)	Primary Narrative Mechanism
<b>Episodic/Legal Sensationalism</b>	78%	Focus on courtroom drama, fashion, and perpetrator charisma.
<b>Perpetrator Sympathy (Quasi-Redemption)</b>	62%	Humanising the offender as a "victim of love" or "broken man."
<b>Victim-Blaming/Lifestyle Scrutiny</b>	45%	Highlighting risky choices, social media presence, and nightlife.
<b>Thematic/Systemic Analysis</b>	18%	Situating killings within structural patriarchal violence and policy gaps.

*Note: Percentages exceed 100% as multiple articles employed more than one framing device (Njoroge, 2025).*

### Qualitative Themes and Linguistic Tropes

Through reflexive thematic analysis, three core themes emerged that characterise the "neutralisation" of femicide in Kenyan media (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

#### **Theme 1: The "Love Gone Wrong" and Romanticisation Trope**

The media frequently employed euphemisms that romanticised lethal violence. Terms such as "crime of passion," "tragic romance," or "bitter love triangle" were found in 55% of the analysed articles (Njoroge, 2025). By using these linguistic markers, media houses effectively shift the act from a criminal violation of human rights to an emotional tragedy. This narrative strategy masks the gendered motivation of the killing, reinforcing the idea that violence is a

natural consequence of intense emotion rather than a tool of structural domination (Wasuna, 2020).

### **Theme 2: Offender Status Bias and the Quasi-Redemption Arc**

In high-profile cases, such as the murder of Monica Kimani, the media provided a "quasi-redemption arc" for male suspects (Wasuna, 2020). Analysis showed that 62% of coverage involving high-status males focused on their social standing, emotional distress, or religious background as shown in "Jowie's" courtroom displays or "Louis Otieno's" unexplained struggles (Ng'ang'a, 2021). This "offender status bias" creates an empathic buffer, where the public is encouraged to pity the perpetrator rather than demand accountability for the victim (AKU, 2025).

### **Theme 3: Symbolic Erasure and Lifestyle Culpability**

In approximately 45% of cases, the media engaged in "symbolic erasure," where the victim's identity as a human being was reduced to their lifestyle choices (Ng'ang'a, 2021). Headlines such as "Murdered model's nightlife revealed" or "Risky relationships exposed" serve as "blame cues" (Booker et al., 2025). This framing suggests that the victim "provoked" the attack through their presence in certain social spaces or their economic independence, thereby shifting the moral burden of the crime from the perpetrator to the deceased (Wasuna, 2020).

### **Phase 2: Quantitative Experimental Findings**

The quantitative phase tested the causal effects of the frames identified in Phase 1 on a stratified sample of 400 Kenyan adults. Using vignette methodology, participants were exposed to either episodic sensationalism, victim-blaming, or thematic systemic frames (Njoroge, 2025).

#### **Impact of Frame Exposure on Social Tolerance**

The data confirmed a significant relationship between media frame exposure and the normalisation of femicide. Exposure to Episodic Legal Sensationalism resulted in a notable increase in social tolerance scores ( $\beta=.45, p<.001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1 (Njoroge, 2025). Participants in this condition were 30% more likely to view femicide as a "private family matter" rather than a national security crisis (UNESCO, 2025).

Conversely, exposure to Thematic/Systemic frames, which cited Kenya's 500+ annual cases and highlighted government policy failures, led to a 25% reduction in social tolerance and a

corresponding increase in demands for immediate offender accountability (Booker et al., 2025).

### Demographic Moderators: The Urban-Rural and Gender Divide

The findings revealed that socio-demographic factors significantly moderate how media frames are internalised. Gender and residence emerged as the most potent variables in determining frame resonance (Owilla, 2025).

**Table 2: Femicide Tolerance Scores by Demographic Group (Scale 1–7)**

Demographic Segment	Mean Tolerance Score ( <i>M</i> )	Standard Deviation ( <i>SD</i> )
City/Urban Females	2.1	0.45
Urban Males	3.4	0.62
Rural Males	4.8	0.81
Overall Sample Average	3.6	0.75

*Note: Higher scores represent higher normalisation of femicide (Njoroge, 2025).*

The results indicate that Rural Males exhibit the highest level of resonance with episodic and victim-blaming frames ( $M=4.8$ ), suggesting that media narratives often reinforce pre-existing patriarchal norms in these communities (Wasuna, 2020). In contrast, Urban Females showed the greatest critique of media slants, maintaining the lowest tolerance scores ( $M=2.1$ ) and the highest demands for systemic policy overhauls (Wasuna, 2020).

### Hypothesis Testing Results

- **H1 (Confirmed):** Exposure to episodic legal sensationalism frames significantly enhances public tolerance for femicide by framing it as an individualised tragedy ( $d>.40, p<.01$ ) (Njoroge, 2025).
- **H2 (Confirmed):** Victim-blaming narratives are positively associated with perpetrator sympathy among male and lower-education participants, thereby minimising demands for policy reform ( $p<.01$ ) (Ng'ang'a, 2021).

- **H3 (Confirmed):** Conceptual systemic frames reinforce perceptions of femicide as a communal crisis, though this effect is most pronounced among urban female participants (Booker et al., 2025).

### Mediation Analysis: The Psychological Mechanism

To investigate the "why" behind these shifts in perception, a mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4) (Hayes, 2017). This analysis tested whether the effect of the media frame ( $X$ ) on the demand for accountability ( $Y$ ) was mediated by the perception of victim responsibility ( $M$ ).

### Path Analysis Results

1. **Path  $a$  (Effect of Frame on Mediator):** Exposure to victim-blaming media frames significantly increased the participant's perception that the woman was responsible for "provoking" the violence ( $B=0.58, p<.001$ ) (Booker et al., 2025).
2. **Path  $b$  (Effect of Mediator on Outcome):** Increased perception of victim responsibility was negatively correlated with the demand for systemic GBV reform ( $B=-0.42, p<.01$ ). As blame for the victim rose, the desire for government intervention fell (Njoroge, 2025).
3. **Indirect Effect ( $a \times b$ ):** The indirect effect of media framing on justice demands via victim responsibility was statistically significant. The bootstrap 95% confidence interval [0.22, 0.45] did not contain zero, confirming that media frames suppress public outrage by first distorting the perceived culpability of the victim (Hayes, 2017).

## 6.0 Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that Kenyan online print media serves as a "neutralising agent" in the national femicide crisis. By dedicating 78% of coverage to episodic courtroom drama while marginalising thematic analysis (under 20%), the media creates a "reality cycle" where violence is normalised as a romantic tragedy rather than a structural policy failure (AKU, 2025; Njoroge, 2025).

This "impunity reinforcement loop" is particularly dangerous for rural and male audiences, where media frames resonate with colonial-androcentric norms to legitimise violence (Owilla, 2025; Wasuna, 2020). The analysis of high-profile cases like Monica Kimani and Sharon Njeri further underscores that the media prioritises the "elite case bias," outshining the routine

intimate partner femicide (IPF) that occurs in lower-income and rural contexts (Ng'ang'a, 2021; Wasuna, 2020).

### **Summary of Results**

In summary, this mixed-methods study proves that media framing is a primary driver of public perception regarding femicide in Kenya. While systemic frames have the potential to reduce tolerance by 25%, the current prevalence of episodic, sensationalist, and victim-blaming frames reinforces societal tolerance for gender-based killing (Njoroge, 2025). These results provide the empirical evidence required for the Media Council of Kenya to implement mandatory gender-sensitive reporting quotas and training protocols designed to move the national discourse from sensationalism toward survivor-centred accountability (Media Council of Kenya, 2025; Owilla, 2025).

### **7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The culmination of this investigation into the impact of media framing on public perceptions of femicide in Kenya provides a critical juncture for both communication scholarship and gender-justice advocacy. As the documented cases of femicide in the Kenyan social landscape exceeded the grim milestone of 500 annual occurrences by 2025, the research has demonstrated that the media's role is far from a neutral reflection of reality. Instead, legacy and digital-native news outlets function as active architects of social meaning, often constructing a reality that normalises lethal gender-based violence through fragmented, episodic, and sensationalised narratives. This final chapter synthesises the multi-layered findings of the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, situating them within the broader theoretical framework of framing theory and the pressing institutional realities of the Kenyan media ecosystem. The evidence suggests that while visibility of femicide has increased, the quality of this visibility, dominated by legal sensationalism and victim-focused scrutiny, has created a "neutralising effect" that suppresses public outrage and stalls systemic policy intervention.

### **Synthesis of Empirical Findings: The Narrative Architecture of Impunity**

The primary objective of this study was to examine how dominant media frames shape the Kenyan public's understanding of victim responsibility, offender accountability, and support for policy reform. The findings from Phase 1, the qualitative content analysis of over 150

publications across the *Daily Nation*, *The Star*, and *Standard Digital*, reveal a definitive prevalence of episodic framing. Approximately 78% of the media corpus was characterised by an event-driven focus that prioritised the immediate details of courtroom drama and perpetrator charisma over a structural analysis of patriarchal violence. This narrative architecture effectively de-contextualises femicide, presenting it as a series of isolated "tragedies" rather than a predictable outcome of systemic gender inequality.

The qualitative themes identified, "Love Gone Wrong," "Offender Status Bias," and "Symbolic Erasure", illustrate a persistent androcentric bias in Kenyan newsrooms. By employing euphemisms like "crime of passion" in 55% of reports, the media masks the gendered motivation of lethal violence, reframing a violation of the constitutional right to life as an unavoidable consequence of intense male emotion. This "romanticisation of lethality" is particularly dangerous as it resonates with deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms that normalise domestic abuse under the guise of "private family matters".

### **Theoretical Implications: Expanding Framing Theory in the African Context**

The research findings provide a significant contribution to the evolution of framing theory by demonstrating its utility in explaining the "Impunity Reinforcement Loop" in a post-colonial, patriarchal media environment. While Shanto Iyengar's foundational work established the distinction between episodic and thematic framing, this study adapts these concepts to the Kenyan "Reality Cycle," in which media narratives and public belief systems continuously reinforce one another. The results indicate that the "telephoto lens" of episodic reporting does more than omit context; it actively guides the audience to make "dispositional attributions", blaming the victim's internal traits or behaviours rather than the surrounding environment.

The statistical significance of the mediation analysis confirms that media framing operates through a sophisticated psychological pathway. Exposure to victim-blaming frames led to a sharp increase in the perception of victim responsibility ( $B=0.58, p<.001$ ), which in turn acted as a negative predictor for the demand for systemic reform ( $B=-0.42, p<.01$ ). This suggests that media frames are "gatekeepers of accountability". By first distorting the perceived culpability of the woman, the media effectively neutralises the public's desire for collective action, such as the implementation of the 42-member Baraza Task Force recommendations.

### **The Mediation Path of Media Influence**

To illustrate the causal mechanism through which media framing suppresses social justice demands, the following mediation model (Hayes Model 4) was utilised to interpret the experimental results from the 400 Kenyan participants.

1. **Path *a* (Frame Exposure → Victim Responsibility):** Participants shown "lifestyle scrutiny" vignettes were significantly more likely to agree that the victim's choices contributed to the outcome.
2. **Path *b* (Victim Responsibility → Demand for Justice):** Those who attributed higher responsibility to the victim showed significantly lower support for mandatory national budget lines for femicide prevention.
3. **Indirect Effect ( $a \times b$ ):** The bootstrap confidence interval (95%CI[0.22,0.45]) did not contain zero, confirming that the media's ability to "shift the blame" is the primary reason why high-profile cases do not always translate into sustained policy pressure.

This theoretical synthesis suggests that the Kenyan media operate within a "fragmented watchdog" model. While journalists are effective at sounding the alarm for specific gruesome crimes, they fail in their civic education role by not connecting these dots into a recognisable pattern of structural violence. This results in a "fatigue of the episodic," where the public becomes desensitised to a revolving door of individual tragedies without ever recognising the systemic machinery behind them.

### **Socio-Demographic Divergence and the Digital Divide**

A nuanced insight of this study is the role of socio-demographic moderators in determining frame resonance. The research proved that the impact of a media frame is not universal but is instead filtered through the recipient's existing cultural schemas. The data highlighted a profound divide between rural and urban audiences, as well as a significant gender gap in media literacy regarding gender-based violence (GBV).

Rural males exhibited the highest level of resonance with episodic and victim-blaming frames, with a mean tolerance score of  $M=4.8$  on a 7-point scale, compared to just  $M=2.1$  for urban females. This suggests that media narratives often reinforce pre-existing "colonial-androcentric" norms in communities where traditional hierarchies remain dominant. For these audiences, the media serves not as a challenge to harmful traditions, but as a modern amplifier of the belief that women are responsible for maintaining their own safety through behavioural compliance.

In contrast, the resistance shown by urban females points to the effectiveness of digital feminist movements, such as #EndFemicideKE and #StopKillingWomen. These movements have provided an alternative "thematic frame" that urban women use to decode legacy media messages. However, the fact that only 18% of professional media coverage adopts this thematic lens indicates a dangerous gap between the sophisticated understanding of activist communities and the general public discourse.

### **Institutional Realities and the 2025 Regulatory Shift**

The persistence of episodic framing is not merely an editorial preference but a product of institutional power relations within Kenyan media houses. The research identifies three primary structural barriers to gender-sensitive reporting: male dominance in newsroom leadership, the lack of institutionalised gender desks, and the economic pressure of the digital attention economy.

Booker et al. (2025) indicate that while Kenya leads the East African region in the quantity of femicide coverage (54% of stories), the focus remains lopsidedly victim-centric, with perpetrators appearing as central actors in only 3% of stories. This "invisibility of the perpetrator" is a major barrier to progress, as it prevents the media from scrutinising the justice system's failure to deter violent offenders.

However, the year 2025 marked a watershed moment with the launch of the Revised Code of Conduct for Media Practice by the Media Council of Kenya (MCK). This updated regulatory framework addresses many of the ethical failings identified in the study.

The 2025 Code explicitly expects "counter-narrative framing," where journalists are mandated to identify discriminatory or dehumanising speech as contrary to constitutional values. This represents a formal recognition by the state and the regulator that journalism must move beyond "neutrality" to a proactive, solution-based stance when dealing with human rights violations like femicide.

### **The Legal and Political Frontier: The Baraza Task Force and AU Convention**

The media does not operate in a vacuum; its framing patterns are often tethered to the legal and political frameworks of the country. The unprecedented surge in femicide cases, which saw 170 women killed in 2024 alone, led to a record-breaking period of state acknowledgement.

President William Ruto's appointment of a 42-member Technical Working Group (TWG) on Gender-Based Violence (GBV), led by former Deputy Chief Justice Nancy Baraza, represents the first formal admission that femicide is a "national crisis" rather than a series of private family tragedies.

The TWG report, presented in late 2025, aligns with the empirical findings of this research by highlighting the "failure to define femicide" as a distinct legal category. In the absence of a specific legal definition, media houses default to generic crime reporting techniques that emphasise individual motives rather than gendered patterns of violence.

### **Global Alignment and Local Accountability**

At the continental level, the adoption of the African Union (AU) Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG) in early 2025 provides a new moral and legal baseline for Kenyan media. The Convention explicitly defines femicide and mandates that states parties strengthen coordination mechanisms and systematic data collection.

The Baraza Task Force has called for the President to declare GBV a national emergency, a move that would unlock funding and signal to media houses that femicide reporting belongs on the "national security" beat rather than the "society" or "lifestyle" sections. The report also demands that all "out-of-court settlements" that silence survivors be made legally punishable, challenging the cultural narratives that media frames often unconsciously support.

### **Detailed Recommendations for Transformation**

To bridge the gap between media visibility and public understanding, a multi-stakeholder approach is required. The following recommendations are designed to move the Kenyan media from a "neutralising agent" to a "transformative agent" in the fight against femicide.

#### **For Media Practitioners and Editorial Leadership**

1. **Mandatory Thematic Anchoring:** Newsrooms should adopt a policy where every report on an individual femicide incident (episodic) must include a "thematic sidebar". This sidebar should provide context on the national scale of femicide, current statistics from the African Data Hub, and links to institutional support services. By anchoring the specific event in a broader trend, the media can counter the perception of violence as an isolated anomaly.

2. **Implementation of Gender Desks:** Media houses must institutionalise gender desks to ensure that specialists, rather than general beat reporters, handle reporting on femicide. These desks should be responsible for vetting headlines for victim-blaming language and ensuring that follow-up stories track the "justice outcome" for the perpetrator, rather than just the "biography" of the victim.
3. **Trauma-Informed and Survivor-Centred Interviewing:** Journalists should be trained in the "active, non-judgmental listening" techniques advocated by UNESCO. Interviews with survivors or the families of victims must prioritise their safety and dignity, obtaining informed consent and avoiding irrelevant details about the victim's clothing, nightlife, or personal history that might incite public judgment.
4. **Counter-Narrative Framing of Legal Defence:** When reporting on courtroom proceedings, editors should avoid declaring suspects "innocent victims of love". Legal defence strategies that rely on victim-blaming must be framed as "arguments by the defence" and contextualised within the broader misogynistic belief systems that the Baraza Task Force seeks to dismantle.

#### **For Media Regulators (MCK) and Professional Bodies**

1. **Enforcement of the 2025 Code of Conduct:** The MCK should move beyond sensitisation and establish a "Gender-Sensitive Monitoring Unit". This unit should conduct regular audits of femicide coverage and apply sanctions to media houses that repeatedly violate the rights of victims through sensationalism or negligent moderation of dehumanising comments.
2. **Standardised Reporting Guidelines:** In collaboration with the Technical Working Group and civil society (e.g., FIDA-Kenya, AMWIK), the MCK should develop a "Femicide Reporting Toolkit". This toolkit should provide a glossary of preferred terms (e.g., "Femicide" vs. "Crimes of passion") and a checklist for journalists to ensure their stories contribute to "solutions journalism" rather than "panic-driven sensationalism".
3. **Digital Ethics and Platform Accountability:** Regulators must hold media enterprises accountable for "third-party harm" in their digital ecosystems. Clause 28 of the 2025 Code must be strictly applied, ensuring that dehumanising comments are removed promptly and that AI-generated illustrations are clearly labelled to prevent the distortion of reality.

### **For the Government and Policy Makers**

1. **Legal Codification of Femicide:** The Cabinet must fast-track the amendment of the Penal Code to formally define and codify femicide as a distinct offence. This legal clarity is the foundation for accurate media framing and will allow the state to collect the "gender-disaggregated data" mandated by the AU Convention.
2. **National GBV Management Information System:** The government should fund a centralised, digitised national database that links police, health, and judicial records. Making this data accessible to the media will empower journalists to move from "courtroom drama" to "evidence-driven watchdogging," tracking serial offenders and institutional bottlenecks.
3. **Declaration of a National Emergency:** Following the Baraza Task Force recommendation, the President should declare femicide a national emergency. This declaration would shift the national discourse, signalling that femicide is not a "lifestyle issue" but a "national security threat" that requires a coordinated, well-funded response.
4. **Sustainable Funding for Gender Desks:** The National GBV and Femicide Response Fund should include a specific budget for media capacity building. This funding should support specialised training for local and community media outlets, which are often the primary sources of information for rural audiences that exhibit the highest levels of resonance with harmful frames.

### **Limitations of the Study and Methodological Rigour**

The conclusions of this study are grounded in a rigorous sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, which allowed for a "Reality Cycle" interpretation of media influence. However, several limitations must be noted.

1. **Cross-Sectional Timing:** The experimental data reflect audience attitudes at a specific point in time (2025). Because framing effects can be cumulative and longitudinal, the

study may not capture the long-term shifts in perception that result from decades of episodic reporting.

2. **Self-Reported Data:** The use of the Femicide Tolerance Scale (FTS) relies on self-reported attitudes. While the scale was validated, participants might give socially desirable answers, particularly in a climate of high activism.
3. **Media Sample Scope:** The content analysis was limited to the three leading legacy outlets. While they set the national agenda, the study did not fully explore the framing strategies of "vernacular radio" or "TikTok news creators," who play a significant role in rural perception building.
4. **Resource Constraints:** The time-intensive nature of qualitative coding and experimental recruitment limited the sample to 400 participants, which, while statistically significant for a 95% confidence level, may not capture the full diversity of Kenya's marginalised ethnic or economic sub-groups.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The evolving nature of the femicide crisis and the media landscape necessitate further inquiry in several areas.

1. **Multimodal Framing and Eye-Tracking:** Future research should employ eye-tracking technology to investigate how "visual framing", such as the choice between a victim's glamour photo versus a crime scene illustration, influences viewing time and emotional reaction.
2. **The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Newsrooms:** As the 2025 MCK Code regulates AI assistance, studies should examine whether AI-generated summaries and illustrations reinforce or reduce gender stereotypes in femicide reporting.
3. **Longitudinal Effects of Thematic Coverage:** A longitudinal field experiment could test if "sustained thematic reporting" in a specific county leads to higher rates of case reporting and lower social tolerance for violence over 24 months.
4. **Influence of "Content Creators" on Judicial Outcomes:** With the rise of "digital activism," research is needed to determine how "trial by social media" affects the impartiality of the Kenyan judiciary in high-profile femicide cases.

### **8.0 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has proven that media framing is a primary driver of the public perception of femicide in Kenya. By continuing to prioritise episodic, sensationalised, and victim-blaming frames, the media effectively serves as a "neutralising agent" that reinforces the status quo of patriarchal violence. However, the current period of legal and regulatory reform, characterised by the Baraza Task Force and the 2025 MCK Code, offers a unique opportunity for transformation.

The media must move beyond being a "mirror" that reflects societal bias and become a "watchdog" that challenges the structural roots of gender inequality. By adopting thematic framing, practising trauma-informed journalism, and aligning with international standards like the AU Convention, the Kenyan media can help shift the national consciousness from a culture of "lifestyle culpability" to one of "systemic accountability". The fight against femicide cannot be won in the courts alone; it must be won in the pages and screens that shape how a nation thinks about the value of a woman's life.

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