Foregrounding Negativity: Front-Page News in The Standard Newspaper and Prospects for Constructive Journalism in Kenya

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Abstract
Constructive journalism emphasizes solutions, context, and community engagement to foster democratic conversation and social cohesion. While the media should provide balanced coverage of both positive and negative news, the dominance of negativity in news coverage often undermines public trust and civic engagement, especially where political biases and economic pressures mediate public opinion. The study investigated the prevalence of negative news and the use of constructive journalism principles in frontpage headlines and graphics of *The Standard* newspaper in Kenya. The objectives of the study were: to analyse the framing of negative news on *The Standard*'s, and to assess the newspaper's application of constructive journalism principles in framing front-page headlines. Using framing theory as a basis and adopting an exploratory research design, a content analysis of 52 conveniently sampled front-page headlines was conducted. Data was collected through content analysis of front-page headlines and graphic content. The analysis revealed a high prevalence of negative news framing and limited use of constructive journalism elements, such as solutions reporting and community engagement. The findings suggest that adopting constructive journalism practices could help *The Standard* to balance negative reporting with solution-focused narratives, thereby enhancing public discourse and democratic engagement in Kenya.
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1.0 Introduction

Constructive journalism is an innovative media practice that seeks to enhance journalism's societal role by emphasizing not only problems but also solutions and positive developments. The term was first conceptualized by Karen McIntyre (2015) in her doctoral research, which defined constructive journalism as an emerging form applying positive psychology principles to news reporting. This approach aims to produce engaging and productive stories that preserve journalistic integrity while fostering positive emotions among audiences. McIntyre argued that constructive journalism could reduce public stress and inspire constructive action by spotlighting responses to social issues rather than focusing solely on challenges. Broadly, constructive journalism encompasses a balanced perspective incorporating context, community engagement, and critical yet hopeful narratives, with solutions journalism as a subset emphasizing rigorous, evidence-based reporting on responses and their efficacy (McIntyre, 2015).

The historical evolution of constructive journalism traces back to the early 2000s, gaining wider recognition in the late 2000s through pioneering voices like Lisbeth Knudsen, who publicly challenged journalism's negative bias in 2007 and advocated for stories that inspire hope and social change (Gyldensted, 2011; Curry & Hammonds, 2014). Scandinavian media outlets and platforms such as De Correspondent embraced such approaches in the early 2010s, institutionalizing correspondents focused on progress and constructive narratives. Academics like McIntyre and Bro (2023) contributed both theoretical and practical frameworks, positioning constructive journalism as a counter to sensationalism by providing contextual, empowering reports that encourage democratic conversation (McIntyre, 2015; Bro, 2023; Kibarabara, 2023). Nevertheless, despite its promise, constructive journalism faces critiques regarding potentially becoming overly optimistic or "feel-good" reporting, highlighting challenges related to balancing constructive approaches with the traditional watchdog role to avoid advocacy bias and audience complacency (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018).

Central to the practice and analysis of journalism is framing theory, which originated in communication studies through Gregory Bateson's early insights (1955) and Erving Goffman's foundational work on interpretive frameworks (1974), emphasizing how media organize and shape perceptions by selecting aspects of reality to highlight (Bateson, 1955; Goffman, 1974). Robert Entman (1993) further refined the concept, outlining framing as a strategic communication process that defines problems, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgments, and suggests remedies through selective emphasis. Framing profoundly influences public interpretation of social

realities, including media coverage of health crises. In contrast, negative framing, characterized by disproportionate focus on problems, conflicts, and threats, has been criticized for engendering public anxiety, misinformation, and disengagement. Negative news framing emerged historically as part of the media's prioritization of sensationalism and conflict, reinforcing 'if it bleeds, it leads' norms (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Its effects include heightened public stress, distrust, and reduced civic engagement, sparking calls for more balanced, constructive approaches in media narratives (McIntyre, 2015; Drok & Veglis, 2019).

Kenya's print media landscape has a complex history shaped by colonial legacy, political struggles, and evolving democratic freedoms. While the print sector enjoys constitutional guarantees of media freedom post-2010 (Republic of Kenya, 2010), the media ecosystem is challenged by political manipulation, economic pressures, and technological shifts (Korir & Nabushawo, 2021a; Sichach, 2024). These constraints impact the media's effectiveness as a civic educator and watchdog, often leading to sensationalism, rapid dissemination of unverified information, and insufficient constructive journalism practices, particularly evident during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Korir & Nabushawo, 2021b). These structural and operational challenges necessitate reforms to bolster the media's role in fostering informed and constructive public discourse in Kenya.

Within this landscape, *The Standard* newspaper holds a prominent position as Kenya's oldest daily, dating back to 1902, evolving from a colonial mouthpiece to a bold player in public affairs journalism with a regional and national reach (Kimani, 2018; BT Reporter, 2019). The newspaper maintains a resilient market presence, especially in regions like Nyanza, Coast, and Rift Valley, consistently ranking second to the *Daily Nation* in readership share. Its brand is associated with outspoken coverage and significant influence over public debate, making it a critical site for examining framing practices and prospects for constructive journalism in the Kenyan context (BT Reporter, 2019). Such focus is vital to understand how *The Standard* navigates the tensions between traditional negativity bias and emergent solution-focused reportage amid Kenya's distinctive socio-political realities.

Empirical studies investigating framing practices in Kenyan newspapers reveal entrenched patterns of negative or problem-centric reporting. For example, research by Situma (2021) found that Kenyan dailies, including *The Standard*, predominantly employed neutral to negative frames in covering COVID-19, which often increased public anxiety. Korir and Nabushawo (2021b) further observed that sensationalism and unverified sourcing were prevalent during health crises coverage, compromising media credibility and public trust. These studies collectively underscore the challenges facing Kenyan print media in implementing constructive journalism principles, suggesting a persistent dominance of negative framing that limits balanced, solution-oriented narratives. Therefore, in this study, it was deemed that investigating how *The Standard* might foreground or resist negativity offers insights into the prospects and limitations of constructive journalism as a transformative approach within Kenya's media environment.

1.1 Thesis

Kenyan media historically exhibit tendencies toward sensationalism, political bias, and conflict-centric narratives, which complicate their role as impartial watchdogs and balanced informers of the public (Kipkoech, 2023; Ogeto, 2019). Although the Kenyan Constitution guarantees freedom of the press (Republic of Kenya, 2010), these media practices contribute to public mistrust, polarization, and weakened civic engagement, thereby undermining the democratic function of journalism. Previous research highlights the ongoing tension in Kenyan media between political partiality and the public's demand for credible, constructive information (Njambi, 2019; Torotwa, 2023), underscoring the media's dual mandate as both watchdog and civic educator. Meanwhile, constructive journalism offers a promising pathway to counterbalance the entrenched negativity bias and political partisanship that characterize much of Kenyan media coverage, particularly on highly visible platforms like front-page displays.

Constructive journalism has gained international recognition for its balanced approach, melding problem recognition with solution-oriented, context-rich, and hopeful reporting (Their, 2024; Beck, 2023). However, operationalizing its principles within Kenya's complex media landscape presents significant challenges requiring careful empirical scrutiny. Besides, the adoption of constructive journalism in Kenya remains underexplored and novel, signalling a critical research gap. This study sought to fill that gap by analysing *The Standard*'s front-page news to examine the extent of negative news framing and to assess the newspaper's application of constructive journalism principles in its coverage of issues of public interest. By focusing on *The Standard*, one of the leading influence in Kenyan public discourse, this study sought to contribute to understanding how constructive journalism might reshape news framing and foster more informed, democratic, and engaged publics in Kenya.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study sought to fulfil these objectives:

i. To analyse the framing of negative news on the front covers of *The Standard* newspaper
ii. To assess *The Standard*'s application of constructive journalism principles in framing of front-page headlines

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Framing theory, grounded in the work of Gregory Bateson (1955) and expanded by Erving Goffman (1974), provided a framework for exploring how Kenya's print media, specifically *The Standard*, influences audience perception by strategically selecting what to emphasize. Bateson introduced the concept of 'frame' as a psychological tool that helps individuals organize their perceptions of reality (Bateson, 1955). Goffman described frames as schemata of interpretation that help individuals to locate and label certain elements information (Goffman, 1974). This theory posits that frames are not merely cognitive shortcuts but are deeply embedded in social interactions and contexts.

Robert Entman (1993) further refined Framing theory, articulating that it involves selecting certain elements of reality to make them more salient in communication. This strategic selection shapes how audiences perceive issues and influences their understanding of topics being covered (Entman, 1993). According to Entman, frames achieve four aims: defining problems, identifying causes, making moral verdicts, and advocating specific solutions (Entman, 1993). These aims constitute many of the questions asked in journalistic reporting, specifically 'what happened?', 'who did it?', 'why did it happen?', 'how did it happen?', 'where did it happen?', 'when did it happen?', and 'so what next?'

The Framing theory is grounded on four conventions: humans perceive the world using well-defined cognitive systems of perception; communicators can tailor messages along specific frames to achieve predetermined interpretations; framing entails inclusion and exclusion of certain aspects of reality, and framing makes it easy to define problems and arrive at suitable solutions. Framing theory helps to provide a coherent narrative of reality where no expert knowledge is available. A study in China found that advertisers of green hotel products and services use goal framing to nudge consumers to use their products (Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, the main strength of Framing theory is that it can be used to inspire positive action.

Framing theory also has weaknesses. It can be used to frame negative stories leading to chaos, as exemplified by the Rwanda Genocide of 1994 (Gessese, 2020). Additionally, the process of framing a news story can be influenced by editorial policies, the type of media, and journalists' personal values. The theory also assumes that audiences share the same frames (Borah, 2011), which may not be the case. Despite its weaknesses, the assumptions of Framing theory hold true when one considers how the media propagates specific messages using predetermined frames of references, hence its application in the present study.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Negative News Framing on Newspaper Front Covers

Recent studies in developed countries have extensively examined the prevalence and prominence of negative news framing on newspapers, highlighting its impact on audience engagement and public perception. Robertson et al. (2023) conducted a large-scale experimental study analysing viral news headlines across major newspapers in the United States and Europe. Using randomized controlled trials, they tested how emotional valence, especially negativity, influenced reader click-through rates. The target population was online news consumers in developed countries. Findings revealed that negative headlines, particularly those evoking sadness, attracted significantly higher engagement than neutral or positive ones. The study implies that economic incentives drive publishers to prioritize negative news framing to maximize readership, potentially fostering a more pessimistic public outlook. Robertson et al. recommend future research to explore the long-term psychological effects of repeated exposure to negative news and its implications for democratic discourse.

In another study focusing on US newspapers, Patterson (2021) investigated narrative framing on front pages of major national and regional newspapers through content analysis. The study targeted print newspaper editions from 2020 to 2021, analysing over 500 front-page stories. Methodologically, the research categorized stories by narrative frame types, such as conflict, wrongdoing, and human interest, and quantified their frequency and placement prominence. Results showed that 30% of front-page stories employed conflict or wrongdoing frames, which are inherently negative, and these frames were more likely to appear in the most visible front-page positions. The study highlights that negative framing dominates front-page news, influencing public trust and understanding of political issues. Patterson suggests further research to assess how these frames affect civic engagement and whether alternative framing strategies could improve public discourse.

Across Africa, Ngange, Mesumbe and Ndode (2024) examined the effects of bad news reports on media audiences in Buea municipality, Cameroon. The study surveyed 376 residents using quantitative methods grounded in agenda-setting, framing, and gatekeeping theories. The target population was local media consumers exposed to front-page negative news stories. Employing t-tests to analyse responses, Proctor found that negative news elicited strong emotions such as fear, anger, and distrust toward public officials, while also decreasing overall media consumption. However, some respondents acknowledged that negative news could raise awareness and prompt social change. The study recommends a "silver lining" approach, integrating positive elements within negative stories to mitigate adverse psychological effects. Ngange et al. call for future research to explore the applicability of such balanced framing in diverse African media contexts and its impact on audience resilience.

In Kenya, a study by Biyogo and Ong'ong'a (2024) examined how media framing influences public perception of political financing in Kisii County, Kenya, targeting political leaders, community members, and media personnel through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys and interviews. Grounded in agenda-setting, cultivation, and framing theories, the study found that media definitions, communicative framing patterns, and proposals significantly shape public attitudes, with media framing exerting the strongest impact on perceptions of political financing. The findings highlight the media's pivotal role in shaping political discourse and trust, suggesting that balanced and transparent framing can enhance democratic engagement and accountability. The study's methodological rigor and theoretical integration offer a valuable framework for future research on media effects in localized political contexts, encouraging further exploration across different regions and over time to deepen understanding of framing's long-term influence.

Overall, the reviewed studies have documented the prevalence and impact of negative framing on audience emotions and civic participation. Research in Africa like that of Ngange et al. (2024) has also highlighted adverse psychological effects with limited exploration of balanced framing approaches. However, from the reviewed studies there remains a lack of focused inquiry into the specific framing patterns and consequences of negativity in Kenyan print media. By analysing the framing of negative news on *The Standard*'s front pages, the study sought to address this void by investigating the dominance of negativity in visible media spaces, discussing its potential effects on public trust and democratic discourse, and the prospects for integrating constructive journalism frameworks that could mitigate the adverse impacts identified in prior research to promote more balanced, solution-oriented news narratives in Kenya.

2.2 Application of Constructive Journalism Principles in Framing of Front-Page Headlines

Recent research on the application of constructive journalism principles in framing front-page headlines reveals varying extents of adoption and impact across different regions, starting with developed countries. A study in Germany by Djerf-Pierre and Ekström (2025) examined the integration of constructive journalism within the Rhein Main publishing group (VRM). The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods, including guided interviews and content analyses, to assess how the "Project Future" initiative introduced constructive reporting into daily editorial routines. Findings showed that VRM successfully embedded constructive journalism, which led to changes in journalistic role perceptions and editorial practices, emphasizing a more holistic and solution-oriented approach to news coverage. This shift aimed to counteract negativity bias and enhance reader loyalty, although the implementation required significant time and skill development. The study highlights the challenges and benefits of adopting constructive journalism in traditional media and calls for further empirical research on its production conditions and audience impact.

In the broader context of developed countries, a systematic review of 22 experimental studies across 19 research projects evaluated the effects of solutions and constructive news stories on audiences (McIntyre & Lough, 2023). This review found that constructive journalism consistently influences audience emotions positively, suggesting that solution-focused headlines and stories can mitigate negative emotional responses typically associated with conventional news. The review underscores the psychological and engagement benefits of constructive journalism, reinforcing its potential to reshape news consumption patterns in developed media markets. It also points to the need for more nuanced studies on how constructive framing affects different demographic groups and the long-term implications for news trust and civic engagement.

In South Africa, a recent study by Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman (2024) investigated journalists' and editors' perceptions of constructive journalism's potential within online news platforms. Employing qualitative methods, including interviews with media practitioners, the study found cautious optimism about constructive journalism's role in enhancing news quality and public discourse. However, challenges such as limited resources, entrenched negativity bias, and the fast-paced nature of online news production were identified as barriers to full implementation. The study advocates for capacity-building initiatives and structural changes in newsrooms to foster a constructive news culture in South Africa, emphasizing the importance of local context in adapting global constructive journalism principles.

In a study focusing on Tanzania, Bulendu and Yanqiu (2024) provide a comprehensive examination of constructive journalism practices on the mainland. The study aimed to redefine news framing by balancing negativity and positivity in news coverage. Using a mixed-methods approach, surveying 169 respondents, conducting 30 in-depth interviews and focus groups, and analysing 240 news items from eight media outlets, the research revealed a significant mismatch: while journalists and media predominantly favoured negative narratives, audiences showed a clear preference for positive, constructive content. This discrepancy highlights the need for Tanzanian media to reconsider their editorial strategies to better align with audience desires for balanced and solution-oriented news. The study suggests that adopting constructive journalism principles could improve public trust and engagement in the region.

In Kenya, Kibarabara (2023) critically examined the theoretical foundations and real-world application of constructive journalism as both a counter to mainstream journalism's negativity bias and a framework for socially

responsible reporting. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative content analysis and multimodal critical discourse analysis of news coverage on emotive topics (such as terrorism, environmental conflict, and protests) with in-depth interviews of 19 Kenyan journalists and focus group discussions with Kenyan news audiences. The findings revealed that constructive journalism techniques are broadly applicable across different media contexts and genres, but their sustained practice is challenged by structural and political economy factors within news organizations. The research highlights the nuanced roles journalists play, including balancing critical scrutiny with interventionist, solution-oriented reporting, and underscores the importance of audience perceptions in fostering constructive journalism. Notably, the dissertation advances theory by proposing a concrete analytical framework of ten interrelated attributes for constructive journalism and contributes to de-Westernization debates by foregrounding the value of research from non-Western contexts. Ultimately, Kibarabara's work provides both scholars and practitioners with a robust model for understanding and implementing constructive journalism, while calling for further research into its long-term sustainability and adaptation across diverse media landscapes.

While existing studies have examined constructive journalism practices in developing countries, such as South Africa, Tanzania and Kenya, these have often focused on general news content or broader journalistic practices rather than the specific framing of highly visible front-page headlines. This study sought to address the paucity of empirical research on how front-page news, a key site for shaping public perception, is framed constructively to counteract negativity bias, foster solution-oriented reporting, and enhance public trust. Additionally, the paper sought to respond to calls for more context-sensitive analyses by investigating the practical challenges and prospects of embedding constructive journalism within Kenya's unique media and political economy, thereby bridging a gap between theoretical models and the actual production and framing conditions in Kenyan newsrooms.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design. This design was appropriate for in-depth analysis of media framing and the application of constructive journalism principles, as it allowed for detailed examination of meanings, narratives, and journalistic practices embedded in text. The target population comprised all front pages of *The Standard* newspaper published from January to April 2025. A purposive sampling method was employed to select 52 front pages, comprising 5 copies released in January, 16 from February, 18 of those published in March, and 12 from April. Data collection involved critical content analysis, systematically examining front-page headlines and visuals for framing indicators such as problem definition, attribution of blame, moral evaluation, and proposed solutions, alongside constructive journalism markers, including the presence of solutions-oriented narratives, inclusivity of diverse perspectives, and facilitation of constructive dialogue. The analysis utilized an interpretive approach to identify latent and manifest content, presenting findings thematically to elucidate patterns of negativity framing and constructive reporting practices. Ethical considerations included obtaining necessary permissions for accessing newspaper archives, ensuring responsible interpretation without misrepresentation, and maintaining confidentiality regarding any sensitive editorial or respondent information, thereby upholding academic integrity and respect for the media organization studied.

4.0 Findings
4.1 Framing of Negative News on the Front Covers of *The Standard*
The analysis of *The Standard*'s front pages from January to March 2025 reveals a consistent pattern of prioritizing negative news, shaping public perception through specific frames that highlight insecurity, political conflict, corruption, and socioeconomic hardships.

4.1.1 Insecurity and Violence Frame
The prominence of the insecurity and violence frame is evident through numerous front-page headlines that depict Kenya as a nation grappling with rising crime rates, terrorism threats, and extrajudicial killings. For example, the February 2nd headline, "Killer squads back," directly accuses President Ruto's administration of reneging on its promise to uphold human rights and justice, pointing to the resurgence of extrajudicial killings. This framing instils fear and erodes public trust in law enforcement and the government's ability to protect its citizens. Similarly, the February 4th headline, "Chiefs abducted," highlights the vulnerability of North Eastern Kenya to Al-Shabaab attacks, creating a sense of unease and raising questions about the effectiveness of security measures in the region. The January 29th headline, "Grand cover-up," reporting on the disappearance of a Nakuru fisherman allegedly arrested by Kenya Wildlife Service officers, underscores a perceived lack of accountability and transparency within state agencies. The cumulative effect of these stories is a heightened sense of insecurity and a questioning of the government's ability to maintain law and order.

4.1.2 Political Conflict and Leadership Critique Frame
The political conflict and leadership critique frame is characterized by critical coverage of President Ruto's leadership style, political infighting, and perceived failures in governance. The January 28th headline, "Bare-

knuckled," reports on former Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua's scathing attack on President Ruto, accusing him of presiding over corruption at State House. This framing highlights divisions within the ruling coalition and raises concerns about the stability of the government. Similarly, the February 10th headline, "Unpresidential Ruto," criticizes President Ruto's sharp tongue and unfiltered remarks, suggesting a lack of statesmanship and raising questions about his suitability for the office. The February 9th headline, "President's bully," shines a negative light on an unofficial presidential aide, suggesting his actions are creating victims even "among the high and mighty in the presence of President William Ruto." This creates perception of an intimidating and unaccountable administration. The March 2nd headline, "Cunning Ruto," accuses the President of using "smoke screens" to divert attention from the country's problems, undermining his credibility and portraying him as out of touch with the needs of the people. These headlines collectively construct a narrative of political turmoil and leadership shortcomings, contributing to public cynicism and mistrust.

4.1.3 Corruption and Governance Failures Frame

The focus on corruption and governance failures is exemplified by headlines that expose fraud, mismanagement, and institutional weaknesses. The February 13th headline, "Fraudsters…," reports on the conviction of former Kiambu Governor Ferdinand Waititu and his wife in a Sh588 million tender fraud case. This story reinforces the perception of rampant corruption within government and the justice system's struggle to hold perpetrators accountable. The February 6th headline, "See no evil, hear no…," criticizes President Ruto for allegedly ignoring unresolved cases of abductions, killings, and a crumbling justice system, painting a picture of a leader who is detached from the realities on the ground. The March 13th headline, "Dishonourable," details a parliamentary scandal involving biased budgetary allocations, further damaging the public's trust in elected officials and their commitment to serving the interests of the people. The March 11th headline "Magnificent duo" is the exception that proves the rule, praising two public servants, the Auditor General and Controller of Budget for remaining steadfast watchdogs. This reinforces the idea that such integrity is exceptional at a time when independent institutions are weakened.

4.1.4 Socio-economic Hardship Frame

The socioeconomic hardship frame is reflected in headlines that highlight economic difficulties and social issues affecting Kenyans. The February 19th headline, "Betrayed by Kenya," focuses on the abduction and detention of Dr. Kizza Besigye in Uganda, with fingers pointed at the Ruto government. This framing raises concerns about the government's commitment to human rights and its relationship with neighbouring countries. The February 19th minor headline, "Broke? Cash circulation drops by Sh10b," signals an ailing economy and strains on livelihoods. Similarly, the January 29th headline, "Alarm as 100 women killed in 6 months," sheds light on the high rates of violence against women, raising concerns about social safety and security. The February 5th headline "Rationing fears over power deals," highlights anxieties about public service delivery, especially concerning basic utilities. These headlines collectively paint a picture of a society struggling with economic hardship, social inequalities, and inadequate public services, contributing to a sense of despair and disillusionment.

4.2 Application and Prospects of Constructive Journalism Principles in Kenya

There is limited application of constructive journalism principles in *The Standard* newspaper. The analysed headlines often prioritize problems and conflict over solutions, fail to incorporate diverse viewpoints, and do not foster constructive dialogue or community resilience.

4.2.1 Problem-Focused Headlines and Public Perception

Headlines such as "Killer squads back," (February 2, 2025) and "DCI, morgue cover-up" (February 5, 2025) create a sense of fear and mistrust in state institutions. The focus on violence and corruption, without highlighting efforts to address these issues, can lead to public cynicism and disengagement. Similarly, headlines like "Garbage governor" (February 27, 2025) emphasize mismanagement and can erode public confidence in local governance, potentially discouraging citizen participation in improving their communities.

4.2.2 Lack of Diverse Viewpoints and Polarized Dialogue

Headlines that present a singular, critical view, such as "President's bully" (February 9, 2025) and "Unpresidential Ruto" (February 10, 2025), contribute to polarized public discourse. These headlines frame political figures in a negative light without acknowledging alternative perspectives. This can discourage constructive dialogue by creating an adversarial environment where people are less willing to listen to and understand different viewpoints. Even headlines that acknowledge division, such as "Kisii leaders divided over Raila heckling" (March 11, 2025), emphasize conflict rather than exploring common ground or potential solutions.

4.2.3 Hindrance of Community Resilience

Headlines like "Chief Justice kicks up storm over insecurity" (January 24-25, 2025) and "Governors reject new revenue formula" (January 30, 2025) highlight conflict and division, which can undermine community resilience. Focusing on national-level disputes, without highlighting community-led initiatives or stories of resilience, can create a sense of helplessness and discourage local action. While "Businesses defy ailing economy" (January 28-25, 2025) suggests resilience, its framing within an economic problem diminishes its potential to inspire and foster

community-led solutions. 2

4.2.4 Problematic Framing

There are many examples of problematic headlines noted. For instance, "Ruto's blunders" (February 17, 2025) focuses on alleged mistakes by the President. This could lead to public distrust and questioning of leadership capabilities. Similarly, "Betrayed by Kenya" (February 19, 2025) conveys a sense of injustice and abandonment. The public may become disillusioned with the government's role in protecting its citizens. Additionally, "Greedy Watchdog" (March 16, 2025) accuses an oversight body (specifically the leader of opposition) of corruption. The public may lose faith in institutions meant to ensure accountability.

5.0 Discussion

The analysis of *The Standard*'s front-page headlines from January to March 2025 demonstrates a clear pattern of negative news framing, with insecurity, political conflict, corruption, and socioeconomic hardship dominating coverage. This aligns with global trends identified in the literature, where negative frames, especially those emphasizing conflict, wrongdoing, and crisis, are favoured for their ability to attract audience attention and engagement. For instance, Robertson et al. (2023) found that negative headlines, particularly those evoking strong emotions like sadness or fear, significantly increase reader engagement, suggesting that such framing serves both commercial and editorial interests. *The Standard*'s focus on insecurity, political infighting, and economic distress mirrors these findings, as headlines such as "Killer squads back" and "Bare-knuckled" not only inform but also amplify public anxiety and scepticism toward authorities.

This persistent use of negative frames has important implications for public perception and trust in institutions. As documented by Patterson (2021), conflict and wrongdoing frames are disproportionately prominent in front-page news, shaping how readers interpret political events and the credibility of leaders. *The Standard*'s headlines, highlighting extrajudicial killings, corruption scandals, and leadership failures, construct a narrative of governmental dysfunction and societal crisis. Such coverage risks fostering cynicism, disengagement, and even distrust in public officials, as was observed in Ngange et al.'s (2024) study in Cameroon, where exposure to negative news correlated with heightened fear and anger among audiences. However, both Patterson and Ngange et al. suggest that while negative framing can erode trust, it may also raise awareness and prompt calls for accountability, indicating a complex relationship between media framing and civic engagement.

Kenyan research by Biyogo and Ong'ong'a (2024) further underscores the media's influential role in shaping public attitudes through framing, particularly in political and governance contexts. Their findings highlight that the way issues are defined and presented in the media significantly affects public opinion and trust, with negative frames often dominating discourse. Yet, the literature also points to the potential benefits of balanced or "silver lining" framing, which integrates positive elements to mitigate adverse psychological effects and promote resilience. The Standard's rare positive headline, "Magnificent duo," which lauds integrity in public service, exemplifies this approach and suggests that greater emphasis on constructive or explanatory frames could enhance public discourse and democratic engagement. Collectively, these findings call for a more nuanced and responsible approach to news framing, balancing the imperative to inform with the need to foster constructive public debate and trust.

The analysis of headlines from *The Standard* also revealed a prevailing focus on problems, controversies, and criticisms, with limited emphasis on solutions or efforts to address issues. This pattern aligns with the broader critique of mainstream journalism's negativity bias, which is also observed in other contexts (McIntyre & Lough, 2023). While there are occasional exceptions, such as headlines that hint at possible solutions or resilience, the dominant framing remains problem-centric. This mirrors findings from Tanzanian media, where a preference for negative narratives persists despite audience desires for more constructive, positive content (Bulendu & Yanqiu, 2024). In comparison, studies from developed contexts like Germany (Fölscher-Kingwill & Wasserman, 2024) demonstrate that deliberate newsroom initiatives can successfully embed solutions-oriented reporting, but such shifts require significant time, skill development, and institutional commitment.

Constructive journalism frameworks emphasize the importance of inclusiveness and diversity of sources as key attributes for improving news quality and societal relevance (Kibarabara, 2023). The limited reflection of multiple viewpoints in headline framing in *The Standard* suggests a gap between constructive journalism ideals and current editorial practices in Kenya. Most headlines analysed do not foster constructive dialogue or highlight community resilience, instead amplifying conflict and division. Constructive journalism, as theorized and practiced in various contexts, seeks to counteract such negativity by promoting stories that encourage dialogue, understanding, and resilience. While Kenyan media occasionally feature stories of hope and resilience, these are not the norm and are rarely given front-page prominence. This contrasts with findings from South Africa (Fölscher-Kingwill & Wasserman, 2024), where constructive journalism initiatives have begun to shift newsroom cultures toward more holistic and community-focused reporting, albeit with ongoing challenges related to resources and entrenched editorial habits.

6.0 Conclusion

From the study findings, the content analysis of *The Standard*'s front-page headlines from January to March 2025 revealed a dominant negative news framing pattern that prioritizes insecurity, political conflict, corruption, and socioeconomic hardships. This persistent problem-centric focus, exemplified by headlines such as "Killer squads back" and "Bare-knuckled," shapes public perception by amplifying fear, mistrust, and cynicism towards government institutions and leadership. The limited inclusion of diverse viewpoints and lack of constructive or solution-oriented framing constrain opportunities for constructive dialogue and community resilience, fostering a polarized and adversarial public discourse. While occasional positive headlines like "Magnificent duo" suggest potential for a more balanced approach, the overall editorial practice mirrors global trends of negativity bias in mainstream media, with significant implications for public trust and engagement. This indicates a critical need for *The Standard* and similar media outlets to adopt more nuanced news framing that integrates diverse perspectives and emphasizes solutions to promote democratic engagement and societal resilience in Kenya.

7.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, it is recommended that media policy-makers in Kenya should institute mechanisms to support balanced news framing and safeguard editorial independence from political and commercial pressures, enabling journalists to engage in in-depth, solutions-oriented reporting without fear of reprisal or financial constraints. Media houses should prioritize continuous professional training focused on balanced framing and constructive journalism techniques, including participatory sourcing, outcome accountability, and empathetic storytelling, while restructuring newsroom workflows to allocate time and resources for long-form, investigative, and community-centred journalism. Practices should explicitly diversify sourcing to include marginalized, rural, and grassroots voices and develop interactive platforms that facilitate genuine two-way dialogue between media and audiences, fostering public trust and civic engagement. For further research, scholars should explore the impact of digital and broadcast media in operationalizing constructive journalism in Kenya, examine audience reception and behaviour changes influenced by constructive journalism, and investigate tailored interventions that reconcile local cultural epistemologies with global journalistic standards to enhance inclusivity and effectiveness in crisis communication.

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