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KENYA**



## INFLUENCE OF THE HASHTAG CONTEXT ON PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION ON SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUES IN KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to determine how the context in which a hashtag is formulated influences public opinion formation on sociopolitical issues in Kenya

**Methodology:** The study adopted descriptive and qualitative research design. The study population consisted of the hashtags generated by Kenyans in the period between January 2014 and December 2016 and the local television stations and members of public involved in hashtag development outside the media fraternity. The sampling frame was obtained from the Communication Authority 2015 report, the Kenya Advertisers Association website and the Twitter database. Purposive sampling was used to select the 35 hashtags and snowball sampling was used to select the hashtag developers.

**Results:** The study found that hash tag context has a significant relationship with public opinion formation. The study found that all hashtags formulated by Kenyans were context bound as they were formed whenever an issue rose. The wording of the hashtag (frame of communication) communicated the issue regime and the opinion of the formulator. The findings revealed that hashtags based on political contexts were more and trended longer. The political hashtags were 51% while social based ones stand at 40%. The rest were from security and economic contexts.

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** The research draws on public opinion theory, the theory participatory communication theory and the Critical Discourse Analysis approach by Fairclough. The formulation and dissemination of news using hashtags is a growing and fast changing phenomenon that requires a new approach in its analysis. The use of these three approaches indicates the complexity of the nature of hashtags and the connection between the hashtag, the context that surrounds its formation and the opinion formed in relation to that context. The concept of citizen journalism must be looked at afresh.

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

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Context is an important element in the communication process. Meaning is derived from contexts. Every genre of communication is guided by context. The idea that meaning does not reside in the word but in the mind has been advanced to show the place of context during communication. Van Dijk (2001, 2005) describes context in cognitive terms. He argues that in the course of our socialization we acquire the necessary knowledge to interpret, understand and remember language behavior in our culture. Wodak and Krzyzanowski (2008) contend that the best way to unpack the concept of context is to use the triangulation approach that has four levels: the immediate language or text's internal context; the inter-textual and inter-discursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses; the extra-linguistic sociological variables or institutional frames of a specific context of situation; and the broader socio-political and historical contexts to which practices are embedded in and related. Stillar (1998) says that context can be used to refer to both the accompanying text of a particular stretch of language which is also called the co-text or the verbal context; or to the situational non-linguistic context of which a text is part.

Context in this research refers to both the situation in which a hashtag is formulated (situational context) and the co-text described above. The situational context may refer to what is happening during that period that would make the hashtag come up, who is involved and how. The issue regime or the big story of the time was investigated as a trend that every interested party would be following. For instance an issue regime can be precipitated by a crisis, a disaster, a behavior or a normal day to day event. The situational context dictates the functional resources that are drawn upon in making, exchanging and understanding text in context.

Situational context was explained by Halliday (1978) as having three characteristics that can be used to describe it: the social action which refers to what is going on and has a recognizable meaning in the social system with a subject matter in which the text plays a part; the role structure which comprises a cluster of socially meaningful participant relationship, both permanent attributes of the participants and the role relationship that are specific to the situation, including speech roles, those that come into being through the exchange of verbal meanings; and, the symbolic organization which refers to the particular status that is assigned to the text within the situation, its function in relation to the social action and the role structure including the channel and medium.

These three functions are labeled field, tenor and mode respectively. The type of social activity involved (field) activates the resources of the ideational function; the role of the relationship involved (tenor) activates the resources of the interpersonal function and the mode activates the resources of the textual function. According to Zappavigna (2012), context is functionally diversified as the combinations of field, tenor and mode. The field is akin to the notion of 'topic' in Twitter discourse which answers the question, 'what is happening or what the text is about?' Tenor considers the social relationship of the actors and the mode refers to the context called the co-text (how a text is constructed using linguistic elements). In this study the co-text context was synonymous with framing. The hashtags under investigation are those formulated by Kenyans on the Twitter platform and the study therefore falls under social media research.

Social media (henceforth SM) allows people to produce information but they are also receivers and distributors of information within their network of online communities. These SM have had a great influence in communication globally due to their real time applicability and ease of use (Zappavigna, 2012). SM serves to close the gap between public and private sphere. They are instruments of communication, leisure and change and are opinion formers and changers. Since the occurrence of mobile phones, the influence of SM on their users has been on the rise across the world in the last ten years. Michaelsen (2011) says that social media involve an on-demand access to content, anytime anywhere on any digital device as well as interactive user feedback, both creative and participative. This means that the users not only use information but they can also create information online. Another important feature of SM is real-time generation of unregulated content. It is a free for all field of opinions and ideas.

Social media have proved to be effective tools of communication and mobilization globally (Gaur, 2014). They have brought news and entertainment closer to the people especially with the growth of mobile phone subscription. Besides passing general information, social media have been used to mobilize publics and fight for a cause. This is especially the case in political mobilization that has been successfully done in different parts of the world notably Egypt, Tunisia and Libya where revolutions and coups took place. Activists in these countries used Twitter to plan and execute the revolutions (Storck, 2011).

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

This research is on the influence of Twitter on formation of public opinion in the Kenyan context. As a social network, Twitter was developed in 2006. It allows users to post messages of 140 characters or less (equivalent to eleven words per post) to the general public or to a set of users who subscribe to the users message stream, otherwise known as “followers”. These micro posts are referred to as “tweets” (Zappavigna, 2012). The content posted on Twitter is open to the public and is searchable unless the user changes his/her privacy settings. Twitter is characterized by the use of the hashtag symbol, #, to identify a tweet’s topical key word and it has been variously used around the world for social and political mobilization. The hashtag (#) convention is used to encourage users to focus around topics. Jungherr (2015) says that Twitter users identify a tweet’s topical key words by prefacing with a # sign. All messages of interest on Twitter can be traced using the hashtag. The # is used to label a topic and it guides all users in directing their tweets. Zappavigna (2012) defines a hashtag as a kind of in-text tagging that is visible within the body of a tweet. This tag arose out of community use and later it was incorporated into Twitter’s search interface. The invention of the hashtag is credited to a man called Chris Messina who sent a tweet on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2007 that read, “How do you feel about using # (pound) for groups as in #BarCamp

[message]?” By October 2007 hashtags had become mainstream when citizen journalists used them to give updates about a series of forest fires in San Diego that is #SanDiegoFire (Twitter.com).

Millions of tweets are posted each day around the world thus creating a huge database. Users get around this by using # to focus and follow a topic or debate of their choice. According to Saturday Nation dated 11<sup>th</sup> February 2017, there were about 319 million monthly active users of Twitter by close of 2016. Hashtags are also used on Instagram and in increasing cases Facebook. The research however is limited to the analysis of hashtag use on Twitter by Kenyans which is a fairly recent phenomenon. Recently, Twitter introduced *trends* a feature that helps to trace popular topics in different countries and cities around the world (Jungerr, 2015). This has made it easier for users to participate in topics relevant to them in terms of issues and personalities. To identify the participant or expected respondent in a Twitter dialogue, the symbol @ is used preceding the user’s account name. @ is therefore a user identifier. This is followed by a word preceded by the hashtag symbol, #. For instance, @bernardklook at #waigurudeals. This tweet contains metadata that allows the user to interact with others. A user is able to receive all tweets from those that the user follows without the requirement of reciprocation. RT stands for retweets, @ is followed by a user identifier and # followed by a word represents the topic under debate. The debate that goes on Twitter about various issues allows the users to express opinion and even influence the opinion of others. A hashtag that gains popularity and attracts long debate on Twitter is said to be *trending*. Hashtags have been used for social and political campaigns, marketing with an aim of convincing buyers, activism and so many other activities. All these activities are based on opinion formation about the issue or item at hand.

Formation of public opinion can be used to refer to the moment when members of a particular public begin to have a belief, feeling or attitude towards something. These can be negative, positive, neutral or even conflicted. These opinions can be looked at as cognitive responses (thoughts provoked) or affective responses (feelings provoked). The opinions can be expressed through the central or the peripheral processing route of opinion formation. The central process is one in which opinions are formed from a thoughtful consideration of relevant information. The peripheral process leads to the formation of opinions without thinking about relevant information. The international Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (1998) contends that public opinion is not easy to define. The term was first used during the French revolution when Louis XVI’s finance minister Jacques Necker referred to public opinion as governing the behavior of investors. Generally, public opinion is a collection of individual opinions on an issue of public interest. These opinions can influence individual and group or government policy.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Kenyans exchange a lot of information on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter and this has been growing steadily (Communication Authority, 2015). This information ranges from political, social, cultural, educational, economic and entertainment pieces. When an issue arises, a large population is able to receive this information through these platforms. The public does this through the creation of WhatsApp groups and individual messaging, through Twitter hashtags and general information sharing on Facebook and other sites such as Instagram and Snapchat especially for the youthful population. This means that every hashtag arises from a certain context. Lately, Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) have been formulating hashtags to tackle emerging issues fast, passing

information to members of the public sometimes before the mainstream media. Usually the hashtags are created in reaction to issues of national importance. Such issues include those that affect a big chunk of the population or are a threat to humanity, for instance, terror attacks, frequent accidents and education crises.

This trend of hashtag formation has led to a paradigm shift in that the mainstream media is also forming hashtags to seek audience with the public and engage them in debate. For instance, #TeachersStrike@Vickyrubadiri/@larrymadowo. This seems like a new version of citizen journalism that should be studied especially in terms of news sources and their validity and influence on public opinion formation. It can almost be described as a revolution where the public is no longer silent about issues and is in fact involved in the creation of news besides participating in various topics. This is a new adaptation and a shift towards digital democracy and citizen participation that needs to be investigated in order to establish the influence that the hashtags being formulated have on public opinion. It becomes even more important when effects of some hashtags formed in the past are considered. For instance, the fact that the public can make a government react through the press or make hasty policy decisions just by creating a hashtag. A good example is the hashtag, #IStandWithKDF that went trending and caused the government to hold a memorial service for soldiers killed in Somalia. The purpose of the study was to determine the influence of the hashtag context on public opinion formation on sociopolitical issues in Kenya. The research sought to answer the questions, in what situational contexts do hashtags emerge and how does this influence the opinion formed by the public on the issue?

## **2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted the descriptive qualitative research design. The study population consisted of the hashtags generated by Kenyans in the period between January 2014 and December 2016 and the local television stations and members of public involved in hashtag development outside the media fraternity. The sampling frame was obtained from the Communication Authority 2015 report, the Kenya Advertisers Association website and the Twitter database. Purposive sampling was used to select the 35 hashtags and snowball sampling was used to select the hashtag developers. A total of five television stations were investigated where designated online journalists were interviewed. The researcher also interviewed two independent hashtag developers. A total of 35 hashtags were investigated. Qualitative data was collected through interviews and the streaming of tweets under the selected hashtags using Survey Monkey and Twitter API tools. The data collected was coded using determined themes and analyzed using content analysis and critical discourse analysis.

## **3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

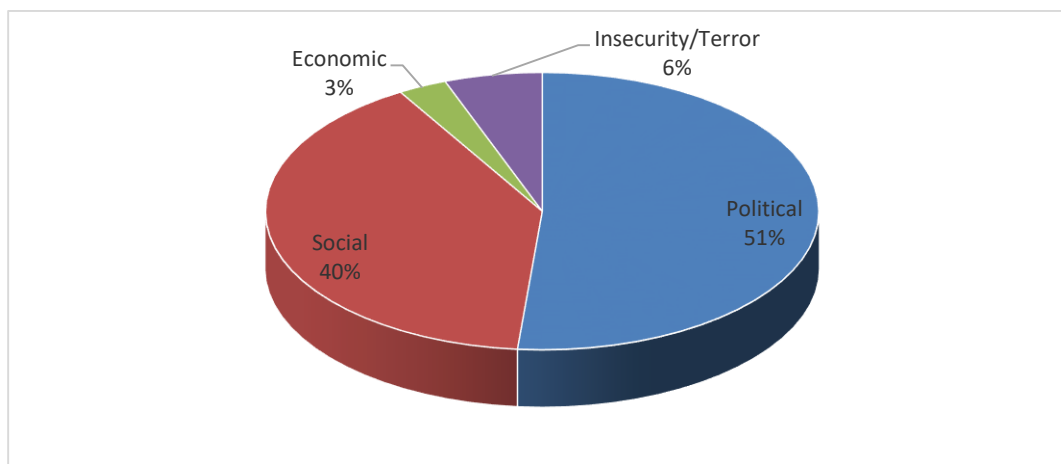
The concept of context in this study refers to the social and political situations that direct the formulation of the hashtags. It is the field in discourse terms. The question that the researcher tries to address here is; what was happening when the hashtag was produced and how was it opinionated by the Kenyan public in Twitter discourse? Context is explained in two levels, the situational context and the co-text. To understand these levels the researcher addresses the field (type of social activity involved), the tenor (the interpersonal aspect drawing on relationship between players) and the mode (the text status in terms of its function in the social situation). In the study the field will refer to social and political happenings around which hashtags are formed. The tenor refers to

the actors in the formation and consumption of the hashtag (media, Wanjiku, commercial developers, and so on). The mode will refer the hashtag itself. The tenor and the field can be described under the situational context. The mode is discussed under the co-text. Mode will refer to the hashtag itself. The tenor and the field can be described under the situational context. The mode is discussed under the co-text. In the formation of public opinion, the interactions can show individual or collective opinions whenever an issue arises resulting in certain behaviour. The public participation theory and critical discourse analysis approach are used to analyze these expressions of opinion.

### 3.1 Situational context

Situational context in this study refers to the social and political situation that direct the formulation of the hashtags. It is the field in discourse terms. The question that the researcher tries to address here is; what was happening when the hashtag was produced? Halliday (1978) describes situational context as having three characteristics that can be used to describe it. The social action which refers to what is going on and has a recognizable meaning in the social system (for instance a terror attack); the role structure which comprises participant relationships specific to the situation ( such as the people exchanging tweets on Twitter); and the symbolic organization which includes the text itself, the function of the text in the situation and the channel of communication ( for instance a hashtag that is formulated to create awareness or inject activist thoughts through social media).

In this study, every hashtag was formulated during a specific issue regime. The issue could be a political crisis such as a scandal in a ministry, a terror attack, collapsed buildings, social disorder and so on. The results in figure 1 reveal that most of the hash tags which were 51% were from political context, 40% of the hash tags were from social context, 6% of the hash tags were from insecurity/terror while only 3% of the hash tags were from economic context. These figures are based on the hashtags mentioned by the respondents as well as those selected for the study by the researcher.



**Figure 1: Situational Context**

The table below shows the specific issue addressed by each of the sampled hashtags:

**Table 1: Situational Context of individual hashtags**

S/NO	HASHTAG	ISSUE	NATURE OF ISSUE
1	#147IsNotJustANumber	Garrissa university terror attack that left a total of 147 people dead. KOTs wanted action taken to secure Kenyans	Insecurity/social
2	#BabaWhileYouWereAway	Opposition leader Raila Odinga had travelled out of the country for almost two months and his followers were trying to show that things go wrong when he is not in the country	Political
3	#BungomaJamesBond	It rose from the comic event of a member of public trying to hang onto a flying helicopter, much like the movie legend James Bond, from where he fell onto the ground injuring himself	Social
4	#DeadBeatKenya	Emanated from a post in SM where women reprimanded men who abscond their fatherly duties leaving the mothers to fend for their children	Social
5	#HotBedofTerror	A CNN reporter had reported that president Obama was visiting the hot bed of terror (Kenya)	Insecurity
6	#HotBedofApologies	CNN had apologized to Kenyans after the complaints about calling Kenya a hot bed of terror got the Kenyan president's attention (he referred to Kenya as the hot bed of opportunities and cultural diversity) and media air time.	Social
7	#HurumaTragedy	A building had collapsed in Huruma Estate, Nairobi, killing several people and media developed the hashtag to inform public and condemn corruption in the building sector	Social
8	#JehovahWanyonyi	This was about a god living in Western Kenya who had followers who believed he was the supreme God. The hashtag came up when he was said to have died	Social
9	#KenyansVSZimbabwe	President Mugabe of Zimbabwe had allegedly called Kenyans thieves and that God should not have created them	Political/Social
10	#ObamaInKenya	It was about the United States President visit to Kenya that many had seen impossible due to political differences after the ICC case	Political
11	#ObamaHomecoming	This was based on the fact the United States has Kenya routes and so his trip	Political
12	#BroOchollaMoment	A pastor had sent a sexually laced message meant for his lover to a WhatsApp prayer group by mistake making Kenyans create a hashtag to show the hypocrisy among church leaders and followers	Social
13	#StopTheDrunkPresident	This was after a terror attack that left several policemen and civilians dead and thereafter a young girl was raped in Nyeri. In response to complaints from Kenyans on security the president said that security starts with the citizens. This led them to think that the president was out of touch with reality (drunk)	Political/ Insecurity



14	#ParisAttack	This was created by the media after a terror attack in the French capital of Paris. KOTs were tweeting in solidarity with the world as they are also constantly victims of terror	Insecurity
15	#RIPJacobJuma	Jacob Juma was a prominent business man who got attention because he had threatened to reveal secrets on a scandal based on Eurobond trading. He was brutally murdered by unknown people and Kenyans read politics	Political
16	#RoguePastor	A pastor in a protestant church had hit a pedestrian crossing a highway and fled from the scene and later denying involvement	Social
17	#PastorOfImpunity	This came about after a pastor hit a pedestrian and was not prosecuted making citizens think that people with money and social influence were treated as if above the law hence the word impunity	Social
18	#SomeoneTellCNN	It was based on a report that depicted Kenya as an insecure state and a hot bed of terror	
19	#SomeoneTellMugabe	Kenyans were reacting to a post in social media claiming that president Mugabe had called Kenyans thieves. It later emerged that it was a fake account	Political/Social
20	#SomeoneTellNigeria	It was a reaction to news that Kenyan players had been treated poorly in Nigeria by being given substandard accommodation while their players had been given VIP treatment in Nairobi, Kenya.	Social
21	#TeamMafisi	This hashtag was created as a way of expressing the extent and faces of sexual immorality in Kenya	Social
22	#ObamaReturns	This was meant to address the fact that Obama had visited his father's land, Kenya, severally before but was now visiting as a president.	Political
23	#UhuruVisitsKenya	The hashtag was in protest of the many presidential trips that many KOTs thought were too expensive for the state	Political
24	#MyPresidentMyChoice	This was created by a political operative to dissuade the continuous criticism leveled against the president in SM	Political
25	#MyDressMyChoice	A young woman had been stripped by touts in Nairobi's central business district over scanty dressing. Women activists on Twitter coined the hashtag and displayed during demonstrations.	Social
26	#TeachersStrike	Coined by the media to discuss an ongoing teachers strike that happened around national examinations time causing panic among Kenyans	economic
27	#LipaKamaTender	This came up during the doctors strike	economic
28	#DeportRutoPilot	This was developed after the Deputy President's, who happened to be white, harassed and assaulted a female police officer. This was seen as a racist attack and a sign of superiority complex that allowed impunity	Political

29	#EducationCrisis	This hashtag was created by the media to create a public debate towards the teachers strike that would show the magnitude of the matter and its impact on the stakeholders in general	Socio-economic
30	#IStandWithKDF	The hashtag was created after several soldiers died in the line of duty in Somalia. KOTs felt that the government was not recognizing their sacrifice and demanded a state organized memorial service for them	Insecurity
31	#POTUS	The hashtag stood for President of the United States. It was a sensitization hashtag prior to the much anticipated Obama visit to Kenya	Political
32	#WaiguruDeals	The hashtag emerged after the NYS looting scandal that translated into the loss of hundreds of millions from the National Youth Service coffers.	Political
33	#Mollis	KOTs created this hashtag after a leaked audio clip went viral. The clip was a conversation between two lovers which was highly obscene and the girl seemed harassed sexually.	Social
34	#RapeDoctor	This was created after a fake doctor who operated a clinic was video-taped raping an unconscious female patient	Social
35	#SomeoneTellKagame	KOTs created the hashtag after the Rwandese president replied to a tweet by a Kenyan who asked him not to ruin his legacy by ruling for life. The president asked him to let Rwanda be and mind Kenyan legacy if there is any	Political
36	#IfMatiang'iWasPresident	The hashtag was in praise of the Kenyan Education Minister who had effected a lot of reforms in the education sector and completely sealing off holes of examination cheating while releasing results in record time. Kenyans wanted same spirit in matters governance especially corruption	Political

The higher percentage of political hashtags shows that politics elicits more discussions online and opinions are expressed more when the context is political. The hashtags sampled were those with over 100,000 mentions. The political ones were more than the social, economic or security based ones. The number of tweets under the hashtags indicates that when an issue arises people want to be heard more if it is political. The expressions may show individual or group opinions sometimes based on their affiliation to a given political party. At 40%, the hashtags formulated in a social context constitute a significant amount compares to the economic and insecurity issues which elicit the lowest reactions.

All the respondents were also asked to state the kind of situations lead to hashtag formation. The aim was to find out the situational context of hashtag formation. Some of their responses are outlined below.

Respondent 1: *Breaking news; issues of national interest; interesting news or topic; exclusive stories or interviews.*

Respondent 2: *Hashtags are formulated when news items break and there is need to gather feedback from viewers e.g. during a tragedy. Also during surveys when public responses are inevitable.*

Respondent 3: *Trending topics and news of national importance.*

Respondent 4: *Creating awareness, popularizing a programme and addressing topical issues.*

Respondent 5: *Breaking news such as terror attacks, elections. Strikes and global hit stories e.g. Trump's victory*

The media respondents were further asked to indicate the situations that lead to formation of a hash tag. The following were the responses.

The public hash tag developers were asked to indicate what social or political issues inform the formulation of the hashtags. The following were the responses

Respondent 1: *'Hashtags are a representation of what is happening today socio-politically, economically or a mix of all. So yes, they all inform formulation of hashtags.'*

Respondent 2: *'A tragedy such as #NaivashaTragedy, Scandals e.g NYS, Worls events, Politics e.g. Obama visits Kenya, Social issues such as #KNHCancerMachines, Fundraising #JadudiFundraise, Sexual harassment e.g#MigunaMigunaVSPassaris,#MydressmyChoice'*

The journalists were asked to indicate the factors they consider when coming up with a hashtag. The following were the responses:

Respondent 1: *'Has to be simple, very few characters. Current. Capture the message.'*

Respondent 2: *'Must be short (to fit on screen).Must be original (not from another media house).No vulgar language. Choice of language /code depends on program. Informative. Emotional appeal'*

Respondent 3: *'The topic of discussion. Media house policy. Objectivity. Journalists code of conduct.'*

Respondent 4: *'Length of hashtag. Appeal to audience.'*

Respondent 5: *'The topic of discussion, the length of the hashtag'*

Respondent 6: *'Yes. The wording. The said hashtag needs to be clear and concise as well as having the correct use of words'*

Respondent 7: *' . Relevance Yes, timing, importance, prominence, oddity, proximity'*

### 3.2 Co-Text

The researcher investigated the 35 hashtags in terms of their linguistic features and function in the social context they were used. The hashtags seemed to address specific issue at any one time. The wording was clear and concise and timely in the sense that the happenings of the day were addressed in the fewest words possible. For instance, #RapeDoctor. This hashtag addressed news that was in mainstream media about an unqualified doctor who drugged and defiled patients. The use of the word rape captured the anger of the people and the magnitude of the issue. A hashtag like #DepotRutoPilot clearly shows the stand of the formulator. That discussion on compromise is

not an option and the pilot needs to be viewed as racist and disrespectful to the locals (Kenyans). #MyDressMyChoice sends a clear message that violence towards women under the guise of decency will not be tolerated as they have rights. #PastorOfImpunity sends a strong message on the need for law to take its course on a pastor who kills an ordinary Kenyan and is still free. The word impunity is strong enough to warrant officers to act. #SomeoneTellCNN, #SomeOneTellKagame and #SomeoneTellNigeria were hashtags that trended globally and have come to be identified with Kenyans on Twitter. In fact, they formed the strongest level of patriotism whenever Kenyans have been attacked by outsiders. The wording leaves one sure that whatever it is they did has hit Kenyans the wrong way. This is collective opinion formation and expression. Common opinions are formed by Kenyans on Twitter in solidarity when the issues affect Kenya.

The hashtags analyzed by the researcher reflect this feature of wording that is directly addressing the social situation at play. The function of the hashtag is clear. For instance, some are informative, like #ObamaInKenya, #BroOchollaMoment, #ParisAttack, #HurumaTragedy. This is about creating awareness by expressing an opinion. The #BroOchollaMoment expressed the general view of society that religious pastors should not be caught in affairs outside marriage and then keep preaching abstinence and fidelity. Others are meant to push for action besides creating awareness on issues of national importance. Such hashtags include, #SomeoneTellCNN, #StopTheDrunkPresident, #IStandWithKDF, #147IsNotJustANumber. The hashtag #IStandWithKDF was about getting the government to honour over 100 soldiers murdered by the Al Shabaab terror group in neighbouring Somalia. Many Kenyans were not aware that there was no constitutional provision for state memorial for fallen soldiers. The strong opinions expressed by KOTs made the government review policy and hold a memorial service for the soldiers. Others are meant to mock, create humor or give a neutralized criticism of an issue, for example, #JehovahWanyonyi, #BabaWhileYouWereAway, #BungomaJamesBond and #UhuruVisitsKenya.

### **3.3 Social Practice**

The concept of social practice was described by Fairclough in his work on discourse analysis 1992. He analyzed discourse on three levels; the text, the discursive practice and the social practice. The text in this study refers to the hashtags. The discursive practice would refer to how the hashtags are formulated and consumed. The social concept refers to the wider social practice to which the communication event belongs. The social practice level focuses on the issues that inform certain discourses. Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) explain that the functioning of discourse referred to in CDA as discursive practice, is a social practice that shapes the world. The concept of social practice views the communication action as individual, concrete and context bound on one hand, and being institutionalized and socially anchored on the other. Thus there is a pattern of regularity. Hashtags are usually formed by individuals and posted on Twitter. They are context bound because they address the issue of the day. The hashtags also involve social interaction through tweets and retweets. Therefore, they are socially bound.

CDA addresses social problems in the society concerned. The sampled hashtags were all based on real issues, whether political or social in the Kenyan society. For instance there were hashtags that

addressed political aspects such as #StopTheDrunkPresident, #myPresidentMyChoice, #UhuruVisitsKenya, #BabaWhileYouWereAway, #What WouldMagufuliDo? and #ObamaInKenya. Other hashtags addresses social issues that Kenyans wanted addressed by the ruling elite. Twitter, through the use of hashtags gave a voice to ordinary citizens. Examples are #DepotRutoPilot, #ArrestRutoPilot, #MyDressMyChoice, #EducationCrisis and #Mollis (Kenyans used this hashtag to condemn rape and castigate those making fun in social media about a girl being raped). Some hashtags are formed for entertainment purposes, for example, #BungomaJamesBond and #TeamMafisi, #BroOchollaMoment.

Issues like insecurity also led to creation of hashtags. The occurrence of terror attacks and other tragedies like collapse of buildings made Kenyans to create hashtags to express anger, sadness, pain and protest to a government that seemed oblivious of the plight of ordinary citizens affected by these tragedies. Such hashtags include: #HurumaTragedy, #GarissaAttack, #IStandWithKDF. The occurrence of events and issues seem to inform hashtag formation. Media houses came up with hashtags in particular situations like breaking news, tragedies, national issues like strikes, examinations and political happenings. News features and other programmes have hashtags meant to allow interaction with viewers. Examples are #CitizenWeekend, #TTTT, #TheWickedEdition, #ElectionsKe, #KCSEResults. Based on these examples we can conclude that every hashtag is formulated when an issue arises and is therefore context bound. All opinions expressed about the issue at hand are within that context defined as the issue regime.

Social context influences the framing of the hashtags. In this case, the frames in question are frames of communication not frames of mind. It is how a message is organized depending on the context of communication. For example, #DepotRutoPilot, was a hashtag framed to communicate directly to the government the stand of the public after a white pilot flying the deputy president assaulted a Kenyan police woman. The action to be taken on the pilot is directly communicated. Besides the hashtag being context bound (the physical assault on the police woman had taken place and Kenyans were angry) the words chosen expressed their public opinion which was action-based.

Besides the analysis of the context in which communication takes place, CDA also examines the effects of this communication in the society. In the Kenyan context, where hashtags formulation and use is concerned, this can be described by looking at the effects and influence of the hashtags on the government and the society at large. All the 35 hashtags investigated led to some action or social effect. This is shown in the table below:

**Table 2: Social Effects of the Hashtags**

S/NO	HASHTAG	SOCIAL EFFECT
1	#147IsNotJustANumber	Government had to take action by covering burial expenses of the Garissa university students and hold a memorial service
2	#BabaWhileYouWereAway	Catapulted the opposition leader's popularity. The name Baba is now

		used by his fans to refer to him. The tag was used to mobilize a huge number of followers in Uhuru park to welcome the leader.
3	#BungomaJamesBond	The man who attempted to hang onto a helicopter was arrested and charged
4	#DeadBeatKenya	The Facebook page was closed after men accused of child neglect complained on defamation and cyber bullying
5	#HotBedOfTerror	CNN had to apologize over this statement to the Kenyan people and government
6	#HotBedOfApologies	This was in response to the apology and it was meant to further humiliate the media house (CNN)
7	#HurumaTragedy	The government had to review documentation of surrounding buildings and demolish those that were not safe
8	#JehovahWanyonyi	The cult was brought to the limelight and its influence in Western Kenya fizzled after featuring on mainstream media
9	#KenyanvsZimbabweans	Diplomatic tiff where the agencies had to act in restoring peace
10	#ObamaInKenya	Sensitization of the Obama visit through discussions on SM
11	#ObamaHomeComing	The world focused on the Obama visit as not just a visit to Africa but to his Father land
12	#OchollaMoment	This has become the term used when people misplace communication
13	#ParisAttack	Sensitization of Kenyans on global terror effects
14	#RIPJacobJuma	This led to investigations being started on the business man's death
15	#RoguePastor	The pastor was arrested due to public outcry and charged in court
16	#PastorofImpunity	A hashtag meant to press for the arrest of the pastor over an accident involving an ordinary Kenyan woman

17	#SomeoneTellCNN	Led to a diplomatic reaction from the president who referred to Kenya as a hot bed of opportunities. Eventually CNN apologized
18	#SomeoneTellMugabe	President Mugabe's government had to respond to accusations of disrespecting Kenyans by saying the page used to send the messages was fake.
19	#SomeoneTellNigeria	The sports organizers had to respond to Kenyans about mistreatment of players
20	#TeamMafisi	This was purely for entertainment but the term gained ground in the society as one that refers to promiscuous individuals with no morals
21	#ObamaReturns	The hashtag was able to bring about the connection between Obama's current visit as president and his earlier visit as a young man in search of his roots
22	#UhuruVisitsKenya	The government responded by explaining the many visits that the president was making outside the country as meant to create opportunities for Kenya
23	#MyPresidentMyChoice	This hashtag was in response to accusations that the president was acting immorally and had no touch with the ordinary Kenyan's state of life especially insecurity. His agents created it to counter the hashtag #StopTheDrunkPresident
24	#MyDressMyChoice	This hashtag led to the arrest of the touts involved in undressing a young woman, after presidential orders
25	#TeachersStrike	Meant to bring to focus the teachers strike. It was created by the media.
26	#LipaKamaTender	A hashtag with a political connotation meant to push the government to pay doctors, the effect was a strike that took a political turn leaving the doctors unheard

27	#DepotRutoPilot	The pilot was arrested and charged for assaulting a woman.
28	#RapeDoctor	The doctor was arrested and charged after the hashtag that created public outrage
29	#EducationCrisis	This hashtag was meant to press the government further to deal with the teachers strike in light of an upcoming exam season.
30	#IStandWithKDF	This led to the government holding a memorial service for fallen soldiers contrary to military practice
31	#POTUS	It was a curious hashtag just before confirmation of Obama visit. It emphasized the status of the American president as a very important person visiting Kenya
32	#WaiguruDeals	A hashtag protesting corruption and impunity. It led to debates that eventually informed the minister's resignation
33	#Mollis	This hashtag was about rape and it led to female activists condemning the act and stopping the playing of the audio clip in which a young girl was being sexually molested
34	#KenyansTellKagame	President Kagame responded to Kenyans on Twitter contrary to diplomatic practice
35	#StopTheDrunkPresident	Kenyans were reacting to the president's attitude on insecurity. This elicited a response from State house.

The effects of the hashtags show that no hashtag fails to elicit a response from the ruling class and its agencies if it is about national matters. Some hashtags led to change or breach of policy especially in diplomatic relations, military and government operations. The Kenyans on Twitter expressed such strong opinions and sustained tweeting that the government had to respond. Such hashtags include #IStandWithKDF, #147IsNotJustANumber, #StopTheDrunkPresident and #SomeoneTellCNN. Respondents interviewed gave their views on these reactions to public opinions under various hashtags below.



The public hash tag developers were asked to indicate whether media houses or other players like the government ever respond to hashtags formulated by independent bloggers or ordinary citizens. The following were the responses.

Respondent 1: *They certainly do. Look at the example of #SomeoneTellCNN- CNN wrongly titled an article and it led to backlash of the network on Twitter as a result they apologized and changed the title. Back home, we have seen the civil society, bloggers, politicians raise concerns using hashtags and government has duly responded. So Yes, they do pay attention. They might not always act but they will take notice.*

Respondent 2: *Yes. CNN responded to #SomeoneTellCNN. It also depends on issue, if it is true, important, etc e.g #ShutNakumattDown.*

The KOT respondents were asked to indicate how they know an important issue. The following were the responses.

Respondent 1: *Global attention or local e.g storming an office is different.*

Respondent 2: *It is how the issue affects everyone e.g banning cars in the CBD e.g #KideroDrums, #Kiderograss (no sense to anyone but making fun of him).*

The media respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they feel the hashtags have influenced how people view and respond to political and social issues. The following were the responses.

Respondent 1: *Well, hashtags are simply conversations and often they are meant to influence outcomes. To what extent, that is case by case. For example, if a politician says #Boycott elections, some might others will not. Those who are influenced must share similar opinions to those who start the hashtag.*

Respondent 2: *Yes there is a shift. #s have created more awareness.*

Respondent 3: *People create accounts that leak and everyone then gains knowledge.*

Respondent 4: *Politics and government –people are more awake and reactive.*

Respondent 5: *Public reactions depends on ‘Who’ e.g pastor arrested because he adds no value like politicians e.g Waiguru #PanganiSix*

The KOT respondents were further asked to indicate what makes them to respond to a hashtag.

Respondent 1: *I respond to hashtags that I feel are beneficial like missing persons e.g #BringBackOurGirls. Those that are like for singing or dancing for creating awareness. #ALSChallenge (ALS is a disease that is not well known)*

Respondent 2: *Subject matter*

Respondent 3: *Repetition (retweets create more interest), if it made into a meme with your social grouping e.g. WhatsApp, Instagram, its relevance to my life, issue awareness such as it is about something I know (is it within my knowledge scope)*

Respondent 4: *Popularity. Topic/issues*

Respondent 5: *Relevance*

Respondent 6: *The topic, if it is related to my personal life; if it is likely to affect me, friends and relatives; to get information about certain issues affecting the country*

Respondent 7: *If it affects me personally, even if indirectly. How popular it is even in memes.*

Respondent 8: *If it is popular. If the hashtag is symmetric or congruent with my beliefs.*

Respondent 9: *The impact of the hashtag if it has a topic that concerns me. If I have an interest in the hashtags.*

These responses brought to light a new way of addressing social and political issues affecting Kenyans, which is creating memes based on those issues. The meme is preceded by a hashtag. Memes are usually presented as humor but have deep messages about everyday occurrences.

The respondents were also asked to indicate what kind of hashtags they do not respond to and why. The following were the responses.

Respondent 1: *Political ones especially those hashtags with redundant themes such as speaking of change that never is.*

Respondent 2: *Topics that don't pick my interests e.g. #WengerOut*

Respondent 3: *Those that are too long, not within my knowledge, monotonous title, those not applicable or related to my life.*

Respondent 4: *Political (No care for politics)*

Respondent 5: *Hashtags that are political related, natural calamities, Kenyan common mwananchi and celebrities. They tend to affect large audiences or a large segment of the consumers.*

Respondent 7: *Those that sound trivial and any with negativity and hatred advances. I do not feel that warrant my engagement and I do not support hatred incitement.*

Respondent 8: *Those on political divide, ethnicity, secret government operations, hate speech. There is close monitoring by the government authorities.*

Respondent 9: *Hashtags that originate from credible sources because they will have an impact on many people. Like those from media houses and corporate.*

All the respondents were asked to indicate whether it matters who comes up with a hashtag on Twitter. This question was meant to address the element of source. Studies done previously indicate that for a message to succeed and get many responses its source plays a part. In this study source referred to the creator of the hashtag. The researcher wanted to know whether it matters who creates a hashtag when the issue arises. Majority of the respondents indicated that it does matter who comes up with the hashtag. The following were the responses.

Respondent 1: *Yes. The level of influence of the hashtag developer matters.*

Respondent 2: *No, No*

Respondent 3: *Yes. Especially based on level of influence, popularity*

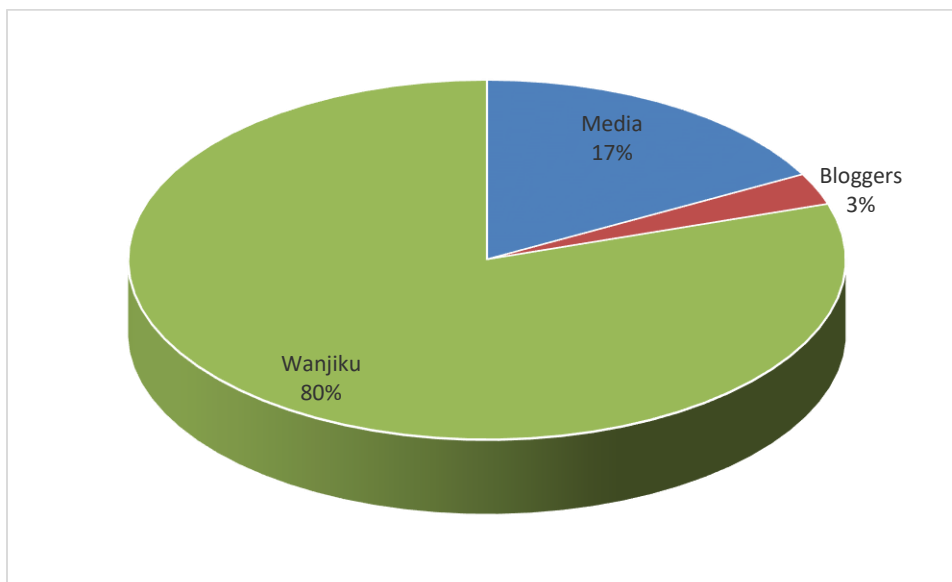
Respondent 4: *Yes. Hashtags generated by important persons and celebrities tend to trend as compared to common mwananchi generated hashtags*

Respondent 5: *Yes. A hashtag created by a popular user will get more retweets and attention than one created by a less popular user.*

Respondent 6: *Yes. The person must be a popular social media figure for the hashtag to trend. For example, Xtiandela, Cyprian Nyakundi and media personalities like Gichuru and Jeff Koinange.*

Respondent 7: *Yes. If it is from a prominent person then it will trend.*

The respondents seem to agree that the formulator of a hashtag in a given context but from the hashtag data collected most (80%) of the popular hashtags were created by ordinary Kenyans. Figure 2 below shows the source of hashtags. The results indicate that once an issue arises it does not matter who creates the hashtag to guide discussion online. The situational context (what is happening) can be brought to public notice by anyone and still elicit reactions and opinion formation. However, the tweets and retweets having the presence and participation of popular bloggers mentioned by the respondents seemed to propagate the discussion more. Most of the tweeps would be seen to tag a blogger or journalist in their tweets.



**Figure 2: Source of hashtag**

#### **4.4 Public Participation and opinion formation**

Public participation in this research is seen as a form of online citizen journalism that allows members of the public to create and debate their own news items. The topics discussed on Twitter are context bound since none is independent of the issues arising in the daily life of the ordinary Kenyan. Political, social, economic and security issues occurring daily inform the hashtag formed.

The researcher analyzed these online interactions based on the four tenets of public participation which are dialogue, voice, liberating pedagogy and action-reflection-action. The concept of dialogue refers to an encounter between men that allows problem recognition in social, economic, or legal issues like injustice. The hashtags formed by Kenyans are about problems they would want addressed or recognized. A hashtag like #147IsNotJustANumber strongly expresses the opinion of Kenyans about students killed in a public university by terrorists. Public schools and universities are cheap and are attended by ordinary Kenyans who may not afford the fees in private academies. The KOTs were bringing to attention a problem facing people in the lower cadre and at the same time underlining the importance of their lives. Citizens are in this case involved in dialogue on socio-economic and political issues that affect the quality of their lives.

The concept of voice refers to citizens being given a chance to articulate their problems, formulate solutions and act on them. Whenever an issue arises (situational context) citizens get a chance to express opinions about it in terms of elaborating or defining it, suggesting way forward and the action to take and demanding to be heard. The hashtags analyzed indicate this aspect in their wording and in the tweets that fall under them. The hashtag #PastorOfImpunity, #MyDressMyChoice and #DepotRutoPilot are strongly worded. The issue of impunity implies that people with high social standing may enjoy rights and privileges above the law even when they kill ordinary citizens. In #DepotRutoPilot, the words are action-based. The public makes a demand to the government. In #MyDressMyChoice, the words clearly show that rights and freedom of relating to dressing has been violated and the women are demanding to be heard. The public voice was also raised through the hashtag #BabaWhileYouWereAway where a lot of issues were discussed including corruption, tribalism, unemployment, extrajudicial killings and nepotism.

The theory of public participation contends that all dialogue should be action oriented and awareness raising so as to be liberating (liberating pedagogy). Hashtags formulated by Kenyans were meant to create online awareness of issues and a discussion on the same. Issues that had lots of tweets and retweets involved much back and forth analysis of the issue at hand. Many Kenyans go out of the way to find out what is trending on Twitter and give their opinion. Mainstream media also have programmes on the trends, for instance Citizen TV's Social Square and NTV'S #TTTT, Which analyze trending issues. Breaking news is sometimes released through hashtags. A good example would be #HurumaTragedy and #ObamaReturns. This raises awareness on the issue and in the debate action is discussed. The tragedy in Huruma was approached by the public from a corruption point of view. The opinion was that buildings are constructed without adherence to safety regulations and the law. This led to the city engineers and other stakeholders taking action by investigation all buildings in the area and ordering the demolition of others. The citizens raised their voices through Twitter and suggested action/solution and the authorities responded. This agrees with Peisker (2011) who says that opinion formation can best be understood if through lens of citizen participation. Use of hashtags is a bottom-up approach where information flows from the citizens to the authorities. Collective opinion is expressed through the hashtags. The expression is sometimes behavioral as in the case of demonstrations and funeral wakes where the public is mobilized through Twitter. Citizen journalism is taking route in Kenya. The interviewees expressed this view.

The public hash tag developers were asked to respond to the question on why there is a new trend in Kenya, where Kenyans are using social media to discuss issues that concern them, especially with the use of hashtags. The following were some of the responses.

Respondent 1: *'Hashtags allow users to form a discussion around a topic of interest. They became popular because now people can virtually meet other people with whom they share similar interest from all corners of the world or Kenya. for instance, brands are able to know what people say or think about their brands and other marketing and communication activities.'*

Respondent 2: *'People spending more time on devices other than TV. Access is good. Can do it anywhere, Penetration is broader even global which is different from radio. It is easy to rally support on social media. One on one conversation allows for sharing thoughts, reply in the tweet and open to strangers.'*

The KOT respondents were further asked to indicate whether they ever respond to the hashtags formulated by media houses. Majority of the respondents indicated yes. The following were some of the responses.

Respondent 1: *Yes and No. Some are boring.*

Respondent 2: *Yes, #TheJumpOff (on radio program)*

Respondent 3: *Yes. #TTTT (The trend show)*

Respondent 4: *Yes. #JKL-MigunaMiguna, #Maina King'angi\_Women talk show(radio)*

Respondent 5: *Yes. Citizen TV #BigQuestion*

Respondent 6: *Yes. JKL Show*

Respondent 7: *Yes. Peaceful elections*

The media respondents were further asked to indicate what kind of responses the trending hashtags been getting from members of the public. The following were the responses

Respondent 1: *This depends on the topic, and the nature. If it is a hashtag to influence change, it gets a positive response. If it is abusive, it receives backlash. Either way, the response are still many and overwhelming.*

Respondent 4: *Mostly resistive reactions.*

Respondent 5: *Excellent*

Respondent 6: *The trending hashtags get a lot of retweets so the information spreads faster.*

Respondent 7: *Both positive and negative responses.*

The media respondents were further asked to indicate whether the responses they get from audience are utilized in any way by the media house and/or journalist. The following were the responses.

Respondent 1: *Yes, they are read on air. Digital reporters will write a story and put it online. For example if they are picked on K.O.T #s and their reactions.*

Respondent 2: *Yes, Wrong information by media house is corrected .The public gives a new story. The public can suggest/propose programs based on a certain feature.*

Respondent 3: *Yes, Responses mostly lead to a follow up of a story or an improvement of a product offered by the media house. They also help us improve or tone down on delivery of news or programmes.*

Respondent 4: *Yes. They give pointers on what the public views as being most important and what deserves coverage by media.*

Respondent 7: *Yes. It is just that anchors don't just read out all comments*

Respondent 8: *Yes. The feedback is always analyzed and if it is possible to make certain corrections and adjustments, they are done.*

The respondents were also asked if they think that the hashtags have been able to shape the opinion of the public in social and political issues in Kenya. They responded as follows.

Respondent 1: *Yes. For instance the famous #DabOfShame, a hashtag that was used to troll president Uhuru Kenyatta and criticize him for campaigning instead of helping starving Kenyans.*

Respondent 2: *It depends on what the topic is. When the public feels is being targeted unfairly then it shifts the opinion. E.g. #KofiOlominde scuffle and #ArrestRutoPilot.*

Respondent 3: *Yes. Most people opt for more popular news items. The more frequent an opinion is passed, the more people adopt it and make decisions based on other past experiences.*

Respondent 4: *Yes, by offering voice to people to air their views, thereby attracting attention of the authorities.*

Respondent 5: *Yes. People lift content from others opinion on a particular hashtag with intent of using it against someone or a particular brand or company.*

Respondent 6: *Yes. A majority of people especially on Twitter use hashtags because they exist so their opinions are instantly shaped by that.*

Respondent 7: *Yes. People are now able to have a wider scope on the issues being discussed rather than one side of the coin to a story.*

From these responses it is evident that the conversations on Twitter have been used to shape opinions. The study was on how communication media by disseminating ideas shapes opinions. For opinion to be formed there are four conditions that must be met. There must be an issue; there must be a significant number of people who express their opinions on it; there must be some sort of consensus among these opinions; and their consensus must at least exert some influence. All the tweets in the study sample had over 100,000 mentions meaning the topic under debate was widely discussed. The participants gave their views and even addressed those views to others. The followers and followees ensure that the topic continues to be discussed. Hashtags formulated by Kenyans have exerted influence through these opinions. For instance, the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN was so fiercely debated on Twitter and the organization had to apologize to Kenyans and their government. The hashtag #UhuruVistsKenya got the attention of the government and the government spokesman had to explain the many overseas trips the president was taking. The government communication in charge of online communication even came up with a hashtag #MyPresidentMyChoice in response to #StopTheDrunkPresident. So the hashtags do influence public opinion and the hashtags have influence on decision-making. These findings are in sync with those of Herbasmas 1962; Singh, 2009; Kacheskey, Pawel and Guillaume, 2011;

and Burger and Lawrence, 1991 that contend that through assembly and dialogue, the public sphere generates opinions and attitudes which affirm, challenge or guide the affairs of the state. The equivalent of assembly in this study is the social media acting as the meeting point that allows the members of the public to express their views.

#### **4.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS**

##### **4.1 Summary of Findings**

The objective of the study was to determine the influence of the hashtag context on public opinion formation on sociopolitical issues in Kenya. The results revealed that 51% of the hash tags were from political context. People responded more when a hashtag was political and most hashtags were therefore political. Social hashtags also had a significant influence at 40%. Hashtags on economic issues and insecurity had the least response. The results also revealed that hash tags context had a significant influence on public opinion formation on socio-political issues in Kenya. The interviews on the respondents also revealed the factors that make a hashtag trend or fail to trend. Respondents gave different factors but there were certain factors that featured in all the answers of the respondents.

The CDA approach by Fairclough argues that discourse is based on the communicative event (field) and the discursive event which refers to the production and consumption of text. In order for the hashtags (texts) to be produced and responded to (discursive process) there must be certain conditions in the situational context all of which form a successful communicative event. In this research the conditions refer to the factors that make the hashtag trend or get many mentions and have a higher volatility in the SM. Some of the factors raised included: the relevance of the hashtag to current events and to the general public or individual's life; the source of the hashtag with celebrities and bloggers attracting more responses; the topic/issue under discussion with politics, sports, controversies, humanitarian drives such as hunger or human rights abuse, social events, sensationalism and tragedies being raised; the number of mentions and retweets that the hashtag gets.

Another finding was that hashtags are the new way of getting information on what is happening in socio-political events. On the situations that led to the creation of hashtags, the respondents gave issues like tragedies, controversial social issues, breaking news, issues of national interest (meaning they affect a majority of the population) and the oddity of an issue.

The respondents also gave reasons that would make a hashtag not to gain popularity in Twitter. Some of the factors that make people not to respond to hashtags include empty political rhetoric that is meant to sell ideologies of the political class such as bringing change that never happens; hashtags that have monotonous wording; hashtags that are too long; hashtags that are trivial in nature; hashtags that trigger hate or animosity among communities; hashtags that would trigger close monitoring from government authorities; those that have no bearing on the individual respondent's life.

##### **4.2 Conclusions**

The study concluded that hash tag context have a significant relationship with public opinion formation. The context could refer to the co-text (communicative context) or the situational context that refers to who is talking about what and where. Social media seem to provide an avenue for

free expression and for citizens to voice their issues. Political context elicits more hashtag formation and response. The public is no longer waiting for the media to frame and prime news once issues break out. The issues arise from their daily lives. They are discussing them as they arise using hashtags and are forming opinions that influence decisions in government and mainstream media. The media can only authenticate what the public has reported. Thus the public is gate-watching and opening the gates at their convenience online.

#### **4.3 Recommendations**

The study recommends that Kenyans should use the hash tags to share opinions about different situations. In addition Kenyans on twitter should respond to the hash tags as they inform and expose daily happenings in the country. The online community in Kenya is huge and has increasingly influenced policy and decision making in the media and government. The government responds to Kenyans on Twitter. The study recommends more interaction between the media and influential bloggers who take the role of opinion shapers once a hashtag has been created by the members of the public.

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