

ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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