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Themes Used to Discursively Construct the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kenya's Newspaper Headlines

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the themes that discursively construct the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya's newspaper headlines, specifically focusing on their role in structuring communication related to the COVID-19 pandemic. While prior research has examined news discourse in various contexts, thematic analysis in Kenya's news reporting has received limited attention. The study examines 59 COVID-19-related headlines drawn from *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation* newspapers. The methodology draws from the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, and specifically employs the Top-Down Approach of sampling texts as espoused by Mautner. Van Dijk argues that those who control discourse indirectly manipulate people's thoughts and actions. This observation is corroborated by the study's findings which reveal that Kenya's print media shaped the COVID-19 discourse through the choice and framing of themes such as bondage, death, economy, education and COVID-19 research and search for vaccines. The analysis shows that Kenya's print media largely constructed the themes in a negative way and this created a sense of crisis and fear among the populace. These feelings of fear and crisis were heightened because the themes encapsulate the things that are dear to Kenyans and which were under threat because of COVID-19. Proactive measures such as online learning during the pandemic were almost wholly excluded from the COVID-19 discourse. The media created unequal power relation with the readership by constructing itself as the reservoir of knowledge about COVID-19. The reader was positioned as subordinate and in dire need of guidance. This was an important discursive strategy for legitimizing the authority of the media about the pandemic. It is hoped that this study will make significant contribution to the fields of discourse, communication and media, as it reveals how media discourse plays a key role in shaping our understanding of pandemics.

Keywords: CDA; COVID-19; Discourse; Newspaper representation; Pandemic; Themes

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1. Introduction

Throughout human history, there have been several global health crises that have profoundly impacted the world. These pandemics have been devastating, resulting in significant loss of life and leaving the majority of survivors with lasting psychological and physical effects. In every pandemic, language has played a crucial role in raising awareness among the general public, with mass media serving as the primary means of disseminating information. Channels such as radio and television as well as newspapers serve to inform and engage society by highlighting pressing issues (Mulonzi, B., Ngumo, M. and Omoke, L., 2023). While the digital age has transformed the way people consume news, with online platforms and social media playing a more significant role, newspapers continue to have a substantial impact on language and contribute to its evolution (Lamichhane, 2017).

The topic or theme defines what is the most important information of a newspaper text (Van Dijk, 1998). Van Dijk also points out that a significant part of discourse and communication is the question of who controls the topic or themes (Van Dijk, 2008). This control may constitute choosing which topic or theme that will be covered and how it will be framed. The one in control also decides which topic is no longer useful and which new topic should be introduced or highlighted. These are important decisions because they may influence what people think is important. Van Dijk further observes that topics may be expressed or signalled by headlines.

The linguistic structure of a headline is thus important in thematic analysis for it is the foundation upon which the framing of a theme is embedded. The words or syntactic structures chosen are central to the framing of the theme. Crucially, there are many people who only glance at the headline of a newspaper as they walk or drive along a street. The only thing they take home is the theme and how it is framed. Let us illustrate this using two headlines from the Kenyan political situation: "Karua: army of foreign hackers rigged the Kenyan election" (Daily Nation, 2022) and the headline "Did hackers ma-nipulate Kenya's presidential poll?" (Ngila, F, 2022, August 26). The two headlines present the same theme. However, they tell two different stories due to differences in lexical and syntactic choices. This demonstrates that those who control the production and distribution of media content hold significant power in shaping public opinion, setting agenda and framing issues. A number of themes emerged in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Kenyan print media and it is therefore imperative to find out how these themes were discursively constructed using different linguistic resources.

Despite the centrality of themes in the dissemination of news, studies on which themes are selected in newspaper headlines in Kenya, and how they are discursively constructed remain limited. Indeed, with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is hardly any study in Kenya that has attempted to investigate the themes that were used to discursively construct the pandemic. Sasala et al, Moinani and Barasa, Habwe and Ndung'u, for example, examined the language used to talk about COVID-19 in Kenya, and all seem interested in the analysis of how this was done using lexical items such as metaphors (Sasala et al, 2022; Moinani amd Barasa, 2021; Habwe and Ndung'u, 2020). It is against this background that this article seeks to explore the centrality of themes in the discursive construction of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya. Specifically, the study is guided by the question: what themes emerged from Kenya's print media's framing of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how did this framing potentially shape the COVID-19 discourse? To address this question, this article examines all the news headlines on the COVID-19 pandemic published between March and December 2020 by the *Daily nation* and *The Standard Newspaper*.

2. Literature review

Tshiswaka et al. (2017) used thematic analysis to justify the construction of the Ebola epidemic narrative in a corpus that constituted both online and offline news articles from the mainstream Congolese print media which were published between 26th Au-

gust to 31st October, 2014. From the findings, three themes emerged which were evident in the selected articles, namely, that the general public was portrayed as a potential victim, while public institutions were portrayed as heroes or warriors battling the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). This study was done in the Democratic Republic of Congo and employed thematic analysis theory. In contrast, this article adopted the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory by Van Dijk (1988a, 1988b, 1993, 1998, 2008, 2009). Again, the focus was on Ebola, while the current study examines the COVID-19 pandemic. It will therefore be important to evaluate if there are any similarities in the findings of the two studies.

Further, Nor and Zulcafli's (2020) research used 700 newspaper articles in Spain to explore the collective image of the 2014 Ebola outbreak. The objective was to understand how people integrate this pandemic into their everyday thinking. The study portrayed Ebola as a disease originating in Africa. It also explored how the pandemic caused fear and was conceptualized as a global threat. The findings also revealed that the pandemic created anger and the assigning of blame. People blamed the political leaders and the media for their inability to manage the crisis. These findings are aligned to the theme of politics. While this study offers useful insights into the current study, it was however, done in Spain.

In addition, Feijen (2016) used a corpus linguistics approach to test Dutch tweets about the Ebola virus, with the aim of comparing how Dutch people interpreted the pandemic. The study reported that the Ebola disease was commonly listed alongside other diseases such as gonorrhea, leprosy, herpes, bubonic plague and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). The study also revealed that Dutch people had distinct perspectives regarding the Ebola disease, which differed from the newspaper representations. It is true that this study gives important insights into the current study, however, it targeted social media and Dutch society.

None of the studies reviewed above employed the CDA framework, yet it is important for the purposes of this study to establish how CDA has been used globally to study pandemics. Joye (2010) investigated the production of two Belgian television reports on the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak using a case-based method. Fairclough's CDA theory was used to examine the relationship between discourse, social and cultural phenomena (Fairclough, 1992). The findings revealed four discursive topics: period of medical silence, SARS as emergency news, three days of ecstatic news and SARS as adventure news. The results also revealed that SARS news coverage not only constructed, but also retained the sociocultural distinction between "us" and "them". This study is important because it shows how the CDA framework can be used to study pandemics. However, its focus is on SARS yet the objective of the current study is to examine the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the dynamics that shape disease discourse in Western societies like Belgium are likely to be different from those of an African country like Kenya.

In addition, Tareen et al. (2021) investigated the ideological shaping of COVID-19 related headlines within selected Pakistan newspapers. The study employed qualitative methodology, focusing on English-language newspapers, *Dawn* and *The News*, gathered through purposive sampling. Applying Van Dijk's (2009) Socio-Cognitive Approach, the study demonstrated that these headlines manipulated perceptions of the pandemic by emphasizing the authority of news sources. The use of Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model makes this study worth reviewing. While significant insights can be drawn from it, particularly on the question of authority of news sources in influencing readers about pandemics, the focus of the study however is on Pakistan society.

In their study, Moinani and Barasa (2021) examined how the word choices of government officials in Kenya influenced public attitudes and behaviour towards the COVID-19 pandemic. They highlighted the power of language in shaping societal perceptions and behaviours. The study also revealed that officials frame the pandemic as a war through the use of threatening language which created mistrust and resentment among the public. This study also uti-

lized the CDA framework and focused on how lexical choices constructed the discourse of COVID-19. Its relevance to the current study lies on its focus on the role of language in shaping public perceptions. It however investigated the language of government officials in their routine speeches to the public about COVID-19. Though it offers important contribution on the discursive construction of COVID-19, its main focus is on speeches rather than the media itself.

2.1 Theoretical framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

This study was guided by Van Dijk's (1988a, 1988b, 1993, 1998, 2008, 2009) CDA theory. He argues that CDA analyses language to unveil hidden meanings. CDA also aims to understand the multidimensional and flexible nature of meaning, acknowledging that meaning is not solely constructed but also influenced by social contexts. This approach seeks to bring about change in social reality, particularly in oppressive or dehumanizing situations. Van Dijk (1993) views CDA as a tool that explores textual elements at both micro and macro linguistic levels. It examines not only explicit content but also what remains unsaid or concealed within discourse.

At the micro level, Van Dijk's (2009) Socio-Cognitive Model emphasizes the importance of lexical items and syntactic structures in language comprehension and production. He examines how choices in words and sentence structures influence the way people understand and construct meaning (Van Dijk, 2008). This micro-level analysis involves looking at how sentences are structured, what is topicalized, and agent-patient relationships in discourse.

Van Dijk's macro level of analysis examines thematic structures. The concept of themes in a discourse is systematized and made clear using macro structures. The gist or essential details of a discourse is exemplified by such themes (the global meaning of a discourse). This means that macro constructs are semantic objects in discourse. Using a variety of linguistic and cognitive rules and techniques, language users can deduce the semantic macrostructures of a

text (Van Dijk, 1998). Generalization, deletion and construction are some of the rules that apply. Generalization is the first macro-rule, which is one of the primary macro rules that involves the replacement of similar minor topics with a superordinate concept. A second important macro-rule is deletion, which involves removal or exclusion of information for ideological purposes. Construction is a third macro rule that results from the first two rules and leads to the construction of a new macro proposition (Van Dijk, 1998). This study employs Van Dijk's approach to highlight the themes that discursively construct COVID-19 in Kenya's newspaper headlines.

Van Dijk's (2009) model emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between micro and macro levels. Micro-level actions and attitudes are influenced by broader social structures at the macro level, and the macro level is shaped by aggregated micro-level interactions. This interdependence highlights the complex connection between individual experiences and societal norms. Individuals are both products of their social context and contributors to shaping it.

Van Dijk's (2008) observes that those who control discourse indirectly manipulate thoughts and actions. Since actions are influenced by thoughts, controlling discourse amounts to controlling minds and, consequently, actions. CDA theory is therefore helpful to this study as it is used to discuss the themes covered in the discursive construction of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya's newspaper headlines.

3. Methodology

This study was done in Kenya and it used the Qualitative Discourse Analysis research design as described by Mautner (2008). This research design involves examining and interpreting language and communication practices in order to understand social phenomena, power relations, and social change. Mautner discusses four crucial steps of undertaking such an analysis.

a. Decide whether specific print media texts are worth examining. In this study, the texts under consideration were on the COVID-19 pandemic which ravaged the world, particu-

larly in the year 2020. There is no question that this is a matter that required investigation both globally and locally.

b. Corpus building. To be able to undertake this type of analysis, one must build a corpus, that is, identifying the material that potentially constitutes data for your project. This is what Bell (1991) cited in Mautner (2008) calls the Universe of Discourse or universe of possible texts. This article will revisit in detail the process that was followed to build the corpus of newspapers bearing COVID-19 headlines in the section on sampling.

c. Mautner argues that the research question determines how selection of data is done. The structuring criterion that was used in this study was time. This is in line with Mautner's advice that a key criterion of structuring while studying events like natural disasters is time. In this regard, the researcher targets newspaper texts published during a certain period. The current study focused on newspaper headlines published in 2020, a period when the entire world grappled with the COVID-19 crisis.

d. Mautner notes that the final step is the actual discourse analysis. This is where the researcher investigates the linguistic choices and other mechanisms at work in the creation of the text. In this study, each headline was analysed by showing how lexical and syntactic choices influenced the choice and framing of COVID-19 themes. The themes logically arose out of this linguistic analysis. As explained in the section on theoretical framework, Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model was used to analyse and critique the discursive construction of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya's newspaper headlines.

The target population for this study was all the Kenya's newspaper headlines on the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason for choosing this target population is to secure a group of newspapers to enable the researcher gain information about the population.

Concentrating on COVID-19 headlines is crucial as they have a significant impact on how the public perceives and acts in relation to the pandemic. Further, headlines possess the power to shape people's thoughts and subsequent behaviour regarding this matter (Van Dijk, 2008).

Furthermore, headlines act as the initial point of contact between individuals and news articles, playing a vital role in grabbing attention and influencing public perception (Lamichhane, 2017). The study specifically examined newspaper headlines due to the widespread presence of COVID-19-related headlines in newspapers, indicating a high level of public interest and concern.

The study employed the Top-Down Approach of sampling texts as recommended by Mautner (2008). The newspaper headlines were manually selected from the newspapers at The Kenya National Library Services (KNLS) in Nairobi. The first stage targeted all the Kenyan newspapers with COVID-19 headlines and progressively narrowed down to the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* newspapers, in the second stage. All the headlines bearing COVID-19 information from the two newspapers comprised the corpus of the study. These two newspapers were chosen because they have a wide readership. This is according to Media Council of Kenya (MCK) (2022) survey report on Status of the Media in Kenya. This has been echoed by GeoPoll's Media Measurement Services survey report in Kenya. According to the results, the *Daily Nation* is the most widely read newspaper with 70% of readers, followed by *The Standard* with 17%. *The Business Daily* and *The Star* tied for third position with 4% readership followed by *The Taifa Leo* at 3%. With 1% of the readership, *The People's Daily* came in fourth. At 0.5%, *Mwanaspoti, Citizen Weekly*, and *Kenya Times* were listed as the least read newspapers (GeoPoll, 2022).

In the third stage, all the headlines from *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation* bearing COVID-19-related information, and published between March 2020 to December 2020 were selected. The study was confined to this period because it represents a critical timeframe when COVID-19 was declared a pan-

demic by the World Health Organization (2020) and had a significant impact globally. In Kenya, the first case was confirmed on 12th March, 2020. Although nationwide curfew was lifted in October 2020, the media continued to report about the pandemic all the way to December 2020. It is however observable that the headlines on the pandemic kept decreasing as we moved towards the end of the year. Examining newspaper headlines during this timeframe, therefore, sheds light on how the pandemic was perceived, understood, and communicated in Kenya.

In the fourth and the last stage, the study examined a total of 59 newspaper headlines with themes relating to COVID-19 related information, specifically 30 headlines from *The Standard* and 29 headlines from the *Daily Nation*. This sample size was determined by selecting all the headlines with COVID-19 related information published during the ten-month period from March to December 2020. It is important to state that only the main headlines on page one of the newspapers were considered. This is because the main headline in a newspaper is the one that draws attention to readers about the significance of a phenomenon. By including all the headlines with COVID-19 related information, the researcher ensured that there was a comprehensive and representative range of discourses about the pandemic in Kenya's newspaper headlines during that period. The sampling procedure is presented in **Figure 1**.
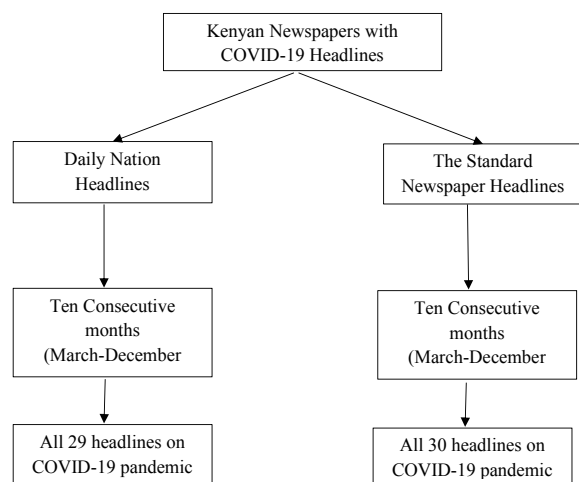

Figure 1. Progressive sampling for COVID-19 Headlines in Kenyan Newspapers.

Source: Adapted from Mautner (2008).

4. Results and discussion

This article examines the themes covered in the discursive construction of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya. Themes or topics are discussed under the macro level of Van Dijk's CDA Socio-Cognitive Model (1998, 2008, 2009). As noted earlier, *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation* newspaper headlines were critically examined. The two newspapers covered a variety of thematic concerns related to the pandemic: bondage, death, economy, education and COVID-19 research and search for vaccines. These themes arose logically from the chronological evolution of the pandemic in Kenya. However, as the article argues, their discursive construction was subjective, largely reflecting the print media's worldview. This is in line with Van Dijk's (2008) observation that the media can frame issues in a particular way, highlight specific actors or events and promote certain ideologies or values. Additionally, media discourse can set the terms and boundaries of public debates, influencing what is considered acceptable or unacceptable, normal or deviant, true or false.

The findings present a narrative of the print media about the pandemic. In the early days, the newspapers focused on reporting of the outbreak and its spread, as well as the government's initial reactions and measures such as lockdowns and curfews to contain the pandemic. Consequences of the pandemic such as number of cases, deaths as well as the information about the virus itself and its transmission followed. As the pandemic progressed, newspapers began to focus on the economic impact of the outbreak on businesses, workers, economic downturns and the overall economy. In addition, the social impact on education and social inequality was the next media focus. Lastly, vaccine rollout and the efforts to vaccinate the population became the central concern. A chronological analysis of how Kenya's print media discursively constructed these themes is presented below.

4.1 Bondage

The theme of bondage emerges out of the lockdown measures undertaken by the Kenyan government to contain the spread of the COVID-19

pandemic. The analysis reveals a construction of the pandemic that emphasizes the negative impacts of the lockdown on the economy and individual freedoms, while also acknowledging the necessity for such measures to contain the spread of the virus. The headlines often use language that frames lockdown as bondage due to restriction or infringement on personal freedom and livelihoods. Yet, as this article will demonstrate, there was another side to lockdown that the media ignored. Consider the following headlines:

NHS 1: The corona lockdown

NHS 4: Shutdown

NHS 11: Lock Kenyans home

NHS 21: Capital city is isolated

NHS 26: Doctor's tale of life in quarantine

NHS 38: *Social distancing?* What *social distancing?*

NHS 42: Kenya stares at return to lockdown

NHS 45: To lockdown or not: what governors will tell Uhuru today

NHD 1: All schools shut as lockdown begins

NHD 2: Corona virus: unease at the isolation unit

NHD 8: Kenya under curfew

NHD 9: Curfew nightmare

NHD 16: Lock us up, Kenyans say

NHD 17: Isolated: Uhuru slaps curbs on 4 hotspots

NHD 30: Why virus hotspots face total lockdown

NHD 31: Fighting COVID-19: picture of a total lockdown in Eastleigh

NHD 32: Nairobi by curfew

NHD 34: Finally, end of virus lockdown is in sight

NHD 35: Big fight over the easing of lockdown

NHD 43: Five counties stare at fresh lockdown

NHD 44: Silent COVID shutdown as numbers rise

NHD 49: Split over Christmas lockdown

To effectively construct the theme of bondage, newspapers have repetitively employed words such as "lockdown," "curfew," "shutdown," "isolation," and "quarantine." These carefully chosen lexical expressions evoke strong emotions of restriction and confinement within the reader, thereby emphasizing the profound sense of bondage associated with these circumstances. The word *lockdown,* for instance, as used in the above headlines is a prison terminolo-

gy that literally denotes the confinement of people in their own rooms, homes or areas as a security measure after or amid a disturbance or pandemic. Similarly, the practice of *quarantine* as highlighted in headline NHS 26 specifically involves isolating people or groups of people who may have come into contact with a communicable disease but are asymptomatic from others who have not been exposed so as to arrest the possibility of the spread of the disease. The two terminologies are examples of prison jargon which denote the deprivation of people's rights of movement. The newspapers are, thus, constructing COVID-19 as bondage. The two terminologies are also a product of choices made by the media both globally and locally. As Van Dijk (2009) argues, the words selected by the media significantly influence our thoughts and actions. Consequently, the above lexical choices form a systematic framework through which readers perceive and experience the pandemic. By consistently encountering these words, the reader's perception of the situation aligns with a feeling of having lost their freedom.

Another example of how the theme of bondage is constructed can be seen in headline NHS 38. The phrase "social distancing," to begin with, may not be appropriate because people who were dislocated physically were actually not necessarily socially disconnected during the COVID period. In Kenya, for example, online platforms became the norm of connecting with family, friends and fellow professionals. In fact, many universities and institutions began offering online instruction during this period. This singular presentation of COVID-19 using lexical items that resonate with imprisonment is consistent with what Van Dijk (2009) describes as exclusion or deletion in the representation of reality by the media. Indeed, Van Leeuwen (2008) notes that this exclusion often has an ideological angle. As this article will show, Kenya's print media consistently framed the COVID-19 pandemic in a negative way.

This headline has two parts, the first is structured as a declarative sentence, presented in the form of a question. The next part is an interrogative sentence. Each part has its own distinct purpose. The initial

segment, "social distancing?" functions to elicit astonishment or prompt understanding. Meanwhile, the latter segment, "what social distancing?" takes on a more critical tone, appearing to cast critique rather than genuinely seeking answers. This particular grammatical construction implies a sense of disapproval and scepticism, suggesting social distancing is not being followed as expected. Through this headline, the newspaper seems to highlight and challenge the perceived lack of adherence to social distancing measures within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya. This multiple-questioning technique also underlines the newspaper's power and authority vis-à-vis the reader. The headline's framing and syntactic structure can therefore be interpreted as ideological.

Again, headlines NHD 8, NHD 9 and NHD 32 focus on the night curfew that was in place between March and October, 2020. In Kenya's history, curfews resonate with conflict and bondage. In October 20, 1952, for example, the British Colonial Government declared a state of emergency to counter the Maumau uprising. A brutal night-to-dawn curfew was part of the containment measures taken by the colonial government. A similar curfew that lasted a month was imposed after the aborted coup attempt by Kenya Air Force officers in August, 1982. Intermittent curfews have also been imposed in a number of Kenyan cities and rural areas due to insecurity, which have always caused considerable fear and inconveniences. It is against this background that the COVID-19 curfew in Kenya should be viewed.

A notable similarity among the three headlines is their brevity. This brevity creates suspense and anxiety among the readership due to the grim reality of curfews in the country's history as outlined above. The lexical item "curfew" has a specific negative connotation among the Kenyan populace. The co-occurrence of "curfew" and "nightmare" in NHD 9, for example, intensifies the sense of bondage and gloom.

The analysis has shown that while physical restrictions occasioned by the lockdown significantly affected people's freedom of interaction, digital technology still enabled considerable social intercourse.

The representation of physical distance, therefore, as social distance was erroneous and misleading. There was not a single headline that highlighted the pandemic in terms of the many imaginative ways that Kenyans connected through digital platforms. Hence, the newspapers' generic framing of the pandemic as bondage was limiting. This is aligned to Van Dijk (2008) assertion that those who dominate discourse may also shape our thoughts and worldview.

4.2 Death

Death is a universal theme that is often represented in various forms in the newspapers. The following headlines show how the theme of death was discursively constructed during the COVID-19 period:

NHS 9: Agents of death

NHS 13: Six urgent actions as COVID-19 patient dies

NHS 27: Survival for the fittest: creative things companies are doing to beat COVID-19

NHS 36: The deadly chain of transmission

NHD 7: How Kenyans are courting death

NHD 14: Stop dancing with death

NHD 36: COVID: lives and stories of the ones we have lost

The theme of death is reinforced by lexical items like "death" and "deadly." Using these death-related terms in newspapers underscores the severity of the situation and prompts a sense of anxiety, hopelessness and urgency. Additionally, emotionally charged headlines about mortality serve as a strong warning to Kenyans, cautioning them against reckless behaviour that could make them susceptible to the pandemic. Newspapers seem to be urging Kenyans to follow government-mandated measures to control the spread of the virus. Equating COVID-19 with death heightens the sense of fear surrounding the pandemic and may promote adherence to government's COVID-19 measures.

At the metaphorical level, to say, for example, 'Stop dancing with death', is another way of saying that *COVID-19 is death*. Headlines like these, thus, make readers feel, think and believe that anyone infected with the virus will die which is false. There is

no question that this conceptualization of COVID-19 leads to pessimism, despair and hopelessness to those who are infected. These headlines may also create fear and worry to readers who are not infected. They may however serve as a warning to the readership to take protective measures against the virus. At the syntactic level, this is an imperative sentence whose function is to command. Thus, the headline positions the newspapers as the reservoirs of knowledge and readers as subordinate and lacking in knowledge. This patronizing attitude constructs unequal power relations between the media and the readership. People may, thus, be persuaded that everything said by the media is true and should be obeyed.

Conceptualizing COVID-19 as death hides the fact that there were millions of people worldwide who survived the pandemic. Indeed, many healed without even going to the hospital and many lives were also saved through emergency measures. According to Worldometer, as of April 13, 2024, reported cases of COVID-19 in Kenya were 344,130; there were 337,309 recoveries and 5,689 deaths. Thus, 98% of those infected had recovered while less than 2% died. This reality is masked by the semantic mapping of COVID-19 to the domain of death. Words, as van Dijk (2009) has noted in his Socio-Cognitive Model of CDA, affect how we think and how we view the world. For a newspaper headline to choose one theme rather than another contributes in shaping our world view.

In headline NHS 27, the word 'survival' is connotatively used to imply that only the healthiest and strongest will survive COVID-19. Put differently, the rest will die. This headline is a case of intertextuality since it is drawn from Darwin's Theory of Evolution. According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and the online Collin's Dictionary, the phrase 'survival for the fittest' means only the strongest and most successful people or things continue to live while the others die or fail. Thus, once again, COVID-19 is indirectly mapped to the domain of death.

As previously discussed, the assertion that only the strongest or healthiest can survive the pandemic is not supported by the available data on COVID-19. Medical interventions such as vaccination, good nutrition, the use of indigenous treatments and containment measures continue to save many lives. Clearly, there is enough empirical evidence to demonstrates that it is not just the fittest who survive COVID-19.

The selection and framing of headlines is solely in the hands of the media. According to Van Dijk (2008) the power to select and exclude information in discourse holds considerable significance. The media's decision to equate COVID-19 with death has a profound effect on public discourse on the pandemic, since as Van Dijk posits, those who control discourse have the power to shape public thinking and behaviour.

4.3 Economy

As the COVID-19 pandemic persisted, it greatly affected Kenya's economy and this was well highlighted by Kenya's print media as demonstrated in the following headlines.

NHS 6: Uhuru rescue plan

NHS 7: Prepare for worse

NHS 22: Tragedy of Kenya's empty grain stores

NHS 25: Why this will be Kenya's worst year

NHS 27: Survival for the fittest: creative things companies are doing to beat COVID-19

NHS 32: Where corona millions went

NHS 33: 500,000 jobs at stake in war on corona virus

NHS 39: It's decision time on corona fight, economy

NHS 40: A budget to the rescue

NHS 44: Where the COVID-19 billions are hidden

NHS 46: Uhuru strikes at bars and leaders behaving badly

NHD 4: Coronavirus: how to rescue the economy

NHD 22: What shall we eat?

NHD 24: IMF sees bright future for Kenya after virus gloom

NHD 38: Traders who made millions from COVID

NHD 40: Raila takes heat in COVID scandal

NHD 41: COVID graft: Mochache on the spot

NHD 45: Sh. 4bn COVID tenders dished out on phone

NHD 48: Murder threats in COVID billions theft

plot

Headlines NHS 7, NHS 22, NHS 25, NHS 27, NHS 33, NHS 39, and NHD 4 convey a sense of imminent crisis and urgency, emphasizing the severe consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. They depict the pandemic as a looming threat, constantly putting economic stability, employment opportunities, and even the basic needs of the people at risk. As a result, a pervasive sense of unease pervades the country, underscoring the need for immediate and decisive action. These headlines portray a stark reality in which the very foundation of the economy and the livelihoods it supports become vulnerable. Notably, headline NHS 33 suggests that the coronavirus jeopardizes a staggering 500,000 jobs, highlighting the enormity of the crisis. The use of precise figures like 500,000 creates the impression that that is the exact and accurate figure. Yet, upon delving into the report, we discover that this is simply a rounding of numbers. Exact figures intensify expressive modality because there is total commitment to the truth. This heightens the power of the media over the readership and they may have no choice other than to believe what they read.

The lexical item "rescue" in headlines NHS 6, NHS 40 and NHD 4 revolve around the role of political leaders and government's intervention in tackling the COVID-19 crisis and its economic ramifications, hence, contributing to the theme of economy. The newspapers suggest to the readership that people are in danger and need to be delivered or liberated economically from the deadly pandemic. These headlines position government efforts, including rescue plans, budgetary measures, and actions against errant leaders, as pivotal in combating the pandemic and its consequences. They convey the prevailing belief that the government's budget holds the potential to mitigate some of the economic challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this instance, it appears that the media is suggesting that assistance for Kenyans is possible only through the government and its leaders. The repetitive use of the lexical item "rescue" falls within the broad pattern of the newspapers headlines to represent the COVID-19

reality in a negative way. On reading these articles, one realizes that the newspapers to a large extent accurately capture the dismal state of the economy. Nonetheless, the newspapers headlines are largely silent about innovative strategies used by Kenyans to deal with hard economic times.

Headlines such as NHS 32, NHS 44, NHD 38, NHD 41, NHD 45, and NHD 48 expose the grim reality of corruption and mismanagement in Kenya, linking it to COVID-19 funds and resources. Phrases such as "COVID-19 billions are hidden," "COVID-19 graft," "sh. 4bn COVID-19 tenders dished out on the phone," and "COVID-19 billions theft plot" contribute to the corruption associated with the pandemic. Five headlines make reference to big money scandals. These headlines specifically talk of millions and billions. The stating of big numbers like millions and billions is a discursive strategy that tends to draw attention to readers. Kenya has had a long history of economic scandals. The billions mentioned in these headlines are real. There is, for example, headline NHS 44, which topicalises a story that graphically shows where 143.4 billion shillings were hidden. The story provides evidence using colour and graphics to show the local and foreign accounts where this money was hidden. These headlines are likely to resonate with Kenyans since corruption has been a central aspect of Kenya's political leadership. Such headlines remind Kenyans of scandals like Goldenberg in 1990s and The Anglo-Leasing exposed in 2002.

The Goldenberg scandal in 1990s, for instance, involved the siphoning of public funds through a scheme where the government subsidized fictitious gold and diamond exports. This scandal cost Kenya about 10% of its GDP and implicated high-ranking officials, showcasing the depth of corruption in the country's political and economic systems. Additionally, The Anglo-Leasing scandal in 2000s was a series of fraudulent security contracts that siphoned billions of shillings from the government. This scandal also involved high-level government officials and highlighted systemic issues of corruption in government procurement processes.

Thus, the discourse on corruption is not new in Kenya's media landscape, and its link to the COVID-19 pandemic is, therefore, part of a continuing narrative. COVID-19 merely repeats a pattern of misuse of public funds, lack of accountability, and a culture of impunity that has persisted over decades.

4.4 Education

The way the theme of education was presented is in line with the general pattern of discursively constructing or framing the themes in a largely negative way. As the analysis and discussion show, the headlines highlighted the negative side of what happened concerning the education sector and largely ignored the proactive measures that were undertaken. This is clearly seen in the headlines below:

NHS 10: KCSE, KCPE delay fears as COVID-19 disrupts calendar

NHS 31: School holiday extended to June as COVID-19 bites

NHS 35: How crisis is messing up our children

NHS 43: How to fix the schools crisis

NHS 51: No masks, no fees: the new reality of day two of school

NHD 1: All schools shut as lockdown begins

NHD 37: Virus puts schools on deathbed

NHD 47: Classes under tents, trees in COVID crisis

The lexical items "disrupt," "bite," and "messing" in headlines NHS 10, NHS 31 and NHS 35 depict the virus as a formidable force that has negatively interfered with the education system. This construction of COVID-19 as a virus that bites, disrupts, and messes is intended to highlight the danger posed by the virus. These verbs are therefore deliberately personified to accentuate the sense of threat presented by the virus. It appears that these verbs are chosen to influence public opinion in order to bring about immediate action for the prevention of spread of the pandemic. This is in line with the Van Dijk's observation that words can shape our thoughts and perspectives on the world. Therefore, when a writer chooses one word over another like in the above headlines, it contributes to shaping our worldview (Van Dijk, 2009).

The word "disrupt" in headline NHS 10, for example, is not only used explicitly but also connotes in the semantics of the verb to interrupt or impede. COVID-19 is therefore conceptualized as a force that can disrupt the country. In this headline, the virus is represented as a particularly malevolent being with the intention of destroying or killing the populace.

In addition, at the syntactic level, 'COVID-19' in the same headline is used as agent, while 'calendar' is the patient. COVID-19 therefore has the power to interrupt the education calendar. This is therefore a warning to the people about the pandemic's ability to destroy the education system, urging them to take necessary precautionary measures. Again, in headline NHS 35, 'crisis' is the agent and 'our children' is the patient. 'Crisis' in this context stands for COVID-19, thus, it is constructed as having the ability or power to 'mess up our children.' The syntax of these two sentences gives agency to COVID-19 and renders 'education' and 'our children' powerless. Thus, the headlines can be read as speech acts that carry the illocutionary force of a warning.

NHD 47 "classes under tents, trees in COVID-19 crisis," seems to be a lamentation of learning having to be conducted outside the formal classroom environment. By highlighting the challenges faced during the pandemic, particularly the makeshift classrooms, the newspapers seek to highlight the magnitude of the pandemic's peril. This is in line with the prevailing attitude that no knowledge can be acquired in an informal setting. However, these newspapers overlook the alternative modes of learning such as Indigenous Traditional African Education which is largely informal.

Additionally, the headlines are completely silent about online learning that emerged during the pandemic. This focus on formal face-to-face education is misleading. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the education sector in Kenya by placing online learning at the centre yet, this transformation was largely silenced in the headlines of the two newspapers. The newspapers therefore employed deletion or silence as a discursive

4.5 COVID-19 research and search for vaccines

The analysis reveals that this theme is used as a vehicle to discursively construct the Kenyan nation as an emerging global player in the world of science and search for a COVID-19 vaccine. As we shall see in the analysis, the theme also notably ignores indigenous and local efforts towards the fight against the pandemic. The following newspaper headlines are considered in the examination of this theme:

NHS 37: New research findings on corona virus

NHS 48: Kenya approves first COVID-19 vaccine trials

NHD 29: Human trials for COVID-19 drugs set to start in Kenya

The phrase "new research findings" in headline NHS 37 suggests an ongoing and evolving scientific exploration into the virus, indicating that new information and discoveries are regularly emerging. In particular, headline NHS 48 conveys a sense of progress and significance in the fight against COVID-19. The use of the word "approves" indicates that the Kenyan authorities have granted permission or authorization for the vaccine trials to take place. The use of the words "new", "first" and "start" in headlines NHS 37, NHS 48 and NHD 29 respectfully suggest a watershed moment in Kenya's efforts to combat the virus. Moreover, headline NHS 37 uses the syntactic structure of nominalization. This use of nominalization leaves out two crucial components of the sentence: the agent (actor) and the patient (what is acted upon). In this case, it draws attention to the reader and highlights that the nation has reached a new scientific milestone. This construction positions Kenya as an emerging power in the global research arena.

Similarly, newspaper headline NHD 29 highlights the involvement of human trials in the search for COVID-19 drugs, indicating a step further in the research process. The use of "set to start" indicates that the trials are imminent, creating a sense of anticipation. The headline implies the country's active role in contributing to the global scientific endeavour to find effective treatments for COVID-19. It also suggests that Kenya is providing a platform for important clinical research. This discursive construction of the Kenyan nation as an emerging global power in the search for COVID-19 vaccines and drugs seeks to create a positive identity of the nation. Further, the newspaper seems to be giving hope to the readers that COVID-19 is conquerable through the discoveries of vaccines and COVID-19 drugs. It is notable that the framing of this theme is different from the others as it largely presents the COVID-19 reality from a positive angle. Yet, one does not fail to notice that there were very few headlines upon which this theme was encapsulated. There was still a lot that was happening that was silenced by the newspapers. The headlines, for example, fail to mention that other than the vaccines, there were herbal medicines and other local remedies that were used to combat the pandemic. It is clear that the newspapers did not consider alternative interventions in the fight against the pandemic as important.

5. Conclusion

This article sought to answer the following question: What themes emerged from Kenya's print media's framing of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how did this framing potentially shape the COVID-19 discourse? Across all themes, there is a consistent pattern of constructing the pandemic in a negative way. While disease is naturally conceptualized by humanity negatively, the way we talk and respond to it does not necessarily have to be negative. Yet, all the themes covered by the print media are discursively constructed in a way that creates a sense of crisis and fear. As the article argues, this may have the positive effect of warning people about the danger posed by the pandemic which may in turn discourage complacency. However, the article has demonstrated that this type of discursive construction ignores the proactive measures that were taken to deal with the pandemic. Additionally, this discourse of fear that arises out of the framing of these themes may also lead to pessimism and inaction.

The article also argues that the themes that emerged out of the reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic construct what it means to be a modern Ken-

yan citizen. These themes constitute the pillars of what it means to be a Kenyan. The article has shown that owing to Kenya's history concerns like freedom, economy, science and death are deeply etched in the collective psyche of Kenyans. As the article has shown, for example, to construct COVID-19 as bondage is a reminder of a past that is full of episodes of tyranny and oppression. The threat of the pandemic covered the entire spectrum of what Kenyans hold dear and consider to be the cornerstone of a modern African state.

The way the themes were framed positioned the newspapers as superior to the reader. Lexical and syntactic structures construct the media as a reservoir of absolute knowledge. We, for example, have headlines that are syntactically structured as commands. Others like "stop dancing with death" take the shape of a parent admonishing a child. This discursive construction creates unequal power relations where the reader is subordinate. This was important because it allowed the media to legitimize their discursive construction of COVID-19 reality. Additionally, this lofty position that the media constructed for itself may have forced the readers to believe what was reported and how it was presented. This is in line with Van Dijk's (1998) observation that journalists as a group belong to a professional middle class. They share certain interests embodied in what they know and think about other social groups.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the CDA framework was central to exposing how the Kenyan print media controlled and shaped the COVID-19 discourse through the choice and framing of themes. The analysis further demonstrates that the idea of media objectivity is a myth. Media experts have noted that media can never be entirely objective because even selecting what will be headlined or how the headline will be phrased is a subjective decision (Fairclough, 2013; Richardson, 2007). This however, does not mean that the media deliberately tells lies but presents the world from a certain vantage point. It is hoped that this study will make significant contribution to the fields of discourse, communication and media, as it reveals how media discourse plays a key role in shaping our understanding of pandemics.

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Conflicts of Interest

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