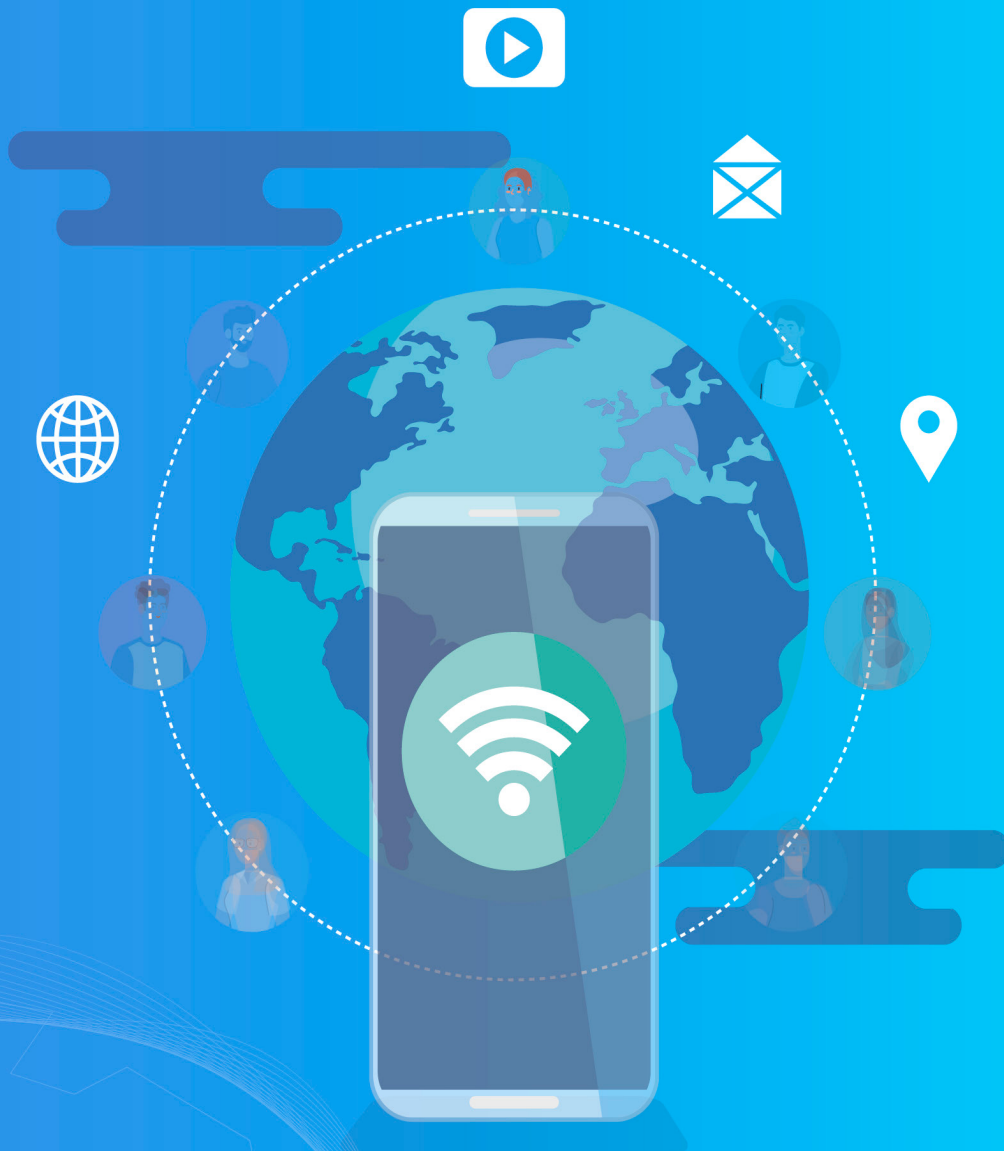




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Cultivating the Mean World Syndrome: Violent Crime Coverage on Kenyan Television

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Kenyan television constructs violent crime coverage in ways that align with cultivation theory's mean world syndrome, the tendency of heavy viewers to see the world as more dangerous than it actually is. Kenyan television has not previously been examined through a cultivation framework in this regard, and this study sought to address this gap, focusing on KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV, Kenya's leading television stations. Using purposive, criterion-based sampling, the study conducted a qualitative content analysis of 27 stories covered by the three stations between 2021 and 2025. The study found that the coverage exhibited the recurring, dramatized, and polarized message-system features that cultivation theory associates with the mean world syndrome. Coverage recurred most heavily around cases involving elite or institutional actors, stations relied on a consistent toolkit of dramatization regardless of a case's underlying facts, and police and state actors emerged as the leading perpetrator category, with demonizing cues softening whenever the state narrated its own conduct. These patterns support cultivation theory's account of how repeated exposure to violent crime coverage can shape a distorted and frightening view of the world, though as a content-based study, this analysis cannot confirm how Kenyan audiences interpret these cues. The study recommends the need for Kenyan newsrooms to sustain follow-up reporting until a case's accountability outcome is confirmed, because coverage often named a culprit without showing consequences, and for editors to diversify sourcing on cases implicating the police or other state actors, because demonizing cues softened whenever officials were left to give their own account of events.

INTRODUCTION

Television and other mass media remain among the most consistent sources through which people form impressions of crime and personal safety, often independently of what official statistics report. Decades of cultivation research show that people who watch more television tend to hold beliefs shaped by what television repeatedly shows rather than by actual crime statistics, and this pattern recurs across countries, genres, and eras (Hermann *et al.*, 2021).

This gap between actual crime rates and public alarm shows up across many countries. American audiences, for instance, have persistently believed crime was rising even as national data showed a decline, a discrepancy tied less to conditions on the ground than to the particular media people consume (Dolliver *et al.*, 2025; Gramlich, 2024). Examining how a given national television landscape constructs the story of crime therefore speaks to a broader, cross-national pattern in which broadcast media, more than lived experience, shapes how populations imagine danger in their own communities.

In Kenya, television and radio remain the leading news sources for most citizens even as social media consumption grows, with Citizen TV alone reaching a large majority of weekly viewers and NTV and KTN also commanding sizable national audiences (Media Council of Kenya, 2024). This dominant place in Kenyan households gives broadcast stations considerable power

over how audiences picture a world beyond their own experience, a power that George Gerbner's cultivation theory helps explain. Heavy viewers tend to absorb television's recurring images of danger as an accurate reflection of everyday life, a process Gerbner (1998) later termed the mean world syndrome.

Crime remains a recurring subject on Kenyan television screens even though national figures tell a more complicated story than television bulletins might suggest. Violent offenses fluctuated across the country between 2015 and 2023, with a modest decline projected for subsequent years, and crimes reported to police fell further in 2025 compared with the previous four years, even as murder cases remained a matter of public concern (National Crime Research Centre, 2024a; The Star, 2026). Even so, Kenyans continue to report considerable anxiety about insecurity, a gap between recorded trends and public perception that mirrors patterns documented elsewhere (Andersen *et al.*, 2024; Romer *et al.*, 2003). How television tells the story of violent crime, which incidents it selects, how often it returns to them, and how dramatically it stages them, likely plays a part in shaping that gap.

Problem statement

Kenyan television audiences depend heavily on KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV for information about crime and public safety, although the manner in which these stations construct violent crime stories has received limited

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scholarly attention through a cultivation lens. Existing Kenyan media studies have examined terrorism coverage, femicide reporting in newspapers, and conflict framing across counties, but few have systematically interrogated the recurring narrative and visual patterns that television news uses specifically for violent crime, patterns that cultivation theorists associate with the mean world syndrome (Kiarie & Mogambi, 2017; National Crime Research Centre, 2024a).

This gap matters because recorded crime statistics have not moved in step with public anxiety about safety, and because heavy consumption of dramatized crime coverage has been linked elsewhere to inflated fear of victimization and diminished interpersonal trust (Chiricos *et al.*, 1997; Kohm *et al.*, 2012). Without a focused examination of how KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV frame, dramatize, and repeat violent crime stories, researchers, journalists, and policymakers lack a grounded picture of whether Kenyan television coverage carries the message-system features that cultivation research associates with a distorted and frightening sense of the world.

Objectives

The general objective of the study was to examine how Kenyan television portrays violent crime in a manner that reflects the cultivation of mean world syndrome cues. The study was further guided by the following specific objectives:

- To analyze how recurrently Kenyan television featured violent crime stories, in a manner that reflects the cultivation of mean world syndrome cues.
- To examine the techniques Kenyan television used to dramatize violent crime stories, in a manner that reflects the cultivation of mean world syndrome cues.
- To assess how Kenyan television framed perpetrators and victims of violent crime, in a manner that reflects the cultivation of mean world syndrome cues.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory was developed by George Gerbner and later extended by Larry Gross through the Cultural Indicators Project at the University of Pennsylvania (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Gerbner began this research in the late 1960s to trace how the recurring patterns of television content might shape the way audiences understand social reality over time. The theory rests on the idea that television functions less like a window onto the world and more like a storyteller that repeats certain images, values, and dangers so often that heavy viewers begin to treat those patterns as an accurate reflection of everyday life (Gerbner *et al.*, 1980). Unlike theories that focus on the short-term persuasive effect of a single program, cultivation theory is concerned with the cumulative, long-term influence of exposure to television's message system as a whole.

Gerbner organized cultivation research around three

interconnected strands of inquiry. Institutional process analysis examines the pressures, ownership structures, and editorial decisions that shape what media organizations produce. Message system analysis studies the actual content of television, identifying the most stable, recurrent, and widely shared patterns across programs and genres, including how frequently violence appears and how it is portrayed. Cultivation analysis then links patterns of exposure among audiences to their beliefs about the world (Signorielli & Morgan, 2009). This study drew specifically on the message system analysis strand, since a qualitative content analysis of violent crime coverage on KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV is concerned with identifying the recurring textual and visual cues within television content rather than with measuring audience beliefs directly.

A well-documented outcome of cultivation research is the mean world syndrome, the tendency of heavy television viewers to overestimate their own risk of victimization and to see other people as untrustworthy or self-interested (Gerbner, 1998). Gerbner *et al.* (1980) also identified two related processes that help explain how this outcome develops. Mainstreaming describes how heavy viewing pulls audiences from otherwise different backgrounds towards a shared, television-influenced view of reality, while resonance describes how the effect intensifies among viewers whose own lived circumstances echo what they see on screen, such as urban residents who both witness insecurity firsthand and consume heavy doses of crime coverage (Shrum & Bischak, 2001). These concepts help explain why particular ways of portraying violent crime, rather than crime coverage in general, might carry more weight in cultivating fear among specific segments of the Kenyan audience.

Applying cultivation theory to Kenyan television requires attention to the specific cues that message system analysis treats as markers of a mean and dangerous world, including how recurrently a violent crime case is returned to across bulletins, the dramatic and visual techniques used to stage it, and the way perpetrators and victims are framed within the story (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). These cues formed the analytical categories through which this study coded the sampled news stories from KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV. Because Kenyan audiences now divide their news consumption between television, radio, and digital platforms, cultivation theory's original assumption of a single dominant medium requires some adaptation. Still, the theory's core claim, that repeated exposure to a stable pattern of frightening content shapes how audiences imagine the world, remains a defensible starting point for examining Kenyan television's coverage of violent crime.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crime coverage and fear of victimization

Chiricos *et al.* (1997) surveyed more than two thousand adults in Tallahassee, Florida. They found that heavier

consumption of television and radio news was associated with greater fear of crime. This relationship held even after accounting for age, gender, race, and direct victimization experience. Weitzer and Kubrin (2004) extended this line of inquiry in Washington, DC, comparing several media forms at once. They found that local television news shaped fear of crime alongside the real crime conditions in a respondent's neighborhood, rather than being explained away by those conditions.

Not every study finds the relationship so consistent. Doob and Macdonald (1979) surveyed residents of four Toronto neighborhoods and found that once the actual crime rate in a neighborhood was taken into account, the link between television viewing and fear of crime largely disappeared. Kohm *et al.* (2012) compared university students in Canada and the United States. They found that media exposure predicted fear inconsistently across the two groups, with a wider range of media effects among American students.

Ejem (2026) pushed this caution further, and in a different direction. Reviewing secondary evidence from high-crime slum communities in Lagos and Accra, their perspective paper proposed a reverse-effect hypothesis, arguing that residents already desensitized by daily insecurity may treat violent television programming, largely entertainment content such as boxing and war films rather than news, as a source of escape, hope, or moral instruction rather than confirmation of danger. The claim remains a position awaiting empirical testing rather than a finding drawn from coded content, but it reframed the debate from how strong the cultivation effect is to which direction it runs. Considered jointly, these three studies offer a useful caution. The cultivation effect is neither automatic nor uniform in direction, and both outcomes depend on how carefully a study controls for real conditions, the media genre examined, and the setting where the theory is tested. Other studies support the relationship more directly. Romer *et al.* (2003) analyzed a national survey, five years of General Social Survey data, and a survey of more than two thousand Philadelphia residents. They found that watching local television news was tied to greater fear of crime across the population and independent of local crime rates.

Cultivation research has also moved beyond fear as its only outcome measure. Shrum *et al.* (2005) applied the theory to materialism rather than crime, showing that heavy television viewing shapes judgments about how affluent society is. This suggests the mechanism Gerbner described travels beyond violence into other beliefs about social reality. Andersen *et al.* (2024) returned to the mean world syndrome under the label of scary world syndrome. They argued that negativity bias in news selection across genres, not entertainment television alone, cultivates anxiety among heavy news consumers. Read as a set, this body of work shows that the cultivation mechanism remains consistent across different media forms, audiences, and outcomes, even where the strength of the effect varies from study to study.

News values and the dramatization of crime

A separate strand of literature explains why crime stories receive the prominence and dramatic treatment that cultivation scholars treat as mean world cues. Galtung and Ruge (1965) identified a set of news values that increase the likelihood that a story will be selected and placed prominently in a bulletin. Among these are negativity, unexpectedness, and reference to elite persons or nations. Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2017) revisited and updated this list twice. Their work confirmed that bad news and stories involving conflict, tragedy, or surprise remained reliable predictors of prominent placement in newsrooms, television included.

Empirical content analyses back up this theoretical account. Dowler (2004) coded local television crime stories in the United States and Canada and found that sensational stories, live reports, and stories involving firearms were more likely to appear on American newscasts, while national and lead stories were more common on Canadian ones. The finding shows that news values are not just abstract selection criteria. They shape measurable, countable patterns in what a station airs. Bednarek and Caple (2017) looked at how newsworthiness is built through language and image choices rather than through event selection alone. Word choice, camera framing, and sequencing can heighten or soften the sense of danger a story carries. These findings describe the newsroom logic that could produce the dramatization, framing, and repetition patterns this study set out to identify on KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV.

Kenyan media and crime perception

Kenyan media scholarship on crime and conflict has grown but has stayed narrow in scope. Kiarie and Mogambi (2017) examined how print newspapers covered terrorism in Kenya. They found a tendency towards event-driven coverage that emphasized casualty counts over context. Kiptinness and Kiwanuka-Tondo (2019) studied how a leading Kenyan newspaper framed HIV and AIDS. Their approach falls outside the crime domain, but it applies the same content analysis tradition this study drew on to trace recurring media frames.

A more recent example came from Mung'ou and Arogo (2026), who coded Daily Nation and The Star articles on femicide published between January 2024 and March 2025. They found that coverage peaked in 2024 and that most perpetrators were intimate partners of the victim, a pattern that echoes the kind of close, story-level coding this study applied to television. Edited volumes on conflict and peace reporting in Africa, including Mano (2022) and Maweu and Mare (2021), described a regional pattern in which media houses leaned towards dramatic, conflict-centered narratives at the expense of context and resolution. This pattern fits what cultivation theory predicts, though it has rarely been tested against Kenyan television specifically.

A desk-based synthesis by Fatuma (2024) extended a similar argument to neighboring Tanzania, though largely

by analogy to Western literature on sensationalism and framing rather than through analysis of Tanzanian media content itself. The review's own Tanzania-specific evidence is a single national survey finding that just over half of residents feel unsafe, a perception the survey attributes to petty crime and political instability rather than to crime coverage directly. The gap between recorded crime and public anxiety has direct support in recent Kenyan reporting. Public perception surveys conducted by the National Crime Research Centre (2024b) indicated that Kenyans often rated their own safety and the prevalence of crime around them more negatively than recorded crime figures would suggest.

Reporting from Eastleigh Voice (2025) captured a related tension. Police misconduct complaints kept rising even as crime declined in most other categories the government tracks, a detail that complicates any simple reading of crime news as a mirror of official statistics. Audience data from GeoPoll (2024) confirmed that KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV remained among the most-watched stations in the country. Whatever patterns these three stations repeat in their crime coverage therefore reach a wide cross-section of Kenyan viewers. The Media Council of Kenya (2020) code of conduct asks journalists to report violence responsibly and to avoid gratuitous detail, a standard this study's coding of dramatization and framing can help test in practice rather than only in principle.

Considered alongside one another, these three bodies of literature point in the same direction. Cultivation theory's claims about crime coverage and fear remain consistent across settings and outcome measures, even where studies such as Doob and Macdonald (1979) and Kohm *et al.* (2012) found the effect to be more limited or inconsistent, and even where Ejem (2026) proposed that similar conditions of chronic insecurity could push perceptions in the opposite direction. News values research explains the newsroom logic that produces dramatized crime coverage, and empirical content analyses confirm that this logic shows up in measurable patterns of story selection and treatment.

Kenyan crime data and audience figures show a gap between recorded crime and public anxiety about safety, on stations that reach most of the country. However, existing Kenyan and regional studies have concentrated on print outlets, single events such as terrorism, or have inferred media effects from perception surveys and Western content-analysis findings, as Fatuma (2024) did for Tanzania, rather than analyzing East African broadcast content directly. How KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV construct violent crime as a recurring message system, in the sense Gerbner described, remains largely undescribed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis design, informed by the interpretivist philosophical paradigm (Fodouop Kouam, 2024), to examine violent crime coverage on KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV. Qualitative

content analysis allows a researcher to move beyond simple counts of how often a topic appears and to interpret the meaning embedded in the way that topic is presented, including tone, sequencing, camera choices, and word choice (Lyhne *et al.*, 2025), which fits a study grounded in message system analysis rather than in surveying audience beliefs directly (Krippendorff, 2019). The study employed purposive, criterion-based sampling of high-profile violent crime cases covered by KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV between 2021 and 2025. Cases were selected mainly on the grounds that they generated sustained, multi-story coverage spanning an incident's full arc, from initial report through investigation, arrest, and trial or burial, allowing the analysis to trace how dramatization and framing develop over the life of a story rather than within a single bulletin. A small number of included cases instead produced a single, high-impact story; these were retained for the contrast they offered against the more heavily recurring cases.

The resulting sample comprised 27 stories drawn from 13 cases, including the murders of Agnes Tirop, Damaris Mutua, and Rebecca Cheptegei, the deaths of the Kianjokoma brothers and Albert Ojwang in police custody, the Shakahola massacre, the Kware dumpsite murders, the killings of Rex Masai and Boniface Kariuki during police encounters, the assassination of Kasipul MP Charles Ong'ondo Were, the Sharon Otieno murder trial, Laikipia and Baringo bandit attacks, and enforced disappearances documented in 2024 and 2025. Stories were drawn from bulletins broadcast across the day as well as main evening bulletins, and were retrieved from the official YouTube channels of the three stations, which preserve broadcast footage in a form suited to repeated close viewing and coding.

The unit of analysis was the individual violent crime news story, coded for the presence of mean world syndrome cues such as dramatization, victim and perpetrator framing, and recurrence across the sampled coverage. Coding proceeded inductively and deductively at once, with initial categories drawn from cultivation theory's message system analysis, namely recurrence, dramatization, and the framing of perpetrators and victims, refined through close, repeated engagement with the sampled footage (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, the study documented its coding decisions and compared emerging categories against the raw footage until the coding scheme stabilized (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Coded data were then organized thematically around the study's three objectives and were presented narratively in the findings, illustrated throughout with representative excerpts drawn directly from the sampled coverage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study findings on the recurrence of violent crime stories, the dramatization techniques used, and the framing of perpetrators and victims. Notable excerpts from the analyzed stories are

incorporated throughout.

Recurrence of violent crime stories

The study found that the sampled coverage rarely treated a violent crime case as a single, self-contained news event. Coverage volume varied sharply and predictably by the social status of those involved and by whether state institutions were implicated. The assassination of Kasipul MP Charles Ong'ondo Were generated six separate stories across NTV and KTN, tracking the story from "Ong'ondo's Final Hours: bodyguard allegedly plotted his killing" through arraignment, detention extension, and a family press conference alleging that the killing was "politically motivated... a hit job ordered from above."

Albert Ojwang's death in police custody generated five stories across all three stations, moving from an IPOA preliminary finding through a Day Break investigative special, an autopsy revelation, an official press briefing, and a special investigative report. By contrast, cases without an elite or institutional dimension, such as the Damaris Mutua murder or the Laikipia and Baringo bandit attacks, generated a single story despite their severity. This distribution echoes the news values that Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2017) identify as predictors of prominent, sustained placement, particularly reference to elite persons and continuity, and confirms an observation by Dowler (2004) that news values translate into measurable, countable patterns in what a station actually airs.

A second, smaller cluster of cases recurred for a different reason. Rex Masai's protest shooting produced two stories, an initial breaking-news report and a separate human-interest interview with his parents, because a death implicating the police generated both an accountability story and a grief story as distinct installments. The Kianjokoma brothers' custody deaths, by contrast, were resolved in a single, emotionally dense funeral story, suggesting that recurrence tracks elite status as well as how long a state institution's own response to an incident stays unsettled enough to keep generating new angles.

Where a case does recur, the stories followed a recognizable arc, moving from an initial trigger, arrest, or discovery through investigation, court proceedings, and burial or sentencing, with each installment adding a new dramatic beat rather than simply updating the audience. Agnes Tirop's case, for instance, returned to screens both "~7 months after crime" for a bond ruling and again "~2 years after crime" for the bail decision, with archival footage of her competing internationally on the track reintroduced each time to renew the emotional stakes of the story.

This serialized structure kept a small set of frightening images in circulation over months or years, which was precisely the kind of recurrence Gerbner's message system analysis treated as a cultivation cue (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999) and was consistent with a finding by Hermann *et al.* (2021) that recurring content patterns, rather than any single broadcast, were what shaped audience beliefs over time.

Dramatization techniques

The study established that every station in the sample relied on a consistent toolkit of dramatic techniques regardless of the case's underlying facts. Visual staging routinely foregrounded the most visceral available imagery. The Kware dumpsite murders were introduced through "aerial and ground shots of the deep quarry dumpsite, bodies wrapped in sacks being pulled out by community volunteers, massive angry crowds," while Albert Ojwang's death in custody was illustrated on Citizen TV's Day Break with "split screens showing detailed medical illustrations of a fractured hyoid bone and soft tissue trauma." Slow-motion b-roll, night-time high-contrast editing, and CCTV reconstructions recurred across the Ong'ondo assassination stories and the enforced-disappearances feature, where "CCTV clips showing unmarked Subaru vehicles blocking targets in broad daylight, masked men dragging citizens away, terrified onlookers" substituted for any official confirmation of what happened.

Narrative language matched the visual intensity. Stations described perpetrators and events using explicitly sensational vocabulary. A suspect became a "psychopathic serial killer" who "chopped [victims] into pieces," a death in custody became a "cold-blooded murder" met with the on-air question, "who is truly safe in this country?," and an ongoing wave of disappearances became evidence of "state-sponsored terror" producing a "climate of absolute fear."

Production treatment reinforced the same register through breaking-news banners, tracking tickers, dramatic low-toned voiceover, and, in several stories, ominous background soundscapes normally associated with true-crime entertainment rather than news bulletins. These findings extend an argument made by Bednarek and Caple (2017) that newsworthiness is built through word choice, camera framing, and sequencing quite as much as through the underlying event, and they suggest that at least some of this coverage sits uneasily against the Media Council of Kenya (2020) code of conduct, which asks journalists to report violence responsibly and avoid gratuitous detail.

Sourcing patterns reinforced the dramatization. Officials, forensic experts, and investigators appeared throughout, but they were consistently paired with emotionally charged eyewitnesses and grieving relatives, while sources who might supply statistical or comparative context, such as criminologists or crime-trend analysts, were almost entirely absent from the sample. This pattern echoes a finding by Kiarie and Mogambi (2017) that Kenyan print coverage of terrorism emphasized casualty counts over context, suggesting the same tendency carries over into Kenyan television's treatment of violent crime more broadly.

Framing of perpetrators and victims

The study established that the single largest perpetrator category in the sample was not the lone criminal but the state itself. Police officers or other state actors were identified as the alleged perpetrators in around 12 of the

27 stories, spanning four of the 13 cases. The Kianjokoma brothers' deaths in Embu police custody were framed not as the acts of rogue individuals but as "an institutional failure utilizing 'excessive force' with untrustworthy excuses," closing with a burial scene of "two identical white coffins being lowered simultaneously into a single wide grave" that visually doubled the scale of loss.

Rex Masai, shot during 2024's protests, was introduced through "shaky smartphone footage capturing the exact moment of the shooting, and bloodstains on the pavement," narrated as being "shot dead in cold blood" by an officer whom the coverage framed as representing "a hostile, lethal state apparatus turning on citizens," before a second, entirely separate story devoted to his parents, whose grief was used to make "the violence feel deeply personal to viewers." Boniface Kariuki's killing by an officer during a street encounter and the Ojwang custodial death completed the cluster.

As a set, these four cases showed that the institution Kenyan viewers might otherwise expect to protect them from a mean and dangerous world, the police, was itself one of the coverage's most consistent sources of danger, a pattern with no equivalent emphasis in the cultivation literature reviewed above, which has generally treated crime coverage as being about danger from other citizens rather than danger from the state.

Individual and non-state perpetrators were also framed in starkly dehumanizing terms. The Kware dumpsite suspect was described as a "monstrous, sub-human 'vampire'... operating completely outside the boundaries of human nature," the bodyguard convicted in Charles Ong'ondo Were's assassination was called a "cold-blooded sociopath" whose "deceptive tears... fooled an entire nation," and the perpetrators behind the 2024-2025 wave of abductions were cast as an "invisible, lawless gestapo operating with complete impunity across the country." This pattern of extreme demonization is precisely the message-system feature that cultivation scholars associate with the mean world syndrome, the tendency of heavy viewers to see the social world as populated by dangerous, untrustworthy others (Gerbner, 1998).

Perpetrator framing shifted, however, when the alleged perpetrator was the state itself, and the source of the story was an official briefing rather than an investigative report. Inspector General Douglas Kanja's press conference on Albert Ojwang's death was coded as "humanized/normalized through administrative jargon," framing the killing as "an unfortunate 'isolated incident'" that minimized systemic guilt, in direct tension with the same case's investigative stories, which described the same events as officers who "tortured and strangled" a defenseless detainee. This divergence suggested that the demonizing cues cultivation theory associates with mean world syndrome were not applied evenly. They intensified when a station's own reporters constructed the narrative and softened when the state was permitted to narrate itself, a distinction the existing Kenyan literature on terrorism and femicide coverage (Kiarie & Mogambi,

2017; Mung'ou & Arogo, 2026) has not previously isolated.

The study found, by contrast, that victims were overwhelmingly humanized through biography, achievement, and family role. Agnes Tirop was remembered as a "former world cross country champion" who "broke the women's 10-kilometer world record barely a month before she was killed," and Rebecca Cheptegei was honored as "an international Olympian... a dedicated mother, and a national hero whose life was taken by gender-based violence."

This individualizing treatment, however, broke down in mass-casualty and protracted institutional cases. The 42 women killed at the Kware dumpsite were reduced to "a horrific statistic," with "the sheer volume..." dominating the narrative, transforming individual victims into a collective mass tragedy, and the Shakahola massacre victims were similarly framed through mass exhumation numbers rather than individual narratives, thus magnifying the scale of terror.

Even a named, high-profile victim could be flattened by a long trial. Sharon Otieno, initially described sympathetically, was reduced over the case's multi-year arc to "a perpetual legal anchor." In the end, the individualizing and statistical modes of victim portrayal served the same cultivating function from opposite directions, with one producing emotional identification with danger and the other producing a sense of danger too vast and anonymous to comprehend.

Accountability language across the sample was frequently coded as ambiguous or unresolved, even where responsibility was explicitly assigned within the same story. The Sharon Otieno case left "accountability suspended in bureaucratic extensions," and Boniface Kariuki's burial closed with the observation that "the perpetrator remains unpunished as the grave closes." This resolution deficit, in which stations named a culprit but rarely showed consequences following through to a satisfying end, mirrored the regional pattern Mano (2022) and Maweu and Mare (2021) described in conflict and peace reporting across Africa, where media houses favor dramatic, conflict-centered narratives at the expense of context and resolution.

Discussion

Taken as a whole, these findings indicated that KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV's coverage of violent crime carried the specific message-system features that cultivation theory identifies as preconditions for the mean world syndrome, namely content that recurs, dramatizes, and polarizes its cast of characters into frightening perpetrators and vulnerable victims (Gerbner, 1998; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). The recurrence pattern documented under the first objective is consistent with a meta-analytic conclusion by Hermann *et al.* (2021) that cultivation effects track the stability of content patterns over time rather than any single broadcast, and it gives an empirical Kenyan grounding to a claim that has

mostly been tested in American and European settings. That the most heavily recurring cases in this sample, the Ong'ondo assassination and the Ojwang custodial death, both involved elite or institutional actors also supports the argument advanced by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2017) that news values, not simply the severity of a crime, govern how much airtime and how many installments a story receives.

The dramatization findings extended an account by Bednarek and Caple (2017) of newsworthiness as something built through language and image choice into a broadcast setting that has not previously been examined this closely. The consistent presence of graphic visual staging, sensationalized narrative language, and emotionally weighted sourcing across otherwise very different cases, from bandit raids to police custody deaths to political assassination, suggests a shared newsroom production logic across the three stations rather than case-by-case editorial choices. This raises a genuine tension with the Media Council of Kenya (2020) code of conduct, which calls for responsible reporting of violence and against gratuitous detail. Several of the stories coded here, particularly those built around forensic and torture detail, sit closer to the sensationalism Dowler (2004) documented on American newscasts than to the more restrained national and lead-story treatment he found more common in Canada.

The framing findings spoke most directly to objective three and to the theoretical concept of resonance (Shrum & Bischak, 2001), the idea that cultivation effects intensify among viewers whose own circumstances echo what they see on screen. Kenyan viewers who already live with police mistrust, urban insecurity, or gender-based violence would find their own realities mirrored, and arguably amplified, in coverage that frames police custody as a place citizens “enter but do not return alive,” or that treats intimate partner violence against celebrated athletes as proof that “even international acclaim cannot shield women from domestic danger.”

That state actors were named as the alleged perpetrator in roughly 44 percent of the sampled stories, more often than any other perpetrator category, extended the mean world syndrome in a direction that research by Gerbner, focused originally on American television, did not emphasize. The frightening world cultivated by this coverage was populated by criminals and, just as prominently, by the state's own security apparatus. At the same time, the finding that official state sources received comparatively softened, administrative framing while investigative stories on the same case demonized the same institution is a pattern the existing cultivation and Kenyan media literature has not isolated. It suggests that mean world cues in this sample are not applied to institutions and individuals uniformly, but depend on who is permitted to narrate the story, a nuance that complicates any simple claim that Kenyan television coverage cultivates fear evenly across all types of perpetrators.

In light of this understanding, these patterns arguably

help explain the gap this study opened with, between Kenya's recorded crime trends and persistent public anxiety about safety (National Crime Research Centre, 2024a, 2024b; The Star, 2026). Serialized, dramatized, and frequently unresolved coverage of the kind documented here is consistent with what Andersen *et al.* (2024) describe as the negativity bias driving scary world syndrome, and with a finding by Romer *et al.* (2003) that local television news cultivates fear of crime independent of local crime rates. It is worth noting, however, that this study analyzed content rather than audiences, so it cannot itself demonstrate that Kenyan viewers respond to these cues the way Chiricos *et al.* (1997) or Weitzer and Kubrin (2004) found American respondents did. The more cautious findings of Doob and Macdonald (1979) and Kohm *et al.* (2012), and a proposal by Ejem (2026) that chronically insecure audiences might read violent content as catharsis rather than confirmation of danger, remain live possibilities that only an audience study of Kenyan viewers could test. What this analysis can establish is that the message system features that cultivation theory treats as necessary conditions for a mean world effect are clearly and consistently present in how KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV construct violent crime.

CONCLUSION

In view of the foregoing, the study confirms that coverage by the analyzed TV stations exhibited the recurring, dramatized, and polarized message-system features that cultivation theory associates with the mean world syndrome. Across the sample, KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV returned repeatedly to cases involving elite or institutional actors. Each installment was staged with dramatic visual, verbal, and production techniques that intensified rather than merely reported the danger involved. The resulting stories were framed through a consistent, if unevenly applied, opposition between demonized perpetrators and either deeply humanized or statistically flattened victims, with accountability frequently left unresolved. Police and state actors emerged as the single most frequent perpetrator category, named in nearly half of the sampled stories. The demonizing cues applied to this category softened noticeably whenever the state was permitted to narrate its own conduct in official briefings, rather than have that conduct narrated by investigative reporters. It is worth noting that this is a qualitative analysis of a purposively sampled set of high-profile cases, and it examined the coverage itself rather than audiences. On its own, then, the study cannot demonstrate that Kenyan viewers absorb these cues the way the theory predicts. That question is left open for further research, pairing this kind of content analysis with studies of Kenyan audiences themselves.

Limitations of the Study

This analysis is confined to KTN, NTV, and Citizen TV, so it cannot speak to how other Kenyan broadcasters or online-only outlets construct violent crime coverage.

The sample also privileges cases that generated sustained, multi-story coverage, leaving open how briefer or lower-profile crime stories are treated on the same stations. Coding further relied on footage archived on the stations' official YouTube channels, which may not capture contextual elements of the original broadcast, such as live anchor commentary.

Recommendations

The study recommends the need for Kenyan newsrooms to adopt editorial policies that sustain follow-up reporting until a case's accountability outcome is confirmed, because the sample repeatedly named a culprit without showing consequences. It further recommends that editors diversify sourcing on cases implicating the police or other state actors, because demonizing cues softened whenever the state was permitted to narrate its own conduct.

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