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REPRESENTATION OF SKIN TONE IN KENYAN DIGITAL MEDIA: ANALYSIS OF AFRO-POP YOUTUBE MUSIC VIDEOS.

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Abstract

Representation refers to how individuals are depicted and given prominence in the media. It examines the qualities, characteristics, roles, behaviours and meanings assigned to those groups. Repeated depictions of individuals with various skin tones shape audience perceptions of beauty, identity and social status and may reinforce or challenge colourist ideologies. This study investigates the manifestation of colourism in Kenyan Afro-pop YouTube music videos. It focuses on the representation of people of different skin tones in Kenyan Afro-pop music videos on YouTube and analyses how colourism is expressed through their portrayal. The study employed a content analysis design. Data was gathered through direct observation (watching) of music videos uploaded on YouTube. The music videos studied are those produced between 2022 and 2026 and garnering over ten million views, to ensure relevance and widespread reach. A total of 11 music videos were sampled using census. Findings reveal a significant imbalance in the representation of skin tones. Light-skinned women are predominantly featured and idealised as the standard of beauty, while brown-skinned individuals receive a fair representation, they are not as favourably represented as their light-skinned counterparts. Dark-skinned women are often marginalised or hyper sexualized, especially in genres known for explicit content. In contrast, dark-skinned men are celebrated as strong and masculine, while light-skinned men are sometimes portrayed as soft or effeminate. The study concludes that Afro-pop YouTube music videos reinforce colourist ideals. It recommends that content creators be more intentional in their casting and narrative choices to promote diverse and inclusive representations of beauty.

Keywords: *colourism, representation, skin tone, complexion, music videos.*

Introduction

Skin tone is an important dimension through which physical appearance and identity are represented in contemporary visual culture. Within many African societies, individuals are distinguished not only by racial or ethnic identities but also by variations in complexion, ranging from lighter to darker skin tones (Dixon & Telles, 2017). These variations can acquire social and cultural meanings, particularly when particular complexions are associated with qualities such as beauty, attractiveness, desirability, status or masculinity and femininity (Hunter, 2007). Consequently, examining skin-tone representation provides an opportunity to understand how physical appearance is visually constructed and differentiated within popular culture.

Representation of skin tone extends beyond determining whether individuals with particular complexions are present in media content. It involves examining the visibility accorded to different skin tones, their positioning within visual frames, the characteristics attributed to them, the roles they perform, their behaviours and the meanings constructed around their appearance (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Individuals with different complexions may therefore occupy different degrees of visual prominence or perform different social and narrative roles within the same media text. Such differences are important because repeated patterns of visibility, positioning and characterisation can reveal the cultural meanings attached to particular skin tones.

The representation of skin tone is particularly significant in visual media because images provide opportunities to communicate ideas about physical appearance through casting, lighting, camera positioning, clothing, body presentation and

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interaction. Music videos are especially relevant because they combine these visual elements with performance and narrative. Research on music-video content shows that physical characteristics, including skin tone, can shape how performers and other participants are positioned and portrayed (Conrad et al., 2009). Consequently, the analysis of music videos can reveal whether individuals of different complexions are presented as central or peripheral figures, active or passive participants, desirable or undesirable characters, and whether particular behaviours are repeatedly associated with particular skin tones.

Research on skin colour and attractiveness has demonstrated that complexion can intersect with perceptions of physical attractiveness, particularly in relation to Black women (Hill, 2002). Similarly, scholarship on colourism has documented the privileging of lighter complexions and the social meanings attached to skin-tone differences (Dixon & Telles, 2017). However, representations of darker skin are not necessarily uniformly negative. Social media movements and other forms of cultural expression have provided spaces for the affirmation and celebration of dark skin and Black beauty (Crutchfield et al., 2020).

More often than not Colorism is gendered (Hill 2002) and tends to have more serious consequences for women in comparison to men which is a double standard in which the expectation of attractiveness is more demanding for women (Hassan, 2018). In comparison to men, women seek validation for themselves through the appraisal of others. Women are constantly assessed by their physical appearance based on culturally constructed norms of beauty. They are defined much more by their looks than their actions.

In the Kenyan context, skin-tone representation is particularly relevant because studies have identified the continued presence of colour-based beauty beliefs and preferences. Kinuthia et al. (2023), for example, examined colourist and texturist beliefs among young women in Kenya, demonstrating the continued significance of complexion within contemporary Kenyan understandings of beauty. At the same time, Kenyan popular culture provides diverse spaces in which different appearances can be displayed, negotiated and represented. Digital platforms such as YouTube have expanded the circulation of Kenyan music videos, making them an important source of contemporary visual cultural material.

Despite the growing literature on skin colour, beauty and colourism, limited attention has been given to the actual representation of different skin tones within Kenyan music videos. Existing studies have examined colourism in relation to beauty, identity, social media and broader experiences of Black populations (Hunter, 2007; Hassan, 2018; Norwood & Monroe, 2017; Kinuthia et al., 2023). However, there remains a need to examine how light-, brown- and dark-skinned individuals are distributed, positioned and portrayed in Kenyan music videos, including the qualities, characteristics, roles, behaviours and meanings associated with their respective skin tones.

This study sought to examine the representation of different skin tones Kenyan Afro-pop music videos on YouTube. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to communication and media scholarship by providing empirical evidence on whether Kenyan Afro-pop YouTube music videos reinforce or challenge colourist beliefs and by informing efforts to promote more inclusive media content.

Research Methodology

This study employed content analysis as the study design in order to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of the issue of colourism in Kenyan Afro-pop music videos on YouTube. Content analysis was done on Afro-popYouTube music videos of Kenyan artists and musicians. The researcher analysed the theme of the songs in relation to the representation of skin tones. It established this through the analysis of the various ways and manner in which individuals with different skin tones are represented.

The study area was YouTube, focusing on popular Kenyan Afro-pop music videos within the last five years which is from 2022-2026. The music videos that were analysed are those with over ten million views on YouTube. Their popularity was reached as a result of the number of views that they have been able to accumulate on YouTube in the last five years (2022-2026).

The study population comprises all Kenyan Afro-pop music videos available on YouTube uploaded between 2022 and 2026. These videos form the unit of analysis

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as they contain visual content relevant to the study of the role that music video content plays in colourism.

The study employed census sampling to select relevant units of analysis. This technique was appropriate for the study because it enabled the researcher to select all the Afro-pop music videos released in the last five years with over 10 million views on YouTube.

The sampling focused on Kenyan Afro-pop music videos produced between 2022 and 2026. The five years were selected to provide a recent and sufficiently broad sample for examining the objective of the study. This was also to ensure that the volume of the content remained manageable for detailed analysis. Specific inclusion criteria were applied to guide the selection process. These included: music videos produced by Kenyan artistes, videos with high viewership (e.g., ten million and above), videos containing visual content and videos publicly accessible on digital platforms such as YouTube.

This study employed observation as a data collection technique. This technique was selected to address the study's objective: the representation of different skin tones in music videos on YouTube.

Observation was used to systematically examine a sample of Kenyan afro-pop music videos on YouTube. This technique allowed for an objective assessment of visual content with regard to the representation of skin tone. A structured observation checklist was used to code elements such as the frequency of appearance of individuals with different skin tones, the roles assigned to individuals (e.g., lead, background, romantic interest), and the nature of representation (e.g., sexualized, empowered, ridiculed). The sample comprised Afro-pop music videos uploaded on YouTube between 2022 and 2026, each with over ten million views. These were selected to ensure relevance and wide reach within Kenyan pop culture.

An observation checklist as a tool for data collection was utilised in the study. The observation checklist was used during the content analysis of selected music videos. It was designed to help the researcher systematically record and code visual and lyrical elements relevant to the study objectives.

The checklist included indicators such as the skin tone of featured individuals. Skin tone was classified into three broad categories, which are light, brown and dark, guided by Wilder's (2010) distinction of skin tone. These categories were applied through systematic visual observation of individuals appearing in the selected music videos. The classification focused on the apparent skin tone presented on the screen and was used consistently through the coding process to examine the patterns and representations. Scenes where lighting effects, filters and colour grading made classification difficult were interpreted cautiously.

The tool was pre-tested using a small sample of the study population, which are music videos on YouTube. The results of the pilot study were used to revise and improve the clarity and reduce subjectivity of the checklist.

Results

The analysis of Afro-pop music videos reveals notable patterns in the representation of different skin tones. The findings indicate that portrayal is often influenced by both skin tone and gender, with certain groups receiving more visibility, positive framing, or central roles than others.

In the music video *Sina Noma* by Charisma, all the male cast members are dark-skinned. However, there is a mix of light-skinned, brown-skinned, and dark-skinned women among female participants. Despite this diversity, there is a noticeable difference in how these women are represented. A dark-skinned woman is shown dancing with her back facing the camera while engaging in suggestive movements. This contributes to her sexualized representation. In contrast, the male participants, who are also predominantly dark-skinned, are shown dancing while facing the camera and are not sexualized in the same manner. This suggests a gendered and tonal disparity in how they are presented, where dark-skinned women may be more vulnerable to hypersexualised representation.

In *Mpishi* by Matata featuring Bien, the representation of skin tones is largely neutral. The artists and the supporting cast are shown dancing and engaging in lively group activities. There is no clear emphasis on romantic or intimate relationships, and no specific individual is singled out as the central visual focus. This collective representation minimises the influence of skin tone in determining visibility or role assignment.

A contrasting pattern is observed in *Donjo Maber* by Iyanii featuring Dufla Diligon. In this video, brown-

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and dark-skinned women are present but are not given significant individual screen time. Instead, they appear within crowd scenes, limiting their visual prominence. Additionally, there is a noticeable disparity in clothing, where male participants are dressed in relatively modest attire such as trousers and jackets, while female participants are dressed in more revealing outfits such as shorts and crop tops. This creates a gendered representation in which women are visually emphasised through their bodies rather than their individuality.

In *Rumours* by Dufla Diligon and Iyanii, the representation of skin tones appears balanced; however. The focus of the video is on the artists addressing rumours about their lives, particularly accusations related to illegal activities. While individuals of different skin tones are present, they are not given distinct roles or meaningful characterisation, which limits deeper analysis of ways in which different people are portrayed.

Similarly, *Kifo cha Mende* by Iyanii featuring Mwanaa predominantly features crowd scenes. Dark-skinned women in the video are portrayed engaging in suggestive dance movements, while dark-skinned men are shown dancing more casually and participating in group activities. This again reflects a pattern where female participants, particularly those with darker skin tones, are depicted in a more sexualized manner compared to their male counterparts.

Another important observation emerges in videos where lighter-skinned women are given greater visual emphasis. In some Afro-pop videos, light-skinned women are positioned as the main visual focus, receiving more screen time and occupying central roles. For instance, in videos where a romantic narrative is present, the light-skinned woman is often portrayed as the primary love interest. This reinforces a subtle but significant pattern in which lighter skin is associated with desirability, attractiveness, and emotional value.

In contrast, brown and dark-skinned individuals are more frequently positioned in the background, appearing in group scenes rather than as central figures. Their roles are often limited to dancing or supporting the main artist, which reduces their narrative importance. This imbalance in portrayal suggests that while diversity exists in terms of representation, it does not necessarily translate into equal visibility or significance.

The song *Inauma* by Bien presents a more emotionally driven narrative centred on a romantic relationship and subsequent breakup. It focuses on reconciliation and emotional expression. However, the female character, who appears lighter in complexion than the male artist, is positioned as the primary subject of affection and apology. This again subtly reinforces the association between lighter skin tones and romantic desirability.

In Inakubalika by Matata featuring Watendawili the distribution of skin tones appears relatively balanced, with light-, brown-, and dark-skinned individuals represented in the video. However, some differences are evident in the distribution of skin tones between male and female cast members. The male participants are predominantly dark-skinned, whereas the female cast includes individuals with light, brown, and dark skin tones. Most scenes feature groups of people, making the video a useful example of collective representation. Overall, the video presents a mixture of skin tones, although the distribution differs between the male and female participants.

In *Kifo cha Mende* by Iyanii,Vijana Barubaru and Cedo the selected scenes predominantly feature groups of people, particularly in crowded settings. Brown- and dark-skinned individuals are visible in these group scenes, indicating the presence of these skin-tone categories within the video. However, the crowded composition makes it difficult to establish the exact proportion of each skin-tone category without systematic counting. The distribution can therefore be described in terms of the visible presence of brown- and dark-skinned individuals, while a more precise comparison would require recording the frequency of each category across the sampled scenes.

The distribution of skin tones in *All My Enemies Are Suffering* by Bien is difficult to determine consistently because of the video's visual effects. The opening scenes are presented in black and white, while other scenes contain colour grading and filters that alter the appearance of the images. These effects make it challenging to distinguish accurately between light-, brown-, and dark-skinned individuals. Consequently, the video's representation of skin-tone categories should be interpreted cautiously, and scenes in which

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skin tone cannot be reliably identified should be excluded from comparative counts.

In *Finale* by Bien and Ali Kiba, individuals with different skin tones are represented, including light-, brown-, and dark-skinned women. The opening scene features the musician in a poolside setting alongside a light-brown-skinned woman. A dark-skinned woman subsequently appears as the musician refers to not having a specific preference. The video therefore includes women from different skin-tone categories, although the opening scene gives initial visibility to a light-brown-skinned woman. The male participants appear predominantly dark-skinned. Overall, the video demonstrates variation in skin-tone distribution, with differences observable between male and female participants and across individual scenes.

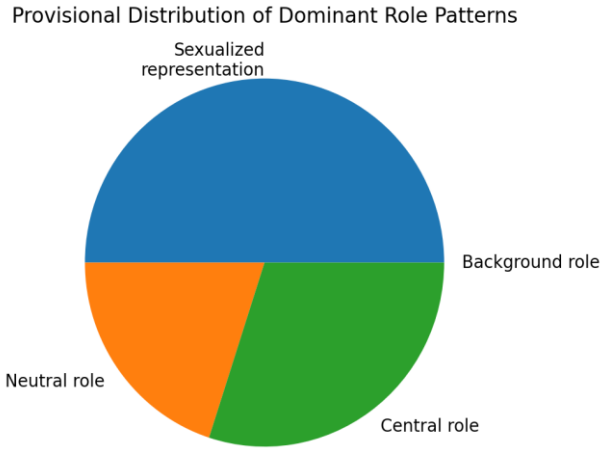
Contrary to many of the other music videos analysed in this category, *Show You Off* by Savara presents a different pattern. In this video, a dark-skinned woman is portrayed as the main love interest. She is depicted in a respectful and non-sexualised manner, engaging in romantic and emotionally expressive interactions with the artist. This depiction challenges the dominant trend observed in other videos and demonstrates that alternative, more balanced representations are possible within the genre.

The analysis reveals the following trends: Light-skinned women are more likely to be shown as central figures, love interests, and symbols of beauty. Brown-skinned women occupy intermediate roles, sometimes central but often part of group scenes. Dark-skinned women are more frequently depicted in sexualized or background roles. Dark-skinned men dominate numerically but are generally depicted in neutral or non-sexualised ways.

Overall, the findings suggest that representation in Afro-pop music videos is shaped by both gender and skin tone hierarchies. While there is visible diversity in casting, the roles assigned to individuals reveal underlying biases. Light-skinned women tend to receive more favourable and prominent representation. Darker-skinned women are more likely to be marginalised or sexualized. These patterns reflect broader societal influences and reinforce subtle forms of colourism within the visual culture...

Figure 1

Frequency of coded visual Representation of Dark-skin in the analysed Afro-Pop YouTube Music Videos



Discussion

The findings suggest that afro-pop music videos continue to reproduce socially constructed beauty hierarchies that privilege lighter skin, especially among women. By repeatedly portraying light-skinned women as the preferred standard of beauty, music videos such as *inakubalika* by Matata and Watendawili, *kifo cha mende* by Iyanii and Vijana BaruBaru and other videos analyzed in this category reinforce colour-based stereotypes and normalise unequal representation.

The findings are consistent with Otieno (2023), who found that media industries, specifically Kenyan print advertisements, predominantly feature lighter-skinned women while dark skin receives less representation because it is associated with beauty, desirability and social status. They observed that visual media like print newspapers have a preference for light skin in their advertisement. This promotes the notion that light complexion is superior to other complexions.

Through the analysis, it was observed that light-skinned individuals are frequently represented as more glamorous, successful and attractive, while darker-skinned women receive limited visibility or are assigned secondary roles. The present study concurs with Hunter (2007), who states that colourism privileges individuals with lighter skin by associating them with beauty, higher social status and greater opportunities, while dark-skinned women are marginalised. It therefore demonstrates that Kenyan Afro-popmusic videos on YouTube mirror global

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patterns of colourism despite growing public conversations about diversity and inclusion.

The findings further indicate that although dark-skinned individuals were present in many music videos, their representation differed from that of their lighter-skinned and brown skinned counterparts. Dark-skinned women were often portrayed in highly sexualized roles. Music videos such as kifo cha mende, inakubalika by Matata and Wetandawili, mpishi and donjo maber sexualizes dark skinned women. Light-skinned women were portrayed as romantic partners, models or symbols of beauty and luxury as seen in the video of finale by Bien and Alikiba. These findings agree with Thomas and Thomas and Kleyman (2020) that Such portrayals may reinforce discrimination against dark-skinned women by suggesting that beauty is primarily associated with lighter skin.

The observed preference for light-skinned individuals in prominent roles can be considered within the broader context of commercial beauty standards and global media influences. Exposure to media content that privileges lighter skin may contribute to the persistence of particular beauty ideals within music video production. Additionally, content creators may perceive the use of light-skinned performers as commercially appealing, although the present study did not investigate directors' motivations or audience preferences. YouTube's competitive environment may also encourage creators to adopt familiar visual conventions such as the hyper-sexualisation of dark-skinned people in an effort to attract viewership. These possibilities require further investigation and should not be treated as established explanations for the casting patterns identified in this study.

The findings can also be discussed in relation to tthe male gaze. This concept explains how visual media may present women from a masculine viewing perspective, positioning them as objects of visual pleasure rather than as active participants. In the analysed music videos, the appearance of women in revealing outfits, suggestive dancing and sexually focused scenes in music videos such as *kifo cha mende* by *Iyanii, mpishi* and *inakubalika* by Matata reflect this pattern. When such representation is combined with differences in skin-tone visibility, it raises questions about how gender and colorism intersect in the visual presentation of performers. However, the analysis should distinguish between observable features of the videos and interpretations of their underlying meanings.

Overall, Kenyan Afro-pop YouTube music videos continue to reinforce colour-based inequalities through visual representations. These portrayals reinforce existing stereotypes and sustain colourism within society. The findings therefore support the theoretical assumption that media representations contribute significantly to the construction of social reality and highlight the need for more inclusive and balanced representation of all skin tones in music videos.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of Afro-pop music videos on YouTube reveals that the representation of fair skin as the dominant beauty standard is a recurring and consistent theme. Fair skin is frequently celebrated, admired, and associated with desirability, femininity, and even social status. This persistent association reinforces long-standing colourist ideologies within contemporary Kenyan music culture and online media.

Individuals of fair skin are often styled in fashionable attire, placed in flattering lighting, and situated within romantic or luxurious settings. Such visual and narrative positioning constructs an idealised image of fair skin, aligning it with beauty, success, and modernity. Consequently, repeated exposure to this representation subtly conditions audiences to associate attractiveness and value with lighter skin tones, while marginalising darker-skinned individuals.

People with dark skin are either underrepresented or associated with less desirable traits, which may contribute to broader societal practices such as skin bleaching, particularly in coastal regions of Kenya. The representation of women in these contexts tends to align closely with explicit lyrics that emphasise sexuality and physical appeal, thereby reinforcing objectification rather than empowerment.

Conversely, while light-skinned women are often idealised as the epitome of beauty and desirability, light-skinned men may be ridiculed or seen as less masculine. They are sometimes characterised as soft or lacking strength, suggesting that lighter skin in men does not carry the same positive connotations as it does for women. This highlights a clear intersection

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between gender and colourism in shaping representation.

These findings support existing research on gendered colourism, which argues that darker skin is often devalued in women but celebrated in men. The preference for dark-skinned men and light-skinned women reflects deeply rooted cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity is frequently associated with strength and dominance traits linked to darker skin while femininity is associated with beauty and delicacy, traits linked to lighter skin.

Another significant pattern observed is the hyper sexualization of dark-skinned women in music videos, particularly in genres with explicit lyrical content. In such contexts, dark-skinned women are more likely to be cast as video vixens in overtly sexual roles, with emphasis placed on their bodies rather than their overall beauty, personality, or elegance. This suggests that while dark-skinned women may be visible, their representation is often limited to enhancing the sexual appeal of the video.

This pattern aligns with broader scholarly research on colourism and gender, which indicates that darker-skinned women are frequently subjected to hyper sexualization in media representations (Collins, 2018). Such portrayals contribute to harmful stereotypes by reducing dark-skinned women to sexual objects, rather than recognising them as individuals with diverse qualities, identities, and experiences.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that although there is some level of diversity in the representation of skin tones across the afro-pop music videos, underlying patterns of colourism persist. Light-skinned women continue to be idealised, dark-skinned women are often marginalised or sexualized, and dark-skinned men are positively associated with strength and masculinity. These patterns highlight the need for more balanced and inclusive representations that challenge existing stereotypes and promote diversity in a more meaningful way.

The study concludes that skin tone is represented in ways that reveal colourist patterns. Light-skinned individuals are more often associated with positive attributes such as beauty, attractiveness and softness. Dark-skinned individuals, particularly women, are less frequently represented, while dark-skinned men are more visible in the sampled videos. Where dark skin is represented, it may be associated with reduced attractiveness or hypersexualised portrayals. These patterns demonstrate that colourism is manifested not only through the number of individuals represented but also through the characteristics and visual meanings attached to different skin tones.

The study recommended that producers, directors and online content creators avoid assigning roles according to complexion and instead portray individuals of all skin tones as intelligent, capable, attractive and successful. Industry stakeholders should formulate ethical guidelines that discourage stereotypical depictions and encourage balanced portrayals that uphold equality, dignity and respect.

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Mikal Ongachi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, conceptualisation. **Maureen Adoyo:** Writing – review & editing and methodology. **Caroline Kokeyo:** Writing – review & editing and methodology.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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