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THE EXPRESSION OF COLOURISM THROUGH LYRICS IN KENYAN MUSIC VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE

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Abstract

Colourism, which is discrimination based on variations in skin tone remains a controversial yet influential form of bias in media representation. This study examines how colourism is constructed and communicated through lyrics in Kenyan music videos available on YouTube. The unit of analysis is the lyrical content of the songs, with limited contextual attention to the visual presence of performers only in so far as it illuminates the meanings attached to the lyrics. Using a qualitative content analysis design, guided by thematic coding data were collected through direct observation of selected videos released between January 2022 and June 2025. To ensure contemporary relevance and broad cultural reach, the study focused on videos that had accumulated more than ten million views at the moment of data collection. Forty music videos were purposively sampled targeting an even representation from five popular Kenyan music genres: Afro-pop, Gengetone, hip-hop, Swahili music influenced by Bongo Flava, and indigenous genres (particularly Ohangla and Benga). The findings indicate that the lyrics frequently associate lighter skin with inherent beauty and romantic desirability, whereas admiration for darker skin is often qualified or requires explicit justification, or is basically through sexualisation This study contributes to scholarship on colourism by demonstrating how popular Kenyan music may reproduce skin-tone hierarchies and shape perceptions of beauty in digital spaces. It concludes that widely viewed YouTube music videos can reinforce colourist ideals, potentially affecting viewers' self-esteem and self-perception, especially among young audiences. The study therefore recommends that artists and other content creators adopt more deliberate and inclusive lyrical and narrative choices that acknowledge and celebrate diverse skin tones.

Keywords: *Colourism, skin-tone discrimination, Kenyan YouTube music videos, media representation, music lyrics*

Introduction

Colorism exists across many societies. In America, its historical roots are often traced to the preferential treatment given to the fair-skinned individuals (Norwood & Monroe, 2017) In the African perspective colorism is considerd as colonial and post-colonial legacy that continues to shape percieved beauty standards (Dupree-Wilson, 2024; Anjari, 2023). Kenya is no exception. Recent studies document the persistence of colourist attitudes among young Kenyan women (Kinuthia et al., 2023), on social media platforms (Kiarie & Jones, 2023), and in print advertising (Otieno, 2023).

Online media is consumed by the majority, if not all, Kenyans. Kenyan music industry has phenomenal growth in the past two decades**Error! Reference source not found.**. Music has a great impact on the soul; it affects our feelings, shapes our beliefs, values, and behaviour with regard to what we see and hear from those music videos. This therefore means that what is displayed in these music videos is very crucial. If there is misrepresentation of dark-skinned people, then those beliefs transfer to the consumers. Lack of representation is also a problem, whereby the video vixens and the cast of music videos are of fair skin only. It is not just what is displayed on the YouTube music videos that could be promoting colorism; sometimes there is also a problem with the lyrics of the song that people listen to. The language used seems to be in praise of fair-skinned people while shaming those with dark skin tones.

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Moscovici (1984) argues that language plays a central role in the construction of social representations. According to the theory of social representations, repeated words and expressions gradually become accepted as common knowledge within society. Consequently, lyrics that consistently praise lighter skin or negatively describe darker skin can contribute to the normalisation of colourist attitudes among listeners. Hunter (2005, 2007) similarly argues that popular culture contributes to the maintenance of colourism through repeated messages that associate lighter skin with attractiveness, femininity, and higher social status. Such messages influence audience perceptions because music is consumed repeatedly across different social settings. Over time, these lyrical expressions may shape public attitudes towards beauty and influence personal preferences.

Feagin (2001) observes that language often reproduces racial and colour hierarchies by attaching positive meanings to whiteness or lighter complexions while assigning less favourable meanings to darker skin. Although these expressions may appear subtle, their repeated use within entertainment media contributes to unequal perceptions of beauty and social value. Research on popular music indicates that lyrics frequently reinforce dominant cultural beliefs regarding gender, romance, and physical attractiveness. Studies reviewed by (Apuke & Jigem, 2019; Conrad et al., 2009). show that many contemporary songs describe women primarily in terms of their bodies, physical beauty and sexual appeal. Although explicit references to skin tone are not always present, the combination of lyrical praise and visual imagery may indirectly reinforce colourist ideals.

In African popular music, lyrical references to beauty, complexion and desirability often reflect broader cultural attitudes. Some songs explicitly praise lighter skin or use terms associated with fairness as symbols of attractiveness, while others celebrate beauty without reference to skin tone. This demonstrates that music can either reinforce or challenge existing colour-based stereotypes depending on the language employed by artists. Despite growing scholarship on media representation and portrayal, relatively few studies have specifically examined lyrical connotations of colourism within Kenyan music videos (Kinuthia et al., 2023; Otieno, 2023; Kiarie & Jones, 2023; Dupree-Wilson, 2024). Existing literature has focused largely on visual images, advertising, social-media discourse or lived experiences of colourism, leaving limited systematic understanding of how song lyrics themselves communicate ideas about skin tone. This constitutes the central knowledge gap addressed by the present study. The study examines whether lyrics in selected Kenyan music videos reinforce, challenge, or remain neutral toward colourism across Afro-pop, Gengetone, Kenyan hip-hop, Swahili, Ohangla and Benga music.

Representation can be understood both as a process and as a product. As a process, it involves the selection, organisation and presentation of people, events, identities and ideas within a media text. As a product, it refers to the resulting images, narratives, language and meanings communicated through that text. This study focusesprimarily on the on the process of meaning-making through culture or language. YouTube music videos do not simply show people with different skin tones but they make specific choices on who should be included and the context in which they are presented. The choices make part of the representational process by which meaning on skin colour tone is constructed (Hall, 1997).

Social Representations Theory (SRT), developed by Serge Moscovici (1984), provides a useful framework for examining how societies develop and communicate shared understanding of social phenomena. Social representations refer to systems of ideas, meanings, values, beliefs and explanations through which a society makes sense of social reality (Moscovici, 1984). These representations are expressed through language, images, symbols, practices and everyday forms of communication. They are not limited to what individuals think but can be examined through the cultural and communicative forms in which socially shared meanings are expressed.

Social Representations Theory is particularly relevant to the representation objective because it enables the researcher to examine the meanings attached to different skin-tone categories. It helps in identifying whether particular complexions are associated with beauty, desirability, social status or other characteristics within the selected media texts. The theory is also applicable to the distribution objective, as differences in the visibility and prominence of skin-

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tone groups can be considered alongside the meanings attached to their presence or absence. Finally, the theory is relevant to the lyrical connotation's objective because language, metaphors and descriptions in songs can provide evidence of socially recognizable meanings associated with skin tone.

Social Representations Theory enabled this study to examine colourism as a phenomenon that can be expressed through culturally recognizable images, categories, language and symbolic meanings. Rather than focusing on whether media representations influence audiences, the theory is used to examine how socially available meanings surrounding skin tone are manifested within media content. It therefore complements Media Representation Theory by providing a framework for examining the social meanings embedded in the visual and lyrical representations of different skin tones in Kenyan YouTube music videos.

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative content analysis as the study design in order to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of the issue of colourism in Kenyan music videos on YouTube. Qualitative content analysis was selected because the primary interest was on meaning connotations and discursive patterns within the lyrics rather than in the quantification of predefined variables. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns relating to skin tone, beauty, desirability and gender.

The unit of analysis was the lyrical content of the selected songs. Observable visual elements (presence and roles of performers of different skin tones) were noted only as contextual information that helped interpret the lyrics; they were not subjected to systematic coding of cinematic techniques such as lighting, costume, make-up, camera angles or editing. The decision to focus on lyrics responds directly to the identified knowledge gap: while visual representation of skin tone in Kenyan and African media has received some scholarly attention, the language of the songs themselves has been comparatively neglected.

The data collection process was conducted using content analysis. The procedure was designed to ensure consistency, accuracy, and alignment with the study's objectives. The first phase involved analysing Kenyan music videos available on YouTube. The researcher identified a sample of music videos produced between January 2022 and June 2025 that had garnered over ten million views. This criterion was used to ensure the selection of widely viewed content with potential cultural influence.

Each video was reviewed using a structured observation checklist developed during the pilot study phase. The checklist included categories for skin tone representation, roles assigned to individuals (e.g., lead, romantic interest, dancer), portrayal types (e.g., sexualized, empowered), and lyrical references to colourism.

Data were recorded systematically, ensuring that each video was analysed using the same criteria. The coding focused on observable elements and direct lyrical content to reduce subjectivity and enhance reliability.

The analysis was guided by the objective to assess the lyrical connotations of colorism in Kenyan YouTube music videos. The qualitative data obtained through content analysis was processed using thematic coding. Each music video was examined based on a structured observation checklist. Data points included: Frequency and prominence of different skin tones, assigned roles (lead, dancer, romantic interest), type of portrayal (e.g., sexualized, empowered, ridiculed) and lyrical references to colour and beauty. These themes were categorised and compared across genres (gengetone, ohangla, Swahili tunes) to identify patterns and trends in how skin tone is depicted visually and lyrically.

Sampling and selection procedures. The researcher first identified Kenyan music videos released between January 2022 and June 2025 that were publicly available on YouTube. The temporal window was chosen to capture contemporary production in the post-pandemic period when digital consumption of music videos accelerated and to ensure relevance to current audiences. A minimum threshold of ten million views (recorded at the time of data collection in mid-2025) was applied as a proxy for cultural reach and potential influence. While YouTube view counts fluctuate over time, the threshold at the moment of sampling ensured that only high-visibility content with substantial audience exposure was included. From the pool of videos meeting these criteria, forty

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videos were purposively selected to achieve representation across five popular Kenyan genres: Afro-pop, Gengetone, hip-hop, Swahili music influenced by Bongo Flava, and indigenous genres (Ohangla and Benga). Approximately eight videos per major genre cluster were retained, with slight variation reflecting the relative volume of high-view content available in each genre. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the goal was depth of thematic insight rather than statistical generalisation.

Each video was reviewed using a structured observation checklist developed and refined during a pilot phase. The checklist recorded: (a) explicit or implicit lyrical references to skin tone, beauty and desirability; (b) the presence and roles of performers of different skin tones as contextual background; and (c) overall thematic orientation of the song. Data were recorded systematically so that every video was examined against the same criteria. Coding focused on observable lyrical content and direct quotations to reduce subjectivity and enhance reliability. The qualitative data were then processed through thematic analysis: codes were grouped into themes relating to the association of lighter skin with beauty and romance, the sexualisation or negative characterisation of darker-skinned women, neutral or celebratory references to dark skin, and the relative absence of skin-tone language.

Results and Discussions

Music lyrics are a powerful vehicle for shaping societal perceptions because they repeatedly circulate cultural values and norms (Hunter, 2005; Moscovici, 1984). The analysis of the forty sampled videos reveals that, while explicit references to skin colour appear in only a minority of songs, the patterns that do emerge are consistent with colourist hierarchies documented in broader scholarship. Lighter skin is frequently linked to inherent beauty, romantic desirability and emotional value, whereas darker skin, when referenced or visually foregrounded, is more often associated with sexual objectification, conflict or requires special justification to be praised.

Lyrical Connotation of Colorism in Ohangla and Benga Music Videos.

Ohangla and Benga music are celebrated for cultural depth and storytelling, yet their lyrics reveal subtle patterns that reinforce colour-based hierarchies, particularly in the portrayal of women. In *Digidigi*, the lyrics do not portray the dark-skinned video performer in a positive light. Instead, the artist associates her with negative traits:

"Madharau ya nini?" (Why the disrespect?)

"Chuki ya nini?" (Why the hate?)

"Kelele za nini?" (Why the noise?)

These rhetorical questions frame the woman as problematic and emotionally disruptive. The attribution of such negative qualities to a dark-skinned female character contributes to a pattern in which darker skin is subtly linked to undesirable behavior. The lyrics construct her identity around conflict rather than affection or admiration, thereby reinforcing negative connotations.

In addition to this negative characterization, the same song also introduces elements of hyper-sexualization directed toward the dark-skinned woman. This is illustrated in the following verses:

"Toto mamani" (My lover)

"Mi napenda digidigi" (I love intimacy)

"Kuja tucheze digidigi" (Let's be intimate)

"Nikpeleke Dubai" (I'll take you to Dubai)

"Tucheze digidigi" (Let's be intimate)

Here, the woman is simultaneously criticized and sexualized. While she is portrayed as troublesome in earlier lines, she is also objectified as a source of physical pleasure. This dual representation—negative characterization combined with sexual objectification—further complicates her portrayal and reinforces the reduction of dark-skinned women to limited and often contradictory roles.

In contrast, the song *Welo* by Obinna does not present any clear lyrical connotations of colorism. The song focuses on personal struggle and resilience, with the artist emphasizing his life experiences and eventual success. There are no explicit references to women's skin tone or physical attributes, suggesting a more neutral lyrical approach in this instance.

However, color-based preference becomes more explicit in *Nyar Jaduong* by Prince Indah, where the artist directly references a woman's skin tone in a positive and affectionate manner. The following verse illustrates this:

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"Lando nyaduse" (Light-skinned girl)

"Kona ni ichando ango mama" (Tell me what you lack)

"Lando we ranga" (Don't look at me, light-skin)

"In emimiyo denda juolga" (You make me blush)

In this excerpt, the term "Lando" (light-skinned girl) is used as a term of endearment. The artist expresses admiration and emotional vulnerability, indicating that the woman's presence evokes feelings of affection and attraction. The reference to her skin tone is not incidental but central to the praise she receives. Additionally, the artist's willingness to provide for her ("tell me what you lack") further elevates her status, associating light skin with desirability, care, and worth.

This positive framing of light-skinned women contrasts sharply with the portrayal of dark-skinned women in other songs, where they are more likely to be associated with conflict or reduced to sexual objects. Such contrasts highlight an underlying hierarchy in which lighter skin is linked to affection and emotional value, while darker skin is linked to negativity or physicality.

Similarly, the song *Cham Thum* by Watendawili contains lyrics that objectify women through metaphorical language. The artist expresses satisfaction in a way that likens his experience with a woman to that of a child being breastfed:

"Ayaa ayeee"

"Wuolooo aseyudo wendo" (I've found a lover)

"Jaber yaye" (Beautiful lady)

"Kama mtoto napewa maziwa" (I'm being breastfed like a baby)

Although the term "Jaber" (beautiful lady) appears complimentary, the subsequent imagery reduces the woman to a source of physical gratification. The comparison to breastfeeding introduces a deeply physical and somewhat infantilizing metaphor, reinforcing the objectification of the female body. Such lyrical choices shift the focus away from emotional connection and instead emphasize bodily functions and pleasure.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that while Ohangla and Benga music may not always explicitly articulate colorism, their lyrical content often reflects underlying biases in how women of different skin tones are perceived and represented. Dark-skinned women are more frequently associated with negative traits or hyper-sexualized roles, while light-skinned women are portrayed as desirable, admirable, and worthy of emotional investment.

Overall, the lyrical patterns observed suggest that colorism operates subtly within these genres, embedded in language, metaphors, and narrative roles. These representations contribute to broader societal perceptions of beauty and value, reinforcing the idea that skin tone influences not only visibility but also the quality of representation afforded to individuals within music and media.

Lyrical Connotation of Colorism in Afro-pop Music

The lyrical content of Afro-pop music provides an important lens through which underlying attitudes toward skin tone and gender can be examined. While some songs may not explicitly promote colorism, closer analysis reveals that the language used often reinforces subtle hierarchies of desirability, particularly through the sexualization and characterization of women of different skin tones.

The lyrics of Sina Noma by Charisma, for instance, do not overtly promote colorism. The song does not directly reference skin tone as a basis for preference or discrimination. However, the absence of explicit color-based language does not necessarily indicate neutrality, as meaning is often constructed through broader thematic and contextual cues within the music and accompanying visuals.

In contrast, the song Inakubalika features a significant presence of dark- and brown-skinned women within its video. Despite this apparent inclusivity, the lyrical content tends to hypersexualize these women, reducing them primarily to objects of physical desire. As the song begins, Ywaya Tajiri, one half of Watendawili, delivers the following lines:

"Niache nyash irite boss kwani mi ni ng'wai (I can't ignore ass, I'm not stupid)"

"Sikosi nguvu boss, mi hukula njugu (I'm energetic, I take peanuts)"

"Bad to the bone, lazima nikunywe supu (Bad to the bone, I must drink soup)"

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"Shake that thing hadi upigwe marufuku (Shake that thing until you are banned)"

These lyrics emphasize physical attributes and sexual performance, framing women particularly those visible in the video as bodies to be admired and consumed. Although the women represented are largely dark- and brown-skinned, their portrayal is not empowering but instead objectifying. This suggests that inclusion in terms of numbers does not necessarily translate into positive or respectful representation.

A similar pattern emerges in the song Mpishi by Matata. At the beginning of the video, a dark-skinned woman is shown dancing as one of the central figures in the scene. The lyrics further reinforce her sexualization through metaphorical language:

"Leo supper tunakula hadi mpishi (For dinner today we will eat even the cook)"

"Bora tushibe (As long as we are full)"

"Mwiko refu tunafunga hadi mshipi (Long cooking stick / symbolic of being endowed)"

"Bora tupike (As long as we cook)"

Here, food metaphors are used to imply sexual intimacy, with the female figure metaphorically reduced to something to be "consumed." The use of such language positions the dark-skinned woman within a purely sexual framework, reinforcing a pattern where darker-skinned women are associated with physicality rather than emotional or intellectual value.

Further evidence of this trend can be observed in Donjo Maber by Iyanji and Dufla Diligon. In this song, the artist praises women primarily based on their physical appearance, as seen in the following lines:

"Napenda vile madem wanekuja wamebeba (I like the way the girls are thick)"

"Napenda vile wanawake wanekuja wameiva (I like the way the women who come are hot)"

These lyrics highlight bodily features and sexual attractiveness as the primary markers of value. The women referenced in this context are largely brown- and dark-skinned, yet their worth is framed almost exclusively in terms of their bodies. This reinforces the notion that, even when darker skin tones are present, their representation is often tied to sexual desirability rather than holistic appreciation.

On the other hand, some songs do not exhibit clear lyrical connotations of colorism. For example, Rumours by Iyanji and Dufla Diligon focuses on the challenges and gossip faced by the artists, without referencing women's bodies or skin tone in a significant way. This suggests that not all Afro-pop songs perpetuate color-based narratives, and some remain neutral in this regard.

However, the song Kifo cha Mende by Iyanji and Vijana Barubaru reintroduces strong sexual undertones. The lyrics and title itself reference an intimate sexual position, reinforcing the broader pattern of sexualized content associated with women. The artist further states:

"Iyanji bad boy kutoka Ingo (Iyanji is a bad boy from Ingo)"

"Napenda njugu na mukombero (I like peanut and white ginger)"

"King wa style napenda kustyle (I like different styles)"

These lines emphasize sexual prowess and experimentation, again centering the narrative on physical intimacy rather than emotional connection. Within the broader context of the genre, such expressions often intersect with visual portrayals where darker-skinned women are featured in similarly sexualized roles.

In contrast, Too Easy by Bien presents a slightly different perspective. In this song, the artist praises a love interest and describes her as easy to love. The video vixen is portrayed as a light-skinned woman, reinforcing the association between light skin and romantic desirability. This is reflected in the lyrics:

"You make it too easy"

"I'm loving you"

Although these lines appear positive and affectionate, they contribute to a broader pattern in which lighter-skinned women are more likely to be associated with love, emotional connection, and positive affirmation, while darker-skinned women are more frequently linked to sexualization.

Overall, the lyrical analysis of Afro-pop music reveals that colorism is not always expressed explicitly but is

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often embedded within themes of desire, objectification, and romantic preference. Dark- and brown-skinned women are frequently present in these songs, yet their representation is often limited to physical and sexual attributes. In contrast, light-skinned women are more likely to be associated with emotional depth, romance, and idealized femininity. These patterns suggest that lyrical content plays a significant role in reinforcing subtle but persistent color-based hierarchies within Afro-pop music.

Lyrical Connotation of Colorism in Gengetone Music

Gengetone music, as a contemporary urban Kenyan genre, is characterized by its energetic beats, youth-oriented themes, and candid lyrical expression. While the genre is often celebrated for its creativity and cultural relevance, a closer examination of its lyrical content reveals underlying patterns in the portrayal of gender and, indirectly, skin tone. Although colorism is not always explicitly stated, the ways in which women are described, addressed, and positioned in the lyrics can reflect broader societal attitudes linked to skin tone and desirability.

In the song *Kaskie Vibaya* by Ssaru featuring Fathermoh, the lyrics present a confrontational exchange between a man and a woman following what appears to be a romantic conflict. The cast of the video largely consists of brown- and dark-skinned individuals; however, the tone of the lyrics is predominantly negative and accusatory. The male artist uses language that portrays the woman as dishonest and financially unstable, as reflected in the following lines:

"Chemichemi za uongo (a liar)"

"Story za jaba (lies)"

"Ndio uniaze ubongo (to mess with someone's mind)"

"Ndio ubebe ka wallet za kamongo (being broke)"

These lyrics depict the woman as deceitful and manipulative, associating her with negative personal traits. While the lyrics do not explicitly mention skin tone, the fact that the woman represented in the video is of a darker complexion invites a reading in which such negative characterization may intersect with broader stereotypes often attached to darker-skinned women.

In response, the female artist Ssaru delivers equally provocative lyrics, challenging the male character and revealing intimate details that further intensify the conflict:

"Nilifika nikaikutana na budako (I met your dad when I got to the city)"

"Akanambia ha kupenda mama yako (he said he does not love your mother)"

"Kisirisi tukutana kwako (we secretly met at your place)"

"Click click band tu juu ya kitanda yako (and slept on your bed)"

Through these lines, the female voice asserts agency but does so in a way that emphasizes sexual transgression and moral controversy. The exchange between the two artists constructs a narrative of immorality, conflict, and disrespect, rather than one of emotional depth or mutual understanding. This contributes to a broader pattern in which women particularly those represented as brown- or dark-skinned are associated with scandalous or morally questionable behavior.

The song further reinforces this theme through additional lyrics in which the female artist refers to herself in a manner that normalizes infidelity:

"Leo ni Jumamosi (Today is Saturday)"

"Saa sita (it's 12 midnight)"

"Imefika ile siku (it is that day)"

"Ya kukubali mi ni cheater (for me to accept that I'm unfaithful)"

Here, the artist openly embraces the label of a "cheater," reinforcing a narrative of promiscuity. It is notable that this portrayal is delivered by a dark-skinned female artist, which complicates the representation further. Rather than challenging stereotypes, the lyrics may inadvertently reinforce existing perceptions that associate darker-skinned women with hypersexuality or moral looseness.

Another example can be observed in *Set It* by Dyana Cods, where the lyrical content shifts from conflict to overt sexual expression. The song is not framed around romance but rather emphasizes physical attraction and sexual confidence. The artist describes her experiences in highly suggestive terms:

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"Sim Simma, who got the keys to my Bima (the one who has access to me)"

"Ukiskia Kimjongcods unajua ni kuririma (when you hear my name you know things will get serious)"

"Female Benzema, golden na go inner (female Benzema, something valuable)"

"Reproduction tunafanya backseat ya Caldina (reproductive activities done in the backseat of a Caldina)"

These lyrics foreground sexuality and physical performance, with the female artist positioning herself as confident and desirable. However, the emphasis remains on the body and sexual activity rather than emotional or intellectual attributes. In the broader context of representation, such portrayals often intersect with visual depictions in which women frequently of darker or brown complexion are sexualized, reinforcing a narrow understanding of their roles.

Similarly, Dance ya Kudonjo by Sean MMG featuring YBW Smith functions primarily as a hype song centered around dance and performance. While the song itself does not explicitly address colorism, its focus on body movement and dance culture aligns with a broader trend in which women's bodies are central to entertainment value. This indirect emphasis can contribute to the objectification of female participants, particularly when combined with visual portrayals in music videos.

On the other hand, songs such as Anguka Nayo present a different perspective. The lyrics of this song do not suggest any clear form of colorism or negative portrayal of women. Instead, the focus is on rhythm, dance, and enjoyment, demonstrating that not all Gengetone music perpetuates problematic representations.

Overall, the lyrical analysis of Gengetone music reveals that while explicit references to skin tone are relatively rare, the genre often relies on themes of conflict, sexuality, and materialism in its portrayal of women. These themes can intersect with visual representations to reinforce subtle forms of colorism. Brown- and dark-skinned women are frequently present in these narratives, yet their depiction is often tied to negative traits, sexualization, or moral ambiguity. In contrast, there is limited emphasis on portraying women in roles that highlight emotional depth, intellect, or empowerment.

These patterns suggest that colorism within Gengetone operates in indirect ways, embedded within broader gendered narratives and cultural expressions. As such, the genre reflects not only contemporary youth culture but also the underlying social attitudes that continue to shape perceptions of beauty, value, and identity.

Lyrical Connotation of Colorism in Swahili tunes.

The analysis of lyrical content in selected Swahili music reveals that explicit references to skin tone are relatively limited. However, where such references occur, they often carry subtle implications regarding beauty, desirability, and value. In many instances, colorism is not directly stated but is implied through praise, metaphor, and the positioning of women within romantic narratives.

In several of the songs analyzed, there is no clear lyrical evidence suggesting colorism. The lyrics tend to focus on love, admiration, and relationships without explicitly linking these themes to skin tone. This suggests that, unlike visual representation, lyrical content in this category is less consistently used to reinforce color-based hierarchies. Nevertheless, a few songs provide insight into how beauty and desirability may still be indirectly associated with particular skin tones.

For example, in *Umenipendea Nini*, the lyrics do not explicitly suggest colorism. The song primarily centers on emotional connection and affection, without making reference to the woman's complexion. This indicates a more neutral lyrical approach, where love is expressed independently of physical attributes such as skin tone.

However, in *woman* by Otile Brown featuring Harmonize, there is a notable emphasis on praising a woman's beauty. Although the lyrics do not directly mention skin tone, the visual representation of the woman in the video who appears light-skinned interacts with the lyrics to create an implied association between beauty and lighter complexion. The artist expresses admiration using affectionate and romantic language, as seen in the lyrics:

"Lips zako zinivuruga abh mpenzi (your lips are beautiful)

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Like my oh my

Ngozi yako inavyometameta (your skin shines)

Kama shima (like a shiny material)

In another verse the artist says:

You're such a beautiful woman

Would you be my only woman

These lines focus on physical attraction and emotional desire, reinforcing the woman's desirability. While the lyrics themselves are not explicitly colorist, when combined with the visual portrayal, they contribute to a broader pattern where beauty is often aligned with lighter skin tones.

Similarly, *Keki* by Willy Paul and Bahati uses metaphorical language to praise a woman, comparing her to sweetness and desirability. The term "keki" (cake) functions as a metaphor for attractiveness and appeal. The lyrics state:

"Oooh mama keki (you are like a cake)

Wewe ni tamu kama keki (you are as sweet as cake)

Oooh unavyonipendeza (you are attractive)

Tamu sana kama keki (as sweet as cake)

In Toto by willy Paul, the artist continues to express admiration in the following verse:

"Wewe ni my sugar sukari (you are my sugar)

Ulivyozidi utamu (you are too sweet)

Nikuite asali (I'll you honey)

Here, the woman is metaphorically associated with sweetness ("sugar,"), which symbolizes desirability and value. While the lyrics do not explicitly mention skin tone, the visual portrayal of the praised woman as light-skinned strengthens the implicit association between light skin and attractiveness. The metaphor of sweetness further elevates her desirability, positioning her as an ideal romantic partner.

It is also important to note that in *Keki*, the term used to describe the woman functions as a term of endearment, reinforcing affection and admiration. The repeated comparison to sweet substances suggests that the woman is not only attractive but also emotionally appealing and valuable.

Despite these examples, it is significant that most of the other songs within this category do not contain lyrics that suggest colorism. Their lyrical focus remains on general themes such as love, relationships, and admiration without attaching these qualities to specific skin tones. This indicates that while visual elements in music videos may reinforce colorist ideologies, lyrical content does not always explicitly do so.

Overall, the findings suggest that colorism in Swahili music is more subtly conveyed through an interaction between lyrics and visuals rather than through direct lyrical statements. Where lyrics praise beauty and desirability, they may indirectly support existing visual hierarchies that favor lighter skin tones. However, the absence of explicit references to skin tone in many songs also highlights the potential for more neutral or inclusive expressions of love and attraction within the genre.

Lyrical Connotations of Colorism in Kenyan Hip-hop

Three Kenyan hiphop songs met the criteria for analysis. The genre is not as popular as before based on the observation made during the research. From the three songs critically analyzed, only one had mention of skin tone.

The song "tiktoker" by Soundkraft featuring Tipsy Gee, Gody Tennor and Kappy contains positive lyrical references to dark skin. Expressions such as "Black chocolate fine" and "fine melanin" celebrate dark complexion by associating it with beauty and attractiveness. In this context, "black chocolate" serves as a metaphor for dark skin, while "melanin" refers to the pigment responsible for skin color.

Black chocolate

Fine melanin

Toka nikapate (since I found her)

Anapenda zile vitu napenda (we have a lot in common)

Within the Kenyan context, the term melanin has become a positive expression used to appreciate dark-skinned individuals. The addition of the adjective "fine" further emphasizes admiration and beauty. Consequently, the lyrics challenge conventional beauty ideals that often favor lighter skin and instead promote positive perceptions of dark-skinned people.

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The lyrics of "Perfect Design" by Nyashinski express admiration, love, and affection towards the female subject. Although the song is a romantic dedication, it does not explicitly refer to the woman's skin tone or complexion. Instead, the lyrics focus on appreciating her beauty and expressing the singer's love and commitment. Therefore, the song does not contain any direct or implied connotations of colorism.

Similarly, "Chinje" by Toxic Lyrically primarily conveys themes of playfulness and flirtation. The expression "slaughtering" is used metaphorically to emphasize the woman's exceptional beauty and attractiveness rather than to refer to her skin tone. The lyrics do not make any explicit or implicit references to complexion and, therefore, cannot be interpreted as promoting or reinforcing colorism.

Synthesis of Findings in Relation to Theory and Prior Research

Taken together, the findings indicate that colourism in Kenyan YouTube music videos is expressed more through patterned associations than through frequent explicit statements. When skin tone is mentioned or strongly implied, lighter skin tends to be linked to romance, emotional value and idealised beauty, while darker skin is more often linked to sexualisation, conflict or requires special linguistic justification to be praised. These patterns are consistent with Social Representations Theory: repeated linguistic and narrative choices gradually sediment shared meanings about the social value of different complexions (Moscovici, 1984). They also corroborate Hunter's (2005, 2007) account of popular culture's role in maintaining colour hierarchies and align with empirical work on music videos (Conrad et al., 2009) and on colourism among Kenyan youth and online communities (Kinuthia et al., 2023; Kiarie & Jones, 2023; Otieno, 2023).

Importantly, the study also documents counter-examples—neutral songs and at least one affirmative celebration of dark skin—showing that the musical field is not monolithic. The existence of such counter-discourses suggests that artists possess agency to challenge as well as reproduce colourist ideals.

This finding suggests that, although some Kenyan hip-hop songs avoid references to skin tone altogether, others intentionally celebrate dark skin and contribute to challenging colorist beauty standards by portraying dark complexion as attractive, desirable, and worthy of appreciation

Conclusion and Recommendation

The results conclude in regards to lyrical content that, only a small proportion of the sampled YouTube music videos contain explicit references to skin color. Some lyrics praise lighter skin, while others positively describe dark skin using expressions such as "fine melanin" and "black chocolate." The limited occurrence of such references suggests that skin color is not a dominant lyrical theme in the sampled music videos, although where it occurs, it provides additional evidence of how skin tone is explicitly valued or described.

Overall, the findings establish the presence and manifestation of colorism in the selected Kenyan YouTube music videos. The study therefore concludes that colorism can be observed through differences in the distribution of skin tones, the positive or negative characteristics attached to particular skin tones, the relative visibility of dark-skinned women and men and the occasional use of skin-color related language in song lyrics.

The findings showed that some song lyrics reinforced colorist attitudes through words and expressions associated with beauty and skin tone. Songwriters, artists and producers are therefore encouraged to use inclusive language that celebrates all skin tones and avoids lyrics that may reinforce prejudice or discrimination. Music is powerful and as such should be used as a platform to promote positive social values, diversity and self-acceptance among audiences, particularly young people. By focusing specifically on lyrics the previously under-examined dimension the study fills a clear gap in the literature on media representation and colourism in Kenya.

The study recommends that media regulators and professional bodies collaborate with artists and producers to develop guidelines promoting fair representation of diverse skin tones. Awareness campaigns on colorism and media literacy should also be strengthened so that audiences can critically evaluate media messages and challenge discriminatory beauty standards. Future research could usefully combine systematic lyrical analysis with controlled examination of cinematic techniques (lighting, costume, camera work) to produce a more

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holistic account of how colourism is constructed across the audio-visual text.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, i Josphat Ogweno and Mikal used Grammarly to assist with language editing, grammar correction, and improvement of clarity and readability. I carefully reviewed and revised the AI-assisted content and I take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript. The AI tool was not credited with authorship.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Josphat Ogweno: Writing,review & editing, Methodology, Data curation and conceptualization. **Mikal** - Conceptualization, Literature review, Methodology

Declaration of conflict of interest

Josphat Ogweno declares that i 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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