



## Influence of Mass Media Messages on Audience Perception Regarding Patient Rights Among the Residents of Mt. Elgon, Bungoma County, Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

Mass media plays a critical role in shaping people's perceptions of all societal issues. This is achieved through mass media content and various channels employed in disseminating information to its audience. Based on this key impact and dominance that the media is perceived to enjoy over its audience, a mixed-method study adopting an exploratory sequential design was conducted in the Mt. Elgon sub-county of Bungoma County, Kenya. The study aimed to establish the perception created by mass media messages on patient rights among the targeted community. Many studies have focused on patients' rights from the policy and public health perspectives and not from communication through the mass media angle. The agenda-setting theory of the mass media and the diffusion of innovation theory guided the study. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed descriptively and thematically respectively. Data was collected from adult residents of Kaptama and Chemoge sub-locations. Out of the 13104 residents of the two sub locations, a sample of 130 adult residents were randomly selected to participate in the study. Additionally, 8 key informants including 2 policy experts, and 6 health journalists drawn from leading media houses in Kenya were also involved. Data was collected with the aid of a questionnaire, interview guides (one for policy experts and another for media practitioners), and focus group discussion schedule. Trustworthiness was applied in validating qualitative data while quantitative data was validated through Cronbach Alpha Co-efficient calculations. The study established that the mass media messages on patient rights are too general focusing on sporadic happenings and not on patient rights in particular. Thus, the messages disseminated on the topic, have not been able to shift the mindset of the study respondents who registered pessimism towards the potential of mass media messages to shape favourable perceptions of patient rights. Journalists need to single out messages on patient rights from general reportage increasing their visibility to attain the desired perception from the media audience.

**Keywords:** Mass Media, Messaging, Patient Rights, Perception

### I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, patient rights have been an issue of concern with over 2 million deaths reported in low and middle-income countries due to patient harm (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Health and Medicine Division, Board on Health Care Services, Board on Global Health, & Committee on Improving the Quality of Health Care Globally (2018). In addition, Africa lags behind in practising safe healthcare whose consequence results in violation of patient rights (Toroitich et al., 2022). According to Kinuthia (2018), in Kenya, patient rights violation cases are reported at 98% in public facilities and 2% in private health facilities. Further, there is the uneven distribution of health facilities with approximately 18% of its landmass failing to meet the WHO provided criteria for patient access (Mugo et al., 2018).

To curb patient harm, Patient rights have been formulated and enacted by various governments. However, some African states fail to safeguard and guarantee the right to health among their citizens despite their commitment to upholding human rights and patient rights in their constitutions (Nampewo et al., 2022). For instance, in Nigeria, the right to informed consent is grossly violated or poorly implemented (Ojo, 2021). In Kenya, the patient's rights are anchored in the Kenya Patient Rights Charter 2013 as well as the constitution of Kenya promulgated in 2010. The high level of patient rights violations is attributed to low literacy levels on people's rights and to the extreme, some patients willingly forego their rights (Malik et al., 2014; Ghazawy, 2017). According to Njuguna et al. (2019), the low knowledge level has further contributed to unfavourable associated attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. This leads to the creation of certain perceptions regarding patients' rights.

Further, most publications on health have focused on specific diseases and populations and little is known about policy communication on patient rights (Mugo et al., 2018). This challenges the mass media's role in creating awareness and changing perceptions by forming the right mindset among its audience.

According to McLeod et al (2017), the mass media messages keep increasing with increased mass media tools. Senam et al (2022), also concur that there is a great rise in the number of mass media channels all over the globe and the corresponding mass media content. The increased media outlets should play the traditional roles of the mass media which include: monitoring, also known as the watchdog role, educating the public on all issues in the community, entertaining and changing or stimulating favorable perception through public debates emanating from media content (Wilding et al., 2018). Acquaye and Boateng (2021) concur that the media need to shape an informed and active society with the ability to participate in decision-making processes.

The media content has to stimulate action within the targeted society of audience by creating a corresponding perception (Senam et al., 2022). According to Sadaf (2011), perception can be defined as 'reality' in people's minds. This refers to a mindset and the corresponding actions people are likely to undertake as stimulated by the nature of the mass media content that they are exposed to. From a media perspective, McLeod et al. (2017) states that people's perceptions are often as a result of exposure to media content. The messages shared, and the manner in which they are put across directly affect the thoughts, feeling and attitudes the audience hold on patient rights and the health systems at large.

The perception formed by the mass media messages relies on media frames. The more the favorable the frames are the more the likelihood of them stimulating a desirable perception and the reverse is true. This means that people's perceptions are created through the media depending on the media content that they are exposed to. Overall, perception formation is dependent on the information acquired. The traditional as well as new media coverage provides an important source of image and perception formation among the general public (Bard, 2023). The process of opinion formation is two-fold, whereby the media can shape people's perception towards issues addressed in their content and perception formed towards the mass media itself as a communication tool. This shows the ability of the mass media to affect self, individuals and society at large (Tsfati & Cohen, 2012).

According to Bard (2023), mass media is a means through which information is disseminated to a heterogeneous audience, whereas perception formation is a psychological mindset or environment created by messages received which consequently affect the decisions made at individual and community levels. The perception created on patient rights based on mass media messages shared directly affect the processes undertaken at health facility levels. Macdonald (2011), states that perception is a driver of health actions undertaken and the respective health outcomes. Mass media assembles various content in order to attain the perception goal. In addition, various avenues of communication are used to transmit messages on cultural beliefs, values and attitudes with the aim of influencing people's perception (Achololu et al., 2021).

In the struggle to change people's perception on an issue, mass media practitioners should always note that perception is influenced by social class, gender, recent exposure and media preferences among other factors (McLeod et al., 2017). These factors can act as hindrances to perception formation processes. Some of the audience end up forming a perception over mass media messages not because of what they contain but because of what their culture, social class and gender dictates. This study sought to examine the influence of mass media messages on the perceptions held by residents of Mt. Elgon Sub-county of Bungoma County on patient rights.

### **1.1 Statement to the Problem**

Over 2 million deaths are reported annually resulting from patient harm. In Kenya, most of these cases are reported in public hospitals, unlike private hospitals. The violation is attributed to low literacy levels on patient rights which is more pronounced in rural and informal sectors in Kenya. This violation impact negatively on service delivery in health facilities. This is compounded by the scarcity of information in the public domain concerning patients' rights. While deaths are being reported due to violation of patient rights, the mass media activities to create a desirable perception on the patient rights are yet to be exhaustively explored. In addition, most of the studies conducted have focused on this issue from the health and policy perspectives ignoring the health communication angle. This study sought to find out the influence of mass media messages on perception created in the minds of the target audience regarding patient rights.

### **1.2 Research Objective**

The research objective of this study was to determine the influence of mass media messages on patient rights perception among residents of Bungoma County Kenya.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

#### 2.1.1 Agenda Setting Theory

This study was underpinned by the Agenda Setting Theory and the Diffusion of Innovation Theory. The theories complement one another to interrogate the phenomenon under study.

#### 2.2.1 The Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting Theory of the mass media express the role of the mass media in setting certain images in the minds of the public. The theory was postulated by Lippmann in 1922 and popularized by McCombs and Shaw in 1972. The theory holds that the mass media has the capacity to set three agendas: public agenda, media agenda and policy agenda (Rogers and Dearing, 1988).

According to Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), media messages can be repeated to create a construct in the memory of the target audience hence efficiency of a communication exercise.

Luo et al. (2019), observe that media are the primary message mediators that shape the public's perception of the world. McCombs and Shaw (2014), concur that the mass media can impose on public opinion over certain issues. Consequently, topics covered by the mass media are perceived to be the most important and can influence people's perception. The power of the mass media in creating awareness among the mass audience is emphasized by Prior (2013), and Protes and McCombs (2016), who state that despite their being alternative sources of information, news media are still the major avenues for most information about the outside environment to be learnt. However, the theory doesn't show a clear cut difference on the magnitude of influence of the mass media among rural and urban audience presenting the need to examine, the influence of the media messages on perception regarding patient rights among rural dwellers as investigated in this study.

#### 2.1.2 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

The theory was postulated by Everett Rogers in his book titled; Diffusion of Innovations (1962) in the diffusion of innovation theory, the steps of diffusion are identified as: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation (Halton, 2023). The theory related to this study in the following ways: The knowledge highlighted in the theory can be translated to mean the mass media awareness created on patient rights; the persuasion relates to the perception created through the mass media messages on patient rights within the study area whereas the implementation refers to application of the mass media messages as the study investigated.

The theory also supports the methodological approach employed in the study. As noted by Lacy and Tandberg, (2014), policy analysis should include multiple methods of analysis in order to yield the best understanding of a given policy. In this consideration, the study will adopt both the national interaction model as well as the regional diffusion model. The two models of diffusion of innovation recognize that both national and regional communication networks are necessary in disseminating information on a new idea such as patient rights.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

Several researchers have revealed that the media has power to create either positive or negative perceptions on various issues in the society. According to Acholonu et al. (2021), in their study to establish audience perception of mass media's role in Entrepreneurial education in South-East Nigeria through a survey, established that the mass media has the potential to promote entrepreneur education at 38%. This poses questions regarding the extent of media influence of perceptions in other areas such as human rights communication and health communication.

Further, according to Choi (2021), in a questionnaire-guided survey on the influence of mass media content use and personal characteristics on the perception of marriage among university students, mass media messages can create a desired perception if delivered through the right media channel. The study concluded that the mass media had a direct influence on the attitudes, opinions and thoughts of members of a society on the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance. Although, this study interrogated the power of mass media messaging in creating the perception, it is not known whether the same can said of media's power to shape perceptions towards patient rights.

Mass media not only aids people in forming favorable perceptions to change but can also mobilize and empower people through the messages disseminated in various levels of human endeavor. In their panel survey on the combined effects of mass media and social media on political perceptions and preferences, Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2019), analyzed the content of five leading national newspapers and two TV stations in Dutch. The study established that newspaper and TV content has strong effects on political perceptions and preferences even when content shared is controlled. The study further noted that perception is created among the audience and is dictated by; individual media exposure, frequency and specific news. These findings emphasize that the media does not create a perception automatically and that media exposure plays a big role. In the current study, there is need to go beyond media exposure and ascertain the extent to

which such media contributes to formation of perceptions regarding patients' rights since the perception created is dependent on the audience's choices of media.

However, caution should be taken on the nature of messages disseminated through the mass media if the desired perception has to be achieved. According to Kagunda (2020), a review of the critical role of mass media in promoting mental health for the realization of Kenya's Vision 2030, the study established that media frames and classifications of messages, affect the perception created on people with mental illnesses. The study illustrates that some frames project persons with mental illnesses as violent or tragic, thereby hampering the treatment and recovery efforts. In addition, lack of appropriate and adequate mass media messages on an issue affecting society can lead to doggedness of the issue. Such kind of framing may have a great bearing on the resultant perception even in other studies, including the current study on patient rights.

Guusu (2019) posits that traditional mass media such as radio, television and print media messages can influence the behaviour of a large number of people's and their values in a way that can enhance their health. In the study targeting to understand the impact of effective communication with use of radio to create awareness about the Nigerian power sector which adopted a case study approach, the use of different media can influence people in various ways. However, its ability to stimulate discussions leading to perception formation at community level still needs to be tackled.

Similarly, Torloni et al. (2020) through a systematic review study on mass media campaigns to reduce unnecessary caesarean section, concurs that for mass media to cause any significant changes on behavior change, which is a mark of positive perception created among audiences on an issue, campaigns need to be designed and carried to a sufficient scale and intensity. This reinforces that media messages have to be repeated to create a desired impact on their audience. Further, the study notes that mass media can be very successful in raising awareness among the public. This could be a hindrance to creating the desired perception because being aware does not guarantee knowledge and any perception created by only being aware can be biased hence perception bias.

On matters of health the mass media messages have greatly contributed to knowledge and attitude and behaviour change. According to Quattrin et al. (2015), in their review of media content spreading over 15 years on health promotion campaigns and mass media; looking for evidence, conducted in Italy, the power of mass media and more especially Computer related platforms and new media, is definitive. However, the study cautions that the audience segment in terms of age contributed to how messages from media platforms were consumed. The current study sought to unearth the relationship between audience demographics and the perception formed on patient rights. Thus, in mass media messaging the demographics of the audience in terms of age, sex, gender and even level of education should be factored for efficiency.

In another study conducted to determine the impact of mass media exposure to messages on chronic illnesses and uptake of screening conducted across three cities in Ghana, it was established that increased exposure to mass media campaign messages on non-communicable diseases commonly known as chronic illnesses, stimulated an increase in the uptake of screening. In addition, the study gathered that the mass media use improved people's awareness levels (Konkor et al., 2024). The current study pursued to expose the significant impact mass media creates in changing people's perception to allow for demand for health services of any form as patient right direct.

It is also notable that the mass media may fail to create the desired perception in the stakeholders as well as the public by providing fewer solutions to issues on patient rights. According to Mwangi (2018) a study on media influence on policy in Kenya; the case of illicit brew, the content analyzed of two leading newspapers in Kenya between 2005 and 2015, it was demonstrated that intense, congruent and evidence driven media content directly influenced government action on related policy enactment but failed to provide solutions required on the issue. The current study aimed to understand the solutions provided in messaging on patient rights that lead to perception created.

Another study examining the role of mass media in promoting national cohesion; a case of Marsabit county, (Guyo, 2013), found out that objective reporting of the mass media will de-escalate conflict. Though the study noted that the media had not provided adequate coverage on conflict issues at Marsabit County. This study exposes the magnitude of media coverage on patient rights to spur a favourable mindset.

Thin mass media coverage can be affected by some factors such as resource availability, time constraints, and ideological as well as cultural factors (Harcup & O'neill, 2017). Thus, as Liao (2023) opines, the mass media should provide the public with appropriate messages on critical issues. Similarly, the current study aimed to interrogate how the media's generation of a favorable discourse in the public sphere affects the perception formed regarding patients' rights. Moreover, according to Rube (2021), the perception created by mass media messages is strongly affected by the perceptions of journalists; who they are, and their perception towards their work. This means there are a number of factors that build up what is called 'perception', hence the need for more research on perception.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study focused on Mt. Elgon sub-county which represents a rural sub-county faced with political, economic and social challenges as stated in Bungoma County Integrated Development Plan (BCIDP), 2018-2022). The county has a shortage of quality health facilities with a high percentage of its residents up to 48.4% living within 5 km and more from a health facility. Only 8.6% reside within a distance of 0-1km from the health facilities. In addition, the county is experiencing an emergence of Zoonotic epidemics due to unprecedented ecological changes and a reduction in natural ecosystems and biodiversity (Bungoma County Integrated Development Plan (BCIDP), 2013- 2017). The study was conducted in the Kaptama and Chemoge sub location which have got the highest numbers of households (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019)).

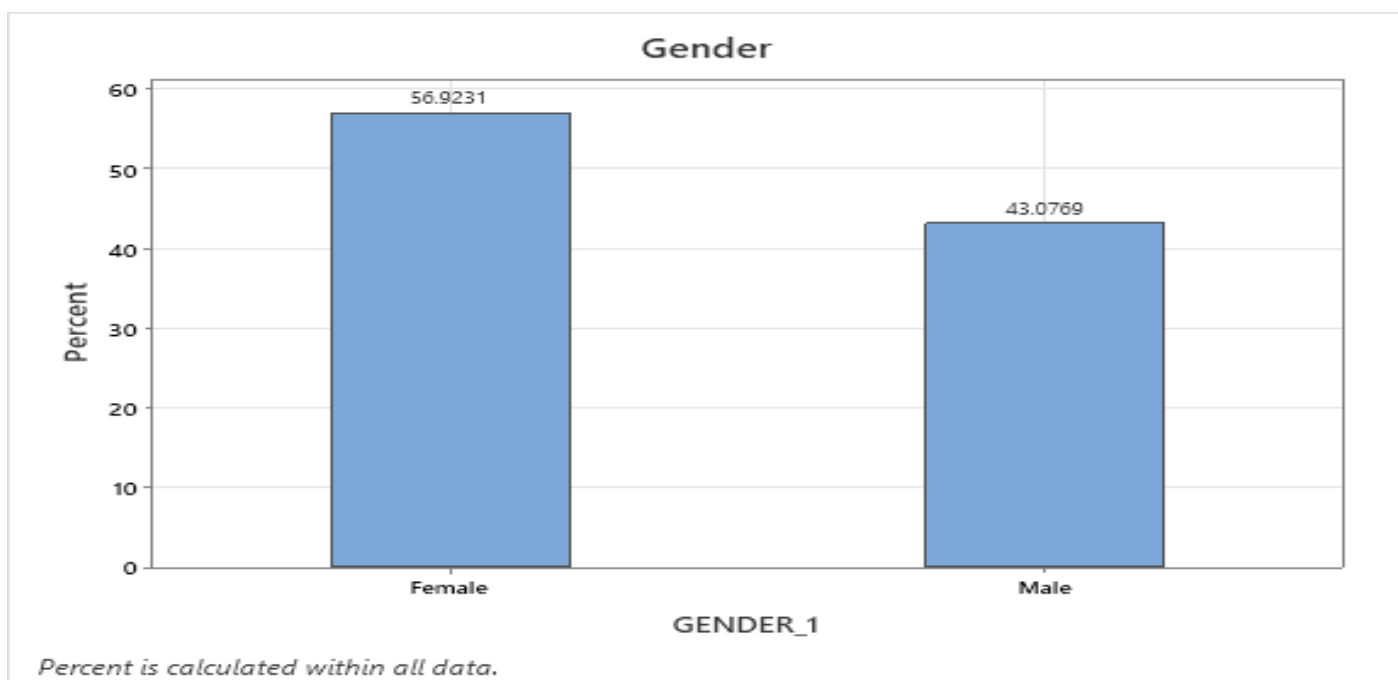
The study adopted the exploratory sequential design of the mixed methods approach which utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The study involved residents of Mt. Elgon, health policy makers/implementers and media practitioners/journalists with a bias in health reporting. In the two sub locations identified, the total population of residents is 13,104 persons of which a sample size of 130 adult residents was randomly selected to participate in the study representing 10% of the population (Mugenda and Mugenda 2003). 6 health journalists were selected from 6 leading media houses as per the rating of Geopoll in 2022 (Murunga, 2022). 2 policy makers were also purposively selected to participate in the study. The tools used in this study included: a questionnaire for adult residents of Mt. Elgon, a focus group discussion schedule for focus groups consisting of adult residents of Mt. Elgon sub-county, and two interview guides tailored to policy experts and media practitioners. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically along identified themes whereas quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, mode and mean).

### IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

#### 4.1 Response Rate

The return rate for all instruments used was 100%.

##### 4.1.1 Gender of Respondents



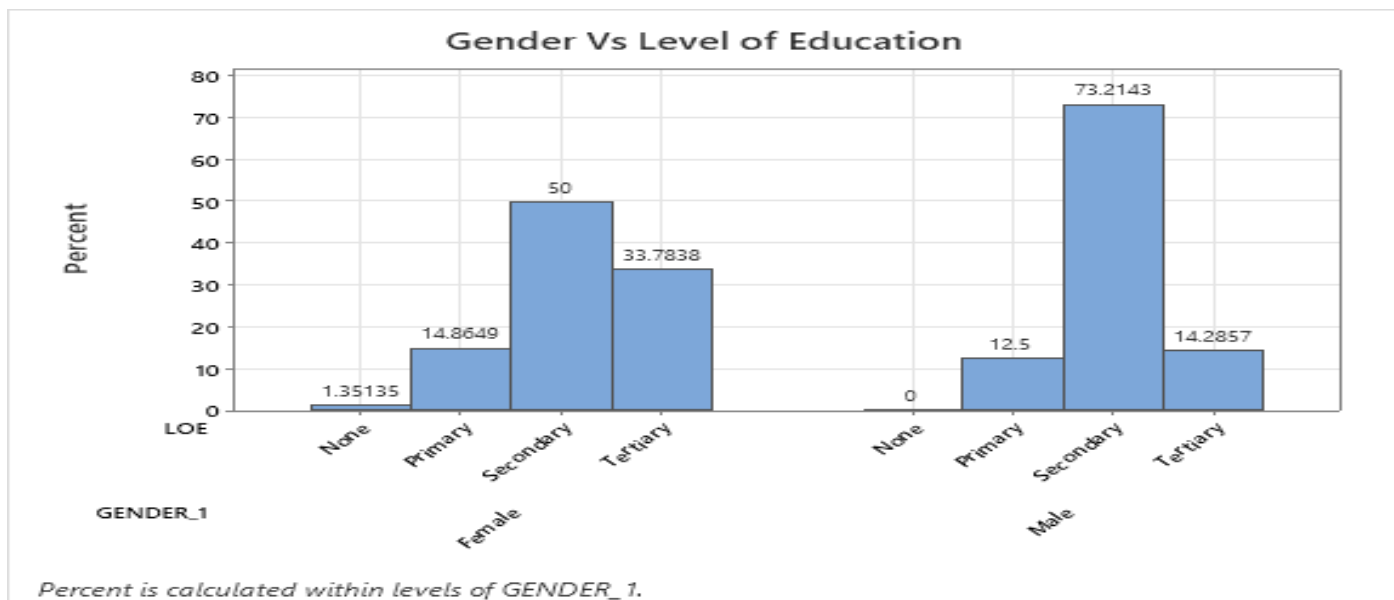
**Figure 1**

*Gender of the Respondents*

As shown in the graph in Figure 1 above, most of the respondents were female rated at 56.9% whereas male respondents accounted for 43.1%. This can be attributed to the time of the day the research was conducted and the willingness of the respondents to participate in the study. This finding confirms the societal role of women as caregivers

and that in most cases, women are the ones who seek medical services for themselves and for other members of their respective families. This finding agrees with Ruiz and Nicolas (2018), that caregiving is a responsibility that is assumed naturally by women who perceive it as their role.

#### 4.1.2 Level of Education of Respondents



**Figure 2**  
*Gender Versus Level of Education*

In terms of the level of education, most of the respondents had attained secondary education which registered 50% and 73% for both female and male respondents respectively. Those without education at all registered 1.3% notable in females. Primary level education was rated at 14.86% in females in comparison to male who recorded a rate of 12.5%. More women have got tertiary education as compared to men rated at 33.8% against 14.2% in both female and male respectively. In addition, male respondents had some level of education whereas 1.3% of female respondents recorded lack of education. The fact that most of the respondents have got secondary education shows their high ability to receive and interpret mass media messages disseminated to them on patient rights. However, the ability to interpret messages correctly is not only dependent on the level of education of the targeted audience but it can be influence by other internal and external factors. According to Oliver and Raney (2023), the audience attitude, mood and other unpredictable external factors can interfere with message evaluation processes.

#### 4.1.1 Perception Created by Mass Media Messages on Patient Rights

This particular section explored the following indicators of a favorable perception towards patient rights attainment as communicated through the mass media. These included the ability to have a changed mindset towards health services and practitioners as well as erosion of people’s fear towards health services and practitioners. In addition, the researcher analyzed the participants’ openness while engaging with health practitioners and the ability and readiness to demand for health services as shown in Table 1 below. Using a Likert scale (6 point) was used.

**Table 1**  
*The Audience Perception Created Based on Patient Rights Messages Disseminated*

Variable	Mean	Sum	Mode	N for Mode	Skewness
Mass media messages have changed my perception towards health care	3.915	509.000	5	52	-0.56
The messages have helped in erasing my fear in seeking medical services	3.754	488.000	4	58	-0.69
They have improved my openness with practitioners	3.769	490.000	5	56	-0.52
They have empowered me to demand for medical services	3.254	423.000	4	51	-0.37

The findings in Table 1 above depict a persistent mode of 5 in the ability of the messages to change the general perception of patient rights and the ability of the mass media to realize openness among patients seeking health services in their respective health centers. The mode of 5 is used to mean or denote a strong disagreement that mass media messages have influenced a given and favorable perception towards the rights of patients. Two of the remaining indicators that is, the ability of the messages to erase fear of the targeted audience about health practitioners and their ability to demand for services registered a 4-denoting disagreement. None of the four indicators received approval.

Further, the persistent mean of the four indicators was 3.7 rounded off to 4 depicting disagreement. The ability of the messages to create a general changed perception recorded the highest mean rated at 3.915, while the ability of the respondents to seek medical services anytime need arises recorded a mean of 3.2 depicting partial agreement. This means that only a section of the respondents agreed that they are always willing to seek medical services while almost a similar number disagreed.

In separate focus group discussions with 12 adult residents of the Mt. Elgon region of mixed gender on the perception created on patient rights and improved knowledge on patient rights. The themes explored were: change of mindset/perception, openness and interaction with health practitioners, erosion of fear, and willingness to uptake medical services as well as the ability to demand for health services at any health facility within the locality. The responses were as follows:

### Excerpt 1

Discussant 1: *I greatly agree that we get a lot of information through the mass media, our radio and television stations educate us on many aspects. But on this one, I can say I am yet to be informed. However, the media has done so well in educating us on various diseases.*

Discussant 2: *I know my rights as a patient. However, I fault the mass media for not doing much on this issue. Most people in this area are not educated on their rights. The time spend to play music should be dedicated to such crucial issues to eliminate cases where patients are mishandled by nurses.*

Discussant 3: *Let me assure you that even when you know your rights you can't demand for them from the nurse or doctors who are attending to you. They can overdose you or misdiagnose you to get rid of any evidence on patient harm allegations in order to protect their jobs.*

Discussant 4: *For me, I stopped going to hospitals, I buy my medicine from chemists. Those young girls and boys in the name of nurses and doctors are shameless. One of them sometimes back instructed me as old as I am, I deserve to be her father, 'take off your trousers, I want to inject you.' I left that hospital and I have never gone to any hospital for medication.*

Discussant 5: *On this one, I think the media people did so well during COVID-19 time. They kept us updated on what was happening here in our country and all over the globe. Their messages both scared and instilled hope, they were both hot and cold.*

Discussant 6: *When you visit hospitals, you can't make demands. Remember you are in pain and at the mercy of the doctors. If you start making demands, they may end up ignoring you. I assure you; you will leave that hospital in a casket when it would have been avoided, had it been that you acted ignorant of your rights.*

### Excerpt 2

Discussant 1: *I don't know what to answer on this question. But I can tell you that the media is more focused on political issues as well as matters of economy. No media house is talking about health issues. Maybe if another strange disease breaks out.*

Discussant 2: *They have informed us of everything happening in the health sector such as the introduction of new community health workers. The CHVs will have a direct impact on the numbers of those visiting health facilities, we are expecting the numbers to decline because CHVs will be attending to minor ailments.*

Discussant 3: *Media messages have enabled me to know my rights and I normally interact with health practitioners freely knowing that I am protected by law.*

Discussant 4: *Let me correct my brother because he has lied on this, in our country rights are just formulated to favor the haves. You can imagine a journalist has told you that you deserve ABC, D...when you visit a health facility but those journalists do not go to public hospitals for treatment. If you demand for the ABCDs as advised by a journalist while being attended to in public hospitals with long queues. You can imagine what will befall you.*

*Discussant 5: They have shared my mind. No rights for common citizens whether the media focuses on them or not*

*Discussant 6: I don't want to comment but let me say that issues to do with rights are very delicate and have to be approached with a lot of care.*

The views discussed during the focus group discussions above confirm that the audience studied still live in fear of medical practitioners that if they make demands relating to their rights, they are likely to be harmed. This is more applicable in public health facilities as shared by discussant 4 in excerpt 2. Further, there is a thought that journalists' words are not always trusted. This is because of the feeling that journalists do not belong to the same class as the respondents. This is brought out by discussant 4 in excerpt 2 and discussant 3 in excerpt 1 who expressed fear of confronting a health practitioner when one's rights are violated and when one demands for better services. They claim that health practitioners are likely to harm them if they make such demands and the health practitioners attending to them feel that their job is at risk. However, a majority agreed that they are not educated about the said rights and this is because the media especially the broadcast media, is presumed to be spending much time running entertainment programs as opposed to educative programs. Moreover, some, for instance, discussant 5 in excerpt 2, think that rights are unattainable and this shows the willingness of such a people to forgo their rights.

Further, separate interviews with media practitioners registered mixed reactions on the perception formed regarding patient rights through the messages disseminated as shown below:

### **Excerpt 3**

*Response 8: Our messages on the plight of patients have been able to influence both the general public and the government. My story on a pregnant woman who is living with a disability struggling to climb up the staircase on her way to the maternity wing of one of the hospitals in our county compelled the hospital management to make structural adjustments to the facility. The hospital constructed a ramp and adjustable beds.*

*Response 9: I have created a positive perception because I focus on solution journalism. For every story that I file, I provide remedies, 'what needs to be done to correct the situation.'*

*Response 10: Our messages have impacted legislation. Millie Odhiambo's reproductive health bill is based on very many stories that we file on reproductive health issues. I also trust that some other bills are being formulated at the county level based on our journalist work.*

*Response 11: Government interventions are mostly determined by the stories that we write. The delivery of drugs and services in health facilities has improved in areas where the media has kept a keen eye on health processes.*

The responses 8-11 above, show the confidence journalists have in the messages that they disseminate and in particular on patient rights. They make proclamations that their messages have not only influenced their audience but also government legislation. In addition, their stories have had a general impact in the transformation of the health sector through infrastructural developments.

### **4.2 Discussions**

Based on the study findings documented above patient rights issues and knowledge are still elusive. This is because most respondents were unable to respond correctly on the issue of the perception formed on patient rights depending on the mass media messages; they have been exposed to on the topic. Instead, most of the discussants in excerpts 1 and 2 shared their personalized opinions on mass media activities. Discussant 5 in excerpt 1 and discussant 2 in excerpt 2 gave their general observation of how the media has failed them in sharing messages on health. The mass media has educated the public on various diseases such as COVID-19 (Nyarko, & Serwornoo, 2022).

According to the statistics recorded in Table 1, the respondents, who are also the targeted audience with mass media messages, registered a strong disagreement denoted by a mode of 5 on the ability of the mass media messages on patient rights to change their general perception on patient rights matters (Cohen et al., 2021). The same is replicated in the ability of the mass media messages on patient rights to result in improved openness of patients towards health practitioners. In addition, a high disagreement was also recorded on the ability of mass media messages to erase fear among patients on probable mistreatment from health practitioners and the potential of patients to demand services from health practitioners denoted by a mode of 4.

In addition, the discussants in excerpts 1 and 2 show a void the media is yet to fill on matters of patient rights. The discussants registered mixed feelings on the perception that they have formed on patient rights based on mass media



messages disseminated to them. Discussants 1 and 5 in excerpt 1 indicate that the mass media messages disseminated have enabled increased general knowledge on general health issues. Further, Discussant 2 in excerpt 2 faults the mass media for the low awareness levels of patient rights issues. The discussants observed that the mass media has keenly focused on emerging issues such as political and economic issues. This shows that the media qualifies its content by the media factor of immediacy. This affects the nature of content disseminated whereby the media tend to just inform than to educate, leaving the audience with thin or no information on the subject. Acholonu et al. (2021) agree that content has to be suitable enough to attain the desired impact and favorable perception.

Further, discussants 4 and 6 as well as discussants 4,5 and 6 in excerpts 1 and 2 respectively show that a patient's knowledge of his rights does not guarantee upholding of the same by the health practitioners but it increases caution taken by patients to enable them receive the desired attention from health practitioners. It also reveals the lines of interpretation of mass media messages on patient rights. Some audiences believe that messages on patient rights are only applicable to the section of the audience that does not receive medical attention from public hospitals. This depicts that there is no uniform interpretation and perception on patient rights issues. This confirms Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2019) study who indicate that perception is dependent on not only the frequency of communication, but also the specific information shared. This shows the power of content as a determinant of the perception formed. To create a uniform perception, journalists need to close the gaps of interpretation by understanding that their audiences are heterogeneous and strive to attain homogenous interpretation among the heterogeneous audiences.

In addition, responses from journalists interviewed contradicted those of members of the public presented in excerpts 1 and 2. Journalists believe that their messages on the violation of patient rights have enlisted action from stakeholders and more specifically the government through legislation, structural adjustments and improved supply of medicine as highlighted in excerpts 3, responses 8 to 11. However, journalists failed to show their specific efforts to run educational programs on specific patient rights and the charter in general. Yet patients' rights are part and parcel of the universal human rights (The United Nations, 2015). This emphasizes the fact that news is the only major media format that journalists use to articulate health and patient rights violation issues. Moreover, journalists focus more on appealing to authorities than improving the knowledge levels of their audience in general.

The level of trust in the practicability of mass media messages is another factor that has greatly affected the audience perception formed on various issues affecting society as addressed by the mass media. The responses by discussants 4 and 5 in excerpt 1 are an indicator of mistrust of journalistic messages and a high level of despondency in the media audience. This is caused by how mass media messages are not only perceived but by the existence of various socioeconomic classes among societies. These findings agree with Sadaf (2011), and Acholou et al. (2021), who state that social, political and economic factors affect people's perceptions and not necessarily mass media messages. The respondent agrees with what journalists may be sharing concerning patient rights but reveals that the systems of implementation of those messages are not available in public health facilities.

These findings agree and disagree with the tenets of the agenda-setting theory of the mass media. As per the findings of this study the media agenda has failed to conform to the public agenda. This has diluted the ultimate power of the mass media to influence audience perception as well as behavior. As noted by Fortunato and Martin (2016), repeated exposure to specific messages through the mass media has to be coupled with the framing of topics in order to influence its audience. Thus, organizations and individuals working towards improving audience perception of patient rights should strive to adjust messages shared and message distribution strategies in order to influence their audience.

The despondency on the attainment of patient rights registered by some of the respondents and discussants of this study challenges the media to adopt appropriate and varied media formats other than news. This means, the media should shift from the news agenda and focus on the public agenda to disseminate messages that are targeted towards changing people's behavior (Weaver, 2007; Fortunato and Martin, 2016). This implies that the mass media should align their content with public agenda to succeed at framing of issues.

Further, the findings also dispute the power of the news genre in creating a favorable perception. Considering that the findings of this study show that news was or has been predominantly used in addressing health and patient rights issues with little or no significant impact recorded, the media practitioners and other stakeholders involved in changing perceptions regarding patients' rights should change tact. This is supported by Gao et al. (2022) who argues that targeted promotional or advertising messages can serve well if used alongside news to influence the agenda-setting process.

## V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusions

In summary, these findings show the existence of a complex relationship between the mass media's opinion set and the audience perception held. The fact that mass media messages disseminated on patient rights have not attained

the desired perception show lack of working interconnectivity between the mass media agenda and the public agenda. There is a disconnect between what the mass media messages disseminated aim to achieve and the actual perception created.

## 5.2 Recommendations

The mass media should strive to create a favorable perception of patient rights among its target audience in the study area. For this to be attained, the media need to work on several issues: personal factors that can be a hindrance to media messages and build trust of media messages among its targets.

Besides, media practitioners and journalists should move away from sending general messages when addressing patient rights issues. This is because journalists have the power to set an agenda through the way they define problems and interpret their causes, treatment and evaluation. Consequently, journalists need to single out messages on patient rights from general reportage to increase their visibility and hence attain the desired perception from the media audience.

In addition, the mass media ought to be consistent while disseminating messages on patient rights. The media should disseminate corresponding messages on patient rights of all forms to win the confidence of the mass audience. This is because media messages are treated with much seriousness if the same messages are carried across various forms of media portraying a variety of content and formats (Fortunato and Martin, 2016).

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