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Media Representation of Youth (-Driven) Innovation Initiatives in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Youth (-driven) innovation has emerged as a topic of significant debate in recent times, reflecting the dynamic role that young people play in driving societal progress. Despite their noteworthy contributions, these innovations often fail to garner adequate attention within the media landscape. This study seeks to explore the coverage of youth innovation in the Kenyan media, with a particular focus on understanding what types of innovations receive the most attention. Using a qualitative content analysis approach and discourse analysis, this study examines how the Daily Nation and the Standard Digital portray youth-driven innovations. By analysing media representation, the research aims to unveil the underlying factors influencing the visibility and portrayal of youth-driven innovations. Through this investigation, the study finds that reporting youth innovation in the context of political influence is downplayed in the media, and much of the prominence is given to economic empowerment and job creation, with less focus on environmental and climate sustainability issues. Young people face challenges ranging from economic hardships to poverty and therefore prioritise the basic need for food over civic engagement. They are also being targeted through digital content monetisation. The youth are defying conventional stereotypes by exhibiting higher risk tolerance and prudent financial habits. The study recommends that the media promote youth innovation equally and minimize biases towards youth and political influences. This will help in understanding societal perceptions that shape narratives around youth innovation, ultimately enhancing awareness of young innovators' roles in Kenya's socio-economic development.

KEYWORDS

youth; gender; representation; socio-economic; youth (-driven) innovation

Introduction

In recent times, youth (-driven) innovation has emerged as a crucial topic. These innovations refer to creative, technology-driven, or entrepreneurial solutions initiated and spearheaded by young people to address societal challenges. In Kenya, initiatives like the *M-Pesa mobile money revolution*, the *Ajira Digital Program*, and numerous agritech solutions reflect the transformative potential of youth in innovation (Ashoka 2023; Ibau 2023). Despite playing a significant role in a country's progress, their initiatives often remain unnoticed, leaving their contributions to society unexplored (AfriLabs 2023).

Although the media, especially mainstream media, have attempted to highlight innovation issues concerning youth (Asthana 2006), there is still a lack of concrete information on how they are portrayed. Youth innovation plays a critical role in addressing national development challenges such as unemployment, food insecurity, and climate change (Kabari 2024). Projects like these highlight the potential of youth-driven innovation in Kenya and the importance of media coverage in amplifying their impact and actively contributing to national development by highlighting both success stories and challenges (Ibau 2023).

Media representation plays an important role in studying innovation, as it pertains to how the media portrays events, issues and ideas related to various groups or individuals (Wasserman 2014). This representation significantly influences public perception, shaping societal norms and affecting people's understanding of innovation. It also contributes to shaping attitudes towards technological advancements and their implications for society. Moreover, these media portrayals can sway government policies regarding funding allocation and overall public support for technological development and scientific research (Happer and Philo 2013). With the rapid growth of digital platforms and increased innovation in technology—such as mobile money, agri-tech, and fintech—the way these advancements are represented in the media becomes even more critical (KCDF 2023; Kenya Vision 2030 n.d.). For instance, major newspapers have primarily featured youth in crime reports or unemployment statistics (Hall 2017), as well as portraying them in problematic ways—as passive recipients of aid, perpetrators of violence, or victims of social problems (Kabala 2019; Titley 2004); and less than 15 per cent of youth-related stories present young people as active agents of positive change (KIPPRA 2024). These findings are echoed by the African Media Barometer Kenya report highlighting that youth voices appear in less than 30 per cent of stories directly affecting young people (Santos 2021). Furthermore, youth voices in mainstream media have consistently been underrepresented (Gallagher, Coelho, and Evans 2011), and despite youths comprising about 75 per cent of Kenya's population, youth-related stories accounted for only 28 per cent of media coverage (Media Council of Kenya 2021).

Globally, the media's representation of innovation remains an important discourse, as seen in discussions surrounding climate, artificial intelligence (AI) and digital transformation. These narratives often oscillate between utopian promises and dystopian fears, which influence public understanding and policymaking, ultimately impacting global markets and international cooperation. Specifically in Kenya, innovations like M-Pesa have received significant media attention (Ngugi and Komo 2017; Vandenberg 2020). The portrayal of such innovation has evolved from scepticism to admiration, reflecting its societal and economic impact and consequently affecting public trust and adoption rates.

Youth innovation projects align with broader development goals such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Bastien and Holmarsdottir 2017). Governments in Africa are facing several critical challenges due to disrupted education systems, reduced access to essential goods and services, increased poverty, food insecurity, and exposure to violence, abuse and exploitation (United Nations 2023). These challenges have exposed weaknesses in the socio-economic system that must be addressed. Young people, who make up about 65 per cent of Africa's population, have shown a strong willingness to lead the way in the continent's economic recovery efforts (Winstead and Wells 2022). Many young people, for instance,

have played an active role in fighting COVID-19 by volunteering in essential services, while others are continuously innovating to meet the emerging demands for essential products (Diepeveen and Phiona 2021). Young entrepreneurs make a difference in their local communities by using sustainable practices, creating eco-friendly products and services, and developing innovative green technologies. They are also finding solutions to challenges faced by their communities, based on evidence and research. Youth-led enterprises are making significant efforts to scale up their innovations and access the necessary resources and opportunities to take their solutions to the next level.

However, they often encounter obstacles such as limited access to funding and marketplaces, lack of industry experience, and regulatory barriers (AfriLabs 2023). These enterprises have the potential to drive sustainable transformations in food systems, create employment opportunities in urban and peri-urban areas, and tackle the urgent need for climate action. This is particularly critical in an era where climate action is of utmost importance, food security remains a global challenge, and urbanisation trends are on the rise.

Young people today are showcasing impressive innovation and resilience in various fields, such as AI, renewable energy, fintech, and sustainability. They use AI to improve healthcare, create renewable energy solutions, and revolutionise e-commerce and online marketplaces (Kidmose 2024). They are also taking the lead in addressing environmental issues by developing sustainable solutions. Furthermore, youth innovation in Kenya is deeply influenced by neoliberal discourses, which promote entrepreneurship as a solution to social and economic challenges. However, these discourses often overlook the systemic inequalities that shape who has access to the resources necessary for innovation (Africa Woman and Child Feature Service 2013). As the paper will discuss, media representations of youth innovation can either reinforce or challenge these neoliberal ideologies, depending on the narratives they emphasise.

However, their journey is not without challenges. To enable these future leaders to achieve their goals, the public and private sectors must work together. Targeted funding, mentorship opportunities, streamlined regulatory processes, enhanced market access, and media coverage can all help these enterprises thrive. By putting these measures in place, we can ensure that emerging leaders not only succeed but also drive sustainable and impactful change in our communities. The challenge is to encourage young people to increase their contributions to the African recovery agenda by spearheading a network of local catalytic solutions, supported by regional advocacy and policy influencing (African Union 2015). On the other hand, media plays a crucial role in bringing youth innovations to the forefront and providing a platform for the younger generation to voice their concerns. It is essential to recognise the numerous advantages of investing in youth-led enterprises, given the dynamic nature of their ventures. Kenya's media landscape has allowed the youth to voice their concerns and share their innovation with the public. It is important therefore to examine what the media landscape looks like and how it represents youth-led innovations in Kenya.

The print and digital media landscape, economic narratives and youth-led innovations

Media in Kenya is vibrant, including a diverse range of platforms such as print, broadcast, and digital media. The print media is well established, with a variety of daily and weekly

newspapers in circulation in English and Kiswahili. Two leading newspapers dominate this field: the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital*, which cover national and international news, business, sports and entertainment (Kibuacha 2024). The *Daily Nation* has an average daily readership of approximately 4 379 400, which gives it a market share of 40 per cent. Following behind is the *Standard Digital*, with around 2 223 500 daily readers and a 20 per cent market share. While these newspapers have significant reach, there has been a noticeable decline in circulation figures over the years. In comparison, other newspapers such as *Taifa Leo* and *People Daily* have smaller shares, at 10 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively (Elliott 2015).

The Kenyan media landscape, like that of other African countries, is facing several challenges, including a decline in newspaper circulation, the rise of digital media, and various economic pressures (Mwita 2021). One significant factor contributing to the declining circulation of print newspapers is the shift to digital media. However, the impact of this transition on rural populations and those with limited access to digital resources is often overlooked (Batta et al. 2017). Newspapers such as the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital* are recognised for the quality of their content, but there is insufficient emphasis on how this quality translates into actual influence and engagement with readers. Furthermore, these newspapers are grappling with financial sustainability and issues concerning media freedom. This environment creates pressure to engage in self-censorship, preventing them from fully exploring innovative solutions or alternative business models. While the print media in Kenya plays a crucial role in informing the public about regional integration efforts (Oranga 2014), it often falls short in terms of comprehensive coverage and public engagement (Happer and Philo 2013).

Kenya's status as the "Silicon Savannah" has spurred considerable media focus on tech-driven youth innovations (UbuntuLife 2022). Initiatives like Ushahidi (a crisis-mapping tool) and Twiga Foods (an agritech solution) have received significant media attention (GSMA 2018; Rotich 2017). These stories depict youth as problem-solvers addressing issues such as food security, climate change and governance (FAO 2023). Addressing climate change is a critical global concern, and many youth-led projects in Kenya focus on environmental conservation, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture, particularly because climate change disproportionately impacts developing countries like Kenya.

Media coverage can amplify youth-led efforts, inspire replication and attract investment, but it can also misrepresent or undervalue their work. Kenyan media portrays youth-led innovation by focusing on technology, entrepreneurship and social innovation initiatives (Ngene et al. 2021). Social categories such as class, gender, ethnicity and geography shape the experiences of young innovators. For instance, young women entrepreneurs in rural Kenya face significant challenges, including limited access to financial capital, digital technology and market linkages. These challenges are often more pronounced compared to those of their male counterparts in urban areas (Mwobobia 2012; Pair et al. 2021).

While urban youth innovators in hubs like Nairobi and Mombasa are frequently featured, rural youth-led initiatives are often underrepresented. This imbalance highlights a disproportionate focus on tech startups (Ndemo and Weiss 2017), overlooking innovations in agriculture, education, and local problem-solving (FAO 2023). As a demographic that drives cultural trends, technological advancements and political discourse,

youth portrayal in media has profound implications for national identity, societal values and policy formulation (Ministry of Information, Communications and The Digital Economy 2023). The media often oscillates between portraying youth as agents of change and sources of societal instability (Mukhongo 2014).

Media reports often provide surface-level coverage of youth-led innovations, focusing on the “what” rather than the “how” and “why”. For example, platforms like Citizen TV and the *Standard Digital* report success stories but rarely explore systemic challenges such as limited funding, mentorship or market access (Angwenyi 2016). Youth-driven ingenuity is vital for achieving Kenya’s Vision 2030 and the SDGs (UNESCO 2023). However, representation in media often determines whether these innovations receive the visibility and support they require. Unlike their portrayal of youths themselves, youth-related coverage has increased but remains predominantly focused on education and unemployment (Winstead and Wells 2022). Youth voices were included in only 23 per cent of stories directly affecting them on television news. Additionally, only 15 per cent of innovation stories feature youth, with limited attention to rural areas (KeNIA 2022).

Conversely, content that celebrates youth achievements in entrepreneurship, technology, and the arts has increased. Media campaigns like *Young Rich*, *Lion’s Den*, *Africa’s Business Heroes*, and *Shark Tank Kenya* showcase young innovators, countering negative stereotypes and inspiring their peers (Heroes 2024). These programmes challenge stereotypes of youth as “job seekers”, instead framing them as “job creators”. However, Ndlela (2020) argues that youth innovators are often portrayed as exceptions, perpetuating a narrative that innovation is rare among young people.

The rise of digital media has profoundly affected youth representation in Kenya, with 87 per cent of young people accessing news through social media platforms. For example, as of June 2024, the number of mobile device connections had reached a penetration rate of 128.3 per cent. Additionally, smartphone penetration reached 68.3 per cent, indicating a shift towards more advanced mobile technology (Communication Authority of Kenya 2024). This shift has led to increased youth participation in online news production and social media journalism, enabling direct engagement in narrative creation (Media Council of Kenya 2021). Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram are increasingly utilised by Kenyan youth to showcase their work. Social media campaigns like #KenyanInnovation and #YouthInTech have enhanced visibility, allowing youth to share their stories without relying on traditional gatekeepers (Fin Tech 2023). However, algorithmic biases, misinformation and the digital divide continue to limit the full potential of these platforms (African Union 2024).

Kenyan youth are politically active, particularly during elections, yet their media representation often fails to capture the complexity of their engagement. Traditional media frequently overlooks youth voices in political debates, focusing instead on seasoned politicians (Nyabola 2018). Social media platforms have become arenas where youth express political opinions, organise activism and challenge dominant narratives. Campaigns like #iParticipate and #YouthAgenda exemplify how digital media amplifies youth agency. Despite youths comprising over 60 per cent of the voting population, youth political candidates received only 12 per cent of media coverage during the 2022 election period (INDI 2023), and this coverage often emphasises youth as political mobilisers rather than legitimate leadership candidates (Sloam and Henn 2019). During

election cycles, youth are often depicted as perpetrators of violence, a narrative that perpetuates fear and diminishes their credibility as stakeholders in democratic processes (Abdulai 2023). Youth-led digital initiatives have significantly changed political discourse and civic engagement (Ferroggiaro 2021). These initiatives empower young people to participate actively in political processes, advocate for social change, and engage meaningfully with their communities. For instance, digital platforms allow youth to organise campaigns, rally support for various causes, and hold leaders accountable. This transformation is especially important in regions where traditional forms of civic engagement are limited or inaccessible (Ambrosino 2023; Cho 2020).

Traditional media often depict youth in terms of unemployment and economic challenges (Camara, Banu, and Abeck 2023; Poyntz and Pedri 2018). While there is an increased focus on youth entrepreneurship and innovation, the coverage is often superficial (Youth Business International 2022). This superficial coverage can overlook critical aspects such as the need for sustainable funding, mentorship and market access. Blogs and digital platforms highlight youth in creative industries and agribusiness (Datta, Melchor, and Laclé 2023; SCALE 2023). Media representation of youth-led innovation significantly shapes public perceptions. Positive stories can inspire young people to pursue innovation and redefine their societal roles. Increased visibility often correlates with greater funding opportunities and heightened investor interest (iHub Kenya 2023). However, coverage of youth agricultural innovations is limited and predominantly focuses on tech-enabled farming solutions. Contemporary scholarship sheds light on the coverage of youth innovation, reflecting complex dynamics around equity, ethics and democratising technological change. Critically examining media representation is essential for fostering inclusive societal responses that appreciate youth innovations' transformative potential.

Situating media representation theory on youth-led innovation

Media representation theory was developed by Stuart Hall (Hall 1997) to explain how media portray individuals, groups and events, shaping public perception and societal norms. Hall argues that media construct reality through images, language and narratives, often reflecting and reinforcing power dynamics, ideologies and cultural values. Understanding how these portrayals can shape cultural narratives and affect identity is crucial, leading to either empowerment or perpetuation of stereotypes. The audience of the media can interpret media messages by accepting the intended meaning, partially accepting and modifying the meaning, or rejecting the intended meaning. Hall proposes four key issues in media representation: stereotyping; symbolic annihilation, which is the absence or misrepresentation of marginalised groups in media; media bias, which shows how news and entertainment favour certain narratives over others; and diversity and inclusion, where media should make an effort to provide more accurate and representative portrayals of different communities.

To understand the theory of media representation within the context of Kenyan media, it is important to recognise how youth-led innovations can be stereotyped in various ways. For instance, young innovators may be depicted as exceptionally talented or as struggling against overwhelming challenges including a lack of sufficient venture capital, coupled with high interest rates on loans, which limits their opportunities for

growth (Owillla 2025). These stereotypes can significantly influence public perception and either enhance or undermine the credibility of youth-led initiatives.

Furthermore, bias in media representation can manifest in the selection and framing of stories. Kenyan media can exhibit bias by focusing predominantly on successful youth-led innovations like the Kenya Film Commission and Nairobi Film Academy, which provide young creatives with the resources they need to succeed (Kenyan Chronicles 2025), while neglecting the challenges and failures that are also part of the innovation process. This selective representation can create an unrealistic picture of the innovation landscape and overlook the systemic issues that young innovators face. It is important to note that the framing involves the way information is presented to shape audience perception. In Kenyan media, this phenomenon is often observed when the media overemphasises certain issues while downplaying others that may be of great public importance. For instance, media can frame these innovations as solutions to national problems, like youth-led startups in the renewable energy sector, which are driving solar, wind and bioenergy projects that support small-scale farmers, particularly in rural areas where electricity access is limited (Sambuli 2014), emphasising their potential for economic growth and social change. Alternatively, they can frame them as isolated successes, disconnected from broader societal issues.

Additionally, Kenyan media can utilise signs and symbols to convey deeper meanings. These symbols can include elements such as tech hubs, modern gadgets and young entrepreneurs to represent youth-led innovations. By incorporating these symbols, the media can create a narrative of progress and modernity, which influences how audiences perceive the role of youth in driving innovation.

Furthermore, understanding the audience is crucial for effective media representation (Bailey 2025). Kenyan media must consider how different segments of the population view youth-led innovations. For instance, older generations may approach these innovations with scepticism, while younger audiences are likely to be more supportive and enthusiastic. Tailoring representations to resonate with diverse audiences can help bridge generational gaps and foster a more inclusive innovation ecosystem. Media institutions in Kenya play a significant role in shaping the representation of youth-led innovations. These institutions, influenced by economic, political, and cultural factors, determine what gets covered and how. Collaborations between media institutions and innovation hubs can ensure more accurate and supportive coverage of youth-led initiatives. By scrutinising these depictions, we can better understand innovation's societal impacts.

In light of this, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

What stories about innovative youth projects are prevalent in the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard*, and how do these stories shape public discourse on youth innovation?

How do the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital* media represent the challenges faced by youth innovation in Kenya?

Methods

The study employed discourse and content analysis to examine textual communicative content (Creswell and Creswell 2017) and purposively sampled two digital media in

Kenya, namely the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital*, between January 2020 and December 2023. This involved analysing how language is used in communication to construct meaning, social realities and power relations. These media are considered influential and market themselves as the most prominent in the country. The *Nation* proclaims “We are Nation. Africa’s #1 independent media brand”, while the *Standard Digital* asserts that they are “Kenya’s bold newspaper, since 1902”. The COVID-19 period was chosen because many youth innovations and initiatives emerged during the pandemic which accelerated these innovations due to factors like the shift to digital platforms and economic disruptions (Diepeveen and Phiona 2021). Kenya stands out due to its young and rapidly growing population, combined with a supportive environment for innovation. The country’s commitment to using technology for financial inclusion and its strategic initiatives to promote innovation make it an attractive option for investment and development (Innovation Agency 2023; Rayan 2024).

The study used Crowdtangle – a Facebook-designed data-scraping tool – to mine data from the media platform (CrowdTangle Team 2021). The two media outlets post their news on the Facebook platform and therefore the data obtained was mainly from Facebook posts of these media. To obtain data from the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital*, specific topics/words were searched and the Crowdtangle platform’s search dates were adjusted to match the study period. The study used a manual method to identify articles related to youth and youth innovation for content analysis. Crowdtangle provides output in the form of CSV files, which makes it easier to work with the data. It is important also to note that other scholars have used this method when there are no specific tools or techniques to collect data (DeVito 2017; Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida 2013).

In addition, it was vital to clean the data; this was done by going through the data corpus to find out which cells were missing information and counter-checking the subsequent cells to find the relevance of the information. If the information in the cell was not sufficient, the cell was deleted. After the process of cleaning the data, the study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select 315 articles from a total of 1 721 articles identified after data cleaning. The rationale for this selection was to ensure that only articles directly relevant to the research questions were included in the analysis. Specifically, the study focused on articles that explicitly used the term “youth”, “youth-led” or “innovation” in their headline or introduced their topic and lede with innovation-related stories. This approach was adopted to maintain thematic consistency and to ensure that the analysed content aligned with the study’s focus on youth innovation during the COVID-19 period.

The decision to narrow the sample to 315 articles was guided by the need to prioritise quality and relevance over quantity. By concentrating on articles that explicitly addressed innovation, the study aimed to capture meaningful insights into how youth innovation was represented in the selected media platforms. This sampling method also allowed for a more manageable and focused analysis, ensuring that the research remained within the scope of its objectives.

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, the study employed inter-coder reliability measures. A second coder was assigned 10 per cent of the dataset (32 articles) to independently code and verify the consistency of the emerging themes. The use of 10 per cent of the dataset for secondary coding was deemed sufficient to establish reliability while balancing the practical constraints of time and resources. This approach is consistent with established practices in qualitative research, where a subset of data is often used

for inter-coder reliability checks to ensure rigor without requiring the duplication of effort for the entire dataset (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2006; O'Connor and Joffe 2020). The inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, which yielded a score of 0.85, indicating a high level of agreement between the coders. This high level of agreement confirms the consistency and reliability of the coding framework and minimises the risk of personal bias influencing the results. The analysis also aimed to identify patterns, themes and the frequency of specific words, phrases or concepts within the text. These two methodologies provide an opportunity to explore deeper meanings and implications by coding the text into categories and systematically analysing it. After analysing the data, five major themes/topics were identified that were present throughout the entire data set. These themes are listed in Table 1.

Findings

This study aimed to investigate what stories about innovative youth projects are prevalent in the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital*, and how these stories shape public discourse on youth innovation as well as how these media represent the challenges faced by youth innovation in Kenya. Through a content analysis of articles posted on the digital platforms of two media outlets, five major themes were identified.

The prevalence of publishing stories about innovative youth

The importance of publishing stories about youth-led innovations cannot be overstated, as Figure 1 shows. By highlighting the creative and innovative ideas that young people are coming up with, we can inspire and motivate others to pursue their ideas and make a positive impact on the world. It is important that we recognise and celebrate the potential of the next generation, and by sharing their stories we can help to foster a culture of innovation and progress. The findings of this study show that *Nation Media Group* published 885 articles on issues related to youth and innovation—more than the *Standard Digital*, which produced 836 articles in the study period. The reason behind the *Nation* publishing more articles is because this media group organises youth innovation summits and other summits that attract youth to participate. The media's involvement in youth innovation projects may be part of its corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy aimed at enhancing its public image. Supporting youth aligns with socially responsible initiatives, fostering goodwill among stakeholders. This involvement enables the media to contribute to local socio-economic development, consistent with CSR principles that focus on giving back to the community. Additionally, it inspires employees and attracts younger audiences, creating a deeper connection between the brand and its audience. This approach reflects the media's strategic alliances with

Table 1. Table showing prevalent themes.

Prevalent theme	Number of articles
Political engagement and representation	484
Economic empowerment and job creation	462
Education, training and skill development	327
Innovation, technology and digital transformation	281
Environmental conservation and sustainability	167
Total	1 721

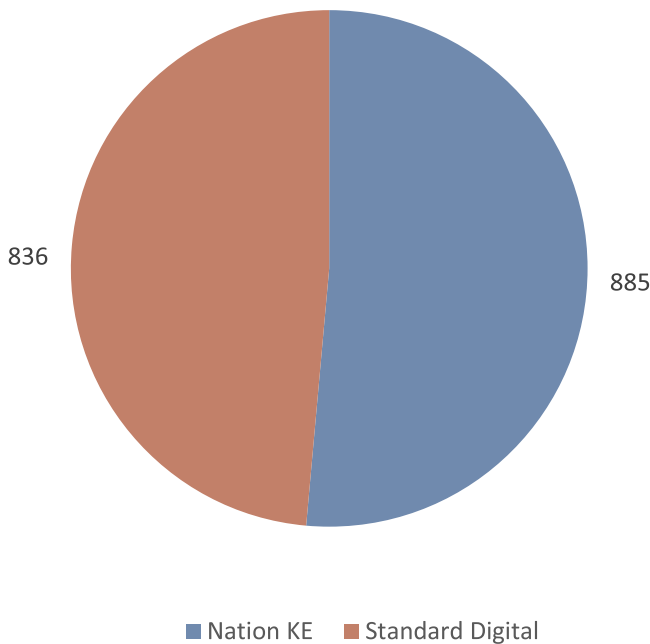


Figure 1. The prevalence of publishing stories about innovative youth.

corporations and government programmes designed to promote entrepreneurship and innovation among youth. Such partnerships can provide funding, technological resources and expanded networks that benefit both the media organisation and its partners. Furthermore, supporting youth initiatives aligns with national policies focused on innovation and economic empowerment, positioning the media as a strategic partner in achieving these goals.

Investing in youth innovation also addresses significant socio-economic challenges like unemployment and underemployment, contributing to social stability and economic growth. These strategies help establish the media as a thought leader, influencing policy and public opinion. Supporting youth-led innovations could create new business opportunities and market expansion, particularly if these innovations are media-related or require advertising and marketing support. Additionally, this involvement strengthens its relationships with policymakers and political leaders, enhancing its leverage and influence in key decision-making processes. In doing so, it is advantageous to cover these stories and articulate them through their platforms. The study found that #KusiFest2022 and #KusiFest2023 are hashtags used by the *Nation* to promote the Kusi Ideas Festival, which aims to promote themes like “When African Youth Get Behind the Wheel” and “Climate Change Narratives, and Mobilising Attention” among young people. For example, Magdalene is a young engineer who is leading the electric mobility revolution in Kenya, while Ms Karimot Odebode is a poet, writer and youth activist from Ibadan, Nigeria, and the founder of the Black Girl’s Dream Initiative—a youth-led feminist organisation.

On the other hand, the *Standard Digital* focuses on publishing articles that invite all African entrepreneurs to join Africa’s “Business Heroes” prize competition and showcase

their impact-driven innovations. Additionally, they promote the work of Heifer International which prioritises the AYuTe challenge. This challenge uncovers existing innovations within the African continent that have the potential to transform current agriculture practices. They also highlight #AGR20 and invest in young Africans whose innovations enable "millions of farmers to access the technology and resources they need to thrive".

Political engagement and representation

Figure 2 shows that both the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital* prioritised publishing stories about youth innovation that focused on political engagement and representation. Specifically, the *Daily Nation* published 234 such stories, while the *Standard Digital* published 250. The *Standard Digital* focused more on stories related to political engagement and representation than the *Nation*. Diving deep into the stories, politicians across the spectrum recognise the importance of "engaging and empowering the youth", who constitute a significant voting bloc. Prominent figures like Raila Odinga, a seasoned opposition leader who ran for president in 2022 but lost to President William Ruto, and President William Ruto himself have actively sought the support of young voters. They promise to create jobs, enhance economic opportunities and ensure greater youth representation in decision-making processes. Ruto has stated, "Youth empowerment will be my primary priority", highlighting his commitment to developing policies that focus on job creation for young people.

However, concerns over exploitation and unfulfilled promises have led to criticism from some quarters, with Odinga accusing politicians of offering "wheelbarrows instead of jobs". Instances of "youth disrupting political" events and concerns over exploitation highlight the need for constructive dialogue and meaningful inclusion, as religious leaders in Naivasha warn, "Politicians must respect the 'sanctity' of our youth and refrain from using them for their selfish gains" (The Youth Cafe 2022). Coverage of youth-led "voter registration drives", particularly through social media campaigns like "#iParticipate", illustrates youth efforts to increase electoral participation. However, media articles often focus more on

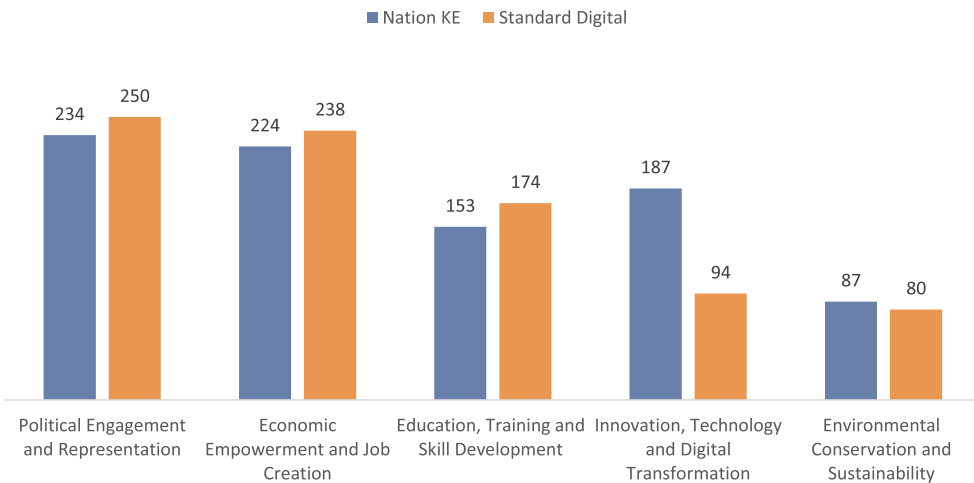


Figure 2. The prevalence of youth innovation initiatives.

seasoned politicians, marginalising youth voices. Youth political participation is often closely linked to economic conditions. For instance, politicians frequently promise job creation and economic opportunities as a way to mobilise young voters. On the other hand, economic hardships, as highlighted in the article “We Ignored Voter Registration to Look for Food”, can discourage political engagement. This underscores the connection between economic stability and civic participation.

Economic empowerment and job creation

According to the study, the second most common theme that emerged from the content analysis of articles from both the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital* was economic empowerment and job creation. During the study period, the *Daily Nation* published 224 such articles, while the *Standard Digital* published 238, indicating that both media outlets tend to focus on reporting about economic empowerment and job creation, particularly with regards to youth innovation. Kenya’s youth represent a vibrant and enterprising force, exhibiting a strong desire for self-employment and entrepreneurship over traditional job roles. As Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua stated, “The youth prefer self-employment over traditional job roles” (*Nation KE*, 2020). Only 13 per cent of the youth express a preference for being hired, indicating a significant inclination towards entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Tackling youth unemployment remains a priority, with initiatives like the “Uwezo Fund” providing financial support for youth-led business ventures, although it faces challenges such as high default rates. Sectors like construction, “agribusiness”, and manufacturing are identified as potential sources of job opportunities, with “a goal to create 36% new jobs for youth by 2030” in these industries. Programmes like “Vijana in KilimoBizz Innovation Challenge” (*Standard Digital*, 2021) invest in youth-led enterprises driving change in food systems. The government has also announced plans to ease financial burdens, such as “HELB waives Sh1,000 charge for issuing compliance certificates, says unemployed youth had complained that it was punitive” and “National government to give a three-month grace period before youth, women start repaying special loans given to them to increase uptake of credit facilities” (*Standard Digital*, 2020).

Education, training, and skill development

According to the study, the third most prominent topic was education, training and skills development. Both newspapers covered this theme, with the *Daily Nation* publishing 153 relevant stories and the *Standard Digital* publishing 174. This suggests that training and skills development are crucial factors in unleashing the potential of youth. The government has implemented various initiatives that focus on education, training and skill development to address this issue. Programmes like the Public Service Emerging Leaders Fellowship (PSELF) and Kazi Mtaani provide young Kenyans with opportunities for hands-on learning, work experience and exposure to public service roles. As one article states, “The Kazi Mtaani program, which injects billions into the pockets of the youth, focuses on training them in public service and providing them with hands-on work experience” (*Standard Digital*, 2021). The integration of technology in education, such as online classes for TVET students, offers flexible and accessible training pathways. “technical and

vocational education and training students starting online classes demonstrate alternative methods of education and training, offering young people a flexible approach to acquiring new skills and knowledge necessary for entrepreneurship and employment". Online classes and digital upskilling programmes spearheaded by the information and communication technology Authority ensure accessible pathways to empower the tech-savvy generation. This connection highlights how media stories about education also support narratives around economic empowerment.

Innovation, technology and digital transformation

One of the main themes that emerged from this study was innovation and digital transformation. Innovation in areas like agribusiness and digital transformation contributes to meeting the SDGs. The *Daily Nation* published 187 articles related to this theme, while the *Standard Digital* published only 94. This finding suggests that innovation and digital transformation are not given priority by these media outlets. The digital age has ushered in a new era of opportunities, which Kenyan youth are seizing wholeheartedly. From leveraging WhatsApp for business to acquiring digital skills through platforms like Amazon, young Kenyans are embracing technology to create innovative solutions and seize emerging opportunities. As noted, "In Kenya, the WhatsApp platform has particularly become mainstream even for business" (*Nation KE*, 2020), while innovation hubs like Konza Technopolis provide vibrant platforms for young minds to bring their ideas to life, according to Chief Executive Officer Catherine Adeya: "Konza Technopolis is a vibrant platform for young innovators to bring their ideas to life and contribute to the development of the smart city" (*Standard Digital*, 2020). Additionally, "Kenya's unemployed youth acquire free digital skills from Amazon" (*Nation KE*, 2020). Events like the "Nation Digital Summit" foster "discussions on responsible" AI usage, data-driven decision-making, and the potential of digital transformation to drive economic growth. As Kevin Mutiso, CEO of mTek, stated, "Our partnership with Kyosk and Fin allows us to reach underserved markets and provide tailored insurance products to local retailers".

In addition, fostering a supportive environment for young people is paramount, with initiatives tackling issues like drug abuse, violence, mental health and skill development. As one youth group urges, "These days you can also be strong even if you are asking for help" (*Nation KE*, 2022), promoting mental well-being. Platforms like the World Skills Competition equip participants like Shradha Saijul Shah with valuable experience: "Kenyan youth should not choose jobs and embrace the opportunities that come their way" (*Nation KE*, 2020). Community-based campaigns like "Elections Bila Noma" foster civic engagement and peaceful participation.

Environmental conservation and sustainability

The last notable theme that emerged was centred around environmental conservation and sustainability. The *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital* had a nearly equal, albeit low, number of articles that addressed this issue: only 87 published in the *Daily Nation* and 80 in the *Standard Digital*. Kenyan youth are actively engaged in environmental conservation efforts, participating in tree-planting campaigns and waste management initiatives, and advocating for sustainable practices. Governor Sakaja's "promise" to pay youth

KSh 2500 a week for tree planting exemplifies programmes that combine employment opportunities with environmental stewardship. As one article states, “Tree planting is seen as a practical and financially viable activity for youth engagement” (*Nation KE*, 2022). The involvement of youth in addressing “climate change” challenges is crucial for building a “sustainable future”, with the United Nations Development Programme and National Youth Council collaborating on reforestation efforts, as “You can always find the youth at the epicenter of any movement for change” (*Standard Digital*, 2021). The use of drones in agribusiness and mapping aims to bolster food security, while youth worldwide are heeding the call to address climate change challenges head-on, as George Odhiambo of Heifer International noted: “The AYuTe challenge aims to uncover existing innovations within Africa that have the potential to revolutionize agriculture” (*Standard Digital*, 2021). This initiative addresses both innovation and environmental conservation, indicating a synergy between these themes.

Media representation of challenges faced by youth innovation

After analysing the content of articles from two media sources, the study identified challenges that hinder youth innovation. Kenyan youth face various challenges that threaten to stifle their potential and limit their opportunities for growth and development. Foremost among these challenges is the persistent issue of “unemployment”, with hundreds of thousands of graduates entering the job market annually, only to find limited prospects for employment. The *Daily Nation* notes that “Unemployment among Kenya’s youth has become a major societal challenge as the numbers keep soaring despite hundreds of thousands graduating every year from universities” (*Nation KE*, 2022).

Compounding this challenge is the harsh reality of economic hardships and poverty, which have forced some young people to prioritise their basic need for food over civic engagement, as exemplified by the statement “We ignored voter registration to look for food, youth tell [Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission] (IEBC)” (*Nation KE*, 2022). This economic struggle not only “undermines” their ability to participate fully in the “political” process but also renders them vulnerable to the lure of criminal activities and extremist organisations, as evidenced by the alarming trend of “Coast youth dump Somali terror group for Mozambique’s Isis” (*Nation KE*, 2022).

Furthermore, the youth grapple with a sense of disillusionment with the political process, as politicians are accused of exploiting them for their agendas. This is captured in a statement by Ruto: “Instead of Raila taking advantage of youth to advance his ‘hidden agenda’ through the protests, he should rather face him directly to iron out the issues he is raising”. This disillusionment, coupled with the challenges of difficult living circumstances, has taken a toll on the mental well-being of many young people, as acknowledged in the following statement: “Today’s world is much more aware of mental health challenges than ever before. Living circumstances have not made things easier with the youth bombarded by a myriad of challenges” (*Standard Digital*, 2022).

Amidst these formidable challenges lies the pressing issue of “food insecurity”, which can only be effectively addressed when the youth, who constitute the largest demographic, are integrated into the food system: “Food insecurity is only going to be defeated when the youth, who form the biggest percentage of the population, are part of the food system across the value chain” (*Standard Digital*, 2021). Yet, despite these daunting challenges,

Kenyan youth possess an indomitable spirit and a wealth of opportunities to drive positive change. Their entrepreneurial spirit and resourcefulness are exemplified by the following quote: “Youth in Mwea, Kirinyaga County turn rice husks into a money-making venture” (*Nation KE*, 2021), showcasing their ability to identify and capitalise on economic opportunities.

Moreover, the youth have the potential to be agents of change through civic engagement and activism, as recognised by Odinga’s statement: “Empowering young people to take active roles in shaping the future is crucial for Kenya’s progress”. Their involvement in environmental stewardship and sustainable development can be a driving force for the nation’s economic growth and sustainable development: “By harnessing the entrepreneurial spirit, fostering skill development, promoting environmental stewardship, and embracing innovation, Kenya can empower its youth to become agents of positive change” (*Standard Digital*, 2023).

Furthermore, young leaders like Chebet, “a youth representative in her county who is also an innovator, mentor, and student” (*Nation KE*, 2021), serve as beacons of hope, exemplifying the desire for change and active participation. Universities have been challenged to embrace agricultural innovations and research, recognising the pivotal role the youth can play in creating solutions to ease the cost of living. Notably, President Ruto has highlighted the youth’s potential in addressing climate change challenges, stating: “African youth are taking the lead in innovating and finding solutions to climate change challenges, even with limited resources and support” (*Standard Digital*, 2023). This recognition underscores the importance of empowering and supporting the youth in their quest to tackle global issues and drive positive change.

Discussion

The landscape of youth innovation in Kenya represents a complex interplay of social, economic, political and technological dynamics. Based on a comprehensive media content and discourse analysis of the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital*, this study provides critical insights into the diverging nature of youth engagement and potential in contemporary Kenyan society. While the findings align with previous research by the African Union (2024), AfriLabs (2023), Happer and Philo (2013), Kabari (2024), and Santos (2021), this study also reveals gaps in how media representations influence public perceptions of youth-led innovation. Youth innovation can be understood as a comprehensive approach to social change, including political participation, economic empowerment, educational development, technological adaptation and environmental stewardship. This study shows that young people are active agents of change rather than just passive recipients of societal interventions.

The findings of this study resonate with existing research but also highlight areas where media representations diverge from reality. For instance, Kabari (2024) emphasises the role of digital platforms in fostering youth entrepreneurship, yet this study reveals that media coverage in Kenya often prioritises political and economic themes over technological innovation. While the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital* have published hundreds of stories showcasing youth involvement in politics, coverage of digital transformation and technological adaptation remains limited. This discrepancy suggests a gap in how media representations align with the realities of youth-led innovation. Similarly, Santos (2021) notes that youth are often underrepresented in mainstream media, a finding corroborated by this study, which highlights how underrepresentation hinders their ability to influence policy and garner public support for their initiatives.

To better understand how media representations shape public perceptions, the findings can be situated within media representation theory. The theory shows how media outlets like the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard Digital* represent and frame youth innovation primarily in terms of political engagement and economic empowerment. For example, the media frequently highlights political rhetoric from figures like William Ruto and Raila Odinga, who acknowledge the importance of appealing to young voters. However, this representation often overlooks other critical areas such as technological adaptation and environmental stewardship, potentially reinforcing that youth are primarily seen as valuable for their political or economic contributions (Ochieng 2022).

In addition, repeated media representation of youth as either agents of change or passive recipients can shape long-term societal attitudes. For instance, while the media celebrates youth-led initiatives like the Uwezo Fund and Vijana in KilimoBizz Innovation Challenge, it also perpetuates narratives of political exploitation, such as offering “wheelbarrows instead of jobs”. These conflicting representations can cultivate public scepticism about the genuine inclusion of youth in decision-making processes.

The real-world implications of these media representations are significant. For example, the study reveals that economic empowerment and job creation form a significant part of media coverage, reflecting the urgent need to address youth unemployment. However, the emphasis on political rhetoric over tangible outcomes (e.g. promises of job creation versus actual employment opportunities) risks perpetuating cynicism among young people and undermining their trust in political institutions. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of youth in mainstream media, as noted by Santos (2021), limits their ability to influence policy and garner public support for their initiatives.

The study also highlights the entrepreneurial spirit of Kenyan youth, with only 13 per cent of them expressing a preference for traditional employment. Media coverage of initiatives like the Uwezo Fund and Kazi Mtaani reflects this shift in aspirations, yet challenges such as limited access to financing and high default rates reveal the complexities of financial inclusion for young entrepreneurs. Policy adjustments, such as easing compliance requirements for loans and offering grace periods for repayment, are crucial in encouraging greater participation in entrepreneurial ventures.

In the realm of education and skills development, both newspapers have extensively reported on initiatives aimed at equipping young people with relevant skills. Programmes like PSELF and digital upskilling initiatives supported by the ICT Authority play a vital role in preparing youth for a technology-driven economy. However, the limited media coverage of digital transformation and innovation, compared to other themes, suggests a missed opportunity to highlight how young Kenyans are leveraging platforms like WhatsApp for business and acquiring digital skills through global platforms like Amazon.

Environmental conservation is another area where youth are increasingly becoming vocal advocates. Media coverage of initiatives like tree-planting campaigns and collaborations with organisations like the UNDP highlights the essential role of young people in sustainability efforts. However, the study also notes that farming ventures often fail to attract young people's interest due to limited access to financing and inadequate market connections. By making agriculture more appealing and profitable through tailored credit options and technological advancements, policymakers can harness the energy and creativity of the younger generation.

The way Kenyan media represents youth-led innovation has implications for policy, public perception and youth engagement. Positive and inclusive representations can inspire young people to pursue innovative solutions to societal challenges, while negative or stereotypical portrayals can discourage participation and reinforce systemic barriers. For instance, media coverage that highlights the dual benefits of youth-led environmental initiatives—such as Governor Sakaja’s tree-planting programme, which creates jobs while combating climate change—can encourage greater public and policy support for such projects. Conversely, media bias and symbolic annihilation can marginalise certain groups of young innovators, limiting their ability to influence policy and access resources. For example, the underrepresentation of youth-led agricultural innovations in media coverage may contribute to the perception that farming is an unattractive career path, despite its potential for economic empowerment and food security.

Conclusion and recommendations for media practitioners, policymakers and stakeholders

To address these gaps, media practitioners should work towards providing more balanced and inclusive coverage that amplifies youth voices and showcases the diverse contributions of young innovators. This can be achieved by increasing the visibility of youth-led initiatives in political and economic discussions, highlighting successful examples of youth innovation to inspire others and reshape public perceptions. Additionally, it is important to avoid sensationalism or tokenism in reporting on youth issues and to offer more coverage of underrepresented areas, such as digital transformation and environmental conservation.

For policymakers and practitioners, there is a need to develop tailored financial products for youth-led startups, such as low-interest loans, grants and venture capital funds. This can be accomplished by collaborating with policymakers to advocate for youth-friendly policies that support innovation, such as tax incentives for youth-led startups and streamlined business registration processes. Additionally, it is important to create an enabling environment for youth-led innovation by addressing systemic barriers, providing resources and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. This approach would encourage a mindset of creativity, resilience and problem-solving among young people by celebrating innovation and offering opportunities for experimentation and learning. Furthermore, women should be encouraged to participate in innovation and technology through targeted initiatives. The focus on digital transformation and sustainability positions Kenya as a leader in innovation on the African continent.

It is important to note that this study relies on content analysis of two media outlets, which is a limitation that could introduce potential bias in sample selection and insufficient analysis of audience reception. Therefore, future research should focus on longitudinal studies examining the impact of youth innovation, comparative analyses with other East African countries, and in-depth qualitative research on the entrepreneurial experiences of young people.

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