



Received: 18-08-2026
Accepted: 28-09-2026

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

An Analysis of Social Media Narratives and the Framing of State Legitimacy and Public Safety During Youth-Led Civic Unrests in Nairobi City County, Kenya

¹ Peter William Abich, ² Dr. Bernard Munyao Muiya

¹ Masters Student, Department of Security, Diplomacy and Peace Studies, Kenya

² Lecturer, Department of Security, Diplomacy and Peace Studies, Kenya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2026.6.5.6972>

Corresponding Author: Peter William Abich

Abstract

Social media has become an important arena through which civic unrest is narrated, interpreted and contested. During youth-led civic unrests, competing digital narratives may portray state institutions, protesters, police conduct and public safety in substantially different ways. However, the prominence of such narratives does not necessarily mean that they produce corresponding changes in public trust in security institutions. This study analysed social media narratives and their framing of state legitimacy and public safety during youth-led civic unrests in Nairobi City County, Kenya. Guided primarily by Framing Theory and supported by the Social Construction of Reality perspective, the study adopted a cross-sectional mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were obtained from 365 respondents, while qualitative evidence was obtained from key informants drawn from civil society and security communication. Descriptive statistics, correlation and multiple linear regression were used to analyse the quantitative data, while qualitative evidence was analysed thematically. Respondents recognised several competing narratives, including portrayals of government as

illegitimate ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.252$), protests as justified civic action ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.247$), emphasis on police violence ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.199$), narratives associated with increased fear ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.205$), and portrayals of security agencies as ineffective ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.276$). Qualitative findings similarly indicated competing and sometimes contradictory narratives concerning state failure, civic resistance, police conduct and public disorder. However, none of the five narrative dimensions had a statistically significant bivariate association with the two-item institutional trust score. Their combined regression model was also statistically nonsignificant ($R^2 = .014$, $F = 1.040$, $p = .394$). The findings demonstrate an important distinction between the perceived prominence of social media narratives and their measurable relationship with institutional trust. The study concludes that social media provides an important arena for framing and contesting state legitimacy and public safety, but recognition of prominent digital narratives does not independently explain variations in institutional trust.

Keywords: Social Media Narratives, State Legitimacy, Public Safety, Institutional Trust, Youth-Led Civic Unrest, Digital Framing

1. Introduction

Social media has changed how civic unrest is communicated and interpreted by allowing citizens, protesters, state institutions, journalists and other actors to participate directly in constructing accounts of unfolding events. Unlike communication environments dominated by traditional media organisations, digital platforms allow competing interpretations to circulate simultaneously and at considerable speed. These accounts may define who is responsible for unrest, whether protest is legitimate, whether state intervention is justified, and whether particular developments constitute threats to public safety. Social media therefore functions not merely as a channel through which information is transmitted but also as an arena in which the meaning of civic unrest is constructed and contested.

Research on protest communication has demonstrated that the framing of civic unrest matters because different presentations of the same event can direct public attention towards different actors, grievances and consequences. Masullo, Brown, and

Harlow (2024) ^[10], for example, demonstrated that legitimising protest coverage could generate more favourable attitudes towards protesters and protest action. Their findings, however, also showed that different dimensions of audience evaluation did not necessarily respond uniformly to the same frame. This distinction is important because support for a protest, assessment of police conduct, perception of public safety and trust in state institutions are related but conceptually different outcomes. The diversity of protest narratives is also evident in studies based on actual media content. García-Perdomo *et al.* (2024) ^[4], examining social media coverage of protests in Chile and Colombia, found that riot and confrontation frames were more visible than deliberative frames within their sampled media posts. Their findings demonstrated how media actors selected particular aspects of protest for emphasis. However, identifying the occurrence of particular frames within sampled messages does not establish how audiences interpreted those messages or whether such interpretations altered their institutional evaluations. The distinction between the presence of a frame, its circulation and its interpretation is therefore important when examining social media narratives.

African research similarly demonstrates that digital protest communication involves competing constructions of state authority and civic action. Narthey and Yu (2023) ^[12], examining the #FixTheCountry campaign in Ghana, identified narratives in which government was portrayed as failing citizens and collective mobilisation was constructed as a response to socioeconomic and governance grievances. In Nigeria, Aboh (2024) ^[1] found that #EndSARS discourse portrayed police officers as oppressors while legitimising resistance to police abuse. These studies demonstrated how protesters constructed moral accounts of state responsibility. However, their concentration on protest discourse could not establish whether people outside the movements interpreted the narratives in similar ways.

The Kenyan experience presents a related but contextually distinct problem. Ingutia (2025) ^[7] and Sawe, Ojiambo, and Obyerodhyambo (2025) ^[15] demonstrated the importance of social media in youth mobilisation and political participation surrounding the 2024 Finance Bill protests. Their studies established the relevance of digital platforms to organisation, grievance articulation and political participation. However, mobilisation is not equivalent to perceptions of state legitimacy or public safety. A platform may facilitate protest participation without necessarily producing uniform evaluations of security institutions among its users.

Recent Kenyan research has also drawn attention to competition over protest narratives. Osman (2025) ^[13] examined differences in source selection between digital-native and legacy-affiliated media coverage, while Ouma (2025) ^[14] examined networked communication and contestation surrounding youth mobilisation and state responses. Such studies demonstrate that narratives surrounding youth-led unrest are produced by multiple actors. What remains less clear is how audiences recognise these competing narratives and whether recognition of them corresponds with differences in institutional trust.

This distinction creates an important analytical gap. Existing studies have provided considerable evidence concerning protest mobilisation, digital activism, media framing and the construction of grievances. However, the presence or

visibility of a narrative should not automatically be treated as evidence that it changes public perceptions of state institutions. A respondent may recognise a narrative portraying government as illegitimate without accepting it, or encounter material emphasising police violence while continuing to evaluate security institutions through prior experiences. Under these conditions, the important question is not merely which narratives circulate, but how audiences recognise competing frames of legitimacy and safety and whether such recognition is associated with institutional trust.

Accordingly, this study analysed social media narratives and their framing of state legitimacy and public safety during youth-led civic unrests in Nairobi City County, Kenya. Specifically, it examined respondents' recognition of narratives concerning government legitimacy, police violence, justification of protest, fear and security-agency effectiveness, and subsequently assessed whether these narrative dimensions were associated with institutional trust. Therefore, the study addressed the following research question: In what ways do popular social media narratives portray state security institutions during youth-led civic unrest?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Narratives and the Framing of Civic Unrest

Social media narratives surrounding civic unrest do not emerge from a single source or produce a uniform representation of events. Protesters, state institutions, media organisations and ordinary users may foreground different aspects of the same incident. Consequently, the analytical importance of social media lies partly in its capacity to accommodate competing definitions of problems, causes, responsible actors and appropriate responses.

Masullo *et al.* (2024) ^[10] examined protest framing experimentally in the United States and established that stories explaining protest grievances generated more favourable evaluations of protests and protesters. However, changes in one evaluative dimension did not necessarily extend to all other assessments. The findings demonstrate that the framing of protest legitimacy should not automatically be interpreted as an equivalent assessment of state or police legitimacy. Moreover, because the study manipulated elements of news stories experimentally, it did not reproduce the heterogeneous information environment encountered by ordinary social media users.

García-Perdomo *et al.* (2024) ^[4] moved from experimental framing to actual media content by analysing social media posts from selected television channels and newspapers during protests in Chile and Colombia. Riot and confrontation frames were more prominent than deliberative frames within the sampled posts. This provided evidence of the relative occurrence of frames within a defined media sample. However, it did not establish that the same distribution characterised the wider social media environment or that audiences interpreted the frames uniformly. The study therefore demonstrates the importance of separating message characteristics from audience responses.

Hansson, Fuoli, and Page (2024) ^[6] further demonstrated that relatively small linguistic changes in social media messages can alter perceptions of blame and willingness to repost content. Their findings show how the attribution of

responsibility can be strengthened or weakened through language. Nevertheless, willingness to circulate a message is not equivalent to acceptance of its claims, perceived insecurity or diminished institutional trust. The distinction indicates that message construction, circulation and attitudinal outcomes should be analysed separately.

2.2 African Experiences of Digital Protest Narratives

Within Africa, social media has provided an important arena for constructing narratives of state responsibility and civic resistance. Nartey and Yu (2023) ^[12], studying Ghana's #FixTheCountry campaign, identified narratives portraying government as irresponsible, citizens as disadvantaged by prevailing socioeconomic conditions, and collective action as a legitimate response. The study established how campaign participants articulated grievances and constructed a moral justification for mobilisation. However, analysis of campaign discourse could not determine whether audiences outside the campaign interpreted these narratives similarly.

Aboh (2024) ^[1] identified comparable processes in the Nigerian #EndSARS protests. Social media discourse portrayed police officers as oppressors and protesters as resisting coercive policing. Whereas the Ghanaian narratives centred substantially on socioeconomic and governance grievances, the Nigerian case focused more directly on police conduct. Both cases illustrate the construction of state responsibility through protest discourse. Yet, because the studies primarily examined protest communication, neither demonstrated that recognition of these narratives necessarily translated into reduced trust among broader audiences.

Jacobs and Kupangwa (2026) ^[8], examining South African media framing of service-delivery protests, identified narratives concerning governance failure, grassroots agency and civic action. Their findings demonstrate that protest coverage can simultaneously acknowledge political grievances and report confrontation or disorder. This challenges any assumption that civic unrest is represented through a single African protest narrative. Rather, different actors may construct competing accounts of responsibility, legitimacy and security.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the key issue is not whether social media contains narratives critical of the state, but under what conditions particular narratives become prominent, how they compete with alternative interpretations and whether audiences translate them into broader institutional evaluations.

2.3 Social Media Narratives in the Kenyan Context

The 2024 youth-led protests in Kenya increased scholarly interest in the relationship between digital communication and civic mobilisation. Ingutia (2025) ^[7] examined the role of social media in the Gen Z uprising and rejection of the Finance Bill 2024, while Sawe *et al.* (2025) ^[15] examined social media as a political activism tool during the June 2024 youth protests. Both studies demonstrated the importance of digital platforms in political participation, mobilisation and grievance articulation.

However, evidence that social media facilitates mobilisation does not establish its effect on perceptions of state legitimacy or public safety. Mobilisation represents collective political action, whereas trust and perceived legitimacy concern individual evaluations of institutions. The distinction is particularly important because users can participate in or observe the same digital environment while

reaching different conclusions about the state, protesters and security agencies.

Osman (2025) ^[13] further demonstrated that the construction of protest narratives depends partly on which voices are selected by media organisations. Ouma (2025) ^[14] similarly described digital communication during the 2024–2025 youth mobilisation as a contested environment involving both networked protest communication and government responses. These findings narrow the Kenyan research gap by establishing that digital protest narratives are contested. They nevertheless leave an audience-centred question: how do respondents recognise these competing narratives, and does their recognition correspond with differences in institutional trust?

The present study addresses this question by examining respondents' ratings of five identified narrative dimensions and integrating those ratings with qualitative accounts of how protest-related social media content was interpreted. Importantly, a high respondent rating is treated as evidence of perceived prominence or recognition, rather than proof that the narrative constituted the largest proportion of actual posts across social media platforms.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Framing Theory

The study was primarily guided by Framing Theory. Goffman (1974) ^[5] provided an early foundation for understanding frames as interpretive structures through which individuals organise and make sense of experience. Entman (1993) ^[3] subsequently applied framing more specifically to communication by explaining how communicative texts select certain aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in ways that promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations or responses.

Framing Theory is particularly relevant to civic unrest because the same event can be represented through substantially different emphases. A confrontation between protesters and police may be framed as excessive state force, necessary maintenance of public order, civic resistance, public disorder or evidence of institutional failure. Each frame directs attention towards particular actors and attributes different forms of responsibility.

In the present study, Framing Theory guided analysis of five narrative dimensions: government illegitimacy, police violence, protest justification, fear and institutional ineffectiveness. These dimensions represented different ways through which social media narratives could define civic unrest and its implications for state legitimacy and public safety. The theory did not, however, imply that exposure to a particular frame automatically caused a change in institutional trust. Rather, it provided a basis for examining which interpretations respondents recognised and how those interpretations competed within the digital environment.

3.2 Social Construction of Reality

The Social Construction of Reality perspective complemented Framing Theory by explaining how interpretations can acquire shared meaning through communication and repeated social interaction. Berger and Luckmann (1966) ^[2] argued that social reality is produced and maintained through recurring processes of interaction and meaning-making. Applied to digital communication,

repeated descriptions, images, labels and interpretations may become common reference points through which users discuss unfolding events.

This perspective is relevant because social media users do not encounter civic unrest solely as physical events. They also encounter descriptions and interpretations produced by other users, protesters, journalists and institutions. Through sharing, commenting and repetition, particular accounts may become familiar ways of understanding state conduct or public safety. Nevertheless, socially shared meaning does not imply uniform acceptance. Different communities may construct different understandings of the same event.

The integration of Framing Theory and Social Construction of Reality therefore allowed the study to distinguish between the selection and emphasis of particular interpretations and the social processes through which those interpretations acquire meaning among audiences. This combination was especially useful for interpreting the coexistence of competing narratives found in the study.

4. Materials and Methods

The study adopted a cross-sectional mixed-methods design. Quantitative and qualitative evidence was collected to examine social media narratives and their relationship with perceptions of state legitimacy, public safety and institutional trust. The cross-sectional design enabled the collection of data at one point in time, while the mixed-methods approach allowed quantitative patterns to be interpreted alongside participants' qualitative accounts.

The study was conducted in Nairobi City County and focused on Westlands, Embakasi, Kibra and Kasarani. These areas were purposively selected because of their socio-demographic diversity, levels of digital engagement and relevance to episodes of civic unrest. The study targeted youth aged 18–35 who actively used social media, digitally active members of the wider public, civil society actors involved in digital advocacy and civic engagement, and security personnel involved in public communication and digital engagement.

The quantitative sample size was initially determined using Cochran's formula, which produced a target of 384 respondents. The final quantitative analysis was based on 365 completed survey responses. A multistage sampling procedure combining cluster and quota approaches was used to obtain respondents across the selected areas. Eligibility required participants to be adults residing in Nairobi and active users of social media.

For the qualitative component, key informants were purposively drawn from civil society and security communication. Their inclusion enabled the study to obtain perspectives from actors who engaged with digital advocacy, public communication and the interpretation of unrest-related information. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires. For Objective One, respondents rated five statements capturing whether social media portrayed government as illegitimate, emphasised police violence, framed protests as justified, increased fear, and portrayed security agencies as ineffective.

Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews. These interviews provided accounts of how different narratives were encountered and interpreted across digital environments and allowed the quantitative findings to be examined alongside participants' descriptions of competing representations of civic unrest. Although the wider study

developed a content-analysis template, the findings available for Objective One do not provide a documented systematically sampled platform-level content-analysis dataset. Consequently, this paper does not claim that the five identified narratives were objectively the most frequent posts across social media platforms. Their prominence is interpreted primarily from respondents' ratings and qualitative perceptions.

Descriptive statistics were used to establish respondents' ratings of the five narrative dimensions. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each dimension. Institutional trust was measured using a two-item score calculated from respondents' trust in updates shared by government security agencies and their belief that police respond fairly during civic unrest. The two items demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .860$).

The five narrative items did not demonstrate adequate reliability as a single unidimensional scale. They were therefore analysed separately rather than combined into a general narrative index. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the bivariate relationship between each narrative dimension and institutional trust. Multiple linear regression was subsequently used to determine whether the five narrative dimensions jointly explained variations in the institutional trust score. Qualitative evidence was analysed thematically and integrated with the quantitative findings. The qualitative material was used to clarify how participants described and interpreted competing frames rather than to substitute for statistical evidence.

Participation was voluntary and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research. Informed consent was obtained before participation, and participants retained the right to withdraw. Personal identifiers were excluded from the presentation of findings, while interview and survey materials were handled in a manner intended to protect confidentiality. The study also recognised the sensitivity of security-related and protest-related information and avoided identifying individual participants through reported qualitative accounts.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Social Media Narratives on State Legitimacy and Public Safety

Respondents rated five narratives concerning government legitimacy, protest justification, police conduct, fear and institutional effectiveness. Table 1 presents the descriptive findings.

Table 1: Respondents' Ratings of Social Media Narratives

Narrative dimension	Mean	Standard deviation
Government portrayed as illegitimate	3.46	1.252
Protests framed as justified	3.44	1.247
Police violence emphasised	3.39	1.199
Narratives increase fear	3.39	1.205
Security agencies portrayed as ineffective	3.36	1.276

All five mean scores were above the neutral midpoint of 3.0. Government illegitimacy recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.46$), followed closely by the framing of protests as justified civic action ($M = 3.44$). Police violence and increased fear each recorded a mean of 3.39, while institutional ineffectiveness recorded a mean of 3.36.

The narrow range between 3.36 and 3.46 is analytically

important. Although government illegitimacy recorded the highest rating, the differences were small and do not support a conclusion that one narrative overwhelmingly dominated respondents' perceptions. Rather, the findings indicate the coexistence of several narratives concerning state legitimacy, civic action and public safety.

The qualitative evidence reinforced this interpretation. Participants described digital spaces as containing competing accounts of the same unrest. Some narratives portrayed government action as oppressive or unjust, particularly where police conduct was foregrounded. Other narratives emphasised disorder and threats to public safety. Protest itself was similarly framed in contrasting ways: as legitimate civic participation in some accounts and as a source of insecurity in others.

Participants also described differences between platforms and digital communities. The same events could be presented differently depending on the source, audience and platform through which they were encountered. This fragmentation indicates that the digital communication environment did not provide a single, uncontested interpretation of civic unrest.

Another qualitative pattern concerned selective amplification. Participants observed that dramatic incidents and confrontational content tended to attract substantial attention, while more balanced or routine accounts were less visible. Nevertheless, visibility could not be equated with accuracy or audience acceptance. Some criticism was regarded as reflecting genuine concerns, while other content was described as lacking context or exaggerating either government failure or protest disorder.

The qualitative findings therefore qualify the descriptive statistics. Respondents recognised the five identified narratives, but the narratives existed within a contested communication environment in which different users could interpret the same event differently.

5.2 Relationship between Social Media Narratives and Institutional Trust

The study subsequently examined whether respondents who more strongly recognised particular narratives reported systematically different levels of institutional trust.

Table 2: Correlations between Social Media Narratives and Institutional Trust

Narrative dimension	Correlation with institutional trust (r)
Government illegitimacy	.096
Police violence	.022
Protest justification	.059
Fear narratives	-.021
Institutional ineffectiveness	-.031

All five relationships were weak and statistically nonsignificant. Government illegitimacy produced the largest correlation with institutional trust ($r = .096$), but the magnitude remained very small. Police violence ($r = .022$), protest justification ($r = .059$), fear narratives ($r = -.021$), and institutional ineffectiveness ($r = -.031$) similarly showed negligible relationships.

These results indicate that recognition of the specified social media narratives was not significantly associated with differences in the two-item institutional trust score within the surveyed sample.

5.3 Combined Relationship between Narrative Dimensions and Institutional Trust

Multiple linear regression was conducted to examine whether the five narrative dimensions jointly explained institutional trust.

Table 3: Regression of Social Media Narratives on Institutional Trust

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	2.916	.414	—	7.048	<.001
Government illegitimacy	.097	.054	.095	1.804	.072
Police violence	.017	.056	.016	.299	.765
Protest justification	.062	.054	.061	1.158	.248
Fear narratives	-.014	.056	-.013	-.256	.798
Institutional ineffectiveness	-.030	.053	-.030	-.576	.565

Model summary: $R^2 = .014$, $F = 1.040$, $p = .394$.

The model explained only 1.4% of the variation in institutional trust and was not statistically significant. None of the five narrative dimensions independently predicted the institutional trust score at the conventional .05 significance level. Government illegitimacy produced the largest standardised coefficient ($\beta = .095$, $p = .072$), but the relationship remained statistically nonsignificant. The results therefore provide no evidence that respondents' recognition of the five narrative dimensions independently or collectively explained meaningful variation in institutional trust in this sample.

5.4 Discussion

The study demonstrates that social media provided an important arena for competing representations of state legitimacy and public safety during youth-led civic unrests in Nairobi City County. Respondents recognised narratives portraying government as illegitimate, protests as justified, police violence as prominent, public fear as heightened and security agencies as ineffective. The qualitative findings similarly demonstrated a fragmented digital environment containing competing representations of state conduct, civic resistance and public disorder.

The identification of narratives concerning government illegitimacy and police violence has similarities with Abloh's (2024) ^[1] findings from Nigeria, where #EndSARS discourse constructed police as oppressors and provided protesters with a language through which resistance could be legitimised. However, the Nairobi evidence adds an important qualification. The present study also identified accounts defending public-order concerns and portraying protest itself as a security threat. The findings therefore do not support the assumption that one anti-state or pro-protest frame characterised the entire digital environment.

This multiplicity is consistent with the broader framing argument that communicators select different aspects of reality for emphasis (Entman, 1993) ^[3]. Police action, civic rights, disorder and government legitimacy represent different possible emphases through which the same unrest can be interpreted. The qualitative findings demonstrate that these frames may coexist and compete rather than develop into a single shared interpretation.

The findings also correspond with the Social Construction of Reality perspective of Berger and Luckmann (1966) ^[2]. Repeated and socially circulated accounts can provide shared reference points through which people discuss state action and public safety. However, the existence of socially

circulating interpretations does not imply that all audiences internalise them in the same manner. The qualitative findings demonstrated that users could accept, reject or reinterpret similar content according to their existing understanding of events.

The most important analytical finding concerns the distinction between narrative visibility and institutional trust. Despite respondents recognising the five narrative dimensions, none demonstrated a significant bivariate relationship with institutional trust, and the combined regression model was nonsignificant. Consequently, the findings do not support an assumption that recognition of critical social media narratives automatically translates into reduced institutional trust.

This result should not be interpreted as evidence that social media narratives can never influence institutional attitudes. McLeroy and Wang (2024) ^[11], for example, reported that repeated exposure to police-brutality content was associated with changed perceptions of police among some Black college freshmen in the United States. The different finding in Nairobi demonstrates the importance of context, population, measurement and research design. The absence of a statistically significant relationship in the present cross-sectional survey cannot be generalised to every population, platform or form of social media exposure.

The result also clarifies the contribution of recent Kenyan studies. Ingutia (2025) ^[7], Kabiru (2025) ^[9], and Sawe *et al.* (2025) ^[15] demonstrate the substantial role played by digital platforms in mobilisation, political participation and issue framing during Kenya's youth-led protests. The present findings do not contradict that role. Instead, they indicate that a platform's importance for mobilisation or narrative circulation does not necessarily mean that recognised narratives explain variations in institutional trust.

One possible interpretation is that institutional trust may depend on conditions extending beyond immediate social media narratives, including prior institutional experience, established political orientations, community histories and assessments of institutional fairness. However, these factors were not directly measured as explanatory variables in the Objective One model. They should therefore be treated as propositions for further investigation rather than established explanations of the nonsignificant result.

The findings consequently support a conditional understanding of social media influence. Digital narratives can make particular grievances and interpretations visible, organise attention around police conduct or public disorder, and provide competing accounts of legitimacy. Their relationship with more durable institutional attitudes, however, may depend on characteristics of audiences, prior experience, source credibility and the wider political and social context.

6. Conclusion

The study analysed social media narratives and their framing of state legitimacy and public safety during youth-led civic unrests in Nairobi City County. Respondents recognised five principal narrative dimensions: government illegitimacy, justified civic protest, police violence, increased fear and institutional ineffectiveness. Qualitative accounts further demonstrated that these narratives existed within a fragmented and contested digital communication environment rather than forming one uniform interpretation of unrest.

The central contribution of the study lies in distinguishing perceived narrative prominence from measurable institutional consequences. Although respondents recognised the identified narratives, none had a statistically significant relationship with the two-item institutional trust score. Collectively, the five narratives explained only 1.4% of the variation in institutional trust, and the overall regression model was statistically nonsignificant.

The study therefore concludes that social media constitutes an important arena in which state legitimacy and public safety are framed and contested during civic unrest. However, the recognition or visibility of particular narratives should not be interpreted automatically as evidence that those narratives change institutional trust. Digital framing and institutional evaluation are related analytical processes, but the relationship between them is conditional rather than automatic.

7. Recommendation and Implications

Security institutions and public communication actors should recognise that social media discourse during civic unrest consists of multiple competing frames rather than a single representation of public opinion. Communication responses should therefore address specific claims concerning police conduct, protest legitimacy, institutional effectiveness and public safety rather than treating critical online discourse as one homogeneous narrative.

The findings also indicate that analysts and researchers should distinguish between the visibility of digital narratives and their measurable relationship with public attitudes. A highly visible or frequently discussed narrative should not be assumed to represent the views of the wider public or to have changed institutional trust without evidence demonstrating that relationship.

Future research should incorporate a systematically sampled and coded dataset of social media posts to establish the actual prevalence of different frames across particular platforms. Such an approach would make it possible to distinguish platform-level narrative frequency from audience recognition of narratives.

Longitudinal or panel research should also examine whether exposure to particular narratives precedes changes in perceptions of legitimacy, safety and institutional trust. This would provide stronger evidence concerning temporal relationships than the present cross-sectional design permits. Further studies should examine conditions that may moderate the interpretation of social media narratives, including prior experiences with security institutions, political orientations, source credibility, platform characteristics and community context. These factors may help explain why audiences encountering similar narratives can arrive at different assessments of state legitimacy and public safety.

8. Acknowledgement

I appreciate my mentor Dr. Bernard Muiya, of the Department of Security, Diplomacy and Peace Studies, at Kenyatta University for his mentorship. I also acknowledge the whole fraternity of the school of law, arts and social sciences at Kenyatta University for their effort in modelling security studies.

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