

Colourism in Online Media: An Analysis of Kenyan R&B YouTube Music Videos

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Abstract

Colourism, or discrimination based on skin tone, remains a subtle yet pervasive form of bias embedded in media representation. This study examined the manifestation of colourism in Kenyan R&B music videos published on YouTube. The study employed a content analysis design, with data collected through systematic observation of selected music videos. The study focused on music videos released between 2022 and 2025 that had accumulated more than 10 million views, reflecting substantial audience reach. Thirteen music videos were purposively sampled and analyzed based on the representation, positioning, and portrayal of different skin tones. The findings revealed an imbalance in the representation and distribution of skin tones. Light-skinned women were predominantly featured and idealized as the standard of beauty, while dark-skinned women were often marginalized or hypersexualized. In contrast, dark-skinned men were frequently portrayed as strong and masculine, whereas light-skinned men were sometimes represented as soft or effeminate. The study concludes that Kenyan R&B YouTube music videos contribute to the reproduction and reinforcement of colourist ideals, with potentially negative implications for audience self-esteem and perceptions of beauty, particularly among young and impressionable viewers. The study recommends that music video producers and content creators adopt more intentional and inclusive casting and narrative practices to promote diverse representations of beauty and reduce colourist stereotypes in Kenyan popular culture.

Keywords: *Colorism, representation, portrayal, skin tone, complexion, music videos.*

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1.0 Introduction

Colourism refers to the discrimination, prejudice, or preferential treatment of individuals based on their skin tone, particularly within the same racial or ethnic group. Dixon and Telles (2017) argue that colourism is rooted in colonialism, during which individuals with darker skin tones were often disadvantaged in employment and other socioeconomic opportunities. Colonial authorities and employers were more likely to favour lighter-skinned individuals for desirable positions, while darker-skinned people were frequently assigned menial, tedious, and poorly remunerated work. Although colonialism formally ended in many parts of the world, colourism persisted and continues to manifest in various social institutions and cultural practices, including in Kenya. The media, in particular, may play an important role in reproducing and normalising colour-based preferences through patterns of representation.

Colourism has developed in different historical and social contexts across the world. In the United States, for example, its development is closely associated with slavery and the sexual exploitation of enslaved African women by white slave owners. These relationships resulted in the emergence of populations of mixed ancestry who were subsequently differentiated partly according to skin tone. Enslaved people with lighter complexions were sometimes accorded preferential treatment, including being assigned domestic duties within plantation owners' households, while those with darker skin were more likely to perform physically demanding labour in plantation fields. Such practices reinforced the perception that lighter skin was associated with superiority, attractiveness, and social status (Norwood, 2017).

In Africa, colourism is widely associated with the legacies of colonialism and racial hierarchies. Colonial policies and systems of racial segregation established social and economic distinctions based partly on skin colour, with lighter-skinned individuals often enjoying greater access to socioeconomic opportunities (Anjari, 2023). These historical inequalities contributed to the development of preferences for lighter skin that continue to influence contemporary perceptions of beauty and social status. One manifestation of this preference is the growth of the skin-lightening and skin-bleaching industry across parts of Africa. The media may further reinforce these preferences through the types of people it features, the roles assigned to individuals with different skin tones, and the ways in which beauty and desirability are represented. Consequently, examining media representations of skin tone is important for understanding how colourist attitudes may be reproduced and normalised in contemporary African popular culture.

Dixon and Telles (2017) argue that media representation of black people affects the attitude and expectation that children have of themselves and the world. If they do not see people with a similar skin tone to them in the media being represented well and praised, they will think that their skin tone isn't beautiful and therefore have a low opinion of themselves and thus low self-esteem. If there is proper representation of the various skin tones that exist in the black race, then the notion that all shades are beautiful and important will be conveyed, and everyone will feel that they are of value and attractive in society. Positive representation of the variety of shades in the media will go a long way in improving the self-esteem of those coming across such content

since it will shape their attitude, opinions and beliefs.

“Distribution of skin tones in Kenyan R&B music videos on YouTube is not equal, with light-skinned individuals, particularly women, dominating music video casting”

The Kenyan society has had this concept for years that fairer skin is better. This means that you are more desirable as a spouse, employee, or leader when you have fair skin. However, in contemporary society, the media seems to be fueling this notion based on how people of various skin tones are portrayed.

Since the media portrays society, it also influences society and has a great effect on people's perspectives, perceptions and opinions. It also influences people's behaviour. The media influences how people are viewed. People emulate what they see in the media. They believe what they hear, and that shapes their opinions and feelings. The media plays a key role in promoting national identity and individuals' body image. Media outlets and platforms continue to affect the body image of society.

Online media is consumed by the majority, if not all, Kenyans. The Kenyan music industry has phenomenal growth in the past two decades. (Ntarangwi, 2016). Music has a great impact on the soul; it affects our feelings, shapes our beliefs, values and behaviour about what we see and hear from music videos. The content displayed in these

music videos is crucial. If there is misrepresentation of dark-skinned people, those beliefs transfer to the consumers. Lack of representation is also a problem, whereby the video vixens are of fair skin only.

This study's objective is to examine the manifestation of colourism in Kenyan R&B music videos on YouTube by analysing the representation of different skin tones and the distribution of individuals of different complexions in the videos. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to communication and media scholarship by providing empirical evidence on whether Kenyan R&B YouTube music videos reinforce or challenge colourist beliefs and by informing efforts to promote more inclusive media content.

Literature Review

Beauty standards are highly based on Europeans standards. (Hassan, 2018). Therefore, the fairer the skin colour, the nicer the treatment and status in society. Together with other physical features such as one's eye colour, shape of the lips, nose shape and hair texture, complexion is indeed seen as a powerful symbol of beauty and attractiveness. European features such as blue eyes, straight hair and narrow noses have been seen as better and superior. This has therefore led to black women feeling deeply affected by the "prejudicial fallout surrounding the issues of skin colour, facial features and hair".

In an attempt to explain colourism, Hunter (2005) describes it as a process of favouring, also known as skin colour stratification, which is a system where individuals of lighter skin tone are privileged over their dark-skinned counterparts. Evidence exists from numerous studies that show that there is still continued preference for lighter shades of skin in different parts of the African

continent. In East African countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, one is considered beautiful if they have an oval face, white teeth, black gums and, of course, lighter skin.

Colourism exists in various countries around the world. In America, colourism comes about as a result of the rape of African female slaves by their white male captors. Slaves of mixed-race nature were born out of these relations, which led to the development of a new class; they were then divided according to their skin tone, unlike previously when they were divided by language. Slaves with lighter shades of skin received preferential treatment by slave owners, whereby they would be given jobs inside of plantation owners' houses while those with darker skin tones were given tedious work such as working in the plantation fields. The white people believed that slaves with lighter skin tones were superior and more attractive as compared to those with dark complexions (Norwood, 2017). Skin colour and issues of attractiveness are a central issue for women, as Hall (2017) argues. She states that colourism can be particularly damaging among women of dark skin complexion.

Colourism as a term was coined in 1983 by activist writer who was also a poet called Alice Walker. In her essay, "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" she defined the system of colourism as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-raced people based solely on the shade of their skin". She addressed two women in the essay, the "Black woman" and the "high yellow" Black woman, using the binary paradigm. Walker stated her concern for "the hatred the Black woman goes through within Black society" and asked that the "light Black woman" be aware of the "pain" they "often quite unconsciously" inflict on the "Black woman".

In male music videos, colourism is seen to be privileging lighter women. But what role, if any, do light-skinned Black female artists play in the perpetuation of the colourist "preference" in the music industry? Hassan (2018) found that, through the use of colour names, physical presentation (hair, makeup, lighting) and casting, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Nicki Minaj's "Formation", "Man Down" and "Pound the Alarm" music videos contain examples of colourism.

Studies on colourism in mainstream media such as print show a preference for lighter skin. According to Otieno (2023), who examined colourism in advertisements published in The Nation newspaper in Kenya, light-skinned models were the most preferred in advertisements for both males and females. The preference for light skin was more pronounced among female models, while dark-skinned males appeared more frequently than dark-skinned females. Colourism exists in Kenyan print newspaper advertisements, where lighter skin is portrayed as the preferred standard of beauty, attractiveness, and social desirability. The study further argued that the unequal representation of skin tones in advertisements reinforces discriminatory beauty ideals and recommended more equitable representation of diverse skin tones in the media.

Knowledge Gap

Despite a growing body of literature examining the concept of colourism and its influence on beauty standards across various societies, several critical gaps remain, especially within the context of Kenyan popular culture and music. Much of the available research has centred on Western contexts, particularly the African American experience, focusing on historical legacies of slavery, the role of media, and the intersection of

race and gender. However, there remains a lack of localised scholarly investigation into how these global narratives of colourism are reflected, adapted, or resisted within Kenyan music videos and online media.

Media Representation Theory

Media Representation Theory was developed by Hall (1997) within cultural and media studies. According to Hall, the media constructs and shapes reality by selecting, organising, and presenting particular images, messages, and meanings. According to the theory, media representations are socially and culturally constructed and influence public perceptions.

Hall explains that representation is the process through which meaning is created and exchanged using language, images, symbols, and signs. Repeated media representations influence how audiences understand people, cultures, and identities. Consequently, media has the power to reinforce stereotypes, challenge existing beliefs, or construct new understandings of social reality.

Within the context of colourism, the theory explains how music videos construct beauty standards based on skin tone. Through repeated visual images and lyrics, audiences may come to associate certain skin tones with beauty, success, romance, or social value while marginalising others.

The theory is directly applicable to this study because it explains the representation of light, brown and dark-skinned individuals in Kenyan music videos on YouTube. It also explains how portrayals and lyrical messages contribute to the construction of meanings about beauty and identity. Repeated portrayals of lighter-skinned individuals in desirable roles and darker-skinned individuals in secondary or stereotypical roles may reinforce colourist beliefs among audiences.

Media Representation Theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining colourism in Kenyan music videos on YouTube. It helps explain how media content shapes public understanding of skin tone and contributes to broader social attitudes regarding beauty, identity, and social value.

Social Representation Theory

Social Representations Theory (SRT), developed by Serge Moscovici, explains how societies develop and communicate shared meanings, beliefs, values and understandings about people and social phenomena. These meanings are expressed through language, images, symbols and everyday communication. The theory is useful in this study because colourism can be communicated through visual presentation and characterisation in music videos.

The theory recognises that social meanings are shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Through anchoring, unfamiliar or complex ideas are connected to familiar categories, while objectification gives abstract ideas concrete forms through images, characters and other media elements. In this study, these processes provide a basis for examining how ideas about skin tone may be expressed through casting and visual presentation in Kenyan R&B YouTube music videos.

Social Representations Theory is relevant to the study because it allows the researcher to examine the meanings associated with different skin-tone categories within media content. It can help identify whether particular skin tones are repeatedly connected with visibility, beauty, desirability, social status or other socially recognisable meanings. The theory therefore complements Media Representation Theory by providing a framework for examining the social

meanings embedded in the representation and distribution of different skin tones.

2.0 Materials and Methods

Research design

This study employed content analysis as the study design in order to generate an in-depth, multifaceted understanding of the issue of colourism in Kenyan R&B music videos on YouTube. Content analysis was done on YouTube music videos of Kenyan artists and musicians. Content analysis was used by the researcher to analyse the theme of the songs in relation to the representation of skin tones. The study design examined the existence of colourism in YouTube music videos. It established this through the analysis of the various ways and manner in which individuals with different skin tones are represented.

Study Area

The study setting was YouTube, focusing on Kenyan R&B music videos between 2022 and 2025. The music videos analysed were those with over ten million views on YouTube. Their popularity was reached as a result of the number of views that they have been able to accumulate on YouTube in the last four years (2022-2025). YouTube is a social media platform where various people upload their videos for views, which translate to income. It is also a platform for entertainment and education of the masses. The study population comprised all Kenyan R&B music videos available on YouTube uploaded between 2022 and 2025.

Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to select relevant units of analysis. This technique enabled the researcher to select music videos that clearly

exhibit themes related to colourism. The sampling focused on Kenyan R&B music videos produced between 2022 and 2025. Specific inclusion criteria were applied to guide the selection process. These included: music videos produced by Kenyan artistes, videos with high viewership (e.g., ten million and above), videos containing visual content and videos publicly accessible on digital platforms such as YouTube. A sample of thirteen music videos was selected for detailed analysis.

Data Collection

The study employed media mining and observation as data collection techniques. Data were collected through media mining, whereby relevant Kenyan R&B music videos were identified and retrieved from YouTube based on the selection criteria. Observation was used to systematically examine the sample of Kenyan R&B music videos on YouTube. This technique enabled systematic assessment of visual content with regard to colourism. A structured observation checklist was used to code elements such as the frequency of appearance of individuals with different skin tones, the roles assigned to individuals (e.g., lead, background, romantic interest), and the nature of representation. The sample comprised Kenyan R&B music videos uploaded on YouTube between 2022 and 2025, each with over ten million views. These were selected to ensure relevance and reach within Kenyan pop culture.

The observation checklist was used during the content analysis of selected music videos. It was designed to help the researcher systematically record and code visual and lyrical elements relevant to the study objectives. The checklist included indicators such as the skin tone of featured individuals. Skin tone was classified into

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

During analysis, the researcher considered the possible influence of video production technique on the appearance of skin tone. Music videos may employ lighting, colour grading, filters and other editing techniques that can alter the visual appearance of complexion. To minimise this potential source of bias, skin tone classification was not based on a single frame or scene. Each individual was observed across multiple scenes. The skin tone category that consistently reflected their appearance throughout the video was recorded. Where lighting or editing significantly affected the appearance of an individual's complexion, the researcher considered the predominant appearance across the video.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained through content analysis was processed using thematic coding. Each music video was examined based on a structured observation checklist. Data points included: Frequency and prominence of different skin tones, assigned roles (lead, dancer, romantic interest), type of portrayal (e.g., sexualized, empowered, ridiculed) and lyrical references to colour and beauty.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the distribution of different skin tones across the cast of the thirteen Swahili tunes music videos analysed is imbalanced. A clear pattern emerges in which dark-skinned male artists dominate the visual space while female video vixens are predominantly light-skinned and brown-skinned. This suggests a gendered trend in the distribution, where dark-skinned men are visibly and consistently featured while dark-skinned women receive comparatively limited representation. Consequently, lighter-skinned women are favoured in visual casting, indicating a possible bias in the aesthetic preference within this genre.

In the song *Keki* by Willy Paul and Bahati, the primary video vixen is very light-skinned. She is a non-black and racially ambiguous woman. Although a dark-skinned woman briefly appears towards the end of the video, her presence is minimal and does not significantly influence the overall visual narrative.

Figure 1

The video vixen Keki's music video



Source: YouTube- video 'Keki' by Willy Paul and Bahati

Figure 2

Singer and video vixen of the music video of the song 'toto' by Willy Paul.



Source: YouTube- music video of 'toto' by Willy Paul.

This is not an isolated pattern. It is replicated in several other music videos within the sample. For instance, songs such as *Toto* by Willy Paul, *Umenipendea nini* by Otile brown featuring Baraka the Prince, *One Call Away* by Otile Brown and Ruby all feature light-skinned female video vixens as the central visual focus. Lighter skin is given more prominence in these productions.

Figure 3

The cast of 'Unanipendea nini's' music video
Source: music video of 'Unanipendea nini' by Otile Brown.



A smaller proportion of the analysed videos feature women of brown and chocolate complexion. These include *Woman* by Otile Brown and Harmonise, *Sasa hivi* by Vijana Barubaru and *Abebo* by Bahati. The video vixens in these music videos are neither extremely light-skinned nor dark-skinned. They represent the intermediate complexion category. Additionally, the cast composition in some music videos like *Abebo* by Bahati and *Prince Indah* reflects a more balanced inclusion of light, brown and dark-skinned individuals.

Dark-skinned female video vixens are the least cast category within the sample. Only a few music videos, such as *Romantic Call* and *Nimeachika* by Vijana Barubaru, prominently feature dark-skinned women as the main visual objects. Several other music videos, like that of songs such as *Nakupenda* by Vijana Barubaru, *Kuukuu* by Willy Paul featuring Jzyno, *Baby* by Bahati featuring Nadia Mukami and *Nawe* by Arrow Boy and Nadia, do not include additional vixens. The visual composition consists of only the performing artists. Most of the artists are dark-skinned men, except Nadia Mukami, who is a chocolate-complexioned female artist.

Table 1

Skin tone distribution in Swahili music videos

Skin tone category	Frequency	Interpretation
Light-skinned	6	Most dominant among vixens
Brown/chocolate	3	Moderately represented
Dark-skinned	4	Less common among female leads.

The findings of the study reveal a significant disparity in the distribution of the different skin tones in local music videos. While dark-skinned

men are fairly cast, dark-skinned women are largely undercast, especially in the role of video vixens. Instead, lighter-skinned women dominate these roles, reinforcing a beauty standard that associates fair skin with attractiveness and desirability.

This aligns with global patterns where light-skinned women are often preferred in media representations, perpetuating Eurocentric beauty ideals. (Hunter, 2007) The tendency to cast lighter-skinned women more frequently suggests an implicit bias within the local entertainment industry, where lighter skin is subconsciously or deliberately favoured over darker skin. The fact that music videos featuring themes of beauty predominantly use light-skinned women as video vixens further strengthens the notion that media perpetuates colourism.

The findings of this study reveal that the distribution of different skin tones in Kenyan YouTube music videos is unequal, with light-skinned women receiving significantly greater visibility than dark-skinned women, particularly in leading and romantic roles. Dark-skinned men, on the other hand, were more frequently represented than dark-skinned women, often occupying dominant or masculine roles. These findings suggest that music videos continue to reproduce socially constructed beauty hierarchies that privilege lighter skin, especially among women. Such patterns support the argument of Media Representation Theory, which states that media do not merely reflect reality but actively construct meanings and shape societal perceptions (Hall, 1997). By repeatedly portraying light-skinned women as the preferred standard of beauty, music videos reinforce colour-based stereotypes and normalise unequal representation.

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

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

4.0 Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher made the following conclusions: Distribution of skin tones in Kenyan R&B music videos on YouTube is not equal, with light-skinned individuals, particularly women, dominating music video casting. This may be attributed to the fact that it borrows a lot from Tanzanian bongo flavour music, in which the singers use light skin and non-black video vixens a lot.

Dark-skinned women are underrepresented. The little representation they get is in a hypersexualised way. Those that get to appear in these music videos are portrayed as beautiful

despite being dark, otherwise being considered as exceptions. Dark-skinned men are more visible.

Light-skinned women are associated with beauty, desirability and innocence, while light-skinned men are often feminised or portrayed as weak and soft. Dark-skinned men are depicted as strong and 'real men', whereas dark-skinned women are often objectified. Many Kenyans spend about three hours on social media in a day (USIU, 2019). The content they interact with influences their opinions, feelings, and perspectives on issues.

Colourism in Kenyan online media, therefore, is not only a reflection of societal bias but a tool that reinforces and perpetuates it. Music, as a powerful medium of cultural expression, plays a significant role in either challenging or sustaining these harmful stereotypes.

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5.0 Recommendations

The findings revealed unequal distribution of skin tones in Kenyan YouTube music videos, particularly the greater visibility of light-skinned women compared to dark-skinned women. The study recommends that music video producers, directors, artists and casting agencies intentionally adopt inclusive casting practices that reflect the diversity of Kenyan society. Equal opportunities should be provided to individuals of different skin tones in leading, supporting and background roles. Such inclusive representation would be valuable in broadening the visual representation of beauty in Kenyan music videos and ensuring that audiences are exposed to diverse images of Kenyan identity and attractiveness.

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