

Reimagining motherhood: Media narratives and gender dynamics in contemporary Kenyan magazines

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Abstract

This study investigates the portrayal of motherhood in contemporary Kenyan media, focusing on how women's conventional roles within the family are depicted. Through critical discourse analysis (CDA), the research examines narratives from *The Parents Magazine* and *True Love East Africa* magazines, revealing how motherhood is framed as a natural and preferred life choice for women. The analysis uncovers the emotional and challenging aspects of motherhood, societal expectations, and the reinforcement of traditional gender norms. The study also highlights the evolving concept of millennial motherhood in Kenya, emphasising how modern Kenyan women navigate career and family challenges while defying traditional roles. Additionally, the study explores the construction of the ideal and authentic woman through media representations, challenging patriarchal structures and redefining gender roles, illustrating a shift towards a more liberated and self-sufficient model of motherhood. The findings underscore the complex power dynamics and persistent traditional norms that shape women's identities and social roles in contemporary Kenyan society.

Key terms: Critical discourse analysis, gender norms, media representation, millennial motherhood, motherhood.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the portrayal of motherhood has garnered significant attention in media studies, particularly as societal norms around gender and family roles evolve. Motherhood occupies a central place in societal narratives, often portrayed as the ultimate fulfilment of a woman's role within the family. This depiction is deeply rooted in traditional gender roles, which see women primarily as caretakers and nurturers. Gender norms are the societal expectations and behaviours associated with being male or female within a specific cultural context. These norms dictate what is considered appropriate for individuals based on their gender and influence various aspects of life, including personal relationships, professional roles, and family dynamics. Gender norms are subject to change over time and can reinforce stereotypes or evolve to promote gender equity. Despite advances in gender equality, these conventional views continue to shape societal expectations and the experiences of women.

This article investigates how contemporary Kenyan media, specifically *The Parents Magazine* and *True Love East Africa*, represent motherhood and the conventional roles of women within the family. Motherhood refers to the state or experience of being a mother, encompassing the biological, social, and cultural dimensions of raising children. It involves nurturing, caregiving, and the emotional and psychological processes associated with maternal roles. Media representation refers to the way in which different groups, identities, and issues are portrayed in various forms of media, including television, film, print, and digital platforms. It plays an important role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes, often influencing societal norms and values. The analysis of media representation involves examining the accuracy, diversity, and context of portrayals, particularly concerning marginalised groups and their experiences. Through media representation, a new phenomenon of millennial mothers emerged. Millennial motherhood refers to the unique experiences and challenges faced by mothers belonging to the millennial generation (born approximately 1981-1996). This concept encompasses the ways in which cultural, economic, and technological shifts have influenced maternal identities, parenting practices, and societal

expectations. Millennial mothers often navigate issues such as work-life balance, social media influence, and changing family structures, which differentiate their experiences from those of previous generations.

By employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research explores narratives that frame motherhood as both a natural choice and a complex identity shaped by societal expectations, emotional challenges, and emerging feminist discourses. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to studying language in its social context. It seeks to understand how discourse shapes and is shaped by social power dynamics, ideologies, and identities. CDA examines the ways language is used to construct meaning, influence perception, and reinforce or challenge societal norms, often focusing on issues such as race, gender, class, and politics. This article explores the discourses surrounding motherhood in contemporary media, highlighting the emotional and challenging aspects of this role with an aim to understand how these depictions reinforce traditional gender roles and influence women's identities and societal positions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an interdisciplinary approach that examines how language constructs and reflects power dynamics, ideologies, and social structures. According to Fairclough (2015), CDA posits that language is not just a communication tool but a means to construct reality and negotiate meanings. This perspective is reinforced by Naidu et al. (2023), who note that discourses are culturally embedded ways of understanding the world, shaped by specific social contexts and power relations. CDA is particularly relevant in this study as it enables an analysis of how media narratives perpetuate or challenge traditional gender roles. The analysis gives attention to the following key tenets: power dynamics- CDA reveals how language perpetuates or challenges power inequalities, particularly regarding marginalised groups (Nadia, 2021); ideological structures- discourse functions ideologically, shaping societal norms and beliefs (Van Dijk, 2022) and historical context - understanding the socio-political context is crucial for analysing discourse implications (Wodak & Meyer, 2022). Utilising Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional

framework—text, discursive practice, and socio-cultural context—the study investigates how magazine representations construct and negotiate identities for millennial mothers and independent women. This approach reveals a significant narrative shift, portraying women as active participants in societal change rather than passive subjects confined to traditional roles.

Various studies have focused on different aspects and issues of motherhood. A study by O'Hara and Swain (2020) highlights the effect of maternal mental health on child development, emphasising the need for mental health support for mothers globally. This study employs the Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that child development is influenced by various environmental factors, including maternal mental health. The researchers did a systematic review of existing literature, analysing data from diverse populations to assess the existing relationship between maternal mental health and child outcomes. The review concluded that maternal mental health significantly affects child development, underscoring the need for integrated mental health support. This study underscores the need for mental stability for successful motherhood.

Another focus on motherhood is on the duality of roles of mothers as caregivers as well as breadwinners and the strain experienced. According to a study by Matias and Zito (2021), working mothers experience significant stress in balancing professional and family roles, which can lead to adverse health outcomes. The study, which examined how social roles influence individual behaviour and stress, revealed that the struggle to balance work and home life leads to significant stress, affecting both mothers' mental health and family dynamics. Another study by Tuwor and Agbeke (2021) examined the traditional roles of mothers in African societies, showing how cultural norms shape maternal responsibilities and expectations. This research sought to understand how diverse cultural practices shape the experiences and expectations of mothers across different African societies. It highlighted the significant influence of cultural expectations on maternal roles, revealing both empowering and restrictive aspects. Kamau (2022) explores the evolving roles of mothers in Kenyan families, particularly in urban areas where economic

changes have altered traditional family dynamics. This research utilises Feminist Theory to analyse how societal changes affect women's roles and experiences in motherhood. The study revealed that urbanisation and economic changes have led to evolving family dynamics, with mothers often taking on dual roles as providers and caregivers, creating new challenges.

Other scholars have identified key barriers faced by mothers in low-income settings, including limited access to healthcare and education, significantly impacting child health. Moyo and Nyoni (2022) investigate how poverty affects mothers in Sub-Saharan Africa, impacting their ability to provide adequate care and education for their children. The study adopts the Social Determinants of Health framework, which emphasises how socio-economic status affects health outcomes. A systematic literature review was conducted, synthesising findings from over 100 studies on the relationship between poverty and maternal health. A study by Wanjiru and Ochieng (2023) discusses the correlation between maternal education levels and child health outcomes in Kenya, highlighting the importance of educational initiatives for mothers. This study is grounded in Human Capital Theory, which posits that education is a critical factor in improving individual and collective economic outcomes. The study found a strong positive correlation between maternal education levels and children's health metrics, suggesting that education is a vital component in improving health outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative analyses to investigate the representation of women in *True Love* and *The Parents Magazine*, as well as how these representations influence identity construction. Qualitative methods focus on personal narratives and social interactions, yielding insights into meanings and themes within textual data (Berger, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quantitative analysis complemented the qualitative findings by employing statistical methods to examine patterns within magazine data (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Kothari, 2004; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2008). Using both qualitative and quantitative methods allowed the study to gain a more holistic view of the

research problem where quantitative data can provide statistical insights and trends, while qualitative offered depth and context, revealing underlying meanings and motivations (Patton, 2015). The combination of both approaches not only led to richer data collection, capturing both numerical data and detailed narratives, but also provided insights that are more representative of real-world complexities hence, the findings were not only statistically significant but also contextually relevant, making them more applicable to policy-making and practical implementation in various fields, such as education, health, and social sciences.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

As Kenyan women increasingly navigate the dual demands of career and family, this study illuminates the evolving concept of millennial motherhood and how media portrayals reflect and potentially shape public perceptions of gender roles. Motherhood in the 21st century has undergone significant transformations, particularly among millennial women. The rise of the millennial mother ideology in Kenya marks a significant shift in the traditional perceptions of motherhood and womanhood. This new ideology presents Kenyan women as working wives and mothers who are emancipated from traditional constraints and focused on their personal and professional success.

In contemporary Kenyan society, the concept of the ideal or authentic woman is evolving. Traditionally, women were confined to domestic roles, but modern discourses in media portray them as educated, career-oriented, and financially independent individuals. This study analyses the representation of modern Kenyan women in *True Love East Africa* and *The Parents Magazine*, using CDA to understand the challenges faced by modern Kenyan women, particularly in balancing education, career, and family responsibilities.

Millennial mothers are depicted as independent, often embracing single parenthood or fostering equal partnerships, challenging traditional family structures. The portrayal of women utilising technology for parenting demonstrates a shift towards a more engaged and informed approach to motherhood. Women like Diana Marua, in the presented data, leverage their celebrity status for empowerment,

controlling their narratives in a media-saturated environment. The emphasis on financial independence reflects a renegotiation of relationship dynamics, promoting economic empowerment among women. The narratives highlight the need to consider multiple identities, enhancing understanding of the diverse experiences of women as discussed through the following aspects.

a) Societal Pressures and Empowerment

Motherhood is depicted in discourse as a preferred and natural life choice for all women. This can be seen through the suffering of Kambua in an article *"It's been a long painful and emotional journey to motherhood,"* in the *Parents Magazine*.

"While it was not really a pressure point to the couple or their family members. Outsiders were relentless in questioning when they would get to see a baby bump. It was later on in their marriage that it started getting to her as well, with questions of whether and when it would actually happen constantly swirling in her mind, getting louder as the years progressed." (The Parents Magazine, March 2020:14)

The narratives surrounding millennial mothers in Kenya highlight the tension between traditional gender norms and the emerging realities of women's lives. Through the experiences of Kambua Mathu, we see a critical examination of societal pressures, cyber-bullying, and the transformative potential of empowerment.

"I learnt that people, in general, are very insensitive and unkind to couples with fertility issues or have had a long wait. You'd imagine that the fire would come from men because women would be more understanding, but it was almost in equal measure, and sometimes women were the ones who fuelled the flames." (The Parents Magazine, March 2020:15).

This story challenges prevailing ideologies and advocates for a redefined understanding of motherhood that embraces diversity and authenticity in contemporary Kenyan contexts. This societal pressure paradoxically led to empowerment. In response to societal pressures, Kambua challenges

existing norms and advocates for more inclusive practices. This activism can lead to broader societal changes, empowering both the individuals involved and their communities.

Societal pressures often highlight injustices or inequalities, prompting individuals or groups to mobilise for change. This can lead to collective empowerment as communities come together to advocate for their rights and challenge oppressive systems. Very few career opportunities take into account that women are wives and mothers as well, which would enable them to have a family and a career at the same time. Because of this, it is still very much a choice between one or the other instead of a balance between the two. From the magazines, it was clear that the Kenyan woman faced this challenge, and in order to appear ideal, she had to choose to opt for the conventional, that is, giving in to the family first. The conversation surrounding women's empowerment, as articulated by Teresa Omondi, critiques the societal pressures that compel women to juggle career and family responsibilities. Women are said to even sacrifice their jobs in order to take care of their families. As Teresa Omondi says in her conversation on women empowerment in the following excerpt;

"I've seen women turn down jobs or career-enhancing opportunities because they feel that they have to be at home all the time, which happens more often than we care to admit. As a gender specialist, I try to encourage a shift in mindset as ideally empowering women tends to have a ripple effect" (The Parents Magazine, February 2020:25).

Omondi's remarks emphasise the necessity of empowering women to pursue their ambitions while challenging the traditional norms that impede their progress (Wodak, 2019). This discourse calls for a cultural shift towards gender equality, recognising that societal expectations often restrict women's opportunities. Omondi's observations reveal the complexities modern women face in balancing their professional aspirations with family obligations, echoing findings from Matias and Zito (2021). The foregoing reveals that exposure to societal expectations can raise awareness about personal and

collective identities. This awareness can empower individuals to embrace their uniqueness and resist conforming to restrictive norms, fostering a sense of agency. Teresa Omondi's insights on balancing career and family responsibilities highlight the societal pressures that continue to dictate women's roles. Her advocacy for empowering women to pursue their goals challenges traditional gender roles and calls for a cultural shift towards gender equality. The expectation for women to sacrifice career opportunities for family responsibilities underscores the ongoing inequalities within domestic labour and the complex dynamics of gender in contemporary Kenyan society (Matias & Zito, 2021; Kamau, 2022).

Dennis Karanja, alias Denno, was born with visual impairment and in the hardships he faced in providing for his family, he drew solace and consolation from his wife for who she was to him and what she did.

"My wife is my pillar; I do not know how many times. I have said before. It is because of her that. I am not just Karanja. I am also baba Alysa."

This quote points to two very important aspects: Dennis drew much courage, strength and encouragement from his wife, who was his pillar, and he did not hesitate to proclaim this again and again. That, as a man, he could come out and clearly say that he depends on his wife as a consoler and comforter, a shoulder to lean on, was something quite remarkable. Secondly, it was through her that he was a father, thus portraying a woman as a mother and homemaker and that he was obviously very proud of his wife and daughter. When life stared hard at Dennis, even with all the efforts he put in, he could barely sustain his family; the author writes:

"His wife, thankfully, is a seasoned baker and every once in a while she got orders for the cakes for events. While the orders were intermittent, they at least put on the table and supplement Dennis income from other side hustler and gigs." (The Parents Magazine, February 2020).

Emerging narratives, such as that of Dennis Karanja, who openly acknowledges his wife's contributions to

the family income through her baking business, challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and illustrate a growing acceptance of men supporting working women as a result of economic challenges where mothers are forced to take dual responsibilities as caregivers and providers (Kamau, 2022).

b) Redefining Gender Norms

The portrayal of millennial mothers as sophisticated and independent, as seen in the article “*The Rise and Rise of Diana Marua*” (Parents Magazine, May 2019/No 170), further reinforces this shift. In the article, Diana is not ready to be shackled by a traditional definition of an African woman founded on submissiveness, innocence and malleability, Diana Marua exemplifies a replica of a highly sophisticated modern lady. As the writer of the article noted;

“Diana Marua falls smack in the middle of that new breed of moms mushrooming in East Africa. They are the digital-savvy millennial moms with skin as thick as cowhide and can do attitude. She is an embodiment of millennial moms who are trying to figure out what it means to have it all; be wives, stay fashionable, raise digital savvy kids and maintain a lucrative career” (p. 22).

This aura of rebellion, defiance and adventurism is quite critical in redefining spaces inhabited by a modern Kenyan woman. It reeks of total emancipation of the female gender and willingness to shift gender discourses to become women-centric. As the writer observes in the article:

“Diana lived up to the expectations when she turned up for the interview: 'flawless make-up, six-inch heels, a maroon soft faux fur gilet worn over white, t-shirt, and black skinny jeans'. She is all casual glam, a combination that screams homemaker, fashionista, and working mom. She is always a news item-whether it is for marrying a younger man, a viral break up video, dealing with a baby man or just being herself” (The Parents Magazine, December 2019: 22).

Diana Marua embodies a modern woman with resilience and ambition, defying the submissive archetype historically associated with African women.

This representation aligns with Fairclough’s (2015) assertion that discourse can serve as a means to challenge and reconstruct existing power dynamics. However, it differs with Tuwor & Agbeke’s (2021) findings that women always tended to get influenced by culture and embraced the traditional roles of mothers.

Millennial mothers in Kenya often navigate intense societal scrutiny and cyber-bullying, particularly when they diverge from traditional gender norms. Kambua Mathu’s experience, detailed in the March 2020 issue of *The Parents Magazine*, exemplifies the criticism women face for unconventional choices, such as marrying older men. This scrutiny reflects Mulvey’s (2016) analysis of the patriarchal gaze, highlighting how media representations reinforce societal expectations of women’s roles. The millennial mother is brought out as one who is outright in what she wants, irrespective of social consequences. Kambua became a victim of trolls and cyber-bullying after her wedding in 2012 to Jackson Mathu (an older, successful architect and businessman ‘and moneyed’), whom she got married to a year after breaking off an engagement to a fellow artist. The question of his age raised eyebrows with people trolling her because of their age, but she easily dismissed this with;

“People will always have something to say regardless. Even if we were age mates or were both singers, there is someone who would still take an issue with that. So long as you are in the limelight, your relationship will always bring mixed reactions” (The Parents March, 2020:12).

Kambua Mathu’s response to cyber-bullying - dismissively addressing societal judgments about her marital choices—underscores the determination of millennial mothers to live authentically, regardless of societal pressures (*The Parents Magazine*, March 2020). The relentless questioning of her plans for motherhood reveals underlying societal norms regarding women’s reproductive roles. Van Dijk’s (2005) insights into discourse’s role in shaping social cognition illustrate how these pressures perpetuate traditional gender roles, positioning motherhood as an essential aspect of womanhood. This view marginalises women without children, framing them as incomplete or unnatural (Herret et al., 2014).

In addition to highlighting power dynamics, the narrative surrounding motherhood in articles like *“It’s been a long painful and emotional journey to motherhood”* (The Parents Magazine, March 2020:14) employs emotive language to construct the experiences associated with motherhood. Terms such as *“painful”* and *“emotional”* set a tone that underscores the challenges women face on their path to motherhood. Fairclough (2015) argues that these linguistic choices contribute to the construction of ideologies that portray motherhood as an emotionally taxing experience. The metaphor of the *“journey to motherhood”* further frames this experience as a complex process rather than a straightforward transition. This representation aligns with societal expectations that women must navigate significant challenges to achieve motherhood, reinforcing the notion that this journey is fraught with difficulties. By emphasising the emotional toll associated with motherhood, these narratives not only reflect but also shape societal perceptions, positioning motherhood as both an aspiration and a trial. Kambua’s narrative illustrates the societal pressures surrounding motherhood, where external questioning about her plans for children highlights the societal norms linking womanhood to motherhood. This relentless scrutiny reflects Van Dijk’s (2005) exploration of how discourse shapes social cognition and reinforces power structures.

c) Medical Negligence and Power Dynamics

The lack of agency for women in medical contexts significantly intersects with socio-economic factors in ways that can adversely affect access to quality healthcare for expectant mothers. Women who lack agency often have little say in their healthcare decisions, which can result in inadequate care during pregnancy. This lack of control can be exacerbated by socio-economic status, where lower-income women may depend on public health systems that offer limited choices and resources. Ruth Mueni’s experience in *“Stillborn”* powerfully illustrates the dynamics between medical professionals and expectant mothers, revealing critical issues of medical negligence and the emotional suffering that arises from it. The dismissive language employed by healthcare providers not only reflects societal attitudes toward women’s reproductive experiences

but also highlights the marginalisation of their voices within medical contexts. This narrative emphasises the urgent need for respectful and patient-centred care in maternal healthcare settings, advocating for a shift in the power dynamics that often disempower women during vulnerable moments.

The article *‘Stillborn’* explicitly addresses the painful reality of losing a child. Ruth Mueni walked into the hospital on a Saturday in July for her last check-up. It was her 40th week of pregnancy, and she just wanted to confirm that everything was all right with the baby before her due date. The visit that was to give her hope turned out into a nightmare:

“The doctor instructed that I should get induced immediately. No explanation was given as to why I was getting induced because I knew I still had a week before I was due. I tried to tell the doctor that I had no contractions, no discomforts; I just wanted to do a scan and check that the baby was okay.”

“Being my first child, I wanted everything to happen naturally. I was in no hurry to deliver my baby. But the doctor and nurses had already decided that I needed to be admitted.” (True Love East Africa, March 2020: 44).

Ruth’s experience paints a grim picture of what goes on in maternity hospitals. It reveals how the opinion of mothers to be in most cases are not sought. It demonstrates the hurriedness the doctors and nurses exhibit when expectant mothers walk into hospitals. Had they listened to Ruth, possibly her baby would have been saved, highlighting the need for maternal education (Wanjiru & Ochieng, 2023). The intersection of gender and socio-economic status often results in healthcare disparities, with expectant mothers in low-income communities experiencing higher rates of complications and poorer outcomes. These disparities can reinforce feelings of disempowerment and hinder access to quality prenatal care. Cultural attitudes towards gender and socio-economic status can lead to systemic discrimination in healthcare settings. Women may face biases from healthcare providers that reinforce their lack of agency, as seen in Ruth’s case.

Strange enough, even after inducing her to labour pains, they leave her unattended. For seven hours

after being induced, Ruth was left unattended by the nurses and doctors.

"I remember feeling ill after being induced possibly because of the pill I was given. I don't do well with tablets. I puked my guts out. My friends who were present at the time tried to get a nurse to come and help but no one came." When the contractions came, and I was in terrible pain, the nurses dismissed them with 'huyo anajifanya tu'. No one came. pp. 44.

By highlighting the story, *True Love East Africa* magazine is able to indict the maltreatment expectant mothers are subjected to. It is sad that it is only after noticing her serious condition that the medics started to attend to her:

"It was only when her partner noticed the umbilical cord hanging outside of her that attention was paid. "I took advice from my friend and I walked around the hospital halls ndio mtoto ashuke (to help the baby to descend from the uterus to the birth canal). I could feel something touch my inner thigh but I thought it was the amniotic fluid or my extremely wet dress sticking to my thighs."

In the aforesaid bizarre occurrence, Ruth was roughed into the theatre for emergency surgery, as her baby's life was literary hanging on a thread. She notes poignantly that:

"When nurses finally came back to check on me, I couldn't comprehend what they were saying. All I heard was 'pulse 8, pulse 8', and then I was instructed to lie face down as I was wheeled to the theatre. While in the theatre, they dilly-dallied. I had to wait another 20 minutes before the surgeon arrived. I don't remember much after that, as I was under anaesthesia. When I woke up, the anaesthetic attendant informed me that my little Leo was no more.' The death of my baby pains me a lot because if the nurses had just taken five minutes to come and check on me to see if I had dilated enough or if everything was okay, they would have discovered that the umbilical cord was hanging out. My baby would have survived" (Pp. 45).

The portrayal of Ruth Mueni's ordeal reveals how emotive language and direct speech can expose the unequal power relations between healthcare providers and their patients. Such language serves to marginalise women's experiences, reinforcing their dis-empowerment (Van Dijk, 2020; Wodak, 2019). This also highlights the health challenges faced by mothers and would-be mothers of low-income households (Moyo & Nyoni, 2022). By framing medical interactions in this way, the narrative calls attention to the importance of acknowledging and valuing women's voices in healthcare discussions, particularly in maternal contexts. These narratives expose the need for a more compassionate and respectful approach in medical settings while simultaneously reflecting the broader challenges women face as they navigate their journeys to motherhood. By reconstructing these narratives, we can foster an in-depth understanding of the complexities of motherhood and advocate for the systemic changes necessary to support women's voices and experiences in Kenyan contexts.

Ruth Mueni's experience in "Stillborn" underscores the emotional and challenging aspects of motherhood, exposing medical negligence and the mistreatment expectant mothers endure, partly because of their poor economic backgrounds (Wanjiru & Ochieng, 2023; Moyo & Nyoni, 2022). The use of direct speech and emotive language illustrates the dismissive attitudes of healthcare providers, emphasising the urgent need for respectful, patient-centred care. This narrative aligns with Fairclough's (2015) examination of language and power relations, illustrating how discourse can reinforce societal expectations around motherhood.

d) Balancing Family and Career

The narratives presented in *The Parents Magazine* (February 2020) highlight the experiences of women such as Joanne Mwangi, Professor Wangari Maathai, and Naomi Munyi, who successfully navigate the complexities of balancing professional and personal lives. Faced with the challenging life of balancing work and family, a woman's pride still stops at her success in the upbringing of her children as a mother. This is what we get from the conversation with Naomi Munyi, the successful trailblazer in the insurance maze:

“While most would definitely term her career trajectory a success, Naomi considers the fact that her two children turned out well as her greatest success. Despite challenges with work-life balance, she opines that motherhood is very rewarding, especially seeing the values she imparted in their lives” (The Parents Magazine, March 2020:31).

For Wanjira Maathai, the daughter of Prof Wangari Mathai, she describes her mother as loving, caring and hardworking.

“To my two brothers and I, she was just a mother and we never saw her in any way.” (The Parents Magazine, December 2019:26).

Joanne Mwangi, a successful Marketing Guru in business, is keen to caution other entrepreneurs when it comes to balancing their careers with other aspects of their lives.

“I think I gave too much to the business, immersing myself too deeply. If I was to live my life all over again, I don’t think I would work the kind of long hours I did. Not that I would give less to the business, but I would have strived for balance in life, especially when my children were younger. It is possible to enjoy both a successful career and give attention to the children but it has to be deliberate.” (The Parents Magazine, December 2019:28).

In the article “Eat Natural foods to boost your energy levels” (The Parents Magazine, March 2020:26), the author targets women:

“Women are charged with many responsibilities some of which keep them on their toes all day long. It is easy for one to miss out on meals or eat unhealthy and the result is reduced energy levels that make one less effective.”

The author of the article goes ahead and recommends natural foods that are the best energy boosters that can refuel a woman's body quickly. Bananas, beetroot, green tea, dark chocolate etc. This is in recognition of the role they play as homemakers and caregivers and motherly. These stories illustrate the societal

expectation that women should contribute to family income while also emphasising the importance of financial autonomy (Matias & Zito, 2021). Teresa Omondi’s advocacy for empowering women underscores the sacrifices many make to maintain family stability, thereby reflecting ongoing societal pressures that dictate women’s roles in both the domestic and professional spheres.

e) Single Parenthood and Relationship Dynamics

The magazine also reveals a significant trend among millennial mothers who are increasingly opting for single parenthood or forming egalitarian marriages. Diana Marua’s story, for example, showcases her decision to marry a younger man and her willingness to temporarily leave the marriage when she felt unsupported. Millennial moms are not given to submissiveness. This same ideology ran in Bahati and Diana's story where they confessed to the readership that despite their rosy exterior, just like other couples, disagreements arose every other day and that, in one instance, Diana packed and left a few months after their child's birth since she felt Bahati was not supporting her:

“When he came home, he would go straight to bed yet I expected him to help me out with the baby...” (The Parents Magazine, December 2019: 23)

It took the intervention of their pastor, an intentional effort to make them reconcile. They confessed that marriage was all about understanding each other.

“For Diana, she had to learn how to submit to her husband while in the Bahati household. Admitting that she was stubborn by nature, she states that she had to learn to respect him as the head of the home.” (The Parents Magazine, December 2019: 23).

For the Bahati’s, the author noted that,

“The couple agree that they have found a system that works for them... at the end of the day, being on the same page is not just for us but for them (the children) as well, says Diana.” (The Parents Magazine, December 2019: 23).

This quite clearly demonstrates that the couple was just pretending to make the marriage work for the sake of the children. She defied the traditional definition of an African woman (Tuwor & Agbeke, 2021). Whilst in a traditional set-up, she is obligated to get married to an older man, Diana had no qualms about getting married to someone younger than her. This can be interpreted as a coup on the traditional concept of marriage in an African context. Just like the contemporary Western woman, age is no longer a determinant consideration in her choice of husband.

“Rather than existing in the realm of the inauthentic plane of existence, she decided to just being herself” (pg23).

The writer’s use of the expression ‘Being herself’ conjures emancipation of the female gender. This shift towards more equitable relationships suggests a departure from traditional inequalities, as evidenced in the December 2019 issue. These narratives indicate a growing recognition of women’s agency in defining their family structures and relationship dynamics.

The above findings reflect a significant shift towards a more liberated and self-sufficient model of womanhood that challenges entrenched gender norms, a clear departure from Mark’s (2020) and Yu’s (2019) studies that saw most Ghanaian women whose main objective is to conform so that they would not be branded leftover women. The narratives found in *The Parents Magazine* portray the ideal modern Kenyan woman as educated, career-oriented, and financially independent, positioning economic empowerment as a critical element of women’s emancipation (Matias & Zito, 2021; Kamau, 2022). However, the enduring expectation for women to balance career and family responsibilities underscores the persistent negotiation of gender roles within a patriarchal framework (Lazar, 2005, 2007; Wodak, 2020).

These representations indicate that millennial mothers are redefining motherhood by striving for personal fulfilment alongside professional aspirations. This aligns with Fairclough’s (2016) and Wodak’s (2019) analyses of discourse and power dynamics and Matias and Zito’s (2021) on balancing work and home life struggles, highlighting how the emphasis on financial

autonomy and mutual support within partnerships reflects a transformation in gender relations (Lazar, 2005, 2007).

Moreover, contemporary media continues to perpetuate traditional gender norms and societal expectations surrounding motherhood. Emotive language and metaphorical representations construct motherhood as a challenging yet fulfilling role, reinforcing its significance in women’s lives. Such discourses echo studies like those of Tuwor & Agbeke (2021) and Charles & Mwangi (2020) on broader societal attitudes and expectations that equate womanhood with traditional motherhood and expected cultural roles, marginalising those who do not conform to this ideal.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: The findings indicate that the narratives presented in *The Parents Magazine* and *True Love East Africa* reflect a complex interplay of empowerment and traditionalism in the portrayal of motherhood. While these magazines present mothers as central figures in family life, they also highlight the emotional and challenging aspects of motherhood, reinforcing traditional gender norms. However, the evolving concept of millennial motherhood is evident, as the media increasingly represents women as empowered and financially autonomous, capable of balancing career and family. As millennial mothers redefine motherhood, they not only challenge traditional roles but also navigate the ongoing tensions between personal aspirations and societal obligations, calling for a re-examination of the structures that shape women’s experiences in contemporary Kenya. This shift challenges patriarchal structures and redefines gender roles, illustrating a move towards a more liberated model of motherhood that resonates with contemporary Kenyan women’s experiences. The research underscores the role of media in reflecting and influencing societal change, suggesting that positive representations of women can contribute to advancing gender equality.

Recommendations: From this study, it is essential for media outlets to continue portraying diverse narratives of motherhood that reflect the realities of modern women. This includes emphasising the diverse and dynamic roles women play beyond traditional caregiving. Additional studies should also explore the

impact of digital media on the representation of motherhood and gender roles, particularly in the context of social media and its influence on public perceptions and in shaping contemporary gender identities. Further, the study recommends that workshops and campaigns should be developed to educate media professionals about the importance of equitable and empowering representations of women, fostering a more inclusive media landscape. Finally, policymakers should draft and advocate for policies that promote gender-sensitive media practices to foster more equitable portrayals of women in Kenyan media, supporting broader societal change. Such policies can include creating independent panels to review media content for gender representation, providing feedback and recommendations for improvement, increasing funding and grants for media projects that centre women's stories, experiences, and perspectives, encouraging innovative storytelling, launching campaigns to educate the public about the impact of media portrayals on societal attitudes toward gender, fostering demand for more equitable content and partnering with women's advocacy groups to ensure media accurately represents women's issues and addresses their concerns.

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