

## Messages that matter: Themes of peace in faith-based radio during Kenya's 2022 general elections

Isaac Wamalwa Manje<sup>1</sup>  
Egara Kabaji<sup>2</sup>  
Lydia Anyonje<sup>3</sup>  
Kizito Muchanga<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>isaacmanje@gmail.com  
<sup>2</sup>egarakabaji@gmail.com  
<sup>3</sup>lydinyonje@gmail.com  
<sup>4</sup>kmuchanga@mmust.ac.ke

<sup>1</sup><https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1812-9467>

<sup>2</sup><https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9000-9549>

<sup>3</sup><https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1487-7191>

<sup>4</sup><https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5430-4558>

<sup>1234</sup>Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the themes of peace messages shared by faith-based radio stations in promoting strategic peacebuilding during Kenya's 2022 general elections. This study was guided by the principles of social responsibility theory. A descriptive case study design was used, focusing on seven purposively selected stations: MBCI Radio, Biblia Husema Broadcasting, Radio Waumini, Sayare FM, Upendo FM, Hope FM, and Family Radio 316. Forty-nine respondents, including presenters, program managers, and producers, were engaged through interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires. The data were analyzed thematically, with qualitative responses coded into recurring themes. Findings indicate that messages emphasizing unity, non-violence, forgiveness, and cohesion played a significant role in fostering calm, bridging divides, and discouraging violence. These messages targeted youth, parents, voters, and political candidates, and were delivered through a mix of radio programs, social media, roadshows, music, sermons, prayers, and community outreach. The study concludes that peace messages from faith-based broadcasters contributed meaningfully to a peaceful election and recommends strengthening youth-focused programming, collaboration with other media actors, and broader use of digital platforms. Anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory, the study affirms the media's obligation to promote peace and social cohesion.

**Key words:** Faith-Based Radio, General Elections, Peace Themes, Strategic Peacebuilding

### I. INTRODUCTION

Peace during transitional periods, particularly general elections, is critical for safeguarding the lives of citizens and protecting the progress societies have made over time. When stability breaks down, communities often suffer setbacks that may take years to recover from. A case in point is Syria, where the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, adopted in 2016, sought to provide a roadmap for stability by calling for a non-sectarian government, the drafting of a new constitution, and the holding of free and fair elections (Samuel et al., 2023).

Across the globe, a number of countries such as South Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, Egypt, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and Burundi continue to struggle with recurring episodes of violence and political instability during election cycles. However, there are also examples that suggest peaceful transitions are possible. Nations like Nepal, Tunisia, Myanmar, Liberia, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Herzegovina, and Bosnia have managed, in varying degrees, to navigate electoral transitions without descending into chaos, despite facing deep political and ethnic divisions (Lee & Chow, 2022). Their experiences provide useful lessons on how peace can be sustained even in fragile contexts.

In Kenya, despite sustained peacebuilding efforts by stakeholders such as the media and faith-based actors, election-related violence has continued to resurface (Mwangi, 2020). This recurring challenge points to a gap that has yet to be adequately addressed. Against this backdrop, the present study set out to explore how faith-based radio stations in Kenya used peace messages to encourage calm and cohesion during the 2022 general elections.

The study was guided by two key variables. The independent variable was the nature and content of peace messages broadcast by faith-based radio stations. This included the themes emphasized in the messages, such as unity,

non-violence, forgiveness, and social cohesion, as well as the methods of dissemination, which ranged from live radio programs and music to social media, roadshows, and community outreach. The design, framing, and delivery of these messages represented the media interventions that the study sought to assess.

The dependent variable was strategic peacebuilding during elections, operationalized through outcomes such as reduced electoral tension, improved community cohesion, increased tolerance among citizens, and the discouragement of violence. These outcomes reflected the extent to which the peace messages influenced public attitudes and behavior, especially among groups most at risk of mobilization for violence, such as the youth and politically active voters.

By examining the relationship between the peace messages disseminated (independent variable) and the peacebuilding outcomes observed (dependent variable), the study sought to demonstrate how faith-based radio stations contribute to sustaining peace and stability during politically sensitive periods.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although many actors have worked to promote peace during Kenya's general elections, episodes of electoral violence continue to recur, leaving behind serious social, political, and economic consequences. Among those involved in peace efforts, the media, and especially faith-based radio stations, stand out because of their religious grounding and the moral authority they hold within communities. These broadcasters have often aired messages that call for unity, forgiveness, and non-violence (Mwangi, 2020). Yet, the actual themes emphasized in such messages and their overall contribution to strategic peacebuilding have not been studied in depth.

Concerns have also been raised about the politicization of religious leadership, which can affect how audiences perceive the neutrality and credibility of faith-based broadcasters. This may, in turn, reduce the effectiveness of their peace initiatives. Without a clear understanding of the nature of these messages and how they align with broader principles of peacebuilding, it is difficult to determine whether they address the underlying drivers of electoral conflict or simply encourage short-term calm.

This gap in knowledge makes it harder for policymakers, practitioners, and religious media houses to design stronger peace communication strategies for future elections. For this reason, the present study set out to examine the central themes in the peace messages aired by faith-based radio stations and to assess how these messages contributed to strategic peacebuilding during Kenya's 2022 general elections.

### 1.2 Research Objective

To explore the main themes in peace messages shared by faith-based radio stations and how they promoted strategic peacebuilding during Kenya's 2022 general elections.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

#### 2.1.1 Social Responsibility Theory of Mass Media

This study was guided by the principles of social responsibility theory, emphasizes that individuals are accountable for fulfilling their civic duties and that their actions should contribute to the well-being of society as a whole. The social responsibility theory of mass media was advanced by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm in 1956 (Garnham, 2020).

The social responsibility theory of mass media provided the framework for assessing whether the themes in the peace messages addressed the needs of society. It was used to evaluate the extent to which the content of peace messages upheld ethical standards, encouraged civic responsibility, and fostered positive community participation.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

A study by Abboud et al (2024) on the role of social media in Kenya's general elections found that the media is a powerful force in mobilizing social action and shaping public opinion. Depending on how it frames its messages, the media can either fuel conflict or promote peace, particularly during politically tense moments such as general elections. This dual capacity is especially relevant for faith-based radio, which this study examined as a platform that deliberately leaned toward peacebuilding during Kenya's 2022 general elections.

Faith-based radio stations occupy a distinctive space in the media landscape because of their religious grounding. Arregui et al (2020) observed that when religion and media work together to disseminate peace messages, the task of promoting peace becomes far easier. In line with this observation, the current study shows that faith-based stations positioned themselves as credible and trusted voices of peace in a season marked by high political emotions.

According to Shafiei and Overton (2023), peace messages from faith-based radio often draw on values such as reconciliation, forgiveness, social justice, love, and peace. To resonate with listeners, such messages need to be framed in ways that connect with shared religious teachings and cultural expectations. Yet their impact is not guaranteed.

Credibility is weakened when religion and media become politicized. At times, religious leaders have used faith-based radio to adopt explicit political stances, thereby eroding their neutrality as peace advocates. In such situations, stations risk being seen less as impartial agents of peace and more as platforms for political propaganda (Garnham, 2020).

Studies on Kenyan media ethics reinforce this tension. Barry and Pul (2020) note that peace communication is harder to deliver effectively when religious leaders and broadcasters appear to have political interests, since neutrality becomes compromised. Similarly, Korir and Nabushawo (2021) point out that many faith-based radio stations are owned or influenced by leaders with close ties to politics, a reality that often prompts audiences to question the sincerity of their peace messaging.

The framing of peace messages is equally important. Laor (2022) emphasizes that messages focusing only on forgiveness and reconciliation, while ignoring the root causes of electoral conflict, often fail to achieve meaningful change. Conversely, messages that stress grievances and injustices without addressing forgiveness, unity, and cohesion may deepen divisions. A balanced approach is therefore crucial. As Lee and Chow (2022) suggest, effective peace communication combines themes of love, unity, and forgiveness with calls for justice, fairness, and respect for democratic processes.

Exploring these thematic directions is significant because they reveal the editorial choices of faith-based stations, their interpretation of social responsibility, and their responsiveness to community needs. Examining how such messages were framed during the 2022 general elections offers important insights into the contribution of faith-based radio to strategic peacebuilding. This study uses Social Responsibility Theory as a guiding framework to evaluate whether the messages promoted ethical standards, civic engagement, and constructive community relationships during one of Kenya's most politically sensitive periods.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive case study design to capture and document events as they unfolded. The aim was to present an accurate account of realities on the ground rather than test theories or establish causality. Seven faith-based radio stations operating in regions prone to election-related violence were selected: MBCI Radio, Biblia Husema Broadcasting, Radio Waumini, Sayare FM, Upendo FM, Hope FM, and Family Radio 316. Respondents included radio presenters, program managers, and producers who were directly involved in shaping programming.

Purposive sampling guided the selection of both the stations and participants. In total, forty-nine respondents were drawn from the seven outlets, representing program directors, presenters, and producers. Data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires, while secondary sources included library research and document analysis. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically through data reduction, display, and interpretation, with findings presented narratively. Descriptive statistics such as tables, graphs, and charts were used to support the qualitative insights. Both primary and secondary data were synthesized to generate the study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

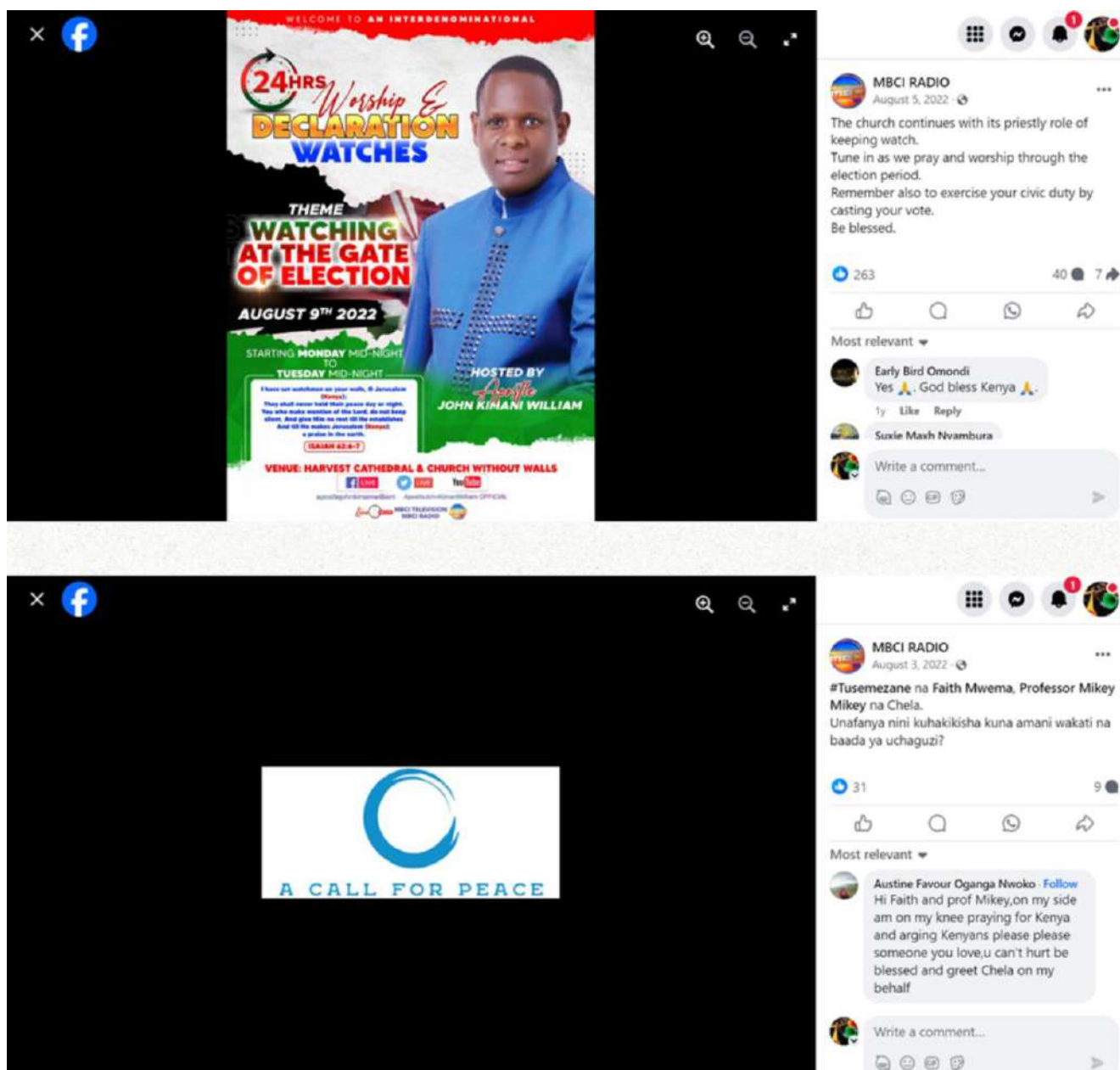
### IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Response Rate

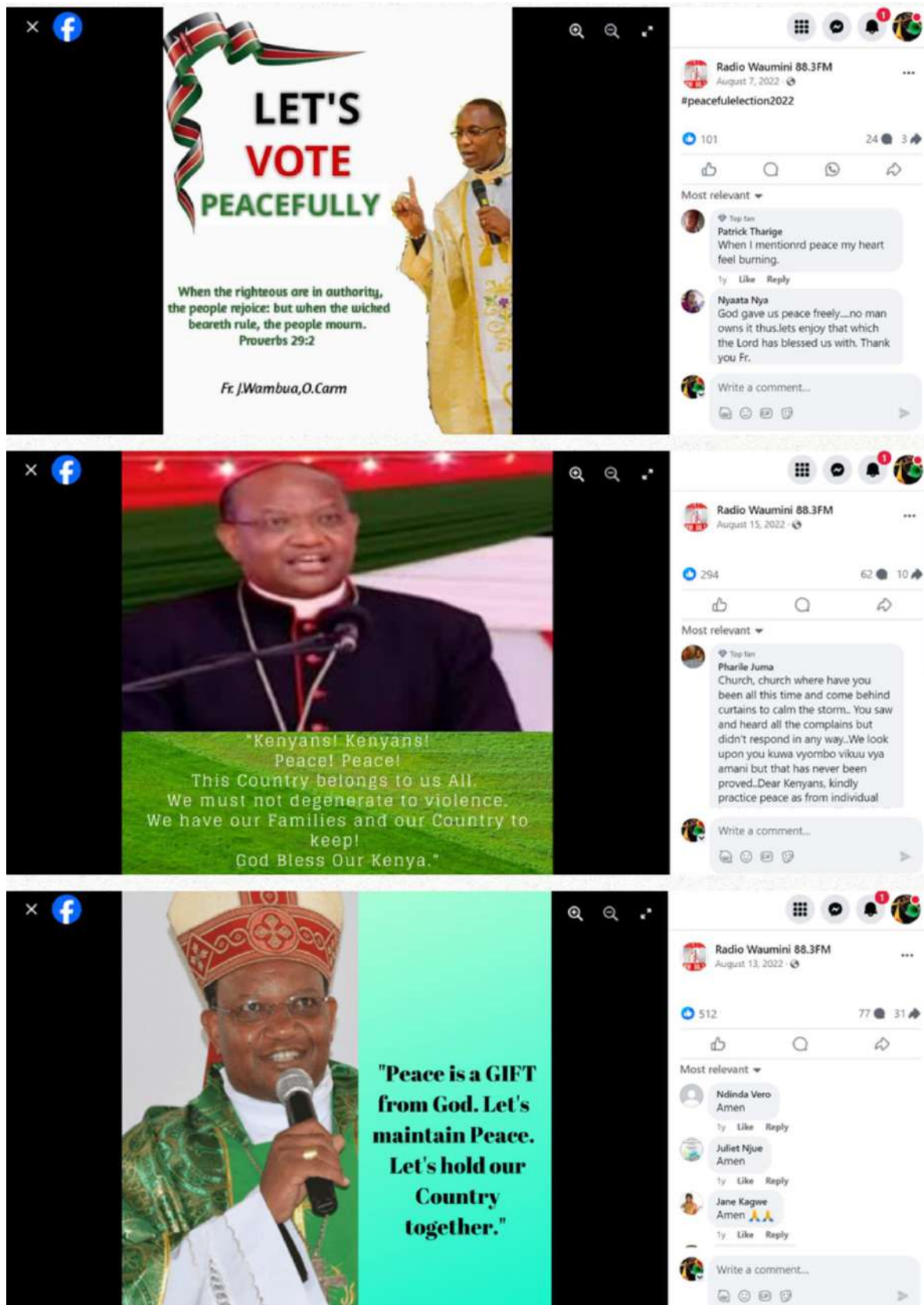
The study focused on 49 journalists, comprising radio program directors, presenters, and producers from seven faith-based radio stations. Out of this target group, 35 journalists from five stations participated, engaging through questionnaires, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews.

#### 4.2 Airing of Peace Messages through Faith-Based Radio during General Elections

Respondents were asked whether their respective faith-based radio stations aired peace messages during Kenya's general elections, and to give examples of such messages. All participants (100%) confirmed that their stations disseminated peace messages before, during, and after the elections. These messages were delivered through live on-air broadcasts, posts on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, and face-to-face community outreach. The peace messages consistently centered on key themes, including voting peacefully, accepting election results, fostering love and unity, respecting others' property, rejecting ethnic violence, embracing diversity, and upholding democratic processes. Faith-based radio stations complemented their on-air broadcasts with social media outreach, using platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to share messages designed to foster strategic peacebuilding during Kenya's general elections as shown in Figure 1 and 2.



**Figure 1**  
*MBCI Radio's Social Media Peace Messages*

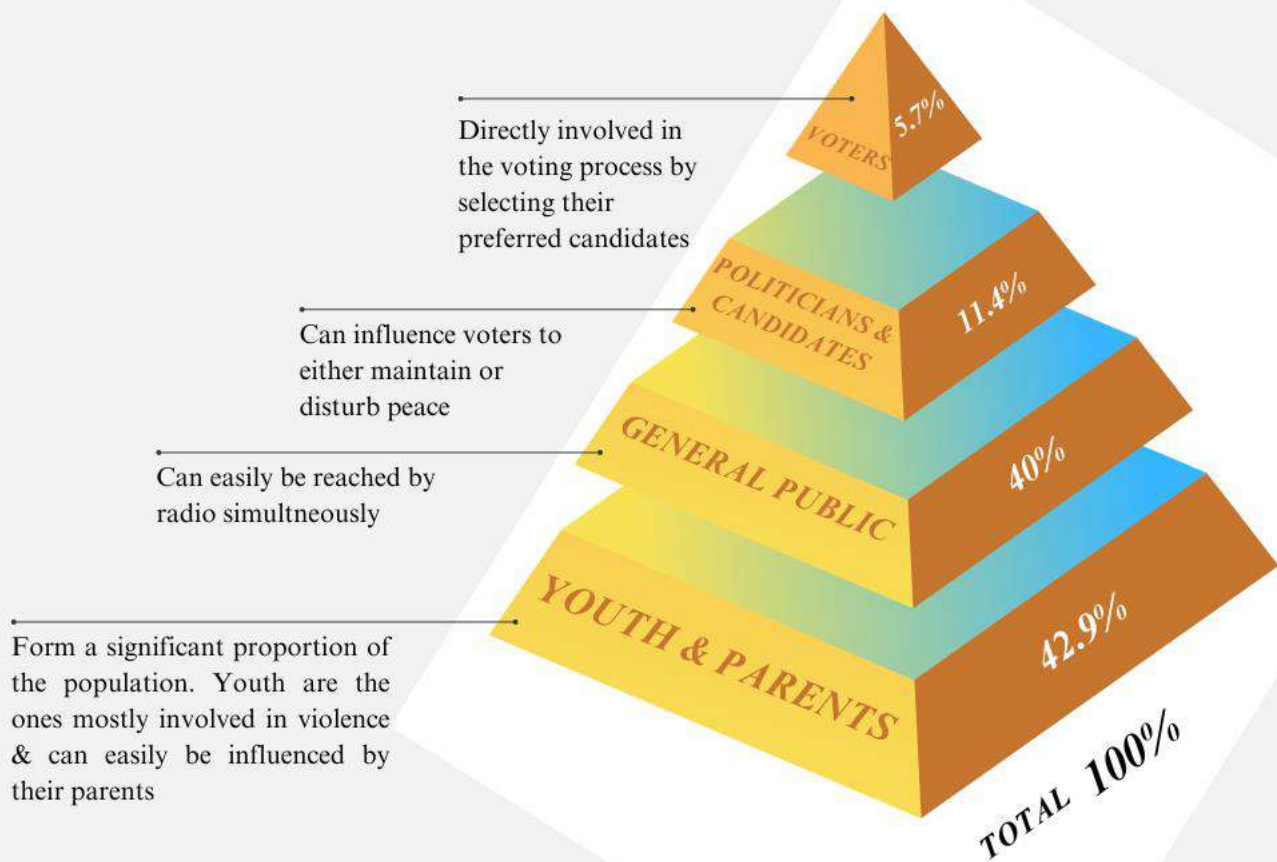


**Figure 2**  
*Radio Waumini's Social Media Peace Messages*

### 4.3 Intended Audience for Peace Messages during General Elections

The respondents were asked to indicate the primary audience for the peace messages broadcast during general elections. Their responses revealed four main target groups: youth and parents (42.9%), the general public (40%), politicians and election candidates (11.4%), and voters in general (5.7%). These proportions are illustrated in Figure 3.

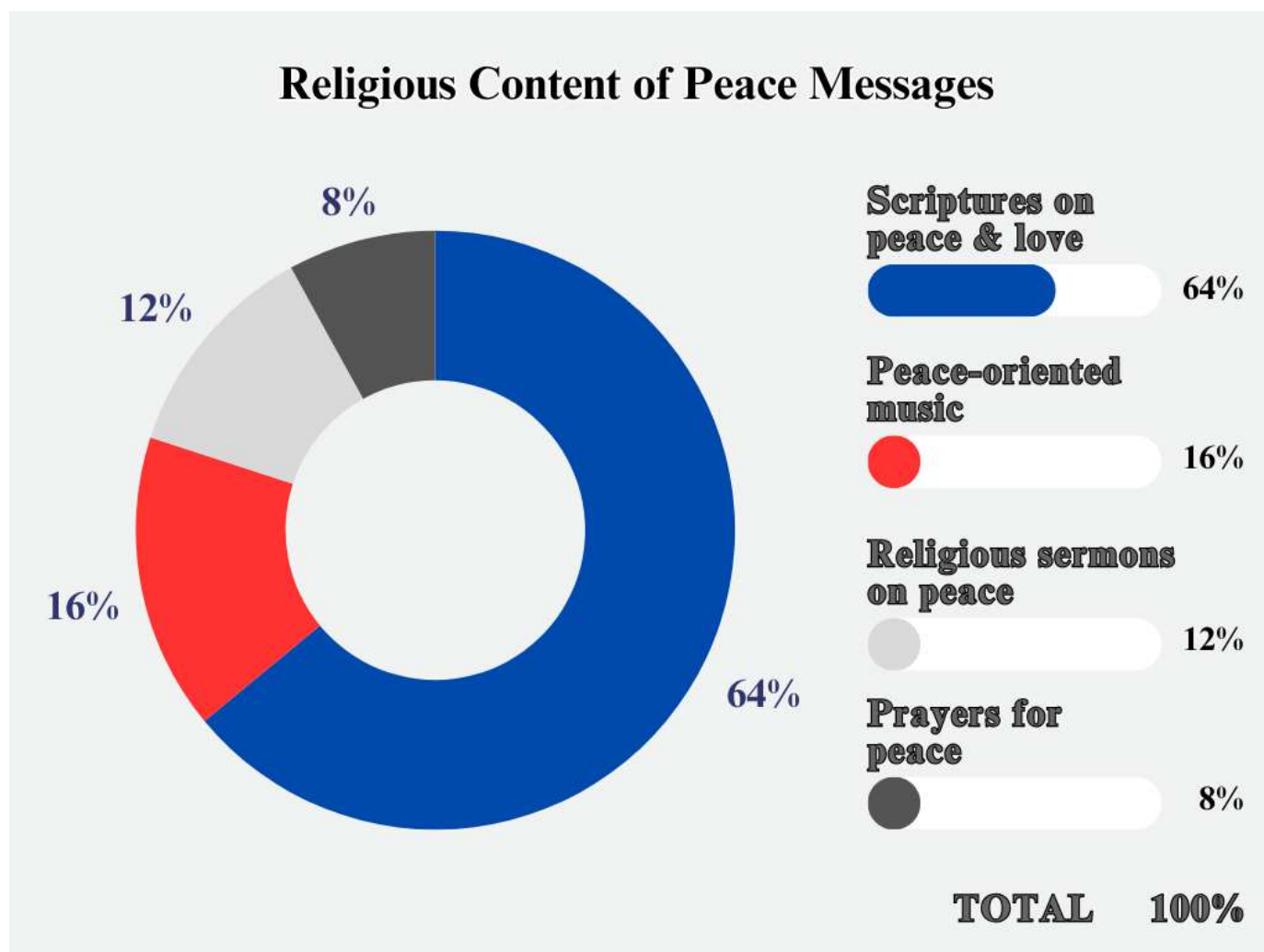
## Target Audience of Peace Messages during General Elections



**Figure 3**  
*Target Audience for Peace Messages*

### 4.4 Religious Dimensions of Peace Messages for Strategic Peacebuilding

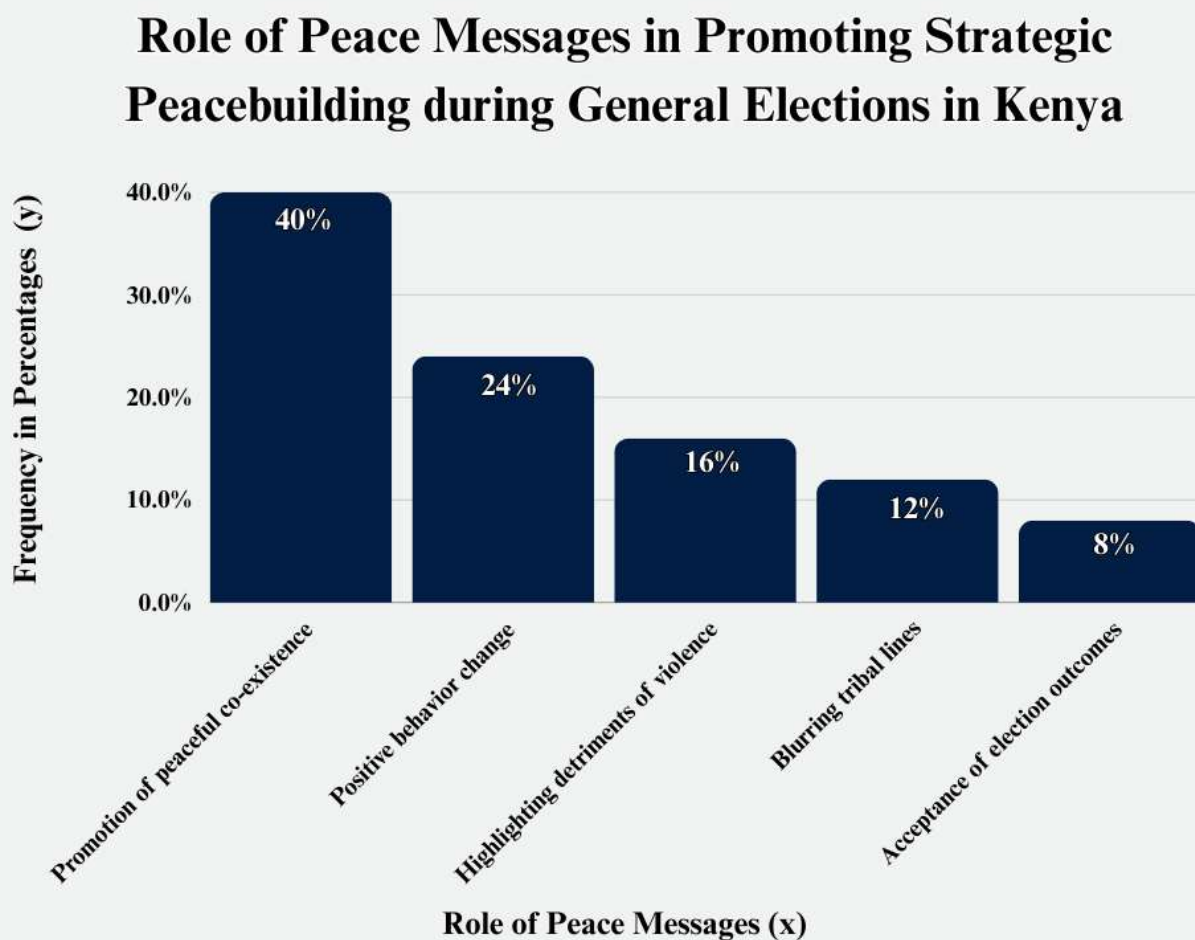
The study also sought to determine the religious components embedded in the peace messages broadcast by the stations during general elections. Respondents reported that these messages often drew on scriptural references about peace and love (64%), peace-themed music (16%), sermons emphasizing peaceful coexistence (12%), and prayers for national harmony (8%), as illustrated in Figure 4.



**Figure 4**  
*Religious Content in the Messages of Peace*

#### 4.5 The Contribution of Peace Messages to Strategic Peacebuilding

Respondents were asked to describe how the peace messages broadcast by their respective radio stations had contributed to strategic peacebuilding during general elections in Kenya. Their feedback indicated that these messages played a significant role in fostering peaceful co-existence (40%), encouraging positive behavior change (24%), raising awareness about the harmful effects of violence (16%), reducing tribal divisions (12%), and promoting the acceptance of election results (8%), as illustrated in Figure 5.



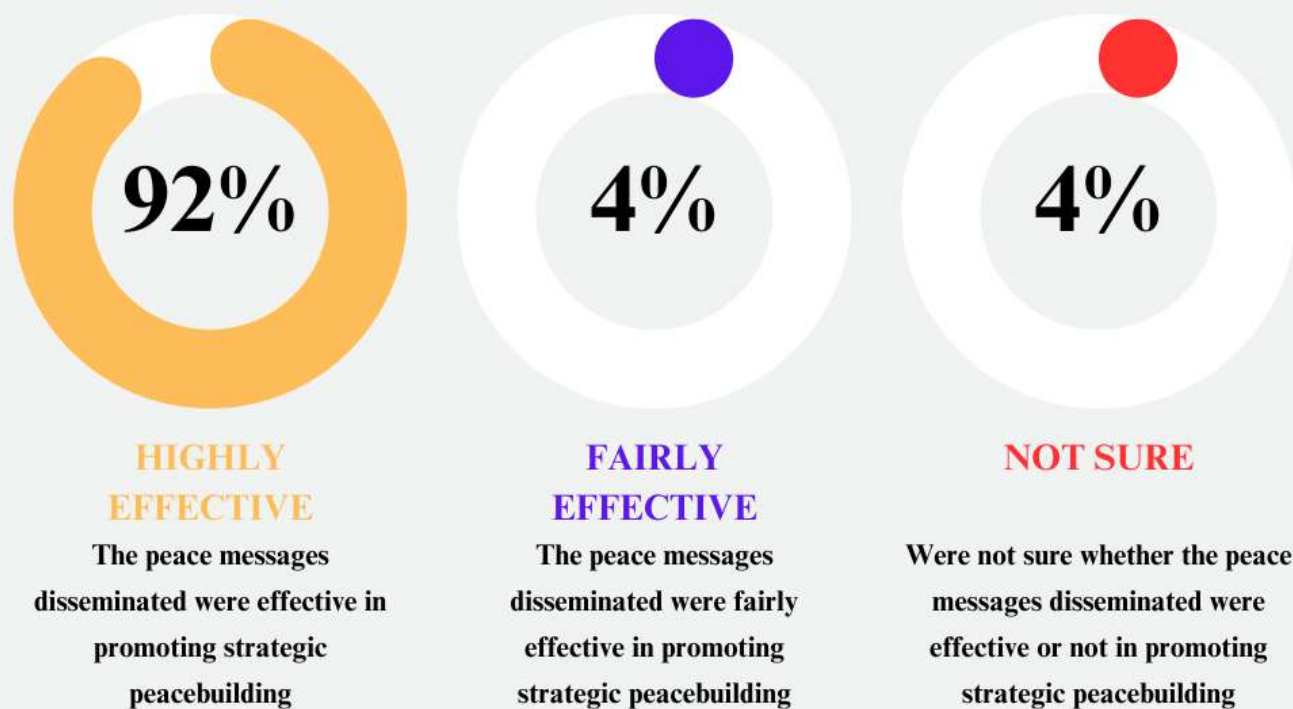
**Figure 5**  
*Contribution of Peace Messages to Strategic Peacebuilding*

These results align with the observations of Mwangi (2020), who emphasized that the media plays a critical role in managing electoral conflict by disseminating positive messages that foster peaceful coexistence, encourage constructive behavioral change, and promote acceptance of legitimate electoral outcomes. Mwangi further argued that the media should serve as a public watchdog, ensuring transparency in the electoral process and thereby enhancing the legitimacy of election results.

#### 4.6 Impact of Peace Messaging on Strategic Peacebuilding Efforts

The respondents were required to evaluate the effectiveness of the peace messages they disseminated in promoting strategic peacebuilding during general elections in Kenya. 92% of the respondents reported that the peace messages disseminated by their respective radio stations were highly effective in promoting strategic peacebuilding during general elections. 4% of the respondents stated that the peace messages disseminated by their respective radio stations were fairly effective in promoting strategic peacebuilding during general elections. Another 4% of the respondents reported that they were not sure whether the peace messages disseminated by their respective radio stations were effective or not in promoting strategic peacebuilding during general elections. This is shown in figure 6.

## Effectiveness of Peace Messages in Promoting Strategic Peacebuilding during General Elections

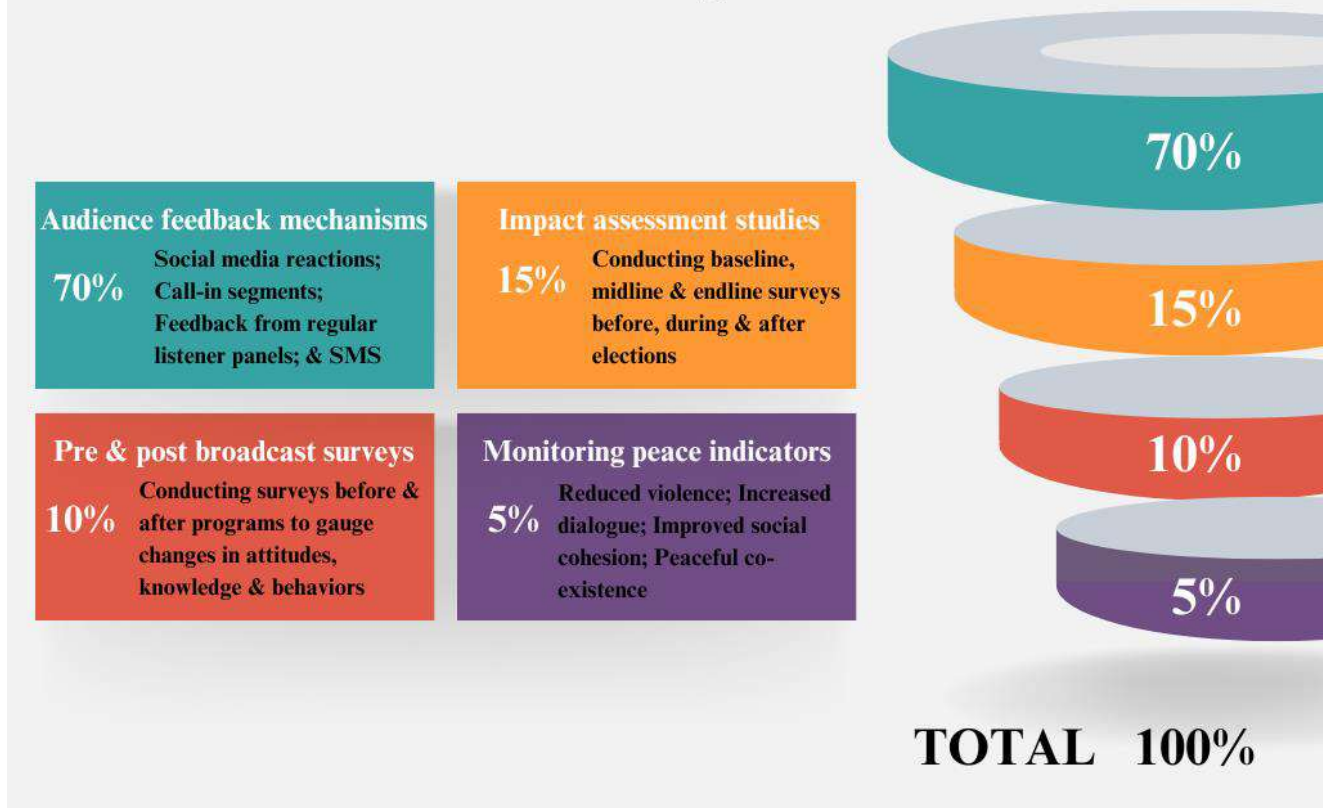


**Figure 6**  
*Impact of Peace Messaging on Strategic Peacebuilding Efforts*

### 4.7 Approaches to Assessing the Effectiveness of Peace Messages

Respondents were asked whether their respective radio stations had mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of peace messages aimed at strategic peacebuilding during Kenya's general elections. A majority (80%) indicated that such mechanisms were in place, while 20% reported having none. Those who confirmed the existence of evaluation mechanisms were further requested to specify them. The methods identified included audience feedback mechanisms (70%), impact assessment studies (15%), broadcast surveys (10%), and monitoring of peace indicators (5%), as illustrated in Figure 7.

## Mechanisms of Evaluating the Effectiveness of Peace Messages



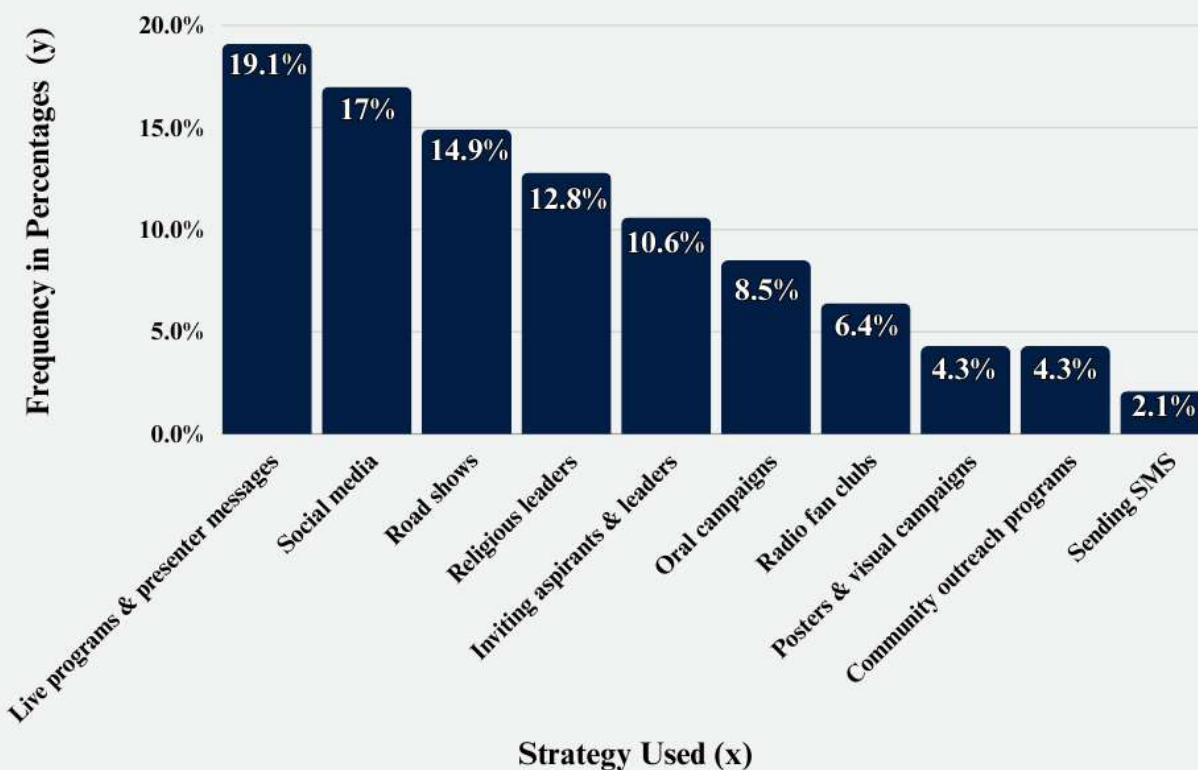
**Figure 7**

*Approaches to Assessing the Effectiveness of Peace Messages*

### 4.8 Approaches for Delivering Peace Messages to the Intended Audience

The respondents were asked to identify the strategies employed by their respective radio stations to disseminate peace messages to target audiences during general elections in Kenya. The strategies cited included: live programs and presenter messages (19.1%); social media platforms (17%); roadshows (14.9%); engagement of religious leaders (12.8%); inviting aspirants and political leaders to publicly pledge peace (10.6%); oral campaigns (8.5%); radio fan clubs (6.4%); posters and other visual campaigns (4.3%); community outreach programs (4.3%); and short message service (SMS) communication (2.1%), as illustrated in Figure 8.

## Strategies of Disseminating Peace Messages to Target Audience



**Figure 8**  
*Approaches for Delivering Peace Messages to the Intended Audience*

These findings are consistent with Ortiz dos Santos (2021), who examined the role of radio journalism in conflict prevention. He noted that while individual strategies are useful, their effectiveness increases when combined into a broader peace campaign. Such an approach not only strengthens the message but also ensures wider reach and deeper audience engagement, especially during sensitive periods like elections.

### 4.9 Additional Peace Messages for Inclusion in Radio Programs to Enhance Strategic Peacebuilding

When asked to suggest additional peace messages for radio programming, respondents highlighted the need for political leaders and contestants to speak directly to their supporters about rejecting violence, showing tolerance, and committing to peace. They stressed that leaders should not only talk about peace but also model it in their conduct. The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) was also seen as having a responsibility to actively promote peaceful elections. Respondents further pointed to the value of incorporating religious teachings, peace-themed music, and recognition of peace champions into broadcasts. Some also noted that programs showing the real consequences of electoral violence could discourage conflict and strengthen peacebuilding efforts.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

Findings revealed that all the sampled stations broadcast some form of peace messages before, during, and after the elections. The primary target audiences included youth and parents, the general public, politicians and political candidates, as well as voters. The religious dimension of these messages was conveyed through scripture on peace and love, peace-oriented music, religious sermons, and prayers for peace. These messages sought to promote strategic peacebuilding by fostering peaceful co-existence, encouraging positive behavior change, highlighting the consequences of violence, mitigating ethnic divisions, and advocating acceptance of election outcomes.

Overall, the peace messages were perceived as effective in promoting strategic peacebuilding during the elections. Their effectiveness was evaluated through audience feedback mechanisms, impact assessment studies, pre- and post-broadcast surveys, and monitoring of peace indicators. Dissemination strategies included live programs and presenter-led messages, social media engagement, roadshows, participation of religious leaders, inviting political aspirants and leaders to publicly pledge peace, oral campaigns, radio fan clubs, posters and visual campaigns, community outreach initiatives, and SMS communication to targeted audiences.

Finally, the main findings of this study indicate that faith-based radio broadcasters play an exceptional and influential role in promoting strategic peacebuilding during general elections. Drawing on the moral authority, community trust, and religious teachings associated with their faith orientation, these broadcasters are able to shape public discourse on peacebuilding effectively. Their efforts have contributed to reducing inflammatory rhetoric and fostering a culture of peace during election periods. In addition, faith-based radio broadcasters have acted as mediators in conflicts between parties by providing platforms for constructive dialogue. They have also remained at the forefront of disseminating messages of hope, reconciliation, and tolerance, despite the numerous challenges they encounter in their operations.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Faith-based radio broadcasters should increase and diversify their strategic peacebuilding programs, messages, and initiatives by giving prominence to peace appeals from contesters and political leaders urging their supporters to maintain peace, reject violence, and embrace tolerance. These broadcasters should provide leaders, politicians, and contesters with dedicated platforms to model good behavior and guide their followers toward peaceful conduct.

In addition, faith-based radio stations should leverage technological tools such as SMS polling, mobile applications, social media platforms, and online surveys to gather real-time feedback from their audiences on the impact of peacebuilding programs, messages, and initiatives. This approach would enable broadcasters to better understand the needs of their target audiences in matters of strategic peacebuilding, address those needs effectively, and continuously improve the relevance and effectiveness of their peacebuilding interventions.

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