

The Influence of Online Discourse Tone on Public Perception of the Affordable Housing Program (AHP)

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Abstract

This study examines how the tone of online discourse influences public perception of Kenya's Affordable Housing Program (AHP) within rapidly expanding social media ecosystems. Drawing on Framing Theory and Social Influence Theory, the research investigates how emotionally charged and socially reinforced narratives shape citizen attitudes toward public policy. The study utilized a quantitative descriptive-correlational design, based on data collected among 362 social media users in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Nakuru counties. Exposure to AHP-related material, perceived tone of discourse, and the way the people were perceived were measured using structured questionnaires and analysed using SPSS. Results indicate that online discussion about the AHP is mostly neutral to moderately negative in nature, and is characterized by skepticism, criticism, and mixed framing. The people's attitudes towards the program also indicate conservative, two-sided views. Inferential statistics, such as ANOVA, demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between discourse tone and attitudes toward the show ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the more positive or balanced the discourse, the more positive the attitude toward the show. The findings highlight the potent nature of social media in not only reflecting but also actively shaping people's opinions through framing and peer influence processes. The success of policy implementation is not only related to implementation outcomes but also to the tone and format of online communication. It suggests that policymakers should be able to employ proactive communication strategies, engage with online stories, and take action on misinformation to increase the level of trust and legitimacy of the policy among the people.

Keywords: *Online discourse, discourse tone, public perception, Affordable Housing Program, social media, framing theory, social influence theory, sentiment analysis, public policy, Kenya*

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed how public opinion is formed, negotiated, and expressed in contemporary society. Unlike traditional media, which is largely centralized and gatekept, social media enables decentralized participation, in which individuals actively produce, share, and interpret data (Afyare & Orey, 2025). This change has led to the development of online discourse ecosystems, in which narratives are continually built and rebuilt as users interact. In this context, the way government

programs like the Affordable Housing Program (AHP) are perceived by the people has ceased to be shaped solely by official communication and is instead shaped by peer-generated information, discussions, and sentiment expressed across digital platforms. Gulzar (2023) argues that social media discourse is critical to how individuals understand, debate, and evaluate policies.

Framing is a key phenomenon in social media discourse, referring to how information is presented, emphasized, or structured to influence interpretation. Framing not only dictates what people think but also how they think (Sussman et al., 2026). Framing in the context of social media uses language, tone, imagery, and narrative construction, often enhanced by shares, likes, and algorithmic prioritization. Hilbert et al. (2017) explain that emotionally charged and strategically presented messages are more likely to gain traction and influence audience attitudes. Therefore, the conversation around public policies like the AHP may be dominated by frames that emphasize certain aspects- such as cost, accessibility, or even controversial political aspects- and diminish others. Although the role of social media in shaping public perception is becoming more significant, the prevalence of negative stories in social media discourse is increasing (Yantseva, 2020). Social media spaces tend to reward sensationalism and conflict, thereby encouraging the exaggeration of critical or negative views. (Groshek & Al-Rawi. Could show that negative sentiment is more likely to propagate faster and over a broader geographic range than positive information, thereby disproportionately altering people's attitudes. Such negative discourse, in the context of the AHP, can lead to skepticism, mistrust, and negative perceptions, whether or not the actual outcomes or intent of the program were favourable.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Discourse and Sentiment Studies

Online discourse refers to the interactive communication of information, opinions, and stories on digital platforms, especially social media. Online discourse, as opposed to traditional means of communication, is dynamic, participatory, and often marked by the rapid dissemination of information. Lewis et al. (2019) claimed that social media platforms serve as a key venue for societal debate, in which users collectively construct meaning and influence each other's perceptions. These platforms make it easier to craft strong narratives that can greatly influence how people think about social, political, and economic problems.

Sentiment is one of the main dimensions of online discourse that captures its emotional tone and is usually divided into positive, negative, and neutral. Sentiment analysis has emerged as a significant methodological tool for understanding people's attitudes in the digital world. Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013) showed that sentiment in social media content can provide insights into public opinion trends, especially during politically sensitive events. In addition, Yantseva (2020) emphasizes that differences in media sentiment levels can affect issue framing and audience attitudes over time.

Negative sentiment has been observed to exert a greater influence on the general opinion than positive sentiment. This is usually explained by the negativity bias; everyone is more likely to pay attention to and be affected by negative information. This bias is amplified on social media, where algorithmic systems promote engaging content, often including controversial or emotionally charged material (Puschmann & Powell, 2018). Consequently, negative discourse may prevail in online discussions, resulting in a distorted view of reality.

Moreover, online discourse is not only shaped by public opinion but also helps form it. Mendelsohn et al. (2021) show that discourse patterns on social media can shape attitudes toward a complex issue such as immigration by reinforcing a particular frame and narrative. This implies that social perception cannot be passively absorbed upon exposure to information but is instead constructed through continuous interactions in digital environments. The tone of discourse, whether supportive or critical, can therefore play a major role in shaping the population's perception of the program.

2.2 Framing Theory

The primary theoretical approach used in this research is Framing Theory. According to the theory, the manner in which information is conveyed will determine how people receive and react to the information. Instead of merely relaying information, media and communicators actively create meaning by telling the story, selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality (Güran & Özarlan, 2022). Framing in social media contexts is not confined to traditional media actors but is distributed among a network of users who together construct discourse.

The Theory of Framing is especially applicable to shaping audience perception through the tone of online discourse (Ocal & Crowston, 2024). Positive frames can focus on benefits, opportunities, and success stories, fostering positive attitudes and reducing criticism, whereas negative frames emphasize risks, failures, or controversies. Dharta (2024) demonstrates that frames considerably influence public opinion by shaping people's thinking and emotional responses.

2.3 Social Influence Theory

In addition to Framing Theory, the Social Influence Theory informs the study, as it explains how individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped by their interactions with others. Social media sites offer an opportune setting for social influence, as users are constantly exposed to how their peers react and feel (Adagala et al., 2026). By engaging in conformity, persuasion, and social learning, people tend to follow the majority views expressed within their networks.

According to Social Influence Theory, people tend to conform their ideas and perceptions to the majority, especially in ambiguous and complicated circumstances. People tend to rely on others' cues to form opinions in the context of public policy, even when they may be unaware of all available information (Al-Omouh et al., 2023). This makes social media discourse an effective tool for influencing the way people think.

Afyare and Orey. (2025) demonstrated that social influence can be affected both in a direct and indirect manner. Direct influence is through explicit communication, i.e., comments and discussions, whereas indirect influence is through indicators, i.e., likes, shares, and trending topics, which signal the popularity or credibility of a particular view. These processes can amplify the effects of prevailing discourse tones, whether positive or negative.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is quantitative, specifically descriptive-correlational. To generalize the tendencies in social media exposure, discourse tone, and the population's perception of the AHP, the descriptive component was employed. It provided a summary of respondents' interactions with online materials and their assessments of the program as a result. The relationship between online discourse tone and public perception, including its strength

and direction, was determined using the correlational component. This design suited well since it enabled the study to test naturally occurring relationships without controlling variables.

3.2 Target Population

The target population was social media users in Kenya who were exposed to discussions about the Affordable Housing Program. Kenya boasts about 13 million active social media users, a large percentage of whom are concentrated in cities such as Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Nakuru, which have relatively high internet penetration. Nonetheless, a very small fraction of users will participate in the discussions of public policies on the Internet. According to digital analytics, sources estimate that an extremely small percentage of users engage in governance-related discourse. The accessible population for this approximation was estimated at 3,800 social media users who are actively exposed to or participate in AHP-related discussions. This population offered a realistic frame for examining the effects of the tone of online discourse on the formation of perceptions.

3.3 Sampling Design

To make the study representative and manageable, the researchers used a multistage sampling methodology. Four counties, Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Nakuru, were purposely selected in the first stage as having high levels of digital activity and relevance to AHP discourse. In the latter stage, respondents were allocated proportionally to the number of counties selected, based on estimated levels of social media use. This guarantees equal representation of users across regions.

Simple random sampling was used in the final stage, where each quota was subjected to simple random sampling to select individual respondents. At a 95 percent confidence level and a 5 percent margin of error, the sample size calculated using Yamane's (1973) formula was 362 respondents out of a population of 3,800. The distribution of the sample was as follows: Nairobi (130), Mombasa (90), Kisumu (72), and Nakuru (70). This distribution was intended to ensure sufficient representation of urban digital populations exposed to AHP-related discourse.

3.4 Research Instrument

The structured questionnaire was used to gather data on social media exposure, discourse tone, and public perceptions of the AHP. The questionnaire had five sections: demographic information, social media usage patterns, exposure to AHP-related content, perceived tone of online discourse, and public perception of the AHP. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure responses. The scale was reverse-coded so that 1 indicated a very positive perception and 5 a very negative one.

Scale Interpretation Framework

To ensure consistency in interpretation, mean scores were categorized. Scores between 1.0 and 1.8 were interpreted as a very positive perception, while scores between 1.9 and 2.6 were considered positive. Scores between 2.7 and 3.4 represented neutral perception. Scores between 3.5 and 4.2 indicated negative perception, while scores between 4.3 and 5.0 reflected very negative perception. This framework ensured standardized interpretation of results across all variables, particularly in assessing the influence of discourse tone on perception.

3.5 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with a sample of 36 respondents, representing 10 percent of the entire sample. The pilot study was to test the clarity, reliability, and relevance of the research instrument before the actual data collection. The pilot study helped identify unclear questions,

determine how to word them, and optimize the questionnaire structure. It also ensured that items measuring discourse tone and the AHP's perception were clearly understood by the respondents. The pilot results also supported the conclusion that the instrument was appropriate for collecting large-scale data and that participants in the pilot study should not be included in the final analysis to avoid bias.

Validity and Reliability

The research instrument was tested, and reliability was assessed by cross-loading items across constructs using Cronbach's alpha, which assesses internal consistency within each construct. The findings showed that there was an acceptable to high reliability in all variables. The exposure to social media had recorded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.832, government digital campaigns 0.740, tone of discourse 0.834, and perception of the people 0.815. These values are higher than the suggested value of 0.70, which is considered high internal consistency. It is worth noting that the tone of discourse construct was highly reliable, indicating that the items consistently measured the same underlying sentiment dimension.

3.6 Data Analysis

SPSS Version 27 was used to analyze the data. It was a strictly quantitative analysis that concentrated on the association between variables. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize characteristics of the respondents, the patterns of social media usage, and the overall perception patterns. Relationships between variables were then investigated using inferential statistics. Online discourse tone and people's perception of the AHP were the variables used in a Pearson correlation analysis to determine the direction and strength of their relationship.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research followed strict ethical standards. The Africa International University Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (ISERC) provided ethical approval, and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) issued a research permit. The study had full informed consent as the purpose of the study was made known to the participants beforehand. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any time without penalty. No personal information, such as names or social media accounts, was obtained, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. All the information was securely stored in password-protected documents and used only for academic purposes.

4. Findings

The study analyzed data from 362 valid responses collected from social media users across Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Nakuru counties who had been exposed to discussions concerning the Affordable Housing Program (AHP). All cases were complete with no missing values recorded for the key variables under investigation, namely online discourse tone and public perception of the AHP. This provided a strong basis for reliable statistical analysis and ensured that the findings consistently reflected the views of respondents who were consistently exposed to AHP-related online discussions.

Before conducting the main analysis, reliability tests were performed to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales used for both online discourse tone and public perception. The discourse tone scale, which included five indicators (positive tone, skepticism, criticism, leadership framing, and negativity), produced a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.887, indicating excellent reliability. Similarly, the public perception scale, measured using five indicators (initiative support, fairness, perceived benefits, knowledge, and participation),

yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.877, also indicating strong internal consistency. These results suggest that the questionnaire items were sufficiently reliable for measuring the constructs under study and that the scales could be confidently used for subsequent inferential analysis.

Table 1: Reliability test

Construct	Cronbach’s Alpha	Number of Items	Interpretation
Tone of Discourse	0.887	5	Good
Public Perception (DV)	0.877	5	Good

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Online Discourse Tone

The objective of the study was to examine the prevailing tone of online discourse surrounding the Affordable Housing Program. Descriptive statistics showed that the mean score for discourse tone was 2.5630 with a standard deviation of 1.15380, based on a five-point scale. The minimum observed value was 1.00 while the maximum was 4.80. This means that respondents generally perceived the dominant online discourse around the AHP as moderately negative to neutral, rather than strongly positive. The relatively high standard deviation indicates substantial variation in how respondents interpreted online conversations, suggesting that social media discussions about the AHP are highly diverse and contested.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics- Tone

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean_Tone	362	1.00	4.80	2.5630	1.15380
Valid N (listwise)	362				

Frequency distribution results further showed that a large proportion of respondents clustered around the lower and middle values of the scale, particularly between 1.40 and 2.80. Very few respondents reported strongly positive discourse tone scores above 4.00, reinforcing the argument that online discussions were largely characterized by skepticism, criticism, and mixed framing rather than strong support. This finding aligns with the literature suggesting that social media environments tend to amplify critical and emotionally charged narratives. The prevalence of skeptical and negative discourse may reflect concerns about affordability, implementation challenges, taxation, and political debates surrounding the AHP.

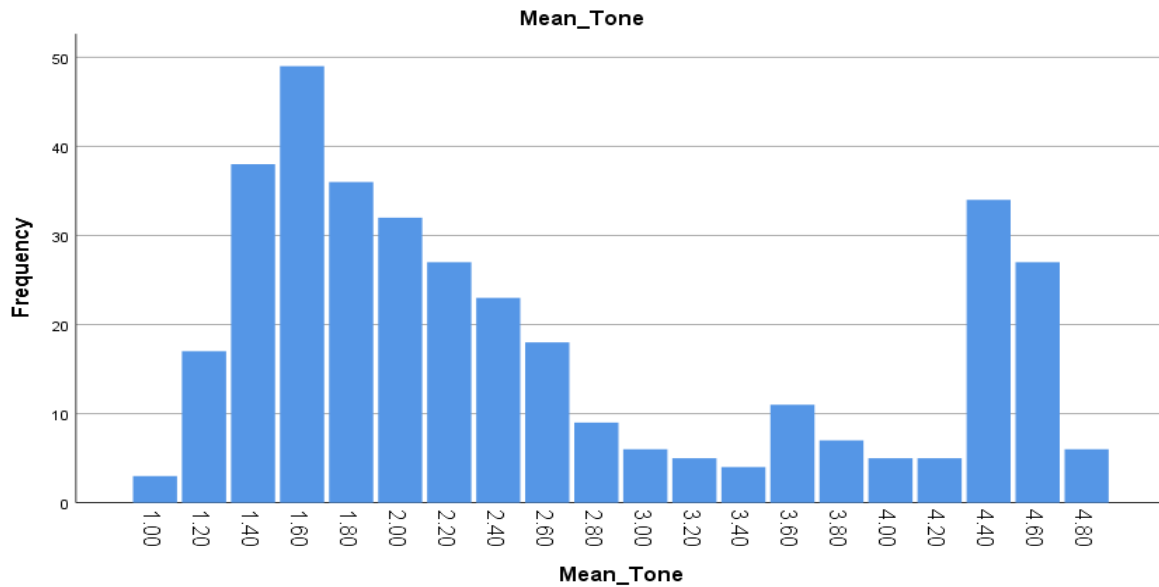


Figure 1: Tone Frequencies

The implication is that most citizens are exposed to a communication environment in which the AHP is discussed with caution, suspicion, or criticism rather than with optimism. Such exposure has the potential to influence how the policy is interpreted and evaluated.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Public Perception of the AHP

The second variable examined was public perception of the Affordable Housing Program. The descriptive results showed that the mean score for public perception was 2.9370 with a standard deviation of 1.14481. The minimum score was 1.20 while the maximum score was 5.00. This mean indicates that respondents’ perception of the AHP was slightly below the neutral midpoint, suggesting mixed but somewhat cautious attitudes toward the program. While some respondents viewed the program positively, a considerable number remained uncertain or held unfavorable perceptions.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics-Perception

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean_Perc	362	1.20	5.00	2.9370	1.14481
Valid N (listwise)	362				

The frequency distribution revealed that the highest concentration of responses was between 2.40 and 3.60, indicating moderate perceptions rather than extreme support or rejection. This pattern suggests that public attitudes are not entirely polarized but are shaped by uncertainty and ongoing debate.

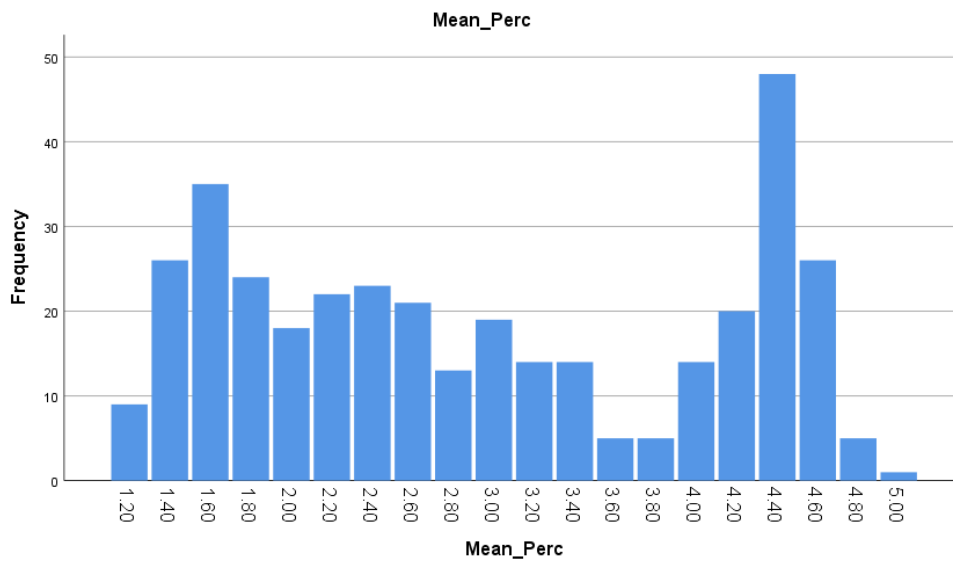


Figure 2: Perception Frequencies

This result reflects the broader policy communication challenge facing the AHP. Although the program may be recognized as an important national initiative, concerns about fairness, transparency, cost implications, and implementation may weaken public confidence. The findings suggest that perception is shaped not only by direct knowledge of the policy but also by how it is discussed in digital spaces.

4.3 Influence of Online Discourse Tone on Public Perception

The central objective of the study was to determine whether the tone of online discourse significantly influences public perception of the Affordable Housing Program. To test this relationship, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted using public perception as the dependent variable and online discourse tone as the grouping factor. The ANOVA results revealed a statistically significant relationship between discourse tone and public perception of the AHP, $F(19, 342) = 13.844, p < 0.001$. Since the significance value was well below the 0.05 threshold, the null hypothesis that discourse tone has no significant influence on public perception was rejected.

Table 4: ANOVA Test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	205.684	19	10.825	13.844	0.000
Within Groups	267.44	342	0.782		
Total	473.124	361			

This finding confirms that variations in the emotional tone of online discussions are associated with significant differences in respondents' perceptions of the Affordable Housing Program. In practical terms, individuals exposed to more positive or balanced online discourse tend to hold more favorable views of the AHP, while those exposed to negative and skeptical discourse are more likely to perceive the program negatively. The between-group sum of squares (205.684) was considerably larger relative to the within-group variation (267.440), indicating that discourse tone explains a substantial proportion of the differences in public perception. This demonstrates that online discourse is not merely reflective of public opinion but actively helps shape it.

The findings strongly support Framing Theory, which argues that the way information is presented influences interpretation. When the AHP is framed online as beneficial, inclusive, and solution-oriented, public perception improves. Conversely, when discourse emphasizes controversy, corruption concerns, taxation burdens, or political manipulation, public trust declines. Similarly, the findings support Social Influence Theory by showing that respondents rely heavily on cues from peers and dominant online narratives when forming opinions about complex policy issues. Since many citizens may not have direct experience with the AHP, they depend on social media discussions to interpret the program’s legitimacy and relevance.

4.4 Group Differences in Perception across Tone Categories

Further descriptive analysis across discourse tone categories revealed a clear pattern: as online discourse tone became more positive, public perception scores also improved. Respondents with lower discourse tone scores (indicating more negative exposure) had lower mean perception scores, while those exposed to more positive discourse showed substantially higher perception scores. For example, respondents in the lower tone categories, such as 1.40 and 1.60, recorded mean perception scores of 2.1789 and 2.4286, respectively, while respondents in higher tone categories recorded progressively stronger perception scores. This pattern demonstrates a positive directional relationship between discourse tone and policy perception.

The mean plot generated by the ANOVA procedure visually illustrates this trend, showing a general upward trend in public perception as the discourse tone increases.

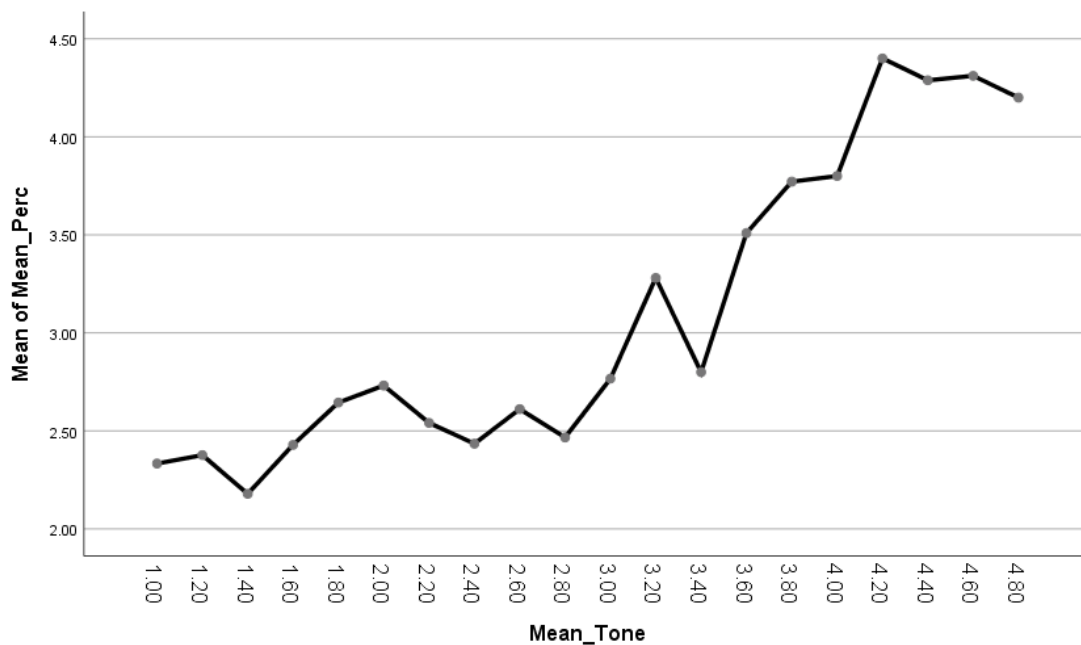


Figure 3: Mean Plots

This finding is important because it demonstrates that the effect of online discourse is not random but systematic. The more favorable the dominant narrative surrounding the AHP, the more likely citizens are to interpret the program positively. This has important policy implications for government communication strategies. It suggests that official messaging alone may be insufficient if the broader digital discourse environment remains predominantly negative. Public institutions must therefore engage more actively in digital spaces to counter misinformation, clarify policy intentions, and improve trust.

4.5 Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of the tone of online discourse in shaping the general population's impression of the Affordable Housing Program (AHP) in Kenya. The results showed that moderate negativity, skepticism, and mixed framing, rather than strong support, constituted the majority of social media discussions about the AHP. Meanwhile, the population's attitude toward the program was reserved and, at best, moderately positive.

The descriptive results indicated that the overall perception of the prevailing online discourse surrounding the AHP was that it leans towards a neutral-to-negative tone. This implies that online platforms are not simply operating as a neutral space in which information exchange occurs, but as a space where critical narratives can become more visible and influential. This observation is consistent with Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013), who found that social media sentiment is a significant determinant of political and policy-related attitudes, owing to the greater likelihood that negative content spreads more quickly and attracts more attention. Yantseva (2020) states that emotionally motivated and critical narratives are often favored in online discussions, especially when the policy under discussion involves an economic sacrifice or a political controversy. Problems such as the obligatory housing levy deductions, affordability, and trust in implementation might have contributed to the prevalence of skeptical discourse in the case of the AHP.

The results also substantiate the thesis of Puschmann and Powell (2018), who believe that the controversial and emotionally compelling content is enhanced by algorithmic systems on social media. Negative stories about the public policy are more likely to draw comments, shares, and reactions, thus becoming more visible than neutral or positive explanations of the public policy (Hanitzsch et al., 2016). This could be the reason why participants in this study were more likely to hear criticism of the AHP than a positive message. This suggests that the structural characteristics of digital platforms reinforce negativity bias, making the communication of policies increasingly challenging for government institutions.

The citizens' perception of the AHP was moderate, slightly below strong approval ratings, indicating mixed feelings about the program. Although some respondents recognized potential benefits in affordable housing and better access to homeownership, many were unsure about fairness, accessibility, and the outcomes of fairness, access, and implementation. This result is consistent with Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013), who find that the framing of issues influences the formation of public perception more than the content of policies. Instead of relying on personal experience, people tend to base their judgments of public programs on the dominant narratives they hold (Hanitzsch et al., 2016). Because many citizens might not yet have directly benefited from the AHP, their perceptions will be shaped by mediated interpretations arising from social media discussions and peer interactions.

The greatest result of the research was that the tone of discourse on the Internet and how people perceive it are statistically correlated. The ANOVA results confirmed that significant differences in discourse tones among respondents were related to significant differences in their perceptions of the Affordable Housing Program. Those exposed to more positive or balanced online discussions were more likely to have positive attitudes towards the program, whilst those exposed to negative discourse reported more skeptical and less supportive attitudes. This observation strongly supports the Framing Theory, which suggests that the manner in which information is presented affects its interpretation and judgment.

Guran and Ozarslan (2022) note that framing is not merely a process of informing but an active process of meaning-making through the accentuation of some aspects of reality and the suppression of others. Within the AHP framework, if social media portrays the program as a solution to housing shortages and economic inclusion, the population's attitudes will become more positive. Nevertheless, as long as people discuss the risks of corruption, political manipulation, or forced taxation, trust decreases (Benkele et al., 2025). The results of the current research posit that such framing effects are highly relevant in the policy communication process and have a direct effect on citizens' judgments of legitimacy.

The findings are also consistent with Hilbert et al. (2017), who found that conflict frames and economic burden frames elicit stronger emotional reactions and greater engagement than solution-oriented frames. Since the content of conflict prevails over digital discourse, policies such as the AHP are subject to interpretation in light of controversy rather than their perceived social benefits. This helps create a perception gap, whereby citizens can oppose policy initiatives based on discourse dynamics rather than the actual policy outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This research paper has explored how the tone of online discourse can affect citizens' perceptions of the Affordable Housing Program (AHP) in Kenya, with particular focus on how social media narratives can influence citizens' attitudes towards the program. Results determined that online discussion about the AHP is dominated by moderate negativity, skepticism, and mixed framing, with less strongly positive accounts. Simultaneously, social attitudes towards the program were found to be both skeptical and moderately positive, reflecting uncertainty about affordability, fairness, and implementation, as well as trust in the government's intentions.

Most importantly, the study established that the tone of online discourse has a statistically significant effect on how people view the AHP. Respondents who were exposed to more positive and balanced discussions were more inclined to express positive attitudes towards the program, whereas those exposed to more negative and critical discourses demonstrated lower levels of trust and support. This observation confirms both Framing Theory and Social Influence Theory by demonstrating that public perception of policy is influenced not only by the policy content itself but also by how that content is framed and discussed in digital spaces.

6. Recommendations

Policymakers and implementing agencies need to more effectively leverage strategic digital communication and public engagement on social media platforms to promote the Affordable Housing Program (AHP) and improve public perception. The study found that the tone of online discussion greatly affects citizens' attitudes towards the program. Therefore, it is highly recommended for government institutions to conduct communication that is balanced, transparent, and timely, clearly explaining the objectives, benefits, and eligibility of the AHP, as well as its development. Engaging with online audiences regularly and effectively via verified social media platforms, interactive forums, and public feedback mechanisms can help combat misinformation, address negative messaging, and build public trust. Furthermore, partnerships with digital influencers, community leaders, and trusted media outlets can help ensure the program's messaging is accurate and positive.

Monitoring online discussions and increasing the digital skills of social media users must also be emphasized. The results showed that emotional and negative message framing leads to skepticism and ambivalent perceptions of the AHP, suggesting the need for relevant actors to

monitor public opinion and detect misleading information in real time. There is a need for public education campaigns on responsible social media use and fact-checking, as well as for critical evaluation of online content, to help citizens make informed judgments about public policies. Future studies can also extend this study's parameters by analyzing additional social media platforms, countries, and demographic groups to obtain a more comprehensive picture of how public discourse on social media influences public attitudes toward government programs.

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