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## Popular culture, contemporary trends and social identities in Kenyan youth fiction

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**Abstract**

This article examines the extent to which contemporary popular cultural trends influence the formation of social identities among the youth. In light of this, the study addresses the question of intergenerational sexual relationship, the psycho-social impact of technoculture on youth identity formation and how HIV/AIDS discourse is used to (re)construct sexual behaviour. The study is informed by the idea that youths are always among the first to experience, first-hand, the problems and possibilities of the successive waves of technical and economic modernization sweeping through capitalist societies (Willis, 2003). At the same time, youths are seen as a part of society that is most likely to engage in the process of cultural borrowing which is disruptive of the reproduction of traditional cultural practices, from modes of dress to language, aesthetics and ideologies (Heaven & Tubridy, 2002). This is bound to affect their identity formation. The study is qualitative, involving close reading of Elizabeth Kabui's *Was Nyakeeru my Father* (2014), Florence Mbaya's *Sunrise at Midnight* (2014), Bill Ruto's *Death Trap* (2005), Carolyn Adalla's *Confessions of an Aids Victims* (1993), Moraa Gitaa's *The Shark Attack* (2014) and Kingwa Kamencu's *To Grasp at a Star* (2005). The analysis is guided by postmodern literary theory in the process of its enquiry.

**Keywords:** consumption, identity, popular culture, technoculture, postmodern

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### Public Interest Statement

This study unravels young people's adoption and consumption of imported culture and technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and how this impacts on their identity formation. This article therefore addresses the issues of technology consumption (technoculture) in shaping identities, inter-generational sexual relationships, and HIV-AIDS discourses.

### Introduction

This paper unravels how young people adopt and consume imported culture and technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and how this impacts on their identity formation. The study borrows from Shield's argument that, in direct contrast to the class based youth cultures of the past, contemporary cultures of the youth are more fleeting, transitional and organized around individual lifestyle and consumption choice. Conversely, they are more likely to be typified by a 'postmodern persona' or by 'multiple identification' (Shields, 1992). The study begins by investigating how contemporary HIV/AIDS discourse is used to (re)construct sexual behaviour and how this sexual behaviour lead to formation of youth social identity. It uses Adalla's and Mbaya's texts to prove that sexual cultures and sexual meanings are constructed through a range of discursive practices across social institutions and that they change over time.

The article also focuses on how young women understand and enact their sexuality within the context of intergenerational sexual relationship. It shows how the young women navigate the social, cultural and economic structures in the same relationships. Our centre of interest being on the relationship between young girls and 'sugar daddy'/'sponsor'; the status benefit that the young girls acquire, and their vulnerability to violence within the context of gender power inequalities which lead to formation of new social identity. In this case the 'sugar daddy' figure has been analyzed as a trope that opens up a series of insights into questions of gender inequality and romance in the changing context of contemporary urban life.

The paper further looks into "Technoculture" as a postmodern trend in young adult fiction that influence the identity formation of the youth. It explains how technology influences the lives of the youths in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Yet, it notes that there is the danger that the youth sometimes become excessively immersed in a glittering world of high-tech experience and lose its social connectedness and ability to communicate and relate concretely to other people. This affects their identity formation.

Baudrillard's, Lyotard's, Harvey's and Jameson's strands of postmodern theory have been applied to unravel how young people adopt and consume these imported culture and technology and also to show how this impacts on their identity formation.

Baudrillard, Lyotard and Harvey, claim that technologies such as computers and media, new forms of knowledge, and changes in the socioeconomic system are producing a postmodern social formation. Baudrillard and Lyotard interpret these developments in terms of novel types of information, knowledge, and technologies, while neo-Marxist theorists like Jameson and Harvey interpret the postmodern in terms of development of a higher stage of capitalism marked by a greater degree of capital penetration and homogenization across the globe. These processes are also producing increased cultural fragmentation, changes in the experience of space and time, and new modes of experience, subjectivity, and culture. These conditions provide the socioeconomic and cultural basis for postmodern theory and their analysis provide the perspectives from which postmodern theory can claim to be on the cutting edge of contemporary developments (Kellner & Best, 1991)

The study therefore deems views of the four theorists important in the analysis of contemporary

popular culture and social identity. In order to lay ground for this argument, the paper begins by discussing popular culture and the implication of HIV/AIDS discourse in (re)constructing sexual behaviour.

### **Popular culture and the implication of HIV/AIDS discourse in (re)constructing sexual behaviour**

The debate surrounding what constitutes popular cultural production especially with reference to literature has been in circulation in African countries - since the seventies, it is in the 80's and 90's that popular literature and culture in general began to receive the critical attention that it deserves within the academy (Barber, 1997). In order to proceed smoothly we first look at how few scholars have attempted to define the term "popular". Mukerji and Schudson (1991) claim that:

Popular culture refers to the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population. (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991, p. 3)

Williams (1983) argues that:

the word "popular" has at least four current meanings. First, it can refer simply to those objects or practices that are well-liked by a lot of people. Or, it can be used to refer to objects or practices deemed inferior and unworthy. In this view, popular culture is everything left over after we have identified what constitutes elite or "high" culture - that is, the paintings and sculptures and symphonies typically associated with the wealthy and well-educated. The term can also refer to "work deliberately setting out to win favour with people". In this usage, popular culture is explicitly commercial: It is work that is produced to be consumed. Finally, the term can refer to the objects and practices "actually made by the people for themselves". (Williams, 1983, p. 237).

These different meanings are all useful depending with the context in which they are applied. William, Mukerji and Schudson definitions are useful in the compilation of this article because the readings analysed here focus primarily on popular cultural production and consumption. At the same time we recognize that popular culture also includes other beliefs and practices that comprise our everyday lived experiences.

The texts analysed here thus reflect more on the popular themes. Newell (2002) argues that writers do revise popular themes for various reasons and one of them is that these are easily recognizable by the readers and therefore, those readers are able to identify with the characters and themes that are dealt with in the texts. Writers borrow their subject matter, such as popular discourses on HIV/AIDS, from the public which they recast within the same public after rewriting and reinterpreting. For instance, Carolyne Adalla is one of such writers whose work feeds the public with topical issues of the day such as discourses on HIV/AIDS.

The HIV stories in *Confessions of an Aids Victim* and in *Sunrise at Midnight* are not presented as the main focus of the writers but as silent features "within" the main story. In *Confessions of an Aids Victim*, the writer focuses on those postmodern cultural practices and ideologies that engender the marginalisation of women while also striving to educate her readers on what HIV/AIDS stands for: its meaning, causes, symptoms and how the virus has evolved. This in brief adds to Fredric Jameson's notion of postmodernist art and the society in which it is produced. Being a Marxist theorist, Jameson

(1991) comments on the relationship of postmodernist art towards the society in which it is produced; that postmodernist art is the direct expression of certain tendencies that can be found in societies.

A reading of *Confession of an Aids Victim* is indeed a reading of ourselves and a judgment of our society. The protagonist through a letter to her close friend and confidant confesses that she has contracted HIV/AIDS. Through this letter, Catherine narrates her life story, looking back from the time she met her first boyfriend, to the long list of male friends she has had sexual contact with, and to the day she was diagnosed with HIV virus. Her dream to go for master's degree course in the US is shattered due to her status. She recounts her happiest moments in life and wishes she could turn back the reality of the present life. She moves back and forth in her life journey and metaphorically laments that life in HIV/AIDS era is like taking an underground train which "Will take those aboard to their graves ..." The letter ends with an appeal to Marilyn to make known to public its contents and the writer's views concerning the HIV/AIDS challenge.

Through fiction, writers capture and display how contemporary HIV/AIDS discourse is used to (re)construct sexual behaviour. Writers like Adalla and Mbaya show that sexual cultures and sexual meanings are constructed through a range of discursive practices across social institutions and that they change over time. For instance the question of objectification of women is rampant in the text. One good example is how Henry manipulates Catherine and treats her with a lot of contempt. This is her genesis to contraction of HIV. We learn that Catherine and Henry meet during a debating club trip (p. 27). Later on when the school closes they plan to meet at Midnite Café. Henry is described as a son of a tycoon and thus Catherine says,

As I approached the café, I noticed Henry seated in a cool blue Peugeot 504 saloon car...he took my bags and kept them in the car boot (p. 31).

What follows is a subtle description of economic difference between the two. The author seems to be insinuating that Henry comes from an affluent society while Catherine comes from a humble background. We are informed that,

The conversation switched on to "old guy, our car, our farm, our bla-bla-bla." So Henry was a brag after all! What was I supposed to talk about? Our quarter-acre farm and its meagre produce? Our roof-leaking semi-permanent house that was not worth a second glance? (p. 32)

Finally we are introduced to the heart of the matter after Henry buys drinks to Catherine. Catherine says,

Thus it was in this half-drunken state that I lost my virginity. If my classmates thought sex was their idea of fun, it certainly wasn't mine. To me it was painful, and embarrassing, and wholly unsatisfying (p. 35).

Adalla introduces the theme of sex by implicating Henry for giving Catherine drinks in order to take advantage of her. By implication, her portrayal of this scenario may act as a caution to young girls who are duped into sex after being intoxicated with alcohol.

Sex, according to Griswold and Bastian (1987), 'like blood, is a powerful narrative device attracting universal interest, and ...it becomes of particular interest during times of rapid change

regarding the institutions of courtship and marriage' (p. 348). Sex as a theme therefore attracts many readers and educate the youth on how to handle the problem of sexuality.

It is worth noting that *Confessions of an Aids Victim* discusses the socio-sexual dynamics surrounding HIV/AIDS in Kenya and the making of everyday sexual history. In this text Adalla dramatises the tension between sexual pleasure on the one hand, and sexual excess and danger/disease on the other. This dramatisation shows how histories of local sexualities continue to shape and be shaped by discourses of pleasure and danger. The portrayal of the dangers of sexual overindulgence which leads to infection with HIV/AIDS makes these issues of immediate concern and gives them great attention by showing a correlation between sexual pleasure, - excess and danger.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1979) discusses the complex set of relationships among knowledge, power and pleasure and shows how these relationships are negotiated and contested at different periods in different circumstances. He shows that sexuality is produced in discourse and that the concept of discourse itself embraces a diffuse network of power relations that shapes human lives.

In Adalla's text, discourses on sexuality is coupled with issues of gender relations and degradation of women by men and factors such as the lack of economic power among women. For instance Catherine says she could not mention to Henry the trouble her mother went through to have them eat a decent meal (p. 32). She further says that, "Personally, I survived on pocket money of fifty shillings for a whole term and mother never forgot to ask if I had some money left over upon closing (p. 34). Other issues raised in the text include; cultural ideologies that subjugate women and familial problems such as lack of parental advice on sex or opposition to intertribal marriage which advances ethnicity. While narrating about the situation of girls in her school, Catherine says that "... all their parents did was to threaten that involvement with boys would lead to misery. They never as much discussed the changes the girls were undergoing and how to cope with outburst of emotions during adolescence (p. 21). At the same time Catherine's parents rejects Brian's proposal to marry her because he does not belong to their tribe. Her mother says, "And about getting married to a Luo, Njeri, forget it! If only your father would hear of it, both of us would be burnt alive..." (p. 80).

Adalla's fiction is also used to explore other medical and scientific issues which science fiction alone cannot explore better as compared to youth fiction. The fact that Catherine contracts HIV makes her restless and sleepless. The readers get to know her anxieties as she goes through the process of counselling.

The ELISA test employed, the doctor says, does not detect the presence of HIV in the blood. It only detects if antibodies have been produced in response to the virus. If the test is positive, it shows that the person has been exposed to the virus. It is therefore assumed that the virus is present in the person, as is the case with me now. From the pamphlet I have, ELISA an abbreviation for Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay, whatever that means (p. 8).

In part, this excerpt reminds us that the text provides a repertoire of means to communicate what science cannot by providing a prism which puts medical issues on HIV/AIDS – such as its manifestations of the disease, how to prevent infection through safer sex or how to care for those infected. This fiction tells the reader much about the anxieties and uncertainties that HIV/AIDS has wrought on individuals and into society in a way that a purely scientific discourse cannot. We therefore infer that HIV/AIDS fiction is not only in engagement with the epidemic by recording it, but also by imagining

the possibility of humanity overcoming it. It represents an attempt to find meaning, indeed to give meaning to the suffering and narratives that can be read as socially symbolic acts in response to particular historical dilemmas, Vrettos notes that:

Narratives of illness could be employed under specific circumstances for conflicting ideological purposes and [show] how conceptions of illness could simultaneously reinforce and disrupt particular and changing uses of somatic fictions in shaping the relationships among cultural, class and gender identities. (p. 8)

Therefore, it is arguable that the writing of popular fiction dealing with HIV/AIDS in Kenya is influenced by specific discourses in circulation in the society and as this thesis attempts to show, this writing also engages with, complements, questions, rewrites and subverts the same discourses upon which it depends in many ways. The writers especially intervene by rewriting those structures and discourses that marginalise people infected with HIV/AIDS and the negative meanings linked with it. This marginalization is what affects the individual's identity and characters such as Catherine can only vent their predicament through writing other than make face to face confessions. The author of this text cleverly employs discourse on sexuality because of its ability to encompass a range of social and cultural issues that individuals face in their daily lives.

*Confessions of an Aids Victims* opens up opportunities and possibilities of making inroads into understanding the social and cultural matrices operating in Kenyan society at a time when AIDS is viewed as a pervasively destructive phenomenon. We therefore argue that Adalla's choice of the theme of sex in this fiction is multifaceted. Firstly, the writer is picking on popular theme that makes the work appeal to a larger audience and may help them understand discourses surrounding sexuality. Secondly, sex in this writing assumes a complex character and becomes a channel through which the writer comments on the complex issues involving socio-economic, cultural and political realities in their societies. Thirdly, sex as a theme is also used to capture or share similarity with people's everyday experiences in their multifariousness.

In *Sunrise at Midnight*, like Adalla, Florence Mbaya investigates some of the cultural, social and economic factors that seem to fuel the spread of HIV/AIDS in part of South Nyanza Kenya, and along the shores of Lake Victoria. Mbaya uses HIV literature to offer possibilities of imagining a social order that is based on economic empowerment. Such a presentation is seen through the talks between Constance and the people living around the lake. She explains to her aunt what these people tell her:

They tell me about their lives, how reducing amounts of fish are affecting their livelihoods ... how the women are forced to give sexual favours to the fishermen so as to be sold fish to; how several have contracted HIV as a result; how Asian middlemen with refrigerated trucks are nowadays camping by the lakeside and offering the fishermen higher prices than the women traders can match... (p. 81).

Mbaya, through her protagonist Constance, makes an observation that lack of economic power among women along the shores of Lake Victoria leads to contraction of HIV/AIDS. Marginalization and gender inequality which is apparent in the region could be attributed to the main cause of the spread of the disease.

Most of the HIV/AIDS narratives largely depend on already existing cultural and social narratives and as a result they help shape a broader cultural understanding of the complex and

conflicted phenomenon of HIV/AIDS. These narratives have a role to play in helping the youth understand the epidemic just like other disciplinary discourses particularly within the academy have done. Their stance is based on the argument that the understanding and representation of HIV/AIDS, and even intervention practices to curb its spread, are embedded in deeply rooted socio-cultural scripts and narratives.

Writers of youth fiction in Kenya have attempted to make meaning out of the multiple and often times conflicting messages about the disease in circulation both inside and outside their societies. Dennis Altman (2001) argues that “there is no one AIDS epidemic, but rather a patchwork which has very different epidemiological patterns and consequences depending on the economic and political [and socio-cultural] resources available” (p. 84). Youth fiction in Kenya therefore serve as significant sites in the history of the epidemic because they are places where the epidemic is “played out”: it is where biomedical messages about disease become reinterpreted and incorporated into the ordinary language and experiences of people; the readers.

Another important theme that is emerging in young adult popular fiction is ‘intergeneration relationship’. The texts exposes how teenage girls fall into relationship with older men who are the age-mates of their fathers hence leading to power and gender inequality.

### **Inter-generational relationship and the Construction of Youth identity**

Intergenerational relationship is a phenomenon in which young girls fall in love with older men and young boys fall in love with older women. This is a form of popular culture that is emerging big in youth fiction. Through the texts, we examine how girls navigate the social, cultural and economic structures in which these relationships take place. A few studies in Kenya have documented the commonality of sexual relations between older men and young girls. Ahlberg, Jylkas and Krantz (2001) in their study of Gendered construction of sexual risks, state that:

There is silence on the sexual exploitation of young girls, the so-called sugar-daddy phenomenon, a relation in which young girls are forced by wealthy older men to exchange sex for money and material gifts, and in which families pragmatically provide contraceptives and secure abortions for their daughters but publicly deny such actions (p. 27).

According to these writers, young people live within a highly paradoxical situation of prohibition, silence, sexual exploitation, pragmatic action and denial. This in essence affects their identity.

The figure of the ‘sugar daddy’ popularly known as the ‘sponsor’ is a familiar one in the recent popular fiction. According to Nairobi News magazine dated 19<sup>th</sup> May 2016, Jacqueline Kubania defines “sponsor” as a colloquial expression among the young, used to refer to older and more financially stable men and women whom young people date, chiefly for financial gain.

The centre of interest here is placed on the relationship between young girls and ‘sugar daddy’/‘sponsor’; the status benefit that the young girl acquires, and their vulnerability to violence and human trafficking within the context of gender power inequalities.

In the context of this paper, the ‘sugar daddy’ figure is analyzed as a trope that opens up a series of insights into questions of gender inequality and romance in the changing context of contemporary urban life.

A growing body of scholarship has demonstrated that romance fiction continues to grow in Africa. As an increasing body of scholarship on romance in Africa demonstrates, the genre is a crucial

template for investigating broader social relations (Newell, 2000, 2002; Bryce, 2002). Whereas in the west, romance is often seen as a formulaic genre that has run its course, in East Africa, it is used to explore a range of pressing social issues. As part of a living culture in the continent, romance templates form part of a communicative process in which a society not only expresses but also generates and forms its worldview (Newell, 2000). Some of the commonly known titles in Kenya include R. Owino's, *Sugar Daddy's Lover*, M. Gicheru's *Across the Bridge* (1979), M. Ruheni's *The Ministers Daughter* (1975), Charles Mangua's *Son of Woman* (1988), Peter Kimani's *Before the Rooster Crows* (2002) and C. Adalla's *Confessions of an Aids Victim* (1993) which bring the romance issues in a subtle manner. Romance fiction in Kenya can be used to explore a number of pressing social and psychological issues.

Kamencu's *To Grasp at a Star* is studied here as one of the books that imperceptibly portrays intergenerational romance. It provides a deep insight towards the dangers of sugar daddies / sponsors in the society. The story introduces us to Makena, a secondary school girl whose dream is to become a star model and Conrad Mshenzi, an older man who poses as a 'sponsor' who can help her fulfil her dreams. Makena's escapades in pursuit of her dream lands her in a very awkward situation. When she first meets Mr. Conrad Mshenzi at Mrs. Oloo's party, they agree to meet in a hotel in Mombasa. When she is at Mombasa, she enjoys luxurious life at Whispering Palm Hotel while fantasizing how her future life as a star modelling will be (p. 37).

After Mshenzi promises her to travel to many parts of the world like South Africa, Paris and New York, she becomes very excited yet she does not have a passport. One day she is arrested by the police with allegations that she is an accomplice of Conrad Mshenzi who deals with drug trafficking and enslaving young women and selling them to the Middle East as household slaves (p. 42). This incident makes her feel sad, miserable and full of regrets. She therefore apologizes to her father and promises to do more on bookwork and shelve her ambition of modelling.

It is evident in this text that 'sponsors' contribute negatively to the lives of the teenage girls. It is a culture that interferes with the education of many female youths; Makena being an epitome of the same.

Makena having found herself between the rock and the hard place develops an autonomous thought. This development of autonomous thought is the principal "rite" of Young Adult fiction. Generally, it is followed by autonomous action, based on that thought that enables the protagonist to solve a problem thrust upon them by the adult world and achieve self-reliance (Vanderstaay, 1992). She appears to be vulnerable in the hands of the policemen and her pursuit for success in modelling is short lived after she discovers that Conrad is both a drug and human trafficker. One of the policemen say:

We have evidence that you are an accomplice of one Conrad Mshenzi in drug trafficking as well as in illegally enslaving young women and selling them to the Middle East as house hold slaves. (p. 43).

Kingwa Kamencu tackles the issue of intergenerational relationship head on and reveals how older men advance their sexual immorality by duping unsuspecting teenage girls into it. In *To Grasp at a Star*, we see Makena being introduced to luxurious lifestyle at Whispering palm hotel by Conrad Mshenzi as a way of luring into criminal activities. Conrad masquerades as a sponsoring agent for a modelling company and he promises to help her become a great star. When Makena arrives at Whispering Palm Hotel:

She got her room key easily. The concierge looked her up and down, surprised that a girl so young was travelling all alone. The Whispering Palms Hotel was a classic four-star hotel with a beautiful marble lobby and opulent furnishing (p. 36).

Introduction to such a scenario is what confuses the young girl and her thoughts begin delving into fantasy of forever living in riches and fame. Out of this brief experience Makena makes a false judgment of her sponsor:

Conrad Mshenzi was a rich man by the look of things. He had booked her a room in the luxurious hotel and would be taking a plane to get to Mombasa, all in one stride (p. 37).

The poor girl is not aware of what lies ahead of her. She is after quick "fame, fortune and money" (p. 37). Conrad Mshenzi tells her that she would be able to fly out of the country, to New York, Paris, South Africa and the likes. He would get her a passport that will be faked and obtained through some of his friends in the immigration office because she is still underage (p. 38).

A 'Sugar Daddy' would always have a sweet tongue to enable their 'prey' believe every lie they tell. In this novella Kamencu seems to be warning young girls not to be over ambitious but they should value their education and gradual progress in life through parental guidance. Had Makena taken heed of her father's advice, she wouldn't have landed in such problems. Kamencu equally castigates old lustful men whose main interest is to waste the lives of teenage girls who are still struggling with education. The society should stand firm and condemn this act as it is killing the dreams of many young girls. Kamencu as a writer looks at the moral health of her society and cautions young girls to withdraw or lower their ambition of quick financial gain and concentrate on their studies.

*To Grasp at a Star* also portrays the prominent issues of suppression of female youth, self-alienation, struggle between masculinity and femininity and regaining of self-identity of women. Kamencu depicts oppression of women through the leading protagonist Makena and her struggle in out-shadowing the masculine domination. She also presents to us a girl child's life which is fractured and dictated by events outside her control. Makena, her leading character, is portrayed as naïve but when she becomes aware of her deplorable plight she tries to rise above her experiences and into a way of knowing herself and the world at large. The arresting of Conrad Mshenzi marks the beginning of the fight against exploitation and commodification of young girls.

In this manner we refer to Kamencu's text as an expository of the wickedness of these uncouth behavior in the society which has shattered dreams of very many young girls and women in the society. 'Sponsors' are a menace that has led to the very many fatherless children in the society. Some of whom form the street gangs. The novella is not only castigating the menace of "sponsors" in the society but also equally looks at it as the dangers in which young girls place themselves in as they struggle to fulfil their financial demand.

In *To Grasp at a Star*, Kamencu is also dealing with questions of power in terms of social and financial power, which seems to be entirely in the hands of men. Her protest is loud and clear, and her attack against male establishment is vicious for instance through the name she gives to her villain. "Mshenzi" is a Swahili word which means stupid. By branding her villain "Mshenzi" prepares the reader into meeting the barbaric nature of this character and by a larger picture the older men who seduce young girls. The question one begs to ask is that, is it possible for males to sustain a system

of oppression without female complicity? To suggest this would be to attempt to oversimplify the way society operates. But Kamencu's work contains very vital lessons of male-female power relations and how this can be used to redeem the fragmented identities of young girls. Indeed, her close exploration of the relationship between young girls and older men, together with her presentation of the role of males in the perpetuation of this social problem is an eye opener to many young girls.

### **Techno culture as a postmodern trend in popular youth fiction**

The inclusion of the theme of information technology in these novels proves that the fictional writers are conversant with the effects of globalization and how technology has influenced the fast growing world in terms of spreading information. The novelists are making attempts to prove that in this digital age, young people are embracing technology which has a lot of impact in their livelihoods.

'Technoculture' is more of a neologism which doesn't appear in dictionaries, but as a postmodern trend theorist Fredrick Jameson calls it a culture of the "Postindustrial age", where society has moved past the industrial age or is "consumer society, media society, information society, electronic society or high tech and the like" (1991, p. 3). On his part Jean Baudrillard (1994) called "Postmodernity" a shift into hyperreality; where "Simulacra" (simulations or representations of the real) have replaced reality, and humans are unable to distinguish real from the unreal (pp. 1-3).

In post modernity people are inundated with information, technology has become a central focus in many lives, and our understanding of the real is mediated by simulations (Sharma &Chaudhary, 2011).

Maria Anwar (2017) states that Science and technology constitute the global economy and everyday culture of the world we live in. She posits that new biotechnologies have changed what we eat and how we reproduce. Email, mobiles and the internet have revolutionized the ways in which we communicate with each other and engage with the world outside us. With advancements like biotech foods, life-support systems, the Walkman, ipod and cloning, videogames and military hardware, technology has shaped a culture of its own that we term "Technoculture".

The texts under study in this chapter refers to simulation and automation in daily life. The interplay of technology, culture and youth identity cannot be denied and it has become an area of interest in contemporary studies because of its significance.

Bill Rutto's *Death Trap* is analysed in this study to trace the development of "technoculture" in Kenya as a postmodern trend and also to find out whether it can be classified partly as science fiction or popular fiction. Latham (2014) observes that science fiction in postmodern age is "less of a genre and more of a way of being in the world," as it has a longstanding history of tracking the futuristic fallout of technological "progress" (p. 6). Bill Ruto's text illustrate that this literary form complements the theme of "technoculture" hence leading to the study of its impact on the lives of the youth.

*Death Trap* introduces the readers to Rangeland High school which is also a high cost school. Hannah Mulandi is a brilliant form six student who comes up with a play entitled "The ABC" which she types and saves it in a computer. Other students are equally allowed to access computers in the lab. Edgar Kazungu, a student at the school, uses a binocular from the ceiling of the computer lab to view Mulandi's work from the computer and there after deletes it:

He hurriedly lifted the binoculars and aimed it at the peepholes on the floor of the attic. Blurred images flashed past in rapid succession as the girls entered the computer room (p. 24).

The deletion of Hannah's work from the computer by Edgar causes Hannah some nervous breakdown and she is admitted in the dispensary. It is through her teacher Mr. Mac Court that she learns the play isn't lost. The teacher had used automatic file backup programme on the computer to restore the lost file (p. 34).

Rutto's fiction is replete with technology, he admires scientific progress but within advisable limits and with caution. The story of Hannah Mulandi proves how human beings prefer the artificial, quick and easy ways of survival and hence feel emptiness in life when disappointed by technology. The author foresees a future where computers will control human activities. Humans will probably be destroyed by the machines they invented and their lives will end in nothing but disappointments and regrets.

The use of technology is also evident when Mr. Patel is told that there might be need to upgrade the current server to accommodate expanded computer networking for the student. We are also informed that Hannah is good at playing piano. The author writes that:

Hannah entered the Christian Union hall quietly and walked to one of the pianos, a grand piano, standing at the back of the hall. There was a second piano, an upright piano, in the front of the hall... As soon as the young preacher ended his sermon, a student asked Hannah to play for them the *Amazing Grace* (p. 26).

When Edgar and Monica get lost during the geographical trip to Lake Baringo and Lake Bogoria areas, the policemen track them through the use of technology. Kazungu the father to Edgar, being the police commissioner gives Gerry orders for immediate dispatch of a platoon of the paramilitary policemen to search and rescue his son and the girl who was reported to have gone missing with him (p. 97). Kazungu also instructs Wanyama, the head of the police helicopter squadron, to have two aircraft ready for pre-dawn take-off, on a search and rescue mission (p. 97). The author further gives description on the use of technology:

Two police helicopters on the tarmac at Wilson Airport were preparing for take-off at the crack of dawn. Police pilot, Inspector Ogolla, a thin spindly man in his mid-twenties, was in his seat, scanning instruments in front of him as he began to go through the pre-flight checks. He punched the starter and the helicopter coughed into life. He flicked on the numerous switches on the instrument panel and then adjusted his headset (p. 107).

This technique compels readers to identify with the situation and feel empathy. The story brings human imagination to techno cultural social reality to life. Rutto's mode of incorporating science fiction into youth fiction as his way of representing social reality is speculative because it complements the theme of technoculture.

According to Ira Chernus (2016), Technoculture was part of postmodern science, postmodern life and thus postmodern literature, and this is what Jameson meant by "culture of Late Capitalism". Bouldand Vint (2011) explain that the 1950's saw the rise of consumer society, Cold War, paranoia and nuclear anxiety. Most could imagine the future only in terms of unending superpower rivalry or the world ending into a devastated wasteland. After WWII ended, the US started mass production of consumer goods and tried to combat influence of the USSR. To boost US economy, Interstate Highway System was constructed in 1956 and the suburbia grew voraciously. Domestic life got transformed by

new consume products like washing machine, dishwasher, rice cooker, transistor radios, telephone and televisions. Two-thirds of the homes owned TVs and drive-in Cinema came into being.

From *To Grasp at a Star*, 'Muddled Transition' is one such story by Kamencu, which centers on Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum and hyperreality. It introduces us to the youth using television and videos as a way of keeping themselves busy. Perhaps it is worthy to note that no technological development defines the postmodern age, or has catalyzed greater social change, than television. TV according to Baudrillard (1994) is one of the many mediums which distinguish the difference between reality and *simulacra* (simulation of reality).

Malaika and Muthoni are secondary school going youths whose lives are influenced by what they watch on TV. Malaika says, "My dad got me the latest Nigerian movies yesterday. Let's go over to my place and watch them..." (p. 62). The novella also states that Muthoni never got time to revise because:

They would watch movies, read magazines and spend their time swapping stories about which boys in the neighbourhood they fancied and other such trivialities. (p. 63)

We further learn that these magazines usually have some pictures with women posing in a seductive way... (p. 63). But the author still emphasizes on the habit developed by these youngsters of reading these elicit material. She states that, later that evening, Muthoni was up in her room flicking through a *Cosmopolitan fashion magazine* she'd borrowed from Malaika (p. 72). When Muthoni's father hires a tuition teacher for her, she cries foul "Now I won't have time for TV, movies or hanging out with Malaika... (p. 73). The author further gives us more information that the girls in Nairobi City Girls... modeled themselves on their favorite television and movie stars, even acquiring American accent (p. 55). It is through the television that they watch the trendy dressing style and the advertisement that expose the sexuality of the female youth. The movies on the other hand would mirror the lives of the African society though Nigerian movies which majorly ape the flashy western lifestyles. This actually interferes with the identity of these young girls because they shift their attention from doing what is real and copy what is artificial. This is what Baudrillard refers to as *simulacra*. Mass media therefore remains a powerful tool that can corrupt the identity of our youth. This then gives them an identity of styled, sophisticated and more exotic, cultured modern women. At same time, the author portrays TV as a tool that separates Malaika from her father. It serves as a disintegrating agent because Malaika has to learn the way of life through TV. That is why we can arguably say that the title 'muddled transition' suits the story because of the confusion witnessed while growing up in a world influenced by the mass media.

'Muddled Transition' depicts Malaika and her father as rich fellows who are owning everything that one may need in a home. While the house is a sign of wealth, luxury and advancement, it is also ironically a symbol of human laziness and detachment. This is because Malaika's father invests more time in his work and commodities rather than family ties. Malaika on the other hand is equally detached from his father because she spends a lot of time on TV when the father is away. Her mother had long died when she was an infant and therefore TV remains as her major companion.

The TV and the magazines stimulate Malaika and Muthoni's imagination by presenting modern dressing style and social relationships. In Baudrillard's words, the TV and the magazines have the power to create *simulacrum* (simulation of reality) to entertain the girls who spend no time in real or natural setting at home. They live by imitating what they learn from the TV.

In *Sunrise at Midnight*, after Constance completes her mission visit at aunt Erika's place, her cousin Thomas promises to keep in touch through email. He says:

"Some enterprising young couple have opened up an internet café at Kivitu shopping centre, and it has completely changed the place". (p. 111). As much as aunty Erika is not comfortable with the use of email, Constance convinces her that they can talk while seeing each other; it is called skyping (p. 112).

In the text there is also depiction of the use of internet and social media that is common among the contemporary youth. According to Vaughan (2008) the internet is a worldwide network of millions of computers and computer networks. This technology has perfected the world as a global village. It has a number of remarkable features which are instantaneous, immediate, worldwide, decentralized, interactive and compliant to mention but a few (p. 48). Internet nevertheless has a wide range of information under one umbrella. Anyone with a computer knows how to access the internet. It allows individual to create a site even with anonymity. This is to say that, it encourages everything that one may think of. Internet is reliable in that, is fast, efficient and brings all libraries under one umbrella. There is evidence of adaptability of the novel, *Sunrise at Midnight* to the recent trends of communication.

The inclusion of this information on facebook, skypes, whatsApps and computers in the novel proves the recent technological development in Kenya and in the world. What the novelist is trying to put across is that in this digital age, one can't escape the use of the internet and technology in general. The internet is a source of data. It is neither good nor bad. The major concern is how one uses it. The author therefore insinuates that we have to embrace technology in a positive way because it has created a brand new environment. Her vision is that a new culture has been born, a culture that is free, rapid and universal. Internet has eliminated distance: it has brought the world together in sharing knowledge, dissemination of information, entertainment, media convergence, communication, and tremendous interactive potential as indicated by Constance. Therefore, technoculture seems to be controlling the lives of individuals who embrace it.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we looked at youth adoption and consumption of new technologies, the wider popular culture and the social aspects surrounding the use of modern technology as devices for communication and how these influence the formation of their social identities. The study analyzed a few selected youth fiction and found out that this is a new genre that is more of popular fiction than the so called serious literature. The study also revealed that contemporary cultural production is dynamic and writers of youth fiction portray the young people who are in the process of creating new cultures. The characters in the texts are a representative of the youth who are yearning for change. It is worth noting that at every turn in the cultural development of our society the driving force has actually been the ethos of change. It is this change in culture that brings about change in identity. Indeed it has been about the active agency to manage the nature and pace of that change rather than simply a romantic and spurious commitment to a return to "authentic" and "originally" cultural practices of our people. The youth have departed from the traditional cultures and the cultures they have been generating ever since their encounter with western modernity are complex hybrid creations that capture the flux of revision and signal traditions and identities that are always in the making rather than ones that are sacred, static evocations of purist Africa. Our argument here is that the texts studied here have

proven that of late there is cultural transformation: and former traditional identities and cultural practices are now being transformed and this transformation is irreversible.

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#### **Disclaimer Statement**

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#### **Authorship and Level of Contribution**

The article has been authored by three scholars, Dr. Omuteche, Dr. Yenjela and Vincent Odhiambo Oduor as the key contributor because of his input as a budding scholar who is undertaking a PhD course in literature.

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