# EXPLORING THE ROLE OF STIGMA MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION IN REDUCING STIGMATIZATION OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS: A CASE OF KIAMBU COUNTY, KENYA

By

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This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university or any other award.

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We confirm that the work presented in this thesis was carried out by the student under our supervision.

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| | |
|---|---|
| CWSK | Child Welfare Society of Kenya |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) |
| GOK | Government of Kenya |
| HIV/AIDS | Human Immunodeficiency Virus/ Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome |
| ISEREC | Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (ISEREC) |
| LGBTQ+ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning |
| NACOSTI | National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation |
| NGOs | Non-Governmental Organizations |
| SMCT | Stigma Management Communication Theory |
| SMC | Stigma Management Communication (SMC) |
| USA | United States of America |

ABSTRACT

Adoption offers children safe and nurturing family environments, yet in Kenya adoptive parents often face stigmatization rooted in cultural beliefs that privilege biological lineage. Such stigma leads to secrecy, exclusion, and discrimination, limiting children's chances of permanent homes. Although communication is central in shaping public perceptions, little research in Kenya has examined how stigma management communication can reduce adoption-related stigma. This study therefore explored the role of stigma management communication in reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in Kiambu County. Guided by Stigma Management Communication Theory (Meisenbach, 2010), the study employed a qualitative research design and conducted 13 in-depth interviews with adoptive parents selected through snowball sampling. Data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed three dominant themes: (1) stigma is communicated through cultural narratives of bloodline and inheritance, community gossip, and institutional practices that portray adoption as abnormal; (2) adoptive parents use a range of stigma management communication strategies, including concealment, disclosure, reframing, selective association, and advocacy, to navigate stigmatizing interactions; and (3) these strategies influence public perceptions by gradually normalizing adoption in interpersonal, community, and media contexts.

The study concludes that stigma management communication plays a crucial role not only in helping adoptive parents cope with stigma but also in transforming wider societal attitudes. It recommends strengthening awareness campaigns, promoting storytelling and media advocacy, and leveraging community and religious platforms to foster greater acceptance of adoption. These findings extend stigma management communication theory to the adoption context in Kenya and provide practical insights for policy, advocacy, and communication-based interventions aimed at reducing adoption stigma.

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

## Introduction

The legal process of adoption enables individuals or couples to obtain parental rights over a child thus benefiting children who require secure and stable homes (Leinaweaver, 2018). The Children's Act of 2001 regulates adoption procedures in Kenya through its legal guidelines. The adoption process becomes accessible through both public and private adoption organizations which function under the Directorate of Children's Services and private adoption agencies respectively. The Children's Act of 2001 restricts adoption to only domestic possibilities for Kenya.

A series of legal steps in Kenya exists to protect children throughout the adoption process which starts with assessment meetings at pre-adoption stages where prospective parents receive professional evaluations from registered adoption agencies and the National Adoption Committee to prove their readiness for adoption responsibilities. Following the successful evaluation the adoption agency or National Adoption Committee assigns adoptive parents to receive a child within a three-month probationary placement (Republic of Kenya, 2024).

The adoption agency tracks both parents and child throughout this time to evaluate their integration process. The following court process requires submission of adoption paperwork to the High Court of Kenya that includes essential reports from the adoption agency and Director of Children's Services together with *a guardian ad litem* appointed by the court to protect the child's well-being. The court system carries out a hearing to examine every aspect thoroughly before authorizing the adoption decree. Upon receiving their adoption order from the court system adoptive parents gain

complete authority as well as responsibility to raise their new child. The legal affiliation between the adoptive family and the adopted child becomes official through an adoption certificate per Republic of Kenya (2001).

This study explored how communication techniques foster better adoption understanding and minimize discrimination while building positive behavioral reception toward adoption. Stigma Management Communication strategies reflected problem-specific plans which indicated methods for delivering information to target audiences according to (Hosek, 2018).

## Background of Study

Adoptive parents in Kenya, including those in Kiambu County, continue to face widespread stigmatization that undermines their sense of legitimacy and belonging. This stigma manifests in multiple ways, ranging from social exclusion, gossip, and mislabeling to institutional practices that fail to recognize adoption as a valid form of family-making. For many parents, the experience of stigma results in emotional distress, identity struggles, and strained social relationships, while adopted children often internalize these messages and develop feelings of insecurity, inferiority, or social marginalization (Brodzinsky, 2013; Farr et al., 2016). The consequences can be profound, including mental health challenges, reduced help-seeking behaviors, and difficulties in building strong family and community ties (Corrigan et al., 2005).

One of the primary ways adoption stigma is communicated is through language. The frequent distinction between “real parents” and “adoptive parents” reinforces the perception that biological connections are superior to social or legal bonds (Brodzinsky, 2013). Such linguistic bias contributes to identity confusion for adoptees and signals to adoptive families that their parental roles are conditional or less authentic. As children

grow, particularly during adolescence when belonging and identity are most contested, the internalization of these stigmatizing discourses can heighten insecurity and social rejection (Brodzinsky, 2013; Grotevant, 2009).

Stigma is also reinforced through institutional communication and cultural norms. School practices, for instance, often privilege biological family structures by requiring children to list their "mother" and "father," overlooking adoptive or alternative family arrangements (Kline, 2014). Media representations also play a role, frequently framing biological reunification as more natural or desirable, thereby portraying adoptive families as temporary or incomplete (Wegar, 2000). These communicative practices construct adoption as a secondary form of family-making, further marginalizing adoptive parents and children in both social and institutional contexts.

The framing of these eligibility criteria sends powerful symbolic messages. By emphasizing age, marital status, and moral conduct, the law communicates cultural values about family, responsibility, and child protection. This can be understood through framing theory (Entman,1993), which explains how institutions highlight certain attributes while downplaying others, thereby shaping how issues are perceived in society. In this case, the framing reinforces the notion that adoption is not arbitrary but is a carefully regulated pathway that requires competence and stability. While this offers reassurance about child protection, it also risks contributing to stigma by implying that adoptive parents must "prove" legitimacy in ways that biological parents do not.

Furthermore, the eligibility rules are not communicated in isolation; they intersect with broader narratives around adoption and alternative care in Kenya. Through media coverage, adoption agency guidelines, and community discussions,

these legal discourses circulate as part of the social dialogue that constructs adoption as either acceptable or stigmatized. Here, legal discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) is particularly useful in showing how institutional language creates and maintains power relations. The law's communicative framing positions adoption as both protective of children and exceptional compared to biological parenthood, thereby shaping public attitudes that influence how adoptive parents are treated.

In relation to this study, which examines the role of stigma management communication in reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in Kiambu County, it becomes clear that the way adoption eligibility is framed at the institutional level contributes to the broader communicative environment in which stigma operates. Adoptive parents must navigate not only community gossip and cultural narratives but also the institutional discourse that frames them as subject to heightened scrutiny. Understanding these eligibility rules as communicative framings therefore provides important context for how stigma is generated, reproduced, and contested in Kenyan society.

Communication is a powerful vehicle for reducing stigmatization of adoptive parents because it reshapes public frames, corrects misinformation, and builds interpersonal empathy through narrative contact and institutional messaging. Recent research shows that open, positive storytelling by adoptive families and advocates whether through radio, television, social media, or community forums, helps reframe adoption from a deficit or *"outsider"* status to one of care, competence, and belonging (Zhuang & Guidry, 2022; Grigoropoulos, 2022).

Evidence from communication-focused adoption studies indicates that improving communicative openness within families supports healthier identity formation and reduces adoption-related macroaggressions (Gorla et al., 2023).

Systematic reviews of stigma-reduction interventions in low- and middle-income countries further highlight that community education, social-contact strategies, and multi-component media campaigns are effective elements for reducing stigma among children and families (Hartog et al., 2020; Hartog et al., 2023). In the Kenyan context, recent vital-statistics data show rising visibility of formal adoptions (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024), which creates opportunities for scaled communication interventions; when eligibility rules, rights, and positive adoption stories are communicated clearly by institutions and media, public fears rooted in lineage and inheritance narratives can be challenged. Taken together, the international and local evidence suggests that deploying coordinated communication strategies, combining personal narratives, supportive institutional messaging, and community education is an evidence-informed path to normalizing adoption and diminishing stigma experienced by adoptive parents.

Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children in Kenya (2014) states that adoptive parents encounter negative public attitudes and the misconceptions of their adoption status in Kenyan society. Residents of Kiambu's rural areas together with other counties in Kenya view adoption negatively because of their cultural beliefs and insufficient public education about this practice even though Kiambu exists as a metropolitan county. Research conducted worldwide shows that adoptive parents face discrimination in a manner that goes beyond Kenyan borders.

The United States confronts transracial adoptive parents with skepticism because of racial prejudices which challenge their ability to parent (Fitzgerald et al., 2014). Society in China still carries adoption stigma because people view adoptive families as "incomplete" during the time when birth control measures enforced the one-child policy (Johnson 2016). Global understandings show why young children in adoption need proper strategies to fight misleading stereotypes around the adoption

experience.

The Kenyan adoption process has changed through time due to the implementation of the Guidelines for Alternative Family Care of Children (2014) which promotes family-based care rather than institutional care. The reforms implemented have not conquered cultural resistance in adoption processes.

Research indicates that public opinion about adoption as an acceptable social choice requires specific communication methods which combine storytelling together with community outreach and media advocacy (Njiru, 2014). Stigma defines how negative social beliefs create devaluing conduct that discriminates against people based on their characteristics or circumstances (Goffman, 2014). Stigma manifests in various forms, including public stigma, which involves widespread negative perceptions and discriminatory actions from society; self-stigma, where individuals internalize societal prejudices and develop feelings of shame or inferiority; structural stigma, which includes institutional policies and laws that disadvantage stigmatized groups; and courtesy stigma, where individuals associated with a stigmatized group, such as family members or caregivers, also face discrimination (Bos et al., 2013).

The stigma phenomenon impacts multiple population groups who consist of disabled people, those with mental disorders or chronic illnesses like HIV/AIDS along with marginalized communities who are LGBTQ+ and racial minorities as well as adoptive families (Corrigan et al., 2005). Adoptive families endure social rejection because cultural misconceptions prioritize infant parent connections over adoptive relationships which creates emotional suffering for adoptive parents and adoptees (Farr et al., 2016).

Mainly because of stigma, people face major negative outcomes including mental health issues alongside problems securing education and employment

opportunities as well as inadequate social support services. Activating change in stigma demands awareness initiatives, policy adjustments and neighborhood-based interventions which fight against discriminatory beliefs to ensure inclusion.

The adoption process heavily depends on Stigma Management Communication (SMC) which describes the various communication methods individuals along with organizations use to fight and overcome stigma effects. The communication methods of avoidance and advocacy along with education efforts and storytelling prompts SMC to fight adoption stigma as it develops platforms that enable adoptive parents to combat social misunderstandings regarding adoption (Servaes, 2003). Adoptive parents who use these strategies achieve control of their storytelling so they can change how people view them and build an inclusive environment in society.

The advocacy dimension of SMC in adoption involves adoptive parents conducting public services through discussions and awareness campaigns while speaking out to change negative adoption stereotypes. Adoptive parents develop awareness through open dialogue about their experiences which leads to the empowerment of adoptive parents who worry about social rejection (Corrigan & Lundin, 2001). The public influencing activities that combine media presence and adoption awareness programs lead to altered social perspectives and assisted in reducing judgment toward parents who adopt children.

Through storytelling adoptive parents have an essential SMC technique that enables them to present their personal adoption stories to create public acceptance. The stories personalize adoption for the public and demonstrate practical and emotional life experiences of families who adopted children as way to overcome discriminatory attitudes. Studies indicate storytelling stands as a strong instrument for community transformation since it changes public attitudes while creating an atmosphere of cultural beliefs against adoption discrimination (Dunbar et al., 2016).

SMC tools play a vital role through education and awareness efforts that provide correct details about adoption to adoptive parents and professionals and the general population. Educational campaigns eliminate false beliefs about adoption to build knowledge among the general public thus eradicating the misconceptions that stem from basic lack of awareness (Bos et al., 2007). Schools should join workplaces and community centers to run educational programs which will develop a supportive environment for adoptive parents.

Adoptive parents at times use avoidance as an indirect method to restrict adoptive conversation in social situations because they want to avoid discrimination or judgment from others. The research demonstrates that proactive communication and advocacy have stronger long-term effects for stigma reduction above using avoidance as a short-term coping mechanism according to (Goffman, 2014).

The practice of Stigma Management Communication requires vital importance in changing how society views adoption. The combination of advocacy work with storytelling and educational programs together with public awareness initiatives enables SMC to help adoptive parents fight stigma thus regaining their sense of identity and promoting stronger acceptance of adoptive families through society (Meisenbach, 2010).

The growth in adoption understanding brings communication power forward as an essential tool for fighting against social prejudices while establishing new societal norms. Social identities of adoptive parents develop through effective communication which enables them to handle the intricate adoption-related stigma. Through effective communication prospective adoptive parents obtain knowledge about how stigma affects their social contacts which leads them to feel less battered by social rejection. Adoptive parents find success by discussing adoption with peers as they access training tools while learning ways to deal with community misconceptions and stereotypes

(Fitzgerald et al., 2014).

Through dialogue inside domestic settings together with adoption support networks and community-based dialogues communication functions to overcome misconceptions which results in making adoption a valid and meaningful family building approach. Adoptive parents gain confidence to take on their parental responsibilities while fighting for their children's welfare (Hosek,2018). Communication creates a secure environment which lets adoptive parents express their adoption experiences while getting guidance and reassurance from individuals who have lived through adoption. Better relationships develop between adoptive parents and members of their extended family and friends when communication occurs (Rains, 2007).

This includes positive interactions with the wider community as well. The act of discuss adoption openly and providing adoption education to others helps adoptive parents generate more positive attitudes about adoption within society. Adoptive parents need support from counseling services coupled with support groups and social networks in order to deal with stigma while developing their personal identity through the process (Rains, 2007).

One of the primary ways adoption stigma manifests is through language. The distinction between "real parents" and "adoptive parents" reinforces the idea that biological connections are superior to social or legal bonds (Brodzinsky, 2013). This type of linguistic bias affects how adoptees construct their identities and how they are treated by their peers, their families and communities. Institutional policies and societal norms also tend to privilege biological families, further reinforcing stigma against adoption (Brodzinsky, 2013).

The biasness in language also presents the idea that family relationships created scientifically or biologically are considered to be more viable and original, hence

discriminating adoptive parents. Children who have been adopted can be affected by the language, making them feel insecure, less valuable, unwanted, bad omen or less than, in families where they are placed. They end up experiencing these effects during the adolescent stage, when social information about the sense of belonging is discussed (Brodzinsky, 2013; Grotevant, 2009).

Apart from language, policies in various institutions and cultural norms also highlight the concept that biological families are better than adopted families. For example, schools require children to fill in the names of their mother and father, without considering adoptive family structures, hence favoring children from nuclear and biological family set-ups (Kline, 2014). Media also frames biological reunification as the preferable place for children in foster care or adoption scenarios, suggesting that adoptive families are merely placeholders (Wegar, 2000).

All these practices suggest to adoptees and adoptive parents that their family bonds are conditional or secondary, therefore can come to an end since they do not have very strong connections. As a result, adopted children may experience discrimination not only in their social interaction but also in systematic and institutional contexts, further leading to identity confusion, emotional distress and social marginalization (Brodzinsky, 2013; Wegar, 2000).

Cognitive training for adoptive parents allows development of supportive environments that both benefit their children and establish more positive social perception of adoption (Kimotho, 2018). This investigation intends to study stigma management communication approaches which help eliminate stigmatization of adoptive parents across Kiambu County.

## Adoption Stigmatization in Global Contexts

Adoption stigma in global contexts has historically been communicated through

language, secrecy, and social discourse that positioned adopted children and families as socially inferior. As Mignot (2019) observes, in early 20th-century Western Europe and America, adoption was often framed as shameful, with children perceived as "second-class" citizens. This stigma was reproduced through communicative practices such as secrecy, silence, and euphemistic language that concealed children's adoptive status to avoid societal ostracism. The reliance on closed and anonymous procedures, such as those in France, can be understood as a form of institutional communication designed to protect children from discrimination but which simultaneously reinforced the idea that adoption was something to be hidden. In this way, stigmatization was not only cultural but was actively constructed and maintained through communicative silences and bureaucratic framing.

By the mid- to late-20th century, changes in how adoption was discussed and framed publicly began to reshape societal attitudes. Legal reforms such as the United Kingdom's Adoption Act of 1976 communicated a shift toward openness, transparency, and recognition of adoption as a legitimate family-building practice (Jones & Hackett, 2011; Keating, 2009). The communicative shift away from secrecy toward openness reflected broader cultural discourses about children's rights, identity, and belonging. Similarly, in France, the gradual movement toward more open adoption procedures demonstrated how institutional communication and public discourse could be reoriented to reduce stigma (Fréchon & Jacob, 2001). These reforms highlight that reducing stigma is not only a matter of legal change but also of reframing adoption through new communicative practices that emphasize legitimacy, care, and the welfare of children.

Contemporary adoption discourse across many developed nations illustrates the ongoing power of communication in shaping perceptions. While stigma has declined significantly, particularly through media narratives and advocacy campaigns that

portray adoption positively, certain forms of stigma persist in relation to international adoption or adoption of children with special needs (Timofti, 2019). These cases reveal how stigma is selectively reproduced through cultural narratives, stereotypes, and representations in both policy and media. At the same time, open discussion, storytelling, and child-centered communication strategies continue to play a vital role in reframing adoption as a socially valued and legally protected pathway to family formation. Thus, the global evolution of adoption demonstrates that the reduction of stigma is closely tied to how adoption is communicated through policy discourse, institutional practices, media framing, and interpersonal narratives.

## Adoption Stigmatization in the African Context

Adoption practices in Africa differ from Western and Asian contexts largely due to the prominence of informal kinship care, where extended family members step in to raise children. This reliance on kinship networks communicates culturally embedded values of belonging and continuity within bloodlines, but it also shapes how formal adoption is perceived. As Oduro (2012) notes, while kinship care is normalized through communal discourse and practice, formal adoption particularly by non-relatives often carries stigma because it is communicated as a disruption to traditional lineage-based identity and inheritance systems. In many communities, adoption is framed as an act that severs a child from their "true" bloodline, and such framings influence how both adoptive parents and children are treated socially.

In Ethiopia, Shiferaw (2020) highlights how communication within institutions and communities either facilitates or hinders adoption. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and inconsistent procedures send ambiguous messages about the legitimacy of adoption, while societal discourses rooted in lineage and inheritance perpetuate stigma. Families internalize these narratives, often choosing silence over disclosure to avoid judgment. The language of

stigma expressed through gossip, derogatory labels, or doubts about the child's character functions as a communicative barrier that discourages adoption as an accepted form of alternative care.

Similar patterns emerge in Nigeria, where Iloka (2020) found that stigma manifests in verbal mistreatment, mockery, and social isolation directed at adoptive families. These communicative acts, tied to cultural beliefs about biological relationships, reinforce adoption as an undesirable or "second-best" option. Here, stigma is not abstract but enacted through everyday communication in households, neighborhoods, and public spaces. In Zimbabwe, Moen, Chiimba, and Etokabeka (2019) emphasize how transitions from orphanages to extended families require intentional communication strategies to prepare children and caregivers. Their findings underscore that without dialogue, counseling, and cultural mediation, reintegration often fails because silence and unaddressed trauma leave children marginalized within families that may see them as "outsiders."

South Africa presents a unique case where communication around adoption intersects with discourses of race and identity. Luyt and Swartz (2021) demonstrate that societal scrutiny often emerges through questions, comments, and subtle non-verbal cues that communicate doubt or discomfort about racial differences within adoptive families. Parents and children must therefore engage in ongoing dialogue, cultural socialization, and identity negotiation to counteract stigmatization. These communicative practices reveal how adoption stigma in post-apartheid South Africa is deeply intertwined with broader narratives of race, history, and belonging.

Taken together, these studies show that adoption stigma in African contexts is produced and reproduced through communication at multiple levels: the narratives embedded in cultural traditions, the language and labeling used in communities, the institutional discourse within adoption systems, and the interpersonal interactions that shape daily life. Conversely, where open dialogue, supportive narratives, and inclusive

communication practices are present, stigma can be reduced, allowing adoptive families to gain legitimacy and social acceptance.

## Adoption Stigmatization in the Kenyan Context

In Kenya, adoption, particularly by non-relatives continues to be stigmatized, largely due to cultural narratives that elevate biological parenthood and blood lineage above alternative forms of care. These beliefs are communicated through everyday language, social interactions, and institutional practices that prioritize kinship ties over adoptive bonds. Ngugi (2017) notes that such stigmatization manifests in preferences for informal kinship care, where extended families assume caregiving roles, rather than formal adoption. This cultural framing communicates the message that adoptive ties are less legitimate, creating both social and psychological barriers for adoptive families.

Studies highlight how stigma is reinforced through communicative practices within communities, religious groups, and even families. Stuckenbruck et al. (2017) argue that cultural discourses around lineage and inheritance frame adoption as a disruption of family continuity, while infertility, often a reason for adoption is itself stigmatized in social conversations, compounding the challenges faced by adoptive parents. These stigmatizing narratives circulate through gossip, labeling, and non-verbal cues, making many families reluctant to disclose adoption or to engage openly in public discussions about their adoptive status.

Legal and institutional communication also plays a significant role in shaping adoption stigma. Juanita (2012) found that despite Kenya's Children Act providing a legal framework for adoption, procedural complexity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and a lack of public education contribute to misconceptions about adoption. Many Kenyans confuse adoption with kinship care, in part because official communication about adoption processes remains inaccessible or poorly disseminated. Lalinde (2012) further

shows that these bureaucratic framings, coupled with cultural and religious discourses, sustain resistance to adoption, particularly among men who perceive it as a threat to family lineage and inheritance continuity. The way institutions communicate adoption as a legal process often emphasizing rules, cost, and bureaucracy rather than family-building reinforces the perception of adoption as an exceptional or even undesirable practice.

Religious communication also has a mixed influence in Kenya. While some Christian groups publicly frame adoption as a moral duty and a form of compassionate caregiving, others reject it on the grounds that it severs biological ties, thereby communicating stigma within religious spaces (Juanita, 2012). These divergent narratives illustrate how religious discourse functions as a powerful form of social communication that either legitimizes or delegitimizes adoption in the Kenyan context.

Overall, the stigmatization of adoption in Kenya is not only rooted in cultural beliefs but also actively produced and reproduced through communication, whether through gossip, institutional language, or religious framing. At the same time, these findings suggest that communication has the potential to transform adoption narratives. By reframing adoption through positive storytelling, institutional clarity, and culturally sensitive dialogue, communication can play a pivotal role in reducing stigma and normalizing adoption as a socially valuable practice.

Taken together with other studies conducted in other parts of the world, these studies demonstrate that while adoption serves as an important alternative care system for orphaned and vulnerable children across, it remains fraught with the challenge stigmatization. Kagunda and Nabushawo (2020) further highlights communication channels such as newspapers, radio, and television, often reinforce negative stereotypes and stigmatize individuals in the society. According to the researchers, the media plays a big role in either perpetuating or challenging these societal biases.

Kiambu County stands out as a significant region in Kenya's adoption landscape, providing a compelling context for examining how effective stigma management communication can influence social acceptance. As of 2019, Kiambu had a population of approximately 2.4 million people, ranking it among the most populous counties in the country (City Population, 2023). The county's proximity to Nairobi, Kenya's capital, contributes to its rapid urbanization and enhanced access to social services, including child welfare institutions.

Notably, Kiambu hosts 12 registered orphanages, placing it second only to Nairobi County in the number of child care institutions (Rentech Digital, 2024). This high concentration of children's homes signals substantial potential for legal adoption and related interventions. While exact statistics on adoptive parents in Kiambu are limited, existing reports indicate that Kiambu ranks among the top counties in domestic adoption applications due to its dense population, growing middle class, and improved awareness of child welfare policies (Kenya News Agency, 2022).

Data from the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census shows that the Christian population in Kiambu County, spread across Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and other denominations, significantly outnumbers other religious affiliations (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019).In summary, Kiambu County's demographic profile, concentration of orphanages, and religious influence make it an ideal setting for exploring adoption dynamics and the role of stigma management communication in enhancing social acceptance.

This research will explore the use of open adoption communication as a stigma management strategy since adoptive parents who engage in open and honest communication about adoption with their children, family and social networks experience lower levels of perceived stigma. Open communication helps normalize

adoption within the family and community context, which is essential in cultures where adoption may still be viewed with suspicion or secrecy (Grotevan et.,al, 2005).

Adoptive families in Kenya, like in many parts of the world, may face cultural and social barriers that fuel stigma, such as beliefs associating childbearing with marital success or the notion that adopted children are not "real" family members. In such contexts, stigma management communication, particularly strategies such as "normalizing" and "educating others" plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and empowering adoptive parents (Wydra et.,al, 2012). Adoptive parents who proactively explain adoption to others and correct misconceptions often report greater social acceptance and self-confidence.

Moreover, stigma management is strengthened when communication is supported by institutional frameworks such as community-based wraparound services that provide counseling and public education (Levy-Shiff, 2001). These services can enhance parents' capacity to communicate effectively about adoption and resist stigma. This is particularly important in Kenya, where adoption is less openly discussed, and families may hide it due to fear of judgment. Integrating these communication strategies into your study can help identify culturally appropriate ways adoptive parents in Kiambu County can mitigate stigma through intentional, supportive, and strategic dialogue.

## Statement of the Problem

Communication plays a central role in shaping how adoption is understood and accepted in society, yet in Kenya it often perpetuates stigma against adoptive parents. Through gossip, labeling, and silence, cultural beliefs that privilege biological lineage over adoptive kinship are communicated and reinforced, creating barriers to the normalization of adoption (Khamala, 2018). As a result, many adoptive families are

pressured to adopt in secrecy or avoid adoption altogether, limiting children's opportunities for permanent and nurturing homes (Mutua, 2013; Jones et al., 2017).

The persistence of these negative perceptions is compounded by limited sensitization and awareness campaigns, which allow misconceptions to remain unchallenged and maintain silence around adoption (Gatwiri, 2021). Although adoption has been studied extensively in fields such as psychology and child welfare, communication approaches to reducing stigma remain understudied in Kenya, despite communication being central to shaping public narratives, transforming cultural beliefs, and reducing prejudice. This gap presents both a social and academic problem: adoptive parents continue to suffer from discrimination, while research has yet to fully explore the communicative strategies such as dialogue, storytelling, media advocacy, and community engagement that could normalize adoption and foster greater social acceptance.

To address this gap, the present study explored the role of stigma management communication in reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in Kiambu County, Kenya. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the communication-based sources and manifestations of stigma, explore the strategies adoptive parents use to navigate and respond to stigmatizing interactions, and evaluate the impact of these strategies on shifting public perceptions within interpersonal, community, and media contexts. By focusing on communication as both a barrier and a tool for change, the research aimed to generate insights into how dialogue, storytelling, media advocacy, and community engagement can be harnessed to challenge misconceptions, normalize adoption, and promote greater social acceptance.

## Purpose of the Study

The research sought to explore the role of Stigma Management Communication (SMC) techniques in cultivating positive behavioral reception towards adoption and reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in rural Kiambu County.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the communication-based sources and manifestations of stigma directed at adoptive parents in Kiambu County.
2. To explore the stigma management communication strategies adoptive parents in Kiambu County use to navigate and respond to stigmatizing interactions.
3. To evaluate the impact of stigma management communication on public perceptions and the reduction of adoptive parent stigmatization within interpersonal, community, and media contexts.

## Research Questions

1. What are the communication-based sources and manifestations of stigma directed at adoptive parents in Kiambu County?
2. How do adoptive parents in Kiambu County use stigma management communication strategies to navigate and respond to stigmatizing interactions?
3. What is the impact of stigma management communication on public perceptions and the reduction of adoptive parent stigmatization within interpersonal, community, and media contexts?

## Justification of the study

Stigmatization has profound negative impacts on adoptive parents in Kenya, with rural dwellers often experiencing the most severe consequences. Individuals exposed to stigma commonly report low self-esteem, social withdrawal, anxiety, depression, anger, and resentment. These psychological effects are frequently accompanied by difficulties in building relationships, reduced help-seeking behaviors, and, in some cases, physical health repercussions (Goffman, 2014). For adoptive parents in Kiambu County, such challenges are intensified by cultural beliefs that privilege biological lineage, as well as by social labeling, gossip, and exclusion within their communities (Ngugi, 2017).

Although the Kenyan Constitution (2010) and international frameworks such as the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) guarantee equal treatment for all individuals regardless of their socio-economic or family status, adoptive parents continue to face unique forms of marginalization that threaten their psychological well-being and social acceptance. Studies in Kenya have shown that adoption remains stigmatized, with many families and communities perceiving it as a disruption of bloodline continuity, inheritance, and family honor (Stuckenbruck et al., 2017). Similarly, research across Africa demonstrates that stigma against adoption is frequently reinforced through verbal mistreatment, gossip, and social exclusion, all of which function as communicative acts that undermine the legitimacy of adoptive families (Iloka, 2020; Shiferaw, 2020).

This study was therefore necessary because it addresses a critical research gap by focusing on stigma management communication as both a coping mechanism and a potential driver of social change. Previous studies on adoption in Kenya and Africa have largely examined legal, cultural, and institutional barriers but have not sufficiently explored communication as an intentional framework for stigma reduction. By

investigating the communication-based sources of stigma, the strategies adoptive parents employ to navigate stigmatizing interactions, and the wider impact of these strategies on public perceptions, this research provides valuable insights into how stigma can be managed and reduced through dialogue, narrative reframing, and community engagement. Furthermore, the study sought to understand identity affirmation methods adopted by parents in the face of prejudice, thereby contributing to the literature on resilience and family identity formation within stigmatized groups.

Exploring the role of stigma management communication in Kiambu County is particularly significant because it combines local cultural realities with global discourses on adoption, communication, and stigma. The findings are expected to inform not only policymakers and child welfare institutions but also faith-based organizations, community leaders, and the media in developing communication strategies that normalize adoption, reduce stigma, and support the well-being of adoptive families.

## Significance of the Study

The findings of this study helps address knowledge gaps by offering deeper understanding of the linkage between stigma management communication and adoption stigmatization especially in rural set up of Kiambu County. This information is useful to future studies on stigma management communication, mental health, family communication and development communication. Focusing on communication strategies such as storytelling, media advocacy, interpersonal communication and public education, this study contributes to new perspectives to the growing literature on how marginalized populations manage and resist social stigma (Corrigan et al.,2012).

In addition, the findings of the study influences policy impact by providing policymakers with empirical evidence needed to develop culturally sensitive

communication strategies that can be used to reduce stigma and promote child adoption. The Government of Kenya (GoK), in collaboration with the Department of Children's Services and organizations such as Child Welfare Society of Kenya (CWSK), can use the findings to refine the National Care Reform Strategy and build targeted campaigns during National Adoption Awareness Month in November. Adoption agencies, social workers, and civil society organizations involved in child protection and family services will also benefit by acquiring tools and language that can help dismantle myths and fears around adoption in local communities.

Furthermore, religious institutions and community-based organizations, which often serve as key influencers in Kenyan society, can leverage this information to foster more supportive environments for adoptive families. These actors play a crucial role in shaping cultural attitudes and can serve as change agents when equipped with the right communication tools and messages. Educational institutions and training centers for social workers and psychologists can also incorporate findings from this research into their curricula, helping to sensitize future professionals to the complexities of adoption stigma and the power of communication in mitigating it.

Finally, the study has the potential to promote meaningful social change by identifying practical and culturally grounded communication interventions that can shift negative public perceptions, challenge discriminatory practices, and foster a more inclusive society. By advocating for openness, empathy, and informed dialogue, the study empowers adoptive parents and adopted children by promoting their emotional well-being and social integration.

## Assumptions of the Study

The study assumed that there are increasing cases of stigmatization among adoptive parents in Kiambu County, which would in the long run reduce the number of

adoptive parents in the county, a move that would lead to isolation of children who do not have a safe space they can call home. The study also assumes that stigma management communication strategies are key in reducing stigmatization and raising awareness about adoption, hence promoting positive attitudes on adoption in Kiambu County.

## Scope of the Study

The study is designed to explore how SMC can be used to reduce stigmatization of adoptive parents in Kiambu County with the aim of reducing the cases of stigmatized individuals and promoting positive attitudes towards adoption and stereotypes surrounding the same. The study focused on three areas: 1) Types and extent of stigmatization faced by adoptive parents, 2) Strategies used by adoptive parents to cope with adoption stigmatization, 3) Key communication tools, channels and strategies that can adapted by communities in Kiambu County to address stigmatization among adoptive parents.

To achieve the objectives of the study, data was collected from adoptive parents in Kiambu County who have faced stigmatization in child adoption. Geographically, the study focused on Kiambu County due to its metropolitan setup and varying numbers of closed adoption cases in the urban and rural set up of the county. These factors make Kiambu County ideal for the study to explore the relationship between SMC and adoption as a form of alternative care in Kenya, hence allowing the researcher to evaluate the communication and adoption stigmatization- related issues that are specific to the region.

## Limitations and Delimitations of the study

This study adopted qualitative research method, meaning narrative data was collected and analyzed qualitatively. The sample sizes for the study were smaller and

therefore, their views might not represent the views of all adoptive parents in the county, hence limiting the level of applicability. However, in depth data was collected through interviews to help overcome the delimitations and therefore, the rich data can be used by future researchers who will focus on quantitative research method.

There is also a possibility that the credibility of the findings may be limited if some participants provide inaccurate responses as a result of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the questions asked. To delimit this, a pretesting of data collection tool was conducted in Machakos County to identify gaps and make changes. The researcher also invited peers to review the analyzed data and help improve the credibility and reliability of the findings. Furthermore, the questions were made understandable to the participant.

## Operational Definition of key terms

Stigma Management Communication: how people or groups communicate to deal with and reduce the negative impact of stigma or discrimination.

Adoptive Parents: Adoptive parents are individuals who legally take on the parenting of non-biological children (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). In this study, they are individuals or couples in Kiambu County raising legally adopted children.

Communication Strategies: Communication strategies are structured methods for delivering messages to influence knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (Rogers, 2003). In this study, they refer to techniques used in Kiambu County like storytelling and awareness campaigns to counter negative views and support adoptive parents.

Coping Mechanisms: Coping mechanisms are cognitive and behavioral efforts to handle stress or social challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this study, they refer to how adoptive parents in Kiambu County manage stigma through support systems and communication strategies.

Stigma: Stigma is a discrediting trait that leads to discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion (Goffman, 2014). In this study, it refers to the negative attitudes and behaviors directed toward adoptive parents in Kiambu County, stemming from the societal belief that adoption is inferior to biological parenting.

Stigmatization: Stigmatization is the social process of devaluing or excluding individuals based on perceived differences (Link & Phelan, 2001). In this study, it refers to the actions and attitudes in

Kiambu County that marginalize adoptive parents.

Stigma Management Communication: Stigma management communication involves verbal and non-verbal strategies used to cope with or counter stigma, such as disclosure, concealment, or education (Meisenbach, 2010). In this study, it refers to how adoptive parents and stakeholders in Kiambu County communicate to manage adoption-related stigma.

## Chapter Summary

This first chapter has provided information on introduction and background to the study. It has highlighted the problem statement, purpose of the study, objectives of the study, research questions, justification of the study, significance of the study, assumptions of the study, and the scope of the study. The chapter has presented information on the limitations and delimitations of the study as well as defining key operational terms that will be used in the study.

# CHAPTER TWO

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

This chapter analyses published work related to the study, covering the theoretical framework, as well as general literature on stigma and its impact on adoptive parents, stigma management communication, adoption and stigmatization in Kenya, stigma management communication strategies for adoptive parents. It also highlights theoretical and empirical frameworks related to the study.

## Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is essential in guiding a research study as it provides a structured platform through which to examine, interpret, and understand the phenomena under investigation. In this study, theoretical grounding helps in identifying key concepts, clarifying relationships between variables, and offering a basis for analyzing findings. It ensures that the study is not only methodologically sound but also contributes to the advancement of scholarly knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Theoretical frameworks also offer predictive and explanatory power, which is crucial in social research that seeks to understand complex behaviors and social attitudes such as stigma.

In the field of stigma management communication, scholars have relied on several theoretical frameworks to explore how individuals and groups navigate stigmatized identities. The theory that directly applies to this study, is the Stigma Management Communication Theory (SMCT) proposed by Meisenbach (2010) and developed by Rains, A. (2007). SMCT focuses specifically on how individuals use communication strategies to manage stigmatized identities. The theory outlines various

approaches including avoidance, justification, reframing, and education as tools for managing social judgment. It offers a nuanced framework for analyzing how adoptive parents in Kiambu County respond to stigma, the kinds of messages they use, and how those messages are received by their communities.

In this study, SMCT provides the most appropriate lens to explore the research objectives. It allows for an in-depth understanding of both interpersonal and public communication strategies that adoptive parents may use to navigate stigma. By applying this theory, the study can uncover culturally specific ways in which stigma is negotiated, resisted, or reproduced in the Kenyan context. Furthermore, it enables the researcher to examine how communication contributes not only to individual coping but also to broader social change, making it central to the goals of this research. The theory also highlights how stigmatized individuals such as people living with HIV, adoptive parents, victims of rape and those with disabilities use communication to talk about societal judgement based on stereotypes and reduce the negative impact of being labeled or stigmatized.

Stigma Management Communication Theory (SMCT) is used in the research to analyze self-empowering strategies that social groups utilize for managing social and psychological challenges stemming from stigma. Stigmatized individuals who face discrimination for reasons such as HIV status or adoption or sexual assault or physical disabilities use communication to engage discussions about societal prejudice based on stereotyping while minimizing the consequences of social labeling (Meisenbach, 2010). The theory establishes framework to understand how individuals faced with stigma employ communication methods which help them manage public dismissal along with societal prejudice and discrimination.

Stigmatized individuals can utilize SMCT to minimize stigma effects while altering their identity attributes and societal interpretations of stigmatized labels with

interpersonal communication for boosting self-acceptance and combating stereotypical perceptions (Rains, 2007). People communicate with others through multiple channels using various modes which may increase or decrease their experience of stigma according to this source. Through communication stigmatized individuals develop methods to challenge reduce discrimination that they encounter in their social environment (Fitzgerald et al., 2014).

The core principle of SMCT demonstrates that specific communication methods serve to control stigma. The stigmatized people who opt for avoidance can successfully control how their identity interacts with stigma. The communication approaches enable stigmatized individuals to stay away from contacts and situations that would lead to stigma or judgment. Reframing presents a method to control stigma by modifying the common perspective on stigmatized identities as shown by the redefinition of adoption into a hopeful transition which gives children refuge inside accepting families rather than presenting it as a desperation measure (Meisenbach, 2010).

Disclosure functions as a stigma management tool because the affected parties can reveal both their story and experience to others so they can gain understanding of the stigmatized matter and erase inaccurate misconceptions. The skills of self-advocacy let someone challenge stereotypes along with negative perceptions by standing up for oneself or others (Meisenbach, 2010). Eventually social support builds up from people uniting based on shared experiences to receive both emotional and social support. According to the second principle of SMC Theory these stigma management strategies depend on the stigmatized condition of the individual as well as their cultural environment and the support structures available in their surroundings (Corrigan et al., 2009). SMC Theory concedes that stigma effects diminish when people communicate effectively to educate and reframe potentially prejudiced perspectives about stigmatized issues thereby lowering the isolation and discrimination experienced by stigmatized

individuals.

According to the theory people who face stigma deal with it by adjusting their lifestyle to match societal norms and building self-identity in spite of discrimination and getting community backing and individual strength (Link & Phelan, 2001) At the same societal level the stigmatized community fights stigma through activism activities which help push for changes in policies and laws while changing social attitudes. Through these social connections people who face stigma develop social support and a sense of solidarity since they meet others with shared experiences thereby learning to handle stigma and establishing belonging.

According to the theory, adoptive parents can adapt their social interactions to fit in with the community thus minimizing social discrimination. At this moment they choose to see adoption as an attractive choice rather than the ultimate option. They should communicate their status as adoptive parents to the general public to inform everyone about why adoption matters in order to inspire society's acceptance of this practice. Through their social interactions adoptive parents have the opportunity to generate support networks consisting of fellow parents who share their adoption stories with others to implement new standards for adoption practices.

The theory serves adoptive parents in Kenya who campaigned the government for pre-adoptive family leave. Under Employment (Amendment) Act 2021 adoptive parents received pre-adoptive leave provisions that permitted them to have one month of leave for forming bonds with their newly adopted child.

## General Literature Review

### Stigma and Its impact on Adoptive Parents

Goffman (2014) defines stigma as the negative social label that demeans an

individual or a group of people with similar experiences that are perceived to be undesirable or deviant. Adoptive parents may face stigma due to cultural factors that may term adoption as a lesser form of parenthood or because of misconceptions about adopted children. Stigmatization related to this may lead to negative emotional, social and psychological effects on adoptive parents such as isolating themselves from the public, developing low self-esteem, stress and anxiety (Meyer, 2003). In Kenya, cultural norms create the belief that biological children form the major family identity and therefore most people find it hard to accept non-biological children (Ngugi, 2015).

A study conducted by Kariuki (2017) highlights that stigmatization based on lack of biological children highly takes place in the rural setup where many people value family structures and therefore the community's perception is more rigid. Furthermore, the stigma associated with adoption in Kenya may develop from the belief that adopted children are different from biological children, hence leading to the discrimination of adoptive parents. It is because of this that adoptive parents tend to experience feelings of shame, inadequacy and a sense of being judged by other people. (Fitzgerald et al., 2014).

## Adoption and Stigmatization in Kenya

The article "Navigating Uncharted Terrain: Domestic Adoptions in Kenya" by Stuckenbruck and Roby (2017) provides an in-depth exploration of the cultural and societal dynamics surrounding adoption in Kenya. The study highlights that adoption is often perceived negatively, with adoptive parents facing stigma due to cultural belief that prioritize blood lineage and fertility. Participants reported that adopting children is sometimes seen as a sign of infertility or a failure to have biological children, leading to societal discrimination and marginalization of adoptive families.

This stigma is so pervasive that some adoptive parents choose to keep their adoption status secret, even from extended family members, to avoid social exclusion

and negative judgment. The study also notes that the inheritance system in Kenya favors blood relatives, further complicating the acceptance of adopted children within families. These cultural attitudes contribute to a prevailing belief that formal adoption is incompatible with Kenyan traditions, despite its legal recognition and promotion as a form of family-based care (Stuckenbruck & Roby, 2017).

Adoption in Kenya is viewed with perceptions based on cultural resistance especially in rural settings such as those of Kiambu County, where most people value family structures with father, mother and children. A report by the National Adoption Committee (2016) reveals that despite adoption being recognized by the Kenyan government as a legal practice, it still meets resistance due to the notion that biological parenthood is better. The stigma around adoption in Kenya is faced by concerns regarding the background of adopted children, with fears that they may carry negative behaviors and features from their biological families such as poverty or criminality (Kariuki, 2017).

Adoptive parents face emotional and social challenges such as discrimination from the society, since they have adopted either a child or two. This makes most of them keep the process a secret to avoid experiencing difficulties in family acceptance. (Mlemwa, 2020). Local adoption agencies such as Buckner Kenya and Child Welfare Society of Kenya (CWSK) have played a key role in promoting adoption as a positive and acceptable practice in the society. They offer counselling services to prospective adoptive parents, raise awareness on the adoption process and why adoption is important hence aiming at reducing stigma around it. However, adoptive parents in Kiambu County often experience challenges in their communities since adoption is considered as a lower alternative to biological parenthood. This can be changed through the use of public education campaign and community-based communication strategies to help shift the perceptions of the public (Njiru, 2014).

## Stigma Management Communication Strategies for Adoptive Parents

Effective stigma management communication strategies that adoptive parents in Kiambu County can implement include both individual strategies and community-based strategies. Individual strategies can entail the ability of being proactive and sharing their adoption story with others, hence making them see that adoption is a normal practice in life and reducing the stereotypes on adoption (Fitzgerald et al., 2014). Furthermore, family and peer support is essential since it offers emotional support to the adoptive parents and social reinforcement which can help them overcome societal judgement (Meyer, 2003).

At the community level, public campaigns and educational programs can be offered with the support of adoption agencies, local governments and NGOs that operate in the county to help reduce stigma by highlighting the importance of adoption. These initiatives aim at changing public perceptions and educating the broader community about the positive side of adoption, dispelling the myths and addressing concerns about the background of adopted children.

Stuckenbruck and Roby (2017) argue that stigma associated with adoption can be addressed through employing various communication strategies to challenge societal misconceptions and promote acceptance. One approach is for adoptive parents to engage in open and honest conversations about their adoption experiences, both within their families and in the broader community. By sharing their personal stories and the reasons behind their decision to adopt, they can humanize the adoption process and dispel myths about adopted children. Additionally, adoptive parents can collaborate with adoption professionals and organizations to organize awareness campaigns and

educational programs that inform the public about the legal and social aspects of adoption. These initiatives can help shift public perceptions and reduce the stigma associated with adoption in Kenya.

## Coping Mechanisms for Adoptive Parents

Adoptive parents often face societal stigma due to the prevailing cultural and social norms that prioritize biological parenthood over non-biological forms of family-building. This stigma can manifest through insensitive questioning, social exclusion, or even overt discrimination, which in turn affects both the psychological well-being of adoptive parents and their ability to fully embrace their parenting roles (Jones, 2016). To combat these challenges, research indicates that adoptive parents employ several coping mechanisms**,** including both psychological strategies and communication-based approaches.

Open and proactive communication is one of the most commonly used tools for managing adoption-related stigma. By openly discussing the adoption process with family, friends, and their children, adoptive parents are able to challenge misconceptions and normalize adoption as a legitimate and loving form of parenting (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). This kind of communication allows them to reframe the adoption narrative, presenting it as a conscious and compassionate decision rather than a fallback or act of desperation. Reframing, as a stigma management strategy, is especially powerful in shifting public attitudes toward adoption (Meisenbach, 2010).

Another effective coping mechanism is the development of support networks**,** both formal and informal. Peer support groups, especially those composed of other adoptive families, provide a safe space for shared experiences and emotional validation. These networks offer adoptive parents an opportunity to gain strength from collective resilience and reduce feelings of isolation (Goldberg, 2009). Professional counseling

also plays a role, particularly when stigma contributes to internalized shame or conflict within the adoptive family structure.

Some adoptive parents also employ selective disclosure or information management deciding when, how, and to whom they disclose their adoptive status. Communication Privacy Management Theory suggests that this kind of boundary-setting helps individuals protect themselves from unwanted judgment while maintaining control over their personal narratives (Petronio, 2002). In communities where adoption is highly stigmatized, such discretion can be a vital tool for minimizing social friction.

Education and advocacy have also emerged as proactive coping tools. Some adoptive parents take on advocacy roles, engaging in public education or policy dialogue to challenge societal biases and raise awareness about the realities of adoption. These efforts not only combat stigma at a structural level but also empower parents and validate their family experiences (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Finally, religious or spiritual belief systems can serve as internal coping resources. In many cultural contexts, including parts of Africa, faith plays a central role in parenting decisions and family acceptance. Adoptive parents may frame their experience within a religious or moral narrative that affirms their role and counters external judgment (Gatwiri, 2021).

## Empirical Literature Review

Adoption remains a critical solution to child welfare across the globe, yet adoptive parents frequently face stigma driven by entrenched cultural and societal beliefs that privilege biological parenthood. Globally, this stigma has been studied extensively, particularly in Western contexts. For instance, Fitzgerald, Johnson, and Lee (2014) conducted a large-scale study in the United States involving 500 adoptive

parents to explore the societal challenges they face.

Their findings revealed a pervasive stigma tied to the notion that biological connections are inherently superior to adoptive ones. Many adoptive parents reported being questioned about their legitimacy as parents or encountering intrusive comments about the absence of a biological link. The study concluded that public education programs, especially those that normalize adoption as a valid and loving way to form families play a significant role in reducing this stigma.

In a related study, Snyder (2014) examined how communication strategies influence the experiences of adoptive parents in the United States. Through in-depth interviews with 200 parents and communication experts, Snyder found that adoptive parents who openly shared their stories and discussed the realities of adoption encountered less stigma. Key communication strategies included community forums, personal storytelling, participation in media interviews, and the use of digital platforms. These approaches allowed adoptive parents to counter negative stereotypes, increase public awareness, and foster empathy among community members.

Moving to the African context, adoption is often viewed through the lens of cultural and traditional values, which can significantly shape public attitudes. In Uganda, Njiru (2014) conducted a qualitative study through focus group discussions with adoptive parents and community leaders. The study revealed that adoption is frequently viewed with suspicion or outright disapproval due to the central role of bloodlines in traditional Ugandan family structures.

Many communities perceived adoptive parents as having deviated from cultural norms, leading to social exclusion and derogatory remarks. Njiru emphasized that this stigma was not merely due to ignorance but was deeply woven into cultural ideologies about lineage and inheritance. To address this, the study recommended targeted public education campaigns that are sensitive to local beliefs and values, suggesting that

collaboration with respected cultural leaders could enhance the credibility of these campaigns.

Similarly, in South Africa, Munyua (2016) explored the effectiveness of public awareness campaigns in altering societal views on adoption. Drawing on data from national surveys and interviews with 150 participants, the study found that while urban communities showed significant shifts in perception due to sustained public education efforts, rural areas continued to resist the notion of adoption. This resistance was attributed to entrenched traditional norms that define family through blood relations. The study concluded that for communication strategies to be effective in rural African settings, they must be community-specific, culturally sensitive, and delivered through trusted local figures or institutions such as churches and schools.

In Kenya, the issue of adoption stigma is equally prominent, particularly in rural communities. Kariuki (2017) conducted a survey across multiple counties involving 300 respondents to investigate cultural resistance to adoption. The study found that stigma was prevalent in areas where traditional family structures remain dominant. Many adoptive parents reported being treated as if they were childless or viewed as having taken a less respectable path to parenthood.

Common stereotypes included assumptions that adoptive parents are infertile or that adopted children are problematic. This stigma not only affected the parents but also extended to the children, who often faced discrimination in schools and social settings. The study highlighted the urgent need for communication strategies that challenge these cultural narratives. It recommended the use of localized media content, including radio and community theatre, as well as partnerships with religious leaders who can validate adoption within a moral framework. In a more focused study, Omondi (2018) examined the role of adoption agencies in Kenya and how they contribute to reducing stigma. Through case studies of three major adoption agencies, Omondi found that these

institutions play a crucial role in reshaping public attitudes by running awareness programs, offering counseling services to adoptive parents, and engaging communities through outreach activities.

Their initiatives included distributing informational leaflets, hosting seminars, and using social media platforms to share positive adoption stories. The study concluded that adoption agencies, when well-resourced and community-focused, can significantly influence societal perceptions and create safer, more accepting environments for adoptive families.

Taken together, these empirical studies reveal that stigmatization of adoptive parents is a widespread issue, influenced by cultural values, societal norms, and levels of public awareness. Globally, public education and open communication have proven to be effective tools in mitigating stigma. In African contexts, particularly in Uganda, South Africa, and Kenya, the influence of traditional beliefs necessitates a more localized and culturally nuanced approach.

The Kenyan studies underscore the dual importance of challenging cultural resistance and empowering institutions like adoption agencies to lead stigma management efforts. For a county like Kiambu, where urban and rural dynamics intersect, a hybrid strategy that includes public education, the use of culturally respected communication channels, and community storytelling could be especially effective. Understanding the specific types and extent of stigma faced by adoptive parents, how they resist and reframe these stigmas, and which communication tools are best suited to their context will be essential in shaping interventions that not only reduce stigma but also promote the normalization and celebration of adoptive parenthood.

## Summary of the Knowledge Gaps

Despite the valuable insights offered by existing studies on adoption and stigmatization, several significant gaps remain in the current body of research. A critical gap lies in the limited focus on rural areas and non-Western contexts. Much of the global literature, particularly from the United States, such as the works by Fitzgerald et al. (2014) and Snyder (2014), focuses on urban, Western settings with a predominant emphasis on issues like transracial adoption and identity formation. These studies, while informative, often fail to address the unique socio-cultural dynamics of rural, non-Western communities, where traditional norms exert a much stronger influence on public perception and familial legitimacy. For instance, while Snyder (2014) effectively discusses openness and media usage as stigma management tools in American families, such strategies may not be practical or culturally appropriate in more traditional, rural Kenyan communities like those in Kiambu County.

Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of research explicitly addressing stigma management communication strategies in both African and global contexts. Most African studies, such as those by Njiru (2014), Munyua (2016), and Kariuki (2017), focus predominantly on the existence and causes of stigma, or on broad structural aspects such as cultural resistance or institutional frameworks but seldom delve into the specific communication tools and approaches that adoptive parents and agencies use to counter stigma.

This presents a gap in the literature, particularly for those interested in communication studies and practical intervention design. While Omondi (2018) highlights the role of adoption agencies in creating awareness, the study falls short of detailing how these communication strategies are developed, disseminated, and received by various community groups.

Moreover, there is limited exploration of the personal stigma management

strategies used by adoptive parents themselves. The emotional labor and adaptive communication that adoptive parents employ in navigating social stigma is rarely given center stage. Yet, understanding these personal tactics, whether it be selective disclosure, identity reframing, or community engagement is crucial in developing effective communication models that resonate on a grassroots level. Existing research often focuses on institutional or structural responses rather than the lived experiences and voices of adoptive parents, particularly those in rural communities who may face compounded forms of stigma due to isolation and prevailing cultural expectations.

This leads to another pressing gap: the lack of research on stigma management communication strategies specific to rural areas. Studies like Munyua's (2016) acknowledge the continued presence of stigma in rural South Africa but do not investigate the communication nuances that could bridge the awareness gap between urban and rural populations.

Rural communities often rely on traditional forms of communication such as community barazas (gatherings), religious forums, or local radio, which are rarely integrated into broader strategies for stigma reduction. Without detailed research into how these channels can be utilized for stigma management, public education campaigns risk missing their intended audiences in rural settings.

In response to these gaps, this study explored the role of stigma management communication in reducing the stigmatization of adoptive parents in Kiambu County, Kenya, with a specific focus on rural communities. It investigated the types and extent of stigma experienced by adoptive parents, and crucially, it examined how these individuals personally challenge stereotypes and manage stigma through everyday communication strategies. This includes identifying the specific communication tools, channels, and messages that are most effective and culturally appropriate for rural Kiambu residents. By concentrating on localized stigma management strategies, the

study went beyond abstract theories and provided actionable insights that can be adopted by adoption agencies, social workers, and communication practitioners.

Furthermore, this research addresses the need for studies rooted in non-Western contexts, where the socio-cultural and religious values surrounding family, parenting, and lineage differ significantly from those in the West. By anchoring the research in the Kenyan context and focusing on Kiambu County, a region that blends both rural and peri-urban dynamics it will provide a nuanced understanding of how stigma is communicated, perpetuated, and resisted within a specific socio-cultural framework. Ultimately, the study contributes to filling a critical gap in adoption literature by offering a communication-centered analysis grounded in local realities, providing both theoretical and practical implications for reducing stigma against adoptive parents.

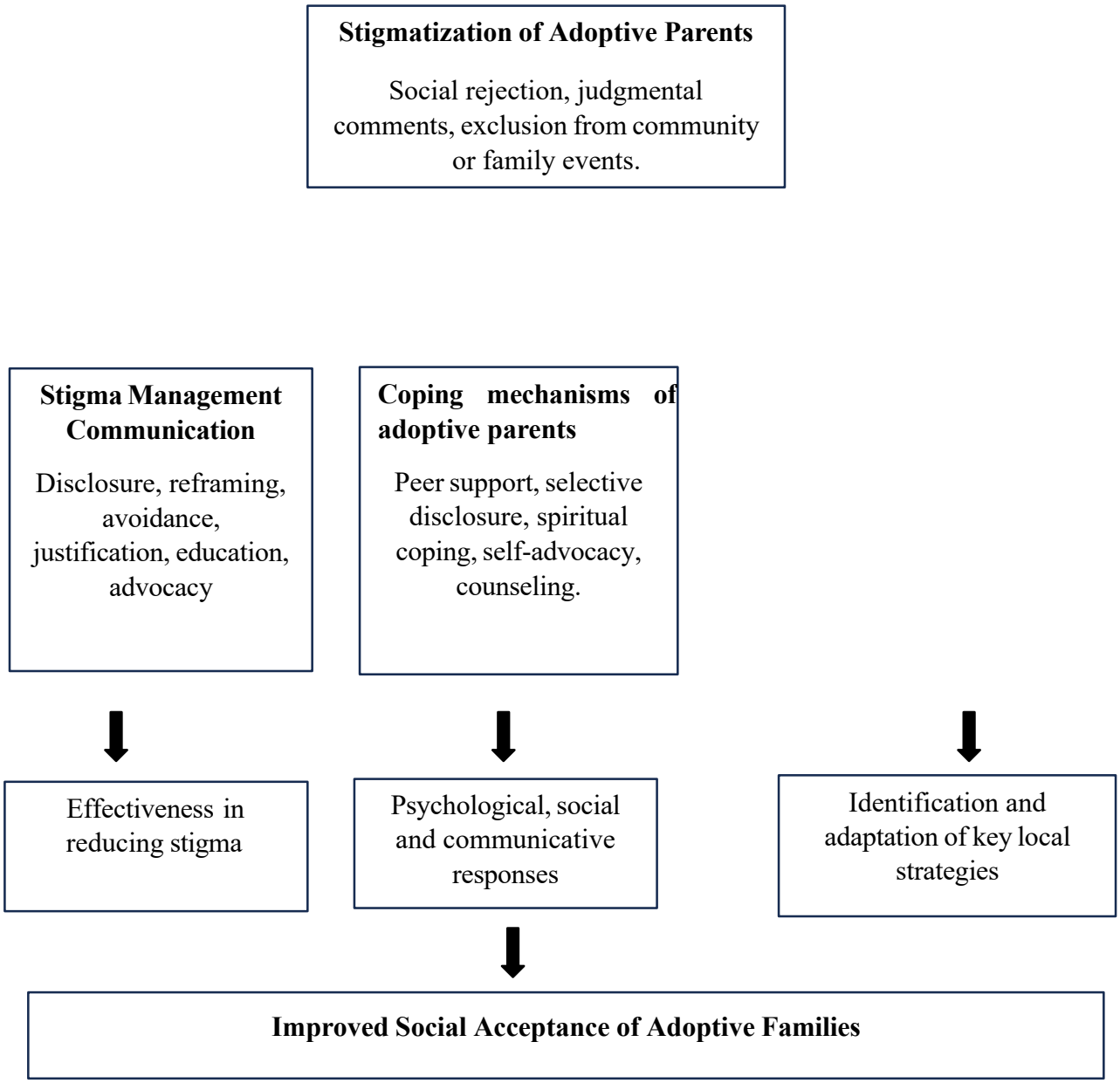
| Study | Context | Key Findings | Research Gaps | Suggestions for Future Research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fitzgerald et al. (2014) | USA (Global Level) | Adoptive parents face stigma related to biological parenthood; need for public education. | Limited focus on rural areas and non-Western contexts. | Research on stigma management communication in non-Western settings. |
| Snyder (2014) | USA (Global Level) | Communication strategies such as public education help reduce stigma for adoptive parents. | Focus on urban settings and transracial adoption. | Investigate how stigma management communication works in rural communities. |
| Njiru (2014) | Uganda (Africa) | Adoption viewed negatively due to traditional family values; stigma against adoptive parents. | Lack of focus on stigma management communication strategies. | Explore specific communication tactics used by adoptive parents. |
| Munyua (2016) | South Africa (Africa) | Public awareness campaigns are vital, but stigma persists in rural areas. | Limited focus on adoptive parents' personal stigma management | Investigate localized stigma management strategies in rural |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | strategies. | communities. |
| Kariuki (2017) | Kenya (Kenyan Context) | Cultural resistance to adoption; stigmatization in rural areas. | Limited research on stigma management communication strategies in rural areas. | Focus on Kiambu County and investigate specific communication tactics. |
| Omondi (2018) | Kenya (Kenyan Context) | Adoption agencies play a key role in reducing stigma through awareness programs. | Focus more on structural aspects of stigma rather than communication strategies. | Research on local-level stigma management strategies for adoptive parents. |

*Figure 1:Summary of Empirical Literature*

## Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework below illustrates the key elements that guided the study in understanding how stigma related to adoption is experienced and managed by adoptive parents in Kiambu County.




*Source: Author (2025)*

*Figure 2: Conceptual Framework*

At the center of the study is the social issue of stigmatization, which adoptive parents experience as a result of cultural norms that prioritize biological parenthood and often marginalize or question the legitimacy of adoptive families. In Kenyan society, particularly in rural settings like Kiambu, adoption may be viewed with skepticism, secrecy, or even shame framing it as a last resort for the infertile rather than as a valid and compassionate way to form a family (Gatwiri, 2021). This negative social labeling

represents the dependent variable in the study which is the stigmatization of adoptive parents.

To understand how this stigmatization can be addressed, the framework identifies Stigma Management Communication (SMC) as the independent variable. This construct refers to the intentional ways in which adoptive parents use communication to respond to and resist stigma. Drawing on Meisenbach's (2010) Stigma Management Communication Theory, the study explores strategies such as disclosure (choosing how and when to reveal adoptive status), reframing (presenting adoption as an act of love or social responsibility), avoidance, justification, and education. These strategies aim to influence how others perceive adoption and help reduce the negative assumptions associated with it. The study seeks to examine how effective these communication behaviors are in managing stigma within a rural, culturally sensitive context.

Another important aspect of the framework is the role of coping mechanisms, which function as a mediating variable. These mechanisms reflect the psychological, emotional, and behavioral responses that adoptive parents develop to handle the effects of stigmatization. Coping mechanisms may include joining peer support groups, seeking professional counseling, relying on spiritual or religious beliefs, and practicing

selective disclosure (Goldberg, 2009; Petronio, 2002). These approaches help adoptive parents manage stress and build resilience in the face of public scrutiny or private doubts. Understanding these lived strategies is essential for capturing the depth of the stigma experience and how parents internally and socially manage it.

The framework also incorporates community-based communication strategies, another mediating variable that captures the broader societal role in either perpetuating or reducing adoption-related stigma. These are the collective efforts undertaken by communities, local organizations, and institutions to shift public attitudes. In the context of Kiambu County, these might include church-based sensitization sessions, storytelling on local radio, school-based education programs, or government campaigns aligned with National Adoption Month. Such community-level interventions can reinforce the messages shared by adoptive parents and help normalize adoption as part of everyday family life.

The expected outcome variable of these processes is improved social acceptance of adoptive families. When stigma management communication is effectively employed, supported by coping mechanisms and embedded within broader community strategies, adoptive parents are more likely to experience reduced discrimination, greater emotional well-being, and more inclusive social interactions. Over time, these shifts can lead to a cultural transformation in how adoption is perceived moving from a source of stigma to a symbol of love, care, and social solidarity.

Importantly, the framework supports the use of a qualitative research approach by focusing on meaning-making, lived experiences, and the context in which stigma occurs. Rather than measuring these variables numerically, the study explored them through interviews and thematic analysis, allowing for an in-depth understanding of

how adoptive parents interpret their experiences and navigate their social realities. The framework thus provides a structure for interpreting complex social phenomena while maintaining the flexibility and depth that qualitative research demands.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the theoretical framework of the study, highlights the general literature related to stigma management communication on adoptive parents and expounded more on empirical studies on stigma management communication and adoption. It also highlighted the theoretical framework of the study and discussed the key variables in the study.

# CHAPTER THREE

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

This chapter highlights the research methods that were used to explore the role of stigma management communication in reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in Kiambu County. It will explain more on the philosophical underpinnings, research design, population and sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis as well as ethical considerations that the study abided to.

## Philosophical Underpinnings

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm also known as anti-positivism which highlights that a social phenomenon can easily be understood based on the perspective of the participant (Cohen et., al 2018). The paradigm states that realities are not fixed but rather defined by the experiences, interactions and cultural experiences of an individual. It also expounds on the importance of focusing on meanings and interpretations that people assign to their experiences and actions, instead of describing them (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher who acts as an instrument plays a key role while using qualitative research method to interview participants, or review documents. Since this research focuses on adoptive parents and how they manage stigma through communication, the philosophy is ideal for capturing key information on how adoptive parents communicate their experiences with stigma and how they overcome the stigma. The philosophy will be key in also finding meanings on how the different types of adoption related stigma passed through communication affects the adoptive parents.

## Research Design

A research design is the overall plan or blueprint that outlines how a research study is structured and conducted. It provides a systematic framework for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in order to answer the research questions and achieve the study's objectives. A well-chosen research design ensures that the evidence obtained addresses the research problem effectively and with clarity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

For this study, an exploratory research design has been preferred. Exploratory research is particularly suitable when a research problem is not well defined or when limited prior studies exist on the topic (Saunders et al., 2019). This study is an under-researched area and as such, an exploratory approach allows the researcher to investigate this phenomenon in depth, uncovering new insights, identifying emerging patterns, and clarifying conceptual understandings around adoption stigma.

This research design is qualitative in nature, meaning it prioritizes rich, descriptive data gathered from participants lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives rather than numerical or statistical data. It enables the researcher to explore the complexities and context-specific dynamics of stigma management communication within a culturally sensitive setting.

In applying this design, the study utilized key informant interviews as its primary data collection methods. Interviews were conducted with adoptive parents in Kiambu County to capture their personal experiences, coping strategies, and communication practices in response to adoption- related stigma. These discussions facilitated interaction among participants, allowing for shared reflections on social perceptions and stigma management.

Through this exploratory qualitative design, the study aimed at building a deep understanding of how stigma is communicated, managed, and possibly reduced through specific strategies in a rural Kenyan context. The findings may also help in formulating hypotheses and recommendations for future research, policy development, and communication interventions.

## Population of the Study

Population refers to the group of elements with specific characteristics that are of interest to a study or researcher (Thacker, 2020). This study concentrated on adoptive parents, who in this case are single parents or couples who have adopted a child or children. Focusing on adoptive parents as the population acknowledges their central role in shaping the adoption narrative and challenging negative stereotypes. These parents are not only the primary caregivers but also active agents in stigma management through their communication practices within families and communities. Understanding their perspectives is crucial for designing effective stigma reduction interventions.

## Target Population

Target population refers to a specific group from a larger population that is of interest to a researcher and from which study participants are recruited and accessed (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). In other words, the target population is that which allows a researcher to draw conclusions about the population. The study focused on adoptive parents in Kiambu County as the general population, with the aim of acquiring personal stories on stigmatization and the role of development communication plays in shaping people's perception on adoption. The study also focused on general population of adoptive parents who have lived in Kiambu County over the last five years.

## Sampling Technique

This study employed the snowball sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method particularly well-suited for qualitative research involving hard-to-reach or stigmatized populations. Snowball sampling is characterized by a referral process in which initial participants known as “seeds” identify and refer other potential participants from within their social or community networks (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017).

This technique has been chosen due to the sensitive and socially stigmatized nature of adoption in Kenya, especially in rural contexts like Kiambu County. Adoptive parents may not be publicly visible or easily identifiable due to cultural taboos, privacy concerns, or fear of discrimination. As such, traditional sampling methods would be ineffective or intrusive. Snowball sampling enables the researcher to build trust gradually within this community, starting with a few known or accessible participants who can then connect the study to others who meet the criteria but may otherwise remain hidden (Etikan, Alkassim, & Abubakar, 2016).

The researcher began by identifying a small number of adoptive parents in Kiambu County through trusted networks or adoption support organizations. These participants were then requested to refer others within their circles who have similar experiences and are willing to participate. This method not only facilitated access but also supported the ethical handling of sensitive issues by promoting voluntary participation and safeguarding confidentiality. The approach aligned with the study's qualitative, exploratory design by enabling rich, context-specific data collection from individuals with firsthand experience of adoption-related stigma (Biernacki & Waldorf, 2018).

## Sample Size

Sample size refers to the number of participants recruited to participate in a study. Scholars have different views on determining the appropriate sample size for qualitative research (Martínez-Mesa et al. 2014). Green & Thorogood (2018) contended that researchers in interview-based studies rarely find new information after interviewing the 20th participant. Sample size in qualitative research is often guided by the principle of data saturation, which is the point at which collecting additional data yields no new themes or insights (Guest et al., 2006).

According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), saturation is typically reached after conducting between 9 and 17 interviews. In light of these perspectives, this study included 15 participants and ensured that data collection was guided by the principle of saturation after interviewing 13 participants. Thematic saturation served as the guiding principle during the data collection process. Thematic saturation refers to the point in qualitative research when collecting further data no longer contributes additional information or reveals new dimensions of the themes under investigation (Vasileiou et al., 2018). It is a practical and conceptually grounded approach to ensuring that the sample size is sufficient without being excessive, especially when exploring subjective and complex experiences such as stigma and communication among adoptive parents.

To determine thematic saturation in this study, data analysis began concurrently with data collection. After each interview, transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify emerging patterns and recurring themes related to stigma management communication, coping mechanisms, and community influences. The researcher assessed whether new data continued to generate new codes or concepts. Thematic saturation was considered to have been reached when two or more consecutive

interviews yielded no additional themes and the existing findings were confirmed.

The final number of participants was guided by whether thematic saturation has been achieved, ensuring both depth and completeness of insights without unnecessary repetition.

## Data Collection Instruments

Sharma (2022) defines data collection instruments as tools that a researcher uses to get data from participants in a study. The research adopted the use of an interview guide and observation during interviews to collect data. According to Mwita (2022), a researcher should select data collection tools based on factors such as the research methods and sample size, as this was key in finding the correct and sufficient data for the study. In consideration of this, I conducted interviews with adoptive parents while using interview guided questions. This helped me explore the type of stigma that they are facing, how they challenge the stigma and types of communication strategies used to reduce stigmatisation on adoption.

## Types of Data

This study relied primarily on primary data, which refers to original information collected firsthand by the researcher for the specific purpose of addressing the research questions. As Gualandi et al. (2023) explains, data includes both primary and secondary sources that a researcher collects, observes, or generates to validate the findings of a study. In this research, primary data was obtained directly from adoptive parents residing in Kiambu County who have either experienced adoption- related stigma or engaged in stigma management communication strategies. These participants' offered firsthand accounts of their lived experiences, perceptions, and communication practices through in-depth interviews. This allowed the researcher to explore the social dynamics

of stigma and gain insight into how adoptive parents use communication to navigate and manage stigmatizing environments.

In addition, the study generated and analyzed qualitative data, which is descriptive and non-numerical in nature. Qualitative data is particularly valuable in exploring complex social issues such as stigma, identity, and communication because it captures the depth, context, and meaning behind individuals' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, qualitative data was collected through transcripts from interviews. These narratives were thematically analyzed to identify patterns, categories, and relationships related to stigma management communication, coping strategies, and societal perceptions of adoption. The use of qualitative data aligns with the study's exploratory design, allowing for a flexible and nuanced understanding of a socially sensitive issue within a specific cultural context.

## Data Collection Procedure

Paradis et al. (2016) defines data collection procedure as the practical steps a researcher follows to gather information from the study population. In other words, it is the process of getting to the field to get information from the study participants. The participants in this study were connected to me through an adoption agency that has placed children with prospective adoptive parents in Kiambu County. The agency linked me up with one adoptive parent who then linked me to others. Therefore, snowballing method was used to identify the adoptive parents in Kiambu County. The participants comprised of couples and single parents who have adopted a child or children. The interview sessions took place physically at locations convenient to the participants and lasted for 45 minutes to one hour per interview. The research questions on (appendix III) guided the interview process.

I used Daystar University's introductory letter and research permit from NACOSTI to seek for permission from an adoptive agency in Kiambu County and first inform them about what the research entails and how beneficial the findings would be to them. I introduced myself to all the participants before conducting the interview and took them through the consent form so that I could conduct the interviews with their permission. I also ensured that I stick to the interview guide while asking questions so that I do not deviate from the research objectives. I requested them for permission to record the interview using a recorder before making the recording for transcription purpose.

## Pretesting

Pretesting according to Hurst et al. (2015) involves piloting the appropriateness of study questions at a study area or with participants with similar characteristics to the study. Pretesting enables researchers to identity challenges and gaps in the research tools before conducting the interviews and make amendments where need be. It also offers them a chance to ensure that the questions are clear, straight to the point and easy for the participant to internalize and respond to. Pretesting was done in Machakos County since it has people who share similar traditions and cultural practices especially on family and biological children bearing. Therefore, interview guides and sampling procedures were tested with two adoptive parents. The participants were also be taken through the consent form and informed the purpose of conducting the pretest before the exercise began, hence providing them an opportunity to voluntarily take part in the pretesting process.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of transforming raw data into meaningful and interpretable information that can answer the research questions and support

conclusions (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020). For this study, thematic content analysis was employed to examine and interpret the qualitative data gathered from adoptive parents in Kiambu County.

The analysis began with the recording of interviews, which served as the primary data collection method. These audio recordings were then transcribed to capture participants' exact words, expressions, and narrative flow. After transcription, the data was subjected to data cleaning and anonymization to protect the identities of participants and maintain confidentiality. Names and any identifying details were replaced with pseudonyms or codes to ensure ethical compliance and participant safety.

The researcher then read through the transcripts multiple times to gain familiarity with the content and develop an intuitive understanding of recurring patterns, emotional tones, and contextual meanings. This immersive reading is a crucial step in identifying underlying issues and framing meaningful themes.

After this, the researcher identified significant statements that relate to the core aspects of the study, such as stigma experiences, communication responses, and coping strategies. These statements were grouped into preliminary codes, which were then organized into themes that reflect broader patterns in the data. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure alignment with the study's objectives and existing knowledge on stigma management communication and adoption.

Finally, the identified themes were reported in narrative format, integrating participant quotations and analytic insights to tell a coherent story of how adoptive parents in Kiambu County experience and manage stigma. The software NVivo was used to support the analysis by helping organize, manage, and visualize qualitative data efficiently and systematically.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues in research are the research design, data collection and analysis stages and processes that may partially or holistically affect the moral values accepted in research (Drolet et al., 2023). Sieber (2004) highlights that ethical issues are categorized into five categories including 1) communicating with the study participants, 2) gathering data and using the data, 3) external factors that are linked to the study, 4) risk and benefits of the study, and 5) selecting theories and frameworks that are related to the study.

This information acted as an ethical guide to the study and ensured that the study meets the practical, institutional and statutory ethical requirements. I also submitted the study proposal to Daystar University's Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (ISERC) for review and approval. Upon clearance with the ISERC, I applied for a research permit from permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) so that I could go ahead and conduct the research.

Practically, I used Daystar University's introduction letter to seek for permission from an adoption agency to link me up with an adoptive parent in Kiambu County. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before any data collection took place. The researcher began by clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the types of questions to be asked. Participants were given a written consent form that outlines their rights, including the right to ask questions, refuse to answer certain questions, or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The researcher would walk participants through the form, ensuring they fully understand its contents before signing. Only those who voluntarily agreed were included in the study.

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Individuals were invited to

take part based on snowball sampling, but no pressure or coercion was applied. Participants were made aware that they are under no obligation to participate and that they can withdraw at any point during or after the interview, without any justification and without facing any negative repercussions.

Anonymity was strictly maintained to protect participant identities. Personal identifiers, such as names or specific locations, would not appear in any transcripts, field notes, or final reports. Instead, each participant was assigned a pseudonym or unique code. This ensures that their identity remains untraceable, even within the published findings of the research.

The study also prioritized privacy and confidentiality. All interviews were conducted in private, safe, and mutually agreed-upon locations to encourage honest and open dialogue. The data collected was stored securely on password-protected for electronic files. Only the researcher had access to this data, and it was not shared with any third party. The information obtained was used exclusively for academic purposes related to this study and not for any commercial or unrelated use.

By observing the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality, this research upheld ethical standards in qualitative inquiry and ensured that participants feel respected, protected, and empowered to share their experiences.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter highlight the research methodology that was used in the study, presented the qualitative aspect of the study and the use of exploratory research design in the study, with the major focus on primary data. The chapter also presented adoptive parents in Kiambu County, as the target population. It also highlighted the use of snowball sampling technique that was used to select participants for the study. It also

explained how data will be collected and analyzed as well as pretesting which was done in Machakos County as well as ethical practices that were conducted throughout the study.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

## Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis and discussion of findings of the study, which were: 1) To investigate the communication-based sources and manifestations of stigma directed at adoptive parents in Kiambu County, 2) To explore the stigma management communication strategies adoptive parents in Kiambu County use to navigate and respond to stigmatizing interactions, and 3) To evaluate the impact of stigma management communication on public perceptions and the reduction of adoptive parent stigmatization within interpersonal, community, and media contexts.

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of Stigma Management Communication (SMC) techniques in cultivating positive behavioral reception towards adoption and reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in rural Kiambu County. The researcher conducted interviews with adoptive parents in Kiambu County and attained saturation after conducting 13 interviews out of the 15 selected respondents.

## Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

### Research Objective 1: To investigate the communication-based sources and manifestations of stigma directed at adoptive parents in Kiambu County.

The analysis of the interview data under research objective 1 highlighted three major themes:

i. Cultural narratives and beliefs about bloodline and adoption
ii. Community gossip, Labeling, and social exclusion

iii. Institutional communication and bureaucratic attitudes.

Cultural Narratives and Beliefs about Bloodline and Adoption

Communication around lineage, inheritance and continuity stigmatizes adoptive parents in various ways. Whereas cultural beliefs in Kiambu County, offers priority to biological children compared to adopted children, conversations around the importance of having biological lineage, inheritance disputes linked to non-biological children and perceptions around real parenthood, tend to place adoptive parents in spaces where they feel discriminated and might at some point fail to raise awareness about the importance of adoption.

Across the interviews, participants pointed out the need to have a biological lineage which would be as a result of naming a child after their parents or grandparents. Communication around the need to have children named after their grandparents resulted to stigma among adoptive parents since the message was passed to them in a harsh tone:

*"I felt stigmatised when I requested my parents to allow me name the adopted child after them. The facial expression and tone that came from their voices when they were responding to the request created fear and I could read between the lines and know that they are not interested in me doing so. They believed that the child did not come from their lineage and might be having strange behaviours that they would not want to be linked to. This made me feel discriminated and therefore, I gave the child two English names from the Bible*."(Participant 6)

This response underscores how stigma is communicated through subtle yet powerful non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and tone, which conveyed rejection

and disapproval. The reluctance of the participant's parents to have the child named after them reflects the deep cultural significance of naming in reinforcing kinship ties and lineage. In many African societies, naming a child after a relative symbolizes continuity of bloodlines and family identity. By refusing to allow this practice, the parents implicitly communicated that the adopted child was not considered part of their lineage and therefore unworthy of carrying on the family name.

Furthermore, the association of adoption with "strange behaviours" highlights how adoptive children are often perceived as outsiders, carrying unknown and undesirable traits that could threaten family reputation. This perception not only excludes the child from cultural practices that affirm belonging but also leaves the adoptive parent feeling discriminated against within their own family. The participant's decision to give the child two English biblical names can therefore be seen as both a coping strategy and a symbolic act of distancing from the stigma attached to lineage-based naming.

Inheritance disputes that are tied to non-biological children also lead to the stigmatisation of adoptive parents, especially through communication. One participant shared how cultural narratives and beliefs about bloodline and adoption led to her stigmatisation:

*"I felt stigmatised when my friends and family members told me that an adopted child is a stranger who will take over family property when I die, yet the family members are the ones supposed to take the property. Others said that the child is an outcast in the community and therefore can turn around against the family when they grow up*." (Participant 4)

The response illustrates that one of the key communication-based sources of stigma directed at adoptive parents in Kiambu County emerges from family and community discourse surrounding lineage and inheritance. Friends and relatives conveyed to the respondent that an adopted child is considered a "stranger" who should not have access to family property, reinforcing the perception that only biological kin are legitimate heirs. This narrative reflects deep-rooted cultural beliefs about bloodlines as the primary basis of belonging, and it communicates exclusion of the adopted child from the family structure.

### Community Gossip, Labeling, and Social Exclusion

Community gossip, labelling, and social exclusion emerged as some of the strongest ways in which adoptive parents in Kiambu County experience stigma. Gossip and whispers from neighbours often take place in verbal form, but they are accompanied by non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and dismissive gestures that communicate disapproval or rejection. These subtle but persistent forms of communication reinforce the perception that adoption is not fully accepted in the community.

For many adoptive parents, the gossip centres on their perceived inability to have biological children or on derogatory assumptions about the adopted child's background. Once such narratives circulate, they quickly transform into labels such as "barren," "outsider," or "buyer of a child." These labels not only target the adoptive parent but also stigmatize the child, positioning both as socially deviant and illegitimate within the community structure. The constant whispering, pointing, or avoidance by community members' signals to the adoptive parent that they are under scrutiny, which intensifies feelings of isolation.

Participants expressed their encounter with community gossip, labelling and social exclusion.

*"When I came with my child, I would hear people gossip whenever I passed with the child and they would look at me strangely, off course wondering where the child has come from yet they did not see me expectant. Since some of them cannot face me and ask the questions directly, they start spreading rumours about the whole situation. Some said that I have bought a child while others said that I stole someone's child and forced him to call me mum. The information spread so fast even in church and I at some point I felt like moving houses*."(Participant 1)

Another participant added:

*"I would speak openly about adoption but since some people started referring me to a barren who has bought a child, I opted to keep the information to myself and would not speak about it in public spaces or even to strangers. The names made me avoid social spaces where those people were because I knew that they would insult me more and this could be verbally or non-verbally."* (Participant 3).

This type of stigmatization is especially harmful because it unfolds in everyday social spaces where the adoptive parent seeks belonging such as markets, churches, or neighbourhood gatherings. The gossip and labelling often result in social exclusion, as adoptive parents may withdraw from such spaces to avoid further humiliation. In this way, stigma is communicated not only through explicit verbal insults but also through exclusionary practices and non-verbal hostility, which together create a hostile environment:

*"I was afraid of what people would say about me when I appear home with a child who looks like me and is old enough, yet they did not see me pregnant, and therefore, I wanted to relocate to another place before immediately after bringing in the child, but then I remembered that the child would at some point meet my colleagues, church mates and former neighbours and therefore, I opted to stay back and ignore what people would speak about the child and myself. I was open to explaining to anyone who was interested in knowing where the child is coming from but no one bothered to ask, all they did was look at me in disbelief."* (Participant 8).

The findings indicate that gossip and labelling are not merely idle talk but are communicative mechanisms that reinforce negative stereotypes about adoption. By marking adoptive parents and their children as "different," these practices limit their social acceptance and push them to the margins of community life. Consequently, gossip and labelling perpetuate stigma by denying adoptive families the recognition and respect accorded to biological families, thereby deepening their sense of alienation.

Institutional Communication and Bureaucratic Attitudes

Institutional communication and bureaucratic attitudes also play a significant role in perpetuating stigma against adoptive parents in Kiambu County. Adoptive parents often encounter negative experiences within formal and semi-formal institutions such as workplaces, churches, and schools, where administrators and colleagues reinforce discriminatory perceptions about adoption. At the workplace, colleagues may make insensitive remarks or insinuations that undermine the legitimacy of adoptive parenthood, for instance by questioning why the parent "should go on pre-adoptive leave." Which allows them to bond with the child.

*"Stigmatisation takes place in the work spaces too. I remember when we were drafting HR policies at our workplace and I requested the team to incorporate a phase that allows adoptive parents to go on pre-adoptive leave, which is authorised in the Kenyan constitution, one person, who knew me very well and knew that I had adopted a child shouted at me and said "why should we give people who have adopted children leave? We only give leave sessions to those who have given birth biologically," that hurt me to the core"* (Participant 2).

In churches, some members and even leaders subtly frame adoption as a consequence of childlessness, thereby attaching moral judgment and reinforcing the label of barrenness.

"*We always thought that churches are safe spaces for everyone but we were disappointed when we shared the matter with our cell group members and some church leaders. They were against the idea of us adopting a child and others even told us to repent our sins and linked our desire to adopt children a result of us procuring several abortions, which was not the case."* Participant 13

Similarly, in schools, administrators may inadvertently stigmatize adoptive families by publicly asking for clarification on a child's background or by drawing unnecessary attention to the fact that the child is adopted.

*"A teacher at our child's school always told her to tell the grand parents to pay for her school trip, the child is very young and she would always come home and say that the teacher has said that my grandparents pay for my trip. We ignored the information but when the child shared several times, we knew something was wrong, we were keen to know why the teacher was feeding the child with such information*

*because the child was questioning if we are her biological parents. This drew unnecessary attention about the child's background since we knew someone within the school had spread information about the child's case, since we had shared the correct information upon admission, however, the information that was shared with the child, in front of others was wrong, that affected both of us and we felt like transferring the child from the school."* Participant 10

These communicative practices, whether verbal or non-verbal, reduce adoption to an exception rather than a normal family-building option, and they often leave adoptive parents feeling singled out and marginalized. Such experiences illustrate how stigma is not only rooted in cultural and community beliefs but is also reproduced through institutional communication and bureaucratic interactions that should otherwise support and affirm family diversity.

Research Objective 2: To explore the stigma management communication strategies adoptive parents in Kiambu County use to navigate and respond to stigmatizing interactions.

The analysis of the interview data under research objective 2 highlighted three major themes:

i. Concealment vs. disclosure strategies
ii. Reframing and positive narratives
iii. Selective association and support networks
iv. Resistance and advocacy communication

Concealment vs. Disclosure strategies

One of the key strategies adoptive parents in Kiambu County use to navigate stigma is the careful management of information around their child's adoption status. Parents often make conscious choices about whether to reveal or conceal this information, depending on the context and the perceived risk of stigmatization. For some, concealment becomes a protective strategy, where they deliberately avoid disclosing that their child is adopted in order to prevent intrusive questions, gossip, or negative labelling.

*"No, I do not share my adoptive story with anyone. I am deliberate about this, so I wouldn't want to start telling people that I have adopted a child because I do not want them to judge me, including my friends. I hang out with my child most of the time and even when my friends come up and ask about the child and why the child is calling me mum, I tell them it is normal for a child to call anyone they stay with mum."* Participant 7

Such concealment is particularly common in environments where cultural attitudes toward adoption are hostile, and parents fear that disclosure may expose them and their children to ridicule or exclusion. In other cases, parents practice partial

disclosure, choosing to share information only with a small circle of trusted family members, friends, or church leaders who are likely to be supportive.

*"I am selective on the people that I share my adoption story with. In our family, its only my close family members who know about it. My cousins and other relatives do not know that I adopted the child. You know I had not met them for quite some time, so when they saw the baby, they just assumed that I delivered. The same applies to my friends and church mates. Those who know are the ones who signed for me the adoption*

*papers and that is it. The good thing is that the child resembles us so no one will bother to ask where he came from*," Participant 5

This selective approach allows them to retain some control over the narrative while shielding the child from broader community stigma. It also reflects the adoptive parent's need to balance openness with caution in a context where adoption is often misunderstood. A few parents, however, adopt a strategy of open disclosure, where they speak openly about adoption in social gatherings, schools, or churches. For these parents, disclosure is framed as a teaching moment aimed at challenging misconceptions and normalizing adoption within their communities. By sharing their experiences, they not only affirm their own legitimacy as parents but also contribute to broader awareness about adoption as a valid family-building option.

*"I am very open about talking my adoption story. I talk freely to people about it and tell them about how the journey was and how we feel as a family. This has helped so many people including those who are interested in adopting children. It has also helped in shaping the narrative about why people are adopting, you know there are several stereotypes about adoption and therefore speaking openly to people helps change the narrative."* Participant 10

These varying approaches demonstrate that disclosure is not a straightforward decision but rather a communication strategy shaped by the social environment. Concealment offers protection from stigma but may reinforce secrecy and isolation, while disclosure whether partial or open creates opportunities for advocacy but exposes parents to potential rejection. The findings therefore highlight concealment and disclosure as critical stigma management strategies that reflect the complex negotiations adoptive parents must undertake in Kiambu County.

### Reframing and Positive Narratives

Another strategy adoptive parents in Kiambu County employ to manage stigma is the use of reframing and positive narratives when talking about adoption. Instead of internalizing the negative labels attached to adoption, some parents intentionally construct counter-narratives that affirm the value of their families and children.

*"While talking to people about how beautiful adoption is, I tell them providing a child or children with safe spaces they can call home is a way of welcoming blessings in your life. I tell them to learn from me, I am young, looking forward to getting married and since I took in this child to stay with me, I have landed three jobs in Nairobi. I never lack, so I always tell my friends and relatives to open doors to children in need and they will be blessed. So instead of them thinking that the adopted child will come and take their inheritance, they should look at it from an angle of blessings."* Participant 5

Emphasizing about adoption being a blessing, enables adoptive parents to shift the conversation from deficiency and stigma to gratitude and fulfilment through describing the experience as a divine opportunity or purposeful act of love.

Adoptive parents also engage in highlighting the child's value and achievements as a way of countering stereotypes that adopted children are problematic or outsiders. Through pointing to their children's good behaviour, strong academic performance, or unique talents, parents provide tangible evidence that adoption produces positive outcomes. This not only defends their parental choice but also normalizes adoption as a pathway to raising successful and well-adjusted children.

*"I tell my people that these children are a blessing in the family and can become great leaders in the community, they should not look at them as outcasts. In some*

*families, the adopted child performs better in school than the biological child. The same applies when one has biological children and stays with the sibling's child and the child turns out to be successful than their biological child*." Participant 8

A further strategy involves the use of spiritual and moral language, where parents frame their children as a "gift from God" or a "divine blessing." In a context where religion strongly influences social values, such language functions as a protective narrative that discourages criticism and elevates adoption as morally commendable. By aligning adoption with spiritual beliefs, parents reposition themselves not as barren or desperate but as chosen and favoured by God to raise the child.

*"What I tell people around me, including my colleagues who ask about adoption is that the adopted child is a gift from God. The same way God gave you a biological child, is the same way God placed this child somewhere for me, and therefore the child should not be referred to as one who was bought, no!"* Participant 4.

These reframing strategies demonstrate how communication can be used to resist stigma and reshape public perceptions. By emphasizing blessings, achievements, and spiritual significance, adoptive parents construct narratives that both protect their social identity and challenge the negative cultural discourses surrounding adoption. In this way, reframing and positive narratives operate not only as personal coping mechanisms but also as subtle forms of advocacy within their communities.

### Selective Association and Support Networks

Selective association and reliance on support networks emerged as another stigma management communication strategy among adoptive parents in Kiambu County. Faced with stigmatizing remarks and exclusion from their immediate families and communities, many adoptive parents sought comfort, belonging, and affirmation in alternative social circles. A notable example of this is joining adoption support groups, both formal and informal, where members share similar experiences and challenges. Within these groups, adoptive parents find a safe space to speak openly about adoption without fear of judgment, ridicule, or negative labelling.

*"We have a WhatsApp group for adoptive parents in Kiambu County where we meet and share ideas about the challenges that we are facing especially in terms of stigmatization and even raising the child. We speak very openly because we are sure that no one will judge us, we have in one way or another gone through similar situations and therefore, it is easier for us to seek refuge,"* Participant 11

These support groups provide more than emotional reassurance; they also serve as important platforms for sharing coping strategies and building resilience. Parents exchange advice on how to address insensitive questions, when to disclose adoption status, and how to frame adoption positively in hostile environments. In this way, the groups function as communicative buffers that protect parents from the isolating effects of stigma.

*"There are so many adoption related groups even on social media. At times I feel so low especially after opening up to someone about my adoption journey and they start judging me or even treating me differently. I just type on the group and ask people*

*for advice, some tell me not to share the story with everyone, others tell me to be careful of whom I am sharing the story with while others say that the more I speak about it, the more it becomes easier to overcome any form of stigma."* Participant 9

Beyond peer-to-peer support, adoption support groups also play a role in advocacy and public awareness. Some groups organize community sensitization forums or engage religious leaders to address misconceptions about adoption, thereby reducing stigma at a broader societal level. For many adoptive parents, participation in such networks reinforces their confidence, strengthens their identity as legitimate parents, and helps normalize adoption within the community discourse.

*"I love how the social groups like Adoption is beautiful are used to raise awareness about adoption and reduce stigmatisation. The group brings together so many adoptive parents and therefore, it makes it easier for them to raise awareness and also advocate for important matters regarding adoption. It is because of such groups that the MPs in parliament passed a bill on offering pre-adoptive leave to adoptive parents, this was not there before*." Participant 8

The findings suggest that through selective association and support networks, adoptive parents deliberately reposition themselves within affirming spaces that validate their parenting choices. This strategy illustrates the importance of collective communication in managing stigma, as it allows parents to counteract negative experiences in their immediate social environments by drawing strength from communities that embrace adoption.

### Resistance and Advocacy Communication

Some adoptive parents in Kiambu County respond to stigma not by concealing or withdrawing but through resistance and advocacy communication. Instead of accepting negative labels and misconceptions, these parents take an active role in correcting misinformation and promoting more positive understandings of adoption within their communities.

One key sub-strategy involves correcting misinformation about adoption. Adoptive parents challenge inaccurate beliefs that adopted children are inherently problematic, that they cannot inherit property, or that adoption is only for couples who are barren. By directly confronting such statements in conversations with relatives, colleagues, or neighbours, they reposition adoption as a legitimate and socially valuable practice. This approach enables them to push back against stigma while also asserting their parental legitimacy.

*"I prefer talking about the stereotypes that surround adoption through empowering the community that people do not adopt children because they are barren, there are families that have biological children and still adopt children. Furthermore, the adopted children are not coming to your family to take your wealth or fight over resources with your children and other family members, instead, we are providing safe spaces for the adopted child and therefore, they deserve to be loved and treated like other children,"* Participant 3

Another approach is educating others through storytelling. Some parents openly share their adoption journeys with peers, church members, or community groups, using personal narratives to humanize the experience and highlight the joys of adoptive

parenting. Through storytelling, they demystify adoption and present it as an act of love rather than desperation. These personal testimonies function as powerful tools for reshaping perceptions and breaking down stereotypes within interpersonal and community spaces.

*"People learn from personal experiences and therefore, using my story to raise awareness about adoption and reduce stigma, makes it easy for people to believe that adoption is a good thing. I tell them about how my life has changed since we adopted, how the children are happy and we look forward to adopting more children and even share with them contacts of adoption agencies and adoption procedures in Kenya. There are people who say, if so and so has done it successfully, then I can also do it, the community also changes their attitude towards adoption,"* Participant 10

The findings therefore demonstrate that resistance and advocacy communication serve as proactive stigma management strategies. By correcting misinformation and telling their stories, adoptive parents transform stigma into opportunities for dialogue and social change. This highlights their agency in not only defending their own families but also in contributing to the gradual normalization of adoption within Kiambu County.

Research Objective 3: To evaluate the impact of stigma management communication on public perceptions and the reduction of adoptive parent stigmatization within interpersonal, community, and media contexts.

The analysis of the interview data under research objective 2 highlighted three major themes:

i. Shifts in interpersonal relationships
ii. Transformation of community attitudes

iii. Media engagement and awareness creation

iv. Normalization and integration of adoption practices

### Shifts in Interpersonal Relationships

The impact of stigma management communication was evident in the way adoptive parents in Kiambu County experienced changes in their interpersonal relationships following disclosure or other coping strategies. In several cases, parents reported improved family acceptance after disclosure. While initial reactions from relatives were often skeptical or dismissive, open conversations helped to reduce suspicion and foster greater understanding. Through explaining their decision to adopt and sharing positive experiences of parenting, some parents noted that family members gradually embraced the child and began to treat them as part of the lineage.

*My family members have become very welcoming after I explained to them about why I opted for adoption, when I started the process, they were hesitant, especially with naming, but as the child grows and the more I talk to them about adoption, they have embraced the process and even offered my child another name, although it is not in the birth certificate. My siblings also love the idea and one even told me that she would like to adopt a child, unlike before when she looked at it as a bad omen,*" (Participant 7).

Adoptive parents also observed that peers became more respectful over time, particularly after witnessing the positive development of the adopted child. Friends, neighbours, and colleagues who may have initially been doubtful or gossiped about adoption eventually adjusted their perceptions when they saw evidence of love, stability, and success within the adoptive family. This shift in peer attitudes highlights

the power of communication strategies such as reframing adoption positively and sharing success stories in transforming social interactions.

"*My friends and neighbours speak more about adoption and how beautiful it is more than I do. I was shocked to even see my colleagues at work encouraging others to adopt children and even go for pre-adoptive leave, unlike before. All this happened after I talked to them about the adoption process and the stereotypes around adoption that people should do away with. In church, our local leaders encourage parents, including those with their own children to adopt more children so that the children can grow up in a family set up*," (Participant 2)

Despite these positive changes, some parents continued to experience ongoing challenges with skeptical relatives who remained resistant to accepting adoption. These relatives often held firmly to cultural beliefs about bloodlines and inheritance, making them less receptive to stigma management efforts. Their continued expressions of doubt or subtle exclusion served as reminders that not all relationships could be transformed through communication.

"*Even if you talk to people so many times about adoption and try to reduce stigma around it, some relatives have firm believes that favour biological children and therefore, you will be wasting your time explaining to them about the whole process and its importance. Some even brush you off, and therefore, since it has taken me like 3 years of empowerment and the fruits are not very good, I opted not to talk about it to my relatives but mind my own business,*" Participant 13

The findings suggest that stigma management communication has the potential to reshape interpersonal dynamics by opening pathways for dialogue and

understanding. While it does not entirely eliminate scepticism, it can create spaces where adoptive families are increasingly acknowledged and respected. This demonstrates that communication is a powerful tool for transforming relationships, even though resistance from deeply entrenched cultural attitudes may persist.

### Transformation of Community Attitudes

Stigma management communication also influenced how adoption was perceived at the community level, leading to gradual transformations in collective attitudes. One of the most significant shifts was normalization through everyday visibility. As adoptive families participated in community events, church activities, and school functions, their consistent presence helped reduce the perception of adoption as unusual or deviant. Over time, neighbours and fellow community members began to view adoptive families as ordinary and legitimate, thereby diminishing the stigma that had initially been attached to them.

"*I would say that stigmatisation among adoptive parents have reduced. The use of adoption groups to raise awareness about adoption has even changed how people view adoption. The same applies to schools. Teachers treat adoptive children like normal children and do not look at them like strangers. People no longer discriminate adoptive parents even in social set ups, in fact they want us to communicate openly and contribute ideas just like other parents."* Participant 7

Another important shift was the admiration and respect earned by adoptive families. Community members who witnessed the care, commitment, and stability within adoptive households often began to express appreciation rather than ridicule. In

some cases, adoption was even reframed by observers as an act of generosity and compassion, with adoptive parents being praised for giving a child a home and future. This admiration created opportunities for adoptive families to be seen as role models within their communities, further strengthening their social standing.

"*My wife and I are treated very well when we attend meetings. People love it when they see our adopted children grow to look like us and then call us mum and dad. They see how happy the children are and even how our biological children relate with them. The collaboration between the two children make people feel like they should adopt children. This is different from when people had so many stereotypes about us, when we started the process*." Participant 3

In addition, many adoptive parents reported a noticeable reduction in gossip and labelling over time. As misconceptions were corrected through disclosure, storytelling, and advocacy, the derogatory names and whispers that once circulated within communities began to fade. Although isolated cases of stigma persisted, the overall intensity of gossip declined, suggesting that stigma management communication had a tangible effect in reshaping community discourse about adoption.

*"People got used to seeing the child with me and no longer gossip or whisper about us. You know my girl is always very smart, she is chubby and plays well with children in the neighbourhood. She does not fight with them and therefore, when other parents see that, they always tell me that my daughter is loved and is charming, so now everyone wants to interact with her, they even come and ask for advice on how to interact well with children and ensure they are well behaved without beating them. That makes me feel nice. (*Participant 8)

The findings demonstrate that communication strategies not only help adoptive parents cope with stigma on a personal level but also contribute to broader social change. By making adoption visible, highlighting positive family experiences, and countering false narratives, adoptive parents foster gradual acceptance within their communities. This transformation underscores the potential of communication as a tool for breaking down long-standing prejudices and fostering inclusivity.

### Media Engagement and Awareness Creation

Beyond interpersonal and community contexts, stigma management communication also extended into the media space, where adoptive parents and their allies engaged in awareness creation. A notable example was the sharing of adoption stories on radio and television talk shows, particularly during initiatives such as National Adoption Month. These platforms allowed adoptive parents to narrate their personal journeys, countering myths and highlighting adoption as a legitimate and fulfilling way of building a family. Such media appearances reached wider audiences and contributed to normalizing adoption within public discourse.

"*We got to the media so many times to raise awareness about adoption and reduce stigmatisation. Hope FM has a talk show that runs throughout the whole of November empowering people about adoption and therefore anyone interested in sharing their stories on adoption is allowed to go. We do this through the help of adoption agencies and also the social groups on adoption. This is a good thing because the message goes out to so many people at the same time. Those with questions related to adoption can also call in and get feedback. Therefore, I feel like this has helped in reducing stigmatisation among the adoptive parents.* Participant 9

Another important channel was social media advocacy by parents, where adoptive families used platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups to share positive stories, post pictures, and correct misconceptions. Social media offered parents the flexibility to control their narratives, choosing how and when to disclose information while also engaging broader networks beyond their immediate communities. This not only built solidarity among adoptive families but also created opportunities for ongoing dialogue about adoption.

*"The existence of Facebook groups such as Adoption is Beautiful and WhatsApp groups by different adoption agencies have played a big role in reducing stigmatisation. In such groups, we are thought about identifying stigma and copying with it. We share that information with others and even community members, like for example if there is a message on reducing stigma, I just forward that to my contacts on WhatsApp, update that on my status or even post on my personal page. Furthermore, since I write a lot about adoption on my personal Facebook page, many people come to my inbox and seek further clarification and therefore, many people have adopted children through content that is shared on social media."* (Participant 4).

Additionally, some parents and child welfare advocates engaged in collaboration with journalists, partnering with media practitioners to highlight adoption-related issues in newspapers, radio programs, and online publications. Through such collaborations, adoption was presented not just as a personal decision but also as part of a broader conversation about child rights and social inclusion. Journalists played a key role in amplifying these voices, helping to challenge negative stereotypes and foster more informed public discussions.

*"We have people like Grace Wanunda who is the founder of the social group Adoption is Beautiful. She talks openly about adoption and even links with various journalists and media houses to raise awareness about adoption, which I feel like helps to reduce stigmatisation since the whole public is empowered. People like Caroline Mutoko, who is a journalist talking openly about how she adopted her children encourages more prospective adoptive parents to adopt and then the community also does not judge us since they now know that adoption is a normal process."* (Participant 12)

The findings suggest that media engagement is a powerful extension of stigma management communication. By entering public spaces through radio, television, social media, and journalistic collaborations, adoptive parents were able to reframe adoption as a socially valuable practice and challenge deep-rooted prejudices. These efforts illustrate how communication strategies move beyond private coping mechanisms to shape public awareness, contributing to the gradual reduction of stigma in Kiambu County and beyond.

## Discussion of the Key Findings

Objective 1: To investigate the communication-based sources and manifestations of stigma directed at adoptive parents in Kiambu County. The findings showed that stigma toward adoptive parents in Kiambu County is communicated through cultural narratives, gossip, and institutional interactions. The emphasis on bloodline and inheritance resonates with research by Stuckenbruck and Roby (2017), who observed that in Kenya adoption is often equated with infertility and is stigmatized as incompatible with cultural continuity. Similar observations have been made in

Uganda, where Njiru (2014) found that adoption is viewed with suspicion because it disrupts kinship-based identity.

These cultural scripts are further reinforced by gossip, labelling, and exclusionary communication practices, which parallel Iloka's (2020) findings in Nigeria, where mockery and social isolation were used to delegitimize adoptive families. Institutional stigma in schools, churches, and workplaces aligns with Brodzinsky's (2013) argument that structural communication (such as insensitive policies and language use) signals that adoption is "secondary." Linking to SMCT, such communicative practices illustrate how stigma is socially constructed and reinforced through everyday talk, labelling, and bureaucratic framing (Meisenbach, 2010).

Objective 2: To explore the stigma management communication strategies adoptive parents in Kiambu County use to navigate and respond to stigmatizing interactions. Adoptive parents in Kiambu County employed strategies such as concealment, disclosure, reframing, selective associations, and advocacy. These findings corroborate Snyder's (2014) USA - based study showing that parents who disclosed their adoption stories in forums and media faced less stigma than those who remained silent. The use of reframing and spiritual narratives resonates with Gatwiri (2021), who highlighted the role of faith in affirming adoptive identity in African contexts.

Advocacy through storytelling and awareness campaigns also mirrors Omondi's (2018) findings that adoption agencies in Kenya successfully reshape public attitudes through community outreach. SMCT explains these strategies as deliberate communication choices, avoidance and concealment minimize exposure to stigma,

while reframing, education, and advocacy directly counteract stereotypes and reshape community discourses (Rains, 2007; Meisenbach, 2010).

Objective 3: To evaluate the impact of stigma management communication on public perceptions and the reduction of adoptive parent stigmatization within interpersonal, community, and media contexts. The study showed that stigma management communication positively influenced interpersonal, community, and media perceptions.

At the interpersonal level, disclosure improved family acceptance, consistent with Fitzgerald et al.'s (2014) finding that openness reduces doubts about parental legitimacy. At the community level, public education and visibility of adoptive families mirror Munyua's (2016) South African study, which showed that awareness campaigns shift perceptions in urban contexts but need localized adaptation for rural settings. Media engagement by parents and advocacy groups aligns with Timofti's (2019) conclusion that positive media framing can normalize adoption and counter stereotypes.

In Kenya, Njiru (2014) also recommended community-specific campaigns using respected cultural leaders, reinforcing the idea that community-level communication is crucial for changing perceptions. SMCT underscores that these strategies not only empower adoptive parents individually but also transform the larger social environment by reframing adoption as legitimate and socially valuable.

## Summary of Key Findings

i. Cultural beliefs about bloodlines and inheritance strongly influence stigma, with adoptive children often framed as "outsiders" who threaten lineage continuity and property rights.

ii. Community gossip and labelling serve as powerful mechanisms of stigmatization, reducing adoptive parents' social acceptance and pushing them toward isolation.

iii. Institutional settings such as workplaces, churches, and schools reproduce stigma, as colleagues, religious leaders, and teachers communicate discriminatory attitudes that question the legitimacy of adoption.

iv. Adoptive parents actively resist stigma through communication strategies, including concealment, selective disclosure, reframing adoption as a blessing, and using spiritual or moral narratives to counter stereotypes.

v. Support networks and advocacy platforms provide critical spaces for resilience and empowerment, enabling adoptive parents to share coping strategies, mobilize collective voices, and influence policy discussions.

vi. Stigma management communication has measurable impacts across interpersonal, community, and media levels, leading to improved family acceptance, transformed community attitudes, reduced gossip, and greater visibility of adoption in public discourse

## Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and analyzed the interviews conducted in Kiambu County and discussed the objectives outlined in chapter one. The chapter also provided a summary of the key findings from the study. These findings generated important information on the role of Stigma Management Communication (SMC) in reducing stigmatization

among adoptive parents in Kiambu County. The next chapter of this study will share this researcher's conclusions and offer recommendations.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Introduction

This chapter offers the conclusion and recommendations of the study that can be used in designing advocacy materials on reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in Kiambu County. This study was guided by three (3) objectives:1) To investigate the communication-based sources and manifestations of stigma directed at adoptive parents in Kiambu County, 2) To explore the stigma management communication strategies adoptive parents in Kiambu County use to navigate and respond to stigmatizing interactions, and 3) To evaluate the impact of stigma management communication on public perceptions and the reduction of adoptive parent stigmatization within interpersonal, community, and media contexts.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrated that stigma is rooted in cultural narratives, social practices, and institutional communication that privilege biological lineage over adoptive ties. Communication around inheritance and naming practices, as well as gossip and labelling, reinforced the perception that adopted children are outsiders who do not fully belong to the family. Furthermore, institutions such as schools, churches, and workplaces often reproduced stigmatizing attitudes through insensitive remarks and exclusionary practices, thereby amplifying the experiences of discrimination faced by adoptive parents.

Despite these challenges, the study concluded that adoptive parents were not passive recipients of stigma. They actively employed stigma management

communication strategies to navigate hostile environments. Concealment and selective disclosure were used to manage when and how adoption status was shared, while reframing adoption as a blessing and highlighting the achievements of adopted children helped parents construct positive narratives that countered stigma. Support networks provided important safe spaces, while resistance and advocacy communication allowed parents to directly challenge misinformation and promote adoption awareness.

Finally, the study concluded that stigma management communication contributed to tangible changes in interpersonal, community, and media contexts. Disclosure and open dialogue improved family acceptance and peer respect, while everyday visibility of adoptive families in community life normalized adoption and reduced gossip. Engagement with the media further amplified positive narratives, reframing adoption as a legitimate and socially valuable family-building practice. Overall, the study concluded that while stigma persists, communication serves as a powerful tool for challenging stereotypes, fostering acceptance, and advancing adoption in Kiambu County.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made. First, there is need for community sensitization campaigns spearheaded by civil society organizations, adoption agencies, and government bodies to counter myths surrounding adoption. Such campaigns should emphasize that adoption is both legally recognized and socially valuable, thereby addressing misconceptions rooted in beliefs about bloodlines and inheritance.

Second, institutional reforms are critical in reducing stigmatization. Workplaces, schools, and churches should adopt inclusive policies that recognize

adoptive families on equal terms with biological ones. For instance, workplaces should grant parental leave to adoptive parents without discrimination, while teachers should avoid singling out children based on their adoptive status. Churches should be sensitized to embrace adoption as an act of compassion rather than framing it negatively in relation to barrenness or sin.

Third, the study recommends the strengthening of support networks for adoptive parents. Both physical and online groups provide opportunities for emotional reassurance, counselling, and collective advocacy, and these should be expanded and resourced. Finally, greater media engagement is essential. Journalists and media practitioners should be encouraged to highlight positive adoption stories, particularly during adoption-related events such as National Adoption Month, to counter stereotypes and foster public acceptance.

This study makes important contributions to the discipline of communication. It demonstrates that stigma is not merely a social perception but a communicative process enacted through words, gossip, tone, non-verbal cues, and institutional practices. By analyzing these communicative mechanisms, the study shows how stigma is produced, reproduced, and experienced in everyday life. It also highlights stigma management communication as a form of agency through which adoptive parents actively resist, negotiate, and reshape negative discourses.

## Contributions of the Study to Communication

This study makes important contributions to the discipline of communication. It demonstrates that stigma is not merely a social perception but a communicative process enacted through words, gossip, tone, non-verbal cues, and institutional practices. By analyzing these communicative mechanisms, the study shows how stigma is produced,

reproduced, and experienced in everyday life. It also highlights stigma management communication as a form of agency through which adoptive parents actively resist, negotiate, and reshape negative discourses.

The study further contributes to African communication knowledge by situating adoption stigma within the cultural context of Kiambu County. In doing so, it illustrates how localized beliefs about kinship, inheritance, and family continuity shape communicative practices that stigmatize adoptive parents. Finally, the study underscores the transformative role of communication in shaping social change. It shows that through disclosure, reframing, support networks, and advocacy, communication can alter interpersonal relationships, transform community attitudes, and reframe adoption in public discourse.

## Areas of Further Research

Although this study has provided valuable insights, it also opens up new avenues for further research. One important area involves exploring the perspectives of adopted children themselves. While this study focused on parents, future research could investigate how children experience stigma and the role communication plays in shaping their identity and sense of belonging.

Another area that requires attention is the long-term impact of stigma management communication. A longitudinal study could examine whether the strategies employed by adoptive parents lead to sustained changes in perceptions of adoption across generations. Comparative studies could also be carried out in other

counties in Kenya to assess how cultural and institutional dynamics differ across regions and whether stigma manifests in similar ways.

Additionally, more research is needed on the influence of media representation. While this study identified positive examples of advocacy through radio, television, and social media, a systematic analysis could provide deeper insights into how adoption is framed in the Kenyan media and how those frames shape public perceptions. Finally, future studies could focus on policy communication by examining how adoption laws, policies, and procedures are communicated to the public and how this affects the level of stigma directed toward adoptive parents.

## Chapter summary

This chapter presented the conclusions, recommendations, contributions, and areas of further research arising from the study on the role of stigma management communication in reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in Kiambu County.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix I: Informed Consent Form

Dear participant,

My name is **Bertha Khakasa Lutome,** a master's student in Communication, specializing in Development Communication at Daystar University. I am currently conducting a study in Kiambu County on the role of Stigma Management Communication in reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents. The objective of this study is to explore how adoptive parents can use communication to overcome stigma, advocate against it, and promote positive societal perceptions of adoption.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study through an in-depth interview, where we will discuss various aspects related to adoption and social stigma. Your insights and experiences will be invaluable in helping to combat stigma against adoptive parents, promote awareness, and encourage the community to embrace adoption as a normal and accepted practice.

The study is purely for academic purposes and will contribute to the fulfilment of my master's degree. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes, and I assure you that all responses will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. Your identity will remain anonymous throughout the research process.

I sincerely appreciate your time and support in this important study. Please let me know if you are willing to participate or if you have any questions.

**Bertha Khakasa Lutome**

**Master’s student, Daystar University**

**Email:** berthalutome233018@daystar.ac.ke

Consented by: _____

Sign: _____

Date: _____

Appendix II: Interview Guide

Thank you once again for agreeing to participate in this study. As mentioned earlier, this research focuses on the role of Stigma Management Communication in reducing stigmatization among adoptive parents in Kiambu County. Your insights and experiences will be invaluable in understanding how communication can be used to challenge stereotypes, foster acceptance, and create support systems for adoptive families.

Before we begin, please feel free to share as much or as little as you are comfortable with. Your responses will remain confidential, and your identity will be protected throughout the research process.

I will now ask you a few questions to begin our interview. If at any point you need clarification or a break, please let me know.

Interview Questions for Adoptive Parents

**Objective 1: To investigate the communication-based sources and manifestations of stigma directed at adoptive parents in Kiambu County.**

1. Can you describe any experiences where you felt judged or treated differently because you are an adoptive parent?
2. In what ways have people communicated (verbally or non-verbally) stigma toward you as an adoptive parent?
3. Where do you think most of the stigma or negative perceptions about adoption come from family, community, media, religious institutions, etc.?
4. How do conversations about adoption usually go when you're interacting with people in your community?
5. Have you noticed any difference in how people talk about biological vs. adoptive parenting? Can you give examples?

**Objective 2: To explore the stigma management communication strategies adoptive parents in Kiambu County use to navigate and respond to stigmatizing interactions.**

1. When someone says something negative or insensitive about adoption, how do you usually respond?
2. Are there specific ways you communicate to correct misconceptions or defend your role as an adoptive parent?
3. Do you choose to share or withhold certain information about the adoption? Why or why not?
4. Have you developed particular phrases or responses you use when discussing your adoptive family?
5. How do you prepare your child or family members to talk about adoption with others?

**Objective 3: To evaluate the impact of stigma management communication on public perceptions and the reduction of adoptive parent stigmatization within interpersonal, community, and media contexts.**

1. In your experience, has openly talking about adoption helped change people's attitudes? How so?
2. Can you share an example where your communication helped someone better understand or accept adoption?
3. Have you noticed any change in how your community or family talks about adoption over time?
4. Do you think more communication and awareness can reduce the stigma around adoption? Why or why not?
5. In your view, how can adoptive parents, the media, or community leaders use communication to shift public perception?

# Appendix III: Ethical Clearance

**VERDICT: APPROVED WITH COMMENTS**

Daystar University Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (DU-ISERC)

Our Ref: **DU-ISERC/28/08/2025/00366G**

Date: 28th August 2025

To: Bertha Khakasa Lutome

Dear Bertha

DAYSTAR UNIVERSITY
Excellence - Transformation - Servant-Leadership

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90145, Athi River, Kenya

**Valley Road Campus**
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Tel: 0709 972 000
0716 170 313
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0724 256 408/9

E-mail: admissions@daystar.ac.ke OR
info@daystar.ac.ke

Website: www.daystar.ac.ke

**EXPLORING THE ROLE OF STIGMA MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION IN REDUCING STIGMATIZATION OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS: A CASE OF KIAMBU COUNTY, KENYA**

Reference is made to your ISERC application reference **No. 180825-06** dated **18th August 2025** in which you requested ethical approval of your proposal by Daystar University Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (DU-ISERC).

We are pleased to inform you that ethical review has been done and the verdict is **Revise to the satisfaction of supervisors then proceed to the next stage.** As guidance, ensure that the attached comments are addressed. Please be advised that it is an offence to proceed to collect data without addressing the concerns of DU- ISERC. Your application approval number is **DU-ISERC-2025/00366G.** The approval period for the research is **between 28th August 2025 to 27th August 2026** after which the ethical approval lapses. Should you wish to continue with the research after the lapse you will be required to apply for an extension from DU-ISERC at half the review charges.
This approval is subject to compliance with the following requirements:

- Only approved documents including (informed consents, study instruments, MTA) will be used.
- All changes including (amendments, deviations, and violations) are submitted for review and approval by Daystar University ISERC.
- Death and life-threatening problems and serious adverse events or unexpected adverse events whether related or unrelated to the study must be reported to Daystar University ISERC within 72 hours of notification.
- Any changes anticipated or otherwise that may increase the risks or affect the safety or welfare of study participants and others or affect the integrity of the research must be reported to Daystar University ISERC within 72 hours.
- Clearance for export of biological specimens must be obtained from relevant institutions.
- Submission of a request for renewal of approval at least 60 days prior to expiry of the approval period. Attach a comprehensive progress report to support the renewal.
- Submission of a signed one-page executive summary report and a closure report within 90 days upon completion of the study to Daystar University DU- ISERC via email [duiserc@daystar.ac.ke].

**Prior to commencing your study, you will be expected to obtain a research license from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) https://oris.nacosti.go.ke and other clearances needed.**
Yours sincerely

Dr. Roseline Olumbe, PhD
Chair, Daystar University Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee
Encl. Review Report

*"...until the day dawn and the* ***daystar*** *arise in your hearts"*
***2 Peter 1.19 KJV***

# Appendix IV: Research Permit

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Ref No: **573193**

Date of Issue: **12/September/2025**

## RESEARCH LICENSE

**This is to Certify that Ms.. Bertha Khakasa Lutome of Daystar University, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Kiambu on the topic: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF STIGMA MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION IN REDUCING STIGMATIZATION OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS: A CASE OF KIAMBU COUNTY, KENYA. for the period ending : 12/September/2026.**

License No: **NACOSTI/P/25/4179470**

**573193**

Applicant Identification Number

Ag. Director General
NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Verification QR Code

NOTE: This is a computer generated License. To verify the authenticity of this document, Scan the QR Code using QR scanner application.

**See overleaf for conditions**

Appendix V: Similarity Index Report