Performance-Based Branding and Public Trust in Kenya: Divergent Paths to Credibility

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between performance-based branding and public trust in Kenya. It compares the trust created by the branding activities of political leaders and that of government institutions, such as the judiciary or the police. Specifically, it tests whether the visual actions used by these parties—such as managing the economy, creating jobs, building roads, and providing healthcare—successfully build trust in political leaders and public institutions. The study analyzes survey data from Afrobarometer Round 10 (2024) across a sample of 2,400 Kenyan citizens, using multivariate regression to test the hypotheses. The findings reveal that public trust in Kenya is critically low and deeply divided. Performance branding has a statistically significant relationship with public trust ($p < .001$), led strongly by economic performance (Partial $\eta^2 = .043$). Crucially, trust follows two completely different paths. Trust in individual leaders ($R2= 9.8\%$) changes quickly and operates through a transactional lens; politicians can easily buy personal popularity using quick, visible projects like job creation and roads. Conversely, trust in institutions ($R2 = 6.8\%$) is much harder to change quickly and remains insulated from short-term fixes, relying instead on long-term honesty, a good historical reputation, and fair rules. Theoretically, the study proves that performance legitimacy follows a strict hierarchy of needs, where citizens prioritize immediate economic survival over broad civic satisfaction. In terms of policy, the government must prioritize economic stabilization over secondary agendas and mandate local labor for state projects. Furthermore, government communication must shift away from promoting individual politicians toward highlighting permanent institutional structures. Finally, deep structural reforms must be institutionalized within organs like the National Police Service, the Judiciary, and the IEBC to ensure fair rules and eliminate the abuse of power.

Keywords: Political Branding, Governance Legitimacy, Performance-Based Branding, Government Performance, Afrobarometer Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Performance-based branding is a strategic approach used by political leaders and public institutions to build public trust (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). In this study, leadership and institutions are collectively defined as governance systems. Trust in institutions refers to public confidence in the key government bodies responsible for implementing the government's agenda, including political parties, national and county assemblies, and ministries. Trust in leadership refers to confidence in elected officials such as the president, members of parliament, members of county assemblies, and governors (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). Similar to consumer brands that cultivate loyalty through consistent and visible product performance, governance actors, whether elected leaders or bureaucratic agencies, build their reputations by aligning themselves with tangible development outcomes to secure public approval and reelection (Kim & Lee, 2022). Within this framework, governance is evaluated not by rhetoric or ideology but by its ability to deliver measurable results in critical areas such as healthcare, infrastructure, and economic reform (Bouckaert et al., 2021).

Government systems employ various strategies to showcase their achievements. One of the most prominent approaches involves high-profile project launches and commissioning ceremonies. Senior government officials, including presidents, governors, and cabinet secretaries, use these events as platforms to celebrate completed development projects, such as roads, hospitals, schools, and water systems (Hope, 2020). These projects are often marked with signage displaying the name of the implementing institution, the cost of the project, and in some cases, the image or name of the political leader associated with the initiative. This form of visual branding reinforces the connection between public services and the individuals or agencies that deliver them.

Press releases, news bulletins, and paid media features were also used to highlight key milestones. Digital platforms, such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube, provide channels for sharing real-time updates, showcasing project progress and directly engaging the public (Nakatudde & Kiyaga, 2023). Public exhibitions held during national celebrations such as Madaraka Day, Jamhuri Day, and Public Service Week offer ministries and agencies opportunities to present their achievements to citizens. Additionally, institutions produce annual performance reports, strategic plans, and midterm reviews that document their accomplishments, challenges, and future goals. Budget speeches, along with the State of the Nation and county addresses by the president and governors, also serve as key moments for communicating institutional performance and overall development progress.

Despite the government's adoption of performance-based branding, public trust in Kenya's institutions and leadership remains low. According to the Afrobarometer Round 10 data, only 47% of citizens express confidence in key public bodies, while religious leaders (72%) and the military (66%) enjoy significantly higher levels of trust (Afrobarometer, 2024). Governance institutions such as courts (44%), police (34%), presidency (52%), parliament (45%), and political parties (32%) continue to lag. Trust is somewhat higher at the county level, where 59% of citizens trust governors and 51% trust county assemblies, which suggests stronger local connections, particularly in rural areas. However, perceptions of widespread corruption continue to erode institutional legitimacy (Transparency International, 2023). Overall, the fragility of institutional trust in Kenya underscores the ongoing challenges related to transparency, accountability, and effective governance.

Therefore, this study examines the relationship between performance-based branding and public trust in Kenya. The study is grounded in performance-based legitimacy theory, which posits that public trust in governance is earned through the effective delivery of services and development outcomes rather than through ideology, tradition, or identity (Gilley, 2006). This study aims to determine whether performance-based branding builds trust among Kenyan citizens.

The data for the study were drawn from Afrobarometer Round 10, which offers nationally representative survey data on public attitudes toward democracy, governance, and public service delivery. Multivariate regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between performance-based branding variables and the level of public trust. This study tested the following hypotheses:

H_{01}: There is no significant difference between trust in leadership and trust in institutions in Kenya.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between performance-based branding and public trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Performance-Based Branding and Trust in Leadership

Performance-based branding has become a core strategy through which political leaders cultivate and maintain public trust. By associating leadership with the delivery of tangible outcomes in sectors such as infrastructure, economic development, and healthcare, leaders seek to present themselves as effective, responsive, and visionary. Scholars such as Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) argue that leaders deploy performance signals including launch of flagship projects or the achievement of national goals as strategic branding tools to position themselves as competent stewards of public resources. In Africa, presidential and gubernatorial figures frequently align their identities with those of high-impact infrastructure projects. Kenya, for example, associates itself with projects such as expressways, digital infrastructure, and housing initiatives. These associations function as political signals of credibility and capabilities.

Hope (2020) also observed that when citizens observed the completion of projects linked to campaign promises, their perceptions of trustworthiness and results-oriented leadership were strengthened. Likewise, Kim and Lee (2022) noted that the publication of economic performance data, such as gross domestic product growth or employment statistics tied to the specific actions of leaders, enhanced trust, particularly during periods of crisis recovery. Studies have shown that leaders who emphasize fiscal responsibility and economic stabilization tend to regain or maintain public confidence.

Health-sector branding has also proven to be influential. Therefore, leaders who associate themselves with improvements in public health through initiatives such as vaccination campaigns, hospital construction, and maternal care, enhance their legitimacy. This is consistent with findings by Nzinga, McGivern, and English (2013), who observed that visible, credible leadership in Kenya's health system strengthened both institutional performance and public trust. Nakatudde and Kiyaga (2023) found that clearly communicating public health gains as outcomes of executive action results in more favorable evaluations of leadership. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that performance-based branding strengthens trust in leadership by linking political identity to measurable service delivery, thereby enabling citizens to assess leaders based on tangible achievements rather than abstract rhetoric.

Performance-Based Branding and Trust in Institutions

Performance-based branding plays a critical role in enhancing trust in public institutions. Public confidence increases when institutions are perceived as effective, responsive, and aligned with their mandates. Christensen and Lægreid (2020) argue that institutional trust grows when there is visible alignment between stated objectives and actual service delivery. In governance systems in which ministries and state agencies actively highlight their performance through the implementation of education, infrastructure, and health programs, branding contributes directly to institutional trust.

Studies have shown that institutional branding is primarily anchored in infrastructure delivery. Esfahani and Ramírez (2020) suggest that agencies involved in timely and transparent infrastructure implementation are often perceived as reliable and professional. For example, in Kenya, institutions such as the National Housing Corporation and the Kenya Urban Roads Authority utilize performance branding through social media updates, project signage, and community engagement strategies. These efforts highlight institutional visibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness. Similar branding approaches have been shown to strengthen trust in African institutions when purpose-driven leadership is consistently communicated (de Villiers & van Staden, 2023).

Public health institutions also benefit from performance branding. Public trust increases when health facilities expand their services or improve capacity, particularly when these outcomes are clearly attributed to the health ministry or devolved county health departments. Fitzgerald, Kabiru, and Tumilowicz (2019) stress that such visible leadership and capacity-building efforts in health institutions directly contribute to perceptions of institutional competence and reliability. Bouckaert et al. (2021) emphasize that consistent branding and positive service experiences, especially in sectors that affect daily life, significantly shape perceptions of institutional trust. These findings support the argument that performance-based branding enhances trust in institutions by demonstrating competence, ensuring continuity and delivering public value through observable results.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted data from Afrobarometer's 2024 survey (Round-10). The study is cross-sectional in nature, and data from 2400 members of the public across Kenya were collected. Similar data were also collected from 40 African countries. In Kenya, the data were collected from regional institutions. The survey captured representative data on democratic, governance, economic, and social attitudes, with strong comparability across time and countries.

The Afrobarometer employed a stratified, multistage, clustered area probability sample that included adult Kenyan citizens above the age of 18. Stratification was done by subnational units and urban–rural residences. Enumeration areas (Primary Sampling Units) were selected using a probability proportional to the population size, with eight households randomly selected per cluster. Within each household, one respondent was purposefully alternated by gender to ensure gender balance; male and female interviews were rotated sequentially. The sample comprised 2,400 respondents, offering national representativeness and a margin of error of approximately 2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Face-to-face interviews were also implemented. They were conducted based on the respondents' choice of language. The interviewers used electronic tablets and underwent rigorous training, including protocol adherence, sampling procedures, multilingual questionnaire delivery, and ethical standards. Supervisors monitored the quality of the interviews in the field. The standardized questionnaire, developed by the Afrobarometer's Questionnaire Committee comprised an interviewer-administered household and consent introduction, core attitudinal and demographic items (roughly Q1–Q100), and contextual and fieldworker details (Q101–Q123).

A detailed codebook outlining the variable coding was created. A universal Survey Manual complements these codebooks by providing standardized guidance on survey structure, field protocols, and data management instructions. Data were made available as open-access files in formats such as SPSS (.sav), with metadata identifiers such as DDI IDs included to support traceability.

The data analysis used a combination of descriptive statistics, multivariate regression, and multivariate significance tests to examine how citizens' perceptions of government performance predicted trust in Kenya's leadership and institutions. Multivariate significance tests, including Wilks' lambda and Pillai's trace, were used to confirm the robustness of the effects at the 0.05 significance level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to describe the level of trust within the public regarding leadership and institutions. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Trust in leadership and institutions in Kenya

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Trust in Leadership	1.5082	1.01712	2400
Trust in Institutions	1.4831	1.17241	2400

Respondents reported a mean score of 1.51 (SD = 1.02) for trust in individual leadership, while trust in institutional structures was slightly lower at 1.48 (SD = 1.17). The relatively high standard deviations, particularly regarding institutions, reflect a notable dispersion in public opinion, highlighting polarized views among the 2,400 participants. These findings reveal a profound trust deficit within the Kenyan public. Rather than reflecting a "moderate" level of confidence, these low mean scores signify deep-seated public skepticism toward both individual political actors and the systemic structures governing the nation. This erosion of faith implies a systemic challenge; public disillusionment extends beyond transient figures in political office to contaminate the perceived integrity of the foundational institutions that support democratic governance. Furthermore, the findings prove the assertions of performance-based legitimacy theory: when citizens routinely experience macro-level governance failures—such as structural corruption, inequitable resource distribution, and the politicization of state agencies—the performance-based legitimacy of the state collapses. In Kenya's contemporary political economy, these findings reflect deep-rooted socio-political divisions. The higher variance of SD = 1.17 in institutional trust underscores a highly fragmented populace, likely polarized along ethnic, regional, or socioeconomic lines. Historically, key Kenyan institutions—such as the Judiciary, the National Police Service, and electoral management bodies—have suffered from perceptions of executive overreach and partisan capture. The data confirm that these historical grievances continue to yield a severe legacy of distrust. This institutional skepticism poses a direct threat to national cohesion, as democratic consolidation relies on the public's belief that state structures operate above partisan interests.

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Comparative Analysis of Trust in Leadership and Institutions

Tests between-subject's effects were used to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between trust in leadership and trust in institutions. This hypothesis was framed as follows:

H_o1: There is no significant difference between trust in leadership and trust in institutions in Kenya.

The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Difference between trust in leadership and trust in institutions in Kenya

Source	Dependent Variable	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	Trust in Leadership	95.112	101.81	.000	.041
	Trust in Institutions	119.461	93.054	.000	.037
Economy	Trust in Leadership	71.055	76.061	.000	.031
	Trust in Institutions	102.051	79.492	.000	.032
Job creation	Trust in Leadership	35.356	37.847	.000	.016
	Trust in Institutions	25.196	19.626	.000	.008
Health services	Trust in Leadership	8.811	9.432	.002	.004
	Trust in Institutions	5.286	4.118	.043	.002
Infrastructure	Trust in Leadership	19.497	20.871	.000	.009
	Trust in Institutions	3.710	2.890	.089	.001

The overall predictive model accounted for a higher proportion of the variance in trust in leadership ($R^2 = 9.8\%$) than in trust in institutions ($R^2 = 6.8\%$). Economic management emerged as the most potent and consistent predictor across both models, yielding a significant effect on leadership trust (Partial $\eta^2 = .031$, $p < .001$) and institutional trust (Partial $\eta^2 = .032$, $p < .001$). Crucially, the remaining performance indicators demonstrated asymmetric effects between the two dependent variables. Job creation exerted a more pronounced effect on trust in leadership (Partial $\eta^2 = .016$, $p < .001$) relative to institutions (Partial $\eta^2 = .008$, $p < .001$). Infrastructure development significantly predicted trust in leadership (Partial $\eta^2 = .009$, $p < .001$) but failed to reach statistical significance for institutional (Partial η^2 2 = .001, $p = .089$). Finally, while health services maintained a statistically significant relationship with both variables, it exhibited the weakest overall predictive power (Partial $\eta^2 = .004$) for leadership; (Partial $\eta^2 = .002$) for institutions). These divergent predictive pathways led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, confirming that trust in leadership and trust in institutions are distinct constructs governed by different operational inputs.

The rejection of the null hypothesis confirms a fundamental distinction in how the Kenyan public evaluates political actors versus state structures. This show that trust is not a monolithic construct; rather, citizens apply highly asymmetric cognitive evaluations when assessing individuals compared to institutions. Because the independent variables explained a larger share of variance in leadership trust ($R^2 = 9.8\%$), it is evident that perceptions of individual political leaders are far more sensitive to immediate, high-visibility performance metrics than the institutions they inhabit.

These findings refine the nuances of performance-based legitimacy by demonstrating that state confidence in Kenya is highly transaction-driven. Public trust in political leadership operates through a transactional lens, making authority volatile and directly dependent on immediate macroeconomic outcomes like job creation and economic stability. Conversely, the weaker impact of these variables on institutional trust suggests that systemic structures operate under a different legitimizing logic. Rather than fluctuating with short-term policy outputs, institutional trust appears insulated, relying instead on structural, procedural, or historically entrenched factors that evolve slowly over time. Within Kenya's political economy, a culture of "extravagant branding" drives a,

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key governance challenge, wherein heavily politicized mega-infrastructure projects are viewed as personal achievements of leaders rather than institutional, outputs. The weak impact of health services on public trust highlights disillusionment with public service delivery, as persistent systemic challenges cause citizens to decouple basic healthcare provision from national state legitimacy.

Hypothesis Testing for Predictors of Public Trust

Multivariate regression analysis was used to assess citizens' effects on public trust in leadership and institutions. This hypothesis was framed as follows:

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between performance-based branding and public trust.

Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Test of significance

Effect		Value	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power[c]
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.053	67.557[b]	.000	.053	1.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.947	67.557[b]	.000	.053	1.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.056	67.557[b]	.000	.053	1.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.056	67.557[b]	.000	.053	1.000
Economy	Pillai's Trace	.043	53.895[b]	.000	.043	1.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.957	53.895[b]	.000	.043	1.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.045	53.895[b]	.000	.043	1.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.045	53.895[b]	.000	.043	1.000
Job creation	Pillai's Trace	.017	20.725[b]	.000	.017	1.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.983	20.725[b]	.000	.017	1.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.017	20.725[b]	.000	.017	1.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.017	20.725[b]	.000	.017	1.000
Health services	Pillai's Trace	.004	4.992[b]	.007	.004	.814
	Wilks' Lambda	.996	4.992[b]	.007	.004	.814
	Hotelling's Trace	.004	4.992[b]	.007	.004	.814
	Roy's Largest Root	.004	4.992[b]	.007	.004	.814
Infrastructure	Pillai's Trace	.009	10.496[b]	.000	.009	.989
	Wilks' Lambda	.991	10.496[b]	.000	.009	.989
	Hotelling's Trace	.009	10.496[b]	.000	.009	.989
	Roy's Largest Root	.009	10.496[b]	.000	.009	.989

The multivariate tests revealed that all four performance-based branding indicators had a statistically significant combined effect on public trust. Economic performance emerged as the strongest predictor of public trust (Wilks' Lambda = .957, F = 53.895, p < .001, Partial Eta Squared = .043, Power = 1.000), followed by job creation (Wilks' Lambda = .983, F = 20.725, p < .001, Partial Eta Squared = .017, Power = 1.000) and infrastructure development (Wilks' Lambda = .991, F = 10.496, p < .001, Partial Eta Squared = .009, Power = .989). Health services had the smallest, though still statistically significant, impact on the combined trust variables (Wilks'

Lambda = .996, F = 4.992, p = .007, Partial Eta Squared = .004, Power = .814). Because all tests demonstrated strong statistical significance and high observed power, the null hypothesis (H02) was rejected, confirming a statistically significant relationship between performance-based branding and public trust.

The rejection of the null hypothesis proves that public trust is not random; instead, it is directly shaped by how citizens perceive government performance. However, the wide differences in effect sizes show that the public does not value all government activities equally. Instead, citizens prioritize clear, survival-based economic realities over broader public services when deciding whether to trust their leaders and institutions. These results support performance-based legitimacy theory but reveal a strict hierarchy of needs. In a developing economy like Kenya, state legitimacy is driven by immediate financial survival rather than general public service delivery. Economic management and job creation influence public trust much more than long-term infrastructure or healthcare. When the macro-economy fails, state legitimacy drops, even if roads or clinics are being built.

Amid high inflation, a rising cost of living, and youth unemployment, financial survival is the primary lens through which Kenyans judge their government. Visible infrastructure projects are secondary if they do not lower daily living costs or create permanent jobs. Similarly, healthcare improvements alone cannot salvage public trust during extreme economic hardship. For Kenyan policymakers, trust-building strategies must prioritize stable economic management and employment, as investments in other sectors will fail without a solid economic foundation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the empirical findings of this study, the following conclusions are presented:

1. Trust Deficit and Public Polarization: Public trust in Kenya is very low and deeply divided. Citizens hold completely different views on whether government systems are fair and reliable. These divisions are likely split along ethnic, regional, or income lines.

2. Trust is Fragmented, Asymmetric, and Not Monolithic: Kenyans do not judge political leaders and state institutions by the same standards. Trust in a specific leader changes quickly based on recent, highly visible projects. For example, politicians can easily gain personal popularity by launching quick, visible projects. However, trusting an entire institution is harder to change quickly. Institutional trust depends on long-term honesty, a good historical reputation, and fair rules.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study offer three main contributions to the theory of performance-based legitimacy. First, the study reveals that performance legitimacy follows a strict hierarchy of needs, meaning citizens prioritize basic needs before caring about secondary government actions. Second, the results show that the relationship between citizens and the state is highly transactional rather than a broad, general social contract; citizens expect direct, specific returns for their support. Finally, the study proves that large-scale infrastructure projects have limited power to force public compliance, showing that big government projects alone cannot guarantee state legitimacy.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study provide critical policy directions for the national government, county governments, and state agencies in Kenya:

- Fixing Government Priorities: Public trust depends directly on the economy. Therefore, the government must fix immediate money and economic problems before focusing on other political plans.

- Changing Infrastructure Policies: Large, visible construction projects do not build deep public trust unless they directly increase how much money families earn. Because of this, the government must pass laws that force state projects to hire local workers and use local materials.
- Improving Government Communication: Trust in individual leaders changes quickly, but trust in public institutions is much harder to change. Government public relations should stop focusing on promoting individual politicians and instead highlight the permanent, lasting parts of the government.
- Fixing Deep Problems in Main Institutions: Quick fixes cannot build institutional trust. Government leaders must make deep, permanent changes within public bodies like the National Police Service, the Judiciary, and the IEBC to ensure fair rules and stop leaders from abusing their power.

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