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Tiktok and the Rise of Protest Music in Digital Activism in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of TikTok in the revitalisation of protest music. Anchored on Digital Mobilisation Theory, the study explores how the platform facilitates virality, digital mobilisation, and activism among Generation Z (Gen Z), examining the intersection of social media, music, and political engagement to amplify protest messages. This study utilised a qualitative research design, utilising online interviews administered through Google Forms among TikTok users, predominantly from Generation Z (Gen Z). Data analysis involves content analysis. It also incorporated a content analysis of viral protest music, trending hashtags, and associated user engagement metrics. Research findings show that TikTok has emerged as a significant tool for political engagement, particularly among Gen Z, through the combination of entertainment with political activism. The ability of TikTok to amplify dissenting voices and accelerate widespread digital mobilisation continues to reshape traditional methods of activism. There is a need, however, to understand how TikTok's unique features, algorithms and curation contribute to its growing role in promoting activism and the dissemination of protest music.

Key words: Digital activism, digital platforms, protest music, social media, TikTok.



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INTRODUCTION

The Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, Black Lives Matter, Gen Z-led protests across many countries, including Kenya, and numerous other movements fighting social injustices have all used music to amplify dissenting voices. Music, besides its artistic role, is a powerful mobilisation tool against social injustice. The Civil Rights Movement's song, *We Shall Overcome*, turned into a protesters' anthem to symbolise defiance, resilience and hope, while Kenya's Gen Z protesters adopted *Reject the Bill* as their rallying song against the 2024 Finance Bill (Kirui, 2025a). Activists sang these songs to express dissent, unite protesters, and strengthen their connection to the cause, thus recording significant successes. This spirit of solidarity, most of the time, translated into a tangible success as recently witnessed during the Gen Z-led protest in Kenya, where the government had no choice but to drop the contentious 2024 Finance Bill.

The protest song *Reject the Bill* amplified under the hashtag *#RejectFinanceBill2024* went viral on most social media platforms, and especially on TikTok, X and Instagram, leading to widespread resistance that would eventually force the government to withdraw the bill (Maina, 2025). At first, the Kenyan government paid little attention to the online demonstrations. However, when the demonstrations broke into the streets, eventually leading to overrunning the Parliament, the government had to bow down to the pressure. Social media played a key role in ensuring that this bill was dropped (Kirui, 2025b).

In the wake of digital disruptions, online protests are becoming the norm, serving as a tool for standing against social injustices. Social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter) and TikTok, focus mainly on the creation of an online community. Chang et al. (2021) noted that Instagram played an essential role in facilitating the online movement of the Black Lives Matter protests, with non-institutional opinion leaders like meme groups, independent journalists, and fashion magazines emerging. Thus, the development of online communities has the capability to rally

equivalent or even larger crowds than a physical community.

The Kenyan online community, led by Gen Z, for instance, attracted millions of participants under the hashtag *#RejectFinanceBill2024*. X, TikTok and Instagram are proving themselves to be the dominating platforms; however, TikTok seem to be taking the lead due to its quick development and distinctive features such as the notion of short-form videos, virality, and strong user-generated content possibilities. According to Buchholz (2023), "TikTok's share is already comprising 26 per cent of the market, far ahead of Instagram's 14 per cent" (p. 1).

The statistics in Figure 1 show the app revenue share from Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok across the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. These figures provide insights into the market distribution of app revenues in these key regions. Stahl and Literat (2023) while exploring how Gen Z constructs, narrates, and projects itself in real-time on TikTok noted that "videos (and images) can be soundtracked with a vast selection of music and recorded sounds, and span a wide spectrum in terms of genre, with comedy, music/dance, and lifestyle videos being particularly popular on the platform" (p. 929).

The focus of TikTok is not necessarily on the users, but as an entertainment entity, which has given it an edge over other social platforms. Jain and Hussenet (2022) alluded that "with TikTok's mission revolving around quality entertainment for users, it has developed a powerful algorithm that has left its competitors, such as Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, in the dust" (p. 2). Once you log in to TikTok, an algorithm generates similar content while avoiding opposing views, enhancing user interaction. According to Jain and Hussenet (2022), "once identifying a user's interests, TikTok's algorithm focuses on maximising content watch time, with 95 per cent of displayed content being carefully chosen by TikTok's algorithm and user search history" (p. 3, respectively).

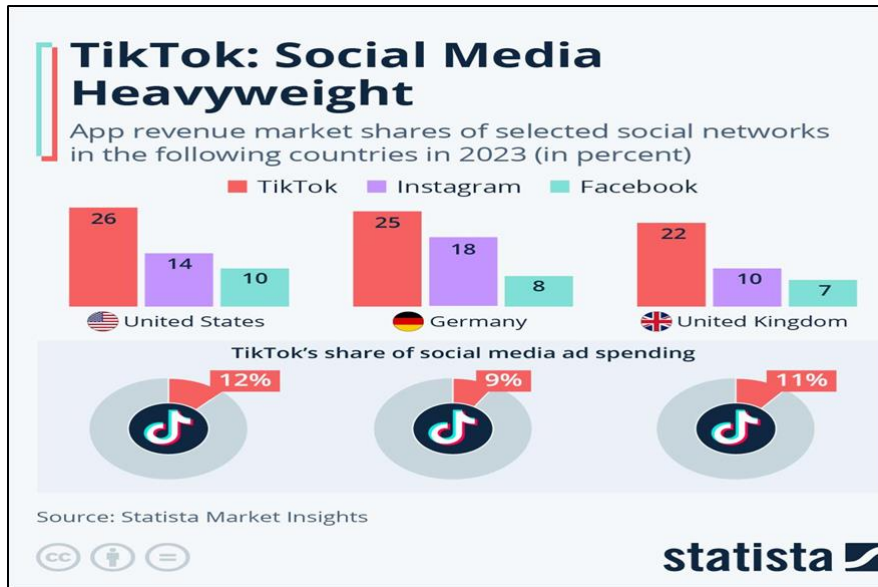


Figure 2: Social Media Revenue Distribution in 2023 in three regions

TikTok also promotes user-generated content by allowing individuals to create and share videos, which strengthens dissident voices. Quick and Maddox (2024) alluded that “platform-specific features and how users understand, deploy, alter, and resist them are essential for understanding political expression and its implications” (p. 2). This enables individuals to become activists, influencing arguments and forming online communities that encourage collective action.

Virality, as defined by Denisova (2020), is a text or a message that “spreads widely in a matter of seconds, minutes or hours in the realm of social networks and other connected platforms” (p. 1). Virality is thus strongly supported by social platforms, allowing information to spread faster and reach a larger audience in real time.

This swift dissemination of messages empowers marginalised voices, raises awareness of critical issues, leading to the sustaining of the protesters’ momentum, making digital media effective catalysts for activism (Kirui, 2025a). The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore the role of TikTok in the rise of protest music, focusing on how the platform facilitates virality, digital mobilisation and activism, particularly among younger generations. It examines the intersection of social media, music, and political engagement, and how TikTok amplifies protest messages and fosters activism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TikTok as a Platform for Digital Activism

TikTok, a platform created by the Chinese business ByteDance, debuted in 2016 as Douyin and was later rebranded. The creators would subsequently merge it with Musical.ly with the goal of expanding its worldwide reach. This would come to pass as TikTok currently is the most popular among the younger generation, the Gen Z. According to Statista (2023), TikTok consumption is on the increase, with the app “popular among younger generations for its short-form video content, usage has soared in recent years in countries across the globe” (p. 1).

One of the key strategies TikTok has adopted, as Wu (2021) notes, is the “localising operations”, especially when managing the overseas market. This included customising the App to each region and using TikTok as a backchannel. This is consistent with Abbas et al. (2022), who alluded that “TikTok has had a major impact on youth as they use the freedom of this platform to express their point of view, using the application as a backchannel.

Wu (2021) notes that “TikTok explores its local cultural characteristics and develops different online activities and challenges suitable for local users (p. 27). The other strategy TikTok is “leveraging the existing platform with overlapping user groups to eliminate the gap between it and the user group” thereby acting as a channel for advertising across various sectors. Several companies have come into

partnership with TikTok, especially in advertising their products. This has become the primary revenue stream for TikTok.

According to Wu (2021), TikTok offers seven types of advertising services: brand takeovers, in-feed video ads, banner ads, search ads, branded hashtag challenge, and influencer marketing. Activists have used sponsored ad tactics, such as branded hashtags and influencers, to continue their fight for social equality, making it easier for their content to go viral—TikTok's ultimate objective. This study seeks to advance the discussion on TikTok's role in facilitating virality, digital mobilisation, and activism, particularly among Gen Z and how the platform catalyses the rise of protest music.

Protest Music and Political Engagement

Protest music has long been a powerful force in driving social and political change (Kirui, 2025a), serving as a unifying voice for communities advocating for justice and reform. With the development of social media platforms, the mobilisation and protest have increasingly moved to online spaces. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) alluded that “TikTok is a vibrant space for youth activism and political engagement because it invites young people to share their views in ways that are appealing to them, that help them connect to peers, and that are deeply anchored in their interests and their cultural lives” (p. 2). Youth have historically spearheaded social movements using protest music, ranging from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter, anti-apartheid protests, and those led by Gen Z.

Today, platforms like TikTok, as noted by Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023), continue this tradition, with over 80 per cent of its global content creators under 25, fostering youthful engagement in social activism through music. Protest music continues to play a key role in amplifying the voices of marginalised individuals and rallying collective action, especially in digital spaces. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) see platforms like TikTok as having made it possible for protest songs to reach global audiences almost instantly, transcending geographical boundaries. Protest music has a great ability to evoke emotions, articulate grievances, and inspire solidarity, making it a potent tool for political engagement. The integration of protest music with

digital platforms has enhanced its reach, allowing it to inspire activism in ways traditional mediums could not. Whether addressing racial inequality, climate change, or economic injustice, protest music remains a timeless and adaptive form of cultural resistance, bridging the historical with the contemporary and reminding societies of the enduring power of art as a catalyst for change.

User Engagement on TikTok

User engagement on TikTok is paramount to the success of protest songs. The platform's interactivity in the guise of likes, comments, and shares increases political dialogue and promotes collective action. These features enhance content visibility (Zhou, 2024) and offer a participatory space where users contribute to driving the virality of protest music. According to Zhou (2024), when users start to like a video, TikTok's algorithm prioritises it on the 'For You' page, exposing it to a larger audience. Zhou (2024) notes that the "algorithm considers various factors, including user interactions (likes, shares, comments), content characteristics (hashtags, captions), and device and account settings to curate the 'For You' page.

When users comment on short videos that have been uploaded on TikTok, they increase political discourse more because the users are supporting the cause by introducing their own experience into the equation, or debating the issues being raised in the protest song. Zakharov (2024), like the previous scholars, suggests that with this kind of engagement, there is an interactive dialogue that increases the effect of the song and its applicability to wider political movements.

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dialogue that strengthens the song's impact and its connection to broader political movements.

Zakharov alluded that the "connective action through continuous exchange and engagement with an online community has an impact on the popularisation of protests, especially in contexts with a censored media environment" (p. 12). Sharing, perhaps the most influential feature, allows users to spread protest music across TikTok and other platforms, including Instagram, X, and WhatsApp, thereby extending its reach beyond the platform itself. Zakharov, while referring to the TikTok platform, noted that a "free space for expressing oneself and sharing live updates, pictures, and videos allowed people to make new connections, thus making the decision to join the offline protest easier" (p. 4).

The branded hashtags that are related to protest songs, such as #BlackLivesMatter or #RejectTheBill, also rely on user engagement. Individuals create, remix, or duet over content bearing these hashtags, providing an extended play and keeping the song in the online conversation. Furthermore, TikTok's stitch and duet features enable users to respond to protest songs by adding their voice, opinion, or creative spin, making the content participatory in nature. This direct interaction makes the users go from passive consumers to co-producers of political discourse.

The platform's virality potential, powered by such interaction, translates to protest music going viral in a matter of hours, sparking conversations and mobilising communities at the opportune time. During Kenya's Gen Z-led protests against the 2024 Finance Bill, the song 'Reject the Bill' became the movement's rallying anthem after being shared widely by TikTok users. This bottom-up mobilisation of protest music illustrates TikTok's unique role as an online space in which activism and music intersect and thus can be a powerful tool for political mobilisation and social change. Ultimately, the interactivity of TikTok democratises political message sharing, enabling protest music to organise and mobilise a worldwide base.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Digital Mobilisation Theory (DMT). DMT provides a framework for understanding how digital platforms could transform traditional activism into interactive and participatory

movements. This theory is particularly relevant in analysing the role of TikTok in protest music and digital activism by stressing the current shift from conventional methods to these online campaigns.

Key insights include the multidimensional nature of online protest mobilisation, such as the use of religious discourse in Morocco to articulate protest claims (Hadi et al., 2024), the power of visual media in enhancing audience engagement during the initial stages of protests (Lu & Peng, 2024), and the effectiveness of social media in mobilising offline actions in autocratic states such as Iran (Kadivar et al., 2024). Additionally, digital networks have been crucial for LGBTQ communities in repressive countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey (Acconcia et al., 2024), indigenous movements in Latin America and Southern Africa (Lupien et al., 2024; Foyet & Child, 2024), and Social Movement Organisations (SMOs) in promoting broader social change by influencing businesses and achieving collaboration agreements.

The objectives of this study are aligned with DMT, specifically how TikTok facilitates digital mobilisation by the virality of protest music, engaging with Gen Z, and giving a voice to the voices of dissent. DMT emphasises that social media platforms such as TikTok are not simply arenas for amusement but are instead successful instruments for political engagement, as they enable individuals to work around the traditional gatekeepers of activism, such as political organisations or mass media. In Kenya, for instance, the trending hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024, #OccupyParliament, #OccupyJKIA, #TokeaTuesday, and #Rutomustgo during the 2024 Gen Z protests reflect TikTok's potential in facilitating collective action through the DMT principles of accessibility, immediacy, and scalability.

This theory is assisting in the explanation of how TikTok's algorithm is facilitating a novel kind of activism through content curation that is both attractive to users' preferences and makes the protest music appear before target audiences (Gen Z). This, therefore, is parallel to the agenda of this study, which aims at discovering how the characteristics of TikTok are causing the protest music to go viral, and in the process, making it a catalyst for political discourse. By using DMT, the study demonstrates

how TikTok has reconfigured activism for the digital age by allowing users to be agents of change and facilitating a more inclusive and participatory model of political activism. Not only does the theoretical model add to the analysis, but it also provides insight into the shifting dynamics of technology, music, and activism.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design. The qualitative design enabled a more in-depth exploration of complex subjective experiences of the participants on how TikTok facilitates digital activism. This allowed the researcher to gain in-depth descriptions of Gen Z and contextual tones regarding the intersection points of TikTok, music, and political engagement with digital activism. This study aimed to unearth how TikTok influences protest messaging and online activism. Data collection was also conducted through online interviews with 24 participants aged 18–25. These participants were all Kenyan TikTok users who were purposively identified based on their engagement with #RejectFinanceBill2024 content, recruited via TikTok posts. All the participants filled out interview schedule forms that were shared via Google Forms. These forms contained open-ended questions.

Additionally, content analysis of viral protest music, trending hashtags, and user engagement metrics was carried out. Specific viral hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024, #OccupyParliament, #OccupyJKIA, #TokeaTuesday, and #Rutomustgo, which were mostly amplified through music and dance challenges, were analysed. Interview data were analysed using thematic coding to identify common themes and trends in the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Content analysis data, including viral protest music, trending hashtags, and user engagement metrics, were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Manual processes were used for initial coding, followed by the use of qualitative data analysis software for more in-depth thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Analysis of Tiktok's Role in Amplifying Protest Music

Viral Music Moments on Tiktok

Viral musical moments on TikTok still shed light on the platform's power in amplifying different social as

well as political matters. From the findings, protest music pertaining to Kenya's 2024 Gen Z-led movements became popular, overcoming the geographical constraints to grab international attention. One of the respondents, when commenting on a popular song titled *Anguka Nayo*, noted that the "international exposure contributed to increased awareness of the protests, thereby escalating the demands for government accountability globally." This moment of visibility and virality was also observed in other international movements, e.g., Black Lives Matter (#BlackLivesMatter) in the United States, the Arab Spring (#ArabSpring) in several countries—i.e., Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain—Occupy Wall Street (#OccupyWallStreet) in the United States, and End SARS (#EndSARS) in Nigeria, all of which had enormous popularity and a very significant global influence.

These protests were highlighted by numerous protest songs that accompanied the dances on TikTok. This led to an increase in views, receiving millions of views across the world. This is America by Childish Gambino was extensively discussed during the Black Lives Matter movement for addressing issues like racial injustice and police conduct. In the same vein, just as songs like Ramy Essam's "Irhal" (Arab Spring) and Davido's "FEM" (EndSARS) defined past movements, TikTok's interactive features now boost the visibility and political significance of modern protest anthems. This platform has enabled creators, influencers, and regular users to engage with and support social justice issues, and thus it is a vital means of digital activism and social change. DMT substantiates these arguments by theorising that digital platforms such as TikTok reframe conventional activism into embodied, performative movements—uniting virtual engagement with concrete offline impact (Kadivar et al., 2024; Lu & Peng, 2024).

Hashtags and Trends

The research findings indicate that hashtags like #RejectFinanceBill2024, #OccupyParliament, #OccupyJKIA, #TokeaTuesday, and #Rutomustgo magnified opposition voices in protests against authoritarian regimes. One of the participants noted that these hashtags "amplified protest songs, making them widely accessible globally." Through the TikTok platform, hashtags are effective tools that

provide easily accessible content hubs where individuals can mobilise around a specific cause, share experiences, and distil messages in favour of social change. Some of the significant examples include #BlackLivesMatter in the US, where racial injustice and police brutality were raised, and #ArabSpring in North Africa and the Middle East, where citizens united to struggle for freedom and change. #OccupyWallStreet in the US and #EndSARS in Nigeria exemplified grassroots mobilisation through video shared, protest music, and personal testimony. Kithinzi (2024) stated that the #RejectFinanceBill2024 campaign in Kenya "generated impressive 713 million impressions from over 31 million interactions" (p.1), a large proportion of which were from TikTok.

Nendo (2024) conducted an analysis of the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024 in July 2024, based on data from TikTok, X, and Facebook. Videos on TikTok associated with this hashtag have garnered more than 500 million views. The outcomes are presented in **Table 1** below.

DMT asserts that hashtags are able to amplify messages and even convert online sentiment into activism. Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded (2022) state that hashtags may ignite social justice movements and collective action. Hashtags and trends on TikTok, therefore, enable individuals to connect, promote various causes, and convert trends into lasting societal movements.

Table 1: Summary of social media platform metrics under hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024

Platform	Key Metrics
TikTok	>500 million views
X (Twitter)	~25 million posts, 1.87 million users
Facebook	17 million users

Creators and Influencers

The research reveals that TikTok creators and influencers play a central part in the spread of protest songs and the furtherance of social messages. As one of the participants observed, "TikTok has made protest songs more available, easily accessible and reproducible at a global scale." Celebrities and other influencers have helped increase its effect by sharing that content. For example, Nick Kosir, or "The Dancing Weatherman" as he's popularly referred to on social media platforms, took part in the viral dance challenge Anguka Nayo. In Kirui's (2025a) examination of a popular song employed by Generation Z (Gen Z) to protest the finance bill under the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024, it was noted that Kosir's effort had attracted over 4.3 million views and 422.5 thousand likes by the end of July 2024 (p. 7). This indicates that individuals can leverage their massive followings to amplify the reach and effect of the cause.

These influencers also partner with artists and activists, effectively wedding entertainment and

social causes. The dialogues created by these influencers extend beyond content sharing; they engage their fans in deep discussions regarding equity, climate change, and human rights and ask for reflection and engagement on these vital matters. TikTok influencers and creators are, therefore, of central importance in framing discussion around social problems, utilising their influence to endorse awareness and promote a sense of community among their followers.

DMT corroborates the above claims by maintaining that online platforms such as TikTok transform conventional activism into active, lively movements, bridging online activity with offline material impacts. Kadivar et al. (2024) argue that DMT enables interactive relations between offline and online activism, thereby encouraging social movements and collective action. Viral music moments on TikTok continue to shed light on the platform's ability to amplify various social and political issues.



Youth-Led Activism on Tiktok

Gen Z's Digital Activism

The research findings indicate that Gen Z's engagement with digital activism on TikTok empowers young people to actively participate in social movements, build a collective identity, and mobilise their peers around issues such as unemployment, repressive finance bills, and corruption. One respondent observed that "protest songs like "Reject the Bill" and "Anguka Nayo" not only foster individual empowerment and identity formation but also serve as unifying anthems that reinforce solidarity and resilience among activists. Through creative content creation and the innovative use of TikTok's unique features, Gen Z users merge entertainment with advocacy, enabling them to spread powerful social messages widely.

Furthermore, the platform's democratising effect on content production allows individuals from different backgrounds to take part in the movement, making grassroots activism more accessible and visible. By allowing creators to produce, share, and disseminate protest music and social messages, TikTok facilitates a sense of community and collective action among like-minded individuals who are passionate about social justice. In addition to these domestic impacts, the tenet of transnational connectivity further amplifies these digital efforts by enabling cross-cultural dialogue and the exchange of strategies across borders, thereby extending the reach and influence of local movements on a global scale.

This interconnected network of digital activism illustrates how TikTok has become an essential tool for shaping social discourse and advancing political mobilisation. Digital media technologies transform traditional forms of activism into dynamic, participatory movements that effectively bridge online engagement with tangible offline change (Kadivar et al., 2024), reinforcing a comprehensive framework for contemporary political mobilisation and collective action in the digital age. These findings highlight the powerful role that digital platforms can play in making the political landscape more accessible and democratic. Moreover, this shift facilitates rapid information dissemination and encourages a more participatory form of democracy, significantly empowering marginalised voices and inspiring a new era of social engagement.

Youth Engagement and Political Discourse

According to the research findings, TikTok has emerged as a dynamic platform that bridges creative expression with political discourse, particularly through the medium of music. One respondent noted that "social media platforms like X and TikTok had more influence in mobilising and passing communication to the youth." These communications represented the creative expressions. This, therefore, enabled the platform's ability to adopt new forms of activism, especially among the younger generation, to leverage music as both a form of entertainment and a powerful political tool. This argument is supported by another participant who alluded that "the connection between music and activism for Gen Z is inseparable, as it is an integral tool for rallying, raising awareness, and communicating the urgency of the causes they are fighting for." Jain and Hussenet (2022) support this assertion by noting that TikTok's mission of quality entertainment is powered by a highly effective algorithm.

This algorithm not only drives rapid user growth and high engagement rates but also gives the platform a competitive edge over rivals like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. Its ability to swiftly adjust to trends and personalise content keeps users engaged longer, fostering an environment where creative content naturally evolves into political messaging. DMT emphasises, too, that TikTok transforms activism by enabling users to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as political organisations or mainstream media. The platform's interactive features—hashtags, challenges, and duets—facilitate widespread participation and rapid dissemination of protest music. This creative yet politically charged content empowers grassroots movements, making TikTok a catalyst for modern activism and a central player in shaping contemporary political discourse and social change.

Challenges And Criticisms of Tiktok's Role in Protest Music

TikTok's Role in Ethical Issues

Invasion of privacy has been a major issue on TikTok, and institutions such as Kenya's Safaricom and the Kenya Power Limited Company (KPLC) have been accused of revealing users' contact information. These invasions, according to Kirui (2025a), have had dire effects, including kidnappings and extrajudicial executions. The policy of user data

on the platform is under scrutiny, with activists and users fearing their private data is being manipulated. The absence of stringent privacy protection legislation makes the users hesitant to fully commit to the site. This will render protest music and activism futile since individuals would not engage in it for fear of being penalised later. All these privacy concerns must be catered to, making TikTok a secure platform for individuals to express their social and political views.

DMT necessitates the need to trust online platforms, thereby facilitating safe online action that is converted into effective offline transformation. In order for it to maintain its role in facilitating collective action, TikTok must adopt transparent data privacy policies. Protection of privacy benefits not just the individual but also continues to facilitate the decentralised and inclusive aspect of modern digital activism, thereby maximising users' trust and participation. By protecting the privacy of its users, TikTok can solidify its position as a site for contemporary activism. It can help in political mobilisation and social movement in the long run, according to DMT theory. It is this symbiotic relationship that digital activism enjoys with its digital medium that renders it more productive and prevalent.

Censorship And Content Moderation

TikTok's content moderation and censorship policy is at the core of the way it handles political content, including protest songs. TikTok has also been charged with having opaque content moderation policies, which sometimes result in suppressing or removing political content. The censorship can muzzle activists, thus preventing important messages from reaching a larger audience. The fine line between maintaining a safe environment and allowing free expression will be difficult and nuanced. TikTok will need clear and fair content moderation guidelines so that it can allow protest music to be shared while also keeping users safe from offensive content. By encouraging the valid political speech not to be unjustly stigmatised, the credibility of the site as a tool for activism will be enhanced.

Commercialisation of Activism

Commodification of activism on TikTok is complex. As much as the algorithm privileges engagement, it

works to amplify content with greater entertainment value over more meaty political messages. According to Kirui (2025b), "the rise of digital platforms such as TikTok, X, and Instagram, the commodification of protest music is further complicated as artists increasingly aim to create viral content rather than engage in serious political debates, resulting in a more superficial connection compared to those forged through political causes" (p. 27).

Commodification of the messages risks watering down the activist content, with good causes being overwhelmed by trendier but less important postings. Kirui (2025b) argues that the paradox of commercialisation and activism brings into question the genuineness of the platform's aspiration to change society. Activists thus walk a tight rope in bringing compelling content while safeguarding the authenticity of their message in this environment.

TikTok must encourage people to take part in meaningful activism without losing the commercial aspects that render it attractive. This viewpoint concurs with Frankfurt School critics Horkheimer and Adorno's contention that modern mass culture industries produce standardised, escapist commodities. The commodities are meant to elicit passive, standardised responses from consumers, thereby substantiating a culture of conformity and shallow participation. Malyshko (2024) argues that the culture industry, at least as Horkheimer and Adorno imagined it, celebrates mass production and conformity and thus stifles original creativity and critical thinking. In their desire for entertainment value and virality, sites such as TikTok are perhaps inadvertently supporting this trend and rendering less visible more earnest and substantial political communication.

Instant Virality and its Lasting Repercussions

The findings of the research indicate that one of the greatest shortcomings of using TikTok as an activist tool is the potential for content to go viral for a limited time, without leading to lasting political change. A respondent noted that "Mwaki, a song by Brazilian producer and DJ Zerb, with Kenyan vocalist Sofiya Nzau singing in Kikuyu was a massive global hit, but fleeting. Another respondent noted that "songs can go viral through challenges, memes, or short videos, creating a sense of

community when users are all interacting with the same songs" though not for the long term since new songs are always being released. Songs fall out of relevance after some time, preventing the sustained cause of the song. Viral videos can possibly generate immediate buzz in addition to mobilising individuals immediately, but lack the substance necessary for long-term change.

The transient nature of viral trends additionally means that significant issues may get only momentary attention from the masses before they shift their attention to the next viral topic. In trying to make activism and protest music so powerful that it can bring about real change, there is a necessity to implement mechanisms that get people involved beyond the initial wave of popularity. This is a strategic process in which short-term publicity is utilised to build long-term movements and active activism. Also, the platform's algorithm that rewards the popularity of posts where a lot of people are engaged could potentially demote more serious political messages to reward less substantial but engaging content.

Activists must weigh the ability to create good content with the requirement to remain authentic. By doing so, users can leverage the initial wave of exposure that TikTok creates to build long-term political campaigns in a way that their cause doesn't lose exposure and reaction in the coming times. The same is also asserted by DMT as she explains the use of engagement and public action fostered by features like hashtags, challenges, and duets on TikTok. They enable mass participation, with users able to promote a cause freely and transmit their messages. The TikTok algorithm, which prioritises high-engagement content, works in tandem with DMT to enable politically significant content to reach large audiences, hence a perception of community and belongingness among users.

Future of Protest Music and Tiktok Evolving Trends

According to the research findings, protest music on TikTok continues to evolve as the platform itself grows and changes. One respondent noted that "ravers who had gone to the club for music and drinks found themselves in a pool of political rage, and to which the political agenda was revitalised", depicting a new trend of activism. The singing of the

national Anthem while facing the police also gave the movement a new form of trend, with TikTok providing a unique avenue for young people to express their political views through music, combining creativity with activism in a way that was engaging and accessible. One protester noted that "most of the time when confronted by the police, they sang the national anthem".

As more artists and activists recognise the potential of TikTok to reach a wide audience, we can expect to see a diversification of protest music genres and styles. TikTok's evolving trends in protest music vividly illustrate how the platform continuously adapts to shifting cultural and political dynamics. Research shows that as TikTok itself grows, new forms of activism emerge, evidenced by club-goers transforming into politically charged "ravers" whose energy revitalises protest movements, and by the powerful visual of protesters singing the national anthem when confronting police. These trends underscore how young users are harnessing TikTok's creative affordances to fuse musical expression with political dissent, suggesting that future evolutions may involve even more collaborative and technologically advanced forms of protest music as the platform and sociopolitical issues continue to develop.

Furthermore, technological advancements will offer new tools for content creation, making it simple to produce high-quality videos that can convey complex political messages. Future trends might include more collaborative efforts between artists and activists, leveraging the platform's interactive features to create a collective voice. DMT supports these new innovations by emphasising the importance of engagement and collective action, both of which TikTok facilitates through its features like hashtags, challenges, and duets. These tools promote widespread participation, making it easier for users to support a cause and amplify their messages. TikTok's algorithm, which prioritises high-engagement content, aligns with DMT by ensuring that politically relevant content reaches a broad audience, thereby fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among users.

TikTok's Influence on Other Platforms

Research findings suggest that TikTok's success is largely attributed to its integration with other

platforms, creating a significant interconnectedness within the digital landscape. One respondent mentioned that "songs can become viral through challenges, memes, or short videos, fostering a sense of community as users collectively engage with the same tracks." This trend indicates that other social media platforms are likely to adopt similar art forms to leverage this phenomenon. For instance, Instagram and Facebook may adjust their algorithms to emphasise engaging, politically relevant content, thereby creating an environment conducive to protest music like TikTok.

YouTube might introduce new formats or features that encourage the creation and dissemination of protest music videos. Additionally, platforms like X could experiment with more audiovisual content to capture the essence of protest music. This cross-platform influence will likely lead to a more interconnected digital activism landscape, where content created on one social media platform can be shared and amplified across others with ease. By adopting TikTok's successful elements, other platforms will play a role in the overall reach and impact of protest music, further embedding it in the fabric of digital activism. DMT emphasises the importance of engagement and collective action, both of which TikTok facilitates through its features like hashtags, challenges, and duets. These tools promote widespread participation, making it easier for users to support a cause and amplify their messages.

TikTok's algorithm, which prioritises high-engagement content, aligns with DMT by ensuring that politically relevant content reaches a broad audience, thereby fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among users. This engagement is crucial for maintaining the momentum of political movements and ensuring that they have a sustained impact. As more artists and activists recognise the potential of TikTok to reach a wide audience, we can expect to see a diversification of protest music genres and styles, leading to more collaborative and technologically advanced forms of protest music as the platform and sociopolitical issues continue to develop.

Impact on Future Political Movements

Research findings show that TikTok plays a significant role in shaping political activism, with its

influence expected to grow. One respondent noted that its ability to mobilise large groups quickly makes it an essential tool for political movements. As more activists recognise TikTok's potential, they are likely to use it to organise, educate, and inspire action. Abbas et al. (2022) noted that TikTok encourages virality and creative crafting of both direct and indirect political content, making it suitable for political expression, mobilisation, and online activism among youth. TikTok's affordances—visibility, editability, association, and persistence—enable users to express political views and mobilise support, leading to more strategic and coordinated campaigns. Its global reach connects activists across borders, fostering solidarity and a shared purpose among diverse groups.

Consequently, future political movements may become more inclusive and collaborative. The integration of TikTok into the broader ecosystem of digital activism suggests that it will remain vital for advancing social change. DMT posits that platforms like TikTok are not only spaces for entertainment but also instrumental for political activities, enabling users to circumvent traditional gatekeepers such as political organisations or mainstream media. For example, in Kenya, trending hashtags like #RejectFinanceBill2024, #OccupyParliament, #OccupyJKIA, #TokeaTuesday, and #Rutomustgo during the 2024 Gen Z protests highlight TikTok's capacity to foster collective action through accessibility, immediacy, and scalability.

This theory contextualises how TikTok's algorithm can curate content that resonates with users, ensuring that protest music gains visibility among target audiences and transforms into a catalyst for political discourse. By using Digital Media Theory, the study illustrates how TikTok has transformed activism in the digital era, enabling individuals to become agents of change and promoting a more inclusive and participatory model of political engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study concludes that TikTok is a force to be reckoned with in the realm of online activism despite its complexity. This therefore call for the need of the careful navigation by the activists' task that must be carefully navigated by activists. While a viral video can highlight an issue overnight that flash of awareness is often short-lived. While

this overnight success remains TikTok's greatest strength, it could also turn out to be its biggest challenge. Trending content can grab everyone's attention for a moment, but that may not be enough to build the deep understanding needed for real, lasting political change.

The key for activists is to find clever ways to turn that moment of fame into a dedicated movement for the long haul. This means creating posts that don't just chase easy views but also spark genuine conversation and debate. Features like duets and stitches are perfect for this. This is because he will be helping to weave individual voices into a powerful, unified call for community action. As the genre of protest music and digital activism on TikTok evolves, the potential of the platform for promoting inclusive and collective action is significantly enhanced.

Further, the quality and effectiveness of protest music videos are to be upgraded by advances in technology, thus allowing the conveyance of more sophisticated and evolved political messages. The impact of TikTok on other social media platforms will also expand, resulting in a unified digital activism ecosystem. The adoption of effective elements from TikTok by other sites will enhance the overall dissemination and influence of protest music and, as it were, incorporate it more into the dynamics of online activism.

The future of political activism on TikTok is clearly bright, considering that the platform will be an even

more pivotal force in defining activism. Being able to easily mobilise large numbers of individuals makes TikTok a critical instrument for political movements. As more activists realise what TikTok can do, it is anticipated that they will use it for purposes of organisation, education, and the stimulation of action. This expansion will most likely result in a more sophisticated and strategic utilisation of the platform with orchestrated campaigns that leverage its distinctive characteristics to boost efficiency.

The international scope of TikTok also allows activists from across borders to unite, fostering a sense of unity and commonalities between various groups. Subsequently, political movements in the future will be expected to be more inclusive and cooperative. This is because they are founded on a broad base of support. The continued development of TikTok, alongside its positioning within the wider framework of online activism, will solidify its position as an indispensable tool for fostering social change and supporting political action. Ultimately, whether TikTok will be successful in facilitating substantial change largely rests on its capacity to promote genuine activism amidst the commercial pressures that are powering its mainstream success.

Recommendation: Activists must always aim to balance compelling content with message integrity. This approach allows them to leverage TikTok's powerful features for sustained advocacy and ensures the platform's future relevance in political activism

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