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Digital Activism Strategies in Citizen-Led Campaigns on TikTok and X: Evidence from Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill Protests

Elvis Lemiso Shunkur ⁽¹⁾

George Gathigi ⁽²⁾

(1,2) Nairobi University, Kenya.

Main author's email: eshunkur@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examined digital activism strategies in citizen-led campaigns on TikTok and X during Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill protests. While digital activism is increasingly central to contemporary protest, little remains known about how distinct platform affordances systematically shape youth mobilisation across short-form video and text-based networks during political crises in the Global South. To address this gap, the study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, analysing 100 social media posts from the hashtags #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliamentKE (50 TikTok and 50 X posts) alongside 14 qualitative interviews with activists, influencers, civil society representatives, and parliamentary officials. Grounded in Connective Action Theory and Public Sphere Theory, the study revealed that citizen-led digital activism operated through personalised, decentralised, and platform-specific communication strategies that collectively produced large-scale visibility and civic engagement. Quantitative content analysis identified five dominant content categories: informational or explanatory posts, protest documentation, satirical and meme-based commentary, mobilisation messages, and civic education content. Platform-specific findings indicated that TikTok primarily facilitated visual storytelling and simplified complex policy issues. Meanwhile, X enabled real-time discourse, political commentary, and coordinated hashtag activism. Engagement analysis showed that mobilisation-oriented content recorded the highest mean interaction levels. Ultimately, the findings show that digital activism in Kenya is inherently platform-dependent. It recommends that civil society organisations and digital activists use cross-platform strategies that combine TikTok's visual/affective simplification with X's real-time discursive coordination to maximise civic education, sustain public pressure, and protect decentralised campaign credibility.

Key words: Digital activism, Gen Z, hashtag activism, TikTok, X (Twitter).



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INTRODUCTION

This study examined digital activism strategies in citizen-led campaigns on TikTok and X during Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill protests. Despite the growing prominence of social media in African political movements, little remains known about how distinct platform affordances systematically shape youth mobilisation across short-form video and text-based networks during political crises in the Global South. While existing literature acknowledges the general role of social media in political mobilisation, it often overlooks how distinct platform affordances—the specific functional properties of digital spaces influence the content, style, and success of digital activism. Digital activism refers to the strategic use of networked communication technologies to organise, articulate grievances, and demand civic accountability outside traditional institutional channels (Cervi et al., 2023; Twinomurizi, 2024).

In sub-Saharan Africa, growing mobile internet access has accelerated the emergence of digitally networked publics who are using these tools to challenge institutional power. For instance, Generation Z (Gen Z)—the demographic cohort born roughly between 1997 and 2012, recognised as "digital natives" occupy these online spaces as their primary sites of social, economic, and civic life. They use the spaces to expose governance failures, debunk state-driven narratives, and coordinate large-scale social movements (GSMA, 2023; Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019).

This empirical gap became particularly pronounced during Kenya's 2024 anti-Finance Bill protests. The Finance Bill is a legislative measure that sought to raise KES 3.7 trillion (approximately USD 28 billion) through new taxation and borrowing mechanisms (Apollo et al., 2024). Citizen-led campaigns under the hashtags #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliamentKE turned TikTok and X into vigorous platforms for political education, grievance articulation, and protest coordination. Youth mobilised through hashtag activism, the strategic deployment of indexed metadata tags to aggregate public commentary, build shared political narrative framing, and coordinate decentralised movements across network spaces.

Across these platforms, protest-themed TikTok videos gained over 500 million collective views. At the same time, combined hashtag activity generated more than 46 million impressions (Kaigwa, 2024), producing an

unprecedented reach of digitally mediated civic action in the country. Despite the scale and visibility of the protests, empirical research on the specific digital activism strategies Kenyan citizens deployed on TikTok and X remains limited. Existing literature on digital tools has examined social media's general role in political mobilisation but has given inadequate attention to how platform-specific affordances, such as TikTok's short-form video features, duets, and stitches, or X's real-time threads and hashtag coordination, shape the content, style, and effectiveness of digital activism in African contexts (Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Sinpeng, 2021). This study addresses this gap by providing an empirical, platform-focused examination of the digital activism strategies used during the 2024 Finance Bill protests.

The study uses Connective Action Theory (CAT), developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), to explain how contemporary activists mobilise through personalised digital content rather than formal organisational structures, and Public Sphere Theory (PST), which conceptualises digital platforms as arenas where citizens deliberate on matters of public concern and demand accountability from governing institutions. Together, these frameworks explain how decentralised, user-generated communication strategies coalesced into politically consequential collective action during the 2024 protests. This paper makes three main contributions to digital media literature. First, it provides a systematic empirical account of the content types and communication strategies Kenyan digital activists used on TikTok and X. Second, the paper shows how platform architecture shapes the form and style of political communication in youth-led movements. Third, it contributes to the understanding of digital activism in the Global South by situating Kenyan protest dynamics within broader debates on connective action, digital publics, and youth political participation.

Lastly, the study is structured into five sections: Section 1 reviews the abstract and introduction; Section 2 reviews relevant literature and establishes a theoretical framework that combines Connective Action Theory and Public Sphere Theory. Section 3 details the methodology and empirical findings for TikTok and X. Section 4 discusses implications for Global South governance. Section 5 concludes with key insights, limitations, future research directions, and references.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Spaces and Political Participation

The rise of digitally networked technologies has fundamentally reshaped how publics form, communicate, and engage in politics. Scholars broadly agree that digital spaces have reconfigured participation by enabling decentralised communication, amplifying citizen voices, and creating collective expression that transcends geographic and institutional boundaries (Castells, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). These platforms host everything from everyday political commentary to organised protest, generating what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) term connective action or mobilisation sustained through personalised content and digitally mediated ties rather than formal organisations.

Globally, scholarship has established that online networks allow citizens to construct collective identities and sustain protest cycles outside formal institutions (Tufekci, 2017). Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) Connective Action Theory (CAT) holds that contemporary activism runs on personalised content sharing across digital networks rather than hierarchical organisation. The Arab Spring and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement illustrate how platforms enable participants to document events, contest official narratives, and build transnational solidarity (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the rapid expansion of mobile internet connectivity, which now reaches over 500 million users (GSMA, 2023), has accelerated the emergence of digitally networked publics that use social media to challenge state power. Continental movements such as Nigeria's #EndSARS, Namibia's #ShutItAllDown, Zimbabwe's #ThisFlag, and South Africa's #FeesMustFall demonstrate how African youth leverage digital networks to bypass state-controlled media gatekeepers and expose governance failures (Bosch, 2018; Ndhlovu & Gopaldas, 2024; Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019).

Kenya offers one of the most sustained empirical illustrations of this global pattern: Nyabola's (2018) landmark study demonstrated that Kenyan citizens historically used platforms like X, Facebook, and WhatsApp to contest official narratives and form counter-publics, while also documenting state surveillance and digital repression (Kirigha, 2026; Rinaudo, 2023; Tsuma, 2023). Early Kenyan hashtag

studies, such as Katiambo's (2017) analysis of #SomeoneTellCNN and Kamau's (2017) and Musasia's (2019) evaluations of political Twitter discourse, confirmed that X served as a key arena for civic accountability and narrative resistance. Broader scholarship has extended this inquiry to other platforms, including Katiambo's (2024) work on anti-brand Facebook activism and Ooko's (2025) study of WhatsApp counter-publics.

Past studies analyse X, WhatsApp, Facebook, or TikTok in isolation, ignoring how contemporary movements operate across a multi-platform ecosystem. While scholars acknowledge that the 2024 Gen Z-led movement against the Finance Bill mobilised under #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliamentKE achieved unprecedented scale (over 500 million TikTok views and 46 million X impressions) (Kaigwa, 2024; Apollo et al., 2024), current research remains largely commentary-driven. This study directly addresses these theoretical and empirical gaps by combining Connective Action Theory and Public Sphere Theory (via Dahlgren's six dimensions).

TikTok and X As Platforms for Political Discourse

TikTok has rapidly emerged as a significant platform for political communication, particularly among younger users. Its design features, which include short-form video creation, algorithmic content amplification, duetting, stitching, and participatory audio trends, enable users to engage with political issues through creative, emotionally resonant, and easily shareable content (Cervi et al., 2023). Research indicates that TikTok's participatory affordances facilitate political communication through entertainment-driven formats that can reach large audiences rapidly, often transcending the limitations of traditional political discourse (Compte & Klug, 2021).

Studies on the role of TikTok in youth political behaviour demonstrate that the platform significantly influences Gen Z's political awareness, information-seeking, and civic engagement (Karimi & Fox, 2023). TikTok enables political communication that blends entertainment and activism, what some scholars describe as 'politainment', creating conditions for viral spread of political messages that traditional media cannot replicate (Cervi et al., 2023). In the African context, Ureke's (2024) analysis of TikTok in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections illustrates how short-form video content shapes political persuasion and engagement; closer to the present case,

Kirui (2025) examines how protest music circulated on TikTok during Kenyan anti-government demonstrations, finding that musical and creative content served as a distinct mobilisation strategy, one that amplified emotional resonance and shareability beyond what text-based commentary achieved.

X (formerly Twitter) has long been established as a central platform for political communication, real-time information sharing, and hashtag-driven activism. Research shows that X enables citizens to coordinate political action, amplify grievances, and engage directly with political actors through structured discourse and networked communication (Murthy, 2024). Hashtag activism on X boosts citizen engagement by enabling users to join shared conversations, mobilise around common causes, and sustain public pressure on political actors (Estrella-Ramón et al., 2024). The platform's architecture supports structured argumentation and public deliberation, positioning it as a key arena for political discourse during contentious moments (Greco, 2023).

In Kenya, Kamau (2017) and Musasia (2019) both examine how X has been used for political coordination, civic commentary, and accountability demands during elections and governance controversies, with Kamau focusing on the discursive strategies citizens use to challenge official narratives and Musasia documenting how hashtag campaigns sustain public pressure across extended periods of contestation. During the 2024 Finance Bill protests, X functioned as a space for real-time policy critique, fact-checking, and coordinated mobilisation through trending hashtags. However, this specific episode has yet to receive comparable empirical attention.

Digital Activism in Africa and Kenya

Across Africa, digital platforms have become central to how citizens articulate grievances, mobilise support, and participate in public affairs. The expansion of mobile internet connectivity, reaching over 500 million users by 2023, has empowered citizens to organise around social justice and accountability concerns in ways that complement and sometimes transcend traditional civic institutions (GSMA, 2023). Nigeria's #EndSARS, Namibia's #ShutItAllDown, Zimbabwe's #ThisFlag, and South Africa's #FeesMustFall campaigns all illustrate how digital platforms enable activists to bypass media gatekeepers, construct alternative narratives, and

mobilise critical civic action (Bosch, 2018; Ndhlovu & Gopaldas, 2024).

In Kenya, expanded internet access and mobile connectivity have reshaped civic engagement, with youth increasingly using social media platforms as a primary space for political expression and mobilisation. By 2024, the country had 22.7 million internet users and 13.05 million active social media identities, with social media use increasing by 38.2 per cent between 2023 and 2024 (Kemp, 2024). TikTok emerged as a particularly significant platform with 10.6 million adult users, reflecting its growing centrality in youth-driven communication and political culture (Safaricom, 2024; Kaigwa, 2024).

Beyond the studies already discussed, a further body of empirical scholarship has examined how digital platforms shape political mobilisation, protest/grievance articulation, and civic identity in Kenya outside the electoral and activist contexts covered above. Katiambo (2024), for instance, examines anti-brand activism on Facebook and demonstrates how digital spaces enable citizens to articulate grievances, construct collective identities, and mobilise around shared concerns. Although the study focuses on consumer nationalism, the findings offer useful insights into how social media can facilitate collective expression and mobilisation, thereby providing a foundation for understanding similar dynamics in youth-led political activism on TikTok and X.

Extending this understanding, Ooko (2025) similarly examines WhatsApp spaces in Kenya as digital counter-publics where identity and participation are negotiated. Her findings show that these spaces can enable alternative forms of identity expression while also reproducing exclusion by privileging dominant identities. This is relevant to the present study as it highlights how digital platforms shape political identity, participation, and the visibility of voices online.

Collectively, this body of work establishes that Kenyan digital activism has been studied across several platforms (Twitter/X, Facebook, WhatsApp) and in several contexts (elections, consumer activism, identity politics), and that TikTok's role in Kenyan protest specifically has begun to receive attention through single-issue studies such as Kirui's (2025) work on protest music. However, an empirical study that systematically examines TikTok

and X together, as they were used during the 2024 Finance Bill protests, remains absent. This study addresses this gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. Connective Action Theory (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) provides a lens for understanding how decentralised, individualised participation through digital platforms generates collective political outcomes without formal organisational structures. The theory posits that contemporary activists sustain mobilisation through personalised content, including hashtags, memes, short-form videos, and creative remixes, that aggregate into powerful collective forces through network effects. This framework is particularly relevant to the 2024 Kenyan protests, which were characterised by spontaneous, leaderless, and digitally coordinated activism (Twinomurinzi, 2024). Public Sphere Theory (Habermas, 1989; Papacharissi, 2010; Dahlgren, 2013; Gathigi & Brown, 2010) contextualises digital platforms as arenas where citizens engage in public deliberation, challenge dominant narratives, and hold institutions accountable. Contemporary scholars have extended this framework to recognise that digital publics are multiple, contested, and shaped by platform architectures that influence who speaks, who is heard, and how discourse circulates.

Rather than viewing the public sphere as a static institutional structure, Dahlgren (2013) conceptualises it as a dynamic communicative space sustained by civic cultures. While Dahlgren outlines six dimensions of civic culture, this study specifically focuses on the three dimensions directly relevant to digital protest dynamics: spaces, knowledge, and practices. First, **spaces** refer to the digital arenas, specifically X and TikTok, where citizens, particularly Generation Z, assembled outside state-controlled legacy media to deliberate and articulate grievances. Second, **knowledge** emerged through crowdsourced infographics, policy breakdowns, and Swahili translations that demystified fiscal policy and enabled informed public participation. Third, **practices** encompassed coordinated online and offline actions, such as MP vote-tracking, legal aid crowdsourcing, and street mobilisation. Focusing on these three core dimensions explains how decentralised digital interactions transformed into structured, politically consequential civic action during Kenya's #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament movements.

The two theoretical frameworks directly shape the study's research questions and objectives, with each anchoring a specific question and objective. Connective Action Theory underpins the first question by examining digital activism strategies on TikTok and X and classifying the hashtags, memes, short-form videos, and remixes that coordinated a leaderless movement. The second question, on how grievances were articulated and how citizens mobilised, draws on both frameworks, with Connective Action Theory explaining how individual grievances aggregated into collective engagement. The third question, on political accountability, rests on Public Sphere Theory's view of platforms as arenas for scrutinising power. Together, the theories shape the study's questions, data coding, and interpretation of findings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative content analysis of social media posts with qualitative data from in-depth interviews and key informant interviews. A convergent design was adopted because the three research questions required both breadth and depth. The first question, on the strategies used in citizen campaigns, requires systematic comparison of content types, formats, and engagement across TikTok and X and across the two hashtags (#RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliamentKE). The second question, on how grievances were articulated and citizens mobilised, is addressed by coding the framing and calls to action in posts and by drawing on participants' accounts of why these messages resonated and what prompted them to act.

The third question, on how digital activism influenced political accountability through institutional responses, cannot be answered from posts alone, since content shows what was demanded but not how institutions received it. It therefore draws mainly on interviews with parliamentary officials and policymakers, read against the public demands and engagement patterns observed in the posts. Across all three questions, the strands are expected to be complementary: content analysis establishes what was posted and what drew engagement, and interviews explain why actors made those choices and how they judged the effects.

The quantitative dataset comprised 100 social media posts: 50 from TikTok and 50 from X, evenly distributed across the two protest hashtags (#RejectFinanceBill2024

and #OccupyParliamentKE), yielding 25 posts per platform-campaign combination. Posts were retrieved using the Keyhole digital analytics tool and selected through systematic sampling to ensure temporal and thematic representation while reducing algorithmic bias.

The target population for the content analysis comprised all publicly accessible TikTok and X posts carrying the hashtags #RejectFinanceBill2024 or #OccupyParliamentKE and published in June 2024. Keyhole recorded approximately 124,600 and 86,900 posts under the two hashtags, respectively. The sampling frame was the list of posts retrieved and exported from Keyhole for each platform–hashtag combination and ordered chronologically by posting date and time. We removed duplicates, inaccessible posts, and posts not directly linked to either hashtag, leaving 100 eligible posts. We used systematic sampling within each of the four platform–hashtag combinations to select 25 posts per combination ($n = 100$). The qualitative component included 14 structured interviews conducted in person in English, averaging approximately 45 to 60 minutes per session.

The interview guide focused on questions related to the research topic. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English before analysis. The interviews included 4 civil society organisation representatives, 4 ordinary citizens, 2 parliamentary officials, 2 policymakers, and 2 digital influencers, aged 24 to 60. The Participants were identified through purposive sampling based on their demonstrated involvement in and relevance to the 2024 protests (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Inclusion criteria required participants to be Kenyan citizens or residents present in Kenya during the protest period who actively engaged in protest activities such as content creation, organising, fact-checking, or attending demonstrations. Eligible age ranges reflected both youth (Gen Z) mobilisation and relevant policy-making

stakeholders. Exclusion criteria required that individuals who engaged only as passive observers, or whose protest-related activity could not be verified, were excluded from the study. This process ensured that included participants, whether citizen activists or policymakers, had a substantive and verifiable connection to the #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #Occupyparliament mobilisation.

The University of Nairobi Research and Ethics Committee approved the study. The researcher secured informed consent for all interviews, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw. We preserved anonymity using pseudonyms and anonymised social media handles (limited strictly to public posts). All primary and digital data were stored securely and accessed exclusively by the researcher per university data governance requirements.

Due to sample size limitations ($N = 100$), quantitative data were restricted to descriptive statistics and standard deviations to examine content categories and engagement variability. We analysed qualitative data using Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six-phase thematic approach. We defined and operationalised categories using a pre-defined codebook with clear inclusion criteria for each content type. The codebook was piloted on a 10 per cent data sample and refined before full analysis. To ensure coding consistency, a single researcher coded the data independently, and a secondary reviewer audited the codes; coding ambiguities were resolved through iterative review. Methodological credibility was ensured through data triangulation across quantitative and interview sources. Triangulation was operationalised by pairing quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative interview themes, using participant insights to contextualise, validate, and enrich numerical patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Content Types and Digital Activism Strategies

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Digital Activism Content Categories (N = 100)

No	Content Category	Frequency	Percentage %
1	Information/Explanatory Content	32	32
2	Protest Documentation	25	25
3	Satirical/Meme-based Commentary	18	18
4	Mobilisation Messages	15	15
5	Civic Education	10	10
	Total	100	100

Informational or explanatory posts made up the largest share (32%), indicating that digital platforms were

widely used to interpret and simplify the Finance Bill for public audiences. These posts included explainer videos, policy breakdowns, infographics, and simplified summaries that translated complex legislative content into accessible formats. Protest documentation was the second most prevalent category (25%), encompassing images, videos, and live recordings of demonstrations that served as real-time evidence of protest activities and police responses. Satirical and meme-based commentary accounted for 18 per cent of the dataset, demonstrating the significant role of humour and creative expression in digital political communication. This category typically used irony, parody, and cultural references to critique government policies and leadership decisions in engaging, shareable formats. Mobilisation messages made up 15 per cent of posts, providing explicit calls to action, including protest locations, times, and online engagement directives.

Civic education content accounted for 10 per cent, offering broader context on parliamentary processes, taxation policy, and citizens' rights. Qualitative interviews corroborated these patterns. One respondent noted the centrality of accessible policy explanations: "On TikTok, for instance, creators transformed complex clauses of the Bill into concise, relatable videos using everyday language, skits, and real-life examples. This approach made the implications of proposed taxes and levies feel personal and immediate" (IDI 4, Digital Activist). Similarly, a civil society actor highlighted the strategic role of digital platforms in information dissemination: "Spaces like X, TikTok and Facebook became so vital...instead of reading the entire document, we simplified it and shared it in smaller pieces so that young people could understand what was in the bill."

Platform-Specific Communication Strategies

Clear distinctions emerged between the activism strategies employed on TikTok and X. TikTok was predominantly characterised by visual storytelling, creative remix practices, and short-form explanatory content. The platform's affordances, including duets, stitches, viral audio, and algorithmic amplification, enabled users to engage with political issues through entertainment-related formats that resonated strongly with young audiences. TikTok content often used local dialects, cultural idioms, and humorous framing to

communicate policy issues in accessible, emotionally engaging ways. One citizen respondent described this dynamic: "We had TikTokers who could influence us and even make short videos...they made the short videos in their local dialects, and it was easy for us to share them with people even in the village". This reflects TikTok's capacity to reach diverse audiences across urban and rural contexts through participatory video culture. This matters in the Kenyan context because the digital divide often creates knowledge and media literacy gaps, which the platform helped bridge. The platform facilitated what Gitomer et al. (2024) describe as 'depersonalised remix', which is the appropriation and creative reinterpretation of political content by multiple users in ways that amplify its reach and emotional resonance.

In contrast, X functioned as a discursive and coordination-oriented platform where users engaged in real-time political commentary, policy critique, and networked mobilisation. One digital activist explained that "On X, information was real-time and the disbursement of information coupled with hashtags and retweets made it easier to reach a wider audience within a very short time". Text-based threads, quote tweets, and hashtag aggregation enabled rapid information dissemination and the construction of structured political narratives.

Hashtag Activism and Networked Communication

Hashtags served as central organising mechanisms for digital activism, aggregating dispersed conversations into coherent protest narratives which enabled users to engage with a unified campaign identity. Analytics data revealed the substantial scale of hashtag-driven engagement: #RejectFinanceBill2024 recorded approximately 124,600 posts and 28.4 million impressions, while #OccupyParliamentKE generated 86,900 posts and 17.6 million impressions. Together, the campaigns generated over 211,500 posts and 46 million impressions, with a total of 5.8 million engagements. Hashtag activity intensified during key protest moments, with #RejectFinanceBill2024 peaking between 18–20 June 2024, and #OccupyParliamentKE reached its highest activity on 25 June 2024. One activist in the human rights space articulated this role. "Having one common hashtag was a really, really interesting and most fundamental tactic that the campaign of 2024 achieved... it centred all the conversation into one place". This pattern suggests that hashtags functioned not only as

communication tools but also as mechanisms for synchronising online and offline protest dynamics.

Engagement Patterns across Content Types

Analysis of mean engagement metrics across content categories revealed differentiated audience responses to different types of activism content. Mobilisation-oriented content recorded the highest mean engagement levels ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.68$), followed by protest documentation and informational content ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.72$). Satirical and meme-based content recorded moderate engagement, while civic education posts generated the lowest mean interaction levels. The standard deviation analysis revealed that protest documentation exhibited the highest variability in engagement, indicating that while some posts achieved exceptional visibility, others generated more moderate responses. These patterns suggest audiences responded most to action-oriented and visually compelling content, and that factors such as timing, emotional resonance, and content quality influenced the effectiveness of specific posts. One participant observed the viral potential of impactful content: 'Some videos even went viral, which helped spread the message to thousands of people across the country' (IDI 6, TikTok Influencer). The engagement differentials across content types illuminate the strategic communication choices available to digital activists seeking to maximise audience interaction.

Discussion

Digital activism during Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill protests was decentralised, personalised, and platform-specific, generating significant political visibility and civic engagement. This supports Connective Action Theory (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), which holds that movements sustain mobilisation through individualised digital participation rather than formal organisation. Citizens, influencers, and activists independently produced content reflecting their own interpretations of events, which aggregated into mass-scale political communication. The prevalence of simplified content reflects an effort to lower barriers to participation. By translating legislative complexity into everyday language, activists performed informal civic education - a pattern seen in other youth-led movements (Dunu & Uzochukwu, 2015) and consistent with evidence that accessible communication broadens civic engagement (Granger-Frye, 2018). Digital platforms thus functioned as sites of both mobilisation and popular political education.

Activism strategies were also clearly platform-specific, confirming that platform architecture shapes political communication. TikTok's audiovisual affordances enabled emotionally engaging, shareable content that resonated with Gen Z, consistent with research on entertainment-driven political communication (Cervi et al., 2023; Compte & Klug, 2021). The use of local dialects, humour, and cultural references embedded cultural identity into the activism, enhancing relatability and diffusion.

X, by contrast, supported structured political discourse, fact-checking, and coordinated mobilisation through its text-based, real-time architecture consistent with its established role in political accountability (Estrella-Ramón et al., 2024; Greco, 2023). The two platforms thus played complementary roles: TikTok drove accessibility and emotional engagement, while X enabled discursive depth and real-time coordination. Ultimately, this multi-platform ecosystem amplified the protests' reach and impact, extending scholarly understanding of African digital activism beyond the X- and Facebook-centred focus of prior research.

Grounded in Public Sphere Theory, TikTok and X functioned as arenas of deliberation where citizens contested official narratives and shaped discourse around the Finance Bill. The platforms enabled both affective publics bound by shared emotion (Papacharissi, 2015) and structured issue publics engaged in policy debate, together producing a powerful counter-narrative to government messaging. The public sphere theory, however, had clear limits. Variability in engagement across content types suggested that algorithmic curation, content quality, and timing shaped which messages gained traction, with engagement concentrating around emotionally resonant, visually compelling content. This raises questions about whether substantively important civic information received proportionate attention, reflecting a broader tension in digitally mediated publics (Fuchs, 2014).

Applying PST and CAT to the Kenyan context also exposes their limits. Habermasian PST assumes rational, critical debate within a unified deliberative space, yet the discourse documented here was affectively charged and meme-driven; the very content that mobilised participation is what classical PST would code as a departure from legitimate deliberation, suggesting the standard itself may misread what functional political

communication looks like in this context. State repression compounds this by fragmenting and constraining open discourse in ways Habermas's framework does not anticipate. CAT better explains the leaderless, hashtag-driven coordination observed across platforms. Still, its assumption of broadly equitable digital access sits uneasily with Kenya's urban-rural digital divide, raising questions about whose participation the "mass-scale" mobilisation actually captures.

The theory is also underspecified for the rapid, high-risk pivot from online coordination to offline street protest, having emerged from lower-stakes Western contexts. These tensions suggest neither theory transfers cleanly: PST needs to accommodate affect and repression-constrained speech, while CAT needs greater attention to structural exclusion and offline risk. Rather than discarding either, a hybrid approach that combines CAT's account of decentralised coordination with PST's attention to contestation, and explicitly accounts for digital inequality and state power, better captures what a digital public sphere can be in African political contexts.

These findings carry implications for both scholarship and practice. For researchers, they demonstrate the value of platform-specific analytical frameworks and point to future work on algorithmic curation's role in amplifying or suppressing protest content, the long-term effects of digital activism on political participation, and cross-platform dynamics in multi-medium protest ecosystems. For practitioners, civil society organisations, digital rights advocates, and civic educators, the success of simplified, emotionally engaging, culturally relevant content offers a model for accessible civic communication that can reach diverse publics, including those in rural or low-digital-literacy contexts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The findings reveal that platform affordances shaped these strategies: TikTok facilitated visual, creative, and emotionally engaging content, while X enabled real-time discourse, structured debate, and hashtag-driven coordination. The unprecedented scale of hashtag engagement, with over 46 million impressions from two campaign hashtags alone, reflects the capacity of digitally networked publics to generate significant political visibility and civic engagement. Theoretically, the study demonstrates the applicability of Connective Action Theory and Public Sphere Theory to understanding youth-led digital activism in the Global South. The personalised, decentralised, and platform-specific nature of the 2024 protest campaigns confirms the CAT framework's account of how contemporary movements operate without formal organisational structures, while the emergence of contested and multiform digital publics during the protests illuminates the evolving nature of the digital public sphere in African contexts. These findings advance scholarly understanding of digital activism strategies and contribute to the growing empirical literature on youth political communication in sub-Saharan Africa.

Recommendations: Based on the empirical findings, the study recommends tailoring digital activism to each platform's strengths, strengthening credibility through fact-checking, and expanding digital inclusion. CSOs and digital rights advocates should use TikTok's short-form visual content for accessible policy education and X's text-driven threads for real-time advocacy and mobilisation. Decentralised protest networks should pair crowdsourced fact-checking with meme-based content to counter disinformation while preserving legitimacy. Finally, policy communicators should prioritise localised dialects and simplified formats on mobile-first platforms to bridge the urban-rural digital divide and broaden civic participation.

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