

“Digitally speaking”: TikTok, Language use and Gen Z demonstrations against the 2024 Finance Bill in Kenya

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Abstract: *This study explores the role of language on social media in shaping Gen Z-led demonstrations in Kenya. The purpose is to examine how language used on TikTok, shapes policy debates and the mobilization of youth activism around the Finance Bill 2024. With 11 purposively - sampled Tik Tok videos, hashtags and user-generated comments as data collected from popular trends, videos and viral content, the study qualitatively investigates how young people creatively use communicative strategies to construct social media trends and perceptions as a way of responding to the planned roll-out of The Finance Bill 2024. The study was guided by the framing theory originally by Erving Goffman (1974) and later expounded by Robert Entman (1993) which observes that the media selects and emphasizes certain aspects of reality while downplaying others to influence public perception. The findings reveal that the use of informal, relatable and emotionally charged communicative strategies to critique the Finance Bill, fosters solidarity and creates viral advocacy campaigns, while, at the same time, enabling Gen Z's to amplify their concerns and drive mass engagement, as they deal with challenges, such as the potential misinformation, oversimplification of complex issues and limited reach to audiences beyond the TikTok demographic.*

Key words: Language, TikTok, Gen Z, Finance Bill 2024, Demonstrations

INTRODUCTION

One of the consequences of the planned roll-out of the Finance Bill 2024 in Kenya was that it divided the country. On the one hand were the youthful Generation Z (hereafter Gen Z) youths who, perceiving the bill as exacerbating financial hardships and increasing inequalities resorted to mass demonstrations and the use of social media to mobilize support and to create a united front to protest against the passing of the Bill into law. On the other hand, the government keen on

collecting more revenue in order to be self-sufficient and stop the age-long reliance on foreign aid used political meetings, rallies and social media positing to rally the citizens behind the Bill. The spirited effort of the Gen Z led to the rejection of the Bill. In both the Gen Z and the Government efforts language played a role in shaping perceptions. To date research on the role of language in the encounter between the Gen Zs and government especially on social media is yet to be done. So, through leveraging the empirical data on how digital discourses shape this activism fills this gap. This study therefore, explores the role of language on social media in shaping Gen Z-led demonstrations in Kenya. It purposes to examine how language used on TikTok, shapes policy debates and the mobilization of youth activism around the Finance Bill 2024. So, it not only addresses a pressing socio-political issue, the Finance Bill 2024, and its impact on youth activism, making it timely and relevant but also, through its findings, informs activists, policymakers and digital media strategists on how online discourse can be leveraged or hindered, in advocacy campaigns.

In recent years, Nairobi has witnessed a tremendous growth in youth-led demonstrations especially those lead by Gen Z. The Gen Z cohort comprises individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Twenge, 2023). Following the millennial generation and preceding Generation Alpha, Gen Z is often referred to as “digital natives” due to their upbringing in an era defined by the internet, smartphones, and widespread social media usage (Turner, 2022). A defining characteristic of Gen Z is their proficiency in navigating digital platforms, which has shaped their communication styles, learning preferences, and social interactions (Robinson & Smith, 2021). Research suggests that Gen Z highly values diversity and inclusivity, frequently leveraging social media as a tool for activism and advocacy (Nolan et al., 2023). These attributes have positioned Gen Z at the forefront of protests against injustices, such as the 2024 Finance Bill, which was widely perceived as oppressive and punitive by Kenyan citizens.

Youth have historically played a crucial role in political activism, not only in Kenya but also across Africa and the world. According to Honwana (2022), youth activism consists of the collective efforts of young individuals, typically between the ages of 15 and 35, who mobilize for social, political, and environmental change. These efforts often include protests, advocacy, and grassroots organizing around issues affecting their communities (Kassimir & Staudt, 2021). Similarly, Watts & Guess (2023) argue that youth activism is a vital form of political engagement, where young people assert their agency to challenge systemic inequalities and advocate for social justice. While scholars define youth activism from different perspectives, they universally acknowledge its significance in addressing critical societal issues such as corruption, police brutality, and social injustice.

Research on Youth Activism

Previous research has examined the role of social media in youth activism (Bennet, Segerberg and Walker, 2014; Castels, 2012; Gerbando, 2012, Tukecki & Wilson 2012, Fullman 2017) but it has

not specifically examined the linguistic features used. In Kenya, Bosire (2016) did a study on the use of sheng in political discourse. While the study focused on the use of sheng as a language it did not focus on specific aspects of the language such as linguistic features and how they are used to frame issue and create perceptions. Ngugi (2020) also researched on the influence of digital media on civic engagement in Kenya. While the study focused on digital media such as the current study it did not specifically assess the use of language on creating perceptions on political discourse.

Other studies which have been done outside the country and have some similarities to the current study include, Gladwell (2020) who did an analysis on the role of digital media on modern activism. Castell (2012) also conducted a study on networked movements and how language and Digital platforms intersect in shaping political movements. The study - while it is closely related to the current study - it overlooked the specific communicative strategies used in framing political discourse and how this affects public perception.

In view of the issues surrounding discourse on digital media and youth activism this study is significant as it elucidates the power of language in framing political issues, revealing how both the government and Gen Z shape public discourse and perception surrounding the Finance Bill 2024. By examining the communicative dynamics of the bill, the research enhances understanding of youth political engagement, the role of language in activism and governmental strategies for managing public perception. It advances discourse analysis in digital activism by illustrating how Kenyan Gen Z strategically employs language on TikTok to frame political issues and mobilize collective action. Additionally, it critically assesses the limitations of TikTok-based activism, including misinformation and audience reach, contributing to broader debates on the effectiveness of digital activism in influencing policy. Overall, the study offers a critical perspective on the intersection of social media, youth activism and political discourse in Kenya, making a substantial contribution to both academic scholarship and policy discussions.

The study was guided by the framing theory by Erving Goffman (1974) which was later expounded by Robert Entman (1993). The theory provides a framework for understanding the role of language in shaping perception and interpretations of social issues such as the finance bill 2024. Framing refers to the process of selecting and emphasizing specific aspects of reality while downplaying others in order to influence public perception. In the case of the demonstrations led by the Gen z in Nairobi, different actors such as the police, the media, the politicians, the activists both construct frames that influence public perception and discourse around the finance bill. Thus, the theory can be used to describe how language can be used to construct narratives, influence public perception and mobilize support around the finance bill 2024.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researchers aimed at conducting an in-depth textual analysis of the coverage on Gen Z demonstrations on TikTok focusing on 11 samples of varied forms of discourses. The analysis specifically targeted articles covering Gen Z demonstrations during the period from June 25, 2024, to July 31, 2024. This period is selected due to the intense activities surrounding Gen Z protests, which garnered extensive coverage on different digital platforms.

The study's design was qualitative in nature. The design enabled the researcher to collect rich detailed data from TikTok which offer real-time reactions, personal reflections and a range of discourse around the Finance bill 2024. By focusing on these platforms, the study was able to capture the authentic voices and strategies youth activists used while engaging with the Finance Bill 2024. Qualitative study has been observed to be the best approach by Creswell and Poth (2018) who have observed that qualitative research allows for the collection of detailed information about people's experiences, behaviors and perspectives.

Purposive sampling was used to choose videos that specifically address activism against the finance bill 2024. Content was selected against pre-determined criteria such as hashtags, keywords or accounts that are known for activism. Time based sampling was also used to collect videos posted between June 25 2024, to July 31, 2024. This method helped to capture temporal shifts in activism, reflecting how youth engagement over the issue of finance bill evolved over time.

The research data was collected from TikTok platform. Social media allows for the collection of natural, organic data that reflects the concerns of the Gen Zs and how they influence others. Qualitative analysis of this data enabled deeper understanding of the language, emotions and rhetorical strategies used by activists to oppose the Finance Bill 2024. Posts on social media include diverse media such as videos, text, images and memes. The variety allows one to analyze different forms of communication which is key in understanding the visual and textual narratives in youth activism.

Data was collected from posts, tweets and videos related to Gen Z protests against the Finance Bill 2024 from TikTok. This involved key words, hashtags and themes to understand how social media content mobilizes and engages participants. Hashtag tracking was used through the use of tweet deck to track the frequency and reach of relevant hashtags e.g #RejectFinanceBil, #FinanceBill2023,). Hashtags were used because they serve as organizing mechanisms for conversation around social issues and videos using hashtags can provide data on public opinion and activism. Videos were transcribed into analyzable texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study analyzed 11 extracts from Tik Tok videos and texts as presented in this section.

Excerpt 1 song

You took an oath you made a vow to protect and serve, not to bring us down.

Why did you fire on unarmed youth? Why did you silence the voices of the truth? Some may urge you act on orders, but what do you have to say?

In the US, officers took a stand, refused to oppress their own land.

Are you a police service or a colonial force for serving the people or a brutal cause.

Till when will you be used and dumped by politician like toilet paper?

You killed Rex Masaai, a dreamer's light.

To the one who pulled the trigger that night, how would you feel if it were your child?

Gen Z activists use a song to express grievances against police brutality during protests, employing interrogative sentences to convey skepticism and frustration with the police. These questions, such as 'why', are not aimed at seeking answers but serve to critique the police's failure to protect citizens. A comparison is drawn between U.S. and Kenyan police, with the former refraining from oppressing citizens and the latter following orders to do so, highlighting the contradiction in Kenyan police actions. The activists emphasize their identity as peaceful, unarmed youth in contrast to the armed police, stressing their vulnerability while countering government narratives that label them as 'criminals'. The government, through the police, portrays the youth as 'dangerous', justifying the use of force against them. This contrast underscores the power imbalance between the youth, depicted as victims and the police, as agents of a powerful government.

By naming victims like Rex Masai, the activists personalize the brutality, evoking empathy and framing the victims as 'innocent' and 'heroic'. The use of the second-person pronoun 'you' directly addresses police officers, creating a confrontational tone. This discourse shapes public perceptions, challenging institutional narratives and asserting the activists' agency in their demand for justice and accountability.

Excerpt 2 A response from a protestor being interviewed by a journalist covering the demonstrations.

It is not that we do not want to pay tax, we are just uncomfortable with every time... Tax hike every year it is something different and unfortunately. We don't actually get to see where the money is going.

The excerpt was subjected to discourse analysis to unravel the lexical and semantic choices and framing used to convey the concerns raised about the Finance Bill 2024. The lexical and semantic

analysis indicates that words such as , “uncomfortable”, “Unfortunately” indicate dissatisfaction with the way taxes are used while at the same time maintaining a non-aggressive tone. The speaker uses the words carefully to avoid direct confrontation maintaining a reasonable and reflective stance. Through the selection of other lexical choices like, “every year”, “tax hike” “something different” the recurrent and unpredictability nature of the tax regime is exposed. The phrases are used to position tax policies as a burdensome and inconsistent and thus leading to frustrations. At the same time through the use of phrases like, “we don’t actually get to see where the money is going” communicates skepticism and distrust in the government and indicates lack of transparency on the part of the government.

A pragmatic analysis of the text through the use of speech acts used in the text to complain about the tax such as, “We are uncomfortable.... With every time...Tax hike every year” the expression is used to show dissatisfaction with the current tax regime. Rationalization is used through the use of the phrase, “It is not that we do not want to pay tax”. The phrase is purposely used to indicate the speaker’s willingness to pay taxes in order to meet the social obligation expected of a citizen thus framing the speakers position as rational. There is some level of criticism brought out in the text for example the phrase, “we do not get to see where the money is going”. This phrase reveals that there is perceived lack of transparency and accountability in the way revenue from taxes collected is used.

Discursive strategies used to frame the issue of tax include those used to show willingness to pay taxes but at the same time resistance to opaque and unfair practices of accounting for the tax. This is reflected through the use of the phrase, “it is not that we do not want to pay taxes”, this positions the speaker as rational rather than oppositional. Accountability frame is brought out through the phrase, “ We don’t actually see where the money is going”. This phrase frames the government as lacking transparency thus justifying public discontent.

In the extract identity is created through the use of collective pronoun, “ we” to position the activists with the larger public. The implication of this identity creation is to show that the grievances and frustrations brought about by the Finance bill 2024 are shared and thus it is used to create solidarity. The tone that is brought out in the text is both measured and reflective; this is achieved through the use of a calm and rational tone thus avoiding aggressive or overt hostility. The style used is conversational which is attained through the use of informal phrases such as, “ every time” ... something different” shows everyday speech, making the sentiments raised about the finance Bill 2024 easily relatable to the rest of the citizens experiences. Through the use of the conversational style the speaker is able to engage with a wider audience through maintaining accessibility. Power relations and resistance to power is brought out in the text through the careful selection of lexical and semantic choices. The words are used carefully to critique authority without directly attacking them. A classic example of this is, “we don’t actually see where the money is going...” implying

that there is a weakness in governance without specifically apportioning blame on specific individuals.

The text is placed in a social and political context which applies to the larger society beyond the Kenyan context. In the economic context the text reveals the frustrations which are common in all societies where taxes are hiked frequently but are not commensurate with the services offered to the citizens. In the political context, trust in government is brought out through the phrase,..”not seeing where the money is going” thus indicating perceived lack of transparency an issue that is found in most governance discourses.

Furthermore, the text can be situated within broader discourses surrounding taxation and social contract where citizens expect tax contributions to have an impact on service delivery. The failure of the government to live up to the expectations of the citizens may result in resistance and disengagement. The issue of public accountability which runs through the text is used to highlight the importance of the government in ensuring transparency and cooperation. Lastly the concept of youth activism and protests is significant in this excerpt as used in the context of demonstrations against the finance bill 2024 as it indicates the major grievances during the protests.

In conclusion it is important to note that the text carefully employs measured language and collective framing to critique taxation policies while putting emphasis on the unmet expectations of the public in terms of transparency and fairness. The text indicates how discourse can be used to balance dissatisfaction while maintaining civic responsibility and thus encouraging reflection and dialogue instead of direct conflict.

Except 3 Personal story

One of the things that did the strike close home, is fact that they increased taxes on cancer treatment. Personally, I have had a relative or someone close to me... undergo that treatment and it is not cheap.

In excerpt 3, Gen Z activists personalize the taxation of cancer treatments to emphasize its broader impact, showing that the issue affects many, not just themselves. By using vague terms like ‘someone close to him’, they make the problem relatable, particularly for those with loved ones facing similar struggles. The use of the term “relative or someone closer to me” is used to establish as personal connection to the issue of cancer treatment and thus reinforcing its emotional effect. This builds a sense of sympathy and solidarity by showing shared experiences. The use of lexical item, “strike closer home” is used as a metaphor to indicate emotional proximity and personal impact on the effects of the Finance bill 2024 at a personal level. Also, through the use of the phrase,” taxes on cancer treatment,” focus is put on a specific and sensitive issue of cancer treatment, putting emphasis on the ethical and moral dynamics of taxing healthcare. This phrase frames the tax hike as unjust due to its impact on the vulnerable in the society.

Reference to cancer treatment as, “not cheap” implies and draws attention of the policy makers to the fact that cancer treatment has a financial burden on the citizenry without specifically indicating the costs. The use of ambiguity leaves room for speculation on the actual costs for the readers to imagine the severity of the financial strain. The issue of healthcare is framed as a moral issue through various discursive strategies. The text frames taxation on cancer treatment as a violation of ethical standards given the threatening nature of the disease. This is clearly brought out through the phrase, “They increased taxes on cancer treatment” this puts the government position of taxing the cancer treatment as lacking empathy and putting priority on taxes revenue rather than lives of individuals.

The speaker does not directly attack the government but rather uses indirect critique to do so through the use of such phrases, “it is not cheap”. The effect of this is that the speaker able to subtly condemn government policies that cause suffering and pain on the people. The speaker further through the careful selection of lexical and semantic features evokes empathy through the use of personalization which invites readers to reflect on similar situations creating a sense of shared humanity. Through highlighting the taxation on cancer treatment, the speaker is able to evoke a sense of outrage at the perceived injustice by the government.

The issue of language and power is highlighted in the text by focusing on healthcare; the text criticizes the disproportionality of tax only affecting the vulnerable especially those suffering from cancer. In the phrase, “They increased tax on cancer treatment” the pronoun “they “implicitly distances the vulnerable from the imposers of tax. There is also an aspect of empowerment of the vulnerable, since the speaker in the text advocated for protecting the rights of patients and their families against the exploitative tax policies.

The tone as reflected in the text is emotional indicating both sorrow and frustration as brought out through the phrase “personally I have heard a relative”. Through the use of the phrase the speaker is able to engage with the audience emotionally making the issue relatable with the rest of the audience. The style is informal and relatable which is achieved through a conversational style (“not cheap”) which makes the narrative accessible and grounded in everyday conversations among the people.

Power imbalance is brought out in the text by highlighting the disparity between the government policies (taxation decisions) and the everyday experiences of the ordinary citizens especially the vulnerable who have to battle with illnesses such as cancer. At the same time there is resistance to those in power by sharing the personal story the speaker is resisting dehumanizing policies and demanding compassion in policy making by the government.

On a broader social context, the text highlights the issue of inequality in health care access which is made worse by the rising costs of living and thus affecting the lower income earners. On the political landscape taxation as a policy issue on cancer treatment indicates dissatisfaction with government priorities especially where life life-saving treatment is involved. At the economic context, health care costs are indicated as unaffordable and yet made worse by additional taxation thus pointing out to continues economic challenges in health care access.

The ideological implications of the excerpt point out to the need to humanize the discourse surrounding taxation to change the discussion on tax from abstract numbers to real life consequences, prioritizing human life to fiscal priorities. The text puts on focus the issue of capitalism in healthcare through the example on the rising costs on treatment. By implication the system where healthcare is commodified is perceived to result in exacerbating inequality.

In conclusion the text employs personal narrative, emotional appeals and indirect critique to frame taxation on cancer treatment as morally and socially unacceptable. It brings out the discourse disconnect between government decisions and the experiences of citizens especially those suffering from cancer. Through the use of the discursive strategies the text is able to position itself as the voice of resistance advocating for fairness and accountability in policy making.

Excerpt 4 Direct Speech to the public

Down down with the rule of the jungle.

Down down with the rule of neocolonialism.

We are here in solidarity to tell the police and remind them that their intimidation tactics will not work on the people of Kenya.

We are here to remind these imperialists, these servants of the capitalists who only care for the highest bidder, that we will not be intimidated.

We want to send a resounding message to people who are dispersing people's assembly, thinking that they will break our spirit... that we remain...

Gen Z activists use symbolic and emphatic language to critique the police and government, anchoring their protests within a broader ideological discourse. Through metaphors like 'rule of the jungle' and 'rule of neocolonialism', they depict governance as chaotic and exploitative, highlighting systemic issues. The repetition of phrases such as 'Down with...' serves as a rallying point, reinforcing unity and determination in their resistance. Terms like 'imperialists' and 'servants of capitalists' are employed to critique the police and government supporters, positioning these groups as agents of oppression. This language draws on anti-colonial and anti-capitalist themes, situating their opposition to the Finance Bill 2024 within a global context of resistance against exploitation. By invoking historical and ideological struggles, the activists strengthen their moral argument, linking their grievances to universal calls for justice and equity. Phrases like 'we will not be intimidated' and 'we will remain' convey resilience and collective commitment,

emphasizing their role as active participants in advocating for societal change. Their portrayal of the government as corrupt and serving elite interests contrasts with their own image as advocates for fairness and equality. This rhetorical strategy elevates their protests, positioning them as defenders of marginalized groups.

Excerpt 5 Direct Speech to the public

Ruto must go, we demand for his immediate resignation, we will not rest until justice is done. We cannot continue witnessing the wake of abduction, the wake of police killings, the wake of corruption...

In Extract 5, Gen Z activists employ the use of repetition and collective pronouns to demand the president's resignation, reflecting moral conviction and rejection of the government's actions. Repetition, such as 'The wake of abduction, the wake of police killings, the wake of corruption', emphasizes the persistence of systemic injustices and fosters a sense of urgency, appealing to public empathy and shared outrage. The use of the collective pronoun 'we' highlights solidarity and collective action, framing the protests as a united front rather than isolated grievances, thereby enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of their cause. Imperative statements like 'Ruto must go' and 'we demand his immediate resignation' convey an unwavering and determined stance, underscoring their resolve to achieve change. Key terms like 'abduction', 'police killings and 'corruption' depict the government's actions as oppressive and unjust, while simultaneously positioning the activists as advocates for justice and human rights. The government is portrayed as corrupt, violent, and unaccountable, in contrast to the activists, who are depicted as principled and determined to secure fairness. By presenting the government as morally bankrupt and the president's leadership as harmful, the activists assert themselves as resolute agents of justice, rallying public support against systemic oppression

Excerpt 6 An interview between a journalist covering the demonstrations and 2 protestors

Journalist: So, is this a fleeting moment or the start of a sustained movement?

Protestor 1: It is a continuous thing because we were here on Tuesday, we are here now again. Unless the policies are changing, unless they actually see what we are saying and why we are on the streets, it will keep on coming.

Protestor 2: Gen Z like accountability. You promise us this and you are not delivering, why? We need to hold you accountable, so, it is definitely not a fleeting moment. Once we are done with this, definitely... talking about recalling MPs and yeah ... let's see how that's gonna go.

In Excerpt 6, Gen Z activists use strategic language to shape public perceptions of their movement and the government. Repetition, such as 'we were here on Tuesday, we are here now again', highlights their persistence and determination. The direct question, 'You promise us this and you

are not delivering, why?’ holds the government accountable for unfulfilled promises, emphasizing a demand for transparency. The pronoun ‘we’ fosters a sense of collective identity, framing the protest as a unified generational effort. The statement ‘unless the policies are changing...’ shifts the responsibility for resolution to the government’s ability to enact reforms. By asserting that ‘Gen Z like accountability’, the activists underscore their focus on integrity and differentiate themselves from older generations. These linguistic strategies present the protestors as unified, determined, and committed to systemic change, while the government is portrayed as unresponsive and lacking trustworthiness.

Excerpt 7 use of roleplay between two demonstrators; an interviewee taking up the role of the president of Kenya and an interviewer acting as a journalist interrogating the former.

Journalist: So Mr. President, when will you stop lying?

President: Where is the lie?

Journalist: You promised the youth free Wifi.

President: My friend, wakati tulichukua usukani 2022, ok... Tulipata bei ya unga ikiwa 260/=...ukweli si ukweli?(when we took over leadership in 2022,.....we got the price of maize flour was kshs 260True or false?)

Journalist: Stick to my question.

President: Na wakati sisi tulichukua usukani, hiyo unga tulishukisha bei kutoka 260/=, saa hizi iko shilingi 110/= (when we took over leadership, the price of maize flour has dropped from kshs 260 to kshs 110) . (It is on record, you can go there to your nearest Kiosk, sawa sawa?)

Journalist: Stick to my question.

President: What was your question?

Journalist: About the free Wifi..

President: So, I personally, tulienda pale Ruiru na MP wa Ruiru, tukafungua an ICT hub, that is employing over 5000 Kenyans who are willing to work online. Wee unadhani hiyo ni mchezo? (so personally , we went with the MP for Ruiru and opened an ICT hub)

.(You think that is a joke.....)

Journalist: Stick to my question.

President: Wee unanielewa.. wakati tulichukua usukani tulipata bei ya fertilizer ikiwa shilingi elfu saba.(do you understand.... When we took over leadership the price of fertilizer was seven thousand shillings).

Journalist: Mr. President, stick to my question.

President: Sijui kama unanielewa,(I don't know whether you understand me) let me finish ...

Excerpt 7 features a roleplay between two demonstrators - one playing the role of the president, the other a journalist - employing language to critique the president’s failure to fulfill promises made to the youth. The journalist’s direct questions, such as ‘when will you stop lying?’ and ‘where is the lie?’ challenge the president’s credibility and demand accountability. Repetition, of the

phrase ‘stick to my question’, underscores frustration with evasive responses. The president’s code-switching between English and Kiswahili highlights a rhetorical style aimed at broader appeal, while topic-switching - deflecting from free Wi-Fi promises to issues like maize flour and fertilizer prices - signals an avoidance of youth concerns. The protestors’ language portrays them as focused and persistent in holding the government accountable for unaddressed commitments. The government through the responses of the president is portrayed as dishonest and unaccountable.

Excerpt 8 Biblical verse

Kitabu ya Isaiah 10:1 inasema, Ole wenu mnaotunga sheria isiyo ya haki. Watu mnaopitisha sheria za kugandamiza. Mnaonyima maskini haki zao. Hapo neno la Mungu linasema, nyinyi mnaofanya kazi hiyo mtajificha wapi adhabu ya Mungu itakapokuja. (Woe to those who make unjust laws... that oppress my people. That is how you ... what will you do on the day of reckoning)

Excerpt 8 integrates a Kiswahili verse from the Bible (Isaiah 10:1) to enhance the legitimacy of the Gen Z protestors’ message and broaden their appeal. The verse condemns unjust laws, aligning with the activists’ opposition to the Finance Bill 2024. Several linguistic strategies, such as direct address in phrases like ‘woe to those who make unjust laws’, set a confrontational tone and signal condemnation. The repetition of terms like ‘unjust laws’, ‘oppressive decrees’ and ‘deprived’ reinforces themes of injustice and oppression, portraying the government as morally negligent. Juxtaposing the powerful with the vulnerable highlights the government’s failure to protect the poor, while positioning the activists as moral defenders of justice and the oppressed

Excerpt 9 A government official’s remarks

They are politically motivated. The budget has already been amended by the committee to represent the views by Kenyans. And I love the fact that the organizers have put in place contacts and every detail that you will need to make this protest successful.

Excerpt 9 introduces a ‘Politically Instigated’ frame, portraying youth activism as driven by political agendas rather than genuine concerns. This frame undermines the legitimacy of the protests by suggesting that young people are manipulated by powerful figures, such as politicians or business leaders. It diminishes their agency, casting them as naive and easily influenced, while framing their activism as irrelevant and destabilizing, thus marginalizing their voices and dismissing their grievances

Excerpt 10 An entry of the definition of ‘Gen Z’ from @ Kenyan Dictionary

@ Kenyan dictionary

Gen Z

(n) How the Government went from defining them as ‘fake digital activists’ to ‘fake A.I protestors’ to rich spoilt brats to ‘our children’ and now ‘treason us criminals’ within a week is beyond us.

They are just Kenyans who want to be heard! Not be labeled and murdered.

#RejecttheFinanceBill2024.

The discourse employs a ‘dangerous youth’ frame to discredit Gen Z activists by labeling them as ‘fake digital activists’, ‘rich spoilt brats’ and ‘treasonous criminals’. These derogatory terms undermine their concerns, suggesting that their activism is driven by privilege, insincerity or misguided rebellion. The label ‘treasonous criminals’ further associates their protests with violence, framing them as a destabilizing force. This portrayal delegitimizes their movement, discourages public support and justifies repressive actions. It reinforces harmful stereotypes, marginalizes youth voices and suppresses their civic participation, maintaining control over dissent.

Excerpt 11 The President’s remarks

I will not sign the 2024 Finance bill and it shall subsequently be withdrawn and I have agreed with these members that becomes our collective position.

In Excerpt 11, the president announces he will not sign the Finance Bill 2024, using assertive declarative statements like ‘I will not sign’ to convey confidence and decisiveness. This language portrays the president as responsive to citizens’ concerns, particularly those raised by Gen Z activists. The use of future tense, with ‘shall’ reinforces the government’s intention to act, presenting it as forward-thinking and attentive to public feedback. The formal tone emphasizes authority, suggesting the government is adaptable. While not directly acknowledged, the influence of Gen Z activists is implied, framing their efforts as impactful and encouraging further activism.

Summary of findings

The study reveals that Gen Z activists employ specific linguistic strategies to shape public perceptions of their protests and the government. Through the use of repetition, collective pronouns and direct address, activists emphasize solidarity, moral conviction and persistence.

They often employ negation and rhetorical questions to highlight perceived injustices, portraying the government as unresponsive and disconnected from citizens’ needs. Furthermore, metaphors and rhetorical defiance are used to frame the government’s actions as oppressive, while positioning the activists as moral agents advocating for justice. In contrast, government officials often employ formal and assertive language to present themselves as responsive, strengthening their public image while downplaying or deflecting concerns raised by activists.

These findings are in line with the theory (Entman, 1993) which guided the study which states that the media selects and emphasizes certain aspects of reality while downplaying others to shape public perception. In the context of the study language such as repetition, collective pronouns and direct address are used by the activists to emphasize solidarity, moral conviction and persistence while downplaying the issue of the finance bill 2024 as unjust and exploitative. On the other hand, the government through the use of assertive and formal language it emphasizes the fact that the government is responsive and caring while downplaying the effects of the finance bill on the citizens.

Implications to Research and Practice

This study has key implications for research and practice. For scholars, it expands literature on digital activism, youth political engagement and the role of language in shaping discourse, highlighting the need to explore activism beyond TikTok in diverse contexts. It also emphasizes the need to assess misinformation and framing in online spaces. For practitioners, including policymakers and activists, the findings offer insights into leveraging digital platforms for civic engagement and policy advocacy. Understanding Gen Z's communicative strategies can inform more effective youth-centered messaging. Addressing misinformation and audience reach challenges can enhance digital activism's credibility and impact on governance and policy decisions.

CONCLUSION

The linguistic strategies used by both Gen Z activists and government representatives significantly influence public perceptions. Activists' use of rhetorical techniques such as repetition and metaphor help amplify their demands and frame the government as negligent, which strengthens their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. On the other hand, government representatives rely on assertive and formal language to project confidence and authority, which can be seen as an attempt to regain control of the narrative. However, activists' effective use of social media as a platform for shaping discourse shows the potential of new media in influencing public opinion and policy outcomes. The theory that guided the study concurs with the conclusions of the study since through the use of language narratives are constructed which eventually influence public perception and mobilize support around the finance bill 2024.

Recommendations and Future Research

Given the power of language in shaping public perception, it is recommended that activists continue to leverage rhetorical strategies that emphasize collective identity, moral responsibility, and urgency. For government representatives, acknowledging and addressing the concerns raised by activists through more transparent communication could foster a more open and responsive relationship with the public. For media outlets, reporting on such movements without perpetuating biased narratives, providing a more balanced view of both sides should be encouraged. Future research should explore how digital activism evolves across different social media platforms and political contexts beyond TikTok. Comparative studies can examine cross-platform dynamics, while longitudinal research can assess the long-term impact of digital activism on policy outcomes.

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