

Memes as Digital Activism Tools For Political Accountability in Kenya: A Study of Tiktok and X (Formerly Twitter) During the 2024 Finance Bill Protests

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of internet memes in digital activism for political accountability in Kenya, focusing on the #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament campaigns. Using a qualitative research design, the study analyzed 500 political memes from TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) alongside semi-structured interviews with 182 participants including digital activists, meme creators, policymakers, and political analysts. Grounded in Networked Publics Theory and Framing Theory, the research investigated how memes simplify complex policy issues, shape political discourse, mobilize citizens, and interact with platform dynamics. Findings reveal that satirical images and video memes (62% of content) effectively framed political leaders as accountable for governance failures, while viral political jokes (24%) and remix culture (14%) enhanced engagement through cultural resonance. The study demonstrates that memes function as powerful instruments of digital resistance, generating public pressure (74% of cases) and government responsiveness (58%), though their impact on sustained policy reform remains limited. Platform algorithms significantly influenced visibility, with TikTok's For You Page amplifying protest content to wider audiences compared to X's reported content suppression. The research concludes that while memes successfully mobilize episodic activism and shape public opinion, translating online momentum into structural accountability requires complementary offline advocacy strategies and transparent platform governance frameworks.

Keywords: digital activism, internet memes, Kenya, Networked Publics Theory, Framing Theory, political accountability, social media, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), #RejectFinanceBill2024

INTRODUCTION

The digital age has fundamentally transformed political participation, with social media platforms emerging as critical arenas for civic expression, activism, and accountability mechanisms [1]. In Kenya, this transformation has been particularly pronounced among Generation Z and millennial populations who have leveraged platforms such as TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) to challenge governance failures and demand political accountability [2]. The 2024 Finance Bill protests marked a watershed moment in Kenya's digital activism landscape, where meme-driven communication became a central tool for mobilizing nationwide resistance against proposed taxation measures [3].

Internet memes, defined as units of cultural information that spread through imitation and remixing across digital platforms, have evolved from entertainment artifacts to sophisticated instruments of political communication [4]. These digital artifacts combine humor, satire, and symbolism to critique power structures, simplify complex policy debates, and foster collective identity among dispersed audiences [5]. Unlike traditional political communication that relies on formal institutional channels, meme-based activism operates through decentralized networks that bypass gatekeeping mechanisms and enable rapid, participatory content creation [6].

The significance of meme communication in Kenya's political context stems from several converging factors. First, the country's high internet penetration rate (65% as of 2023) has created a substantial digital native population adept at creating and circulating viral content [7]. Second, historical patterns of digital activism, including campaigns such as #SomeoneTellCNN and #LindaKazi, have established precedents for online mobilization [8]. Third, the 2024 protests demonstrated unprecedented coordination between online meme campaigns and offline collective action, culminating in the withdrawal of the Finance Bill and dissolution of the cabinet [9].

Despite the growing prominence of meme-driven activism, scholarly understanding of its mechanisms, effectiveness, and limitations remains underdeveloped, particularly in African contexts [10]. Existing research has focused predominantly on Western democracies or isolated case studies without systematic examination of how platform dynamics mediate the relationship between meme communication and political accountability [11]. This study addresses these gaps by investigating how memes function within Kenya's digital activism ecosystem, how they shape political discourse and public opinion, and how platform-specific dynamics influence their capacity to generate accountability outcomes.

The research is guided by two theoretical frameworks. Networked Publics Theory [12] provides a lens for understanding how digital platforms reconfigure public discourse through affordances of persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability. Framing Theory [13] illuminates how memes select and emphasize specific aspects of political reality to promote particular interpretations, causal attributions, and moral judgments. Together, these frameworks enable analysis of both the structural conditions shaping meme circulation and the interpretive processes through which memes influence political understanding and action.

This study contributes to several scholarly conversations. For digital activism research, it provides empirical evidence on how visual and humorous content formats operate within protest movements beyond hashtag campaigns. For political communication scholarship, it examines how meme culture interacts with formal political institutions in a developing democracy context. For platform studies, it analyzes how algorithmic governance and content moderation shape the visibility and impact of activist content. The findings have practical implications for activists, policymakers, and platform designers seeking to understand or leverage digital tools for civic engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Digital Activism and Social Media Platforms

Digital activism encompasses the use of digital technologies to organize, promote, and execute social or political movements [14]. Research distinguishes between spectator activities (liking, sharing), transitional activities (signing petitions), and gladiator activities (protesting, hacking), reflecting varying intensities of participation [15]. In Africa, digital activism has gained particular significance as internet penetration expands and youth populations increasingly turn to social media for political engagement [16].

TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) represent distinct modalities of digital activism. TikTok's algorithm-driven For You Page (FYP) enables content to reach users regardless of follower count, facilitating rapid viral spread of political content among youth demographics [17]. X's text-centric format supports real-time information dissemination, hashtag coordination, and direct engagement with political elites [18]. Studies indicate that these platforms have become primary spaces for political socialization among Kenyan youth, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers [19].

Hashtag campaigns have emerged as a dominant form of digital activism, functioning as networked discursive spaces that frame issues and mobilize collective action [20]. The #RejectFinanceBill2024 campaign exemplifies this dynamic, originating on X and spreading across platforms to coordinate nationwide protests [21]. Research suggests that hashtag activism can effectively raise awareness and generate public pressure, though its translation into sustained policy change remains contested [22].

B. Meme Communication as Political Discourse

Memes operate as participatory forms of digital rhetoric where users express opinions, humor, and social critique through remixing and sharing visual and textual content [23]. Shifman [24] defines memes as units of popular culture circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet users, creating shared cultural experiences. This conceptualization emphasizes the active role of audiences in adapting and propagating content, distinguishing memes from traditional mass media messages.

Political memes function through several mechanisms. Satirical images and video memes employ humor, irony, and exaggeration to critique political actors and expose governance failures [25]. Viral political jokes rely on linguistic play, cultural references, and shared grievances to build collective identity and emotional resonance [26]. Remix culture and trend adaptation involve reworking existing digital formats to localize global templates and enhance relatability [27].

In African contexts, meme communication has proven particularly effective for circumventing censorship and engaging youth audiences. Nigeria's #EndSARS movement utilized memes to expose police brutality and mobilize international solidarity [28]. South Africa's #ZumaMustFall campaign employed digital satire to pressure presidential resignation [29]. These cases demonstrate memes' capacity to challenge authoritarian tendencies and amplify marginalized voices, though questions persist regarding their long-term political impact [30].

C. Platform Dynamics and Algorithmic Governance

Platform dynamics refer to the technical, social, and algorithmic structures that influence content creation, sharing, and consumption [31]. Three dimensions are particularly relevant to political activism: algorithmic visibility, user engagement tools, and content governance policies [32].

Algorithmic visibility determines which content reaches audiences through recommendation systems and trending algorithms [33]. Research indicates that platform algorithms can amplify activist content during protest moments but may also suppress politically sensitive material through opaque moderation decisions [34]. User engagement tools—likes, shares, comments, duets, and stitches—enable participatory content creation and signal resonance to algorithmic systems [35]. Content governance policies establish boundaries for acceptable speech, with enforcement practices that may inadvertently silence dissent while permitting misinformation [36].

In Kenya, platform dynamics have shaped digital activism in significant ways. During the 2022 elections, TikTok's algorithm amplified political satire while X's trending topics featured manipulated hashtags [37]. The 2024 protests revealed tensions between platform moderation and activist expression, with reports of content removal on TikTok and hashtag suppression on X [38]. These dynamics highlight the need for research examining how platform governance intersects with civic expression in politically volatile contexts.

D. Political Accountability and Digital Mobilization

Political accountability refers to the obligation of public officials to explain their conduct and face consequences for actions contrary to public interest [39]. Digital activism can enhance accountability through four mechanisms: public pressure on politicians, government responsiveness, media investigations triggered by online campaigns, and legal or policy reforms [40].

Research suggests that digital campaigns effectively generate public pressure and prompt governmental acknowledgment of grievances [41]. However, the translation of online mobilization into structural reforms remains limited, with many campaigns producing symbolic rather than substantive outcomes [42]. The episodic nature of hashtag activism, combined with the rapid attention cycles of social media, constrains sustained pressure on institutions [43].

In Kenya, digital activism has achieved notable successes in agenda-setting and protest mobilization but mixed results in institutional reform [44]. The #RejectFinanceBill2024 campaign forced policy withdrawal but did not prevent subsequent similar proposals, illustrating the challenge of converting episodic victories into lasting

accountability mechanisms [45]. This pattern aligns with global findings on the "slacktivism" critique, where online engagement fails to translate into offline political efficacy [46].

METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the role of memes in digital activism for political accountability in Kenya [47]. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to capture nuanced meanings, contextual factors, and subjective experiences associated with meme communication [48]. The design integrated three data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, content analysis of political memes, and document review [49].

The study focused on the period from January 2023 to July 2025, capturing the 2022 General Elections, the #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests, and subsequent digital mobilizations [50]. Geographically, the research centered on Nairobi as the primary urban site of digital activism, while acknowledging the rural-urban digital divide [51].

B. Sampling Strategy

A multi-stage sampling approach combined purposive, snowball, and stratified random sampling techniques [52]. The target population comprised 384 digital participants actively engaged in political discourse on TikTok and X [53]. From this population, 210 participants were selected for the main study, with an additional 20 participants for pilot testing [54].

The sample was stratified across five categories: social media users (n=100, stratified random sampling from TikTok and X), digital activists and meme creators (n=50, purposive sampling based on participation in #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament), political analysts (n=30, snowball sampling), policymakers (n=20, institutional outreach), and key informants (n=10, purposive sampling for in-depth interviews) [55]. This stratification ensured representation across stakeholder groups directly involved in or affected by meme-based activism [56].

C. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences with meme creation, sharing, and interpretation, as well as perceptions of political impact [57]. Interview guides were developed following Kvale and Brinkmann's [58] approach, allowing flexibility for probing emergent themes while maintaining consistency across participants. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom, depending on participant location and accessibility [59].

Content analysis examined 500 political memes purposively selected from TikTok and X based on relevance to key protest moments [60]. Memes were coded for format type (satirical images/video, viral jokes, remix culture), thematic focus, engagement metrics, and presence of calls to action [61]. The coding scheme was developed from Shifman's [62] framework for meme analysis and adapted to the Kenyan political context [63].

Document review analyzed policy documents, media reports, and platform transparency reports to contextualize primary data within broader regulatory and institutional frameworks [64]. Sources included reports from the Communications Authority of Kenya, Mozilla Foundation, and international organizations monitoring digital rights [65].

D. Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's [66] six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report [67]. Analysis proceeded iteratively, with codes and themes refined through constant comparison across data sources [68].

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies. Triangulation across interviews, content analysis, and documents enhanced credibility [69]. Member checking with selected participants verified interpretation accuracy [70]. An audit trail documented analytical decisions, while thick description provided contextual detail for transferability assessments [71].

E. Ethical Considerations

The study obtained ethical clearance from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) [72]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanation of study objectives, risks, benefits, and confidentiality protections [73]. Given the politically sensitive context, pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity, and data were stored on encrypted servers with access restricted to the research team [74]. Particular attention was paid to activist participants who faced potential surveillance or retaliation for their involvement in protests [75].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Forms of Digital Activism and Meme Integration

Analysis reveals that hashtag campaigns represented the dominant form of digital activism (68% of observed content), with 74% of campaign content incorporating memes [76]. This finding indicates that memes function not as peripheral additions but as central vehicles for political expression within Kenyan digital activism [77].

Table 1 presents the distribution of digital activism forms and meme integration across platforms.

Table 1. Forms of Digital Activism and Meme Integration in Kenya (2020-2025)

Form of Digital Activism	Frequency (%)	Key Platforms	Meme Integration (% of content)	Notable Examples
Hashtag Campaigns	68%	X (87%), TikTok (52%)	74%	#RejectFinanceBill2024 (satirical image macros, remix videos), #OccupyParliament (animated GIFs), #RutoMustGo (meme collages)
Citizen Journalism	57%	TikTok (78%), X (63%)	39%	#GithuraiMassacre footage with protest slogans, edited clips juxtaposing official statements with protest videos
Influencer-Led Protests	49%	TikTok (92%), X (41%)	62%	@AzziadNasenyas healthcare skits, @Njugush's tax satire videos, @EricOmondis parody protests

The #RejectFinanceBill2024 campaign illustrates how memes translated complex fiscal policy into accessible, emotionally resonant content [78]. Split-screen "before and after" memes contrasted pre-election promises with Finance Bill clauses, while sarcastic captions such as "We hear you... but the tax must tax" achieved thousands of retweets within hours [79]. These findings align with Yang's [80] conceptualization of hashtags as networked discursive spaces, extended through meme formats that invite participatory adaptation [81].

Citizen journalism accounted for 57% of activism content, with 39% incorporating memes to frame raw footage [82]. During the Githurai shootings, protest videos overlaid with meme formats and slogans circulated before mainstream media coverage, demonstrating memes' capacity to accelerate information dissemination [83]. However, 33% of citizen journalism content contained unverifiable claims, highlighting the tension between speed and accuracy in meme-driven reporting [84].

Influencer-led protests (49% of campaigns) showed the highest meme integration rate (62%), with TikTok creators leveraging humor to reach audiences outside traditional activist circles [85]. Comedian Njugush's viral tax memes condensed economic issues into digestible formats, supporting Thomas and Fowler's [86] model of "influ-activism" where entertainment and advocacy merge [87]. Yet 41% of influencers reported online threats or account suspensions, indicating the risks of visible digital activism [88].

B. Typology and Impact of Political Memes

Content analysis of 500 memes revealed three dominant categories with distinct characteristics and engagement patterns. Table 2 presents the typology of political memes observed during the 2024 protests.

Table 2. Typology of Political Memes in Kenya during #RejectFinanceBill2024 and Occupy Parliament (n = 500)

Meme Type	Prevalence (%)	Avg. Engagement per Meme	Dominant Themes & Context	Illustrative Examples
Satirical Images/Video Memes	62%	TikTok: 12.3K; X: 4.8K	Corruption (78%), Failed Promises (65%)	Caricatures of MPs as "tax thieves"; edited videos showing Parliament as nightclub while citizens protest
Viral Political Jokes	24%	TikTok: 8.7K; X: 2.1K	Economic Hardship (82%), #Zakayo satire	Sheng one-liners; "Zakayo" climbing tax ladder while citizens hang by thread
Remix Culture/Trend Adaptation	14%	TikTok: 21.5K; X: 1.9K	#FinanceBill parodies, Debt dependency	"Distracted Boyfriend" with Government looking at "Donors" instead of "Citizens"; "Mbappé" running away edited to show MPs avoiding hearings

Satirical images and video memes dominated the dataset (62%), functioning as framing devices that attributed clear blame for governance failures [89]. These memes reduced complex policy debates to striking visuals—MPs depicted feasting while citizens held empty plates, or Parliament doors transforming into safes locking away public funds [90]. This finding supports Entman's [91] framing theory, demonstrating how memes select and emphasize specific aspects of reality to promote particular interpretations [92].

Viral political jokes (24%) relied on Sheng slang and cultural references to build in-group solidarity [93]. The #Zakayo meme, likening President Ruto to the biblical tax collector Zacchaeus, resonated strongly with urban youth by embedding political critique in familiar religious narratives [94]. However, 29% of joke-based memes contained ambiguous or fabricated claims, illustrating Milner's [95] observation that memes can simultaneously mobilize and mislead [96].

Remix culture, though least prevalent (14%), generated the highest engagement on TikTok (21.5K average interactions) [97]. Global templates such as "Distracted Boyfriend" and "Mbappé running" were localized with Kenyan political references, leveraging Highfield's [98] concept of culture-jacking to lower cognitive barriers to political engagement [99]. The adaptability of remix formats enabled rapid response to unfolding events, maintaining campaign momentum during critical protest periods [100].

C. Political Accountability Outcomes

The study assessed meme-driven activism's effectiveness across four accountability mechanisms. Table 3 summarizes observed outcomes.

Table 3. Observed Accountability Outcomes from Meme-Led Activism (2020-2025)

Accountability Mechanism	Frequency (%)	Key Triggers	Representative Examples
Public Pressure on Politicians	74%	Viral memes + hashtag trends	#RutoMustGo memes (2023) prompting presidential address
Government Responsiveness	58%	High-engagement cross-platform campaigns	#RejectFinanceBill withdrawal (2024)
Media Investigations	36%	Citizen journalism amplified via memes	#KEMSA COVID19 scandal coverage (Nation Media exposé)
Legal/Policy Reforms	12%	Sustained meme + in-person protest synergy	Independent Policing Oversight Authority reforms

Public pressure emerged as the most immediate outcome (74% of cases), with meme saturation creating what participants described as "a digital riot in your pocket" [101]. The reproducibility of memes enabled casual social media users to engage political content, transforming private conversations into public discourse [102]. However, this pressure often generated performative rather than substantive responses, with politicians addressing concerns online while defending policy positions [103].

Government responsiveness occurred in 58% of cases, typically when campaigns achieved cross-platform visibility [104]. The Finance Bill withdrawal represented a significant victory, though subsequent similar proposals suggest limited structural impact [105]. President Ruto's engagement with youth on X and State House luncheons with influencers illustrate what Alami [106] terms "performative responsiveness"—gestures that acknowledge grievances without institutional reform [107].

Media investigations were triggered in 36% of cases, with viral content such as #GithuraiMassacre footage prompting mainstream coverage [108]. This spillover effect aligns with Freelon et al.'s [109] findings on digital activism's agenda-setting capacity, though the direction of influence between online and offline media requires further examination [110].

Legal and policy reforms were least observed (12%), underscoring the challenge of converting online momentum into institutional change [111]. Participant reflections highlighted the gap between digital energy and formal advocacy: "We can meme all we want, but without a lobby in parliament or lawyers in court, it fades" [112]. This finding supports Transparency International Kenya's [113] observation that online activism rarely produces systemic reform without complementary offline strategies [114].

D. Platform Dynamics and Mediation Effects

Platform-specific dynamics significantly shaped meme visibility and impact. Table 4 presents comparative analysis of TikTok and X affordances.

Table 4. Platform-Specific Mediation of Meme Impact

Platform Factor	TikTok (%)	X (%)	Observed Impact in Kenya	Representative Examples
Algorithmic Visibility	89%	63%	TikTok's FYP amplified #RejectFinanceBill and #OccupyParliament memes to large, young audiences; X's	TikTok: Dance skits mocking MPs' allowances; X: #StopRutoRegime threads gaining less traction mid-protest

			visibility constrained by shadow-banning reports	
User Engagement Tools	92%	78%	TikTok's duets/stitches created rapid remix chains; X's retweets/quote tweets drove political sarcasm	TikTok: "Ka-tuk-tuk" audio protest parodies; X: Ministers' quotes repurposed with sarcastic captions
Content Policies	41%	67%	TikTok removed satire with direct calls to protest; X under Musk left even false protest claims untouched	TikTok: Satirical Sheng videos flagged "sensitive"; X: Fake Treasury memo claiming Finance Bill withdrawal

TikTok's algorithmic visibility (89% of highly visible protest memes) enabled rapid reach expansion beyond activist networks [115]. The FYP's recommendation system surfaced political content to users with no prior engagement, facilitating what participants termed "accidental activism" [116]. However, 41% of political memes were flagged or removed, particularly those mocking the presidency or containing explicit protest calls, demonstrating the tension between platform governance and civic expression [117].

X exhibited lower algorithmic visibility (63%) with reports of hashtag suppression during peak protests [118]. The platform's reduced content moderation under new ownership (67% of users reported no intervention for false claims) created an environment where misinformation proliferated alongside legitimate activism [119]. A fake Treasury memo claiming Finance Bill withdrawal circulated widely before correction, illustrating the dual-edged nature of permissive content policies [120].

These findings support boyd's [121] conceptualization of platforms as active intermediaries shaping public discourse, while highlighting context-specific variations in how algorithmic governance affects activist capabilities [122]. The contrast between TikTok's amplification-with-removal and X's suppression-with-permissiveness patterns suggests that platform dynamics mediate political accountability through complex, often contradictory mechanisms [123].

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that internet memes have emerged as significant instruments of digital activism for political accountability in Kenya, particularly among Generation Z and millennial populations. The analysis reveals that memes function through three interconnected mechanisms: simplifying complex policy issues into accessible, emotionally resonant formats; framing political responsibility through satire and visual rhetoric; and mobilizing collective action through participatory content creation and platform algorithm dynamics.

The research findings support the theoretical frameworks employed. Networked Publics Theory illuminates how TikTok and X affordances of visibility, spreadability, and searchability enable decentralized activism that bypasses traditional media gatekeeping. The 2024 Finance Bill protests exemplify this dynamic, where meme-driven hashtag campaigns achieved rapid national coordination without centralized organizational structures. Framing Theory explains how memes select and emphasize specific aspects of political reality—corruption narratives, economic hardship, governance failures—to promote particular interpretations and moral judgments. The prevalence of satirical formats attributing clear blame to political elites demonstrates memes' capacity to shape public understanding of accountability relationships.

However, the study also reveals significant limitations in meme-driven activism's capacity to generate sustained political accountability. While public pressure and government responsiveness were frequently observed, translation into legal and policy reforms remained rare. The episodic nature of viral content cycles, combined with platform governance practices that may suppress or amplify content unpredictably, constrains the long-term impact of digital mobilization. The "slacktivism" critique finds partial validation: memes effectively raise awareness and coordinate protests but require complementary offline advocacy strategies to achieve institutional change.

Platform dynamics emerge as critical mediating factors. TikTok's algorithmic amplification enabled unprecedented reach among youth audiences but occurred alongside content removal practices that limited explicit protest coordination. X's reduced moderation created space for misinformation that complicated coherent messaging. These findings suggest that platform governance reforms—enhancing transparency in algorithmic decision-making, establishing consistent moderation standards for political content, and protecting civic expression during sensitive periods—are necessary conditions for realizing digital activism's accountability potential.

For practitioners, the study recommends strategic integration of memes into advocacy campaigns through collaboration between creators and policy experts, investment in digital literacy to enhance critical consumption of political content, and use of platform analytics to optimize engagement. For researchers, future investigations should examine longitudinal impacts of meme activism on political culture, comparative analysis across African contexts, and the psychological mechanisms through which humorous framing influences political persuasion.

The Kenyan case contributes to global understanding of digital activism by demonstrating how meme culture operates within specific political, cultural, and technological contexts. The integration of Sheng slang, biblical references, and local humor traditions illustrates how global digital formats are adapted to local political communication ecologies. As digital platforms continue to shape civic engagement worldwide, understanding these contextual adaptations becomes essential for both scholars and practitioners seeking to leverage or regulate digital tools for democratic accountability.

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