

Memes, Metaphor and Mobilisation: Innovative Language Use in Kenyan Gen-Z Protest Discourse on X during the June–July 2024 Finance Bill Protests

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Abstract

Protest movements fail or succeed depending on the strength of the language style adopted for mobilisation. This paper examines innovative language use as the creative re-purposing of existing communicative resources for a new discursive purpose. This is in line with the register of political dissent. It examines how Kenyan Generation Z (Gen-Z) protesters constructed political meaning on X (formerly Twitter) during the June–July 2024 Finance Bill protests, with the aim of describing the linguistic strategies through which humour, hybrid language and multimodal composition were deployed for political ends. Seventy-two protest artefacts - textual posts, hashtags, memes, posters, videos and screenshots collected between 18 June and 31 July 2024 - were purposively sampled and analysed through a qualitative descriptive-analytical design. The analysis identifies three overlapping strategies. Humour, satire and irony operated through satirical renaming, metaphorical reframing, ironic recontextualisation of official political language and wordplay. Hybrid and generationally coded language, drew on Sheng, code-switching, code-mixing and digitally altered spellings. Finally, symbolic and multimodal composition, was carried by imagery, memes, remix culture, posters, infographics and video. Overall, this paper observes that innovative language use involves recombining familiar verbal and visual resources into compressed, emotionally charged messages capable of rapid circulation - messages that simultaneously mobilised participation and consolidated a shared generational identity.

Key words: *Gen-Z, linguistic innovation, multimodality, protest discourse*

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I. Introduction

A useful distinction, borrowed from innovation studies, separates invention from innovation: an invention is the origination of a new idea, while an innovation is what happens once that idea is put to commercial use (Kodak, Oketch, & Matu, 2015). Political protest, on this definition, is rarely inventive in a strict sense - slogans, metaphors and satire are old tools - but they can be highly innovative, re-purposing existing linguistic and visual resources to serve a new argument. This paper treats the digital discourse of Kenyan Gen-Z protesters in the light of innovative recombination, rather than invention of language.

Modern digital platforms have expanded the possibilities for such recombination, allowing political meaning-making to draw on the interplay of language, humour, symbols, images, moving images and sound. A prior strand of Kenyan scholarship examined an adjacent instance of multimodal innovation, showing how television advertisers combined colour, gaze, gesture, graphics and music to promote commercial products to Kenyan audiences (Kodak et al., 2015; Kodak, 2017). This paper examines how a comparable form of multimodal innovation operates in a different, non-commercial register: the protest discourse used by Kenyan Gen-Z on X during the June–July 2024 Finance Bill protests.

Digital protest discourse is innovative in its deployment of multi-modes within a single communicative act, not merely in its choice of words. A protest discourse competes for attention inside a fast-moving timeline in much the same way an advertisement competes for attention inside a broadcast environment; in both cases, the message must work quickly, and often indirectly, to be noticed at all. Kodak, Oketch, and Matu (2015)

demonstrate that advertising discourse combines verbal and visual modes to construct meanings and guide audience interpretation. In digital protest discourse, this multimodal logic is adapted to a different communicative purpose: protesters combine compressed verbal messages with visually salient images, graphics, symbols and other modes so that messages can be noticed, interpreted and circulated rapidly.

The parallel with commercial advertising is therefore instructive but not exact. It has been observed that advertising can achieve persuasive effects through the careful integration of verbal and visual resources, including the use of striking phrases within a relatively sparse textual framework. In protest discourse, however, the communicative objective is not consumption but resistance, mobilisation and the construction of shared identity. What the two domains share is a multimodal communicative logic in which meaning is distributed across verbal and visual channels, requiring audiences to interpret the relationship between these resources rather than relying on language alone.

The June – July 2024 Finance Bill protests marked a significant moment in youth political mobilisation in Kenya. Street demonstrations against the proposed Finance Bill were accompanied by extensive activity on X-space, where digital communication supported the coordination of action, circulation of grievances and construction of solidarity. This convergence of online and offline mobilisation can be understood through Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) concept of connective action: a form of political participation in which personalised and easily adaptable action frames circulate through digital networks, enabling participation without requiring strong organisational control or a unified collective identity. Within this connective environment, Kenyan Gen-Z protesters developed a distinctive communicative register characterised by humour, Sheng and code-switching, multimodal visuality, and forms of meaning that frequently invited inference beyond explicit statement.

Existing research on protest discourse, digital activism and youth communication is extensive, but comparatively little of it has examined how these different communicative resources combine specifically within Kenyan Gen-Z protest discourse, or how a movement organised primarily online draws simultaneously on global digital cultures and local multilingual repertoires. This paper responds to that gap, describing the distinctive linguistic strategies of Kenyan Gen-Z protest discourse on X during the Finance Bill protests and explaining how verbal and visual resources were combined to construct resistance, coordinate mobilisation and express a shared generational identity.

II. Literature Review

Communication in a protest movement does more than transmit information: it is part of the process through which grievance is articulated, relationships are negotiated and collective identity is constructed - an identity that Melucci (1996) treats not as a fixed attribute of a movement but as an ongoing process of interaction, communication and negotiation. Framing practices help shape how political issues are interpreted and how participation is encouraged, with social media providing spaces in which movement actors and other participants construct and contest narratives (Mendelsohn et al., 2024). Analysing 1.85 million tweets concerning gun policy, immigration and LGBTQ rights, Mendelsohn et al. (2024) examined how social-movement communication accomplishes diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing tasks. Adem (2019), studying the Oromo protest movement in Ethiopia, similarly demonstrated how Oromo activists, international news media, human-rights organisations and government officials participated in competing and counter-framing processes around the movement. Both studies therefore position protest discourse as a site of contested meaning-making, but neither examines the pragmatic inferential processes through which audiences derive meanings beyond the literal content of protest messages.

A second body of work turns to the symbolic, spatial and multimodal dimensions of protest. Susánszky, Kopper, and Zsigó (2022) found that Hungarian pro-government media shaped representations of protests less through selective omission than through discrediting framing, derogatory language and iconic frames that relied on intertextual associations. Lundberg, Popovski, and Young (2024) similarly showed how the contested occupation and repurposing of urban space can itself become part of a political claim, as protesters transform streets from ordinary sites of circulation into platforms for contention. Read together, these studies demonstrate that protest meaning can be produced not only through explicit verbal framing but also through symbolic associations and the use of space — a perspective that this paper extends to the memes, posters, infographics and videos circulated by Kenyan Gen-Z on X. A related line of research examines how message framing affects participation in digitally mediated activism. Savage, Monroy-Hernandez, and Hollerer (2015), in their study of the Botivist platform, found that an upfront and direct call-to-action strategy produced the highest participation and most responses among the strategies tested. The direct strategy also achieved the highest reply rate, at 81%, and the highest proportion of on-topic volunteers, at 94%. Their findings underscore how the formulation of digital calls to action can influence participation, highlighting the importance of examining not only what protest messages communicate but also how their linguistic design shapes audience response.

A third strand addresses generational identity and youth language. Paoleti and Mujahidah (2025), in a meta-synthesis of 30 sources, found that Gen-Z and Gen Alpha slang functions as a cultural marker and identity resource, with slang also serving to define in-group boundaries. Grandez et al. (2023) catalogued the word-formation processes that shape Filipino Gen-Z slang on Facebook, including coinage, blending, clipping, borrowing and other morphological processes, with spelling change emerging as the most frequent process in their dataset. Within Kenya specifically, Gibson et al. (2024) demonstrate that Sheng is not a simplified or ad hoc form of Swahili but a variety exhibiting retention, contact-induced borrowing and systematic morphosyntactic change. Similarly, Mugun et al. (2024) found that Sheng vocabulary influences Kiswahili learning and writing even in formal secondary school instruction. Taken together, this literature establishes youth language as a structured, creative and identity-bearing resource, while the Kenyan studies demonstrate these properties specifically in Sheng. What remains underexamined is how such youth-language resources are deployed within Kenyan protest discourse, particularly in digitally mediated, multimodal activism.

Taken as a whole, this literature shows that protest discourse depends on framing, symbolism and generational language, and that digital platforms increasingly determine how such meanings circulate. What remains comparatively underexamined is how these resources combine within a single, non-Western, youth-led protest movement, and how the resulting language blends global digital culture with local multilingual repertoires. This paper addresses that gap by describing the linguistic strategies of Kenyan Gen-Z protest discourse on X during the June–July 2024 Finance Bill protests.

III. Theoretical Framework

Two complementary frameworks inform the analysis in this paper. The first is Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar, which treats visual design as a semiotic resource capable of generating meaning in its own right while also interacting with other modes, including written language. Their framework identifies representational, interactional and compositional dimensions of visual meaning and provides analytical resources for examining how elements such as colour, image, framing, salience and layout contribute to meaning-making. This framework is therefore well suited to examining how visual and verbal resources combine to construct meaning in the protest artefacts analysed here.

The second framework is Thibault's (2000) model of multimodal transcription, developed through the systematic transcription of a television advertisement. The model provides a way of representing multimodal texts as sequences unfolding over time, bringing together visual frames, kinetic action, language and sound. Its tabular organisation makes it possible to examine how different semiotic resources are synchronised and contribute to meaning within a moving text. In this study, the model complements Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar by providing a systematic means of analysing the temporal organisation of the video artefacts, particularly the interaction of gesture, movement, sound and image in the construction of political meaning.

IV. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design, combining Sandelowski's (2000, 2010) approach to qualitative description with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Data collection was confined to the digital environment of X during the period of heightened protest activity, 18 June to 31 July 2024. From an information-rich pool of eligible material, seventy-two artefacts — textual posts, hashtags, memes, screenshots, posters, infographics and videos — were purposively selected through criterion-based sampling informed by theory-based considerations (Patton, 2002), with candidates identified through protest-associated hashtags and targeted keyword searches. Selection continued until additional artefacts ceased to yield materially new linguistic patterns or themes, at which point inductive thematic saturation was judged to have been reached (Saunders et al., 2018).

Coding and thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, involving familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes, with the analytic process undertaken recursively rather than as a strictly linear sequence. Video artefacts were additionally segmented and transcribed following Thibault's (2000) model of multimodal transcription, coordinating visual, kinetic and sound information into the analytic tables presented in the Results section. All artefacts were logged and coded against a structured metadata sheet and codebook, with coder identities anonymised for the purposes of the reliability check reported below; the artefacts themselves are reproduced in their original, unaltered form throughout this paper, since redacting identifying detail would misrepresent the public communicative artefacts under analysis. A fifteen-artefact subsample was independently re-coded after a six-week interval, yielding 95% agreement, with remaining disagreements resolved through supervisory consultation.

V. Results and Discussions

The X-space served as the principal digital arena for the June–July 2024 Finance Bill protests in Kenya. Protesters used the platform to circulate textual posts, hashtags, memes, posters, infographics, screenshots and short videos opposing the Bill, with mobilisation coordinated substantially through protest-associated hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024, #OccupyParliament, #RutoMustGo, #OccupyStateHouse, #GenZRevolution and #TupataneThursday. These tags did more than aggregate content: they functioned as coordination points through which grievances were shared and a collective protest identity was assembled.

The analysis presented here draws on a purposively selected corpus of seventy-two protest artefacts spanning textual posts, hashtags, images, videos, screenshots, memes and protest chants; more than half combined two or more communicative modes at once. Table 1 sets out the distribution of artefact types.

Table 1: Table 1: Distribution of protest artefacts.

Artefact Category	Frequency
Textual posts	71
Hashtags	64
Visual images/posters	47
Videos	18
Protest chants	8
Screenshots	7
Memes	4
Multimodal artefacts (combining two or more modes)	52

Multimodality was the norm rather than the exception across the corpus: political argument was rarely delivered through language alone but through the coordinated interplay of image, sound and movement. One striking example is a short video (Artefact A061) built around repurposed wildlife footage: a buffalo confronting a lion at the roadside, set to music and circulated as a metaphor for Members of Parliament shedding their fear of presidential authority. No political figure is named in the clip; the argument is carried entirely by visual substitution, with the reversal of the expected dominance relationship — the lion yielding ground to the buffalo — prompting viewers to infer a corresponding reversal of political power. Table 2 breaks the clip into its constituent phases, adapting Thibault's (2000) approach to multimodal transcription to track how visual sequence, movement and sound work together to build that inference.

Table 2: Table 2: Phase-by-phase breakdown of Artefact A061 in a visual frame.

Phase	What Is Shown	Movement	Audio
Opening standoff	Buffalo and lion face one another at close range beside a road.	Both animals hold a wary, static posture.	Sia's song "Unstoppable" begins playing under the footage.
Buffalo advances	The buffalo steps forward; the lion's posture shifts.	Deliberate forward movement from the buffalo; visible hesitation from the lion.	Soundtrack continues, reinforcing a tone of resolve.
Lion yields ground	The lion begins to back away as the buffalo keeps advancing.	Steady retreat by the lion; continued advance by the buffalo.	Soundtrack sustained through the reversal.
Buffalo holds the ground	The buffalo occupies the space the lion has vacated.	Buffalo remains in place; lion has withdrawn from frame.	Track resolves as the clip ends.

Across the corpus, artefacts like A061 point to a broader pattern: Kenyan Gen-Z protesters repeatedly folded complex political argument into brief, emotionally charged, easily shared combinations of verbal and non-verbal resources, rather than into extended written argument.

Three overlapping strategies recurred across the seventy-two artefacts: humour, satire and irony; hybrid, generationally coded language; and symbolic, multimodal composition. None of the three operated in isolation

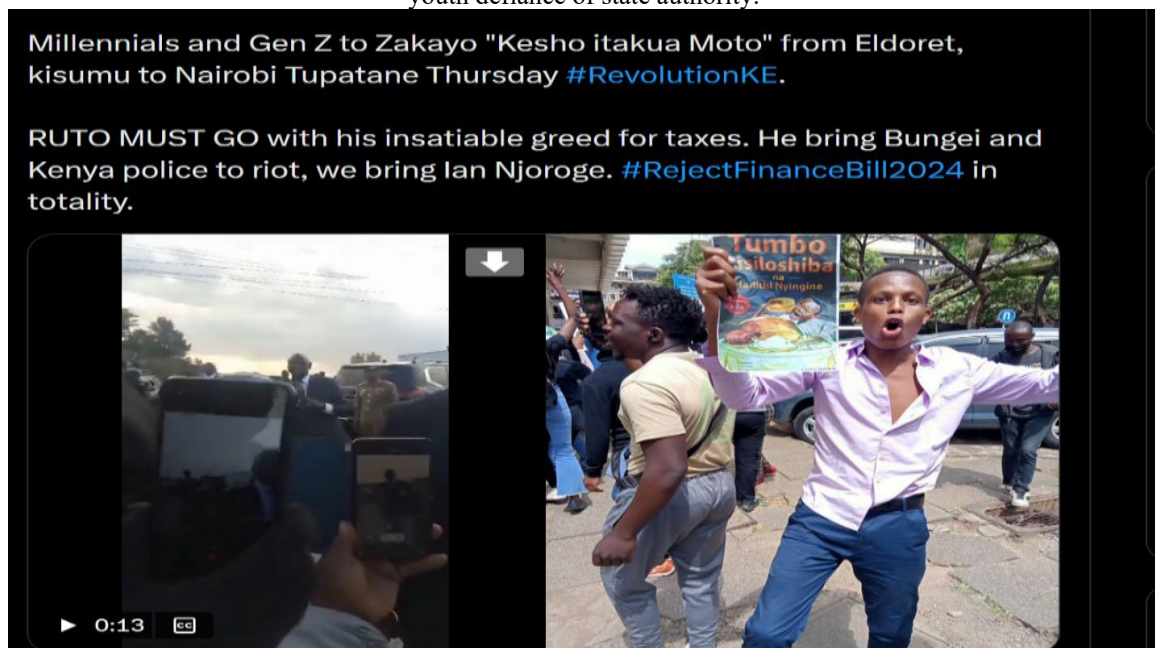
— most artefacts drew on at least two simultaneously — but each is treated separately below to make its distinctive mechanics visible.

5.1 Humour, Satire and Irony as Protest Language

Comic, satirical and ironic material was pervasive across the corpus, turning up in text posts, memes, placards, edited video, song and doctored images alike. Four recurring techniques stood out: renaming political figures for satirical effect, recasting political conflict through familiar metaphor, redeploying official political language against itself, and wordplay.

The clearest of these was satirical renaming. Artefacts avoided President William Ruto's official title almost entirely in favour of the nickname “Zakayo,” an allusion to the biblical tax collector Zacchaeus that let protesters compress accusations of greed, taxation and exploitation into a single, instantly legible label rather than spelling each accusation out. Figure 1 below reproduces one such artefact, which pairs the line “Ruto must go with his insatiable greed for taxes” with the Zakayo label and a reference to Ian Njoroge - a teenager whose publicised standoff with a traffic police officer had already become, in protest discourse, a shorthand for youthful defiance of state authority.

Figure 1: Protest artefact combining the satirical nickname “Zakayo” with a reference to Ian Njoroge, invoking youth defiance of state authority.



A second lexical coinage, “Mpigs,” fused “MPs” with “pigs” to turn a neutral institutional term into an insult through pure wordplay - no metaphor or allusion required, just a morphological collision that was short, sticky and easy to repeat.

Metaphorical reframing worked differently, translating political conflict into the register of everyday relationships. One artefact declared a breakup with the government - “*Tumeachana... imeisha*” (“We have broken up; it is over”) - while another compared disengaging from the current leadership to leaving an abusive relationship. A third staged a puppet interrupting the Finance Bill signing ceremony with the command “*Kwamia hapo!*” (“Stop right there!”), and a fourth proposed the deliberately absurd trade “Free Kartel/Take Ruto,” referencing the Jamaican artist Vybz Kartel, whose conviction had just been overturned in 2024. None of these artefacts argues in the register of formal politics; each relocates the conflict into a domain - romance, imprisonment, an interrupted meeting - that audiences could grasp immediately.

Protesters also turned the government's own language against it. The ruling party's “Bottom Up” economic slogan was reworked into “*Bottom up watu wamechoka bana walitudanganya*” (“Bottom Up - people are tired, they lied to us”), stripping the phrase of its original promise of economic empowerment and repurposing it as evidence that the promise had been broken. The irony here depended on audience familiarity with the slogan's original meaning - the joke does not work without it.

Wordplay supplied a fourth register of humour. Figure 2 shows an artefact built on the slogan “Finance Bill haiwezi lipa bills,” which exploits the dual sense of “bill” - legislation on one hand, household expense on

the other - to argue, in six words, that the legislation would deepen the very financial strain it claimed to address.

Figure 2: Artefact exploiting the dual sense of “bill”.



A related artefact extended this playfulness into visual territory, circulating a silhouette dubbed “a flying mantis” and inviting the audience to collectively work out what, or whom, the shape represented. Across the corpus, humour functioned as a systematic strategy rather than incidental decoration, allowing protesters to fold weighty political grievances into forms that audiences could decode through shared cultural knowledge. This is consistent with Tsakona's (2020) observation that humour is strongly shaped by sociocultural context and shared knowledge, and with Boukhelif, Abdelhadi, and Sahli's (2023) finding that violations of conversational maxims can generate humorous effects and conversational implicatures in online discourse. The present findings extend this scholarship into multimodal territory, showing that inferential processes associated with humorous meaning-making can operate not only in verbal conversational exchange but also across songs, puppet performances, memes and doctored images.

5.2 Hybrid Language, Sheng and Generational Identity

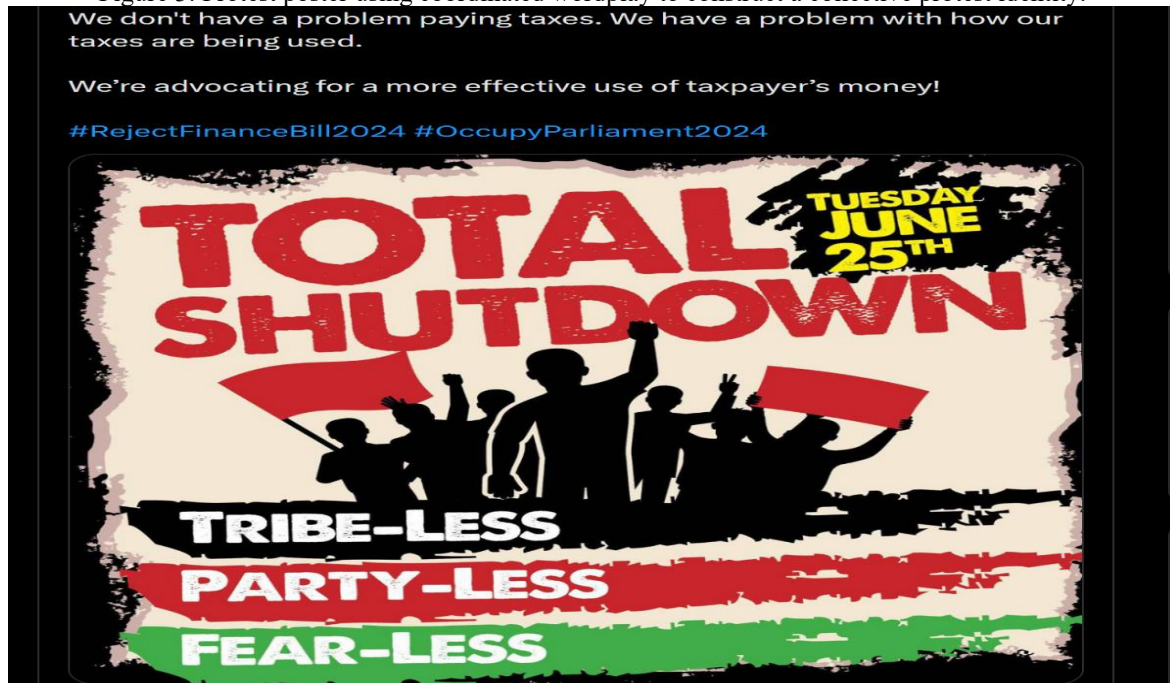
Linguistic hybridity was a defining feature of the corpus, with protesters moving fluidly between English, Kiswahili, Sheng, regional expressions and deliberately altered spellings, often within a single post. Three distinct manifestations emerged: Sheng as an identity marker, code-switching and code-mixing, and digitally altered wording.

Sheng was the single most prominent hybrid resource in the dataset, consistent with Githiora's (2002) description of Sheng as a youth-associated mixed code based on Swahili and drawing lexical resources from other Kenyan languages. More recent morphosyntactic studies further demonstrate that Sheng is a structured linguistic system rather than a deficient or ad hoc form of Swahili (Kariuki et al., 2024; Gibson et al., 2024). Kariuki et al. (2024) explicitly acknowledge Sheng's social function and distinct identity for its speakers, while Gibson et al. (2024) situate urban youth varieties within processes of linguistic innovation and differentiation from older speakers. Expressions such as *Hatupangwingwi* (“We cannot be manipulated”), *Tumechoka* (“We are tired”), *Vulai* (“Marvellous”) and *Wamenaika* (“They have cornered [us]”) recurred throughout the corpus, doing work that their literal English equivalents could not: signalling not just a claim but a claimant, marked as young, urban and Kenyan. Because Sheng is strongly associated with Kenyan youth and urban multilingual repertoires, its use carried a double message - political opposition and membership in the community making that opposition. This extends existing accounts of Sheng as a socially meaningful youth variety into the specific context of protest discourse.

Code-switching and code-mixing between English and Kiswahili, occasionally folding in other Kenyan languages, ran throughout the corpus. One artefact reads: “*Hatuna kazi, tunaweza andamana Monday to Sunday*” (“We do not have jobs, so we can protest from Monday to Sunday”), letting humour, frustration and resolve land within a single sentence. Consistent with Myers-Scotton's (1993) account of code-switching as a socially and pragmatically meaningful resource, the alternation functioned here not as a linguistic shortfall but as a means of signalling group membership and negotiating relationships with different audiences within the same utterance. The coexistence of English, Kiswahili, Sheng and regional forms therefore enabled protesters to construct meanings that no single code necessarily carried alone. This pattern is compatible with Mugun, Simiyu, and Koros's (2024) evidence that Sheng is widely embedded in everyday communication and increasingly appears across informal, educational and mediated contexts.

A third pattern involved deliberate spelling manipulation, reflecting the broader creative wordplay associated with digital youth language. Figure 3 reproduces a poster built on the coordinated triple “TRIBE-LESS,” “PARTY-LESS” and “FEAR-LESS,” using a repeated orthographic device to build a collective identity defined by what it rejects - ethnic division, party loyalty and fear - rather than by any single positive claim. This finding resonates with Grandez et al.’s (2023) identification of spelling change as a prominent word-formation process in Generation Z social-media slang, while extending that observation from everyday digital slang to politically purposeful protest communication.

Figure 3: Protest poster using coordinated wordplay to construct a collective protest identity.



The repeated “-less” suffix does double work: it creates a rhythmic parallel across the three words, and it redefines protest membership around shared political values rather than the traditional social categories it explicitly disowns. This pattern is consistent with Shifman’s (2014) account of digital culture as participatory, in which users imitate, remix and transform circulating cultural forms, and with Paoletti and Mujahidah’s (2025) finding that Gen-Z slang functions as an identity marker and creates in-group dynamics. The present findings extend these observations by showing that such wordplay can function not merely as linguistic play but as a resource for constructing collective political identity and supporting mobilisation.

5.3 Symbolic and Multimodal Protest Communication

Multimodality was close to a default setting for this corpus: meaning was built through the coordinated use of image, symbol, typography, colour, music, gesture and video, not through text read in isolation. Four manifestations recurred: symbolic imagery, memes and remix culture, posters and infographics, and performative video.

Symbolic imagery drew on culturally familiar objects, literary allusion and visual metaphor to imply dissatisfaction rather than state it outright. One artefact (see Figure 1) shows a protester holding up the cover of the Kiswahili set-book anthology *Tumbo Lisiloshiba* (“The Insatiable Stomach”), whose themes of greed and abuse of power would have been immediately legible to the Gen-Z cohort, alongside the warning “*Kesho itakuwa moto*” (“Tomorrow will be fire”). Another labels a political leader “the butcher of Sugoi,” invoking the President’s home village to fuse geographic and moral condemnation into a single phrase. A further video artefact, A046, layers a pig-shaped prop symbolising corruption together with an excerpt from the Kenyan Constitution and the National Anthem, integrating visual, textual and musical resources into one coordinated argument. Table 3 traces the video’s three phases using the same transcription approach applied to A061 above.

Table 3: Three-phase breakdown of Artefact A046.

Phase	What is Shown	Text/Sound	What it Communicates
Opening	A pig-shaped prop is displayed prominently, evoking greed and corruption.	Ambient protest sound.	Frames corruption as the target before any explicit argument is offered.
Escalation	The prop is carried through the crowd alongside placards and gestures of protest.	On-screen text citing Article 37 of the Constitution.	Recasts the demonstration as constitutionally protected civic action rather than disorder.
Resolution	The crowd gathers around the prop in a shared moment of collective performance.	The National Anthem, sung collectively.	Reframes the corruption charge inside a patriotic claim to legitimacy and sovereignty.

Both A061 and A046 illustrate a principle consistent with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) account of visual design as comprising distinct but combinable semiotic resources, and with Kodak, Oketch, and Matu's (2015) and Kodak's (2017) demonstrations that verbal and visual modes work in complementarity to construct meaning in multimodal advertising. The same combinatorial logic that advertisers use to construct persuasive messages was appropriated by protesters to build political arguments, sequencing image, text and sound into an inferential path toward a political claim. Kodak et al. (2015), for example, show that verbal and visual modes are co-deployed to complement one another in constructing an advertising message and guiding viewers toward particular interpretations.

Meme culture and remix were similarly prominent, combining participatory adaptation with the personalised content sharing that Bennett and Segerberg (2012) identify as characteristic of connective action. Their account emphasises digitally mediated political participation through personalised content and easily adaptable action themes rather than organisation-centred coordination. Figure 4 reproduces an artefact that repurposes a globally circulated celebrity meme template, captioning it “Me and my *maandamano* bae in the halls of State House” (“Me and my protest fiancée...”), thereby symbolically repositioning protesters within a space conventionally associated with political authority.

Figure 4: Artefact adapting a globally circulated meme template to comment on Kenyan protest politics.



Consistent with Shifman's (2014) account of memes as artefacts completed only through imitation and remix, globally familiar templates were routinely repurposed to carry locally specific political meaning. A related artefact layers an AI-generated protest song over authentic footage; another uses split-screen editing to place protesters and politicians performing near-identical dance movements side by side, inviting the audience to judge how differently the same gesture reads depending on who performs it.

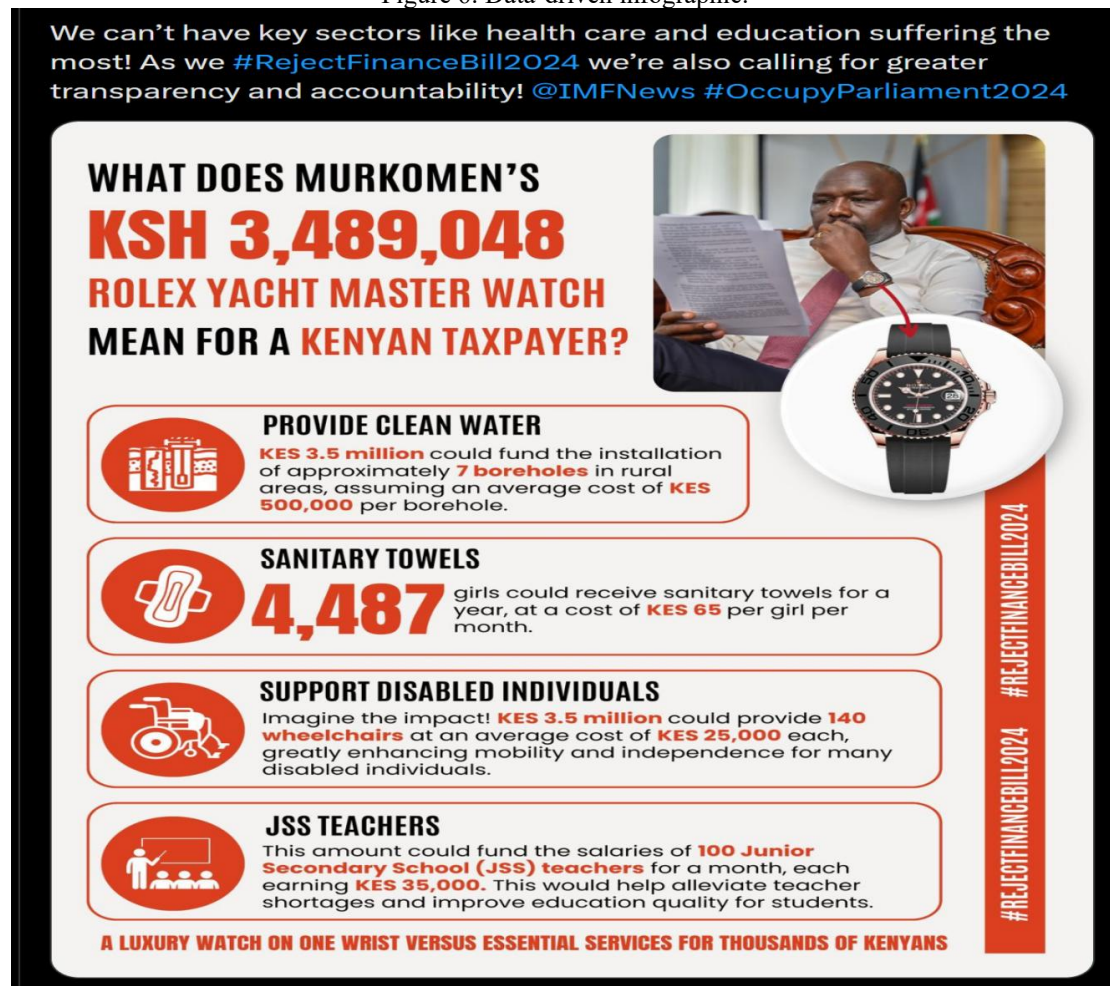
Posters and infographics combined language, colour, typography and spatial layout into self-contained multimodal arguments. Figure 5 reproduces a mobilisation poster that folds logistical detail (what to wear, what to bring, where to meet), a constitutional citation and symbolic imagery into a single object that informs, legitimises and mobilises all at once.

Figure 5: Mobilisation poster combining logistical instructions, a constitutional citation and a raised-fist image.



The layout does more than convey information: the interplay of visual hierarchy, colour contrast and legal citation gives the poster a sense of urgency and legitimacy that a plain announcement would lack. A companion set of infographics pursued a related strategy through numbers rather than symbols, visually comparing government spending against unmet public need. Figure 6 reproduces one such infographic, setting the cost of an official's wristwatch against the number of boreholes, sanitary products, wheelchairs or teacher salaries the same sum could fund.

Figure 6: Data-driven infographic.



No accusation of corruption appears anywhere in the infographic's text; the numbers do that work on their own, leaving the audience to draw the inference from the comparison rather than from an explicit claim. Read alongside the video evidence in Tables 2 and 3, these artefacts show posters, infographics and video operating simultaneously as information, persuasion and symbol. Table 4 draws the three strategies together, summarising their principal manifestations and the communicative work each performed.

Table 4: Major linguistic strategies identified in Kenyan Gen-Z protest discourse.

Linguistic Strategy	Principal Manifestations	Communicative Function
Humour, satire and irony	Satirical renaming, metaphorical reframing, ironic recontextualisation of official language, wordplay	Delegitimising authority; compressing grievance; increasing shareability
Hybrid, generationally coded language	Sheng vocabulary, code-switching and code-mixing, digitally altered spelling	Constructing Gen-Z identity; reinforcing solidarity; supporting mobilisation
Symbolic, multimodal composition	Symbolic imagery, memes and remix, posters and infographics, video	Communicating resistance; heightening emotional engagement; supporting mobilisation

5.4 Innovation as Communicative Convergence

The findings suggest that innovation in Kenyan Gen-Z protest discourse lies less in inventing new linguistic forms than in creatively converging existing ones - humour, Sheng, global meme formats, constitutional text and locally resonant imagery - into artefacts built for rapid circulation on a character-limited, image-driven platform. That pattern both echoes and departs from earlier findings on multimodal innovation in

Kenyan commercial discourse. Kodak, Oketch, and Matu (2015) and Kodak (2017) found that Kenyan television advertisers innovate by combining colour, gaze, gesture and music with slogans to build consumer appeal, with Kodak, Oketch, and Matu (2015) additionally showing how celebrity endorsement was used to enhance advertisement appeal and influence consumer response. The underlying principle - that verbal and visual modes are co-deployed so that neither bears the whole communicative weight alone - recurs throughout the protest artefacts examined here. The two domains diverge, however, in what they promote: where advertisers promoted a product, protesters advanced political positions - legitimacy, resistance and generational solidarity.

A further point of convergence, and of departure, concerns the audience's role. Where the commercial advertisements examined by Kodak et al. (2015) and Kodak (2017) sought to guide viewers towards desired interpretations and consumer responses, Gen-Z protest discourse positioned its audience more explicitly as a co-producer of meaning. A meme achieves its effect when the audience recognises the template being subverted; wordplay depends on the audience holding two meanings of a word in mind at once; and a nickname such as “Zakayo” achieves its intended political association when the audience supplies the biblical and cultural knowledge linking it to greed and exploitation. This participatory demand is consistent with Shifman's (2014) account of Internet memes as digitally circulated artefacts that are imitated and transformed by users, and with her description of imitation and remixing as central practices of participatory digital culture. It helps explain why humour, hybrid language and multimodal symbolism functioned not as decoration but as mechanisms through which the discourse became culturally intelligible, engaging and readily shareable.

Finally, the recurrence of constitutional citation - Article 37 in particular - alongside satire and Sheng suggests that Kenyan Gen-Z protesters innovated across genre as much as register, fusing the formal language of constitutional rights with the playful register of internet culture within single artefacts. Visible in both the mobilisation poster (Figure 5) and the video traced in Table 3, this fusion suggests that communicative innovation here served two purposes simultaneously: establishing the protest's legitimacy in citable, formal terms while keeping it culturally accessible, emotionally engaging and shareable for an audience that did not treat seriousness and humour as mutually exclusive registers.

VI. Conclusion

This paper set out to describe the linguistic strategies through which Kenyan Gen-Z protesters constructed political meaning on X during the June–July 2024 Finance Bill protests. Analysis of seventy-two protest artefacts identified three overlapping strategies - humour, satire and irony; hybrid, generationally coded language; and symbolic, multimodal composition - through which protesters compressed political grievance into forms capable of rapid circulation. Across all three, innovation lay less in the invention of new linguistic forms than in the creative recombination of existing verbal, visual and cultural resources: satirical nicknames, Sheng and code-switching, memes, posters and video were repurposed and combined to delegitimise authority, construct a shared generational identity and mobilise participation simultaneously. These findings extend earlier Kenyan scholarship on multimodal innovation from the commercial register of television advertising into the very different, non-commercial register of protest discourse, while also demonstrating that the participatory, inferential demands long associated with digital meme culture operate across a far wider range of semiotic resources than memes alone.

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