



Literary Insurgency: Generation Z Digital Vernaculars and the Remaking of Political Culture in Kenya

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Abstract

Kenya's 2024–2025 Gen Z-led protests against the Finance Bill demonstrated that contemporary political mobilisation is inseparable from literary form. Slogans, hashtags, memes, and spoken-word performances did not merely accompany the movement; they constituted its primary mode of political reasoning. Yet African literary scholarship has been slow to treat this digitally mediated corpus as literature proper, and political-communication scholarship has been slow to treat it as anything other than messaging. This article addresses that gap by asking how literary devices operating within Kenyan Gen Z digital protest discourse construct political meaning, mobilise collective identity, and reconfigure civic participation. Drawing on postcolonial theory, Butlerian performativity, Bhabha's theory of hybridity, and African theories of language and power associated with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Achille Mbembe, and Karin Barber, the study conducts a qualitative discourse analysis of publicly circulated protest texts collected between May 2024 and July 2025, spanning slogans, hashtags, chants, placards, memes, and spoken-word excerpts. Close reading identifies seven recurring devices: metaphor, satire, irony, symbolism, repetition, code-switching, and intertextuality. Moreover, the study traces how each performs distinct political work, from converting fiscal policy into embodied grievance to constructing a leaderless, ethnicity-transcending collective subject. The findings show that literary language operates as infrastructure for what the study terms constitutional civic pedagogy: a mode of address that teaches sovereignty through form rather than argument. The article's original contribution is a replicable framework for reading digital political ephemera as literature, extending African literary studies beyond canonical genres while offering political-communication scholars a vocabulary for the aesthetic dimensions of protest. Practically, the findings suggest that civic educators, journalists, and policymakers seeking to understand youth political consciousness must attend to literary form, not only to stated demands.

1.0 Introduction

The relationship between literature and political life in Africa has never been settled or peripheral. From the anti-colonial pamphleteering and prison writing of the independence era to the satirical fiction of post-independence disillusionment, literary expression across the continent has functioned as a parallel civic institution: a space where power could be named when direct speech was dangerous, and where communities rehearsed alternative futures. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insistence that language is never a neutral vessel but a site of struggle over meaning and belonging remains foundational to this tradition, as does Mbembe's account of satire and grotesque exaggeration as instruments through which colonised and postcolonial subjects negotiate illegitimate authority. In Kenya specifically, literature has long occupied this

civic register: from Ngũgĩ's own novels and detained prison diaries to the oral poetry traditions mobilised during multiparty agitation in the 1990s, literary form has repeatedly done political work that formal institutions could not.

What has changed is the infrastructure through which this literary-political work now travels. Kenya's Generation Z, broadly, citizens born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, came of political age inside smartphone-mediated public spheres, and their political vocabulary bears the marks of that formation. The 2024 mobilisation against the Finance Bill, and the sustained 2024–2025 wave of demonstrations that followed, was organised not through party structures or ethnic patronage networks but through hashtags, TikTok skits, X/Twitter threads, WhatsApp forwards, and street chants composed, in the literal sense, as pieces of language: metaphors were selected, ironies were timed, refrains were repeated until they became collective property. Emerging scholarship has already begun documenting the movement's leaderless, cross-ethnic, digitally coordinated character and its self-understanding as constitutional pedagogy rather than conventional partisan protest. What this literature has not yet done systematically is read the movement's language as language — as a body of text organised by recognisable literary devices, worthy of the same close reading historically reserved for the novel, the poem, or the play. This is the gap the article addresses.

Political-communication research on the 2024 uprising has established its organisational novelty — leaderless, cross-ethnic, digitally coordinated — but has generally treated language as a transparent carrier of grievance rather than as form worth reading in its own right.

The study's objectives are to (1) identify and classify the dominant literary devices operating in a purposive corpus of Kenyan Gen Z protest texts produced between May 2024 and July 2025; (2) analyse, through close reading, how each device constructs political meaning, affect, and collective identity; and (3) theorise the implications of these findings for African literary studies and for the study of political communication more broadly. The significance of the study is twofold. Theoretically, it extends the definition of literature to accommodate digitally mediated, collectively authored, ephemeral forms, in keeping with recent digital-humanities arguments that literary creativity has migrated beyond the bound book without disappearing. Practically, it offers civic educators, journalists, and policymakers a vocabulary for taking youth political expression seriously as reasoned discourse rather than dismissing it as noise or spectacle. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: the next section reviews scholarship on political culture, digital activism, sociolinguistics, and literary language; the third section develops the study's theoretical framework; the fourth details the methodology and corpus; the fifth presents findings organised by literary device, supported by summary tables; the sixth discusses implications for democratic transformation and literary studies against competing prior claims. Finally, the article closes with a conclusion, limitations, and an agenda for future research.

2.0 Literature Review

This section provides an empirical and theoretical foundation for the study. It begins with a review of related literature, organised around key themes in order to highlight current knowledge and identify critical gaps, especially in Kenya.

2.1 Political culture and its African revisions

Almond and Verba's civic culture thesis, which defines political culture as the pattern of orientations — cognitive, affective, and evaluative — that citizens hold toward the political system, remains a reference point across the field. Nonetheless, behaviouralist assumptions travel awkwardly to postcolonial contexts shaped by colonial rupture, ethnic engineering, and structurally weak formal institutions. African political scholarship has responded by insisting that political culture on the continent must be read through the sediment of colonial history and the colonality of power that persists in postcolonial state forms. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's account of colonality of power argues that formal independence did not dissolve the epistemic and

institutional hierarchies established under colonial rule, and that African political subjectivity continues to be produced in negotiation with those inherited structures. Read against this backdrop, Kenyan Gen Z's insistence on constitutional language over ethnic or party language is not simply a generational preference; it is a deliberate repudiation of a political culture that earlier generations experienced as captured by patronage and colonially inherited hierarchy — a claim this article's findings substantiate at the level of textual form, not only political outcome.

2.2 Digital activism: mobilisation, affect and its limits

A substantial body of scholarship documents how digital platforms restructure the mechanics of protest mobilisation. Tufekci's account of networked social movements argues that digital tools dramatically lower the cost of rapid, large-scale mobilisation while weakening organisational capacities for negotiation, strategic planning, and leadership succession that earlier movements built through slower coalition work. Kenyan scholarship on the 2024 uprising largely confirms this pattern while complicating its pessimism. Indeed, accounts of the protests emphasise that digital-first, leaderless, cross-ethnic organisation was constitutive rather than incidental, positioning the movement explicitly against the tribal and elite-brokered protest tradition dominant since independence, and reframing constitutional sovereignty as the protest's organising grammar. Complementary discourse-historical analysis of Finance Bill social-media text finds patterned linguistic strategies constructing a sharp binary between protesters and political elites. Comparative African cases extend this picture. Nigeria's #EndSARS movement has been analysed as a case of narrative agency in which activists constructed state figures as threats through comparison and labelling, and as a case of digital literacy functioning as a precondition for sustained civic agency; three-country comparative work on #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, #EswatiniLivesMatter, and #EndSARS finds that transnational hashtag movements achieve only 'a modicum of success,' forcing piecemeal concessions rather than structural reform: a finding directly relevant to this article's discussion of the Kenyan movement's durability. Where this literature is comparatively thin is in its treatment of language as literary form rather than communicative instrument: studies of connective action and discourse-historical framing analyse rhetorical strategy but rarely ask what a slogan is doing as metaphor, or what a hashtag is doing as compressed narrative — the precise gap this article's findings are designed to close.

2.3 Sociolinguistic scholarship on Sheng and code-switching

A distinct and well-established sociolinguistic literature documents Sheng, the Swahili-based, English- and vernacular-inflected urban youth code centred on Nairobi, as a marker of generational and urban identity that has expanded from street slang into media, politics, and education. Foundational work established Sheng's structural profile as a mixed code drawing on Swahili syntax with lexical borrowing from English and Kenyan mother tongues; subsequent scholarship has traced its spread into mainstream domains and its function as a badge of youth identity distinct from, and often in tension with, standard Kiswahili and English. A smaller strand reads Sheng explicitly through Bhabha's postcolonial hybridity, arguing that Sheng speakers occupy a linguistic 'third space' that lets them negotiate ambivalent, multiply mediated identities rather than choosing between colonial and indigenous linguistic inheritance. This article draws directly on that strand, but extends it: where existing Sheng scholarship examines everyday and media contexts, the present study is among the first to trace Sheng's specific deployment within protest discourse, where its code-switching function is not merely identity-marking but actively constitutive of the movement's cross-ethnic political coalition.

2.4 Digital humanities and the expanding object of African literature

A parallel body of digital-humanities scholarship has begun to ask what digital textual production means for the boundaries of literature itself. Work on Twitter and world literature

argues that hashtag-organised writing communities constitute a genuinely new literary practice, with their own conventions of brevity, serial composition, and collective authorship, rather than a debased imitation of print literature. Scholarship on digital African literatures goes further, arguing that internet memes function as quotidian expressions that draw upon and regenerate older oral and print literary traditions, and situating African digital literary production within, not outside of, the continent's contested relationship to global data infrastructures. Barber's earlier anthropological account of African texts as fundamentally public and communally owned property rather than the product of an isolated authorial genius anticipates and helps explain this digital pattern. It is evident that the collectively authored, infinitely repeatable protest slogan is less a departure from African literary tradition than a digital intensification of it. This literature productively destabilises genre boundaries but has focused primarily on self-consciously literary digital platforms such as online literary magazines and Twitter fiction communities rather than on protest discourse specifically. The present study extends this seam into the Kenyan case, treating protest slogans, chants, and hashtags not as evidence used to illustrate a political argument but as primary literary texts meriting the same close-reading attention as canonical genres.

2.5 Situating the gap

Four gaps emerge from this expanded review. First, African political-culture scholarship has theorised the postcolonial state's coloniality but has not connected that theorisation closely to the formal properties of the language through which citizens contest it. Second, digital-activism scholarship has documented organisational and affective dynamics with considerable empirical rigour but has generally bracketed literary-formal analysis. Third, sociolinguistic scholarship on Sheng has established its identity-marking function in general social life but has not extended that analysis systematically into protest discourse. Fourth, digital-humanities scholarship has expanded literature's object to include memes, hashtags, and digital storytelling but has concentrated on self-identified literary spaces rather than protest discourse. This article's contribution is to hold these four literatures together: to read a specific, empirically bounded corpus of Kenyan Gen Z protest text through African, sociolinguistic, and digital-humanities theories of literary language, in order to make a claim simultaneously about political culture, digital activism, sociolinguistic identity, and the definition of literature.

3.0 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The study integrates four theoretical resources rather than treating them as parallel or competing lenses. Postcolonial theory, particularly Ndlovu-Gatsheni's coloniality of power and Ngũgĩ's account of language as a terrain of struggle, supplies the historical and structural register: it explains why Kenyan Gen Z's political language so often reaches for metaphors of debt, theft, and biblical tax-collection, and why the movement's rejection of ethnic patronage language carries the charge of a decolonial refusal rather than a merely generational one. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity supplies the linguistic register proper: his account of hybridity as the productive, often destabilising space where multiple codes and traditions meet explains the pervasive code-switching between English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and mother-tongue expressions in the corpus, and clarifies why that code-switching is not linguistic laxity but a deliberate performance of a plural, cross-ethnic collective subject — a reading directly supported by sociolinguistic scholarship situating Sheng in a comparable postcolonial 'third space.' Butler's theory of performativity supplies the pragmatic register: her argument that repeated, ritualised speech acts do not merely describe but bring into being the identities and relations they name explains how a chant or hashtag, repeated across thousands of individually authored posts, performatively constructs a collective political subject — 'Gen Z' as a coherent civic actor — that did not pre-exist its own repeated utterance. African theories of language and power, particularly Mbembe's account of satire and the grotesque, and Barber's account of

African text as public, communally owned property, supply the tonal and formal register. This explains why so much of the corpus is comic, mocking, and irreverent even when its subject matter — police violence, fiscal extraction, and enforced disappearance — is grave, and why authorship is so readily distributed and repeated rather than individually claimed.

These four frameworks are integrated rather than sequential. A single protest artefact — the recurring nickname ‘Zakayo’ for President Ruto, drawn from the biblical tax collector Zacchaeus — can be read simultaneously through all four lenses: postcolonially, as an assertion of a distinctly Kenyan, Christian-inflected political vocabulary against the technocratic language of fiscal policy; through hybridity, as a fusion of scriptural reference and contemporary political complaint; performatively, as a name that, through repetition across the corpus, constructs the president as a stable object of ridicule independent of any single utterance; through Mbembian satire, as a grotesque miniaturisation of presidential authority that permits critique without direct confrontation; and through Barber's account of communal textual ownership, as a name that belongs to no single author and is therefore less exposed to the personal risk that would attach to an individually signed accusation. This integration — reading single artefacts through all four frameworks simultaneously rather than assigning each framework to a separate section of analysis — is the study's distinctive analytical procedure, and it is applied consistently across the findings below.

Figure 1 situates this integrated framework within the study's larger causal logic, tracing the path from raw digital protest text to democratic-level transformation.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking digital protest text to democratic transformation through literary mediation. Each stage is theorised, not merely descriptive: the transition from ‘literary devices’ to ‘political meaning’ is explained by postcolonial and Mbembian theory; from ‘political meaning’ to ‘collective identity’ by Bhabhaian hybridity and Butlerian performativity; and from ‘collective identity’ to ‘political mobilisation’ and ‘democratic transformation’ by the comparative digital-activism literature reviewed above.

3.2 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design, appropriate to a research question concerned with meaning-making rather than measurable frequency or causal effect. It proceeds from a constructionist epistemological position: political meaning is treated as produced in and through discourse, not merely reflected by it, consistent with the study's Butlerian and Bhabhaian theoretical commitments. The specific analytic method is close textual analysis informed by literary-critical reading practice and critical discourse analysis, applied to a purposively assembled corpus rather than a statistically representative sample, since the study's aim is depth of interpretation rather than generalisable frequency counts.

The corpus was assembled from publicly available, non-restricted digital and print-adjacent sources associated with Kenya's 2024–2025 Gen Z-led protest movement, spanning five source types: slogans and chants, hashtags, placards, memes, and spoken-word or chant-poetry performances, collected between May 2024 and July 2025. Table 1 reports the composition of the final corpus by source type, the selection criteria applied to each, the collection period, and the analytic purpose each source type served. Purposive sampling was used throughout: texts were selected for their density of literary device, their public salience (measured by sustained circulation and citation in journalistic or scholarly sources rather than by proprietary engagement metrics), and their coverage of the movement's temporal arc from the initial Finance Bill mobilisation through subsequent phases of the protest cycle.

Because the study uses purposive qualitative sampling, Table 1 describes the source types, selection criteria, collection period, and analytic purpose rather than reporting frequency

counts. The analysis therefore treats the corpus as a qualitatively bounded set of textual artefacts selected for literary and political salience, not as a statistically representative dataset.

The two authors carried out the sampling and data analysis with the help of two research assistants. Sampling continued until thematic and device-level saturation was reached, operationalised as the point at which three consecutive coding sessions produced no new device–function pairings not already present in the coding frame. When disagreements arose regarding categorisation of device–function pairings, they were resolved through consensus-building and inter-rater reliability (IRR) checks. Both authors independently confirmed that no new pairings emerged during the final three coding sessions.

Source Type	Selection Criteria	Period	Purpose
Slogans / chants	Sustained public circulation at marches; repeated across ≥ 2 independent events	May 2024–Jul 2025	Trace repetition and collective-identity construction
Hashtags	Trending status corroborated by journalistic/scholarly citation; platform: X, TikTok	May 2024–Jul 2025	Trace intertextual and code-switched compression
Placards	Publicly photographed and re-circulated; legible full text	Jun–Aug 2024; 2025 continuations	Trace symbolism and visual-textual fusion
Memes	Public circulation on X/TikTok/Instagram; literary-device density	May 2024–Jul 2025	Trace satire, irony, and intertextual reference
Spoken-word / chant-poetry	Publicly performed and recorded at vigils or gatherings	Jun 2024–Jul 2025	Trace metaphor, allegory, and affective register

Table 1. Corpus characteristics by source type, selection criteria, collection period, and analytic purpose.

Inclusion criteria required that a text (i) be publicly and voluntarily circulated rather than privately communicated, (ii) be attributable to the collective movement rather than to an identifiable private individual in a way that would require personal consent, and (iii) fall within the May 2024–July 2025 window. Texts were excluded where their primary content was factual reporting without literary composition, where they consisted of unverifiable or single-source claims, or where analysis would require reproducing personally identifying material about private citizens. The unit of analysis is the individual textual artefact; a slogan, hashtag, chant line, placard, meme, or short spoken-word excerpt analysed both independently and in relation to recurring patterns across the corpus.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, open coding identified the literary devices present in each artefact (metaphor, satire, irony, symbolism, repetition, code-switching, intertextuality, hyperbole, and allegory). Second, axial coding grouped artefacts by dominant device and by thematic content (fiscal grievance, state violence, generational identity, constitutional appeal, solidarity, and mourning). Third, close reading was conducted on illustrative artefacts within each category, situating each within the theoretical framework described above and cross-referencing with the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed. The final findings focus on the seven devices that recurred sufficiently across the corpus to support device-level interpretation; hyperbole and allegory were retained in the initial coding frame but were not sufficiently recurrent to warrant separate findings sections.

Trustworthiness was pursued through triangulation across platforms and text types (hashtag, chant, placard, meme, spoken word), through peer debriefing between the two authors during coding, and through an explicit audit trail linking each analytic claim to a documented, publicly circulated artefact. Ethical considerations centred on the public, collectively authored nature of the corpus: no private accounts, direct messages, or content requiring authenticated login access were used; no individually identifying biographical information about private citizens is reproduced; and where an artefact could plausibly be traced to an identifiable private

individual, it was either excluded or anonymised at the level of platform and phrasing rather than attributed. The study did not require primary human-subjects data collection and relied exclusively on materials already in the public domain.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study.

4.1.0 Finding on Literary Devices

The corpus displays dense, overlapping use of seven literary devices: metaphor, satire, irony, symbolism, repetition, code-switching, and intertextuality, each performing identifiable political work. Table 2 summarises this device-level analysis, focusing on each device in relation to competing claims in prior scholarship.

Literary Device	Representative Example	Political Function	Supporting Theory	Analytical Interpretation
Metaphor	“Njaanuary” (njaa + January)	Converts fiscal policy into embodied, seasonal grievance	Ngũgĩ — language as struggle	Relocates interpretive authority from technocratic to vernacular register
Satire / irony	“Zakayo” nickname for the President	Miniaturises authority; permits critique without direct confrontation	Mbembe — postcolonial grotesque	Comic biblical framing reduces speaker risk while sharpening accusation
Symbolism	Flag; funeral/coffin imagery; the Constitution held aloft	Constructs de-ethnicised national identity; memorialises loss; enacts sovereignty claim	Ndlovu-Gatsheni — coloniality of power	Objects become arguments: the Constitution is enacted, not merely cited
Repetition	“Ruto Must Go” across thousands of posts	Performatively constitutes a collective subject without central authorship	Butler — performativity	Repetition substitutes for institutional structure in a leaderless movement
Code-switching	English–Kiswahili–Sheng fusion in slogans	Performs a plural, cross-ethnic collective subject at the level of grammar	Bhabha — hybridity	Linguistic form mirrors the coalition politics it names
Intertextuality	Biblical and independence-era liberation references	Situates digital protest within continuous national resistance tradition	Barber — anthropology of texts and publics	New medium, inherited grammar: formal innovation with rhetorical continuity

Table 2. Major literary devices, representative examples, political functions, supporting theory, and analytical interpretation.

4.1.1 Metaphor: converting fiscal policy into embodied grievance

Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill was, on its face, a technical fiscal instrument; a schedule of tax adjustments debated in parliamentary committee language. The protest corpus systematically translated this technical register into embodied, corporeal metaphor. The widely circulated portmanteau ‘Njaanuary’, fusing the Kiswahili njaa (hunger) with the month January, itself already colloquial shorthand in Kenya for the lean post-holiday financial period — recast an abstract fiscal calendar as a felt, seasonal bodily condition. Similarly, descriptions of the Bill as a mechanism designed to ‘skin’ or ‘squeeze’ ordinary citizens rendered taxation as an assault on the body rather than an administrative adjustment. This metaphorical work performs the function that Ngũgĩ's account of language as a site of struggle would predict: it relocates the terrain of political argument from technocratic language, where the state holds interpretive authority, to embodied vernacular language, where lived experience holds authority. This finding confirms discourse-historical scholarship on the same protest wave, which

independently documents a patterned linguistic strategy of eliteversus-citizen contrast; it extends that scholarship, however, by showing that the contrast is achieved specifically through the literary mechanism of embodying metaphor, a formal dimension the discourse-historical literature does not isolate. Metaphor here is not decorative; it is redistributive, transferring the power to define the Bill's meaning from parliamentary committee to street.

4.1.2 Satire and irony: negotiating authority without direct confrontation

Consistent with Mbembe's account of the postcolonial grotesque, a significant proportion of the corpus operates through satire and irony rather than direct denunciation. The recurring biblical nickname 'Zakayo,' drawn from the parable of the diminutive tax collector Zacchaeus who climbed a tree to see Jesus, was applied to President Ruto across memes, chants, and placards throughout the protest period. The nickname performs several kinds of work simultaneously: it miniaturises presidential authority through a comic, almost childlike biblical reference; it draws on a shared Christian cultural vocabulary that cuts across Kenya's ethnic divisions, reinforcing the movement's explicitly cross-ethnic self-presentation; and it allows sharp political critique — an accusation of predatory taxation — to be delivered through humour rather than direct accusation, reducing both the personal risk to individual speakers and the confrontational register of the utterance. This pattern both confirms and complicates comparable Nigerian scholarship on #PantamiMustGo and #EndSARS narrative construction, which documents comparison and labelling as the dominant discursive strategies for constructing a state figure as threat; the Kenyan case shows a comparable labelling strategy but achieves it through a specifically biblical-satirical register rather than the more directly accusatory labelling documented in the Nigerian cases — a difference plausibly rooted in Kenya's distinct religious-political vocabulary, and a productive avenue for future comparative work rather than a settled explanation here. Ironic register recurs, too, in slogans that adopt the state's own developmental vocabulary against it, inverting an official claim into an indictment. This satirical-ironic mode is not incidental colour; it is, following Mbembe, a historically specific African postcolonial strategy for negotiating authority under conditions where direct confrontation carries disproportionate personal risk.

4.1.3 Symbolism: the flag, the coffin, and the constitution

Three symbols recur with particular density across the corpus: the Kenyan flag, carried and photographed at major demonstrations; coffin or funeral imagery invoked in tribute to protesters killed during the demonstrations; and the physical booklet of the 2010 Constitution, frequently held aloft at protests and referenced in chants and placards. Each symbol performs distinct political labour. The flag, deployed by a movement explicitly organised against ethnic patronage politics, functions as a claim to a shared, de-ethnicised national identity — a visual argument that the protesters represent 'Kenya' rather than any constituent ethnic bloc. Funeral and coffin imagery performs the affective work of transforming individual, often officially minimised deaths into collective, memorialised loss, a pattern consistent with, though not identical to, #EndSARS scholarship's account of hashtag movements negotiating necropolitical violence discursively — the Kenyan case relies more heavily on physical, photographed funeral objects than on the primarily textual memorialisation documented in the Nigerian literature, suggesting a productive point of comparative divergence. The Constitution, held as a physical object rather than merely cited as a legal text, symbolically enacts the movement's central political claim: that sovereignty resides with the people rather than with elected officials who violate constitutional constraint, turning a legal document into what recent scholarship on the uprising describes as an instrument of civic pedagogy: protest as a lesson in what the Constitution already promises.

4.1.4 Repetition: manufacturing collective identity through recurrence

Repetition operates at both the micro level of individual chants — call-and-response formulas repeated for the duration of a march — and the macro level of the corpus as a whole, where near-identical phrasings recur across thousands of individually authored posts. This

repetition is best understood through Butler's account of performativity: no single utterance of a slogan such as 'Ruto Must Go' constitutes the collective political subject it names, but the slogan's repetition, across an enormous and decentralised number of individually authored instances, performatively brings that collective subject into being. This is one mechanism through which a leaderless movement can cohere without central organisation: repetition substitutes for institutional structure in the formation of collective identity. This finding lends textual specificity to Tufekci's broader claim that digitally networked movements achieve scale without traditional organisational capacity: where Tufekci's account operates at the level of network structure, the present analysis shows the linguistic mechanism — literal repetition of literary form — through which that scale is achieved and experienced by participants as solidarity rather than mere aggregation.

4.1.5 Code-switching: performing a plural, cross-ethnic subject

The corpus displays pervasive code-switching among English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and, less frequently, specific mother-tongue expressions, often within a single sentence or slogan. Read through Bhabha's theory of hybridity, and consistent with sociolinguistic scholarship situating Sheng in a comparable postcolonial 'third space,' this code-switching is not linguistic inconsistency but a deliberate performance of the movement's plural, cross-ethnic self-understanding. A slogan combining English constitutional vocabulary with Sheng intensifiers and Kiswahili solidarity markers enacts, at the level of grammar, the same cross-ethnic coalition the movement claims at the level of politics. This finding extends existing Sheng scholarship, which has documented the code's expansion into media, politics, and education as a general sociolinguistic phenomenon, into the specific context of protest discourse, where code-switching is not only identity-marking, as prior scholarship establishes, but actively constitutive of political coalition — a function the existing sociolinguistic literature has not previously isolated.

4.1.6 Intertextuality: linking contemporary protest to historical struggle

Finally, the corpus is densely intertextual, drawing on biblical narrative (the Zakayo trope discussed above), on the language of Kenya's own independence and multiparty-democracy struggles, and, more diffusely, on the global vocabulary of digitally mediated protest associated with movements such as the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter. This intertextuality performs historical legitimation: by echoing the vocabulary of earlier Kenyan liberation struggles, contemporary protest text situates itself within a continuous national tradition of resistance rather than presenting itself as a novel or rootless youth phenomenon, even as its digital form is genuinely new. Read through Barber's account of African text as communal property, this intertextual reuse is not derivative but constitutive of how African literary tradition has long operated — through recirculation, allusion, and communal reworking rather than singular authorship. This dual gesture — formal innovation combined with rhetorical continuity — is characteristic of the broader Global South pattern of digitally mediated protest identified in comparative scholarship, in which new communicative technologies are consistently pressed into service of long-standing political grammars rather than displacing them.

4.2 Generation Z and Democratic Transformation

Taken together, these seven devices support a reading of Kenyan Gen Z political culture as a significant departure from the ethnically mediated participation patterns that have shaped Kenyan politics since independence. Where earlier generations' political mobilisation was frequently organised through, and legible in terms of, ethnic coalition, the corpus analysed here constructs its collective subject largely through literary rather than ethnic markers: a shared vocabulary of biblical satire, Sheng-inflected solidarity language, national symbols, and constitutional reference. This is consistent with recent political-science accounts of the 2024–2025 uprising as leaderless and 'tribeless,' but the present analysis adds a mechanism to that description: the literary architecture of the movement's language — its metaphors, repetitions, and code-switching — helps produce the cross-ethnic coherence observed at the level of

political outcome. Digital literary practice, in other words, is not simply a channel through which an already-formed cross-ethnic political identity is expressed; it is one of the mechanisms through which that identity is actively constructed.

This has a further implication for democratic theory, and here the findings sit in productive tension with the comparative hashtag-activism literature. Three-country comparative research on #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, #EswatiniLivesMatter, and #EndSARS finds that hashtag movements typically achieve only piecemeal institutional concessions rather than structural reform, a pattern several accounts attribute to weak organisational capacity. The Kenyan case, as read through the present literary analysis, suggests an additional and more optimistic variable: durability may depend partly on whether a movement builds a literary-symbolic repertoire — a shared vocabulary, recognisable satirical figures, and reusable metaphors — that persists and is reactivated across subsequent mobilisation cycles, independent of any single protest event's immediate policy outcome. Kenya's continued deployment of 'Zakayo,' constitutional symbolism, and Gen Z self-identification across the 2024–2025 protest cycle offers preliminary support for this reading, though confirming it rigorously would require longitudinal research.

4.3 Implications for Literary Studies

The findings challenge the residual assumption, still operative in much African literary scholarship, that literature is properly located in the novel, poem, and drama, with digital and ephemeral forms treated as marginal or pre-literary. The density and sophistication of literary device documented in this corpus — metaphor doing redistributive political work, satire performing historically specific postcolonial negotiation with authority, intertextuality performing continuity with a national liberation tradition — meets the same critical bar literary scholars apply to canonical texts. This is consistent with, and extends, digital-humanities arguments that hashtag-organised writing constitutes a genuine literary practice with its own formal conventions, and Barber's earlier argument that African textual production has long been public and communally authored rather than the product of an isolated genius. The implication for African literary studies specifically is that its object must expand to include collectively authored, ephemeral, digitally circulated political text, analysed with the same close-reading rigour historically reserved for bound and authored works — not as a lowering of disciplinary standards but as a necessary response to where literary creativity is now demonstrably occurring. For digital humanities, the contribution runs the other direction: this study demonstrates that African digital-humanities scholarship, which has thus far concentrated on self-identified literary platforms, has a substantial and under-analysed object immediately at hand in protest discourse itself.

5.0 Conclusion

This article has argued that Kenya's Generation Z protest movement is best understood not merely as a political phenomenon that happens to use literary language, but as a movement substantially constituted through literary form. Close reading of a purposively assembled corpus of slogans, hashtags, chants, placards, memes, and spoken-word text identified seven recurring devices — metaphor, satire, irony, symbolism, repetition, code-switching, and intertextuality — each performing specific, theorisable political work: converting fiscal policy into embodied grievance, negotiating authority through postcolonial satire, constructing cross-ethnic collective identity through repetition and code-switching, and situating contemporary protest within a continuous national tradition through intertextual reference.

The study's contribution is fourfold. Theoretically, it proposes reading digitally native protest text as literature proper, extending African literary studies' object beyond canonical genres and integrating postcolonial, performative, hybridity, and African-literary theories of language within a single analytic procedure rather than treating them as parallel commentaries. Methodologically, it offers a device-by-device close-reading protocol, summarised in the

conceptual framework and coding tables above, that other researchers can apply to comparable digital protest corpora. To African literary studies, it offers empirical demonstration that a specific, bounded national case meets the same critical standard long applied to canonical genres. To digital humanities, it demonstrates that protest discourse constitutes a substantial and currently under-analysed object of literary study, distinct from the self-identified literary platforms the field has thus far prioritised. The findings carry practical implications for civic educators, who might draw on the movement's own literary vocabulary in constitutional education; for journalists, who could better contextualise protest language by attending to its literary architecture rather than treating it as raw sentiment; and for policymakers seeking to understand the durability of youth political consciousness beyond any single legislative episode. The study is subject to clear limitations. Its purposive, non-probabilistic sampling privileges texts that achieved public salience and literary density and therefore cannot support claims about the statistical prevalence of any device across the full universe of protest communication. Its reliance on publicly circulated material excludes private communication that may have shaped the movement's language in ways not captured here. Its two-author qualitative interpretation, while triangulated through peer debriefing and research-assistant support, remains an interpretive account rather than a claim to singular textual meaning. Future research might extend this framework comparatively to other African Gen Z-led movements — including Nigeria's #EndSARS and subsequent mobilisations, and Uganda's and Ghana's youth protest cycles — to test whether the literary mechanisms identified here, particularly the role of code-switching in constructing cross-ethnic identity, generalise or vary by national linguistic and political context. Longitudinal research tracking whether the movement's literary-symbolic repertoire persists, fades, or is reactivated across subsequent protest cycles would also extend the democratic-transformation argument advanced here and help adjudicate between the more pessimistic durability findings of comparative hashtag-activism literature and the more optimistic reading proposed in this article.

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