

Social Media as a Counterforce to Manufactured Consent: Democratic Resistance and the Kenyan Gen-Z Movement of 2024

Cosmas Knowen^{1*} & Olivar B. Wamayeye²

¹Zetech University, Kenya (cosmasknowen@gmail.com)

²Rongo University, Kenya (oliverbarasa44@gmail.com)

Corresponding author: cosmasknowen@gmail.com

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as a transformative force in democratic participation, challenging traditional media gatekeeping and enabling citizen-led political mobilization. This systematic review examines how social media platforms fostered democratic engagement during Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z movement, in which young activists used X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to organize protests against the Finance Bill 2024. The movement demonstrated how digital platforms enable rapid information dissemination, coordinate collective action, and amplify marginalized voices beyond traditional media narratives. Through a systematic thematic analysis of secondary literature and documentation of the 2024 protests, this paper reveals that social media facilitated unprecedented direct engagement between citizens and government leaders, including Kenya's first presidential participation in an X-space discussion. However, significant challenges, including misinformation, digital surveillance, state-sponsored censorship, and the rural-urban digital divide, constrained the movement's full potential. The findings suggest that maximizing social media's democratic potential requires prioritizing digital literacy programs, strengthening independent journalism, ensuring equitable access to technology, and protecting digital rights. This study contributes contextually relevant insights into digital activism in African democracies and offers lessons for global democratic engagement in the digital age.

Keywords: Social Media; Democratic Participation; Gen-Z Movement; Digital Activism; Fostered Democracy

Introduction

The rise of social media has profoundly transformed political participation and democratic processes worldwide, fundamentally altering how individuals and organizations interact in the public sphere (Castells, 2015; Howard & Hussain, 2013). Digital platforms have become integral to modern society, offering unprecedented opportunities for citizens to engage with their governments, provide feedback, and participate in political discourse (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Governments have increasingly recognized social media's potential to enhance communication and facilitate citizen participation in governance (Bertot et al., 2010; Madyatmadja et al., 2020).

However, the relationship between social media and democracy remains complex and contested. While these platforms provide spaces for alternative information sources and political expression, they also pose new challenges for information control and public opinion formation (Tufekci, 2017). Younger generations, particularly Generation Z, have gained unprecedented access to diverse information sources and platforms for political mobilization, challenging traditional gatekeeping mechanisms (Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga & Chen, 2019).

In Kenya, the trajectory of digital technology adoption reflects broader tensions between control and democratization. In the late 1990s, the government initially banned Internet use in civil service offices, fearing loss of control over information flows and potential disruption to bureaucratic structures (Waema & Mitullah, 2007). This resistance stemmed from a limited understanding of the Internet's transformative potential and concerns about operational disruptions (Kipsoi et al., 2012; Mwadulo & Otieno, 2020). By 1999, recognition of the Internet's benefits for efficiency, communication, and innovation led to a policy reversal (Macharia & Nyakwende, 2009). The government subsequently implemented policies promoting information and communication technology (ICT) integration within the civil service sector, acknowledging the Internet's crucial role in modernizing Kenya's public sector and maintaining competitiveness in the global landscape (Mureithi, 2016).

Today, Kenya's media landscape has undergone significant transformation, with social media platforms challenging the dominance of traditional outlets such as television, radio, and newspapers (Wahutu, 2018). Platforms like X (formerly Twitter) have become preferred spaces for young, urban Kenyans, offering diverse narratives from citizen reporters and digital activists (Mukhongo, 2020). TikTok's rapid growth, driven by its video-centric approach, has captured substantial audience engagement (Kang'ethe & Onyango, 2024). While Facebook remains the most widely used platform in Kenya, particularly in rural areas, its impact is difficult to gauge because of its fragmentation into specific groups (Ndavula & Mberia, 2012; Nesi, 2020).

The dynamic, participatory nature of social media platforms has enabled Kenyan youth to engage in broader political activities, from online protests and political contestation to the creative appropriation of protest messages into viral memes (Nyabola, 2018). This interactive "spreadable media" culture has fostered collective action and civic engagement, empowering citizens to hold their government accountable and shape the country's democratic trajectory (Jenkins et al., 2013; Mukhongo, 2020). This paper contributes to the emerging literature on how tech-savvy publics leverage social media's transformative potential to organize, raise awareness, and mobilize for political change, thereby fostering democratic participation and challenging entrenched power structures.

Literature Review

Social Media and Democratic Engagement

The relationship between social media and democratic participation has drawn substantial scholarly attention in recent years. Research shows that social media platforms facilitate political participation by lowering barriers to engagement and enabling diverse forms of political expression (Boulianne, 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2018). These platforms create opportunities for marginalized voices to participate in public discourse, potentially democratizing political communication (Dahlgren, 2013). In Kenya, recent studies have documented how social media fostered civic engagement among Gen Z and served as a catalyst for political change during the 2024 protests (Ingutia, 2025).

However, scholars have also identified significant challenges associated with social media's role in democracy. The spread of misinformation and disinformation poses serious threats to informed democratic participation (Macharia & Ong'ong'a, 2024; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Additionally, algorithmic curation can create echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs rather than promote deliberative dialogue (Sunstein, 2017). Despite these challenges, evidence suggests that social media can enhance democratic engagement when paired with digital literacy and critical thinking skills (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

Youth Activism and Digital Platforms

Generation Z has emerged as a particularly active demographic in digital activism, leveraging their technological fluency to organize social movements and challenge established power structures (Vromen et al., 2015). Research on youth activism shows that young people use social media not merely for entertainment but as tools for political mobilization and civic engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). The connective action framework proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) explains how personalized, digitally networked action differs from traditional collective action organized by formal organizations. In Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z movement, activists demonstrated this connective action through decentralized, leaderless mobilization using hashtags such as *#RejectFinanceBill2024* and *#OccupyParliament* (Njuki et al., 2024).

The role of meme culture and creative digital content in youth activism has also attracted scholarly attention. Kang'ethe and Onyango (2024) examined how meme culture shaped Gen Z's political engagement during the Finance Bill protests, showing that social media platforms enabled young Kenyans to rapidly share information, leverage AI to improve understanding, and simplify complex legal documents through regional translations. This creative appropriation of digital content is a distinctive feature of contemporary youth-led movements.

Digital Activism in African Contexts

African contexts present unique dynamics for digital activism, shaped by specific political, economic, and technological conditions (Ekine & Chao, 2013). Research on digital activism in Africa has documented how citizens use social media to challenge authoritarian practices, demand accountability, and organize social movements (Bosch, 2020; Mwangi, 2023). In Kenya, social media has played an increasingly important role in political mobilization, as demonstrated during the 2017 and 2022 elections (Abboud et al., 2024; Mabweazara, 2018; Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2019).

However, digital activism in Africa also faces distinctive challenges, including limited Internet access, government censorship, and surveillance (Gagliardone et al., 2015). The digital divide remains a significant barrier, with rural populations often lacking access to digital technologies needed to participate in online political discourse (Porter et al., 2016). Recent research has documented how these challenges manifested during Kenya's 2024 protests, when government authorities occasionally restricted social media access and activists faced abductions and harassment (Ingutia, 2025). Understanding these contextual factors is essential to analyzing social media's role in democratic engagement in African settings.

Media Theory and Democratic Participation

The emergence of digital platforms has challenged traditional theories of media and democracy. Habermas's (1991) concept of the public sphere provides a foundational framework for understanding how media spaces enable democratic deliberation. His theory posits that the public sphere serves as an arena where citizens engage in reasoned debate over matters of general interest, shaping public opinion that can influence state power. However, Habermas also acknowledged limitations in the bourgeois public sphere's ability to represent all citizens' interests equally.

Complementing this perspective, Castells's (2009) network society theory highlights how digital networks have reshaped power dynamics and political communication. Castells suggests that the network society, driven by social and media networks, has given individuals and marginalized groups new ways to engage with and influence politics. This framework explains how social media fosters "spreadable media" and participatory culture that challenge conventional power structures (Jenkins et al., 2013). These theories are still very relevant for understanding current digital activism, including Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z movement.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses two complementary theoretical frameworks, Jürgen Habermas's Public Sphere Theory and Manuel Castells's Network Society Theory, to analyze social media's influence on democratic participation during Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z movement.

Habermas's (1991) theory of the public sphere describes a space for informal discussion where citizens participate in reasoned debates and form opinions on common issues. Importantly, he emphasizes that this public space should be accessible to everyone, enabling public opinion to shape and oversee government power. This theory offers useful methods for understanding how social media creates new venues for citizen dialogue and democratic participation, extending beyond traditional media controls. Nonetheless, Habermas recognizes the limitations of the bourgeois public sphere in representing all interests, a point that remains significant in light of digital divides and disparities in online access.

Castells (2009) network society theory posits that the network society, defined by the importance of social and media networks, has given individuals and marginalized groups new opportunities to influence entertainment and politics. This shift has led to the rise of "spreadable media" and "playful participation," which challenge traditional power hierarchies (Jenkins et al., 2013). His framework highlights how digital networks reshape power dynamics and foster innovative political mobilization.

These theories provide complementary perspectives for analysis. Habermas's public sphere theory explains how social media fosters inclusive spaces for citizen discussion and the shaping of public opinion. Castells's network society theory highlights how digital platforms can transform politics by enabling new forms of

mobilization and challenging traditional power structures. Both frameworks view new media spaces as having democratizing potential while recognizing ongoing issues related to access, representation, and power disparities.

Methodology

This paper used a systematic thematic review to analyze social media's influence on promoting democratic participation during Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z movement. This approach allows for a thorough synthesis of existing research and helps identify recurring patterns, themes, and gaps in current understanding (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

The review adhered to established systematic review protocols, including: (1) formulation of clear research questions about social media's impact on democratic participation; (2) setting inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting literature; (3) conducting systematic searches across various academic databases and sources; (4) critically appraising the retrieved literature; and (5) synthesizing findings thematically (Tranfield et al., 2003).

Sources for the literature review included peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, books, and reputable online platforms such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and institutional repositories. The search involved keywords like "social media," "democratic participation," "digital activism," "Kenya," "Gen-Z," "Finance Bill 2024," and related terms. Emphasis was placed on recent publications from 2020 to 2025, while also including key foundational theoretical works. Special focus was given to studies discussing the 2024 Kenya Gen-Z protests and youth-driven digital activism within African contexts.

The analysis highlighted key themes that surfaced during the 2024 Gen-Z movement's pursuit of government accountability. These included: (1) social media's transformative power in political mobilization; (2) mechanisms for challenging traditional media narratives; (3) government responses and accountability measures; (4) successes and challenges in digital activism; and (5) broader implications for democratic engagement. The literature was systematically organized around these themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of social media's role in the movement.

The Transformative Power of Social Media in Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z Movement

The dual nature of social media is well documented, with studies showing that algorithms can promote division, hatred, and violence, as observed during the Arab Spring and other protests (Tufekci, 2017). Nevertheless, the 2024 Kenyan Gen-Z movement illustrates how social media can have a positive impact when used effectively to foster democratic participation.

The "Gen-Z movement" describes social and political activism primarily led by Generation Z members, born roughly between the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2010s. This group is known for their strong familiarity with digital technology, having grown up with smartphones, social media, and pervasive Internet access (George, 2024). Their increased use of platforms such as Instagram and X enabled them to share information, organize efforts, and amplify their voices on various issues (Vromen et al., 2015). The movement encompasses causes that resonate with this generation, such as economic inequality, social justice, government accountability, and political reform. Although initially driven by Gen Z, the movement has also gained support from other groups, including Millennials, both in Kenya and abroad (Ingutia, 2025).

The discussion started on X-spaces (formerly Twitter spaces), which played a key role in mobilizing political support during Kenya's 2017 and 2022 elections (Abboud et al., 2024; Mukhongo, 2020). It was initially sparked by complaints about the high cost of living and rising taxes, which contradicted the government's promises in the 2022 election campaign. The government had built significant youth support through a "hustler" narrative focused on empowering ordinary citizens. The trigger for protest was the Finance Bill 2024, which proposed tax hikes on basic goods such as bread, sanitary products, fuel, and digital services (Mogeni, 2024). Although Kenya has laws encouraging public participation, these laws are often only procedural in practice (Wahutu, 2018). As a result, X-space users launched the hashtag *#RejectFinanceBill2024*, which quickly spread to other social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook (Njuki et al., 2024).

On TikTok, primarily known for entertainment, users played a leading role in the *#RejectFinanceBill2024* campaign (Kang'ethe & Onyango, 2024). Despite its fragmentation into various groups, Facebook also significantly contributed to mobilization efforts. This campaign sparked the creation of another hashtag, *#OccupyParliament*, which organized young people to protest across nearly all Kenyan counties, especially in Nairobi and the cities of Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, and Eldoret (Ingutia, 2025). These protests marked a significant shift from traditional ethnic-based political mobilization to an issue-oriented approach, with young Kenyans rallying around shared concerns such as economic policies, government accountability, and social justice rather than tribal loyalties (Nyabola, 2018). This trend reflects increasing political maturity and a focus on common interests over ethnic divisions.

Challenging Traditional Media Narratives

Social media represents a significant departure from traditional media across several key aspects, especially in terms of accessibility, user-generated content, and decentralized distribution of information. These differences allow social media to act as a strong counterbalance to conventional gatekeeping processes.

Social media is much more accessible than traditional media. Traditional outlets like TV networks and newspapers need significant resources and infrastructure, often restricting ownership to large corporations or governments. Conversely, social media platforms are available to anyone with Internet access, democratizing participation and enabling a wider array of voices, including marginalized groups and individuals who might be excluded from mainstream media (Castells, 2015). Recent studies show that Kenya's digital divide has decreased notably, with more people becoming technologically savvy (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2023). The digital divide now involves not just access to technology but also the complexities of usage and the benefits that follow (van Dijk, 2020).

Second, social media relies heavily on content created by users. Unlike traditional media, which is often produced by trained journalists bound by institutional constraints and biases, social media platforms enable anyone to generate and share their own content. This change gives people the power to report on events, share personal stories, and voice their opinions without interference from traditional gatekeepers. As a result, social media tends to present a wider range of grassroots perspectives, often bringing attention to stories and viewpoints that mainstream media may overlook or suppress (Hermida, 2010).

Third, social media promotes decentralized sharing of information. Unlike traditional media, where information moves from a central source like a news station or newspaper to a passive audience, social media breaks this top-down model by supporting peer-to-peer communication and network sharing.

Information can spread quickly and virally through social connections, often bypassing traditional channels altogether (Tufekci, 2017). This decentralization makes it harder for those in power to control narratives or hold a monopoly over information.

Initially, the Kenyan government labeled protesters as “*wealthy, entitled kids*” to diminish the movement's credibility (Mogeni, 2024). However, the widespread, grassroots nature of protests and the protesters' effective use of digital tools challenged this narrative. They bypassed traditional media, which typically depends on news values like prominence and connected directly with the public through live streams, real-time updates, and viral content (Ingutia, 2025). The ongoing online and offline protests culminated in protesters storming the parliament building on June 25, 2024, forcing Members of Parliament who had approved the controversial Finance Bill without considering public opinion to flee. Many political and governance experts saw this as a symbolic reclaiming of power, aligning with Article 1 of the Kenyan Constitution, which affirms the sovereignty of the people. This unrest ultimately compelled the government to withdraw the contentious tax bill that had ignited the protests.

Government Response and Accountability

Amid political unrest, Kenya's President William Ruto initiated a multi-sectoral national dialogue, suggesting two representatives from various organizations to form a 100-member committee, later expanded to 150. The youth rejected this, seeing it as insincere tokenism rather than real reform (Mogeni, 2024). This compelled the President to join an X-space discussion to listen directly to the public, an unprecedented move among African leaders, to hear directly from the public. Participants challenged longstanding perceptions of power, speaking truth to authority. Subsequently, most of the Cabinet was dismissed, reflecting a move towards greater government accountability.

Hashtags like *#RejectFinanceBill2024*, *#OccupyParliament*, and *#StopAbductingUs* gained considerable traction, helping activists craft unified messages and rally support (Njuki et al., 2024). These tags enabled quick information sharing and maintained the movement's energy. Additionally, widespread live streaming on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok allowed activists to broadcast events in real time, further challenging traditional media's control over the narrative (Hermida et al., 2012; Kang'ethe & Onyango, 2024).

The social media campaigns achieved significant engagement, reach, and impact. Millions of Kenyans, both domestically and in the diaspora, interacted with the content through sharing, liking, and commenting on posts (Ingutia, 2025). This intense involvement led to concrete results such as higher protest participation, increased public discussion, and more pressure on political leaders. Additionally, the campaigns attracted attention from international media and human rights groups, drawing global scrutiny and support for the movement (Mogeni, 2024).

Navigating Successes and Challenges

The Kenyan Gen-Z movement's engagement with social media showcased both its empowering possibilities and its complex hurdles in using digital platforms for authentic civic participation. While social media allowed the movement to bypass traditional media barriers, rally broad support, and influence policy, issues like misinformation, government censorship, and the digital gap created serious challenges that limited its overall impact.

The Challenge of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation

The 2024 Gen-Z movement encountered complex issues related to information disorder, including misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information, which greatly damaged its credibility and diminished public trust in activists and government institutions. Recognizing these different types of information disorder is essential for evaluating their effects on democratic engagement and the relationship between citizens and the state in Kenya.

Drawing on Wardle and Derakhshan's (2018) framework, information disorder consists of three related yet separate phenomena. Misinformation is false or inaccurate information shared without malicious intent, often resulting from genuine mistakes or misunderstandings. Disinformation involves the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or misleading information with intent to deceive, manipulate public opinion, or gain political or financial benefits. Mal-information involves sharing genuine, accurate information deliberately shared with malicious intent to cause harm, such as leaking private data or releasing true info purposefully to damage reputations (Horn Institute, 2024; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018).

During Kenya's 2024 protests, all three types of information disorder were weaponized against the movement. The government sponsored disinformation campaigns systematically attempted to discredit activists and weaken the movement's legitimacy. Amnesty International (2025) revealed coordinated efforts by state-supported trolls and paid bloggers, known as "527 bloggers," hired to spread false information and tarnish Gen-Z activists. These influencers, earning between 25,000 and 50,000 Kenyan Shillings (approximately \$190-390) daily, actively pushed pro-government messages and created counter-hashtags to drown out protest messaging (Amnesty International, 2025). For instance, when protesters popularized *#RutoMustGo*, pro-government influencers quickly responded with *#RutoMustGoOn* to manipulate trending topics and reduce protest visibility.

False narratives were systematically deployed to delegitimize the movement. Several government-aligned bloggers disseminated unsubstantiated claims that the Gen-Z movement had been funded by foreign donor organizations, echoing President Ruto's own allegations despite lack of credible evidence (Mboya, 2024; Mogeni, 2024). Additionally, disinformation campaigns targeted critical media outlets, with hashtags like *#WhatIsNationHiding* and *#RIPNationMedia* trending after the Nation Media Group published investigative reports critical of government policies. These campaigns included absurd claims that the newspaper's ink and paper caused cancer, a clear example of disinformation designed to undermine independent journalism (Freedom House, 2024; TechCabal, 2025).

Malinformation involves selectively using accurate details to harm activists and distort public conversations. High-profile activists often face targeted campaigns where authentic personal information was strategically leaked or miscontextualized to damage their credibility. For example, Hanifa Adan, a well-known human rights activist and journalist of Somali origin, suffered malinformation attacks calling her a "foreigner," "fool," and "Somali terrorist," using her ethnicity to attack her activism (Amnesty International, 2025). These campaigns show how truthful information about individuals' backgrounds can be weaponized to incite discrimination and undermine their role in democratic discussions.

The rise of information disorder has posed major challenges in distinguishing fact from fiction. Studies show that 48.4% of social media users in Kenya primarily rely on social media for news, significantly higher than the global average of 34.2%. Despite this, 75% of these users find it difficult to tell real news

from fake online (Mboya, 2024). This susceptibility created an environment ripe for manipulation because many lacked the digital literacy to critically assess information sources. The problem was magnified by the commercial disinformation industry in Kenya, where influencers exploited their skills during political crises to profit from spreading false information (Madung & Obilo, 2021; Mboya, 2024).

Implications for Democracy and Citizen Trust

Information disorder during the Gen-Z movement had profound implications for democratic participation and citizen-government trust relationships. First, systematic disinformation campaigns undermined the legitimacy of citizen-led movements and eroded public confidence in authentic grassroots activism. When governments deploy resources to manufacture counter-narratives and flood digital spaces with false information, they create environments where citizens struggle to identify genuine civic initiatives versus state-sponsored manipulation (Amnesty International, 2025). This erosion of trust extends beyond the immediate movement to affect future mobilization efforts, as potential participants become skeptical of online activism's authenticity.

Second, misinformation and disinformation severely undermined citizens' trust in government institutions. The government faced what experts called a "trust crisis" rather than just a "fake news problem" (Africa Check, 2024). When officials repeatedly presented selective facts, contradicted themselves, or failed to provide verifiable data, it fueled widespread skepticism among the public. For example, Kenya's Catholic bishops in November 2024 condemned what they called a "culture of lies" within the government, stating that "it seems that the truth does not exist. If it does, it is only what the government says" (Africa Check, 2024; Carnegie Endowment, 2024). This deep loss of trust in institutions risks destabilizing democracy, as citizens become increasingly doubtful of their government's transparency and accountability.

Third, the weaponization of information disorder created chilling effect on free expression and democratic participation. Activists not only faced false accusations but also experienced coordinated online harassment, threats, and intimidation aimed at silencing dissent (Amnesty International, 2025). Participants reported receiving threatening messages such as "We will come and attack you" and warnings that their education would end if they continued protesting. This technology-facilitated violence fosters an atmosphere of fear that deters civic engagement, especially among vulnerable groups who cannot afford protective tools like VPNs or legal aid (The Africa Report, 2024).

Fourth, information disorder hampers citizens' ability to make informed decisions, which is essential for a working democracy. When digital platforms are filled with conflicting narratives, false data, and manipulated content, citizens struggle to access reliable information needed to assess government policies and hold leaders accountable (Reuters Institute, 2025). This challenge was particularly acute during the Finance Bill 2024 debates, where misinformation about proposed taxes was widespread alongside truthful data, making it hard for citizens to grasp the bill's actual implications. The resulting confusion weakened informed democratic engagement and policy discussions.

Ultimately, the movement's spread of misinformation exposed how Kenya's democratic institutions are vulnerable to digital manipulation. The organized use of paid influencers, bot networks, and disinformation campaigns showed that democratic discussions can be systematically undermined when resources and coordination are used effectively (Madung & Obilo, 2021; Mozilla Foundation, 2023). This poses a serious

threat to democratic values, allowing wealthy and technologically skilled actors to distort public opinion and artificially silence genuine citizen voices.

Tackling these challenges requires comprehensive approaches combining digital literacy education, enhanced fact-checking systems, regulatory frameworks to safeguard digital rights, and accountability measures for disinformation actors. As Kenya prepares for upcoming elections and political changes, effectively managing information chaos will be essential to uphold democratic integrity and restore trust between citizens and the government (Horn Institute, 2024; KICTANet, 2024).

Government Censorship and Surveillance

Government censorship posed significant hurdles, with authorities sometimes blocking access to social media during critical events like large protests, aiming to hinder communication and coordination (Gagliardone et al., 2015; Ingutia, 2025). Additionally, some activists encountered online harassment and threats, including abductions and enforced disappearances, which discouraged participation and fostered an environment of fear and uncertainty. Those abducted later reported cruelty inflicted by security forces, who released them without court proceedings as legally required. Others were unfortunately found dead and discarded (Mogeni, 2024).

The Digital Divide

The rural-urban digital gap further hindered the movement, as many rural and economically disadvantaged Kenyans had limited Internet and digital access. This disparity caused uneven reach and impact, possibly reducing its overall effectiveness (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2023; Porter et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the Kenyan Gen-Z movement effectively leveraged social media to influence political discussions and enact tangible change, highlighting the power of digital activism.

Broader Implications for Social Media and Democracy

The 2024 Kenyan Gen-Z movement highlights important insights about how social media can promote democratic participation worldwide. The protests reveal lessons such as the effectiveness of decentralized, grassroots mobilization via social media to bypass traditional power structures and media narratives (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). It also shows how tech-savvy young people can use innovative digital strategies like meme culture, crowdfunding, and coordinated hashtag campaigns to spread their message and exert pressure (Kang'ethe & Onyango, 2024; Njuki et al., 2024).

The Kenyan protests marked a shift from ethnic-based to issue-based activism, reflecting increased political maturity and prioritization of common interests over divisive identities (Nyabola, 2018). This underscores the vital role of journalists as vigilant fact-checkers in combating misinformation and fostering public trust in the media (Macharia & Ong'ong'a, 2024). Additionally, the protests highlight social media's growing and crucial influence in shaping political discussion and facilitating tangible change. As digital platforms continue to amplify diverse voices and decentralize cultural narratives, they offer both opportunities and challenges for democracy (Tufekci, 2017).

The movement clearly demonstrated social media's powerful role in mobilizing and organizing grassroots activities. These online platforms allowed activists to quickly share information, coordinate efforts, and rally broad support. By using social media to sidestep traditional media gatekeepers, the movement reached

a global audience directly. This instant communication created a sense of urgency, motivating more people to participate and act (Ingutia, 2025).

Another key lesson is the impact of storytelling and personal stories. The movement skillfully employed individual testimonies to make their causes more relatable and foster emotional bonds with their audience. These stories not only increased awareness but also challenged negative stereotypes and misinformation. By sharing varied and genuine experiences, social media can promote more meaningful and inclusive discussions (Gerbaudo, 2012; Kang'ethe & Onyango, 2024).

Looking to the future innovations in social media technology might further support these democratic roles. For instance, improvements in artificial intelligence could help identify and combat misinformation more effectively. Additionally, better encryption and privacy protections could shield activists from surveillance and censorship. To leverage social media for positive social impact, activists and policymakers should prioritize boosting digital literacy, supporting independent journalism, and guaranteeing fair access to digital tools.

Conclusion

The Kenyan Gen-Z movement of 2024 demonstrates how social media can boost democratic participation and citizen engagement in governance. Platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok allowed young activists to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, sharing their messages directly with a global audience. This facilitated rapid information spread, coordinated actions, and broad mobilization, giving diverse voices a platform to humanize social issues and combat negative stereotypes and misinformation, ultimately holding the government accountable.

Social media played a vital role in facilitating real-time communication and coordination, allowing the movement to react quickly to events, hold leaders accountable, and push for change. This example shows how social media can foster a more participatory and inclusive democracy, enabling citizens to engage in public debates and shape societal results. The movement also proved that issue-based activism can go beyond ethnic differences, reflecting a growing sophistication in Kenya's democratic engagement.

However, challenges like misinformation, digital surveillance, and the digital divide present serious risks. Misinformation can damage the credibility of movements, surveillance and censorship can threaten activists, and unequal access to technology can worsen social inequalities. Despite these issues, social media still holds great potential to promote positive social change. When used responsibly, technological advances can enhance misinformation detection, safeguard privacy, and support inclusive online communities.

Prioritizing on digital literacy initiatives, fostering inclusive community engagement, and strengthening digital rights protections can enhance the positive impact of social media while reducing its dangers. Policymakers, civil society groups, and tech companies need to collaborate to foster spaces where digital activism thrives and participants are safeguarded. The experiences from Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z movement provide important lessons for democratic participation worldwide, highlighting social media's powerful potential and the challenges it entails. The imbalance between digital friction and digital literacy awareness needs to be addressed. There is a need for significant interpretation and distinction between Tech-savvy and digital/social media literacy, beyond the Tech-savvy confidence.

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