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Abstract

Research on Kenya's 2024 anti-Finance Bill protests has established that social media enabled a decentralised, youth-led mobilisation. This article asks a different question: what happened to the participants who made that mobilisation visible. Drawing on an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design combining a structured content analysis of 300 high-engagement posts on X and TikTok (12 June to 1 July 2024; Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$), a survey of 107 digitally engaged Kenyans aged 18 to 35, and 12 semi-structured interviews, we argue that the platform affordances that facilitated the protests were also the affordances that increased participants' traceability. Algorithmic amplification carried unknown creators to national audiences and into the attention of security agencies; persistence preserved evidence of state violence and individual participation alike; hashtag coordination that assembled crowds also aggregated them. We term this dynamic affordance inversion. The survey registers its consequences directly. Only 7% of respondents felt very safe expressing political views online while 53% felt unsafe, and respondents reported a structured repertoire of defensive practice: disabling location (38%), avoiding showing face or voice (38%), anonymous accounts (33%), encrypted applications (19%) and post deletion (13%). Interviews show these choices were not merely technical but ethical, weighing personal exposure against obligation to peers in a manner consistent with Obonyo's (2024) account of self-reflective African communication ethics. The article contributes an affordance-theoretic account of how digital protest generates the conditions of its own suppression, and evidence that the costs fall on ordinary participants rather than on recognised activists alone.

Keywords: *Platform affordances, digital repression, protest, self-censorship, Kenya*

1. Introduction

Between 18 June and 1 July 2024, Kenya experienced the largest sustained protest wave since the 2007–2008 post-election crisis. The immediate trigger was the Finance Bill 2024, which proposed to widen value-added tax and introduce levies on essential goods and digital services in a country whose median age is 20.3 years (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2024) and where youth employment is dominated by informal and insecure work. The protests were led overwhelmingly by people under 30, coordinated without a party, a union, or named leadership, and conducted largely on X and TikTok. On 25 June, demonstrators breached

the National Assembly precincts; on 26 June, President William Ruto declined to assent to the Bill and referred it back to the Assembly under Article 115(1)(b) of the Constitution with a recommendation to delete all its clauses; on 25 July, the National Assembly rejected the Bill in its entirety (EY, 2024; Parliament of Kenya, 2024).

The state's response was lethal. The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) documented 39 deaths, 361 injuries and 627 arrests between 18 June and 1 July 2024 alone, together with 32 abductions or enforced disappearances (KNCHR, 2024a); by December 2024 the Commission's cumulative count of protest-linked disappearances had reached 82, with 29 people still missing (KNCHR, 2024b). Amnesty International's later estimate for the full 2024 cycle is at least 63 killed (Amnesty International, 2025). On the afternoon of 25 June, national connectivity fell by roughly half for approximately seven hours; operators attributed this to a submarine cable fault, but forensic network analysis found the signature more consistent with a directed shutdown (Meng et al., 2025; NetBlocks, 2024).

That combination of a protest that succeeded and participants who were killed, disappeared and surveilled is the problem this article addresses. The existing literature on the case, which has grown quickly, has largely settled the first half. Multiple studies have now established that the protests exemplified connective action (Kariuki & Gichanga, 2025; Omoke, 2026), that memes and satire functioned as accountability instruments (Akondo et al., 2026; Muya & Onyinge, 2026), that X and TikTok performed complementary roles, and that digital-native narration outpaced legacy media. The descriptive question of scale was answered within two weeks of the events by commercial analytics: Nendo (2024) reported 24,989,246 X mentions between 12 June and 1 July, and DFRLab recorded over 14 million engagements from more than 400,000 unique accounts on #RejectFinanceBill2024 during 23–29 June alone (Chenrose, 2024).

What remains substantially unexamined is the second half: how the affordances that produced this visibility acted upon the people who supplied it, and what those people did in response. Amnesty International (2025) has documented tech-facilitated violence against Kenyan human rights defenders qualitatively, through interviews with 31 activists. But activists are a selected population: practised, networked, and often supported. The 2024 protests also involved many ordinary participants who did not fit those characteristics. Whether ordinary young Kenyans experienced, perceived, and adapted to digital risk, and how, is an open question with direct bearing on how we theorize digital protest in repressive settings.

We advance an argument we call affordance inversion. Platform affordances are not fixed properties but relational possibilities that emerge between a platform's features and users' perceptions of them (Nagy & Neff, 2015; Ronzhyn et al., 2023). We show that in Kenya's 2024 protests, four affordances functioned first as capacities for mobilisation and subsequently as vectors of exposure. These are algorithmic amplification independent of follower count, content persistence and replicability, searchable hashtag-based coordination, and low-cost anonymity. The same recommendation system that carried a video from an account with no followers to an audience of six figures carried it to a security apparatus. The same persistence that archived police violence archived participation. This is not the familiar observation that surveillance accompanies digital activism; it is a claim about mechanism: the specific properties that make platforms effective for leaderless mobilization are constitutive of the vulnerability that follows.

The article addresses three research questions:

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RQ1. How did the affordances of X and TikTok structure the mobilisation, coordination and narrative framing of the 2024 protests?

RQ2. How did digitally engaged Kenyan youth perceive and experience the risks of their online participation?

RQ3. What repertoire of defensive practices did participants develop, and what ethical reasoning did they draw on when deciding between visibility and protection?

Section 2 situates the case, Section 3 develops the framework and specifies the gap in the existing literature, and Section 4 sets out the methodology and its limits. Section 5 reports findings, Section 6 develops the argument and considers the 2025 protest wave, and Section 7 concludes.

2. Context: The Finance Bill 2024 and Kenya's youth conjuncture

Kenya's 2024 fiscal crisis was structural. Public debt servicing consumed a rising share of ordinary revenue, and the Finance Bill 2024 was drafted under International Monetary Fund programme conditions requiring domestic revenue mobilisation. Its provisions, which included proposed levies on bread, cooking oil, mobile money transfers and motor vehicles as well as an expanded eco-levy, were widely read as taxing subsistence and digital participation simultaneously.

The demographic context matters for the argument that follows. Kenya's median age of 20.3 years places it among the world's youngest populations (UNDESA, 2024). Modelled International Labour Organization estimates put youth (15–24) unemployment at approximately 11.9% (World Bank, 2024), but this headline figure understates youth economic distress, because the ILO definition counts any paid work in the reference week. A fuller characterisation is pervasive underemployment and informality, with a substantial graduate-employment gap. This is Honwana's (2012) *waithood*: a prolonged, involuntary suspension between childhood dependence and the economic independence that would confer full social adulthood.

Two features distinguish the 2024 mobilisation from Kenya's protest history. First, it was not organised by, aligned with, or endorsed by any political party, and it explicitly refused the ethnic-coalition logic that has structured Kenyan contentious politics since multipartyism. Second, it originated in and was conducted through platforms rather than being merely publicised on them. Prior Kenyan scholarship on digital politics has concentrated on electoral periods and on the ambivalence of digital publics, which have amplified incitement as readily as participation (Mutahi & Kimari, 2017). The 2024 case departs on both counts.

3. Theoretical framework and the state of the literature

3.1 Connective action and the limits of leaderlessness

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) distinguish *collective action*, which depends on formal organisations and negotiated collective identity, from *connective action*, in which personalised expression circulating through digital networks substitutes for organisational brokerage. Participation requires no membership and no ideological agreement, only a personal action frame that travels. The condition of possibility is what Castells (2010) termed the network society, in which power is exercised through communication flows rather than through institutional position, and in which movements can constitute themselves outside formal organisation (Castells, 2012). Milan (2015) refines the identity question: in cloud protesting, collective identity is assembled

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from a shared symbolic repertoire hosted on platforms rather than negotiated through membership, which explains how participants can act in concert while declining any common label. The Kenyan case fits the type: participants coordinated through hashtags, spontaneous X Spaces and TikTok trends rather than through any structure, and interviewees in this study consistently declined the label “activist.”

Two cautions apply. First, “leaderless” overstates the case. Gerbaudo (2012) shows that even in movements without formal leadership, a *soft leadership* operates through the choreography of assembly: influential accounts set tempo, direct attention and confer legitimacy without commanding. Gerbaudo (2017) develops the point further, arguing that contemporary leaderlessness is better understood as a political claim about legitimacy than as an accurate description of how coordination actually occurs. Our data support this reading. Second, connective action has already been applied to this case. Omoke (2026) analyses the discursive construction of youth and government in the 2024 protests using connective action alongside the discourse-historical approach; Kariuki and Gichanga (2025) combine connective action with framing theory across 45 interviews. We therefore do not present connective action as our contribution. We adopt it as an established description of the mobilisation’s *form* and ask what that form cost.

3.2 Affordances, imagined affordances, and inversion

An affordance is not a feature. Bucher and Helmond (2018) distinguish high-level affordances (what a platform makes possible in general) from low-level affordances (specific interface mechanisms), and boyd (2010) identifies four properties of networked publics, namely persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability, that structure what can happen within them. Nagy and Neff (2015) add the necessary corrective of *imagined affordances*: what matters for action is what users believe a platform will do, which may diverge from what it does. Ronzhyn et al. (2023) note in their systematic review that the term is used so loosely that authors must specify which definition they adopt. We adopt the relational definition: affordances are possibilities for action that emerge in the relation between platform properties and situated user perception.

The concept’s standard use in protest research is enabling: affordances explain how movements achieve scale without organisation. Our argument is that this is a partial reading. Each of boyd’s properties is symmetrical with respect to who benefits. Persistence preserves the record of a police shooting and the record of who filmed it. Scalability delivers a policy explainer to a national audience and delivers its author’s face to whoever is watching. Searchability lets a protester find a first-aid point and lets an investigator assemble a network. TikTok’s recommendation architecture, which Gerbaudo (2026) argues organises publics into algorithmically constituted interest clusters rather than social networks, distributes content by relevance to audiences rather than by connection to authors. That is precisely why it can surface an unknown creator, and precisely why that creator cannot predict or control who sees them. We call the resulting dynamic **affordance inversion**: the transformation of a mobilising capacity into an exposing one, without any change in the underlying platform property.

To our knowledge, affordance theory has not been applied to Kenya’s 2024 protests. This is the theoretical opening the article occupies.

3.3 Affective publics and platform vernaculars

Papacharissi (2015, 2016) theorises *affective publics*: networked formations mobilised and connected through expressions of feeling, which cohere around structures of storytelling rather than around deliberation. Emotion is not decoration on political communication but its organising principle. This framework has been applied to TikTok climate activism by Hautea et al. (2021), who operationalise it through named affordances and a coded video sample, a design close to our own. Hashtags are the syntax through which such publics assemble: Jackson et al. (2020) show that hashtags do not merely label content but determine what becomes visible, urgent and emotionally available, and that this capacity is disproportionately consequential for groups excluded from institutional media access. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) argue that TikTok has become a primary venue for youth political expression precisely because it rewards affective, humorous and culturally embedded speech over deliberative argument, while Zeng and Abidin (2021) show how generational antagonism on the platform is conducted through memetic form. Both are directly pertinent to a movement that defined itself generationally.

Emotion in the Kenyan case travelled in a specific register. Gibbs et al. (2015) introduce *platform vernacular* to name the styles, grammars and conventions that emerge on a given platform through the interaction of design and use; Schellewald (2021) provides an empirical typology of TikTok's communicative forms. Kenyan protest TikTok was conducted substantially in Sheng, the Nairobi urban vernacular blending Kiswahili, English and ethnic languages, and in idioms of *matatu* culture, gospel and drill. This is not incidental. Vernacular framing made fiscal policy legible to audiences whom formal civic education does not reach, and it simultaneously made the content difficult for outsiders, including automated moderation, to parse. Muya and Onyinge (2026) analyse this performative register in the Kenyan case in detail.

The comparative reference point for the Kenyan case is Nigeria's #EndSARS movement, which was similarly youth-led, digitally coordinated and culturally expressive, and which similarly met lethal state force (Ojedokun et al., 2021). Iwuoha and Aniche (2022) analyse that repression through a mixed-methods design combining interviews with large-scale post analysis, and their finding that digital organisation invited rather than deterred state violence anticipates the mechanism we specify here. Jenkins et al. (2016) provide the wider frame: participatory culture supplies entry points into political life for people whom formal civic institutions do not reach, which is the recruitment pattern our survey data record. Mutsvairo and Ragnedda's (2019) account of the African digital divide notes that these entry points are unevenly distributed across the continent, and this limits any claim we make about whom the 2024 movement could include.

3.4 Digital repression and the visibility–vulnerability relation

The literature on digital repression in Africa has moved beyond shutdowns as its central object. Rydzak et al. (2020) show that network shutdowns frequently fail to suppress protest and can displace it into less controllable forms; Mare (2020) explains the licensing and harassment mechanisms through which operators are induced to comply. Feldstein (2021) situates these tactics within a comparative account of digital repression as a governance repertoire, and Roberts and Bosch (2023) frame African digital citizenship as constitutively dual, being technologies of agency and of repression at once. Zuboff's (2019) analysis of surveillance capitalism explains why the data exists to be exploited; Mann et al. (2003) describe the counter-move of *sousveillance*, in which citizens invert the surveillant gaze by recording authority. Milan and Treré (2019) argue for

reading datafication from the margins, where the costs of visibility are borne. Our contribution is to specify the mechanism connecting these literatures in a single case: not that surveillance accompanies activism, but that the affordances constituting the activism constitute the surveillability.

3.5 What is already published on this case, and what is not

Honesty about the state of the field is necessary. Since late 2024, this case has been analysed in at least twenty peer-reviewed outputs. Karanja and Musili (2026) survey 374 Kenyan Gen Z on generative-AI protest tools. Muya and Onyinge (2026) examine meme culture and political satire. Nguu et al. (2026) combine a 360-respondent survey with 600 X posts and television bulletins to analyse the criminalisation of protest discourse. Akondo et al. (2026) code 500 memes across TikTok and X. Ouma (2025) develops a “digital securitisation cascade” across 2024–2025. Moore et al. (2026) survey 918 rural respondents aged 18–28 and find, contrary to expectation, that protest participation complemented rather than displaced electoral intention. Kariuki and Gichanga (2025) and Omoke (2026) apply connective action.

Four consequences follow, and we state them plainly. First, no novelty claim of the form “this is the first study of...” is available. Second, our sample sizes are modest relative to the field and cannot ground any claim resting on scale or representativeness. Third, the descriptive characterisation of platform division of labour is established and is reported here as corroboration, not discovery. Fourth, the genuine openings are theoretical and substantive rather than empirical-descriptive: we identified no published study of this case applying affordance theory, and no study providing participant-level quantitative evidence on perceived risk and self-censorship among ordinary participants, as distinct from professionally activist ones. Those are the two openings this article occupies.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A quantitative phase combined structured content analysis of platform data with a cross-sectional survey; a subsequent qualitative phase used semi-structured interviews to interpret the quantitative patterns, particularly the risk and adaptation findings, which the survey could establish but not explain. The sequence matters for the argument: the survey identified a defensive repertoire, and the interviews established the reasoning behind it.

4.2 Phase 1a: content analysis

We analysed 300 high-engagement posts, 150 from X and 150 from TikTok, published between 12 June and 1 July 2024 and carrying #RejectFinanceBill2024, #OccupyParliament, #FreeShad or #RutoMustGo. Sampling was purposive and engagement-stratified: within each platform and each day of the window, posts were ranked by aggregate visible engagement (likes, shares/reposts, comments and, for TikTok, views), and the highest-ranked available posts were drawn to fill a daily quota. This procedure captures the content that shaped the movement’s discourse; it does not describe the population of protest posts, and we make no inferential claim about that population.

Each post was coded on nine variables: platform; post type; date; hashtags present; engagement metrics; dominant tone (hopeful, angry, sombre, defiant, satirical, informative, empathetic); primary theme; language (English, Kiswahili, Sheng, multilingual); creator identity (activist, influencer, youth participant, anonymous); and visual symbols present. Coding was manual rather than automated, since tone, Sheng idiom and visual symbolism are not reliably detected by available classifiers for this language context. Coding was managed in NVivo.

Two researchers independently coded a subsample of 50 posts (16.7% of the corpus). Inter-coder agreement reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating substantial agreement (Krippendorff, 2019; Lombard et al., 2002). Disagreements were resolved by discussion and the codebook was refined before the remaining posts were coded. The full codebook appears in Appendix A.

Because platform research APIs were not accessible for this study, engagement figures are as displayed publicly at the time of capture, and deleted or restricted posts are necessarily absent. This is a material limitation in a context where deletion was itself a protest tactic, and we return to it in Section 4.7.

4.3 Phase 1b: survey

An online questionnaire was administered to Kenyans aged 18–35 who had engaged with the protests through social media. Recruitment used protest coordination channels on Telegram and WhatsApp together with reposts by youth accounts. A total of 107 valid responses was obtained. The instrument covered demographics, platform use and intensity, forms of participation, motivations, offline attendance, perceived safety, and protective practices. It combined closed items with open-ended questions and required approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. A consent statement preceded the first item. The full instrument appears in the Supplementary Material.

The sampling frame is a self-selected population reached through protest-affiliated channels. This is the correct frame for the research questions, which concern people who participated, but it excludes non-participants, those who withdrew before the recruitment window, and those whose risk assessment precluded responding to a research request at all. The last exclusion biases the safety findings in a specific and knowable direction: the most fearful are least likely to be in the sample, so the reported prevalence of insecurity and self-censorship should be read as a **lower bound**. This limitation should therefore be considered when interpreting the magnitude of reported insecurity.

Analysis used descriptive statistics, frequencies and cross-tabulations in SPSS. No inferential tests are reported, and none would be appropriate given non-probability sampling. Percentages are reported to one decimal place where the underlying counts warrant it and rounded otherwise; n is stated wherever a subgroup is described.

4.4 Phase 2: interviews

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who had played an active role through content creation, coordination or on-the-ground organising. Participants were recruited purposively to span four roles: recognised youth influencers, anonymous protest accounts, TikTok creators and street-level organisers. We approached them via direct message or referral. Interviews were conducted over encrypted platforms (Signal or Zoom), lasted 45–75 minutes, and were

recorded with consent and transcribed. The interview guide appears in the Supplementary Material.

4.5 Qualitative analysis

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Following familiarisation, initial codes were generated inductively and then organised into candidate themes, which were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset, defined, and named. We report this as *reflexive* thematic analysis deliberately: themes were developed through interpretive engagement rather than discovered, and we make no claim that a different team would generate identical themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding was conducted by two researchers with periodic joint review; we do not report a reliability coefficient for the qualitative phase, since reliability coefficients are conceptually inappropriate to reflexive thematic analysis.

Analytic attention centred on how participants described decisions about visibility, on the emotional register of those decisions, and on the moral vocabulary they used.

4.6 Ethics, positionality and reflexivity

The Daystar University Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee granted ethical approval. All participants gave informed consent. The survey collected no personally identifying information. Interview participants were offered pseudonymity by default rather than on request, and were told they could decline any question or withdraw at any point without giving reasons. Recordings and transcripts were stored encrypted with access restricted to the research team. No approach was made to any person known to be in detention, to anyone under 18, or to the families of those killed or disappeared.

Two ethical considerations were specific to this study. First, publication itself carries risk: quoting a distinctive phrase from a small movement can identify its author. We have therefore paraphrased where a verbatim quotation would be traceable, and we note where we have done so. Second, social media posts, although publicly accessible, were not authored with research in mind. We treat contextual integrity rather than technical accessibility as the operative standard, and we do not reproduce usernames, handles, or images of identifiable individuals.

On positionality: all five authors are Kenyan communication scholars based in Nairobi who observed the protests as residents and as members of the generational and national community under study. This proximity afforded interpretive access to Sheng idiom, to the significance of specific sites and dates, and to the affective texture of the period; it also carries a risk of sympathetic framing. We have addressed this by holding the argument to what the data supports, by reporting findings that complicate the movement's self-description, and by presenting the state's account where it is documented rather than only where we find it credible.

4.7 Limitations

We state limitations before findings rather than after, because several bear directly on how the findings should be read.

Sampling. Both the post corpus and the survey are non-probability samples. The findings should not be statistically generalised to Kenyan youth, protest participants, or protest content. The survey

population is urban-skewed, consistent with the geography of both protest activity and connectivity; Moore et al. (2026) provide the rural counterpart this study cannot.

Scale. With 300 posts and 107 respondents, this study is smaller than several published analyses of the same case. We therefore make no claim resting on scale, and we treat convergence with larger studies as corroboration and divergence as a question rather than a correction.

Missing data by construction. Deleted, restricted and private content is absent from the corpus. Since deletion was a documented protective tactic, the corpus systematically under-represents the most exposed content and the most frightened creators, who are the very population the article's argument concerns.

Retrospection. Survey and interview responses were collected after the events and are subject to recall effects and post-hoc rationalisation, particularly regarding motivation and the sequencing of decisions.

Causal inference. The design cannot establish that social media caused the Bill's failure. Digital mobilisation coincided with street protest, elite defection, church and civil-society pressure, and international attention. We describe the digital dimension of a multi-causal outcome and do not isolate its effect. Readers should treat any causal language in the movement's own self-description, including in our interview data, as participant belief rather than as established fact.

Single-case design. Findings are analytically rather than statistically generalisable, and the affordance-inversion argument is offered as a candidate mechanism warranting testing elsewhere rather than as a demonstrated regularity.

5. Findings

We report findings in four movements: the shape of digital participation (5.1–5.2); the division of platform labour and its vernacular register (5.3); the composition and temporal evolution of the corpus (5.4); and the experience of risk and the repertoire of defensive practice (5.5), which carries the article's principal contribution.

Throughout, we distinguish three evidentiary registers, and we ask readers to hold them apart. **Contextual figures** derive from third-party analytics and are cited as such; they establish the scale within which our data sits and are not our findings. **Corpus findings** derive from our coded sample of 300 posts and describe that sample only. **Participant findings** derive from the survey ($n = 107$) and interviews ($n = 12$).

5.1 The scale of the mobilisation (contextual)

Two independent analyses establish the magnitude of the digital mobilisation. DFRLab, analysing 23–29 June 2024, recorded that #RejectFinanceBill2024 generated more than 14 million engagements from over 400,000 unique accounts on X and generated more than 750 million views, with over 80% of engagement consisting of reposts; on TikTok, #RejectFinanceBill2024 carried approximately 81,000 posts and the variant #rejectfinancebill approximately 89,000, while #OccupyParliament carried nearly 18,000 (Chenrose, 2024). Nendo, using a wider window of 12 June–1 July, recorded 24,989,246 X mentions comprising 698,316 original posts from 410,508 unique authors, 22,399,717 reposts (89.6%) and 1,891,213 replies and quotes (7.6%), with TikTok

content exceeding 500 million views; it also recorded protest-related X Spaces activity, with individual sessions drawing on the order of 59,000 listeners and peak concurrent listenership across the period reaching approximately 130,000 (Nendo, 2024).

The two datasets are not contradictory: they use different windows, platforms and metrics, and the reposts recorded by Nendo sit within Nendo's own mentions total rather than within DFRLab's engagement count. We report both because the finding common to both, that amplification vastly exceeded authorship at over 80% of engagement in DFRLab's data and 89.6% of mentions in Nendo's, is the single most consequential fact about this mobilisation's structure, and it is corroborated in our participant data below.

5.2 Who participated, and how

Survey respondents ($n = 107$) were young, urban and near-evenly gendered. Women comprised 50.5% ($n = 54$) and men 47.7% ($n = 51$), with 0.9% ($n = 1$) identifying as non-binary or gender-diverse and one response (0.9%) missing. This near-parity is notable against a Kenyan protest history in which street demonstration has been male-dominated, and suggests that platform participation lowered a gendered threshold to political action. The modal age cohort was 23 to 27 years (28.0%, $n = 30$), followed by 28 to 31 (18.7%, $n = 20$) and 18 to 22 (11.2%, $n = 12$). Residence concentrated in Nairobi, followed by Kiambu, Kisumu, Mombasa and Machakos, reflecting both protest geography and connectivity distribution.

Platform use was multiple rather than exclusive. X was used by 64% of respondents, TikTok by 58%, WhatsApp by 51% and Instagram by 41%. Intensity was high: over 55% engaged with protest content several times daily.

The distribution of activities is the finding that matters most for what follows. Respondents shared or reposted others' content (56%), watched or liked posts (47%) and commented (46%), while only 34% created original content. Participation was overwhelmingly amplificatory. Because item 9 permitted multiple selections these categories overlap and do not form a ratio, so the comparison with the platform-level figures in Section 5.1 is directional rather than numerical. It nonetheless establishes something the aggregate figures cannot: the movement's reach was produced by a large number of people each taking a small, low-authorship action. That distribution is central to the article's argument, because it means the population exposed by amplification was far larger than the population of authors, and far larger than the population that would describe itself as activist.

Motivations were civic rather than personal. Political frustration was cited by 62%, a desire to raise awareness by 61%, solidarity with others by 44% and personal experience of injustice by 32%. Sixty-two per cent reported that they joined because they saw a post from a peer rather than from a public figure. This is the connective-action mechanism operating at the level of individual recruitment.

Offline and online participation were complementary, not substitutive. While 62% engaged exclusively online, 38% attended a physical protest. Given the documented lethality of street protest during this period, a 38% attendance rate among a digitally recruited sample is high, not low. Interviewees described the relationship as directional: several reported that online exposure precipitated physical attendance rather than replacing it. One participant, unable to attend for family reasons, characterised amplification as a substantive contribution rather than a substitute

for one. This framing recurs across the interview corpus and resists the slacktivism thesis on the participants’ own terms.

5.3 A division of platform labour

The corpus and interview data converge on a clear functional differentiation, consistent with prior analyses of this case and with Tufekci’s (2017) argument that platform choice conditions the kind of political communication that emerges.

X operated as logistical infrastructure. Posts carried protest locations and times, police movement updates, first-aid points, and contact details for volunteer medics and pro bono counsel. X Spaces functioned as continuous, open-access assemblies: during the 25 June events, Spaces ran without interruption, providing legal guidance, situational updates and collective processing in real time. Amplification, not authorship, was the dominant behaviour, consistent with the repost shares reported by both third-party analyses (over 80% and 89.6% respectively). A survey respondent’s summary is characteristic: “Twitter was our HQ. We got everything there: locations, alerts, even emergency numbers.”

TikTok operated as the affective and vernacular engine. Content took the form of chants, spoken word, skits, re-enactments, explainers and mourning reels. Within the 150 TikTok posts coded, 40% used Sheng or Kiswahili to explain the Bill’s provisions. This vernacular work performed a translation function that formal civic education does not: it rendered fiscal policy as household arithmetic. A widely circulated formulation ran, “You earn 15k, they tax 3k. You take a matatu, they tax it. You breathe, they might tax that too.”

Creator identity in the corpus was diffuse. Approximately 20% of the 300 coded posts originated from accounts identifiable as activists or influencers; the remainder came from ordinary participants or anonymous accounts, and a substantial share of the most-engaged accounts had no prior record of political commentary. X Spaces were, however, typically convened and moderated by recognisable accounts, and several anonymous collectives functioned as high-volume reposting hubs. We return to this asymmetry in Section 6.2.

TikTok’s recommendation architecture distributed content by relevance rather than by follower count. An interviewee captured both the promise and the volatility of this: “TikTok lets us tell our stories in our own voice. Some videos had 10 views, some had 100,000, but every one mattered.” The unpredictability in that sentence is not incidental. It is the mechanism of Section 5.5.

Table 1. Platform roles, affordances and exposure vectors

	X	TikTok
Primary function	Coordination and logistics	Storytelling and affective expression
Dominant behaviour	Amplification (>80% of engagement; 89.6% of mentions)	Creation and remix
Key enabling affordance	Real-time synchronous broadcast; searchable hashtag streams; Spaces	Follower-independent algorithmic distribution; low-cost production
Register	Directive, informational, urgent	Vernacular, humorous, elegiac

	X	TikTok
Exposure vector	Network mapping; hashtag-based aggregation; public account graph	Face and voice capture; unpredictable reach; geolocated background detail
Documented risk	Account profiling and suspension; coordinated counter-hashtag burial	Metadata exposure; moderation bias; targeted harassment

The right-hand rows of Table 1 are the article’s analytical addition. Prior treatments of this case tabulate function and strength; we tabulate the affordance and its inverse, because they are the same property described from two positions.

5.4 Thematic composition and tonal trajectory

Thematic coding of the 300-post corpus produced five primary categories. Mobilisation content, comprising announcements, logistics and security warnings, accounted for approximately 30% and dominated the early window. Solidarity and empathy accounted for approximately 25% and rose sharply after 23 June. Critique and political accountability accounted for about 20% and remained sustained throughout. Calls for justice, centred on named abducted individuals, accounted for approximately 15%. Humour and satire accounted for approximately 10%.

Tone tracked events rather than themes. Between 12 and 20 June the modal register was hopeful, defiant and informative. After 23 June, following the abductions of Shad Khalif and Gabriel Oguda on that date (Chenrose, 2024; Tongola, 2024) and the escalation of police violence, the register shifted to grief and rage. Between 27 June and 1 July, the modal tone was empathetic, mixing satire with mourning.

The hashtag record maps this transition precisely. Before 23 June, the dominant tags were coordinative: #OccupyParliament, #RejectFinanceBill2024, #TotalShutdownKE. After 23 June, the dominant tags became nominative and protective: #FreeShad, which DFRLab measured at over 900,000 engagements, and #FreeOguda, alongside #RutoMustGo (Chenrose, 2024). The movement’s communicative task changed from assembling people to accounting for them.

Illustrative coded entries from both platforms appear in the Supplementary Material. This shift produced a distinct content type we term **protective witnessing**: posts circulating identifying details of missing persons in order to make disappearance costly. A representative form ran, “Last seen: Nairobi CBD, 4:37 PM. Wearing a red hoodie. His phone is off. Please share.” Such posts are sousveillance in Mann et al.’s (2003) sense, an inversion of the surveillant gaze, but they are also, and unavoidably, the voluntary publication of identifying information about a person already in danger. The tension is not resolvable, and participants knew it.

5.5 Visibility, risk and the repertoire of defensive practice

This section reports the article’s principal empirical contribution.

Perceived safety was low. Only 7% of respondents reported feeling “very safe” expressing political views online during the protest period, while 53% reported feeling unsafe. Given that the sample was recruited through protest channels and consists of people who continued to participate,

and given that the most fearful are least likely to have responded to a research invitation at all, this figure should be read as a conservative lower-bound indication rather than a population estimate.

Protective practice was structured, prevalent and specific. Respondents reported: disabling location services (38%); avoiding showing face or voice (38%); using anonymous accounts (33%); using encrypted applications such as Signal and Telegram (19%); and deleting posts after publication (13%).

Three observations follow. First, these are not generalised anxieties but discrete technical countermeasures, each matched to a specific exposure vector: geolocation metadata, biometric identifiability, account attribution, interception, and persistence respectively. Their prevalence indicates a diffused platform literacy usually attributed to trained activists. Second, the ordering is informative: the two most common practices (38% each) target the two affordances that were most productive for the movement, namely locational coordination and face-to-camera vernacular testimony. Participants were disabling precisely what had worked. Third, and most consequentially, roughly one in eight respondents deleted content. This means the movement's archive was actively thinned by its own participants for protective reasons, which is why platform-derived corpora, including our own, systematically understate the movement's most exposed content.

Interview data establish that these were not reflexes but decisions, and that they were reasoned morally as well as tactically. Participants described a calculus in which their own exposure was weighed against obligations to others. One organiser described ceasing to post under their own name after friends were abducted, creating an anonymous account and posting updates late at night. That change of practice preserved the informational function while severing it from an identifiable person. Another described the recursive effect of deletion and re-amplification: "After my video went viral, I deleted it. I was scared. But then others reposted it. That gave me courage." The content persisted through the network after its author withdrew from it. This is a distributed solution to individual exposure that only an amplification-dominant movement can produce.

The emotional cost was substantial and was borne by people who did not consider themselves activists. Participants described exhaustion arising specifically from digital participation, distinct from the physical danger of the street. One recalled crying after publishing a missing-persons thread: "Even when I wasn't protesting physically, I felt drained. Posting became emotional." This pattern is consistent with emotional labour, involving the sustained management of one's affective state in the performance of a role, and it affected people who had entered the movement by resharing a friend's post.

Participants' ethical vocabulary was relational rather than individualist. Across the interview corpus, decisions about visibility were justified by reference to consequences for others: whether posting would expose a peer, whether amplifying a missing-person alert served the missing person or merely the amplifier, whether a creator's family would bear the cost of their reach. This reasoning was not derived from any codified framework. It corresponds closely to Obonyo's (2024) account of self-reflection as a primordial ethical framework in African communication, in which moral judgment is tested against internalized communal standards rather than external rules. Participants were, in effect, running such a test before posting.

6. Discussion

6.1 Affordance inversion

The findings support a specific claim about mechanism. Four affordances made the 2024 mobilisation possible, and each of the four produced the exposure that followed.

Follower-independent distribution. TikTok's recommendation architecture allocates reach by content relevance rather than by social connection (Gerbaudo, 2026). This is what allowed an account with no followers to reach a national audience, and it is the affordance our interviewees valued most explicitly. It is also unbounded and unpredictable by design: the creator cannot know the audience in advance, cannot cap it, and cannot recall it. That 38% of respondents avoided showing face or voice is a rational response not to surveillance in general but to this affordance in particular.

Persistence and replicability. boyd's (2010) properties enabled the movement's evidentiary function, since police conduct was recorded, preserved and redistributed faster than it could be denied. The same properties meant that a participant's own record could not be withdrawn once replicated. Our finding that 13% deleted content, combined with the interview account of others immediately reposting deleted content, shows participants encountering this directly: deletion is available to the author, but replication has already removed the content from the author's control. Protection and exposure are the same operation viewed from opposite ends.

Searchable, hashtag-aggregated coordination. Hashtags made the movement legible to itself, permitting real-time coordination without organisation. They equally made it legible to anyone else, aggregating dispersed participants into a queryable set. Amnesty International (2025) documents that state-aligned accounts were paid to flood and bury protest hashtags. That attack was available only because the coordination mechanism was public and centralised on a string.

Low-cost anonymity. Anonymous accounts allowed sensitive material to circulate without attribution, and 33% of respondents used them. But anonymity on these platforms is presentational rather than infrastructural: it withholds a name from other users while leaving metadata, device and network identifiers with the platform and its legal environment. Participants' migration to Signal and Telegram (19%) indicates awareness of exactly this distinction.

The general form of the argument is this: an affordance is a possibility for action, and possibilities are not indexed to the actor who first exploits them. A platform property that lowers the cost of coordination for a movement lowers it symmetrically for the movement's opponent, without changing the property. This is why "affordances enabled the protest" and "affordances endangered the protesters" are not two findings but one.

The claim has a boundary. Inversion is not automatic; it requires an adversary with the capacity and will to exploit the same properties. What made 2024 an inversion rather than merely an amplification was a security apparatus willing to abduct, a legal environment permitting data access, and a paid influence operation. Without those conditions, the same affordances remain merely enabling. The mechanism is conditional, and stating the condition is what makes it testable elsewhere.

6.2 Beyond leaderlessness

Our data qualify the movement's self-description. Participants uniformly declined the label "activist" and described themselves as "just youth who were angry." Yet approximately 20% of high-engagement posts in our corpus originated from identifiable influencers or activists, X Spaces were moderated by recognisable accounts, and specific anonymous collectives functioned as reposting hubs that concentrated and redirected attention. This is Gerbaudo's (2012) soft leadership and Gerbaudo's (2017) leaderlessness-as-claim: not command, but choreography, meaning the setting of tempo and the direction of gaze by actors who are identifiable even when they are not authorised.

The distinction matters for risk. A genuinely flat network distributes exposure evenly. A routed one concentrates it on the nodes, which is consistent with the pattern of who was abducted: Shad Khalif and Gabriel Oguda were taken on 23 June, before the largest demonstration, and both were high-visibility accounts (Chenrose, 2024; The Star, 2024; Tongola, 2024). Leaderlessness protected the movement's continuity, since no arrest could decapitate it, while offering no protection to the individuals who performed leadership functions without holding leadership positions, and therefore without any of the institutional protection that a formal role might have carried. This is a cost of connective action that the connective-action literature, focused on mobilisation efficacy, has not adequately registered.

6.3 Vernacular civic engagement as a double property

The Sheng-and-Kiswahili register documented in 40% of our TikTok subsample performed two functions simultaneously. It made policy legible to audiences that formal civic communication does not reach. This is a genuine democratisation of political literacy, and the aspect that Muya and Onyinge (2026) analyse as performative resistance. It also constituted a partial encryption. Digital protest spaces in African contexts are, as Mutsvairo and Karam (2018) argue, sites of cultural production and identity negotiation rather than only arenas of argument, and the Kenyan vernacular register bears this out. Coded references, in-group humour and rapidly mutating slang are poorly handled by automated moderation and by outside observers, which afforded a measure of cover.

That cover was thin and it did not last. Vernacular obscurity does not defeat a domestic adversary who shares the vernacular. The protection afforded by Sheng operates against platform-scale automated systems and foreign observers, not against the Kenyan state. Where accounts of vernacular resistance treat linguistic creativity as straightforwardly protective, our case suggests the protection is audience-specific and should be specified as such.

6.4 An ethic of care under surveillance

The moral reasoning our participants described is theoretically significant beyond the case. They justified posting decisions by anticipated consequences for named others rather than by rights claims, risk-to-self calculations alone, or movement strategy. Obonyo (2024) argues that ethical reasoning in African communicative contexts is frequently uncoded and proceeds through self-reflection against internalised communal standards. Our participants asked, before publishing, whether a post would expose a friend and whether it would help the missing person or only the

poster. That deliberation is precisely the structure Obonyo describes, operating in real time and under duress.

This carries a practical implication. Digital security guidance is typically framed around individual threat modelling: protect your device, your account, your identity. The reasoning we observed was collective, in that participants modelled threats to networks rather than to selves. Guidance built on an individualist premise may therefore misfit the populations it is written for, and the mismatch is a difference in the unit of analysis rather than a matter of cultural style.

6.5 Durability: the 2025 wave

The argument's temporal reach can be assessed against subsequent events, which we treat strictly as a documented coda rather than as data. This study collected no primary evidence on 2025, and we make no empirical claim about it.

Albert Omondi Ojwang, a teacher and blogger, was arrested on 7 June 2025 over a post on X and died in police custody in Nairobi that night; a post-mortem on 10 June found head injuries, neck compression and soft-tissue trauma inconsistent with the police account of self-inflicted injury (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2025). Protests followed. KNCHR recorded 19 deaths from gunfire, more than 500 injuries and at least six incidents of rape or sexual assault as at 29 June 2025 (Amnesty International Kenya, 2025); the Saba Saba demonstrations of 7 July 2025 produced 38 deaths and at least 130 injuries on KNCHR's verified count, with 14 of 15 completed post-mortems finding gunshot wounds (KNCHR, 2025).

Two features are consistent with affordance inversion and are worth noting for future research. First, the 2025 mobilisation was triggered by the killing of a person for a social media post. On the public record, the exposure vector became the immediate trigger of the next protest cycle. Second, published accounts indicate pre-emptive migration of sensitive coordination to encrypted platforms in anticipation of surveillance and blackout, rather than migration in response to it (CIPESA, 2025). If that is confirmed by primary research, it would indicate that participants had internalised the inversion and were front-loading countermeasures, with the defensive repertoire moving from reaction to standing practice. Amnesty International's (2025) documentation of paid counter-hashtag operations and AI-generated harassment imagery suggests the adversary adapted in parallel. Testing this properly requires primary data across waves, which we identify as the priority for subsequent work.

6.6 Contribution

The article makes three contributions. **Theoretically**, it introduces affordance inversion as a specified mechanism linking the enabling and repressive consequences of platform architecture, and applies affordance theory to a case where the authors identified no prior application. **Empirically**, it provides participant-level quantitative evidence of perceived insecurity and defensive practice among ordinary digitally engaged Kenyan youth, a population distinct from the professional human rights defenders whose experience has been documented qualitatively (Amnesty International, 2025), and shows the defensive repertoire to be structured, prevalent, and matched to specific exposure vectors. **Conceptually**, it identifies protective witnessing and relational visibility ethics as practices that existing accounts of digital activism do not capture.

Three implications follow. For **theory**, affordance analyses of protest should specify the adversary alongside the movement, since the same property yields opposite consequences depending on who else can act on it. For **practice**, digital security provision should address amplifiers, not only creators and organisers, since our data show exposure distributed across a population that does not self-identify as at risk. For **platform governance**, recommendation systems that distribute content independently of follower count deliver a genuine democratisation of reach while removing the creator's ability to anticipate their audience. That trade-off is currently made silently on the user's behalf, and it is most consequential precisely where the political stakes are highest.

7. Conclusion

Kenya's 2024 anti-Finance Bill protests achieved what they set out to achieve. The Bill ultimately did not become law. The mobilisation that accompanied that outcome, one cause among several as Section 4.7 sets out, was decentralised, peer-driven and conducted through platforms whose properties made organisational infrastructure unnecessary: X carried coordination, TikTok carried the vernacular and affective work of persuasion, and, on both independent third-party analyses of platform data, the great majority of interactions were acts of amplification rather than authorship (Chenrose, 2024; Nendo, 2024).

This article has argued that those same properties constituted the conditions of the participants' vulnerability. Algorithmic distribution that ignored follower count carried unknown creators to audiences they could not see. Persistence that preserved evidence of state violence preserved evidence of participation. Hashtags that assembled a movement aggregated a list. Anonymity that felt protective was presentational. Participants understood this: 53% felt unsafe and only 7% felt very safe, and they responded with a structured repertoire of countermeasures aimed precisely at the affordances that had worked, disabling location and withholding face and voice at equal rates of 38%. They reasoned about those choices in relational rather than individual terms, weighing exposure against obligation to peers in a manner consistent with self-reflective African communication ethics.

The wider claim is modest and, we think, portable. Affordances are possibilities, and possibilities are not owned. Any account of digital protest that theorises platform properties only from the movement's side describes half of a symmetrical relation. In settings where the state can act on the same properties, the mobilising and the exposing are not sequential phases but a single structure, and the costs of it fall most heavily on the ordinary participants who supply a movement's scale without ever claiming its identity.

Declarations

Ethics approval. The Daystar University Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee approved this study. All participants provided informed consent before taking part.

Consent to participate and to publish. Survey respondents gave consent by proceeding past a written consent statement. Interview participants gave verbal consent, recorded at the start of each interview, to take part and to the publication of anonymised extracts.

Data availability. De-identified survey data and the content-analysis codebook are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Interview transcripts are not available. Individuals in the roles occupied by our participants were abducted during the period studied; the risk of re-

identification cannot be adequately mitigated, and participants consented on the basis that transcripts would not be shared. Social media posts are not redistributed, in line with platform terms and with the contextual-integrity considerations set out in Section 4.6.

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