

MUSIC DUALISM: POLITICAL INTOLERANCE IN KENYA AND THE GEN-Z MOVEMENT

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the dualistic nature of music as a cultural artefact and a political instrument in promoting socio-political change in Kenya, with a particular focus on the 2024 Generation Z (Gen Z) led protest in Kenya. Anchored on Cultural Resistance Theory (CRT), the study thematically analysed data from 31 participants obtained through online interviews. The findings revealed how music—especially protest songs—has evolved into a tool for promoting systemic political change, building unity, and increasing awareness. It emphasised the importance of music in social movements, demonstrating its ability to shape national identity and political discourse while also articulating resistance. The study demonstrates how cultural resistance through music can inspire future generations to struggle for justice and equality, underlining music's long-standing role in political reform. Despite severe official repression, including police violence and wrongful detentions, the movement has won important gains, including the repeal of a contentious financial bill and the pledge to reduce unnecessary government spending. This study emphasises the importance of music in social movements, demonstrating its ability to shape national identity and political discourse while also articulating resistance. Further to this, music has developed into a potent instrument for opposing hegemonic systems, elevating dissident voices, and promoting international solidarity when paired with social media. The study recommends further research on whether the commercialisation of protest music has led to losing its intended role as a tool for fighting social inequality.

Key terms: Cultural resistance, Gen Z movement, political mobilisation, protest music, social change.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kauzlarich and Awsumb (2011) allude that "music is a universal form of communication that provides avenues for artists and listeners to explore and critique an unlimited variety of social problems, including state crime and oppression" (p. 465). This sentiment is supported by liberation songs pushing for social equality. "*Who can bwogo me, who can bwogo me, who can bwogo me, I am unbwogable*" is a memorable hook from GidiGidi MajiMaji's song "*Unbwogable*" released in 2002. This song played a central role in ending the Nyayo era, which had ruled the country for 24 years. The opposition party, NARC, used "*Unbwogable*" to galvanise voters, leading to a landslide victory. Similarly, in 2024, Sir Newton's song with the hook "*Reject, reject, reject the Bill*" mobilised the Kenyan citizens, mostly Gen Z, against the Finance Bill 2024, pressuring the government to drop it. Wadagliz's Kile Kienyewe (KK) genre viral hit, "*Anguka Nayo*", not only became a struggle song for the Kenyan Gen Z but transcended the borders to become a global sensation. Historically, world movements such as Occupy Wall Street (2011), which originated in Downtown Manhattan, the UK Uncut (2010), and the Anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, among many others, used music to help them achieve their goals. In Kenya, the Genz Movement used social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and YouTube to amplify the centrality of music in political protest more efficiently and quickly than ever before. According to Kauzlarich and Awsumb (2011), "music reflects a range of political and social ideologies and commentaries". Scholars continue to debate the connection of music with other disciplines, such as politics, nature, technology, and medicine.

During the Gen Z-led protests against Kenya's 2024 finance bill, music emerged as a strong vehicle for mobilisation and expression, prompting various critical concerns regarding its impact and role in social change. Songs such as Sir Newton's *Reject the Law*, and Wadagliz's *Anguka Nayo* stood out as powerful anthems that resonated deeply with demonstrators. These songs not only offered emotional support but also conveyed the youth's political frustrations and demands. The words of *Reject the Law* were notably associated with political opposition to the financial law, whereas *Anguka Nayo* functioned as a joyful anthem, commemorating the protestors' triumphs. The political and social themes addressed in these lyrics reflected the public's outrage at governmental corruption and inefficiency, highlighting the need for reform. However, questions have been raised concerning the influence of traditional Kenyan music in these protests. While contemporary genres like reggae and hip-hop dominated the protests, could traditional Kenyan instruments or musical forms, such as drumming, contribute to cultural authenticity, or were they overshadowed by more current protest music? Music had a dualistic aspect, serving as both a medium of cultural expression and a powerful political tool.

On the one hand, it empowered the youth by building togetherness and mobilising big crowds; on the other, it risked causing splits by potentially excluding groups or political factions who did not identify with the chosen music. While music helped to unite the youth, it also emphasised generational and political differences. Music influenced both the participants' mobilisation and attitudes, helping to establish a group identity and create a shared emotional experience. Songs, in addition to energising the masses, shaped the public image of the protest by presenting it as a moral and political war. Music helped to raise awareness and shape public opinion, and digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X amplified the movement's message. The viral spread of protest songs demonstrated the potential of music to engage both local and worldwide audiences. In the long run, the impact of these protest songs on Kenya's political and social landscape could shape future political action and affect the way music is utilised in social movements to voice opposition and advocate for change. This paper examines how music functioned as

both a cultural expression and a political tool in Kenya's Gen Z-led protests, analysing its role in mobilisation, social change, and collective identity.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review section discusses the evolution of music as a political tool in Kenya. It explores how music has transcended its role as a mere cultural expression to become a powerful weapon for addressing socio-political injustices.

Cultural Resistance Theory (CRT)

Cultural Resistance Theory (CRT) is rooted in Critical Theory by Frankfurt School philosophers such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse and was popularised and expanded by Stephen Duncombe (Bettel & Zobl, 2013). Duncombe (2002) explored how cultural practices and artefacts can challenge dominant ideologies and critique power structures within capitalism, culture, and society. Duncombe (2002) described cultural resistance as a "stepping stone, providing a language, practice, and community to ease the way into political activity" (p. 8). CRT emphasised music's dual function in the Gen Z movement, where grassroots culture may either promote progressive change or perpetuate negative views. According to Jones (2021), "when grassroots culture is leftist, it represents the surfacing of the common political will, and when it is nationalist or populist, it represents the uncritical regurgitation of conservative mass-media discourse." In Kenya, Gen Z used protest songs such as *Reject the Bill*, *Anguka Nayo*, and *Utawala* to criticise government policies on unemployment, taxes, and governance. These songs used their content to express discontent and promote resistance, addressing societal inequalities and corruption. Form emphasised these lessons, with youths singing the national anthem and raising flags during protests to represent patriotism and nonviolent dissent. Interpretation adds complexity, with songs like *Anguka Nayo* having marginalised groups expressing their grievances through music. Activities like generating, sharing, and connecting with oppositional cultural content were important, with platforms like TikTok and Instagram facilitating mobilisation and amplifying dissent. Through these initiatives, Gen Z reimagined culture as a contested place in which marginalised people challenge dominant structures and demand change. Gen Z reimagined culture as a contested space where marginalised groups challenge dominant structures, reflecting Jones (2021) view that music serves as a tool for social change, "drawing upon lineages that are very much 'within' the mainstream music industries, as well as upon more radical political and cultural lineages" (p. 36).

Evolution of Music as a Political Tool in Kenya

Music has long been more than just a form of cultural expression; it has also served as a strong weapon for addressing centuries of socio-political injustices. Gonzalez (2024), while examining protest music, noted that "politically charged, topical songs taking issue with the government, or culturally focused songs pointed at injustices facing marginalised groups" (p. 12). In African traditional society, music was an integral aspect of human growth and culture, providing both recreational and functional uses. Technological innovations have had a direct impact on how African music is created, produced, marketed, and consumed (Kirui et al., 2022), with social media amplifying advocacy for social justice. One of music's most important tasks has been to advocate for social equality, particularly throughout the struggle against colonialism. In South Africa, for instance, music became a powerful tool used to express displeasure and rally support for the abolition of the apartheid regime. Kenya followed a similar path, using music to challenge a perceived oppressive regime since independence. This was, however, most evident during the

2002 election period when Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's song *Unbwogable* became an anthem, capturing the hearts of Kenyans as they sought to dismantle the powerful political party Kenya African National Union (KANU). The term *Unbwogable*, is a Sheng Street slang term, loosely translated to "unshakable." Although *Unbwogable* was not initially intended to push for a political agenda, the newly coined Luo term came to be associated with the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) and was adopted to signify that the opposition party was 'unshakable' or 'unstoppable' (Nyairo & Ogude, 2005). NARC adopted *Unbwogable* as their anthem, playing it at nearly every political rally to energise and charge the crowd that was eager for social change. *Unbwogable* joined a list of songs advocating for social change and gained widespread popularity. Barack Obama, former US president, borrowed the hook line for his 2008 campaign, using 'Obama is *Unbwogable*'. Eric Wainaina's "*Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*" has been instrumental in combating corruption by exposing corrupt practices prevalent in government institutions. This song, unlike *Unbwogable*, was written to directly address the corrupt practices. "*Daima Mkenya*," another of Eric's songs, became a consoling anthem, particularly in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 post-election violence.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study investigated the dualistic nature of music during Kenya's Gen Z political protests by employing a qualitative research design. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured online interviews with those who actively took part in or watched the protests. The interview questions were shared online and left open for participants to respond. After six days, the responses reached a point of saturation, indicating no new significant information was being provided, and further data collection was stopped. Thirty-one (31) respondents gave detailed answers that emphasised the ways in which music impacted and moulded the protests. Because the questions were distributed online, no personal information, including names or email addresses, was needed, guaranteeing anonymity, accessibility, and voluntary participation. Primary data was augmented with secondary data gathered from social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to enhance results and provide a more complete understanding of the protest's dynamics. These sites, which have a large influence on adolescent culture, were critical in coordinating participants and sharing protest songs.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following questions guided the researcher in gathering insights on the role of music during the Gen Z protests.

- a. Which specific songs stood out to you during the protests, and why do you think they were impactful?
- b. How did the lyrics of these songs resonate with the political or social issues being addressed?
- c. What role, if any, did traditional Kenyan musical elements or instruments play in the music associated with the protests?
- d. Do you think music during these protests had any dualistic nature—both empowering and potentially divisive? Can you elaborate?
- e. Can you describe your experience with the Gen Z protests and how music played a role in these movements?
- f. In what ways do you think music acted as a unifying tool for the Gen Z movement?
- g. Did you notice any instances where music was used to challenge authority or express dissent? If so, can you share examples?

- h.** Beyond mobilisation, how do you think music influenced the attitudes and perceptions of those involved in the protests?
- i.** How effective do you believe music was in spreading awareness and shaping public opinion about the movement's goals?
- j.** In your opinion, what is the long-term impact of the music used during these protests on Kenya's political and social landscape?

Looking at the Gen Z political protests in Kenya through the lens of Cultural Resistance Theory, music became key in shaping the movement. According to this theory, culture can be used as a tool to oppose and undermine established power structures, especially in underprivileged populations. Songs served as instruments for social change, unity, and opposition during the uprisings, transforming music into a kind of cultural resistance. Through the widespread distribution of protest songs on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok, Gen Z members were able to organise, express their annoyances, and fight against political repression (The Africa Report, 2024). These songs frequently combined contemporary protest topics with indigenous Kenyan musical components, resulting in a distinctive cultural expression that struck a deep chord with young people. They drew attention to political injustices, urged solidarity, and criticised authority, providing a way to challenge established power structures as well as a means of fostering a sense of communal identity. An overview of the protest songs found in the survey is given in Table 1, together with information on their cultural and political effect, subject relevance, and mention frequency. The table demonstrates how these songs served as potent symbols of cultural resistance, mobilising tools, challenging prevailing political narratives, and elevating the voices of underrepresented communities. The examination of these songs highlights the dual character of music as a political instrument and a cultural artefact, highlighting its important contribution to the socio-political goals of the Gen Z movement.

Table 1: Overview of the Protest Songs

Song Title	Artist/Performer	Frequency
1. Anguka Nayo	Wadagliz	17
2. Reject the Bill	Sir Newton	5
3. Tujiangalie	Sauti Sol	4
4. Utawala (Niko Njaa)	Juliani	4
5. National Anthem	National Anthem	4
6. Maandamano	Bien Aime	2
7. Nairobi	Mayonde	1
8. My Land is Kenya	Roger Whittaker	1
9. Nitawakumbusha	Phy	1
10. Wajinga Nyinyi	King Kaka	1
11. Daima Mkenya	Eric Wainaina	1
12. Kudada	Fathermoh	1

13. Vijana Msilale	Khaligraph Jones	1
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Music as a Cultural Artefact

Several songs, as shown in Table 1, proved vital in shaping the narrative of resistance during Kenya's Gen Z 2024 protests, emphasising music's role as a cultural artefact. This is consistent with Cultural Resistance Theory, which maintains that music is both a medium of cultural expression and a tool for challenging authoritarian systems. The lyrics of these songs resonated well with Gen Z demonstrators' political and social concerns, particularly those of social inequality, government corruption, and marginalisation. For example, *Reject the Bill* argued for unity and collective action against the Finance Bill, emphasising the economic constraints imposed on regular individuals. According to one respondent, the songs "were addressing the economic implications, particularly high taxation on citizens, that would be expressed after the passage of the finance bill". Another respondent claimed that "*Reject the Bill* song expresses the pain of being oppressed economically and socially". Similarly, *Anguka Nayo* became a defiant anthem, motivating young people to oppose oppressive governmental authorities. It became a tool for ridiculing the government's perceived irritating policies. One respondent claimed that "for any bad decisions made *Anguka Nayo* came in". While the song's lyrics, as indicated in Table 2, did not explicitly address societal inequalities, Gen Z incorporated it into their resistance, notably through the accompanying dance that represented their battle". According to one respondent, "the phrase *Anguka Nayo* was definitely 2024's take on anything wrong with the country". One other respondent noted that; "the lyrics of *Anguka Nayo* captured the raw emotions of the youth, to criticise the government and call for change. The phrase *Anguka Nayo*, which translates to Fall with it, became symbolic of the protesters' resilience and determination to bring down corrupt systems and leaders. The song's energetic and rebellious tone matched the urgency and intensity of the protests, making it an anthem for the youth demanding accountability and better governance".

Table 2: Lyrics and Translation of Anguka Nayo by Wadagliz.

<p>Chorus <i>Anguka Nayo, eh, ati</i> <i>Anguka Nayo, cheki</i> <i>Anguka Nayo twende down low nayo</i> <i>Stand up to your feet</i> <i>Mikono juu alafu click</i> <i>Tuliza pace alafu one lege</i></p> <p>Chorus <i>Anguka Nayo, one lege, eh, Anguka Nayo, ati</i> <i>Anguka Nayo, ati, eh</i> <i>Anguka Nayo, Anguka Nayo, Ati</i> <i>Anguka Nayo kama uko na new catch, ati</i> <i>Anguka Nayo ka unaparty na magwash, aha</i> <i>Anguka Nayo round two kwa hii bash, ati</i></p> <p>Chorus</p>	<p>Chorus Fall with it, eh, ati Fall with it, check Fall with it, let's go down low with them Stand up to your feet Hands up then click Calm the pace then one leg.</p> <p>Chorus Fall with it, one lege, eh, Fall with it, ati Fall with it, ati, eh Fall with it, Fall with it, Ati Fall with it if you have new catch, ati Fall with it ka una party na magwash, aha Fall with it round two for this bash, ati</p> <p>Chorus</p>
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Anguka Nayo, with its catchy rhythm, sparked a viral dance challenge on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok, challenging Kenya's authoritarian rule while transcending national boundaries. The rhythm not only encouraged youth engagement but also acted as a cultural artefact, combining entertainment and resistance, building unity, and elevating Gen Z voices in their battle against political oppression. One respondent noted that "... fast-paced rhythms evoked an emotional and exciting atmosphere that attracted the feelings of resonance and psychological participation of self-drive to the protest". In the same breath, one respondent alluded that "music made all protesters sing in one voice, in the same rhythms hence, in this spirit, the message of unity was spread". The infectious melody, with its repetitious and uplifting tone, helped to unite and energise the youth during protests. The melody's simplicity and catchiness made it easy to chant and dance to, cementing its status as a potent cultural emblem of defiance and resistance. One respondent noted that "a great tune can shift perspectives like nothing else. It's like magic, almost as enchanting as hearing your thoughts on it!". In a show of solidarity, some celebrities danced to the song and declared their support for Kenyan Gen Z's fight for social equality. Nick Kosir, also known as "The Dancing Weatherman" on social media, participated in the viral dance challenge *Anguka Nayo*, which has received over 4.3 million views and 422.5 thousand likes. Figure 1 shows Kosir's screenshot of *Anguka Nayo*. According to another respondent, dance moves are a unifying factor, and their association with the protests birthed a common ground for Gen Zs.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Nick Kosir Dancing to Anguka Nayo

Note: This was shared on his social media handles on July 14, 2024.

Besides the dance challenge, *Anguka Nayo* was accompanied by graffiti art that visually enhanced the message of defiance and resistance. One respondent noted that "songs can become viral through challenges, memes, or short videos, fostering a sense of community as users collectively engage with the same tracks". Graffiti, which was frequently bold and significant, converted public areas into strong sites of

protest, combining visual creativity with political messaging to strengthen the youth's battle against authoritarian government. **Figure 2** depicts some of the graffiti published on social media alongside protest songs such as *Anguka Nayo*, *Reject the Bill*, and others, visually underlining the theme of resistance and agitation.

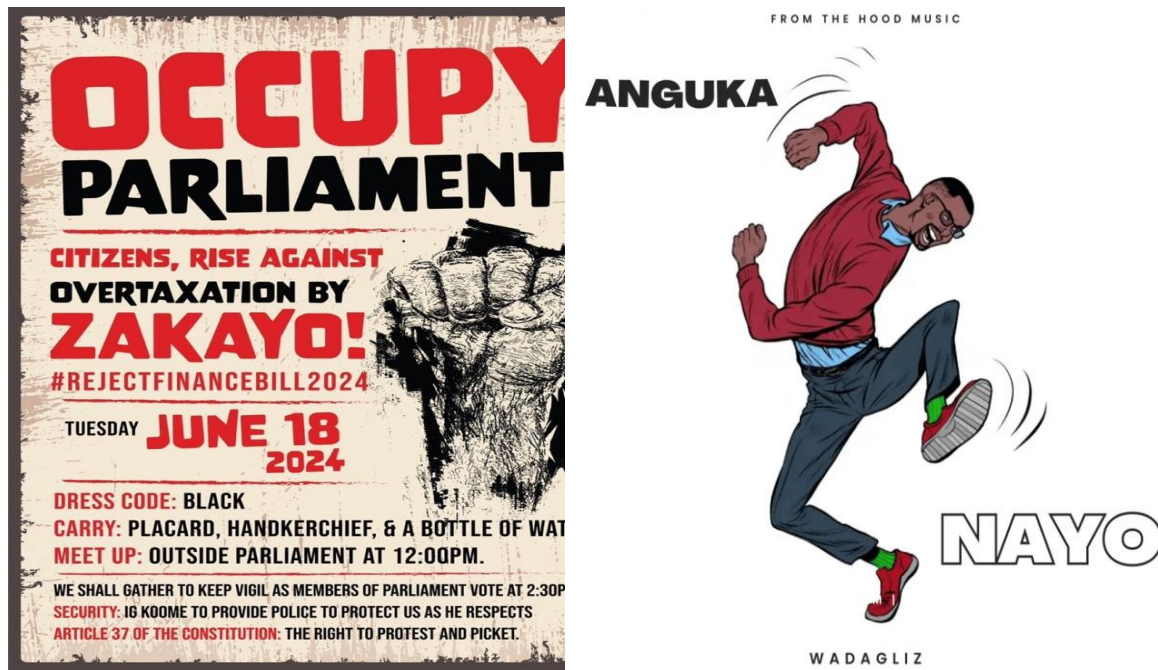


Figure 2: Graffiti Shared by Gen Z

Note. Some of the graffiti posted on social media accompanied the song "Anguka Nayo," visually emphasising its message of resistance and rebellion.

Other prominent songs, such as the Kenya National Anthem and Daima Mkenya, inspired patriotism. According to one respondent, the National Anthem "was also sung during the protest, with protesters holding Kenyan flags as a show of patriotism." Gen Z sang the National Anthem and patriotic songs while carrying the Kenyan flag, symbolising unity and national pride during their struggle. Another respondent stated that "lyrics brought about patriotism and made politicians realise that Kenyans love their country". The widespread distribution of these songs on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok demonstrates music's power to transcend physical protest settings and spread political messages around the world. Dance challenges inspired by these songs expanded their reach and emotional resonance, resulting in a participatory culture in which music served as a rallying point for demonstrators. According to one respondent, music "served as a rallying cry for accountability and transparency by exposing and toppling corruption of government officials". This phenomenon shows Cultural Resistance Theory's emphasis on using cultural practices such as music not just as cultural artefacts but also to challenge established power structures.

Music as a Political Tool

Historically, music has served as a powerful political tool, particularly among Gen Z, providing a platform for marginalised voices to mobilise, unite, and express resistance against oppressive regimes during times of social and political instability. In Kenya, for example, songs like *Anguka Nayo*, *Reject the Bill*, and *Utawala* were rallying cries, motivating the public and articulating the demands for political reform. Drawing on Cultural Resistance Theory, music during protests not only encourages togetherness but also serves as a tool for resistance, bridging cultural and generational divides. Traditional instruments, current protest anthems, and powerful lyrics combine to create a shared soundtrack that unifies protesters while also strengthening cultural identity. Music has long been employed as a powerful political tool, assisting in mobilisation, uniting, and expressing resistance during times of political and social turmoil. Music, particularly among Gen Z, has a huge impact on protest movements by offering a platform for marginalised voices to speak out against repressive regimes. In Kenya, songs like *Anguka Nayo*, *Reject the Bill*, and *Utawala* served as rallying cries, inspiring the populace and articulating the demands for political reform. Drawing on Cultural Resistance Theory, music at protests not only promotes unity but also acts as a tool for resistance, transcending cultural and generational gaps.

Music as a Mobilisation Tool.

Music acted as a unifying and mobilising force, uniting people and encouraging active participation. Protest songs such as *Reject the Bill* and *Anguka Nayo* boosted the campaign by promoting a sense of unity and resistance. One respondent stated, "*Anguka Nayo*... represented a unified stand against oppressive systems, fostering a shared sense of purpose and resilience." Music served as a rallying cry, allowing demonstrators to organise their efforts and focus their energies on a common purpose. Another respondent stated that music "did bring us together, especially in mobilising and encouraging us to keep fighting." In a similar thread, a different respondent noted that "music was used as a Mobilisation weapon, and through singing the protest songs, unity came about". According to Sadler (2022), "protest music can potentially serve many internal functions, or ones that serve to support and motivate oppressed people within movements that centre around their own liberation" (p. 2).

Lyrics frequently play an important role in organising gatherings and articulating protesters' demands, establishing a sense of urgency and commitment. Another participant reported that "the uplifting lyrics brought people together, creating a sense of collective strength and determination to overcome challenges." Gonzalez (2024) stated that "protest music helps provide awareness, education, and Mobilisation for social movements" (p. 147–148). This is consistent with the findings of this study and CRT, which investigates how cultural products, such as music, mobilise groups to oppose dominant political authorities and societal structures by providing a collective platform for expressing dissent.

Expression of Dissent and Resistance

Songs like *Utawala* by Juliani, *Wajinga Nyinyi* by King Kaka, and *Tujiangalie* by Sauti Sol all criticised authority, corruption, and poor governance. According to one response, the *Anguka Nayo* slogan, for instance, "became a rallying cry, symbolising the protesters' dissent and demands for better governance and an end to corruption". Similarly, Gonzalez's (2024) research found that "the song's lyrics expressed dissent, which helped raise awareness about the cause and advocated for change" (p. 145). Juliani's powerful song *Utawala (Niko Njaa)*, according to one respondent, demonstrated how "politicians have become so entitled that they end up forgetting about (the plight) their people". Protesters used music to

speak out against repressive policies like the disputed Finance Bill 2024. According to one response, Gen Z protestors used songs published on social media to "challenge bills that they were not comfortable passing," which led to the government withdrawing the Finance Bill 2024 and partially suspending most cabinet secretaries. Music has become a potent instrument for uprising, encouraging young people to confront authoritarian regimes and speak out against economic injustice. This argument is consistent with Gonzalez (2024), who states that "the same music for the social movement could also help advocate for change and challenge the narrative of those against the social movement."

Similarly, Abushbak and Majeed (2020) emphasised the essential part of social media platforms such as Instagram in "organising protests, informing, and connecting protesters" (p. 12), which is consistent with respondents' findings about the importance of these platforms in mobilising activism. Kebaya (2018) emphasises the role of popular art in exposing "vices such as corruption, abuse or excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings, fabricated evidence, and ineffectiveness that taint the image of the Kenyan police" (p. 121). These ties demonstrate how music and social media combine to promote dissent and resistance, validating CRT's claim that music serves as a counter-narrative, allowing oppressed groups to challenge and undermine entrenched power structures. As one respondent stated, music was utilised to "bring down the corrupt systems and those in power who are responsible for the country's socio-economic issues."

Music as a Uniting and Solidarity-Forming Force

Music broke down ethnic, religious, and social barriers, establishing a sense of belonging and common identity among the Gen Z protestors. The majority of respondents thought that music promoted solidarity among Gen Z. One responder stated that "traditional Kenyan musical elements and instruments played a significant role in the music associated with protests, particularly in creating a sense of cultural identity and unity". In a similar vein, another respondent admitted that "music made all protesters sing in one voice, in the same rhythms, and thus the message of unity was spread." Another respondent added to these comments that using music in call and response technique meant that "Gen Z had no choice but to unite in singing the choruses and verses". Yet another respondent hinted that "social media and virality, especially TikTok, has had a massive influence on how Gen Z consume and shares music. Songs can become viral through challenges, memes, or short videos, fostering a sense of community as users collectively engage with the same tracks. This creates a shared soundtrack for the digital age, uniting people across geographical and cultural divides".

Patriotic songs, such as the Kenya National Anthem and Daima Mkenya, symbolised national pride and solidarity. One respondent observed that music "helped to shape the identity of the movement, creating a sense of solidarity." Protest chants, viral dance challenges, and shared rhythms united people, forming a common language of resistance. Gonzalez (2024) noted that "the emotional connection conveyed in the song builds upon credibility and provides a solid reason why people must overcome obstacles and work together for solidarity (p. 130) This assertion by Gonzalez (2024) aligns with both the data and CRT. According to CRT, social action and solidarity are essential for subverting dominant forces by constructing a united front that reflects common concerns through cultural practices.

Emotional and Psychological Impacts of Music

Music alleviated emotional stress during protests, making the experience more enjoyable and raising morale. A respondent pointed out that "the lyrics of *Anguka Nayo* captured the raw emotions of the youth to criticise the government and call for change." Another respondent added that "fast-paced rhythms evoked an emotional and exciting atmosphere that attracted the feelings of resonance and psychological participation of self-drive to the protest". The majority of the respondents described music as both encouraging and soothing, providing hope amid fury and mourning over lost lives. Songs offered emotional resonance, motivating individuals to participate in the movement. One respondent noted that "songs that resonate with protestors help to unify diverse groups by creating a shared emotional experience. When crowds sing or chant together, it can create an intense sense of community and reinforce their commitment to the cause. This shared energy can lead to more cohesive and persistent actions, even in the face of challenges or opposition".

Ellefsen and Sandberg (2022) argue that emotion may "transform people who were previously uninterested in politics into defiant protestors; it can make disengaged activists re-engage, and engaged protestors change the issues they prioritise" (p. 1104). According to CRT, music enhances these emotions, boosting psychological empowerment and giving people a sense of action in the face of hardship. The majority of the respondents agreed that songs maintained and improved participants' excitement by elevating spirits, lowering tension, and providing relief. Protest music, they say, acted as resistance anthems, bringing activists together around a common cause and establishing a sense of community. The expressive impact of lyrics and melodies enabled demonstrators to process loss, particularly those who have lost their lives because of police violence, while also eliciting empathy from others who were previously alienated from the cause. Music's power to link people made emotionally and psychologically an essential instrument for resilience, solidarity, and long-term participation.

Amplification through Social Media and Virality

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube enabled protest songs to spread swiftly and get international notice. These platforms operate on three principles: like, share, and comment (Annysa Nur Agafanthy, 2025), which could easily result in the virality of the content. One respondent stated that social media sites such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and others "enabled songs to spread rapidly, allowing for widespread participation and connection among activists". Viral phenomena sparked by the dancing challenge broadened the movement's reach beyond national lines, drawing international attention to the cause. According to one participant, "international visibility helped raise awareness about the protests, amplifying the calls for government accountability on a global scale." Gonzalez (2024) suggested that "social movements that utilise music for that movement may potentially reach a wider audience" (p. 152).

Using hashtags like #RutoMustGo, #OccupyParliament, #RejectFinanceBill2024, and #TotalShutdownKenya, viral songs like Sir Newton's *Reject the Bill* and Wadagliz's *Kile Kienyewe* hit *Anguka Nayo* were very popular. Social media gave the demonstrations a worldwide soundtrack, allowing people all over the world to take part and interact virtually. Kirui (2024) notes that "the augmented visibility of the artists is enhanced by the seamless interoperability between the social media platforms and MSS" (p. 14). These platforms artistically brought attention to concerns of economic injustice and corruption while transforming protest songs into rallying cries that brought people together across geographic borders. The demonstrators' voices were heard by a wider audience, which promoted

international solidarity and increased pressure on the government to heed their demands. This supports CRT's claim that resistance is magnified online and extends beyond physical locations, enabling a range of people to oppose hegemonic institutions globally.

Patriotism and National Identity

Patriotic songs like Daima Mkenya and the Kenya National Anthem represented both love for the country and opposition to authoritarian government. Protesters from Gen Z used these songs and proudly waved Kenyan flags to highlight their call for improved governance and togetherness. Someone said, "The National Anthem was also sung during the protest, with protesters holding Kenyan flags as a sign of patriotism." Similarly, another respondent stated that "the protesters realised how powerful music is and how important patriotism and patriotic music are." Armed with two important "weapons"—smartphones for documentation and communication and Kenyan flags as symbols of national pride—protesters waved the flag and sang the National Anthem as police approached, transforming these acts into harmless yet powerful messages of resistance and solidarity.

According to Gonzalez (2024), "when using music as an anthem for protest, the goal shifts with the channel used, as it is easier to find a collective identity on social media." According to one participant, "the lyrics expressed patriotic sentiments, urging politicians to realise that Kenyans love their country and won't tolerate its deterioration." The movement challenged narratives that questioned Kenyan patriotism by expressing local pride via song. Using CRT, regaining national identity through music enables protesters to reject oppressive leadership while expressing a shared cultural and historical identity that challenges hegemonic forces. This was clearly achieved as one respondent noted that "the notion pushed by politicians that Kenyans are not patriotic got debunked, as Kenyans heavily streamed and engaged with Kenyan music during the protest".

Music as a Medium of Communication

Music has developed as a strong tool for expressing unhappiness with government policy, particularly among Kenya's Gen Z. Protest songs raised worries about economic disparity, pervasive corruption, and political leaders' inability to keep campaign pledges. One respondent noted that "social media platforms like X had more influence in mobilising and passing communication to the youth," demonstrating the role of digital platforms in amplifying these messages. Young people were able to express their discontent in a way that was widely understood, emphasising the topics that were most important to them. One respondent highlighted that the protest songs "were addressing the exact issues that the Gen Z wanted to be handled by the government of Kenya," demonstrating how music acted as both a form of protest and a rallying cry for genuine political change.

By combining music's emotional power with the reach of social media, the movement was able to effectively communicate its demands for justice, responsibility, and reform to a larger audience. The lyrics of protest songs emphasised the urgency of their words, which circulated swiftly and reached both locals and officials. Gonzalez (2024) reinforced this point, stating that "Music can shift culture, attitude, and belief dynamics by appealing to emotions, logic, and providing credibility through its lyrics and sound" (pp. 25-26). Music acted as an alternative communication medium during protests, bypassing traditional methods of information control and allowing protesters to question the narratives offered by mainstream media and political systems. According to Critical Race Theory (CRT), music enables marginalised groups to affirm

their own identities and histories, thus providing a place for resistance and a counter-narrative to dominant powers. Protest songs helped unite people by appealing to both emotion and reason. They empowered voices that may otherwise be suppressed, effectively disrupting the prevailing political and media conversation.

Energising and Entertaining the Movement

Music added pleasure and entertainment to protests, resulting in a lively, peaceful, and engaging environment. One respondent noted that "the songs became more than just entertainment; they represented a unified stand against oppressive systems fostering a shared sense of purpose and resilience". The Shujaaz Memorial Concert, which brought together Gen Z, drew a big crowd to Uhuru Park to commemorate the activists killed during anti-Finance Bill rallies. The July 7 event, a day also known as Saba Saba, served as a reflection on the day's significance in Kenya's fight for second liberation. One respondent noted that "the music allowed Kenyans to have some happy moments, like when there was a concert in Uhuru Park; for Kenyans to de-stress and unwind from the heaviness of the protest." Songs with powerful beats, calming piano chords, and fascinating rhythms energised demonstrators and inspired them to keep fighting for change. This is consistent with the Cultural Resistance Theory, which emphasises the importance of amusement and enjoyment in resistance movements.

Music that mixes enjoyment and action promotes long-term participation by instilling a sense of community and togetherness. Music, by emotionally engaging protesters, contributes to the transformation of the struggle for change into a collective cultural practice rather than a political act. Ellefsen and Sandberg (2022) stated that "for individual emotions to be turned into collective action, a shared reference point needs to be articulated" (p. 1110). This reference point increases people's connections to the cause, improving their chances of long-term participation. The beats and songs create a shared experience, encouraging unity and identity within the movement. As protesters sing and dance, music elevates the demonstration into a political and social event, transforming resistance into a form of collective expression. This cultural dimension not only increases solidarity but also reinforces the movement's resilience, making it more sustainable and impactful over time. Music transforms the protest into a living representation of shared beliefs and collective strength, fostering emotional and political engagement within the movement.

Historical Connections to Freedom Struggles

Respondents noted that the music during the protests resembled songs from Kenya's struggle for independence. One respondent observed that "the lyrics evoked a sense of nostalgic patriotism," linking the current protests to past moments in history that had called for national pride. This continuity represented a generational effort to combat oppression and advocate for justice. In a similar vein, another respondent pointed out, "Gen Z, who are often at the forefront of social and political movements in Kenya, have used music as a form of resistance, awareness, and solidarity during protests and calls for change." The observation underscores the critical function that youth play in opposing social disparities and oppression.

Jones (2021) examines cultural resistance in the context of DIY artists, asserting that "it is understood as standing, consciously or not, in opposition to some dominant (or 'hegemonic') values, and in opposition to some of the institutions responsible for perpetuating those values" (p. 38). His work investigates the complexity of DIY cultural resistance, stressing its historical linkages to battles for justice while criticising its

concepts of autonomy and marginality. This is consistent with Gen Z's use of music and internet platforms in Kenya to challenge political intolerance, as both movements traverse the intersection of cultural acknowledgement and structural redistribution in their opposition against oppression. Protest music, which is firmly rooted in Kenya's past struggles for freedom, supports the sense that resistance is an intrinsic part of the country's identity. According to Cultural Resistance Theory, music promotes a sense of collective identity along a spectrum of resistance, encouraging long-term efforts for justice. Jones' analysis of DIY movements lays the groundwork for understanding how Gen Z leverages music as a cultural resistance strategy to question societal norms, achieve social change, and amplify underrepresented voices. This strategy empowers voices from underrepresented groups while promoting group action for justice.

Cultural Resistance Theory (CRT)

The Kenyan Gen Z employed music to promote resistance, awareness, and solidarity during protests, aligning with CRT tenets. Protest songs like *Reject the Bill* and *Utawala* evoke historical justice movements, demonstrating the ongoing importance of cultural practices in confronting systemic oppression and socio-economic inequities. According to one respondent, "protest songs emerged as powerful tools to channel anger, inspire resistance, and articulate grievances about rising costs of living, increased taxation, and government accountability." This viewpoint is consistent with Jones' (2021) assertion that DIY cultural resistance "is understood as standing, consciously or not, in opposition to some dominant (or 'hegemonic') values, and in opposition to some of the institutions responsible for perpetuating those values" (p. 38). This assertion by Jones (2021) emphasised the importance of music as a medium for challenging systemic injustices and mobilising collective action. This viewpoint is consistent with the behaviours of Gen Z, who use music and digital platforms to combat misrecognition and maldistribution while cultivating a common identity.

Cultural Resistance Theory (CRT) underscores music's potential to link historical and contemporary struggles, inspiring underprivileged people to act against institutional injustices. Jones' (2021) examinations contribute to CRT discourse by shedding more light on the multiple conflicts of DIY resistance, particularly the obstacles to autonomy and marginality. These outcomes are consistent with Gen Z's grassroots activities in Kenya, where they use music to circumvent structural constraints, challenge hegemonic systems, and raise their voices for social and political change. Gen Z's usage of music shows how cultural resistance challenges dominant narratives while amplifying disadvantaged voices and driving social and political change.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Kenya's 2024 Gen Z-led protests highlighted the role of music as a catalyst for social change. Songs like *Reject the Bill*, *Utawala*, and *Anguka Nayo* amplified youth grievances and discontent, promoted action, and aimed to unify diverse voices, thus aligning with Cultural Resistance Theory. These political protest song messages were further enhanced through dance challenges and graffiti art. Under the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024, these songs challenged the repressive 2024 finance bill, economic injustice, corruption, and political oppression, demonstrating how music can challenge power structures and inspire accountability. The role of music during political protests remains deeply rooted, reflecting on Kauzlarich and Awsumb's (2011) argument that it both mirrors and critiques political ideologies.

While past struggle songs pushed for multi-party democracy, today's songs advocated for better governance. National symbols like the *Kenya National Anthem* and *Daima Mkenya* used in protests emphasised a blend of resistance and patriotism. This still showed the music's dual role in challenging and affirming national values. Social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and X augmented the protesters' voices by providing a channel through which messages were passed, thus promoting solidarity and political engagement beyond physical spaces. Music, therefore, continues to play a key role in shaping political discourse, motivating movements, and challenging power structures.

Recommendations: Further research is recommended in understanding the place of political protest music in the wake of commercialisation of music. These future studies could examine the impact of commercial interests on the authenticity and effectiveness of protest songs. This could be done by investigating if commercialised protest music retains its ability to inspire social change or if it dilutes the message due to market-driven influences. Such research could provide valuable insights into the evolving role of music in political activism.

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