Exploring Thematic Content and Multimodal Strategies in Kenyan Anti-Police Brutality Hashtag Activism

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Abstract
In the face of rising social injustices, particularly incidents of police brutality, citizens globally are turning to digital platforms to voice dissent, mobilise support, and demand accountability. Twitter, an interactive public platform, has emerged as a powerful tool for digital protests. This study investigates how Kenyans on Twitter creatively utilize the platform to protest and demand justice in response to systemic police brutality. Anchored in the discourse of digital activism, the study identifies the dominant themes in anti-police brutality tweets and examines how these are articulated through the platform's multimodal affordances. Using a hashtag-based case study, the research purposively samples a corpus of tweets associated with a high-profile case of police brutality in Kenya, under the hashtag #JusticeforKianjokomaBrothers. The study uses qualitative thematic analysis, supported by multimodal critical discourse analysis, to uncover the key themes communicated in the tweets. The findings reveal a range of persuasive and affective themes, including calls to action, critique of authorities, information sharing, expressions of solidarity and emotion, social commentary and memorialisation. Users communicate these through a blend of linguistic, technological, and visual strategies, demonstrating how they creatively frame protest messages. The findings underscore Twitter's role as a platform for civic expression, enabling users to challenge dominant narratives and reimagine digital space as a site of advocacy. It contributes to broader conversations on digital activism, creativity in protest communication, and the potential of networked publics to foster civic resilience in contexts of repression.

Keywords: Digital protests, Kenyan Twitter, multimodal critical discourse analysis, police brutality, thematic representation

Introduction

In the contemporary digital age, social media platforms have become critical spaces for civic expression, particularly in contexts where states repress traditional forms of protest. Among these platforms, Twitter (presently X) stands out as a global platform where users can mobilise, raise awareness, and challenge social injustices in real time. In Kenya, Twitter has become a crucial channel for expressing dissent and demanding accountability in the face of bad governance, human rights violations, and police brutality. Hashtag activism has gained traction in organizing and amplifying protest discourse.

A defining feature of digital platforms is users' collaborative content production, often referred to as user-generated content (UGC). Through this UGC affordance, users become producers who shape and transform interactions (D'Ambrosio, 2019), increasing interactivity (Herring, 2019).

The absence of traditional gatekeepers on social media platforms has enabled users to freely express their opinions on different issues in society (Demata, 2018). These largely unmonitored spaces facilitate public conversations across geographical and social boundaries, positioning social media as an essential medium for activism and building networks (Kharroub & Bas, 2016). As a result, Twitter has emerged as a platform for expanding activists' networks and driving sociopolitical change.

Twitter's techno-discursive design plays a central role in shaping how meaning is constructed in tweets. With a 280-character limit, multimedia capabilities, and interactive features such as hashtags, mentions, and hyperlinks, the platform supports real-time multimodal communication. These affordances position Twitter as a platform for advocacy, particularly through hashtag activism. This is a form of digital protest characterized by a large volume of ideologically motivated tweets clustered under a unifying hashtag with the aim of initiating social change (Altahmazi, 2020). Globally, hashtag activism has played an important role in raising awareness of diverse issues. Viral hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter exemplify how this type of activism highlights social injustices and mobilises global attention.

In Kenya, Twitter has become a prominent platform for civic expression, where Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) actively engage in digital protests. In response to recurring cases of police brutality, human rights violations and impunity, KOT have launched online campaigns using hashtags such as #JusticeFor(victim's name), #Free(individual's name), #EndPoliceBrutalityKE, and #SayTheirNamesKE to demand justice and amplify the victims' voices. These hashtags serve as rallying calls that catalyse national conversations around human rights abuses and the need for police reforms.

Despite the growing use of hashtag activism in Kenya, research into how users creatively construct messages using the platform's affordances remains limited. Few studies have examined how tweeters harness textual, technological, and visual resources to produce persuasive protest tweets. This gap is significant, especially in cases involving police brutality against ordinary citizens, where mainstream media coverage may be limited, skewed or muted by power dynamics. In such cases, digital platforms become an essential tool for framing alternative narratives and sustaining public attention.

This study focuses on the hashtag #JusticeForKianjokomaBrothers, which emerged in August 2021 following the deaths of Benson Njiru Ndwiga (22) and Emmanuel Mutura Ndwiga (19). The two brothers from Kianjokoma village in Embu, Kenya, were reportedly killed by police officers enforcing COVID-19 curfew restrictions. The tragedy sparked national outrage and led to widespread online protests. The KOT expressed anger, sorrow, and demands for justice through tweets that often blended texts and visuals.

This study investigates the thematic content of tweets under this hashtag and examines the multimodal strategies tweeters employ to craft the protest messages. By analysing the linguistic, visual, and technological resources deployed in these tweets, the research highlights how users exploit Twitter's technological affordances to construct messages that are emotionally resonant and ideologically loaded. In doing so, the study positions Twitter not merely as a communication platform but as a creative space for civic engagement.

Review of Related Literature

Recent scholarship has explored Twitter's role in facilitating civic engagement and digital protests. Linguistics-focused studies highlight how language expresses emotion, constructs identity, and asserts ideological positions. For example, D'Ambrosio (2019) examines how language in

#BlackLivesMatter tweets conveys emotions, judgments, and evaluations, while Hanafy (2021) and Walker and Kaye (2022) show how identity is constructed through textual resources.

Within the African context, Aboh (2024) analyses Nigeria's #EndSARS campaign, showing how metaphor, hyperbole, irony, codeswitching and culturally resonant religious expressions construct the police as brutal and the government as insensitive. The findings reveal that digital protest language is not only ideologically charged but also rooted in local sociolinguistic realities, which helps build authenticity and emotional appeal. Similarly, Nartey and Yu (2023) in their study of Ghana's #FixTheCountry campaign, identify strategies such as naming and shaming, metaphorical framing, and appeals to collective suffering. Nartey (2022) further shows how Ghanaian tweeters use local symbols and idioms to frame the state as unresponsive while positioning themselves as agents of reform. These studies emphasise the rhetorical complexity of protest discourse in African digital spaces.

Complementing these linguistic approaches, scholars have also investigated the role of visual resources in protest discourses. Casas and William (2019) report that emotionally charged images improve tweet visibility and diffusion in #BlackLivesMatter, while visuals associated with sadness reduce engagement. Studying South Africa's #FeesMustFall campaign, Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017) argue that visuals help reinforce solidarity and expand public support. In the Kenyan context, Okoth (2020) shows how KOT deploys humour, satire and condemnation in memes to critique political leadership and amplify protest messages. These studies affirm that visuals are integral to how meaning is constructed, and emotions mobilised in digital protest discourse on Twitter.

While existing scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of digital protests, many studies focus on linguistic or visual resources in isolation. Given Twitter's inherently multimodal nature, this separation overlooks how linguistic, technological, and visual resources interact in protest discourse. This study addresses this gap by adopting a multimodal critical discourse approach to examine how diverse semiotic resources are deployed to construct anti-police brutality messages on Kenyan Twitter. It aims to uncover themes emerging from this discourse while examining how users navigate the platform's affordances to communicate. In doing so, it contributes to broader conversations on digital activism, particularly in African contexts, by illustrating how ordinary citizens reimagine digital platforms as spaces for resistance and advocacy. It also highlights the need to attend to the multimodal nature of communication in the digital age.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a multimodal, critical research paradigm. To unpack the thematic representations and communicative strategies in the tweets**,** the study draws on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as outlined by Machin and Mayr (2023). MCDA extends the scope of critical discourse analysis by recognizing that communication is inherently multimodal, and each mode contributes to meaning within specific social contexts. The theory posits that semiotic choices are never neutral; rather, they are ideologically loaded and socially situated. This orientation makes MCDA well suited for analysing user-generated protest messages on digital platforms, where users strategically deploy multimodal resources to express dissent and mobilise solidarity.

Twitter's technological affordances, such as character limits, hashtags, mentions, emojis and multimedia embedding, shape how users communicate. These technological features require an analytical framework that accounts for the content and form of communication. MCDA enables

such analysis by systematically examining linguistic and visual resources, revealing how users creatively harness these affordances to construct persuasive narratives around social justice and accountability.

Methodologically, MCDA guides thematic interpretation of the tweets by linking communicative choices to broader ideological struggles. The approach facilitates the analysis of how tweets function as ideologically constructed texts that engage in diverse communicative acts. Through this lens, the study uncovers how KOT transforms Twitter into an activism site, where creativity and ideological contestation converge to challenge police brutality and assert solidarity.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative, hashtag-based case study design focused on tweets posted under the hashtag #JusticeForKianjokomaBrothers. The design enabled an in-depth examination of anti-police brutality protests and the creative strategies of protest discourse. Tweets were collected using Mecodify, an open-source software that integrates with Twitter's API for structured retrieval and metadata preservation. Purposive sampling guided corpus construction. The corpus included only tweets posted between 5th and 15th August 2021, the peak of online activism. To capture the discourse's multimodal character, the sample included only tweets with both text and media elements (images, videos, or GIFs) that referenced police brutality. It was further limited to original tweets by individual users**,** excluding institutional accounts to foreground authentic citizen voices. Retweets and quote tweets were also omitted to reduce bias towards popular content.

The final dataset of 496 tweets was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and MCDA (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Thematic analysis identified recurring themes within the tweets, while MCDA helped interpret how linguistic, technological, and visual elements interact to produce ideological meanings. The analysis followed three steps: data familiarisation, coding, and theme development.

Data familiarisation involved multiple readings of the tweets to develop a comprehensive understanding of their content, tone, and structure. Preliminary observations regarding common expressions, technological features, and visual elements were documented. Open coding, which allows codes to emerge inductively from the data, was used. Based on O'Connor and Joffe's (2020) argument, each tweet was treated as a single analytical unit and initially coded based on its dominant thematic focus. Tweets containing multiple ideas were segmented into meaningful sub-units and assigned multiple descriptive codes to capture the communicative acts. To ensure reliability, three researchers independently coded 10 percent of the data. Discrepancies were resolved through discussions and consensus following Saldana's (2021) guidance on inter-coder agreement. The researchers then applied the refined coding scheme to the full dataset.

Subsequently, the codes were organized into six overarching thematic categories: call to action**,** information sharing**,** solidarity and emotional expressions**,** critiquing authorities**,** social commentary**,** and condolences and memorialisation**.** The study interpreted each theme through the MCDA lens, focusing on how linguistic, technological, and visual resources were deployed to construct meaning and contest dominant narratives.

The study followed social media research ethics protocols**.** The researchers obtained an academic license from Twitter**,** analysed only publicly accessible tweets, and anonymized all tweets to safeguard privacy. No private or deleted content was accessed or used in the discussions.

Findings and Discussion

Each theme emerged through a strategic combination of multimodal resources, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Multimodal Strategies Employed Across Thematic Categories

Theme	Linguistic Strategies	Visual Strategies	Technological Strategies
Call to Action	Imperatives, repetition, rhetorical questions	Protest graphics, slogan-based posters	Hashtags; targeted @mentions to authorities
Information Sharing	Formal tone, passive voice, factual narration	Screenshots, news images, official documents	Hyperlinks; contextual hashtags (e.g., *#BreakingNews*)
Solidarity and Emotional Expression	Kinship terms, emotive language, collective pronouns	Victim portraits, funeral imagery	Emojis (😭, 💔, ✊🏾); repeated use of thematic hashtags
Critique of Authorities	Pejoratives, analogies, accusatory tone	Sarcastic memes, satirical PS screenshots, protest illustrations	Targeted @mentions to police and government accounts
Social Commentary	Moral lexicon, intertextual quotes, sarcastic imperatives	Quote-based visuals, reflective GIFs	Global hashtags (*#BLM*, *#GeorgeFloyd*)
Condolences and Memorialisation	Ritualistic phrases, spiritual allusions, commemorative refrains	Tribute posters, candlelight visuals, coffin and vigil images	Candle (🕯️) and dove (🕊️) emojis; hashtags with victims' names

This section presents a discussion of the strategies deployed in the construction of the themes through the linguistic, technological, and visual lens.

1. Call to Action (CTA)

Tweets in this theme rallied public support, demanded accountability, and pressured state authorities to act. These calls were communicated explicitly and implicitly through the combination of linguistic constructions, technological affordances, and compelling visuals.

Linguistic Strategies

The tweets were rich with imperatives, with a direct call to some action such as "*retweet for their justice", "we must all demand for justice",* and "*let's stand for what's right,"* intended to directly prompt reader participation. Declarative statements like "*we demand justice", "another day to demand justice"*, and "justice must be served" functioned as assertive proclamations that explicitly urged action through conviction. Implicit appeals to action were framed in motivational tones such as *"the longer we stay quiet the stronger our oppressors become"*, *"the dead cannot cry out for justice"* and *"It's the duty of those living to do so for them."*

Lexical choices laden with emotional appeals like *"brutally murdered", "heartbreaking" and "devastating"* were used to draw sympathy and empathy, which could potentially spur action.

Similarly, orthographic emphasis through capitalization and spacing, for instance, "*RETWEET"* and "*J.U.S.T.I.C.E,"* visually reinforced the CTA.

Rhetorical strategies included intertextual quotes, rhetorical questions, and repetitions. For instance, the quote *"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends Martin Luther King Jr."* invokes a well-known human rights voice to implicitly urge action against silence. Rhetorical questions such as "*till when?"* and repetitions like "*Enough is Enough"* created moral and emotional urgency.

Technological Strategies

Users strategically used hashtags, particularly *#JusticeForKianjokomaBrothers*, as a personalised rallying call for justice, helping to mobilise collective awareness. Since human beings are more likely to be moved by the plight of named individuals than unnamed ones (Nartey, 2022), a personalised tag served as a stronger CTA. Tagging official government institutions such as @IG_NPS (Inspector General of police), @NPSOfficial_KE (National Police Service of Kenya), @DCI_Kenya (Director of Criminal Investigations Kenya), @IPOA_Ke (Independent Policing Oversight Authority), and @InteriorKe served as public demands for accountability and a mechanism to exert institutional pressure. These mentions turned passive observations into participatory action by making institutional actors visible and accountable.

Visual Strategies

Visual CTAs included emotionally charged graphics depicting police brutality and symbolic icons like the raised fist. These images often featured text overlays such as *"STOP KILLING US*", transforming them into urgent, affect-laden messages. By referencing global justice symbols, the visuals linked local grievances to broader global struggles, enhancing the protest's legitimacy and urgency.

From the MCDA perspective, the semiotic resources in this theme transform users from passive observers into active resistors. These choices ideologically reframe civic engagement as a moral duty, aligning with Nartey and Yu's (2023) view that digital protests mobilise collective action through strategic discourse.

2. Information Sharing

Another theme was the dissemination of facts, investigative updates, and official responses. These tweets framed the protests as informed and credible, blending factual reporting with critical commentary.

Linguistic Strategies

Many tweets in this theme adopted a formal and factual tone, place and name anchors, and the passive voice to present information. For example, the tweet *"Two Brothers Arrested for Allegedly Flouting Covid-19 Rules Found Dead in Embu…"* uses a neutral media-like construction to break the news. Passive expressions such as *"one life lost today in #Embu #kianjokoma",* and *"On Sunday, brothers Benson & Emmanuel Ndwiga were killed while in police custody"* are used to emphasise the event over the actor. Specific dates, locations, and names lend credibility and accuracy to the information provided.

Technological Strategies

Tweeters leveraged on hyperlinks, hashtags and mentions to share information. Hyperlinks to news sites were incorporated to expand the tweet's content and provide evidence to support the claims made. For instance, the tweet *"Two Embu brothers died of multiple head and rib injuries, autopsy reveals* https://bit.ly/3fBiKn2*..."* has a link to the *Daily Nation* digital edition where the full story is covered. Other hashtags such as *#BreakingNews* indexed new information, helping users track real-time updates. *#EndPoliceBrutality* and *#BlackLivesMatter* connected the Kenyan protests to global protest conversations. These hashtags served as information aggregators and metadiscourse markers, while mentions of media outlets and activists increased reach and visibility.

Visual Strategies

Screenshots, video clips of news reports, photographs of legal documents and autopsy reports added legitimacy to the claims made. By embedding this evidence within the tweets, users shifted from subjective protest to documented, factual argumentation. Such visuals functioned as proof, solidifying the protest's credibility.

Tweets in this theme negotiate power by foregrounding factual narration, official documentation, and visual evidence to challenge state narratives. In line with MCDA's principles, the protestors employ semiotic resources that reclaim epistemic authority and legitimise the protests. These tools of reportage and documentation assert citizen agency in shaping public truth and holding institutions accountable, serving as an ideological act that repositions information as a weapon against impunity.

3. Solidarity and Emotional Expressions

This theme captured shared emotional responses among users, including grief, empathy, shock, frustration, disappointment, and anger. These expressions were key in constructing a sense of community and emotional alliance.

Linguistic Strategies

The tweets used emotionally charged language, pejorative labels, kinship terms, plural pronouns, rhetorical questions, intertextual references, repetition, and affirmations to express grief, intensify outrage, and build a sense of communal solidarity and moral urgency. Emotionally loaded words like *"heart wrecking", "brutally murdered",* and *"pain of a mother"* framed the killings as tragedies that deserved public mourning. Pejorative language such as *"incompetent", idiots",* and *"rogue officers*" expressed the tweeters' moral outrage towards the state actors. This aligns with Aboh (2024) findings that police are given negative labelling and constructed as oppressors in protest discourses. Familial terms such as *"mama (mother) Benson", "our sons",* and *"our brothers"* and the plural pronouns (we and our) personalised the loss and fostered a communal sense of suffering. The usage of pronouns affirms findings from other studies (Aboh, 2024; Hanafy, 2021; Nartey, 2021; Walker & Kaye, 2022) that plural pronouns index collectivism, which helps to challenge structural oppression.

Repetition of rhetorical questions like *"Till when?"* and "*why kill us?"* reinforced emotional intensity and urgency. Statements like *"they were our brothers", "being young is not a crime*" and *"our mothers don't deserve this"* appeal to shared humanity, framing the injustice as widespread and deeply personal. Intertextual referencing using quotes such as *"If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it"* by Zora Neale Hurston historically frames the discourse, enhancing the moral gravity of the situation. Vows and affirmations such as *"We stand*

with the family", "We are here" and *"We shall not forget"* serve to express solidarity and moral framing.

Technological Strategies

Emojis visually expressed affect. The loudly crying face (😭) and broken heart (💔) conveyed grief, while the raised fist (✊🏾) symbolized unity and defiance. The emojis were often repeated or sequenced for emphasis, amplifying their emotional weight and visual impact. These emojis were regularly paired with hashtags to encode solidarity visually and textually.

Visual Strategies

The theme was communicated through raw, evocative, and unfiltered visuals that evoked empathy and anger. Photographs of the deceased during happier moments served as visual anchors for personalising the tragedy. The images humanised the victims, evoking empathy and outrage from the audience. Funeral imagery, depicting mourners, coffins, hearses and the graveyard, served as powerful reminders of the tragedy's finality. Tributes and funeral video clips offered immersive, emotionally resonant content that deepened viewer engagement. These visuals helped convert grief into collective memory and solidarity. As Casas and William (2019) argue, emotionally resonant content increases engagement and amplifies identity, reinforcing a shared ideological stance against injustice.

Tweets in this theme exemplify how affective discourse operates as an ideological tool in protest contexts. Through multimodal strategies, users frame collective identity as political action, echoing MCDA's assertion that emotional discourse can ideologically contest dominant power structures (Machin & Mayr, 2023).

4. Critique of Authorities

Tweets in this theme explicitly condemn Kenyan authorities, particularly the police, Ministry of Interior (MoI) officials, and investigative bodies like the Director of Criminal Investigations (DCI). Users attribute the deaths of the Kianjokoma brothers to systemic impunity and institutional failures. These tweets aimed to expose complicity, demand accountability, and strip state actors of their perceived legitimacy.

Linguistic Strategies

The tweets used accusatory lexical choices, action-loaded verbs, sarcastic tone, rhetorical questions, irony, analogies, and juxtaposition of facts with evaluative commentary to frame authorities as oppressive, delegitimise state actors, and provoke critical reflection on systemic injustice. Lexical choices such as *"killers in uniform", "rogue police officers"* and "*inhumane officers"* framed the police as agents of violence and immorality. Additionally, verbs such as "*killing", "brutalizing"* and "*murdering"* painted them as perpetrators rather than protectors. An accusatory tone appeared in statements such as *"Kenya police kill more people than gangsters…",* and "*Same people entitled to protect us are the same killing us…,"* which deconstructed the legitimacy of the state actors.

Rhetorical questions like "*But who protects us from you?"* emphasised the contradiction in the role of the law enforcers. Sarcasm and irony were also evident in tweets mocking the institutions. For instance, *"Dear DCI, We are waiting for your composition. We are waiting for your well composed composition telling us, that the people behind the murder of Benson and Emmanuel have been apprehended…"* carries a sarcastic tone, condemning the inaction of the

investigative body. Analogies comparing state brutality to terrorism in expressions such as *"Terror is Terror, whether by AlQaeda or by state Government department"* further framed the authorities as criminal entities. Tweeters also juxtaposed factual narration with evaluative commentaries to indirectly critique state inaction. For example, the tweet *"The burial for the late Emmanuel & Benson Ndwiga will be held on 13th Friday. It's our dear hope that investigations will be complete by then. @DCI_Kenya…"* pairs a burial announcement with a pointed remark on the investigation, subtly prompting the audience to question the authority's commitment to justice.

Technological Strategies

The mention (@username) feature was tactically used to confront public officials and institutions. Users tagged key officials such as @IG-NPS and @FredMatiangi (then Cabinet Secretary MoI) to hold them personally accountable. Tagging officials using their personal Twitter handles put them in the spotlight, emphasising their personal responsibility to address the issue. Such tagging broke traditional communication barriers, allowing citizens to publicly attribute blame. This increased pressure on the state actors, making it difficult for them to ignore the demands.

Mentions were also used to call out institutional inaction, as seen in tweets like *"How can @IG_NPS still remain in office? @ODPP_KE @IPOA_KE @IMLU_org",* where several institutions have been tagged. Mentioning the IG serves as a direct condemnation of his leadership, while the other institutions such as ODPP, IPOA and IMLU have been implicitly condemned for abetting the IG's stay in office, despite his failures.

Visual Strategies

Visual strategies involved recontextualising existing images or creating new visual protest artifacts using irony, personalisation and contextual contrast to highlight the government's insensitivity and demand accountability. The visuals included photographs of the victims and the grieving mother to humanise the tragedy and justify the condemnation of state actors. Funeral imagery amplified the emotional impact and reinforced the criticism.

Illustrations and drawings depicted systemic police violence, juxtaposing silhouettes of powerful officers with vulnerable civilians. A screenshot of a televised interview of the then Permanent Secretary in MoI blaming citizens instead of police served as a visual critique, recontextualised to highlight state insensitivity. Meme videos with ironic press briefings portrayed government incompetence using humour and satire to highlight the failures. This aligns with Okoth's (2020) findings on the use of humour and irony to critique political leaders.

In this theme, the KOT deploy a range of multimodal strategies to delegitimise state actors and expose systemic failures. From an MCDA standpoint, such semiotic resources enable users to contest dominant power structures and reposition power in the hands of citizens. The personalisation of blame through direct @ mentions of public officials and recontextualisation of state imagery into visual ridicule align with Aboh (2024) findings where Nigerian protestors use sarcasm and irony to expose government as complicit. These strategies illustrate how digital discourse can act as counter-power, unmasking institutional failures and pressuring public actors through performative confrontation.

5. Social Commentary

This theme encompasses reflective, philosophical, and emotional critiques of broader issues including justice, corruption, and citizen responsibility. Users positioned the killings within a systemic framework, using the discourse to make moral and political observations.

Linguistic Strategies

The tweeters used morally charged vocabulary, emotive language, rhetorical devices, intertextual references, and ironic juxtapositions to construct reflective, ethically grounded social commentary that challenged systemic injustice and provoked critical audience engagement. Words like "*injustice", "impunity"* and "*brutality*" signalled moral reasoning, framing the situation in ethical terms. Additionally, expressions such as "*our silence", "normalized killings"* and "*reset button"* highlight structural and systemic issues that needed to be addressed. The use of emotive language such as "*Our mothers don't deserve this…", "our boys are dying for being boys"* and "*The hottest place in hell…"* amplified moral outrage. Comparisons and juxtapositions like *"If COVID doesn't kill us, the police will…"* and *"Loot COVID billions and walk free, break curfew and die…"* exposed contradictions and double standards.

Analogies, sarcasm, and rhetorical questions enhanced the logic and emotional force of the social commentary. For instance, the analogy "*When the elderly die, we lose our history when the young die we lose our future*" reflects on the broader societal loss. In another tweet directed at the then PS for MoI, the sarcastic imperative "*enjoy the privilege as it lasts!"* and the metaphor *"the thunder of JUSTICE is loading"* frame justice as inevitable and beyond bureaucratic control. Such strategies critique state power while warning that complicity will ultimately be met with public reckoning.

Intertextual quotations constructed silence as complicity. Desmond Tutu's statement "*If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor…"* was accompanied by a photograph of the two brothers, anchoring its moral indictment in their deaths and positioning neutrality as tacit support for police violence. Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston's *"If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it…"* appeared with a modified photograph of the brothers alongside mentions of senior security officers. This tagging directed the indictment towards institutions responsible for accountability. Through these intertextual references, the KOT appropriated widely circulating moral statements and recontextualised them within a Kenyan struggle against police brutality, enhancing its legitimacy and prompting personal reflection. These references elevate the discourse from reactive protest to reflective commentary on justice, moral responsibility, and civic courage.

Rhetorical questions like *"Isn't police custody supposed to be a place of safety?", "What will it take for those responsible to be held accountable?"* and "*So this gave the police the power to kill?"* challenge readers to critically engage, amplifying moral outrage. The questions expose the hypocrisy of police actions by highlighting contradictions between the expected role of police (protection) and the reported reality (death). They prompt readers to reconsider their complicity, heighten emotional responses, and steer them towards a shared condemnation without explicitly stating it.

Technological Strategies

Strategic hashtag use connects the Kenyan protest to global justice movements, lending it moral weight and broader resonance. Hashtags like *#BlackLivesMatter* and *#GeorgeFloyd* position the Kianjokoma case within a global discourse on police brutality, suggesting shared structural violence. This usage invites the audience to view the protest as part of a wider global pattern of state oppression.

Visual Strategies

Visual commentary was delivered through text-based images containing moral quotes, reaction GIFs, and memes. These visuals combined satire with serious reflection to provoke emotional and intellectual engagement. For instance, reaction GIFs showing disbelief critiqued government hypocrisy, while meme illustrations highlighted the power inequalities between police and citizens.

This theme exemplifies how digital protests function as a site for moral reflection and ideological contestation. In line with MCDA, the strategies used reflect how meaning-making is not only expressive but also political. The moral lexicon, intertextual quotes, and visual imagery reaffirm civic responsibility and frame silence as complicity, inviting readers to critically examine their positionality within systems of injustice. Thus, social commentary becomes an ideological call to conscience.

6. Condolences and Memorialisation

Tweets in this category reveal how the protest discourse creates a shared space for digital mourning and collective remembrance. Tweeters expressed grief, honoured the victims, and transformed private sorrow into public memorials and protest,

Linguistic Strategies

The linguistic strategies evoked shared grief and reverence. Emotionally charged lexical choices such as *"rest in peace", "gone too soon*" and *"forever remembered"* conveyed deep sorrow and reverence. Kinship terms like *"our boys"* and *"our children"* personalised the loss and framed it as communal.

Spiritual phrases such as *"final sendoff*" and *"dance with the angels"* contributed to honouring the deceased and reinforcing their memory. Religious allusions like "*May their souls rest in eternal peace*" and *"fare-the-well"* offer comfort and invoke hope, framing death within a spiritual context. Repeated refrains like *"Say their names"* and *"we will not forget"* create a memorial rhythm that affirms collective vows to remember and resist forgetting.

Technological Strategies

Hashtags such as *#JusticeForEmmanuelAndBenson* and *#JusticeForNdwigas* served as digital memorial markers, archiving the victims' memory within the public domain. The candle of remembrance (🕯) and the dove of peace (🕊) emojis were used to symbolically convey mourning, spiritual rest, and hope for justice. These visuals functioned as digital vigils, signalling a longing for justice and closure.

Visual Strategies

Personal photos of the victims, funeral imagery, tribute posters and user-generated videos created a digital shrine that made mourning visible and sustained. Tribute videos blended sentimental music, symbolic visuals and text overlays to construct emotional narratives of loss and remembrance. By curating memories and spiritual symbolism, these multimodal strategies honoured the deceased, fostered solidarity and transformed mourning into a collective act of resistance.

Memorialisation in this discourse is not merely commemorative; it is an ideological act that transforms personal loss into collective resistance. Contrary to Casas and William's (2019) argument that images associated with sadness limit engagement, the emotionally charged visuals

in this protest have the potential to amplify collective memory and justice. The convergence of grief, memory, and resistance exemplifies how users reclaim digital spaces as platforms for restorative justice and ideological affirmation.

Conclusion

This study examined how KOT used multimodal strategies to protest police brutality in the #JusticeForKianjokomaBrothers protests. Combining thematic analysis with MCDA, the analysis identified six dominant themes, which include call to action, information sharing, solidarity and emotional expression, critiquing authorities, social commentary, and memorialisation. These themes emerged through the strategic interplay of linguistic, technological, and visual resources, revealing the communicative creativity in digital protest discourse.

The findings demonstrate how users navigate Twitter's affordances to construct protest messages. Linguistically, tweets relied on emotive language, collective pronouns, intertextual quotations, and rhetorical questions to demand justice, summon solidarity, assign blame, and document grief. Technological affordances such as hashtags, mentions and emojis were tactically used to enhance visibility, assign blame, personalise accountability and express emotions. Diverse visuals formats were used to represent the loss, substantiate claims, deepen emotional resonance and frame the discourse as legitimate and urgent. This multimodal discourse reveals a layered form of engagement, where all resources play a crucial role in constructing the themes.

The study affirms Twitter's dual role as a discursive and affective space, where users engage in both ideological and emotional expression. Through the interplay of linguistic, interactive, and visual resources, KOT constructed collective protest narratives that simultaneously mourned the dead, condemned police brutality, challenged authority, and demanded structural and social change. This challenges the perception that digital activism is reactive, instead revealing that digital protest on Twitter is multimodally constructed, blending form and function to generate ideologically loaded discourses.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital activism by offering empirically grounded findings on how ordinary users mobilise Twitter's affordances to construct persuasive and emotionally resonant protest discourse. It advances three key insights. First, digital protest messages are multimodal and ideologically complex, shaped by the platform's affordances and user creativity. Second, emotionally driven expressions play a central role in mobilizing public attention and fostering communal identity. Third, digital protest is not only a form of resistance but also a form of remembrance, positioning mourning as communal and political.

As this study has shown, in contexts marked by injustices and state repression, online spaces emerge as crucial sites for challenging silence, building solidarity, and asserting visions of justice. Future research could examine how digital protest messages are received, circulated, and how they influence policy. Comparative studies across platforms or protest events may deepen insights into the evolving dynamics of digital civic engagements.

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