



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Framing the Gen Z protesters in Kenyan daily newspapers: A discourse-historical approach**Joy Karambu<sup>1</sup>, Mugambi C. Ngumo<sup>1</sup> & Lillian Kemunto Omoke<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of Humanities, School of Education and Social sciences, University of Embu, Kenya\*Correspondence: [1739@student.embuni.ac.ke](mailto:1739@student.embuni.ac.ke)**ABSTRACT**

This study examines how Kenya's mainstream newspapers, *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, discursively constructed Gen Z protesters during the June 24 anti-Finance Bill demonstrations. Existing studies of Gen Z protests in Kenya and globally overwhelmingly focus on digital media. Relatively little attention has been given to how newspapers frame such political movements. To address this gap, this study analyses front-page headlines and editorials in the newspapers to explore how Gen Z are constructed. Drawing on Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach and Framing Theory, the findings reveal a systematic pattern of positive representation, in which Gen Z protesters are constructed as heroic, victorious, revolutionary, victims of police brutality, and morally legitimate actors. Their actions are intensified when aligned with democratic ideals, while negative aspects are mitigated through nominalization, backgrounding, and silence. This framing is reinforced through intertextual references to Gen Z protests in other parts of the world. The interdiscursivity in the editorials further gives the protesters legal justification. Recontextualization of constitutional language in journalistic discourse, particularly the constant reference to articles 1 and 37, legitimizes the actions of the protesters. This study demonstrates the ideological role of newspapers in influencing the way we think about politics and youth activism. These findings are aligned with the observations of media scholars that newspapers are an important site for studying politics and ideology.

**KEYWORDS:** construction, daily newspapers, discourse-historical approach, framing theory, Gen Z, media discourse

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## 1. Introduction

There is a tendency among scholars to interpret youth-led protests by Gen Z as a global transformation of political institutions. Research from different parts of the world appears in titles describing Gen Z protests with phrases like “global phenomena” (Sangwa, 2025), “patterns of Gen Z protests” (Zheng, 2024), and “Gen Z rising” (Chenoweth & Cebul, 2026). As these studies show, the Gen Z protests are increasingly being framed as a generational global phenomenon where young people are challenging the political establishment and demanding a new democratic order.

Similarly, the Kenyan Gen Z protests in 2024 have been described as a wave of youth-led political demonstrations that attracted national and international attention (Ardebili, 2025; Ingutia, 2025; Kirui, 2025; Osman, 2025; Radoli et al., 2025; Twinomurinzi, 2024). These studies show that the demonstrations were driven mainly by Gen Z who mobilised against the 2024 Finance Bill. The bill introduced heavy tax increases and austerity measures and was widely perceived by young Kenyans as a threat to economic stability and fairness.

Opposition to the bill began online and turned to mass demonstrations, culminating in large street protests on June 18th, 20th, and 25th, 2024. Thousands of predominantly young protesters took to the streets across Kenyan cities. The protests continued even after the bill was withdrawn by the President. These protests, which included invading the parliament, highlighted deep public frustration over governance, economic hardship, and state accountability. Kenya has experienced political protests such as the Saba Saba in the 90s, and post-election protests in 1997, 2007, 2013, 2017, and 2022, but the Gen Z protest was different in the manner of organization and execution. The protesters claimed to be leaderless and not affiliated with any political party. It was widely reported that the protests happened in almost all the counties.

There was extensive use of digital platforms in the protests, such as TikTok, X, and Facebook, for coordination, messaging, and mobilisation. Many protesters used these online tools to share grievances, organise actions, and amplify their message beyond traditional media spaces (Ingutia, 2025; Kabiru, 2025; Kariuki & Gichanga, 2025; Sawe et al., 2025; Twinomurinzi, 2024). Hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament were largely circulated on digital platforms. This digital activism reflected how Kenyan Gen Z are deeply networked and adept at using online platforms to influence political discourse.

A central theme in the protests was the appeal to constitutional rights. Article 37 of the Constitution of Kenya was widely cited: “Every person has the right, peaceably and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket, and to present petitions to public authorities” (The Constitution of Kenya, 2010). This constitutional provision became a key basis for the Gen Z protests, framing their actions as legitimate and peaceful civic engagement protected under national law.

Media coverage played a key role in shaping how the protests were understood by the broader public. Although Kenyan digital and print media outlets were influential in communicating information about the protests, much of the research available is on the digital platforms (Ingutia, 2025; Kirui, 2025; Radoli et al., 2025; Twinomurinzi, 2024). Despite the massive influence of print media in shaping public opinion, very few studies are available on how Kenyan newspapers discursively constructed this protest.

This article seeks to address this gap by attempting to answer the question: How are the Gen Z protesters discursively constructed by the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*? An integration of Ruth Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach and the Framing theory shows how the two newspapers systematically constructed the Gen Z Protesters.

## 2. Global Perspectives on Media Discourse and Political Protests

As already observed, there is a large body of research that examines Gen Z protests as a global phenomenon. The grammar of these studies is in keeping with a systematic pattern of a global conceptualization. These studies repeatedly talk about the protests as a global phenomenon, as a pattern, as a phenomenon that is rising, as a wave, etc. Desai (2025), for example, explicitly captures this global angle by noting that a “wave of youth-led protests has hit streets in Nepal, Morocco, Madagascar, Philippines, Indonesia...” (p. 1). The author goes on to give an extensive survey of these protests, including other countries like Kenya (2024), Serbia (2024 and 2025), Bangladesh (2024), France (2025), and India (2025). While this global perspective is important, the local angle of these protests needs exploration. The current article seeks to specifically show how the Kenyan newspapers

framed the youth-led protests in 2024.

Additionally, this literature also tends to concentrate on the digital, character, and mobilization of these youth-led protests (Chenoweth & Cebul, 2026; Zheng, 2024). Zheng (2024), for example, highlights the use of popular culture and internet memes in these youth-led protests. The author observes that “for many of this new generation of protesters, popular media, particularly that which is accessed through the internet, played a major role in shaping their personalities and beliefs” (Zheng, 2024, p. 13). The study further discusses the centrality of computers and phones in these youth-led protests. While it is natural and expected for scholars to give primacy to the role of digital platforms in constructing Gen Z protests, the role of mainstream media, particularly newspapers, also needs to be investigated. Indeed, many scholars have demonstrated the central role of newspapers in influencing the way people view and think about public issues and events (e.g., Ngumo & Omoke, 2021; Mautner, 2008; Van Dijk, 1988a; Van Dijk, 1988b).

Another pattern emerging from these studies is the way Gen Z protesters tend to be positively constructed by academic and media narratives. Chenoweth and Cebul (2026), for example, note that Gen Z protests have spread across multiple countries, from Indonesia to Peru, and that youth mobilization is a significant feature of these movements. They state that young people frequently lead nonviolent movements, using creative strategies to organize demonstrations and form wide coalitions, which increases the likelihood of success. The authors also view these movements as strong expressions of generational agency and collective resistance to poor governance.

### **3. Discourse, Media Framing and Protests in Kenya**

The global pattern of giving primacy to how digital platforms construct Gen Z protesters is again replicated in the available literature on the youth-led protests against the 2024 Finance Bill in Kenya (Ardebili, 2025; Ingutia, 2025; Kirui, 2025; Osman, 2025; Radoli et al., 2025; Twinomurinzi, 2024). The grammar of these studies consistently expresses digital spaces not simply as tools of communication, but as primary sites where protest narratives are constructed, circulated, and contested.

Twinomurinzi (2024), for example, explains that digital platforms shared highlights, stories, and powerful narratives about the protests, showing that these platforms play an active role in shaping and spreading certain representations of the events. Similarly, Ingutia (2025) frames social media as a space where Gen Z mobilise and voice their opposition, suggesting a discourse that constructs youth not as passive actors but as active political agents shaping national conversation. Across these studies, digital platforms are repeatedly constructed as strategic, decisive, and enabling. This reinforces a narrative of technologically mediated activism.

Another important discursive pattern emerging from the literature is the fusion of culture, technology, and protest messaging, particularly in how dissent is framed and circulated (Kirui, 2025; Ardebili, 2025). Kirui (2025), for instance, shows that people share protest messages through viral music, popular hashtags, and active user participation, where entertainment and activism are closely connected. This construction positions protest not only as political action but also as cultural expression, expanding the ways dissent is communicated. Similarly, Ardebili (2025) focuses on “tweets of resistance,” framing social media discourse as a site where resistance itself is linguistically and symbolically constructed, further emphasizing the discursive nature of online activism.

In addition, some studies show that digital discourse also influences how the state responds to protests and constructs security narratives. Ouma (2025), through the concept of a “Digital Securitisation Cascade,” which means that when protests receive close attention on digital platforms, the state is more likely to frame them as security threats. This shows that digital protest discourse does not operate in isolation, but actively interacts with and shapes how the state understands and responds to protests. The study also notes that the viral spread of images and videos showing police violence attracted international attention. This suggests that digital narratives can influence how both the state and the protesters are perceived, sometimes reducing the legitimacy of the state while strengthening the legitimacy of the protesters.

Overall, both the global and the Kenyan studies consistently construct digital platforms as central arenas of discourse production, where protest narratives are created, amplified, and contested, and where both protesters and the state are discursively positioned. However, while this literature is considerable and important in demonstrating how digital technologies redefine political action, it largely privileges digital media as the

primary site of meaning-making. As a result, the role of mainstream media, particularly newspapers, in framing these protests remains underexplored.

#### **4. Theoretical framework**

This study adopts Discourse-Historical Approach (henceforth, DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016; Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Wodak, 2009) and the Framing theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007). This is in keeping with the general practice in all Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA) studies, which recognize that CDA is an interdisciplinary framework. As such, the theorists insist that it is important to adopt social theories to help interpret the ideological implications arising out of language use (Wodak & Meyer, 2016; Fairclough, 2013). Since the Framing theory is a framework for explaining media communication, it is influential in clarifying the discursive strategies emerging from the DHA theory.

##### **4.1 Discourse-Historical Approach**

Various CDA approaches offer frameworks for exploring the link between language and power. Ruth Wodak's DHA is especially appropriate for this study, as it operates on two interconnected levels: discursive strategies and contextual analysis. DHA's strength lies in its capacity to analyze both media language and the socio-political context in which that language is produced, making it well-suited for examining how Kenyan newspapers represented the Gen Z protesters.

DHA focuses on several key discursive strategies: nomination, which considers how protesters are named or categorized in the text; predication, which examines the qualities or actions attributed to them; argumentation, which analyses the justifications or reasoning provided to support certain evaluations; perspectivization, which looks at the point of view adopted by the text or sources; and intensification or mitigation, which reflects how strongly or weakly events or actions are described. Importantly, DHA emphasizes that these strategies cannot be understood in isolation from their broader context. For instance, the historical, political, and social circumstances of the protests shape how language is used and how meaning is constructed.

##### **4.2 Framing Theory**

Chong and Druckman (2007) argue that the central premise of the Framing theory is that an issue or an event can be seen from a variety of angles and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations. Framing is the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue. They may also change their thinking about an issue.

In communication, a frame organizes reality by giving meaning to unfolding events and promoting certain definitions and interpretations of political issues. For example, an issue like a Gen Z protest can be defined by the media as a transformation of society or chaos. Chong and Druckman (2007) further discuss the effects of frames in communication on individuals. They argue that frames affect the attitudes and behavior of audiences. They say that "media frames sometimes mimic those used by politicians, social activists, other media outlets, or citizens" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 109).

They go further to discuss what makes a strong frame. They argue that strong frames strike opinion readers and audiences as being more compelling than alternative arguments. They further argue that the political strategy is to link a proposal to a positive idea or value that is widely available to the public. For example, legitimizing youth protests might sound quite appealing when they are linked to values like freedom and economic emancipation.

Frames are influenced by power structures and social institutions. The theory recognizes that elite actors, including political leaders and institutional authorities, often dominate the framing of public events. However, it also acknowledges that grassroots actors and social movements can create alternative frames that challenge dominant narratives.

#### **5. Methodology**

The corpus for this study was drawn from front-page headlines and editorials of the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* during the month of June 2024. These newspapers were selected because they are widely read in Kenya and play a central role in shaping public discourse (Media Council of Kenya, 2024). June 2024 was

chosen because it represented the peak period of media coverage of the Gen Z protests following the passage of the 2024 Finance Bill.

In his article, Van Dijk (2017) demonstrates the triangulatory benefits of analyzing front-page news headlines and editorials on the same topic. Van Dijk (1991) says that headlines summarize the most important information about a news event. He further argues they could be biased because the summary reflects the perspective of the media organization. He also shows that they set the cognitive tone by guiding the reader on how to think about the subject of the article.

Editorials have the superstructure of a summary of the events, comments/opinions on the event, and a conclusion/recommendation (Van Dijk, 2017). The comments or recommendations are organized by argumentation. Editorials in the *Daily Nation* range between 300 and 700 words, while in *The Standard*, the range is between 140 and 530 words. In both newspapers, they are placed in the middle pages.

Sampling of the headlines was done using the saturation method, which involves moving between theory and data. That is, one samples and analyses until the saturation point (Mautner, 2008; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). Headlines were added iteratively until no new patterns emerged. This yielded 21 headlines, as shown in Table 1 in the data analysis section. All editorials on Gen Z protests in June 2024 were selected. The *Daily Nation* had 7, while *The Standard* had 6, totaling 13. Data was retrieved from online newspaper archives. Sketch Engine for Language Learning (henceforth, SKELL) was used to identify lexical patterns and collocations. This allowed for a systematic analysis of recurring language use (Paltridge, 2021).

## 6. Data Analysis and Discussion

The analysis begins with front-page news headlines because they represent the macro-structures of a newspaper and are the first elements encountered by readers. In many cases, readers only see the front-page headlines and form an impression without reading the full articles. For this reason, headlines play an important role in shaping public understanding of events. After examining the news headlines, the analysis moves to editorials. Editorials are significant because they articulate the official position of a newspaper on a particular issue (Van Dijk, 1991). To organise the analysis clearly, a coding system is used. The *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* are coded as N and S, respectively. NH and EH refer to **News Headlines** and **Editorial Headlines** respectively. More specifically, SNH denotes **Standard News Headlines**, while NNH denotes **Nation News Headlines**. SEH and NEH stand for **Standard Editorial Headline** and **Nation Editorial Headline**, respectively. This coding system helps present the data systematically in the analysis.

### 6.1 Front-Page News Headlines (NH)

This section analyses the front-page news headlines from the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* newspapers. The 21 news headlines are captured in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

NH No.	Date	Newspaper	Headline
SNH1	19/06/2024	The Standard	Ruto beats retreat amid tax protests
SNH2	21/06/2024	The Standard	Ruto, you betrayed us.
SNH3	22/06/2024	The Standard	Family's double pain after son dies in demos.
SNH4	23/06/2024	The Standard	The storm in Ruto's paradise
SNH5	24/06/2024	The Standard	The revolt continues
SNH6	25/6/2024	The Standard	Tax rebellion: Ruto's wiggle room shrinks
SNH7	26/6/2024	The Standard	Deaths, Mayhem
SNH8	27/6/2024	The Standard	Ruto gives in to Gen Z
SNH9	28/6/2024	The Standard	The military question
SNH10	30/6/2024	The Standard	Reckoning hour: 15 key things Ruto should do
NNH11	19/6/2024	Daily Nation	New face of protests as Ruto backs down
NNH12	21/6/2024	Daily Nation	A Youth Revolt
NNH13	22/6/2024	Daily Nation	Power of numbers for restless youth
NNH14	23/6/2024	Daily Nation	Ruto summons security chiefs

NNH15	24/6/2024	Daily Nation	Listen to youth, church tells state
NNH16	25/6/2024	Daily Nation	Ruto's options
NNH17	26/6/2024	Daily Nation	Pandemonium
NNH18	27/6/2024	Daily Nation	Ruto's olive branch
NNH19	28/6/2024	Daily Nation	Those we lost
NNH20	29/6/2024	Daily Nation	14 hours of terror
NNH21	30/6/2024	Daily Nation	Under siege

### 6.1.1 Nomination

Nomination or naming is the “discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes, and actions” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.33). In the headlines from *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation*, Gen Z protesters are nominated through revolutionary labels, generational categories, metaphors, and victim identities. We have headlines that use nomination strategies related to revolutionary action and resistance (SNH5, NNH12, and SNH6). For example, in (SNH5, NNH12), the protests are called “revolt”, implying that the protesters are revolutionaries. Similarly, the lexical item “revolt”, as seen in (NNH12, SNH5), carries strong revolutionary connotations historically associated with resistance against political authority. The word “revolt” suggests organized resistance against the state. The protests are again framed as “rebellion,” which according to SKELL collocates with words related to resistance and revolt. Through this nomination strategy, Gen Z protesters are discursively constructed as revolutionary actors engaged in a struggle against political authority. Naming the protesters revolutionaries frames the resistance as justified and necessary. In their framing theory, Chong and Druckman (2007) observe that a frame organizes reality by giving meaning to unfolding events and promoting certain definitions of political issues.

The protesters are also named through generational identity, for example, (SNH8, NNH12, NNH13, and NNH15). SKELL shows that the labels “Gen Z” and “youth” are a distinct generational group. This naming strategy collectivizes thousands of individual protesters into a unified political actor. In addition, the grammatical structure “gives in to” (SNH8) suggests that this generational group possesses the power to influence political decision-making. “Gen Z” positions the youth as a coherent political force that can compel the president to concede. This framing resonates with other global youth revolutionary protests, like the Arab Spring.

Gen Z protesters are also nominated through metaphorical representations (SNH4, NNH11, and NNH13). NNH11 metaphorically names the protesters using the noun phrase “new face,” which takes us back to revolutionary action. Again, NNH13 metaphorically calls the protesters “numbers” in the phrase “power of numbers”. This frames them as an unstoppable political force. NNH13 calls the protesters the “storm.” This presents them as a powerful natural force. Storms are also typically associated with disruption, intensity, and uncontrollable energy. Examples in SKELL confirm that the word “storm” collocates with words like “lightning and thunder,” “cyclone,” “tornadoes,” “strength,” “warnings,” “severe,” etc. By using this metaphor, the headline therefore discursively constructs the protesters as a force capable of destabilizing political institutions.

Another form of nomination appears through victim identity, where protesters are described using family roles. For example, in SNH3, the noun “son” is used to refer to the protester. Instead of calling the person a protester or demonstrator, the headline identifies him through his relationship to a family. This choice of words makes the story more personal and emotional. It reminds readers that the person who died was someone’s child. In this way, the headline presents the young protesters as family members whose deaths cause deep pain and loss, rather than only as political actors involved in demonstrations.

Pronouns are also used as nomination strategies that construct Gen Z as victims and members of a collective community. In SNH2, the pronoun “us” in “Ruto, you betrayed us” represents the protesters as a collective group that feels aggrieved by the president. The pronoun creates a direct relational opposition between “you” (the president) and “us” (the protesters), thereby positioning Gen Z as victims of political betrayal. This discourse of victimhood is deepened by the use of the demonstrative pronoun “those” in NNH19: “Those we lost.” The headline frames the youth as part of “us” and indirectly the state as “them.” The pronoun “we” suggests collective identification between the newspaper, the public, and the victims, while “those” refers to the individuals who died during the protests. Through this nomination strategy, the deaths are presented not as isolated incidents but as losses that affect society as a whole. This framing further reinforces the representation

of Gen Z protesters as victims whose suffering connects with the broader community. This resonates with Chong and Druckman's (2007) argument that a strong frame depends on linking a proposal to a positive idea or value that is widely available to the public. The idea of victimhood easily attracts sympathy and support.

### 6.1.2 Predication

Predication is the discursive strategy through which particular qualities are attributed to social actors (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016; Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Wodak, 2009). Both newspapers give attributions that are in line with legitimizing the protesters, for example, NNH12, the nominal attribution "youth" modifies the noun "revolt." In NNH13, "youth" is the noun modified by the adjective "restless." They legitimize the protests on grounds of generation and disenchantment. As noted earlier, the protesters are metaphorically called a "new face." The attribute "new" introduces a revolutionary angle and legitimizes it. Unsurprisingly, "rebellion," which implies that the protesters are rebels, is modified by the word "tax" in SNH6. All these predicative strategies frame the protest as something unavoidable and therefore justified.

### 6.1.3 Argumentation

Argumentation, according to Reisigl and Wodak (2016), refers to the discursive strategy through which claims are justified or challenged by providing reasons, evidence, and logical arguments. They argue that every argument has *topoi*, which are conclusion rules or warrants that link an argument to a claim. In other words, a *topos* is the logic that makes a claim look reasonable. The headlines clearly contain *topoi* such as justice and resistance. For example, the revolutionary action is justified on the basis of tax (SNH1, SNH6), betrayal (SNH2), and unfulfilled promises (SNH10). The protests are also justified on the logic of inevitable change (SNH4, SNH5, SNH10, NNH11, NNH12, and NNH15).

It is important to illustrate how this *topoi* work in the headlines. The headlines that frame the protest as a "revolt" imply that the nation is at a point where transformative social change is long overdue. A headline like "new face of protests as Ruto backs down" (NNH11) not only connotes revolutionary action but also implies that the Gen Z are winning.

According to Fairclough (2013), the position of participants in a clause as an actor, goal, or beneficiary constructs ideological assumptions about agency, responsibility, and power. In these headlines, the president is consistently given agency and responsibility in a negative way (SHN1, SNH2, SNH4, SNH6, SNH8, SNH10, NNH11, NNH14, and NNH18). For example, in SNH1, he "beats retreat," SNH8, he "gives in," NNH11, "backs down." All these headlines adopt the syntax of the president losing to the pressure of heroic protesters. The headlines also consistently adopt syntactic structures that frame the argument that the protesters are winning, for example, (SNH4, SNH5, NNH11, NNH12, NNH13, etc.). This can, for example, be seen in NNH13, which takes the structure of nominalization "power of numbers for restless youths". The headline explicitly frames the young protesters as having power over the state by virtue of their numbers.

### 6.1.4 Perspectivization

Perspectivization is "positioning the speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 33). In most of these headlines, the voice of the newspapers dominates and seems to consistently speak on behalf of Gen Z. As already explained, the protesters are depicted as heroic, while the president and government are portrayed as losers in the hands of the protesters (see SNH1, SNH4, SNH5, SNH6, SNH8, etc.). In some cases, the Gen Z are allowed to speak directly to the president, for example, SNH2 "Ruto, you betrayed us." A dialogic situation is created where the Gen Z condemn the president as a traitor. There are also cases where the newspapers explicitly give voice to influential actors like the church, as in NNH15 "listen to youths, church tells state." Again, the state is constructed as an institution that does not listen to Gen Z. This frames the protests as justified. We also have cases where the newspapers conflate their voice with that of Gen Z. For example, NNH19 "Those we lost." In this manner, the voicing allows the newspapers to appropriate the protest action. In these headlines, the newspapers adopt the perspective of Gen Z and the public to position the youth as active, powerful, and revolutionary, while showing the government as passive, cornered, and weak. By doing this, the newspapers guide readers to sympathize with the youth, recognize their influence, and view their actions as justified.

### 6.1.5 Intensification or Mitigation

Intensification is the practice of boosting or amplifying the positive actions of the in-group, while mitigation plays down the negative. On the other hand, the negative actions of the out-group are amplified while their positive actions are played down (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016; Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Wodak, 2009). There is a pattern in the headlines to intensify the positive actions of Gen Z and to play down their negative actions. For example, the headlines of the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* on the 26th June are simple nominalizations describing the invasion of parliament by the protesters. NNH17 “Pandemonium” and SNH7 “Deaths, Mayhem.” These headlines mask the violent actions of the protesters who invaded parliament. They clearly mitigate the possible responsibility of protesters in the attendant violence and destruction.

The framing of the president as losing to Gen Z is intensified by ensuring that virtually all headlines in the corpus construct him negatively. The president is described using phrases like “gives in”, “backs down” his “wiggle room shrinks,” “under siege”, “gives an olive branch”, and “summons security chiefs.” Conversely, the heroic and revolutionary status of Gen Z is intensified through headlines that frame the protesters’ actions as invincible and justified. The Gen Z are described in terms of causing a “storm”, having a “new face,” creating a “revolt,” and having the power of “numbers.”

### 6.2 Editorials

In this section, we analyse 7 editorials published in the *Daily Nation* and 6 in *The Standard* that addressed the Gen Z protests in Kenya, in the month of June 2024. Discursive strategies used in the front-page headlines are again encountered in the editorials. However, the way they are used is different but they still frame the protesters and their actions positively. This is because editorials, unlike the headlines explicitly bring out the ideological position of newspapers (Van Dijk, 2017). The distribution of these editorials is presented in Table 2. Editorials are categorized using their headlines.

**Table 2- Editorial headlines (EH)**

No. of the EH	Date	Page no.	Newspaper	Headlines
SEH1	20/6/2024	14	The Standard	Prosecute police officers for attacking protesters
SEH2	21/6/2024	14	The Standard	Peaceful protests, please
SEH3	24/6/2024	12	The Standard	Finance Bill 2024: MPs have final chance to do the right thing tomorrow
SEH4	25/6/2024	14	The Standard	Resurgence of abductions and killer plainclothes police deeply concerning
SEH5	26/6/2024	12	The Standard	Finance Bill 2024 should mark a turning point for public participation
SEH6	27/6/2024	16	The Standard	President has made a good decision but too late
NEH7	19/6/2024	13	Daily Nation	Police brutality against protests courting anarchy
NEH8	23/6/2024	14	Daily Nation	Speed up probe into deaths during protests
NEH9	25/6/2024	15	Daily Nation	Seek dialogue to avert deadly street protests
NEH10	26/6/2024	17	Daily Nation	Lets reason together, Kenya belongs to us all
NEH11	27/6/2024	17	Daily Nation	The tide has turned, lets us not squander the teachable moments
NEH12	28/6/2024	16	Daily Nation	KDF patrols a welcome security assurance
NEH13	30/6/2024	12	Daily Nation	Probe police atrocities and punish culprits

#### 6.2.1 Nomination

As in the headlines, protesters are given generational identity via the use of names like “Gen Z” and “youth”. Additional terms are used largely due to the expansiveness and directness of editorials. This is seen in the following examples:

*SEH3: The emerging widespread antipathy captured by the Gen Z protests largely stems from the realisation that public participation has become a cosmetic ritual that does not count*

*SEH4: Police officers will provide security and guard public property, not attack unarmed youths who are agitating for their rights.*

A naming that is in line with generational identity has the discursive function of framing the protesters as a group with youthful energy and power. Additionally, these texts raise issues that justify the actions of the protesters, for example, public participation being “cosmetic.” SEH4 also explicitly, through the voice of the editor, states that they “are agitating for their rights”

The protesters are also categorized under a legal or constitutional framing, where they are called “protesters” or “demonstrators”. This is well illustrated in the following examples:

**SEH1:** *It is foolhardy to attack and maim unarmed protesters...*

**SEH2:** *Although the protesters were largely peaceful...*

**NEH12:** *The confrontations between the protesters and the police have claimed scores of lives and caused serious injuries.*

**NEH13:** *From what transpired later, it is clear that the demonstrators behaved with civility, but the police did not...*

By naming them “protesters” and “demonstrators,” the editorials legitimize their actions as a democratic right. Indeed, Article 37 of the Kenyan Constitution 2010 gives citizens the right to demonstrate, thus the protests are framed as legitimate democratic action. The content of this texts further systematically underlines the democratic rights to protest via the use of phrases like “unarmed,” “peaceful,” “behaved with civility,” etc.

Again, the editorials keep naming the protesters using terms like “citizens,” “Kenyans,” “patriots,” “public,” and “people,” which give them a national identity. This naming falls within synecdoche, which is a part standing for the whole. The young protesters are made to represent the whole nation. Let us examine the following examples from the corpus;

**NEH7:** *The citizens’ right to picket or stage protests or demonstrations is guaranteed by the Constitution.*

**NEH10:** *Thousands, probably millions of Kenyans from all walks of life turned out to exercise their democratic right to picket...*

**NEH11:** *The young Kenyans have, in a space of just a few weeks, dismantled and redefined Kenya’s civic space.*

**NEH11:** *This nation owes this group of young patriots a huge debt of gratitude.*

**SEH5:** *...The public is now determined to not only be heard but also to have its opinion adopted.*

**SEH6:** *...Precious lives of young people have been snuffed out by police bullets, and property destroyed countrywide*

Giving Gen Z a national identity frames them as acting for the nation. This also gives them moral or ethical agency against the state. Through giving a national identity, these editorial texts also frame the protesters as heroes and martyrs who are sacrificing for the nation, for example, the nation owes them “a huge debt of gratitude”, they have “redefined Kenya’s civic space.” Their lives have also been “snuffed out by police bullets.” This naming and accompanying text justifies the Gen Z actions. The names also have positive connotation. “Patriots”, according to SKELL, for example, co-occurs with words like “heroic”, “true”, “independence”, “community”, “efficient”, “won”, etc.

The protesters are also given a humanizing identity where they are framed as victims using the noun “lives.” For example,

**SEH6:** *...Precious lives of young people have been snuffed out by police bullets, and property destroyed*

countrywide

**SEH6:** *Lives have been lost, property destroyed and the economy brought to a standstill because of individuals unwilling to listen to the voices of reason.*

Here, the discourse of victimhood is used to highlight the vulnerability of protesters against state brutality. The naming “lives” is accompanied by texts that show graphically the brutality of police officers and the state. Very strong metaphors like “snuffed out” depict the protesters as victims while the police officers are portrayed as brutal and insensitive.

The game of numbers is also used to emphasize the power of the protesters and the brutality of the state. In the following example, the protesters are called “hundreds,”

**NEH13:** *The death toll is rising as **hundreds** more nurse serious injuries.*

The discursive function here is to frame the protesters as victims of state brutality. The number emphasizes the enormity of this violence.

### 6.2.2 Predication

As noted earlier, predication is the discursive strategy through which particular qualities are attributed to social actors (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016; Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Wodak, 2009). In the editorials, this strategy appears strongly in the descriptive expressions used to construct Gen Z protesters. These attributes can be discussed under a number of categories. We, for example, have attributes that frame the protesters as moral or ethical. In several instances, they are described as “peaceful,” or behaving with “civility” as in SEH1, “peaceful protesters” in NEH9, NEH13, “largely peaceful” in NEH10, “very peaceful demonstrators,” in NEH7, and “protesting peacefully” in SEH4. The repeated use of the adjective “peaceful” frames the protesters as calm and law-abiding citizens. In SEH1, the phrase “peaceful protest” establishes the demonstrations as orderly civic action rather than violent unrest. Through this repetition across different editorials, the newspapers frame Gen Z protesters as individuals who are exercising their rights within acceptable democratic limits.

The word “civility” (NEH13) carries strong connotations of respect, order, and responsible conduct as shown by the SKELL. By describing the demonstrators in this way, the editorial constructs them as mature participants in public discourse. The noun also evokes the idea of civic responsibility, which positions the protesters as individuals who are aware of their role within society. This description, therefore, strengthens the image of Gen Z as responsible citizens rather than unruly crowds.

Then we have attributions that are aimed at giving emotional appeal, for example: “precious” in NEH10 “precious lives” “innocent” in NEH8 “innocent people” and “Innocent law-abiding people” NEH 7. The discursive function, in such attributes, is to construct or frame the protesters as victims of police violence and brutality. For example, *The Standard* talks of “precious lives” having “been snuffed out by police bullets.” Similarly, the *Nation* writes that “the mandate of police officers is not “to kill and maim innocent people.”

Further, we have a related category of attribution where protesters are framed as harmless in the hands of brutal police officers. They are described as “unarmed” as in SEH1, SEH4, SEH6.

**SEH1:** *to attack and maim **unarmed** protesters whose only crime is shouting for change.*

**SEH 4:** *The expectation is that police officers will provide security and guard public property, not attack **unarmed** youths who are agitating for their rights.*

**SEH6:** *... the killings and brutality that was meted on **unarmed** protesters in Parliament...*

This shows that they were not carrying weapons and therefore did not pose a physical threat. Indeed, there are several examples in SKELL where unarmed groups are harmed or even killed. Thus, Gen Z are framed as defenseless, and a discourse of victimhood is again constructed.

Another category of attribution is on the numerical power of the protesters. The following examples

illustrate this tendency in the editorials.

**NEH13:** *More than 200 people were reportedly arrested...*

**NEH10:** *Thousands, probably millions of Kenyans from all walks of life turned out to exercise their democratic right to picket and petition their leaders.*

The number “more than 200” is clearly used by *The Standard* to discursively construct the police force as an insensitive and brutal institution, as the editorial adds, “...brutalised for no good reason by the same officers who are supposed to protect them” NEH13. The number also shows that the protests had attracted many young people. The second quotation from the *Daily Nation*, where protesters are described as “thousands” or “millions,” frames the protest as a national event.

### 6.2.3 Argumentation

As noted earlier, argumentation is the discursive strategy through which claims are justified or challenged by providing reasons, evidence, and logical arguments (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The editorials use the topos of responsibility via statements such as the following:

**SEH3:** *Most of the Gen Zs are educated, yet they cannot find decent jobs.*

**SEH3:** *The emerging widespread antipathy captured by the Gen Z protests largely stems from the realisation that public participation has become a cosmetic ritual.*

The logic of the claim can be summarized in the following manner: since the young people are educated, it is the responsibility of the government to provide them with jobs, and if the government fails to do so, then the young people have a right to protest. Therefore, the conjunction “yet” highlights the gap between education and opportunity, presenting a clear societal problem that can be addressed through the protests. Similarly, the statement in SEH3 uses the topos of responsibility, where the government is framed as failing to organize for public participation. This failure gives young people the justification to protest. Here, “stems from” shows causation, and the word “realisation” frames the protesters as aware and rational actors responding to systemic issues. These examples provide logical reasoning that positions the protests as understandable responses to societal failures.

We again encounter the topos of law and moral obligation in several instances in the editorials. Let us consider the examples below:

**SEH4:** *Police officers will provide security and guard public property, not attack unarmed youths who are agitating for their rights.*

**SEH5:** *MPs should still go through this Bill with a fine tooth comb*

**NEH10:** *The deaths and bloodshed of young protesters must not be in vain*

The modal “will” expresses normative expectation and obligation, contrasting what the police should do with what they actually did. In NEH10, the modal “must” expresses moral necessity, demanding recognition of the protesters’ sacrifice. SEH5 uses “should” to give a rational prescription for action. These examples imply that state officers, such as the police and MPs, are presently acting unfairly against Gen Z and that they have a moral obligation to redeem themselves. Such an argumentation structure discursively constructs Gen Z as civil, morally conscious, but victims of irresponsible state officers.

The editorials also utilize the topos of transformative social change, which is framed as justified and inevitable. The newspapers use verbs and phrases that emphasize the transformative role of Gen Z. Consider these examples:

NEH11: *The young Kenyans have in a space of just a few weeks dismantled and redefined Kenya's civic space*

NEH10: *...the historical trajectory will never be the same again.*

NEH11: *This moment... should mark a major turning point in our politics...*

SEH5: This should mark a **new beginning** for public participation.

The verbs “dismantled and redefined” give weight to the argument that Gen Z are reshaping society positively. Similarly, “...never be the same again” emphasizes that the protests have changed the country's social and political environment. Expressions such as “a major turning point” and “new beginning” suggest that these events are both necessary and inevitable for political reform. The newspapers frame the youth as active agents driving meaningful change.

#### 6.2.4 Perspectivization

Perspectivization reveals the standpoint from which Gen Z is interpreted and how the editorial voice guides readers' understanding of the protest. There is a systematic pattern where the editorial voice constructs Gen Z as peaceful, while police officers are framed as violent. This binary opposition succeeds in framing Gen Z as victims. Even in the headlines that look like they are neutral, the subsequent accompanying text in the body of the editorials clearly constructs the police officers as brutal and Gen Z as the victims.

The following headlines, for example, clearly illustrate this framing of the victimhood of Gen Z (SEH1, SEH4, SEH7, NEH8, and NEH13). For example, SEH1 states, “Prosecute police officers for attacking protesters.” The headline begins with the verb “prosecute,” a direct command that clearly expresses the editor's stand. The editorial voice demands accountability from the authorities.

A similar pattern is observable in the body of the editorials:

NEH13: *From what transpired later, it is clear that the demonstrators behaved with civility, but the police did not.*

SEH2: *Although the protesters were largely peaceful, police in some of these areas kept on firing tear gas canisters to disperse them.*

SEH4: *Several cases of extra-judicial killings and abduction of civilians by people believed to be police officers have been reported.*

NEH7: *The police cannot arrogate to themselves the power to arbitrarily take away constitutionally guaranteed rights.*

NEH10: *Precious lives have been lost, limbs maimed, and bucket-loads of blood spilled.*

NEH13: *The police officers' key mandate of maintaining law and order is not a licence to kill and maim innocent people.*

Following Van Dijk (1988b), an ideological square is clearly drawn by the two newspapers, where the police officers are systematically negatively represented, and Gen Z are positively represented. The police officers are wholly responsible for brutalizing Gen Z. On the other hand, Gen Z are framed as “innocent,” “peaceful,” “civil,” and “victims” of this brutality. In keeping with the framing theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007), we see a situation where grassroots actors like Gen Z are being constructed as having the ability to challenge the dominant groups.

### 6.2.5 Intensification or Mitigation

The editorials consistently use intensification to emphasize the harm, danger, and moral wrongs faced by Gen Z protesters, making their victimhood central to the narrative

The following texts demonstrate various ways of achieving intensification.

**SEH1:** *Indeed, the barbarity displayed by the police was on another level.*

**NEH10:** *Precious lives have been lost, limbs maimed, and bucket-loads of blood spilled.*

**NEH11:** *Days of untold pandemonium, loss of life and limb at the hands of trigger-happy security agents.*

**SEH4:** *Last week, Rex Masai, while protesting peacefully, was shot and killed by a man in civilian clothes suspected to be a police officer.*

The phrase “on another level” amplifies the extremity of police actions. In NEH10, the repeated listing of harm with intensifiers such as; “precious lives...limbs maimed...bucket-loads of blood” dramatizes the scale of violence. NEH11 uses the adjectives “untold” and “trigger-happy” to heighten the perception of chaos and reckless force. In SEH4, the verb phrase “was shot and killed” intensifies the fatal consequence of police action. These examples imply that protesters were exposed to extreme violence and danger, discursively constructing them as morally innocent people being victimized.

Any wrongdoing by the protesters is largely mitigated through silence:

**SEH1:** *From what transpired later, it is clear that the demonstrators behaved with civility, but the police did not.*

**SEH2:** *Although the protesters were largely peaceful, police in some of these areas kept on firing tear gas canisters to disperse them.*

**NEH7:** *The use of brute force by police to disperse peaceful protesters in Nairobi’s city centre...is a shameful violation of their cardinal rights.*

**NEH13:** *...against mostly peaceful protesters is chilling.*

The adjective “civility” in SEH1 emphasizes the peaceful and restrained nature of the protesters, mitigating any suggestion of wrongdoing. In SEH2, the phrase “largely peaceful” qualifies the protest, limiting blame for disorder or escalation. NEH7’s explicit description of “peaceful protesters” shifts responsibility to the police, reinforcing the non-threatening nature of the demonstrators. In NEH13, “mostly peaceful” similarly downplays any minor disruptions, highlighting the protesters’ innocence. Any wrongdoing by the protesters is largely mitigated through silence in both the headlines and the body of editorials.

### 7. Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity

“Intertextuality means that texts are linked to other texts in the past and in the present” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 28). When a text is transferred to a new context, it is labeled recontextualization, and if an element is taken out of a given context, we have a process of decontextualization. On its part, interdiscursivity shows that discourses are linked to each other. This means that discourses are open and in many cases hybrid. In this section, the article looks at how headlines and editorials draw on earlier texts and discourses to construct the Gen Z protesters.

To begin with, one clear example of intertextuality is found in SEH3, where the editorial quotes Abraham Lincoln with his famous definition of democracy as “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” A 19th-century American political text is recontextualized in 21st-century Kenyan Gen Z protests

discourse. The editorial then links this Lincolnian definition to Article 1 of the Constitution, which states that sovereign power belongs to the people. We now have 19<sup>th</sup> century political discourse interlinked with legal discourse out of Kenya's 2010 constitution. Both are hybridized with journalistic discourse in the editorial. A chain of intertextuality is thus created. These chains of intertextuality legitimize the protesters' actions. Gen Z are constructed as the legitimate defenders of democracy and the Constitution.

Another important demonstration of intertextuality is the repeated use of the term "Gen Z" in both the headlines and the editorials. This term had been used in global protests before the 2024 protests in Kenya. Examples include: Hong Kong protests (McCreary, 2021; Battocchio et al., 2023), the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria (Ajisafe et al., 2021), and climate change activism (Tyson et al., 2021). It was also applied to youth in Thailand's 2020 protests (McCargo, 2021), Myanmar's 2021 anti-coup movement (Jordt et al., 2021), and activism in Iran (Abou Karam, 2023). Naming the Kenyan protesters "Gen Z" legitimizes their actions because it suggests that what is happening in Kenya is similar to what has happened in other parts of the world. Thus, the term "Gen Z" carries intertextual meaning that positions the protesters within a global and historical framework of resistance.

Another recurring term is "revolt" (e.g., SNH5, NNH12). The term has a long history of intertextuality. When readers encounter it, they connect it to a web of other texts, including the Mau Mau revolt, Saba Saba protests in the 90s, and anti-colonial and neo-colonial revolts in Africa, such as the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Others include global and historical revolts such as the Arab Spring (2010-2011), the French revolution (1789-1799), and the Russian revolution (1917-1923). The editorials, for example, are full of such references though indirectly:

*SEH 1: Going by history, it is obvious police mostly break up demonstrations at the behest of the powers that be.*

*SEH 4: This new development is taking us back to the dark days when opposition to the government was considered sacrilegious, and people would indiscriminately be arrested on very flimsy excuses.*

These examples connect the current Gen Z protests to earlier revolts in Kenya, and therefore, give the protesters a historical justification. Therefore, the word "revolt" constructs Gen Z protesters as revolutionaries, heroes, and powerful actors.

Interdiscursivity is also a central feature in the corpus. In several editorial articles, legal discourse is explicitly recontextualized in journalistic discourse. In particular, there is repeated reference to Article 1, which states that sovereign power belongs to the people, and Article 37, which talks about the right to demonstrate (SEH1, SEH3, SEH4, NEH7, NEH8, NEH9, and NEH11). Let us examine some examples:

*SEH3: The preamble of our Constitution states that power belongs to the people. This power is only donated to elected representatives (reference to Article 1).*

*NEH8: The people's right to picket or stage peaceful protests is enshrined in the Constitution, which also guarantees their freedoms of expression and association (reference to article 37).*

There are also several editorials that make reference to the Constitution in general and the Bill of Rights in particular (e.g., NEH7, NEH10). Indeed, some editorials read like a lecture on the constitutional right of Kenyans to protest (e.g., NEH7, NEH8, NEH10, and SEH2). These editorials almost sound like a session on civic education concerning Kenya's constitutional rights. Thus, recontextualization of legal discourse into the editorials frames Gen Z as having the right to protest. They are constructed as rightful actors exercising constitutionally guaranteed freedoms.

## 8. Conclusion

Anchored on Ruth Wodak's DHA and the Framing theory, this article sought to examine how Gen Z protesters were discursively constructed by Kenya's leading newspapers, *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*. The corpus

was drawn from the front-page headlines and editorials from the two newspapers in the month of June 2024. The analysis reveals a systematic pattern of positive representation of the Gen Z protesters. Through, for example, nomination, predication, argumentation, and perspectivization strategies, the protesters are framed as heroic, revolutionary, victims of police brutality, and morally legitimate. When their actions are aligned to democratic ideals, they are intensified using pre-modifiers and post-modifiers. Potentially negative actions, like the invasion of parliament, are mitigated through nominalization, backgrounding, or silence.

The positive representation is further reinforced through intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Intertextual reference to Gen Z protesters in other countries makes them part of historical actors. Re-contextualization of legal discourse in editorials, particularly the constant reference to Articles 1 and 37 of the constitution, legitimizes the actions of the protesters.

These findings are aligned with observations of other scholars that the media plays an ideological role and can shape and influence the way we think and act about events like political protests (Fairclough, 2013; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2007; Ngumo & Omoke, 2021; Richardson, 2007; Van Dijk, 2017; Wodak, 2009). This study demonstrates the value of integrating DHA and the Framing theory to critically examine how newspaper texts legitimize the actions of political actors.

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