Abstract

The growth of the Internet in the last two decades has helped increase political and civic engagement and scrutiny. The growth of a digital economy in Kenya has led to the emergence of a vibrant online community with 89.7% of the population having access to the Internet. This paper examines how Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) use visuals as a form of political protest. Using an open source data tool, the paper provides results from a qualitative analysis of 200 tweets that drove three political hashtags with a special focus on the most prominent memes, cartoons and pictures. This research finds that #KOT uses visuals to highlight government corruption and incompetence through mockery, condemnation and humour. These findings contribute to a growing body of literature that studies the relationship between new communication technologies and connective action.

Keywords

Digital protest, Kenya, Twitter, Connective action, Visuals, Government corruption, Technology, Internet

1. Introduction

The rapid rise of Internet technologies over the last two decades in Africa has conversely led to an increase of digital and public protests relating to a plethora of issues affecting its citizens (Bosch et al. 2018; Nyabola 2018). The use of mobile telephones and Internet-enabled gadgets
has contributed to social media becoming an integral part of the social and political transformation in Africa (Kaigwa 2017; Omanga 2015). Some of the most highlighted recent examples of these protests have been reported in countries such as Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya and Ethiopia. The citizens “demonstrate, tweet and blog for more democracy, self-determination and against authoritarian governments” (Heinrich Böll Stiftung n.d.). The Internet has further led to the rise of new gatekeepers and a new activist archetype: connective action, which is initiated and driven by social media users and activists (Bennett & Segerberg 2012).

Recent research on Kenya’s social media landscape reveals how Twitter has been a key platform used in popular movements and has displayed the most lively and insightful political conversations (Haugerud et al. 2020; Nyabola 2018). Twitter has been used as a channel of communication between the government, emergency responders and the public (Kaigwa 2017; Nyabola 2018; Simon et al. 2014) to address reported corruption, media misrepresentations, and share humour and messages of solidarity, (BBC 2014; Nothias & Cheruiyot 2019; Tully & Ekdale 2014). Others have also focused on the influence of hashtags on public opinion and the participatory playfulness and entertainment around memes (Kaigwa 2017; Munuku et.al 2017; Tully & Ekdale 2014).

However, little has been done on how Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) use visuals specifically as a form of political participation. This study addresses part of the gap in academic literature by seeking to examine how KOT use visuals as a form of political protest and how their actions can be viewed through the logic of connective action. It has already been suggested that mass mobilizations can occur among individuated populations using social networks, such as Tumblr, Twitter and Facebook, to bridge and transcend in-person interactions (Bennett & Segerberg 2012).

Through an examination of three online political protests by KOT, this research is guided by the following question(s):

How do Kenyans on twitter use visuals as a form of political protest?

- Research sub-question 1 (RQ1): What types of visuals are used in the hashtags this research examines and what are the patterns/differences that emerge?
- Research sub-question 2 (RQ2): What do the representations identified in the analysis of the visuals reveal about how KOT use them as a form of political protest?

This essay is arranged in five main sections: firstly, it presents an overview of literature examining some of the discussions that have been had on digital protests and the types of visuals often used in digital protests by KOT. This paper can only discuss these major aspects due to space and word restrictions. The theoretical framework employed is presented next before
moving on to the case study. This will be followed by the methodology, key findings and results in relation to the literature reviewed. Finally, the paper will discuss the study’s limitations, with suggestions for future research, and then present the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Protests and use of visuals

Protest is an essential part of politics (Bosch et al. 2018). Protest defines any form of dissent towards a particular occurrence and varies in terms of reach and scale. It could be in the form of a vigil, rallies, strikes and, most recently with web 2.0, the use of social networking sites for protest purposes (Eesuola 2015; Kauffman 2018; Theocharis et al. 2013). Protests often stem from different historical and structural forces and occur for a number of reasons including authoritarian political regimes, exploitation, poverty and corruption (Auvinen 1996; Eckstein & Merino 2001). Whether covert or overt, protests have intent and are either reactive or proactive and are organised to make or deny claims (Eckstein & Merino 2001: 11). Protests throughout history have been catalysts for social change, justice and the advancement of human rights, as seen in the women’s rights and civil rights movements (Evans 1980). Some studies have demonstrated the importance of protests in helping develop an informed and engaged public (Eckstein & Merino 2001; Eesuola 2015).

Different groups currently have a virtual space in real time with the Internet and social media to challenge, reframe and re-inscribe representations and perceived injustices (Carroll & Hackett 2006: 87). Other scholars have focused on how the Internet has also enabled relative accountability and global protection. This case is rooted in the knowledge that what is published online is viewable on a global scale. The protestors assume that they have outside witnesses and are safe from extreme government treatment, because most regimes are afraid to elicit international condemnation (Karatzogianni 2015; Nepstad 2011). However, authoritarian governments have found a way to tackle this by shutting down the Internet in their countries during periods of unrest, for example, in Sudan, Ethiopia, Chad and DR Congo (Dahir 2019).

Another win for online protests is the amount of data that is produced and collected. Where knowledge of previous pre-Internet protests is mostly available in history books and reported testimonials of participants and observers, social media has helped movements “document, preserve and commemorate the struggle. Through surviving web pages, tweets, and online links, researchers can access a unique online archive complete with real-time reactions to historical events as they unfold” (Baer 2018: 40; cf. Melgaço & Monaghan 2018).
On the other hand, some studies (Forbes 2002; Sunstein 2002) have revealed that, in the same way the Internet allows for quick and easy access to information, other people use it to spread inaccurate or false information. This misinformation is further compounded by users’ own confirmation bias, which leads them to avoid physical public spaces with divergent views for private spaces on social media where their prejudices are further reinforced. Morozov (2012) further argued that online protests leave behind digital footprints that authoritarian regimes can utilise for the surveillance and oppression of those involved. Apart from misinformation and surveillance, Internet protests have also been accused of giving rise to public apathy and slacktivism, or keyboard activism, that reportedly fail to make any lasting political change as they are great for getting attention but not for organising (Morozov 2012; Tufekci 2017). Nyabola (2018) concurs, claiming that without an offline component; most online protests can often stop at just being noise.

Conversely, the arguments on slacktivism could be considered only half the discussion, as they fail to recognise other barriers to joining traditional protests. Disabled people, for instance, might have limited physical access to protest spaces or visa restrictions might make this impossible in the case of migrants. Others who are excluded are those who work at jobs that make it difficult to travel because of resources, such as time and money. By excluding them, an activist hierarchy is formed that marginalizes other significant voices (The Guardian 2016). One way in which people choose to protest online is by using visuals. The use of visual communication dates back to early man’s use of cave paintings and hieroglyphics to tell stories and share history. This has evolved since the twentieth century to the use of photography, TV, cinema and, most recently, digital platforms. These shared visuals come in different forms, for example, photographs, illustrations, graphs, gifs, memes and videos. They serve as representations or imaginations of our society (Gerodimos 2019; Lilleker et al. 2019).

Freedberg (1989) and Scheufele (1999) draw our attention to the socio-political power of images with their capacity to not only grab attention but illicit different emotions, such as pleasure, anger and humour. Images can influence the public’s views and how individuals react to their society.

Brantner et al. (2011) discusses the role of visuals in framing an issue and how their ability to evoke feelings affects the public’s evaluation of messages. Lilleker et al. (2019) and Messaris (2019) also note that visuals help cut through communication noise and this, in itself, can be beneficial or detrimental to democratic engagement. Visuals are now subject to editing and manipulation for nefarious purposes, for instance, political propaganda, due to the increased access to technology. Apart from spreading dis- and misinformation, their ability to be manipulated makes even authentic visuals suspicious in the eyes of the public. However, visuals are
still vital in protests. As Blaagaard et al. (2017) point out, they are essential in making protests or conflicts visible or invisible, adding that the large number of visuals produced are all under the social networks’ algorithmic control. The latter creates a struggle for visibility during protest events by giving some visuals prominence over others and creating a particular narrative of the protest.

Research on social movements further highlights how visuals can sometimes be more powerful than words alone because they elicit emotions and lead to collective action, as was seen with the Arab Spring wave, Occupy WallStreet protests and even the 2017 Kenyan elections (Howard 2013; Nyabola 2018; Wang & Caskey 2016). Neumayer and Rossi (2018) also identified visuals as part of a larger narrative, as they are often presented within a hashtag or as part of tweets from a network of followers. Their work supports observations made by Schill (2012) and Hariman and Lucaites (2007) that visuals do not function autonomously, but are part of written arguments, with the ability to transport the viewer figuratively to a particular point in time.

Huntington (2017) further argues that visuals such as memes are easy to overlook in media use and political decision-making as they might appear inessential. However, they most often are an indicator of how people feel about certain political issues and political information and shape what they look and focus on politically. Mukhongo (2014) identified while studying Youth and Political Images in Kenya that Kenyan youth uses visuals to fashion their own information environments outside of government, organisations and journalistic sanctions. The visuals are a representation of the way the youth experiences the world. The study noted that visual messages allowed them leeway to convey concise descriptions of the political landscape of the country, as they could make them more informative and creative. Another group of Kenyans who have been the subject of research is KOT. They are viewed as exemplary when it comes to how African audiences use technology to challenge different narratives (Adeiza & Howard 2016; Kaigwa 2017; Nothias & Cheruiyot 2019; Tully & Ekdale 2014).

2.2 Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) and dissent on Twitter

Kenya began its information and communication technologies revolution at the close of the 20th century and in the early 2000s. The government legally recognised the Internet and set up a state-owned incumbent operator to provide the service. This came with a feeling of renewed optimism that a new wave of democracy as technology would create novel avenues for political participation (Tettey 2001; Mureithi 2017: 29-32). Nyabola (2018) notes that Kenya’s digital boom has been heavily tied to the role of technology in politics and diversifying its economy. This has seen the development of mobile money platforms, such as M-Pesa and Pesalink,
the e-Citizen platform that provides government services, such as land services, and business, passport and marriage registration. The growth of a digital economy in Kenya has led to the emergence of a vibrant online community with 89.7% of the population having access to the Internet (Communications Authority of Kenya n.d.) A perhaps unintended consequence for the government in working to set up a digital economy is the emergence of a vibrant online community that would have otherwise remained untapped in an analogue space. This online community has its origins in the contested 2007 elections in Kenya. Kenya went through ethnic violence from December 2007 to February 2008 triggered by a disputed presidential election perceived to be fraudulent (Adesina et al. 2012; Kanyiga 2009; Roberts 2009).

Protests erupted in different parts of the country following the announcement of President Mwai Kibaki’s win. The internal security minister, John Michuki, followed this announcement with a ban on all protests and police were called in to quell the unrest. He also suspended live broadcasts, “in the interest of public safety and tranquillity” (RSF 2008). Kenyans turned to alternative ways of receiving and giving out information following the mainstream media news blackout; the most common being the use of short message services from mobile phones (Internet & Democracy 2008; RSF 2008). Kenyans in the diaspora, with the help of family and friends, teamed up to use social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and blogs to share information on the crisis, while promoting peace and Kenyan unity (Goldstein & Rotich 2008; Mäkinen & Wangu 2008; Ndemo & Weiss 2016; Nyabola 2018; Tully 2011).

Kenyans were enabled to create new narratives and channels of information with the help of social media and thanks to the mainstream media blackout, with which to imagine statehood and identity (Nyabola 2018). This was the beginning of the youth in Kenya adopting the Internet for political expression as it provided relative security and allowed them to circumvent censorship from their authoritarian government that often led to increased political detentions and cancellation of public meetings on the grounds of national security (Mukhongo 2014; Von-Doepp 1996).

Facebook has been the social networking site most frequented in Kenya, followed by Pinterest, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn. The rating of the different social sites reflects Kenya’s population, of which almost three-quarters is under the age of 30, the median being 19.7 years (StatCounter 2019; World Population Review 2019). Another study on social media consumption in Kenya revealed that the main reason most Kenyans are active on social media is for news, politics and entertainment, adding that Twitter is mostly used by those of 26 to 35 years (USIU Africa 2019). Interestingly, when it comes to social media platforms, the Facebook user base in Kenya stood at 8,799,000 users at the time of publishing this study; their reach is limited to family, friends and preselected groups (Dotsavvyafrica 2016; Internet World Stats
Twitter users in Kenya make up 9.36% of social media users as of February 2019 (Internet World Stats 2019; StatCounter 2019). Twitter has a reported 1.5 million active monthly users in Kenya as of May 2018; now estimated to be over 2 million (USIU Africa 2019).

Twitter, founded in 2006, has proven to be the perfect outlet for citizens to express themselves. It works as a conversational search engine and its hashtags allow you to link up with more diverse users. According to Kwon et al. (2014), this is characterised by users posting the web address of external content, retweeting content or reconstructing context through their own comments. Twitter also has a visual sharing option for tweets, which was critical for this research. Depending on their deemed worthiness, tweets are retweeted, replied to or flagged for others with the “@” symbol or a hashtag symbolized as“#”. The hashtag, firstly conceived as a tool for interpersonal communication, was repurposed “as a vehicle for disruptive acts of political resistance. It offered a new idea: that the sharing of ideas in digital spaces might itself be a form of radical resistance” (Liuet al. 2016: 139). These hashtags act as both indices and identifiers of either an individual post or some larger context as it relates to a larger topic. (Shaw 2010). Yang et al. (2012) argued that hashtags serve as both bookmarks and community membership, connecting a virtual community of users. Consequently, users can discern both who is talking and what they are talking about. It is because of this that Twitter has been more effective in contributing to Kenya’s digital culture of connective action, characterising and shaping the perception of the country globally (Kaigwa 2013; Social Media Revolver 2015).

As Tufekci notes, “only a segment of the population needs to be connected digitally to affect the entire environment” (2017: 18). The KOT’s first known postings were in 2007/2008, during and after the post-election violence (Kaigwa 2017). #KOT is recognised as an “influential and vocal group that ensures their country is discussed fairly and with respect online” (Barnett 2012). They are seen as siblings in a family who may disagree with one another, but there is an unspoken rule that the only people allowed to speak ill of Kenyans are Kenyans (Barnett 2012; Mungai 2015).

Munuku (2019) observed that hashtags in Kenya originate mainly from ordinary citizens and other groups, such as media and activists, and are used to direct public debate on national issues. Albeit, not all tweets that refer to Kenya have the #KOT; different organisations, including CNN, use it to tag content related to the Kenyan public (Tully&Ekdale 2014:137). The #KOT’s campaigns have also been effective in other ways, including driving positive change, galvanizing and channelling public discontent, political mobilization, governance and civil awareness (Kaigwa 2017; Nothias&Cheruiyot 2019; Omanga&Chepngetich-Omanga 2013). Unfortunately, #KOT is not all fun and games and social good. There have been reported instances of misinformation, cyber-bullying and trolling, which is often connected to a trending
topic. The victims are diverse – from the Chief Justice, to celebrities, politicians and other Kenyans. The bullying often starts with tweets and images that are perceived as funny, before deteriorating to threats of physical harm and hate, leading some of the victims to deactivate their accounts or take their own lives (Eveminet 2019; Simon et al. 2014; Soko Directory 2019).

3. Theoretical Framework: Connective Action

Kenyans using Twitter as a political discourse platform to mobilize, drive positive change and channel public discontent (Gitonga 2015; Kaigwa 2017; Nyabola 2018), can best be understood through Bennett and Segerberg’s logic of connective action. They argue that connective action is “digitally networked [...] engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles and grievances”, especially among younger generations (Bennett & Segerberg 2012: 743). A part of the central argument of connective action logic is “the recognition of digital media as organising agents”, thus, participants in digital protests do not need a shared sense of unanimity. Instead, they are drawn together by personalized frames from inclusive ideas, little or no organisational association, and technology (Bennett & Segerberg 2012: 744-745, 752).

They argue that digital media, especially social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, enable people to commit to an action and recommend it to others by sharing their own personal experiences through words and visuals, while, at the same time, connecting to large populations across time and space (Ibid.). Bennet and Segerberg also identify two types of connective action: organisationally-enabled and crowd-enabled. Organisationally-enabled connective action may be centred on resource-rich non-governmental organisations that adopt a signature mode of personalizing engagement. They also offer a variety of communications and interactive media regarding how people can engage. Crowd-enabled connective action is characterised by groups that are largely without lead actors and are dominated by personal action frames (Bennet & Segerberg 2012: 756). Similar to Bennett and Segerberg, González-Bailón (2015) recognises how the Internet and social media have changed the way in which people interact and organise. This has resulted in formal organisations that used to be necessary in defining narratives and mobilizing members who were taking a back seat, meaning that both social and online movements are dependent on the public’s drive to act.

Breuer (2012), on the other hand, argues that crowd-enabled connective action allows for individuals to be part of different networks and maintain various social connections. These connections, alongside algorithms set up by networks, expose them to protest-related information whether they seek it or not (Breuer 2012: 8). That being said, connective action is not without
its critics. Pond & Lewis (2017) point out two main limitations: firstly, that connective action focuses mainly on network structuralism and not so much on the role of ideology in shaping social action. Secondly, that connective action downplays the fact that technologies are different and are designed for different purposes, thus, their use and outcomes cannot be generalized (Pond & Lewis 2017: 3-4). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) acknowledge one of these limitations when addressing the challenge of connective action, which is to get individuals to move beyond just sharing content to more public engagement and mass media impact.

4. Research Methodology

This is a qualitative exploration of the types of visual protest typologies employed by KOT. The unit of analysis in this study is the body of the tweet, referring to the featured issues within each visual, and the accompanying written text. Visual and verbal contents were therewith considered as mutually dependent in terms of forming the message.

4.1 Data Selection

This study focuses on the still visuals used in three hashtags: #CongratulationsGovernor, #MheshimiwaFisi(Hyena MPs) and #MrPresidentTumechoka— meaning “Mr President, we are tired”. They were selected because they trended nationally, were featured on mainstream media, and focused on political protests and targeted government officials. The decision to include the three hashtags was further influenced by the fact that they addressed government officials at different levels of government, both local and national; thus, possibly providing insights into how KOT address their leaders on different administrative issues.

4.2 Method and Sampling Approach

Methodologically, this study employs principles of qualitative content analysis (QCA; Schreier 2012). The QCA was selected as it allows for the analysis of data with latent meanings, which requires some degree of interpretation in a systematic way. According to Schreier, QCA allows meaning to be constructed by the researcher or recipient of data based on their attribution to the words they hear or read, or to the images that they see (Schreier 2012:2). The QCA is also employed here because it allows one to focus on the analysis of selected aspects of the data based on the research question in a systematic and flexible way. It is systematic because all relevant data is examined and placed in an applicable coding frame. The latter must be consistent. It is flexible, as it allows the researcher to tailor the coding frame based on their own
material (ibid.: 3-9). Even though this study comprises a QCA, it applies some quantitative methods of counting the frequency of main codes and themes observed in the visuals studied. Mecodify, an open source tool that enables the extraction, codification, analysis and presentation of Twitter data, was used to retrieve the tweets (Al-Saqafl 2016). It allows researchers to retrieve specific Twitter results, for example, tweets containing images with varied timelines. It provides a set of filters, which makes it simpler to inspect data thoroughly and focus on different segments of interest, for example, the most popular images and how they were used (Al-Saqafl 2016: 10-14). The initial search that included the three hashtags was conducted within the periods indicated in Table 1, as this was the period that the hashtags trended on Kenyan Twitter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hashtag</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Total no of Tweets</th>
<th>Tweets with still visuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#CongratulationsGovernor</td>
<td>1st – 30th November 2018</td>
<td>1258</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#MhesniimiwaFisi [Hyena MPs]</td>
<td>13th November to 15th December 2018</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#MrPresidentTumechoka (Mr President we are tired)</td>
<td>1st February to 15th March 2019</td>
<td>5933</td>
<td>1088</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Hashtag time period search and results of tweets with still visuals (author’s illustration)

Mecodify was further used to pull up a predefined number (default is 100) of tweet IDs that had a visual and were retweeted the most to develop a manageable sample for the qualitative analysis of the three hashtags. Neumayer and Rossi (2018), and Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017) argue that analysing the top retweeted visuals used in protests helps to identify which visual typologies captivated the protestors. It gives a sense of what the Twitter users prioritized and helps to filter out different sides of a conflictual protest by drawing attention to the dominant conversations. The data from Mecodify was then transferred to three separate Microsoft Excel tables for each of the hashtags. This was done to provide structure and allow for an initial appraisal of the texts, images and patterns. Recurring images which depicted similar visuals and similar text from previous tweets were collected and analysed only once. Relevant tweets that were not fully published in English but featured Kiswahili (the second official language in Kenya) were paraphrased into English for ease of codification and analysis.

An open-coding approach, i.e., examining the data and labelling related phenomena (Strauss & Corbin 1998), was used for the initial categorisation of data to determine relevant and irrelevant tweets. Focusing only on the visuals and captions, all tweets were preliminarily assessed for relevance to see whether they included words or visuals that clearly related to or alluded to
the protest under the relevant hashtag. Those that did not fit the criteria were coded as irrelevant, which meant no further analysis was necessary. The results of the analysis are displayed in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hashtag</th>
<th>Relevant Tweets</th>
<th>Irrelevant Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#Mheshimwafisi</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#CongratulationsGovernor</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#MwPresidentTumehoka</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Results of the relevant and irrelevant tweets from three hashtags (author’s illustration)

The next step involved identifying the different types of visuals used in the relevant tweets. A total of 10 main content categories were identified (see table 3). A full list is featured in the findings. The next step was to identify the different issues raised by the different visuals. I first developed an initial coding frame to classify, organise and summarise my raw data based on my research question and literature with a relevant sample of 203 tweets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMAGE TYPE</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document</td>
<td>Visual is a written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence.</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="Document Example" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial Cartoon</td>
<td>An illustration or graphic mainly with caricatures of personalities containing a political or social message.</td>
<td><img src="image.png" alt="Editorial Cartoon Example" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: An example of visuals identified within the tweets (author’s illustration)

I then used this coding frame to code at least half of my data. I split the sample in two for intra-coder reliability. I coded the first sample of 50 and the next sample of 50 after two weeks. The
results from both instances of coding were consistent, indicating that agreement was sufficient for all variables. New codes that recurred were also noted and utilised to come up with a revised coding frame for issues identified within the tweets. This process led to the identification of 12 main issues, as shown in table 4. The revised code was then applied to my full sample of relevant tweets; some tweets were coded for more than one issue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>CODE DEFINITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Anger</td>
<td>Tweet contains an expression of vexation, disapproval or criticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Call to Action</td>
<td>Tweet alludes to or states an action or order either towards a leader or other users, with the aim of dealing or addressing a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Condemnation</td>
<td>Tweet expresses direct censure or blame towards a leader or other individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Frustration</td>
<td>Tweet alludes to feelings of defeat at being unable to change a situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Humor</td>
<td>Tweet contains a joke or a humorous opinion related to the hashtag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Information</td>
<td>Tweet contains information to notify or update other users about the situation or give background information or sharing facts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Mockery</td>
<td>Tweet contains use of sarcasm or disparaging messages targeted toward the leader in an expression of disapproval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Praise</td>
<td>Tweet shows genuine appreciation towards a leader and their performance by giving examples of what they believe is good work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Question</td>
<td>Tweet poses a direct query to either a leader or to other users.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Recommendation</td>
<td>Tweet is an open-ended post with suggestions on possible solutions or nomination of different individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Resignation</td>
<td>Tweet expresses feelings of acceptance of being unable to change the circumstances of an unwanted situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Threat</td>
<td>Tweet alludes to an intention to cause harm or damage towards a leader due to their actions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: The 12 main issues identified in the tweets (author’s illustration)
5. Findings

The primary objective of this study was to identify how KOT use visuals as a form of political protest. This section begins by presenting general data from the three hashtags as they relate to the research questions. Presentation of the findings is mainly done by using tables and diagrams.

RQ1: What types of visuals are used in the hashtags this research examines and what are the patterns/differences that emerge?

Memes formed the bulk of visuals preferred (78 % of the whole coded corpus) when looking at the visuals used by KOT. Memes (Milner 2016; Mina 2019; Shifman 2014) in this study are understood under the combined definition of being personal expressions which form units of popular culture that are appropriated by internet users as forms of persuasion or political advocacy. Memes are the street art of the social web, as they are diverse, expressive and complex, and exist in various political spaces. After memes, the most popular visuals were newspaper and Google screenshots, followed by editorial cartoons. Conversely, TV and Facebook screenshots were used least. Table 5 shows the frequencies of the different visuals used by KOT. That most of the visuals were memes could be attributed to the fact that memes allow for a variation in the presentation of information and also help navigate the Twitter limit of 280 characters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VISUAL TYPE</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document</td>
<td>Visual is a written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial Cartoon</td>
<td>An illustration or graphic mainly with caricatures of personalities containing a political or social message.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Screenshot</td>
<td>Visual is a screen grab from Facebook.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Screenshot</td>
<td>Visual is a screen grab of content from Google.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List Screenshot</td>
<td>Visual is a screen grab of a list of particular information.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meme</td>
<td>Visual, textual or a combination of both for the purpose of addressing existing issues.</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper Screenshot</td>
<td>Visual is a screen grab from or of a newspaper article.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Screenshot</td>
<td>Visual is a screen grab of a TV report.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Screenshot</td>
<td>Visual is a screen grab off Twitter.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User photo</td>
<td>Visual shared originated from the user.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Frequencies of the different visuals used by KOT (author's illustration)

Most of the memes used were developed from news stories or related directly to the leader mentioned in the tweet, as demonstrated by figure 1, which shows a meme that is made up of
a series of newspaper covers detailing cases of graft and another of a governor accused of using public funds for his own ends.

Figure 1: Example of memes used by #KOT under #MrPresidentTumechoka and #CongratulationsGovernor (author's illustration)

The fact that newspaper screenshots were the second most popular visual is a possible indication of where most users get their news. #KOT also use a combination of English and Kiswahili, the two official languages in the country, to express themselves. This was probably done to be more inclusive and open up the protests to Kenyans across the board. Additionally, #KOT found and tagged any of the politicians mentioned within the tweets; this may have been a way to give them an opportunity to address the allegations made against them directly. Interestingly, under #MrPresidentTumechoka as opposed to #MheshimiwaFisi and #CongratulationsGovernor, #KOT used visuals that avoided personal attacks of the president, unlike the other two, where they pointed out personal scandals that involved the different leaders. #MrPresidentTumechoka focused mainly on memes and newspaper screenshots highlighting reports of graft within the government. Most of the visuals used in #MweshimiwaFisi had a representation of a hyena. One type featured memes of different members of parliament (MPs) with half of their faces featuring the muzzle of a hyena or an editorial cartoon featuring a hyena. Figure 2 shows some examples of this.
RQ2: What do the representations identified in the analysis of the visuals reveal about how KOT use them as a form of political protest?

When accessing what protest strategies are present in the visuals #KOT used, the most coded issues across the three hashtags suggest that users often turn to the use of mockery, condemnation and humour when raising issues targeting their leaders. On the contrary, sentiments expressing anger or frustration or those carrying threats or recommendations seem less dominant. Conversely, although humour and mockery are a large part of how users deliver their disdain or appreciation, they are always careful to base their tweets on facts from a news item as a way of validating what they say. Of the three hashtags, #KOT had a call to action that related to a collective action in the form of a planned demonstration only in #MrPresidentTumehoka. The #KOT shared a document (figure 3) detailing a plan to have a 100,000-man peaceful demonstration on the streets of Nairobi against the rising graft cases in the country.
Table 6: An overview of the issues raised within the coded tweets (author’s illustration)

Table 6 shows an overview of the issues raised within the tweets coded.

Figure 3: A tweet containing a visual of a document notifying the public of a planned demonstration under #MrPresidentTumechoka (author’s illustration)
6. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to identify how KOT use visuals as a form of political protest. All the hashtags in this study were context bound, similar to other studies on how #KOT formulate hashtags and use technology to challenge different narratives and direct public debate on national issues (Adeiza & Howard 2016; Kaigwa 2017; Munuku 2019; Nothias & Cheruiyot 2019; Tully & Ekdale 2014). It also confirmed how Twitter acts as an important channel of communication between individuals and the government when addressing issues of public interest (Kaigwa 2017). #MrPresidentTumechoka occurred as a result of an official report that uncovered $200m had been spent on the construction of a dam that did not exist. #CongratulationsGovernor was also based on a report revealing that governors were asking for more funds despite prior misappropriation and underutilisation of resources. Lastly, #MheshimiwaFisi was fuelled by the news that Kenya’s MPs had secretly tabled a bill in parliament that would see them provided with more perks outside of their pre-existing hefty salaries (BBC Swahili 2019; CapitalFm 2018; Kimuyu2018; Nairobi News 2018).

Twitter served as a public space in which #KOT could easily connect with other citizens who shared their concerns and leaders who they wanted to address in real time while in different locations. The #KOT were drawn together purely by their interest in the three different hashtags. This is seen by how quickly the hashtags started trending as soon as news of the reports reached the public. This study argues that scholars should understand this rallying together under Bennett & Segerberg’s (2012) crowd-enabled connective action, which is characterised by groups that are largely without lead actors and dominated by personal action frames. These spontaneous groups use social media platforms such as Twitter because they allow for a speed of mobilization and the flexibility regarding how the public can be part of various forums discussing different issues. They join in an action and reach out to others through sharing their own views using words and visuals (Bennett & Segerberg 2012: 744-756).

When looking at the typology of protests employed by #KOT across all three hashtags, it is recognised that mockery, condemnation and humour dominate their discussions, lending credence to Ekdale & Tully's (2014) study, which identified Twitter hashtags as spaces of leisure and development in Kenya. Their findings that Kenyans used Twitter to unite against perceived government corruption and share jokes is also observed in this study, as all three hashtags were targeted towards government officials at different levels of government. Notably, even though they all addressed different officials, the issues highlighted in the visuals point mainly to corruption, as illustrated by figure 4 from the #MrPresidentTumechoka and #MheshimiwaFisi. Regarding understanding the visuals used across the three hashtags, #KOT users were careful
about ensuring that all the visuals shared were relatable to the Kenyan audience, paying credence to Mina (2019) and Shifman’s (2014) observations that most visuals used in protests tend to be imbued by the user’s own cultural experience and, in this way, they borrow or draw from pre-existing attitudes and values, while simultaneously helping to affirm political beliefs and identities. The #KOT relied on other users being able to make connections between the visuals shared and the message being passed across, despite most of it being witty.

An example is shared from the #CongratulationsGovernor hashtag in figure 5. Here, the user shares a meme of the Mombasa governor labelled as a tourist with visa stamps across his chest. The caption advised the governor to keep crisscrossing the globe while his county lost its former tourism glory. In order to understand the travel reference in the meme, the user has to be aware not only of the governor’s numerous trips outside the country but of the symbolism of visa stamps as a metaphor for travel. Under the hashtag #MheshimiwaFisi, which loosely translates to “Honourable Hyena” or “Hyena MP”, #KOT relies on the public’s understanding of the hyena, an animal known for its greed, as it relates to Kenyan MPs. These visuals, which form part of a collectively held cultural and historic knowledge, can bring out powerful emotions and elicit action or reaction. Equally, they help to divulge how #KOT use visual messages to convey concise descriptions of the country’s political landscape, as they allow them to be more informative and creative (Mina 2019; Mukhongo 2014).
Huntington’s (2017) argument that visuals and particularly memes are easy to overlook in media use and politics might have informed the decision by #KOT users to mainly employ the use of humour and memes to articulate their issues. This is because they afforded them a level of protection against punitive government action. This is similar to what Nyabola (2018) and Kaigwa (2018) observed, which is that mockery and humour have always been part of political practice in Kenya. They allow the citizens to use wit to highlight sensitive issues or condemn without being seen to overtly challenge the current government. However, it is important to note that sometimes what is presented as humour could also double up as bullying, which occasionally deteriorates to threats of physical harm and hate. Figure 6 illustrates this from the #MheshimiwaFisi hashtag, where the user shares a picture of parliament in session and wants the terrorist group Al-shabaab to blow up the building with the MPs inside.
7. Limitations of the study and further research

This study was by no means exhaustive regarding the issue of how KOT use visuals as a form of political protest, as it only analysed this issue based on the 100 most retweeted tweets with visuals, as opposed to all the tweets featured in the three different hashtags. The content analysis focused on a section of tweets that were published over a period of a month each. However, an analysis over a longer period of time may have divulged more information on other visuals that #KOT use in political protest. While the approach used proved to be suitable for this research project, the research design has some limitations, for example, in terms of the non-generalizability of results. This study and its results are restricted to KOT who were part of the three different online protests and, thus, cannot be considered representative of national, regional or international practice.

The limitations of the study presented above could be addressed in future research by broadening the scope of the analysis to include the key voices that are most visible and influential in shaping the discourse within the three hashtags. As this study was limited to Kenya, it would be interesting to do a cross-cultural study on how visuals are used in Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa and Nigeria, where the use of visuals in online political protests are also popular. With the understanding that control of content is not the same as control of interpretation, a survey to study the impact of visuals in communicating political satire could be done with KOT. It would make a great contribution to understanding how the audience perceives the content of images and memes produced and if this content has any influence on their political choices.

8. Conclusions

Trending topics catch the attention of KOT. Some of these topics have gone on to legitimize #KOT for the world, their leaders and themselves based on the outcomes (Kaigwa 2017: 191). Most online protests, which tend to die out within 48 hours, are seen to have little impact as they do not translate into public protests. Even though these protests are generally more national than international, they are equally important, because by studying them they provide great insights into the underlying issues that eventually lead to collective action. Additionally, some commonalities of protest might also be realised when situated alongside other national protests across the globe (Mina 2019; Nyabola 2018).

A few studies have only recently begun looking at the use of new visuals, such as memes, as a form of political participation (Milner 2016; Mina 2019; Shifman 2014). These studies have focused on Europe and North and South America and not so much on the African continent.
This study sought to counter this research bias by looking at how KOT use visuals as a form of political protest. It contributes to the growing literature that studies the relationships between new communication technologies and connective action. Firstly, the study reveals how social media platforms, in this case Twitter, enable citizens to make quick connections, have access to more information and gain the ability to interact directly with those in the political system (Nyabola 2018). Secondly, it brings to the fore how #KOT use visuals as arguments and proof of their reality and as a way to unite and highlight instances of government corruption and incompetence. In this study, #KOT mainly expressed their opinions in the form of mockery, condemnation and humour. Additionally, the visuals shared and distributed act as part of historical memory, and are useful for future protests that might lead to collective action (Mina 2019). Finally, even though this study is by no means exhaustive on the issue of how KOT use visuals as a form of political protest, it is still invaluable and a great start towards understanding how the use of visuals are deliberate actions to share different perspectives in a cultural discourse.

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