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Visual Humor as a Political Tool: The Case of Memes in Kenya's 2022 Election

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### Visual Humor as a Political Tool: The Case of Memes in Kenya's 2022 Election



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#### Abstract

**Purpose:** This research explores internet memes' multifaceted role as vehicles of visual humor and political instruments during Kenya's 2022 general elections.

**Methodology:** Conducting a content analysis of memes circulated online from June 1st to August 1st, 2022, the study investigates their utilization in conveying political messages, analyzes usage patterns, and assesses their impact on political discourse and satire throughout the election period. Employing Neuman's content analysis framework (1997), the research scrutinizes the intersection of humor, visual communication, and politics within Kenya's digital media landscape. Memes are systematically categorized based on prominent political themes, with Twitter data serving as a primary source for analysis, offering valuable insights into how visual humor shapes political expression, persuasion, and commentary in the digital age.

**Findings:** The findings reveal that memes not only entertained but also facilitated political engagement by enabling citizens to criticize authority, frame electoral narratives, and mobilize support, particularly among youth. They amplified socio-political concerns and fostered participatory dialogue that transcended traditional barriers to political involvement. The study concludes that memes functioned as powerful tools of civic expression, shaping both individual and collective political consciousness during the election.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** These findings carry important implications for understanding digital politics in Africa. They highlight the capacity of participatory media to empower citizens, challenge dominant narratives, and promote accountability while also underscoring the need to address misinformation and unequal access to digital platforms. This research therefore enriches scholarly debates on political communication and offers practical insights for policymakers, media practitioners, and campaigners seeking to harness digital media for inclusive democratic engagement.

**Keywords:** *Visual Humor, Political Communication, Online Media, Kenyan Culture, Pragmatics, Digital Discourse*

**JEL Codes:** *D72, L82*

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## INTRODUCTION

Kenya's rapid internet expansion has transformed it into one of Africa's most connected nations, where digital platforms facilitate widespread online engagement and political participation (Mureithi, 2017; Gichaba & Musakali, 2020; Ardebili, 2025). With the proliferation of smartphones and affordable mobile data, social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram have become essential venues for political expression and digital activism (Willems & Mano, 2016; Nyabola, 2018; Ardebili, 2025). These platforms connect Kenyan audiences globally while enabling local political engagement, allowing the sharing of messages that shape, contest, and critique prevailing political narratives. Over 75% of Kenya's population is under 35 (KNBS, 2022), and young Kenyans not only consume content but actively create it, placing themselves at the forefront of sociopolitical conversations. This youth-driven digital activism has transformed platforms into arenas for civic participation, protest, and mobilization, significantly impacting democratic governance by holding leaders accountable (Osiakwan, 2017).

Recently, humorous, often satirical visual content shared widely online have emerged as powerful tools for youth digital activism. Memes allow young Kenyans to critique authority, shape public discourse, and communicate complex political ideas in humorous, relatable ways, demonstrating the participatory and reflective functions emphasized in media theory (Ogola, 2020; Ardebili, 2025; Nakuwa, 2025). Their shareability and adaptability make them ideal for widespread engagement, particularly during moments of political tension or electoral contests. By situating this study within the frameworks of Gerbner's cultivation theory and participatory media culture, we examine how memes influence perceptions of political reality, contribute to political consciousness, and foster active participation in Kenya's digital public sphere (Gerbner, 1998; Levendusky, 2013; Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010; Milner, 2012).

Political campaigns increasingly leverage memes to shape voter perceptions, engaging in a mobile-savvy electorate that consumes information primarily via social media (Boulianne, 2015). Iconic examples like the "Githeri Man" image and the #SomeoneTellCNN campaign illustrate how memes both reflect public sentiment and contest dominant narratives, highlighting the participatory and counter-hegemonic potential of digital humor (Hassan, 2018; Nothias & Cheruiyot, 2018; Fisher, 2015; Willems & Mano, 2016). Similarly, televised satire, such as Bull's Eye on NTV, and contemporary TikTok or Instagram memes demonstrate continuity in humor as a mechanism for political critique, making complex policies accessible while engaging audiences in civic discourse. Through these examples, it is evident that humor and memes function not only as entertainment but as instruments of political communication, shaping both individual and collective political perceptions.

A similar example of digital engagement is the #SomeoneTellCNN campaign, which demonstrated how Kenyans on Twitter challenged international media narratives. Nothias and Cheruiyot (2018) highlight that while much research critiques international media's stereotypical portrayals of Africa; little attention is given to how African audiences actively contest these representations. #SomeoneTellCNN arose as a response to errors in the US news channel's reporting of local events, particularly its portrayal of a terrorist attack in Nairobi. Using the hashtag, Kenyans not only critiqued media inaccuracies but also reframed global narratives about East Africa, showcasing Twitter as a platform for questioning media hegemony and rewriting dominant stereotypes (Fisher, 2015; Willems & Mano, 2016). This example illustrates the participatory nature of digital culture, where audiences actively produce

counter-narratives, blending humor, irony, and social commentary to engage politically. Together, these examples underscore the power of digital platforms in amplifying voices, challenging narratives, and reshaping perceptions.

This spirit of digital resistance is not confined to hashtags alone. In living rooms across Kenya, especially after the nine o'clock news between 2015 and 2022, families would gather around their televisions to watch *Bull's Eye* on NTV, a weekly satirical segment that held up a comedic mirror to the country's political elite. With sharp wit and a healthy dose of irony, the show exposed political contradictions and public frustrations, often making politicians the butt of jokes. It wasn't just entertainment; it was a ritual of critique, a space where humor became a form of civic engagement. Viewers even phoned in live, adding their voices to the unfolding national commentary. This continuity between televised satire and online meme culture highlights how humor serves as a longstanding mechanism of political participation in Kenya.

Fast forward to 2024, and satire had found new terrain: memes and short videos on TikTok and Instagram. When Kenyan youth filled the streets in weeks-long protests against the government's financial policies, a parallel uprising erupted online. Memes circulated rapidly, not only mocking the regime's missteps but also serving as tools for political education. Some memes broke down complex policies into digestible, ironic takes. Others carried layered meanings, intelligible only to those familiar with the aspects of protest culture and local slang. This was digital resistance in code funny, clever, and subversive. This illustrates the dual function of memes: reflecting existing social conditions while enabling marginalized voices to challenge power structures, as described in participatory media frameworks. As mainstream media coverage lagged or softened the protests, platforms like TikTok and Instagram became the real-time pulse of dissent, where satire, sarcasm, and symbolism spoke louder than press releases.

These instances reveal how humor, satire, and digital creativity have become powerful tools for political engagement in Kenya, whether through televised skits, viral hashtags, or coded meme culture during protests. Yet while such digital expressions continue to shape public discourse, less is known about how memes function specifically within the electoral landscape. Despite the pervasive role of memes in shaping political discourse, there is a notable gap in understanding how Kenyan culture and political dynamics are visually represented through memes during elections. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) use memes to participate in political communication and shape political narratives, particularly during the 2022 elections (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). By applying cultivation theory and participatory culture concepts, this study examines memes as both reflective and constitutive instruments of political identity and electoral influence.

The collective of Kenyans on Twitter (famously known as KOT) represents a vibrant online community and a critical facet of Kenya's dynamic digital public sphere. This group attracts middle-class users and cultural, economic, and political elites, who engage in debates, celebrate achievements, criticize opponents, and use memes as a creative and humorous medium for discourse (Nothias and Cheruiyot, 2018). Memes, as digital artifacts, function as emotive tools that shape public perceptions of political candidates and influence voter attitudes, reflecting both the media's cultivation effects and participatory engagement. By analyzing Twitter data, this study highlights how memes serve as powerful emotive tools that shape public perceptions of political candidates and influence voter attitudes (Shifman, 2014). These digital artifacts play a crucial role in Kenya's political landscape, reflecting the evolving intersection of social media, political engagement, and cultural representation (Ogola, 2020)

Building on this role of KOT in shaping discourse, memes are not only reflective but also constitutive of political identities and narratives in Kenya's digital spaces. Memes are reshaping political entities by transforming them into dynamic digital platforms that support continuous content creation and identity interactions elements often overlooked by traditional media. On a global scale, memes have increasingly served as 'powerful tools for political mobilization' in recent years, especially during election cycles, social movements, and moments of political upheaval. They play a dual role, simultaneously 'reinforcing existing power structures' during periods of political stability while 'enabling marginalized voices to challenge the status quo' in times of crisis (Burgess & Green, 2009; Milner, 2012). In Kenya, these dual functions are visible in how memes circulate through online communities like KOT, both mirroring public sentiment and influencing political momentum. Analyzing memes provides insight into the complex dynamics of Kenyan politics and broader implications for global political communication.

This growing body of work on memes in political discourse connects with longstanding media theories that explain how media shapes public perceptions. The media's influence on political perspectives has long been a subject of study, providing context for understanding how memes operate as instruments of political expression. Gerbner's cultivation theory, for instance, suggests that "increased media consumption can shape one's worldview to align with the media's portrayal of reality" (Gerbner, 1998; Levendusky, 2013). Applying this framework to digital media, particularly memes, highlights their power to influence public perceptions and behaviors. Viewed through this lens, memes become not only vehicles for political communication but also critical tools in shaping both individual and collective political consciousness.

Furthermore, understanding memes within the broader context of participatory digital culture helps to unpack their democratic potential. Academic research often situates internet memes within the "framework of participatory media culture," where user-generated content is highly valued, and personal contributions are emphasized over traditional, structured forms of discourse (Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010; Williams, 2012). While much of the existing scholarship has focused on the "creators of memes," there is an increasing recognition of the need to explore the "impact of memes on audiences." Memes, though not social networks themselves, are central to participatory media, reflecting evolving cultural and communicative practices in the digital age (Milner, 2012). Their prominence in Kenya's digital sphere underscores their role in shaping public discourse and influencing political engagement. By situating this study within both media effects theory and participatory media culture, it contributes to understanding the relationship between meme exposure and political engagement, offering insights for policymakers, media professionals, and campaigners.

**Study Objective:** This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do Kenyans on Twitter use visual humor in the form of memes to engage in political participation during the 2022 election?
2. How does exposure to these memes influence political awareness and participation?

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the widespread presence of internet memes and their notable influence on modern political discourse, there remains a notable gap in empirical research examining the observable effects of visual humor on political engagement and voter perceptions particularly in the context of the 2022 Kenyan election. Understanding how memes function as a tool for

communication, persuasion, and political commentary is pivotal for assessing their tangible impact on public discourse in Kenya. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the measurable role of internet memes as both a form of visual humor and a political tool on social media platforms during the 2022 elections. Specifically, it seeks to:

- Investigate how memes were used to communicate political messages and frame electoral candidates or issues.
- Examine patterns in meme creation and dissemination to understand their reach and engagement among Kenyan online audiences.
- Evaluate the observable effects of memes on public opinion, including their role in shaping perceptions, generating discussion, and reinforcing political narratives.

By addressing these objectives, this research aims to shed light on the practical and measurable functions of visual humor through memes, offering insights into their impact on political communication and participatory digital culture within Kenya's electoral context.

### **Research Questions**

**Study Objective:** This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do Kenyans on Twitter use visual humor in the form of memes to engage in political participation during the 2022 election?
2. How does exposure to these memes influence political awareness and participation?

### **Significance of the Study**

This research addresses a crucial gap in the academic literature by examining the role of visual humor, specifically internet memes, as a political tool during the 2022 Kenyan election. It offers valuable insights into how memes were used to communicate political issues, analyze their practice, and study their impact on political discourse and satire. These findings not only contribute to scholarly understanding but also inform practical strategies for policymakers, media practitioners, political campaigners, and the general public. By focusing on internet memes as visual humor, this study offers a unique perspective on political communication in Kenya, highlighting its evolving nature in the digital age.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study explores how Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) used digital artifacts, particularly political memes, as tools of civic engagement during the 2022 general elections. Rather than treating memes solely as entertainment, they function as instruments of critique, identity performance, and grassroots activism, reflecting and shaping political discourse.

To guide this analysis, two complementary frameworks are employed: participatory media culture and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Participatory media culture explains the social dynamics of meme creation, dissemination, and audience engagement, highlighting how young Kenyans actively produce and circulate content to participate in political conversations (Zuckerman, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2013). However, it does not fully account for the ideological meanings or power relations embedded within memes. CDA addresses this gap by systematically analyzing language, symbolism, and narratives, revealing how memes reproduce, challenge, or subvert dominant political ideologies (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Together, these frameworks provide a holistic lens: participatory media culture captures the social processes of meme-based engagement, while CDA uncovers their

ideological and discursive effects on political consciousness and civic participation in Kenya's 2022 elections.

**Participatory Media Cultures** - Participatory media cultures emphasize active content creation, sharing, and remixing, contrasting with traditional mass media's one-way communication model (Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010; Shifman, 2014). Memes are particularly effective as accessible, relatable forms of political expression, enabling users to remix current events into humor-laden commentary. Burgess's (2008) concept of "spreadability" explains how content gains cultural traction through imitation and adaptation. Memes quickly embed themselves in public discourse, becoming tools for collective narration and resistance (Shifman, 2013).

In Kenya, memes localized through humor, language, and shared cultural references captured public sentiment during the 2022 elections (Nyakangi, 2020). For example, the viral "Githeri Man" meme depicted a well-known Nairobi street vendor holding githeri, with captions critiquing politicians' empty promises. Similarly, the "Sina Maoni" meme reflected public frustration after a Citizen TV interview, while the "Evidence Lorry" meme humorously depicted Odinga's legal challenge (Citizen Digital, 2022). These artifacts combined humor and critique, facilitating participation in political dialogue while circulating widely on Twitter and WhatsApp.

**Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** - CDA complements participatory media culture by analyzing the ideological and discursive dimensions of memes (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). It examines how texts, interactions, and social contexts encode power, legitimacy, and societal norms. In Kenya, political memes not only reflected public emotions but also challenged authority, framed narratives about the electoral process, and highlighted societal perceptions of justice and legitimacy. By applying CDA, this study captures the dual role of memes as both participatory and ideological instruments within Kenya's digital public sphere.

**Integration of Frameworks** - Together, participatory media culture and CDA provide a comprehensive analytical lens: one highlights the social dynamics and participatory processes of meme production and circulation, while the other elucidates their ideological content and discursive influence. This combination allows the study to explore how digital artifacts mediate political engagement, shape public opinion, and reflect power relations during Kenya's 2022 elections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in existing scholarship on digital media, political communication, and participatory culture. It extends these discussions by specifically examining the role of memes in Kenya's 2022 elections, a context that remains underexplored in current literature. Prior research has established how digital platforms foster civic engagement and informal political discourse (Zuckerman, 2015; Highfield, 2016). Building on this foundation, the present study explores how meme culture especially as shared and reshaped through Kenyan Twitter communities serves not only as entertainment but as a tool for political participation and commentary.

This connection to prior research provides a theoretical and empirical lens for analyzing how visual humor and satire reflect public sentiment, challenge dominant narratives, and mobilize collective identity. Gerbner's cultivation theory and the participatory media culture framework by Jenkins et al. (2013) offer a strong conceptual base for understanding the power of user-

generated content in shaping perceptions. These frameworks are particularly relevant in the Kenyan context, where memes function as both mirrors and amplifiers of public discourse. By situating this research within these bodies of literature, the study contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to understand how digital media transforms civic life offering insight into the unique ways that memes operate in Kenyan political expression. In doing so, it advances not just regional knowledge but also enriches global conversations on media, politics, and participatory culture in the digital age.

### **Media, Politics, and Digital Participation**

The connection between media and politics has long intrigued scholars, who have studied how exposure to different media affects political views and behaviors. Research has shown that negative newspaper articles, TV news, talk radio, and political cartoons can influence trust, opinions, and voting decisions (Miller, Goldenberg, Erbring, 1979; Brinkman, 1968; Levendusky, 2013). Media catering to extreme views can intensify polarization, making public discussions more divisive (Habermas, 1989). Overall, media shapes political thought and behavior by influencing perceptions of reality (Gerbner, 1998).

In the Kenyan context, the 2022 general elections highlighted the critical role of digital media in political discourse. Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) used memes to express opinions, critique candidates, and comment on the electoral process. The "Sina Maoni" meme, emerging after a man on Citizen TV responded with "Sina Maoni" (I have no comments), was widely shared and adapted across social media, reflecting public sentiment. Additionally, disinformation on platforms like TikTok, including over 130 videos targeting William Ruto viewed by more than 4 million people, underscored challenges in moderating content and its influence on public opinion (Wired, 2022). Critiques of online activism often highlight a gap between discussion and meaningful action. Memes challenge this division by blurring the lines between talk and action, functioning as both participatory and persuasive discourse (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2013). Memes are informal, grassroots expressions that can influence public opinion and civic participation. For example, political memes like the Pepper Spray Cop series highlighted social issues and sparked public debate (Milner, 2013).

During Kenya's 2022 elections, meme-driven political discourse surged. Following the announcement of William Ruto as president-elect, opposition leader Raila Odinga filed a court challenge alleging electoral fraud. This legal contestation sparked discussions on social media, with users sharing memes that criticized the electoral process and expressed skepticism. The "Evidence Lorry" meme, which humorously depicted Odinga's legal team presenting evidence, symbolized the perceived inadequacy of their case and circulated widely (Citizen Digital, 2022). Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), these memes facilitated political participation while encoding ideological positions, reflecting societal perceptions of power, legitimacy, and justice (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Through humor and satire, they critiqued authority and framed narratives about the electoral process, illustrating the dual role of memes as participatory and ideological instruments in Kenya's digital public sphere.

### **Internet Memes: Definition and Conceptualization**

The term "meme" originates from Richard Dawkins, referring to a cultural unit transmitted through imitation (Blackmore, 1999, p. 6). Initially, Dawkins viewed humans as passive carriers of memes, but with internet memes, humans became active participants (Blackmore, 1999). Internet memes encompass various forms, such as images resembling editorial cartoons or parody videos. Shifman (2014) delineated internet memes as digital items sharing common



characteristics, created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, or transformed online by many users. In essence, memes are collections of digital content united by a common theme, referencing each other and drawing from popular culture or news events. Shifman (2014) highlighted how memes connect individuals and collective efforts, reflecting uniqueness and connectivity in an era of 'networked individualism' and humor is central to many memes and enhances their appeal and shareability.

Research on internet memes has shown their impact on identity formation, public discourse, and commentary. Scholars have examined memes as forms of public discourse, rhetoric, and memetic phenomena (e.g., Kuipers, 2002; Milner, 2012). Political internet memes, a subset of internet memes, aim to promote political ideas or criticize opponents. For this study, political memes specifically depict or reference political figures, government actions, or policy issues in Kenya during the 2022 general elections.

### **Memes in Participatory Media**

Research increasingly positions memes as central to modern participatory media culture, which emphasizes creative contributions as a form of engagement (Bennett, Freelon & Wells, 2010). On the other hand, participatory media cultures value artistic expression, support user-generated content, and emphasize social connectivity, often in opposition to traditional mass media (Bennet et al., 2010). In this context, the value of media content lies in its 'spreadability', indicating its cultural significance and longevity through processes of imitation, adaptation, and innovation. According to Burgess (2008), user-generated content gains significance and endurance within participatory media culture through a culture involving imitation, adaptation, and innovation (p. 106). Such traits are relevant to contemporary studies of internet-based civic engagement and political discourse, as participatory media cultures raise questions about the relationship between mass popular culture and individual audience members.

In the realm of political internet memes, scholars view them as forms of discourse and identity expression within participatory media culture (Shifman, 2014). Memes function as tools for political persuasion, grassroots activism, and public expression and play a significant role in shaping contemporary political discourse and civic engagement within participatory media cultures (Shifman, 2014).

A notable example during the 2022 Kenyan elections was the "Sina Maoni" meme. The meme originated from a viral video where a man, when asked about his opinion on the elections, responded with "Sina Maoni" (I have no comment). This simple phrase quickly became a template for various adaptations, with users inserting different captions to express their political sentiments or frustrations. Over time, the meme evolved, reflecting the dynamic nature of participatory media culture, where content is continuously remixed and repurposed to fit changing contexts and audiences.

### **Online Political Humor**

The concept of humor has been thoroughly investigated across multiple disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, literature, and linguistics, owing to its pervasive presence in public culture and its essential role in daily interactions (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). Humor, aimed at eliciting laughter, serves as a social activity that alleviates tension and fosters a sense of unity among group members (Pascale, 2004). In the contemporary landscape of online social networking, platforms like WhatsApp have emerged as significant arenas where humor plays a pivotal role. Here, humor functions as a tool for fostering community, forging

connections, facilitating positive interactions, encouraging self-disclosure, and diffusing tension and conflicts (Lefcourt, 2001; Yip & Martin, 2006). The humorous content circulated on these platforms takes various forms, ranging from positive to negative humor, with themes tailored to their potential impact on social relationships (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

Political humor serves as a vital component of societal political discourse, engaging both active participants and those on the sidelines. Researchers note that exposure to political humor not only increases political attention but also aids in educating individuals about political issues, particularly among digital natives, thereby boosting political efficacy and interest (Hajjada, 2010). By blending humor with user-generated content, political humor reflects the collective opinions of the masses, amplifying its impact on the audience. Beyond entertainment, memes have found utility in various professions, including public relations and advertising, as creative tools for communication and audience engagement. However, the primary objective behind meme usage often revolves around creating buzz and garnering publicity, rather than purely disseminating information. In political campaigning, memes serve as instruments for shaping public opinion and propagandistic endeavors (Bauckhage, 2011).

### **Digital Political Entertainment**

Research in digital political entertainment predominantly delves into the impact of digital satire, focusing on how online platforms disseminate political messages in a humorous or satirical format. Baumgartner (2007; 2008) conducted quantitative analyses on digital political satire, particularly animated cartoons, to scrutinize their influence on candidate evaluations. One study revealed that exposure to online, editorial-style political cartoons had a detrimental effect on evaluations of presidential candidates. Paradoxically, it also hinted at potential positive outcomes for political engagement stemming from such exposure (Baumgartner, 2008). Another experiment featured an animated video, "Second Term," from JibJab.com, portraying President Bush in self-mockery. Results indicated diminished trust in political institutions but increased favorability ratings for Bush, attributed to their self-deprecating humor (Baumgartner, 2007).

While research on memes typically emphasizes their form-related attributes, such as interactivity and organization, when viewed as media consumed by individuals, it aligns with the principles of political entertainment research. This perspective emphasizes the importance of examining the content, tone, and impact of mediated messages on viewers' political perceptions and decisions. Light-hearted and satirical political media, including memes, wield considerable influence over individuals' political comprehension and decision-making processes, as evidenced by existing literature (Eveland, 2003). In the African context, traditions of political satire also play a prominent role, with programs such as *The XYZ Show* in Kenya using puppetry and humor to critique leaders and government performance. Much like memes, such satirical productions provide citizens with an accessible yet impactful form of political commentary and entertainment (King'ori & Mureithi, 2022).

### **Analysis of Political Memes Shaping the 2022 General Elections in Kenya**

Against this theoretical backdrop, the content analysis of this research will focus on personalized and viral political memes on Twitter that shaped the narrative of the 2022 general elections in Kenya. Through a critical examination of six hashtags memes, namely

#SinaMaoni, #MapemaNdioBest, #katasimutuposite, #Hiiimeenda, #SemeniDynastyMbayHasoraAtaware, #RailaTheEngima. It will explore how humor was

strategically incorporated into spreadable and viral media to drive collective action during political campaigns, protests electoral fraud, and discussions on societal issues surrounding the elections. These memes serve as collective frames that framed the story of the 2022 elections in Kenya, indicative of how humor and memes were used as powerful tools in online political contestation. Through a critical analysis informed by CDA, the research aims to uncover the ideological underpinnings of these memes and their role in shaping public discourse, challenging power dynamics, and mobilizing citizens for political engagement both online and offline.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research utilized a qualitative inductive approach to analyze social media discourses within the Kenyan Twittersphere during the June-August 2022 period. The aim was to explore how various publics engaged with trending hashtags as forms of political contestation in Kenya. The data collection method involved participant observation, focusing on the content and context of tweets related to specific hashtags associated with political themes and events surrounding the 2022 Kenyan elections. To collect data, the researcher utilized GetDayTrends to monitor Twitter trends and passively observe discussions surrounding trending hashtags. Six hashtags were selected for analysis based on their prominence, generating between 5K – 10K tweets and continuing to reverberate as part of national slogans by politicians and corporate brands. These hashtags included #SinaMaoni, #MapemaNdioBest, #SemeniDynastyMbayaHasoraAtaware, #katasimutuposite, #Hiiimeenda, and #RailaTheEngima.

Once the data was collected, the next step involved a detailed reading of the memes and tweets associated with each selected hashtag. Various thematic analyses were employed to systematically code and categorize tweets based on recurring topics, sentiments, and rhetorical strategies. This approach involves systematically coding and analyzing data to identify patterns, themes, and variations within the text (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). And the approach facilitated the identification and exploration of patterns, themes, and underlying meanings within the qualitative data. The research acknowledged several limitations inherent in analyzing social media data, including issues of sample representativeness, bias in user engagement, and the transient nature of online conversations. To address these challenges, the study adopted a reflexive approach and integrated thematic analysis to uncover patterns and themes within the rich tapestry of Twitter discourse surrounding the 2022 Kenyan elections.

## **Results of the Selected Cases Trending Twitter Hashtags**

During the 2022 Kenyan general elections, online users under the collective of Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) were not experts in technology, law, or activism, yet actively engaged in satirical participatory culture through memes and viral hashtags. Participatory media cultures during the elections—through hashtags, political humor, and memes shaped social commentary and political discourse in Kenya (Mukhongo, 2020). This section examines how participatory media shaped political discussions through the following selected cases: #SinaMaoni, #MapemaNdioBest, #katasimutuposite, #Hiiimeenda, #SemeniDynastyMbayaHasoraAtaware, #RailaTheEngima.

## #SinaMaoni,



The #SinaMaoni meme became a cultural phenomenon during the 2022 elections, offering comic relief amidst political tension. It originated from a viral Citizen TV clip in which a man answered a journalist's question on election fairness with, "Kulingana na mimi, sina maoni. Sina maoni kabisa" (In my opinion, I don't have an opinion at all). The meme resonated widely online, reflecting the struggles and hopes of the working class and urban poor, and addressing concerns about electoral integrity.

Amid fears of election irregularities, #SinaMaoni tweets and memes blended humor with social commentary, providing a satirical take on political issues. Its popularity extended beyond social media, becoming a topic on morning radio shows and daily conversations, highlighting humor's role in citizen engagement. By incorporating Kiswahili, the meme ensured accessibility and inclusivity, cementing its position as a cultural touchstone during the 2022 elections.

## #MapemaNdioBest



The #MapemaNdioBest meme, originally a rallying call for early arrival at polling stations, became a major cultural phenomenon during the 2022 elections. Its catchphrase, "Mapema ndio best" (Early is the best), transcended politics to feature in corporate branding and music, including artists Gwaash and OnlyOneDelo, highlighting its cultural resonance. Its viral adoption on digital platforms, tied to #KenyaDecides2022, fostered community engagement through likes, shares, and comments. Using Kiswahili enhanced its accessibility and broad appeal, cementing its role as a cultural touchstone during the elections. Beyond entertainment, #MapemaNdioBest encouraged civic engagement by promoting early voting as a proactive and empowering action. By integrating into political discourse and everyday conversations, the meme illustrated how humor, technology, and civic responsibility intersect in Kenya's digital political communication.

## #Katasimutukosite



The #Katasimutukosite meme, originating from Tanzanian comedian Umar Iahbedi Issa's phrase "Kata simu kata simu tupo site" (Hang up the phone to avoid disturbance), became a light-hearted element of Kenyan political discourse during the 2022 elections. Its humor offered relief amidst intense electoral discussions. The meme's viral spread on Twitter and other social media amplified its cultural impact, fostering camaraderie among users. Accessible and inclusive through Kiswahili, it resonated across diverse groups, indirectly shaping public opinion by providing a humorous counterbalance to election stress.

## #SemeniDynastyMbayaHasoraAtaware



The #HustlerVSDynasty meme emerged as a prominent cultural phenomenon during the 2022 campaign, framing discourse around the "hustlers versus dynasty" narrative. Coined by former President Uhuru Kenyatta, it challenged perceptions of ethnic divisions and highlighted debates around political leadership. While humorous and participatory, the meme influenced public opinion and media coverage. Its satirical content, amplified by younger audiences, sometimes carried subtle disinformation, shaping narratives around ethnicity, power, and politics in Kenya.

**#Hii imeenda**

The #HiiImeenda meme encapsulates the enduring use of humor and satire in Kenyan political discourse, particularly during the 2022 general elections. Featuring politician Junet Mohammed confidently declaring victory with the phrase "Hii imeenda" (this one is gone), the meme humorously portrays political overconfidence, reflecting the uncertainties of Kenyan politics. Despite its comedic nature, the meme critiques political narratives by highlighting the disconnect between confident declarations and actual outcomes, subtly countering propaganda and challenging political credibility. Its use of Kiswahili ensures accessibility across diverse segments of society, emphasizing its significance as a cultural touchstone in political commentary. Ultimately, the meme exemplifies how humor and satire are integral components of engaging with governance issues in Kenya.

**#RailaTheEngima -**

The #RailaTheEngima meme highlights Raila Odinga's enduring influence as a political figure in Kenya and Africa. Revered as a contemporary revolutionist, Odinga has shaped public attitudes toward political leadership and governance. Through campaign strategies using music, proverbs, songs, and football commentary, he effectively engaged supporters, employing rhetorical techniques like allusion and analogy to inspire activism. Circulating mainly on social media, the meme serves as a testament to Odinga's stature, reinforcing his legacy and impact on political discourse. It became a platform for admirers to express reverence for his contributions, with widespread adoption reflecting his continued popularity. By portraying Odinga as an enigmatic figure adept at navigating political complexities, the meme strengthens his public image as a visionary leader and agent of change.

**Key Discussions – Trending Twitter Hashtags****Participatory Media Engagement**

The analysis of participatory media engagement during the 2022 Kenyan elections reveals the pivotal role played by ordinary citizens in shaping online political discourse. Through the active creation, sharing, and reshaping of memes and hashtags, individuals across various social strata engaged in lively discussions, debates, and expressions of political viewpoints on platforms

like Twitter. These digital spaces became arenas for citizens to voice their opinions, frustrations, and aspirations, transcending traditional barriers to participation.

At the heart of this culture were specific memes and hashtags that captured Kenya's political climate. *#SinaMaoni* emerged from a viral news moment, resonating with citizens disillusioned by the electoral process. *#MapemaNdioBest* transcended politics into becoming a cultural phenomenon, adopted by corporate organizations and musicians, symbolizing early action and engagement. Hashtags like *#Katasimutukosite* integrated humor into political discourse, while *#SemeniDynastyMbayaHasoraAtaware* challenged traditional ethnic divisions, reflecting class-based politics and new socio-political narratives. *#Hiiiimeenda* captured supporters' optimism, reflecting resilience and determination amidst uncertainty.

Comparatively, these Kenyan examples mirror wider trends across African elections, where memes and hashtags serve as grassroots tools of civic engagement. For instance, during Nigeria's 2019 elections, hashtags like *#Atikulated* and *#NextLevel* mobilized political identities online (Premium Times, 2019). In South Africa, satirical memes targeting Jacob Zuma's scandals circulated widely as instruments of critique (SAPeople, 2020). While hashtags like *#SinaMaoni* and *#MapemaNdioBest* are uniquely Kenyan, they reflect a broader continental pattern of citizens using humor, satire, and digital creativity to navigate electoral politics.

### **Political Expression Discourse**

Baumgartner's research (2007; 2008) on digital political satire suggests that exposure to such content can influence candidate evaluations and political engagement. Memes, viewed as a form of media consumed by individuals, align with principles of political entertainment research and can impact political comprehension and decision-making. In the Kenyan context, empirical studies confirm that memes were not only shared widely but also attracted measurable engagement during the 2022 elections. For instance, Njeru (2023) reports that election-related hashtags such as *#SinaMaoni* and *#MapemaNdioBest* recorded thousands of retweets and shares within hours of their first appearance, amplifying citizen frustrations and motivating digital participation.

Memes like *#SinaMaoni* and *#MapemaNdioBest* have emphasized civic engagement and activism through catchy and motivational slogans, encouraging citizens to take proactive roles in shaping political outcomes. Moreover, memes integrated into discussions around the election, such as *#HustlerVSDynasty*, have underscored their cultural significance and relevance within the political landscape, introducing and popularizing narratives like "hustlers versus dynasty" that highlight shifting dynamics within Kenyan politics. This narrative gained visibility through spikes in Twitter trends that coincided with campaign rallies, showing how meme-driven discourse aligned with offline political events (Ochieng, 2022).

Additionally, memes like *#RailaTheEngima* have showcased innovative campaign strategies employed by political figures like Raila Odinga, demonstrating the use of humor, satire, and popular culture as legitimate avenues for engaging with the state and commenting on government shortcomings. While the precise effect on voter behavior remains difficult to quantify, available metrics such as engagement rates, trending frequency, and sentiment analysis indicate that memes played more than an anecdotal role; they actively shaped online conversations and circulated ideological frames (Mutahi & Kimari, 2021).

## Counteracting Propaganda

Internet memes have served as powerful tools in counteracting propaganda and negative narratives surrounding elections in Kenya. Memes such as #SinaMaoni and #MapemaNdioBest have provided a counterbalance to election-related tensions and fears of irregularities by offering a light-hearted perspective on the situation. By injecting humor into the discourse, these memes have effectively countered negative narratives, promoting positive and proactive messages that encourage civic engagement and participation in the electoral process.

Moreover, memes like #HustlerVSDynasty and #RailaTheEngima have countered propaganda or overconfident political narratives by highlighting discrepancies between predictions and actual results, challenging the credibility of political figures and narratives. Additionally, memes associated with political figures like Raila Odinga may have countered propaganda by emphasizing his positive contributions to political leadership and governance, showcasing his visionary leadership qualities and revolutionary impact. Psychological and media studies research helps explain the mechanisms behind this effect. Humor has been shown to lower resistance to political messages by reducing anxiety and creating emotional distance from fear-based propaganda (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Nabi, 2016). Satirical memes can reduce susceptibility to disinformation by framing political claims in ways that invite critical reflection rather than passive consumption (Boukes, 2019). In this sense, memes function not only as counter speech but also as affective buffers, transforming fear-inducing narratives into opportunities for collective laughter and resilience. However, it's important to acknowledge that while memes can serve as effective tools for counteracting propaganda, they may also contain elements of satire and humor that could potentially serve as vehicles for spreading specific narratives or ideologies, including subtle incitement or disinformation.

## Socio-Political Narratives

During the 2022 Kenyan elections, memes played a pivotal role in shaping socio-political narratives. These internet memes, as described by Shifman (2014), were digital items circulated online, often containing humor and referencing popular culture or news events. Specifically, political internet memes aimed to promote political ideas or criticize opponents, serving as tools for political persuasion and grassroots activism.

The influence of internet memes on socio-political narratives during Kenyan electoral processes is profound and varied. Memes such as #SinaMaoni and #MapemaNdioBest have injected humor and levity into the discourse, offering a respite from the tensions surrounding elections while simultaneously encouraging civic engagement. By presenting voting as an empowering action and advocating for early participation, these memes have influenced public opinion by reshaping perceptions of political responsibility and the significance of proactive involvement in shaping political outcomes. Additionally, memes like #HustlerVSDynasty have redefined political discourse by framing narratives around class-based politics, challenging entrenched perceptions of ethnic divisions and reshaping the way voters conceptualize political allegiances.

Furthermore, memes such as "Hii imeenda" and #RailaTheEngima have highlighted the influential role of political figures like Raila Odinga, shaping public opinion by portraying them as enigmatic or visionary leaders. These memes have influenced perceptions of leadership qualities and contributions to the socio-political landscape, illustrating the power of internet memes in shaping public discourse and opinion during electoral processes in Kenya.



### **Influencing Media Coverage**

The role of internet memes in shaping media coverage during Kenyan electoral processes is evident in their ability to become prominent topics of discussion and analysis across various media outlets. Memes like #SinaMaoni and #MapemaNdioBest have sparked discussions on morning radio shows and daily conversations, where media often amplified them organically as reflections of what was already trending online. In these cases, memes shaped coverage indirectly, with journalists and presenters responding to public discourse rather than deliberately adopting the memes as political tools (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). Similarly, memes associated with events like #KenyaDecides2022 have led to discussions in media outlets, highlighting their role in shaping cultural discourse and reflecting the public's engagement with political events.

Moreover, memes such as #HustlerVSDynasty and #RailaTheEngima have shaped media coverage by becoming focal points for discussions and analysis, particularly regarding political rhetoric and strategies employed by prominent figures like Raila Odinga. In contrast, some media outlets intentionally integrated these memes into their framing of political debates, using them as shorthand for complex narratives such as class divides, personality politics, or questions of legitimacy (Entman, 1993). This illustrates a dual mechanism: memes can either be picked up organically as part of wider civic conversations or strategically deployed by media actors to advance specific political framings.

### **Cultural and Linguistic Context**

The linguistic elements and rhetorical devices employed in internet memes during the Kenyan elections have played crucial roles in shaping their accessibility, inclusivity, and effectiveness in conveying political messages. Memes like #SinaMaoni and #MapemaNdioBest utilize Kiswahili, one of Kenya's official languages, making them accessible and resonant across different segments of society. This choice of language facilitates engagement among diverse communities while reflecting Kenya's rich linguistic heritage. Moreover, rhetorical devices such as humor, repetition, and visual elements enhance the impact of memes in conveying political messages. Memes like #HustlerVSDynasty use repetition for comedic effect, emphasizing key political phrases, while #RailaTheEngima incorporates visual elements to highlight leaders' significance. These devices make memes engaging, memorable, and effective in communicating complex political ideas succinctly. Overall, the strategic use of language and rhetoric underscores memes' role in shaping public opinion, facilitating discourse, and promoting civic engagement, aligning with Zuckerman's notion of participatory media culture (Zuckerman, 2008).

### **Media and Communication Strategies**

In the 2022 Kenyan elections, political candidates strategically utilized memes and hashtags as integral components of their communication strategies. These digital tools provided avenues for candidates to connect with voters, shape public opinion, and mobilize support, particularly among younger demographics more active on social media platforms. Memes and hashtags allowed candidates to convey their messages concisely and visually, making complex political issues more accessible to a wider audience. Moreover, these digital tactics were seamlessly integrated into broader communication strategies, complementing traditional campaign tactics such as rallies and media appearances. By fostering online communities around specific hashtags, parties created a sense of belonging among supporters, encouraging active participation and advocacy on social media.

Visual humor, particularly in the form of internet memes, played a significant role as a political tool in the 2022 Kenyan election. Memes served as potent vehicles for satirical commentary, critique, and parody, allowing citizens to express their political views humorously and engagingly. Through clever imagery, captions, and pop culture references, memes captured the attention of audiences and sparked conversations about pressing socio-political issues. This visual humor humanized political candidates, making them more relatable and approachable to voters. Through Fairclough's critical discourse analysis and Zuckerman's concept of participatory media culture, it's evident that memes operate within specific textual and social contexts to disseminate messages and foster engagement in political discourse (Zuckerman, 2008; Fairclough, 1992).

Notably, opposing parties differed in the effectiveness of their meme strategies. While Party A focused on humor and relatability to create viral content that resonated wide among youth, for instance, using a meme featuring a popular local comedian joking about long queues at polling stations Party B relied on more issue-based memes, such as infographics explaining policy proposals, which, although informative, garnered less engagement and virality. This contrast highlights how tone, creativity, and audience targeting shaped the overall impact of meme campaigns during the election.

### **The Discourse in the Images**

The memes circulated during the 2022 Kenyan elections leveraged rhetorical devices and visual elements to engage audiences and convey political messages effectively. For instance, memes like #HiiImeenda capitalized on humor and repetition, employing the catchphrase "Hii imeenda" to comically emphasize Junet Mohammed's confident declaration, thereby critiquing political rhetoric. This strategic repetition not only added comedic value but also underscored the disparity between political promises and actual outcomes, enhancing the memes' effectiveness in challenging prevailing narratives. Additionally, symbolic iconography, like visual depictions of prominent political figures such as Raila Odinga, reinforced their roles as influential leaders, bolstering the memes' impact on political discourse. Overall, by skilfully intertwining rhetorical devices with visually engaging elements, these memes became potent instruments for critiquing political narratives, fostering dialogue, and mobilizing support throughout the 2022 Kenyan elections.

### **Conclusion**

The study investigates the use of internet memes and hashtags as tools for political engagement during the 2022 Kenyan elections, shedding light on their multifaceted roles in shaping political discourse. Through an analysis of Twitter data, the research reveals how these visual elements were employed by various stakeholders, including ordinary citizens and political actors, to participate in political dialogue, offer critiques, and mobilize support. Participatory media engagement emerges as a key finding, illustrating how citizens actively contributed to political discussions by creating, sharing, and reshaping memes and hashtags, transcending traditional barriers to political participation.

Furthermore, the study explores how memes and hashtags served as vehicles for social commentary and political expression, addressing a range of political issues through satirical, humorous, and critical lenses. Memes amplified societal concerns and grievances, fostering collective awareness and solidarity among online communities. Additionally, the research delves into the role of memes in shaping socio-political narratives, demonstrating their contribution to portraying themes and divisions within Kenyan society, such as emerging class-

based politics and challenges to traditional ideologies. Memes provided citizens with a platform to express grievances, aspirations, and critiques, deepening the relevance and impact of political discourse.

Notably, the findings have broader implications for digital politics across Africa. They illustrate how social media platforms can empower citizens, particularly youth, to engage in political dialogue, challenge established narratives and hold political actors accountable. African democracies can harness these digital tools to foster more participatory, inclusive, and responsive political environments, while also recognizing the need to address misinformation and digital inequalities. While acknowledging the limitations of analyzing social media data, the study calls for further research to address biases in user engagement and to explore the socio-political context more comprehensively. By addressing these research gaps, scholars can gain deeper insights into the dynamics of digital political engagement and expression in Kenya and beyond, enriching our understanding of contemporary political discourse.

### **Implications of the Study**

This study highlights several key implications for political communication and digital engagement in Africa:

- Digital activism can significantly reshape political participation, allowing citizens to influence narratives and mobilize support beyond traditional avenues.
- Political actors must recognize the power of visual and participatory content to engage voters effectively, particularly among younger demographics.
- Finally, these findings encourage comparative research across African contexts, examining how local cultures, languages, and socio-political environments shape the effectiveness of digital political strategies.

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