

**THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE 2024 GEN Z PROTESTS IN  
KENYAN NEWSPAPERS**

**JOY KARAMBU**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN LINGUISTICS OF THE UNIVERSITY  
OF EMBU**

**JUNE, 2026**

## ABSTRACT

This study explored the discursive construction of the 2024 Gen Z protests in Kenya's newspapers. The study was guided by the following three objectives: To investigate the discursive construction of the Gen Z protesters in the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*; To assess the discursive construction of the law enforcement officers during the Gen Z protests in the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*; To examine how the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* discursively constructed the strategies used by Gen Z during the 2024 protests. Data analysis was conducted using two complementary theoretical frameworks: Ruth Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) and Chong and Druckman's (2007) Framing Theory. The DHA was adopted because it provides analytical discursive strategies which enabled systematic analysis of how language constructed the social actors and the protest events. Framing Theory was employed because it explains how media texts select and emphasise certain aspects of reality to promote particular interpretations of events. A total of 62 texts were sampled from the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*: 21 front-page news headlines, 13 editorials, and 28 news articles published in June 2024. This period was selected because it represents the peak of the protest activity. Both newspapers were selected because they command the widest readership in Kenya, with the *Daily Nation* at 35% and *The Standard* at 21% of the national readership, according to the State of Media Report 2023/2024 by the Media Council of Kenya. The findings revealed three systematic patterns. First, both newspapers overwhelmingly constructed the Gen Z protesters positively as revolutionaries, patriots, and representatives of the entire Kenyan nation. They were attributed qualities of peacefulness, civility, and bravery, and their actions were constitutionally mandated. This positive construction was reinforced through intertextual references to various global movements and laws positioning protesters as legitimate defenders of democratic order. Second, both newspapers consistently constructed law enforcement officers in a negative manner. Nominations escalated from neutral labels such as "police officers" to condemnatory terms such as "killer plainclothes police." They were constructed largely as brutal, and as violators of the constitution. Third, Gen Z's protest strategies were constructed as innovative, technologically sophisticated, and unprecedented. Digital platforms, the leaderless structure, and accountability tools such as the "Wall of Shame" website were framed as legitimate instruments of democratic participation superior to formal state accountability mechanisms. This study contributes to the disciplines of discourse studies, media studies, and political communication. The newspapers constructed the technological strategies as powerful tools that the youths can use to oversight the government, a role that is traditionally performed by Parliament. The framing of the protest as an in-group versus an out-group situation, has important implications in media studies in that grassroots groups as opposed to the elite, can attain newsworthiness. It was established that reference to the past global protests gave legitimacy to the 2024 protests. This implies that global occurrences have an influence on subsequent political actions.