Trending but Not Transforming: Generation Z's Social Media Activism and Its Diplomatic Impact in International Relations

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Abstract

Generation Z — the cohort born between approximately 1997 and 2012 — has emerged as the most digitally mobilised generation in political history, leveraging platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X and Discord to organise transnational advocacy and challenge entrenched governance structures. Yet a critical paradox persists ,the generation that trends globally rarely transforms diplomatically. This paper examines the relationship between Generation Z's social media activism and its tangible impact on international relations, arguing that while digital activism has democratised political expression and produced measurable domestic disruptions, its structural conversion into lasting diplomatic outcomes remains limited and uneven. Drawing on comparative case studies — alongside empirical evidence from quantitative platform studies and theoretical frameworks of soft power, generational theory, and networked social movements, this paper identifies the conditions under which digital youth activism does and does not translate into diplomatic recalibration. It further interrogates platform architecture, disinformation dynamics, and the mobilisation-distraction paradox as structural constraints on Gen Z's diplomatic agency. The findings suggest that while Generation Z constitutes a genuinely novel geopolitical force, the efficacy of their digital activism in reshaping international relations depends critically on context, institutional responsiveness, and the capacity to bridge online momentum with sustained offline institutional engagement.

Keywords -Gen z, Diplomacy , Social Media ,Digitalisation ,etc .

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented convergence of generational change and digital disruption in the arena of international relations. Generation Z, shaped by cascading global crises — from 9/11 and the 2008 financial collapse to the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerating climate breakdown — has entered the political landscape not through conventional institutional channels but through the decentralised, high-velocity architecture of social media (Roche & Szobonya, 2022; Kumar, 2025). Unlike preceding generations whose activism was spatially anchored in physical protest sites — Tahrir Square, Wall Street, Tiananmen — Gen Z movements are constituted in algorithmic spaces that compress geography, amplify grievance, and enable transnational solidarity at unprecedented speed (Mia & Hasan, 2025; Rezaei & Owens, 2023).

And yet, this mobilisational power coexists with a stubborn structural reality: trending is not transforming. Matthes (2022) identifies a Social Media Political Participation Paradox — despite exponential growth in youth social media use, the voter turnout gap between young adults and older generations has not meaningfully narrowed across the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and Japan. Platform-specific studies confirm that Instagram primarily facilitates passive political engagement, with active systemic participation scoring dramatically lower (SSRN, 2025). Disinformation dynamics further complicate the picture: trust in social media news, rather than traditional institutional sources, correlates most strongly with the willingness to spread false information (Humprecht, 2023), meaning the very infrastructure of Gen Z political expression is simultaneously a vector of democratic vulnerability.

This paper situates these tensions within the broader question of Gen Z's diplomatic impact — understood not merely as domestic protest capacity but as the ability to reshape state behaviour, foreign policy orientation, and the conduct of international relations. The August 2024 student uprising in Bangladesh, which overthrew an incumbent government and triggered measurable recalibration of the country's relations with India, Pakistan, and the

United States (Bhuiyan et al., 2026), represents perhaps the most consequential recent case of Gen Z activism crossing the domestic-international threshold. The dissolution of Madagascar's government following youth-led protests in October 2025 (FPRI, 2025), and the parallel wave of movements from Morocco to Nepal, suggest that such cases are no longer exceptional. What remains analytically underdeveloped is a systematic account of when, how, and under what conditions digital youth activism produces diplomatic consequences — and this gap is what the present paper addresses.

Research Objectives

This paper is guided by the following research objectives:

- To examine the nature and scope of Generation Z's social media activism and its articulation within existing frameworks of soft power, digital diplomacy, and networked social movements.
- To critically assess the conditions under which Gen Z digital activism translates — or fails to translate — into tangible shifts in international relations, through comparative case study analysis of the Global South.
- To interrogate the structural constraints — including platform architecture, the mobilisation-distraction paradox, disinformation dynamics, and the digital divide — that limit the diplomatic efficacy of Gen Z's online political engagement.
- To evaluate the theoretical implications of Gen Z's political agency for established IR frameworks, including Nye's soft power theory, Mannheim's generational theory, and Castells' networked social movement paradigm.

Literature review

The role of Generation Z's in international diplomacy through social media organises around three analytically distinct themes.

Generation Z as a Non-Traditional Political Force

Generation Z — individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s — constitutes a qualitatively new political cohort whose agency derives from digital fluency, global consciousness, and institutional scepticism (Kumar, 2024). Roche and Szobonya (2022), drawing on Mannheim's (1952) generational theory, argue that Gen Z exercises 'transformational soft power' — reshaping geopolitical narratives through norm diffusion rather than coercive authority. Frontiers in Political Science (2021) further reconceptualises Gen Z as 'socio-political educators' whose moral authority grants them informal diplomatic agency in global discourse. Critically, however, Kumar (2024) identifies 'slacktivism' — the structural tendency of Gen Z political expression to manifest as performative online gestures without substantive follow-through — as the defining vulnerability of this generational capacity.

Social Media as an Instrument of Contemporary Diplomacy

Social media has become constitutive of diplomatic practice at multiple levels. Garba (2025) demonstrates through analysis of Zelenskyy's and Biden's conduct during the 2022 Ukraine conflict that platforms now enable real-time strategic signalling that bypasses traditional

institutional channels — 'Twiplomacy.' At the non-state level, Svensson and Carvalho (2022) establish longitudinally that Fridays for Future's Instagram strategy secured formal youth representation in COP negotiations, while Kim and Al-Rashid (2023), through computational analysis of TikTok videos — 4,127 videos, identify a 'witnessing function' through which Gen Z short-form content humanises conflict and builds transnational solidarity. Ndlovu and Okonkwo (2022) extend this through 'diasporic relay diplomacy,' whereby diaspora youth amplify domestic movements to international audiences with documented influence on African Union and UN discourse.

Structural Constraints on Digital Activism

The optimistic account of Gen Z's diplomatic agency is substantially qualified by evidence of structural constraints. Biruri and Ali (2025), drawing on primary survey data from 384 Kenyan university students, find that only 35 per cent sustain political engagement beyond the trend cycle — direct empirical corroboration of the slacktivism thesis. Feuerstein and Patel (2021) demonstrate that algorithmic recommendation systems produce 'geopolitical bubble formation,' narrowing Gen Z's international exposure and compounding misinformation susceptibility. Morozova and Hernandez (2023) provide computational evidence that state-linked influence operations deliberately manufacture youth cynicism toward multilateral institutions. The geographic unevenness of Gen Z impact is further illustrated by the India–Kenya contrast: Indian Gen Z demonstrates high digital exposure but predominantly passive engagement (SSRN, 2025; Sage Journals, 2025), while Ray (2025) documents that sustained Kenyan Gen Z campaigns produced the reversal of proposed tax legislation — confirming that platform access is necessary but insufficient for diplomatic impact.

Research Gap

Despite the scholarly progress documented above, a significant gap persists at the intersection of these three themes. Existing literature establishes that Gen Z can mobilise international attention (Svensson & Carvalho, 2022; Kim & Al-Rashid, 2023; Ray, 2025) and that slacktivism represents a structural vulnerability (Kumar, 2024; Biruri & Ali, 2025). However, no study has systematically examined why Gen Z digital activism characteristically fails to sustain the pressure required to function as effective non-state actor diplomacy in international relations. The field has documented the what — Gen Z creates diplomatic moments — but has not theorised the why behind the consistent failure to convert those moments into durable agenda-setting, norm diffusion, or state behaviour change: the three core functions of non-state actors in IR theory.

The present paper addresses this gap through the case comparative design — Fridays for Future and the India–Kenya contrast — supported by primary survey data from 51 university respondents. By holding platform availability constant while varying diplomatic outcome across cases, the paper isolates slacktivism as the binding constraint and advances IR non-state actor theory by specifying the precise conditions under which digital mobilisation does and does not constitute genuine diplomatic participation.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative case study analysis with social media content analysis and quantitative primary data derived from an original survey instrument. The mixed-methods approach is epistemologically justified by the complexity of the research question: while quantitative data measures the breadth of Gen Z digital engagement patterns, qualitative case analysis illuminates the mechanisms through which such engagement does or does not translate into diplomatic outcomes. The case study method is appropriate for this inquiry given its established utility in examining contemporary phenomena within their real-world international relations context.

Primary data

Primary quantitative data was collected through an anonymous online survey administered via Google Forms specifically for Gen Z's . A total of 51 valid responses were obtained. The instrument comprised five closed-ended questions designed to measure: (i) the incidence of real-world follow-up action following online political engagement; (ii) the temporal duration of engagement with international issues; (iii) self-assessed perceptions of social media's influence on governmental behaviour; (iv) dominant platform usage for international political content; and (v) direct experiential observation of viral campaign ephemerality. Responses were analysed descriptively through frequency distributions and percentage calculations. The sampling method constitutes convenience sampling and the findings are accordingly not generalisable to the broader Gen Z population; they are presented as directional primary evidence corroborating the slacktivism thesis advanced in secondary literature.

Secondary data – From case studies

Two case studies are selected from the peer-reviewed literature on the basis of theoretical sampling: each case is chosen to represent a qualitatively different diplomatic outcome, thereby enabling analytical comparison. Case Study 1 — Fridays for Future (2018–2021) — represents

a case of partial diplomatic success followed by institutional co-optation . Case Study 2 — the India–Kenya comparative case — represents the clearest available contrast between active Gen Z digital activism producing tangible political outcomes and digitally exposed but politically passive Gen Z populations. Together, these cases operationalise the thesis by holding the independent variable — social media platform availability — constant while varying the dependent variable — the sustainability and diplomatic impact of Gen Z engagement.

A supplementary qualitative content analysis of social media posts was conducted across these case study contexts. Posts were identified through targeted hashtag searches — specifically #FridaysForFuture and #COP26 on Instagram and Each post was coded along four dimensions: (a) platform of origin; (b) engagement metrics (likes and shares); (c) presence or absence of a call to offline action; and (d) explicit referencing of governmental, institutional, or policy actors. This content analysis functions as illustrative corroboration rather than primary argumentation, operationalising the distinction between digital visibility and diplomatic intent at the post level.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

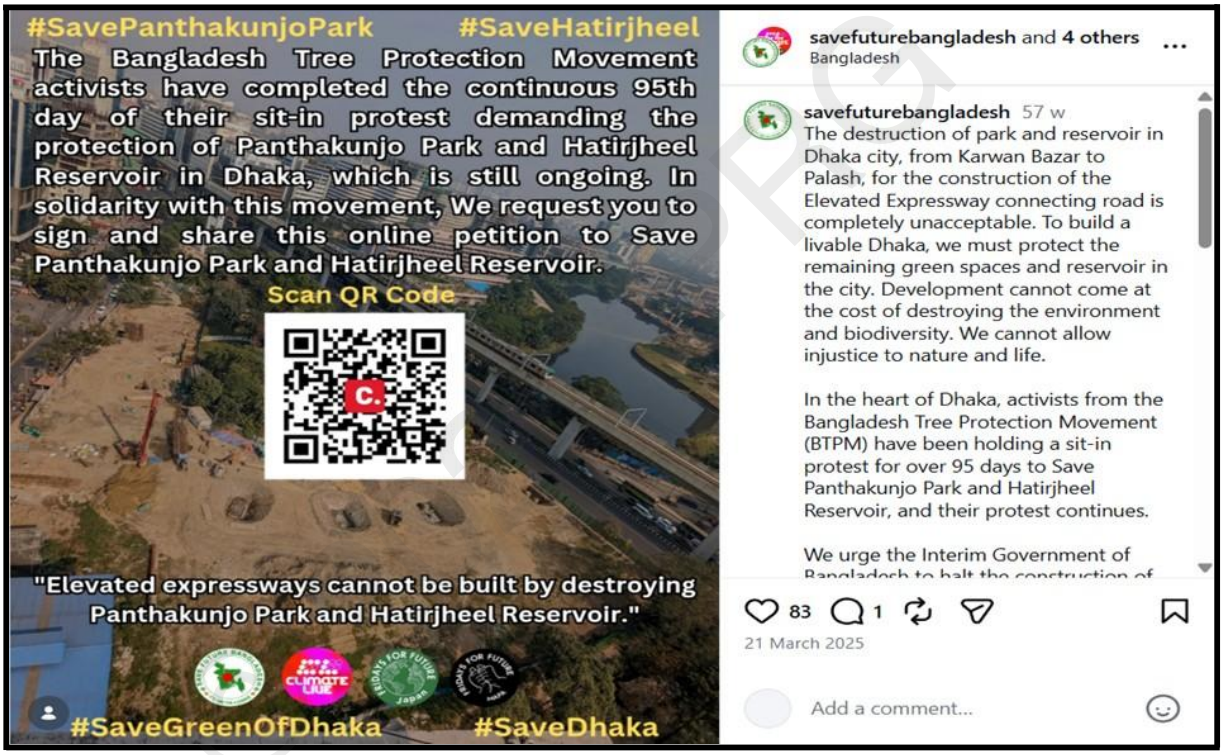
Survey participation was entirely voluntary and all responses were anonymised at the point of collection. No personally identifiable information was retained. The study acknowledges three principal methodological limitations: first, the convenience sample constrains external validity; second, causal inference between Gen Z activism and diplomatic outcomes cannot be established through the case study and survey design employed, and findings are therefore presented as correlational; third, social media content analysis is subject to platform availability and post deletion, which may introduce selection bias into the observed content. These limitations are mitigated through triangulation across three independent data sources — secondary literature, survey data, and social media content analysis — which collectively strengthen the reliability of the paper's central argument.

Case Study Analysis

Case Study 1: Fridays for Future & Climate Diplomacy

The Fridays for Future (FFF) emerged in 2018 through school strikes led by Greta Thunberg in front of the Swedish parliament, advocating for immediate climate change policies. This bottom-up movement expanded into a worldwide youth movement using social media platforms like Instagram which helped in creating a common visual culture among FFF through protest posters, climate artwork, and messages. From 2018 to 2021, FFF successfully organized

several global climate strikes in over 150 countries, depicting an effective collaboration across nations in the movement. In addition, a verified Instagram account of FFF in 2018 and other national and regional accounts made a huge online footprint for the movement. All these accounts functioned to raise awareness regarding the concerns about climate change in each of their regions from the urban infrastructure destruction in Dhaka to climate justice initiatives by youths in Kenya and air pollution activism in India. Although the decentralized structure of the movement had its own advantages, FFF took up a coherent narrative focusing on the significance of "listening to science."



Instagram post by Bangladesh-based activists amplifying the *Save Panthakunjo Park and Hatirjheel Reservoir* campaign, tagged to the Fridays for Future network, illustrates how local environmental struggles are integrated into global digital climate activism.

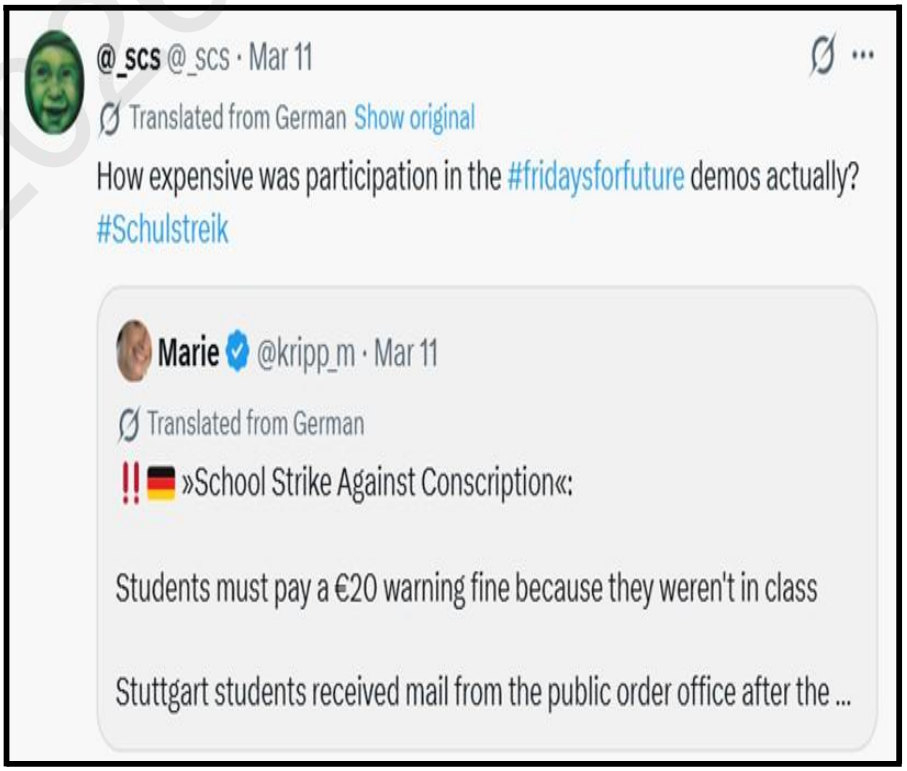
Instagram post linked to Fridays for Future Delhi highlighting air pollution in Delhi as a structural public health crisis, demonstrating how local chapters frame environmental issues as governance and policy failures.

Instagram post linked to Fridays for Future India promoting a "Save Musi" cultural event in Hyderabad, illustrating the use of music and community engagement as forms of climate activism.

The high levels of visibility in terms of the Fridays for Future movement have led to greater influence within the realm of climate change governance on an international level. The inclusion of young people as observers and delegates in forums such as the Conference of the Parties (COP) makes it evident that youth activists are becoming active participants within discussions regarding climate change. It leads to the conclusion that the youth generation has become non-state actors who are capable of forming international policy agendas. In this respect, the young people exercise soft power through constant activism and the use of digital platforms. At the same time, institutions like COP are gradually welcoming more youth participants into official proceedings. In spite of initial successes, the Fridays for Future movement encountered difficulties in maintaining its influence, especially when the situation was aggravated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown imposed certain restrictions, which led to a move from street actions to digital campaigns. Virtual strikes, webinars and other forms of online activities took precedence over traditional methods of collective action. Although this showed the adaptability of the movement in its tactics, the symbolic power of street protests was lost, since digital activism did not involve collective action and any form of institutional exit. On the other hand, the movement shifted its attention towards internal processes and community building rather than trying to exert its influence on policymakers. The emotional momentum of the movement is observed a decline evidenced by diminishing hope and a weakening of the "Greta effect." The path ahead of Fridays for Future (FFF) reinforces the claim that despite being able to create significant moments of worldwide attention, maintaining sustained structural involvement poses difficulties for Gen-Z activists. FFF managed to create a "diplomatic moment" through emphasizing the voice of youths in climate politics. However, increased reliance on digital forms of protest comes along with specific limitations. For example, an empirical study analysis of over 111,000 tweets posted by nearly 48,000 users demonstrates that online material was primarily utilized to share personal views and information rather than organize activities, as posts meant for mobilizing and motivating gained less attention. This means that the ability of digital networks to keep participants engaged in the process is limited. Hence, although it could be considered as mere slacktivism, FFF seems to represent symbolic discourse-based activism capable of creating an agenda.

A qualitative analysis of about 15-20 Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter) posts related to #FridaysForFuture and #COP26 reveals that the posts are largely concerned with

awareness and framing of issues rather than mobilizing actions in the real world. While there are offline activism elements such as calls for signing petitions or attending an event, their presence is minimal, indicating an inclination towards narrative construction rather than mobilization.

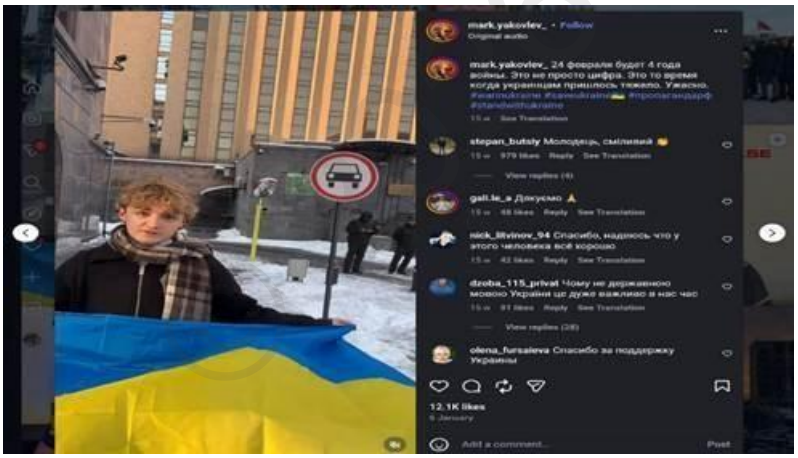


Twitter screenshots depicting posts supporting the #FridaysForFuture movement

Case Study 2:Ukraine War & TikTok Counter-Diplomacy:

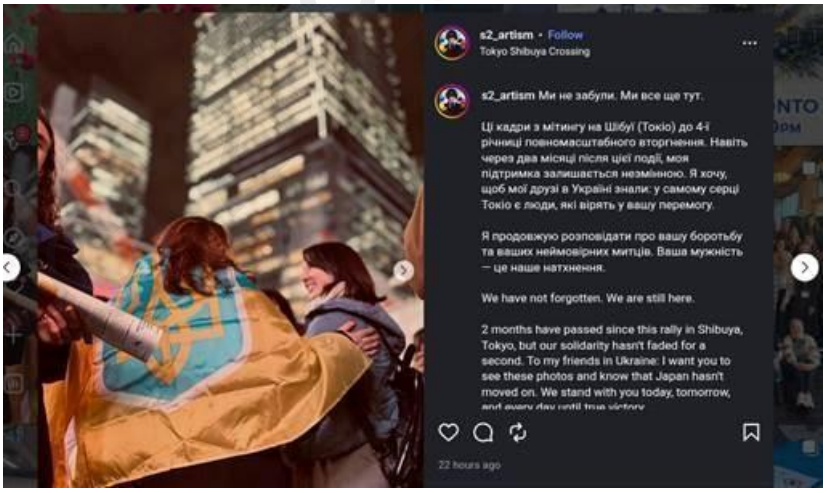
With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, young Ukrainians and Gen-Z users from around the world began creating short videos on apps like TikTok, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), showing slices of their daily life during a time of war. Those videos were first-hand reporting from the scene of the war, sound and images like air raid warning signals, being displaced and their resilience humanized this war rather than it being a media report. As Kim and Al-Rashid (2023) found in their study of 4127 videos from conflict zone participants, this content served the quite powerful role of allowing young people to engage in what they termed "digital witnessing," or meaning, presenting their version of the war.

The Gen-Z phenomenon had a profound influence on global media and discourse, according to International Relations. The widespread sharing of this content affected international views of the conflict, deepening moral and emotional engagement. Studies have shown that social media is the catalyst for political engagement among young people, so social media activism can translate to increased political influence. At the same time, political leaders used social media to communicate owing state and non-state actors share a digital environment.



To further explore this dynamic, an examination of specific posts on Instagram and Twitter/X under the hashtags #StandWithUkraine and #UkraineWar reveals differences in interaction, with English-language posts generating more interaction than non-English content, despite the fact that both depicted similar experiences. This phenomena is especially consistent with Gillespie's (2018) claim that platform algorithms serve as gatekeepers, determining which voices are heard and over which.

However this influence often remains uneven and short-lived. As Morozov(2011) notes, digital activism goes only so far as bringing forth initial attention rather than sustaining long-term political impact. The Ukraine Case thus does the job of demonstrating the ineffectiveness of Gen-Z activism owing to platform dynamics and changing global media cycles, despite being able to influence global discourse and harbouring international attention.



Case Stduy 3: India vs Kenya Comparative Case

Gen Z-led protests were triggered in Kenya by the 2024 Finance Bill demonstrate how digital mobilisation can merge with concrete political outcomes. The 2024 Finance Bill sought to expand taxation amid widespread perceptions of high tax-rates, corruption, and low trust in institutions. This led to the rapid escalation of protests across the country. Survey data showed that over two-thirds of the population believed that the common people paid more than enough in taxes, and that only 42% of the population had faith in the tax authority, indicating widespread dissatisfaction (Afrobarometer, 2019). Activists used popular slogans such as "#RejectFinanceBill2024" and "#RutoMustGo" to create connections between online

engagement and offline activism. This resulted in the withdrawal of the Finance Bill 2024 on 26th June 2024 by the President of Kenya William Ruto. The president refused to assent to the bill and returned it to Parliament for reconsideration, requesting all provisions be withdrawn.

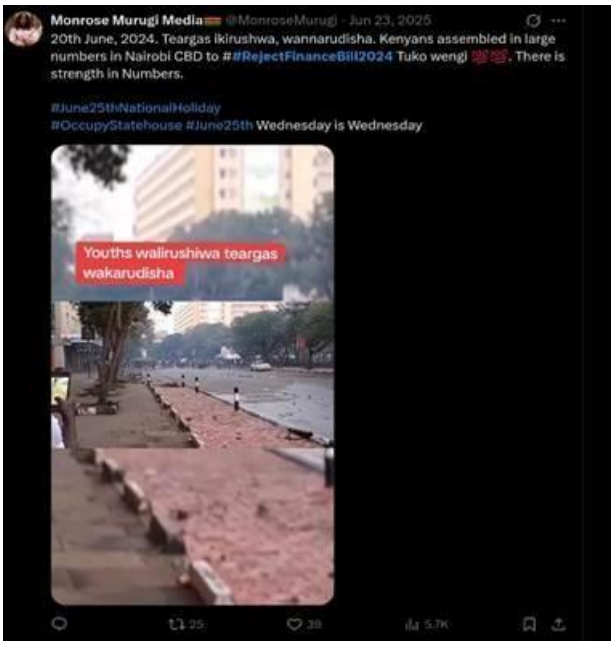
Twitter screenshots illustrating youth-led digital mobilisation and public dissent surrounding the #FinanceBill2024 and #RutoMustGo protests in Kenya

In India, Gen Z shows considerable engagement with politics through social media sites like Instagram and X (formerly Twitter). However, this engagement is mainly passive in nature. Empirical evidence shows that most engagement includes actions such as likes, shares, and scrolling but rarely involves more organized forms of political engagement. Unlike the Kenyan case study, these online engagements rarely turn into organized collective action. Additionally, the involvement is highly personality-based and unstable, as demonstrated by the fluctuating online following of figures such as Raghav Chadha, reflecting weak and non-committal forms of participation. This implies that political engagement by Gen Z in India is fragmented and has little to no impact in the offline world.

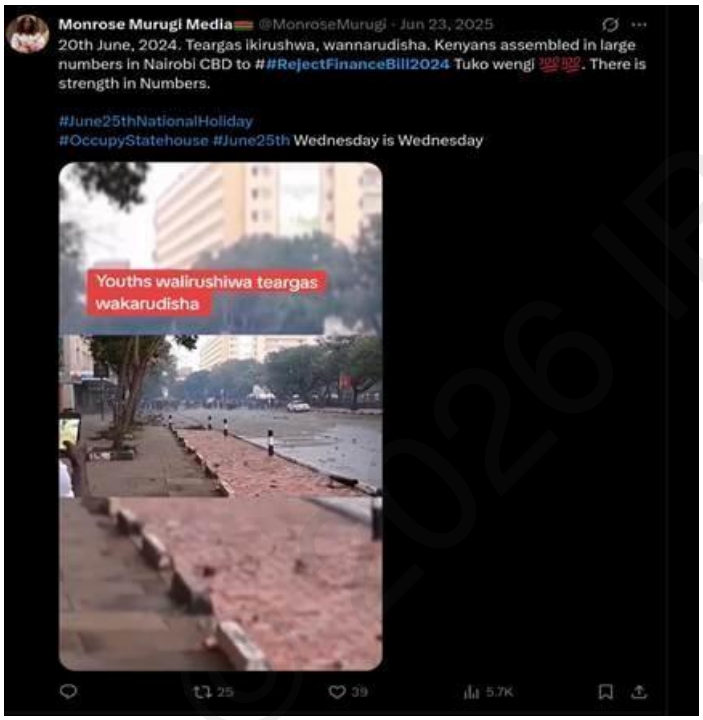
Instagram and X posts demonstrating the largely passive and personality-centric nature of Gen Z political engagement in India

The key difference between Kenya and India does not lie in access to the digital medium but in the continuity and level of engagement. In Kenya, Gen-Z activism was not limited to online protests but led to offline mobilisation, with a clear economic issue - rise in taxation, to bring

people together. The continuity of engagement led to digital activism translating into political pressure and caused the government to take steps to amend the tax hikes as seen in the case of their protest against the 2024 finance bill, which produced thousands of digital posts under the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024, which actually translated into real action, in the form of on ground protests,rallies etc. On the other hand, Gen-Z activism is still passive and inactive,for eg- as seen during the protest against the Indian Government's "Agnipath Scheme" in 2022. Although they are highly exposed to political happenings, this action is limited to likes and shares of political posts. This is aggravated by a lack of a common cause and existing divisions in society and political ideology which hinder mobilisation. As Al-Biruri and Ali suggest, many young people want something to change, but only a few are willing to take action to continue their engagement, and hence the impact. This is reflected in the primary data survey conducted for this paper.



From an International Relations standpoint, Kenyan Gen-Z to some extent, acted as a non-state actor in affecting domestic policies with longer term economic and diplomatic effects. This continued approach influenced state policy, which is consistent with liberal and constructivist approaches of bottom-up influence. Conversely, the Indian Gen-Z has shown lack of unity and continuity , and thus no impact on policies. This supports the argument that pressure and not just digital influence by Gen-Z is required to affect political and global change.



Primary Data Analysis

Primary Data Findings and Analysis

Survey findings – total 51 responses collected

The findings are presented across five dimensions corresponding to the survey instrument's five questions, followed by an integrated interpretive analysis that connects the empirical patterns to the paper's central thesis.

1. Real-World Action Following Online Political Engagement (Q1)

Respondents were asked whether, after sharing or liking a post about an international political issue, they had taken any further real-world action, including signing a petition, attending a

protest, donating, or contacting an official. The results indicate that 58.8 per cent of respondents (n = 30) reported taking no follow-up action, 33.3 per cent (n = 17) reported taking action only sometimes, and a mere 7.8 per cent (n = 4) reported consistently translating online engagement into offline action. Cumulatively, 92.2 per cent of respondents are therefore characterised by passive or inconsistently active political engagement.

Response — Q1: Real-world action taken after sharing?	N	% of 51
No — did not take any real-world action	30	58.8%
Sometimes — inconsistently took action	17	33.3%
Yes — consistently took real-world action	4	7.8%
PASSIVE OR SEMI-PASSIVE TOTAL (No + Sometimes)	47	92.2%

Table 1

2. Duration of Engagement with International Issues (Q2)

Respondents were asked to characterise the duration of their typical engagement with an international issue encountered on social media. Findings reveal that 27.5 per cent (n = 14) lose interest within less than one week, and a further 25.5 per cent (n = 13) engage for one to four weeks. Collectively, 52.9 per cent of respondents demonstrate short-term engagement of less than one month. While 31.4 per cent (n = 16) reported engaging until an issue is resolved, and 15.7 per cent (n = 8) reported engagement over several months, these long-duration respondents nonetheless represent a minority of the sample. The predominance of short-term engagement across the sample is analytically significant: for Gen Z digital activism to function as effective non-state actor diplomacy — capable of producing durable agenda-setting or shifting state behaviour — sustained engagement over months and institutional cycles is a prerequisite. The present data suggest that the majority of Gen Z respondents do not meet this threshold.

Response — Q2: Duration of engagement	N	% of 51
Less than one week	14	27.5%
1-4 weeks	13	25.5%
Several months	8	15.7%
Until the issue is resolved	16	31.4%
SHORT TERM TOTAL (<4 weeks)	27	52.9%

Table 2

3. Perceived Influence of Social Media on Government Behaviour (Q3)

When asked whether they believed their social media activity could actually influence how governments or international bodies behave, 43.1 per cent (n = 22) answered affirmatively, 31.4 per cent (n = 16) answered negatively, and 25.5 per cent (n = 13) expressed uncertainty. The finding that fewer than half of respondents believe their digital engagement carries genuine diplomatic weight is notable: it suggests that a substantial proportion of Gen Z's online political activity is conducted without a strategic expectation of diplomatic consequence — consistent with the performative rather than instrumental nature of slacktivism as theorised by Kumar (2024). Taken together with Q1 findings, a distinct pattern emerges: respondents engage online without necessarily believing in — or acting upon — the possibility of influence.

Response — Q3: Belief that posts influence governments	N	% of 51
Yes — believe socialmedia can influence governments	22	43.1%
No — do not believe posts have diplomatic influence	16	31.4%
Unsure — uncertain about influence	13	25.5%

Table 3

4. Primary platform for International Political Content (Q4)

Respondents were asked to identify the platform they use most for international political content. Instagram emerged as the dominant platform, selected by 34 respondents (66.7% of sample on a multi-select basis), followed by youtube (24 respondents), X/Twitter (12 respondents), and tiktok (5 respondents). The predominance of Instagram — an image-and-story-driven platform — over Twitter/X and tiktok is consistent with research on Indian Gen Z's consumption-oriented political engagement (SSRN India, 2025). Instagram's algorithm prioritises passive content consumption over active discussion, which may structurally

reinforce the passive engagement pattern observed in Q1 findings. The relatively low tiktok uptake in this sample (9.8% primary platform) contrasts with Kim and Al-Rashid's (2023) findings from conflict zone contexts, suggesting that platform choice may itself be a moderating variable in the activism-diplomacy relationship.

Response — Q4: Primary platform for political content	Mentions	% of Respondents
Instagram	34	66.7%
Youtube	24	47.1%
X (Twitter)	12	23.5%
Tiktok	5	9.8%

Table 4

5. Observed Ephemerality of Viral Campaigns (Q5)

The final question asked whether respondents had ever witnessed an international campaign go viral on social media and subsequently disappear without producing any visible real-world result. A substantial majority — 76.5 per cent of respondents (n = 39) — answered affirmatively. A further 15.7 per cent (n = 8) were unsure, and only 7.8 per cent (n = 4) reported not having observed this phenomenon. This finding constitutes perhaps the most striking data point in the survey: over three-quarters of the sample have directly experienced what this paper theorises as the slacktivism cycle — viral mobilisation followed by rapid dissipation without diplomatic consequence. This represents first-hand observational confirmation of the structural ephemerality that the paper argues prevents Gen Z digital activism from functioning as durable non-state actor diplomacy.

Response — Q5: Witnessed viral campaign disappear without result	N	% of 51
Yes — have witnessed this phenomenon	39	76.5%
Not sure	8	15.7%
No — have not observed this	4	7.8%

Table 5

Discussion of Insights Derived from Case Studies (Secondary Data)

A common thread that runs through these three cases is Gen Z's capability to create strong narratives through digital activism but inability to sustain political consequences without offline

mobilisation. It is evident through the FFF movement that Gen Z youths were able to leverage digital media to construct a climate discourse and establish their position as non-state actors within COP. However, the prolonged engagement was largely discursive after the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic, implying that although digital media may be useful in awareness creation, sustained actions remain elusive. Similarly, the Ukraine conflict presents another example of how young people are making an impact through digital activism. The "digital witnessing" of the conflicts by the youth made it easy for them to make an impact. At the same time, the use of algorithms in various platforms, coupled with an evolving media landscape, contributed to inconsistent impacts.

Unlike the previous two cases where digital activism did not yield any policy consequences, the Kenyan case presents an opportunity where young people influenced the government to withdraw the Finance Bill. This comparison highlights an important theoretical distinction between digital visibility and diplomatic influence. While digital activism can rapidly generate attention, visibility alone does not constitute political power. Tangible diplomatic or policy consequences emerge only when online mobilisation is reinforced through sustained collective action, institutional pressure, and broader socio-political conditions. Therefore, although Gen Z has emerged as a significant non-state actor within International Relations, the effectiveness of its activism remains structurally conditioned rather than inherently transformative.

Conclusion

Generation Z cannot be understood either as an apathetic digital audience or as an inherently transformative revolutionary force. This paper demonstrates that Gen Z constitutes a distinct geopolitical actor whose influence within contemporary diplomacy is conditional, context-dependent, and structurally constrained. The cases examined in this study reveal a critical distinction between digital visibility and actual diplomatic influence. Although digital platforms enable Gen Z to shape narratives, mobilise transnational solidarity, and gain international attention, visibility alone rarely produces substantive political transformation. The Kenyan protests illustrate that digital activism can contribute to policy outcomes when accompanied by sustained offline mobilisation and favourable political conditions. In contrast, the FFF movement and youth engagement during the Ukraine conflict demonstrate the limitations of digital participation when institutional pressure and collective action weaken over time. These outcomes are further shaped by structural factors, including platform architectures prioritising engagement over civic participation, algorithmic preference for entertainment-oriented content, corporate control of digital spaces, and expanding state capacities for

surveillance and internet shutdowns. Consequently, virality should not be conflated with political power. At the same time, Gen Z activism remains historically significant. Its decentralised and horizontal character reflects a strategic adaptation to contemporary forms of state control, while its ability to translate local grievances into globally intelligible political narratives distinguishes it from previous generations. In line with Mannheim's concept of "fresh contact" (1927/28), Gen Z is not merely using new technologies for conventional political purposes but is reshaping the meaning of political agency within digitally networked societies.

As Generation Z increasingly enters formal political and diplomatic institutions, the boundary between digital activism and official diplomacy is likely to narrow further. The central challenge for policymakers and scholars, therefore, is to develop institutional conditions capable of converting digitally mobilised visibility into durable, accountable, and substantive political change.

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