



**EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY
STUDENTS DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY WHEN
ENGAGING IN ONLINE ACTIVISM IN SELECTED PUBLIC
UNIVERSITIES IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA**

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Abstract:

This research examined the challenges faced by students demanding accountability when engaging in online activism in selected public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study was informed by Good Governance Theory. The study employed a qualitative research approach under the multiple bounded-case study design. The target population consisted of 2 universities, 2 deputy vice chancellors, 2 deans of students, 2 student association chairs, and 1500 online activists. The study used criterion purposive sampling to include the 2 universities, 2 deputy vice chancellors, 2 deans of students, and 2 student association chairs. The 60 student activists were selected using snowball sampling to identify information-rich participants with relevant experience in online activism. Data collection tools included in-depth interview guides for deputy vice chancellors, deans of students, student association chairs, and student activists. The study also used an observation checklist to collect data. The study ensured the trustworthiness of instruments by triangulating data from interviews, observations, and documents. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of context and participants. Dependability was maintained by clearly documenting research procedures and maintaining an audit trail. Conformability was achieved by bracketing researcher biases, keeping reflexive notes, and ensuring findings were grounded in participants' voices rather than personal assumptions. The data collected was analyzed using a thematic approach and presented in the form of narratives and direct quotations. The

study found out that student activists face various challenges, including disciplinary actions, suspension threats, and academic penalties for expressing dissenting views online. It was also revealed that surveillance and monitoring of student posts on social media by university authorities created an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, discouraging open participation and honest dialogue. The study recommends that the government promote digital inclusion and student protection by expanding internet infrastructure, especially in underserved areas, integrating digital literacy into curricula, and establishing legal safeguards for student activists. Public universities should be required to implement transparent and responsive communication channels to address student issues. These reforms aim to ensure safe, equitable, and impactful civic engagement, empowering students to influence decision-making and drive meaningful transformation in higher education.

Keywords: Kenya, Nairobi, students, leaders, accountability, challenges, activism, universities

1. Introduction

Online student activism in the United States has roots going back to the colonial era when higher education first began (Johnston, 1998). Over time, student activism has addressed a wide range of political and institutional leadership issues. According to Wong *et al.* (2016), student movements against malpractice occurred at numerous universities during the 2015–2016 academic year, including Yale University, the University of Missouri, and the University of Cincinnati. Student activism at Northeastern, a U.S. public research university (RU), tackled problems such as racial injustice and the university's relationship with fossil fuel businesses. According to an NBC report (2020), university leadership issues, including low revenues and financial mismanagement, led to closures and students being unable to continue their education. Business Insider (2021) also reported that in 2015, five major U.S. institutions were involved in fraud.

In response to social injustices and suppression of student voices, students have long used activism to raise awareness and promote institutional change. In the 1960s, University of Missouri students advocated for representation in administration and anti-discrimination policies, with one in five protests addressing racial prejudice. These efforts led to milestones such as the first African American studies department at San Francisco State University in 1968. In the 2000s, U.S. students used online activism to improve campus conditions, oppose layoffs, and challenge administrative decisions, as seen at Georgetown, Miami, Tufts, and USC. Movements like #BlackLivesMatter further mobilized students against racial injustice. By 2020, online activism emphasized issues such as college affordability, campus equity, and leadership accountability, demonstrating its continued relevance in promoting social justice and institutional reform.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these efforts, as students began demanding academic concessions, housing assistance, and tuition refunds when colleges transitioned to online learning. According to Evans *et al.* (2020), hundreds of undergraduates at the University of Chicago declined to reimburse tuition for the spring quarter to pressure the institution into reducing tuition as well as eliminating fees charged to learners. At The New School, students successfully advocated for accelerated refunds for housing and meal plans. Meanwhile, Student activists at the University of North Carolina demanded modifications to the university's graduation criteria and grading guidelines. Activists at Pomona College forced the administration to offer emergency accommodation for those in need after students were abruptly evacuated from campus housing.

Over the last two decades, the demands placed on leadership in American public schools have changed significantly. Whether leadership practices will evolve to meet these demands remains uncertain. This shift is primarily due to the implementation of performance-based accountability policies, which assess, reward, and penalize schools based on student performance metrics. While the benefits of these policies are contested, it is undeniable that they have basically altered the expectations and pressures faced by school leaders.

In the United Kingdom, while students participated in sit-ins and rallies to advocate for social change, there was limited understanding of how these efforts shaped leadership roles and perceptions of activism on campus (Warikoo, 2016). During the 2000s, grassroots student movements combined online and offline strategies, favoring horizontal organizing, decentralized networks, and occupations, exemplified by the first wave of anti-austerity protests and the 2011 Occupy movement (Ginsberg *et al.*, 2023). These methods influenced ongoing campaigns for free education, rent strikes, anti-casualization, divestment, and decolonization of curricula. Notably, the National Campaign Against Fee Cuts led the free education movement, remaining active until 2017 (Schlereth, 2022).

In Asian countries, student activism in Taiwan is somewhat unique. Student online activism has never undergone a significant developmental phase. While Taiwanese students, like those in China and Indonesia, sometimes view themselves as a “pure” and “moral” force with a special role in political protest, they have not led Taiwan’s democracy movement. Student protests generally respond to political liberalization initiated by the regime rather than institutional challenges (Wright, 2012). In Malaysia, student online activism evokes three common responses: outright dismissal, nostalgic reflection on the late 1960s and early 1970s when students were prominent in global protests, and observations from graduates since the mid-1980s that, although students are not inherently opposed to activism, coercive legislation discourages participation (Weiss, 2012). These patterns highlight contextual and regulatory barriers shaping online activism in the region.

In Africa, students’ online activism has been reported in African higher education institutions (HEIs). A good illustration of this is the one that was reported by Sesant *et al.* (2015), which describes an incident that occurred in 2015, when students protested

vehemently against the proposed tuition hikes and called for a refund, consistent with the government's earlier promises. The protest #RhodesMustFall came before the student activism known as #FeesMustFall. Still in South Africa, Students at the University of Cape Town called for the Africanization of both the faculty and the curriculum, "decolonization" of the institution by removing colonial "white supremacy." Symbols, such as the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, which they found offensive and oppressive. The resultant social change incorporated an expanded financial help to state-funded colleges Administration (Maylam, 2015), adoption of English as the official language, substituting English for Afrikaans, as was the case at the universities in Pretoria and Stellenbosch.

During the periods spanning from 1948 to 1979, as well as from 1980 to 1996, Nigeria experienced a total of 21 and 36 significant occurrences of student protests. The most recent incident resulted in a tragic event where law enforcement officers brutally killed 100 university students, with an additional 1000 individuals being detained in the aftermath.

In Egypt, students from 18 HEIs challenged the vulnerability of the political framework, bringing about the capture and removal of 1352 students (Zayed, 2016). Between 1990 and 2000, 47 instances of violent student activism were reported in Kenya, characterized by clashes with the police, willful property damage, serious injuries, and fatalities (Kiboii, 2013). The Kenyan Vice Chancellors' Committee characterized the nature of the student unrest in its report from 2000 as consisting of demonstrations, class walkouts, institutional closures, violent altercations with law enforcement, throwing stones, obstructing government buildings, seizing vehicles, paralyzing city centers, looting, and inflicting damage on property and infrastructure.

Kenyan universities are undergoing unprecedented changes that have led to multiple challenges. These include the accelerated pace of globalization, persistent economic crises and traditional structural adjustments, significant changes in the makeup and focus of the student population, and alterations in the curriculum and instructional methods. Additionally, Kenya's 35 public universities and their constituent colleges are reeling under debts totaling more than KES60 billion (about US\$456 million) in workers' pensions, income tax deductions and other statutory staff remittances. These have posed great challenges to public university leaders, thereby affecting the governance of university education. Suffice to say, neither the vice-chancellors nor the government is providing a roadmap on how to salvage the situation.

Gathogo (2020) indicates that Kenya's higher institutions have unapproachable and non-straightforward leadership. This is explained further by Denisova-Schmidt (2021), who posits that unaccountable leaders in higher education exist in both developed and developing countries across public and private institutions, and within both elite and mass education systems. Despite her assertion that this is nothing new, she asserts that the massification, internationalization, digitalization, and commercialization of higher education will increase the importance of accountability in the agendas of institutions of higher education.

The overall impact of governance has been the unplanned expansion of university education without a corresponding increase in funding, resulting in a significant decline in the quality of education and reduced democratization in decision-making within university management (McCowan, 2017). Governance is a critical element in managing issues in universities. It will assist policymakers in creating an environment that fosters leadership, management, and accountability among various government agencies.

Given the circumstances and the preceding context, there are gaps in both research and documentation regarding the extent of governance challenges confronting public universities in Kenya and their implications for social transformation (Gonzalez-Zapata, *et al.*, 2015). Accountability leadership has been one of the main causes of riots in most public universities today. Starting from the election itself, there have been reported cases of leaders rigging themselves in. This is the root cause of bad leadership, as most of those people who may have rigged themselves in are not the choice of the people. These leaders end up embezzling funds from the students' kitty in order to repay themselves for the money they spent to put themselves in office.

This has led to a lack of transparency in funds, which has been characterized by mismanagement of the funds (Vian, 2020). The students expect the leadership to use the money collected annually by the Students' Union to be used in activities that favor them, such as facilitating. Inter-faculty sports strengthen the understanding among students and increase tolerance. The leaders end up using this money to facilitate their next campaign and even fund riots against any opposition that may arise during the course of their leadership.

The student leadership has also been very reluctant when it comes to responding to issues that affect students (Day, *et al.*, 2016). This includes delayed loan funding, unhealthy conditions such as leaking taps in the hostels, frequent fights and even theft, just to mention a few and even delayed results from the school, which the students expect the leadership to negotiate with the administration on their behalf, but it's usually not the case. Most of these leaders use their time in office to plan for the next election. This may lead to chaos and riots as students decide to take matters into their own hands in trying to make their voices heard.

The university leadership has also been noted to be one that lives an extremely expensive lifestyle. This raises concern from the students' side, as they have noted that any time a student gets elected, their life changes for the better. This is characterized by them exiting their hostels to live in leafy suburbs and buying motor vehicles, not to mention some of them even changing their dress. This leads to the students questioning whether there is controllability and responsibility in the way their funds are managed. Such cases may contribute to riots in school as students demand a change in leadership. It not only ends there, but it also depends on the feud during elections as most students are ready to vigorously compete in the elections and secure their share of the rewards.

Cases of leaders using their political muscles to settle their personal issues and even suppress their opponents have been rampant. They do these through funding chaos, which later leads to destruction of property, disruption of classes and even death to some

of the students due to confrontation with the police as they try to calm them down. This, therefore, leads to the conclusion that the lack of accountable leadership, particularly in most public universities, is one of the main catalysts of riots in universities.

Online activism has increasingly replaced traditional forms of protests, sit-ins, and riots in the information technology era. Often referred to as hashtag activism, clicktivism, or slacktivism (Morgan, 2021), it has flourished in higher education, prompting leadership accountability and social transformation (Waddock *et al.*, 2022). Saunders (2013) defines activism as actions undertaken by movements or groups to challenge existing social or political systems. University students, through their umbrella bodies, have engaged in movements addressing leadership issues affecting campus life. Traditionally, activism involved direct confrontations, but a paradigm shift has emerged, with online activism gaining popularity among undergraduates as a safer, more accessible, and impactful mode of advocacy (Kligler-Vilenchik *et al.*, 2021).

The global increase of the undergraduate students from 3.6 million in the 1960s to 8.5 million in the 1970s and 200 million currently has correspondingly seen the growth of online activism (Ittefaq *et al.*, 2019). Besides, there have been ramifications arising from the pressures on the infrastructure and institutional policies that have impacted negatively on students at the institutions, as noted by Kezar (2010). There is no doubt that this, along with the information age, has led to more student activism online, resulting in social changes in the institutions. This is supported by Wit *et al.* (2021) who accent that, just as groups, youth, and students become crucial actors in social change, so has online activism. Consequently, the study will aim at establishing whether student online activism has impacted the way university leaders manage the institutions, thereby bringing social transformation in the higher institutions of learning.

Accountable leadership is critical in ensuring that institutions of higher education manage their human and material resources. This has become even more important as universities become increasingly interdependent. It is imperative to mention that when accountability is demanded from IHE, students may lose trust, leading to more activism to agitate for a social transformation (Van Trung, 2021).

Brown (2018) observed that colleges and universities are institutions that must manage a progressively intricate accountability landscape. This is based on the understanding that higher education is an important training ground for many professions. In the early 1980s, accountability was principally associated with 'accounting for the use of public funds necessitating a broader understanding of accountability, which expanded in the 1990s to include responsibility towards students. Universities were then expected to be more transparent about the quality of their teaching and learning (Mallory, 2023). Another aspect of accountability focuses on industry, emphasizing the need to ensure the quality of graduates and the relevance of their skills across various occupational settings. Additionally, a traditional level of accountability to society involves fostering good citizenship and preserving intellectual and cultural heritage in diverse forms. From the 1990s onward, there has been a growing consensus on the need

for universities to clearly define, measure, and focus on their goals and claims concerning both the economy and society (Pampallis *et al.*, 2020).

This pressure influences the core of the curriculum and academic professionalism. As leadership accountability in higher education evolves, institutions are crucial in transforming existing structures into high-performance, technology-driven social economies. Alam (2022) highlights that education is a key component in this transformation, and in a competitive global environment, enhancing leadership accountability to produce a skilled workforce is essential for future economic growth. Considering that university accountability involves a multitude of stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, staff, and students, all of whom engage in the daily operations of the university, it is inevitable that students' perspectives will play a significant role in the decision-making process. By breaking down the problem into logical steps, we can easily arrive at a solution.

In recent years, online activism has become an important tool for promoting social and political change, particularly within academic institutions. In Nairobi, Kenya, students from public universities increasingly use online platforms to advocate for greater accountability in university leadership, aiming to foster social transformation. This engagement is largely driven by social media, which provides dynamic spaces for mobilizing and sharing information (Tufekci, 2017). Online activism in Kenyan universities includes campaigns, petitions, and protests calling for transparency, improved governance, and inclusive decision-making. Historically, student-leadership relations have been tense, often due to administrative inefficiencies, resource misallocation, and marginalization of student voices (Barkan, 2013). Social media now allows students to organize petitions, engage in discussions, and use hashtags to amplify their concerns, enhancing the visibility and impact of their activism (Ndiema, 2019).

Empirical studies on student activism in Kenya indicate that online platforms have enhanced students' ability to bypass traditional gatekeepers, such as university administrators and political elites, allowing direct communication with wider audiences (Githinji, 2017). Research further shows that the success of online activism depends on student engagement, strategic approaches, and the responsiveness of university leadership to public demands (Muchemi, 2018). While online activism has achieved successes, including holding university leaders publicly accountable, limitations remain, such as state surveillance, censorship, and challenges in sustaining momentum, highlighting the need for strategies that strengthen both impact and continuity (Adhiambo, 2020).

The need for social transformation within Nairobi's public universities is pressing, as students face challenges related to financial management, lack of student representation in governance, and the quality of education. Online activism, therefore, represents a powerful tool for advocating for reforms that could lead to more democratic and accountable university leadership. As the universities in Nairobi face challenges regarding leadership, there is limited research examining the challenges faced by

students demanding accountability when engaging in online activism in selected public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya, which raised the need for this study.

2. Statement of the Problem

Universities worldwide are regarded as pillars of academic excellence, innovation, and ethical governance (Alam, 2022; Mallory, 2023). They are expected to operate transparently, responsibly, and involve students in decision-making. According to McCowan (2017), resource mobilization, competent policymaking, and social transformation require accountable leadership. However, many universities, particularly in developing countries, face persistent leadership challenges (Van Trung, 2021). In Africa, studies reveal ongoing accountability and governance problems, including corruption, misuse of resources, and nepotism (Sesant *et al.*, 2015; Gathogo, 2020). Despite government interventions like the Public Universities Act and the Commission for University Education, issues of poor governance and lack of transparency continue (McCowan, 2017).

According to the Commission for University Education (2024), 87.27% of disciplinary cases in Kenyan universities were related to examination malpractices. Out of 3,841 cases, 3,352 involved cheating, impersonation, or the use of unauthorized materials. These statistics reveal a troubling culture of academic dishonesty, undermining credibility and accountability in higher education. Similarly, Kerubo *et al.* (2024) found that 68% of Kenyan researchers engaged in some form of research misconduct, with 36% committing fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism. Such data highlight systemic integrity issues that hinder the achievement of ethical academic standards and responsible leadership in universities.

This study revealed gaps in theory, conceptual, and methodology in the literature. The theoretical gap is due to the previous research, which used different frameworks than the one used in the present study, which did not explore the integration of online activism theory and accountability models in higher education. The conceptual gap is that the previous studies have concentrated on the general concerns of governance, but not the particular relationship between the online activism of students and the accountability of university leaders. The gap in methodology is noticeable in the studies where the main dependence was placed on the descriptive or document analysis approaches, but in the given study, a mixed-methods approach is chosen in order to embrace both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the phenomenon.

With such gaps, this research aims to understand the dynamics of online activism among students in an effort to make public university leaders in Nairobi County accountable. In particular, it examines the challenges faced by students demanding accountability when engaging in online activism in selected public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya, which raised the need for this study.

2.1 Objective of the Study

- Examine the challenges faced by students demanding accountability when engaging in online activism in selected public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

2.2 Research Question

- What challenges do students face in demanding accountability through online activism in public universities in Nairobi County?

3. Theoretical Framework

This study was based on Good Governance Theory, which emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s through the influence of institutions like the UNDP and World Bank, aiming to promote development through better governance. It emphasizes principles such as accountability, transparency, rule of law, participation, equity, and responsiveness. The theory evolved post-Cold War as part of the development agenda and gained traction globally, including in Kenya through the 2010 Constitution and global frameworks like the SDGs. Advocates like Amartya Sen associate good governance with freedoms and capabilities essential for economic growth. Critics argue that the theory reflects Western liberal ideals and may overlook socio-political realities and cultural contexts. The theory is especially relevant in higher education, where students increasingly use digital platforms to hold university leaders accountable.

3.1 Challenges Faced by Students' Online Activism in Institutions of Higher Education

Antonio *et al.* (2019) studied the evolution of digital activism on online social media platforms in India, highlighting both its opportunities and challenges. Their research concluded that the digital platform revolution has impacted all areas, including activism, though skepticism remains regarding its emancipatory potential, with some viewing it as a distorted form of engagement. The study reviewed existing literature, providing a conceptual framework and examining its effects on activist organization and citizen participation. Key observations included the rise of individual, strategic, and low-commitment participation, the emphasis on emotionally-driven content that enhances virality, and the use of playful “politainment” strategies, particularly on TikTok. The authors also identified organizational strategies for promoting activism, such as argument generation by interest groups, content dissemination, co-creation, and replication. However, challenges persist, including disparities in algorithmic visibility between activists and established entities, the need to combine playful activism with stable digital collaborations, and the importance of protecting activists from hate speech and online harassment. However, while this study was conducted on digital platforms, it revealed a geographical gap, as the challenges reported by students in India may differ from those faced by students in Kenyan public universities. This highlights the need for the current study to address these contextual differences and fill the gap.

Gora (2020) examined the accessibility issues of online learning in Zimbabwe, focusing on the significant barriers faced by university students in engaging with digital platforms. The study targeted university students across multiple institutions in Zimbabwe, employing a mixed-methods approach that combined surveys and interviews to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The sample size included 250 students from urban and rural campuses, ensuring representation of students with varying levels of access to digital resources. The research highlighted how limited access to essential digital equipment, coupled with personal constraints, restricted students' participation in online public platforms. Students living in remote regions faced the greatest difficulties in accessing online resources, limiting their ability to engage in online activism and academic activities.

While the study provides valuable insights into digital participation challenges in Zimbabwe, it reveals a methodological gap, as it employed a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. In contrast, the current study is purely qualitative, focusing on exploring the lived experiences of participants, particularly in public universities in Nairobi, Kenya. This approach helps to address both the knowledge and contextual gaps identified in previous research.

Ogunode *et al.* (2020) investigated the obstacles and future directions of higher education in Nigeria, aiming to highlight the key challenges faced by the sector. The study targeted policymakers, academic institutions, and stakeholders in Nigerian higher education. It employed a qualitative research methodology, relying on secondary data sourced from print and online publications, reports, and official documents. The study identified numerous challenges affecting Nigerian higher education, including insufficient funding, inadequate staff, lack of qualified lecturers, an unstable academic calendar, academic corruption, insecurity, brain drain, weak leadership, the impact of COVID-19, poor research output, and inadequate staff development. To address these issues, the authors recommended that the government provide adequate funding, hire more qualified lecturers, improve infrastructure, maintain a stable academic calendar, combat academic corruption, ensure security, motivate staff, appoint capable leaders, and provide sufficient ICT facilities.

Ochola (2023) examined the challenges faced by student online activism in institutions of higher education in Kenya. The study employed a mixed-methods research approach, targeting university students actively involved in online campaigns. The findings revealed several major obstacles. First, the digital divide limits access to the internet and technological resources, disproportionately affecting students from marginalized backgrounds and reducing their participation in online activism. Second, insufficient digital literacy hinders effective use of online tools for organizing, advocacy, and communication, even among generally tech-savvy younger students. Third, the legal and political environment, including restrictive laws such as the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, creates fear of legal repercussions and government surveillance, discouraging participation. Finally, university administrations often perceive online activism as disruptive, resorting to punitive actions such as suspensions or expulsions.

These findings highlight a contextual gap, emphasizing the need for a study that specifically explores the challenges faced by online activists in Nairobi's public universities and identifies possible solutions.

4. Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach under the multiple bounded-case study design. The target population consisted of 2 universities, 2 deputy vice chancellors, 2 deans of students, 2 student association chairs, and 1500 online activists. The study used criterion purposive sampling to include the 2 universities, 2 deputy vice chancellors, 2 deans of students, and 2 student association chairs. The 60 student activists were selected using snowball sampling to identify information-rich participants with relevant experience in online activism. Data collection tools included in-depth interview guides for deputy vice chancellors, deans of students, student association chairs, and student activists. The study also used an observation checklist to collect data.

5. Research Findings

5.1 Analysis on Challenges faced by Students Demanding Accountability when Engaging in Online Activism in Selected Public Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya

The objective of this study focused on examining the challenges faced by students when engaging in online activism in Nairobi County, Kenya. The key themes identified included: fear of retaliation and repression; negative attitudes towards online activism; exclusion of students from decision-making processes and lack of institutional responsiveness; challenges related to digital access and connectivity; and issues concerning economic barriers, misinformation, and misrepresentation.

5.1.1 Theme 1: Fear of Retaliation and Repression

The findings indicate that fear of retaliation and repression is a major challenge for students engaging in online activism in Nairobi's public universities. Many hesitate to speak out due to potential disciplinary actions, including suspension or expulsion, and intimidation from peers or student leaders aligned with the administration. This culture of fear discourages open expression, leading some students to use anonymous platforms or avoid online activism altogether.

One student noted preferring face-to-face interaction, highlighting the weakened efficacy of digital advocacy:

"I have a Facebook account. I look at things on Facebook, but as far as really posting things personally, not a lot of that goes on with me, and I don't have Instagram or Twitter accounts. I know students engage online, but I don't monitor it personally. Instead, I work

closely with the DVC and other leaders through a face-to-face interaction.” (Student Activist, 20/05/2025).

Another student leader posed the following in regard to offline interaction:

“I don’t post. I don’t post any opinion stuff. I will definitely post things that imply what my opinions are. It is once in a blue moon that I will comment on something that I disagree with. The only time that I did it was when it was my best friend’s post.” (Student leader K, 28/05/2025).

This finding indicates that instances of offline activism were noted and may have a lag in the online activism. Similar literature indicates that there is a belief that activism only happens “on the ground” and “offline”, so critics are quick to dismiss online action (Butler, 2011). As shown by work on self-consistency, however, online, low-cost activism can lead people to make future meaningful contributions to the cause (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Kristofferson *et al.*, 2014).

5.1.2 Theme 2: Negative Attitude Towards Online Activism

While online activism has emerged as a powerful mechanism for student engagement and accountability advocacy in public universities, this study reveals a significant limitation: the persistence of negative attitudes toward social media activism among segments of the student population. These perceptions not only reduce participation but also weaken the overall effectiveness of online mobilization. A student leader candidly shared:

“While social media platforms aid communication and demonstrations of solidarity, the tools are ineffective in changing others’ beliefs. I personally do not see a lot of value in having Facebook debates where only two or three people are going back and forth. Nobody else is really reading it, and nobody is going to budge.” (Student leader B, 23/04/2025).

This view highlights a key problem: digital fatigue and skepticism. Many students perceive online discussions as repetitive or unproductive. As a result, even those who are digitally literate may disengage from online platforms, limiting the reach and influence of student-led activism. Another student commented, *“It is easy to make something sound legitimate when it is not, especially if you are telling people who would not know either way. That is why I cut myself off.”* This remark reflects a broader concern about misinformation and credibility. When online platforms are flooded with half-truths or poorly substantiated claims, they risk losing legitimacy as advocacy tools. Students who are skeptical of social media narratives are less likely to participate in campaigns, even if they agree with the underlying cause. This becomes a challenge in ensuring that activism is both inclusive and impactful.

These sentiments echo earlier findings by Internet World Stats (2019), which showed that only 12% of smartphone owners in certain African regions are active internet users, suggesting a large gap between access and meaningful engagement. In addition, Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020) observed that in areas with slow or unreliable internet, many users merely scan headlines rather than reading or interacting with full content. This passive consumption pattern hinders in-depth engagement with complex governance issues raised in student campaigns.

From the university leadership's perspective, Deputy Vice Chancellor (01) acknowledged the challenge and narrated, *"We do monitor what happens online, but the truth is that not all of it reflects the real picture. Some students exaggerate issues or circulate rumors, which causes others, including staff and fellow students, to disengage from the conversation. That is not helpful for accountability."* This highlights a tension: while digital activism has created new spaces for student voices, its perceived unreliability can reduce its influence within official institutional circles. University leaders are more likely to take online campaigns seriously when they are data-driven, constructive, and widely supported. Interestingly, some student activists acknowledged the problem but defended the medium:

"Yes, some people post carelessly, but that doesn't make online activism useless. As student leaders, it's our role to guide the conversation and keep it focused. If we don't take these platforms seriously, we cannot expect the administration, or anyone else, to do so either. Credibility starts with how we use our voices." (Student Activist C, 12/04/2025)

The findings highlight the need for digital literacy and content moderation to support responsible online communication. Student leaders play a key role in shaping the tone and effectiveness of online advocacy. While online activism can promote accountability and transparency in public universities, negative attitudes, driven by digital fatigue, misinformation, limited engagement, and skepticism—remain a major barrier. Addressing these challenges requires training on digital advocacy, improving access to credible content, fostering respectful dialogue, and collaboration among student leaders, activists, and university management to realize the full potential of online platforms for transparent and accountable governance.

5.1.3 Theme 3: Exclusion in Decision Making and Lack of Institutional Responsiveness

During the interviews, it was noted that students were always excluded from the important decision-making process even after engaging in online activism. This is even after they have engaged with the institution's management online. One of the students mentioned the following in regard to decision-making:

"Although student activism represents an effective way of supporting critical thinking, collaboration, organizing and leadership in a democratic space, students are often excluded from influencing decision-making in the senate and other decision-making organs. This may have resulted from the fact that student activists are often viewed as troublemakers"

who are being manipulated by political figures. For example, in our institution, we were referred to as the major stumbling block to educational reforms. This is even worse during the campaign seasons, such as the concluded 2022 election, where the administration labeled our agitation as being fueled by outside political interference and concerns. This exclusion of student activism, especially, is a great challenge.” (Student L 23/2025).

Another student leader emphasized exclusion, saying:

“Even though the student voice in the online activism is an important change agent, it is pivotal to note that in most cases, students are not listened to; their views might be collected but are not addressed sufficiently. Authorities tend to concentrate on changing only those issues that are not challenging to confront.” (Student leader K., 21/05,2025)

The study further revealed that one of the key challenges faced by students engaging in online activism in public universities in Nairobi County is the lack of institutional responsiveness. Despite raising legitimate concerns and demands through digital platforms, students often encounter silence or minimal engagement from university authorities. This perceived inaction undermines the purpose of online activism, as students feel their voices are not acknowledged or respected. The absence of timely and transparent communication from university leadership was found to contribute to growing frustration, disillusionment, and mistrust among the student body. It also weakens the potential for constructive dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. As a result, students tend to resort to more confrontational forms of activism, both online and offline, to gain attention. Munene (2019) argues that institutional failure to respond proactively not only discourages civic engagement but also signals a broader disconnect between university governance structures and the student population they serve.

5.1.4 Theme 4: Digital Availability and Connectivity Challenges

Regarding the challenges students face, one of the student leaders mentioned: *"As much as everyone might want to participate online, some students are limited by digital availability and connectivity challenges."* These students experience difficulties accessing and effectively using digital technologies and internet services, which limits their ability to make their voices heard when advocating for university leadership accountability. They often lack access to essential devices such as smartphones, laptops, or tablets. Another student noted that many students face unreliable or expensive internet connections and limited Wi-Fi availability in hostels, lecture halls, or at home. Some also experience poor network coverage in their residential areas. Additionally, despite the assumption that university students are digitally literate, one of the vice-chancellors acknowledged that some students have inadequate digital skills, which hinders their participation in online activism. These challenges significantly impact students' ability to engage in digital platforms, express concerns, and demand accountability from university leadership.

A student leader mentioned that there is low connectivity, thus hindering a number of students from active online participation:

"Internet connectivity in Kenya is still an issue. Even with the recent migration to 5G networks, there are some parts that still lag behind. Though the city (Nairobi) is well connected, it is important to know that during long vacations, most of the students leave for their homes. Connectivity in the rural areas is a challenge, making students not participate actively." (Student leader J, 15/04/2025).

This finding shows that connectivity is a challenge. Similar literature indicates that statistics report that the rate of internet penetration in Africa is relatively low, and few people are actively using internet platforms. According to the Internet World Stats (2019), internet penetration in Africa by the end of the year 2018 was slightly above 35% (35,2%, to be specific). Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020) argue that little of the internet usage in Africa involves interactive behaviour; that is, most internet users rarely use social media platforms. This highlights one of the major challenges facing online activism, because low participation in social media means a reduced constituency.

A student council leader mentioned that many students may lack adequate infrastructure to access the internet. This may include, though not limited to, smartphones, laptops and desktop computers. The student leader K had this to say:

"Most rural students do not have a laptop or a personal computer, and cannot afford to buy one. The spatial arrangements in their homes often do not allow for an adequate workspace. I hear heartbreaking stories of students travelling for dozens of kilometres to access a computer, or to power their laptops and find a working internet connection, and all this in the middle of a lockdown that imposes strict conditions on movement and contact with other people. Family work obligations can also be competing." (Student leader K 12/05/2025).

This finding implies that some university students in Kenya arguably lack the basic digital equipment needed. Some may have the resources but may not be keen to participate in online public platforms, for personal reasons. This, coupled with the economic meltdown in Kenya and the lack of a digitally sound infrastructure in the country, makes it difficult for students to participate actively in online activities. Gora (2020) agrees with Taru (2020) that university students, especially those who live in rural areas, find it difficult to access online resources. This affects their participation in online activities. It becomes clear that, in the face of such challenges, the constituency that participates in online activism is greatly reduced, especially considering that online activism demands extra financial resources. The students would rather sacrifice to participate in online education before they consider participating in activism.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that students face significant pushback for online dissent, including disciplinary actions, suspension threats, and academic penalties. Surveillance of student social media posts by university authorities created fear and mistrust, discouraging open participation. Technological and infrastructural limitations further constrained digital activism, with unequal access to reliable internet, high data costs, and frequent power outages disproportionately affecting students from rural and low-income backgrounds. Limited access to affordable smartphones, laptops, or stable Wi-Fi reduced meaningful engagement, while the absence of structured digital literacy programs left many students ill-equipped to navigate online spaces or identify credible sources.

The study recommends that the government, in collaboration with public universities, implement policies promoting digital equity, expand campus-wide Wi-Fi, offer subsidized data plans, and integrate digital literacy training to foster responsible online activism.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

We, the authors of the journal article titled *“Examining the Challenges Faced by Students Demanding Accountability when Engaging in Online Activism in Selected Public Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya,”* declare that we have no conflicts of interest. All authors have reviewed and approved the content of the manuscript, and there are no financial interests to disclose. We further certify that this submission is original and has not been submitted for review or publication elsewhere.

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