

Miscommunication and Missed Opportunities: Rethinking Conflict Resolution through Shakespeare's Julius Caesar

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Abstract

Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests exposed the fragility of governance when leaders fail to engage citizens meaningfully, a challenge directly linked to SDG 16's goals of peace, justice, and strong institutions. Using Shakespeare's Julius Caesar as a comparative lens, this paper examines how miscommunication, rhetorical strategies, and ignored warnings escalate conflict. Caesar dismisses critical advice, Brutus struggles to win public trust, and Antony stirs the crowd—failures that echo Kenyan youth feeling silenced and marginalized. Combining literary insight, African political contexts, and conflict resolution theory, the study demonstrates that sustainable governance requires transparent, empathetic, and inclusive communication. Literature thus offers practical lessons for building trust, resolving conflict, and fostering peaceful, accountable societies.

Keywords: Miscommunication, Political Communication, Conflict Resolution, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Kenya Gen-Z Protests, SDG 16

Background

In June and July 2024, Kenya witnessed unprecedented Gen-Z-led protests sparked by the Finance Bill, which introduced new taxes amid economic hardship. What began as opposition to taxation quickly grew into wider demands for accountability, transparency, and trust. Unlike earlier protests led by political parties or unions, this movement was decentralized and digital, with young people using social media to mobilize, share grievances, and reshape conversations about governance and citizenship (Mutahi & Kamau, 2024).

At the heart of the crisis was a communication breakdown. Government responses—delayed, dismissive, or patronizing—failed to address young people's concerns and instead deepened mistrust (Branch & Cheeseman, 2020). This mirrors Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, where Caesar ignored warnings and the conspirators failed to communicate a credible message, leaving space for Antony's rhetoric to ignite unrest. In both Rome and Kenya, missed opportunities for dialogue turned political tension into crisis. These parallels highlight a central truth of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16): peace, justice, and strong institutions cannot rest on laws alone. They depend on transparent, empathetic, and inclusive communication that builds trust. Where dialogue is neglected, as both history and contemporary Kenya show, legitimacy falters and instability follow.

Rationale

This study is important because it places communication at the heart of governance and peacebuilding—not just laws, economic reforms, or institutions. Political crises often appear as conflicts over resources or policy, but at their core, they reveal how leaders and citizens speak, listen, and relate to one another. By examining Kenya’s Gen-Z protests alongside Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, this study shows that literature can offer meaningful lessons about power, persuasion, and miscommunication.

Both contexts highlight a common challenge: leaders often underestimate the value of dialogue, empathy, and attentiveness in maintaining trust and legitimacy. In Rome, the absence of honest communication leads to civil war; in Kenya, dismissive rhetoric and unresponsive leadership fuel anger and frustration. When examined together, these contexts demonstrate how literature serves as a lens for understanding today’s political challenges. For conflict resolution, the lesson is clear: lasting peace requires more than strong institutions—it depends on meaningful communication that builds trust and inclusion.

Statement of the Problem

Communication lies at the heart of good governance, yet it is often treated by political leaders as a one-way tool for control or damage management rather than a means of genuine engagement. In Kenya’s 2024 Gen-Z protests, the government’s dismissive statements and heavy-handed responses exposed a serious breakdown in communication. Instead of opening dialogue, leaders’ rhetoric alienated young people, deepened mistrust, and widened the gap between citizens and the state. These failures did not just affect public perception—they threatened the stability and credibility of governance itself, highlighting the importance of inclusive, accountable, and peaceful institutions as envisioned in SDG 16.

A historical parallel can be found in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. After Caesar’s assassination, the conspirators’ inability to communicate a clear and persuasive message left them vulnerable to Mark Antony’s powerful rhetoric, which stirred public outrage and civil unrest. Both in ancient Rome and modern Kenya, the lesson is clear: trust is the foundation of political authority, and it is built through transparent, empathetic, and consistent communication. When dialogue fails, disagreements can quickly escalate into crises, reinforcing the need for effective

communication in promoting the peaceful, inclusive, and accountable governance that SDG 16 champions.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

1. Examine how communication breakdowns contributed to the escalation of Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests.
2. Analyze *Julius Caesar* as a lens for understanding the dynamics of miscommunication, rhetoric, and political instability.
3. Draw lessons from both the play and the protests on how communication can support effective governance, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding.
4. Assess the role of effective communication in promoting inclusive, accountable, and peaceful governance, in line with SDG 16.

Research Questions

1. How did communication breakdowns contribute to the escalation of Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests?
2. In what ways does *Julius Caesar* illustrate the dynamics of miscommunication, rhetoric, and political instability?
3. What lessons can be drawn from both *Julius Caesar* and the Kenyan protests on the use of communication for effective governance, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding?
4. How can effective communication promote inclusive, accountable, and peaceful governance, in alignment with SDG 16?

Literature Review

Communication, Trust and Governance

Communication is the heartbeat of governance, yet it is often treated as secondary to laws and policies. SDG 16 calls for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, but these goals cannot be achieved through institutions alone—they depend on trust, transparency, and dialogue between leaders and citizens. When leaders fail to communicate authentically, they risk alienating the public and creating space for misinformation, unrest, and resistance.

Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests made this painfully clear. Government statements were delayed, evasive, or dismissive, framing protesters as misguided while ignoring their real concerns (Ogola, 2023). Instead of easing tensions, this rhetoric deepened mistrust. As Easton (1975) reminds us, legitimacy rests not just on structures of authority but also on citizens' confidence in fair and responsive governance. Once trust collapses, so too does institutional credibility—undermining the very vision of SDG 16.

This challenge is not unique to Kenya. Across Africa, governments often rely on top-down communication rooted in postcolonial traditions of authority (Branch & Cheeseman, 2020). But today's youth expect recognition, participation, and accountability. For them, governance is not a monologue but a dialogue. Their voices, amplified through digital platforms, demand to be part of shaping inclusive and peaceful societies.

The lesson is clear: strong institutions alone are not enough. To realize SDG 16, leaders must embrace transparent, empathetic, and responsive communication. Legitimacy is built not by decrees but by dialogue; peace is sustained not by rhetoric but by listening; and inclusive governance thrives only when citizens feel heard and valued.

Shakespeare, Power and Miscommunication

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* shows how fragile politics becomes when communication fails. The conspirators kill Caesar in the name of liberty, but their weak and divided message leaves them exposed. Brutus appeals to reason and honor, yet his words fail to stir the people. Antony, by contrast, speaks to emotion, irony, and grief—turning a funeral into a rebellion. His speech proves how rhetoric can tear institutions apart as easily as it can sustain them.

The play is rooted in Elizabethan anxieties about power and succession, but its lessons reach far beyond Shakespeare's time. Like Rome, Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests revealed how mistrust grows when leaders neglect empathy and dialogue. Official statements, often dismissive or technical, only deepened frustration, while youth voices on digital platforms gained momentum through creativity and emotion.

Julius Caesar also warns of rumor and perception: Casca's account of Caesar refusing the crown reminds us that half-truths can shape politics as much as facts. Today, digital misinformation carries the same risk, often spreading faster than official communication.

The play's relevance to SDG 16 is clear. Strong institutions depend not only on laws but also on trust, transparency, and authentic dialogue. Both Rome and Kenya show that when communication breaks down, disagreement hardens into crisis, and legitimacy collapses.

Contemporary Youth Movements and Digital Mobilization

The rise of Gen-Z as a political force in Kenya reflects broader global trends in youth-led activism. Around the world, young people are increasingly using digital platforms to organize, voice grievances, and reimagine political participation. Movements such as the Arab Spring, Nigeria's #EndSARS campaign, and climate activism led by figures like Greta Thunberg illustrate the transformative power of digital communication in shaping contemporary protest cultures (Tufekci, 2017).

In Kenya, the 2024 protests highlighted the communicative sophistication of Gen-Z. Unlike earlier movements that relied on centralized leadership, these protests were decentralized and networked, with social media platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram serving as critical spaces for organization and storytelling. Young people not only shared logistical information but also crafted narratives that challenged state authority. Memes, viral videos, and hashtags condensed complex grievances into symbolic messages, amplifying voices often sidelined in mainstream political discourse (Mutahi & Kamau, 2024).

This digital activism disrupted traditional hierarchies of political communication. Historically, governments-controlled access to mass communication channels like radio and television, but Gen-Z leveraged digital networks to engage directly with the public, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. As Castells (2012) notes, such networked forms of communication fundamentally alter power dynamics, enabling marginalized groups to influence public debates in ways previously unimaginable.

At the same time, this rapid digital mobilization carries risks. Online communication spreads quickly, sometimes outpacing fact-checking and creating vulnerabilities to misinformation. Governments may respond with surveillance, censorship, or internet shutdowns, which can heighten tensions rather than resolve conflicts. These dynamics echo Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, where rumors, miscommunication, and emotionally charged rhetoric carried as much weight as reasoned debate. In both contexts, the way information flows—or fails to flow—

shapes collective action and determines political outcomes, demonstrating that communication itself is a decisive factor in governance and legitimacy.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, concerned less with measurement and more with meaning. The goal is to explore how communication—or its absence—shapes conflict, using Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests as parallel case studies. A qualitative design allows for nuance, enabling attention to symbols, words, and actions as carriers of political power (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this sense, the study does not treat Shakespeare's text as a static literary artifact nor the protests as isolated events; rather, both are situated within their historical and cultural contexts.

Two theoretical frameworks anchor the analysis. New Historicism provides a lens for reading *Julius Caesar* not simply as a timeless tragedy but as a text embedded in Elizabethan anxieties over succession, legitimacy, and popular opinion (Montrose, 2011). This same framework allows the play to be re-read in dialogue with contemporary Kenya, where young people's frustrations with governance echo the Roman plebeians' disillusionment with their leaders. Alongside this, Galtung's (1996) Conflict Triangle helps unpack the multiple dimensions of communication breakdown. It reveals how rhetoric, or its failure, can activate structural violence (economic exclusion), cultural violence (stereotypes dismissing youth as naïve), and direct violence (clashes between protesters and security forces). In Shakespeare's Rome, as in modern Nairobi, words are not neutral—they either bridge or deepen wounds.

The data for this study comes entirely from secondary sources. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* forms the primary literary text, read through the critical interpretations of scholars such as Greenblatt (2018) and Montrose (2011). For the Kenyan case, analysis draws on recent studies of youth activism and governance (Mutahi & Kamau, 2024; Ogola, 2023; Branch & Cheeseman, 2020), complemented by news reports, government statements, and policy reviews. These diverse sources offer multiple perspectives, creating a form of triangulation that minimizes bias while illuminating the complexity of both contexts.

Analysis proceeds through thematic interpretation. In *Julius Caesar*, themes such as miscommunication, manipulative rhetoric, and the missed opportunities for dialogue are foregrounded to show how political trust collapses. These themes are then read alongside

Kenya's 2024 protests, where dismissive government rhetoric, misinformation, and delayed responses widened the gap between leaders and citizens. The comparative method is not about equating Shakespearean Rome with contemporary Kenya, but about allowing the past to illuminate the present. For instance, Antony's ironic funeral oration is juxtaposed with Gen-Z's creative use of TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) to mobilize public opinion, showing how rhetorical mastery can shift the balance of power.

Because the study relies only on publicly available data, ethical concerns tied to fieldwork do not arise. Nevertheless, it maintains a responsibility to accuracy and fairness, especially when discussing a sensitive subject like state-citizen conflict. Care is taken to foreground young people's perspectives as represented in credible reports, avoiding sensationalism while acknowledging limitations. Chief among these limitations is the reliance on secondary rather than primary data, which constrains the depth of insights into lived experiences of protesters. A second limitation is interpretive bias, which is inevitable in qualitative work. Finally, while parallels between Shakespeare's Rome and Kenya are revealing, they remain suggestive rather than exhaustive, pointing toward avenues for further research rather than claiming definitive conclusions.

In sum, this methodology is deliberately interpretive, designed to bridge literature and politics, past and present. By drawing Shakespeare's warnings into conversation with Kenya's unfolding struggles, it highlights the enduring truth that communication—listening, empathy, and dialogue—is the fragile thread on which peace and governance hang.

Analysis and Discussion

Miscommunication and Political Manipulation

At the heart of both Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests lies a profound insight into how societies unravel when communication collapses. The relationship between leadership and the governed—whether in ancient Rome or contemporary Nairobi—is sustained not merely by authority or laws, but by mutual understanding and trust. When that trust is eroded through manipulation, distortion, or strategic silence, communication becomes a tool of domination rather than dialogue. This section examines how miscommunication and manipulation function as political instruments in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and how similar

dynamics were visible in Kenya's 2024 protests, where rhetorical strategies shaped public perception, deepened mistrust, and intensified conflict.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare crafts a world where words carry the weight of daggers. Cassius's manipulation of Brutus demonstrates how rhetoric can weaponize emotion under the guise of reason. Cassius appeals to Brutus's love of Rome and fear of tyranny, persuading him that Caesar's ambition threatens the Republic. His decision to forge letters supposedly written by concerned citizens illustrates how communication can be deliberately falsified to fabricate consensus (Shakespeare, 1599/2008). As Greenblatt (2018) observes, this manipulation marks one of Shakespeare's earliest explorations of what he calls the "politics of persuasion," where language ceases to clarify truth and instead becomes a strategic means of control. Cassius's words distort rather than inform, creating an illusion of democratic urgency to justify violence.

This "weaponization of language" (Greenblatt, 2018) is not unique to Rome. Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests reveal comparable manipulative tendencies in official communication. Many young activists accused state officials of issuing ambiguous or contradictory messages regarding taxation, employment, and economic policy. Leaders promised "youth empowerment" and "digital innovation," yet these phrases often lacked tangible policy detail, functioning instead as rhetorical pacifiers (Mutahi & Kamau, 2024). At the same time, government spokespeople strategically framed protesters as "misled" or "politically sponsored," attempting to delegitimize their cause and fracture solidarity among youth movements (Ochieng, 2024). In both cases—Cassius's manipulation of Brutus and the state's framing of protesters—language becomes a means of managing perception rather than facilitating understanding.

The consequences of such communicative manipulation are profound. In *Julius Caesar*, deception breeds mistrust not only between individuals but across Rome's political hierarchy. Brutus's misplaced faith in Cassius and the conspirators' reliance on propaganda led to a chain reaction of betrayal and bloodshed. Similarly, in Kenya, the state's lack of transparent communication widened the gap between leaders and citizens. Protesters viewed official statements as insincere and self-serving, leading to what Habermas (1984) calls a breakdown in "communicative rationality"—a situation where dialogue no longer functions to reach mutual understanding but instead to maintain dominance.

Moreover, both Shakespeare's Rome and modern Kenya demonstrate how miscommunication amplifies polarization. Cassius's rhetoric divides Rome's elite between loyalty and conspiracy, just as political discourse in Kenya divided citizens between "patriots" and "troublemakers." As Luhmann (1995) argues, communication systems in politics are prone to distortion when actors prioritize control over comprehension. This distortion transforms the public sphere into a battleground of narratives rather than a platform for truth.

Ultimately, the parallel between Cassius's manipulation and Kenya's political rhetoric exposes a shared vulnerability in governance: when communication is stripped of sincerity, it ceases to unify and instead becomes a weapon of division. Political institutions built upon manipulation may achieve short-term compliance, but they sacrifice long-term legitimacy. Shakespeare's tragedy thus transcends its Roman setting to offer a universal lesson—political decay begins not in violence, but in the corruption of language. For modern Kenya, the events of 2024 reveal that the same truth endures: when words lose integrity, democracy loses its foundation.

Missed Opportunities for Dialogue

In both Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests, the breakdown of dialogue emerges as a pivotal moment where potential understanding gives way to alienation and conflict. Dialogue, as a cornerstone of governance, is not merely a linguistic exchange—it is a moral and civic act that sustains trust between leaders and citizens. When it fails, so too does the social contract. The inability or unwillingness to engage in meaningful conversation transforms governance into domination and dissent into rebellion. Shakespeare dramatizes this failure through Caesar's hubris and the conspirators' silence, while Kenya's political leadership repeated the same pattern by ignoring youth voices until discontent spilled into the streets.

In *Julius Caesar*, the conspirators' decision to assassinate Caesar rather than confront him reveals their profound mistrust in dialogue as a means of reform. Cassius and his fellow senators perceive Caesar's growing influence as a direct threat to republican values, yet they never attempt to reason with him. Instead, they interpret his popularity as tyranny and resort to violence—a fatal substitute for conversation. Their act reflects what Galtung (1996) identifies as "direct violence," a visible outcome of unaddressed structural and communicative inequalities. Equally, Caesar's own failures compound this problem. He dismisses the soothsayer's warning to "beware the Ides of March," disregards Calpurnia's anxious dreams, and ignores Artemidorus's plea to read a letter that could have saved his life (Shakespeare,

1599/2008). These moments illustrate Caesar's arrogance and inability to listen and, by extension, the dangers of monologic leadership. As Bloom (2010) notes, Shakespeare constructs Caesar's downfall not as the triumph of fate, but as the inevitable result of his "deafness to the voices of caution."

The missed opportunities for dialogue in *Julius Caesar* parallel Kenya's 2024 protests in striking ways. Months before the demonstrations erupted, young Kenyans had already voiced concerns through social media campaigns, online petitions, and youth forums about economic hardship, unemployment, and the controversial Finance Bill. These expressions represented a digital form of civic dialogue, an invitation to political conversation. Yet, government leaders often responded with silence or condescension. Official statements described the youth as "misguided" or "misinformed," thereby dismissing legitimate grievances as social media agitation (Ogola, 2023). This refusal to listen or engage mirrors Caesar's disregard for warnings—both rooted in an entrenched belief that authority is self-justifying and dialogue is unnecessary.

Galtung's (1996) Conflict Triangle provides a valuable framework for interpreting this communicative failure. Kenya's protests exposed three interlinked forms of violence. Structural violence manifests in the exclusion of youth from policy-making and their limited access to economic opportunities. Cultural violence appeared in the stereotypes that labeled Gen-Z protesters as lazy or politically immature. These layers culminated in direct violence, evident in clashes between demonstrators and security forces. Similarly, in Rome, structural violence took the form of elite conspiracies and closed political systems, while Caesar's autocratic posture represented cultural domination. Both societies, ancient and modern, illustrate that when communication is suppressed, latent tensions erupt into open conflict.

Moreover, the lack of dialogue in both contexts reveals the fragility of political legitimacy. As Habermas (1984) argues, legitimate governance depends on communicative action—on leaders' willingness to justify their decisions through rational discourse rather than coercion. When governments substitute dialogue with decree, they forfeit the moral authority that sustains public trust. The Kenyan government's delayed and defensive communication during the protests demonstrated this risk. Rather than engaging the youth as stakeholders in policy discussions, it positioned them as adversaries, leading to a widening credibility gap. This echoes Brutus's failure in *Julius Caesar*: after killing Caesar, he attempts to rationalize the act

to the Roman public, but his words ring hollow because they arrive too late—after trust has already been destroyed.

Both Shakespeare's Rome and contemporary Kenya illustrate a universal truth about governance: silence is not neutrality—it is complicity. When leaders fail to listen, they inadvertently radicalize the very voices they hope to silence. As Adichie (2009) reminds us, “the danger of a single story” lies in reducing diverse perspectives to a monolithic narrative of power. The youth in Kenya, much like the plebeians in Rome, sought not violence but recognition. Their protests were not mere acts of defiance but desperate appeals for dialogue in a system that had stopped listening. Thus, the missed opportunities for communication in both contexts are not just political miscalculations—they are moral failures that transform preventable crises into historical turning points.

Miscommunication and Leadership in *Julius Caesar*

Leadership in *Julius Caesar* is inseparable from the problem of communication. Shakespeare reveals that even noble intentions can be undone by rhetorical missteps and interpretive failures. Cassius's conspiracy thrives because Caesar and his allies underestimate the importance of open dialogue and trust-building. The Senate's inability to deliberate transparently transforms political rivalry into treachery. Cassius manipulates Brutus through selective truths and appeals to ego rather than reason, showing how communication, when untethered from ethics, becomes a form of violence.

The funeral orations serve as a case study in the communicative power of rhetoric. Brutus's speech relies on logic and moral appeal—he defends Caesar's assassination as an act of republican virtue. However, his tone of moral superiority alienates the crowd. Antony, conversely, wields empathy and irony; his repeated refrain, “Brutus is an honorable man,” gradually dismantles Brutus's credibility while stirring collective emotion (Shakespeare, 1599/2008). As scholars such as Garber (2014) and Bloom (2010) note, this scene encapsulates Shakespeare's profound insight into how emotional persuasion often outmaneuvers rational argument in political contexts.

Contemporary Kenya provides a mirror image. During the protests, leaders often relied on formal press briefings, rigid and top-down communication devoid of empathy, while protesters used humor, symbolism, and emotional storytelling to convey their grievances. The contrast

echoed the rhetorical gap between Brutus's stoicism and Antony's populist eloquence. In both contexts, leadership failures stemmed not from lack of authority but from lack of communicative sensitivity. As Ochieng (2024) observes, Kenya's leaders "spoke at the people, not with them," a miscalculation that turned citizens into opponents rather than collaborators in governance.

The Role of Miscommunication in *Julius Caesar*

Miscommunication functions as a pivotal catalyst for tragedy in *Julius Caesar*, shaping the downfall of key characters and the disintegration of the Roman Republic. Shakespeare intricately weaves a pattern of misunderstanding and misinterpretation that underscores the fragility of political alliances and human relationships. The play demonstrates how the failure to communicate intentions clearly—whether through language, symbolism, or silence—can lead to devastating consequences.

One of the most significant instances of miscommunication arises in the conspirators' perception of Caesar's ambition. Brutus, in particular, misreads both Caesar's motives and the will of the Roman people. Influenced by Cassius's rhetoric rather than concrete evidence, Brutus acts upon a hypothetical fear rather than a factual threat. This misjudgment exemplifies what scholars such as Greenblatt (2018) describe as "rhetorical manipulation masquerading as rational deliberation," in which persuasive language distorts truth. Brutus's tragic error lies not in malice but in his inability to discern between persuasion and authenticity—a miscommunication that ultimately leads to Caesar's assassination and Brutus's moral collapse.

Another profound moment of miscommunication occurs between Caesar and the prophetic voices that warn him. The soothsayer's "Beware the Ides of March" and Calpurnia's dream both serve as symbolic communications that Caesar fails to interpret correctly. His dismissal of these omens, motivated by pride and political image, transforms divine warning into tragic irony. As Bloom (2010) notes, Shakespeare portrays Caesar as "a man deafened by his own authority," suggesting that miscommunication can stem not from the lack of information but from the refusal to listen.

The crowd scenes further dramatize the destructive potential of miscommunication. Following Caesar's assassination, Antony's funeral oration manipulates the ambiguity of Brutus's claim that Caesar was ambitious. Antony's repeated line, "Brutus is an honorable man," becomes an

exercise in irony that reshapes public perception. What was intended by Brutus as an act of liberation is reinterpreted by the masses as treachery. Here, miscommunication is weaponized—used strategically to control collective emotion and destabilize political order.

Through these layers of misunderstanding, Shakespeare exposes a universal truth: that communication, while central to governance and human connection, is also inherently vulnerable to distortion. In political contexts, miscommunication becomes a tool of power, persuasion, and ultimately, destruction. This thematic exploration resonates beyond the play, inviting reflection on how failed communication continues to influence leadership, justice, and collective decision-making in modern societies.

The Role of Rhetoric and Symbolism

Rhetoric and symbolism lie at the heart of political struggle, whether in Shakespeare's Rome or modern Nairobi. Antony's funeral speech demonstrates how carefully crafted language can redefine public perception. Through repetition, irony, and theatrical gesture, Antony transforms Caesar's corpse from a political liability into a moral symbol of betrayal and loss. As rhetorician Bitzer (1968) explains, effective rhetoric reshapes the "rhetorical situation," turning private sentiment into collective action.

Similarly, Kenya's Gen Z protesters understood this power instinctively. Their use of hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #OccupyParliament turned online discourse into civic mobilization. Digital platforms became arenas of symbolic performance, where memes, videos, and slogans distilled complex economic grievances into accessible and emotionally charged messages (Mutahi & Kamau, 2024). Turning the Kenyan flag upside down symbolized national distress, while chanting popular anthems during protests fostered unity and defiance. These performative acts mirror Antony's theatrical rhetoric, appealing to emotion, identity, and justice rather than pure logic.

However, government rhetoric often had the opposite effect. Describing protesters as "foreign influenced" or "misguided" alienated the very demographic it sought to reassure. As Fairclough (1992) argues, discourse is never neutral; it reproduces power relations. The Kenyan government's narrative, intended to project authority, instead reinforced perceptions of elitism and disconnection. Both Antony's oration and Gen Z's digital campaigns reveal that political

legitimacy depends not only on institutional authority but also on narrative control. Those who command the story ultimately command the people.

Implications of *Julius Caesar* for SDG 16

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* extends beyond the historical and literary—it resonates with the moral imperatives embedded in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 16: promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions. The tragedy illustrates how fragile institutions become when communication gives way to manipulation, when trust erodes under the weight of ambition, and when dissent is silenced instead of understood.

In Rome, Brutus's moral reasoning and Antony's emotional rhetoric clashed without synthesis, producing chaos and civil war. In Kenya, similarly, defensive political discourse replaced participatory dialogue, undermining the very institutions tasked with upholding justice and peace. As the UN (2015) emphasizes, strong institutions are built on transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. Both Shakespeare's Rome and contemporary Kenya reveal the perils of neglecting these principles.

The enduring lesson is clear: sustainable governance is communicative governance. Laws and authority alone cannot sustain peace; what binds societies is trust, empathy, and dialogue. Shakespeare's tragedy reminds modern policymakers that words can heal or destroy, unite or divide. For Kenya and other nations striving toward SDG 16, communication is not a peripheral tool of governance—it is the foundation upon which justice and peace are built.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Communication Failures Across Time: Rome and Nairobi

The findings of this study highlight that breakdowns in communication are not peripheral issues in governance—they are central fault lines that can destabilize entire societies. In *Julius Caesar*, ignored warnings, misused rhetoric, and a lack of empathy contributed to civil war in ancient Rome. More than two millennia later, Kenya's 2024 Gen-Z protests reveal strikingly similar dynamics: citizens felt dismissed, their grievances trivialized, and leaders appeared more committed to propaganda than to dialogue. This parallel does not suggest a direct comparison between Rome and Nairobi but underscores how recurring patterns of miscommunication continue to shape political life across vastly different contexts.

At the core of both cases is what Habermas (1984) describes as a “legitimation crisis”—situations in which institutions lose credibility because leaders fail to maintain genuine channels of communication with those they govern. When citizens no longer believe that dialogue is possible or meaningful, they may withdraw consent, and in extreme cases—as seen in both Rome and Kenya—turn to confrontation. Communication, therefore, is not an optional complement to governance; it is its lifeblood. The failure to listen, engage, and respond not only erodes trust but also sets the stage for conflict, demonstrating that dialogue is both a preventive and transformative tool in maintaining societal stability.

New Historicism and the Continuing Relevance of *Julius Caesar*

Reading *Julius Caesar* through a New Historicist lens allows us to see the play as both a product of Elizabethan England and a text that speaks across time. Shakespeare wrote the play in 1599, a period marked by anxiety over succession. Queen Elizabeth I was aging without an heir, and public debate on succession was tightly controlled. The theater offered a space where these tensions could be dramatized under the guise of Roman history (Greenblatt, 2018).

Within the play, miscommunication emerges in multiple forms. Caesar dismisses the soothsayer’s warning to “beware the Ides of March,” ignores Calpurnia’s plea to stay home after ominous dreams, and brushes aside Artemidorus’s letter exposing the conspiracy. These silenced or neglected voices are not incidental; they reveal a leadership deaf to dissent. Caesar equates listening with weakness, trusting that authority alone will command obedience. This hubris ultimately exposes him not just to assassination, but to the collapse of the very order he sought to uphold.

Kenya’s 2024 Gen-Z protests reflect a modern echo of this dynamic. Long before the streets filled with demonstrators waving placards or mobilizing hashtags, youth leaders, civil society groups, and policy analysts had sounded alarms about rising debt, unemployment, and corruption (Ogola, 2023; Mutahi & Kamau, 2024). Yet official responses often arrived late, couched in technical jargon, or delivered with a dismissive tone that further alienated the young. Like Caesar, Kenya’s leaders sometimes mistook silence for consent, overlooking the growing frustration beneath the surface.

Through this comparative lens, Shakespeare’s Rome and contemporary Kenya highlight the communicative foundations of legitimacy. Both contexts demonstrate that power is fragile

when leaders fail to listen, and literature functions as a mirror reflecting how ignored warnings and neglected voices can destabilize societies.

Miscommunication as Violence: Galtung's Conflict Triangle

Johan Galtung's (1996) Conflict Triangle provides a valuable framework for understanding how miscommunication can evolve into structural, cultural, and direct violence. In both ancient Rome and contemporary Kenya, communication breakdowns intersect with systemic and societal forces, producing consequences that reach far beyond words alone.

Structural Violence

In *Julius Caesar*, senators such as Brutus and Cassius perceive Caesar's rising popularity as a direct challenge to the political equilibrium of the Republic. While ordinary citizens celebrate Caesar as a hero, the elites interpret his influence as a threat to their shared authority. This tension between rulers and the ruled reflects similar dynamics in Kenya, where persistent inequalities ranging from youth unemployment to inequitable taxation and limited access to political participation have fueled discontent. When these structural grievances were met with dismissive or delayed government responses, frustrations deepened, creating fertile ground for protest and social unrest.

Cultural Violence

Shakespeare also exposes how cultural norms silence or devalue certain voices. Calpurnia's urgent warnings to Caesar are disregarded, not only because of Caesar's pride but also because of the patriarchal attitudes that marginalize women's insights within the political sphere. A comparable pattern emerged in Kenya, where youth were frequently labeled as immature, misled, or externally influenced. Such stereotypes served to delegitimize their activism and rationalize state repression. In both contexts, entrenched cultural beliefs perpetuated the exclusion of dissenting voices, reinforcing inequality and weakening democratic discourse.

Direct Violence

The assassination of Caesar marks the tragic culmination of ignored warnings, eroded trust, and unaddressed grievances. What began as a crisis of communication ultimately manifests in bloodshed. Similarly, in Kenya, direct violence surfaced when peaceful protests escalated into confrontations with police, resulting in injuries and fatalities. These outcomes reveal a

critical insight: visible conflict seldom erupts spontaneously. It often represents the final stage of unresolved tensions—structural inequalities, cultural biases, and repeated failures of dialogue converging into open violence.

Applying Galtung's framework demonstrates that miscommunication is not simply a rhetorical lapse; it is a deeply political phenomenon intertwined with social inequalities, cultural prejudices, and institutional weaknesses. Both Shakespeare's *Rome* and contemporary Kenya show that when dialogue collapses, the resulting vacuum destabilizes social order and reshapes collective perception and action.

Furthermore, both *Julius Caesar* and Kenya's 2024 Gen Z protests illustrate how political legitimacy depends on trust and effective communication. In Shakespeare's play, Caesar assumes that his reputation and authority are sufficient to ensure loyalty, while Brutus relies on reason and civic ideals to justify his actions to the Roman crowd. Antony, by contrast, wields emotion, irony, and rhetoric with remarkable precision, transforming collective grief into public outrage and redirecting loyalty through persuasion. These dynamics reveal that legitimacy is not sustained by power alone but is continually constructed through perception, empathy, and the art of communication.

In Kenya, similar dynamics unfolded. Government leaders often emphasized technical explanations—such as the fiscal necessity of the finance bill and the macroeconomic logic of taxation—while neglecting the lived experiences and emotional realities of young citizens. As a result, official messages failed to resonate or inspire confidence. Meanwhile, digital activists employed humor, creativity, and emotion through memes, music, and hashtags, effectively turning social media into a powerful platform for mobilization and solidarity.

These parallel cases make one principle unmistakably clear: rhetoric is not ornamental but foundational. The contrasts between Caesar's overconfidence, Brutus's cold rationality, Antony's emotional dexterity, and the Kenyan government's technocratic detachment all demonstrate that effective governance requires more than sound policy. It demands communication that is persuasive, trustworthy, and empathetic. Only through such communication can legitimacy be sustained and social cohesion preserved.

Conclusion

Both *Julius Caesar* and Kenya's 2024 Gen Z protests reveal a timeless truth: when leaders fail to listen, governance falters and peace begins to unravel. Authority and institutions may provide the framework for order, but true legitimacy arises only through open, empathetic, and consistent communication—precisely the kind of inclusive dialogue envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which calls for peace, justice, and strong institutions.

In Shakespeare's Rome, Caesar's refusal to heed repeated warnings and the conspirators' resort to violence rather than negotiation illustrate how missed opportunities for dialogue can ignite chaos. The absence of communication bred mistrust, ultimately plunging the Republic into civil war. Similarly, in Kenya, early signs of discontent such as youth petitions, online activism, and civil society appeals were visible long before the 2024 protests reached their peak. Yet, rather than engaging these voices constructively, government responses were often delayed, dismissive, or couched in technical language that alienated rather than reassured citizens. By the time genuine engagement was attempted, the trust necessary for dialogue had already eroded.

The parallel between these two contexts underscores a fundamental principle: dialogue cannot be a reaction to crisis; it must be the cornerstone of governance. As peace building theorists like Galtung (1996) remind us, sustainable stability grows from inclusion and trust, not from coercion or rhetorical dominance. In *Julius Caesar*, Antony's speech demonstrates how words possess the dual power to heal or to inflame, an insight mirrored in Kenya, where labeling protesters as unruly only deepened resentment. At the same time, empathetic communication could have restored calm and legitimacy.

Ultimately, both Rome and Kenya illustrate that when dialogue is replaced by manipulation or silence, political disagreement transforms into conflict. The enduring lesson is clear: transparent and inclusive communication is not a peripheral act of goodwill; it is the very foundation of peace, legitimacy, and effective governance.

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