



# The Use of Mock Politeness as a Communicative Strategy by Kenyans on X

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## Abstract

Kenyans on X function as a community of language users where language is not just a tool of communication, but an instrument for achieving social goals where they use language to navigate social interactions, have fun, critique leaders and assert their social identities. This paper examines the use of mock politeness as a communicative strategy by Kenyans on X. With a focus on their language, the study discusses how mock politeness helps Kenyans on X discuss various social, political and economic issues around this virtual space. Impoliteness theory by [1] Culpeper (1996) helps to analyze how impolite language is used in this virtual space. A qualitative research approach is used in the study as the data is linguistic. Purposive sampling technique was used to select tweets that showed how mock politeness impoliteness strategy was used by Kenyans on X. A guiding card was used to collect and place data collected in various categories. Content analysis method was also used to analyze data that was collected. This research is important as it helps to understand how Kenyan X users employ mock politeness to express themselves and negotiate power dynamics on X. The study sheds light on the communicative practices of Kenyan X users.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics

## Keywords

Kenyans on X, Twitter, Mock Politeness, Impoliteness, Impoliteness Strategies

## 1. Introduction

Research on impoliteness was pioneered by [1] Culpeper (1996) who observed

that it is not always that interlocutors attempt to be polite in their interactions. This was a reaction to [2] Brown & Levinson's (1987) notion of politeness that assumed that interactants tend to shape their conversations in a polite way to avoid threatening the hearer's face. While [2] Brown & Levinson (1987) showed that individuals strive to save their interactant's face in interactions, Culpeper (1996) noted that people sometimes want to damage their hearer's face needs. He therefore extended [2] Brown & Levinson's (1987) perspectives by examining instances where speakers intentionally violate politeness norms to achieve communicative goals. Culpeper's ideas have gained scholarly attention with other scholars shifting from politeness research that had been dominated by earlier studies to the notion of impoliteness.

[1] Culpeper (1996) presents five impoliteness super-strategies and one meta-strategy. Impoliteness super-strategies are a kind of parallel but opposite to politeness strategies. Bald on record impoliteness is performed directly when face is irrelevant. The face threat is direct, clear and unambiguous. Positive impoliteness is meant to destroy the hearer's positive face needs. Positive face is the desire to be acknowledged and shown appreciation. Any sub-strategy that shows a speaker's lack of acknowledging an addressee leads to a positive face threat, thus impoliteness. Such sub-strategies, according to [1] Culpeper (1996) include ignoring the other and using inappropriate identity markers. Negative impoliteness uses strategies that damage negative face wants. Negative face is the desire for autonomy. Hearer's negative face is threatened by impoliteness strategies such as ridiculing an addressee and belittling the other. Off record impoliteness on the other hand is done by means of implicature in a way that one attributable intention outweighs the other while withhold politeness is the absence of politeness markers where they are expected. For instance, failing to thank someone who has helped you is a case of withholding impoliteness.

[1] Culpeper (1996) presents mock or sarcasm politeness as an impoliteness meta-strategy. Mock politeness is the performance of a face threatening act using politeness strategies that are obviously insincere and therefore remain surface realizations. The output strategies are not closed lists and would include any linguistic act that would achieve communicative functions of sarcasm politeness. The root of mock impoliteness is the irony principle by [3] Leech (1983). This principle states that "if you must cause offence, at least do so in a way that does not overtly conflict with the politeness principle but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature." In this way, the use of irony as a strategy aims to minimize the force of impoliteness and lets aggressiveness be manifested by the speaker in a less dangerous manner as compared to direct criticisms. Leech (1983) [3] therefore presents irony as a friendly way of being offensive. Culpeper also points out that a speaker is required to uphold the cooperative principle at some point in order to observe this meta-strategy.

Mock politeness involves the use of politeness as a mask for underlying

impoliteness. This includes the adoption of polite forms that convey a message that is contrary to the polite surface structure. The principles of impoliteness are relevant to social media discourse as participants use intentional acts of sarcasm to communicate with others. This involves indirect acts of passive aggressive remarks to convey hidden meanings.

X has become a prominent platform used by Kenyans. There are about 1.90 X users in Kenya according to [4] Data Report (2023). Kenyans on twitter use the phrase Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) and Kenyans on X (KOX) to refer to themselves. The term emerged organically in 2011 as a way to identify the collective presence of Kenyans who use X platform. Impoliteness on X manifests through the use of direct and confrontational language. It is common for Kenyans on X to employ impolite strategies that include insults irony and sarcasm. Impolite language may also be used to attract attention, express frustration or engage in X wars. Watts (2003) [5] notes that people use impolite linguistic forms when they disregard the face of an individual. Culpeper's (1996) [1] mock politeness strategy is applicable on X as KOX tend to use language that is seemingly polite on the surface level but conceals an underlying ironic tone. Mock politeness in social media discourse helps users to convey criticisms with a layer of humour to avoid direct confrontation. Its significance lies in its effectiveness in helping speakers to engage in discourse while maintain a degree of social harmony as they may engage in sensitive topics without resorting to direct confrontation.

## 2. Methodology

The population of this study consisted of all tweets by Kenyans on X made between January and June 2024 that show the use of mock politeness as a communicative strategy by Kenyans on X. This ensured that the researcher collected data on the most recent topics under discussion while ensuring the data was manageable for analysis. Purposive sampling technique was used in the study to select tweets that displayed how mock politeness is used by Kenyan X users. Tweets were retrieved from X and content analysis was done to examine how Kenyans on X use mock politeness. Tweets were given pseudonyms to conceal tweep's identities.

## 3. The Use of Mock Politeness by Kenyans on X

[1] Culpeper (1996) proposed that interactants use mock politeness impoliteness strategy when they want to state an act using language that looks sincere but conveys sarcasm, rudeness and carries insincerity. This (im)politeness strategy is common among Kenyan X users and it is used as a communicative strategy to achieve communicative goals such as criticisms, expression of disagreements, joking, mockery among others. Mock politeness mainly employs irony and sarcasm to portray its message. The use of this strategy by KOX helps them navigate social interactions on X. The following tweets that show how KOX use mock politeness as a communicative strategy were identified in this study.

@S141

Gov't shareholders wanatumiwa SMS waende NCPB depot only to end up picking fake fertilizers and fake seeds. This year they're going to harvest maize cobs with teeth only, and we shall remember when they laughed at us during Maandamano. Bwana God is not Kamau.

S141 uses the phrase “government shareholders” to mock those who were deceived to be part of government as they are the ones who run the current regime. This tweet shows political deception as the said “shareholders” are now suffering since “their” government is now giving them fake fertilizers and seeds. As a result, the shareholders will harvest poor quality maize. Mock politeness in this tweet has been employed to remind the “shareholders” how they used to laugh at those whose party lost elections during demonstrations. The phrase “Bwana God is not Kamau” is used humorously to show how things have turned against those who voted for the leaders who are now deceiving them. Mock politeness has therefore been used by S141 to highlight betrayal of “shareholders” by their government. Just like in S140, the interpretation of S141 by KOX is dependent on shared cultural knowledge of the content in the tweet as words such as shareholders and Maandamano (demonstrations), as well as the topic about fake fertilizer was trending at Kenyan X space and mainstream media at the time of this tweet and is expected by the tweep to be known by his audience for proper reception of the message. KOX insiders are able to interpret the mock politeness used in this tweet while outsiders may not see it. Therefore, the integration of mock politeness by KOX fosters a community of language among Kenyans on X.

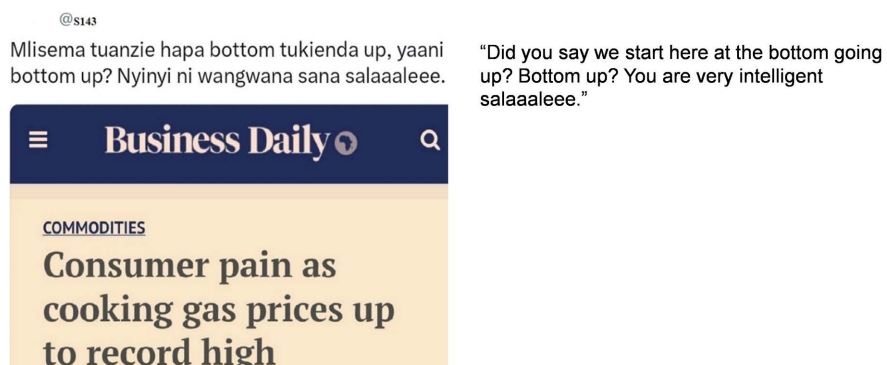
@S142

Speaker Moses Wetangula breaks Omanyala's 100M record in Trans nzoia after meeting with George Natembeya



S142 shows a satirical comment on Moses Wetangula’s action of running when chaos erupted between his supporters and George Natembeya’s supporters during a social gathering. Mock politeness is employed in the humorous phrase “Breaks Omanyala’s 100 m record” to expose his cowardice act of disappearing. Mock politeness has been used in this tweet as a form of humour where it shows a playful narrative of running to an extent of “breaking Omanyala’s record”. Ferdinand Omanyala is a renown Kenyan athlete who represents the country in athletics

outside the country. Mock politeness usage in this tweet shows how KOX employ language in a friendly way to cause offense. The use of mock politeness in this tweet damages Wetangula's face as a bold and courageous leader and exposes him as a coward. Through the use of sarcasm, the tweet breaches politeness norms and the tweets functions pragmatically as a form of entertainment. Mock politeness here shows how KOX use language to convey meaning that is different from its literal interpretation.



S143 uses mock politeness to comment on the news article from Business Daily newspaper about cooking gas prices going up. He uses the common phrases "bottom up" and "nyinyi ni wangwana" (you are very wise) that were used during UDA (United Democratic Alliance) campaigns. This is a sarcastic and indirect approach to mock tweeps who voted for these leaders expecting prices of basic commodities to go down. Their expectation was that the bottom up approach was meant to uplift Kenyans from the grassroots upwards. However, things have turned the opposite and the consumer feels the pain of harsh economic times. Mock politeness as used by S143 is meant to humiliate the tweeps who supported the regime with high expectations. This tweet has exposed KOXs use of mock politeness to cause offence in that the aim of the tweep is to make the supporters of the regime feel hurt and regret for their actions. This is the use of mock politeness as a friendly way of being offensive.



S144 employs mock politeness by stating the famous phrase "we have stabilized the economy" to comment on the news that 44 companies are shutting down due to harsh economic times. This will lead to Kenyans losing jobs. This juxtaposition contradicts the claim of having a stable economy, creating a disconnect between narratives given by local leaders and the reality on the ground. The phrase "and

other short stories” is used ironically to state that this claim of having a stable economy is one of the many narratives that leaders give when they appear in public. This tweet highlights the importance of mock politeness among KOX in exposing government’s lies. It is used as a form of mockery towards their rhetoric. It also shows an instance of KOX’s use of mock politeness to ease risks of direct offence regardless of its aggressive nature like in bald on record impoliteness strategy.

@S145  
The good people of Kirinyaga said that even if she was a thief, she was their thief. We shouldn't interfere with such profound love. 😞😞

S145 employs mock politeness to refer to Kirinyaga county resident’s complaint of misuse of county funds. She reminds them that they knew she (their governor) was a thief but they said she was their thief. Sarcasm is employed by the tweep stating that nobody should interfere with “such profound love”. This is a mockery of their complaint against the same thief they said was theirs. This tweet exposes how people overlook flaws in leaders during campaigns just because they are from the same tribe. The use of mock politeness in S145 serves as a critique of blind loyalty in politics. This tweet shows that the use of mock politeness is more artistic and entertaining than direct forms of impoliteness. It serves the pragmatic function of mockery to the people of Kirinyaga by expressing negativity in a way that is intended to avoid direct aggression towards the “good” people of Kirinyaga who voted their thief.

@S152  
Sense is chasing you but you are faster

 **Moreen** @eastfan16 · 4d  
Like they need to just understand that people dislike that man and it's not changing anytime soon , not everyday defend his honour 🙄

Similarly, S152 tells Moreen that she is senseless in an indirect way. This is the use of mock politeness. Moreen’s tweet expresses anger towards “they”, who need to understand that people do not like the man in question and they should not always defend him. S152 feels that Moreen is not making sense and turns to the use of mock politeness telling her that although sense has been chasing her, she has been faster and it cannot catch up. This is a polite way of saying she does not make sense. Through mock politeness, S152 is able to mitigate the impact of direct offence as it passes a message in an indirect manner. This tweet therefore shows how KOX relies on mock politeness as a form of indirect communication.

@S155  
My good friend @OliverMathenge has blocked me for 3yrs now. Just because of my sober political engagement with him. Someone tell him to marry because he's getting old buana.

S155 uses mock politeness by referring to @OliverMathenge as his “good friend” whereas he has blocked him for three years after they had a bitter political engagement. He says that it is his “sober” engagement that got him blocked. Despite his criticism of Oliver for being blocked, the tone of the tweet remains light-hearted and playful as the tweep jokingly suggests that @OliverMathenge should consider getting married because of his old age. This adds a humorous element to the message. This tweet shows how KOX uses mock politeness to engage with each other in a playful manner where it serves the pragmatic function of entertainment.

@S157

To all Cabinet Secretaries, immediately you got appointed, you were supposed to look for someone with brains or a team to help you run the ministry. Also, hire a publicist. These are the first steps to not get fired. Remember, your ignorance shall display in public.

S157 passes a message to cabinet secretaries that they have no brains to run their ministries. However, this is done softly through the use of mock politeness where he advises that they should have looked for someone with brains or a team to help run the ministries. This presupposes that the ministries are not being well run for lack of brains. The tweep also suggests hiring of publicists which shows that their public relations is poor. The tweep highlights that following this advice is helpful for them to retain their jobs. Mock politeness in this case has been used to directly address the cabinet secretaries who do not seem to understand their roles. It has also been used to expose their lack of understanding of their roles in the ministries.

@S158

This is like your wife telling you that she will make sure that the first child is your biological child. Madam, nani mwenzangu?

^Admin

 **Kenyans.co.ke**  @Kenyans · 1d  
Gachagua Reveals Kenyans to be Prioritised in Passport Issuance

S158 sarcastically mocks Gachagua’s statement that it is Kenyans who will be prioritized in issuance of passports. He says telling Kenyans that this is like a wife telling a husband that she will ensure that the first born belongs to him. This is the use of mock politeness to show that saying such words is unnecessary for the government as passports are meant to be given to the citizens of a country. Through the use of mock politeness in this statement, the tweep shapes the tone of the tweet, making it possible for him to pass an important message using lighter language.

@S167

A kitengela Florist is being sought by DCI Kambu to help them in setting up their flower garden



Mock politeness has been employed by S167 to humorously report that DCI (Directorate of Criminal Investigations) Kiambu is looking for a suspect who has planted bhang in his farm. By referring to him as a florist, and stating that the police are looking for him, not for arrest but “to help them setting up their flower garden”, the message is passed to KOX in a humorous way. This use of mock politeness is employed to pass a message in an entertaining way. This depicts the characteristic of mock politeness as a form of indirect communication that expresses another connotation different from its literal interpretation.

@S170

Follow

President Ruto’s Datsun Lexus, made in Kariobangi Light Industries, Kenya. President is wondering why people can’t drive cars made in Kenya like he does 😏😏😏😏



S170 employs irony to mock president Ruto’s statement that people should consume goods made in Kenya. By referring to his classy ride as a “Datsun Lexus made in Kenya”, he exposes his hypocrisy of speaking without leading by example. Mock politeness is also seen where the tweep says the car is made in Kariobangi light industries. This creates a humorous effect as the president’s car is imported. The association of “light industries” to an imported presidential vehicle shows the irony of the president’s statement. Further, the statement uses mock politeness by

stating that the president is wondering why people are not using Kenyan products like he does. The use of mock politeness in this tweet mocks the idea of the president living a lavish lifestyle while telling Kenyans to buy cheap products.

@S171

I have seen Ruto saying that it is better to consume made in Kenya Goods than imported ones. For example, he is seen here donning some Paris Lunetier Shades worth Ksh.180,000 from Githurai France, and a Stefano Ricci crocodile-leather belt worth Ksh.400,000 from Witeithie Italy.



S171 also alludes to the same trending topic as S170 and employs mock politeness to mock the president's statement about consuming locally made products. The tweep criticizes him in a seemingly polite manner, using language that is ironic and sarcastic. He says that Ruto is a good example of local goods consumption since he wears shades from Githurai France and an expensive belt from Witeithie Italy. This juxtaposition of local places with Italy and France, where president Ruto's attire originates exposes him as hypocritical. Mock politeness in this statement contrasts William Ruto's support for use of local products and his actual consumption of foreign goods.

@S174

I like this argument. It is typically what you would hear from a class 3 dropout. It is like drug peddlers complaining that the industry has employed over 1 million people and that declaring it illegal would render the millions jobless.

**Mr. Kinuthia Pius.** @Belive\_Kinuthia · 26 Jan  
Dear Kenyan Judiciary;



Where do you want the 130K Kenyans working in the affordable housing construction sites to go to?

Mr. Kinuthia Pius tweets asking the judiciary where they want 130 thousand Kenyans working under the housing project to go if they declare it illegal. S174 employs mock politeness in answering him by first stating that he likes his argument. He employs mock politeness to liken his argument to a class 3 dropout. This is a way to question his intellectual ability. He also states that asking such a question to the judiciary is like questioning the government for declaring drug

peddling illegal yet it employs a million people. This is the use of mock politeness through irony and mockery to show that this argument is flawed.

@S175

Just like your cap, you have a very backward way of thinking. All your tweets!

 **William**  @mtejawilliam · 09 Jan  
Larry Madowo thinks being in 45 countries as an employee is an achievement. Bro, you're working for your masters and you have no freedom.

S175 also employs mock politeness impoliteness strategy to answer @mtejawilliam, who feels that Larry Madowo should not feel that he has achieved anything by being in 45 countries while working for his masters. Comparing a cap, that is worn by the youth facing backward, to @mtejawilliam's way of thinking critiques his backward way of thinking. The phrase "all your tweets" shows the intensity of this backwardness as it does not affect this tweet alone, but all of them. Mock politeness has been employed using sarcasm and humour to cool down the effect of the impoliteness in this tweet.

@S176

Kenyans RANTED and RAVED at how condescending Murkomen treated the man who asked for a job. The UPROAR gave the guy the job. The guy never thanked Kenyans for the highlights, but went ahead to heap praise on Murkomen and Ruto. This is the same brain Kenyans use during ELECTIONS.

S176 is angered by the man who was turned down by CS Murkomen after requesting him for a job. After the clip went viral, KOX called out this cold treatment and the man finally landed a job. However, he ended up praising Murkomen and Ruto instead of Kenyans, to the anger of KOX. The use of mock politeness in this statement lies in the juxtaposition between the actions of the individual seeking a job and the subsequent praise heaped on Murkomen and Ruto. The initial part of the statement highlights how Kenyans reacted negatively to Murkomen's treatment of the man asking for a job. The use of terms like "ranted", "raved" and "uproar" suggests strong public disapproval and backlash against Murkomen's behavior. The tweet also mocks Kenyan voters by suggesting that they do not engage their minds when voting. Mock politeness in this tweet enables the tweep to use politer language to cause threat to face.

@S177

Why stop at 1963? Blame colonialists, Arabs, long distance trading kambas, Bantus coming from Congo forest, etc, as well.

 **Nation Africa**  @NationAfrica · 2h  
Murkomen: I'm dealing with a mess that's been piling up since 1963

S177 also uses mock politeness to react towards a statement by Murkomen who results to blame games when his ministry of transport fails to perform as per the expectations of Kenyans. He says that the reason for his failures is the mess that was created by those who came before him since 1963. S177 mocks him by saying that 1963 is not far enough and so he should consider blaming colonialists, Arabs, long distance traders, Bantu's adventure from Congo forest among others. This tweet uses sarcasm to expose the dirty blame games played by such leaders who keep blaming previous regimes. Mock politeness manifests in S177's way of encouraging Murkomen to go further before 1963 and blame more people for his failures. This encouragement is the use of politeness strategy that is insincere and thus it remains as a surface realization thus reducing the impolite tone. It shows a negative purpose and its intention is to avoid a direct offence.

 @s178

The only reason why the pyramids still exist in Egypt is because they were to Huge and Heavy for Europeans to steal/loot and put them in their museums.

S178 ridicules Europeans appetite for theft of African resources during colonialism. On the surface, the tweet seems to offer a reason why pyramids are still in Egypt. However, the underlying implication is that Europeans are thieves, but they could not carry our African pyramids dues to their massive size and weight. This suggests that if they were lighter, they would be stored somewhere in European museums just like other artifacts and resources that were stolen. Mock politeness is used here to criticize colonial practices of stealing and displaying African artifacts in Europe.

@s179

When this crackhead & the hubby requested for seafood from controller of budget, their appetite was accommodate at the supplementary budget. They never asked the clergy to pray for their incubating madness. When Doctors request for money to meet their basic needs & satisfy their cravings for kamongo, the Executive gathers preachers to pray & solve their problems spiritual. My concern with religion is that it allows us by the millions to believe what only lunatics or idiots could believe on their own. Those of us who voted for this pendejos owes Kenyans an apology.

 **Capital FM Kenya**  @CapitalFMKenya · 2d  
Pastor Dorcas Rigathi gathers preachers to pray for an end to doctors strike dlvr.it/T58hnH

The use of mock politeness in this tweet is seen in the use of sarcastic tone towards the actions of Dorcas Rigathi to gather preachers to pray for an end to doctors' strike instead of addressing the real issues at hand. S179 shows how she and

her husband, the deputy president, received additional money from the controller of budget to accommodate their appetite when they requested it even without praying. However, when doctors ask for better pay, instead of being given money, pastors are called to pray for an end to the strike. This sarcastic tone is enhanced by the tweep stating that they owe Kenyans an apology for voting for such Pendejos (fools). This tweet shows how KOX employ mock politeness to highlight incompetence and hypocrisy among leaders and to express their frustrations.

@S180

A picture is worth a THOUSAND words. The guy hugging Ababu Namwamba is Josiah Kariuki, the alleged mastermind of the fake fertilizer scam. Opposite is the President. To the far is Jayne Kihara, the Naivasha Town MP. Your guess is as good as mine.



The phrase “your guess is as good as mine” is used sarcastically by S180 as a form of mock politeness to inform KOX that nothing will be done to Josiah Kariuki, the mastermind behind the distribution of fake fertilizer around the country. This picture shows that the said person is highly connected to top individuals in the government and so, KOXs call for arrest of the people behind the fake fertilizer is wastage of time. Therefore, “your guess is as good as mine” means it is a waste of time to wait for the government to arrest anyone concerning the issue. The use of the phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” shows that KOX can make their own judgement on the relationship between the president, Ababu Namwamba who is being hugged by the seller, Naivasha town MP and Josiah Kariuki the distributor of fake fertilizer.

@S181

I hate myself that one day I thought that Gladys Shollei had something upheads,

Her incompetence and ignorance is unleashed anytime she opens her mouth to talk about things she doesn't know !

Empty head !

S181 uses mock politeness to imply that Gladys Shollei has nothing up heads. By the tweep stating that he hates himself for thinking that Shollei had brains shows a sense of disappointment and negative perception of her. The tweet shows her lack of competence and knowledge of anything when she speaks. Therefore, this tweet shows use of mock politeness by first expressing self-blame for thinking that she had something in her head. This tweet shows a common use of mock politeness as a form of resistance and shows the reduced hierarchy between people of different social classes that happens due to invisibility on X. This enables KOX to engage and speak about senior leaders without fear of backlash.

@S182

We're crossing over to our very own  
Political Pettiness Reporter, over Ndeiya  
Viewpoint along State Capture Road. Bwana  
[@KIMANIICHUNGWAH](#), take it away.

In S182, direct address is employed by tagging @KimaniIchungw'ah and telling him to "take it away". This tweet takes the form of a journalist reporting by stating that "we are crossing over to our political pettiness reporter". Mock politeness is used in this tweet by jokingly referring to Ichungw'ah as "our very own political pettiness reporter". He is being referred like that since the tweep feels that any time he takes the stage to speak in a gathering, he becomes petty by discussing petty issues. Mock politeness therefore as used in this tweet is meant to address his petty behaviour in a manner that does not directly imply threats to his face. Through mock politeness, S182 presents Kimani Ichungw'ah as a petty leader softly.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper has analyzed how Kenyans on X use mock politeness in their interactions. The results show that mock politeness is highly present in tweets made by KOX, especially those that are politically oriented. Mock politeness entailed the use of polite language in a sarcastic and ironic way in order to hide underlying impoliteness. Through using mock politeness in their tweets KOX achieved social commentary through commenting on trending topics around the nation. Criticism was also made easier since sarcasm and irony involved using language in a way that softens face threatening acts. Furthermore, mock politeness acted as a form of humour in Kenyan twitter space. Humorous tweets were shared as a form of banter and a mode of entertainment among Kenyan X users. Humorous tweets involving local trending topics created a comic effect.

Through the use of mock politeness, KOX was able to engage the top leadership easily using tweets that mocked their utterances and actions in a way that exposed their poor leadership styles. KOX also challenged authority through the use of mock politeness. Mock politeness has played a key function in its contribution to

the linguistic practices of KOXs community of language and served as a communicative strategy.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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