

# Youth Aggressive Communication Behaviour During Elections in Uganda: A Case of 2021 Presidential Election

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed at understanding the aggressive communication behavior of youth on Facebook during elections. The study traced the evolution of communication behavior from public spaces to the rise of mass media and the internet, particularly focusing on Facebook's increasing influence as a political space, to its manifestation in Uganda's electoral process. Guided by the Communication Affordance Theory and Wolfsfeld's Political Contest Model, the study sought to understand how Facebook's affordances shaped youth engagement in electoral activities. The study followed a cross-sectional design to address the heterogeneity of the respondents in the fields of politics and

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social endeavors and employed a mixed method approach. Results show that during Uganda's 2021 presidential elections, there was a significant prevalence of aggressive communication behavior among the youth on Facebook. Cyberbullying, intimidation, and criticism were commonly observed. Recommendations were made to promote youth political engagement, discourage violent behavior, and provide opportunities for youth participation in governance. Aggressive communication was defined as a style where individuals violated the rights of others through verbal and non-verbal means.

**Keywords:** *Aggressive, Communication, behavior, youth, presidential elections, Uganda.*

## BACKGROUND

Facebook has been a significant tool in organizing and preparing the public for election activities (Lee, Diehl & Valenzuela, 2022). It has been particularly utilized by elite youths to inform fellow voters about the electoral process (Kwan, 2021). However, there was limited investigation into youth aggressive communication behaviors on Facebook during Ugandan elections, making this study necessary. The research aimed to explore the aggressive communication behavior of youth on Facebook during elections, its motivations, and its effects.

Historically, the rise of mass media in the 1940s and 1950s impacted political communication, with mass media becoming dominant in the 1980s and 1990s (Casteltrione & Pieczka, 2018; Kümpel, 2020). The introduction of the internet and social media platforms like Facebook in recent years had become crucial in electoral campaigns (Kwan, 2021).

The Communication Affordance Theory guided the study, focusing on how Facebook impacted public communication activities during elections (Majchrzak et al., 2013). The theory explored how technologies provided new affordances, shaping interactions and influencing behavior (Bucher & Helmond, 2016). Additionally, Wolfsfeld's Political Contest Model was applied to understand how new

media, including Facebook, could influence political attitudes and support marginalized groups (Robinson, 2001; Segev & Sheaffer, 2013).

Aggressive communication was defined as a style in which individuals expressed their feelings and opinions in a manner that violated the rights of others, both verbally and nonverbally (Eberl et al., 2020; Chunly, 2019). This study focused on intimidating, bullying, and critical comments made by youth on the Electoral Commission's Facebook page during Uganda's 2021 elections.

In the context of Uganda's 2021 general elections, Facebook played a crucial role in informing and educating the public on electoral processes (Muzee & Enaifoghe, 2020). The ban on public campaigns due to COVID-19 restrictions led to increased reliance on social media platforms like Facebook for political communication (Isilow, 2020). However, the impact of this on youth aggressive communication behavior had not been thoroughly investigated.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature discusses the heterogeneity of political content flows on Facebook compared to offline social networks due to features like loose ties and limited selective exposure based on shared opinions (Kim, 2011; Pew, 2012). Aggressive communication behavior during elections on Facebook is influenced by factors such as anonymity, leading to disinhibition and uncivilized behavior (Rösner, 2016; Suler, 2004; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012).

Regarding youth engagement, historical examples show how African youth have played significant roles in establishing or overthrowing political structures (Anonymous source). However, political apathy among the youth can be attributed to prolonged political leadership and dynastic politics in some countries (CNN Report, 2015).

Studies reveal that political discussions on social networking sites like Facebook can have both positive and negative effects. It provides opportunities for information exchange and civic engagement, but it also faces challenges of aggressive behavior and cyberbullying among young users (UNDP, 2013; UNICEF).

The aggressive communication behavior of youth during elections can be explained by different models, such as the coerced youth model, revolutionary youth model, delinquent youth model, and youth clientelism model (AP Eneji, 2017). The use of social media platforms has empowered pro-democracy movements, enabling extensive networks and organizing political actions. However, it has also faced government crackdowns (Ojok, 2017).

Facebook's political content flows are more diverse than offline social networks due to unique platform features. Aggressive communication behavior during elections among youth can be linked to anonymity and disinhibition online. Understanding the different models of youth engagement in political violence sheds light on complex socio-political dynamics. Additionally, social media has significant implications for political participation and activism, while also posing challenges related to cyberbullying and harmful behaviors.

While the studies touch on the aggressive communication behavior of youth during elections, there is a gap in understanding the underlying socio-psychological mechanisms that drive this behavior and its potential impact on political polarization and civic engagement. Moreover, the literature fails to thoroughly examine the role of political echo chambers and algorithmic biases on Facebook, which may exacerbate the lack of exposure to diverse viewpoints and contribute to increased polarization. Furthermore, there is limited research on how youth engagement in political violence intersects with online communication behavior and the broader socio-economic context in African countries. Addressing these gaps would enhance our understanding of the complex relationship between social media, political communication, and youth political engagement.

## METHODOLOGY

Our study followed cross-sectional design to address the heterogeneity of the respondents in the fields of politics and social endeavors. It was used because the researcher had limited time and had to collect data at a single point in time. The research approach employed a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative studies to unveil issues related to youth aggressive communication behaviors.

The study population consisted of youth, electoral commission officials, and political leaders, specifically students from Bishop Stuart University, NTC cell political leaders, and Electoral Commission officials of Mbarara District, totaling 40 participants. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample size for the study. In order to conduct this sampling strategy, the researcher purposively selected 30 youth entering Bishop Stuart University (staff and students) that has a Facebook page. Purposive sampling was also used in selecting 5 electoral commission officials and 5 political leaders who acted as informants for the study. Dworkin (2012) reminds us that in qualitative research of the “grounded theory” type, having 25 to 30 participants is a minimum to reach saturation.

The data collected for the study included primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through interviews and questionnaires administered to the respondents, while secondary data was obtained from the Facebook page of the Electoral Commission and online newspapers covering the election. Content analysis of the Electoral Commission's Facebook page and online newspapers was conducted to analyze attitudinal and behavioral responses. Questionnaires were administered to some youth, and in-depth interviews were conducted on electoral commission officials, political leaders and some youth to gather their perspectives and experiences.

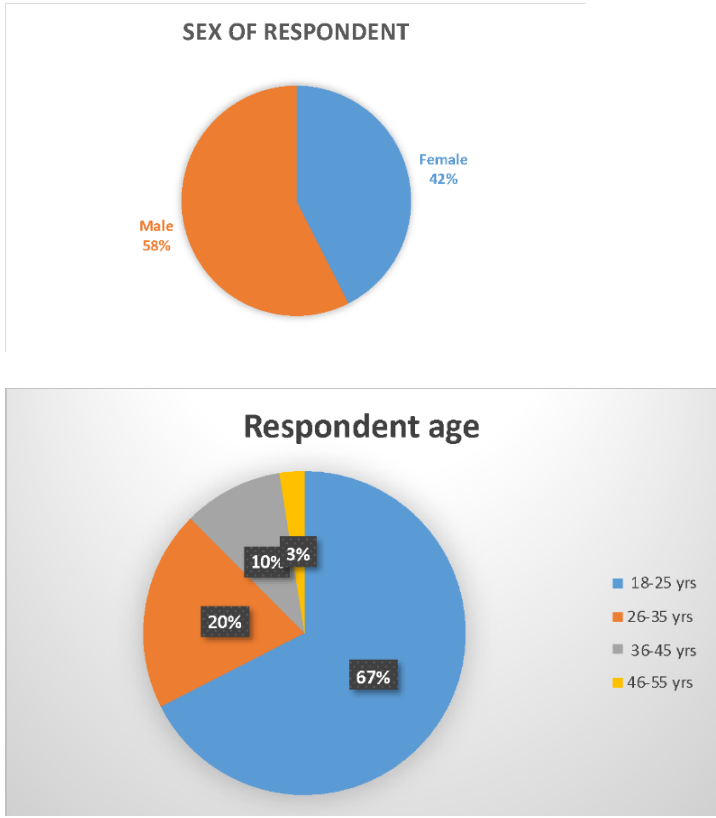
Data analysis involved coding and entering questionnaire data into Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 26 for descriptive analysis. Conceptual and narrative analyses were employed to categorize and interpret the data. The QDA Miner tool was used for content analysis.

Ethical considerations were taken into account, with an introductory letter obtained from the university and informed consent obtained from the participants. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study to protect the identities of the respondents.

## RESULTS

The study examined aggressive communication behavior on Facebook during the 2021 Ugandan presidential elections. Data was collected

from 40 respondents, including Bishop Stuart University students (30 students), NTC cell political leaders (5), and Electoral Commission officials in Mbarara District (5). The response rate was 100%, ensuring reliability and validity.



Demographic characteristics of the respondents were analyzed, including gender, age group, marital status, and education level. The majority of respondents were male (58%), aged between 18 and 25 years (67.5%), and single (62.5%). Most respondents had a bachelor's degree (50%).

### Aggressive Behavior

		<b>Frequ ency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percentage</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Valid	cyber bullying	20	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Intimidat ion	13	32.5	32.5	82.5
	Criticism	6	15.0	15.0	97.5
	Other	1	2.5	2.5	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

The aggressive communication behavior witnessed during the elections included cyberbullying as the most common aggressive behavior (50%), followed by intimidation (32.5%) and criticism (15%) and other behavior with 2.5%.

#### Cyberbullying:

Cyber bullying was found to be the most common aggressive behavior with 50% of the respondents intimating that they have ever been bullied or have bullied someone on a political post.

Abusive language and use of emojis were cited

*“Behind the key board, majority of us become bullies. We think we are invisible.” Interview with a youth respondent 2023.*

*“The comments on electoral commission posts are uncalled for and the words used leave you to wonder on the type of leaders we will have tomorrow.” Interview from electoral commission official 2023.*

*“Bad and disrespectful statements are the order of online comments. Interview from a political leader, 2023. She added, “I have always seen posts of cartoons depicting candidates in a disrespectful way.”*

### **Intimidation:**

32.5% of the respondents said they were intimidated. This occurred on either their Facebook posts or on their comments to other posts.

*“You make a comment on a post, and someone in opposition intimidates you with a gun emoji.” Interview with a youth respondent, 2023.*

*“The electoral commission would post schedule of activities, and someone would comment that the officials should look for another country to live in if President Museveni wins” Interview from Electoral Commission Official, 2023.*

### **Criticism:**

15% of the respondents said they witnessed criticism on political posts during the 2021 election time.

*“The electoral commission is an NRM government agency. Nothing good is expected out of their posts.” Interview with a youth respondent 2023.*

*“Majority of the youth responding negatively to the Face book posts of the Electoral Commission are in opposition.” Interview with a political leader, 2023.*

### **Others**

2.5% of respondents agreed that they have experienced other forms of aggressive behavior by the youth on Facebook during election period. The researcher found out that cyber bullying is the most



common aggressive communication behavior that the youth engage in. This was followed by Intimidation and lastly, criticism.

The exerted social influence of other online users and the power of social norms might be another cause of aggressive language use in online communication. According to social influence theories, individuals affect each other's opinions and behaviors in social context and tend to conform to prevalent social norms of a common social group (Masur, 2021; Rösner, 2016).

Specifically, it was found that social networks create opportunities for youth to gather information about politics that allows them to live beyond personal resource constraints. The effect of social networks on participation is contingent on the amount of political discussion that occurs in youth (Masiha, et al., 2018).

In this study, ender analysis showed that boys more often than girls faced aggression from unknown users (respectively: 69.7% and 59.1%) or a group of unknown users (respectively: 13.1% and 10.9%). Girls, on the other hand, more often pointed to aggression on social networks from their real acquaintances.

It should be noted that the answers about the forms of manifestation of aggression in this study did not vary with the socio-demographic and sociocultural factors. At the same time, it is noteworthy that youth with low academic performance and low interpersonal status (single) were noted to experience aggression at higher rates as compared to older/mature counterparts in higher learns.

In order to clarify the features of network aggression, those youths who indicated that they were "victims" of aggression were asked to specify in what form it was expressed. The majority (46.0%) answered that they received personal messages containing insults, ridicule, harassment, and threats. More than a third of respondents (33.5%) indicated that the aggression consisted in public "show-downs" with other users ("holy wars," "flaming," "hating," "trolling,"); 20.5% noted that the aggression was expressed in public posts, containing insults, mockery, harassment, threats, among others.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Young men and women are typically politically engaged in universities (where permitted), but they are frequently disenchanted with political institutions and leadership and excluded from the development of policy. As a result, youth political activism is not structured into official groups.

The Electoral Commission should support crucial initiatives like pre-election education and mass sensitization in order to discourage the populace, particularly young people, from indulging in violent behavior. This will clear up the public uncertainty, which is frequently exploited by powerful political figures to terrorize voters and provoke violence.

The Government of Uganda should give opportunities to young people to engage in governance and take part in political and decision-making processes. Youth Participation is heavily influenced by the political, socioeconomic, and cultural environments in which discrimination against young people is pervasive due to social norms in many areas of the world.

Political participation can be regarded as both formal and informal participation, both of which should be encouraged in order to maintain a strong and vibrant democracy. Strong evidence suggests that young people globally participate in formal, institutional political processes at a considerably lower rate than elder citizens. Young people become disenfranchised as a result, which calls into question the political system's ability to be representative.

## CONCLUSION

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, played a crucial role in shaping political participation among the youth in Uganda. The findings

align with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, indicating that young people actively engage with media to fulfill their needs.

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