



Research Article

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Social Media Use and Student Politics in Ugandan Universities

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Abstract

Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are essential in university students' daily politics. In Uganda, where the university administration and the Ugandan regime limit party politics, students have turned to social media to share political messages, acquire political knowledge, create public opinion, and mobilize peers. Some university administrations have prohibited partisan politics, and the regime has used legal frameworks such as the Public Order Management Act 2013 to prevent the opposition from recruiting and mobilizing students. The purpose of the paper was to investigate the role of social media on student politics, specifically guild elections, at four regionally selected universities. The study used a mixed method approach, including 12 in-depth interviews, a survey of 182 students, and documentary reviews. The findings highlight two significant issues: First, social media use constantly influences politics during election season and throughout the year. Second, given the constraints imposed by the university administration and the regime, social media has given students an alternative political platform.

Keywords: student politics, political parties, university administration, democracy, and political communication

1. Introduction

University students increasingly use social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter in politics because they find them easy and trendy. In Uganda, student politics is essential since students continue to engage in politics, impacting society (Mugume & Luescher, 2017; Sicherman, 2005). Students at Makerere University, Gulu University, the Islamic University of Uganda, and Mbarara University of Science and Technology are political forces, as they have been since they participated in independence struggles, making them an influential group in their respective communities. Given the fragility of Uganda's political system, which causes student politics to have a substantial effect on national politics (Altbach, 1984; Weinberg & Walker, 1969), society views students as elites who actively participate in political action.

Student politics in Uganda may be traced back to colonial times when students were essential to a highly mobilized pre-independence state. University students have maintained their influence in

national politics by serving as the youth wings of political parties and as beacons of civil society. Most have used these forums to create networks and become acquainted with the contemporary political landscape. While some students were interested in a political career, it was the first significant rung on the ladder for professional recognition and future growth (Loader, Vromen, Xenos, Steel, & Burgum, 2015). Ugandan universities have modelled and produced famous politicians active in university politics since the 1960s, such as former Ugandan Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda and presidential aspirant Olara Otunu. This supports Lipset's (1966) contention that universities generally serve as training grounds for future political elites.

Scholars such as Byaruhanga (2006), Lutaakome, Tamale, and Ssengooba (2005), and others like Mugume and Katusiimeh (2014) have examined Makerere University's (MAK) official student leadership and the institutions in place for student participation, according to Mugume and Luescher (2015). By focusing on traditional political participation, such as elections and affiliation to a political party in a university context, these studies have also provided some insight into on-campus party politics and the influence of national politics on student politics (Mugume & Luescher, 2015). On the other hand, this study looked into the new standard of student representation and election processes in Ugandan universities through social media platforms. Student participation is an essential aspect of university politics in Uganda, and it is now reinforced by student representative entities such as student associations, councils, guilds, unions, or governments, whose significant responsibility is to represent and defend the student body's interests. All of these student organizations, however, have one thing in common: they organize, aggregate, articulate, and express student interests while also providing various services and arranging student events (Klemeni, 2012).

In Uganda, student organizations are renowned for their crucial role in opposing colonial authority and authoritarian administrations during the regimes of Obote and Amin (Altbach, 1983; Munene, 2003). This led to the state routinely engaging in student organizations. This trend has continued today, with the state actively sponsoring national student organizations to have a monopoly and complete control (Bianchini, 2016). Student organizations are a vital voice in Ugandan politics, and students always take an active interest in elections for their leaders. As a result, the ruling party and the opposition have been drawn to rally student support, which is known to impact political and governance processes. The election of the guild president of Makerere University has historically been crucial to each of Uganda's political parties (Byaruhanga, 2006).

As a result, the Ugandan government has paid particular attention to student politics by sponsoring student representative organizations, which Kemencic (2012) refers to as corporatist models. The government has taken control of student representation and sanctioned a student representative association, giving them the authority to speak on behalf of all students and serve as a conduit between the state and the collective student body. National student representative organizations also draw the government's attention due to their claim to represent all students in the country (Klemeni, 2012). In the 1960s, the Uganda People's Congress established the National Union of Students of Uganda (NUSU), mostly comprised of university students and entirely controlled by the ruling party. According to Mujaju (1970), NUSU was founded in 1963 on the Makerere Student's Guild initiative. The state then co-opted it to promote socialist ideas among university students (Mujaju, 1972).

The current regime has operationalized a neo-corporatist model that formally grants one or a few student associations a monopoly on student interest intermediation by recognizing them as the representative voice of all students and formally involving them in the structures and processes of national higher education policy-making. A neo-corporatist system of student-state relations frequently involves some state provisions to support the existence and functioning of student representation (Klemeni, 2012). This association is known as the Uganda National Students Association (UNSA), and it is strategically under the patronage of the current Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni. The UNSA also collaborates closely with most student guild leadership structures as institutional statutory bodies, and the organization is led by a democratically elected committee of students (Brooks, 2017).

Even though such an association results from student political liberalization, the state has yet to fully open up student political space because opposition parties and university chapters cannot actively convene assemblies, recruit students, or promote their views. The administration has exploited the Public Order Management Act of 2013¹ to limit university opposition in institutions that allow multi-party politics, like Makerere University; this has prompted students to vote primarily for opposition candidates in protest. In addition to voting opposition, several universities have emerged as hotbeds of activism, collective action, and resistance to the regime (Klemeni & Park, 2018; Weiss et al., 2012). It is also documented that most Ugandans who have molded the country's history after independence were Makerere University student activists (Byaruhanga, 2006).

Despite the state's restriction of political space, the popularity of opposition candidates in university politics is clear evidence that there is competition in Uganda between student representation in public policy and student interest articulation. This has forced students to seek out opportunities to participate in formal and informal student representation systems in the four universities, with the student guild being the most successful and legitimate option. Students actively participate in guild elections and have faith in the process because elections are formally arranged by an electoral committee comprised of students but overseen by a Dean of students to represent their interests (Klemencic, 2012). The university guilds differ in how they are elected and their influence (Mugume, 2015), and some universities, such as the Islamic University of Uganda and Mbarara University of Science and Technology (Soudien, 2008), have banned multi-party politics.

In Uganda, university administrations have yet to liberate the political space after carefully analyzing what happened. Specifically, Makerere University opened the political space to allow partisan politics and freedom of expression. This also involves using social media platforms in political participation among students in the four universities. Besides universities having social media policies for students and lecturers, the government has kept tabs on students through legal frameworks to regulate their political activities depending on circumstances². The masked intimidation by the university administration and the state has narrowed political space among the students in universities where they cannot quickly assemble and demand better services from the university, as seen in the Islamic University of Uganda and Mbarara University of Science and Technology. However, it is essential to note that universities such as Makerere and Gulu have continuously demanded the opening of political space through informal political action or direct access to university leaders, including actively using social media for politics (Munene, 2003).

The rivalry between the state and students on political activity has pushed student leaders to seek routes to have unresolved issues heard by the university administration as they engage stakeholders and, when they disagree, resort to strikes. Most student strikes, including those of university workers and government employees, are thus planned and deliberate (Ajayi, 2013). However, the university administration has gradually used legal frameworks to limit student freedoms and rights, causing students to lose faith in official student organizations and associations. Students have developed an alternate platform to get their views heard in terms of social media on this basis.

University students have included social media use in learning and politics (Richardson, 2017;

¹ The Act sets out the process in which public meetings must be organized and held ; to provide for the duties and responsibilities of the police, organisers and participants in relation to public meetings; to prescribe measures for safeguarding public order; and for related matters.

² The 1995 Constitution permits peaceful demonstrations and empowers police to keep law and order to safeguard the rights of others. The provision of Section 8 of the Public Order Management Act that the police has been invoking to stop political gatherings and rallies is unconstitutional in so far as it contravenes Article 29(1)(d) of the Constitution which guarantees the enjoyment of the freedom to assemble and demonstrate.

The actions of the police to prohibit, instead of regulating public rallies and demonstrations of those seeking to consult their members and supporters is unconstitutional. Constitutionality of the Public Management Order Act, Daily monitor, July 26, 2016. <http://www.monitor.co.ug/Magazines/PeoplePower/Constitutionality-of-Public-Order-Management-Act/689844-2807998-cic9l/index.html>

Halim et al., 2018). Students at all four universities have increasingly utilized Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter to demand improved services, protest tuition increases, and, most crucially, participate in guild elections. However, the growing use of social media has not gone unnoticed as the Ugandan state has been involved in a cat-and-mouse game as follows: the government imposed a social media tax after youth, primarily students, used the platforms to circumvent the limited political space for political action, which was supplemented by the Public Order Management Act, which made it difficult for students to assemble and demonstrate against any injustice that was bestowed upon them. The students discovered another way around the tax by using virtual private networks, and they continued to actively use social media platforms for political activities such as peer mobilization, sharing political information, and exposing human rights violations.

1.1 Theory of the Public Sphere

Political communication, particularly debates to develop public opinion, has been regarded as deliberative democratic participation since Aristotle's times. Scholars have viewed it as a form of communicative action mediated in the public sphere (Habermas, 1984) and a good sign of a robust governance system (Gamson, 1992; Kim & Kim, 2008; Mutz, 2006). Political communication is a political tool and the driving force behind decision-making (Jarren & Donges, 2006). As a result, political communication is a continuous process that influences politics - not just during election season but at all times in universities. This ongoing process and interaction give student governments legitimacy, and above all, students have channels for checks and balances in their universities.

According to Habermas (1991:27), the public sphere is a space where "private people come together as a public", intending to utilize reason to advance critical knowledge, which leads to political transformation. On the other hand, the public realm demands unrestricted access to knowledge and equal and protected participation. Habermas (2006; 1991) also contends that in modernity, the public sphere can be rejuvenated through speech communities enabled by social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. Speech communities value a type of discourse known as communicative action. Social media platforms can potentially discuss issues of particular concern and shape public opinion.³

From Habermas' theory, three fundamental requirements can be drawn that characterize the circumstances for creating a public sphere. The first condition is a disregard for one's status. The public sphere was independent of any authority, rank, or status. The second condition is a common source of concern. The final requirement is inclusion. In other words, Habermas felt that the public sphere was created by debate and discussion and that it was open to all citizens and allowed them to form their opinions freely (Habermas, 1989). Social media platforms have the potential to meet all three needs by creating a virtual public realm that allows students to participate in university politics.

According to Dahlberg (2001) and Papacharissi (2002), it is common knowledge that social media platforms are essential to student life. These platforms transcend geographical barriers and allow students from various backgrounds to congregate, connect, and converse in a newly minted public sphere. According to Loader and Mercea (2011), the overall structure of social media offers participants unrestricted access to information and equal and protected engagement. Further, the platforms of social media are generally easy to access, and students can, in principle, disseminate information, which makes participation and information acquisition among students free from the influence of outside sources (Fuchs, 2012; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Because of this, the theory is suited to describe social media users' role in student politics, despite constraints such as legal frameworks and social media policies implemented by the government and universities, respectively.

³ Lisa M. Kruse, Dawn R. Norris & Jonathan R. Flinchum (2018) *Social Media as a Public Sphere? Politics on Social Media*, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 59:1, 62-84, DOI: 10.1080/00380253.2017.1383143

1.2 The Nature of student politics in Uganda

Student politics are actions taken in educational institutions to influence decisions that impact students. Examples of these activities include guild elections and protests. Pabian and Minksova (2011) define the term "student politics" as an umbrella concept to refer to all different forms of political actions carried out by students, regardless of whether these activities are formal or informal. According to Altbach, the fact that it is aimed against society or academics attests to the often-oppositional nature of student activism. This type of activism is marked by various student campaigns, protest marches, and even violent protests (Altbach, 1966; 1991). Student politics can be understood today as an aspect of students' informal or extraordinary political activities, as opposed to the well-established political institutions and processes of representation at various levels (Luescher, 2015). This definition is based on the idea that student politics is a subset of student politics. Students in Uganda participate in illegal rallies, restrict political dialogues, and use social media platforms to influence decision-making, among other examples of how student politics in Uganda has grown in recent years.

In terms of Altbach, student politics is about the public expression of new ideas, about shaping public debate on a topic (for example, the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam War in the 1960s, disinvestment from apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, or women's rights and global warming in the 1990s and 2000s). As a result, it is often accomplished through publications, public speaking, campaigning, the use of social media, and finally, demonstrations (Altbach, 1992). Debates on contentious matters have always been open to student participation in Uganda universities. These discussions are published in print and social media to disseminate information and ignite public opinion. As a result of being exposed to various topics of interest and having the opportunity to discuss these topics on various social media platforms, students make up the most significant contributors to the virtual public sphere. After participating in online debates, some of them went one step further. They participated in nationwide rallies, such as the one about the social media tax, during which they marched to parliament to demand that the government make changes to the tax.⁴

The involvement of students in politics has a spillover effect on national politics because politicians look for ways to interact with institutions like Makerere University to acquire momentum in popularizing their agendas. This has a spillover effect on the country's politics as a whole. This study expands on previous research supporting this assumption about the interplay between national politics and student politics about issues important to students and those of national relevance. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, national politics significantly impacted the activities and atmosphere at Makerere University.

According to Musisi and Muwanga (2003) and Sicherman (2005), it was a factor in the regime of President Idi Amin being brought to an end. Sicherman (2005) suggests that President Museveni's rise to power in the late 1980s led to a resurgence of student politics at Makerere University, which had been dormant since Amin's administration. Byaruhanga (2006) argues further that since the country gained its independence, the politics of the student body at Makerere University have been consistently influenced by its politics. In recent years, the resolutions of strikes carried out by students at Makerere University have required the participation of the Office of the President (Mugume, 2014).

Student politics is motivated by societal political and social factors whose emphasis is generally focused on student action. Uganda has a long history of student activism, particularly at Makerere University, and former students have undertaken most liberation fights. Students are typically motivated to engage in activism due to social and economic circumstances. Poor campus facilities, common in Ugandan institutions, have fueled activism and protest. Makara (2017) implies that Makerere University's student activism is historical. According to Makara, professors give students academic material and analysis to assist them in appreciating challenges in life. Unsurprisingly, Makerere University students joined the rest of the country in protesting the suggested amendment

⁴<https://www.softpower.ug/2-arrested-for-protesting-social-media-tax/>

to Article 102 (b) of the Constitution, which limits the presidential age to 75 years.⁵

The government has taken note of the damage caused by university strikes and how they have the potential to turn students into powerful political forces. In modern times, this is viewed as a political threat to governments that have overstayed their time in power since they can spark nationwide protests if not controlled and monitored. Despite these concerns of control and monitoring, students have impacted Ugandan politics, as seen by multi-party guild elections in which they have popularized opposition politics by frequently electing guild presidents from the opposition. Weinberg and Walker (1969) suggest two significant reasons for the cohabitation of student leaders and political parties. Political parties necessitate the temporary recruitment and renewal of party membership. Students are aware of prospective job options due to political party recruiting and membership. Mr. Robert Rutaro, 2008/2009 Guild President of Makerere University, was recruited and headed the NRM youth bureau at the party headquarters. Weinberg and Walker (1969) repeat that job recruiting is a system linkage in the interaction between student leaders and political parties enabled by university political parties.

In situations where recruiting and co-opting active student leaders has been difficult, student activism has been limited by legislation governing university operations, including bans on campus political expression by both students and academic staff. As a result, the traditional concept of university autonomy has been eroded (McConnell, 1981). Academic freedom and free speech are commonly used, yet their implications are ambiguous. For example, most Ugandan universities have a strict social media policy. According to Makerere University's social media policy enshrined in the Information, Communication and Technology Policy 2016-2020, "Only authorized personnel by the university shall be allowed to make postings on the university official social media sites" (Mak-Social Media Policy, pg,28), whereas the Mbarara University of Science and Technology's ICT draft policy (2018) emphasizes that only authorized personnel by the university shall be allowed to make official posts on the university's official social media sites.⁶

Another legislative hurdle to student politics is the Public Order Management Act (POMA), passed in August 2013 and gives the Inspector General of Police broad power to approve or prohibit public meetings. This has adversely affected multiparty politics, particularly by restricting opposition parties' ability to organize and hold political debates in universities. The Act has significantly impacted student freedom of expression since it prohibits formal institutions like political parties where students are designated for participation and representation under the multiparty system. The dominance of opposition parties in guild leader elections over the years proves that this law's ultimate result in universities has been ongoing dissatisfaction and political action against the ruling government.

This dominance of opposition party leaders in Ugandan universities, as shown in the table below, has created tensions in the political terrain, as the government has implemented surveillance mechanisms and restrictive strategies, such as the introduction of the Public Order Management Act 2013 to ensure students do not engage in reactionary political actions.

Table 1: Showing Guild Presidents from the opposition

Makerere University			
S/N	NAME	YEAR	PARTY
1	Nambassa Shamim	2021/2022	National Unity Platform
2	Ssempijja Ivan	2020/2021	Independent
3	Julius Katerregga	2019/2020	National Unity Platform
4	Papa Were Salim	2018/2019	Independent
5	Kato Paul	2017/2018	Forum for Democratic Change

⁵ Makerere University dons defend student anti-age limit protests; <http://dispatch.ug/2017/09/28/makerere-university-dons-defend-student-anti-age-limit-protests/>

⁶ <http://www.must.ac.ug/sites/default/files/ICT%20Policy--MUST%20v4-%20ofeb%202018.pdf> - MUST ICT policy page 21

Mbarara University of Science and Technology			
1	Justus Mugenyi Kizito	2021/2022	National Unity Platform
2	Umar Ryan Muhumuza	2019/2020	National Unity Platform
3	Charles Obore	2016/2017	Forum for Democratic Change

Source: (Fiedwork,2019)

In Uganda, political authorities and university management respond aggressively to student dissatisfaction by repressing organizations, imprisoning student leaders, and imposing severe restrictions on freedom of movement on activist organizations. Political parties have been suspended in guild elections at universities such as Gulu University and the Islamic University of Uganda, Mbale, as students compete on individual merit. Such policies have rendered the guild in these universities ineffective in addressing student concerns, as they can no longer confront the administration or protest issues like tuition hikes or poor food in halls of residence.

1.3 Social Media and University Student Politics in Uganda

The growth of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in Uganda has radically altered how students engage in politics. Students are all allowed to engage if they have access to political information on themes of interest and can express their opinions or form public opinion, creating a virtual public sphere. The platforms have enabled them to disseminate political messages, shape public opinion, rally fellow students, and gain political knowledge, strengthening previously marginalized communities. University students are becoming more attracted to participating than ever as they see a new lease on political space that welcomes even those who had lost trust in the university's formal processes to join. Without a doubt, social media has transformed student politics, yet, many university administrations are concerned about using social media to make disrespectful, disparaging, and ridiculing remarks about faculty and other students.

The leading causes of the current trend at universities are the availability of the Internet and the prevalence of smartphones among Ugandan university students. According to the National Information Technology Authority of Uganda's 2017/2018 National IT Survey, about 24.8 million Ugandans, or 70.9 percent, own mobile phones⁷. The internet usage rate has increased from 39.7 percent in 2015 to 51.9 percent in 2016, providing new channels for deliberative action through political communication to effect change in their country. (UBOS, 2017) and highlighted the most popular sites among students as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. The young (15-24 years old) are at the vanguard of smartphone usage, accounting for 15.8 per cent of the population. This age group confirms that most university students choose smartphones because they admire and understand what they can do (Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014).

Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have also enabled students to engage in political discussions, which may improve student interactions with their leaders. Universities' efforts to engage citizens, such as students, in democratic processes have increased in recent years. Social media networks are helpful for this goal. Prof. Nawangwe Barnabus, Vice Chancellor of Makerere University, is well-known for using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to engage students and staff⁸.

2. Data and Methods

The study conducted a survey of 194 student leaders, of which 182 were completed, as well as in-depth

⁷ Eronie Kamukama, (2018) More Ugandans own mobile phones, Eronie Kamukama (Daily Monitor Newspaper, March 9, 2018)

⁸ The Professor has been known to use his accounts to communicate some of the official messages from his office consequently growing his digital footprint by every tweet or post. Facebook Verifies Makerere Vice Chancellor's Page. CampusBee.2019. Accessed at <https://campusbee.ug/news/facebook-verifies-makerere-vice-chancellors-page/>

interviews with 12 executive leaders of the university guild, including the Guild President, Vice President, and Prime Ministers, at four Ugandan universities: Makerere University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Gulu University, and Islamic University. Purposive sampling was used to target the respondents, which requires the researcher to actively pick the most productive sample to address the study topic (Marshall, 1996). The survey findings were then edited, coded, and submitted to descriptive statistics using social science statistical software. The in-depth interviews were transcribed and analyzed in NVivo using an inductive and theoretical thematic analysis approach. The thematic approach resulted in an informative analysis that answered specific study questions (Braun & Clark, 2006); two key themes arose inductively: First, consider the importance of social media in student politics: how students use social media platforms in university politics. Second, in Ugandan institutions, student guild elections are held to determine how students are represented and their influence on meeting student requests.

3. Findings

3.1 Role of Social media use in University politics

In all four universities, Makerere University (MAK), Gulu University (GULU), Islamic University of Uganda, Mbale (IUIU), and Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST), 32 per cent of the 100 students surveyed were female, while 68 per cent were male. This was because females do not typically participate in student politics at universities. Gender has been studied by social scientists at various degrees of political involvement (Verba et al., 1997; Burns et al., 2001; Booth-Tobin & Han, 2010). Some believe that women are "less political" because "females of all ages are less likely to engage in most institutionalized political and civic activities" (Verba et al., 1997; Burns et al., 2001). The paper also looked at the most popular platforms, the role of political knowledge in political involvement, and party politics in universities.

According to survey results, there were indicators that students prefer WhatsApp to Facebook and very few students used twitter for political participation. See table below;

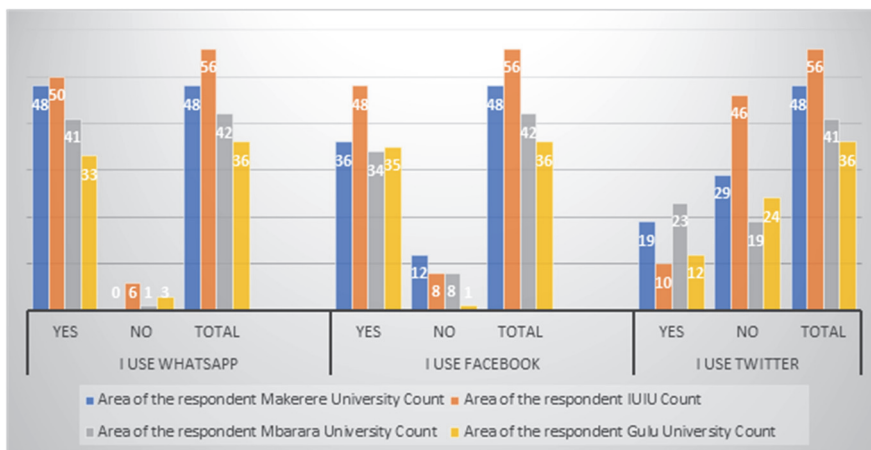


Figure 1: Commonly used social media platforms in universities

Source: (Fieldwork, 2019)

Over 90% of the four universities said they are engaged on WhatsApp. Makerere University (MAK) received 100% (n=48), Islamic University of Uganda (IUIU) received 89% (n=50), Mbarara University

of Science and Technology (MUST) received 98% (n=41), and Gulu University (GULU) received 92% (n=33). MAK had 75% of the n=36, IUIU had 86% of the n=48, MUST have 81% of the n=34, and GULU had 92% of the n=33. Finally, Twitter is not widely used in political participation, as evidenced by the following figures: MAK had 40% n=19, IUIU had 18% n=10, MUST have 56% n=23, and GULU had 33% n=12. According to the statistics above, WhatsApp and Facebook are the most often utilized, and one of the guild heads from Gulu University reaffirmed their use in political engagement as follows;

"Social media was very instrumental in winning the guild race at Gulu University in 2019. It is used for propaganda, providing detailed information, promoting slogans such as the famous glory to glory and persuading voters to shift from one political camp to another. However, social media platforms have their worrying side, especially the distortion of information. There are defamatory campaigns such as harmful propaganda based on tribal sentiments".
(In-depth interview of Guild leader, Gulu University on 11th August 2019.)

The most important role of social media in universities is that it facilitates sharing of political information that imparts political knowledge among the students.

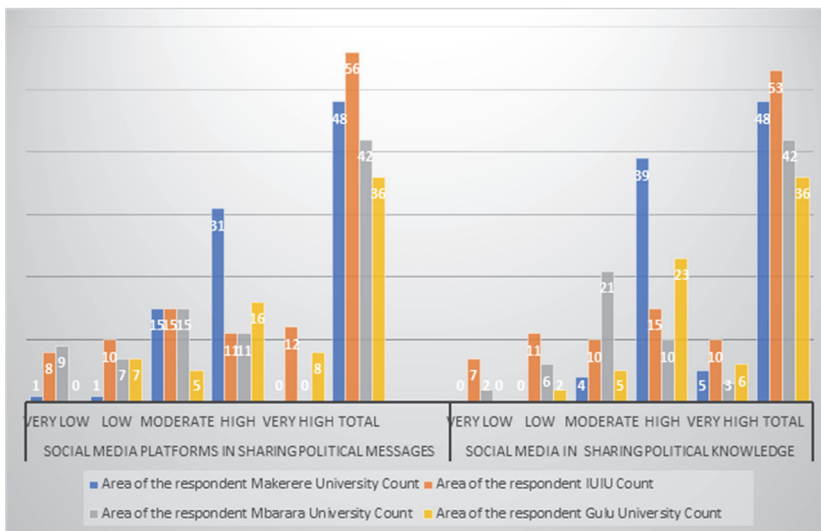


Figure 2: Role of social media in promoting political knowledge and sharing political messages
Source: (Fieldwork, 2019)

When asked whether social media use enhances political awareness, respondents agreed as follows: Makerere University received 91% (n=44), Islamic University in Uganda received 47% (n=25), Mbarara University received 31% (n=13), and Gulu University received 81% (n=29). Makerere and Gulu universities have comparatively high percentages because student politics are less regulated than in other universities. The same pattern emerged when asked how they ranked social media for sharing, posting, and receiving political messages. Makerere University received 65% (n=31), Islamic University of Uganda received 42% (n=24), Mbarara University of Science and Technology received 31% (n=13), and Gulu University received 81% (n=29). One of the guild leaders corroborated the preceding findings by sharing his own experience as follows;

"Social media is the most efficient and effective means to pass on information to students today, and even the mass media now picks up updates and information from there. Information at the university

is shared mainly on WhatsApp and Facebook. Facebook and Twitter are important for providing official information on behalf of my government. WhatsApp is used more for local communication within the university. At some point, we were blocked from other traditional media platforms, so we found an alternative on these social media platforms. Social media works hand in hand with mobilization, for one to run a strong campaign team, you need a social media team that is ready to take on the propaganda. Even after elections, these platforms are very helpful in communication and mobilization.”
(Indepth interview of Guild leader on 18th November 2019)

The other confirmed role of Social media use in University politics is mobilization where according to the survey results the respondents agreed as follows; MAK had 97% (n=47), IUIU had 84% n=47, MUST had 76% n=32 and GULU had 97 % n= 35 see graph below;

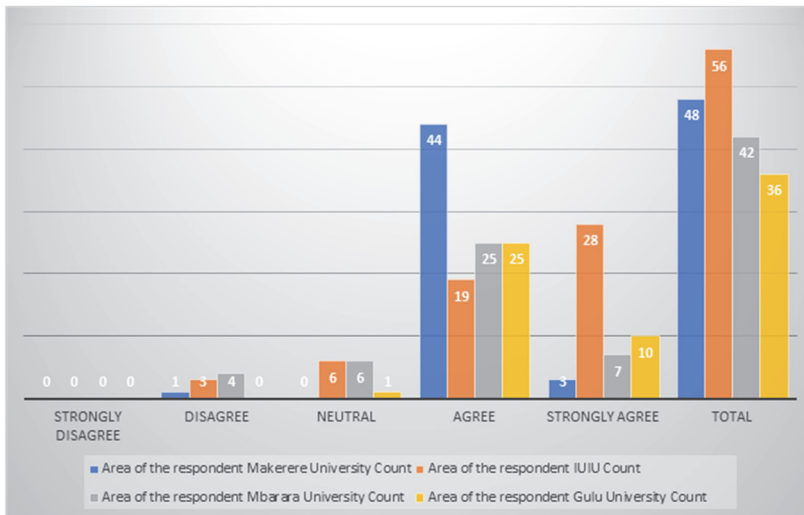


Figure 3: Role of social media use in mobilization
Source: (Fieldwork, 2019)

However, issues such as restrictions on social media by university administrators who cite the university's Social Media Use Policy to penalize students who use these platforms to organize strikes⁹ have hampered mobilization. Prof. Barnabas Nawangwe, Vice Chancellor of Makerere University, suspended a Guild Representative Council (GRC) member in September 2018 due to social media messages and publications¹⁰. The university administration and government officials have infiltrated most student WhatsApp groups. Governments perform surveillance by analyzing and exchanging ever-increasing amounts of data on their populations, employing data mining technologies to identify individuals "of interest." The surveillance has now spread to the administration, which generally checks what students post. A student leader expounded on this as follows:

“We have been called numerous times by university authorities after strategic discussions have been held on these social media platforms. The university uses social media policies that are well designed

⁹Eronie Kamukama, (2018) More Ugandans own mobile phones, Eronie Kamukama (Daily Monitor Newspaper, March 9, 2018)

¹⁰ The Professor has been known to use his accounts to communicate some of the official messages from his office consequently growing his digital footprint by every tweet or post. Facebook Verifies Makerere Vice Chancellor's Page. CampusBee.2019. Accessed at <https://campusbee.ug/news/facebook-verifies-makerere-vice-chancellors-page/>

and referred to when student interests are not compatible with the university management".
(Interview with Guild President, November 9, 2019).

The elimination of partisan politics at the Islamic University of Uganda and Mbarara University of Science and Technology is another hurdle for student politics in some universities. According to Byarahanga (2006), who highlights Makerere University's efforts to avoid partisan politics, many students usually attract political parties to propagate their ideology regardless of the administration's strictness. However, this has yet to occur at IUIU or MUST since the administration remains rigorous on student politics. Partisan politics on African university campuses is well recognized to cause problems, and some countries (including Tanzania) and universities (including South Africa's University of the Free State) have forbidden partisanship in student elections (Soudien, 2008; United Republic of Tanzania, 2005). One of the guild leaders at Mbarara University of Science and Technology reaffirmed the following reasons for the prohibition of political parties:

"In Mbarara University, political parties have been banned by administration despite students trying to smuggle them in for the last two years. The dean of students, who is the overseer/patron of the guild, believes parties promote violence on campus. This has affected university politics generally, as scientists also have less interest in university politics." (Interview, with Guild leader, August 12, 2019)

In IUIU, the guild leader also urged that partisan politics was abolished as follows;

"Politics at IUIU is restricted; they do not expect students to engage in partisan politics. The political parties were banned, and the aspirants were given three days to campaign on individual merit. The university management also vets the aspirants, who must be conversant with Sharia law. Once the elections are done, the students expect us to do our work, which involves lobbying and being result oriented to meet the students' expectations. The students rarely respond to collective efforts to engage in political debates and peaceful protests. This explains why we have had a few cases of strikes. (Guild Leader, Islamic University of Uganda, 16th October 2019)

3.2 Student Guild elections in Ugandan Universities.

The most visible and prevalent form of student politics is institutionalized student organizations, which function more as representative groups to represent and defend the interests of the entire student population (Klemeni 2012: 2; 2014: 396). Student governments, which can take the shape of student unions, councils, parliaments, boards, and guilds, among other things, are different types of organizational bureaucracy unique to higher education governance. The four institutions chosen for this study have student guilds in which students, with the help of the Dean of Students, arrange elections of representatives that include the nomination of leaders, campaigns, and the announcement of the electoral results. The student guilds, on the other hand, have varying degrees of influence depending on their amount of autonomy. According to the interviews, only Makerere and Gulu universities have guilds that influence and occasionally pressure the administration to fulfil their requests through strikes when diplomatic efforts fail. MUST and IUIU¹¹ administrations are rigid, denying students the autonomy and freedom to protest.

The four university guilds are best defined as quasi-governments because they establish rules and standards for organizing the student body (Klemeni, 2014). The guilds are political in that they aggregate collective student interests and represent students on councils with institutional and public authorities. According to Park and Klemeni (2018), student organizations are perceived as professional and service organizations because they provide academic and welfare support services, manage student facilities, and occasionally even run businesses (such as travel agencies, publishing houses, clubs, and restaurants). The guild canteen and photocopier services are run by the guild

¹¹ Uganda: Students Want Varsity Body Out of Guild Polls, Daily Monitor Newspaper, March 6, 2019. Accessed at <https://allafrica.com/stories/201903060253>

leadership at each of the four universities in this study. This helps to sustain student groups by generating funds to support the day-to-day operations of student offices. It was also discovered that the cash generated stimulates students at all four colleges to compete for leadership positions within the student guild.

Students are adequately represented and have a clear roadmap for handling the difficulties they encounter at Makerere and Gulu universities, where the authorities have institutionally streamlined student representation. University student leaders have found ways to interact with the administration and sometimes organize protests, making them icons of activism. Activism refers to practices of student collective action through various types of political participation on and off campus, as well as in online spaces, in which students favour or oppose a specific cause or hold the authorities accountable for their words and deeds. In general, numerous progressive scholars have argued for the inclusion of student leaders in institutional decision-making bodies such as councils, citing a variety of justifications for doing so (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). These approaches have been used in institutions where students are represented on the university council and can contribute to issues that impact them.

The calls for the inclusion of student leaders to represent students as stakeholders arose during the international trend of promoting democratic governance in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which involved a shift in institutional management to managerialism, resulting in the inclusion of students in some aspects of university governance (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014; Nkata, 2004). As a result, Ugandan colleges liberalized the political setup of student politics, leading to calls for political discussions, membership in political parties, freedom of expression, and the election of leaders, among other things. However, as previously said, not all colleges, particularly MUST and IUIU, provided students with such political independence. The justification for these two colleges is that political freedom morphed into activity, which cost the university administration money when the riots turned violent, resulting in the loss of life and property.

According to the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001 (as modified), the four universities have student guild constitutions¹² approved and ratified by the University Council. The guild falls under the jurisdiction of the Dean of Students, who is responsible for organizing the election of student leaders under the supervision of an electoral committee made up of students. Guild leaders are typically elected for one academic year, with the Guild President presiding over the student cabinet. Students are usually given a month to campaign for the flagbearer. Where partisan politics is permitted, the major political parties frequently send financial and human support to campaign for the flagbearers¹³

Makerere University has a history of student leaders and political parties, and these are some factors to examine when attempting to understand how partisanship connects to student politics (Byaruhanga, 2006; Mugume & Katusiimeh, 2016). They are, however, mixed reactions to party politics. Students are suspicious about party membership, and those who did open up favored the opposing parties for various reasons. The paper also agrees with Mugume (2014) that university students are intensely active with political parties for financial reasons, with flag bearers typically receiving some financing to mobilize voters and recruit for the party. Students were also encouraged by individuals who served as guild presidents and flag bearers and went on to achieve high positions after graduation, such as Robert Rutaro, now the Head of the Youth Desk at the Secretariat¹⁴.

Partisan politics, on the other hand, has yet to meet student expectations in Ugandan colleges,

¹² Accessed at: <https://policies.mak.ac.ug/sites/default/files/policies/GUILD%20CONSTITUTION%20NEW.pdf>; Gulu varsity prepares for guild polls, *New Vision Newspaper*, April 12, 2006, <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/150573/gulu-varsity-prepares-guild-polls>;

¹³ Parties tighten grip on Makerere guild race, *New Vision Newspaper*, March 12, 2008. Accessed at <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1194515/parties-tighten-grip-makerere-guild-race>

¹⁴ NRM Staff Petition M7 Over Lumumba, *The Red Pepper Newspaper*, March 7, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.redpepper.co.ug/2016/03/nrm-staff-petition-m7-over-lumumba/>

as individuals who get party flags are torn between furthering party agendas and realizing student objectives. Student leaders feel obligated to their party and aspire for future rewards, which may drive them to act contrary to their mission as student representatives (Mugume & Luescher, 2017). Despite the NRM regime aggressively financing party candidates in colleges, opposition candidates typically win, as seen in the table above, which shows the dominance of the National Unity Platform and the Forum for Democratic Change. This study attributes this trend to the oppositional nature of student politics, accompanied by emancipatory student political protest (Munene, 2003). As a result, the state and ruling government have devised methods to monitor political activities within the university closely. Makerere University Guild President H.E Julius Katerega emphasizes that;

"State is wary of the university's political activism, whereby it has put mechanisms in place to ensure the students are kept in check. This involves planting spies among the student body and leadership to keep track of our planned activities. The state has always used the Public Order Management Act to limit students organizing political assemblies to debates that may not be in the interest of the state and institutional authorities, As you are aware, I was abducted by state agents for spearheading a strike a few days ago on tuition increment." (In-depth interview carried out on November 19, 2019)

According to the above interview, Makerere University is known for student activism among the four campuses, despite a popular student vote process frequently emphasized by media companies and political parties. However, the other three universities' student politics have been impacted by the university administration, which has limited party politics in response to Makerere University's violence.

The management of the three universities, except for Makerere University, has outlawed or attempted to avoid involvement in partisan politics, citing lessons learned from Makerere University, where property is destroyed, students are maimed, and lives are lost. Universities prefer students to compete and are voted on merit without regard for political party affiliation. Typically, contestants are given a month to launch political campaigns, which have been made easier by social media usage. It has become less expensive and more convenient, alleviating the difficulties of printing many posters and personally reaching out to each student.

Gulu University's guild has been more persistent in making the administration allow political space. Despite university administrators' refusal to admit political parties on campus, the student guild modified the constitution in 2016. The candidates of 2019 ran campaigns and then voted based on parties, with the Forum for Democratic Change leaning candidate winning the 2019 elections⁵. This demonstrates how students are motivated to have student representation independent of the university council.

Social media has given student politics a new lease on life, as they now find politics entertaining. Even in universities where the administration restricts participation, this impacts student participation. According to the poll results, all universities find politics fascinating: MAK had 90% (n=47), IUIU had 84% n=47, MUST have 76% n=32, and GULU had 86% n=31. See the graph below

⁵M, Ivan(2019) People Power candidate defeated in Gulu University guild president race; <https://www.watchdoguganda.com/news/20190414/65898/people-power-candidate-defeated-in-gulu-university-guild-president-race.html>

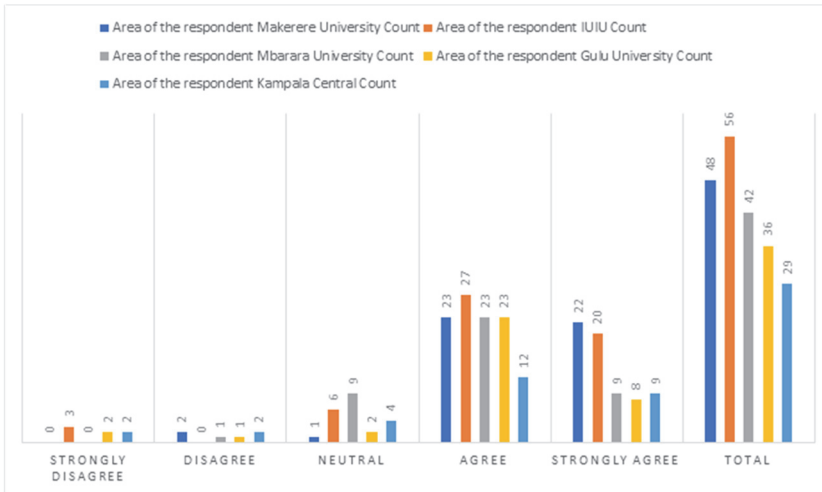


Figure 4: Social media makes politics interesting

As a result, the graph above indicates that social media has transformed how politics is seen as boring and less engaging. Park et al. (2004) discovered in their quantitative examination of the views and experiences of 12–19-year-olds that a sizable minority of teenagers - about 20%—regard voting as a waste of time¹⁶. However, this is increasingly changing as students may now participate online by sharing manifestos of various candidates, mobilizing friends to vote, and watching political rallies, among other things.

4. Conclusion

It has been established in the four regional universities that social media continues to influence politics during the election season and at all times, as student leaders continue to post political messages and mobilize their constituents due to the new virtual public sphere. Given the university administration’s lack of trust in the political system and legal barriers, the platforms have given students hope as an alternative political forum. This study also revealed the following findings: First, there is enormous potential for social media use in student politics if there is freedom of expression. Second, multi-party politics is only visible at two universities: Makerere University, where the administration is supportive and accepts national political parties to participate in student politics, and Gulu University, where students have remained resilient and have informally fielded party-leaning candidates in 2019. Finally, in today’s world.

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¹⁶ Park., A., et al., *Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds*, p 20

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