The Influence of Commonly Used Social Media Platforms on Political Participation among Voters in Busega District, Tanzania

The Influence of Commonly Used Social Media Platforms on Political Participation among Voters in Busega District, Tanzania

[1*] David Jacob, [2] Revocatus Kabobe

[1*,2] Open University of Tanzania

https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2615-3327

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of social media platforms on political participation among voters in Busega District, Tanzania. The study specifically analyzed the most utilized social media platforms for political engagement and their role in shaping political discourse and participation.

Methodology: A qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and content analysis. A total of 30 participants were purposively selected, including community leaders, social media influencers, politicians, and active voters. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.

Findings: The study found that WhatsApp and Instagram were the most utilized social media platforms for political engagement, with 53.3% of participants preferring WhatsApp and 20% using Instagram. Facebook (16.7%) and X (formerly Twitter) alongside TikTok (10%) had relatively lower engagement levels. The findings indicated that social media enhances political participation by enabling real-time discussions, increasing political awareness, and facilitating voter mobilization. However, challenges such as misinformation, limited internet access, and financial constraints were identified as barriers to effective engagement.

Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The study contributes to digital democracy literature by highlighting the role of social media in fostering political participation in rural African settings. It recommends policy interventions to enhance digital infrastructure, regulate online political conduct, and combat misinformation. Political stakeholders are advised to strategically utilize WhatsApp and Instagram for voter education and mobilization to strengthen democratic engagement.

Keywords: *Social Media, Political Participation, Digital Democracy, Voter Engagement, Tanzania*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globally, social media has significantly transformed political participation by providing interactive platforms where voters can engage with political processes. Digital communication technologies have facilitated the rapid dissemination of political content, enabling citizens to interact with political leaders, discuss policy matters, and mobilize for electoral participation (Boulianne, 2020; Theocharis & Jungherr, 2021). Social media has reshaped the nature of political communication, fostering a participatory culture that allows voters to engage in real-time discussions and influence political discourse (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become central to political activism, providing spaces for both grassroots mobilization and high-level policy debates (Bennett & Segerberg, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020).

The impact of social media on voter engagement is particularly pronounced in developing democracies, where digital communication tools offer alternative avenues for political expression and organization. Studies suggest that social media enhances political awareness, encourages civic engagement, and provides an avenue for marginalized voices to participate in the democratic process (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2021; Gainous & Wagner, 2020). However, concerns regarding misinformation, political polarization, and digital divide persist, affecting the effectiveness of social media in fostering informed political participation (Tucker et al., 2018; Guess et al., 2020).

In Tanzania, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has increased the use of social media for political communication. The proliferation of mobile phones and internet accessibility has contributed to the growing reliance on digital platforms for political discourse (Mwesiga, 2021). With the rise of political campaigns conducted online, social media has become an essential tool for voter mobilization, political activism, and civic education (Nyirenda-Jere & Biru, 2020). However, the extent to which social media influences voter participation in semi-rural areas remains underexplored.

Busega District, a semi-rural area, presents a unique case for examining how voters utilize social media for political engagement. The district reflects both the opportunities and challenges associated with digital political participation, including issues of digital literacy, internet accessibility, and the spread of misinformation (Nyirenda-Jere & Biru, 2020). Political actors and civil society organizations have increasingly leveraged social media to engage with voters, educate the electorate, and advocate for policy changes (Makulilo, 2020). However, disparities in internet access and technological infrastructure may hinder the full realization of social media's potential in promoting inclusive political participation (Howard & Hussain, 2019).

The role of social media in political engagement is evolving alongside technological advancements and changing voter behaviour. As digital platforms become more sophisticated, political communication strategies continue to adapt, incorporating data analytics, targeted messaging, and algorithm-driven content distribution (Bakir & McStay, 2018). In this context, understanding the patterns of social media usage among voters in semi-rural areas like Busega

District is essential for evaluating its broader implications on democratic governance and political inclusivity in Tanzania.

The increasing reliance on social media for political engagement raises concerns about the credibility of online information and its impact on voter decision-making. Persily & Tucker (2020) highlight concerns about the credibility of online information in political engagement, noting that misinformation and propaganda can distort public perceptions and influence electoral outcomes. Guess et al. (2020) further emphasize that algorithmic biases contribute to political polarization by creating echo chambers that restrict diverse viewpoints. To address these issues, a multidimensional approach is needed, including media literacy programs, regulatory measures, and ethical technology practices.

This study explores how social media shapes voter behaviour, political awareness, and decision-making in Busega District, contributing to discussions on digital democracy in Tanzania.

1.1 Problem Statement

Social media is a major force in shaping political participation, providing voters access to political discussions and campaign information. However, its impact in semi-rural areas like Busega District is not well explored. While many voters in Busega rely on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram for political updates, challenges such as misinformation, low digital literacy, economic barriers, and limited internet access hinder effective participation. Misinformation and politically motivated propaganda may mislead voters and affect electoral outcomes (Persily & Tucker, 2020).

Voters in semi-rural and remote areas of Busega are most affected by these challenges. Limited internet access and digital literacy prevent meaningful engagement with political content, while economic barriers make it difficult for some to afford necessary digital tools. Misinformation and propaganda further distort political awareness and decision-making, potentially influencing voter manipulation and electoral integrity.

Despite the expansion of internet access in Tanzania, there is limited research on how social media influences political participation, especially in semi-rural districts. Existing studies focus more on urban areas, leaving a gap in understanding how social media impacts voter engagement in less connected regions like Busega. This study will examine social media's influence in political participation, identify challenges, and suggest ways to optimize digital tools for informed voting, contributing to discussions on digital democracy.

As of 2023, over 29.5 million Tanzanians, approximately 57% of the population, had internet access, with social media as a primary political platform (TCRA, 2023). In Busega, about 35% of the population voter base of 124,316 as of the 2020 general election, (roughly 43510.6 people) engage with social media for political purposes (Busega District Council, 2023). However, challenges such as low digital literacy, poor infrastructure, and misinformation limit the impact of social media on political participation. A recent survey found that only 42% of voters in

Busega trust political information on social media (Mussa & Mwita, 2023). This study aims to explore these issues and their effect on voter participation.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Digital Democracy Theory (Dahlgren, 2013).

The Digital Democracy Theory (Dahlgren, 2013).) posits that social media platforms foster political engagement by providing an open, interactive space for individuals to share information, express opinions, and participate in political discussions. Dahlgren (2013).) highlights that digital platforms democratize access to political information, enabling broader political participation, especially among younger and more digitally literate individuals. Unlike traditional media, which tends to be more passive, social media platforms offer users the opportunity to engage actively with the political process. This theory is crucial to this study as it provides a lens through which to analyse the role of social media in political engagement in Busega District, where internet access and digital literacy may influence the extent to which voters participate in political discussions online.

2.1.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) provides insight into why individuals engage with media. The theory suggests that people actively choose media to fulfil specific needs such as information, entertainment, or social interaction. Katz et al. (2020) argue that individuals are not passive consumers of media but actively engage with it based on their personal motivations and desires. In the context of political participation, this theory suggests that voters in Busega District may turn to social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram to satisfy their political information needs. The theory is relevant for this study as it explains how voters' active choices in engaging with specific types of political content on social media can shape their political behaviour and influence their awareness of electoral issues.

2.1.3 Digital Divide Theory (Norris, 2001)

The Digital Divide Theory (Norris, 2001) addresses disparities in access to digital technologies, suggesting that individuals with limited access to technology or lower levels of digital literacy face significant barriers to participation in the digital realm. Norris (2001) highlights that the digital divide can lead to inequalities in political participation, as those without sufficient resources or digital skills may be excluded from online political discourse. This theory is highly relevant to this study, as it underscores the challenges faced by voters in Busega District, where limited internet access and digital literacy may impede full engagement with political discussions on social media. By focusing on these barriers, the theory contributes to understanding how unequal access to technology might hinder voter participation and influence electoral outcomes in rural areas.

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2.1.4 Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

The Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) suggests that while media may not dictate what people think, it plays a critical role in shaping what people think about by highlighting particular issues and topics. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that the media's emphasis on specific issues influences public perception and sets the political agenda. In the context of social media, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can direct attention to particular political topics, thereby influencing what voters consider important during elections. This theory is relevant for this study as it highlights how social media can shape the political agenda in Busega District, guiding voter attention to key issues and influencing decision-making in the political process.

These theories collectively provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of social media's impact on political participation in Busega District. They offer insights into why voters engage with social media, the barriers to participation, and the influence of digital platforms on political behaviour. By integrating these theories, this study aims to examine how social media can both facilitate and hinder political engagement in a semi-rural setting, contributing to the broader discussion on digital democracy.

2.2 Empirical Review

Mugarula (2017) investigated the impact of social media on youth participation in the 2015 national elections, focusing on students from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication and the Institute of Social Work. The study employed a case study design with a sample of 100 respondents, utilizing interviews and questionnaires for data collection. Findings revealed that 84% of the youth registered to vote due to social media influence, and 77% obtained election information through these platforms. The study concluded that social media significantly raised awareness and participation among youth in the 2015 elections.

Babeiya and Magoti (2023) explored the status of Tanzanian political parties on social media platforms. Through a review of social media pages, key informant interviews, and documentary analysis, the study found that, despite using social media for political activities, political parties had a low profile online. The research indicated that social media had not significantly altered the balance of power among political parties in Tanzania. Factors such as limited awareness of social media's potential, an unpredictable political system, and resource constraints were identified as contributing to this status. The study recommended policy and capacity-building interventions to empower political parties and citizens for effective online engagement.

Awinia (2021) examined the penetration of social media in party politics and elections in Tanzania, focusing on emerging practices and challenges. The study involved interviews with party members and leaders from five political parties that participated in the 2015 and 2020 general elections. It concluded that, despite restrictive cybersecurity laws, social media had been institutionalized as a civic cyberspace for political campaigns. The increasing use of social media

transformed core political party campaign activities, including political mobilization, promotion of party ideology, inter- and intra-party interaction, and fundraising.

Massawe (2022) conducted a study on the role of social media in political engagement among voters in Busega District. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study surveyed 200 respondents across different wards in Busega. Findings indicated that 63% of the respondents used social media as their primary source of political news, with Facebook and WhatsApp being the most popular platforms. However, challenges such as digital illiteracy, misinformation, and inconsistent internet access hindered effective political participation through social media. The study recommended enhanced digital literacy programs to maximize the positive impact of social media on voter engagement in Busega District.

Nyirenda and Adepoju (2020) examined the role of social media in political mobilization in Malawi's 2019 general elections. The study revealed that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp were instrumental in mobilizing voters, especially among the youth. However, the research also highlighted issues such as the spread of fake news, propaganda, and cyber harassment, which affected voter perceptions and participation. The study emphasized the need for regulatory measures to balance digital freedom and political integrity.

Adebayo (2021) explored social media's influence on voter behaviour in Nigeria's 2019 elections. Through a content analysis of political campaigns on social media, the study found that political parties used social media extensively to reach voters, but misinformation and political polarization posed significant challenges. The research suggested that digital campaigns be complemented with offline engagement to ensure an inclusive democratic process.
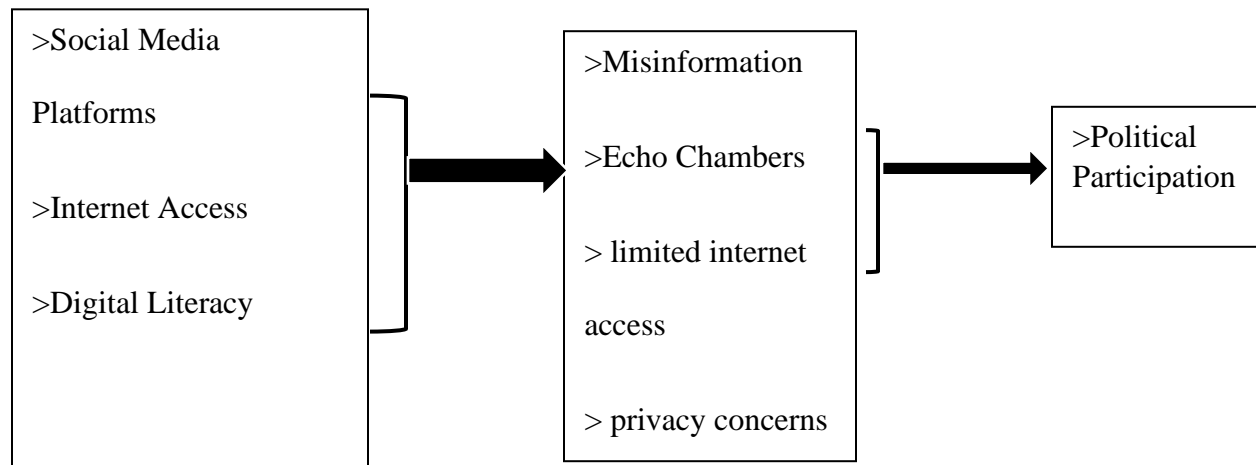
Smith and Johnson (2022) analysed the impact of social media on political engagement in the United States during the 2020 presidential elections. Their study found that social media platforms significantly influenced political discourse, voter mobilization, and campaign strategies. However, concerns over misinformation, algorithmic bias, and online political manipulation raised questions about the ethical implications of digital political engagement.

Kumar et al. (2023) examined the effects of social media on democratic participation in India's 2019 general elections. The study revealed that while social media platforms played a crucial role in voter education and mobilization, challenges such as echo chambers and targeted misinformation campaigns impacted the quality of democratic participation. The research called for increased regulation and fact-checking initiatives to counter digital political misinformation.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between social media platforms (independent variable) and voter participation (dependent variable), with challenges such as misinformation and internet accessibility acting as moderating factors.

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┌─────────────────┐          ┌──────────────────┐          ┌──────────────┐
│ >Social Media   │          │ >Misinformation  │          │ >Political   │
│                 │          │                  │          │ Participation│
│ Platforms       │          │ >Echo Chambers   │   ──────▶ │              │
│                 │ ──────▶  │                  │          └──────────────┘
│ >Internet Access│          │ > limited internet│
│                 │          │                  │
│ >Digital Literacy│         │ access           │
│                 │          │                  │
│                 │          │ > privacy concerns│
└─────────────────┘          └──────────────────┘
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Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Researcher (2025)

In this framework, social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, influence political participation among voters in Busega District by facilitating political discussions, mobilization, and awareness. However, factors such as misinformation, limited internet access, and privacy concerns may moderate this influence, potentially affecting the extent of voter engagement and turnout.

2.4 Research Gaps

While existing studies have explored the role of social media in political participation, most have focused on urban populations, neglecting rural areas like Busega District. Additionally, previous research has primarily examined general voter engagement without assessing specific challenges such as misinformation, digital literacy, and government intervention in rural contexts. Furthermore, limited studies have categorized voter participation based on demographics such as age, education, and economic status in relation to social media usage. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by providing empirical evidence on how social media influences political participation among voters in Busega District.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. The study was conducted in Busega District, Tanzania, targeting active voters, politicians, and community leaders. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 30 participants. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns in the data.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Social Media Platforms Utilized by Voters

Findings indicate that WhatsApp (53.3%) and Instagram (20%) are the most preferred platforms among voters, primarily due to their accessibility and ease of communication. WhatsApp, in particular, stands out due to its ability to facilitate real-time political discussions and mobilization, making it a preferred tool for engagement in political discourse. Participants highlighted that WhatsApp groups allow for instant information sharing and direct interaction, which is crucial in mobilizing voters and discussing political issues in a timely manner.

However, traditional methods of communication still play a significant role in political engagement, especially among voters who are not active on social media platforms. whistles, public announcements (PA systems), and community meetings continue to be effective means of mobilizing voters in both urban and rural areas. These methods allow for direct, face-to-face engagement, fostering a sense of community and trust. Particularly in rural areas like Busega District, village leaders and elders use these traditional methods to encourage voter participation, spreading political messages through loudspeakers and public forums that are accessible to all, including those without internet access.

In addition, radio broadcasts and television remain influential, especially among older voters and those without access to smartphones or the internet. Radio is particularly valuable in rural areas due to its wide reach and accessibility, with many voters relying on it as their primary source of information. Magazines and newspapers also provide in-depth political analysis, though their reach is somewhat limited compared to more immediate forms of communication like social media or radio. These traditional media formats are trusted for their detailed and credible information, making them essential for engaging voters who prefer well-researched and formal content.

In contrast, Facebook (16.7%) and X with TikTok (10%) had relatively lower engagement levels. While these platforms are still significant, their usage was limited compared to WhatsApp and Instagram. This can be attributed to factors such as the complexity of navigating these platforms for political engagement, the nature of content shared, and the broader, less interactive format they offer compared to WhatsApp's group dynamics. Moreover, younger voters tend to gravitate more towards Instagram and TikTok for their visual and dynamic content, while older voters may find WhatsApp's text-based communication more accessible and practical. Therefore, WhatsApp's high engagement reflects its suitability for immediate, group-based political discussions, while Instagram's popularity can be linked to its visual appeal and broader reach among diverse age groups.

4.2 Position of Social Media in Political Participation

Social media serves as a vital tool for voter mobilization, awareness creation, and political discourse. However, misinformation and digital illiteracy limit its effectiveness. Participants highlighted the need for digital literacy programs to help voters discern credible information.

4.3 Challenges Affecting Social Media Effectiveness

Participants cited the spread of false information, which affects voter perceptions. Wards such as Igalukilo, Imalamate, Kalemela, Kiloleli, Lutubiga, Mkula, Ngasamo, Nyaluhande and Shigala experience weak network signals. Many voters struggle to afford smartphones and data bundles, limiting their engagement.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that social media, particularly WhatsApp and Instagram, plays a significant role in political participation among voters in Busega District. However, challenges such as misinformation, financial constraints, and poor internet access hinder its full potential. Addressing these challenges will enhance digital political engagement.

5.2 Recommendations

Improve digital infrastructure to enhance internet accessibility in rural wards. Enact policies to regulate misinformation and promote responsible social media use. Conduct digital literacy campaigns to educate voters on identifying credible political information. Utilize both social media and traditional platforms (e.g., community meetings) to reach all voters. Leverage WhatsApp and Instagram for voter engagement and education. Establish official social media channels to counter misinformation and provide accurate political content.

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