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## EDITORIAL

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## In this issue

This is a collection of research articles authored by scholars from journalism, media and communication departments and schools at universities in South Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania. The first article by Godfrey Wandwi and Gilbert Jacksoni examines how emerging 5G networks are reshaping mobile journalism and altering both the production and distribution of news, with drone systems serving as a prominent, illustrative use-case of 5G-enabled capabilities. Using Grounded in the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the research interrogates how media organizations and independent citizen reporters are integrating low-latency, high-bandwidth 5G links into mobile newsgathering workflows to deliver richer, real-time coverage from the field. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with newsroom editors, freelance mobile journalists, and technical operators, as well as a focus group discussion. The second article by Pikolomzi Qaba and Bongani I Dlamini examines how media representation and community perceptions shape the reputation of Amahlathi Local Municipality (ALM) in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. Drawing on Stakeholder Theory, Reputation Management Frameworks, and Social Exchange Theory, this qualitative study employed mixed content analysis to examine 15 media reports from Daily Dispatch, News24, and GroundUp – spanning from November 2018 to February 2022, alongside 10 substantive community feedback instances gathered through five public forums (150 participants) and three community meetings (75 participants). The third article by Prever Mukasa, Solomon Serwanjja, and James Kiwanuka-Tondo explains the processes by which TikTok cyberbullying targets at Makerere University and Uganda Christian University, rebuild their communicative identities in response to architecturally mediated harassment using the Constructivist Grounded Theory. The researchers conducted twenty-six in-depth interviews using purposive sampling. Constant comparative analysis generated twelve focused categories organized around a core category. Nalugya Kukundakwe and James Kiwanuka-Tondo in article four, evaluates the exposures of Covid-19 Pandemic health communication campaigns in Uganda – using the information processing theory to evaluate the understanding of the effectiveness the Covid-19 messages. The study used descriptive quantitative research approach, specifically a survey was administered to 320 participants selected using simple random sampling. The fifth article by Eric Kyama and Fred Kakooza examines the utilisation of TikTok by the National Unity Platform (NUP), one of the leading opposition political parties in Uganda. More specifically the study examined the evolving role of social media in shaping political discourse in emerging democracies by using the 2025 Kawempe North parliamentary by-elections in Uganda. The Technology Acceptance Model and the Collective Action Theory were applied to illustrate the nexus between digital technology and political mobilisation. The sixth article by Samwilu Mwaffisi examined whether media pluralism in Tanzania since media deregulation in the early 1990s, has promoted social accountability. This study was guided by Pluralist Media Theory and employed a mixed-methods research design. Qualitative data was collected through key informants and focus group discussions, while quantitative data was collected through survey research.

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# Political Mobilization by TikTok During Uganda Elections: A Case of the National Unity Platform (NUP)

Eric Kyama  
Fred Kakooza

## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the utilisation of TikTok by the National Unity Platform (NUP), one of the leading opposition political parties in Uganda. More specifically the study examined the evolving role of social media in shaping political discourse in emerging democracies by using the 2025 Kawempe North parliamentary by-election in Uganda. The Technology Acceptance Model and the Collective Action Theory were applied to illustrate the nexus between digital technology and political mobilisation. In-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis were used for data collection. The sample involved 7 participants for in-depth interviews while content analysis was carried out on 10 TikTok videos. The study found that NUP used TikTok to rally supporters to protect votes, promote its candidate and party ideologies, as well as expose irregularities. The content on TikTok had a blend of music and speeches, informative messages, and humorous content. The use of TikTok also came with challenges such as targeted party attacks, high costs of data, and sporadic internet connections. The study concludes that TikTok is a necessary platform for digital political mobilisations. Unique to this study was the integration of entertainment through music into political speeches that enhanced the appeal of political messages to target audiences. Political parties can fully benefit from the platform based on proper planning and financial readiness to harness engagement and interactions that are unique but important for digital political communication.

**Key words:** *Social media. TikTok. Ugandan Politics. Parliamentary by-elections. Robert Kyagulanyi National Unity Platform*

## Introduction

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes in emerging democracies such as Uganda. Its role in political mobilisation has become increasingly evident (Ainomugisha & Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire, 2024), and activists and politicians have leveraged these platforms to raise awareness about political issues, thereby enhancing public participation (Namayego, 2023). The National Unity Platform (NUP), led by Robert Kyagulanyi, has increasingly leveraged social media to challenge President Museveni's decades-long rule. NUP's social media strategies, including Kyagulanyi's personal online engagement, underscore the growing influence of social media on Uganda's electoral democracy (Ainomugisha & Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire, 2024). For the 2025 Kawempe North by-election in Uganda, political parties appeared to employ comparatively conventional digital communication strategies. The National Resistance Movement (NRM), Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), Democratic Party (DP), and People's Progressive Party (PPP) primarily used official Facebook pages, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp networks to publicise campaign schedules, circulate photographs from rallies, communicate policy messages, and mobilise supporters (Dogra & Kaur, 2021). However, in addition to the mentioned social media platforms, NUP aggressively used TikTok videos that generated higher levels of engagement than other competing political parties. The Kawempe North by-election was won by a NUP candidate.

The NUP's strategic use of TikTok—widely regarded as an effective platform for engaging audiences through short, visually compelling videos—raises important questions for academic inquiry. Therefore, three research questions guided this study: 1) In what ways did the NUP use TikTok for political mobilisation in the parliamentary by-election? 2) What strategies guided NUP's TikTok content during the parliamentary by-election? 3) What were the NUP's experiences in using TikTok for political mobilisation during the parliamentary by-election? In order to appreciate TikTok as an emerging platform for digital political communication, the next section focuses on the literature review to give a broad understanding of the deployment of TikTok in political mobilisation.

## **Literature review**

### **TikTok and Political Mobilisation**

The unique advantage of social media lies in its ability to communicate complex messages through visuals, which are often more impactful and easier to interpret than lengthy verbal communication. On the international scene, the transformative role of social media in political discourse was evident in Donald Trump's rise to power (Changa, 2025). His unexpected victory in the 2016 United States presidential election and subsequent re-election in 2024 demonstrated how social media can bypass traditional media channels and influence voter behaviour (Jungherr, 2023). Visual platforms such as TikTok use algorithm-driven feeds that prioritise creativity and novelty, making them powerful tools for political communication (Benjamin et al., 2022; Changa, 2025). Its design allows new or less established voices to reach wide audiences without relying on traditional political visibility.

TikTok's affordances make it particularly suitable for political mobilisation. For example, Benjamin et al. (2022) argue that users can easily create and share content, analyse trends in real time, and engage through comments and reactions, providing valuable insights for strategic communication. The platform's rapid growth is largely driven by its appeal to young audiences. TikTok allows users to personalise content and position themselves at the centre of their narratives (Benjamin et al., 2022; Literat & Kliger, 2019). Additionally, TikTok's content retention structure supports trend analysis and audience insight, which are valuable for political mobilisation strategies (Benjamin et al 2022). As Tufekci (2017) notes, social media has democratised political reporting by empowering citizens to share real-time updates and alternative viewpoints. Consequently, TikTok is increasingly recognised as a powerful political tool in the digital age (Cervi et al., 2023; Ureke, 2024).

A review of the official NUP TikTok account shows that the party had amassed over 600,000 followers at the time of this study—the largest following of any Ugandan political party on the platform. According to the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC, 2023), TikTok accounts for the highest data traffic, exceeding 22 million gigabytes, surpassing all other social media platforms and indicating its widespread use. This demonstrates the platform's value as a tool for political communication, enabling political actors to engage diverse audiences through innovative formats such as short dance videos, live-streamed speeches, and viral challenges (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). Social media content plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, mobilising supporters, and facilitating direct communication between candidates and voters. It also enhances political engagement by encouraging voter participation and stimulating discussion on key issues (Ate et al, 2023). In Uganda, the strategic importance of digital political communication is reinforced by the country's youthful demographic profile and growing social media adoption. With the youth accounting for approximately 58% of the population (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2025), digital platforms resonate with the youth culture and have become increasingly important spaces for political engagement and electoral mobilisation.

To effectively use social media for political mobilisation, actors must define clear objectives, such as promoting manifestos, highlighting candidates' competencies, countering misinformation, or influencing voter attitudes (Ate et al, 2023; Lilleker & Jackson, 2016; Newman, 2015). Consequently, political actors are investing more heavily in social media strategies that resonate with young voters through authentic,

entertaining, and interactive content. By adopting TikTok's participatory culture—through humour, music, trends, and user-generated content, politicians are able to enhance their visibility, foster engagement, and influence political discourse among Uganda's digitally connected youth (Chen, 2022; UBOS, 2025). From the foregoing, the adoption of TikTok for digital political communication can be appreciated theoretically through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Collective Action Theory (CAT).

### **Theoretical framework**

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was originally developed by Davis (1989), posits that individuals are more likely to adopt a technology when they perceive it as useful and easy to use (Kongsoontornkijkul et al., 2019). This theory extends to social media and digital activism, demonstrating that perceived usefulness, ease of use, and enjoyment significantly influence individuals' willingness to engage in online political participation and collective campaigns (Alalwan et al., 2017; Rauniar et al., 2014). In a study by Kongsoontornkijkul et al. (2019), the TAM framework was used to describe important factors in technology acceptance and to describe or predict behavior in accepting newly developed information systems. For this study, TikTok's perceived usefulness is reflected in its ability to disseminate campaign messages quickly, mobilise supporters, and reach a broad audience, particularly young voters who dominate the platform. TikTok's intuitive interface and built-in creative tools enabled the rapid production and sharing of short, engaging videos. This allowed NUP to respond quickly to unfolding campaign dynamics while maintaining a consistent online presence.

The Collective Action Theory (CAT) developed by Olson (1965) emphasises the importance of shared interests, communication, and coordination in enabling individuals to act collectively (Sandler, 1991). The theory provides insights into how social media, including TikTok, functioned as a tool for mobilisation. It depicts social media platforms as aggregators of many users who can collectively bargain for a public benefit. In a study titled *The Logic of Collective Action: Theory and Applications*, Sandler (1991) demonstrates the potential of group size to promote more effective collective action. Contemporary scholars (cited in Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci, 2017) argue that digital media reduce the costs of coordination, enable rapid information diffusion, and strengthen social incentives for participation, thereby making collective action more feasible.

The interaction between the two theories, TAM and CAT, is central to this study, as TikTok's perceived usefulness is closely tied to its ability to enable collective action through user engagement and interaction, while its ease-of-use lowers barriers to participation, allowing more individuals to engage in political processes. The next section explains the methods used in collecting data to answer the three research questions of the study: ) In what ways did the NUP use TikTok for political mobilisation in the parliamentary by-election? 2)What strategies guided NUP's TikTok content during the parliamentary by-election? 3)What were the NUP's experiences in using TikTok for political mobilisation during the parliamentary by-election?

### **Method**

The study used a qualitative research approach which focuses on the nature and meaning of social phenomena (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Through the case study design, the author explored how NUP deployed TikTok for mobilisation during the 2025 Kawempe North parliamentary by-election. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis of selected TikTok videos published by the party. Interviews were conducted with seven respondents, including the NUP Deputy Spokesperson, the head of youth mobilisation, two members of the social media team, the Deputy Head of the Women's League in Buganda, as well as two independent political communication experts giving a total sample size of 11 participants. These participants possessed direct knowledge of the party's communication strategies and were therefore well-positioned to explain the deployment of TikTok in political mobilisation.

In addition, qualitative content analysis was conducted on 10 out of 51 TikTok videos posted between January 27, 2025 and March 27, 2025, on the NUP TikTok platform. This period had heightened campaign activities from which the above sample was selected using a constructed week random sampling. The videos selected for this analysis were chosen because they embodied key thematic dimensions that included ideological exposition, critique of regime excesses, and candidate portrayal, which collectively capture the central communicative strategies employed in the party's TikTok mobilisation efforts. According to Shava et al. (2021), qualitative content analysis is useful for analysing diverse communication materials including video narratives and other media artefacts. The findings are provided below following the research questions: 1) In what ways did the NUP use TikTok for political mobilisation in the parliamentary by-election? 2) What strategies guided NUP's TikTok content during the parliamentary by-election? 3) What were the NUP's experiences in using TikTok for political mobilisation during the parliamentary by-election? are presented in the following section.

The videos and in-depth interviews were all analysed using thematic analysis. The data was systematically organised and analysed in order to arrive at meaningful insights (Dawadi, 2020). Video content and extracts were thematically analysed using dimensions provided in the code sheet and the dominant dimensions were transformed into themes for data presentation. This was achieved by careful watching and listening to the videos, reading the attached captions and lower thirds. Similarly, for in-depth interviews, audio records were carefully listened to, and transcribed. The texts were read and re-read in order to identify dominant statements which became themes. Therefore, the analysis of video data and in-depth interviews included identifying, describing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within a data set in exploring how NUP leveraged TikTok for political mobilisation.

## **Findings**

The findings have been presented according to the following themes: Deployment of TikTok in political mobilization, TikTok Strategies for political mobilization and Experiences of TikTok deployment during the by-elections as elaborated in this section.

### **Deployment of TikTok in Political Mobilisation**

The first research question considered the ways in which NUP use TikTok for political mobilisation in the parliamentary by-election. The data collected from qualitative content analysis indicate that NUP deployed TikTok videos to call for action. At least five of the ten analysed videos lasted for 5 minutes, and they called upon supporters to mobilise their peers to attend rallies, attend aspirants' debates, and call upon the voters to fight for their freedom. For instance, a video posted on January 28, 2025, had voices of the NUP election management committee calling upon supporters to pick forms for expressing interest in the parliamentary by-election. Another video that was posted on February 08, 2025, called upon people of Kawempe North constituency to fight for their freedom. They were cautioned not to allow unlawful arrests of NUP supporters. Below is a screenshot of an address targeted towards people of Kawempe North.



In video 1, the NUP President, Robert Kyagulanyi, calls on voters to be vigilant: “I need to tell you this: they are not going to give you your freedom; they are not going to give you freedom on a silver plate; you will have to fight for it. When you see them arresting people unlawfully, don’t allow them (National Unity Platform, February 8, 2025). As respondent 6 observed, “TikTok is hugely interactive in the sense that it’s visually appealing, playful, interactive, and creative”. This is what informed NUP’s decision to post brief videos about events regarding the Kawempe North constituency by-election targeting young people who prefer brief videos since they have a short attention span.

NUP has used TikTok videos to highlight election events. The video content analysis shows key party events, including press conferences, leadership meetings, aspirants receiving expression of interest forms, debates, candidate nominations, political rallies, and incidents involving security raids on supporters and candidates. The screenshot below is from video 6 about election events and security raids at NUP offices.



*UPDF soldiers at the NUP offices in Makerere Kavule (National Unity Platform, March 2, 2025).*

This text from video 6 at a TikTok handle #Freemachete #freeGenGaddafi details the events of the attack by UPDF soldiers at the NUP offices in Makerere Kavule: “We are peaceful, why are you attacking us? We have not broken the law. Leave us, leave our people. Why are you taking our people?” (National Unity

Platform, March 2, 2025). This suggests that NUP strategically uses TikTok not only to publicise its activities but also to highlight both its political mobilisation efforts and instances of state-inflicted repression, thereby shaping public perception and sustaining visibility.

The finding shows that NUP used TikTok to reach a broader audience. As one participant explained “social media has more numbers than mainstream media” (Participant 7). Moreover, the findings indicate that not everyone could be physically present at the party’s headquarters. NUP was acutely aware of the strategic importance of the Kawempe North by-election and made a deliberate effort to amplify its visibility on TikTok, particularly among urban audiences, where internet access and smartphone penetration are significantly higher than in rural areas. TikTok was further employed by NUP to promote its candidate, Erias Nalukoola Luyimbazi, in the Kawempe North by-election. From the content analysis, four of the ten reviewed videos explained why Nalukoola was the preferred choice for the parliamentary seat. These videos featured campaign rallies and the unveiling of candidate Nalukoola by the NUP party president, Robert Kyagulanyi, alongside other senior party leaders rallying support on his behalf. Below is the screenshot of the TikTok video 7 of Nalukoola (in blue) being unveiled.



*Unveiling candidate Nalukoola (National Unity Platform, March 14, 2025).*

Sharing the video of Robert Kyagulanyi unveiling or endorsing the party’s candidate is a powerful sign of trust and legitimacy—both within the party and to the electorate. The respondent further explained that viewers who encounter these videos may interpret the Respondent 7 believes that this “public endorsement is a cue to place trust in the candidate that the party has selected and therefore the voters ought to do the same.

### **TikTok Strategies for Political Mobilisation**

The second research question was on the strategies that guided NUP’s TikTok content during the parliamentary by-election. The findings indicate that using TikTok videos to encourage vote protection is among the strategies that NUP used to mobilise the Kawempe community to safeguard the vote. One of the videos emphasises the tangible contributions the late legislator Muhammad Ssegirinya made during his tenure. Moreover, the video reassured voters that Erias Nalukoola would uphold that legacy and not betray their trust. NUP urged voters to turn out in large numbers on election day and underscored that Nalukoola’s victory would only be possible if supporters actively protected the vote count at the different polling stations.



*Mbasaba muve mu okutya (Do not fear) (National Unity Platform, March 4, 2025)*

One participant emphasised “that these videos played a critical role in countering fear and apathy, particularly in the face of an intimidating security environment”. The findings further show that the party’s call for vote protection was both deliberate and strategic to empower voters by reinforcing the idea that the election belonged to them and that these were not ordinary times. This suggests that NUP was aware of the potential deterrent effect that heavy security presence could have on voter turnout in the Kawempe North by-election and recognised the need to re-energise and reassure its supporters. The party also likely understood that without heightened voter vigilance and participation, electoral victory could easily slip out of reach.

In addition, the findings indicate that NUP strategically used the Kawempe North by-election as a platform to disseminate its political ideologies. During several campaign rallies, senior party figures, including the party president, secretary general, and the chief mobiliser, articulated the party’s core values and vision. The participants consistently emphasised that Nalukoola was the candidate best aligned with these principles, portraying him as both ideologically committed and accountable to the electorate. Central to their messaging was the assertion that the voter was the ultimate authority. Below is a screenshot of a video 4 posted on TikTok showing Kyagulanyi addressing the masses during a rally.



*President @Bobi Wine addressing the great people of Kawempe North ahead of the by-election (National Unity Platform, March 11, 2025).*

Rallies, particularly those held in urban areas, serve as powerful platforms for disseminating political ideologies. In the video text, the NUP president rallies people to participate in the elections: “I want to tell you that all the money that has been stolen in Uganda, which is Ugandan shillings 10 trillion, can do a lot of things in Uganda. We want to put this country right by ensuring that we fight corruption” (National Unity Platform, March 11, 2025). Moreover, Respondent 6 believes that “such gatherings attract both supporters and sceptics, creating a unique opportunity to engage diverse audiences”. The respondent further argued that recording and sharing these rally messages on viral platforms like TikTok can significantly amplify their reach and impact, influencing a broader audience beyond the immediate physical gathering.

The study found that NUP used the TikTok platform for political entertainment. The party strategically blended speeches and music both at campaign rallies and in content shared on the party’s official TikTok account. This fusion of music and political messaging was a deliberate tactic. In one of the videos, the party president, Robert Kyagulanyi, performs some of the songs Nalukoola once sang as part of the Firebase music group. A musical group owned by President Robert Kyagulanyi himself. This revelation elicited thunderous applause, cheers, and clapping from the thousands in attendance.



*Happening now (then) live at Nalukoola's campaign (National Unity Platform, March 18, 2025)*

The combination of music and speech was intentionally crafted to broaden the appeal of the campaign message. Respondent 1 argues that the campaign messaging had been designed to highlight the political realities in Uganda through both spoken word and music. Furthermore, video content analysis revealed that the music performed during the campaigns was deeply political and highly informative. The analysis of campaign video 5 features revolutionary songs by Robert Kyagulanyi, the NUP Party President, as well as performances by other politically conscious artists such as King Saha and Zex Bilangilangi.



*Musical performance at the NUP campaign rally (National Unity Platform, March 25, 2025).*

Participant 2 confirms that the use of music during the campaign rallies presented a strategic opportunity to educate citizens about their power to effect change, particularly in a political environment where freedoms of assembly, association, and expression are increasingly suppressed.

The study also found that humour guided the NUP TikTok content creation for political mobilisation. It was established that NUP posted several video clips of its party members making humorous political comments and also struggling to express themselves in the English language, particularly on why they deserved to be

trusted with the party's ticket in the by-election. Video 2, which depicts a contestant who struggled to express himself in the English language, got strong viewership and commentary. The party's eventual candidate, Erias Nalukoola Luyimbazi, was also caught on video cracking jokes in a soft tone, which attracted strong viewership and commentary. Below is a screenshot of a TikTok video 2 with the contestants.



*Funniest NUP MP candidate (National Unity Platform, February 7, 2025)*

The use of humorous videos was to show that the party welcomes and gives everyone a chance to express themselves to win the ticket. Participant 3 was of the view that these videos were not only for humour but also to encourage others that, despite their inability to express themselves in English, they stood a nomination chance provided the public accepted them. Among other strategies, NUP used symbols. An examination of all 10 videos of NUP content on TikTok reveals that the videos were embedded with the party's slogans "people power, our power," which were used either as taglines or verbal statements. The posted videos show people donned in NUP's party colours, holding umbrellas, and others wearing berets and caps with a raised fist, a symbol of resistance and solidarity.



*The Nalukoola campaign trail (National Unity Platform, March 5, 2025)*

The finding further shows that the posted videos featuring party slogans, insignia, and symbols were intended for public familiarisation before the voting. In case they could not remember the candidate's name or face, they would remember the symbol of an umbrella. This suggests that NUP was aware that consistently sharing TikTok videos could familiarise the public with the party's symbols and, in the process, increase recognition of the candidate's image and presence.

Exposing poll malpractices and violence was one of the strategies that guided NUP TikTok content during the Kawempe North by-election. NUP posted many videos showing security attacking their supporters and at the same time paving the way for other candidates from other political parties such as the National Resistance Movement (NRM), Forum for Democratic Change, Democratic Party and independents. The videos also showed the NRM candidate distributing money to the voters, which NUP branded as voter bribery. TikTok video clip 10 has been described as having a returning officer hiding a NUP declaration form.



*Kawempe North by-election, returning officer caught on camera hiding a declaration form that had majority votes for NUP (National Unity Platform, March 3, 2025).*

Participant 4 noted that from day one, they resolved to “use TikTok as a major tool to expose irregularities which could be missed or deliberately ignored by the mainstream media houses”. This suggests that the use of TikTok by the NUP team was inspired by the many advantages of social media channels over legacy media, which encouraged citizen participation in the electoral process by sharing timely information.

### **Experiences of TikTok deployment during the parliamentary by-elections**

The third research question focused on NUP's experiences in using TikTok for political mobilisation during the parliamentary by-election. The findings show that TikTok provided NUP with real-time messaging experiences during the by-election. The videos helped in relaying information about their campaign messages, including exposing irregularities such as beatings and abductions of their members. TikTok was “more engaging with a global community, a national community that makes you communicate to not only voters but many other parts of the country and the world” (Respondent 3). This indicates that TikTok helped NUP to spread its messages beyond Kawempe North constituency and probably aided the party to have national and global attention. Based on social media affordances, TikTok facilitated real-time feedback for the NUP campaign team. The NUP campaign team expressed that whenever they posted a challenge, say of a missing supporter using TikTok videos, they would immediately get comments showing which security vehicle had abducted him or her.

The findings further show that TikTok helped in identifying security officials who had masked up and clobbered their supporters. Due to the real-time exposure, many of the missing NUP supporters were located. Moreover, the study found that TikTok helped NUP reach thousands of voters in a very short time and in most cases in real-time. NUP officials said that it was a great experience for them to see a single video being viewed by more than 1000 people in less than an hour, and attracting huge commentary from the followers. It was also observed that members of the public played a very big role in pushing their videos to have a far reach as they kept sharing them across platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and X. Respondent 2 shared that “people on the ground were posting about Nalukoola and other party members campaigning for him or those brutalised by security agencies”. This demonstrates that social media has a wider reach since many people with smartphones and other digital gadgets can participate in producing and sharing content of interest.

Moreover, the study found that misinformation was one of the biggest negative experiences the NUP team faced during the by-election campaign. Some TikTok content was altered by their competitors to drive their message in a negative context. For instance, Respondent 4 revealed that social media accounts were created with “names that sound NUP (ish) and were used to abuse the Kabaka (King)” yet this is a taboo in Buganda. The respondent adds that “the Kabaka is a no-go area”: This suggests that NUP rivals were very determined to discredit the party’s efforts to secure victory in the Kawempe North by-election. In response, the party would provide “full videos to show that they had been altered and fixed the negative information” (Respondent 4). This quick response to misinformation shows that NUP had planned for such eventualities.

The study also reveals that the NUP mobilisation team that was charged with the production and dissemination of TikTok videos for the by-election was violently targeted both in the field and online. Several of the team members were beaten, abducted, threatened online, and sometimes their TikTok and other social media accounts hacked or blocked. As Respondent 5 explains, “the team had to keep on opening and creating new pages and accounts now and then”. Moreover, the team faced too much censorship, coupled with intimidation and warnings or threats to their lives: “Don't do this, don't do that. Don't say this, don't reveal this information (Respondent 1). But we prepared for them because it is what we have been going through since the party was formed four years ago” (Participant 1). The attacks, threats, and abduction of members of the NUP mobilisation team suggest that the party achieved victory despite the brutality when it won the by-election whose poll processes were not free and fair.

In addition, the study found that high data costs and network challenges were among the barriers that NUP faced to realising the full potential of TikTok affordances during the parliamentary by-election campaigns. Data was expensive and would quickly deplete on top of the bad network signal that would slow down the upload of videos. For example, participant 3 expressed that they found a solution in “switching from one network to another to ensure that the videos were uploaded in real time for their youthful audience not to miss out”. This points to the fact that the campaign required huge amounts of data and a reliable network, which largely paints a picture of the barrier towards information access over digital platforms in Uganda.

## **Discussion**

The findings presented are in relation to how NUP utilised the TikTok platform for political mobilisation, the strategies that informed the content that NUP shared on TikTok and NUP’s experiences in using TikTok as a tool for political mobilisation during the parliamentary by-election for Kawempe North.

### **Deployment of TikTok for Political Mobilisation**

The study demonstrates that the National Unity Platform (NUP) used TikTok in a way that goes beyond simple message dissemination, thereby positioning the platform as a central tool in shaping political narratives during the parliamentary by-election in Kawempe. TikTok functioned as both a campaign tool and a mechanism for political accountability, enabling NUP to present itself as an active participant in the electoral process while highlighting the constraints under which it operated. This strategic use of TikTok aligns closely with the

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), particularly the idea that technology adoption is driven by perceived usefulness and ease of use (Venkatesh et al., 2012). The consistency and diversity of NUP's content, ranging from campaign activities to footage of confrontations with security forces, suggests that the party encountered minimal barriers in using the platform. Moreover, this supports the TAM argument that when a technology is perceived as easy to use, it is more likely to be adopted and integrated into routine practice (Nikou, 2019; Venkatesh et al., 2012). At the same time, the nature of the content indicates that TikTok was not merely convenient but also effective in achieving the party's broader communication goals, particularly in amplifying its visibility and framing its political experiences in a way that resonates with the public.

Evident from the findings is that NUP used TikTok to actively curate its content to shape how their campaign events were interpreted. By sharing videos of candidate nominations alongside footage of security-related disruptions, the party created a juxtaposition that implicitly communicated a narrative of resilience in the face of adversity. This approach aligns with existing scholarship on political communication on TikTok, which emphasises the importance of tailoring content to platform dynamics, maintaining variety, and ensuring that posts are timely and engaging (Chen, 2025; Ureke, 2024; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). NUP's ability to diversify its content, moving between formal political processes and emotionally charged incidents, suggests a sophisticated understanding of how to sustain audience attention while reinforcing its political messaging.

The integration of music into political communication further illustrates NUP's adaptive approach to digital engagement. By blending speeches with musical performances, the party created content that was both informative and entertaining. This was relevant in the context of TikTok, where user attention is often limited, and content must be engaging to be effective. As Ate et al. (2023) and Narasimhamurthy (2014) suggest, tailoring content to audience preferences is crucial for enhancing political engagement. In this case, the use of music likely helped to retain viewer attention while reinforcing the party's message as well as emphasising the importance of political symbolism in NUP's TikTok content.

### **TikTok Strategies for Political Mobilisation**

Equally important is the way NUP humanised its digital content, particularly through the use of humour and relatable storytelling. For example, in a TikTok video where Robert Kyagulanyi introduced the party's candidate for the Kawempe North by-election, he began by narrating the candidate's musical journey before inviting him to perform. NUP adopted this approach in a deliberate manner which transformed what could have been a routine political endorsement into an engaging and relatable moment, particularly for younger audiences who are more likely to connect with musical, cultural and artistic expressions. Rather than relying solely on formal speeches, NUP integrated elements of pop culture to make its content more engaging without losing its political focus.

The audience's enthusiastic response to this performance suggests that such strategies were effective in bridging the gap between political messaging and everyday experience. Scholars such as Chang (2025), Francia (2018), and Chen (2022) have emphasised that effective political communication on social media requires authenticity and emotional connection, often achieved through informal and engaging content. By combining storytelling, humour, and music, NUP created a form of communication that felt less formal and more accessible, thereby enhancing its appeal. This approach reflects a broader shift in political communication, where the boundaries between entertainment and politics are increasingly blurred, especially on platforms such as TikTok. Such mobilisation through informal approaches resonates with the Collective Action Theory which posits that individuals can be mobilised to contribute to a shared goal, even when they may not directly benefit from their participation (Reuben, 200).

The public's involvement in identifying perpetrators of abductions and assisting in locating missing supporters illustrates how TikTok facilitated a form of crowd-sourced engagement that extended beyond the party's formal structures. This challenges the "free rider" critique, which suggests that individuals are unlikely to participate in collective efforts if they can benefit without contributing (Peiffer, 2020). The spontaneous and

widespread participation observed in this study indicates that, under certain conditions, individuals are willing to engage actively, particularly when the issue at hand is perceived as urgent or morally significant which further speaks to the Collective Action Theory. Interestingly, the amplification of NUP's TikTok content was by individuals outside formal party structures. This suggests that engagement was driven as much by the content's emotional and informational value as by political affiliation.

This observation complicates the assumption that collective action depends primarily on strong social ties or high levels of trust within a group (Burgh, 2014; Kuhne et al., 2024; Peiffer, 2020). Instead, it points to a more fluid form of digital mobilisation, where participation is shaped by the immediacy and resonance of the content rather than by pre-existing relationships or ideological commitments. The TikTok video content consistently sought to mobilise voters around shared concerns, particularly issues related to governance, accountability, and the misuse of public resources. The party's call for voters to elect leaders who would not misuse public funds reflects the core principle of collective action theory, which emphasises the need for leaders to articulate common grievances and inspire collective effort (Rucht & Ohlemacher, 2019). By framing the by-election as an opportunity to address these concerns, NUP positioned voter participation as both a civic duty and a collective responsibility.

### **Experiences of TikTok deployment during the parliamentary by-elections**

During the campaigns, NUP tapped into collective memory and sentiment which was reinforced by emotional appeals, particularly through references to the late legislator Muhammad Ssegirinya. By invoking his legacy and framing voter participation as a way of honouring his sacrifice. This strategy aligns with the argument that emotionally resonant content is more likely to engage audiences and sustain participation (Chen, 2025; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). It also illustrates how political communication on digital platforms often combines rational arguments with emotional narratives to create a more compelling call to action. Calling on the electorate to actively participate in the electoral process, including encouraging supporters to pick nomination forms and attend aspirants' debates aligns with Wurst et al.'s (2023) assertion that political mobilisation often begins with leaders initiating engagement and guiding public involvement.

By using TikTok to disseminate these calls to action, NUP demonstrated an understanding of its audience, particularly the youth, who are more likely to engage with digital content. This reflects the TAM perspective, on perceived ease of use and relevance of the TikTok platform to the target audience (Nikou, 2019). Beyond mobilisation, TikTok also served as a platform for articulating NUP's political ideology. The party consistently presented its candidate, Erias Nalukoola, as embodying its core values, using both rally speeches and digital content to reinforce this image. This dual strategy of combining physical and digital presence aligns with arguments by Lilleker and Jackson (2016) and Newman (2015), who highlight the transformative impact of social media on political communication. By sharing rally highlights and ideological messages online, NUP was able to extend its reach beyond those physically present, thereby influencing a wider audience.

The consistent use of slogans such as "People Power, Our Power," along with visual elements like the party's umbrella symbol and colours, suggests a deliberate effort to reinforce brand identity. This aligns with the TAM's emphasis on intentionality and perceived usefulness. The strategic use of symbols enhances recognisability and facilitates voter identification (Bousbani, & Al-Razgan, 2015; Davis, 1989). In a digital environment where content is rapidly consumed, such visual cues play a critical role in ensuring that political messages are easily identifiable and memorable.

At the same time, TikTok's affordances allowed NUP to engage in real-time communication, particularly in documenting and exposing electoral malpractice and state violence. The ability to share videos as events unfolded enabled the party to present its perspective without the delays or filters associated with traditional media. This aligns with arguments that social media platforms provide a space for unmediated communication and rapid dissemination of information (Benjamin et al., 2022; Changa, 2025; Tidy, 2020). By documenting incidents of violence and irregularities, NUP not only informed its supporters but also sought to

influence broader public opinion. The real-time nature of TikTok also facilitated immediate feedback from users, which proved valuable in situations such as identifying abducted supporters or tracking security operatives.

This interactive dimension underscores the platform's role as more than just a broadcasting tool; it functions as a space for dialogue and collaboration. This aligns with Namayego's (2023) observation that digital platforms are increasingly being used to foster civic engagement and public participation, a trend that is clearly reflected by this study. Despite the affordances of the TikTok platform in political mobilisation, there were challenges that NUP experienced with digital communication, particularly the spread of misinformation and content distortion. The alteration of NUP's videos by unknown actors highlights the vulnerability of digital content to manipulation. This phenomenon reflects broader concerns about the role of misinformation in shaping political discourse and undermining public trust (Kriesi, 2015; Paget, 2020).

It also points to the limitations of the TAM, which does not fully account for the misuse of technology or the complex motivations behind such actions (Hai, 2015). In addition to misinformation, the study identifies structural challenges such as high data costs and unreliable internet connectivity. These factors complicate the assumption that perceived usefulness and ease of use are sufficient for technology adoption. While NUP demonstrated a strong commitment to using TikTok, external constraints such as limited resources and infrastructural challenges affected its ability to fully leverage the platform. This suggests that the effectiveness of digital political communication is not determined solely by user perceptions but also by broader socio-economic conditions.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the findings illustrate a complex and dynamic relationship between media technology, political communication, and public engagement. NUP's use of TikTok reflects both the opportunities and challenges associated with digital platforms, highlighting their potential to reshape political narratives while also exposing their limitations. The study ultimately shows that TikTok became far more than just a social media platform for the National Unity Platform (NUP); it evolved into a dynamic space for mobilisation, storytelling, and political engagement. Through short, compelling videos, NUP was able to call supporters to action—encouraging them to pick up expression of interest forms, attend aspirants' debates and rallies, turn up to vote, and actively protect that vote. At the same time, TikTok served as a real-time window into the party's journey, capturing events before, during, and after the Kawempe North parliamentary by-election, including campaign activities as well as moments of tension such as attacks on party offices and brutality against supporters. Most outstanding is how NUP used the platform to shape perception. The unveiling of its candidate was not just informational but persuasive, offering reasons why he deserved public trust. Beyond this, TikTok became a tool for rallying the Kawempe community around safeguarding the electoral process, especially in the face of fears of voter intimidation and malpractice. The platform also allowed the party to clearly communicate its ideology, with leaders consistently articulating its values and vision in ways that were accessible and engaging.

Rather than relying on traditional, rigid political messaging, NUP made its content lively by blending speeches with music. Humour added another layer, keeping audiences entertained but informed. At the same time, a strong visual identity was maintained through symbols like the umbrella, red beret, and party colours, reinforcing recognition and solidarity. Moreso, TikTok also played a critical watchdog role. It exposed alleged electoral irregularities, security crackdowns, and abductions, while enabling real-time interaction. This level of immediacy expanded NUP's reach far beyond traditional media. However, the findings demonstrate that political actors must invest adequately in digital strategies, ensure creative and engaging communication, and embrace platforms like TikTok for their reach and immediacy.

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