

**THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF WHATSAPP IN PROMOTING
SOCIAL COHESION IN UGANDA**

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DECLARATION

I, Steven Dunstan Busuulwa, declare that this study titled “The Public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda” is a result of my intellectual contribution and has never been published and/or submitted for any other degree award to any other University before. All the works of other persons mentioned in this book are properly recognised and attributed.

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This dissertation has been submitted for examination with the approval of the following supervisor:

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Date: 05/05/2025

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my father, Steven Busuulwa Senior and mother, Edith K. Busuulwa for the relentless support and prayers throughout my life. Thank you for walking with me throughout this academic journey.

I also dedicate this study to my wife, Jackie Busuulwa and to our children; Rochelle Hilder Nalule, Rovin Divine Mbawadde, Rolyn Precious Nakibuule and Roshana Edith Nambooze.

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Looking at them, Jesus said, “With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.” (Mark 10:27)

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ACRONYMS

ACME African Center for Media Excellence

AMB African Media Barometer

CSOs Civil Society Organisations

FGDs Focus Group Discussions

IT Information Technology

ITU International Telecommunication Union

NGOs Non-governmental organisations

NRM National Resistance Movement

OTT Over The Top Services

REC Research and Ethics Committee

SMS Short Message Service

SSA Sub-Saharan Africa

UCC Uganda Communications Commission

UNESCO United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

US United States

US United States of America

VPN Virtual Private Networks

Wi-Fi Wireless Fidelity

www World Wide Web

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district. WhatsApp is becoming an important tool and gradually changing the way people interact and socialise with others. However, there is a gap in existing literature, particularly, how the public perceives WhatsApp's role in the promotion of social cohesion in Uganda. Therefore, the study applied the social network theory (Castells, 1996), as a relevant theory to provide insights into public perception the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. This study took a qualitative approach. It employed in-depth interviews and focus group discussion (FGDs) methods for data collection to obtain answers to the research questions. In-depth interviews were held with 5 interviewees, including: media scholar, social media expert, information technology (IT) expert, Media regulator and Civil Society Official (CSO), while 2 FGDs were held with members of the public (from the 2 divisions; Kampala Central and Kawempe) of Kampala. The study is premised on the background that social media can work to facilitate social networks and relationships.

The findings of this study revealed that there have been several ways through which the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. These include: public sphere, social mobilisation tool, and source of information. Further, it was also established that WhatsApp usage presents various opportunities in the promotion of social cohesion, especially among the users in Kampala district. These include: instant messaging, multi-media capability, adaptability, language and ease of use, user-generated content, and security, safety and privacy of users. The study also established that there are some challenges which are associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. The challenges are many, including: limited digital literacy, misinformation, disinformation and fake news, restrictions on social media usage, network challenges, cost dynamics, and scamming, hacking and privacy breaches.

The researcher draws conclusions, proposes other areas of inquiry and recommends a need for Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) to expand, but not to suffocate space for exercise of the right to online freedom of expression by adopting 'well-intentioned policies' on social media usage; coupled with government expansion of the internet infrastructure in the entire country to step up connectivity on these social networks. Further, the study recommends that there is dire need for WhatsApp users to become more digital literate, particularly through acquiring multi-media skills so as to become more tech-savvy.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study explores public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district. This chapter provides the study's context, as well as the statement of the problem, purpose, research objectives, research questions, scope, significance, scope, theoretical framework and the justification of this research which aimed at exploring public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The last section analyses the theoretical framework which is the social network theory and how it applies to the study. Chapter two provides a review of relevant literature to advance the purpose of the study, categorised under themes of: the rise of WhatsApp, WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion, and barriers to WhatsApp usage. In Chapter three, the research methodology is provided with a discussion of the procedures, methods and instruments which were used in order to achieve the study's objective. Chapter four makes a presentation of the findings that are discussed in Chapter five, and a summary of major findings, conclusions and recommendations are provided in Chapter six.

1.1 Background to the study

Digital technologies have proliferated and penetrated more than 90% of many countries around the world, as observed by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2021). Social media platforms like WhatsApp, X, and others have transformed the way information is being obtained and shared but also more importantly, facilitating social cohesion (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021). Similarly, Anspach et al. (2019) noted that social media has become relevant tools in the distribution and circulation of information and news about many events (Anspach et al., 2019). Social cohesion, defined as the degree of unity and solidarity within a community, has emerged as a critical element in promoting social stability, trust, and cooperation among individuals (Larsen, 2014). In today's interconnected digital age, González-Bailón and Lelkes (2023) averred that social media platforms are critical tools in connecting individuals from diverse backgrounds across the globe. Similarly, in this digital age, Lee et al. (2023, p. 1) observed that social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are "becoming more prevalent and gradually changing the way people interact and socialise with others". In the context of WhatsApp (the study focus), Bhatt and Arshad (2016) submitted that WhatsApp is one of the most popular applications used by

young people as a way of communicating with friends, family and strangers. Further, it enables users to have multimedia downloads and text messaging without having to pay.

For purposes of this study, social media is defined as a “group of internet-based applications that developed on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated contents” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media has been found to enlarge or rewire networks, creating new opportunities for membership and affiliations (González-Bailón and Lelkes, 2023). On the one hand, online social networks can provide a platform for individuals to express themselves, share personal experiences, and connect with others who have similar interests or experiences (Krasnova et al., 2013). In addition, Davis (2017) concurred with Krasnova et al.’s view by noting that social media provides a forum for individuals to express their beliefs, interests, and connect with others globally. On the other hand, social media can have negative effects, such as the spread of misinformation and the creation of echo-chambers (Tech Policy Press, 2023). From a general outlook, there is evidence largely from existing studies to suggest that social media, particularly WhatsApp plays a critical role in facilitating social cohesion. However, little is known about public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. This required a scientific inquiry.

A recent Social Media Usage report by GeoPoll (2024) observed that the number of social media users in Africa has gradually increased, with the total now surpassing 384 million, which view is also shared by Statistica (2024). Currently, WhatsApp has 3.03 billion users in 2024, a rise of 9.02% or 250.96 million more users from 2023, making it the most popular global mobile messenger application (Statistica, 2024). Meanwhile, Gul et al. (2021) averred that WhatsApp has grown in popularity among young people because of its distinctive features of easy communication via text or voice messages, pictures, videos and video calls between two persons or groups, which makes communication easier, faster, cheaper and more enjoyable. Further, Lee et al. (2023, p. 1) developed a view similar to Gul et al.’s by asserting that “the mobile instant messaging application, WhatsApp, has become a popular form of communication among adolescents”. For example, in the Ugandan context, Quan-Haase and Young (2010) maintained that WhatsApp is used primarily by family members to maintain relationships with individuals they are acquainted with and to communicate family related matters easily. For this reason, “transformations are seen in the way Ugandans are socialising

with one another and in the way families utilise their free time” (Kaddu and Mukasa 2016, p. 70). Since WhatsApp is gaining popularity at a fast pace, in very specific terms, it was important to establish how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion, the perceived opportunities and challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Uganda.

In spite of this freedom, Alina (2020, p. 28) submitted that “the government of Uganda has been in the habit of instituting both direct and indirect controls against the media during national elections”. For instance, this was evident in the 2021 Presidential elections as social media (particularly, WhatsApp, Facebook and X) was shut down by the government two days ahead of the Presidential elections over national security concerns (Ibid). Besides, this research builds on the premise that social media platforms can act as catalysts for enhancing social cohesion among users. However, from the theoretical underpinning of this study, Castells (1996, p. 328) stressed the “need for research” on how particular social media platforms, like WhatsApp, affect social contexts in which it is being used.

Regarding social media subscriptions and applications, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC, 2023) Annual Communications Sector report observed that:

There were 20.7 million social media subscribers by 2023 in Uganda. Besides, the reduction in costs and accessibility of mobile data plans and innovative packages has further enabled consumers to actively participate in social media, often maintaining multiple accounts across different platforms. WhatsApp remains the most popular app due to the person-to-person communication features as well as multi-functionality including text, voice and video calling, while video content streaming applications such as TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube, have also driven significant user growth. Netflix, although still emerging, represents a growing trend towards streaming services that are redefining internet usage (UCC, 2023, p. 42).

Further, this points at the dominance of WhatsApp, particularly in the promotion of social cohesion among users in Uganda. According to the National Information Technology Authority (NITA, 2022, p. 5), internet connectivity stood at “13.4% in urban areas [like

Kampala] compared to 3.2% in rural areas.” Consistent with the above, the National IT Survey (2022, p. 16) report observed the existence of “the urban-rural digital divide, with 13% of the households in urban areas having a working internet connection compared to 3.2% in rural areas.” The report added that “Kampala (the capital city) and the regions around it had the largest number of households with internet access” (p. 83). Despite of the efforts the country is taking to improve its digital infrastructure, there is still need to expand internet access so as to enhance mobile connectivity, coupled with addressing the existing digital divide.

This study specifically used the case of Kampala district because of its central location and urban set up, with an assumption of a high digitised population. With its urban set up, the population here represents many categories of people from different backgrounds, thus, appropriate for the study. Concretizing this position, in Zimbabwe, Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo (2013, p. 407) observed that Internet penetration remains low and “it is mainly concentrated in the urban centres.” The implication is that there exists low internet fiber in the countryside compared to urban locations, and this is assumed to have a strong bearing on connectivity. Further, this study adopted the social network theory as a guide to provide insights into public perceptions of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. Further, the study recommended strategies that can enhance effective WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Uganda.

1.2 Statement of the problem

A review of studies indicates that WhatsApp is becoming an important tool for social cohesion and fostering interactions among users (Lee et al., 2023; Tulin et al., 2018; Kaddu and Mukasa, 2016; González-Bailón and Lelkes, 2023). For instance, Lee et al. (2023, p. 1) stressed that social media such as, WhatsApp is “becoming more prevalent and gradually changing the way people interact and socialise with others.” Similarly, in the context of WhatsApp and social cohesion, Tulin et al. (2018) asserted that people perceive smaller groups as more cohesive, while group density shows no link to perceived cohesion. Thus, group dynamics will largely affect social cohesion through WhatsApp usage (Ibid). Meanwhile, in their study to examine the way technological development is transforming the social family cycle in Uganda, and the associated challenges, Kaddu and Mukasa (2016, p. 9)

submitted that “power [electricity] is a major challenge to social media usage, followed by cyber bullying and online harassment from someone of the opposite sex, posting of inappropriate and upsetting information on the site...”. Concretizing the above, González-Bailón and Lelkes’ (2023) study to examine whether or not social media undermines social cohesion concluded that there exists some potential drawbacks and challenges of social media.

From the theoretical perspective, Kakooza (2018) submitted that social network structures connect people, and this connection can be explained by the social network theory which illustrates the process of how people interact through networks. From the foregoing discussion, despite some accessibility challenges identified in the literature, it is assumed that WhatsApp has been a game-changer, particularly in facilitating social interactions among individuals. While there is a growing number of studies on WhatsApp, the platform is still under-researched (Boulos et al., 2016; Mars and Scott, 2016), particularly in exploring public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. Therefore, this study set out to fill this gap.

1.3 Purpose and Objectives

1.3.1 Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

1. To find out how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district
2. To assess the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district
3. To investigate perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does the public perceive WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district?
2. What opportunities have been presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district?
3. What challenges are associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district?

1.5 Scope of the study

The study explored public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district. The study considered 16 participants for the 2 focus group discussions (FGDs), each having 8 participants, in the two divisions of Kampala: Kampala Central and Kawempe. Thus, the two research sites (Kampala Central and Kawempe) are urban and semi-urban settings respectively and these people were assumed to rely more on social media to build social networks. This means that the choice for these sites was based on the view that the former comprises of an urban setting and the latter is semi-urban, where community members were assumed to have different experiences regarding the issue under investigation. From a gender perspective, 8 female and 8 male participants were considered for the study. This was necessary since gender differences largely influence many choices in respect to particular issues. Further, 5 interviewees were recruited purposively for the in-depth interviews on the basis of the offices they occupy. These included: a media scholar, social media expert, information technology expert, Media regulator (UCC official) and Civil Society Organisation (CSO) official. The objective was to gather responses from people who related more with the study. Additionally, these interviewees shared expert opinion and deeper insights into the issue at hand. Further, the study was carried out in August 2024, and largely focused on literature of 2014 – 2024.

1.6 Justification

The use of social media has dramatically increased the opportunities for social interactions and cohesion among individuals (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021). Specifically, social media platforms like, WhatsApp, Facebook, and others can influence social cohesion by changing

the structure and composition of networks (Hollenbaugh and Ferris, 2014). However, there exists paucity of local literature to provide insights into public perceptions of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. Despite WhatsApp boasting of 4.7 million users as of January 2024 (World Population Review, 2024), a number of challenges are associated with the use of social media platforms in Uganda (Kaddu and Mukasa, 2016; Chibita and Ugangu, 2017; Alina, 2020). For instance, Alina (2020) submitted that the government of Uganda has been in the habit of closing social media particularly during the Presidential election campaigns over national security concerns. From the theoretical perspective, Castells (2005, p. 6) suggested for “a need to assess the dynamics, constraints and possibilities of the social networks from a context-specific approach”. In light of this view, the question of how social media affects social cohesion in Uganda deserved a scientific investigation. It is upon this background that this particular study set out to explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda.

1.7 Significance

This study contributes to the local scholarship available on how social media promotes social cohesion in Uganda. Thus, little academic attention has been paid in this area; hence the study contributes to the sparse, but growing body of knowledge available.

The study also provides areas for further inquiry, particularly in areas relating to how social media promotes social cohesion in Uganda. These areas could be picked up by several scholars to investigate further on the problem. Therefore, the study provides a basis for future research.

This research may also be used as a basis for policy formulation (or adjustments) regarding social media in enhancing social cohesion among the different stakeholders in Uganda. Therefore, this study is assumed to be timely in contributing to social media regulation in Uganda and by extension, on the African continent.

The following section explores the theoretical framework, which is the social network theory and how it relates to the study.

1.8 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the social network theory, advanced by Sociologist Manuel Castells in 1996. The social network theory is defined as a material transformation of our social fabric, as new technologies allow the formation of new forms of social organisation and social interaction along online networks (Castells, 2000). He adds that networks have become the most common organisational form of human activity which has borne globalization, and communication is now characterized as borderless with no time restrictions (Ibid). Additionally, Castells (2000, p. 17) asserted that “a number of major social, technological, economic and cultural transformations came together to give rise to a new form of society.” Meanwhile, Monge and Contractor (2003, p. 39) submitted that “communication networks are the patterns of contact that are created by flows of message among communicators through time and space.” The basic unit of the social network is “the individual/ user who is the basic target of change and is linked to the society and community through the network” (Dijk, 2012, p. 45), thus “creating and sustaining relationships between others and self” (Baym, 2015, p. 1). The understanding here is that social networks, particularly (WhatsApp, the study focus) are an extension of what is happening in real life situations and therefore can be used to influence social cohesion and relationships among users.

From the perspective of social media, Kakooza (2018, p. 58) submitted that:

These connections have been explained by the social network theory that highlights the process through which content shared on social media platforms is received, and how feedback is registered through interactions with the message and the message senders. Social networks provide a social environment that can influence and shape the behaviour of individuals by facilitating meaningful communication and engagement based on interrelated social interactions to complete the communication cycle (Kakooza, 2018, p. 58).

Further, this interactive social system facilitates social cohesion, shared history and close relationships (Cherny, 1999), with social actors participating and introducing into the network new values and interests as defined within this changing social structure. Bringing WhatsApp to bear with the ongoing discussion, this study explored public perception of the

role of WhatsApp (as interactive platforms) in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. In relation to how this interaction on social media brings about social influence within networks, Buhler and Kohler (2002, p. 7) identified “structural similarity and cohesiveness” as key drivers in defining the network social structure. Structural cohesiveness in networks “is based on individuals that are highly connected to one another, either directly or indirectly to influence behavioural change” (Montgomery and Casterline, 1996, p. 154), while structural similarity “looks at how influence is passed on amongst people in similar positions within the network” (Buhler and Kohler, 2002, p. 3) to make informed decisions using the other as a frame of reference. Based on structural similarity and cohesiveness, Castells (2009, p. 10) argued that this network provides for a “relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically [and symmetrically] the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favour the empowered actors’ will, interests and values”.

The shared knowledge in this changing social structure may consequently result into “cooperation, shared production of new qualities, new social systems or new communities with feelings of belonging together” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 42). This social media network influence created the need to explore public perception of WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, through assessing “the dynamics, constraints and possibilities of the new social structure” (Castells, 2005, p. 6). To fully understand how these interactions work, Heer and Boyd (2005, p. 1) visualised online social networking as “an interconnected system within which members explore, discover and learn from their connections through exposure to information while preserving a fun-filled online space”. Castells (2000) has concluded that the World Wide Web (www) and the Internet have created the network society that has expunged time and space.

However, the structure of a network can both enable and constrain social action (Castells, 1996). In view of Castells’ observation, the study findings also reaffirmed that there are some perceived opportunities and challenges presented by WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. In very specific terms, the researcher used the social network theory to establish how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion, assess the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. In addition, the researcher used this theory as a way of providing an insight and understanding of the perceived challenges associated with

WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. The explanation of the major tenets of the theory has been done in relation to its applicability to the study.

1.9 Summary

This chapter has put the study into perspective by providing the study's background, outlining the scope, research problem, purpose and research objectives, research questions, justification, significance and the theoretical framework of the study. Regarding the theoretical underpinning, the researcher further regards the social network theory as a solid anchor and useful guide to the arguments advanced in this study. Therefore, the theory provides a lens through which public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district could be explored. The next chapter analyses the literature reviewed to highlight the gaps and need to carry out this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter highlights a thematic review of literature categorised under various themes. The review is based on the themes, namely: the rise of WhatsApp, WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion and, barriers to WhatsApp usage.

2.1 The Rise of WhatsApp

The WhatsApp Messenger (WhatsApp) was established in 2009 by Jan Koum and Brian Acton (Yeboah and Ewur), and facilitates different forms of communication, “from voice calls, video calls and unlimited text messaging, to the sharing of videos, images, audio recordings and documents (Lee et al., 2023). Having been introduced to the users in 2009, Silver et al. (2019) observed that WhatsApp is a relatively latecomer to social media, though, its growth since then has been rapid. According to Meola (2016), WhatsApp receives overwhelming responses from users all around the globe which has revolutionised social information exchanges, and it has been ranked as the most popular application across several countries. Likewise, various studies demonstrate that WhatsApp is a free application that can be used on both smart-phones and computers, from which the users can send text, real-time locations, images, voice recordings, documents, videos and the like (Dodds, 2019; Mefolere, 2016; Boulos et al., 2016). For Kartal (2019), WhatsApp is a tool that has multimedia features, group chat, and unlimited messaging.

As of 2024, WhatsApp has 3.03 billion users, making it the most popular global mobile messenger application (Statistica, 2024). Globally, the large number of mobile smart-phone users, along with affordability of mobile data, has enabled many people to use WhatsApp throughout the world (Dodds, 2019). Further, WhatsApp is simple, intuitive, and user friendly (Mefolere, 2016). Therefore, WhatsApp has become a viable tool which facilitates users to connect individually and collectively. Additionally, Kumar and Sharma (2017) submit that WhatsApp affords users to use text messaging, real-time locations, images, voice recordings, documents, and videos. As a platform, WhatsApp enables the users to be connected whenever and wherever as long as they are connected to the internet (Awada, 2016; Boulos et al., 2016). Additionally, Dodds (2019) noted that WhatsApp also facilitates communication within groups up to 250 members. For instance, group members can share

messages to the group instantly (Boulos et al., 2016), and the application introduced end-to-end encryption of messaging to protect user privacy in 2016 (Ibid).

In the context of journalism, Dodds (2019) observes that WhatsApp has become an important journalistic tool. For instance, it enables journalists to create new, more informal relationships with their sources and also promotion of new levels of mutuality and solidarity among journalists (Dodds, 2019). Further, in their study to assess Instagram and WhatsApp in health and healthcare, Boulos et al. (2016) established that WhatsApp differs from other social media tools and digital communication platforms in several ways. For example, WhatsApp offers more immediacy and spontaneity compared to other tools, such as Facebook and Skype which hardly require an account to be tied to users' mobile phone numbers (Boulos et al., 2016). From the Ugandan perspective, the implication is that WhatsApp presents an affordance of immediacy than other technologies as it permits immediate response, particularly in light of social cohesion and building relationships among users.

Further, in Uganda, there were 13.3 million internet users at the beginning of 2024, when internet penetration stood at 27%. Internet users increased by 1.2 million between January 2023 and January 2024 (Statistica, 2024). The country was home to 4.7 million WhatsApp users in January 2024, as observed by the World Population Review (2024). From a general outlook, Lupton (2014) argued that social media platforms have transformed the way information is being obtained and shared, but also more importantly is their ease in use. This means that WhatsApp can engage various users, particularly in their respective local languages and feedback is realized immediately. Thus, a more localised outlook for social cohesion among users is facilitated by WhatsApp. This study investigated how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

The next section assesses the use of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion.

2.2 WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion

This section provides a review of literature to assess the use of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion. This literature provides some gaps, specifically on WhatsApp's role in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. From a sociological perspective, Hollenbaugh and Ferris (2014) submitted that social media platforms like, WhatsApp, Facebook, and others can influence social cohesion by changing the structure and composition of networks. This can impact

individual perceptions, beliefs, and access to resources, influencing opportunities for engagement and cooperation between individuals and groups (Ibid). Research has explored the relationship between social media use, social trust, and ideological polarisation. For instance, Hollenbaugh and Ferris (2014) suggested that social media use can lead to increased polarisation and decreased trust, the relationship is complex and context-dependent.

In their study to investigate the impact of the use of WhatsApp in a higher education learning environment on students' perceived academic performance and team effectiveness, Lee et al. (2023) submitted that WhatsApp is a universal form of communication platform which facilitates interaction and communication with families, friends or workmates. They added that social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are becoming more ubiquitous and gradually changing the way users interact and communicate with others. Meanwhile, Bhatt and Arshad's (2016) study to examined the impact of WhatsApp on the youth. They established that WhatsApp is one of the most popular tools used by young people to communicate with friends, family and strangers, and it facilitates users to have multimedia downloads and text messaging without having to pay. In a similar development, Quan-Haase and Young (2010) noted that WhatsApp is used primarily by family members to sustain relationships with near and far individuals they are acquainted with to communicate family related matters with ease. The implication is that WhatsApp provides a platform for individuals to express their beliefs, interests, socialise and connect with others globally.

In another development, Jailobaev et al. (2021) investigated WhatsApp groups in social research and the new opportunities for fieldwork communication and management. They established that "WhatsApp groups have become a platform for connecting people at any point of time, bringing together people across time zones, creating communities of similar-minded/tasked people, and giving a sense of belonging to group members" (Ibid, p. 63). Further, in the context of WhatsApp and social cohesion, Tulin et al. (2018) asserted that people perceive smaller groups as more cohesive, while group density shows no link to perceived cohesion. Tulin et al.'s view is indicative of the fact that WhatsApp is more effective in promoting social cohesion among smaller groups than for larger networks. Thus, from the Ugandan perspective, the implication is that group dynamics will largely affect social cohesion through WhatsApp usage. From this reasoning, Jailobaev et al. (2021, p. 79) have concluded that "WhatsApp is an easy-to-use application. The platform's user-friendly features including, the fact that it is connected to a mobile number of users, makes it

convenient to use.” From the perspective of multi-media, Kartal (2019) noted that WhatsApp is a service that has multimedia features, group chat and unlimited messaging. Kumar and Sharma (2017) also concur with Kartal’s view as they highlighted that WhatsApp allows users to send text, real-time locations, images, voice recordings, documents, and videos. In this regard, WhatsApp allows people to form communities using their phone numbers and are able to message each other, do live calls, both on video and on audio, and also post any kind of content, whether video, audio, among themselves. Thus, messages can be easily be packaged in different forms, to incorporate audio, video, text, still photos, and the like.

Additionally, WhatsApp makes communication immediate (Kumar and Sharma, 2017; Awada, 2016; Mefolere, 2016; S´anchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya, 2015). In agreement, Dodds (2019) maintained that WhatsApp facilitates communication within groups, and group members can share messages to the group instantly (Boulos et al., 2016). Further, in their study to assess Instagram and WhatsApp in health and healthcare, Boulos et al. (2016) established that WhatsApp differs from other social media tools and digital communication platforms in a number of ways. For example, WhatsApp offers more immediacy and spontaneity compared to other tools, such as Facebook and Skype which do not require an account to be tied to users’ mobile phone numbers (Ibid). From the perspective of young people, Lee et al. (2023, p. 1) developed a similar view by asserting that “the mobile instant messaging application, WhatsApp has become a popular form of communication among adolescents.” In the same vein, various studies (Kumar and Sharma, 2017; Awada, 2016; Mefolere, 2016) have concluded that WhatsApp makes communication immediate. The implication is that WhatsApp is quite exceptional in facilitating instant communication. By and large, all the foregoing scholarship seems to extol WhatsApp as an efficient and viable public space in facilitating social cohesion. However, in the Ugandan context, this may be at a minimal level since the digitised population is assumed to be relatively low (low connectivity), largely due to limited internet penetration. Further, it appears that there is a gap in literature specifically pointing at the challenges of social media usage, particularly WhatsApp in enhancing social cohesion in Uganda. This study filled the gap.

A few studies in Uganda have investigated the contribution of social media in facilitating social cohesion and relationships (Atusingwize et al., 2022; Okaka, 2019; Kaddu and Mukasa, 2016), yet scholars have highlighted the need for research to address the role of social media in enhancing social cohesion and, its relative effectiveness. Therefore, this study

contributes to understanding this research need. In particular, the study assessed how the public perceives the use of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, and the associated opportunities. The last section explores the barriers to WhatsApp usage.

2.3 Barriers to WhatsApp usage

In a bid to facilitate social cohesion, social media usage, particularly WhatsApp is associated with a host of challenges. For instance, Keenan et al. (2018) noted that the largest barriers to social media usage include unprofessionalism of users, social media being a distraction and a lack of time for users to learn how to use these networks effectively, which view is also shared by Alan and Kabadayi (2016). Relatedly, Ezearn and Iywesi (2012) asserted that there are several challenges associated with use of social media. In particular, they identified lack of a maintenance culture, unreliable power supply and limited professionalism of users. This study makes a presumption that a number of these challenges have a potential to affect the efficacy of WhatsApp in enhancing social cohesion in Uganda. In agreement, in a study to investigate the effect of social media on voter behavior in Kasyeri Province, Turkey, Aslan et al. (2021) observed that the effect of social media on the voters differed considerably in respect to gender, marital status, age, education, income status, residence, purpose of use and relevance to the political agenda. This implies that availability and access to social media platforms by the different stakeholders did not solely affect voter choices. Thus, a combination of factors, like socio-economic characteristics of the users, ease of usage and experience, purpose, complexity of these networks are also critical in affecting social cohesion in Uganda.

Further, while social media use may generally be linked to more diverse news diets (Yang et al., 2020) and, engagement and expression (Boulianne, 2019), they are also associated with a host of challenges, including attempts to falsely shape the public agenda (Vargo et al., 2018), spread disinformation (Grinberg et al., 2019), exposure to fake news on WhatsApp (Ahad and Lim, 2014), WhatsApp being weaponised (Aizenkot and Kashy-Rosenbaum, 2018), and computerised propaganda (Woolley and Howard, 2019). Similarly, Bullock (2018) established that there are increasing numbers of privacy breaches, thefts and commercial misuse associated with use of social media. While there has been anecdotal evidence of WhatsApp playing a central role in social cohesion and relationship building, negative effects of WhatsApp have also been presented (Aizenkot and Kashy-Rosenbaum, 2018). This means that distortions, misinformation, disinformation and unverified information are common

features carried particularly by WhatsApp, thus, posing a limitation to efficient usage in enhancing social cohesion in Uganda.

The African Media Barometer (AMB, 2022) report observed that the country had just passed the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Bill 2022 which criminalises various uses of computers and digital technologies and largely stifles online freedom of expression rights. In agreement, among the many rights violated worldwide during the past 17 consecutive years, Neuberger et al. (2023) emphasised that freedom of expression and media freedom appear to have declined more than any other right. They added that many autocratic regimes have introduced repressive laws to the online sphere and adopted invasive technologies to monitor digital communication (Ibid). Further, in view of censorship, Alina (2020) noted that:

Authoritarian governments and pseudo-democratic ones have reacted and continue to react by censoring such social media platforms... The fear of apprehension has made users publish content under pseudonyms or use social media in a manner that is not for political engagement (Alina, 2020, p. 29).

All these seem to stifle online freedom of expression, particularly WhatsApp usage, which consequently hinders the platform's potential in fostering social cohesion in Uganda.

Further, Alina (2020, p. 28) submitted that “the government of Uganda has been in the habit of instituting both direct and indirect controls against the media during national elections”. These closures were evident in the 2021 Presidential elections as social media (particularly, WhatsApp, Facebook and X) was shut down by the government two days ahead of the Presidential elections over national security concerns. However, the ban on these platforms was lifted after the General elections. In agreement, Mugerwa (2016) observes that during the 2016 Presidential elections, UCC imposed a ban on social media usage for three days as Ugandans were voting. However, several users still managed to bypass the blockade using virtual private networks (VPNs), which view is also shared by Kalinaki (2016). Likewise, Kawuma (2017) observed that UCC blocked the usage of social media during the opposition-led civil protests dubbed, walk-to-work in the aftermath of the 2011 Presidential elections in Uganda. This was after Dr. Kiiza Besigye utilized social media platforms to communicate schedules for walk-to-work protests while his supporters both within and outside the country these platforms for political communication and sharing updates. On this basis, AMB (2022) noted that several governments have also sought to control digital media by shutting it or slowing it down, or simply removing content inconvenient to the government.

Additionally, Chibita and Ugangu (2017, p. 252) reasoned that on several occasions, “regulation and control of social media has been justified on the basis of countering terrorism, shutting out political opponents and dissenting voices, fighting pornography and guarding against cybercrime”. On his part, Musisi (2016) argued that the reason cited by government was an evident threat to public order and safety presented by social media. These government restrictions do not work to strengthen, but rather weaken established social ties, cohesion and relationships among social media users. Meanwhile, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC, 2018, p. 34) report observed that the “internet penetration levels are still low with only about 39% of the Ugandan population having access to the internet”. In the African context, Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo (2013, p. 407) observed that internet penetration remains low in Africa and “it is mainly concentrated in the urban centres....” As a platform, Awada (2016) and Boulos et al. (2016) reasoned that WhatsApp enables the users to be connected whenever and wherever as long as they are connected to the internet. Consequently, the use and effectiveness of WhatsApp to promote social cohesion is compromised by the limited internet infrastructure. In addition, the implication is that the low internet fiber in the country affects connectivity in some parts of the country.

However, on a positive note, Kakooza (2018, p. 33) observed that among other factors, the growing number of social media users is attributed to “the improved internet connectivity and the seamless acquisition of internet enabled mobile digital devices.” On this basis, the social media infrastructure in the country has expanded as a reason of growing internet connectivity. Overall, this study is cognizant of the fact that the internet infrastructure has a direct bearing on the social media landscape in the country, and this particularly affects WhatsApp usage in enhancing social cohesion in Uganda.

In a study to examine the way technology development is transforming the social family cycle in Uganda, and the associated challenges, Kaddu and Mukasa (2016, p. 9) submitted that “power is a major challenge to social media usage, followed by cyber bullying and online harassment from someone of the opposite sex, posting of inappropriate and upsetting information on the site...”. In agreement, Ezearn and Iyvesi (2012) asserted that there are a number of challenges presented to social media usage. In particular, they highlighted lack of a maintenance culture, unreliable power supply and limited digital literacy among users. Meanwhile, from the perspective of digital and media literacy, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2016) observed that in Sub-Saharan Africa

(SSA), a growing number of young people are getting more literate than it had been 50 years ago, which means that most of them will continue to be tech-savvy. In the context of young people and WhatsApp usage, this raises more hope in harnessing the potential of this network, particularly in promoting social cohesion.

Generally, the evidence in the literature points to the fact that social media, particularly WhatsApp has greatly affected social cohesion among users. However, there exists a host of challenges in Uganda that inhibit the access and use of WhatsApp in terms of internet and online penetration as well as government restrictions. In light of this view, this study investigated the perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in an effort to facilitate social cohesion in Uganda. Further, this study sought to understand how various stakeholders are negotiating such barriers in their use of WhatsApp for social cohesion.

2.4 Summary

This chapter has looked at the literature from previous scholars and gaps have been highlighted with a view of carrying out this study. It has also introduced and analyzed relevant literature that was used to make sense of the findings in Chapter 5. But most importantly, the chapter has singled out the major attributions and/ or how WhatsApp promotes social cohesion, and the associated barriers. From the above review, it is evident that all the above studies were never intended to explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. Therefore, this study set out to address this research gap. The next chapter will discuss the research methodology that was employed during the study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the procedures, instruments and methods which were used in order to achieve the objectives of the research. The issues to be discussed relate to the research design, interpretation of the research philosophy and instruments which were used, sampling techniques, ethical considerations and study limitations.

3.1 Research design

This study adopted the descriptive design since it allowed the participants to be observed in a natural and unchanged setting without interfering with their normal activities or behaviours (Odiya, 2009). This means that the study was conducted in a realistic and natural environment instead of gathering participants in a laboratory experiment. This design was employed in an attempt to “provide a complete and accurate description of a situation” (Dulock, 1993, p. 23). The descriptive design was appropriate for this study since public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district had not been given much attention before as an area for study in Uganda. Therefore, the study attempted to describe and explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda based on the key research questions: i) How does the public perceive WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district? ii) What opportunities have been presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district? iii) What challenges are associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district? This design allowed the researcher to apply a multifaceted approach to data collection and analysis (Neuman, 2011). In particular, data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The study focused on identifying key interviewees and study participants respectively, and soliciting information as pertaining to the objectives of the study. Since the study sought to provide an insight and deeper understanding on the issues under investigation, a qualitative approach was used in gathering relevant information and analysing data. This is detailed and justified below:

3.2 Research Approach

This qualitative inquiry employed FGDs and in-depth interviews to understand the issue at hand. The qualitative approach as described by Wimmer and Dominick (2003) is more appropriate when the researcher does not intend to quantify the variables under study, establish causality or generalise their findings, which applied to this study. This qualitative approach was instrumental to the study because it helped the researcher bring forth the richness and holism in meanings and interpretations that people attach on things and issues around them, as observed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Similarly, Bryman (2012) noted the advantage of qualitative research as allowing the researcher to view events in the social world through the eyes of the people under study. In qualitative research, there is face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the participants, which allows the researcher to get in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study (Ibid). This was exploratory research aimed at exploring public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. Therefore, this approach enabled the researcher to gain deeper understanding of how WhatsApp has been used to promote social cohesion in Kampala district. In agreement, Deacon et al. (2007, p. 5) also shared a similar view by noting that the use of the “interpretive” philosophical view will help to generate meaning by “exploring the ways that people make sense of their social worlds”. For instance, members of the public (social media users) had different perspectives in respect to the topic. This study explored these interpretations/ perspectives with a view of unraveling hidden meanings.

For this particular study, the researcher drew meanings and conclusions from a small group of people, particularly social media users, using both methods. A detailed and justified discussion on this will be provided in subsequent sections of the chapter. Furthermore, the study was supplemented with secondary sources or desk reviews of existing related studies that have been done.

3.3 Population/Area of study

Wimmer and Dominick (2011) noted that a population is a group or class of subjects, variables, concepts or phenomena to be investigated. Using Kampala district as the geographical scope, the population for this study therefore consisted of members of the public (from the 2 divisions; Kampala Central and Kawempe), thus urban and semi-urban settings respectively in Kampala district. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with a saturation sample of officials considered to be knowledgeable and relating to the topic under investigation. The study engaged key stakeholders, like media scholar, social media

expert, IT expert, Media regulator and Civil Society Organisation (CSO) official – from African Center for Media Excellence (ACME). For instance, the choice for ACME is based on one of the three broader areas which the organization works on. This relates to looking at media as a facilitator of the civic space, thus, media's role in enhancing citizen's access to information, citizen's consumption of news and current affairs. Therefore, ACME invests a lot in media literacy so that citizens can also become more conscious, and informed consumers of news.

3.4 Sampling techniques and Sample size

3.4.1 Sample size

According to Keyton (2006), a sample size is the number of people or units from whom meaningful observations are to be deduced. For every study, a sample size must be determined, especially due to financial and time constraints which do not allow engaging the entire population. Reinforcing the above, Wimmer and Dominick (2011) argued that researchers are generally required to get representative samples whenever the population or a set in which we have an interest is too large. For instance, being the central business district, Kampala has a high number of people. This factor warranted sampling to address the above constraints. Thus, the study was carried out in Kampala district and it engaged 16 participants to inform 2 FGDs (each having 8 participants) from the 2 divisions of Kampala Central and Kawempe. The choice for these was that the former comprises of a typical urban setting and the latter is semi-urban, where the members may seem to have different experiences regarding the topic under investigation. In addition, 5 interviewees were recruited for the in-depth interviews. The idea was to gather responses from people who frequently use social media for socialisation causes and other key stakeholders relating to the topic. Further, to protect the identity of the 5 interviewees, codes (pseudo names) were used as illustrated in the table below:

Interviewee	Code
Media scholar	<i>Participant 1</i>
Social media expert	<i>Participant 2</i>
IT expert	<i>Participant 3</i>
Media regulator	<i>Participant 4</i>
CSO official, ACME	<i>Participant 5</i>

Table 1: Codes for Interviewees

3.4.2 Sampling technique

The researcher used purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method to arrive at the sample for both in-depth interviews and FGDs. Creswell (2003, p. 185) stated that, “purposive sampling involves selecting a person or site to be included in the study because the person or site is thought to be typical of the phenomenon being investigated”. On their part, Wimmer and Dominick (2003, p. 88) submitted that purposive sampling includes subjects, units or elements selected “for specific characteristics or qualities and eliminates those that fail to meet the criteria”. They add that a purposive sample is also chosen with the knowledge that it does not represent the general population (Ibid). Therefore, this helped the researcher to gain a deeper understanding and insights into the problem under investigation. Specifically, the sample for the in-depth interviews was chosen on the basis of the offices they occupy, hence being knowledgeable about the topic under investigation. Additionally, FGD participants (social media users) were adult residents in the research sites chosen from the 2 divisions.

3.5 Procedure for data collection

After approving the research proposal by the School of Journalism, Media and Communication, and clearance of data collection instruments by the research supervisor, the researcher obtained an introductory letter from the school that was used for fieldwork. For

the data collection stage, the researcher made appointments with different potential participants for the study. Thereafter, the researcher started conducting FGDs and interviews depending on the schedules agreed on by both the researcher and the respective study participants. All the interviews which were conducted took place at the interviewee's convenient venues, like offices or workplaces and each interview last roughly for 35 minutes. Meanwhile, the two FGDs were moderated by the researcher and these lasted averagely 60 minutes each.

3.6 Data Collection methods and tools

For this particular study, the researcher used in-depth interviews and FGDs as the main methods of data collection.

3.6.1 In-depth interviews

These are a form of semi-directed discourse or conversations with the goal of uncovering the participant's perspectives. They go beyond "asking questions to obtaining actual facts" (Keyton, 2006, p. 269). These were held with 5 interviewees. These included: media scholar, social media expert, IT expert, Media regulator and CSO official from ACME. These were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide as a tool (*See Appendix B*). The researcher used in-depth interviews because this technique allows interviewer-interviewee "interaction, involves first person point of view and new interpretations, perspectives and fresh insights can be achieved through what is studied" (Keyton, 2006, p. 269). Similarly, Wimmer and Dominick (2003, p. 127) submitted that one of the critical advantages of the in-depth interview is the "wealth of detail that it provides". Therefore, the main objective of using this method in this study was to obtain insight and depth into the topic being investigated, and to allow the interviewees more freedom in responding using their own words.

Further, these in-depth interviews were individual-specific and customised, where the 5 interviewees did not necessarily answer similar questions. This eventually led to detailed information especially since, each response generated another question on its own. These interviews were also carried out in a one-on-one format where the researcher, having an interview guide asked open-ended questions and the interviewees answered. Probing was also necessary in that any confusion that may have arisen between the interviewer and interviewee

could be addressed. Apart from the researcher's note taking, an audio digital recorder was used for more accuracy later while transcribing the data. Additionally, the in-depth interviews took place in a quiet environment so that the researcher does not miss out on any piece of information offered by the interviewees. Further, this enhanced the clarity of messages on the audio recorder, thereby easing the transcribing process for the researcher.

It was also deemed important to use FGDs in this study as an additional research method. The idea behind the use of FGD method was that group processes could help people to explore and shed light on the views that were expressed in a one-on-one interview. The FGD helped the study participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities regarding WhatsApp usage and social cohesion. This method is detailed in the subsequent sub-section.

3.6.2 Focus Group Discussions

According to Bryman (2004, p. 239), an “FGD is an interview with several people on a specific topic or issue”. The FGD method is also referred to as “group interviewing” (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003, p. 128), which helps to understand audience attitudes and behaviour. Specifically, 2 FGDs were held with members of the public (from the 2 divisions; Kampala Central and Kawempe) in Kampala district, who were assumed to rely more on social media to build social networks (*See Appendix C*). Each of these groups consisted of 8 participants, thus a total of 16 participants from the 2 divisions. The researcher participated as a facilitator in the discussions; posing questions, clarifying where and whenever necessary and using probing follow-up questions. The FGDs were recorded with the permission of the participants and notes were taken to back up the recordings. This method was used since the study aimed at social construction of reality concerning WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion among users in Kampala district. In this regard, the goal was to gain an understanding of the key issues of the study, rather than extrapolation or generalisation of findings to other contexts or sample groups, as common in quantitative studies. Thus, only participants who met the criteria or those who had the requisite characteristics were purposively recruited to constitute the two FGDs.

Meanwhile, Creswell (2009, p. 180) noted that one of the key characteristics of FGDs is that they are more ‘naturalistic’ than say in-depth interviews since they include a range of communicative processes such as “storytelling, joking, arguing, boasting, teasing, persuasion,

challenge and disagreement”. In this respect, the role of the researcher was to moderate the discussion so as to be more focused on the key issues under investigation. However, Wimmer and Dominick (2003, p. 127) argued that the limitation with FGDs is that the technique is associated with “self-appointed group leaders” who should be checked by the researcher so that they do not monopolise the discussion or impose their views on other members of the group. The researcher paid special attention to this exercise by not allowing only a few participants to dominate the discussions.

3.7 Quality/Error control

Wimmer and Dominick (2011) argued that qualitative researchers must pay attention to several different concerns for their studies to achieve credibility. Meanwhile, Lincoln and Guba (1994) went further to suggest that the use of trustworthiness and authenticity to assess the quality of qualitative research are important because there are several truths/ways of explaining the social world. In light of these views, the researcher pre-tested the instruments before the actual research among participants with similar characteristics to determine their worth and clarity. Altogether, 7 participants participated in this exercise. From this process, the researcher corrected grammatical errors and modified the questions which seemed not to be clear. Besides the conventional pre-testing, the tools were also checked and approved by the research supervisor (expert pre-testing). Further, the researcher trained a research assistant to work alongside him in the field to collect quality data. These procedures were carried out to ensure that the findings are reliable.

3.8 Data processing and analysis

The collected data from in-depth interviews and FGDs was recorded on an audio recorder and written in note books. The data gathered was analysed, presented and interpreted to make meaning as informed by the study’s objectives. Each objective was presented with the data collected pertaining to it, and an interpretation derived thereafter. Keyton (2006, p. 296) noted that data interpretation is a “necessary process in deriving meaning out of patterns, themes, concepts and propositions”. The first step was to transcribe this recorded data to text, thematically analyse and later present it in narrative form. Coding was an important technique which was used to classify, select and organise data to obtain effective information for the researcher’s data analysis after conducting all the interviews. According to DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, p. 183), coding refers to “the development of categories that emerge from

the data as a result of reviewing the data for inherent concepts and patterns”. From the researcher’s perspective, coding was a way to identify and describe some common occurrences, opinions, and meanings occurring in the statements of the study participants.

In addition, some redundant accounts were disregarded from further data analysis. For purposes of this study, redundant accounts refer to some information that could not advance the purpose of the study by answering the research questions directly or indirectly. After coding the entire data set, the researcher began thematic descriptions on these codes. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.82) observed that “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”. At the same time, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, p. 189) defined a theme as “an idea that characterises and ties together materials from different people or people in different settings”. For this research, the themes came from the original expressions within the data as well as summaries of pieces of words, statements or phrases. In agreement, Mesly (2015) submitted that, as a process of encoding qualitative information, thematic analysis facilitates the location and emergence of themes found in information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon. A theme may be identified at the manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon). Both the manifest and latent levels applied to this study since evident patterned responses or meaning within the data set and patterned hidden meanings were thematically analysed.

Basically, there are two ways to do coding: manually or using computer software. For this study, the researcher manually applied coding for themes by writing margin notes, drawing diagrams, and more importantly, having all the codes in the mind. By doing so, the generated themes actually led the researcher to go back and forth through the whole data set as a quick searching method. The main reason why the researcher did not need a computer programme is that the data sets were comparatively small. From the very beginning of the fieldwork until the end of all the interviews, the researcher kept managing and limiting the data size. This helped to focus on the research questions instead of taking a very broad scope. To be specific, when field notes were sorted out, the researcher selected the most typical ones which are closely related to the research topic.

As part of data analysis, coding helped the researcher to understand the recurring viewpoints from the participants. During the coding process, the researcher gradually captured

significant points to make arguments and develop insights under the surface of the texts. Further, the researcher was open to discovering and presenting contradictory research findings and making critical suggestions. For example, different interviewees provided differing or even contradictory explanations for the same phenomena from different perspectives. In this study, an objective attitude was required to report the variety and define reasonable opinions.

3.9 Ethical considerations

The research procedure requires “consideration of ethics since many ethical issues and challenges may arise during data collection, data analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports” (Creswell, 2009, p. 56). In agreement, Bryman (2012) stressed that ethical issues arise at a variety of stages in social research. In view of the above, the researcher abided by the School of Research and Post Graduate Studies (Uganda Christian University) standards for research proposal writing, and approval from Research and Ethics Committee (REC). The researcher further observed honesty and openness, presenting findings without altering any. Further, the confidentiality of the interviewees, where requested, was respected. The researcher briefed the participants about the research intentions within which process; there was not any deception. This was aimed at getting informed consent. For instance, Cresswell asserted that the researcher should:

Develop an informed consent form for participants to sign before they engage in the research. This form acknowledged that participants’ rights have to be protected during data collection. This form, for instance included, the right to participate voluntarily, purpose of the study, procedures of the study, the right to ask questions, benefits of the study, and others (Cresswell 2003, p. 64).

In addition, Wimmer and Dominick (2003, p. 75) observed that “researchers are responsible for maintaining professional standards in analysing and reporting their data”. The researcher had an ethical responsibility to acknowledge both the primary and secondary information sources to refrain from plagiarism since it is unethical.

From a gender perspective, the researcher observed gender parity right from sample selection to the data analysis. The justification for this is that study participants (men and women)

seem to have differing experiences regarding WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion among users, which called for the need to have a gender balanced sample and to do a gender analysis when looking at the various variables. For instance, each of the two research sites considered a balanced sample, in light of gender. Altogether, 8 female participants and 8 male participants participated in the FGDs from the 2 divisions of Kampala Central and Kawempe.

3.10 Limitations of the study

There is no research project which is perfectly designed without any limitations (Patton, 2002). For this study, the researcher experienced unresponsiveness of some sources to give information. However, this was dealt with by carefully choosing a representative sample and refusing to pay for information as this could lead to exaggerated responses to justify payment.

Another limitation relates to researcher bias which always relates to the qualitative approach associated with unstructured or semi-structured (open-ended) questions. However, the researcher tried to be vigilant and aware of potential bias and to ensure that the findings are as objective as possible.

3.11 Summary

This chapter has discussed the methodological approach that the researcher employed in the study. It has illustrated how the data collection methods were administered through in-depth interviews and FGDs; how interpretation of data was done; the ethical considerations considered and the obstacles encountered during data collection. The next chapter provides a thematic presentation of the study's findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

The previous chapter has discussed the research methodology used in this study – qualitative approach. This chapter presents the findings obtained, using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The major sets of data are presented using the objectives of the study: public perception of WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district, the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district, and perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. This arrangement of data aims to ensure that the reader is guided on how the objectives of the study were achieved. This study explored public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district.

4.1 Public perception of WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district

4.1.1 Public sphere

As its first objective, this study investigated how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The study's findings from FGDs established that the public use WhatsApp as an appropriate public sphere or arena that brings together people to deliberate on various issues, which ultimately promotes social cohesion. It was established that WhatsApp has promoted the idea of communities of interest in space (WhatsApp groups) to achieve particular goals. Through these virtual communities, there is a sense of togetherness and strengthening of social ties, as one of the male FGD participants held in Kawempe division (*FGD 2*) explained:

We create WhatsApp groups where we meet a number of people. These groups are created for different purposes. As a social media platform, WhatsApp provides a convenient and reliable public space to pursue particular causes. This has worked not only to achieve the goals of the group, but also to promote togetherness and cohesion in these networks (*FGD 2*).

Indeed, while responding to the question of how WhatsApp is used to promote social cohesion in Uganda, responses from in-depth interviews also commended WhatsApp as a

viable platform for building social relationships and togetherness. The study findings established that WhatsApp has been an effective tool for building social networks and cohesion. For instance, *Participant 1* (a media scholar), observed that in the context of social cohesion, WhatsApp has been a game-changer since it offers space for group interactions, realisation of goals and promotion of togetherness. He observed that:

When you look at social cohesion, ideally WhatsApp has been used by people to create a sense of togetherness through WhatsApp groups. Now, those WhatsApp groups become communities of interaction basically.... Every time a WhatsApp group is formed, it has a particular cause for which people are coming together to achieve a particular purpose – most times (*Participant 1*).

Participant 5, a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) official, also shares a view similar to the above by noting that in light of social cohesion, WhatsApp brings together like-minded people to pursue particular goals. He emphasised this position by asserting that “.... in terms of social cohesion, WhatsApp has the potential to facilitate social cohesion to the extent that it allows people with common interests to come together on a particular channel and share ideas” (*Participant 5*). However, from a negative outlook, he stressed that WhatsApp is a very personalised and fragmented platform, which on the other hand is presumed to cause social disintegration. Similarly, a female FGD participant concretised *Participant 5*'s position by maintaining that “WhatsApp has promoted social disintegration, people no longer meet physically” (*FGD 2*). Further, she added that while some people are included on these WhatsApp groups – family, social, professional groups, work-based groups, business/investment clubs, and others, many are excluded. This in a sense has somehow worked to break or weaken existing traditional social ties. Meanwhile, her male counterpart also echoed a similar view by submitting that “truth is – people are no longer social; they choose to spend time on their phones with only those in their inner circles” (*FGD 2*). From the above reasoning, there seems to be mixed reactions on how the public perceives WhatsApp (as a public sphere) in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. In other words, WhatsApp usage has worked to promote social cohesion, and on the other hand weakens some existing social ties.

4.1.2 Social mobilisation tool

The second way through which the public perceives WhatsApp usage is its social mobilisation function. Through WhatsApp groups, it was established that members use the platform as a vehicle to mobilise others for social causes. Responses from both the in-depth interviews and FGDs affirmed that WhatsApp has provided a convenient and accessible tool through which social mobilisation occurs. For instance, *Participant 1* extolled WhatsApp as a viable platform with the potential to mobilise and bring people together to realise particular goals. He asserted that:

You can find people who are going to get married creating WhatsApp groups to solicit funds and support. You can find workers, not necessarily as an organisation WhatsApp group but a worker's WhatsApp group where they talk about issues surrounding their work, mobilise resources for various activities, and the like. So in that way, it brings people together to realise particular goals (*Participant 1*).

Further, while emphasising WhatsApp's social mobilisation function, *Participant 3*, an IT expert noted that "compared to a Facebook group or an X list, and X listen, WhatsApp is really the main means by which people self-organise/ mobilise and keep interacting". For instance, he adds that "every family has a family WhatsApp group; every old student belongs to alumni WhatsApp group, which also applies to business people, farmers, and others". Thus, through WhatsApp, people with shared values and aspirations can easily mobilise into their social groups to achieve particular objectives. In the context of politics, *Participant 4*, an official from UCC, submitted that "WhatsApp is a very powerful tool... it has played a very big role in the electoral process and even in mobilising political activism in the country". The idea here is that various political actors use this platform as a vehicle to mobilise political and civic activism in respect to some causes.

From the FGDs, WhatsApp was commended for its social mobilisation role in an effort to pursue different interests by respective users, which consequently promotes social integration. For instance, a woman in the FGD held at Kampala Central (*FGD 1*) noted that:

WhatsApp is quite phenomenal. WhatsApp groups offer a platform for mobilisation of interest groups and achievement of collective goals becomes easier. For instance, rotary groups, fundraising groups/ purposes, sports groups, investment groups, alumni groups, and many others. This way, social

integration is promoted, while fulfilling the purpose to which these networks exist... (FGD 1)

From the above understanding, WhatsApp is a popular application which has worked as a conduit or tool for mobilisation of interest groups to realise various goals in Kampala district. This social networking creates a sense of community, relationship and social cohesion.

4.1.3 Source of information

The third way through which the public perceives WhatsApp usage is the platform's informational role. Responses from the in-depth interviews revealed that WhatsApp provides a fast and reliable source of information to various users. For instance, *Participant 5* noted that WhatsApp facilitates information sharing among different groups to achieve particular goals. He concretised this by asserting that:

WhatsApp has fostered group communication where like-minded people can use the forum to share information. This has enabled the respective groups to work towards achieving particular goals. The platform has also proved to be a reliable channel for sharing information beyond the purpose to which the respective groups were created (*Participant 5*).

On his part, *Participant 4* submitted that “WhatsApp provides a good or easy accessible tool to be able to put people in groups, to be able to empower them with information and knowledge that can actually help them to develop.” Further, while emphasising WhatsApp's informational role, *Participant 1* noted that WhatsApp is a viable platform which works to disseminate information to respective networks. He noted that:

I have seen in some platforms old students of particular schools come up to inform others of an ongoing fundraising drive.... There was a message making rounds on social media about Namasagali College and how dilapidated it is (*Participant 1*).

However, he further highlighted that WhatsApp comes with a lot of “information clutter that it really overloads the users”. For this reason, people sometimes simply switch off WhatsApp because there's a lot of information coming in.

From the FGDs, WhatsApp's information role was lauded by majority of the participants, which promotes a sense of cohesion among users. For instance, a woman in one of the FGDs noted that:

WhatsApp is one of the main sources of information for people, and a reliable platform for getting news updates about various issues. This empowers us to make informed choices in many aspects. Actually, WhatsApp has the capacity to shape public opinion/perception of issues more than the traditional media (FGD 2).

The above finding indicates that WhatsApp is a valuable resource in disseminating information among various users. Therefore, the public perceives WhatsApp as a reliable source of information on various issues, which in turn fosters social cohesion among users in Kampala district.

4.2 The perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district

4.2.1 Instant messaging

The study further investigated the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The study findings from in-depth interviews indicated that WhatsApp presents various opportunities in the promotion of social cohesion, especially among the users. Responding to the question of the opportunities which have been presented by WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion among users, *Participant 1* noted that “you are able to send out information and receive feedback, which is instant... This instant communication comes in handy/in time to clarify a particular issue that would have escalated if that particular information didn’t come in instantly and immediately.” This not only makes this platform a source of information to the users, but also promotes real-time messaging. In essence, this works to strengthen relationships and promoting social cohesion among users. Reacting further to the above, *Participant 4* offered the following response:

Currently, WhatsApp is one of the popular platforms because it has the use of instant messaging... In terms of information dissemination, it is quick; meaning messages can be exchanged very quickly for people to access them. Even just after sharing the message, people will see it and can choose to forward it to others, or share it with somebody else. WhatsApp offers a very quick messaging application... Sometimes you may find that platforms like X could have limitations in this respect (*Participant 4*).

The above view was strongly augmented by one of the male FGD participants who argued that "...WhatsApp offers an opportunity of real-time messaging and various users are always able to share immediate feedback" (FGD 2). Similarly, another female FGD participant amplified this position by submitting that unlike other social media platforms, WhatsApp is quite exceptional in facilitating instant communication (FGD 1). From the above arguments, there is a clear indication that instant messaging is one of the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

4.2.2 Multi-media capability

Further, the study established that multi-media capability was another opportunity presented by WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The study findings from in-depth interviews revealed that WhatsApp offers an opportunity to the users of packaging messages in different formats. This seems to be quite appealing to the audience members. For instance, *Participant 1* explained this point by noting that:

Also, WhatsApp as a communication tool allows different formats of information to be shared within the group. So, it's not limited to a particular line of content format. You have a variety of content coming through the text, audio, video, and photos. So there's a variety of content which allows whoever is communicating to package content appropriately to whatever audience they are reaching out to (*Participant 1*).

In agreement, *Participant 3* submitted that "WhatsApp allows people to form communities using their phone numbers and be able to message each other, do live calls, both on video and on audio, and also post any kind of content, whether video, audio, among themselves." He added that messages can easily be packaged in different forms to incorporate audio, video, text, still photos, and the like. Besides WhatsApp and some social media networks, legacy media (radio, television and print) and other non-media platforms, like posters, can hardly possess this functionality – multi-media potential. On his part, *Participant 4* advanced a view similar to the above by asserting that:

WhatsApp has an advantage of flexibility in handling multi-media, handling texts, handling voice, handling video, handling image sharing. I think many platforms are just catching up... but WhatsApp has already proved its edge in terms of that and today you have seen people using a lot of voice messaging,

people would rather speak and send a voice note than actually text and so on. So these other platforms like the Facebook and X are probably yet to catch up game in that regard (*Participant 4*).

Further, a woman in one FGD noted that WhatsApp has features which support multi-media. She singled out voice calling as a popular and convenient feature which enables users to deliver messages to others instead of composing long text messages, which is time consuming (*FGD 1*). From a general outlook, majority of the FGD participants applauded WhatsApp for its multi-media potential or flexibility for users to package content in various formats tailored towards particular audiences.

All the above viewpoints are pointers to the fact that multi-media capability was another opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. This study is cognisant of the view that the way news is packaged will have a bearing on media audiences, particularly in eliciting the intended meaning of the sender.

4.2.3 Adaptability, language and ease of use

The study established that the other perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage is the platform's adaptability, language and ease of use. The study findings from the FGDs revealed that as a comparative advantage, WhatsApp is very adaptable, and enables users to share messages in local languages. For instance, a woman in one of the FGDs made an observation that "due to its adaptability, WhatsApp users can package their messages in different languages to appeal to the different people" (*FGD 1*). For example, according to the Constitution (1995) of the Republic of Uganda, the country is a multilingual with over 41 dialects with differing languages. She added that the platform is non-complex regardless of education levels and its compatibility partly explains its dominance in the country. In light of this, WhatsApp usage has predominantly fostered social cohesion. In a related development, another male FGD participant asserted that ease of usage and non-complexity present critical characteristics of the network to the users. Consequently, WhatsApp has emerged as an effective tool for strengthening social ties and relationships (*FGD 2*).

Meanwhile, responses from in-depth interviews also concurred with FGD findings. For instance, *Participant 4* submitted that:

WhatsApp as an application is very versatile in a sense that it has the ability to take videos and share them. It has been more localised through use of various

local languages, locally produced videos, and other forms of content with ease (*Participant 4*).

He added that the functionality of WhatsApp allows users to access the network even with basic or medium type of phones. Reinforcing the above statement, *Participant 5* noted that “the platform has features that can actually promote social cohesion... It is accessible by a wide socio-economic class within the country, whether the young, whether the old, those with low education background, people are using WhatsApp...” Further, regarding ease of use, *Participant 1* averred that “these applications come already installed on the phone; whoever has a phone somehow finds him/herself using WhatsApp.”

Meanwhile, a male FGD participant also shared a similar trail of thought by noting that WhatsApp usage is not restricted by factors, like demographic characteristics of the users (including: gender, age, educational background, marital status, and others), coupled with non-complexity of the network (*FGD 1*). He concluded that it is a more user-friendly interface compared to other social media platforms, in light of social cohesion. From a general outlook, the study participants did not hold mixed reactions regarding the adaptability, language and ease of WhatsApp usage as critical features presented by the network to the users. From this understanding, the platform’s adaptability, language and ease of use was another opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

4.2.4 User-generated content

The study further established that user-generated content was another opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The study findings revealed that WhatsApp users not only engage in the consumption of content on these platforms, but they also participate in the production aspect of content in their respective networks. For instance, *Participant 1* noted that WhatsApp as a social network supports an inclusive, interactive and effective communication in a sense that all the group members do participate by sharing their opinions in various communities of interest. He emphasised this by noting that:

.... As a communication tool, what WhatsApp is really giving us is two-way communication... That is very distinct and it even completes the cycle of communication. In communication, that becomes effective communication as

long as the message is sent and feedback is realised... Once a channel is able to give you that, then it becomes an effective channel. For example, in Kampala and surrounding areas, you will say that perhaps social media (WhatsApp, in particular) are the best tools to promote social cohesion (*Participant 1*).

The study findings from FGDs also praised WhatsApp as a viable platform for social engagement and participation, which promotes social cohesion. For instance, one of the female FGD participants observed that "... the fact that users can share their own opinions on WhatsApp, as well as seeing or following those of others contributes to the effectiveness of these platforms in building and strengthening unity among different groups" (*FGD 2*). On his part, *Participant 5* submitted that these digital networks bear a characteristic that promotes social cohesion as they open up opportunities for people to discuss issues through what he called "digital bimeezas", unlike the "physical bimeezas" in the past. Specifically, the idea is that media democratisation has been promoted by WhatsApp usage as the network offers a convenient and potential marketplace of ideas in the various communities of interest. This, in a sense has promoted social cohesion. From the media agenda setting perspective, the study further revealed that there is cross-pollination between social media and legacy media as the two feed off each other.

However, *Participant 5* highlighted a disadvantage that:

WhatsApp can also facilitate a process where people withdraw into what sometimes we call echo-chambers; whereby you go into a WhatsApp group, of people that think like you, believe in the same things as you, and then you lock yourself out of other groups where there might be more diverse opinions and more diverse perceptions of social issues (*Participant 5*).

The prevailing idea is that people often join WhatsApp groups with like-minded people, and then close themselves off from other (would-be) meaningful social discourses.

Overall, user-generated content was another opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

4.2.5 Security, safety and privacy of users

The other perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage relates to security, safety and privacy of users. The study findings from both the FGDs and in-depth interviews established that WhatsApp users are guaranteed protection and safety of their conversations. For instance, a male FGD participant submitted that “as an affordance, WhatsApp provides end-to-end encryption of chats or messages among users” (*FGD 1*). Another female FGD participant echoed a view similar to the above by observing that as a comparative advantage, private messaging is a critical feature supported or offered by the network to the users. She added that some specific conversations are not appropriate for the larger public domain or networks (*FGD 2*). In a related development, *Participant 1* submitted that WhatsApp maintains the user-to-user end calls and this works to keep network hacking at a peripheral level. He explained this by asserting that:

.... The message is between the two of you. No one will hack or see it. If it’s deleted, it’s deleted! So, it provides that sense of security and privacy. It’s been promoted as a safe platform to communicate certain things (*Participant 1*).

Participant 4 also concurred with *Participant 1*’s assertion by noting that WhatsApp provides safety and security of their conversation. He emphasised this by observing that:

Because of the end-to-end encryption, people probably like it a lot for this feature... information that cannot be put on public forum end up on WhatsApp because of its end-to-end encryption... the only people who can see that message is me who created the message and you who has received it (*Participant 4*).

From the foregoing arguments, the underlying view is that the security, safety and privacy of users is another perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

This study further explored the perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. These are explored in the next section.

4.3 Perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district

4.3.1 Limited digital literacy

The study findings established that there are some challenges which are associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. For instance, *Participant 1* noted that digital illiteracy is one of the major obstacles to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. This is illustrated in the response below:

The country is low on digital literacy; people that can ably navigate the digital platforms/tools are still very few and this creates a sense of unsafe environment to navigate social media.... Sometimes they give away too much of personal information or too much of other private information which may lead to perhaps unpleasant stuff (*Participant 1*).

Reinforcing the above argument, *Participant 2* asserted that for effective WhatsApp usage, “one of the ways is to help people to be digital literate and their consumption of media – media and digital literacy are very important... Therefore, the idea of people being digitally literate is critical”. In respect to the existing digital divide, *Participant 4* stressed that Uganda is experiencing increased connectivity and Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) is driving inclusion to close the digital divides, hence access to WhatsApp will become higher because of inclusivity.

Meanwhile, a woman in one of the FGDs submitted that “the digital literacy levels in Uganda are quite low, for instance, some WhatsApp users misuse emojis without knowing what they’re communicating.... Stickers do action; but still people misuse them” (*FGD 1*). In agreement, another FGD participant argued that:

A good number of people using WhatsApp are not tech-savvy. They do not have adequate skills to package messages appropriately for various consumers in their networks, and most importantly, they lack digital media ethics.... This means violations and abuse of other people’s rights is a common occurrence (*FGD 2*).

In this regard, low digital literacy levels in the country present a strong limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

4.3.2 Misinformation, disinformation and fake news

The second perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage is misinformation, disinformation and fake news. For instance, in an exclusive interview with *Participant 5*, he observed that generally “social media really amplifies harmful information at a rate which is very difficult to deal with.... people share things without checking their truthfulness.” He suggested a need for “public or civic education about digital platforms, news literacy; so that people can always be able to tell or have skills and knowledge to distinguish between fake news and news that is quality news...” In the context of social media regulation, *Participant 4* concurs with the above view by maintaining that there is a lot of fake news and misinformation on WhatsApp and the media regulator somehow lacks mechanisms to evaluate and discard this content. He emphasised this position by asserting that:

We have a challenge of misinformation and fake news that is propagated over the platform and it is difficult to be able to control this.... We may not fact check what is on WhatsApp simply because we don't have the access until somebody makes it known (*Participant 4*).

One of the FGD participants also shared a similar view:

I will never trust information on social media (WhatsApp inclusive) before verifying it on traditional media. There is availability of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, distorted and biased, misleading information on online platforms. Actually, I think there is more fake news than accurate information on these sites (*FGD 1*).

The majority of the FGD participants admitted that existence of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation on WhatsApp is assumed to compromise the whole idea of social cohesion among users due to limited trust on shared content. On a positive outlook, the study's findings revealed that some of this is quality/positive and useful information for the users. Generally, all the above are a pointer to the fact that misinformation, disinformation and fake news present a strong limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

4.3.3 Restrictions on social media usage

The third perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage relates to restrictions on social media usage. While exploring the challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the

promotion of social cohesion in Uganda, one of the FGD participants noted that “the existence of restrictive regulatory frameworks, like Computer Misuse Act (2022, amended), Anti-pornography Act (2014), and many others suffocate the right to freedom of public expression through this network” (*FGD 1*). Meanwhile, another FGD participant decried government intervention particularly through closure of social media during the election period. He noted that:

Government has on several occasions instituted a ban on social media in the entire country during the election period. They normally say that members of the opposition and other political/civic activist groups can easily mobilize through these networks and threaten the security of the country.... This is not common with traditional media. It frustrates the potential of social media, particularly WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion (*FGD 1*).

From this reasoning, *Participant 2* suggested that there should be adoption of some well-intentioned policies which will work not to stifle but promote exercise of the right to freedom of speech and expression for social media users, for cohesion to flourish. From the perspective of social media regulation, while responding to the question of what regulations are in place for the use of social media in Uganda, *Participant 4* stated that:

We do not have stand-alone laws or regulations that specifically address data communication or social media in that matter but within existing laws, we have sections of different laws that have been adopted for regulating social media. If you look at the UCC Act (2013), it has context to do with regulating broadcasting and content standards.... In terms of data communication, all those users of social media or data communication that fall under the ambit of broadcasting are regulated under those broadcasting standards. Not everybody using social media is a broadcaster, but people who are simultaneously using social media to disseminate information, news and so on to large audiences, for example bloggers fall under that ambit (*Participant 4*).

By and large, restrictions on social media usage pose a challenge to WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

4.3.4 Network challenges

The fourth perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district relates to network challenges. Findings from the FGDs revealed that the low internet penetration in the country affects the use of WhatsApp in an attempt to promote social cohesion. For instance, one of the FGD participants decried the unstable network experienced almost on a daily basis while using social media (WhatsApp). She observed that “we usually experience recurrent network loss for WhatsApp usage, and geographical location matters a lot in the country. For example, the network is quite stable in Kampala and very faint elsewhere. It is worse for Lyca Mobile users” (FGD 1). Consequently, the use and effectiveness of WhatsApp to promote social cohesion is compromised. Further, a female FGD participant’s argument is also supportive of the above view as he notes that:

Generally, there is relatively low connectivity in the country mostly as a result of limited internet infrastructure. Consequently, this creates a digital divide especially between the urban population and their rural counterparts, and those with a low socio-economic status. Actually, this may partly explain the country’s low digitized population (FGD 2).

In a related development, “network challenges subtly hinder the country’s social media landscape, unlike in the Western world. Sometimes we need to re-start our phones in search for network to share videos, content... Internet service providers like Lyca are so weak” (FGD 2). Further, from the perspective of in-depth interviews, *Participant 2* makes a valid observation by revealing that there is relatively low connectivity as a reason of low internet fiber in the country. He added that this requires some reasonable investment by government, private sector and other development agencies to address this concern. All in all, network challenges pose a strong limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

4.3.5 Cost dynamics

The other perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district relates to cost dynamics. The study findings from the FGDs established that generally the cost of data communication is relatively high and data bundles tend to deplete so fast. For instance, a female FGD participant submitted that “Over The Top Services (OTT) tax is now included on the data bundles we buy. It is quite high and we are

lacking WiFi, which is a necessity in the West” (FGD 2). She added that most of them can only access WiFi at their workplaces, and are often offline when they go home. In view of this, the relatively high cost of data bundles seems to pose a limitation to WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion among users. Further, another female FGD participant reaffirmed this position as she noted that “data is very important because it helps us to connect to others. Previously, we were using Short Message Service (SMS) before the invention of these social media platforms and they were quite cost effective compared to the later” (FGD 1). For this reason, one of the FGD participants concluded that:

Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) have been created by cyber engineers, which some of us use to bypass the data requirements. Though this is illegal in Uganda, to the users it’s legal because no one has ever come out to talk about the illegality of these networks. No one’s rights are violated! However, there’s no cyber security through use of these networks. The owners access your information. At one point, the same data can be used against you – especially those who share funny videos (FGD 1).

Regarding the cost dynamics, another participant shared a view that:

The last time I checked, I think OTT had been removed. However, the cost really remains high because in terms of buying data bundles and utilisation – the bundles get depleted quickly! Regulators should come out and determine the cost of data which is manageable, and also address the quick depletion of data through utilisation (Participant 1).

Participant 1’s view was also held by *Participant 3*. From this understanding, the cost of internet poses a limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in respect to promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

4.3.6 Scamming, hacking and privacy breaches

The other perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district relates to scamming, hacking and privacy breaches. The study findings from both the in-depth interviews and FGDs affirmed this position. For instance, *Participant 4* asserted that WhatsApp is a convenient avenue for scamming and fraud

activities where various users have been victims without their knowledge, which challenges the notion of cohesion. He posited that:

You have seen WhatsApp groups that are actually for scammers and fraudsters especially people dealing in pyramid schemes.... mobile money schemes are happening, fake employment schemes are happening and they are not visible to the authorities to be able to check them (*Participant 4*).

Findings from the FGDs also pointed to the same problem. For instance, a man from the FGD confirmed the above by noting that there is a lot of cyber crime on WhatsApp. For instance, someone sends you a link for a promotion and when you click on it; they can always access your information, defraud you of your money. He added that:

I am vigilant to the links sent on my WhatsApp. Even if they are official, I have to first make an inquiry from the origin/source of the link to keep hackers at bay! Sometimes I enter the link into Google to confirm (*FGD 1*).

In light of the above, another FGD participant concluded that “WhatsApp should first scrutinise whether or not the shared links are authentic, thus hyper-text protocol transfer should be a concern by developers” (*FGD 1*). She added that there also exist cases of invasion of privacy via WhatsApp. In this regard, the study’s findings revealed that scamming, hacking and privacy breaches pose a major barrier to WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

This chapter has presented the findings from the FGDs and responses from in-depth interviews conducted. The findings have been presented under the themes of: public perception of WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district, the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district, and perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. The next chapter provides a discussion of results and interpretations of the findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the researcher presented the findings from the FGDs and responses from the in-depth interviews. This chapter relates these findings to the literature review and the theoretical framework in order to provide a relation between the new data obtained by the study and the existing knowledge on the subject. This discussion is pegged on the research objectives that were set by the study, namely: public perception of WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district, the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district, and perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

This study was conceptualised within the social network theory, which provided a lens through which public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda could be explored.

The social network theory was developed in 1996 by Sociologist Manuel Castells, who first mentioned the term “network society” in his book “The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture.” He asserted that:

The definition in terms of a network society is a society where the key social structures and activities are organised around electronically processed information networks. So it’s not just about networks or social networks, because social networks have been very old forms of social organisation, it’s about social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies (Castells, 1996, p. 34).

He assumed that “we are passing from the industrial age into the information age” (Castells, 2005, p. 5). In view of this, Castells (2000, p. 17) observed that “a number of major social, technological, economic and cultural transformations came together to give rise to a new form of society.” From the perspective of a network society, he noted that “networks have become the predominant organisational form of every domain of human activity” (Castells, 1996, p. 101), thus “creating and sustaining relationships between others and self” (Baym, 2015, p. 1). Meanwhile, Monge and Contractor (2003, p. 39) submitted that “communication networks are the patterns of contact that are created by flows of message among communicators through time and space.” Further, the social network theory assumes that

technological advancement is the most important individual precondition for the resurgence of networks (Castells, 1996; Fuchs, 2009). However, the structure of a network can both enable and constrain social action (Castells, 1996). In the context of this study, the findings also reaffirmed that there are some perceived opportunities and challenges presented by WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. Nevertheless, as an appropriate guiding framework, the social network theory has been used as a guide in exploring how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion, the perceived opportunities and, underlying challenges presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Uganda.

Therefore, the application of the social network theory in this study provided not only an appropriate, but also a solid anchorage to the arguments submitted herein. This study established how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Uganda. The discussion is provided in the next sub-chapter.

5.1 Public perception of WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district

5.1.1 Public sphere

As its first objective, this study investigated how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The study's findings from FGDs established that the public use WhatsApp as an appropriate public sphere or arena that brings together people to deliberate on various issues, which ultimately promotes social cohesion. It was established that WhatsApp has promoted the idea of communities of interest in space (WhatsApp groups) to achieve particular goals. Through these virtual communities, there is a sense of togetherness and strengthening of social ties. The finding is in line with the observation by Tayeebwa (2012) that social networks, like WhatsApp, have re-distributed communicative power and expanded the global public spheres making wider participation a reality. From the perspective of the public sphere as a theory, the "public sphere in cyberspace is an electronic environment where private individuals can meet through the net to engage in debate regarding general issues" (Dashti 2008, p. 57). Actually, Habermas (1996, p. 359) described a public sphere as "a network for communicating information and points of view...." As Lim (2009, p. 69) put it, "the increased participation, interaction and convergence on social media and the entire Internet experience is a new form of the public sphere." Castells (2008, p. 79) concurs with Lim's observation by noting that "social media is

indeed the new public sphere.” The current society organises its public sphere based on communication networks, referred to as the ‘network society.’ Bringing WhatsApp to bear with the above literature, the findings of the study revealed that the network has provided a social site or online space for establishing and strengthening relationships among users in Kampala district. Therefore, WhatsApp is a crucial public sphere where public opinion on various issues is formed and reconfigured, goals realised and ultimately fostering cohesion.

Indeed, while responding to the question of how WhatsApp is used to promote social cohesion in Uganda, responses from in-depth interviews also commended WhatsApp as a viable platform for building social relationships and togetherness. The study findings established that WhatsApp has been an effective tool for building social networks and cohesion. For instance, it was observed that in the context of social cohesion, WhatsApp has been a game-changer since it offers space for group interactions, realisation of goals and promotion of togetherness. In agreement, online social networks can provide a platform for individuals to express themselves, share personal experiences, and connect with others who have similar interests or experiences (Krasnova et al., 2013). In addition, Davis (2017) concurred with Krasnova et al.’s view by noting that social media provides a platform for individuals to express their beliefs, interests, and connect with others around the world.

It was also noted that in light of social cohesion, WhatsApp brings together like-minded people to pursue particular goals. This finding is consistent with Jailobaev et al. (2021)’s submission that “WhatsApp groups have become a platform for connecting people at any point of time, bringing together people across time zones, creating communities of similar-minded/tasked people, and giving a sense of belonging to group members” (p. 63). Meanwhile, in the context of WhatsApp and social cohesion, Tulin et al. (2018) asserted that people perceive smaller groups as more cohesive, and warned that group density shows no link to perceived cohesion. Therefore, group dynamics largely affects social cohesion through WhatsApp usage.

However, the disadvantage associated with WhatsApp is that it is very personalised and fragmented platform, which on the other side is presumed to cause social disintegration. This is in contrast to Baumgarten (2011)’s earnest argument that the evolution of social networks has provided a reliable way of keeping connected, voicing opinions, reaching out to others and above all, developing both new and old relationships. In light of the current study, the

thinking behind this is that WhatsApp has not worked to break or weaken existing traditional social ties, but rather promoting social integration. Additionally, the FGD findings revealed that people are no longer social as they choose to spend time on their phones with only those in their inner circles. Castells (2015)'s revelation is consistent with this finding as he noted that social networks have posed a great danger to face-to-face interaction and sociability due to the new forms of wireless communication like mobile telephone communication, Wi-Fi networks, particularly for the younger groups of the population. Further still, the new public sphere theory seems to acknowledge the challenges and potential pitfalls of this new sphere, like the spread of misinformation and the erosion of reasoned discourse. For instance, the study findings established that there are some challenges which are associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. A detailed discussion of these is provided in the subsequent sections.

From the perspective of the 50-State theory, the theory refers to the United States of America (USA), where each state's citizens participate in the political process, influencing their state's policies and, in turn influencing the national public sphere (Kovenock and Robertson, 2008). This means that both the public sphere and 50-State theory are related through the idea of public participation and the role of citizens in influencing government policies. In the African context, Wasserman (2003) noted that new media technologies play a role in facilitating an African public sphere in which civil society organisations (CSOs) from different African countries cooperate in influencing public policy. Actually, the public sphere acknowledges the significance of digital technologies and social media (WhatsApp in particular) in shaping public discourse, democratic participation and relationship building.

Generally, from the foregoing discussion, there seems to be mixed reactions on how the public perceives WhatsApp (as a public sphere) in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. In other words, WhatsApp usage has worked to promote social cohesion, and on the other hand weakened some existing social ties.

5.1.2 Social mobilisation tool

The second way through which the public perceives WhatsApp usage is its social mobilisation function. Through WhatsApp groups, it was established that members use the platform as a vehicle to mobilise others for social causes. In agreement, Chibita and Ugangu (2017, p. 249) observed that "in 2007 a section of Ugandans successfully mobilised through

social media and averted plans by the state to have part of the country's natural forest, Mabira demarcated for sugarcane growing." About two million protesters are said to have been mobilised to march on the streets of Kampala. Similarly, Kakooza (2018) submitted that individuals, organisations and currently political parties in Uganda have incorporated social media to mobilise and rally people in a bid to realise particular goals. From this understanding, Castells (2012, p. 229) emphasised that social networks are "decisive tools for mobilising, for organising, for deliberating, for coordinating and for deciding". This example of social mobilisation through social networks solidifies the view that social media has a potential to promote social cohesion. Consistent with the above views, the study findings from in-depth interviews extolled WhatsApp as a viable platform with the potential to mobilise and bring people together to realise particular goals.

Further, while emphasizing WhatsApp's social mobilisation function, it was revealed that compared to a Facebook group or an X list, and X listen, WhatsApp is a critical tool through which people self-organise/ mobilise and keep interacting. For instance, every family has a family WhatsApp group; every old student belongs to alumni WhatsApp group, which also applies to business people, farmers, and others. Similarly, Lee et al. (2023) submitted that WhatsApp is a worldwide form of communication tool which facilitates interaction and communication with families, friends or colleagues at work. They added that social media such as WhatsApp and others are becoming more ubiquitous and steadily changing the way users interact and socialise with others. In a similar development, Quan-Haase and Young (2010) noted that WhatsApp is used mainly by family members to sustain relationships with near and far individuals they are acquainted with and to communicate family related matters easily. For this reason, Kaddu and Mukasa (2016, p. 70) observed that "transformations are seen in the way Ugandans are socialising with one another and in the way families utilise their free time." Thus, through WhatsApp, people with shared values and aspirations can easily mobilise into their social groups to achieve particular objectives.

In the context of politics, the study established that WhatsApp has played a very big role in the electoral process and even in mobilising political activism in the country. Bertrand et al. (2021, p. 5)'s view is in line with the above finding as they maintained that "politicians and political parties are increasingly coming to see social media as an integral part of their election campaign toolkit". In addition, towards the 2021 Presidential elections in Uganda,

the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) formed a series of WhatsApp groups to mobilise supporters in selected areas (Ibid). In this respect, Stromer-Galley (2014) concluded that presidential political campaigns now habitually and aggressively use social media to reach, engage and mobilise voters. Specifically, the idea here is that various political actors use WhatsApp as a vehicle to mobilise political and civic activism in respect to some causes. From the FGDs, WhatsApp was commended for its social mobilisation role in an effort to pursue different interests by respective users, which consequently promotes social integration. In agreement, Boadi (2013, p. 74) noted that “many strong relationships exist as a result of social networking online since social networking is about mutual communication.” From the theoretical basis of this study, Davies (2014, p. 6) made a valid proclamation that probably the most vital aspect of social media is the network effect produced when a user who has seen a video, visited a page or read a tweet passes on the same message or a reference to all of their friends or followers. Due to the network or multiplier effect of social media, these are “second degree networks” (i.e. followers of followers) (Ibid, p. 6). Specifically, the implication of this is that WhatsApp has a multiplier effect which facilitates its social mobilisation function in an effort to realise particular goals. From the above understanding, WhatsApp is a popular application which has worked as a conduit or tool for mobilisation of interest groups to realise various goals in Kampala district. This social networking creates a sense of community, relationship and social cohesion.

5.1.3 Source of information

The third way through which the public perceives WhatsApp usage is the platform’s informational role. Responses from the in-depth interviews revealed that WhatsApp provides a fast and reliable source of information to various users. The findings are in line with the observations of Yoo and Gil de Zuniga (2014) that positive consequences are expected of these platforms’ ability to inform users especially as a result of information sharing. They added that never before has so much cost-friendly information been so close at hand for citizens (Ibid). This implies that WhatsApp facilitates information sharing among different groups to achieve particular goals, at limited cost. Further, the study established that WhatsApp provides a good/ easy accessible tool to be able to put people in groups, to be able to empower them with information and knowledge that can actually help them to develop. Thus, WhatsApp is a viable platform which works to disseminate information to respective networks. In agreement, Shearer and Gottfried (2017) argued that social media platforms are

also increasingly important information sources for the public. Similarly, Khan et al. (2019, p. 137) observed that these platforms “provide an affordance to enable the distribution of information within a social context”.

On her part, Nassali (2017, p. 41) submits that social media platforms “not only provide a platform for discussing socio-economic/ political issues, but also a source of story ideas especially for broadcast”. Relatedly, Andersson’s (2018, p. 45) submission is consistent with the above views as he observed that social media networks have also become a primary source for local and international news media and a way to “stay in touch” with political, social, and economic issues. The above scholarship points to the fact that the broadcast media, in particular, often pick their agenda from the social media’s agenda (which is inter-media agenda setting). As Daneke (2014) put it, the common thread in the above literature is that social media, particularly WhatsApp, has vastly enhanced the process flow of information and communication in the world today. From the theoretical basis of this study, Heer and Boyd (2005, p. 1) visualised online social networks as “an interconnected system within which members explore, discover and learn from their connections through exposure to information while preserving a fun-filled online space.” This view is consistent with the study finding. Central to this discussion is the development and proliferation of social networks, like WhatsApp, which have fundamentally altered the way information is produced, processed and disseminated.

However, the study further highlighted that WhatsApp comes with a lot of information clutter that it really overloads the users. For this reason, people sometimes simply switch off WhatsApp because there’s a lot of information coming in. In line with this finding, Kakooza (2018, p. 144) decried the too much information on social media by noting that “the targeted audience is competing with and may not necessarily receive the communication intended for them.” The implication is that despite information being a resource for WhatsApp users, information overload on the network may not allow users to sieve out what is relevant to them. Thus, they will not attend to all this information. In spite of this weakness, majority of the FGD participants extolled WhatsApp’s information role, which they perceived to promote a sense of cohesion among users. The above finding indicates that WhatsApp is a valuable resource in disseminating information among various users. Therefore, the public perceives

WhatsApp as a reliable source of information on various issues, which in turn fosters social cohesion among users in Kampala district.

The above section has made a discussion on how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. This study further explored the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The discussion is provided in the next section.

5.2 The perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district

5.2.1 Instant messaging

The study further investigated the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The study findings from in-depth interviews indicated that WhatsApp presents various opportunities in the promotion of social cohesion, especially among the users. In agreement, Dodds (2019) maintained that WhatsApp facilitates communication within groups, and group members can share messages to the group instantaneously (Boulos et al., 2016). Further, in their study assessing Instagram and WhatsApp in health and healthcare, Boulos et al. (2016) established that WhatsApp differs from other social media tools and digital communication platforms in a number of ways. For example, WhatsApp offers more immediacy and spontaneity compared to other tools, such as Facebook and Skype which hardly require an account to be tied to users' mobile phone numbers (Ibid). Similarly, the study findings revealed that unlike other social media platforms, WhatsApp is quite exceptional in facilitating instant communication. In the Ugandan context, as a comparative advantage, the implication is that WhatsApp presents an affordance of immediacy over other social networks as it permits immediate response, particularly in light of social cohesion and building relationships among users.

According to the study findings, this not only makes this platform a source of information to the users, but also promotes real-time messaging. In essence, this works to strengthen relationships and promoting social cohesion among users. From the theoretical perspective, Castells (2000) has concluded that the World Wide Web (www) and the internet have created the information age that has expunged time and space. Further, the study findings from the FGDs established that a single message can be sent to a number of people in a minute, thus

WhatsApp offers an opportunity of real-time messaging and various users are always able to share immediate feedback. From the perspective of young people, Lee et al. (2023, p. 1) developed a similar view by asserting that “the mobile instant messaging application, WhatsApp has become a popular form of communication among adolescents.” In the same vein, various studies (Kumar and Sharma, 2017; Awada, 2016; Mefolere, 2016) have concluded that WhatsApp makes communication immediate. By and large, all the foregoing scholarship seems to extol WhatsApp as an efficient and viable public space in facilitating instant messaging, and social cohesion by extension. From the above arguments, there is a clear indication that instant messaging is one of the perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.2.2 Multi-media capability

Further, the study established that multi-media capability was another perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The study findings revealed that WhatsApp offers unprecedented opportunity to the users of packaging messages in different formats. This seems to be quite appealing to the audience members, and consequently fosters social cohesion among users. This study finding is also buttressed in the observation of Kartal (2019) who noted that WhatsApp is a service that has multimedia features, group chat and unlimited messaging. Kumar and Sharma (2017) concurs with Kartal’s view by highlighting that WhatsApp allows users to send text, real-time locations, images, voice recordings, documents, videos and others. In line with these views, the study findings revealed that WhatsApp allows people to form communities using their phone numbers and are able to message each other, do live calls, both on video and on audio, and also post any kind of content, whether video, audio, among themselves. Thus, messages can be easily be packaged in different forms, to incorporate audio, video, text, still photos, and the like. The current study is cognisant of the view that the way news is packaged will have a strong bearing on media audiences, particularly in eliciting the intended meaning of the sender.

Additionally, the study revealed that besides WhatsApp and some social media networks, legacy media (radio, television and print) and other non-media platforms, like posters, can hardly pose the multi-media potential functionality. In agreement, Dunn (2023) submitted that by and large, WhatsApp has a potential to ease and improve the dissemination of news

and other media products beyond traditional distribution channels. This is true since content format can range in modality from text, video, audio, links, photos, and others, as observed by Lee (2010). Additionally, social media networks differ greatly in their features and user base. It is upon this foundation to highlight that the functionality of social networks varies from one to another, which view is also reiterated by Nsubuga (2020, p. 21) who expounded that some social networks have “photo-sharing or video-sharing capabilities; others have built-in blogging and instant messaging technology.”

Further, the study findings noted that WhatsApp has features which support multi-media. For instance, voice calling is a popular and convenient feature which enables users to deliver messages to others instead of composing long text messages, which is time consuming. From a general outlook, majority of the FGD participants applauded WhatsApp for its multi-media potential or flexibility for users to package content in various formats tailored towards particular audiences. In the same way, various studies demonstrate that WhatsApp is a free application that can be used on both smart-phones and computers, from which the users can send text, real-time locations, images, voice recordings, documents, and videos (Dodds, 2019; Mefolere, 2016; Boulos et al., 2016). Meanwhile, Bhatt and Arshad (2016)’s study to examine the impact of WhatsApp on the youth established that WhatsApp is one of the most popular applications used by young people to communicate with friends, family and strangers, and it enables users to have multimedia downloads and text messaging without having to pay. For instance, part of Bhatt and Arshad’s view can be exemplified by Alan and Kabadayi (2016) who argued that owing to the video covering capacity and features, WhatsApp provides a vivid eyewitness account. Generally, the implication is that WhatsApp has a potential to facilitate a broader exposure of users to diverse content formats, sources of information as well as a plurality of viewpoints.

All the above views are pointers to the fact that multi-media capability was another opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.2.3 Adaptability, language and ease of use

The study established that the other perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage is the platform’s adaptability, language and ease of use. The study findings from the FGDs revealed that as a comparative advantage, WhatsApp is very adaptable, and enables users to share messages in local languages. For instance, it was established that due its adaptability, WhatsApp users can package their messages in different languages to appeal to the different

people. Consistent with the above finding, Kakooza (2018, p. 63) reasoned that “social media platforms are increasingly providing a multimedia digital language that is representative of our cultures and therefore cater for interpersonal, mass communication and mass self-communication, which resonates with today’s information, and communication needs.” Additionally, the platform is non-complex regardless of education levels and its compatibility partly explains its dominance in the country. In light of this, WhatsApp usage has predominantly fostered social cohesion. In a related development, the FGD findings asserted that ease of usage and non-complexity present critical characteristics of the network to the users. Meanwhile, responses from in-depth interviews also concurred with FGD findings by revealing that WhatsApp is very versatile and also more localised through supporting use of various local languages and other forms of local content with ease. These views are also supported by Lupton (2014) who argued that social media platforms have transformed the way information is being obtained and shared, but also more importantly is their ease in use. This means that WhatsApp users can engage with others directly, particularly in their respective local languages and feedback is realised. Additionally, the inference is that a more localized outlook for WhatsApp usage and social cohesion is facilitated. Consequently, WhatsApp has emerged as an effective tool for strengthening social ties and relationships.

Further, the functionality of WhatsApp allows users to access the network even with basic or medium type of phones. It is accessible by a wide socio-economic class within the country, whether the young, whether the old, those with low education background, people are using WhatsApp. Further, regarding ease of use, the study revealed that these applications come already installed on the phone and users somehow find themselves using WhatsApp. This finding is congruous with Mefolere (2016)’s observation that WhatsApp is simple, intuitive, and user-friendly. Therefore, WhatsApp has become a social network which facilitates individuals to connect individually and collectively. Jailobaev et al. (2021, p. 79) also echo a view similar to Mefolere’s by concluding that “WhatsApp is an easy-to-use application. The platform’s user-friendly features including, the fact that it is connected to a mobile number of users, makes it convenient to use.” Moreover, this scholarship corresponds to the FGD findings as it was noted that WhatsApp usage is not restricted by factors, like demographic characteristics of the users (including: gender, age, educational background, marital status, and others), coupled with non-complexity of the network. It was concluded that WhatsApp is a more user-friendly interface compared to other social media platforms, in light of social cohesion. From a general outlook, the study participants did not hold mixed reactions

regarding the adaptability, language and ease of WhatsApp usage as critical features presented by the network to the users. On this basis, the platform's adaptability, language and ease of use was another perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.2.4 User-generated content

The study further established that user-generated content was another opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. The study findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that WhatsApp users not only engage in the consumption of content on these platforms, but they also participate in the production aspect of content in their respective networks. For instance, it was noted that WhatsApp as a social network supports an inclusive, interactive and effective communication in a sense that all the group members do participate by sharing their opinions in various communities of interest. In support, Kaddu and Mukasa (2016) shed more light on the above views as they argued that social media platforms have democratized the space for citizen engagement and participation. Similarly, Hamann (2012, p. 5)'s observation reaffirms the above argument by submitting that social media "has brought democracy to the rest of the world and played a significant role in sustaining audience participation and engagement." Specifically, the idea is that media democratisation has been promoted by WhatsApp usage as the network offers a convenient and potential marketplace of ideas in the various communities of interest, thereby promoting social cohesion among users.

The study findings from FGDs also praised WhatsApp as a viable platform for social engagement and participation, which promotes social cohesion. For instance, it was revealed that users can share their own opinions on WhatsApp, as well as seeing or following those of others. This contributes to the effectiveness of these platforms in building and strengthening unity among different networks. It was also established that these digital networks bear a characteristic that promotes social cohesion as they open up opportunities for people to discuss issues through what was called "digital bimeezas", unlike the "physical bimeezas" in the past. This, in a sense has promoted social cohesion. The finding is in line with Cordeiro's (2012) observation that the discovery of social media has among other things, created a non-traditional, dynamic and participative audience. In the context of gate keeping, Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) reason that the news stories which get into the media go through a gate

keeping process during which news editors assess their newsworthiness using news values. This is not the case with WhatsApp usage as the news gates have no control to sieve out any kind of information shared in the respective groups. In this regard, Hallahan (2006) has concluded that the absence of a gate-keeping role through use of social media permits anyone to share his/ her opinion(s), which eventually spread into the mainstream media. Actually, Wilding et al. (2018, p. 1) submitted that "... the consumption, distribution and production of news have altered fundamentally. Digital platforms provide a point of access to news – a function formerly performed by media companies." This view is in line with that of Belair-Gagnon et al. (2016) that in many media houses, chat apps such as WhatsApp are largely used in the coverage of any breaking news event. They commended WhatsApp in enabling the news consumers who upload footages captured as eyewitnesses (Ibid).

Reinforcing the above position, the African Media Barometer (AMB 2022, p. 65) noted that "the media often pick up several issues on social media and run stories that provide context and details. The media make sure to fact-check the stories. Legacy media has accepted that they do not break the news". Further, this view is consistent with the study findings as it was established that there is cross-pollination between social media and legacy media as the two feed off each other. For instance, Dodds (2019) stated that WhatsApp has become an important tool for journalists as it enables them to create new, more informal relationships with their sources and also promote new levels of mutuality and camaraderie among journalists. Therefore, digital platforms (WhatsApp in particular) can now be regarded as key tools within the broader framework for news media, as they influence their agenda.

Form the theoretical underpinning of the study, Kakooza (2018, p. 58) emphasised that "these connections have been explained by the social network theory that highlights the process through which content shared on social media platforms is received, and how feedback is registered through interactions with the message and the message senders." For Cherny (1999), this interactive social structure eases cohesion, unity, shared history and close relationships, with social actors participating and bringing into the network new values and interests as defined within this changing social structure.

However, the study revealed that WhatsApp has a disadvantage of facilitating a process where people withdraw into what sometimes we call echo-chambers; whereby you go into a WhatsApp group of like-minded people, and then you lock yourself out of other groups

where there might be more diverse opinions and more diverse perceptions of social issues. The line of argument in this study pertaining to creation of echo chambers through WhatsApp usage manifests in the Tech Policy Press (2023)'s observation that social media can present negative effects, such as the spread of false information and the creation of echo chambers. The prevailing idea is that people often join WhatsApp groups with like-minded people, and then close themselves off from other (would-be) meaningful social discourses. Overall, user-generated content was another perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.2.5 Security, safety and privacy of users

The other perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage relates to security, safety and privacy of users. The study findings established that WhatsApp users are guaranteed protection and safety of their conversations. For instance, study findings from the FGDs noted that as an affordance, WhatsApp supports end-to-end encryption of chats or messages among users. Additionally, as a comparative advantage, private messaging is a critical feature supported or offered by the network to the users. These findings are congruent with Boulos et al. (2019)'s assertion that WhatsApp also facilitates group communication and the application initiated end-to-end encryption in 2016 to protect user privacy. In agreement, the end-to-end encryption of WhatsApp restricts people other than the sender and receiver to read or access what is sent (Pang and Ting Woo, 2020). Further, it was revealed that some specific conversations are not appropriate for the larger public domain or networks. Therefore, this presents WhatsApp as an appropriate tool for private reasons, which strengthens social ties in the respective networks.

In a related development, study findings from the in-depth interviews found out that WhatsApp maintains the user-to-user end calls and this works to keep network hacking at a peripheral level. Further, it was concluded that WhatsApp provides safety and security of the user's conversation. As Santos and Faure (2018) suggested, the end-to-end encryption seems to adequately address concerns about security and privacy of WhatsApp users. The implication of this is that WhatsApp is perceived as a more secure and safe digital space for user engagement, participation, and mobilization purposes, among others. Actually, Brandtzaeg and Lüders (2018) have highlighted that the perception of WhatsApp as a safe and secure space may also have been influenced by the issue of context collapse in more

open and public social networks like Facebook and X, where multiple publics and networks are flattened into a single context. Because these networks expose users to multiple audiences, users may find it hard to engage with all of these different audiences at the same time. This limits users' ability to have open and meaningful conversations on key issues, driving them to move these conversations to smaller group chats on messaging apps like WhatsApp instead (Ibid). From the foregoing arguments, the underlying view is that the security, safety and privacy of users is another perceived opportunity presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

This study further explored the perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. These are explored in the next section.

5.3 Perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district

5.3.1 Limited digital literacy

The study findings established that there are some challenges which are associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. For instance, the study findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that digital illiteracy is one of the major obstacles to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. As Jenkins (2009) noted, digital literacy is the ability to effectively and critically navigate, evaluate and create information using various digital technologies. On the contrary, the study revealed that many WhatsApp users do not have adequate skills to package messages appropriately for various consumers in their networks, and most importantly, they lack digital media ethics. The general view is that low digital literacy, besides other factors, is a critical challenge for social media usage. Specifically, the scholarship infers that effective WhatsApp usage is associated with several challenges, particularly low digital literacy of the users. Reinforcing the above arguments, it was noted that for effective WhatsApp usage, one of the ways is to help people to be digital literate and their consumption of media, thus media and digital literacy are very important. Therefore, the idea of people being digitally literate is critical.

In respect to the existing digital divide, the in-depth interview findings stressed that Uganda is experiencing increased connectivity and Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) is driving inclusion to close the digital divides, hence access to WhatsApp will become higher

because of inclusivity. Meanwhile, from the FGDs, the study established that there is limited digital literacy levels in Uganda, for instance, some WhatsApp users misuse emojis without knowing what they're communicating. Stickers do action, but they are wrongly used much of the time. In agreement, the FGD findings further found out that many WhatsApp users are not tech-savvy. This means violations and abuse of other people's rights is a common occurrence. On a positive note, UNESCO (2016) showed that in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), a growing number of young people are getting more digital literate than it had been 50 years ago, which means that most of them will continue to be tech-savvy. In the context of young people and WhatsApp usage, this raises more hope in harnessing the potential of this network, particularly in promoting social cohesion.

From a general outlook, low digital literacy levels in the country present a strong limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.3.2 Misinformation, disinformation and fake news

The second perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage is misinformation, disinformation and fake news. For instance, the study findings from the in-depth interviews found out that generally social media really amplifies harmful information at a rate which is very difficult to deal with, where users share things without checking their correctness. The findings are supported by Philips and Young (2009, p. 91) who observed that oftentimes, "most social media networks carry untruths, half-truths, hype and extravagant claims that become reputation time bombs" in the changing communication environment.

Meanwhile, Allcot and Gentzkow (2017) stated that some sites are entirely established to share intentionally fabricated and misleading stories especially where aliases are used, hence creating potentials for infringement on individual privacy as well as encouraging libelous acts. Further, while social media use may broadly be associated with more diverse news diets (Yang et al., 2020) and, engagement and expression (Boulianne, 2019), they are also associated with a host of challenges, including attempts to artificially shape the public agenda (Vargo et al., 2018), spread disinformation (Grinberg et al., 2019), exposure to falsehoods on WhatsApp (Ahad and Lim, 2014), WhatsApp being weaponised (Aizenkot and Kashy-Rosenbaum, 2018), and computerised propaganda (Woolley and Howard, 2019). The above literature is in line with the study findings from the FGDs which further revealed that there is existence of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, distorted and biased, misleading

information on online platforms. Actually, it was assumed that there is more fake news than accurate information on these sites, which compromises the credibility of information on WhatsApp.

While there has been anecdotal evidence of WhatsApp playing a central role in social cohesion and relationship building, negative effects of WhatsApp have also been recognised (Aizenkot and Kashy-Rosenbaum, 2018). This means that distortions, misinformation, disinformation and unverified information are common features perceived to pose a challenge to WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. This is true given that majority of the FGD participants admitted that existence of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation on WhatsApp is assumed to compromise the whole idea of social cohesion among users due to limited trust on shared content. On a positive outlook, the study's findings revealed that some of this is quality/positive and useful information for the users. Generally, all the above are a pointer to the fact that misinformation, disinformation and fake news present a strong limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.3.3 Restrictions on social media usage

The third perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage relates to restrictions on social media usage. While exploring the challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Uganda, FGD participants noted that the existence of restrictive regulatory frameworks, like Computer Misuse Act (2022, amended), Anti-pornography Act (2014), and many others suffocate the right to freedom of public expression through this network. Consistent with this study finding, the AMB (2022) report observed that the country had just passed the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Bill 2022 which criminalises various uses of computers and digital technologies and largely stifles the right to online freedom of expression. In agreement, among the many rights violated worldwide during the past 17 consecutive years, Neuberger et al. (2023) emphasised that freedom of expression and media freedom seem to have declined more than any other right. They added that many autocratic regimes have introduced repressive laws to the online sphere and adopted invasive technologies to monitor digital communication (Ibid). Further, in view of censorship, Alina (2020) noted that:

Authoritarian governments and pseudo-democratic ones have reacted and continue to react by censoring such social media platforms... The fear of

apprehension has made users publish content under pseudonyms or use social media in a manner that is not for political engagement (Alina, 2020, p. 29).

All these seem to stifle online freedom of expression, particularly WhatsApp usage, which consequently hinders the platform's potential in fostering social cohesion in Uganda.

Further, the study revealed that the government often clumps down social media during the election period. For instance, Mugerwa (2016) observes that during the 2016 Presidential elections, UCC imposed a ban on social media usage for three days as Ugandans were voting. However, several people still managed to bypass the blockade through virtual private networks (VPNs), which view is also shared by Kalinaki (2016). On his part, Musisi (2016) argued that the reason cited by government was an apparent threat to public order and safety paused by social media. Likewise, Kawuma (2017) observed that UCC blocked the usage of social media during the opposition-led civil protests dubbed, walk-to-work in the aftermath of the 2011 Presidential elections in Uganda. This was after Dr. KiizaBesigye utilized social media platforms to communicate schedules for walk-to-work protests while his supporters both within and outside the country used these platforms for political communication and sharing updates. On this basis, AMB (2022) noted that several governments have also sought to control digital media by shutting it or slowing it down, or simply removing content inconvenient to the government. These closures were evident in the 2021 Presidential elections as social media (particularly, WhatsApp, Facebook and X) was shut down by the government two days ahead of the Presidential elections over national security concerns (Ibid). However, the ban on these platforms was lifted after the General elections. Additionally, Chibita and Ugangu (2017, p. 252) reasoned that on several occasions, "regulation and control of social media has been justified on the basis of countering terrorism, shutting out political opponents and dissenting voices, fighting pornography and guarding against cybercrime". Overall, these government restrictions do not work to strengthen, but rather weaken established social ties, cohesion and networked relationships among social media users.

From this reasoning, findings from the in-depth interviews have suggested that there should be adoption of some well-intentioned policies which will work not to stifle but promote exercise of the right to freedom of speech and expression for social media users, for cohesion to flourish. From the perspective of social media regulation, while responding to the question of what regulations are in place for the use of social media in Uganda, it was revealed that

there are no stand-alone laws or regulations that specifically address social media usage. However, within existing laws, there are sections of different laws that have been adopted for regulating social media. For example, the UCC Act (2013) has context to do with regulating broadcasting and content standards.

By and large, restrictions on social media usage pose a challenge to WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.3.4 Network challenges

The fourth perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage relates to network challenges. Findings from the FGDs revealed that the low internet penetration in the country affects the use of WhatsApp in an attempt to promote social cohesion. The FGD participants decried the unstable network experienced almost on a daily basis while using social media (WhatsApp). This corresponds with the UCC (2018, p. 34) report observed that the internet penetration levels are still very low with only about 39% of the Ugandan population having access to the Internet. It was also established that WhatsApp users usually experience recurrent network loss and geographical location matters a lot in the country. For example, the network is quite stable in Kampala and very faint elsewhere, and actually worse for Lyka Mobile users. In line with this finding, Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo (2013, p. 407) observed that internet penetration remains low in Africa and “it is mainly concentrated in the urban centres.....” As a platform, Awada (2016) and Boulos et al. (2016) reasoned that WhatsApp enables the users to be connected whenever and wherever as long as they have access to the Internet. Consequently, the use and effectiveness of WhatsApp to promote social cohesion is compromised by the unstable and limited internet infrastructure.

In a related development, it was further noted that network challenges do hinder the country’s social media landscape, unlike in the Western world. Sometimes WhatsApp users have to restart their phones in search for network to share videos and other content. Further, from the perspective of in-depth interviews, it was observed that there is relatively low connectivity as a reason of low Internet fiber in the country. In addition, this requires some reasonable investment by government, private sector and other development agencies to address this concern. However, Kakooza (2018, p. 33) contended that among other factors, the rising number of social media users is credited to “the improved internet connectivity and the seamless acquisition of Internet enabled mobile digital devices.” This implies that the social

media infrastructure in the country has expanded as a reason of growing Internet connectivity. This in turn, has enhanced the use of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion among established networks.

All in all, network challenges pose a strong limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.3.5 Cost dynamics

The other perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage relates to cost dynamics. The study findings from the FGDs established that generally the cost of data communication is relatively high and data bundles tend to deplete so fast. The FGD participants submitted that Over The Top Services (OTT) tax is now included on the data bundles they buy. It is quite high and they lack WiFi, which is a necessity in the developed countries. They added that most of them can only access WiFi at their workplaces, and are often offline when they go home. On the contrary, Wakabi (2016, p. 18) noted that the subsidised costs of social network usage is believed to be “boosting the citizen’s interest in democratic affairs and enabling formerly excluded communities to engage with others”. In the context of news reporting, Nsubuga (2020, p. 20) reaffirmed this position by maintaining that social networks (like WhatsApp) are cheaper digital tools that allow smaller media competitors to emulate the feats news reporting in immediate and timely manner and further help to reduce the space constraints. In view of this literature, the relatively lower cost of data bundles seems to enhance WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion among users.

Further, the FGD participants reaffirmed this position by noting that data is very important for them to connect to others. Previously, they were using Short Message Service (SMS) before the invention of social media, which were assumed to be quite cost effective compared to social media. In agreement, in spite of the promising Internet and mobile phone landscape in Uganda, Jørgensen (2010, p. 13) highlighted that “there are still a number of challenges including limited Internet penetration, high costs of access, poor telecommunications infrastructure, the inconsistent quality of service....” In particular, high costs of Internet access seems to compromise the potential of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. However, from the theoretical framework of the study, Castells (1996) established that the structure of a network can both enable and constrain social action. In the context of this study, the findings are consistent with part of Castells’ view by affirming that

as a social network, WhatsApp usage is associated with some challenges. These have a strong bearing in respect to promotion of social cohesion among users.

Similarly, the study findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that despite removal of OTT tax, the cost of data bundles and utilisation still remains high, and the bundles get depleted quickly. In this respect, a number of study participants observed that regulators should come out and determine the cost of data which is manageable, and also address the quick depletion of data through utilisation. Meanwhile, Pinto and Mansfield (2012) observed that falling costs of smart phones and data have increased reach and access to social media. Actually, Dodds (2019) made a valid proclamation that the large number of mobile smart-phone users globally, along with affordability of mobile data has made it possible for many people to use WhatsApp throughout the world. This literature seems to suggest that social media networks (particularly WhatsApp) are quite ubiquitous, affordable and offer platforms for audience engagement and strengthening social ties among established networks.

By and large, the cost of internet poses a limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in respect to promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

5.3.6 Scamming, hacking and privacy breaches

The other perceived challenge associated with WhatsApp usage relates to scamming, hacking and privacy breaches. The study findings affirmed this position. For instance, the study findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that WhatsApp is a convenient avenue for scamming and fraud activities where various users have been victims without their knowledge, which challenges the notion of cohesion. Consistent with this finding, the UCC (2015, p. 15) report noted that there are often “complaints on issues such as fraud, counterfeit phones and privacy and data protection issues.” Findings from the FGDs also pointed to the same problem. It was noted that there is a lot of cyber crime on WhatsApp. For instance, someone sends you a link for a promotion and when you click on it; they can always access your information or defraud you of your money. In light of the above, the FGD participants concluded that WhatsApp should always first scrutinise whether or not the shared links are authentic, thus hyper-text protocol transfer should be a concern by developers.

Further, it was established that there also exists cases of invasion of privacy via WhatsApp. Consistent with the above position, Bullock (2018) established that there are increasing

numbers of privacy breaches, thefts and commercial misuse associated with use of social media. Over all, González-Bailón and Lelkes (2023)'s study to examine whether or not social media undermines social cohesion concluded that there exists some potential drawbacks and challenges of social media, which view is consistent with the findings of this study.

In this regard, the study's findings revealed that scamming, hacking and privacy breaches pose a major barrier to WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

This chapter has discussed the findings from the FGDs and responses from in-depth interviews conducted. This chapter has related the findings of the study to the literature review and the theoretical framework. The next chapter provides the summary, conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.0 Introduction

The previous chapter has discussed the study's findings while linking them to relevant literature, and also drew on insights from the theoretical framework. This chapter comprises a summary of the findings, conclusions and recommendations, and suggests other related areas for further research.

6.1 Summary of major findings

This study set out to explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district. The study's findings are presented and discussed in relation to the study's research questions outlined in Chapter 1.4 as:

1. How does the public perceive WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district?
2. What opportunities have been presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district?
3. What challenges are associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district?

6.1.1 Public perception of WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district

The findings from both the in-depth interviews and FGDs established that there have been several ways through which the public perceives WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district. These include: public sphere, social mobilisation tool, and source of information. From this understanding, WhatsApp is an appropriate public sphere or arena that brings together people to deliberate on various issues, a vehicle to mobilise others for social causes and, a valuable resource in disseminating information among various users. This in turn fosters social cohesion among users in Kampala district.

6.1.2 The perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district

The study's findings established that WhatsApp usage presents various opportunities in the promotion of social cohesion, especially among the users in Kampala district. These include:

instant messaging, multi-media capability, adaptability, language and ease of use, user-generated content, and security, safety and privacy of users. On the whole, the study's findings established that there are some perceived opportunities presented by WhatsApp usage in promoting social cohesion in Kampala district.

6.1.3 Perceived challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district

At the start of the study, the researcher's interest was to explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district. From the data presented and the results discussed for this research, WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district is associated with a host of challenges. The challenges are many, including: limited digital literacy, misinformation, disinformation and fake news, restrictions on social media usage, network challenges, cost dynamics, and scamming, hacking and privacy breaches. From a general outlook, these factors present a strong limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district.

6.2 Conclusions

Based on the study's findings, the public perceives WhatsApp as an effective and convenient public sphere or online space which has promoted the idea of communities of interest in space to achieve particular goals. Through these virtual communities, there is a sense of togetherness and strengthening of social ties. Through its social mobilisation role, WhatsApp has also proved to be a viable platform with the potential to mobilise and bring people together to realise particular goals. This in turn fosters social cohesion among users in Kampala district. Further, as presented in chapter four, the public perceives WhatsApp as a reliable source of information on various issues, which empowers users to make informed choices about a range of issues. This also implies that WhatsApp has the capacity to shape public opinion/perception of issues among users in various networks. From the above, the network has worked to promote social cohesion among users in Kampala district.

Additionally, the opportunities associated with WhatsApp usage in light of social cohesion point at the efficacy of this social network across different demographics. For instance,

WhatsApp is accessible by a wide socio-economic class within the country, whether the young or old, those with low education background, rich or poor, and the like. From this, the study brings to light a clear way to partly explain the dominance of this network and its future evolution in facilitating relationship building cohesion in Uganda. In addition, it is evident that the growing internet penetration in the country has also played a critical role in expanding the social media infrastructure and usage. This means that there is a growing digitised population, particularly using WhatsApp in the promotion of social cohesion.

However, the potential of WhatsApp to effectively promote social cohesion among various users in Uganda has been restricted by a couple of factors including, but not limited to; limited digital literacy, misinformation, disinformation and fake news, restrictions on social media usage, network challenges, cost dynamics, and scamming, hacking and privacy breaches, and many more. These need to be addressed so as to harness the potential of WhatsApp usage in promotion of social cohesion among users, particularly in Kampala district, and Uganda in general. This means that a wider population could benefit from WhatsApp usage to establish and strengthen social ties in Kampala district and beyond.

In respect to young people, WhatsApp is very critical in promoting social cohesion among this category since they were assumed to be the majority social media users. Therefore, this is an appropriate tool which creates a sense of togetherness and strengthening of social ties among young users. From this reasoning, normally WhatsApp messages are largely designed to appeal to the young people who are majority social media users in Uganda. This is presumed to greatly affect social cohesion, particularly among the users in Kampala and Uganda in general.

6.3 Recommendations

This sub-chapter gives possible ways or strategies on how WhatsApp can effectively be used to enhance social cohesion in Uganda, basing on the study's findings. Below are the recommendations to:

6.3.1 Media regulator

This research recommends that the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) ought to expand, but not to suffocate space for exercise of the right to freedom of expression (particularly, the right to freedom of public expression) through adopting well-intentioned

policies on social media usage. This will empower users to effectively harness the potential of WhatsApp in the promotion of social cohesion in the country. For instance, one of the male FGD participants noted that “the existence of restrictive regulatory frameworks, like Computer Misuse Act (2022, amended), Anti-pornography Act (2014), and many others suffocate the right to freedom of public expression through this network” (*FGD 1*). Further, as an autonomous entity, UCC should not have any external leanings or influence, particularly from the ruling party in execution of their duties. For instance, clamp down of social media, particularly before, during and after the General elections. In this regard, people will build more trust in WhatsApp usage for social cohesion in the country. Further, UCC should always embark on education and awareness campaigns regarding social media usage during General election campaigns in the country.

6.3.2 Government

Further, the study recommends that the government should actively work towards expanding the internet infrastructure almost in the entire country to step up connectivity on these social networks, particularly WhatsApp. The study findings revealed the existence of recurrent network failures and slow internet connections in many parts of the country. This was perceived by the public as a major challenge for WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district. As this study suggests, the perceived opportunities presented through WhatsApp as a unique online public sphere, can effectively facilitate the promotion of social cohesion among users. Additionally, laws like the Computer Misuse Act (Amended 2022), Anti-pornography Act (2014), and many others, should be revised or deregulated not to stifle the right to freedom of speech and expression through the use of social media platforms. In this way, public participation and engagement, and media democratization will be upheld, safeguarded and guaranteed. Eventually, as a social network, WhatsApp usage will have a strong bearing on the whole idea of social cohesion in Uganda.

6.3.3 CSOs

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), like African Center for Media Excellence (ACME) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should also be encouraged to work towards promoting a more digitized population in particular and creating a digitally inclusive economy. For instance, this will empower people to increasingly rely on social media in Uganda, particularly WhatsApp for social cohesion, coupled with realisation of other goals.

Further, there is need to address the digital divide highlighted in the study findings where some segments of the population have not embraced or adopted digital technologies. In order to minimize these disparities, information, education and awareness campaigns on digital inclusivity should be prioritised targeting the non-digitised segments of society. These organisations are assumed to possess adequate resources to engage in such programmes, hence supplementing on government efforts. In this undertaking, strengthening the private-public partnership move to provide a favourable work and policy environment for CSOs/NGOs by the government is a critical aspect. This is true since previously the relationship between government and CSOs/NGOs have been sour, where the latter has suffered the former's wrath by being clumped down largely as a reason of threatening national security. To some CSOs/NGOs, sustainability challenges have frustrated their existence due to lack of funding from the sponsoring agencies or donors.

6.3.4 WhatsApp users

This research recommends that WhatsApp users should effectively harness the potential of this network in promoting social cohesion. To achieve this, there is dire need to become digital literate, particularly through acquiring multi-media skills so as to become more tech-savvy users. For instance, *Participant 1* noted that digital illiteracy is one of the major obstacles to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district, which view was also held by majority FGD participants. Thus, low digital literacy, besides other factors, is a critical challenge for social media usage in general. Further, this study is cognisant of the idea that people can no longer afford to ignore digital technologies in the current times. It is likely that we shall be seeing more sophisticated use of social media, including disinformation, fake news, misinformation, online privacy breaches and other cyber crimes.

6.4 Areas for further research

This study explored the public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district. This therefore means that there are other key areas that could be tackled or researched about in the same line. In other words, the scope of this study was limited to public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda.

Further inquiry may involve:

There is need to do a comparative study on how social media and traditional media enhance social cohesion in Uganda. The study findings revealed that both social media and traditional media feed-off each other, thus some kind of cross-pollination exists.

While the study focused on social cohesion, comparative studies should be done on how the public perceives WhatsApp usage in facilitating other causes, like: political, health and, environment communication.

An inquiry should also be done to investigate the affordances of other social media platforms in light of social cohesion in Uganda.

Another area of inquiry could be made on the digital divide and its effects on the public in regard to social cohesion in Uganda.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking part in this study and your input will add significant value in this research project. This research process forms part of my Master's thesis titled: "The Public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda", at Uganda Christian University. This study explores public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district.

Please be advised that you may choose not to participate in this research and should you wish to withdraw at a later stage, you have full right to do so and your action will not disadvantage you in anyway. Your participation in this research will be through participating in an unstructured interview or being part of a focus group. These will be arranged to bring the most minimal disruption in your daily schedule. There is no material or financial benefits attached to participating in this research and this is done on a volunteer basis. The information obtained will be treated as confidential and will be safely stored at Uganda Christian University.

Should you need further clarity on the matter explained above, or at any matter that is directly or indirectly associated with this research, please contact me or my supervisor.

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Your participation is much appreciated, thank you.

I, consent to participate.

Signature:

Appendix B (i): Interview Guide for Media scholar/ Social media expert/ IT expert

1. What social media platforms are most commonly used for social cohesion in Uganda?
2. Why are these more popular than others in light of social cohesion in Uganda?
3. In specific terms, how is WhatsApp used to promote social cohesion in Uganda?
4. As a communication tool, do you think WhatsApp is useful in promoting social cohesion in Uganda? Yes/No, explain reason for response.
5. Do you think the public appreciates WhatsApp as communication platforms for promoting social cohesion?
6. Generally, what opportunities do you think are associated with the use of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda?
7. In your opinion, what would be the best communication channels to be used in promoting social cohesion in Uganda?
8. What do you think are the gaps in the communication interventions you have mentioned?
9. What makes a communication channel/tool good, effective?
10. In your view, what challenges are associated with WhatsApp usage in Uganda?
11. What are the remedies for the above challenges?
12. In your opinion, what makes a communication channel/tool good, effective?
13. In your view, what is the future of WhatsApp usage as public space to enhance social cohesion in Uganda?
14. What would you generally recommend for WhatsApp usage by the public to effectively enhance social cohesion in Uganda?

Appendix B (ii): Interview Guide for Media regulator

1. What regulations are in place for the use of social media in Uganda?
2. Why are some social media platforms more dominant than others?
 - Probe to understand the most commonly used platforms in view of social cohesion in Uganda?
3. Specifically, how is WhatsApp used to promote social cohesion in Uganda?
4. In your view, do you think the public has embraced WhatsApp as a communication platform for promoting social cohesion?
5. What ethical concerns arise with social media, particularly WhatsApp usage in an effort to facilitate social cohesion in the country?
 - Probe for existence/efficacy of monitoring mechanisms, if any, in addressing these issues
6. How do you see the future of social media usage by the public in affecting social cohesion in Uganda?
7. In comparative terms, what opportunities have been presented by WhatsApp over other communication platforms in expanding public space for facilitating social cohesion?
8. In particular, what challenges are associated with WhatsApp usage in Uganda?
9. Over all, what challenges does UCC face in regulating social media usage in the country?
10. What are the possible remedies for these challenges?

Appendix B (iii): Interview Guide for CSO Official

1. What is your position in this organization?
2. For how long have you been working in this position?
3. What does your work entail?
4. What social media platforms are more dominant in Uganda? Why these?
5. In specific terms, how is WhatsApp used to promote social cohesion in Uganda?
 - Explore the effect it creates in terms of reach, building social ties, and others.
6. How satisfied/dissatisfied are you with the view that social media, particularly WhatsApp offer an effective public sphere for promotion of social cohesion among various stakeholders?
7. What other communication platforms do the public use to facilitate social cohesion in Uganda?
 - Probe if other communication channels are used, like mass media, printed materials like posters, interpersonal communication, and others
8. How appropriate/inappropriate are these platforms compared to social media (WhatsApp) usage in enhancing social cohesion in the country?
9. Overall, what challenges are associated with WhatsApp usage in Uganda?
10. How have these challenges been addressed?
11. What would you recommend generally on how social media can effectively enhance social cohesion in Uganda?
12. Please provide any other information you think is relevant to this study.

Appendix C: Focus Group Discussion guide for members of public

1. How often do you use social media?
 - Probe for motivation behind its use, ease of use, purpose, and others.
2. What social media platforms do you use most for social cohesion and interactions?
3. In very specific terms, how do you use WhatsApp to facilitate social cohesion amongst yourselves?
4. How do you evaluate the success of relationships and social networks established through WhatsApp usage?
 - Probe for strategies for sustainability, future of these social ties, and others
5. What other communication platforms have been used to enhance social cohesion in Uganda?
 - Probe if mass media is used; printed materials like, posters are used, e.t.c.
6. How appropriate are these platforms compared to the use of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in society?
7. How do you describe the use and role of WhatsApp as a communication tool for social cohesion?
8. Do you think WhatsApp is effective in facilitating social cohesion in society?
 - Explore its impact in terms of reach, strengthening social ties, and others.
9. In your opinion, what makes a communication channel good, effective?
10. What opportunities have been presented by WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion among users?
11. Overall, what in your view and from your experience are the key challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in Uganda? How do you deal with them?
12. What would you recommend generally to enhance social media (particularly, WhatsApp) in promoting social cohesion in Uganda?
13. Please provide any other information you think is relevant to this study.



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SCHOOL OF RESEARCH & POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

DISSERTATION CORRECTION COMPLIANCE REPORT BY THE CANDIDATE (POST VIVA FORM)

Date: 05/05/2025

Name of Candidate: STEVEN DUNSTAN BUSUULWA

Reg. No: RS22M54/003

Title of Dissertation: THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF WHATSAPP IN PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION IN UGANDA

SN	COMMENTS BY EXTERNAL EXAMINER	ACTION TAKEN	INDICATOR
1	Chapters 1 – 3 The document shared reads draft 2, I wonder whether this was the version for examination or	It was the right document, but poorly named. This has been rectified.	Not applicable.

<p>there was another one.</p>	<p>I found the abstract to include unnecessary details as seen in the tracked changes document. At this point the abstract should include an introduction and background, statement of the problem, method, key findings and recommendations if any. There are details not necessary in my opinion presented at the abstract. Not sure if the abstract should have paragraphs or a block, again that depends on the student handbook used.</p>	<p>The abstract has been revised/ formatted by providing only the relevant details, including; introduction and background, statement of the problem, theoretical framework, methods, key findings and recommendations.</p>	<p>See page x</p>
<p>There is a statement at the statement of the problem that require unpacking because of vague connotation it presents.’... the power is a major challenge to social media use’? What kind of power? Is this electricity or household power differentials?</p> <p>The study lacks justification for Kampala district and I think that is necessary. It is also important that reader is given the characteristics of Kampala district in terms of mobile phones penetration, access to internet and literacy levels or digital</p>	<p>This has been rectified and it reads: “power [electricity] is a major challenge to social media usage, followed by cyber bullying and online harassment from someone of the opposite sex, posting of inappropriate and upsetting information on the site...”</p> <p>As per the examiner’s observation, concrete justification for Kampala district has been provided as a way of providing more study context to the reader (in the background section). In very specific terms, the reader is given the characteristics of Kampala district in terms of mobile</p>	<p>This has been rectified and it reads: “power [electricity] is a major challenge to social media usage, followed by cyber bullying and online harassment from someone of the opposite sex, posting of inappropriate and upsetting information on the site...”</p> <p>As per the examiner’s observation, concrete justification for Kampala district has been provided as a way of providing more study context to the reader (in the background section). In very specific terms, the reader is given the characteristics of Kampala district in terms of mobile</p>	<p>See page 5</p> <p>This is addressed on pages 3 – 4.</p>

	literacy levels as part of the background information.	phones penetration, access to internet and digital literacy levels.	
	The term respondent is often used as a general term for any research, however leans more towards quantitative. The better term for qualitative research would be participants or interviewees. I would recommend these over respondents. Also use of informants instead when speaking about key individuals who would offer insights instead of respondents would go a long way.	As advised, the researcher has addressed this concern throughout the entire write-up. “Respondents” has been disregarded where it appeared, and the study used “participants or interviewees”	See pages 1 – 72.
2	Chapters 4 & 5 I found the presentation of data needing further clarity especially if one were to distinguish FGD1 from 2. For instance, reporting has been shown as FGD participant 1, 2 etc. so how does one distinguish one feedback of FGD 1(male) or FGD2 (female) only? Provide clarity around here for comprehension	This has been thoroughly addressed by showing which FGD 2 relates to Kawempe division, while FGD 1 relates to Kampala Central division. For instance, “.....one of the male FGD participants held in Kawempe division (<i>FGD 2</i>) explained...” Further, it should be remembered that each of these FGDs had a balanced sample, in light of gender. Altogether, 8 female participants and 8 male participants participated in the FGDs from the 2 divisions of Kampala	Corrected on pages 29 & 31.

<p>I would have loved to see the inference made by the author around the adaptability of language and how that contributes to social cohesion (see page 45). The author needs to make inference in most of the findings here to give the link to the subject matter which is the role of WhatsApp in social cohesion.</p>	<p>Central and Kawempe.</p> <p>The researcher has made logical conclusions regarding the study findings (particularly, Adaptability, language and ease of use), and these have been linked to the study focus.</p>	<p>See pages 29 – 66.</p>
<p>There is a useful finding around solidarity of some sorts , I wondered whether it is possible to form social cohesion for the wrong reasons? And who would define wrong from right? I am thinking of social capital building. (see your finding on pyramid schemes...)</p>	<p>One of the challenges associated with WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district relates to scamming, hacking and privacy breaches. Under this challenge, the examiner suggested unpacking this finding and relating it to social capital building. However, the researcher has instead observed ethics in report writing by reporting findings without making alterations. Secondly, adjusting this to suit the examiner’s interest would mean that the researcher is investigating areas outside the study scope.</p>	<p>See page 44.</p>
<p>I found the multi modal (multi-media capability) provisions of whatsAPP very useful opportunity</p>	<p>The study established that multi-media potential (capability) was one of the opportunities presented by WhatsApp in</p>	<p>See pages 34 – 35 & 53 –</p>

	<p>and wondered whether this research found that there was considerable use in this select group? Eg use of video to emphasize a written or texted message and the like and whether that enforced the social cohesion or not. Not sure I read that finding.</p> <p>The finding of techno-savvy or lack of it, the issue of digital literacy skills missing needed more finding backing. If this exists in raw data, I would say beef it up as it makes useful contribution looking into the future of digital divide, but also digital literacy studies in mobile communication studies.</p>	<p>promoting social cohesion in Kampala district (See Sub-section 4.2.2 & 5.2.2). For instance, <i>Participant 4</i> (under 4.2.2) noted that “WhatsApp has an advantage of flexibility in handling multi-media, handling texts, handling voice, handling video, handling image sharing.” This seems to be quite appealing to the audience members, and consequently fostering social cohesion among users.</p> <p>This finding on techno-savvy/digital literacy skills has been tightened by backing it up with more study findings. Generally, the study concluded that low digital literacy levels in the country present a strong limitation to effective WhatsApp usage in the promotion of social cohesion in Kampala district, with evidence from study findings and existing literature.</p>	<p>54.</p> <p>See pages 59 – 60.</p>
<p>3</p>	<p>Chapter 6 & References</p> <p>Certain recommendation needs a stronger backing from data eg one on regulations and freedom of expression. Please flesh up those bits of data so that when making recommendations, it is based on</p>	<p>The recommendations, particularly on regulations, and freedom of expression have been backed up with evidence from the data. For instance, one of the male FGD participants noted that “the existence of restrictive</p>	<p>Pages 70 & 71.</p>

	<p>solid data.</p> <p>References were okay and I take it that you are using APA style. However, go through them again to make sure none was left out.</p>	<p>regulatory frameworks, like Computer Misuse Act (2022, amended), Anti-pornography Act (2014), and many others suffocate the right to freedom of public expression through this network” (FGD 1) (See 6.3.1 Media Regulator)</p> <p>APA citation and referencing style was used in the study. Further, all in-text citations have corresponding references.</p>	<p>See pages 73 – 89.</p>
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SN	COMMENTS BY VIVA VOCE PANNEL	ACTION TAKEN	INDICATOR
1	<p>Social cohesion should be clearly linked to the study’s objectives and findings, and then further connected in the discussion section. Make sure to explain how it relates throughout the structure of the work.</p>	<p>Social cohesion was clearly linked to all the Chapters in the write-up. The purpose of the study was to explore public perception of the role of WhatsApp in promoting social cohesion in Uganda, using the case of Kampala district. This was well achieved.</p>	<p>See pages 1 – 72.</p>
2	<p>It’s also important to confirm whether the literature was thoroughly explored, including engagement with the updated version of the Public Sphere Theory.</p> <p>Since the focus of the study is on WhatsApp, it would be valuable to incorporate insights on the new public sphere, as well as the 50-state theory. This would help to demonstrate how the concept of the public sphere has evolved</p>	<p>Relevant literature was reviewed in an attempt to advance a meaningful discussion regarding the Public Sphere theory. However, both the study findings and past scholarship point to the fact that WhatsApp (as an online public sphere) has worked to promote social cohesion, and on the other hand weakened some existing social ties.</p> <p>From the perspective of the 50-State theory, the theory refers to the United States of America (USA), where each state’s citizens participate in the political process, influencing their state’s policies and, in turn influencing the national public sphere (Kovenock and Robertson, 2008). This means that both the public sphere and 50-</p>	<p>See pages 46 – 48.</p> <p>See page 48</p>

	adding depth to the ongoing academic debate.	State theory are related through the idea of public participation and the role of citizens in influencing government policies. The study's findings revealed that the public use WhatsApp as an appropriate public sphere or arena that brings together people to deliberate on various issues, which ultimately promotes social cohesion, among other purposes.	
3	Review and reference a paper by Herman Wasserman and other relevant scholars that relate to this topic to support your arguments.	A paper by Wasserman, H. (2003). The Internet, civil society and a Pan-African Public Sphere: Renaissance or Delusion? Paper presented at the CODESRIA 30 th – has been review to provide more insights into the public sphere discourse. Other relevant studies were also considered in furtherance of this discussion.	See page 48

STEVEN DUNSTAN BUSUULWA

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Candidate's Name

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Signature

DR. KAZIBWE SAMUEL (Ph.D)

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Supervisor's Name

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Signature