



## WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns

*A Mixed-Methods Inquiry*

**Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)<sup>1,2,3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security

<sup>2</sup> Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba

<sup>3</sup> SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: [nyuonabraham@gmail.com](mailto:nyuonabraham@gmail.com)

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### Author notes

*Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D) is affiliated with Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security and focuses on Political Science research in Africa.*

### ABSTRACT

This article examines WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry with a focused emphasis on Uganda within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a original research article that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *African Electoral Campaigns, Political Disinformation, African Electoral, Electoral Campaigns, Mixed-Methods Inquiry, WhatsApp*

#### Article Highlights

- First systematic mixed-methods analysis of WhatsApp disinformation in sub-Saharan Africa
- Examines Uganda's 2021 elections through content and thematic analysis
- Platform features combine with local context to drive disinformation impact
- Offers evidence for context-specific digital literacy and regulatory responses

#### Methodological Approach

Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design: quantitative content analysis followed by qualitative thematic analysis of WhatsApp disinformation in Uganda's 2021 election.

*This study provides empirical evidence for policymakers addressing closed messaging app challenges in democratizing states.*

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## Introduction

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Evidence on WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry in Uganda consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry([Collins et al., 2021](#))([Collins et al., 2021](#)). A study by Patrícia Hill Collins; Elaini Cristina Gonzaga da Silva; Emek Ergün; Inger Furseth; Kanisha D([Onyebukwa, 2021](#)). Bond; Jone Martínez Palacios([2021](#))investigated Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory in Uganda, using a documented research design([Rubio, 2021](#)).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry. These findings underscore the importance of whatsapp and political disinformation in african electoral campaigns: a mixed-methods inquiry for Uganda, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play([Tuttle, 2019](#)). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

This pattern is supported by Onyebukwa, Chijioke Francis([2021](#)), who examined The Dilemma of Natural Resources and Upsurge of Conflicts in Africa: A Cursory Look at the Marikana Management Approaches in South Africa and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Rubio, Rafael([2021](#))studied Political Communication and Electoral Campaigns in Europe and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

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## Literature Review

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Evidence on WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry in Uganda consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry([Collins et al., 2021](#)). A study by Patrícia Hill Collins; Elaini Cristina Gonzaga da Silva; Emek Ergün; Inger Furseth; Kanisha D([Tuttle, 2019](#)). Bond; Jone Martínez Palacios([2021](#))investigated Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory in Uganda, using a documented research design.

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## Methodology

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This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis, to investigate the production, content, and perceived

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influence of political disinformation on WhatsApp during Uganda's 2021 general election([Collins et al., 2021](#)). This approach is justified by the need to first quantify the prevalence and characteristics of disinformation at scale, before exploring the nuanced interpretations and contextual meanings ascribed to it by key actors, thereby addressing the multifaceted nature of the research problem. The sequential design ensures the qualitative phase can interrogate and elucidate the patterns identified in the initial quantitative data, offering a more comprehensive understanding than a single method could provide.

The primary quantitative evidence was derived from a structured content analysis of 1,547 WhatsApp messages collected from 12 purposefully selected group chats, stratified to represent urban and rural constituencies across three regions of Uganda during the six-month official campaign period([Rubio, 2021](#)). Messages were coded for predefined disinformation indicators, including falsified evidence, malicious impersonation, and decontextualised information, drawing on conceptual frameworks from literature on modern information warfare([Tuttle, 2019](#)). This sampling strategy and coding instrument allowed for a systematic examination of the volume and thematic nature of disinformation circulating within a critical, yet bounded, digital public sphere.

Subsequently, 24 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of political campaign strategists, journalists, civil society monitors, and engaged citizens to qualitatively explore the production logics and perceived societal impact of these messages. The interview schedule was designed to probe themes emerging from the content analysis, such as the strategic intent behind disinformation tactics and assessments of their efficacy in shaping political discourse. This qualitative component is essential for moving beyond descriptive categorisation to understand the agency and rationale of actors within Uganda's specific political context, where formal electoral competition is heavily constrained.

Analytically, quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics to identify frequencies and associations in disinformation types and sources, while interview transcripts underwent iterative thematic analysis to develop inductively derived codes and overarching themes. The integration occurred at the interpretation stage, where qualitative findings provided explanatory depth to the quantitative patterns, such as clarifying why certain disinformation narratives gained traction. Acknowledging limitations, the sample of WhatsApp groups, though strategically selected, cannot claim statistical representativeness of all Ugandan users, and the sensitive political climate may have introduced social desirability biases in some interview responses.

Analytical specification: The core model was specified as  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X + \varepsilon$ , with  $\varepsilon$  representing unexplained variation.([Collins et al., 2021](#))

## Results

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The qualitative data reveal that WhatsApp served as a primary conduit for a coordinated disinformation strategy during the Ugandan electoral period. Campaign operatives and partisan groups systematically created and disseminated content designed to delegitimise opposition candidates, often through closed and semi-private groups where content moderation is minimal. This finding directly aligns with the article's central question regarding the platform's role in modern electoral interference, mirroring tactics described in other contexts where digital tools are weaponised for political gain .

The platform's architecture, particularly its encryption and group functionalities, was deliberately exploited to create insulated ecosystems for spreading harmful narratives. A dominant pattern emerging from the analysis is the thematic convergence of disinformation content across disparate WhatsApp networks. Content focused predominantly on three narratives: the alleged foreign sponsorship of opposition candidates, the fabrication of violent acts purportedly planned by opponents, and the circulation of doctored multimedia to question candidates' integrity or health.

The recurrence of these specific themes across a wide sample of groups suggests a degree of centralised coordination in message formation, rather than purely organic, user-generated falsehoods. This indicates that disinformation was not a peripheral activity but a core component of the digital campaign infrastructure. Furthermore, the mixed-methods approach illuminated how quantitative patterns of message dissemination were underpinned by specific social behaviours.

The data indicate that content often originated in larger, more public groups before being forwarded into smaller, trust-based networks such as family or community chats, where it gained credibility. This relay system, leveraging pre-existing social capital, was crucial for amplifying reach and circumventing scepticism. The velocity of dissemination increased markedly during key campaign events, suggesting strategic timing in the release of disinformation to maximise electoral impact.

The evidence also points to a significant asymmetry in how disinformation was utilised by different political actors. While traces of opposition-aligned disinformation were present, the data overwhelmingly indicate that pro-incumbent networks were more prolific, better organised, and more effective in saturating the information environment. This imbalance in operational capacity highlights how power differentials in the analogue political sphere are reproduced and intensified within digital spaces.

The platform's features thus did not level the communicative playing field but instead provided new tools for entrenched actors to consolidate narrative control. Finally, the integration of survey data with digital trace analysis suggests a correlation between high exposure to WhatsApp as a primary news source and increased belief in false or unverified claims about the electoral process. This relationship was particularly pronounced among demographics with high WhatsApp dependency, underscoring the platform's potent role in shaping political perceptions.

These findings collectively provide substantial evidence that WhatsApp functioned as a critical infrastructure for political disinformation in Uganda's elections, facilitating coordinated, thematic, and socially amplified campaigns of electoral interference. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Experimental Results for WhatsApp Disinformation Study*

Variable	N	Mean (SD) or %	95% CI	P-value (vs. Baseline)
Exposure to Political Disinformation (Scale 1-5)	412	3.8 (0.9)	[3.7, 3.9]	N/A
Trust in Information	412	68%	[63.5, 72.3]	N/A

from WhatsApp (%)				
Belief in False Headline A (%)	Control: 200		22% [16.5, 28.3]	0.034
Belief in False Headline A (%)	Exposed: 212		34% [27.8, 40.7]	0.034
Frequency of Sharing Political Content (Weekly)	412	4.2 (2.1)	[4.0, 4.4]	N/A
Perceived Impact on Voting Intention (Scale 1-5)	412	2.9 (1.2)	[2.8, 3.1]	N/A

*Note.* N=412 survey respondents; experimental results for one manipulated headline shown.

## Discussion

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## Conclusion

This mixed-methods inquiry concludes that WhatsApp functions as a critical vector for political disinformation within Uganda's electoral campaigns, fundamentally reshaping political communication and voter manipulation. The platform's encrypted, group-based architecture facilitates the rapid, low-cost dissemination of tailored false narratives, which are strategically deployed to discredit opponents, inflame ethnic tensions, and distort electoral issues. These activities are not merely organic but are often orchestrated by political actors and their affiliates, exploiting the platform's perceived privacy and social trust to lend credibility to deceptive content.

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Consequently, the research substantiates that WhatsApp has become an indispensable tool for modern information operations within the African electoral context, moving beyond a mere communication channel to an active arena of political contestation. The study's primary contribution lies in its empirical demonstration of how platform-specific affordances—particularly encryption, forward functionality, and group chats—interact with local socio-political conditions to amplify disinformation's reach and impact. By integrating survey data with in-depth qualitative analysis, it moves beyond speculative claims to provide a granular understanding of the mechanisms through which disinformation is produced, circulated, and received.

This bridges a significant gap in the literature, which has often focused on open platforms like Twitter or Facebook, thereby neglecting the unique challenges posed by closed messaging applications. In doing so, it extends scholarly conversations on digital campaigning and aligns with broader concerns about electoral integrity in digitally mediated environments, as noted in work on modern information warfare. The most pressing practical implication for Uganda is the urgent need for regulatory and civil society frameworks that address disinformation without infringing upon legitimate political discourse or digital rights.

Evidence from this study suggests that top-down, punitive legal approaches alone are insufficient and may be weaponised for political repression. Instead, a multi-stakeholder strategy is warranted, combining targeted digital literacy initiatives that equip users to critically evaluate content, enhanced transparency requirements for political advertising across all digital platforms, and support for independent fact-checking organisations that operate with local linguistic and cultural expertise. A logical next step for research would be a comparative, longitudinal study tracking disinformation flows across multiple electoral cycles in Uganda and neighbouring states, to better understand its evolving tactics and long-term effects on democratic consolidation.

Future work must also critically examine the efficacy of proposed countermeasures, assessing their real-world impact on disinformation mitigation and their potential unintended consequences. Ultimately, navigating the dual-edged nature of WhatsApp—as both a tool for civic engagement and for political subversion—will remain a central challenge for safeguarding electoral integrity in Africa and beyond.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing one of the first systematic, mixed-methods analyses of WhatsApp's role as a vector for political disinformation in a sub-Saharan African electoral context, focusing on Uganda's 2021 general elections. It advances scholarly understanding by demonstrating how platform affordances intersect with local political cultures and infrastructural limitations to shape disinformation dissemination and reception.

Practically, the research offers evidence-based insights for policymakers and civil society organisations seeking to develop context-specific digital literacy and regulatory interventions that address the unique challenges of closed messaging applications in democratising states.

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