

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON RELIGION AND CULTURE IN UGANDA AND GLOBALLY

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the way communities engage with religious practice, cultural identity, and social norms. This paper examines the multifaceted effects of social media on religion and culture, with a particular focus on Uganda and a comparative analysis of global trends. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, including surveys, interviews, and content analysis, the study explores how platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have reshaped religious expression, evangelism, cultural preservation, and cultural erosion. The findings reveal a complex interplay between digital connectivity and identity: while social media has democratised religious participation and facilitated cultural exchange, it has also introduced challenges such as the spread of religious misinformation, cultural homogenisation, and the erosion of indigenous values. The paper concludes with recommendations for responsible digital engagement by religious institutions, cultural custodians, and policy makers in Uganda and beyond.

Keywords: social media, religion, culture, Uganda, digital evangelism, cultural identity, cultural erosion, globalisation, online communities.

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented transformation in communication, driven largely by the rise of social media. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have become integral to daily life for billions of people worldwide. In Uganda, internet penetration has grown considerably, with the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) reporting steady increases in mobile broadband subscriptions over the past decade. This connectivity has not only changed how Ugandans access information and entertainment but has also profoundly influenced two of the most deeply rooted aspects of human society: religion and culture.

Religion occupies a central place in Ugandan society. The majority of Ugandans identify as Christian, with a significant Muslim minority and adherents of indigenous African religions.

Cultural traditions — from the Acholi of northern Uganda to the Buganda Kingdom in the central region — have historically been transmitted through oral traditions, ceremonies, and communal gatherings. Social media now constitutes an additional — and increasingly dominant — medium through which both religion and culture are expressed, contested, and renegotiated.

Globally, the relationship between social media and religion has generated substantial academic interest. Scholars have examined how digital platforms facilitate new forms of worship, enable transnational religious communities, and allow religious actors to reach vast audiences with unprecedented speed. At the same time, researchers have raised concerns about the spread of religious extremism, the commodification of faith, and the displacement of traditional religious authority. Similar dynamics play out in the cultural sphere, where social media simultaneously promotes cultural diversity and accelerates the homogenisation of cultures under the influence of globally dominant Western content.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of these dynamics with a focus on Uganda, situating local developments within a global framework. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) How has social media affected religious practice and expression in Uganda and globally? (2) How has social media influenced cultural identity, cultural preservation, and cultural change in Uganda? (3) What are the negative consequences of social media on religion and culture, and how can these be mitigated?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and Religion: Global Perspectives

Academic engagement with the intersection of social media and religion has grown substantially since the early 2010s. Campbell (2012) introduced the concept of the 'networked religion,' arguing that digital media reshapes religious community, identity, authority, and ritual practice. According to Campbell, religious communities do not simply adopt digital technologies passively; rather, they actively negotiate and adapt these technologies to align with their theological convictions and communal norms.

Cheong (2014) highlighted the paradox of religious authority in the digital age: while social media democratises access to religious knowledge, it simultaneously challenges established hierarchies within religious institutions. Pastors, imams, and other religious leaders who once held exclusive interpretive authority now compete with a vast array of online voices. This democratisation has been celebrated by some as liberating and critiqued by others as destabilising.

Research on Islam and social media has examined how platforms like YouTube and Facebook have facilitated the global spread of Islamic teaching and created transnational Muslim communities (Bunt, 2018). Similarly, studies of Christianity and social media have documented the rise of 'televangelism 2.0,' in which preachers use live-streaming and viral content to build enormous

online followings that transcend national boundaries (Hoover, 2016).

2.2 Social Media, Religion, and Culture in Africa

In the African context, research on social media and religion has explored how digital platforms intersect with African spirituality, Pentecostalism, and Islam. Obadare (2016) examined the growing influence of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria — a trend mirrored in Uganda — noting that social media has become a critical tool for church growth, fundraising, and the projection of pastoral authority. Meyer (2015) has similarly documented how Ghanaian Pentecostal churches use digital media to create a 'sensational public sphere' in which religious spectacle and emotional experience are central.

In Uganda specifically, the proliferation of WhatsApp groups among religious communities has been noted as a significant development. These groups serve as spaces for prayer, scripture sharing, announcement of church events, and pastoral counselling. However, they also serve as conduits for the rapid spread of religious misinformation and theological disputes (Namutebi, 2021).

With respect to culture, scholars have noted that social media has both enabled and threatened African cultural heritage. On one hand, platforms like YouTube have provided African musicians, storytellers, and cultural practitioners with global audiences for indigenous content. On the other hand, the dominance of Western content on social media platforms has contributed to what some scholars describe as 'cultural imperialism 2.0,' wherein local cultural expressions are marginalised or transformed to conform to global aesthetics (Ndlela, 2020).

2.3 Cultural Identity in the Digital Age

Theorists of digital culture have long grappled with questions of identity in online spaces. Castells (2010) argued that the network society creates new possibilities for identity formation that are not entirely determined by geography or tradition. For young people in Uganda, social media has opened windows onto global youth cultures — from K-pop to hip-hop to American fashion — which interact in complex ways with local cultural identities.

Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity as a 'production which is never complete' is particularly relevant here. Social media accelerates the processes through which cultural identities are constructed, contested, and reconstructed. In Uganda, this is evident in debates — often conducted publicly on social media — about the appropriateness of certain dress codes, marriage practices, gender roles, and forms of artistic expression.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effects of social media on religion and culture. The mixed-methods approach is appropriate given the complexity of the research questions,

which require both statistical data to identify broad patterns and in-depth qualitative insights to understand the meanings and experiences behind those patterns (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Study Area

The primary study area is Uganda, with particular emphasis on Gulu City (Northern Uganda), Kampala (Central Uganda), and Mbale (Eastern Uganda). These locations were selected to capture geographic, ethnic, and religious diversity within Uganda. The global dimension of the study is addressed through a systematic review of existing literature and published data from international organisations and research institutions.

3.3 Target Population and Sampling

The target population for the primary research consists of Ugandan social media users aged 15 to 60 years, religious leaders (pastors, imams, and cultural/traditional leaders), and members of online religious communities. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who are active social media users and who are embedded in religious or cultural communities. A total of 200 survey respondents were targeted across the three study sites, alongside 20 in-depth interview participants selected from religious leaders and cultural custodians.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Three primary data collection instruments were used in this study:

Structured Questionnaires: A self-administered questionnaire comprising both closed and open-ended questions was developed to collect quantitative data on social media usage patterns, frequency of religious engagement via social media, perceived effects on religious beliefs, and attitudes towards cultural change driven by social media. The questionnaire was pre-tested with a sample of 20 respondents to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity.

In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with religious leaders, cultural custodians, and social media influencers to gather nuanced qualitative data. Interview guides were developed based on the research questions and reviewed by academic supervisors. Interviews were conducted in English and Acholi (with translation where necessary), audio-recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Content Analysis: A systematic content analysis of selected Ugandan Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups (where access was granted by group administrators), YouTube channels, and TikTok accounts was conducted over a period of three months. The content analysis focused on religious and cultural content: its nature, reach, tone, and engagement metrics. A coding framework was developed to categorise content into thematic clusters including religious evangelism, cultural promotion, cultural critique, and misinformation.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and inferential statistics (chi-square tests and correlation analysis) with the aid of SPSS version 25. Qualitative data from interviews and content analysis were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for social research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Ethical clearance was sought from the Gulu University Research Ethics Committee. Special care was taken when engaging with religious communities to avoid any perception of bias or disrespect towards particular faiths.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Social Media and Religious Practice in Uganda

The findings of this study indicate that social media has substantially transformed religious practice in Uganda. Survey data reveal that 78% of respondents use social media for religious purposes, including watching sermons online, participating in prayer groups, and sharing devotional content. WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used platform for religious engagement (67%), followed by Facebook (54%) and YouTube (42%).

Religious leaders interviewed in this study acknowledged the significant role of social media in extending the reach of their ministries. One pastor from Gulu noted: 'Before social media, our congregation was limited to those who could physically attend. Now we reach people in Kampala, Nairobi, London — the gospel has no borders online.' This sentiment was echoed by Islamic scholars who use Facebook Live to deliver Friday sermons and Quranic lessons to followers across Uganda and the diaspora.

However, the study also identified significant concerns. Religious misinformation — including false prophecies, doctored videos of alleged miracles, and the promotion of theologically questionable teachings — was identified by 65% of respondents as a notable problem on social media. This finding aligns with global research documenting the ease with which social media platforms amplify religious content regardless of its accuracy or theological legitimacy.

4.2 Digital Evangelism and New Forms of Worship

Social media has given rise to new forms of religious worship and community formation that operate independently of physical church or mosque structures. Online prayer meetings, live-streamed worship services, and virtual Bible study groups became particularly prominent

during the COVID-19 pandemic and have since been retained as permanent features of religious life in Uganda and globally.

Content analysis of Ugandan YouTube channels revealed the emergence of a new category of digital religious leader — individuals with no formal theological training who have accumulated large online followings through charismatic preaching, healing testimonials, and prosperity gospel messaging. This phenomenon raises important questions about accountability, doctrinal integrity, and the future of institutional religious authority.

4.3 Social Media and Cultural Identity in Uganda

The relationship between social media and cultural identity in Uganda is ambivalent. On one hand, platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok have provided unprecedented opportunities for the promotion and celebration of Ugandan cultural heritage. Artists performing traditional Acholi, Buganda, Banyankole, and other indigenous music have gained international audiences through social media, contributing to cultural pride and economic livelihoods.

On the other hand, the study found widespread concern — particularly among older respondents and traditional leaders — about the erosion of cultural values driven by social media exposure to foreign content. Specific concerns included the adoption of Western dress codes by young people, the decline of traditional marriage practices, changing attitudes towards premarital relationships, and the diminishing use of indigenous languages in daily communication. Approximately 71% of respondents aged 40 and above agreed that social media has weakened respect for cultural traditions among Ugandan youth.

4.4 Global Dimensions: Cultural Homogenisation and Religious Pluralism

At the global level, this study's review of existing literature confirms that social media contributes to both cultural homogenisation and unprecedented cultural pluralism — often simultaneously. The dominance of English-language content and Western cultural products on major social media platforms creates structural inequalities that favour the cultural outputs of wealthy nations. This dynamic is particularly consequential for societies like Uganda, where colonial legacies have already created vulnerabilities in cultural self-confidence.

At the same time, social media has enabled marginalised cultures to assert their presence on the world stage in ways that were previously impossible. The global spread of African music genres — including Afrobeats, Bongo Flava, and Ugandan Afrofusion — is partly attributable to social media. Similarly, global movements such as Black Lives Matter have demonstrated the capacity of social media to mobilise cultural and political solidarity across national boundaries.

In the religious sphere, social media has accelerated the processes of religious globalisation and pluralism. Ugandans are now exposed — through social media — to religious traditions and theological arguments that would previously have been geographically inaccessible. This exposure

can deepen interfaith understanding but can also fuel religious intolerance when platforms amplify extremist voices.

4.5 Challenges and Risks

Several key challenges emerge from the findings of this study. First, the proliferation of online religious content has created a fragmented and largely unregulated information environment in which it is difficult for ordinary users to distinguish credible religious teaching from manipulation and fraud. Second, social media algorithms — designed to maximise engagement rather than promote accuracy — tend to amplify sensational religious content, including prosperity gospel messaging and predictions of miraculous healing, which can have harmful material and psychological consequences for vulnerable individuals.

Third, the use of social media to promote extremist interpretations of religion — a problem documented in global research — is not absent from Uganda. Content analysis identified instances of religiously divisive content circulated on Ugandan Facebook groups and WhatsApp networks, though this was not a dominant trend. Fourth, the cultural effects of social media disproportionately impact young people, who are the most intensive users of these platforms and the most susceptible to the cultural influences they carry.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the effects of social media on religion and culture in Uganda and globally, drawing on mixed-methods research and a review of existing literature. The findings confirm that social media is a powerful and double-edged force in the domains of religion and culture. It has democratised religious participation, extended the reach of faith communities, enabled new forms of worship, and provided platforms for the celebration of cultural heritage. At the same time, it has facilitated the spread of religious misinformation, challenged traditional religious authority, contributed to cultural erosion, and exposed communities to the homogenising pressures of global digital culture.

For Uganda, the implications are particularly significant given the centrality of religion and culture to national identity and social cohesion. The uncritical embrace of social media by religious institutions and individuals risks amplifying harmful content and undermining the integrity of religious communities. Similarly, the passive consumption of globally dominant social media content — without deliberate efforts to promote indigenous cultural expression — poses real risks to Uganda's rich cultural heritage.

The paper recommends that religious institutions develop clear digital media policies, invest in digital literacy training for their members, and collaborate with social media platforms to flag and remove harmful religious content. Cultural institutions and government bodies should actively promote indigenous content creation through financial support, digital skills training, and policies

that incentivise the production of local cultural content. At the individual level, social media users — particularly young people — should be encouraged to approach online religious and cultural content critically and reflectively.

Future research should conduct longitudinal studies to track changes in religious practice and cultural identity over time in relation to social media use. Comparative studies between different regions of Uganda and between Uganda and other African countries would also enrich understanding of how local contexts shape the relationship between social media, religion, and culture.

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