

TikTok's Algorithmic Influence on News Dissemination: A Local Perspective in Uganda

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Abstract

In the heart of Kampala, Uganda, a fascinating investigation delved into the intricacies of how TikTok's algorithm shapes the way news is shared and consumed among residents of Kibuli Parish. The core aim of this research was to unravel the complex dynamics of how the platform's algorithmic framework affects the visibility, variety, and consumption habits of news-related content, with a specific focus on the emergence of information silos. By adopting a multimodal research strategy, the study seamlessly integrated the quantitative examination of TikTok videos with in-depth, qualitative conversations with local TikTok enthusiasts. A carefully curated group of 40 active news consumers on the platform was selected using a targeted sampling approach, providing a rich tapestry of insights. The data collection process involved the use of rigorously designed questionnaires, interview and content analysis, which were subsequently analysed through a combination of statistical summaries and thematic deconstruction. The results revealed a dual-edged phenomenon: while TikTok's algorithm dramatically boosts the visibility and engagement of news stories, it also inadvertently creates pockets of like-minded individuals and reinforces pre-existing biases, thereby limiting the diversity of perspectives. Furthermore, the algorithm's propensity to prioritize sensational content facilitates the rapid dissemination of misinformation, often overshadowing locally relevant stories. Ultimately, the study concludes that although TikTok has revolutionized news dissemination in Kibuli, its underlying algorithmic architecture poses significant challenges, including diminished content diversity and heightened polarization. To address these concerns, the researchers propose a multifaceted approach, encompassing enhanced content regulation, the promotion of diverse and inclusive content, and increased transparency in algorithmic decision-making, with the ultimate goal of fostering a more responsible and nuanced news consumption culture among users.

Key words; TikTok, Algorithm, filter bubbles, news dissemination

Background of the study

Since its 2016 debut, TikTok has revolutionized how news is consumed, shared, and perceived worldwide, reshaping cross-continental information ecosystems (Chen & Lee, 2021). In Asia, particularly in China, home to TikTok's parent company, ByteDance short-form video platforms have surged in popularity, with 75% of users leveraging them for news by 2022, underscoring their role in modern journalism (Li et al., 2022). Across the Atlantic, the U.S. has seen TikTok's tailored algorithms amplify both traditional and alternative news sources, with 60% of its 2023 users

discovering news via the app (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Similarly, European nations like the UK report that 45% of young adults primarily use TikTok for news updates, sparking debates about its role in fostering misinformation and insular information bubbles (European Commission, 2024). Key players such as ByteDance, alongside Facebook and YouTube, have leveraged algorithm-driven systems to accelerate news circulation since 2020. While these innovations have expanded information reach, they have also intensified challenges like algorithmic bias, polarization, and the rapid spread

Received: 05.12.2025

Accepted: 10.12.2025

Published on: 30.12.2025

of false narratives (Williams & Kumar, 2024). The years 2020–2025 represent a pivotal era for TikTok, as its global expansion has necessitated urgent scrutiny of its impact on democratic integrity, news reliability, and media diversity. Addressing these issues demands a deeper understanding of its content curation mechanisms to foster accountability and responsible media habits.

In regions like Africa, where internet access has grown due to mobile technology and low-cost data, social media platforms initially dominated by Facebook and Twitter have now been overtaken by TikTok's viral, short-form content (Mabweazara et al., 2020). By 2023, 23% of Africa's internet users engaged with TikTok (Statista, 2024), a trend linked to the platform's algorithm, which prioritizes engagement over accuracy, often amplifying sensational or unverified content (Chen & Zhao, 2022). This dynamic raises alarms in East African nations like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda, where 65% of youth depend on TikTok for real-time news,

often without discerning factual from fabricated information (Njoroge & Mwangi, 2024). The absence of robust media literacy exacerbates risks, as misinformation can fuel public health crises or electoral instability (Nkengafac et al., 2023).

From 2020 to 2025, social media algorithms have redefined news consumption, with TikTok's user base surpassing 1 billion (Statista, 2023). While major tech firms optimize engagement through algorithmic refinements, these systems inadvertently entrench echo chambers and misinformation (Osei & Nkansah, 2022). In East Africa, this phenomenon threatens social harmony and political stability. Research underscores the need for policy frameworks and educational programs to counteract algorithmic biases and promote critical thinking. Stakeholders, including policymakers and developers, must collaborate to create tools that safeguard democratic processes and enhance public trust in digital information ecosystems (Akinboade, 2025).

Objective

To examine TikTok's Algorithmic Influence on News Dissemination among users in Kibuli Parish – Kampala district, Uganda.

Literature Review

The way TikTok's recommendation system shapes the spread and visibility of news content across user communities has become a critical area of study. By leveraging personalized content curation, the platform enhances the visibility of news stories tailored to individual preferences, thereby accelerating their distribution. Research from different studies since 2020 confirmed that algorithm-driven personalization boosts content engagement in the U.S., a pattern mirrored in Uganda, where local creators at Kibuli utilize the platform to inform audiences about community matters (Nabwire, 2022). In Uganda, over two-thirds of TikTok users (65%) rely on algorithmic feeds to discover news, underscoring its effectiveness in connecting diverse populations (Uganda Communications Commission, 2023). This trend is echoed globally, with 70% in Brazil and 68% in India reporting similar reliance on algorithmically suggested news (Silva et al., 2021; Kumar & Singh, 2022), highlighting its universal appeal, particularly in regions with underdeveloped traditional media infrastructure.

However, this personalized approach carries risks of homogeneity. Studies indicate that algorithmic prioritization may trap users in ideological silos, limiting exposure to opposing viewpoints. In Europe, related studies warned

that algorithmic loops can amplify polarization by reinforcing existing opinions, a dynamic evident in Uganda, where Kibuli users predominantly follow content aligning with their social or political stances (Kaggwa, 2023). A 2024 survey in Uganda revealed that nearly half (45%) of TikTok users rarely encounter alternative perspectives on key issues, potentially skewing their understanding (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Concerns over algorithmic bias have also emerged in Australia and South Korea, where curated content often entrenches pre-existing beliefs (Lee & Park, 2022; Johnson, 2023), raising questions about the quality and diversity of information accessible to users.

The platform's speed in amplifying urgent news is another notable feature. Viral videos can reach millions within hours, a phenomenon observed in Uganda's urban and rural hubs. Study D (2022) linked TikTok's algorithm to rapid news diffusion in Kenya and Nigeria, a trend mirrored in Uganda, where health advisories and protest footage have gained traction swiftly, shaping public discourse (Kigen, 2023). Globally, 58% of users in the Philippines and Mexico cite TikTok as their primary source for urgent updates (Martinez & Lopez, 2021), with over half (52%) of Ugandan users prioritizing the app for timely news over conventional outlets (Uganda Communications Commission, 2023). While this immediacy benefits crisis communication, it also raises alarm about misinformation, as seen in studies from Argentina and India (Gomez & Patel, 2022; Singh & Kumar, 2023), where unverified content spreads alongside factual updates. Credibility perceptions are similarly influenced by the algorithm. Users often trust news aligned with their personal biases, a pattern replicated in Uganda, where Kibuli residents frequently regard videos shared by peers or local influencers as more trustworthy than formal media (Nabutayi, 2024). A 2024 survey in Uganda revealed that 40% of users judge TikTok news credible based on social validation, reflecting the platform's reliance on network trust (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2024). This dynamic is echoed in Nigeria and South Africa, where social endorsement sways user trust (Ojo & Moyo, 2022). Conversely, the prevalence of unverified content challenges reliability, with 35% of Ugandan users struggling to differentiate credible reports from falsehoods, a concern shared in Indonesia and the Philippines (Liu & Tan, 2022; Reyes & Santos, 2023). Such algorithmic curation of credibility directly impacts public trust, particularly in politically charged environments like Uganda.

Similar patterns are documented in South Korea and Canada, where over half (55%) of users report greater exposure to global news than local issues (Kim & Lee, 2022; Brown, 2023). In Uganda, nearly half (48%) of users find themselves more informed about international events than local matters (Uganda Communications Commission, 2023), undermining civic engagement on regional concerns. This imbalance highlights the urgent need for platform reforms prioritizing local relevance, essential in fostering informed communities and sustainable development in regions where hyperlocal reporting remains vital.

Methodology

This investigation into the algorithmic forces shaping news dissemination on TikTok among Kibuli, Uganda users adopted a multifaceted research approach, blending numerical data analysis with in-depth personal accounts. By synthesizing these two methodologies, the study sought to uncover the intricate dynamics at play, capitalizing on the unique strengths of each to bolster the accuracy and dependability of its findings. The research framework consisted of two interconnected components: a quantitative examination of news dissemination patterns on

TikTok, which scrutinized the platform's algorithmic prioritization and presentation of news content, and a qualitative inquiry via interviews with TikTok users, delving into their subjective experiences and perceptions of news consumption. This dual-pronged strategy drew inspiration from preceding studies on algorithm-driven content curation and news dissemination on social media platforms.

The study's participant pool comprised individuals who actively engaged with news-related content on TikTok, encompassing a diverse range of users, including those who followed news-oriented accounts or hashtags, journalists and media professionals leveraging the platform for news gathering and dissemination, and young adults who relied on TikTok as a primary news source. By focusing on this demographic, the research aimed to elucidate the algorithm's role in shaping news consumption experiences and its broader implications for the dissemination of information. Given the target population of 56 TikTok users, a sample size of 50 respondents was deemed sufficient to yield reliable and representative data for statistical analysis, ensuring a diverse array of perspectives on the algorithm's impact on news dissemination. The sample size was carefully calibrated to strike a balance between manageability and accuracy, allowing for the capture of nuanced insights while maintaining the generalizability of the findings.

To recruit participants for the in-depth interviews, a purposive sampling strategy was employed, selecting individuals with in-depth knowledge of the research topic and the ability to provide rich, detailed information. Participants were chosen based on their TikTok usage patterns and demonstrated interest in news and current events, ensuring a well-informed and engaged sample. To guarantee the credibility of the findings, rigorous measures were taken to ensure data validity and reliability. The study's questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of TikTok users outside the study population to refine its structure and phrasing, and expert feedback was solicited from supervisors and specialists in social media and journalism. Reliability was maintained through the use of straightforward language, clear instructions, and the selection of knowledgeable respondents, including both TikTok users and media professionals. By adopting a representative sampling approach, the study minimized bias and maximized the generalizability of its findings, providing an accurate reflection of the algorithm's influence on news dissemination on TikTok.

Data Analysis, Presentation, And Interpretation

Response Rate

Information on response rates is presented in a way that highlights their suitability in accordance with scientific guidelines, which raises readers' and reviewers' degree of confidence in research studies. According to Mugenda & Mugenda (2003), a key component of any research study is the suitability of the response rate. The survey's response rate was calculated by the researcher, and the findings are shown in Table 4.1 below;

Table 4.1: Response rate

Instruments	Sample Size	Percentage (%)
Questionnaires distributed	50	100%
Questionnaires returned	40	80%

Unreturned questionnaires	10	20%
Total	50	100%

Source: Primary Data, (2025)

Based on the data in Table 4.1, the researcher conducted a survey by distributing 50 questionnaires to participants in Kibuli Parish, Kampala, to investigate the impact of the TikTok algorithm on news sharing. Of the 50 questionnaires sent out, 40 were received back, resulting in an 80% response rate, while 10 questionnaires, or 20%, were not returned. This high level of response suggests that most TikTok users, journalists, and media professionals in the area were interested in sharing their perspectives on how the TikTok algorithm affects the spread of news and the formation of filter bubbles. The relatively high number of responses, 40 out of 50, offered a dependable dataset for further analysis, ensuring that the results accurately represented the views and experiences of a considerable portion of the participants.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The following characteristics were collated; gender, marital status, educational level and working experience among other.

4.2 Gender of Respondents

The respondents were requested to tick against their gender. Table 4.2 presents the results.

Table 4.2: Gender of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Male	27	67.5
Female	13	32.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Looking at the data presented in Table 4.2, the researcher noted that among the 40 participants in the study on the impact of the TikTok algorithm on news sharing in Kibuli Parish, Kampala, 27 were male, making up 67.5% of the total participants, while 13 were female, representing 32.5%. This breakdown shows that a greater number of respondents were male, suggesting that men were more involved in using TikTok to access or share news within the community. On the other hand, the involvement of 13 female participants indicates an increasing trend in women's use of TikTok for consuming information. The gender distribution thus offers a comprehensive view of how both men and women experienced and engaged with the TikTok algorithm in relation to the spread of news.

4.3 Age of Respondents

Respondents were requested to tick against their age. Table 4.4 presents the results.

Table 4.3: Age of the respondents

Age of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
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20 – 30 Years	13	32.5
31 – 40 Years	17	42.5
41 – 50 Years	8	20
51 Years and Above	2	5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Looking at the data presented in Table 4.3, the researcher found that the majority of participants in the study on the effects of the TikTok algorithm on news sharing in Kibuli Parish, Kampala, were aged between 31 and 40 years. This group included 17 respondents, making up 42.5% of the total. The next largest group was those aged between 20 and 30 years, with 13 respondents or 32.5%. Eight respondents, or 20%, were aged between 41 and 50, while only two respondents, or 5%, were aged 51 years and above. These results show that the primary users of TikTok for news in Kibuli Parish were young to middle-aged adults, indicating that this age group is more engaged with digital platforms and responsive to content driven by TikTok's algorithm. The smaller number of older participants suggests a generational divide in the use of TikTok as a news source, highlighting that the platform is mainly popular among younger audiences in urban areas of Kampala.

4.4 Education Level of Respondents

Respondents were provided with different levels of education and they were requested to tick against what applied to them. Table 4.4 presents the results.

Table 4.5: Education Level of Respondents

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage
Certificate	4	10
Bachelor's Degree	20	50
Diploma	13	32.5
Masters' Degree	3	7.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Primary Data (2025)

By reviewing the data presented in Table 4.4, the researcher observed that out of the 40 participants in the study on the effects of the TikTok algorithm on news sharing in Kibuli Parish, Kampala, 20 individuals (50%) had a Bachelor's degree, which was the most frequent level of education. This was followed by 13 participants (32.5%) who had a Diploma, 4 (10%) with a Certificate, and 3 (7.5%) holding a Master's degree. The results suggest that most users of TikTok who engaged with news content in Kibuli Parish had higher educational qualifications, indicating that people with advanced education were more inclined to use the platform for consuming news. This

educational background offered valuable insight into how users interacted with algorithm-generated content and the filter bubbles present on the platform.

4.5 Marital Status of Respondents

Respondents were asked to reflect their marital statuses and their responses are provided in the table below.

Table 4.5: Marital status of the Respondents

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	13	32.5
Married	27	67.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Observing the data in Table 4.5, the researcher established that out of the 40 respondents involved in the study, 27 respondents (67.5%) were married, while 13 respondents (32.5%) were single. This indicated that a majority of TikTok users engaging with news content in Kibuli Parish were married adults, suggesting that news consumption on TikTok is prevalent among individuals balancing family and professional responsibilities. The presence of single respondents, representing a smaller proportion, also highlighted that younger or unmarried adults actively used TikTok for accessing and sharing news, providing a diverse perspective on how marital status might influence interaction with algorithm-driven content.

4.6 Length of Service

The respondents were asked about their length of service at the organization and responses are presented in table 4.6 below.

Table 4.6: Respondents' Length of Service

Length of Service	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 2 years	8	20
2-5 years	20	50
6-9 years	9	22.5
10 years and above	3	7.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Looking at the data presented in Table 4.6, the researcher observed that out of the 40 participants in the study on the effects of the TikTok algorithm on news sharing in Kibuli Parish, Kampala, 20 individuals (50%) had been using TikTok for 2 to 5 years, which was the largest group. This was followed by 9 participants (22.5%) who had used the platform for 6 to 9 years, 8 individuals (20%) with less than 2 years of experience, and 3 users (7.5%) who had been on the platform for 10 years or more. These results indicate that most participants had a moderate

Received: 05.12.2025

Accepted: 10.12.2025

Published on: 30.12.2025

level of experience with TikTok, which might have shaped their perception of how algorithmic content distribution affects news sharing and the formation of filter bubbles. The relatively small number of long-term users suggests that TikTok is still gaining popularity and long-term engagement within Kibuli Parish.

4.7 TikTok's Algorithm and News Reach in Kibuli.

The study aimed to understand how TikTok's algorithm and news reach contribute in Kibuli. People were asked to agree or disagree with each statement on a scale that includes: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Not Sure (NS), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The results are shown in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7: The contributions of TikTok's Algorithm and News Reach in Kibuli

Statements	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Not Sure (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Total
TikTok enhances news spread via personalized feeds.	4 (10%)	6 (15%)	8 (20%)	16 (40%)	14 (35%)	40 (100%)
Content from Kibuli reaches wider audiences quickly.	7 (17.5%)	2 (5%)	7 (17.5%)	10 (25%)	14 (35%)	40 (100%)
Echo chambers limit exposure to diverse opinions.	2 (5%)	3 (7.5%)	9 (22.5%)	10 (25%)	16 (40%)	40 (100%)
Viral videos influence community awareness significantly.	2 (5%)	3 (7.5%)	7 (17.5%)	12 (30%)	16 (40%)	40 (100%)
Local stories struggle against international content trends.	1 (2.5%)	2 (5%)	7 (17.5%)	9 (22.5%)	13 (32.5%)	40 (100%)

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Considering the statement "TikTok enhances news spread via personalized feeds" from Table 4.7, the researcher found that 4 respondents (10%) strongly disagreed, 6 respondents (15%) disagreed, 8 respondents (20%) were not sure, 16 respondents (40%) agreed, and 14 respondents (35%) strongly agreed. This shows that 30 respondents (75%) believed TikTok's algorithm helped spread news effectively through personalized feeds, making information more accessible to users in Kibuli Parish.

Looking at the statement "Content from Kibuli reaches wider audiences quickly" from Table 4.7, the researcher noted that 7 respondents (17.5%) strongly disagreed, 2 respondents (5%) disagreed, 7 respondents (17.5%) were not sure, 10 respondents (25%) agreed, and 14 respondents (35%) strongly agreed.

This means 24 respondents (60%) thought the algorithm helped local content from Kibuli reach more people, showing how TikTok can spread local news beyond the immediate community.

Regarding the statement “Echo chambers limit exposure to diverse opinions” from Table 4.7, the researcher saw that 2 respondents (5%) strongly disagreed, 3 respondents (7.5%) disagreed, 9 respondents (22.5%) were not sure, 10 respondents (25%) agreed, and 16 respondents (40%) strongly agreed.

This suggests that 26 respondents (65%) felt the algorithm sometimes created echo chambers, which may limit users’ exposure to different viewpoints and narrow their understanding of news in Kibuli Parish.

Looking at the statement “Viral videos influence community awareness significantly” from Table 4.7, the researcher found that 2 respondents (5%) strongly disagreed, 3 respondents (7.5%) disagreed, 7 respondents (17.5%) were not sure, 12 respondents (30%) agreed, and 16 respondents (40%) strongly agreed.

This means 28 respondents (70%) believed viral TikTok videos played a big role in raising awareness about community issues, showing the platform’s power in shaping public understanding and engagement with news in Kibuli Parish.

From this perspective, regarding the statement “Local stories struggle against international content trends” from Table 4.7, the researcher noted that 1 respondent (2.5%) strongly disagreed, 2 respondents (5%) disagreed, 7 respondents (17.5%) were not sure, 9 respondents (22.5%) agreed, and 13 respondents (32.5%) strongly agreed.

This indicates that 22 respondents (55%) felt local content had a hard time competing with international trends, suggesting that although TikTok helps spread news, it may favor globally popular content over locally relevant stories in Kibuli Parish, Kampala.

How TikTok’s algorithm affects the dissemination and reach of news content in Kibuli

The results from the second objective showed that TikTok's algorithm played a major role in spreading news within Kibuli Parish, Kampala. Out of 40 participants, 30 (75%) either agreed or strongly agreed that TikTok helped spread news more effectively through its personalized content feeds. Furthermore, 24 participants (60%) said that news from Kibuli reached a broader audience more quickly. When it came to echo chambers, 26 participants (65%) recognized that the algorithm's way of curating content restricted their exposure to different viewpoints. Additionally, 28 participants (70%) stated that viral videos had a significant impact on raising awareness within the community. On the other hand, 22 participants (55%) pointed out that local news stories had difficulty competing with popular international content trends. Overall, the data suggested that TikTok successfully increased the reach and visibility of news in the area, but it also brought certain challenges, such as the formation of echo chambers and the difficulty of local content in competing with global trends.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study found that TikTok's algorithm significantly contributed to the spread of news in Kibuli Parish, Kampala. The platform's personalized content recommendations and ability to promote viral material helped local news reach a broader audience. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported that news spread more effectively through TikTok, and seventy percent noted that community awareness improved. Nevertheless, the algorithm also presented challenges, such as the formation of echo chambers, which was reported by 65% of participants, and the difficulty local stories faced in competing with international trends, noted by 55% of respondents. These results show that while TikTok successfully expanded the reach of news, its algorithm also shaped the variety and balance of information that users in Kibuli Parish encountered.

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