How Online Narratives Played Out on **Twitter Before, During and After** the 2021 Uganda Elections

May **2021**

CIPESA

Contents

Introduction

Uganda has an estimated 2.5 million social media users. Among the various social media platforms, Twitter, has come to have a strong influence and relevance on the country's political discourse.[1] Various studies have shown that Twitter data can provide useful information for tracking rapidly evolving public sentiments, measuring public interests and concerns, indicating real-time political narratives and how they change over time.[2] However, these studies are not without limitations as they only qualitatively perform manual coding of a very small number of tweets.

This research aimed to understand the perceptions and sentiments surrounding Twitter users' discourse and reactions in the lead up, during and after the 2021 Uganda Elections. Machine learning techniques were used to analyse approximately 2.2 million tweets (written mostly in English, Luganda and local colloquialisms) related to key hashtags collected between November 01, 2020 and January 31, 2021. Of over 1,800 civic, political or election related hashtags which were identified and tracked across the two months since the presidential nominations in early November 2020, 500 purposely selected hashtags were used as seed data for the research. Another batch of 500, 000 Tweets were collected from January 01 to January 31, 2021.

The perceptions and sentiments from this analysis evolved over time, driven by the interactions between offline and online events that happened between November 2020 and January 2021. The analysis examined the topics related to the tweets; the themes of these identified topics; and users' reactions.

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1 *Available at https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-uganda*
2 *https://jisajournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s13174-018-0089-0*

Investigation Methods

Research Design

An observational approach was used to select all the tweets contained in the defined hashtags related to Uganda's 2021 elections. Data preparation consisted of three steps: sampling/selection; data collection; and pre-processing. For sentiment analysis, Twitter data mining techniques were utilised to prepare and analyse data, alongside natural language processing methods to establish salient topics and terms within the hashtags.

 The unit of analysis was each message-level tweet posted on Twitter.

Sampling and Data Collection

Using "Uganda Elections 2021" as a key search term, the research selected over 500 trending hashtags, (including those with typos). Twitter's open application programming interface (API) was used to collect tweets published between November 01, 2020 to January 31, 2021.

The different hashtags were categorised to help guide affiliation. For instance, mention of a candidate's name hashtag e.g #Museveni, #Kyagulanyi or #Tumukunde was considered generic or neutral and could be used by either the opposition or ruling party. On the other hand, mention of #Vote4Kyagulanyi or #MuseveniMustLead was considered a representation of support for the specific candidate. The researchers classified several other hashtags as either driven from the opposition or the ruling party. For example, #Tweberemu or #WeAreRemovingaDictator were driven from the opposition while hashtags like #SecureYourFuture or #StopHooliganism were known to have been driven by pro-ruling party actors.

Twitter Scraping Data:

Making the Connection to Twitter API

Twitter's Streaming API was used to obtain perceptions and sentiment. The data, downloaded in JSON format, was parsed into an R or Python dictionary. The TwitteR library package in R Programming was used to access the Twitter API.[3]

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3   *Note that the researchers signed up for a Twitter developer account to access the API, as each user is provided with a unique set of consumer key, consumer secret key, access token, and access secret key. Through the Twitter API, requests for tweets were done by stating the search term.*

Analysis Methods Used

Data Analysis

"Topic modeling"[4] was applied to analyse and extract topics from the tweets extracted. This approach also helped with discovering the "abstracts/topics'' from a collection of text documents based on statistics of each word. A large collection of Uganda election related hashtagged tweets and identifying clusters of words were grouped together based on similarity and patterns in the clusters appearing in multitude.

It was then possible to identify topics within the set of tweet texts without any prior data manipulation. Topic modeling application allowed the discovery of the thematic structure in a large corpus of text, making it possible to organize, summarize, and visualize the latent themes and patterns present in any kind of text corpus.

Qualitative Analysis

Findings from unsupervised learning were contextualised to support deeper understanding into the dataset. This included labeling hashtags as "opposition" or "ruling", labeling the popular words and tweet topics, assigning meanings and themes to the topics, interpreting the themes and patterns identified from the tweets, and inductively developing themes for the latent topics generated by algorithms.

The qualitative approach relied on active monitoring of accounts and hashtags, while the diverse, in-depth interpretations from humans allowed for inductive, exploratory analysis, and the application of theoretical approaches.

Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis as a computational and natural language processing-based method was used to analyse Twitter users' sentiments, emotions, and attitudes in the datasets. This is an essential method in social media research because it helps guide or see varying sentiments, understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. In this case, from the pro-ruling, pro-opposition, and generic actors.

The sentiment analysis was based on a machine learning model for predicting emotions from English Tweets. This model classified each tweet into eight pairwise emotions derived from the NRC Sentiment and Emotion Lexicons,[5] namely joy-sadness, trust-disgust, fear-anger, and surprise-anticipation.

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[4] *A branch of unsupervised methodology for the natural processing language. Unsupervised learning algorithms were used for this analysis focussing specifically on the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). See more about LDA:*
https://www.google.com/url?q=https://monkeylearn.com/blog/introduction-to-topic-modeling/&sa=D&ust=1612011904374000&usg=AOvVaw18gtIZtoYA3F8ZAUhbBGpr
[5] *See more: http://saifmohammad.com/WebPages/NRC-Emotion-Lexicon.htm*

Investigation Highlights

General

1. **Of the over** 2 million hashtagged tweets analysed, the majority discussed the incumbent President Yoweri Museveni and Member of Parliament (MP) Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine. There was limited mention of the other nine candidates in the presidential race.
2. Over the period reviewed, there was a gradual shift in the nature of narratives that took place. The shift was often in tandem with offline events which were carried into online spaces. However, in some instances, online events also influenced both the online and offline narrative.
3. A key driver of the conversations and sentiments was events depicting increased levels of violence and intimidation meted out to large sections of the opposition, journalists, and civil society, with emotions centered around human rights and press freedom concerns.
4. In perhaps what could be considered a first, online activism and movement building in Uganda resulted in international corporate action - the cancellation by MTV Base of the MTV Africa Music Awards which were scheduled to take place in Uganda after the elections.

Emotions Driving Engagement

5. Top engagement topics were related to arrests, police brutality, campaigns, elections and violence. Trust, Fear, Anticipation and Anger were the top most emotions that were displayed by social media users in reference to the hashtags related to Uganda Elections 2021. Fear, anticipation and anger were mostly driven from the pro-opposition users behind hashtags like #FreeBobiWine and #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda.
   a. Restricted access to broadcast media by opposition candidates, and perceived double standards of enforcing Covid-19 restrictions by the police and electoral body against Bobi Wine and other opposition candidates contributed to the emotions of anger and fear that emerged in the hashtags.
   b. Engagements revolving around the arrests and jailing of Nigerian musicians Omah Lay (#FreeOmahLay) and Tems (#FreeTems) between December 13 and 17, the arrest of human rights lawyer Nicholas Opiyo on December 22 (#FreeNicholasOpio), the shooting at, repeated assaults and arrests of Bobi Wine's campaign team in December (#FreeBobiWine) led to huge spikes in hashtag usage and conversations.
6. Just before the elections, there was a drop in Trust and an increase in Fear, Sadness and Disgust which could be related to the social media and internet shutdowns.
7. After the elections, the emotion of Anticipation dropped.

Hashtag Tugs Of War

8. Pro- ruling party hashtags emphasised "securing the future", focusing on general safety of lives, property and businesses. The pro-opposition actors, especially those in support of Bobi Wine, pushed for more representative rule to include groups of marginalised, ethnic minorities, as well as job creation, in addition to advocating for the incumbents removal with hashtags like #WeAreRemovingADictator.
9. Hashtag wars ensued between pro and anti-regime accounts with the use of hashtags such as #StopHooliganism versus #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda. These wars introduced elements of disinformation with both sides using false and "out of context" imagery and content.
10. #JournalismIsNotACrime online narratives centred around the crackdown on media especially following assaults and blocks on journalists and activists covering Bobi Wine on his campaign trail. This was compounded with engagement following the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) request to Google to shut down primarily opposition-leaning Youtube channels; and the hacking of the opposition's (National Unity Party -NUP) Youtube channel, GhettoTV, Map Media and others. These events elicited negative sentiment online.

International Influence

11. Discussions around international relations and regional impact of elections were also witnessed as the human rights situation worsened in the country. Notably, proposed sanctions against Uganda's security leads, the appointment of Army generals from military interventions in neighbouring countries to lead security operations during elections and reports of continuous tensions with Rwanda, among others.

12. In the absence of a local (Ugandan) presence on Twitter following the social media shutdown and eventual internet shutdown, the international community and diaspora maintained online narratives – mostly in favour of the opposition.

Top Elections Hashtags on Ugandan Twittersphere

The elections-related hashtags that form part of Twitter narratives between November 2020 and January 2021 were mostly related to commentary on arrests, violence and police brutality. Very clear lines of narratives - in support of or against the ruling party or opposition - were buttressed by particular hashtags. These included:

Pro-Ruling Party

#securingyourfuture
#m7ugschoice
#stophooliganism
#votem72021

Opposition

#stoppolicebrutalityinuganda
#freebobiwine
#weareremovingadictator
#kyagulanyi4president
#stoppolicebruitalityinuganda

Neutral

#freeomahlay
#freetems
#nbsupdates
#ugvotes2021
#freetemsandomahlay
#nbspoliticom
#UGDecides21
#UgandaDecides2021

Affiliation of Hashtags

The clustering of the top 50 hashtags from the conversations across the months of November and December shows connections between related hashtags from the same grass root actors or close to one another. The strength of connections and association are evidenced by the size of the lines or strokes.

The clustering of hashtags as related topics or events across Uganda elections Twittersphere showed a very strong connection (based on the line size) between the pro ruling party hashtags like #M7nomination02nov #M7nomination #M7nominationday02nov and other hashtags like #securingyourfuture #M7ugschoice #M7ismypresident #bobisnotreadytolead #sevolution.

At the center, there was a strong pro-opposition cluster of hashtags like #weareremovingadictator #stoppolicbrutalityinuganda #bobiwine and #Kyagulanyi4president. While at the bottom, a strongly connected cluster around #FreeTems #FreeOmalay #EndSars #StopAttacksOnNgos that shows other closely related hashtags which were pushed by a combination of local actors and international actors including with links to the #EndSars Nigerian protest.
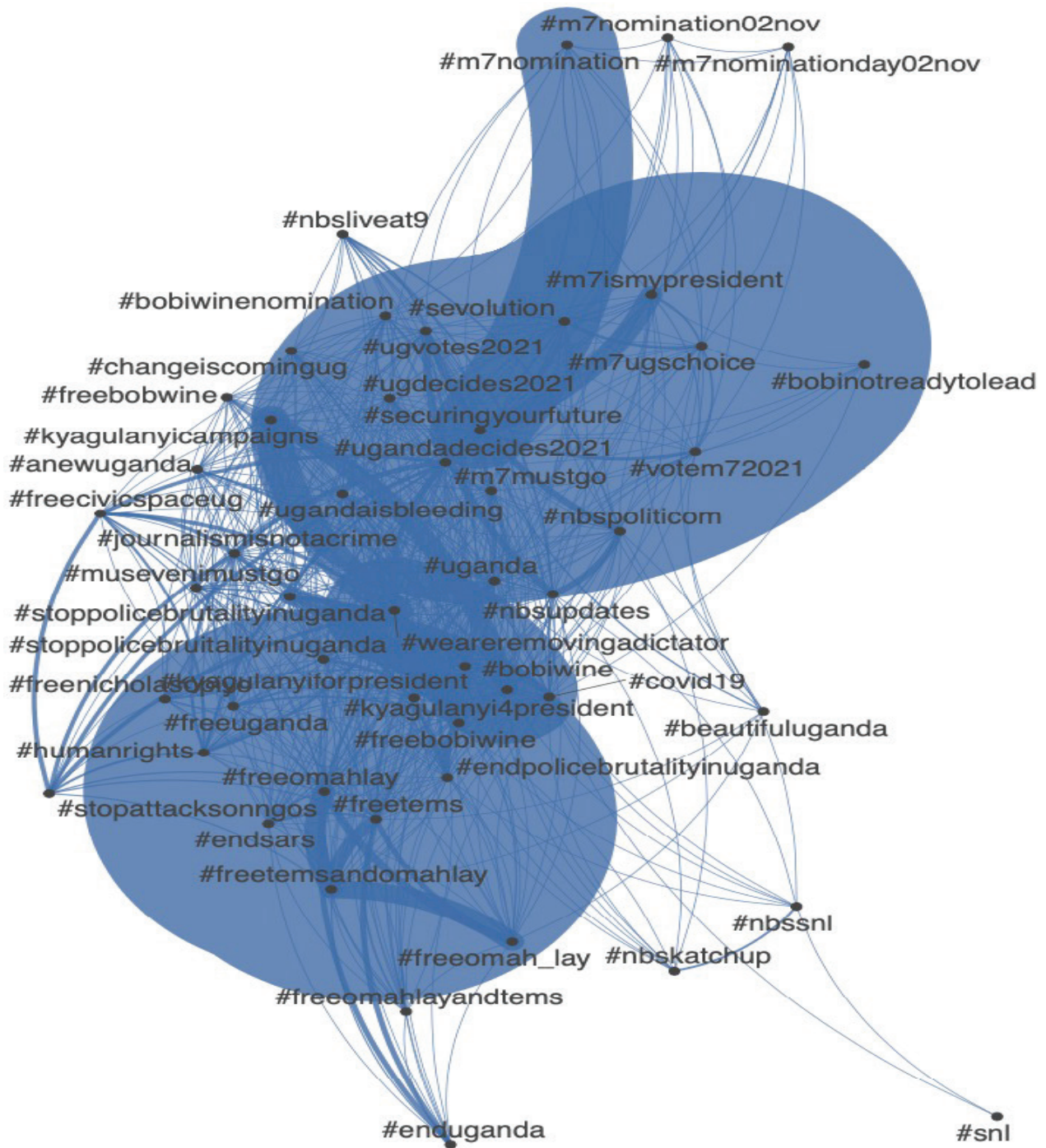
Image 1*: Affiliation of Hashtags*

Unlike the Uganda elections of 2016, most online commentary was fueled by individuals and activists than it was by media houses who amassed more engagement with their tweets and hashtags.

The Evolution of Narratives in the Lead up and Post the Uganda 2021 Elections

Although there were 11 presidential aspirants, election related online narratives were dominated by just two – then incumbent Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, head of the National Resistance Movement (NRM), and opposition leader of the National Unity Platform (NUP) Robert Kyagulanyi (Bobi Wine). While nearly all opposition candidates reported incidents of suppression or violence against them and their supporters by the Uganda Police Force and other government entities, most commentary often pitted NRM supporters against NUP supporters.

Unlike 2016 when media houses dominated narratives, more generic hashtags like #UgVotes2021 were used to sustain discussions around the elections. Some although media houses like NBS utilised #nbspoliticom and #nbsupdates which garnered considerable levels of engagement. While other media houses may have had their own hastags, they were not as engaged as seen with the #nbspoliticom hashtag.
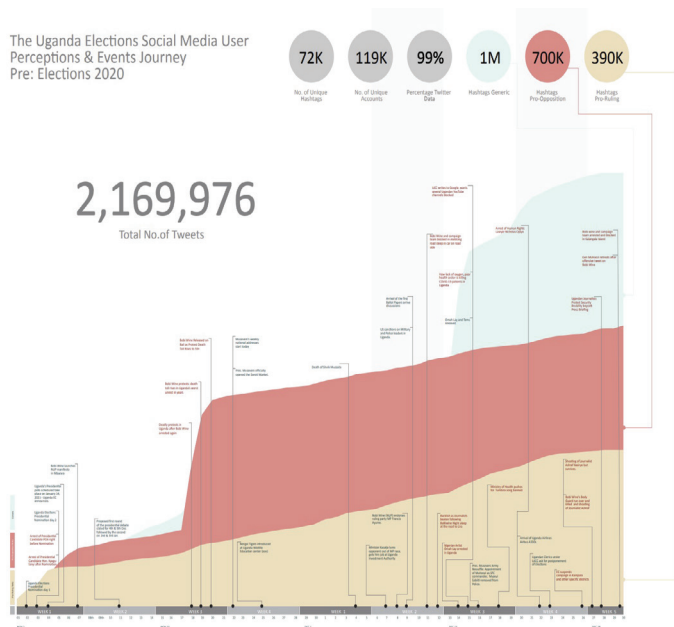

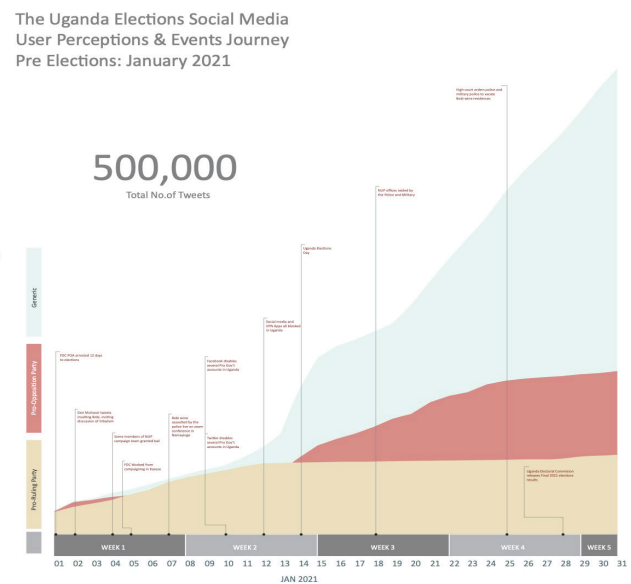*Image 2:* User perceptions pre-elections

Image 3: User perceptions during and post the elections

November
2020

In the lead up to the elections, pro-ruling party hashtags were dominant. This dramatically changed and set the tone for the rest of the narratives for the period studied when on November 2, Kyagulanyi and the head of the opposition party Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) Patrick Amuriat were arrested on presidential nomination day. The spike (Image 1) represents the ignition of opposition driven commentary around three hashtags - #freebobiwine, #stophooliganism and #stoppolicebrutalityinuganda which revolved around deadly violence, police brutality and repressive measures taken by the state. The three hashtags' dominance did not last for long and there was a drop around November 5, as the candidate had only been briefly detained.

While ruling party narratives continued growing steadily, a second dramatic spike emerged on opposition commentary on November 18, still featuring the hashtags #freebobiwine, #stophooliganism and #stoppolicebrutalityinuganda. This was driven by another arrest of Kyagulanyi on November 18 while campaigning in Luuka district (Eastern Uganda) on allegations of flouting Covid-19 guidelines which required presidential candidates not to hold rallies of more than 200 people. During the protests that followed his arrest, police and the army shot dead more than 50 individuals and arrested nearly 1,000. In solidarity with Bobi Wine, several opposition candidates suspended their campaigns and demanded for his release.

Whereas Kyagulanyi was detained for two days, the discussions around the death toll from protests continued over the next few days. This phase saw sustained activity on the three hashtags - #freebobiwine, #stophooliganism and #stoppolicebrutalityinuganda - all of which carried sentiments of trust, fear and anger. The discussions around violence and police brutality were also picked up by international media which could have supported the sustained online narrative. The rise in sharing of disturbing images and videos from the riots strongly contributed to the sentiment in discussions in what was described as the country's worst unrest in a decade. However, there was a drop in this narrative when Bobi Wine was granted bail on November 20.

Also observed were several smaller spikes in discussions when Kyaluganyi was briefly arrested or blocked from staying in hotels while on the campaign trail, and when his bodyguard was killed.

December
2020

Over December, there was constant usage of pro-opposition hashtags like #KyagulanyiForPresident, #WeAreRemovingADictator alongside pro-ruling party hashtags like #M7UgsChoice and #SecuringYourFuture. Despite the consistent usage patterns of these hashtags, there were little significant spikes in discussions.

However, December 13, saw a spike in the usage of new neutral (ie non political party affiliated) hashtags with a huge spike around the arrests and charging of Nigerian musicians Omah Lay and Tems through the hashtags #FreeOmahlay and #FreeTems. The duo faced charges of reportedly violating Covid-19 restrictions by holding a public music event. With the hashtags attracting the international community, the discussions added traffic to online engagements on Ugandan Twittersphere, and further buoyed commentary on the elections.

The days between the arrests and release on December 17 of the Nigerian artistes saw the biggest use of any hashtags in Ugandan Twittersphere during the period of research due to the significant involvement of the international community and users with particularly large followings such as Nigerian performers Burna Boy (4.8 million followers), Wizkid (8.1 million followers), Davido (8.7 million followers). This fueled further engagement with some linking back to #PoliceBrutality narratives that were already in Uganda's Twittersphere. It also created linkage to #EndSars commentary which would remerge in January 2021 in relation to police brutality in Uganda.

The intimidation of the media and civil society groups and actors by the police and ruling party officials also attracted considerable engagement. On December 22, Ugandan authorities arrested prominent human rights lawyer Nicholas Opiyo. Discussions spread across Twitter in real time, with several eyewitnesses posting images and video of plainclothes police handcuffing Opiyo along with four others. Opiyo was later charged with money laundering, in a case his organisation said was part of a crackdown on dissent ahead of elections in January 2021.

January 2021

In January 2021, pro ruling party actors dominated online narrative before generic hashtags took over closely followed by pro-opposition hashtags.

Online campaigning for the release of the NUP team arrested in December remained present in early January alongside a rise in the use of hashtags like #FreeNupTeam #UgandaIsBleeding #WeAreRemovingaDictator. The January 2 introduction of the NUP Uvote tallying app did not result in any spike from pro-ruling party actors. However, the January 7 assault of Bobi Wine during an online breifing saw an increase in pro-ruling party hashtags including #SecuringYourFuture and #M7UgsChoice.
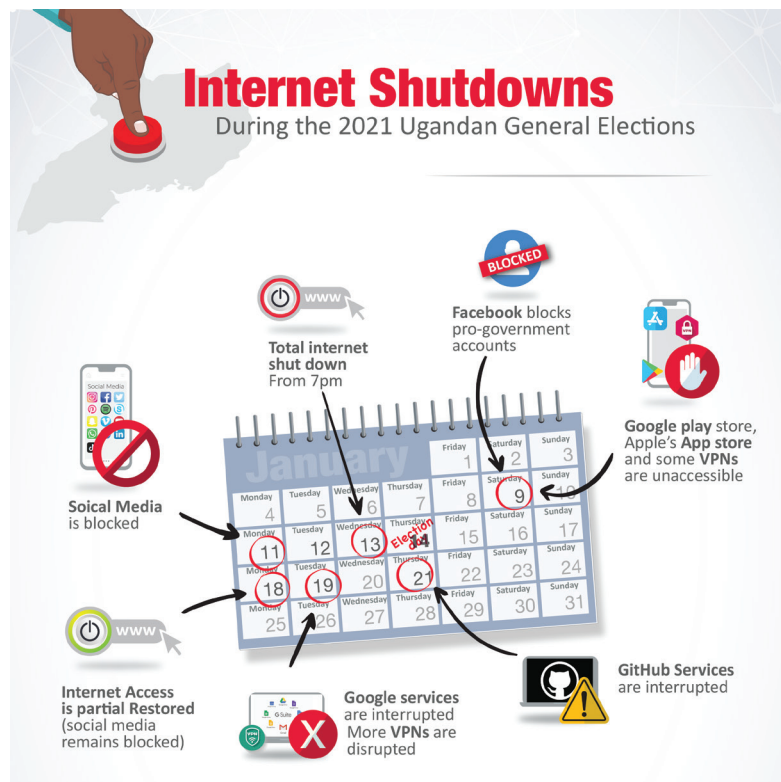

Image 4: *Network Disruptions in Uganda during 2021 Elections*

As the month progressed, there were steadily introduced blocks limiting access to social media, virtual private networks (VPN's), various Google services, GitHub, and eventually to the whole internet.

Unlike in the two previous months, online events came to influence both online and offline narratives. This was the case when Facebook and Twitter suspended the accounts of various pro-government individuals over what Facebook described as "Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB)" to suit the online narrative interests of the ruling party. The two platforms' actions to address disinformation sparked the ire of President Museveni who responded by stating in a national address that, "If you want to take sides against the (ruling party), then that group will not operate in Uganda," adding that, "We cannot tolerate this arrogance of anybody coming to decide for us who is good and who is bad." The Facebook and Twitter crack down resulted in a drop in pro-ruling party narratives.

A day after Museveni's pronouncements on January 11, 2021, access to social media was blocked and two days later on January 13, 2021, the internet as a whole was blocked as citizens prepared to go to the polls. Uganda was effectively cut off from online narratives.

The vacuum of online narratives coming out of Uganda was consequently filled by international actors and the diaspora who were mostly in support of the opposition hashtags and commentary. This was further fueled by the house arrest of Bobi Wine immediately after the elections.

Post the election week (January 18) saw equal use of hashtags between pro opposition hashtags and neutral hashtags and a significantly huge drop in the use of pro ruling party hashtags.Eventually, generic – non-political - hashtags regained control of online narratives by January 25. On January 25 the high court ordered police and military police to vacate Bobi Wine's residence.

On January 28, the Electoral Commission released the final results which confirmed Museveni as the winner of the presidential election with 59% of the vote following a voter turnout of 57%.

Shifts in Tweet Volumes

The shift in tweet volumes of the hashtags was monitored with the aim of establishing the differences in content shared by opposition against ruling party actors.
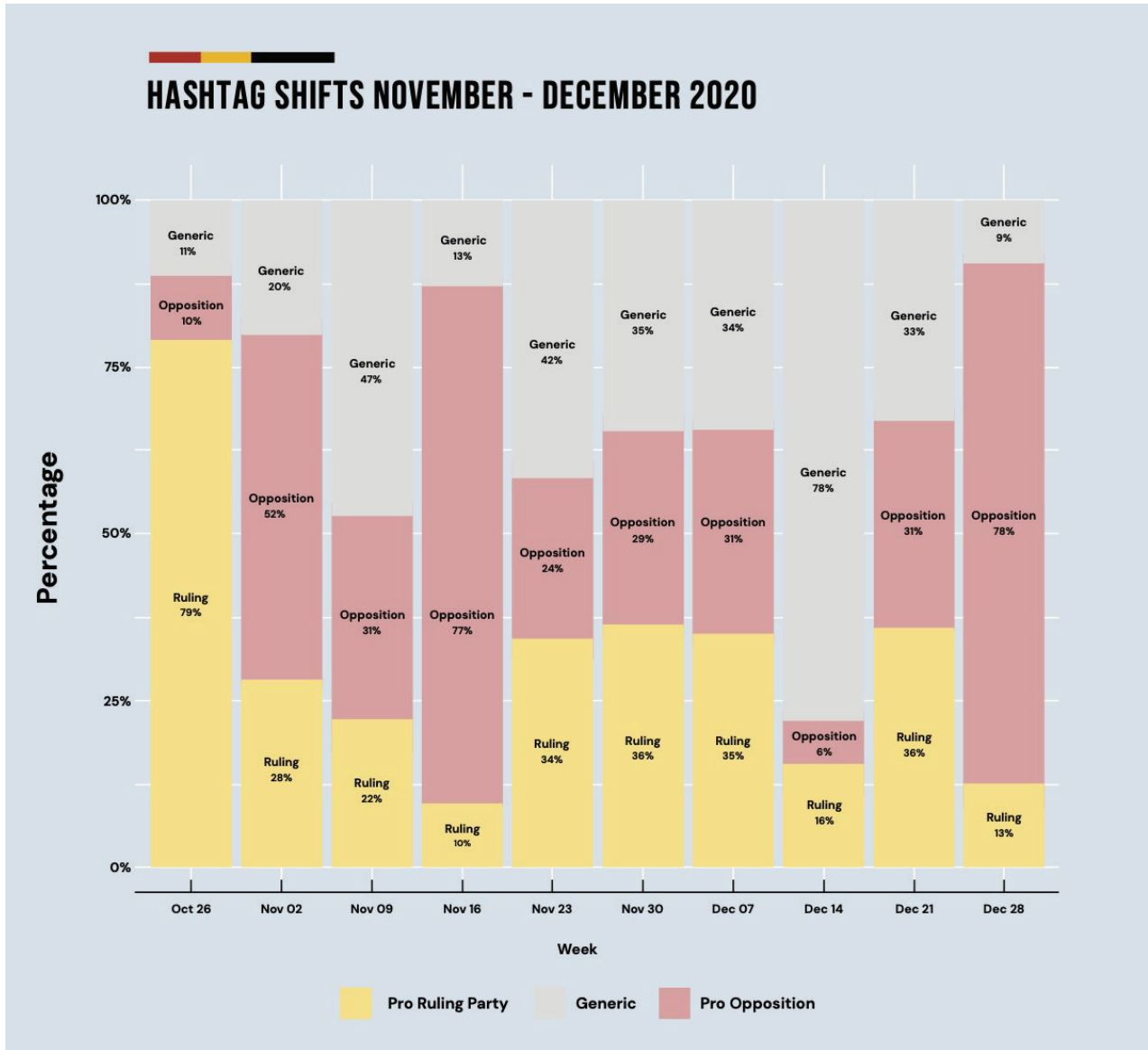

HASHTAG SHIFTS NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2020

Image 5: Hashtag Shifts in November and December 2020

Ahead of the November election nomination exercise, narrative appeared to be largely controlled by ruling party hashtags - 79%. The graph above shows a shift that began on October 26[6] leading into November and December from majority ruling party hashtags to majority opposition hashtags. The hashtags related to opposition

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6 *The research period run between November 1 and January 31, 2020. However, the use of week conventions that start on Monday resulted in the first week commencing on October 26.*

narratives maintained control of discourse in the weeks of November 2, November 09 and November 16 in rlation to the arrests of opposition actors including Kyagulanyi, and the brutality displayed by security operatives andthe police.

Starting November 23 through to December 14, the narrative was largely generic or neutral.before gaining momentum in the week of December 21 to an almost equal standing between ruling government and opposition commentary. The first half of the week of December 28 saw a stronger shift in favour of opposition narrative following further arrests and assaults. This was accompanied with the emotion of disgust.
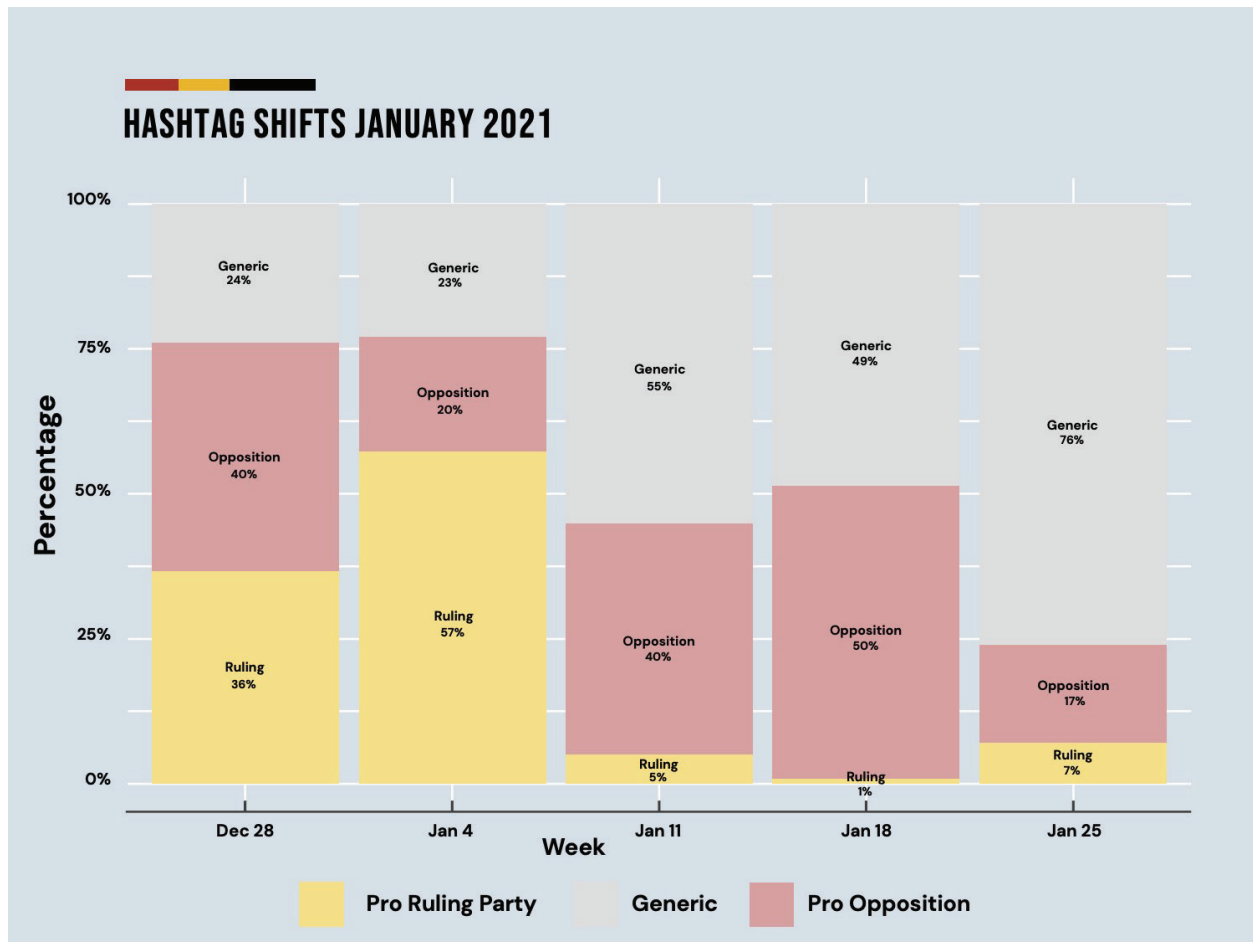

HASHTAG SHIFTS JANUARY 2021

Image 5: Hashtag Shifts in January 2021

However, within the same week starting January 1, analysis shows that both pro opposition and pro ruling party actors were in equal competition on driving online narratives.
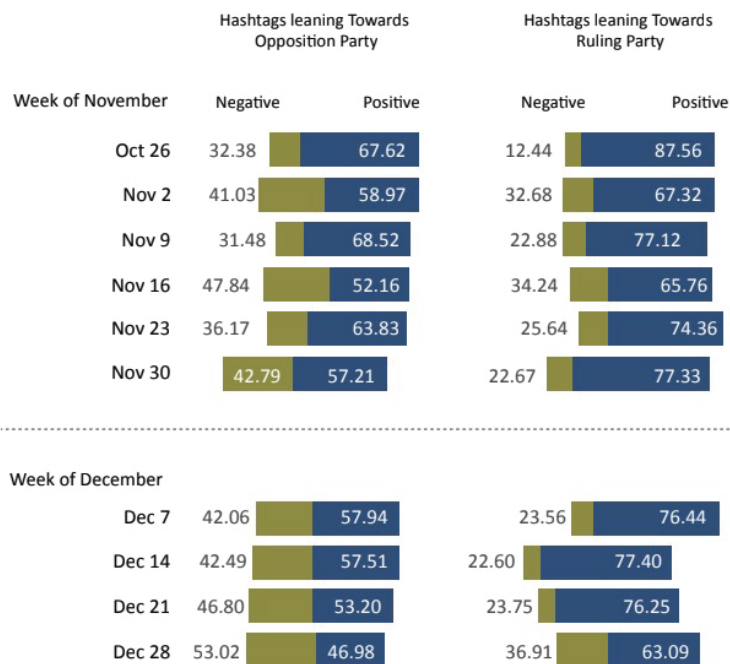
The following week (January 4) saw pro-ruling party actors dominating online narrative before generic hashtags took over closely followed by pro-opposition hashtags. Starting January 11 until the last week of the month, there was equal use of hashtags between pro opposition hashtags and generic hashtags and a significantly huge drop in the use of pro-ruling party hashtags.It was also during this time that access to social media, VPN's and the eventual blockage to the internet took place.

Eventually, generic hashtags regained dominance of online narratives by January 25 ahead of the official presidential election results announcement.

The Emotions Of the Elections

To understand the emotional reactions online, the top 50 hashtags from the data set were analysed. This entailed analysis of NRC Sentiment and Emotion Lexicons which is a collection of seven lexicons. The Emotion lexicon is a list of English words and their associations with eight basic emotions (anger, fear, anticipation, trust, surprise, sadness, joy, and disgust) and two sentiments (negative and positive). For this research, the annotations were manually done by crowdsourcing followed by the filtering out of only tweets that were posted in the English language around the top hashtags.

WEEKLY SENTIMENT PERCENTAGES ACROSS PRO OPPOSITION PARTY AND PRO RULING PARTY HASHTAGS

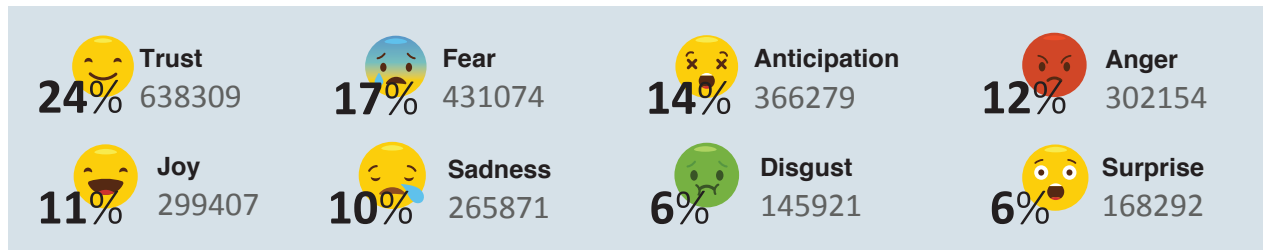|	Hashtags leaning Towards Opposition Party		Hashtags leaning Towards Ruling Party	
Week of November	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive
Oct 26	32.38	67.62	12.44	87.56
Nov 2	41.03	58.97	32.68	67.32
Nov 9	31.48	68.52	22.88	77.12
Nov 16	47.84	52.16	34.24	65.76
Nov 23	36.17	63.83	25.64	74.36
Nov 30	42.79	57.21	22.67	77.33
Week of December				
Dec 7	42.06	57.94	23.56	76.44
Dec 14	42.49	57.51	22.60	77.40
Dec 21	46.80	53.20	23.75	76.25
Dec 28	53.02	46.98	36.91	63.09

Note: Worked with the NRC Sentiment and Emotion Lexicons which is a collection of seven lexicons, including the widely used Word-Emotion Association Lexicon.

Image 6: *Weekly Sentiment Percentages Across Pro Opposition Party and Pro Ruling Party Hashtags*
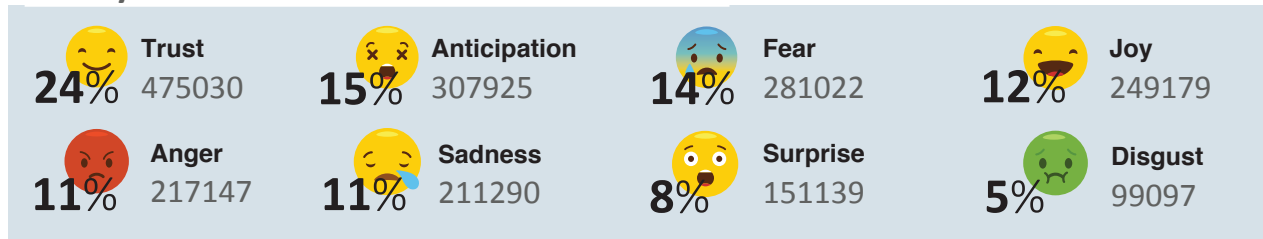
The data reveals mixed emotions with Trust, Fear , Anticipation and Anger among the top most emotions displayed by Twitter users behind the top 50 hashtags who tweeted in English.

November- December 2020

Trust 24% 638309	**Fear** 17% 431074	**Anticipation** 14% 366279	**Anger** 12% 302154
Joy 11% 299407	**Sadness** 10% 265871	**Disgust** 6% 145921	**Surprise** 6% 168292

January 2021

Trust 24% 475030	**Anticipation** 15% 307925	**Fear** 14% 281022	**Joy** 12% 249179
Anger 11% 217147	**Sadness** 11% 211290	**Surprise** 8% 151139	**Disgust** 5% 99097

Examples of tweets pushed by ruling party actors that registered emotion of trust and positive sentiment include the below.

Beingestell @beingestell · Jan 5
Here's the new Entebbe Municipality Central Market. Improved Market access for #ABetterUganda
#SecuringYourFuture

Odrek Rwabwogo and 9 others

Aine Melissa @AineMelissa · 6h
These dams have helped to increase on the power supply in the country where by most households in the country have acess to power.
#M7UGsChoice #SecuringYourFuture

Kig Enock. and 6 others

Kayobe @Kayobe6 · Jan 2
The torture that Museveni is imposing on Ugandans is unimaginable! The crime these people have committed is not supporting him in the coming elections. #UgandaIsBleeding #stoppolicebrutalityinuganda #m7stopkillingugandans#WeAreRemovingADictator

A-A. Muhammad M. @Its_muddaththir · 11h
The news coming from Uganda are so brutal and heartbreaking! 💔 💔😢 😢

#UgandaIsBleeding #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda

The sentiment of trust was mostly driven by pro-ruling party actors or hashtags like #SecuringYourFuture while the opposition leaning actors or hashtags contributed to most of the fear, anticipation and anger emotions across the data.
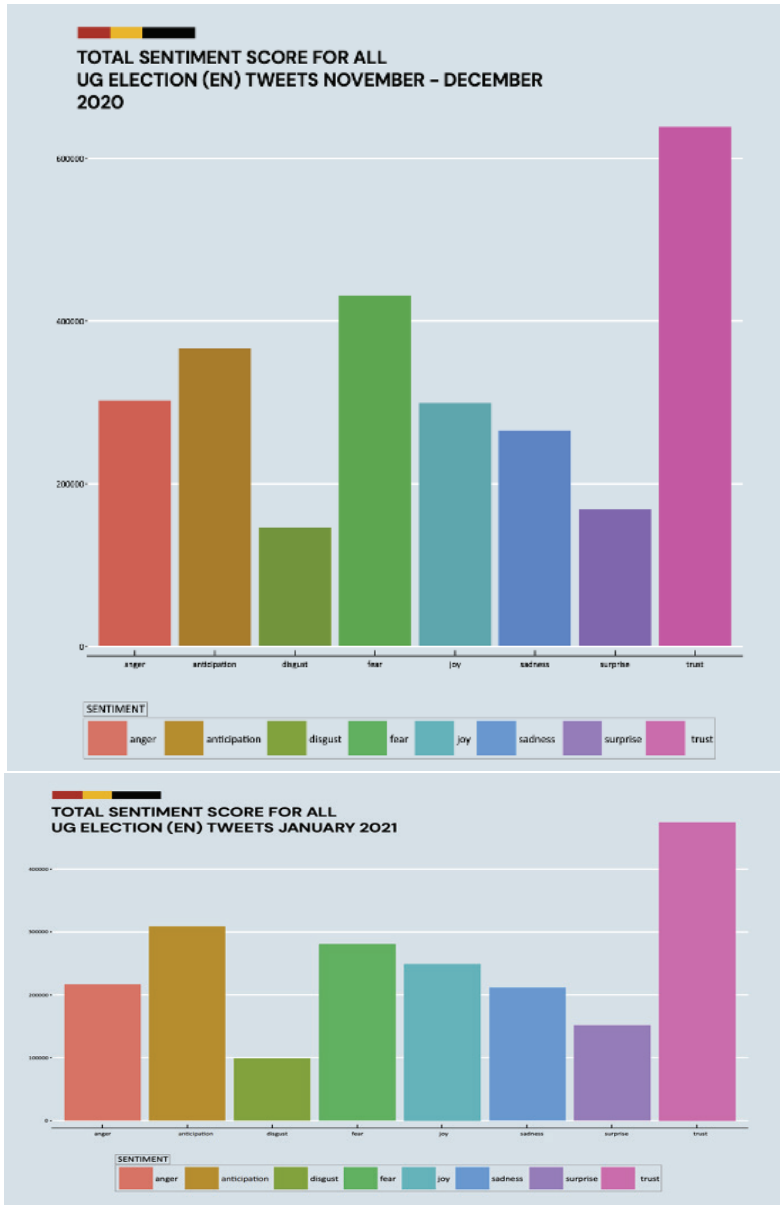

A weekly shift in the emotions - increases in fear and anger - corresponded with offline activities during the weeks of November 2, November 16 and December 28 in reaction to the arrests of opposition actors and members of their party which fueled the use of hashtags like #FreeBobiWine #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda.

Further emotional reactions included a drop in emotion of trust and a rise in Disgust among users across all political affiliations joined by the international community. This was correlated with the arrest of the Nigerian musicians in Uganda.

Overall, negative sentiment mostly corresponded to hashtags pushed by opposition and vice versa for pro-ruling party hashtags or generic content which in summary made opposition actors appear more angry and fearful during the elections. This analysis is in contrast to print media coverage of the elections, which according to research conducted by the African Center for Media Excellence (ACME) reported that despite the high levels of violence in the campaigns, an overwhelming majority of stories about the presidential candidates were couched in a neutral tone. There were less than four negative stories for every 100 reports analysed.

Image7 : *Sentiment scores*

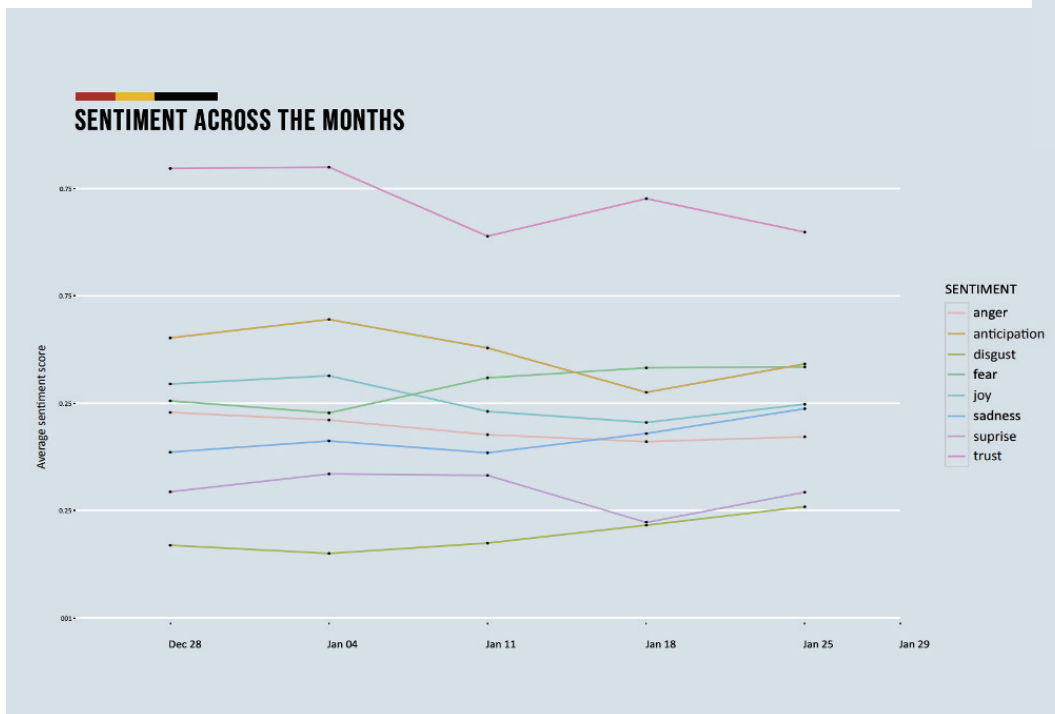## November – December 2020
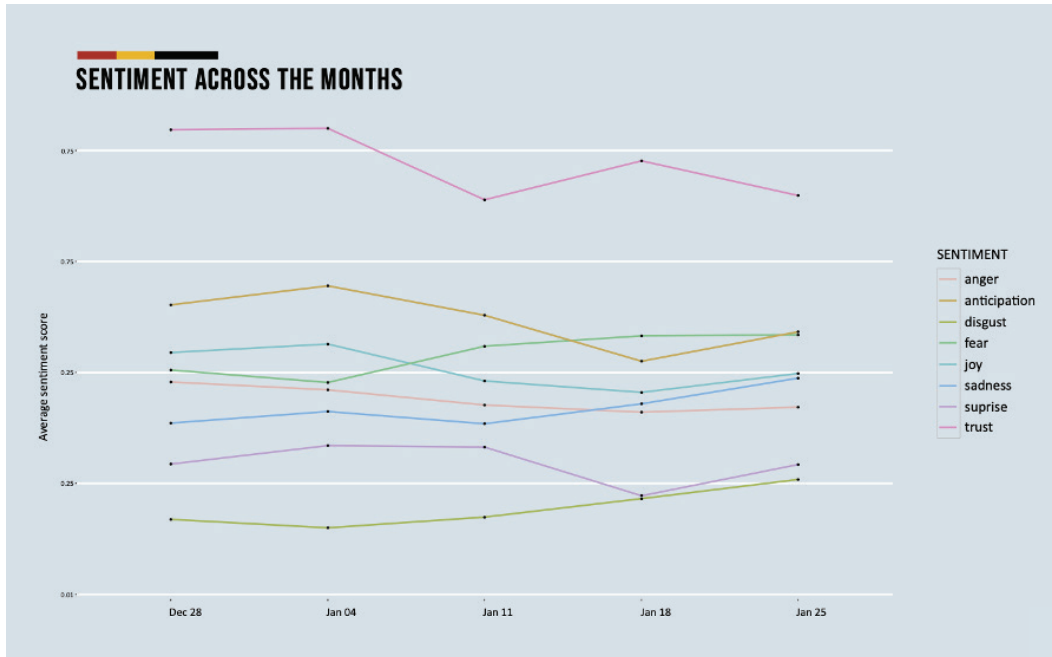
January 2021

same graph

Image 8: Weekly sentiment shifts

Hashtag Wars Of Misinformation and Disinformation

Two hashtags #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda and #StopHooliganism waged a head to head war against each other online with the former being pushed by opposition leaning actors while the latter was pushed by ruling party actors.

Between November and December 2020, both pro-ruling party and opposition narratives employed the use of "out of context" imagery as shown below to justify their political positions and social concerns. Some would be picked up by media houses and relayed onto further audiences. In the case of pro-ruling party content, Facebook and Twitter took down accounts perpetrating false narratives.
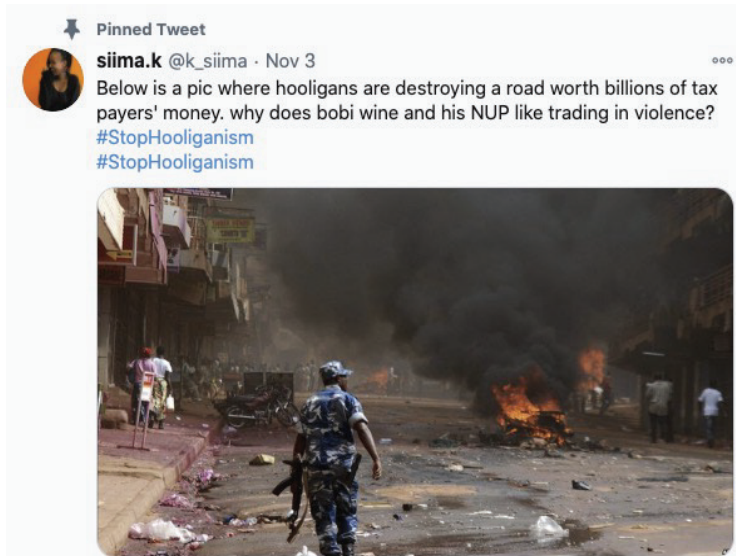
Case Study
According to reports, account @k_siima allegedly seeded and pushed the #StopHooliganism hashtag. It was amongst the first to tweet this imagine, which was later retweeted by @mkainerugaba (Muhoozi Kainerugaba, son to the President). The image is in fact from a BBC and Voice of America (VOA) dated 2011, during the #WalkToWork riots in Kampala that erupted when Kiiza Besigye, a former opposition candidate from the FDC (Forum for Democratic Change) political party was arrested.

@k_simma has since been suspended by Twitter for violation of its community standards. However, other accounts, carrying the same misleading information initially published per the above remain active.

Charity_xtine
@Charity_Xtine

Below is a pic where hooligans are destroying a road worth billions of tax payers' money. why does bobi wine and his NUP like trading in violence?
#StopHooliganism
#StopHooliganism

Arinaitwe Rugyendo 🇺🇬 and 3 others

2:04 AM · Nov 4, 2020 · Twitter Web App

59 Retweets   39 Quote Tweets   228 Likes

Concerned citizen 🇺🇬🇺🇬 @FredBinMbiro2 · Nov 4, 2020

Below is a pic where hooligans are destroying a road worth billions of tax payers' money. why does bobi wine and his NUP like trading in violence?
#StopHooliganism
#StopHooliganism

💬 1   🔁 1   ♡ 4   ⬆

Concerned citizen 🇺🇬🇺🇬 @FredBinMbiro2 · Nov 4, 2020

Below is a pic where hooligans are destroying a road worth billions of tax payers' money. why does bobi wine and his NUP like trading in

Other examples of disinformation include the below:

Rinah Mutesi
@Rinahtori

Bobi wine kyagulanyi and NUP hooligans robbed @daniellutaaya cameras @KKariisa

#stophooliganism

3:44 PM · Nov 13, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Kamusiime Marble
@KamusiimeMarble

A mother trying to access a road which was blocked by Bobi wine and NUP hooligans

#StopHooliganism

4:15 PM · Nov 13, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Rinah Mutesi
@Rinahtori

what if we all woke up and said no to this hooliganism of Bobi wine kyagulanyi and NUP?

#StopHooliganism

7:31 AM · Nov 13, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Both pro- ruling party hashtags like #StopHooliganism and opposition hashtags like #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda showed increased usage whenever there was an arrest of any Presidential candidate especially Kyagulanyi. Data shows increased usage spikes on November 3, 2020, November 18, 2020, November 15, 2020, and on November 27, 2020.

The graph below illustrates the correlation between the two hashtags in usage especially when they went head to head in the months of November and December. Though the sample data had more hashtag usage from #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda compared to the #StopHooliganism, there is a clear contest between the two factions to push their narrative on Twitter. The users behind the #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda shared several images around the riots that took place with many of these pointing fingers to the security operatives in Uganda, while the users behind the #StopHooliganism shared several images, many out of context portraying citizens as hooligans vandalizing state property and Infrastructure.

HASHTAG WARS
Story of #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda vs #StopHooliganism.

■ #StopHooliganism   ■ #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda

NOV 30
Bobi Wine supporters shot dead

DEC 30
Arrest of Bobi Wine and 100+ campaign team Kalangala District

NOV 18
Arrest of Bobi Wine at ampaigns Luuka District

NOV 03
Arrest of Bobi Wine on Nomination Day

125K
100K
75K
50K
25K
0

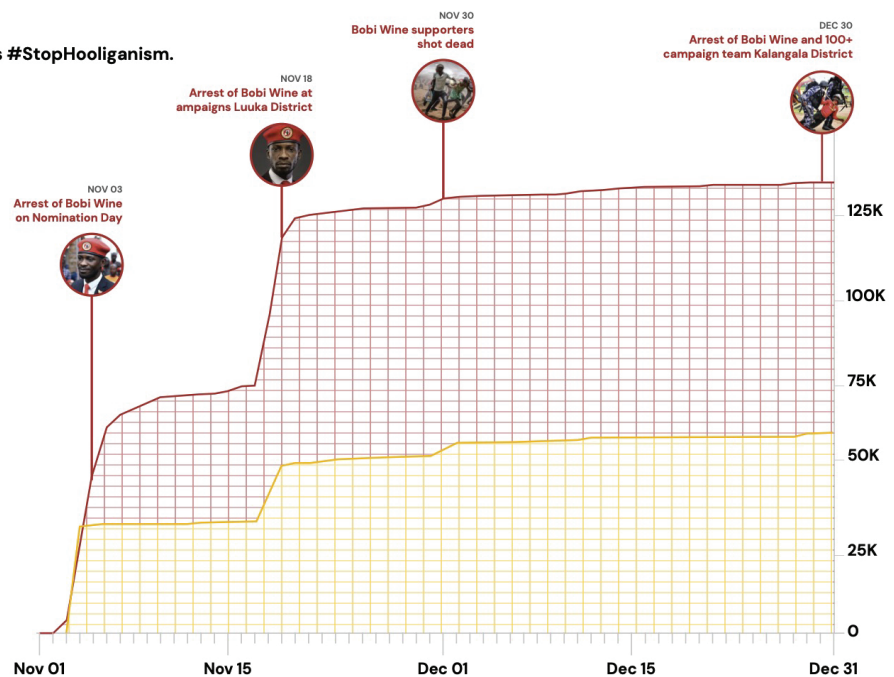Nov 01   Nov 15   Dec 01   Dec 15   Dec 31

Image 9: *Hashtag Wars, #StopPoliceBrutalityInUganda vs #StopHooliganism*

MeronAinomugisha ❤️
@Meron_Gisha256

#StopHooliganism
We are yarning for roads and NUP supportes are destroying them! How sure are we that the NUP party will bring peace in our country 😒😒
This is serious,,ehhhhhh
#tweddeko

👤 Proud Mufumbira ❤️🇺🇬🇺🇬 and 2 others

11:11 AM · Nov 19, 2020 · Twitter for Android

62 Retweets   194 Quote Tweets   572 Likes

Omusheshe ❤️🇺🇬 @KiraboAnge · Nov 19, 2020

#StopHooliganism
We are yarning for roads and NUP&FDC **supporters** are destroying them! How sure are we that the Opposition parties will bring peace in our country 😒😒 @mkainerugaba @KagutaMuseveni @NRMOnline @FrankTumwebazek
This is serious,
#twedeko

🔲 3

On the election eve and election day, online narratives spiked mostly centered around hashtags like #BobiWine #Uganda #UgandaDecides #UgandaDecides2021 and #UgandaElections. New hashtags entered the online conversations in reaction to the house arrest of Bobi Wine post the elections including #freebobiwine #blacklivesmatter and #freeuganda. Thereafter, it appeared that the twitter wars of November and December were quickly forgotten as online narrative centered on the shutdown. The restoration of access to the internet saw continued support for hashtags like #freenupteam #m7ugschoice #securingmyfuture alongside #m7ugschoice and #securingyouruture.

Meanwhile, a new war emerged with political undertones with a spike in the hashtag #VisitUganda. The hashtag was initially used by the ruling party to showcase the MTV Africa Music Awards (MAMA) which were scheduled to be hosted in Uganda. Opposition actors quickly latched onto it to highlight the post elections related violence to the international community which the hashtag intended to reach such as here, here and here.

Pro-opposition actors also used the hashtag to pushback against Uganda's hosting of the awards which seems to have paid off as organisers - MTVBase - later announced their postponement. This illustrated how public opinion on politics can influence private sector interests on social media.

MTV Base Africa ✓ @MTVBaseAfrica · Feb 4
MTV Base is postponing the 2021 MTV Africa Music Awards.

We will keep fans updated as we have more news.

💬 1.2K   ⟲ 2.8K   ♡ 6.6K

Discussion

As has become a global trend, online activity and narrative has come to play a pivotal role in political discourse in the leap-up, during and after elections. From showcasing their manifestos, campaigning, engaging citizens through to propaganda, online platforms political contenders and supporters alike are leveraging online platforms.

However, it appears that political interests supersede the public good and concerns, both online and offline, as during Uganda's elections, online content likely to lead to offline harm and vice versa were consistently present.

Narratives online were largely shaped by individuals than they were by media houses in 2016. This shift of trust from long established media to individuals marks a turning point in the use of online platforms as an avenue for sparking public debate and transparency and accountability in governance.

Public opinion and narrative can now be shaped outside of the traditional gatekeepers of information - media and the state itself. This distribution of sources has encouraged more active stances by both platforms and states in regulating online content and indeed, the takedown of government linked accounts by Facebook and Twitter and the eventual disruption of social media and the internet is a testament to this.

However, in the leadup to the takedowns and disruptions, there was a clear competition between pro and anti-regime accounts for online narrative dominance which included disinformation wars. While the action taken by platforms to address the skewed narrative may have helped, the damage was already done as narratives had already moved offline and into other spaces where they could still be consumed. Evidence of this was presence of false and misleading information in the discourse that remained online - in favour of the opposition and led by the diaspora and international community - after the country was closed out of the internet.

Indeed, among the fundamental challenges with internet shutdowns is the limited opportunity to fact check, verify or provide counter narratives into content shared online. Granted, the continued affronts against media and civil society in the lead-up to the elections further supported the censorship and state excesses claims that opposition actors were highlighting in some of their narratives.

Movement building and organising online was prevalent as there were numerous causes for online users to rally against and for during the elections with both political sides optimising their online presence to this effect. However, there may have been some crosspaths between both groups such as during the rally for the release of the Nigerian artists as well as the cancellation of the MAMA awards where momentarily, there was some shared concern albeit with different approaches. This highlighted the power of online activism where the pressure mounted by activists on the MAMA's led the organisers to postpone the event.

The research shows that there was an almost instant uptake in narratives related to the elections which just as quickly disappeared after the elections. This points to the mismatch between sustained online and offline civic engagement where interest is not sustained after election despite the various social concerns that are brought to the fore in the lead up and during elections persisting until the next elections cycle.