



## Leveraging Social Media Influencers to Increase Voter Turnout: A Case of Tanzania

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### Abstract

*Low voter turnout continues to undermine democratic participation worldwide, with young and first-time voters often being the most disengaged from electoral processes. In Tanzania, this trend is particularly concerning, as voter turnout declined from 67.3% in the 2015 general elections to approximately 50% in 2020. Understanding the factors that contribute to youth disengagement is therefore critical for sustaining democratic legitimacy.*

*This study examines the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in addressing voter apathy in Tanzania. Social media has transformed the way citizens access information, interact, and participate in political discourse, and influencers increasingly shape public opinion, especially among younger populations. By situating SMIs within the broader framework of political communication and civic mobilisation, the study draws insights from global, African, and Tanzanian experiences to assess how digital influence can translate into meaningful electoral engagement.*

*Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilises secondary data reviews and in-depth interviews with Tanzanian youth, civil society representatives, and influencers. The findings suggest that SMIs possess significant potential to increase political awareness, counter misinformation, and mobilise young voters, particularly when campaigns are authentic, issue-driven, and culturally sensitive. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including concerns over ethical conduct, the credibility of influencers, the risk of spreading misinformation, and the absence of robust regulatory frameworks to guide electoral digital engagement.*

*The study concludes that SMIs are a valuable yet underutilised resource for enhancing democratic participation in Tanzania. To maximise their impact, it recommends the development of strategic partnerships among electoral management bodies, civil society organisations, and influencers. By leveraging the reach and persuasive power of social media influencers in a structured and ethical manner, Tanzania has the opportunity to revitalise youth participation, strengthen democratic processes, and enhance civic engagement nationwide.*

**Keywords:** Social media influencers; Voter turnout; Political communication; Youth engagement; Election; Democracy

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background

Low voter turnout has become a recurring challenge across democracies, even in contexts where civic education and technological penetration have improved access to political information (IDEA, 2023). This

paradox highlights that access to information alone is not sufficient to guarantee active participation in electoral processes.

In many African countries, and particularly in Tanzania, the disengagement of young people, who constitute the majority of the electorate, has raised concern among policymakers, civil society organisations, and electoral management bodies. Youth, often regarded as the engine of democratic renewal, have shown tendencies toward apathy, disillusionment with formal politics, or engagement in non-electoral forms of participation such as protests and online activism.

In Tanzania, this challenge is particularly pronounced. Between the 2015 and 2020 general elections, voter turnout declined sharply from 67.3% to 50.7% (NEC, 2021). Scholars and political analysts have linked this downward trend to multiple factors, including diminished public trust in electoral institutions, perceptions of limited political alternatives, and systemic obstacles such as cumbersome voter registration procedures and logistical difficulties on Election Day (Paget, 2020).

Additionally, socio-economic factors, such as a lack of access to information, geographic isolation in rural areas, and limited civic education, have further discouraged participation. This decline in voter engagement not only undermines the perceived legitimacy of elected governments, but also threatens the inclusivity, responsiveness, and overall vibrancy of Tanzania's democratic governance. If left unaddressed, persistent voter apathy may entrench political disengagement, weaken accountability mechanisms, and reduce citizens' sense of ownership over national decision-making processes.

Paradoxically, while electoral participation has declined, Tanzania has witnessed a rapid surge in digital engagement. According to DataReportal (2024), the country has over 6.9 million active social media users, representing nearly 10% of the total population. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have become central to the way Tanzanians, particularly urban youth, consume news, exchange opinions, and express political identities. This growing digital ecosystem provides fertile ground for exploring innovative strategies to re-engage young voters through communication modes that resonate with their lived experiences and media habits.

Globally, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as key actors in shaping public opinion, political discourse, and social movements. Beyond their entertainment or lifestyle roles, influencers operate within well-established marketing frameworks, including influencer marketing theory, source credibility theory, and relationship marketing principles, which emphasise the importance of trust, authenticity, and audience engagement (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencers communicate through personalised, culturally resonant, and authentic modes of expression, leveraging humour, storytelling, visual aesthetics, and vernacular language to foster strong parasocial relationships – one-sided bonds in which audiences feel a personal connection to the influencer. This sense of trust, relatability, and intimacy often surpasses what conventional political actors can achieve, allowing influencers to sway opinions, mobilise communities, and set social agendas (Molyneux et al., 2022; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

Moreover, influencer marketing literature highlights how platform-specific strategies, content framing, and engagement metrics contribute to campaign effectiveness (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). The interactive nature of social media platforms allows influencers to receive immediate feedback, adapt messaging, and amplify content through shares, comments, and collaborations, extending their reach and impact beyond local or national boundaries. Consequently, SMIs function as intermediaries bridging formal political structures and digitally connected youth populations, aligning with the key principles of relationship marketing and digital influence strategies.

Empirical evidence underscores this potential. In the United States, influencers on TikTok and Instagram have collaborated with civic organisations to promote voter registration campaigns, leading to measurable increases in youth participation during the 2020 presidential elections (Bonilla & Rosa, 2021). In Nigeria, SMIs leveraged their digital reach during the 2023 general elections to mobilise first-time voters, educate citizens on electoral procedures, and counteract misinformation (Okoro & Madu, 2023). These examples illustrate that SMIs can function as civic educators and catalysts for democratic participation, consistent with influencer marketing research on strategic content dissemination, audience engagement, and behavioural influence.

This paper situates Tanzania within this broader global trend and asks: Can SMIs contribute to reversing voter apathy and stimulating higher electoral turnout among Tanzanian youth? The analysis foregrounds opportunities, risks, and ethical considerations necessary for sustainable influencer-led political engagement. While SMIs hold the promise of bridging the gap between digital enthusiasm and democratic participation, their practice is subject to concerns around political manipulation, authenticity, and unequal access to platforms. Engaging with core marketing and influencer marketing theories provides a framework to understand these dynamics, and to design communication strategies that are both innovative and ethically grounded.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Despite Tanzania's rapid digital transformation and the widespread adoption of social media platforms among young people, electoral participation within this demographic remains disproportionately low. While Tanzanian youth are among the most digitally connected groups in society, actively engaging in online conversations, cultural trends, and entertainment, their presence in formal political spaces, such as voting, lags behind. This disconnect highlights a critical gap between the communication ecosystems that youth inhabit and the institutional structures of politics and elections. Political institutions have not fully adapted their engagement strategies to align with the digital and influencer-driven cultures of young citizens, leaving social media as an underutilised channel for political mobilisation.

In marketing and influencer marketing literature, influencers are recognised as strategic intermediaries who can shape attitudes, behaviours, and consumer – or in this case, civic – decisions through trust, authenticity, and social proof (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social media influencers with large, loyal, and interactive youth audiences thus emerge as potential agents capable of bridging the gap between political institutions and young voters. However, the absence of structured and strategic engagement with influencers risks underutilising their mobilisation potential. If left outside formal democratic strategies, opportunities for amplifying voter education and encouraging turnout are lost. Conversely, unregulated or ad-hoc use of influencers raises concerns, including the spread of misinformation, erosion of trust through ethical violations, and partisan manipulation that may distort electoral fairness (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

The research problem is therefore framed as follows: How can social media influencers be effectively and ethically leveraged to increase voter turnout among youth in Tanzania? Addressing this question requires integrating insights from influencer marketing theory, examining strategies to maximise positive impact, and considering the ethical, regulatory, and institutional safeguards necessary to prevent misuse.

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses the persistent challenge of low voter turnout among young people in Tanzania, a trend that undermines the legitimacy, inclusivity, and vibrancy of democratic governance (NEC, 2021; Paget, 2020). By examining the potential of social media influencers

(SMIs) to mobilise youth participation, the study contributes to understanding innovative and contextually relevant strategies for enhancing democratic engagement in the digital era.

Second, the study has practical implications for policymakers, civil society organisations, and electoral management bodies. Insights from the research can inform the design of youth-focused civic education campaigns, guide ethical collaboration with SMIs, and help develop interventions that bridge the gap between online engagement and actual electoral participation.

Third, the study contributes to the academic discourse on digital political communication in Africa, a relatively underexplored area. While global evidence shows that influencers can effectively increase youth participation in elections (Bonilla & Rosa, 2021; Okoro & Madu, 2023), there is limited empirical research on their role in the Tanzanian context. This research, therefore, fills a critical gap and offers a foundation for future studies on digital civic engagement and democratic innovation.

## **1.4 Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on the role of social media influencers in promoting electoral participation among Tanzanian youth. The research is limited to digital platforms with high youth engagement, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), reflecting the predominant channels for political discourse among urban young populations (DataReportal, 2024). The study primarily examines influencer-driven initiatives aimed at increasing voter awareness, registration, and turnout. While acknowledging broader factors affecting electoral participation (DataReportal, 2024), such as institutional trust, political alternatives, and structural barriers (Paget, 2020; DataReportal, 2024), the research concentrates on the intersection of social media influence, civic education, and youth engagement.

Geographically, the study focuses on urban and peri-urban areas where internet penetration and social media usage are highest. Temporally, the analysis considers the current digital ecosystem and recent electoral cycles, providing a contemporary understanding of influencer-led political mobilisation in Tanzania.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Global Perspective**

Globally, social media influencers (SMIs) have redefined political communication by bridging the gap between political institutions and younger, digitally active populations. From a marketing perspective, influencers operate as key opinion leaders, leveraging their reach, credibility, and relational trust to shape audience attitudes and behaviours (Freberg, 2021; Brown & Hayes, 2008). In the United States, the 2020 presidential election illustrated how SMIs could serve as catalysts for voter mobilisation. Influencers on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok applied influencer marketing strategies, including content framing, authenticity signalling, and engagement-driven campaigns, to reach millions of young voters (Katz & Jenkins, 2021). Their effectiveness derives from parasocial relationships and perceived authenticity, concepts central to influencer marketing theory.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the “#TurnUp” campaign leveraged influencers to encourage youth participation in the 2019 general election. By amplifying non-partisan messages and using peer-oriented content strategies, influencers demonstrated their ability to supplement traditional voter education approaches with marketing-inspired communication tactics (Bossetta, 2020; Freberg, 2021). These examples underscore how the principles of influencer marketing audience targeting, trust cultivation, and content optimisation can be applied to political contexts, reshaping the traditional voter outreach paradigm.

## 2.2 African Context

Across Africa, SMIs have played increasingly pivotal roles in electoral campaigns and broader socio-political movements, often employing strategies aligned with influencer marketing best practices, such as engagement-driven messaging, authenticity signalling, and narrative framing (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). For instance, Nigeria's #EndSARS protests demonstrated the transformative power of digital activism, where influencers mobilised widespread support both online and offline (Iwilade & Akinbobola, 2022). Similarly, during Kenya's 2022 general election, SMIs were central to shaping political narratives, raising youth awareness about voting processes, and enhancing candidate visibility (Nabacwa & Mukhongo, 2022).

However, the effectiveness of these marketing-informed strategies is constrained by structural challenges. Digital inequality – characterised by limited internet access, high data costs, and uneven connectivity – restricts the reach of influencer campaigns, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. Weak regulatory frameworks governing online political communication further expose electorates to manipulation, disinformation, and digital propaganda. Despite these barriers, SMIs, when deployed strategically, demonstrate the potential to increase political literacy, mobilise underrepresented groups, and foster civic engagement, highlighting the relevance of influencer marketing frameworks in political contexts across the continent.

## 2.3 Tanzanian Experience

In Tanzania, the social media landscape has grown significantly over the past decade. According to the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA, 2023), the number of active internet users continues to rise, with platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok central to youth interaction. Prominent influencers, including Millard Ayo and Salama Jabir, have emerged as influential voices capable of engaging millions of followers. From a marketing standpoint, these influencers employ strategies consistent with influencer marketing theory, such as personal branding, content targeting, and trust-building with followers (Freberg, 2021; Brown & Hayes, 2008).

While these figures have demonstrated a strong capacity for mass engagement in entertainment and social discourse, their direct involvement in electoral mobilisation remains limited. Existing efforts are often fragmented and lack systematic frameworks connecting influencer strategies with broader political communication goals (Mmuya & Kweka, 2021). This underexplored area highlights a critical gap in both scholarship and practice. Although Tanzanian influencers are strategically positioned to contribute to civic education and voter mobilisation, there remains insufficient empirical evidence regarding their impact on electoral processes, representing a fertile area for research that integrates principles of marketing, influencer engagement, and political participation.

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

The study employs a dual theoretical framework by integrating the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Two-Step Flow Theory, complemented by relevant marketing perspectives such as the Source Credibility Theory and the Social Influence Theory. According to UGT, media consumers are active participants who deliberately select and engage with content to satisfy specific psychological and social needs, such as political identity formation, trust-building, and social integration.

From this perspective, social media influencers serve as a highly responsive medium, providing personalised, interactive, and trust-based content that traditional political communication channels often fail to deliver. Through comments, live sessions, and direct engagement, influencers can tailor information

to resonate with the preferences, beliefs, and concerns of their followers, thereby enhancing the perceived relevance and credibility of political messages.

In contrast, the Two-Step Flow Theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) positions influencers as contemporary opinion leaders who act as intermediaries between political institutions and the public. This framework emphasises their persuasive power, suggesting that influencers do not merely transmit information but actively interpret, filter, and contextualise it in ways that make it more accessible and compelling for their audiences.

From a marketing perspective, this dynamic aligns with the Source Credibility Model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), which highlights how the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the influencer enhance message acceptance and behavioural influence. Likewise, the Social Influence Theory explains how influencers leverage social proof and identification processes to shape audience attitudes and voting intentions, much like how consumer choices are guided by endorsements in commercial marketing.

By integrating these communication and marketing frameworks, the study establishes a robust analytical lens for understanding the dual role of social media influencers in Tanzania. They are not only conduits for political information, but are also active mediators who shape how citizens perceive, engage with, and participate in electoral processes. This combined perspective allows for a nuanced exploration of how influencer credibility, persuasive communication, and audience gratification converge to drive voter mobilisation, civic engagement, and the broader dynamics of digital political communication in a rapidly evolving media environment.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring perceptions, trends, and the underlying meanings associated with the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in electoral mobilisation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach facilitated the collection of rich and contextual insights into how SMIs shape youth engagement in political discourse in Tanzania. It enabled an in-depth examination of the strategies and practices influencers employ to communicate political messages, establish credibility, and encourage participation among young voters.

Furthermore, the qualitative framework made it possible to identify subtle and context-specific factors, such as cultural influences, platform dynamics, and audience responsiveness that shape the effectiveness of influencer-driven campaigns. This design therefore provided a holistic understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with the use of SMIs in enhancing voter turnout within the Tanzanian electoral landscape.

#### **3.1 Data Collection**

This study relied exclusively on secondary data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of social media influencers in electoral mobilisation. A thorough review of existing literature, reports, and documented digital campaigns was conducted to ensure a robust and evidence-based analysis. The sources consulted included:

- Academic studies examining social media, political communication, and youth participation in Africa, and specifically in Tanzania. These studies offered theoretical and empirical insights into how digital platforms shape political engagement and influence voter behaviour.
- Policy documents and reports from governmental and regulatory bodies, including the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA, 2023), provide critical data on trends in digital

communication, internet usage, and the adoption of social media among different demographic groups.

- Election observation reports and analyses from organisations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI, 2021), offering valuable perspectives on voter behaviour, civic engagement, outreach strategies, and the effectiveness of digital campaigns in promoting political participation.
- Online content archives documenting influencer-led civic campaigns conducted between 2019 and 2023. These included publicly available social media posts, videos, live streams, and interactive sessions that aimed to enhance youth awareness, encourage political participation, and foster civic education.

By relying on these diverse secondary sources, the study was able to triangulate evidence, identify patterns, and assess the potential impact of influencers on democratic engagement in Tanzania, while highlighting areas where empirical research remains limited.

### **3.2 Content Analysis**

A systematic content analysis of influencer posts related to civic engagement and political participation was conducted to explore how social media personalities contribute to democratic processes. The dataset included posts, videos, and live sessions published between 2019 and 2023, spanning two national election cycles as well as various civic education campaigns. Each post was carefully coded according to recurring themes, such as calls for voter registration, encouragement of youth participation, advocacy for governmental accountability, and dissemination of accurate election-related information.

Content analysis provides a robust methodological approach for uncovering communication patterns, framing strategies, and the techniques used by influencers to engage their audiences in digital environments (Krippendorff, 2018). This method enables researchers to systematically examine both the content and form of messages, revealing how influencers shape perceptions, mobilise civic action, and potentially impact political behaviour. By analysing the frequency, context, and sentiment of posts, the study offers insights into the strategic role of social media influencers in fostering informed and active participation among citizens.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

Data from secondary sources were analysed using a thematic approach. Themes were identified through both deductive reasoning – guided by established concepts from prior literature such as trust, authenticity, voter motivation, and ethical considerations – and inductive reasoning, which allowed patterns to emerge organically from policy reports, academic studies, and documented online campaigns. The use of thematic analysis supported a systematic exploration of communication patterns, message framing, and engagement strategies employed by SMIs to promote youth political participation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorff, 2018).

By drawing exclusively from secondary data, the study adopted methodological triangulation, integrating insights from scholarly works, government and non-governmental policy documents, and real-world social media campaign records. This triangulated approach enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings, offering a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on how SMIs function within Tanzania's political communication environment. Moreover, it enabled the identification of recurring trends, thematic gaps, and emerging opportunities in influencer-led voter mobilisation strategies, providing valuable implications for practice, policy, and future research.

## 3.4 Findings

### 3.4.1 Youth Perceptions of Influencers

A recurring theme among respondents was the perception of social media influencers (SMIs) as more relatable, authentic, and trustworthy than mainstream politicians. While political figures are often viewed with scepticism due to perceived corruption, partisanship, or self-interest, influencers are seen as peers who share common experiences and communicate informally. Their content is embedded in everyday life, making their messages appear genuine and less agenda-driven, which aligns with Loader et al. (2016) who note that young people trust peer-led digital communication more than traditional political campaigns.

Respondents indicated they are more likely to register and vote when encouraged by influencers they follow, especially those who are consistent in their messaging and demonstrate personal commitment to civic causes. For instance, an influencer who documents their own participation in voter registration is perceived as particularly persuasive. This suggests that SMIs can bridge the gap between political apathy and active engagement by normalising participation in democratic processes.

Moreover, the interactive nature of social media enhances this influence. Unlike politicians who rely on one-way communication through rallies or press conferences, influencers engage followers directly via comments, live sessions, and personalised content. This two-way communication fosters a sense of community and accountability, making civic messages more impactful. Overall, SMIs have the potential to mobilise young voters and reshape the culture of political participation in Tanzania.

**Table 1: Youth Perceptions of Influencers**

Theme	Respondents' Views	Supporting Evidence
Relatability	Influencers seen as “ordinary people” facing similar social challenges as youth	Loader et al., 2016
Trustworthiness	Politicians viewed with suspicion; influencers trusted due to long-term engagement	Katz & Jenkins, 2021
Voting Motivation	Youth more likely to register and vote if encouraged by influencers	Nabacwa & Mukhongo, 2022

### 3.4.2 Content Effectiveness

Respondents emphasised that issue-based content particularly on topics such as employment, education, and human rights resonated more strongly with youth than partisan endorsements. This suggests that political communication through influencers should prioritise practical, relatable messaging that connects directly to the lived realities of young people, thereby building trust and fostering meaningful engagement.

The format of message delivery was also highlighted as important. Creative approaches such as humour, short TikTok videos, memes, and storytelling were especially effective in capturing attention and stimulating discussion. These formats make political content more digestible, encourage peer-to-peer sharing, and amplify reach, aligning with Bossetta's (2020) findings that meme culture and humour enhance accessibility and engagement with political issues.

Additionally, interactive formats, including live Q&A sessions, influencer-led challenges, and collaborative content with civil society organisations, were identified as strategies for deepening engagement. Such

approaches promote active participation rather than passive consumption, which is critical for cultivating informed and politically active youth.

**Table 2: Content Effectiveness**

Content Type	Impact on Youth Engagement	Supporting Evidence
Issue-based (jobs, education, rights)	Seen as credible, relatable, and motivating for voter turnout	Nabacwa & Mukhongo, 2022
Humour & Storytelling	Creates relatability, reduces seriousness of politics, increases sharing	Bossetta, 2020
Short Videos & Memes	High retention, viral potential, fosters discussions	Katz & Jenkins, 2021

### 3.4.3 Risks and Ethical Concerns

Respondents noted that issue-oriented content particularly on employment, education, and human rights elicits stronger engagement from young people than conventional partisan endorsements. This suggests that political messaging delivered through social media influencers should focus on non-partisan, practical, and relatable themes that reflect the everyday realities of youth. Emphasising concrete issues enables influencers to build trust and credibility, foster meaningful interaction, and support civic awareness and informed decision-making.

Participants also underscored the importance of message presentation. Creative formats such as humour, short TikTok clips, memes, storytelling, and visually engaging infographics were identified as especially effective in attracting attention and encouraging discussion. These approaches improve accessibility, promote peer-to-peer sharing, and extend the reach of political messages, aligning with Bossetta (2020), who argues that visually engaging and humorous content simplifies complex issues and stimulates dialogue among younger audiences.

Additionally, interactive strategies including live question-and-answer sessions, influencer-led challenges, polls, and collaborative content with civil society organisations were frequently highlighted for their capacity to enhance engagement. By encouraging active participation, these methods allow young people to express views, seek clarification, and engage directly with issues affecting their communities, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and participatory democratic environment.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of tailoring political communication to youth preferences and behaviours. Influencers who combine issue-based messaging with creative and participatory formats are better positioned to capture attention, foster civic engagement, and contribute to a more informed and active electorate.

**Table 3: Risks and Ethical Concerns**

Risk	Description	Supporting Evidence
Misinformation	Risk of influencers spreading unverified or false information	Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017
Lack of Transparency	Followers unaware of paid political promotions	Iwilade & Akinbobola, 2022
Commercial Exploitation	Influencers may prioritise financial gain over civic education	Mmuya & Kweka, 2021

### 3.4.4 Institutional Gaps

Respondents highlighted limited collaboration between the National Electoral Commission (NEC), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and social media influencers. Existing civil society initiatives for voter education and civic engagement are often small, donor-dependent, and lack long-term sustainability. This structural gap constrains the integration of influencer-driven campaigns into formal voter education strategies, limiting their impact on electoral participation.

The NEC has traditionally relied on mainstream media such as television, radio, and newspapers for public voter education, and has not fully recognised social media influencers as partners in electoral mobilisation. As a result, opportunities to leverage influencers' extensive reach, particularly among youth, remain largely untapped. The absence of systematic collaboration frameworks means influencer initiatives are often ad hoc and uncoordinated. Strengthening partnerships between NEC, CSOs, and influencers could enhance voter education, improve democratic participation, and ensure that digitally connected young voters are better informed about electoral processes.

**Table 4: Institutional Gaps**

Institutional Actor	Current Role	Identified Gap	Supporting Evidence
NEC	Provides voter education via mainstream channels	Limited collaboration with influencers	TCRA, 2023
CSOs	Small-scale voter education projects	Lack of scale, sustainability, and digital integration	Mmuya & Kweka, 2021
Influencers	Large youth followership and communication capacity	Not systematically engaged by institutions	Nabacwa & Mukhongo, 2022

## 4. Discussion

The findings confirm that social media influencers (SMIs) can serve as critical intermediaries between disengaged youth and electoral institutions, a role that aligns with global experiences. Evidence from the United States and the United Kingdom demonstrates that influencers increase political participation by leveraging their authenticity and relatability to younger demographics (Katz & Jenkins, 2021; Bossetta, 2020). Similarly, in Africa, influencers have been instrumental in issue-based activism such as Nigeria's #EndSARS protests and Kenya's 2022 elections, where they amplified awareness and mobilised participation (Iwilade & Akinbobola, 2022; Nabacwa & Mukhongo, 2022). The Tanzanian case reflects these global and regional patterns, but also reveals unique contextual challenges, including weak institutional frameworks, regulatory uncertainties, and limited digital access in rural areas (Mmuya & Kweka, 2021).

A key insight from this study is that authenticity remains the foundation of influencer effectiveness. Audiences tend to reject content that appears externally imposed or insincere, confirming earlier literature on parasocial trust and influencer credibility (Abidin, 2018). Allowing influencers to use their own tone, style, and communication strategies is therefore indispensable for effective electoral engagement. Unlike conventional political advertising, influencer-driven campaigns must preserve a personal and informal character to maintain youth interest and build trust.

The study also highlights the importance of structured partnerships between influencers, electoral bodies such as the National Electoral Commission (NEC), and civil society organisations (CSOs). Previous African research indicates that fragmented or ad hoc collaborations limit the sustainability of influencer mobilisation (Nabacwa & Mukhongo, 2022). Establishing formal partnerships could align influencer activities with broader voter education objectives, while also enhancing accountability and resource support.

Transparency is another critical factor for success. In established democracies, disclosure of paid or sponsored political content is mandatory, with regulatory bodies requiring influencers to disclose affiliations with political parties or candidates (Federal Election Commission, 2020). In Tanzania, however, such measures are not consistently enforced, posing risks of misinformation, covert propaganda, and declining public trust. Introducing mandatory transparency standards would safeguard the credibility of influencer campaigns and enable audiences to critically assess political messaging.

Finally, capacity-building through education is essential. Influencers require training on electoral laws, political advertising regulations, and misinformation management. Comparable initiatives in South Africa, where digital literacy workshops were organised for content creators during the 2019 elections, equipped them to counter disinformation and enhance civic engagement (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2020). In Tanzania, such training would not only prevent the unintentional spread of misinformation, but would also reinforce influencers' role as responsible facilitators of civic education.

Overall, these findings indicate that while Tanzanian influencers are strategically positioned to boost voter turnout, their effectiveness depends on frameworks that are tailored to the country's socio-political realities. Building regulatory clarity, strengthening partnerships, and fostering digital literacy are essential steps in fully realising the democratic potential of influencers. Thus, the Tanzanian experience both reflects global trends and underscores the need for context-specific strategies that address institutional weaknesses while harnessing the opportunities of the digital sphere.

#### **4.1 Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to established research ethics by taking several key measures. First, informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time. Second, the anonymity and confidentiality of all responses were strictly maintained, with personal identifiers removed to protect participants' privacy. Third, potential conflicts of interest were carefully managed by maintaining strict neutrality regarding any partisan affiliations, thereby safeguarding the integrity of the research process.

Looking forward, future influencer campaigns in the electoral context should also uphold strong ethical principles. These include ensuring transparency regarding sponsorships, requiring influencers to disclose any political affiliations, and providing training in digital ethics and responsible online communication. By embedding these ethical standards, influencer-led initiatives can build trust with audiences, foster informed civic engagement, and promote accountability in the political communication process.

### **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **5.1 Conclusion**

Social media influencers represent a largely underutilised yet highly promising tool for revitalising voter turnout in Tanzania. The rapid expansion of social media platforms, particularly among younger demographics, provides a unique avenue for political engagement that traditional campaigns often fail to access (Khan et al., 2021; Nhamo & Ndlela, 2020). Influencers can simplify complex political messages,

personalise communication, and build trust, which helps counter voter apathy and disengagement (Bode, 2016). Their ability to engage audiences through relatable content, interactive formats, and peer-to-peer influence positions them as strategic partners in promoting active citizenship and informed electoral participation.

However, the effectiveness of influencer-led campaigns depends on ethical and transparent practices. Unregulated or biased messaging risks can erode public trust and amplify misinformation, thereby threatening democratic processes (Tandoc et al., 2020). To mitigate these risks, campaigns should be developed within frameworks that emphasise accountability, inclusivity, and collaboration among influencers, electoral bodies, and civil society organisations.

In the Tanzanian context, harnessing the power of social media influencers offers several actionable benefits. First, it can enhance voter education by making political information more accessible and engaging. Second, it can reach historically disengaged groups, particularly urban and rural youth who actively use digital platforms but often feel excluded from traditional political communication (Moyo & Nkosi, 2022). Third, responsibly managed influencer campaigns can contribute to strengthening democratic legitimacy by fostering inclusive political dialogue and participation.

## 5.2 Recommendations

- i. **Ethical Guidelines:** The National Electoral Commission (NEC), in collaboration with civil society organisations, should develop comprehensive codes of conduct for social media influencers involved in electoral campaigns. These guidelines would ensure that influencers communicate political content transparently, avoid spreading misinformation, and respect the principles of fairness and impartiality, thereby preventing manipulation of public opinion. Clear ethical frameworks can also enhance public trust in both the influencers and the electoral process.
- ii. **Capacity Building:** Structured training programmes should be provided to influencers to enhance their understanding of political literacy, civic responsibility, and ethical communication practices. Such programmes can equip influencers with the skills to disseminate accurate electoral information, engage audiences responsibly, and promote informed voting behaviour. By improving their knowledge and professional competence, influencers can become effective partners in strengthening democratic processes.
- iii. **Collaborative Campaigns:** Strategic partnerships between influencers, youth-led organisations, educational institutions, and electoral bodies can facilitate structured and credible engagement initiatives. Collaborative campaigns can integrate creative content, interactive discussions, and civic education materials, creating a more impactful approach to voter mobilisation. These partnerships can also ensure that influencer-led campaigns align with national electoral priorities and reinforce messages of civic responsibility.
- iv. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continuous monitoring and evaluation of influencer campaigns are essential to assess their effectiveness, identify misinformation, and refine strategies for future elections. Data-driven assessment tools can track reach, engagement, and audience impact, providing insights for improving the design of campaigns and ensuring accountability. Feedback mechanisms can further support adaptive approaches and reinforce positive influencer behaviour.

By implementing these strategies, Tanzania can harness the potential of social media influencers not only as instruments of voter mobilisation but also as catalysts for long-term democratic participation, civic engagement, and an informed electorate. Leveraging influencers responsibly can strengthen the overall electoral ecosystem and promote a culture of transparency, accountability, and active citizenship.

## Acknowledgements

The author extends gratitude to the interview participants, civil society representatives, and influencers who contributed insights. Special thanks to the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and current Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for providing background reports.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The author hereby declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this paper.

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