

A Theoretical Analysis of the Use of Whatsapp in Labour Rights Advocacy by Kenya Universities Staff Union Members at Egerton University

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to analyse the theoretical framework of the use of WhatsApp in labour rights advocacy by the Kenya Universities Staff Union members at Egerton University. The study utilised the Technological Determinism Theory and Agenda Setting Theory and a qualitative case study design by collecting data on the dynamics of WhatsApp utilisation for labour rights advocacy by KUSU members at Egerton University using semi-structured interview schedules and structured observations as instruments. The data was analysed using content analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis methods, while qualitative descriptions and descriptive statistics were used to present the data. The results indicated that labour rights advocacy among KUSU members using WhatsApp is predominantly predetermined by the Technological Determinism Theory, Agenda Setting Theory, Social Constructionism of Technology Theory, Diffusion of Innovations Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory. The study's findings will play the role of filling the theoretical framework knowledge gap in empirical studies related to social activism through new media artefacts like WhatsApp. The study recommends further research on theoretical frameworks that align with the utilisation of new media artefacts in digital activism.

Key terms: Digital communication, Kenya Universities Staff Union, labour rights advocacy, theoretical analysis, WhatsApp.

INTRODUCTION

This study sought to analyse the theoretical framework of the use of WhatsApp in labour rights advocacy by the Kenya Universities Staff Union members at Egerton University. According to Ochieng and Kamau (2022), although traditional media artefacts such as newspapers, radio and television still play a significant role in labour rights advocacy by trade unions in Kenya, the last decade has experienced a proliferation of mobile communication technologies which have transformed the landscape of labour rights advocacy. This trend is primarily driven by the high level of media exposure within communities like public universities, influenced by the global advancement of digital communication technologies. The use of new media technologies such as WhatsApp has transformed communication dynamics within trade unions such as the Kenya Universities Staff Union, enabling more effective member mobilisation and sharing of information related to labour rights.

According to Smith and Johnson (2023), WhatsApp, as a widely accessible and cost-effective platform, allows trade unions to mobilise members swiftly, disseminate crucial information, and coordinate collective actions with greater flexibility. Nguyen and Thomas (2024) observe that such platforms empower marginalised groups by providing alternative channels to voice concerns and negotiate labour rights outside traditional constraints. Furthermore, as Omondi (2024) notes, the interactive nature of WhatsApp facilitates peer-to-peer support and knowledge sharing, which strengthens solidarity and collective bargaining power within trade unions. Munyua and Kariuki (2022) opine that in the context of public universities trade unions, digital communication tools and channels have proven significance in overcoming barriers related to wide coverage and inclusivity, thereby promoting enhanced labour rights advocacy activities.

The study of the theoretical framework on the utilisation of new media communication platforms in labour rights advocacy by workers in public universities in Kenya is an aid to future investigations in social activism through digital innovations. Neuman (2014) reported that theories distil complex real-world phenomena into interpretive models by identifying patterns, variables and relationships so that researchers are able to focus on the most important

elements of a problem. Kerlinger and Lee (2000) examined how theoretical frameworks provide backgrounds upon which scientific knowledge is built by allowing researchers to test hypothesis, refine models, and contribute to a growing body of evidence over time. According to Adebayo and Muriithi (2023), theoretical perspectives such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Castells Network Society Theory, and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory have increasingly informed empirical research on digital activism and labour movements.

The integration of new media communication technologies into social activism efforts has been a subject of great scholarly interest. McCombs and Shaw (1972), the developers of the Agenda Setting Theory, emphasised that the media have the power to influence the salience of issues in public opinion. Similarly, Castells (2009) argued that communication technologies have redefined the dynamics of power and resistance in society. This paper aims to examine the underlying theories that inform and support the utilisation of WhatsApp's new media communication channel and platform in labour rights advocacy by workers subscribed to the Kenya Universities Staff Union at Egerton University by assessing aspects of society, technology, the role of advocacy and the agenda of labour rights. The results will put in place a comprehensive empirical framework of theories that inform the study of digital activism, such as labour rights advocacy in public universities in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature related to theoretical frameworks in the context of mass communication and digital activism under three sub-headings, namely, the concept of mass communication theory, prior studies and gaps. The section also outlines the theoretical framework of the study.

The Concept of Mass Communication Theories

Good theories don't just explain the past or present but help predict future behaviour or outcomes under specific conditions. For instance, the Diffusion of Innovations Theory helps predict how and why new media technologies spread within a group (Rogers, 1962). According to McQuail (2010), mass media communication theories are linked to Lasswell's Communication Model, which involves aspects of

transmission, publicity, and reception of information. McQuail (2010) further states that a theory is a broad proposition derived from observation and logical reasoning, whereas a model is a specific component or attribute of a theory that connects the different elements of a theory in a structured manner.

In mass communication, theories provide answers and wide propositions on how the media impacts the audience. Mass media communication theories thus provide explanations and predictions. Domminick (2013) notes that new media involves the technological developments in mass media communication involving interactivity, connectivity, accessibility and the multiplication of content. Nguyen and Thomas (2023) and Adekunle and Mbatha (2022) concur that the legacy of mass media theories such as Agenda Setting Theory must be adapted to reflect the interactivity, algorithmic curation, and user-generated content that define today's media ecosystem. Zhao and Williams (2023) opine that the blurred boundaries between producers and consumers of content have prompted researchers to revisit audience-centred theories and media effects frameworks within contexts like social media activism.

Prior Studies

Myers (2022) observes that the study of new media technology in social activism can be amplified by first having an overview of the social influence concept of communication, where the thinking, feelings, and behaviours of people in a social perspective are influenced by how they communicate. Fuchs (2017) observes that human beings are social in nature and can only exist by entering into social relations with other humans where they exchange symbols of communication and influence others' knowledge and understanding, levels of attitudes, actions, beliefs, feelings and perceptions. Smith and Jones (2022) argue that although new media communication technologies have not altered the basic concepts, attitudes and role of mass media, they have paved the way for the need for further academic and theoretical exploration of mass media communication.

WhatsApp messaging and social networking media are significantly being utilised as a pivotal tool for digital activism across the globe due to their innovative, user-friendly and real-time communication features (Shao &

Lin, 2020). According to Achieng and Onyango (2023), WhatsApp is a preferred digital communication tool for labour rights advocacy among workers in Kenyan public universities because it facilitates real-time communication, coordination and mobilisation among trade unions' members in efforts aimed at elevating labour rights advocacy campaigns. The scholars emphasise that WhatsApp's real-time communication and user-friendly features render it suitable for digital activism, especially in the context of labour rights advocacy.

The WhatsApp platform facilitates effective coordination and mobilisation among union members, thus enhancing the impact of activism. In Kenyan university communities, WhatsApp serves not only as a platform for personal communication but also as a vital tool for labour rights advocacy due to its flexible and instant messaging features (Mwangi & Kimani, 2022). According to Wang and Zhou (2023), the name "WhatsApp" is a connotation that imitates the English language phrase "What's up", which is used in social and informal communication settings to indicate current events or news, hence signifies WhatsApp's casual and conversational communication basics.

Gaps

Muthairo and Ragnedda (2019) examined how digital tools such as WhatsApp have been instrumental in organising protests and mobilisation of communities worldwide. This study, however, was broad-based and failed to address specific communities such as KUSU. A study conducted by Voss and Williams in 2022 titled "The role of social media in labour rights advocacy", utilised the Agenda Setting Theory of mass media communication to discuss how social media allows activists to set the agenda of labour rights by highlighting labour rights issues predominantly, unlike the laxity of traditional media. The study also examined how labour rights activists frame messages on social media to appeal to different audiences, thus shaping public perception on labour rights. The study, however, failed to note the technological and social significance of the theory in the study.

A notable study carried out in 2013 by Bennett Williams and Anders Segerberg titled "The logic of connective action: Digital media and personalisation of contentious politics," explored how digital activists

construct identities and collective action frames from digital spaces. The study, however, utilised only the Social Constructionism Theory and neglected technological innovation and agenda-setting aspects of mass communication. Another study by Gil de Zuniga and Valenzuela in 2012, titled "Understanding the motivations behind social media use in activism", adopted the Uses and Gratifications Theory but ignored the social and technological aspects of activism.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilised the Technological Determinism Theory and Agenda Setting Theory in data analysis by exploring the significance of WhatsApp as a digital communication tool in aiding the agenda of labour rights as an important topic of discussion and shaping of opinion by Kenya Universities Staff Union members at Egerton University.

The Technological Determinism Theory helped the study to determine the role of WhatsApp as a new media technology in enhancing labour rights advocacy by Kenya Universities Staff Union members at Egerton University by measuring why it is a preferred tool and how its features are manipulated to advance the labour rights agenda. Hauer (2017) states that technological determinism is the assumption that technology is the key determinant of development in society. On the other hand, the Agenda Setting Theory helped the study determine how WhatsApp features, once manipulated by the group's members, help advance the agenda of Labour rights on the platform through messaging. Indeed Careers Guide (2023) outlines that Agenda Setting Theory is a philosophy of mass communication that explains how media messages influence the public agenda depending on how they are treated in prominence. The study explored the theory's tenets like public agenda, priming and framing. During data analysis, the study was keen to determine the frequency of labour rights-related messages and themes on the platform, and

how they are selected and presented to influence engagement.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative case study design approach, which involved an in-depth analysis of messages posted on the KUSU Egerton University chapter WhatsApp group and interview conversations with members. The group has a population of three hundred (300) members who utilise the platform to engage on labour rights-related issues. Purposive sampling method was utilised to identify messages related to labour rights advocacy posted on the platform, while a cluster and purposive method was used to identify a sample size of thirty-five (35) members, including active members, passive members, dormant members and group administrators. Proportional and saturation principle techniques were applied to arrive at sample sizes in each cluster as indicated in Table 1. The study targeted fifteen (15) active members, ten (10) passive members, five (5) dormant members and five (5) group administrators. The study recorded and transcribed interview conversations with members and subjected them to content analysis, thematic analysis and discourse analysis to identify the social, technological and labour rights themes in order to infer mass media communication theories.

The study also identified labour rights-related messages and themes on the platform through structured observations, and sought to understand their social, technological and labour rights framing in order to infer themes that imply mass media communication theories. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed to text data. Before the interviews began, the researcher introduced the topic and aim of the study, indicated the recording process and the confidentiality of the data in order to confirm consent of the respondents. The study utilised qualitative descriptions and descriptive statistics to present data.

Table 1: Proportions and Sample Size(s) of KUSU WhatsApp Group Members

Category/Cluster	Proportion	Percentage	Sample size/Saturation
Group Administrators	10	3.1	5
Active Members	30	10	15
Passive Members	210	70	10
Dormant Members	50	16	5
Total	300	100	35

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study identified messages and interview results that inferred mass media theories by analysing social frames cues, technological frames cues and labour rights advocacy frames cues from the sample population.

Social Frames Cues

These involved how the WhatsApp platform facilitates social organisation, community building and collective identity among KUSU members at Egerton University. According to Myers (2022), social influence is a process that involves how people's attitudes, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours change over time due to interactions with others. People derive identity from the groups they belong to, hence they get influenced by group dynamics. The following indicators were used to identify social frame cues from the data.

i) Sense of Belonging

Expressions of solidarity among KUSU members were identified from phrases and words such as: "Good morning comrades", "dear members", "brothers and sisters", and "beloved members".

For example, a message shared by one active member who is an official of the university's Retirement Benefits Scheme read: "Good morning dear colleagues. Just a quick reminder, there will be an education day for KUSU members on May 18th 2025 at the Senior Common Room grounds. Let us all attend. Thank you".

ii) Moral Support

Sharing of emotional messages and reactions was observed. For example, "we shall overcome", "God will see us through", "nothing lasts forever my dear", "it is unfortunate", "it is so sad". For example, the following message is emotionally constructed. "It is unfortunate we have lost our brother Kimemia after

he was unable to meet medical expenses due to non remittance of NHIF deductions. May God rest is soul in eternal peace".

iii) Labour Rights Advocacy Narratives

These included narratives and analogies related to injustices and unfair treatment at work that were shared by active members, which inferred sympathy and empathy. For example: "Members, let me share with you the story of my life since we started receiving half salaries. I have several loans which are not being repaid in full. The arrears are earning interest and I have been listed with CRB. This means I cannot be able to borrow a loan from any financial institution, even shylocks! I have two children in secondary school, one at college and another one at university. I don't know how iam going to cater for their fees because the half salary cannot even be enough to cater for basic needs at home. My spouse is not employed. This situation has turned us into paupers. The law is very clear that it is illegal to pay a worker incomplete remuneration. The union should do something about this through a legal process..."

Technological Frames Cues

These included messages and utterances related to how WhatsApp, as a digital communication tool, influences labour rights discourse and strategies by KUSU members at Egerton University. Omanga (2019) discusses how platforms such as WhatsApp serve as a "digital public" in Kenya, enabling citizens to engage in socio-economic, political and cultural discourse, hence influencing collective action strategies. The following indicators were used to analyse the technological frames cues in the study.

i) Accessibility and Immediacy

Data indicated that three hundred (300) KUSU members are subscribed to the KUSU, Egerton

University branch WhatsApp group out of the seven hundred (700) members of the branch. This means that about 43 per cent of KUSU members access the platform for labour rights communication. One hundred per cent of the group's administrators confirmed that the union chose WhatsApp as a platform to engage in labour rights because of its features like immediate and quick communication, as well as its ability to reach a wider audience. Table 1 shows that the majority (70%) of the group's members are passive, which means that the majority of KUSU members consume labour rights-related messages shared on the platform. The rate of sharing messages by active members indicated that an average of five (5) messages is shared on the wall every day by each active member, which translates to thirty-five (35) messages in a week and three hundred and fifty (350) messages per month by a single active member. An

average of seventy-five (75) messages are posted every day by the fifteen (15) active members of the group, five hundred and twenty-five (525) in a week and two thousand and one hundred (2100) messages in a month. This rate is above average according to digital activism standards that rate between 300-800 messages in a month.

ii) Multimedia Sharing

This involved a variety of formats of the messages related to labour rights shared on the platform, enabled by WhatsApp features. These included short messages, long messages, video clips, photographs, links, documents, emojis, Graphic Interchange Formats (GIFs) and memes. Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of responses from active members on the formats of messages they share on the platform.

Table 2: Formats of Messages Posted by Active KUSU WhatsApp Group Members

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Long text messages	15	100
Short text messages	15	100
Photographs	10	66
Video clips	10	66
Links	10	66
Documents	8	33
Emojis	10	66
GIFs	8	53
Voice chats	5	33
Memes	5	33

From the table above, 100 per cent of active members use both long and short messages, 66 per cent use visual content, 53 per cent use GIFs, and 33 per cent use emojis and memes to interact on the platform. The mean frequency (average number of active members' posts per format is equal to 10, i.e. 101 divided by 10. This shows that about 10 active members, or 66 per cent, use each of the formats. The median of the formats is 10, i.e. 10 plus 10 divided by 2. This indicates that half of the formats are used by at least 10 active members of the group. The mode of formats of messages is 10, which suggests that at least 10 active

members, or 66 per cent, use all the formats to interact on the platform. The range of the formats is 15 minus 5. This indicates that there is a high variability of message formats on the platform.

Labour Rights Agenda Frames Cues

These were direct references to labour rights advocacy messages shared on the WhatsApp platform by KUSU members at Egerton University. The study analysed themes of messages related to labour rights posted by active members of the group to infer the agenda of labour rights, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Labour Rights Related Themes of Messages Posted by Active KUSU WhatsApp Group Members

Theme of Message	Frequency
Wage-related issues	15
Medical and health issues	8
Job security concerns	10
Career progress matters	10
Trade union and leadership issues	15
Employer-employee relations matters	5
Legal and ethical issues	5
Government labour policy issues	8
Solidarity and social inclusion cues	10
Work environment and safety issues	8

The table indicates that the most shared labour rights agenda by KUSU members on the WhatsApp platform is wage-related and trade union leadership issues. The least shared labour rights-related messages are the employee-employer relations and legal-ethical issues. This suggests that economic pressure and trade union leadership and accountability dominate the agenda of labour rights themes on the KUSU, Egerton University branch WhatsApp group platform.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: This study sought to carry out a theoretical analysis to explore the theoretical framework underlying digital advocacy in the context of labour rights advocacy via WhatsApp by Kenya Universities Staff Union (KUSU) members at Egerton University. Three indicators, including social networking frames cues, technological determinism frames cues and labour rights agenda frames cues, were used to navigate this objective. From the data analysed, the following conclusions were made concerning theoretical frameworks underlying the utilisation of WhatsApp for labour rights advocacy by KUSU members at Egerton University.

i). Social Constructionism of Technology Theory

This theory was developed in 1984 by Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker in their publication titled "The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts. The theory argues that technological advancements are shaped by social norms but not vice-versa. Its tenets apply to social groups and technological interpretations by the social group members. In mass communication studies, this theory can help explain how new media technologies such as WhatsApp are developed to suit social groups'

socio-economic and cultural-political needs. In the context of the KUSU social group at Egerton University, WhatsApp has been adopted for labour rights advocacy and social cohesion building among the members. The theory can be used to interpret how the labour rights landscape dictates the different ways in which WhatsApp is utilised. For example, according to the majority of KUSU members at Egerton University (see table 3), this WhatsApp group has enhanced a sense of solidarity and social inclusion among them. This indicated that the need for unity and articulation of labour rights by KUSU members dictates the use of WhatsApp; thus, apart from sharing information related to labour rights, the platform has brought them together as a family.

ii) Technological Determinism Theory

Technological Determinism Theory was developed by Marshal McLuhan in the 1970s through his work titled "The Medium is the Message" (McLuhan, 1967), which loosely translates to the nature of a communication technology. The theory, unlike the Social Constructionism Theory, opines that technology shapes how information influences the audience. Its tenets are pegged on how technology drives social change, the uniqueness of each technology and outcomes, and the role of technology in human cultural adaptation. In mass communication studies, this theory can be used to explain how new media communication channels revolutionise communication dynamics and mass culture. In the context of the utilisation of WhatsApp for labour rights advocacy by KUSU members at Egerton University, this theory can help analyse how WhatsApp has revolutionised the labour rights advocacy landscape at Egerton

University through its innovative features and accessibility, while adding a unique leaf to the social cohesiveness among KUSU members as a distinct social group. The results analysed and presented indicated that KUSU members at Egerton University actively utilise WhatsApp features to set the agenda of labour rights. It indicated that the members are satisfied with the way the WhatsApp technology aids their labour relations concerns, and it was concluded that the technology had advanced labour rights advocacy by the members.

iii). Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda Setting Theory was developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 in their study of the USA Presidential Elections of 1968. The theory stipulates that the media influences public opinion by setting the agenda through consistent reporting on certain topics or issues. The tenets of this theory involve the agenda or media messages, and the factors that influence their selection, how the messages are structured and the principles or strategies behind the structuring of the messages – all geared towards attracting attention or influencing the opinion or judgment of the audience. In mass communication studies, this theory can be used to explain the important role of media content rather than technology in shaping the attitudes and perceptions of the audience. In the context of the utilisation of WhatsApp in labour rights advocacy by KUSU members at Egerton University, this theory can help explain how WhatsApp enhances the messaging strategies in order to advance or set the labour rights agenda. From the data analysed and presented, it was concluded that WhatsApp features like real-time messaging, multimedia messaging, interactivity, feedback monitoring and wide coverage features had enabled KUSU members to set the agenda of labour rights, thus enhancing advocacy.

iv). Diffusion of Innovations Theory

This theory was developed by Everett Rogers in 1962 in his work titled “Diffusion of Innovations”. The theory explains how new ideas, practices or technologies spread in society over time. The theory revolves around the process by which people adopt new innovations and the underlying factors that influence this adoption. It involves perceptions of a social group on an idea or innovation, the channel of

communication and the time frame of adopting the innovation by the social group. In mass communication studies, this theory can help explain how social groups adapt to new communication technologies and the factors that influence the choice or decision to adopt the technologies. In the context of the utilisation of WhatsApp for labour rights advocacy by KUSU members at Egerton University, this theory can help analyse how WhatsApp was adopted and the reasons behind its choice. It can also help explain how suitable the technology is by measuring the perceptions of the users and the success of advocacy. For example, the results show that 43 per cent of KUSU members at Egerton University are enrolled on the platform. This indicated that the subscription is bound to increase. The results also indicated that the members utilise a variety of WhatsApp features to share messages and interact, an indication that more features were bound to be utilised by the members as they continue interacting with WhatsApp.

vi). Uses and Gratifications Theory

This theory focuses on why and how social groups adopt specific media artefacts or content to satisfy their specific socio-psychological needs. The theory suggests that the audience is not passive users of media but active agents who make deliberate choices on which media suits their needs. Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gureritch developed this theory in the 1970s as a reaction to theories that treated mass media audiences as passive. The theory is outlined by the goals of a media artefact to satisfy the needs of an audience, where the audience actively plays a role in the choice of that media. In mass communication studies, this theory can help explain why audiences prefer certain media platforms over others and help understand various media consumption patterns. In the context of the use of WhatsApp for labour rights advocacy by KUSU members at Egerton university, this theory can help establish the underlying reasons or factors that contributed to the choice of WhatsApp by KUSU members as a media platform to advance their labour relations campaigns needs that include a need for mobilisation, equal participation, wide coverage, timely real-time updates and freedom from censorship and control among other factors. Members can share a variety of messages in a variety of formats and be

able to engage satisfactorily on labour-related matters as well as monitor feedback.

Recommendations: The results of the study highlighted key theoretical frameworks that can be adopted in mass media and digital advocacy-related empirical studies. The results form a crucial discourse of mass media and social activism theoretical

frameworks, which future researchers ought to apply in their studies. It is therefore recommended that a wider study of mass media and social activism theories related to digital activism should be carried out to promote future research and knowledge accumulation in regard to mass media communication and social activism theories.

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Journal of Media and Communication

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