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Influence of Facebook and WhatsApp on Gender-Based Violence Prevention Projects among Adolescents in Kicukiro District

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) prevention requires communication that improves awareness, supports respectful attitudes, and connects adolescents with appropriate services. This study examined adolescents' perceptions of the contribution of Facebook and WhatsApp to GBV prevention projects in Kicukiro District, Rwanda. Cultivation Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Feminist Media Theory informed the study. A mixed-methods, cross-sectional design was reported, involving 399 adolescents aged 13–19 years. Questionnaires and interviews provided primary data. This article presents descriptive findings on respondents' gender and four communication-related statements. Female respondents accounted for 56.9% of the sample, while male respondents represented 43.1%. Mean scores ranged from 4.76 to 4.95, with standard deviations ranging from 0.219 to 0.534. Respondents expressed favourable perceptions of the platforms' contributions to recognising the seriousness of GBV, discussing violence, speaking out, and shaping attitudes towards survivors. These findings describe perceived communication benefits; they do not establish reduced violence or demonstrate causal effects. The study concludes that Facebook and WhatsApp offer potential channels for adolescent engagement within broader GBV prevention programmes. Project managers should combine accessible messages with responsible moderation, privacy protection, digital literacy, and clear referral arrangements. Future evaluations should distinguish online participation from changes in knowledge, attitudes, help-seeking, and experiences of violence.

Keywords: *Social networking sites, Facebook, WhatsApp, gender-based violence prevention, adolescents.*

1.0 Background to the Study

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a public health and human rights concern that can undermine physical, psychological, social, and educational well-being. Prevention therefore requires attention to harmful gender norms, unequal power relations, and discriminatory attitudes (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). Adolescence is a relevant period for examining how messages about

relationships, consent, and safety are understood. Research in Rwanda identifies barriers to accessing reliable information on sensitive subjects, supporting the need for communication approaches that respond to adolescents' circumstances (Mbarushimana *et al*., 2022).

Facebook and WhatsApp offer distinct communication features that may support the implementation of GBV prevention projects among adolescents. Facebook can facilitate the dissemination of public awareness messages, multimedia educational materials, campaign updates, and discussions through pages and groups. WhatsApp can support direct communication, group discussions, and the sharing of educational resources within peer and community networks. These functions may help prevention projects extend their reach, encourage participation, and promote discussion of consent, respectful relationships, and available support services. Research on adolescent access to sexual and reproductive health information in Rwanda demonstrates the relevance of digital communication channels to young people's information-seeking practices (Mbarushimana *et al*., 2022).

Nevertheless, the availability of these communication opportunities does not necessarily establish their effectiveness in preventing GBV. Digital platforms may also facilitate cyber-harassment, threats, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, misinformation, and the circulation of harmful gender stereotypes. A joint technical brief by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Save the Children (2025) emphasises the importance of age-appropriate prevention, legal protection, survivor-centred responses, platform accountability, and stronger evidence on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Similarly, UN Women (2025) identifies technology-facilitated violence as an extension of broader gender inequalities and calls for coordinated approaches to prevention, digital safety, and survivor support. The contribution of Facebook and WhatsApp to GBV prevention needs to be examined in relation to both their communication opportunities and the risks associated with their use.

Social networking sites may extend the reach of youth-oriented communication, but their availability does not establish their effectiveness. A rights-based approach requires attention to both adolescents' participation and their protection in digital environments (Livingstone & Third, 2017). For GBV prevention projects, this means considering who can access messages, whose experiences are represented, and whether discussion can occur safely. Digital communication should therefore complement school, family, community, and service-based interventions rather than operate as an isolated prevention strategy (UNICEF *et al*., 2025).

Rwandan research provides a relevant foundation for examining digital prevention communication. Mbarushimana *et al*. (2022) explored barriers and enabling conditions affecting young adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health and rights information. Their findings help explain the importance of communication beyond the household, although the study did not test Facebook or WhatsApp as GBV prevention interventions. Kawonga *et al*. (2025) examined sexual violence among adolescent girls and young women in Kicukiro and identified social and structural drivers requiring coordinated responses. Together, these studies establish a local rationale for examining communication without assuming that digital participation resolves the underlying causes of violence.

The present study examines adolescents' perceptions of Facebook and WhatsApp as communication channels within GBV prevention projects in Kicukiro District. Existing Rwandan

studies address access to sensitive information and the drivers of sexual violence, but do not directly evaluate the perceived contributions examined here (Mbarushimana *et al*., 2022; Kawonga *et al*., 2025). The article focuses on awareness, attitudes, discussion, and speaking out against GBV. Its contribution lies in describing these perceptions while distinguishing them from demonstrated changes in violence or service use.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

GBV prevention projects need communication that adolescents can access, understand, and use safely. Rwandan evidence identifies challenges in obtaining sensitive information and social conditions that sustain vulnerability to sexual violence (Mbarushimana *et al*., 2022; Kawonga *et al*., 2025). However, the existence of these challenges does not establish that Facebook or WhatsApp will resolve them. The research problem concerns how adolescents perceive these platforms' contributions to prevention communication and how such perceptions should be interpreted within project evaluation.

1.2 Research Objective

The objective was to examine adolescents' perceptions of the contribution of Facebook and WhatsApp to communication-related performance in GBV prevention projects in Kicukiro District, Rwanda.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

Cultivation Theory provides a perspective on the relationship between repeated media exposure and perceptions of social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Applied to the present topic, it suggests examining the messages adolescents encounter about gender, violence, and acceptable relationships. The theory offers an interpretive lens rather than a finding that repeated exposure necessarily produces beneficial effects. Its relevance depends on the content and consistency of messages, as well as the wider environment in which adolescents interpret them. A cultivation perspective directs attention to patterns of communication rather than isolated posts. A prevention campaign might repeatedly present violence as unacceptable, while other material encountered on the same platform might normalise coercion or blame survivors. The present study did not measure such competing exposure patterns. Consequently, its favourable descriptive responses should not be treated as a direct test of cultivation processes. The theoretical application identifies questions for further research concerning exposure, message consistency, and perceptions over time (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Social Learning Theory provides a complementary account of how people may learn through observing others. Bandura's (2001) social cognitive account of mass communication links mediated messages with learning, motivation, and social networks. In GBV prevention, the relevant application concerns how adolescents interpret examples of respectful relationships, peer responses, and help-seeking. The theory does not imply that observing a message automatically produces action. Opportunities, social support, and perceived consequences remain relevant to whether a communicated behaviour is adopted. For this article, the social learning perspective helps distinguish exposure to a message from participation in a prevention activity. Reading a post, observing a supportive response, and deciding to challenge harmful behaviour are different

processes. A survey item about speaking out can indicate a perceived opportunity, but it cannot demonstrate how learning occurred or whether action followed. This distinction gives the theory a useful role in designing subsequent evaluations without claiming that the present descriptive results tested its mechanisms (Bandura, 2001).

Feminist Media Theory directs attention to gendered representation, voice, and power within communication (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Its application here concerns whose accounts are heard, how survivors are portrayed, and whether messages challenge or reproduce unequal gender relations. A digital space may permit participation while still exposing participants to judgement or exclusion. Accordingly, the analytical focus extends beyond the number of messages circulated to the conditions under which adolescents can contribute and the meanings attached to their contributions. These three perspectives address related but distinct questions. Cultivation concerns repeated representations; social learning concerns observation and possible action; feminist media analysis concerns power and representation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Bandura, 2001; Byerly & Ross, 2006). Their combined use supports a more precise interpretation of communication-related performance. In this article, they organise the discussion of perceived awareness, attitudes, and participation. They do not substitute for measures of exposure, learning, or gender relations that the reported tables do not contain.

2.2 Digital Communication and Participation

Social media communication involves several functions, including sharing, conversation, relationships, and group formation (Kietzmann *et al*., 2011). These functions help explain why prevention projects may consider digital channels when communicating with adolescents. However, a platform's communication features are not equivalent to a project's outcomes. A message may circulate widely without being understood, trusted, or applied. Evaluating a prevention project therefore requires a clear account of the relationship between the communication activity and the intended benefit. For this study, awareness refers to respondents' perceived recognition of the seriousness of GBV. Attitudes concern perceptions associated with survivors and violence, while participation includes the perceived opportunity to speak out. These distinctions make the four reported statements easier to interpret. They also prevent a broad label such as project performance from concealing differences between recognition, evaluation, and action. The functional approach to social media supports examining these different forms of engagement rather than treating all online activity as interchangeable (Kietzmann *et al*., 2011).

Children's digital rights provide another basis for assessing participation. Livingstone and Third (2017) examine the relationship between protection and the opportunities available through digital connectivity. Their perspective is relevant because adolescents should be considered participants in communication, with interests extending beyond receiving information. In the present application, participation includes opportunities to ask questions, express concerns, and understand available support. Such opportunities need to be considered alongside privacy, accessibility, and the possibility of harmful responses. The practical implication is that engagement indicators should have a clear meaning. Counting responses to a post may describe activity but reveal little about whether the exchange was respectful or useful. Similarly, a quiet participant may still read and understand information without contributing publicly. These examples illustrate why online visibility is an incomplete indicator of communication value. A rights-based interpretation

therefore supports attention to different forms of participation and the conditions under which adolescents choose to engage (Livingstone & Third, 2017).

2.3 Digital Risks and Privacy

Digital channels can also facilitate harm. Henry and Powell (2018) review empirical research on technology-facilitated sexual violence and identify the importance of examining abuses involving digital technologies. This literature qualifies any assumption that greater online activity necessarily benefits prevention. The present article therefore treats the same communication environment as a potential source of information and risk. Prevention communication needs to consider harmful responses, unwanted exposure, and the possible misuse of sensitive material. Privacy is also relational. Marwick and boyd (2014) examine how teenagers negotiate privacy within networked settings, drawing attention to the role of other people in shaping what remains private. Applied to GBV prevention, this perspective suggests that an individual's decision to share information cannot guarantee control over its subsequent circulation. A participant may trust an immediate audience while being unable to control copying or redistribution. This is a conceptual implication for communication planning, rather than a privacy incident documented by the present study.

Age adds another dimension to the analysis. UNICEF *et al*. (2025) adopt a life-course perspective on technology-facilitated GBV, recognising that risks and response needs differ across stages of life. This supports treating adolescent communication as more than a simplified version of adult communication. For project planning, the relevant implication is to consider comprehension, dependency, and access to support when designing messages. The present data do not compare younger and older adolescents, so they cannot establish which arrangements work best for different ages. These perspectives point to an evaluative distinction between reach and safe reach. The former concerns whether messages are encountered; the latter also considers the circumstances of exposure and participation. A prevention project could reach many adolescents while allowing harmful discussion or exposing sensitive information. This distinction is proposed as an analytical implication of the digital-risk literature, not as an additional result of the survey (Henry & Powell, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2014). It provides a basis for interpreting favourable platform perceptions with appropriate care.

2.4 Evidence from Rwanda

Mbarushimana *et al*. (2022) used qualitative interviews with key informants to examine young adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health and rights information in Rwanda. The study's value for the present article lies in its attention to information access within a wider social environment. Its focus differs from an evaluation of digital GBV prevention projects. Accordingly, it supports the relevance of communication barriers without establishing the effectiveness of the two platforms considered here. Kawonga *et al*. (2025) examined drivers and prevention strategies for sexual violence among adolescent girls and young women in Kicukiro. Their qualitative investigation provides local evidence that violence prevention must address social conditions and relationships. The relevance to this article is contextual: digital communication operates within those conditions. The study should therefore inform the rationale for a broader prevention approach, while remaining distinct from evidence about adolescents' perceptions of Facebook and WhatsApp. The two studies converge in directing attention beyond individual knowledge alone. One considers the environment surrounding access to sensitive information; the other examines

conditions associated with sexual violence in a specific locality (Mbarushimana *et al*., 2022; Kawonga *et al*., 2025). Their different populations and research questions limit direct comparison. Nevertheless, together they support examining how communication relates to adolescents' circumstances rather than assuming that access to a platform is sufficient for prevention.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed here connects media interpretation, participation, privacy, and the local conditions of prevention. Theoretical work explains why messages may matter, while rights and risk perspectives clarify why communication requires safeguards (Bandura, 2001; Byerly & Ross, 2006; Livingstone & Third, 2017). The Rwandan studies provide context but do not answer the specific descriptive question addressed in this article. This combination supports a focused investigation of perceived communication contributions rather than a broad claim that digital platforms prevent violence. The present research addresses that descriptive gap through four statements concerning awareness, attitudes, discussion, and speaking out. These dimensions offer a starting point for interpreting what adolescents believe the platforms contribute. The resulting evidence remains narrower than a full evaluation of GBV prevention outcomes. Recognising that boundary helps connect the survey to the literature while preserving the distinction between theoretical expectations and measured results. Subsequent research can build on this foundation by examining exposure, implementation, and outcomes over time.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design to examine adolescents' perceptions of Facebook and WhatsApp in GBV prevention projects in Kicukiro District, Rwanda. Quantitative and qualitative information was collected at one point in time. The results presented in this article are descriptive and therefore provide a snapshot of respondents' views rather than evidence of change over time.

3.2 Target Population

The target population comprised adolescents aged 13–19 years living in Kicukiro District, Rwanda. The sampling calculation used a population figure of 263,076, attributed in the original study to the 2022 census. This figure should be treated as the reported sampling input; the article does not establish that it represents the district's population aged 13–19 years. Adolescents were selected because their perspectives were relevant to awareness, engagement, and access to GBV prevention information.

3.3 Sample Size

The study used the following finite-population formula, attributed to Yamane (1967), with a stated margin of error of 5%:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = calculated sample size

N = population input used in the calculation (263,076)

e = stated margin of error (0.05)

Substituting the values:

$$n = \frac{263{,}076}{1 + 263{,}076(0.05)^2} = \frac{263{,}076}{658.69} = 399.39$$

The calculation yielded approximately 399.39. The article reports a final sample of 399 adolescents aged 13–19 years. This reported sample is retained in the descriptive tables; rounding the calculated minimum upwards would yield 400.

3.4 Data Collection

The study reported using primary and secondary information. Questionnaires and interviews provided primary data on adolescents' perceptions of Facebook and WhatsApp in GBV prevention projects. The results reproduced here comprise respondent frequencies, percentages, item means, and standard deviations. Interview procedures and thematic findings are not detailed in the reported results, so the interpretation is confined to the descriptive evidence presented.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Respondent Profile

Table 1 presents the gender distribution of the 399 respondents. These descriptive characteristics provide context for interpreting the sample's perceptions of Facebook and WhatsApp in GBV prevention communication.

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	172	43.1	43.1	43.1
	Female	227	56.9	56.9	100.0
	Total	399	100.0	100.0	

Note. Source: Primary data (2026).

Female respondents accounted for 56.9% of the sample (227 participants), while male respondents accounted for 43.1% (172 participants). The findings therefore reflect the views of both groups, with greater female representation. This distribution describes participation in the study; it does not establish differences in exposure to violence or in platform use. Because the results are not disaggregated by gender, the article does not infer that male and female respondents held different views.

4.2 Perceived Contributions of Social Networking Sites

The study examined respondents' perceptions of the contribution of Facebook and WhatsApp to GBV prevention communication. Table 2 summarises four statements concerning the seriousness

of GBV, speaking out against violence, attitudes towards survivors, and awareness arising from online discussion. These items describe perceived communication contributions rather than direct measures of project effectiveness.

Table 2: Perceived Contributions of Social Networking Sites to GBV Prevention Communication

Statement	N	Mean	SD
What I see on social media communication strategies influences how serious I think gender-based violence is	399	4.95	.219
Social networking sites encourage adolescents to challenge or speak out against gender-based violence	399	4.76	.534
Content I see on social media communication strategies affects my attitudes toward victims of gender-based violence	399	4.94	.239
Discussions about gender-based violence on social networking sites make me more aware of its seriousness.	399	4.93	.256

Source: Primary Data (2026)

Table 2 shows consistently favourable responses across the four statements. The highest mean concerned perceptions of the seriousness of GBV (M = 4.95, SD = 0.219). Attitudes towards survivors followed (M = 4.94, SD = 0.239), while awareness through online discussions recorded a mean of 4.93 (SD = 0.256). Speaking out against GBV had the lowest mean, although responses remained favourable (M = 4.76, SD = 0.534). These descriptive statistics do not establish statistical significance or causal effects. The statement on speaking out against GBV recorded greater variation than the other items (M = 4.76, SD = 0.534). Respondents generally perceived social networking sites as channels through which adolescents could challenge violence. The wider spread of responses suggests that this perception was less uniform than perceptions concerning awareness. However, the item does not measure whether respondents actually challenged violence, reported an incident, or supported a survivor. Its practical value lies in identifying a perceived opportunity for participation that future evaluations could examine through behavioural indicators.

Respondents also expressed favourable views about the influence of social media content on attitudes towards survivors (M = 4.94, SD = 0.239). The small standard deviation indicates limited variation in responses. Nevertheless, the statement refers to an influence on attitudes without specifying the direction or magnitude of any change. The findings therefore support a cautious interpretation: respondents perceived an influence, but the data alone cannot establish increased empathy or reduced victim-blaming. Evaluations using clearly defined attitude measures would help distinguish supportive responses from potentially harmful ones.

The statement on online discussions and awareness of the seriousness of GBV recorded a mean of 4.93 (SD = 0.256). Respondents' views were closely clustered, suggesting broad agreement within the sample. This pattern supports the perceived relevance of discussion-based communication. It

does not show how frequently respondents encountered such discussions, whether the information was accurate, or how well it was understood. These distinctions matter when interpreting awareness as a component of prevention communication. Taken together, the results identify perceived opportunities for awareness and participation. They are compatible with using social networking sites to support communication, but they should not be interpreted as proof that GBV declined. The study's cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported perceptions limit claims about sustained behavioural change. For project management, the main implication is to evaluate message quality, safe engagement, and access to support alongside digital reach.

4.3 Interpretation for Project Evaluation

The four items should be interpreted individually before being combined under a broad performance label. The statement concerning seriousness refers to perceived recognition of a problem. The statement concerning survivors refers to attitudes, while the speaking-out item relates to possible participation. Each addresses a different part of prevention communication. A project could perform well on one dimension while making less progress on another, so a single general conclusion should not obscure the differences between the items. The item means differ by relatively small amounts. Their ordering is descriptively useful, but the article does not report a statistical comparison establishing that these differences are meaningful.

The higher standard deviation for speaking out is also descriptive. It does not identify the reasons for variation or establish which adolescents felt more able to participate. These limitations support a careful reading in which the tables summarise perceptions without assigning causes to them. The data are reported jointly for Facebook and WhatsApp. They therefore do not establish which platform contributes more to awareness or which is more suitable for a specific communication task. Platform comparisons would require separate measures of exposure, use, and outcomes. The present results instead support considering the platforms together as perceived communication channels within the study setting. This distinction is useful when translating the findings into project decisions.

4.4 Scope and Limitations

The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time. It cannot determine whether favourable attitudes preceded platform use, followed it, or were associated with other experiences. The descriptive findings also do not identify a comparison group. Consequently, the results should not be used to estimate the effect of digital communication relative to school activities, community programmes, or other sources of information. Self-reported perceptions provide valuable information about respondents' views, but they do not independently verify exposure or behaviour. The tables do not include measures of message frequency, knowledge accuracy, referral completion, or violence incidence. They also do not report platform-specific results or subgroup comparisons. The interpretation therefore remains at the level of perceived communication contributions among the sampled adolescents. The manuscript does not provide sufficient detail to verify the age-specific population denominator, participant recruitment, instrument reliability, or ethical approval and consent procedures. These reporting limits constrain assessment of representativeness and research safeguards. The study's descriptive results can still be presented accurately, provided that the missing details are not inferred. Further reporting should distinguish documented procedures from general recommendations for future work.

5.0 Conclusion

The study concludes that respondents perceived Facebook and WhatsApp as useful channels for GBV prevention communication among adolescents in Kicukiro District. Favourable responses concerned awareness of the seriousness of GBV, online discussion, speaking out, and the influence of content on attitudes towards survivors. These findings support consideration of social networking sites within wider prevention programmes. They do not establish that the platforms reduced violence or independently improved overall project performance. The high item means and small standard deviations indicate consistently favourable perceptions within the sample. However, closely clustered responses cannot establish the accuracy of messages, the quality of participation, or changes in help-seeking. The platforms' potential contribution should therefore be understood in relation to the communication outcomes actually measured. Stronger evaluation would connect these perceptions with independently assessed knowledge, attitudes, and service-related outcomes. Facebook and WhatsApp can be considered as complementary channels within existing prevention approaches. Their use requires accurate and age-appropriate content, responsible moderation, privacy protection, and clear support pathways. These conditions are practical recommendations arising from the interpretation of the findings, rather than implementation arrangements verified by this study. A cautious approach preserves the distinction between promising communication opportunities and demonstrated prevention outcomes.

6.0 Recommendations

6.1 Policy and Practice

The Government of Rwanda, working through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, should strengthen policies promoting digital literacy, online safety, gender equality, and GBV awareness among adolescents. Schools should integrate responsible social media use and online harassment prevention into relevant educational activities. Collaboration among policymakers, schools, communities, and digital platform providers should be strengthened to protect adolescents and promote accurate, age-appropriate GBV prevention messages. Managers of GBV prevention projects should consider integrating Facebook and WhatsApp into their communication and stakeholder engagement strategies. They should establish clear communication plans, monitor message reach, the quality of engagement, and access to verified support information, and implement appropriate safeguards to address misinformation, cyberbullying, victim-blaming, and privacy concerns. Collaboration with parents, schools, community leaders, and youth organisations should be encouraged to reinforce prevention messages and connect adolescents with appropriate support services.

6.2 Further Research

Future evaluations should define the intended outcome before selecting an indicator. Awareness could be examined through knowledge questions, while attitudes require items that distinguish supportive from harmful beliefs. Participation could be assessed through voluntary engagement and appropriate help-seeking measures. Data collection should protect confidentiality and avoid treating public disclosure as evidence of programme success. These are proposed evaluation directions, not procedures claimed for the current study. Future researchers should examine how Facebook and WhatsApp influence adolescents' GBV awareness, attitudes, participation, and

prevention-related behaviours. Comparative and longitudinal studies are recommended to assess differences between platforms and investigate whether online prevention communication contributes to sustained changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. Theory-informed evaluations could investigate how social networking sites shape adolescents' perceptions of gender roles and GBV.

7.0 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes context-specific descriptive evidence on adolescents' perceptions of Facebook and WhatsApp in GBV prevention communication in Kicukiro District. It draws attention to awareness, discussion, attitudes, and speaking out as distinct aspects of communication-related project performance. The contribution is a beneficiary-focused account of perceived relevance, rather than a causal assessment of violence prevention. The article also clarifies the value of separating digital activity from prevention outcomes in project monitoring. Posting frequency and online visibility describe communication activity, whereas knowledge, attitudes, safe participation, and service access require different indicators. Cultivation, social learning, and feminist media perspectives offer complementary ways to interpret these distinctions. The resulting framework can guide more focused evaluation of adolescent-centred GBV prevention communication.

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