

Many Ugandans scroll social media for entertainment. Others are using the same platforms to build export and other businesses. Which side do you belong to?

Social media can either be an asset or a liability. Does social media consume your working hours? Are your security guards glued to TikTok, instead of being vigilant at the gate? Are you driving sales online? What exactly does social media mean to you? I think this is the point to sit upright. Social media should not be dismissed as a time waster, but judged by how it is used.

ALGORITHM-DRIVEN MARKETING

Global trade is shifting online and Ugandan Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) need to adapt. The next exporter might not own a factory or warehouse. They may own a smartphone, internet connection, digital payment account and social media page. Buyers communicate digitally and payments move electronically. Marketing is algorithm-driven. This is the language understood by Uganda's youth, who make up the biggest percentage of our population.

A Ugandan selling handicraft on Instagram can now reach customers in Nairobi, London or Toronto without ever boarding a plane, let alone owning a passport. The next export market might not begin at a trade fair, but on a smartphone screen. Welcome to the year 2026.

Digital trade is changing exports, both goods and services like tourism and business process outsourcing.

E-COMMERCE: CAN UGANDAN SMES SELL GLOBALLY ONLINE?

DIGITAL VISIBILITY

E-commerce and online marketplaces are gaining prominence. Social commerce on digital platforms is driving business while cross-border digital payments are taking centre stage. Visibility is now digital before it becomes physical. Uganda's SMEs are connecting with local and international buyers through TikTok Business, Instagram Shops and WhatsApp Business. However, Facebook, remains locally shut out by government.

Small businesses can now access markets directly with crafts, fashion, coffee brands, leather products, processed foods and tourism experiences. Digital platforms reduce dependence on middlemen.

Social media is now a trade tool. Social platforms are a commercial infrastructure. Ignore them at your own peril.

DIGITAL INFLUENCING

Influencer-driven commerce is the order of the day. The more followers you have, the more likely you are to land advertising deals because of the audience you influence. Christine Nampeera advertises several



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products and describes herself as a digital marketer.

Zari Hassan is another high-profile influencer who leverages her massive social media following to market products and services.

Digital trade is not magic. There is a whole cocktail of ingredients that must be blended together. High internet costs affect digital trade



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and e-commerce. Logistics and international shipping networks move products seen on Instagram to the final consumer.

FRAUD ONLINE

In addition, online fraud is real. Not all that glitters is gold and payment systems can be challenging. The world might see your product online in seconds, but delivery still

depends on systems. Locally, you need the bodaboda rider to deliver the package; megabytes cannot do this. You need courier companies like Posta Uganda or DHL to deliver handmade baskets to Germany.

Digital payments also come with trust issues. Buyers need reviews, consistency, professionalism and communication.

For maximum benefit, export readiness still matters. Even digital exporters need standards, packaging, branding, customer service, traceability and reliability.

INTERVENTION BY GOVERNMENT

Government institutions also have a major role to play. The private sector cannot carry the cross alone. Digital literacy should be promoted alongside SME training. Affordable internet should become a priority and logistics systems must be strengthened in a land-linked country like Uganda. The digital payment infrastructure also requires improvement to increase foreign exchange inflows.

Digital trade and e-commerce are a major opportunity for the youth. Young people might not own acres of land on earth, but they can own square miles of land in cyberspace, creating jobs and opportunities for others.

Digital trade is not replacing traditional exports like coffee, cocoa and tea. It is expanding who can participate. The next generation of exporters may not begin in factories or boardrooms, but on smartphones, digital platforms and online marketplaces.