

Digital literacy

DIGITAL LITERACY
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Many smartphone owners primarily use their devices for calls, messaging and entertainment, rather than for activities such as business, education or digital services.

Across Uganda, smartphones have quickly gained traction becoming one of the fastest spreading technologies of the past decade. Yet beneath the growing presence of smartphones lies a quieter challenge. Many users still lack the skills needed to use them productively.

Operating a small clothes shop in Jinja town, 24-year-old Sarah Nabwire acknowledges that she owns a smartphone and uses it for social media communication, posting, and entertainment. However, she admits to underutilising its potential due to limited digital knowledge and skills.

"I know the phone can do many things," she says. "But I don't know how to use them."

According to the latest Inclusive Digital Economy Scorecard (IDES) Assessment (2021) as referenced in Uganda's Digital Transformation Roadmap 2023 - 2028, Uganda is rated at 33 percent under the skills domain, 77 percent under the policy and regulation domain, 42 percent under the innovation domain and 51 percent under the infrastructure domain. These figures indicate that Uganda scores highly on digital policy and regulation and lower across skills, innovation, inclusiveness as well as infrastructure.

The mismatch between digital policy, device adoption and limited digital literacy is increasingly drawing attention from policymakers, educators and technology companies who argue that Uganda's digital transformation will depend not only on connectivity, but also capability.

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, Dr Aminah Zawedde illustrates the scale of the shift.

"In the last five years, smartphone ownership rose from 7.6 million in 2020 to 18.2 million in 2024, while broadband population coverage and adult internet penetration expanded to approximately 85 percent and 89 percent."

But the expansion of access has not translated into meaningful digital use.

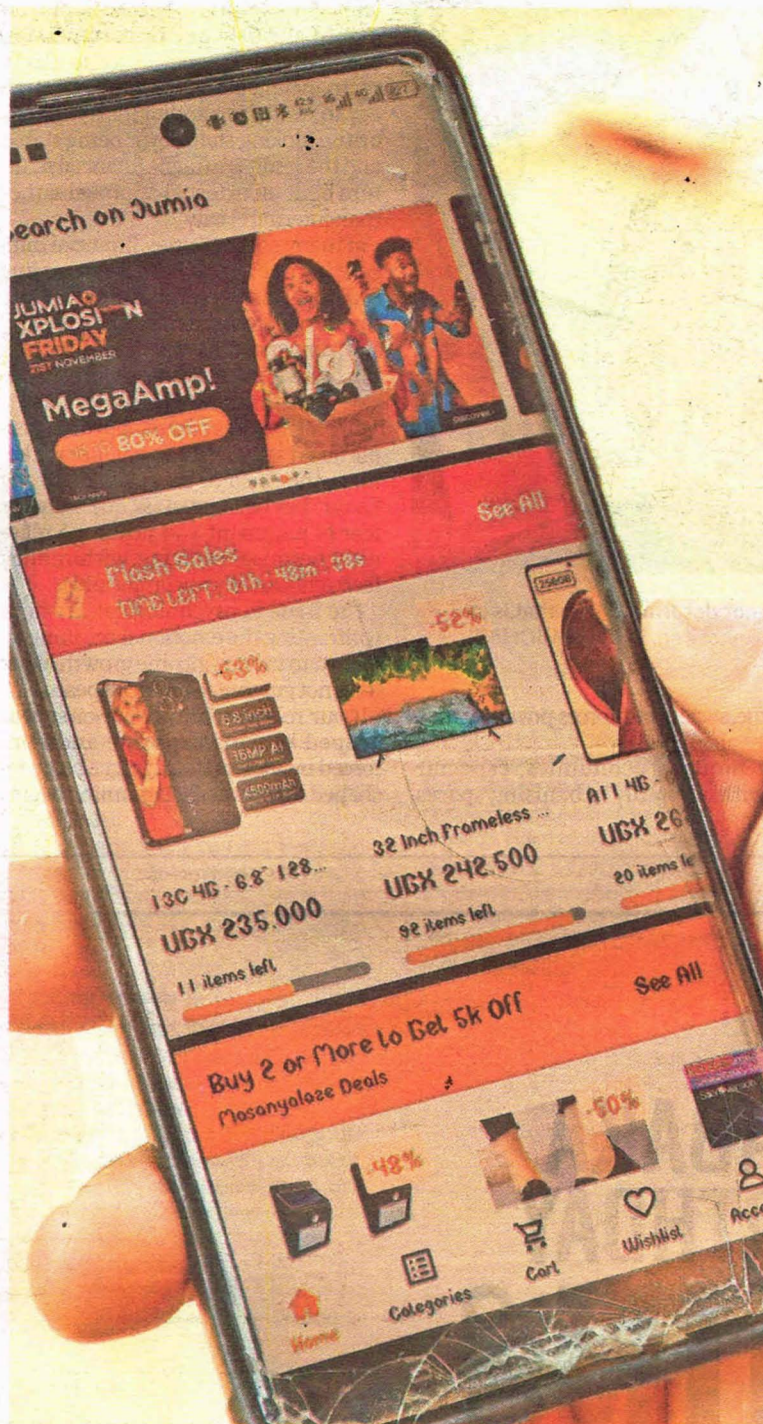
"The gap is a result of a speed mismatch. Access has expanded rapidly, while digital skills development has grown more gradually," says Zawedde. As a result, many smartphone owners primarily use their devices for calls, messaging and entertainment, rather than for activities such as business, education or digital services.

That gap, experts say, risks limiting the economic benefits of Uganda's expanding digital infrastructure.

Digital lag

Speaking at the International Literacy Day 2025 Symposium, Charles Draecabo, national projects coordinator at UNESCO Antenna Office, noted that, "In today's rapidly evolving world, to be literate is to be digitally empowered, and lit-

Why smartphone users still lack digital skills



eracy is no longer confined to the ability to read and write on paper."

Literacy now encompasses the capacity to access, interpret, evaluate and create digital content, to navigate the complexities of online spaces, to discern fact from fiction and to participate meaningfully in civic, economic and cultural life.

Over the past decade, Uganda has made significant investments in expanding digital infrastructure. Broadband coverage has expanded across much of the country, and mobile internet subscriptions have surged as telecom operators extend network coverage and introduce device financing programmes.

Telecommunications companies say these initiatives are already changing the market.

"Our device financing strategy has yielded a 30.1 percent rise in smartphones connected to our network, growing penetration to 44.9 percent," says Rhona Arinaitwe, senior manag-

A man looks at products online on Jumia on November 19, 2025. According to UCC, out of the 58.3 million devices connected to mobile networks, only about 20 million are smartphones. PHOTO/ISAAC KASAMANI

Smartphone access

- Uganda's smartphone penetration stands at about 35.6 percent, compared with more than 60 percent in Ghana, 72.6 percent in Kenya, and over 90 percent in countries such as Egypt and South Africa.
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er Communications, Public Relations and Stakeholder Management.

These programmes aim to make smartphones more accessible to first time users by allowing them to purchase devices through installment plans. However, affordability remains a challenge.

Although devices cost approximately Shs150,000, that price equates to 40 percent of the average monthly income for the average Ugandan.

According to the 2023/2024 National labour force survey, nearly half of Uganda's rural workers earn about Shs200,000 per month.

This affordability gap explains why feature phones still dominate the telephone market, with users or subscribers increasing from 17.8 million in 2020 to 26.7 million in 2024, according to UCC data.

Fred Otunnu, director corporate affairs at UCC further highlights that out of the 58.3 million devices connected to

Digital use

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mobile networks, only about 20 million are smartphones.

As such Uganda's smartphone market is poorer in comparison to regional counterparts.

Uganda's smartphone penetration stands at about 35.6 percent, compared with more than 60 percent in Ghana, 72.6 percent in Kenya, and over 90 percent in countries such as Egypt and South Africa.

For policymakers, the question is no longer whether Ugandans can access smartphones, but whether they know how to use them effectively.

Training gap

The Ugandan majority suffers from digital literacy, however, women suffer the most. The 2024 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) National Population Census reveals that women constitute a substantial majority of the national population, making up 24.33 million (53 percent) of Ugandans while men account for 21.56 million (47 percent).

Statistics indicate that women contribute 76 percent of the labour force in the agricultural sector and own nearly 40 percent of the formal and informal businesses in the business sector.

Despite their economic significance,

their potential is limited as majority remain digitally illiterate. UBOS statistics reveal a concerning gender divide as only 8 percent of women aged 15 and above use the internet compared to 11 percent of men. In rural areas, the disparity widens further with just 7 percent of women having access to the internet against 17 percent of men.

Future of work

Furthermore, the 2025 Future of Work in Uganda report indicates that earnings vary considerably depending on gender and sector, with women earning less than men. Within freelance work despite women working the greater number of hours in comparison to the male counterparts, a significant earnings gap exists, with men earning an average of Shs16,472 per hour compared to Shs11,075 for women. This is mainly because women, mainly limited by digital skills are concentrated in lower paying fields like administrative support while men dominate tasks in IT and data analysis.

Turning connectivity into capacity

Expanding coverage and device access is only the first step. The real test lies in turning connectivity into meaningful capability, ensuring that digital tools enhance livelihoods, education, and entrepreneurship. Bridging this gap, experts say, requires coordinated action across multiple fronts.

Ivan Koreta, lead, apprenticeships at Refactory, emphasises a three pronged approach. The government must ensure equitable access to devices and connectivity. Educational and skilling institutions must equip learners with practical, industry-aligned digital skills.

"Connectivity without skills is a half empty promise," he argues. "As long as people's understanding of technology is skewed, moderate connectivity will not translate into meaningful outcomes in work, education, or entrepreneurship."

Practical, job-linked training is central to this transformation. Koreta highlights initiatives like the 10X programme, implemented by Outbox with support from the Mastercard Foundation, which targets young women with advanced digital skills and structured exposure to real world projects, ensuring that learning is directly tied to work placement.

Similarly, Gideon Nkurunungi, digital transformation consultant and former CEO of ICT Association of Uganda, stresses that smartphones must be treated as entry points rather than endpoints.

"Training should illustrate how devices enable income generation, customer management, digital record keeping, and micro-business operations," he says, advocating for micro-learning modules, sandbox applications, and real life simulations that build confidence without financial risk.

Additionally, Nkurunungi observes that embedding digital skills into formal education, linking training to employment opportunities, and ensuring mentorship and follow up are key steps in turning access into capability.

Training must shift from passive use to active capability, she highlights that Uganda is already implementing this approach through SME digitisation programmes, e-agriculture platforms, e-commerce training, and innovation support under the National ICT Initiatives Support Programme (NIISP).

Turning connectivity into capability is a question of relevance and opportunity.