

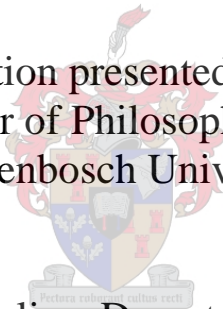
Are “untouched citizens” creating their deliberative democracy online?

A critical analysis of women’s activist media in Zimbabwe

By

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Declaration

By submitting this dissertation electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: December 2017

Abstract

This study examines women's political participation in Zimbabwe by investigating whether online media platforms, specifically blogs, provide Zimbabwean women with spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge the dominant discourse and participate in politics. Anchored in the broader conceptualisation of political participation, the epistemological premise of this study explores how everyday conversations by women in blogs on the five selected websites (*WCoZ.org*, *Kubatana.net*, *Herzimbabwe.co.zw*, *Herald.co.zw* and *Chronicle.co.zw*) morph into political conversations. Given that the use of the internet, specifically digital communication platforms, is an important pathway to the enhancement of deliberative democracy in society, particularly the engagement in the public sphere by those who are otherwise marginalised from mainstream politics, this study contributes to these debates by determining how and under what circumstances everyday conversations permeate into political conversations. By focusing on women in Zimbabwe, who are without alternative communication platforms to articulate their agendas following state control of the media, this study investigates how political expression and democratic engagement manifest on different types of new media platforms. Womanism, feminist critical and critical political economy theories were used as the most appropriate theoretical points of departure. These paradigms offer a holistic analysis of women's lived experiences in Zimbabwe and of how political, economic, cultural and social institutions influence women activists' activities in new media. A qualitative research approach employing the collective case study as a research design was adopted. Data for analysis were collected from the five purposively selected websites and from online semi-structured interviews conducted with selected bloggers from these websites. The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, employing the qualitative analysis software package ATLAS.ti Version 7. The findings reveal that blogs, as alternative and securer spaces, offer possibilities for social transformation by enabling Zimbabwean women to reclaim their space in the political, socio-economic and cultural spheres. This is in contrast to the view that digital media are driven by existing hierarchies and power structures. By introducing their views on issues that affect them and developing a voice of their own, Zimbabwean women are not only challenging the dominant discourse and social norms that oppress them, but also illuminating various other significant personal impacts that women derive from blogging that are relevant for political participation, offering a nuanced understanding of possibilities for political participation and democracy from the premise of everyday conversations whereby previously "untouched citizens" can create a deliberative democracy online.

Opsomming

Hierdie studie ondersoek die deelname van Zimbabwiese vroue aan die politiek deur te probeer vasstel of aanlynplatforms, spesifiek blogs, ruimte vir kritiese kommunikatiewe interaksie skep waar vroue bestaande dominante diskoerse kan uitdaag en aan die politiek kan deelneem. Geanker in 'n breër konseptualisering van politieke deelname, ondersoek die epistemologiese uitgangspunt van hierdie studie hoe alledaagse gesprekke deur vroue in blogs in die vyf geselekteerde webwerwe (*WCoZ.org*, *Kubatana.net*, *Herzimbabwe.co.zw*, *Herald.co.zw* en *Chronicle.co.zw*) morfeer in politieke gesprekke. Die gebruik van die internet, spesifiek digitale kommunikasieplatforms, is 'n belangrike faktor vir die bevordering van deelnemende demokrasie in die samelewing, veral vir betrokkenheid in die openbare sfeer deur diegene wat andersins buite die hoofstroompolitiek gemarginaliseer is. Hierdie studie dra dus by tot die debat deur vas te stel hoe en onder watter omstandighede alledaagse gesprekke verander in politieke gesprekke. Die studie probeer bepaal hoe vroue in Zimbabwe, wat weens die staatsbeheerde media-omgewing sonder alternatiewe kommunikasieplatforms is, hul eie agendas kan artikuleer en hoe politieke uitdrukking en demokratiese betrokkenheid op verskillende nuwe-mediaplatforms manifesteer. Die teorieë van womanism, feministiese kritiese teorie en kritiese politieke ekonomie is as die mees geskikte teoretiese uitgangspunte gebruik. Hierdie paradigmas bied geleentheid vir 'n holistiese analise van vroue se daaglikse ervarings in Zimbabwe en hoe politieke, ekonomiese, kulturele en sosiale instellings die aktiwiteite van vroue-aktiviste in nuwe-media beïnvloed. Die kollektiewe gevallestudie as navorsingsontwerp is as kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering gebruik. Data vir analise is uit die doelbewus gekose vyf webwerwe versamel en aanlyn semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude is met doelgewus gekose bloggers van hierdie webwerwe gevoer. Die data is deur kwalitatiewe inhoudsanalise danksy die kwalitatiewe analise-sagtewarepakket ATLAS.ti Weergawe 7 ontleed. Bevindings het getoon dat blogs, as alternatiewe en veiliger ruimtes, moontlikhede bied vir sosiale transformasie deur Zimbabwiese vroue in staat te stel om hul ruimte in die politieke, sosio-ekonomiese en kulturele sfeer terug te eis. Dit is strydig met die siening dat digitale media deur bestaande hiërargieë en magstrukture beheer word. Deur hul standpunte te stel oor kwessies wat hulle raak, en deur 'n eie stem te ontwikkel, daag Zimbabwiese vroue nie net die dominante diskoers en sosiale norme wat hulle onderdruk uit nie, maar belig ook verskeie ander aspekte wat vroue uit blogskryf identifiseer en wat relevant is vir politieke deelname. Daarmee word 'n genuanseerde begrip van moontlikhede vir politieke deelname en demokrasie gebied deurdat alledaagse gesprekke omvorm word sodat voorheen “onaangetaste burgers” hul deelnemende demokrasie aanlyn skep.

Dedication

To Thabani, Archibald and Andile, for encouraging me to push boundaries,
and for all women, the “untouched citizens”, disempowered by conventional politics.

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List of Acronyms

AIPPA	Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act
AWC	Association of Women's Clubs
EISA	Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa
ESAP	Economic Structural Adjustment Programme
FAWMZ	Federation of African Media Women Zimbabwe
GMMP	Global Media Monitoring Project
ICT	Information and communication technologies
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
NCA	National Constitutional Assembly
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SAfAIDS	Southern African HIV and AIDS Dissemination Service
SAPES	Southern African Political Economy Series
WAG	Women's Action Group
WCoZ	Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe
WASN	Women and AIDS Support Network
WLSA	Women and Law in Southern Africa
WOZA	Women of Zimbabwe Arise
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
ZANU PF	Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front
ZMMT	Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust
ZWLA	Zimbabwe Women Lawyers' Association
ZWRCN	Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network

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Chapter 1

Introduction

*“... I use words to give voice to my thoughts
because when I write, no one can shut me up”
(blogger 16:2:2016)*

1.1 Overview and motivations for the study

This study¹ examines women's² political participation in Zimbabwe by investigating whether online media platforms provide Zimbabwean women with spaces for critical communicative interaction in which they can challenge dominant discourses and participate in opinion making and politics. Besides contributing to scholarship on women's activism in Zimbabwe (for example Win, 1995; Osirim, 2001; Tripp, 2001; Geisler, 2004; Win, 2004), this study suggests a new angle by analysing women's communication, specifically everyday conversations on new media platforms, to determine how such platforms, as blogs, allow for women's participation in matters of political, economic and socio-cultural interests. This study is significant in the sense that it investigates online media use by women in a unique political, economic and socio-cultural environment in which both the public and private media do not provide the critical discursive realm in the ideal sense of the public sphere (Chuma, 2005: 56).

The study therefore seeks to analyse the content of women's communication on different websites posted during the year 2013³ to determine whether blogs act as potential countersites⁴ to challenge hegemonic discourses on political, economic and socio-cultural practices by marginalised women in Zimbabwe. This is in line with the argument by Downing, Ford, Gil and Stein (2001) and

¹ The thesis is written according to Zimbabwean/South African English spelling. However, quotations used will be in the English of the source. As a result, there will be variations of some words, e.g. 'organisation/organization,' 'commercialisation/commercialization'.

² "Woman" is a laden concept as women are made up of different categories. The concept is reviewed and defined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation (Research Context and Definition of Terms). However, for the purposes of this study, I will treat the term "woman" as one category.

³ This study focused on content published from the period January 1, 2013, six months before the July 31 Zimbabwe Presidential and Parliamentary elections, and six months afterwards, to January 31, 2014. The pre-election period is particularly interesting because this is when there is an increase in online communication initiatives as different groups campaign for issue representation. The six months post-election period is also significant, as different groups continue to campaign for issues and candidates for ministerial and government positions.

⁴ Countersites in this study refer to those sites or spaces that seek to deconstruct and denaturalise women's oppression. The term is used interchangeably with "counterpower", "counterhegemonic" and "counternarratives."

Couldry and Curran (2003) that alternative media, including online media platforms, act as sites of counterhegemonic cultural and political practice.

For this analysis, women's blogs were drawn from five websites run by women's organisations and individual women activists, as well as news media. These websites, outlined here according to the dates of their establishment, are:

www.wcoz.org, set up in 1999 and run by the Women's Coalition;

www.kubatana.net, set up in 2001 by feminist activists;

www.herzimbabwe.co.zw, set up in 2012 by journalist and activist Fungai Machirori;

www.herald.co.zw, whose blog page was set up in 2012. The site is owned by the daily newspaper, *The Herald*; and

www.chronicle.co.zw, whose blog page was set up in 2013. The site is owned by the daily newspaper, *Chronicle*.

The websites of the three women's organisations were selected based on their dedication to political activism and women's empowerment. The Women's Coalition, which is a formal institutional organisation, also represents a large constituency of Zimbabwean women, as it comprises more than 60 women's organisations, clubs and associations and hundreds of human rights activists (WCoZ, 2015). It also includes the women's wings of political parties and, with eight chapters around the country, the organisation gives Zimbabwean women an opportunity to meet and engage collectively on issues that affect them (Chitsike, 2011: 173).

Kubatana.net and *HerZimbabwe.co.zw* are the most popular feminist and activist websites in Zimbabwe listed by global internet aggregator, *alexa.com* (2015), as well as *Techzim.co.zw*, drawing in large numbers of Zimbabwean feminists and activists on women's issues. *The Herald* is a national daily newspaper with a readership of 43% of the urban population and the *Chronicle* is a regional daily with a readership of 17% of the urban population (ZAMPS, 2016). While Alpha Media Holdings's *NewsDay* hosted citizen's blogs under the banner, "AMH Voices" during the period under review, the study's aim was to analyse journalistic blogs focusing specifically on women's empowerment and political participation. Thus, the two media organisations *The Herald* and the *Chronicle*, whose blogs fit the study's criterion, were selected. It is critical to point out that the two dailies are state-owned, and therefore, ideally, their content should be reflective of the ideologies of the status quo, in this case the state, and the ruling ZANU PF.

For the purposes of this study, journalists drawn from the news media included both female and male journalists who blog on women's issues. By focusing on both female and male journalists, the study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the presentation of political, economic and socio-cultural issues on these blogs by both women and men. In addition, this allowed an understanding of men's experiences of disempowerment and how they relate these to women's experiences of inequality, as also argued by Flood (2007). The ultimate goal of this study was to ascertain the extent to which blogs promote democracy by enabling a critical exchange of ideas by previously marginalised groups such as women.

The media scenario in Zimbabwe justified such an investigation, as the representation of critical national debates during the period under review was largely limited to competing interests amongst the elite in the political, economic and social spheres, excluding the views of the majority of citizens, especially women (Chuma, 2005: 46). In addition, cultural attitudes hostile to women's political involvement persisted among both women and men, as reflected by the media coverage of female politicians and the deliberate attempts to silence them by suppressing their views and political rights (Tripp, 2001: 152).

Chitsike (2011: 182) concurs with Tripp (2001) when she posits that the mass media in Zimbabwe kept women out of politics because of negative media coverage and the societal portrayal of women leaders. For example, during the 2013 general elections, while Zimbabwean women celebrated the 30% increase in representation in Parliament, women representation in public office and other local governance structures dropped from 19% to 16% (Lowe-Morna, Chingamuka & Dube, 2013: 31).

Another factor to consider was that, due to the political and economic turbulence in Zimbabwe between 1995 and the early 2000s, mass media emerged as a particularly sensitive issue for government elites, who considered mass media as crucial weapons in their hold onto power (Willems, 2011: 52). In this context, the restricted democratic space generated a multiplicity of alternative public spheres that enabled groups, such as women's organisations and individuals, to continue to participate and engage in the wider debate on issues of public interest (Moyo, 2007: 82).

The motivation for the study stems from my participation and interest in women's media in Zimbabwe. Having worked for the state media – initially, the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) for four years as business reporter, and later the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group for another four years as business editor for its weekly, the *Sunday News* – I developed an interest in advocating for women's issues in and through the media. I was one of the few female editors in middle management at the

time, and experienced how women-focused story ideas were repudiated and how, generally, women's voices in knowledge-making and public policy were neglected and omitted in the news-gathering processes. In addition, my involvement with female journalists' associations, such as the Federation of African Media Women in Zimbabwe (FAMWZ), and a women's activist project, *AfricaWoman*, further sensitised me to the disparities between women and men in the media and the suppression of women's voices and issues in the mass media. Therefore, the choice for undertaking this research is a combination of interactions and experiences of women's marginalisation that I encountered in my personal and professional life as a Zimbabwean woman. These experiences shaped my understanding of women and political participation in the Zimbabwean context.

1.2 Preliminary study

A preliminary database search on the internet that included the EBSCO, Scopus, JStor and Google Scholar search engines and the online catalogue of the J.S. Gericke Library of Stellenbosch University, showed that concerns about declining civic engagement⁵ and political participation⁶ amongst marginalised groups in society, especially women, are a global problem, as indicated and discussed in detail in Chapter 3 (Literature Review).

For a long time, women have been excluded from formal and representative participation, a requirement for deliberative democracy⁷ (Dahlgren, 2011). According to Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010), political participation is necessary for democracy but, sobered by the firmly established decline in most indicators of civic engagement and political participation (Norris, 2000; Putnum, 2000; Strandberg, 2008: 1), scholars concerned with the future of democracy have turned their attention to online media platforms to reverse this trend (Freelon, 2010: 1). Research conducted in the United States and Europe by Norris (2000) and Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) indicates a decline in civic engagement and political participation by women. In China, studies have explored how new media and communication technologies such as smartphones can have a positive effect on citizen engagement in public discourse and political participation (Wei, 2014).

Similarly, African feminist researchers have explored women's mobilisation in Africa and the role of media in women's activist work (Allen, 2001; Tripp, 2001; Hassim, 2003; Waylen, 2007; Gouws, 2008). In Zimbabwe, research has been done showing the subjugation of women and their

⁵ Civic engagement refers to "those activities aimed at resolving problems of a community" (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins & Delli Carpini, 2006: 320). For this study, this concept is understood together with political participation.

⁶ Concept defined in Chapter 2 (Research Context and Definition of Terms).

⁷ Concept defined in Chapter 2 (Research Context and Definition of Terms).

exclusion from mainstream politics (for example Kachingwe, 1986; Kazembe, 1986; Gaidzanwa, 1994; Kawewe, 2000).

The arguments in both global and local studies by pro-democracy optimists have been that the internet provides an alternative to the top-down vertical communication symptomatic of representative democracies (Strandberg, 2008: 1) and that there is now immense potential for decentralised networking and discussion, enabling feminist political activism in the process (Carstensen, 2006: 490). These arguments have given the concept of the public sphere by Habermas (1989), which strongly emphasise horizontal citizen deliberation and communication, a new lease of life by reformulating it in a way that explains various communication possibilities on the internet.

The possibility of the internet – specifically new media platforms⁸ as forms of the public sphere supporting the extension of a deliberative democracy by enabling rational communication and public opinion formation that can challenge the status quo – has been of significant interest to contemporary feminist research (Dahlgren, 2011: 5). Researchers in this field have focused on the use of new media as public spheres (Latour & Weibel, 2005; Dahlgren, 2011), to claim “voice and recognition” (Couldry, 2010), to broaden political participation (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006) and for social movements and political mobilisation (Papacharissi, 2002; Fotopoulous, 2014). Previous research has also focused on young people and social media (for example Holt, Shehata, Stromback & Ljungberg, 2013) and women and political participation in the United States, Europe and China (Norris, 2000; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Wei, 2014).

Few studies (for example Moyo, 2007; Somolu, 2007; Levac, 2013; Mpofo, 2016) have focused on online media use for setting the African women’s agenda, despite their unique political, economic, social and cultural contexts. More so, in authoritarian environments such as in Zimbabwe, where the government curtails freedom of the press and freedom of expression (Chuma, 2005: 56), it becomes critical to identify and analyse other sites of expression for marginalised citizens. Also, despite the control of the mass media, and threats of state censorship and email monitoring through the Interception of Communication Act (2007), marginalised groups in Zimbabwe still regard the internet as providing alternative platforms of communication outside of the state machinery (Moyo, 2007: 102-103).

While some studies suggest the internet reinforces existing inequalities with regard to who becomes politically informed and involved (Dahlgren, 2001), and that only a few “untouched

⁸ Concept defined in Chapter 2 (Research Context and Definition of Terms).

citizens”⁹ may be reached (Van Laer, 2007: 5), proponents of deliberative democracy identify many examples of deliberation of varying quality taking place through online communication (Papacharissi, 2004; Coleman, 2005; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Dahlberg, 2011; Dahlgren, 2011; Gallagher, 2013).

From a journalism studies perspective, this study approaches new media platforms, particularly journalistic blogs, as facilitating deliberative democracy through everyday conversations. From this approach, the study situates journalist bloggers and women activists in Zimbabwe as counterpublics¹⁰ seeking critical spaces for interaction to empower women by challenging dominant discourse and bringing women’s issues into the public sphere, as was also argued by Sesanti (2009: 215).

Therefore, the rationale of this study to examine blogs and community forums by women’s groups, individuals and news media is to assess the role of online media as potential countersites to challenge hegemonic discourses on political, economic and socio-cultural practices by marginalised women in Zimbabwe, whom this study refers to as the “untouched citizens” (Van Laer, 2007: 5).

1.3 Problem statement

The repression of Zimbabwean women before and after colonial rule has resulted in them being marginalised from public discourse and political participation (Gaidzanwa, 2004: 1). In addition, state control of the mainstream media has left women with no alternative communicative spaces to articulate their own agendas and participate in the public sphere (Moyo, 2007: 101). In this study I sought to investigate whether online media platforms provide Zimbabwean women with spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge the dominant discourses and participate in opinion making and politics.

⁹ Referring to marginalised women. In-depth definition provided in Chapter 2 (Research Context and Definition of Terms).

¹⁰ Concept defined in Chapter 2 (Research Context and Definition of Terms).

1.4 Goals, theoretical points of departure and research questions

1.4.1 Goals

The main objective of this study was to establish whether the new media give Zimbabwean women spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge dominant discourse. The ultimate goal was to contribute to feminist discourses on new media and activism by analysing how specific bloggers in Zimbabwe question domination, express the standpoints of the oppressed and argue for the advancement of a co-operative society.

The specific goals of this study were to:

- establish how women's organisations and women and male journalist activists are using blogs as critical spaces for communicative interaction in which dominant discourses are challenged;
- identify what women talk about and the ways in which women's organisations, women and male journalist activists are presenting their communication to the public through blogs; and
- assess whether blogs have given women in Zimbabwe critical reflexive spaces of communicative interaction and participation in politics.

1.4.2 Theoretical points of departure

For the purposes of this study, three theoretical frameworks, namely that of womanism, feminist critical theory and the critical political economy of the media theory, were selected to provide a basis for the analysis and to answer the study's research questions. These approaches are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 (Theoretical Frameworks).

The emergence of a uniquely African formulation of feminism is one of the most energising developments in feminist theory and discourse in recent history (Jacobs, 2011). Driven by the need to locate feminist theory within the context of African women's past, present and future realities, feminists from all over the globe have been forced to re-examine the horizons of feminist practice as they apply in different locations (Arndt, 2002).

Western forms of feminism, which include liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, and first-, second- and third-wave feminisms, have been criticised for failing to challenge the underpinnings of social institutions (Rakow, 1986), for focusing on meaning at the expense of doing (Creedon, 1993), and for producing elitism and the values of the larger culture (Lueck, 2004).

In addition, Western feminists do not realise that their own interests and the interests of poor women in the global south, particularly in Africa, are far from being identical (Mohanty, 2003).

Womanism, therefore, as an Afrocentric form of feminism (Walker, 1983; Ogunyemi, 1985; Collins, 1991; Hudson-Weems, 1993), identifies the ethnicity of the African woman and her cultural identity and is a celebration of “black roots and the ideals of black life while giving a balanced representation of black womanhood” (Koyana, 2001: 65). Womanism differs from feminism because it allows for specific discussion of the woman of African descent’s existence in reality and in imagined existence (Mangena, 2013: 8), and it recognises that African societies have inequitable structures that oppress or marginalise women. This study accepts Koyana’s (2001: 65) and Mangena’s (2013: 8) definition of womanism as an “Afrocentric form of feminism”, and seeks to employ the African cultural values and expectations lens to argue for women’s rights and empowerment (Sesanti, 2009: 215).

Womanism accommodates African women’s reality, identity and dynamics of empowerment better (Kolawole, 2002: 96). Therefore, using Zimbabwean women’s cultural realities and lived experiences, this study analysed the influence of these factors on the blog narratives used and the kind of issues, from their experiences, that female and male journalists and women activists bring into the public sphere.

My second theoretical point of departure, namely the Marxist approach of feminist critical theory, was used to critique capitalism and its influence on communication on the internet, particularly blogs and community forums. Premised on the framework of cultural studies, critical theory, generally, assumes that the media are not merely carriers of ideology, but rather shape people’s very ideas of themselves and the world (Cramer, 1998: 3). According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2002: 90), critical theory focuses on issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy and other social institutions and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system. This approach is fundamental to feminist critical theorists in assessing the power dynamics in communication. In adopting this definition, this study sought to use feminist critical theory to analyse competing power interests between groups and individuals in Zimbabwe – identifying who holds the political power in the social construction of identities and realities.

From a journalism studies point of view, feminist critical theory is applied most when exploring social institutions and their transformations through interpreting meanings of social life, and the historical problems of domination, alienation and social struggles (Creswell, 1998). In addition, journalism and media researchers use feminist critical theory to establish whether the media

have the ability to empower, to establish a critical democracy, or to engage marginalised people in the rethinking of their socio-political role (Fiske, 1993; Giroux, 1997). By analysing the content of blogs, this study illustrates how women bloggers express suppressed possibilities of existence and potential for change, and question domination, which are central to the research question (presented in section 1.4.3 of this dissertation).

The third theory, namely critical political economy theory (CPE), is an integrated analysis of media and society (Golding & Murdock, 2000: 88). Hardy (2014: 190) argues that CPE is galvanised by the intersection of Marxist thought and democratic politics, and that it raises questions about power in communications and the conditions for realising democracy. Generally, CPE postulates that nobody has access to a complete range of cultural goods without restriction (Fenton, 2007: 12). Proponents of CPE, such as Golding and Murdock (2000), McChesney (2013) and Hardy (2014), posit that CPE of the media is a critical realist approach that claims that different ways of financing communications have implications for the range and nature of media content, and the ways in which these are consumed and used.

By exploring how communication resources are organised, and relating this to how wider aspects of social life are organised and change, CPE provides the foundations for an inclusive, integrative study of media and communications (Hardy, 2014: 198). In this way, CPE blends the Marxist feminist critical approach with new media analysis by examining the connections between communication structure and processes, culture and society. Hence this approach, which already integrates feminist critical theory, blends in well with womanism in offering a holistic analysis of women's lived experiences in Zimbabwe and of how culture, politics, economic and social institutions influence women activists' activities in new media.

1.4.3 Research questions

1.4.3.1 The central research question

The central research question is formulated as:

Do online media give Zimbabwean women spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge dominant discourse and increase women's participation in politics?

1.4.3.2 Research sub-questions

The research sub-questions are formulated as follows:

- How are women's organisations and journalist activists (both women and men) in Zimbabwe using blogs as platforms for political discourse?
- How are women's organisations and journalist activists presenting messages to other women on these blogs, including in the narratives used?
- Are the six specific themes of women and democratic politics online (outlined in section 1.5.3 of this study) identifiable on the five websites?
- To what extent is the discourse in the blogs across the five websites indicative of counterpower to established norms?

1.5 Research design and methods

1.5.1 Research design

For this study, I employed qualitative methodologies. According to Lindlof (1995: 9) and Singleton and Straits (2005: 309), qualitative inquirers strive to understand their objects of interest, and unlike quantitative research methods which measure phenomena, qualitative research methods are valuable to understand the character of experience, particularly how people perceive and make sense of their communication experience. Creswell (2014: 186) concurs, adding that the qualitative research methodology aims less at measuring and more at understanding, often from the "inside", namely the subjects under investigation.

This study employed the collective case study method to address the central research question. The choice of collective cases is supported by Du Plooy (1995), Mark (1996), and Babbie (2010), who argue that a collective case study provides insight into an issue. Babbie (2010: 309) posits that, while there is no consensus on what constitutes a "case", the term is generally used to refer to an event, a programme, an activity, a process or one or more individuals, usually bounded by parameters such as time and activity (Creswell, 2003). In this study, five cases (websites) were selected. These cases are bound by women activist content.

The methodology applied is qualitative content analysis (QCA), using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis tool, ATLAS.ti. QCA served both as an analytical tool and method of data collection. QCA is a family of systematic, rule-guided techniques used to analyse the informational contents of textual data (Mayring, 2000). It is informed by the works of Robson (1993), Silverman (1993), Hijams (1996) and Babbie (2010). As part of QCA, this study employed narrative and interpretive analyses, the emphasis of which was on meaning produced by the structure of the text and choice of words used in the blogs, and gaining insights into the bloggers who create the messages.

According to Berger (1991: 25), QCA is a “means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they write”.

To gain a deeper understanding of the themes and issues that emerged from the QCA, semi-structured interviews (SSIs) conducted through email were then carried out to establish the context of the themes. By their nature, SSIs elicit rich descriptions and explanations in identifying local contexts (Denscombe 2010; Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the interviews allowed the researcher to delve deeper into social and personal matters (Chilban, 1996; Shklovski & Valtysson, 2012). Electronic interviews are less pre-constructed and more discursive and naturalistic (Seymour, 2001), which might increase the richness of the narratives. By using email interviews, the study sought to gain a better understanding of the bloggers’ insights and the purpose of their messages. SSIs through email were conducted with 20 selected journalist bloggers, gender activists and communication officers and managers in women’s organisations. Communication officers and managers in women’s organisations were selected for being both bloggers and key experts to enable an in-depth understanding of the goals of the platform. The questions, in the form of an interview guide (see Addendum A), form part of the research design. A detailed discussion of the research design, methodology, sampling and data analysis is provided in Chapter 5 of this dissertation (Research Design and Methodology).

I initially field-tested the interview guide in a pilot study with four key participants to assess the types of questions used and to clarify ambiguities, if any. A total of six blogs were pilot-tested to assess the extraction of themes. A pilot study involves pre-testing and trying out a particular research instrument (Baker, 1994: 183), and one of its advantages is that it might indicate areas of improvement in the main research.

1.5.2 Sampling strategy and procedures

Purposive sampling was used to select the blogs and institutional websites belonging to women’s organisations and news media organisations. The blogs and websites were selected based on their dedication to political activism and women’s issues. As discussed under 1.1, the websites of three women’s organisations, namely Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ), www.wcoz.org, Kubatana, www.kubatana.net, and HerZimbabwe, www.herzimbabwe.co.zw, were purposefully selected, using two search strategies on Google. The first strategy used the phrase, “the most popular feminist websites in Zimbabwe”. To test for reliability, a similar search using the term “top websites in Zimbabwe” was conducted on a global internet aggregator, www.alexa.com.

Next to be purposively selected were news media websites, namely that of *The Herald*, www.herald.co.zw, and *Chronicle*, www.chronicle.co.zw. Journalists and activist bloggers on these sites were also purposively selected for blogging extensively on women's issues and general politics. These bloggers were also followed on their individual webpages to widen the sample.

Chronicle has only male journalist bloggers and this site was incorporated to add depth to the analysis by understanding whether male journalist bloggers are relevant in understanding whether online media empower or disempower women in Zimbabwe.

1.5.3 Data analysis

Analysis was done using qualitative content analysis of the blogs and webpages of organisations, as well as transcripts of the semi-structured interviews. The researcher sought to find out how women's participation emerged in the following themes that were identified from the literature review as reflecting the dominant debates on women and political participation in relation to the new digital media revolution and new online public spheres. Scholars, for example Latour and Weibel (2005), Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006), Dahlgren (2011) and Gallagher (2013), have noted that the possibilities for new media platforms as politically oriented expressive platforms for the marginalised and "untouched citizens" are anchored on six themes:

- *participation*,
- *deliberative democracy*,
- *empowerment*,
- *public sphere*,
- *representation* and
- *challenges*.

The data analysis followed the three steps set out by Miles and Huberman (1994: 21-22), namely that of data reduction, organising and assembling, and finally data analysis. The analysis of the data was done using a qualitative analysis tool, ATLAS.ti. By using a computer-aided data analysis software programme like ATLAS.ti it was easier to analyse the data systematically and to ask questions that researchers would otherwise not ask because the manual tasks involved would be too counterproductive (Friese, 2011). ATLAS.ti also enables the integration of large volumes of data and those of different media types more easily (Friese, 2011).

1.6 Chapter outline

Chapter 1: Introduction: This chapter provided an overview of and motivations for the study, including a preliminary literature review, problem statement, goals and theoretical points of departure, research questions and research design.

Chapter 2: Research Context and Definition of Terms: This chapter discusses the major developments in the history of the democratisation process that have had political significance for Zimbabwean women's activism from 1995, at the height of media liberalisation (Win, 2004; Essof, 2005), to the 2013 general elections to provide the necessary context for the foundation of this study. Also in this chapter, key concepts of the study are defined and reviewed.

Chapter 3: Literature Review: This chapter reviews related literature on democracy, new media use and the political participation of women, as well as women's activist media globally and locally.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Frameworks: This chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks chosen for the study and the reasons for their choice.

Chapter 5: Research Design and Methodology: This chapter discusses the research design and methodology deemed to be appropriate for this study.

Chapter 6: Presentation of Research Findings I: The study's findings from blogs are presented according to the research themes. (The separation of the findings into two chapters was necessary in order to allow for the presentation of findings from each of the five websites).

Chapter 7: Presentation of Research Findings II: The study's findings from interviews are presented, according to the research themes.

Chapter 8: Analysis and Discussion: In this chapter, data is analysed and discussed in terms of the reviewed literature and chosen theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 9: Conclusions and Recommendations: In this chapter, conclusions are drawn and recommendations made for future research.

1.7 Chapter summary

This chapter introduced the research topic and provided a brief context, explained the motivation, discussed the preliminary literature review and the rationale for the study, explained the problem statement and focus and formulated a central research question and sub-questions. Theoretical

frameworks as well as the research design and methodology were also explained. Finally, a chapter outline was provided for the dissertation.

The next chapter contextualises women's activism in Zimbabwe. In addition, key concepts used in the study are defined and reviewed.

Chapter 2

Research Context and Definition of Terms

“While women’s political participation improved democracy, the reverse is also true: democracy is an incubator for gender equality”

(Ban Ki-Moon, 2011)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is an account of the history of the women’s movement and women’s activism in Zimbabwe to provide the necessary context for this study. The chapter captures the critical developments that contributed to the agitation of Zimbabwean women, and their subsequent activism during the period 1995 to just before the 2013 general elections. This discussion contextualises the political, socio-economic and cultural positions that women in Zimbabwe found themselves in during the period under review, and their resultant quest for voice and recognition. The chapter does not intend to contextualise this against a historic account of women’s participation in this region, as it is not the focus of this study.

The aim of this study was to establish whether blogs act as countersites of resistance for women in Zimbabwe. Through analysing descriptive elements of blogs, as well as focusing on their content and structure, this approach gives insights into the phenomenon of women’s activist media by indicating the types of communication the bloggers encourage, and their motivations and uses. Guided by this research goal, this chapter therefore is not a comprehensive account of the history of the women’s movement and activism in Zimbabwe, nor does it analyse the entire women’s movement. Rather, its focus is on the phenomenon of online media use for activism, hence a small subset of women’s activist media is used.

However, for the purposes of this study, women’s activism and communication strategies adopted during this period are understood in the context of wider civil society.¹¹ While it is generally understood that women’s movements and activism draw on tactics from indigenous women’s strategies in traditional African societies, the types of activisms, forms and strategies adopted are

¹¹ Civil society is generally understood to refer to formal institutions that conform to Western models and aspirations (Nyamnjoh, 2005: 29). These institutions, which include women’s organisations, amongst others, seek to advocate for various liberties in any society. However, for the purposes of this study, the understanding of civil society is widened to include even informal networks and the critical alternative media, within which collective concerns, anxieties and dreams are played out.

largely informed by the political, socio-economic and cultural context that women find themselves in in their everyday lives.

2.2 Research context: Women's movements in Zimbabwe

2.2.1 Introduction

The period from 1995 to 2013 witnessed the growth of Zimbabwe's civil society in general (Sachikonye, 2003) and, for the women's movement, the political economy of the time was conducive to reclaim their space in the political, socio-economic and cultural spheres. The period 1995 to 2013 was important in shaping the women's movement in Zimbabwe for two reasons. Firstly, this was the era of democratisation,¹² which stimulated an increase in advocacy by women's groups and other civil society actors as they demanded human rights, equality and equal participation in politics. In addition, the discourse of national development, as Essof (2005: 1) argues, continuously re-asserted patriarchy,¹³ and the political will to address gender inequality diminished rapidly and instead, the state intensified regulation of women in both private and public spheres. Thus, this political and socio-economic upheaval of the late 1990s to late 2000s created foundations for different types of women's activism in Zimbabwe.

Secondly, the period under review was characterised by the liberalisation of the media, as part of the democratisation process. This enabled the birth of private newspapers in Zimbabwe, reducing the state media's hegemonic hold on the dissemination of information and control of political discussions (Mukundu & Ngwenya, 2011: 75). In other words, this development implied that the dissemination of political messages was no longer the preserve of the state media. Simultaneously, the growth of technology gave rise to alternative spaces of communication, giving previously marginalised groups a voice (Chuma, 2005). In this discussion, mention is made of women's organisations formed during the period under review, as well as individual women's activist media¹⁴ established during the same period. In line with this study's objective, that of establishing whether new media act as countersites of resistance for women in Zimbabwe, two major developments are discussed, namely that of democratisation processes and their impact on the political, economic and cultural positions of women, as well as that of media liberalisation and technology, and their impact

¹² This concept varies across analysts, but is generally understood to be a long-term process of moving toward democracy from an authoritarian political system (Yoon, 2001: 171). This process was implemented in Africa in the 1990s.

¹³ Patriarchy refers to gender inequality or gendered power relationships between men and women (Patil, 2013: 847).

¹⁴ Women's activist media refers to those organisations that are active in women's issues, activism, women's empowerment, gender equality and political participation on their websites.

on women's activism. In addition to mapping women's activism in Zimbabwe, this chapter also defines the major concepts that are employed in the study.

First to be discussed is an overview of women's activism and a brief background to the five organisations being studied; then the democratisation processes and their impact on the political, economic and cultural positions of women in Zimbabwe; and lastly, media liberalisation and technology – how they have influenced women's activism. This is followed by definitions of concepts key to this study.

2.2.2 The rise of women's activism in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, women's participation in the liberation struggle for independence provided an impetus for post-independence struggles for gender equality (Staunton, cited in Chuma, 2005). Research on women mobilising in Zimbabwe in the 1990s to early 2000s (for example, Schmidt, 1992; Kagoro, 2003; Essof, 2005; Win, 2004) documents this fact and captures elaborately how women's protests and activism changed over time in line with the political, socio-economic and cultural environment. It is important to capture in this introduction that, initially, the tangible gains of gender equality in Zimbabwe came in the form of legislative change, for example the Legal Age of Majority Act (1982), which granted women majority status at the age of 18, and the Sex Disqualification Act (1980), which allowed women to hold public office (Essof, 2005: 1). However, as discussed in the foregoing paragraphs, the gains attained by women in the immediate years after independence soon dissipated as women, 15 years into independence, found themselves on a collision course with the state (Essof, 2005).

Post-independence Africa, generally, witnessed a continent-wide drive towards authoritarian one-party systems of governance, with political leaders controlling, and in some instances eliminating, all forms of political opposition (Makumbe, 1998; Nyamnjoh, 2005). Zimbabwe was no exception. The government achieved this by occupying all political space, controlling state power and institutions (Makumbe, 1998: 307), and propagating ideals that were only favourable for the ruling party. Consequently, this meant that the needs of the majority of citizens no longer mattered and, as Geisler (2004: 24) posits, women's issues were no longer central to the ideological foundations of states, but were rather implemented on an ad hoc basis, mostly as a privilege rather than a right. Gudhlanga (2013: 161) reaffirms this when she argues that what emerged after independence was a situation where the cost of democratic struggle for freedom and independence in Zimbabwe was democratically and socially shared, but the gains were significantly privatised to the advantage of the political elites and those that were well connected politically.

Following years of one-party state rule, with ZANU (PF) dominating Zimbabwean politics since independence, the presidency had grown excessively powerful while the capacity of other governmental institutions to ensure accountability declined (Sithole, 2001: 161). At the same time, the constriction of the communicative space meant that oppositional discourses were restricted (Moyo, 2011: 746). Fearing for the consequences of these developments, civil society organisations, which included women's organisations, initiated broad-based discussions on the most effective way of improving governance in Zimbabwe (Sithole, 2001: 161). Women organised themselves by coming together and seeking a platform for articulating their perspectives and pushing for the women's agenda. Thus, the realisation that the most effective way to improve governance in Zimbabwe was to craft a new Constitution in earnest marked the nation-wide mobilisation of women, both as a group and as individuals, who sought to reclaim their rights as equal citizens to men. Hence, 1999 to 2009 witnessed a great momentum in women's involvement in opposition politics, and a record number of women showed interest in campaigning for parliamentary seats (Chitsike, 2011: 170).

The rise of women's movements on the Zimbabwean political field therefore was a critical vehicle that would drive the inclusion of women's agenda and women's voice in political processes (Chitsike, 2011: 172). From a handful of women's associations that focused on the welfare of women in the early 1980s, there were over 25 registered organisations by 1995, including trade unions, professional groups, women's rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and issue-based social movements (Win, 2004: 19). Some of these women's organisations, according to Essof (2005: 2), were overtly feminist in orientation, while others were more mainstream and conservative in their approach. From this assessment by Essof, it becomes clear that, when public opinion and dissent are silenced under authoritarianism, women have to employ strategies that do not alienate them from the wider culture – the reason why the women's coalition body in Zimbabwe works closely with government.

It is also critical to note that the women's movement in Zimbabwe has, over the years, thrived on coalitions and alliances, for example the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ), the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN), Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), and Zimbabwe Human Rights Lawyers' Association (Essof, 2005). These alliances comprise both women's organisations and individual activists, and the survival of coalitions meant working within the state and, in some cases, with state actors. Initially there was virtually no room for individual women activists for fear of state hostility and reprisals (Essof, 2005). WCoZ, as a women's activist online site, is one of the five case studies investigated in this study. The other cases are the online

women activist sites HerZimbabwe and Kubatana, and those of two mainstream media organisations, *The Herald* and the *Chronicle*, whose blog pages were set up during the period under review. These five websites are discussed next.

2.2.2.1 Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe

The Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ; www.wcoz.org) was launched in June 1999 during the constitutional reform process and, at inception, its goal was to inform and invite women to participate in the process (Chitsike, 2011: 173). It is a network of 60 women's groups¹⁵ and over two hundred human rights activists with national structures and eight branches across the country, giving women an opportunity to meet and engage collectively on issues affecting women in Zimbabwe (Chitsike, 2011: 173). From its initial goal, WCoZ pressed for a constitution that would protect women's political, economic and social rights and, in February 2000, it campaigned for a 'No' vote on the draft constitution because it was silent on the issue pertaining to women's empowerment (Essof, 2005).

In addition, during the 2000 elections, the organisation supported and endorsed the 55 women candidates who were standing for parliamentary elections, and 14 were voted into office (Essof, 2005). This indicated the power of solidarity on a cause, and gave impetus to continued collective activism. Besides advocating for constitutional reform as the basis for women's empowerment, WCoZ is a forum where women meet to engage in collective activism on issues affecting women and girls in Zimbabwe, and its goal has since widened to achieve gender equity and equality through the creation of space for women and girls to collectively initiate and participate in strategies and actions that lead to their empowerment (WCoZ, 2015) (the underlined terms are this researcher's own emphasis on what is relevant to this study).

From this goal, therefore, efforts towards the creation of space for women to initiate and participate in strategies and actions that lead to their own empowerment are the fundamental aspect of this study. One such space that the organisation created to access and communicate with a wider constituent of Zimbabwean women is its online community forum. This forum, which is free for anyone to join and post comments and participate in the discussion, provides an interface between women's organisations and women on a variety of issues affecting women, as well as advocating for

¹⁵ Some member organisations include: the Family Support Trust, FAMWZ, the Harare Legal Projects Centre, the Musasa Project, NCA, SAFAIDS, the SAPES Trust, WASN, WLSA, WAG, ZWRCN, the Zimbabwe Association of University Women and ZWLA, amongst others (Essof, 2005).

debates on political, socio-economic and cultural aspects that have an impact on women's lives in Zimbabwe (WCoZ, 2015).

2.2.2.2 HerZimbabwe

HerZimbabwe (www.herzimbabwe.co.zw) was founded in 2012, and its aim is to harness the potential of digital media to share and tell Zimbabwean women's stories, as well as nurture young women's digital activism (HerZimbabwe, 2015). Its primary target is Zimbabwean women aged 20 to 35, although contributions are accepted from women and men of all ages. The website promotes personal narratives, social commentary and perspectives on gender. The website also promotes digital storytelling by empowering women with knowledge of how to produce and package stories in engaging and appropriate formats (HerZimbabwe, 2015). The site is owned by journalist-turned-activist Fungai Machirori.

2.2.2.3 Kubatana

Kubatana (www.kubatana.net) is an online community of activists in Zimbabwe. It is a civic organisation that promotes the use of the internet and mobile phones for social change, and has a community of bloggers who write stories on numerous issues such as the economy, elections, media and personal reflections (Moyo, 2011: 750). In addition, women's issues, empowerment and activism are also some of the issues bloggers write about. The website was established in 2001 with the idea of creating a central online library and archive for civil and human rights information published by NGOs in Zimbabwe. While some of the bloggers on this platform work directly for Kubatana, most are not employed by the organisation. Four of the bloggers who participated in this study began their blogging on this platform before setting up their own personal blogs or joining other activist media.

2.2.2.4 The Herald

The Herald is one of the country's major daily newspapers and was established in 1891 as the *Rhodesia Herald*. It is owned by the state, through the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (1980) Ltd., the largest publisher of newspapers in Zimbabwe. *The Herald* readership constitutes 43% of adult urban Zimbabweans (ZAMPS, 2016). It is one of the media organisations in Zimbabwe (at the time of the study), which its content on its online blog platform, www.herald.co.zw, was found to be relevant for the goals of the study and to answer the study's research questions. Established in 2012, the online blog platform has 20 bloggers, five of them female journalists. Besides using employed journalists, the organisation also has guest bloggers, who are not necessarily journalists. The bloggers write about

various issues such as business/economics, gender, parliamentary issues, arts, sports and personal reflections (*The Herald*, 2015).

2.2.2.5 Chronicle

The *Chronicle* is another daily newspaper owned by the state, through the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (1980) Ltd. The paper began publishing in 1894 as the *Rhodesia Chronicle*, and its readership is 17% of adult urban Zimbabweans (ZAMPS, 2016). The *Chronicle*'s blog platform, www.chronicle.co.zw, was established in 2013, and was found to also have relevant content the study sought to analyse. However, unlike *The Herald*, the *Chronicle* has only male journalist bloggers. Here, bloggers also write on topics such as sport and politics, as well as personal reflections (*Chronicle*, 2015). This site has been incorporated into this study to add depth to the analysis by understanding whether male journalist bloggers who blog on women's issues are relevant in comprehending whether online media empower or disempower women in Zimbabwe.

2.2.3 Democratisation: Women and political economy

The democratisation process, implemented in the 1980s, focused broadly on issues of governance, corruption, electoral processes and constitutional change (Kagoro, 2003). Despite its "noble" ideals of establishing the construction of democratic institutions and processes and instilling freedom, equality and justice in Africa (Ambrose, 1995: 42), the democratisation process in Africa was implemented by ruling parties and the economic elite and hence failed to deliver social justice to the masses (Ambrose, 1995: 43). In Zimbabwe, the process of democratisation was implemented by the ruling ZANU PF, and therefore served its interests at the expense of those of the masses. Diamond (1989: 25-26) opines that democracy has to proceed as a "bottom-up" phenomenon, and for this to happen, popular organisations must themselves be "bottom-up" and truly popular in character. For this study, democratisation for Zimbabwean women means empowerment and the right to public opinion.

However, the continued state repression and incapacitation of civil society to participate in the democratic process during the period under review resulted in the disenfranchisement and marginalisation of such groups of women (Gaidzanwa, 2004). While in traditional society, women had different roles in both the private and domestic spheres (Mikell, 1997; Gudhlanga, 2013), the continued masculinisation of politics laid the foundations for narrow spaces for the advancement of women politically, economically, socially and culturally. Through the divide of private and public spheres for women and men respectively, women's roles in politics are limited to a particular female

space, such as political parties' women's wings, where members are given little space to influence policy formulation, not even policies directly relevant to them (Geisler, 1994: 546). Limitations also occur through the media representations of women politicians by cultural and social institutions. Consequently, such an environment renders the political process of little use to women (Geisler, 2004: 26), as it not only restricts them to the fringes of the political process but also disempowers them and their agency.

The democratisation era also witnessed a rapid decline in the Zimbabwean economy due to failed Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAPs). Failed ESAPs left thousands of men jobless due to retrenchments, leaving women with the burden of looking after their families (Garatidye, 2014). Consequently, women bore the brunt of poverty due to their "low social status", which is linked to historical factors as well as a lack of education and employment opportunities, and the effects of a patriarchal culture (Garatidye, 2014: 4). This triple burden of being seen culturally as politically inferior, suffering the burdens of a poorly performing economy, and the historical factors outlined above, put Zimbabwean women in unique positions of oppression.

In addition to the above, the Land Reform Programme, implemented in early 2000, worsened the economic position of women as it resulted in food shortages from 2002 to 2008 (Sithole, 2001; Win, 2004). Women, marginalised from the political processes and decision making on programmes such as the Land Reform Programme, bore the brunt of the resultant food shortages. In addition, this period was characterised by a highly hostile political environment following the entry of opposition parties in the year 2000,¹⁶ and the subsequent widespread violence towards women¹⁷ that ensued.

Thus, this hostile political and economic context resulted in the erosion of women's rights. Democratisation, with its promise of a re-making of politics and ensuring gender equality and participation by both women and men, failed to meet the expectations of the majority of women outside of the state echelons, forcing them to "find new ways of doing politics" (Waylen, 1996: 17). Instead, Waylen further argues, democratisation benefitted only a few women with political connections. In addition, democratisation silenced public opinion and dissent, eroding women's rights and power in the political and socio-economic and cultural spheres (Nkiwane, 2000: 329). This led

¹⁶ While there had been other, insignificant smaller opposition parties in Zimbabwe during the period under review, the year 2000 saw the entry into politics of Zimbabwe's strongest opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

¹⁷ However, as the country plunged into socio-economic and political upheaval in the late 1990s and early 2000s, conditions for women's activism became increasingly challenging and women activists became targets of state-sponsored violence (Essof, 2005: 5).

to the weakening of their agency,¹⁸ voice and participation, both at the individual and collective level (UN Women, 2015: 52). This is evident from the few women parliamentarians (Gudhlanga, 2013). For example, while women's representation in the Zimbabwean Parliament has been rising marginally, to 6% from 1980 to 1985; to 10% from 1985 to 1990; to 11% from 1990 to 1995; and to 34% by 2013 (Zimbabwe Parliament, 2015), women's representation is still low when compared to that of men.

Despite worsening the positions of women in Zimbabwe through failed ESAP programmes, the process of democratisation has at the same time increased the consciousness of Zimbabwean women (McFadden, 2005: 9). Buoyed by international events such as the Beijing Platform in 1995 and the UN Women conferences and regional events, women acquired more radical political perspectives and, according to McFadden (2005: 10), all this had an impact on the political character of women as individuals and as leaders of the movement. Therefore, faced with a lack of alternatives to contest state exclusion and state tyranny, Zimbabwean women entered into a politically strategic alliance with a national movement, the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), which had emerged in the late 1990s, to push for social justice (Sithole, 2001; McFadden, 2005; Chitsike, 2011). This ensured that women's issues and concerns were centrally visible in Zimbabwean politics, and it positioned women to advocate for an alternative discourse on rights and entitlements in the larger social sense (McFadden, 2005: 13-14). This process culminated in the drafting of the new Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013.¹⁹

2.2.4 Democratisation: Women, culture and patriarchy

Culture and patriarchy are important considerations to contextualise Zimbabwean women's political and socio-economic statuses, and their grievances about these. Despite the gains of independence and the implementation of gender-equal laws by most African states, power inequalities between women and men, as well as gender stereotypes and discriminatory social norms, are deeply embedded (UN Women, 2015: 51). Nkiwane (2000: 328) argues that, while the African woman "is now enlightened and is aware" of her rights to fight against her domination, the power of patriarchy and culture in

¹⁸ Agency refers to the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is associated with decision making within the household level about the day-to-day allocation of resources and responsibilities. These decisions have implications for the capacity of women to exercise their rights in both the public and private spheres (UN Women, 2015: 52).

¹⁹ The current Constitution of Zimbabwe, on which women's activism is based and which forms the basis for this study to understand women's experiences. The contents of the Constitution as they are related to gender equality and women's empowerment are outlined in Section 6.2.1.1.1 of this study.

Africa still compels the African woman to “listen but not to hear”. Rather, women, according to expectations from African culture and patriarchy, should not question male authority.

Nkiwane argues further that culture and tradition compels women to embrace cultural and traditional values, no matter how perverse or retrogressive, and that culture tends to be used as a “Trojan horse for retrogressive social practices” (2000: 329). This points to the fact that, while culture reflects a people in any given society, its interpretation and implementation between women and men differs, with the latter focusing more on the domination aspects of culture that trivialise the rights and positions of women. These different interpretations of culture and its uses by women and men in different societies place Zimbabwean women specifically in a unique situation, on the basis of which it is critical to analyse the interface between their understanding of culture and their identities and roles in society. This is because, when women are used as icons of the nation (by being silenced), they often become captive to patriarchal structures and ideologies (Joseph, 1997: 6).

In Zimbabwe, women continuously fight against cultural injustices and seek recognition of their full rights as citizens. Zimbabwean feminist and activist, Gaidzanwa (2004), argues that the oppression of Zimbabwean women, which has continued up to present, has resulted in them suffering a double yoke of oppression and marginalisation, from both state tyranny and patriarchy.

Therefore, democratisation, with its promise of a fair and just society for all through open systems of governance and popular participation, did not materialise for Zimbabwean women. This is because the state incorporated electoral democracy, while at the same time emphasising traditional roles for women such as encouraging them to be “good mothers and wives”, rather than challenging the ruling party through social mobilisation (Fallon, 2008: 23-24). This view is supported in a recent study on Zimbabwean women and politics, which shows that patriarchy has bracketed Zimbabwean women into restricted roles of mother and wife (Gudhlanga, 2013: 153), in the process making a clear separation between the private and public spheres.

Thus, in sum, patriarchal gender roles for Zimbabwean women have become interwoven in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres, denigrating women, whether formally educated or not, whether traditional or modern, to lesser roles in the public arena, and therefore less participation in the public sphere and politics (Nkiwane, 2000). The result of this is that women in Zimbabwe, realising the need to question the basis of power in Zimbabwean society, began to seek communicative spaces for participation to advocate for a democratic culture. This brings the role of the media, discussed next, into the spotlight.

2.2.5 Media liberalisation and women's activism

The role of the media in the years immediately after independence was viewed as that of building a loyal citizenry and bringing about economic and political development (Willems, 2011: 47). From this premise, the key role of the media was that of nation building, and this justified state control of the media in many developing countries (Willems, 2011: 52). However, the environment of liberalisation and deregulation created by the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) during the process of democratisation contributed to the expansion of the private press in Zimbabwe (Saunders, 2000), and in Africa in general (Hyden, Leslie & Ogundimu, 2002). This followed the realisation that the lack of communication platforms was a drawback to democracy.

The liberalisation of the media therefore fostered the growth of diverse new democratic spaces for participation in governance, a development that is significant for traditionally marginalised political actors, such as women as it offers possibilities for their representation (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005: 789). However, the private press in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in Africa, did not provide the critical discursive realm in the ideal sense of the public sphere, as it also aligned itself with special interests organised along class and racial lines (Chuma, 2005: 56). It could be argued, therefore, that the private press in Zimbabwe did not extend the public sphere to include women, as it also conformed to political, socio-economic and cultural factors. The restrictions of the private and independent press in Africa during democratisation are aptly summed up by Karikari, cited in Chuma (2005), who posits that the independent press in Africa is an elite institution, peddling elite interests at the expense of the masses. Thus, mainstream media came to be associated with those in power, and with political control (Leung & Lee, 2014).

In addition to the political economy of media ownership, which restricted access to the public sphere by wider audiences, the protracted political and economic environment during the period under review resulted in further restrictions on public discourse. Faced with pressure to maintain its stronghold on power and to counter the growing criticism by the people, the Zimbabwean Government enacted laws that “grossly” curtailed basic civil and political liberties (Moyo, 2011: 746). According to Moyo, these laws not only neutralised the public and private media as spaces of civic engagement and public debate, but had a constraining effect on freedom of journalistic practice and other human rights generally.

The subsequent constriction of communicative spaces in Zimbabwe culminated in the development and adoption of new media platforms as sites for counter-discourses by marginalised groups such as women. This study theorises that new democratic spaces, which were widened with

the advent of the internet in the late 1990s and up to the present, offer sites of learning and networking and provide alternative entry routes into politics. In some cases, these spaces became informal counterhegemonic public spheres in which public opinion could be formulated, nurtured and sustained (Moyo, 2007). These new spaces offer women's organisations and movements the possibility of exerting influence on the policy process from outside political institutions (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005: 789, 793). Cornwall and Goetz (2005) further argue that these new democratic spaces offer opportunities for women to expand their political skills and to improve the quality of public decision making by introducing their views and exercising their substantive voices in these new democratic arenas.

2.2.6 Summary of the research context

This section discussed the two major developments, namely the democratisation process as well as media liberalisation and the rise of technology. In essence, these capture the context of women's agitation during the period under review. The discussion of the political, economic and socio-cultural conditions under the two major developments mentioned above link with the three levels of women's empowerment analysed in this study, namely that of the personal, the relational and wider societal and political levels, as espoused by Collins (1997).

2.3 Review and definition of concepts

This section defines key concepts that are used in the study. Mouton (2001: 123) posits that all research involves certain key concepts around which the study is built, and these need to be defined and that reasons for the choice of definitions be given.

The first concepts to be reviewed and defined are "woman", "politics", "participation" and "political participation", and "democracy", "deliberation" and "deliberative democracy", as they form the foundation of this study and are needed to determine who are the women in this study, what politics is, and what participation means for Zimbabwean women. This will be followed by definitions of "empowerment", "new media: blogs", and "counterpublics: the untouched citizens", as they are also critical to this study.

In the next section, the concepts of "politics" and "participation" are reviewed and defined.

2.3.1 Woman

The goal of feminism is to fight against oppression and emancipate women. However, as this study shows in Chapter 3 (Theoretical Frameworks), it has been difficult to find a universal definition of

feminism because women's experiences have been found to differ in different contexts (Ebunoluwa, 2009). The challenge for feminism, therefore, is to continue promoting the cause of women without losing sight of the differences between women (Hekman, 2006:100). From this premise, contemporary feminist approaches do not presuppose a homogeneous concept of "woman". This is because within "women" as an oppressed group, there are varying categories that women identify themselves with (for example, ethnicity, sexual orientation, amongst other factors). There are varying other categories that women fall under, depending on their contextual factors such as the political, economic and socio-cultural environment. Therefore, the fight for women's empowerment is much more complex. However, realising this, feminist studies are increasingly focusing on "women", not as a biological category, but the female gender as a social category, enabling the connection of women's oppression to their sexuality (Ebunoluwa, 2009: 228). Further, in patriarchal societies in Africa, the biological aspect of being a woman is collapsed with gender roles and social class to limit women's discursive spaces to challenge their domination in society, as was also argued by Koyana (2001). Thus, due to entrenched patriarchy, in which women's and men's biology is key in determining the social organisation of society, women are treated as second class citizens. This is regardless of one's wealth, age or education status, amongst other demographics.

Definition of "woman" in this study

For the purposes of this study, which focuses on analysing women's lived experiences, I treated "woman" as one category, with the goal of ascertaining how the female gender is subjected to various forms of oppression within Zimbabwe's political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. This study does not, however, lose sight of the differences between women. Therefore, the bloggers in this study are not necessarily a representative of the entire population of Zimbabwean women, but it is the Zimbabwean female experience that the study is concerned with, in attempting to assess the political relevance of blogs.

2.3.2 Politics and political participation

2.3.2.1 Politics

The discipline of politics is traditionally located within Aristotle's *The Politics*, in which he evaluates differing constitutions in search of the best method of government, igniting deep-rooted sentiments amongst scholars as to what constitutes the political (Squires, 2004: 121). There are researchers who equate politics and political participation with electoral activities, such as voting, attending political campaigns and working for political parties (Valenzuela, Kim & Zuniga, 2012: 320). Another view

defines it in terms of relations of power. According to Squires (2004: 121), within this latter view there are those who focus on a narrowly defined range of power relations and others who adopt a broader range.

Feminist theorists promote the conception of politics as relations of power and work to extend this power to both the public and private spheres. For example, theorists such as Norris (2002) and Zukin *et al.* (2006) have widened this view and define politics and civic engagement as behaviour aimed at resolving the problems of the community. A definition by Leftwich (2004: 100) projects politics as being found wherever two or more human beings are engaged in some collective activity, whether formal or informal, public or private. Therefore, the understanding of politics from this premise is that it entails conversing, through word or action, on issues that need the attention of another, be it an individual, a group of people or the entire society, and that these conversations occur in both private and public spheres.

Similarly, Narayan (1997) advocates for a broader understanding of political activity to include those activities that would otherwise not qualify as political, adding that political activity must be seen as encompassing all areas marked by negotiation over power. For example, Narayan (1997: 58-59) posits that a woman's individual struggle to renegotiate gender roles and domestic chores with her partner or employee, and working to foster more equitable policies within a particular institution, would be a political activity as much as attending a town meeting or taking part in political discourse over matters of national concern. Thus, as she further argues, the meaning of politics is altered from the norm and becomes more inclusive in the process, breaking the dichotomy between the private and public spheres. In other words, politics is fluid and unbounded and encompasses any human activity.

Definition of politics in this study

For the purposes of this study, the following definition is thus adopted for politics: The everyday struggles that women face and the activities they engage in in social settings in both public and private spheres.

2.3.2.2 Participation

Participation, in the broader concept of political participation, directly addresses power and its distribution in society. Servaes (1999: 198) defines real participation as that which directly addresses power and "touches the core" of power relationships. Pateman (1970: 43) earlier posited that, for full participation to be attained, each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power

relations to determine the outcome. When equated with communication, participation in the media allows citizens to be active in the public sphere and put their right to communicate into practice (Carpentier, 2007: 88). However, the right to participate in the media rests on the prerogative of the media owners, while participation through the media gives opportunities for individuals and groups to participate in public debate, as well as opportunities for self-representation (Couldry, 2003). It is the latter form of participation this study seeks to assess, where self-representation and personal expressions of marginalised groups are key.

Definition of participation in this study

For the purposes of this study, participation therefore entails the ability by citizens to be active in the public sphere and able to discuss issues that affect them, and to realise their potential for change. It is therefore important to understand what forms of politics the marginalised experience and how the forms are expressed in various media.

Political participation is defined next.

2.3.2.3 Political participation

Political participation is loosely defined as citizens' activities affecting politics (Van Deth, 2014: 351). However, Van Deth argues further that this definition is deceptive, as political participation is virtually endless and includes not only divergent phenomena such as voting, demonstrating and boycotting, but other informal activities, including protests, social movements and, increasingly, voluntary activities in pressure groups, civic associations and charities (see also Norris & Lovenduski, 2004). Thus, political participation has been described in many ways (for example by Van Deth, 2014). In the various definitions of scholars, however, four critical points stand out: political participation is an *activity*; it is something done by people in their role as *citizens*; it should be *voluntary*; and it *deals with government, politics, or the state* (Van Deth, 2014: 351-352). Van Deth's conceptualisation of political participation therefore is applicable to this study to identify and integrate the expressive forms of engagement online that may take place outside formal politics, by assessing the activity, the content and whom the act is directed at. In expanding this conceptual idea of political participation, Norris (2002: 16) argues that political participation entails activities that have an impact on civil society and that seek to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour.

Other scholars in this expanded approach, for example Macedo, Alex-Assenson and Berry (2005: 6) have viewed politics and civil society as interdependent. For them, civic engagement include any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity. Zukin *et al.* (2006: 52) applied the same approach, defining civic participation as behaviour aimed at

resolving problems of the community. The study therefore sees no conceptual distinction between civic engagement and political participation.

Definition of political participation in this study

For the purposes of this study, the following definition was adopted for political participation: The self-expressions in the public sphere by marginalised groups on issues that affect them individually, as a group, and as part of wider society, used in order to realise their potential to alter social behaviour by influencing political processes and promoting social reform.

The next concepts to be defined are “democracy” and “deliberative democracy”.

2.3.3 Democracy and deliberative democracy

2.3.3.1 Democracy

Democracy is another concept of which the definition is fluid, as it means different things to different people in different contexts. The majority of definitions of democracy are influenced largely by the Western liberal approach to democracy, from where the majority of scholarship on democracy originates. Hence, democracy is generally equated with elections, or electoral participation. For example, McNair (2003: 18) defines democracy as providing the necessary political choices for the electorate among competing political parties, and the election of the candidates only through rational and informed decisions of the electorate.

Similarly, Garnham (1992: 364) posits that democracy not only deals with freedom, but with the knowledge necessary to activate choices through the political judgement of various alternatives open to citizens. In positioning these definitions against the context in which there is empirical evidence of “antipathy to democracy and its sustaining institutional structures, and a preference for thin rather than strong democracy”, Barber (1988: 18) contends that, from these definitions, democracy is unattainable.

However, this study found the definition of democracy by McChesney (2000) to offer a point of departure for understanding democracy as it relates to this study. McChesney (2000: 5) argues that democracy and democratisation ensure “reducing social inequality and establishing a media system that serves the entire population and promotes democratic rule”. Given the emphasis of new media platforms on widening the public sphere, this study combines Garnham’s (1992) and McChesney’s (2000) definitions, which pronounce the need to reduce social inequality and the critical role of the media system that caters for the needs of all.

Definition of democracy in this study

For the purposes of this study, the following definition was thus adopted for democracy: Democracy entails reducing social inequality by establishing a media system that caters for everyone, and enabling freedom of speech for people to share knowledge and to make the necessary political choices at an individual and collective level. This definition is more appropriate to the Zimbabwean situation because of its emphasis on (i) a free media as a means of reducing social inequality, (ii) the need for freedom of speech, and (iii) the sharing of knowledge to make informed political choices.

2.3.3.2 Deliberation

The concept of deliberation refers to the unconstrained exchange of arguments that involves practical reasoning and always potentially results in a transformation of preferences (Cook, 2000: 948). The deliberative element refers to a belief that decision making is best conducted by argumentation proffered by and to participants committed to the values of rationality and impartiality (Elster, 1998). Deliberation also acknowledges the vernacular rhetoric uttered in everyday social settings (Welsh, 2002: 698). For example, to win the attention of the audience, public deliberators attempt to “speak better” and invent potentially broadly acceptable political vocabularies within the context of their audiences (Isocrates, cited in Welsh, 2002: 691). From this premise, deliberation can be seen as encompassing the different strategies that communicators employ to win the attention of those communicated to.

Baek, Wojcieszak and Delli Carpini (2011: 365) define deliberation as public discussion about socio-political topics that should include or represent everyone affected by an issue, offer equal opportunities to participate and express diverse views, and that is open to alternatives. Dorr Goold, Neblo, Kim, De Vries, Rowe and Muhlberger (2012: 24) aptly sum up deliberation by arguing that deliberations discuss “what we should do as a political community in addition to what I want as an individual”.

Definition of deliberation in this study

For the purposes of this study, the following definition was thus adopted for deliberation: A public discussion about political, economic and socio-cultural topics that impact on people’s daily lives. Deliberators participate and express diverse views with the goal of transforming policies, for the betterment of not only individuals, but society as a whole.

2.3.3.3 Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy refers to the type of democracy in which people collectively reason together towards decision making on matters of common concern (Cohen, 2009: 7). The central argument is that deliberation, beyond mere voting, should be critical to decision making (Ani, 2013: 210). Applied in different settings, some scholars (for example Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli & Steenbergen, 2004) employ the term to refer to bodies whose members deliberate on nearly equal power terms, such as parliaments, other scholars (for example Fishkin, 2011) apply it to deliberative forums that are formally set up to enable citizen involvement in decision making, while others (for example, Dahlgren, 2009) apply it to informal everyday conversations. This study is anchored in the latter, which emphasises a broader form of deliberative democracy beyond the formal centres of decision making.

Definition of deliberative democracy in this study

For the purposes of this study, the following definition was thus adopted for deliberative democracy: It entails creating opportunities for public exchange about what Welsh (2002) and Baek *et al.* (2011) call socio-political topics in social settings, increasing knowledge and participation by enabling diverse views from everyone affected by an issue.

The next concept defined is “empowerment”.

2.3.4 Empowerment

The concept of empowerment is interpreted differently according to different situations, precisely because it generally refers to an increase in power and the nature of that power varies depending on the context (Arnold, 2012: 77). However, the empowerment of women as advocated in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) is a radical demand and depends on “the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women” (Gallagher, 2013:27). Thus feminist interpretations of empowerment lead to a broader understanding of power, to include power dynamics within the self, in relation to others and in the wider society (Rowlands, 1997: 14). Therefore, empowerment is the process by which people, in this case women, become aware of the power dynamics at play in their lives and work towards undoing the negative social constructions (Rowlands, 1997: 14). Rowlands (1997) further postulates that this process enables women to see themselves as having the capacity and right to act and influence decisions. Similarly, Thas, Ramilo and Cinco (2007: 14) define empowerment as “enabling people towards self-determination, and for women this emphasises the importance of increasing their individual power and taking control over decisions and issues that

shape their lives”. From this premise, empowerment is the rejection of hegemony and the creation of public spaces where women as individuals and groups can participate in and influence public discussions.

Women’s studies and feminists have often utilised concepts of empowerment in response to the marginalisation and limited power of women. Arnold (2012: 78) argues that the term empowerment can be used to address the status of groups or marginalised individuals, along with efforts to increase their social and political power in a particular cultural or societal milieu. The assumption in this approach is that empowerment is an issue of political and societal positioning within a larger structure. From a feminist point of view, the emphasis is on the empowerment of women as a group, within larger cultural domains (Arnold, 2012: 78).

The media are one of the conduits for the attainment of empowerment, as access to information is important for personal, relational and societal power (Arnold, 2012: 79). Blogs therefore provide a mechanism for locating empowerment, thus control of and access to media outlets is interwoven with the understandings of empowerment. For Somolu (2007: 482), the power of the blog as a tool for empowering women lies in its ability to provide an avenue for women to express themselves and connect with other women. According to Somolu, blogs empower by giving a voice to the unheard. Through story shaping, encouragement, education and words, women promote strong, positive images.

Definition of empowerment in this study

For the purposes of this study, the following definition is thus adopted for empowerment: The extent to which women, as individuals and as a social and political group, have power in culture to re-present and re-assert their identities and to be able to discuss, share knowledge, make choices and take control of decisions and issues that shape their lives.

2.3.5 The online public sphere

2.3.5.1 New media: Blogs

Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) give a three-fold definition of new media. They define new media as technological devices, the discussions held with those devices, and the social contexts and institutions of their use. This definition acknowledges the social-shaping nature of technology. Similarly, in defining the “new” in new media, Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant and Kelly (2003: 13) refer to a wide range of changes in media production, distribution and use, adding that new media are

more than technological changes, but are also textual, conventional and cultural. From this premise, new media therefore are not homogenous in nature and form, but, rather, their appropriation is unique across regions. For Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler (2009: 176), new media include citizens' access to relatively inexpensive communication technologies with which they can interact with media, generate their own content, and create alternative networks for information dissemination. Papacharissi (2004) adds that new technologies provide information and tools that may extend the role of the public in the social and political arena.

From a journalism perspective, new media are journalism online, as they facilitate and enable an exchange of ideas and stories amongst people and offer representational possibilities and experiences. In this way, new media meet the normative purpose and role of journalism in society, namely that of providing citizens with information (Deuze, 2007: 211). However, Roberts (2014: 12) reminds us that new media are embedded in current social practices, therefore they are part of the "battle for hegemony" in and around social projects and have altered the terrain through which the "battle" is fought. At the same time, Roberts argues, new media have to operate through on-going capitalist contradictions that have manifested in society for years, and that will always remain as long as capitalism is the dominant socio-economic system.

Definition of new media in this study

For the purposes of this study, the following definition was thus adopted for new media: New media constitute platforms that facilitate the creation of alternative networks of information and counter-discourses that extend the role of the public in the political, economic and socio-cultural arena. At the same time, new media constitute communication and discussion practices engaged in by citizens online, where previously marginalised groups, like women, define themselves and their world view by generating their own content.

Definition of blogs in this study

Specifically, this study concerned itself with blogs as online public spheres, providing arenas for discussion, dissent and debate that translate into knowledge and a feeling of empowerment, which is critical for social transformation and development (Radloff, Primo & Munyua, 2004). Lowrey (2006: 479) define blogging as the publishing of public interest information and commentary, while Watson and Hill (2006: 27-28) define blogs as a platform for diary writing and reflecting on people's lives, adding that this is what draws people to blogging. Similarly, Alexander, cited in Watson and Hill (2006: 28), argues that blogs, as a form of new public spheres, are a significant contributor to the dissemination of alternative narratives to those provided by the traditional mass media, and such

narratives serve as “a tool for mobilising global protests”. Most blogs are personally published, while others are published under institutions, as organisations seek to project more personal “voice” from their senior executives to influence the firms’ identity among constituents (Baer & Alex-Brown, 2010). Thus, it is critical to point out that blogging as a practice, like new media, is not homogenous as there are different types of blogs, with different goals. However, despite the different subject areas that blogs are categorised under, the fact that blogs are organised around the voice of the blogger and the topics in which he or she is interested (Blood, 2004), renders the practice relevant to research that seeks to understand bloggers’ perceptions on particular issues in different contexts, such as in this study. In addition, Deuze (2003) posits that the power of blogging is its social narrative role in society – how a message reaches out in a population through social interactions.

For the purposes of this study, blogs are conceptualised as both individual and collective units as it combines blogs published individually by bloggers, and those published by organisations. These units are bound by particular content, women’s activism and political participation. From this premise, the bloggers and the organisations perceive themselves as part of a community that shares values, as also argued by Kramer (2004). The following definition was thus adopted for blogs: Blogs refer to writings on new media that entail people’s thoughts, opinions and reflections on their lives and those of others, and at the same time challenging culture and other social norms that oppress people.

The next concept to be defined is “counterpublics: the untouched citizens”.

2.3.5.2 Counterpublics: the “untouched citizens”

The concept of the counterpublic emerged as a direct critique of the bourgeois notion of a singular, overarching public sphere in which all citizens potentially debate the activities of the state (Habermas, 1989). According to Fraser (1992) there are multiple publics, mainly differentiated by group characteristics or by group identities such as gender, sexuality, race, nationality. Counterpublics therefore react to the exclusionary politics of dominant public spheres and the state (Squires, 2004). From this premise, Fraser (1992: 123, 124) defines counterpublics as parallel discursive arenas in which members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. Fraser (1992: 124) further argues that counterpublics have a dual character in society: “On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and re-groupment; on the other hand, they function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics.” By challenging oppression and existing forms

of power in societies, marginalised groups, particularly women, whom this study refers to as the “untouched citizens”, become counterpublics agitating for social reform and equality for all.

Milioni (2006) posits that counterpublics are important in the transformation and modification of existing norms and patterns of the critical public sphere, while Felski (1989: 166) describes counterpublic spheres as critical oppositional social forces that assert distinctiveness against the homogenising and critically denuding tendencies of modern mass communication. Therefore, spaces for self-presentation, and for the self-articulation of issues and reflexivity, enable this distinct presentation of issues in advocating for societal change. Felski’s definition acknowledges that counterpublics themselves are heterogeneous, but their formation is based more on the “commonality in the experience of oppression” (1989: 167), the spaces they inhabit together, and the institutions and practices that they share as citizens (d’Entreves, 1989:8).

In concurrence with Felski, Asen (2000: 440) views counterpublics as collectives that emerge to articulate exclusions and that imagine themselves explicitly as “alternative collectives” that are not homogeneous, but consists of all those who recognise and speak out concerning a specific set of political, socio-economic and legal exclusions. Asen (2000: 439) adds that counterpublics are not necessarily composed of persons excluded from wider public spheres, allowing for possibilities of coalitions with multiple social groups.

Definition of counterpublics: the “untouched citizens” in this study

For the purposes of this study, the following definition was thus adopted for counterpublics: Counterpublics refer to women, the “untouched citizens,” who become critical oppositional forces that argue against dominant conceptions of the group. These counterpublics, or the “untouched citizens”, project discourses and hidden opinions previously spoken only in private spaces, launching persuasive campaigns to change the minds of the dominant publics while at the same time embracing common values and seeking solidarity with other marginal groups.

2.3.6 Summary of definition of concepts

This section defined the key concepts on which the study is built. These are: “politics”, “participation” and “political participation”;; “democracy”, “deliberation” and “deliberative democracy”, “empowerment”, “new media/blogs” and “counterpublics: the untouched citizens”, as they are critical to this study.

2.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the contexts of the women's movement and developments that spurred women's activism in Zimbabwe since 1995 were discussed. In addition, key concepts used in the study were defined. These included politics and political participation, democracy and deliberative democracy, empowerment, new media and counterpublics. Each concept was examined, and thereafter a working definition was given for the concept for the purposes of this study.

In the following chapter, a review of the literature on new media, democracy and the political participation of women, both globally and locally, is discussed.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

“A free society creates a set of public forums, providing speakers’ access to a diverse people, and ensuring in the process that each of us hears a wide range of speakers, spanning many topics and opinions”

(Sunstein, 2001: 26)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical analysis of the literature that informs this study. Guided by the study’s research question, namely to establish whether online media use by women’s organisations and journalist activists in Zimbabwe enables women to challenge dominant discourses and increase women’s participation in the public sphere, and consequently in politics, the researcher explores debates on political participation and deliberative democracy from a gender perspective. These debates are situated in the context of the digital media revolution and new online public spheres. Structured thematically, the discussion focuses on six key themes identified from the literature review (see explanation in section 1.5.3 of this dissertation). These six themes of the study are:

1. *participation,*
2. *deliberative democracy,*
3. *empowerment,*
4. *public sphere,*
5. *representation,* and
6. *challenges.*

The review of themes 1 to 5, discussed in this particular order, is divided into two periods: the pre-digital and digital. This is premised on the fact that the study investigates online media use, hence the pre-digital era serves to contextualise the inquiry. The review of theme 6 is discussed last, with no demarcation of pre-digital and digital. This is because the challenges were found to be similar in both periods.

Each thematic discussion begins with a global overview, after which the debates are contextualised within Africa, where the revolutionising effects of digital technology in general, and

specifically of the internet, are hotly contested by both Western and African scholars. Subsequently, the discussion on each theme narrows the scope of these debates to Zimbabwe, the focus of this study.

A review of the literature is a critical component of every study, for several reasons. Firstly, it serves to share with the reader the results of other studies that are closely related to the one being undertaken (Creswell, 2014: 28). Secondly, it provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study, as well as a benchmark for comparing the results with other findings (Boote & Beile, 2005: 5; Creswell, 2014: 28). In addition, a literature review helps the researcher to come up with a sound theoretical framework that shapes the design and direction of the study, and to make important decisions about methodology (Rubin & Babbie, 1993: 104).

This chapter now proceeds by first highlighting how the literature search was conducted. The search engines used to establish the existence of literature on the use of online media platforms for deliberation by women were EBSCOHost,²⁰ Scopus,²¹ JStor²² and Academic Premier.²³ The online catalogue of the J.S. Gericke Library of Stellenbosch University, which provided access to the World libraries (Worldcat),²⁴ African Journals Online²⁵ and Southern African Libraries (SACat),²⁶ provided relevant studies. In addition, the search engine Google Scholar²⁷ proved to be useful. Similarly, conference papers, theses and dissertations from the Database for African Theses and Dissertations (DATAD) portal²⁸ provided a general overview of similar research conducted by other scholars.

The words and phrases with which the search was executed were:

- “gender and democracy”,
- “gender, women, media and political participation”,
- “women’s mobilisation and activism in Africa”,
- “new media, democracy and political participation”, and
- “new media, women activism and empowerment”.

²⁰ <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ez.sun.ac.za/ehost/search/advanced?sid=11539369-8dc9-49f2-bbf1-e1cebb1bcbe9%40sessionmgr113&vid=0&hid=115>.

²¹ <http://www-scopus-com.ez.sun.ac.za/>.

²² <http://www.jstor.org.ez.sun.ac.za/>.

²³ <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ez.sun.ac.za/ehost/search/advanced?sid=04ff60f9-aac2-458f-9b2c-84a908de6630%40sessionmgr4002&vid=0&hid=4214>.

²⁴ <http://sun.worldcat.org/>.

²⁵ <http://www.ajol.info/>.

²⁶ <http://reference.sabinet.co.za.ez.sun.ac.za/sacat>.

²⁷ <https://scholar.google.co.za/>.

²⁸ <http://datad.aau.org/>.

Drawing literature from “gender and democracy” and “gender, women, media and political participation” is important to this study, as it offers a point of departure for the understanding of the historical context of differences in political participation between women and men. The search yielded a considerable amount of literature, and the researcher selected 16 papers that offered a global overview of the issues, particularly in Western democracies (Habermas, 1989; Sarvasy & Siim, 1994; Schlozman, Burns & Verba, 1994; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995; Verba, Burns & Schlozman, 1997; Lijphart, 1997; Norris, 2000; Siim, 2000; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Takeda, 2006; Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010; Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), 2015; Dahlberg, 2011; Dahlgren, 2011; Muller, 2014; UN Women, 2015). The study found the following eight studies to be the most relevant: Schlozman *et al.* (1994), Norris (2000), Inglehart and Norris (2003), Takeda (2006), Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010), Dahlgren (2011), GMMP (2010) and Muller (2014).

Another six studies in which the research focused on Africa, and specifically Zimbabwe, were accessed, and all were relevant to the study, namely: Tripp (1994), Yoon (2001), Cornwall and Goetz (2005), Waylen (2007), Ezeani (2009) and Moyo (2011).

In line with this study’s inquiry into the role of media and communication in a democracy, a search of “women’s mobilisation and activism in Africa” was also conducted. The search yielded a number of studies (for example Tripp, 2001; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Tripp, Casimiro, Kwesiga & Mungwa, 2009; Geisler, 2004). Other studies focused on the impact of culture and patriarchy on women’s political participation (for example Nkiwane, 2000; Lueck, 2004; Gudhlanga, 2013). Of particular relevance to this research are the following studies: Nkiwane (2000), Tripp (2001), Geisler (2004) and Cornwall and Goetz (2005). These studies capture succinctly the conditions under which women’s mobilisation in Africa has occurred since the democratisation in the 1990s. An in-depth discussion of this is in Chapter 2 (Research Context and Definition of Terms).

Since this study’s focus is on new media, the literature search was then narrowed down to “new media and democracy”, and “new media, democracy and political participation”. There is a growing body of literature since the early 1990s on digital democracy (for example Gurevitch *et al.*, 2009; Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010; Mansbridge, Bohman, Chambers, Christiano, Fung, Parkinson, Thompson & Warren, 2012), the use of new media as public spheres and deliberative forums (Fishkin, 1995; Papacharissi, 2002; Latour & Weibel, 2005; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Van Laer, 2007; Baek *et al.*, 2011; Dahlgren, 2011), and to claim voice and recognition (Couldry, 2003; Graber, 2003; Mitra, 2005). In addition, an increasing number of studies on digital democracy have explored the gender neutrality of online public spheres (Fraser, 1990; Plant, 1997; Monberg, 1998; Wajcman, 2004), and informal forms of political communication (Dryzek, 2000;

Young, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Graham, 2008; Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). The most relevant literature for this study includes Fraser (1990), Stromer-Galley (2002), Mitra (2005), Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006), Van Laer (2007), Gurevitch *et al.* (2009), Gil de Zuniga *et al.* (2010), Steenveld and Strelitz (2010) and Mansbridge *et al.* (2012).

The last search, on “new media, women activism and empowerment”, generated literature on how women, in different parts of the world, are using online media for activism (for example Deuze, 2003; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Byerly & Ross, 2006; Somolu, 2007; Van Doorn & Van Zoonen, 2008; Lievrouw, 2011; Moyo, 2011; Steele, 2011; Gallagher, 2013; Zobl & Reitsamer, 2013; Nasir, 2014). Studies that are most relevant for this study include Byerly and Ross (2006), Lievrouw (2011), Gallagher (2013) and Zobl and Reitsamer (2013) for the Western overview, while Somolu (2007), Moyo (2011) and Nasir (2014) contextualise the African and Zimbabwean setting.

The researcher now reviews this literature, and the first theme to be discussed is *participation*.

3.2 The pre-digital era

3.2.1 Introduction

This section examines relevant literature on democracy and women’s participation in politics in the pre-digital era. However, digital scholars who make reference to the pre-digital era are incorporated to support the arguments. The researcher discusses all the themes identified in this study, as outlined in section 3.1. Each thematic discussion first gives the Western focus, mainly that of the United States of America (USA) and Europe, as well as Asia. The USA and Europe have dominated scholarship on democracy and political participation, while examples from Asia provide the context for this research, as the majority of governments are authoritarian regimes, therefore similar to the context of the case study of this research. The African focus then follows, with specific reference to a number of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically Zimbabwe. These key debates and discussions of the pre-digital era are then contextualised to the new media environment to situate this study’s inquiry. Discussed first is women’s participation in politics in the pre-digital era.

3.2.2 Participation

Participation is theorised in different forms, and in different types, of politics to contextualise the feminist media criticism, and to connect this criticism to the various strategic ways in which women carry out distinct political interventions in different settings. Thus, it is useful to understand, first, how women have been marginalised from political processes in order to discern the political

intervention strategies employed by women in new public spheres of digital media. First, a global overview of studies in the USA, Europe and Asia is discussed.

3.2.2.1 The gender gap and political participation: Global overview

Participation in politics is generally used as a yardstick to determine power differentials and social inequalities between women and men in society. This is because a participatory public is crucial for democratic responsiveness and is seen as an intrinsic democratic good (Verba *et al.*, 1995). This is why gender equality in political power in industrialised countries has grown tremendously over the past 50 years, with more women running for and taking up positions in national parliaments than ever before (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010: 318). However, research also indicates that, while women have made significant strides in wielding political influence (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010), they are still found to participate less in politics across a variety of Western nations (Schlozman *et al.*, 1994; Verba *et al.*, 1997; Norris, 2000).

A number of observations and reasons have been given for why women participate less in politics. For example, Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010: 319), in a review of women's political participation over the years, point out that differences in men's and women's political participation in the USA and Great Britain are not as large as other notable disparities among social groups (for example racial or economic), but, according to Verba *et al.* (1997), these differences are persistent. Other studies in the USA have revealed that women participate less in politics due to systematic biases that favour citizens who are more privileged in terms of their socio-economic status (Lijphart, 1997). In addition, Schlozman *et al.* (1994) demonstrate that women have less money in their households and also less control over the money in their households, which disadvantages them from participating in politics. In other words, the inequalities within the household impede women more than men from engaging in political deliberations.

Similarly, other studies have revealed gaps in political participation between women and men in other democracies world-wide (for example Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Norris, 2000; Inglehart & Norris, 2003), indicating that having democratic institutions alone will not close the gender gap in political participation. In fact, Inglehart and Norris (2000: 7) claim that Japan, Taiwan and South Korea demonstrated "lower support for women in politics than would be predicted by their level of socio-economic development alone". In a similar vein, while contextualising participation in Japan, Takeda (2006: 185) noted that, despite Japan having the world's second largest economy and entrenched democratic institutions, Japanese women generally have fewer opportunities for empowerment than many women from "Third World countries". In the light of these disparities,

therefore, new understandings of participation need to be brought to the fore. This suggests the need for a more expansive approach to understand the varying contextual factors of participation. In the case of Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, culture was found to be the major impediment to the participation of women in politics.

Furthermore, electoral system structures, socialisation, as well as masculine norms and patterns of behaviour embedded in politics and society (Inglehart & Norris, 2000), continue to widen the gender gap in political participation.

Other research in this area has focused on different modes of participation between women and men, in particular women's vibrant participation in informal political efforts and organisations (Sarvasy & Siim, 1994; Siim, 2000), suggesting non-formal engagement may be easier for women (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010).

While studies of political participation in the USA, Great Britain and other countries in Europe, as well as in Asia, have made great strides and provide an indication of the various factors influencing participation, the extent to which these factors can be generalised to other Western nations, and to developing nations in Africa, is still unclear (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010: 319). It therefore is necessary to review the literature on the local context; first Sub-Saharan Africa and then Zimbabwe, as is done in the following section.

3.2.2.2 The gender gap and political participation: Local overview

Previous studies have traced the role of women in traditional societies in Africa and their political roles post-independence (for example Geisler, 2004; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). The major findings of these studies are that the development of the state politics in Africa has used gender to consolidate the power of the state and that of the elite class. This system of government, as Geisler (2004: 25) argues, defends its own corporate interests, while excluding those of the subordinate groups. This is done by eliminating women's independent organs of representation and reducing their participation in decision making.

Further research on women's participation in politics, similar to findings in the Western democracies, indicate that women are poorly represented in politics and that they participate less in decision-making bodies, as shown by Yoon (2001). In her study of 31 Sub-Saharan African countries between 1990 and 1999, Yoon (2001) examined the effect of democratisation on women's legislative representation and found that, overall, there has been a decrease in women's representation in parliaments, save for a few countries that implement gender quotas. This indicates that women in Africa, as are women globally, are poorly represented in politics and other decision-making bodies

(Yoon, 2001: 170). This reifies an earlier argument by Schlozman *et al.* (1994), namely that women's issues and perspectives continue to be pushed out of the public sphere. This is in contrast to the democratic ideals supported by scholars prior to the digital era, for example Pateman (1970) and Barber (1984), namely that for democracy to be enjoyed by all there needs to be a maximisation of the direct involvement of as many citizens as possible and equal consideration of their interests in the political decision-making process.

In a review of women in parliament in the past 20 years, United Nations Women (UN Women, 2015: 6) reveal that, in 1995, no state in Sub-Saharan Africa had elected more than 30% of women to their single or lower houses. Seychelles and Mozambique fell just below that mark, at 27,3% and 25,2% respectively. This scenario is attributable to, amongst other factors, prevailing cultural attitudes regarding the roles of women in society, lack of support as well as lack of resources (UN Women, 2015).

Therefore, to understand women's struggles for gender equality in political participation in Zimbabwe, as in most African countries, it is necessary to place it in a wider historical, social and political context (Gaidzanwa, 2004; Tripp *et al.*, 2009). This is critical because, as Tripp *et al.* (2009: 50) posit, political party agendas did not push for the advancement of women's status post-independence, but instead governments tried to keep women apolitical by pushing them to the fringes of political structures, thus relegating them to the private sphere.

Furthermore, culture and patriarchy have been identified as the major impediments for women's participation in politics in Zimbabwe (for example Nkiwane, 2000). In addition, the country's political and electoral processes restricted women from participating in politics. Studies (for example Gaidzanwa, 2004; Geisler, 2004) reveal that women in Zimbabwe suffer from severe political and economic disadvantages, which hamper their entry into political and other leadership roles.

Collectively, the studies above indicate that the lack of equality between women and men, emanating from systematic biases and power imbalances in society and a lack of access to communication spaces in both Western and developing countries, results in less participation by women in politics. Women also have less power than men, evidenced by the disproportionate representation of women and men in African parliaments. Other factors that impede women's participation in politics include political and economic disadvantages, the legal system that reinforces male control, and culture. While these are similar globally, hence the persistence of the gender gap in political participation, applications are different across societies.

3.2.3 Deliberative democracy

3.2.3.1 Deliberative democracy: Global overview

The revival of participatory democracy emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, inspired in part by the oppositional social movements as well as the appraisal of theorists such as Rousseau, Barber, Pateman and Habermas (Chadwick, 2009: 12-13). For participatory democrats, political deliberation, if it fulfils certain criteria, can have a transformational influence on citizens. Thus studies on deliberative democracy generally argue that, contrary to liberal individuals' perspectives that assume that citizens' political views are predetermined by their interests, legitimate solutions to political problems can only be found by engaging in sustained reflective and rational discourse (Habermas, 2006; Chadwick, 2009).

Other studies on deliberative democracy have emphasised the criteria for attaining deliberative democracy through assessing mainstream institutions globally (Forester, 1999; Mansbridge, 1999), while others have used Habermas' criteria of rationality, relating it to theories of democracy (for example, Benhabib, 1996; Dryzek, 2000). Others have criticised deliberative democracy as espoused by Habermas (for example Fraser, 1992; Kohn, 2000; Mouffe, 2000). Scholars in this group position deliberative democracy within actual decision making, while others advocate for broader forms of deliberative democracy beyond the formal centres of decision making. This is the approach this study seeks to take, as it offers the opportunity to look beyond formal deliberation and emphasises, as its point of departure, how the political emerges from everyday conversations, as also argued by Barber (1984).

Similarly, Dahlgren (2009) supports an earlier argument by Barber (1984), namely that zeroing in too tightly on strict political deliberation risks losing sight of everyday conversations and their relevance for democracy. This understanding of deliberative democracy also views different contexts as facilitating some forms of deliberation and avenues for information. Therefore, because deliberation happens everywhere, even in authoritarian regimes, it is necessary to consider the contextual factors of that system and the standards by which the system should be evaluated.

Also critical to this research in the studies discussed here is that the democratic function of deliberation is to promote an all-inclusive political process in terms of equality. This is attained by allowing multiple and plural voices, interests, concerns and claims; for those excluded, no deliberative democratic legitimacy is generated (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012: 12). Therefore, this systemic approach to deliberation views the media as connecting many parts of the deliberative

systems. In other words, the role of communication in aiding deliberation, using Habermas' concept of the public sphere, is emphasised. However, to counter criticism of the Habermasian public sphere, the deliberative democracy advocated for in this study is one that is linked to the horizontal media function, which emphasises freedom of expression.

Deliberative democracy in the African context is discussed next.

3.2.3.2 Deliberative democracy: Local overview

Much research has been done on the democratisation process in Africa. However, although the bulk of the literature praises recent political changes toward democracy in Africa and analyses the internal and external factors that brought about this change (for example Joseph, 1997; Chabal, 1998), little attention has been paid to the effect of this change on women's legislative representation, and on the general representation of women's issues and perspectives in decision making. A study by Joseph (1997) examined dynamics of political change in 47 Sub-Saharan African countries and discovered that democratic ideals had different effects across countries, due to the fragmented nature of African cultures, amongst a host of other context-specific dynamics.

One of the conclusions of Joseph's (1997: 365) study was that the "electoralist, institutionalist, and proceduralist" criteria for deliberative democracy must be expanded into broader conceptualisations, in order to assess the democratisation effects in Africa. Other research in Africa has focused on the role of the independent media in Africa's democracy and democratic governance (for example Rønning, 1993; Kasoma, 1995).

Similarly, in Zimbabwe, much of the research on deliberative democracy in the pre-digital era focused largely on the role of the media in democracy (for example Zaffiro, 2001), the rise of women's mobilisation and civic society (for example Gaidzanwa, 1994; Win, 1995; Makumbe, 1998), and how opposition candidates are finding ways to challenge the ruling party's monopoly (for example Rich, 1997).

Collectively, studies under this theme indicate that research on deliberative democracy in the 1990s sought to achieve different things in Western democracies compared to those conducted in Africa. The differences arise largely from the different political systems, with much of Africa under authoritarian regimes. One of the reasons is the lack of sustained reflective discourse between the states and citizens, as citizen knowledge of debates, both in government and the public sphere, comes through the media, along with framing and perspective setting, in which all media must, by their nature, engage (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012: 20). From this discussion it is concluded that different media

perform different functions within different deliberative systems and with different results. This leads to the discussion of the next theme, empowerment.

3.2.4 Empowerment

3.2.4.1 Empowerment: Global overview

Women's empowerment is focused on increasing women's power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including access to information and participating in decision making (UN, 2005: 13). For this to happen, access to media that are free and independent, diverse and accessible, serving a "societal purpose", is key (Herman & Chomsky, 1994: 298).

However, research conducted in Western democracies on traditional forms of political engagement that takes place face-to-face in offline settings, for example voting and campaign events (Verba *et al.*, 1995; Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010), has shown women to participate less in decision-making positions, thereby limiting their empowerment. Various factors have an effect on this, as shown in the discussion in section 3.2.2.1 earlier. The factors relevant to the empowerment of women are the socio-economic status of women in society and the lack of access to communication platforms, which, as Herman and Chomsky (1994: 1) argue, have remained concentrated and monopolised by the elite.

Furthermore, the low socio-economic status of women reduces their power to participate in political activities. For example, Fishkin (1995) posits that promoting meetings that include all parties affected by an issue requires effort and resources, which women might not have. In addition, such meetings might attract an unrepresentative handful of citizens (Fraser, 1990). Even when traditionally marginalised citizens are included, stereotypes or fear of isolation might silence their voices (Sanders, 1997). Similarly, Verba *et al.* (1995) argue that people participate in politics when they are asked to join political causes and have the necessary resources to do so, such as time, money and cognitive abilities. Therefore, this arguably limits the involvement and empowerment of those in the lower classes in society, such as women.

From a feminist lens, Harp, Bachmann and Loke (2014: 291) point out that, historically, women have been excluded from the public sphere by being discouraged from speaking up in public and participating in public discourse. This has been facilitated by the political structures and institutional arrangements, cultural practices and beliefs existing in a political system at any given time. Consequently, the media, as part of the political system, inculcate and defend the political, economic and social agenda of the privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state

(Herman & Chomsky, 1994: 298), alienating marginalised groups, such as women, from the democratic polity and, ultimately, from empowerment. This is why feminist media research has to interrogate the media, particularly media production and representation and how they perpetuate structures of domination, and has to continue to do so (Aldoory & Parry-Giles, 2005: 337). The goals of such research have been, for example, to accentuate productive images of empowerment (Durham, 2001) and to share success stories on how women-led media projects, such as *Cotidiano Mujer* in Uruguay, the Centre for Advocacy and Research in India, and Women's Media Watch in Jamaica, amongst others, are destabilising the disempowered images of women and promoting feminist perspectives within the media (Gallagher, 2002: 16).

3.2.4.2 Empowerment: Local overview

In connecting political participation and deliberative democracy to women's empowerment in Africa, it suffices to approach women activists as an interest group that advocates for change and as an intellectual force that challenges cultural definitions (Van Zoonen, 1994: 152). This means that feminists in general, and African women in particular, may engage with the media in ways that appear to be completely unconnected but that can inform each other within a shared political framework. These connections are important, but have been explored insufficiently by researchers.

In her research on black American women, Collins (1991: 111) posits that the empowerment of women is an outcome of changed consciousness, resulting from both internal transformation and the effects of this transformation on broader society. In other words, empowerment encompasses ways of knowing one's self, and embracing one's self as fully human. This argument by Collins resonates with bell hooks's (1990: 145, 149) concept of the dual nature of marginality, where, for women of African descent, marginalisation is both a "site of deprivation" and a "space for resistance". Applied in the African setting, specifically Zimbabwe, this offers an examination of the empowerment effects on black women who have increasingly been active in social and political movements, many of them working for causes of social justice, equality, women's rights and struggles against patriarchy (for example Kachingwe, 1986; Kazembe, 1986; Schmidt, 1992; Waylen, 1996). This networking of women in relation to various causes has enabled solidarity between different groups of women to share their concerns (Win, 1995), thus enabling dialogue between and amongst women, which is a prerequisite for empowerment.

3.2.5 Public sphere

3.2.5.1 The role of the media in democracy: Global overview

The focus on public discourse is especially prominent in deliberative democracy (discussed in section 3.2.3), as these public deliberations that encompass everyone in society are a necessary prerequisite for democracy (Fraser, 1990). This participatory approach to democracy emphasises that the media should provide the platform for self-education through participation (Pateman, 1970; Servaes, 1999). Scholars supporting this participatory approach to democracy (Habermas, 1989; Monberg, 1998) emphasise the need for media systems that are all inclusive and “give voice to public opinion” (Graber, 2003: 143). These studies track and analyse the role of the media in democracy and serve as a general guide to the role of the media in deliberative democracy, as a public sphere, for empowerment, and for political participation. Therefore, this discussion only highlights the epistemic and democratic functions of the media in these four areas. Epistemically, Herman and Chomsky (1994: 298) argue that any democracy needs the media to enable the public to assert meaningful control over the political process by providing it with the information needed for informed political decisions, and to act as watchdogs and critics.

Therefore, the overarching role of the media in democracy is political inclusion, enabling a free public exchange of arguments amongst citizens. However, because media perform different functions in different deliberative systems, the public sphere function of the media differs across societies, groups and individuals. For example, Monberg (1998: 435) argues that, as long as women remain “submerged and depoliticised” by the media, they will remain outside the public discourse. Similarly, feminist scholars have long criticised the media for providing ideological support for hegemonic power structures through their top-down approach, and how, for example, these hegemonic groups drive rhetorical devices, idioms for communicating one’s needs and the paradigms of argumentation (Fraser, 1990). Furthering this critique, Fraser (1990) calls for intervention in and transformation of the systems of power in terms of both media practices and content, so that different forms of participation manifest in individuals and groups in society.

3.2.5.2 The role of the media in democracy: Local overview

The literature exploring women’s mobilisation in Africa emphasises the role of the media in women’s activist work (Tripp, 2001; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Waylen, 2007). Applied to Africa, the role of the media as “carriers of democratic public spheres” (Habermas, 2006: 419), and of giving “voice to

public opinion” (Graber, 2003: 143), has been found to be lacking. This is because of the different political systems found on the continent and the patriarchal power structures inherent in society.

What is also critical to note is that the stifling of democratic principles in post-independent Zimbabwe, in particular, also meant the development of state-centred media and the eradication of criticism of those in power (Zaffiro, 2001). Despite becoming a multi-party state in the 1990s, and the subsequent rise of independent media, the government continues to stifle freedom of expression and pluralism (Saunders, 2000). According to Gaidzanwa (2004: 32), women are some of the most disenfranchised groups in accessing the media, and because women’s issues are no longer prioritised in the hegemonic male public sphere, the media tend to give wider coverage to the socially powerful, especially at election time. In sum, to enable political participation and deliberative democracy, the media should provide a forum for the discussion of diverse, often conflicting, ideas and give voice to public opinion. It therefore is necessary to review literature on the representation of women in the media, as is done next.

3.2.6 Representation

3.2.6.1 Media representation of women: Global overview

Murdock (1999) defines representation as rhetorical and ideological processes in terms of which something is described and how something appears. Underlying the concept of representation is “media power”, which Couldry (2000: 4) defines as concentration in media institutions of the symbolic power of “constructing reality” (both factual representations and credible fictions). This construction of reality has resulted in stereotypical portrayals of women that dominate current popular representations and perceptions of women – representations that have symbolically annihilated women (Tuchman, 1978) through stereotypes of their bodies. This is because the media provide ideological support for hegemonic power structures.

Ideology is defined as a way of affixing meaning to texts, which is what the mass media do (Fourie, 2007: 218). Similarly, Mendes (2011: 12), who tracked representations of women’s movements since the 1960s, defines ideology as a system of beliefs that are partial, misguided and distorted and conceal the real imbalances of power in society. Thus, through representation, the media give a particular view of the world as reality. Tied to ideology is also hegemony, where dominant groups in society feel they can impose their needs and desires on others (Mendes, 2011). From this premise, the concepts of ideology and hegemony form the basis of understanding media power and representation. This is because, as Fourie (2007: 307, 321) argues, media give meaning to the world

using systems of representations, justifying narrow perspectives and at the same time concealing other interpretations.

While much has been researched about women's representations in the media and news frames during the pre-digital era (Rakow, 1986; Davis, 1990, Basow, 1992), few studies have investigated the significance of the media imagery for women. From these studies, women in politics get less coverage, and the coverage focuses on what are seen as typically female character traits and women's issues. This is despite the progress that has been made in advancing gender equality in society.

Another strand of research in this area has investigated women in decision-making positions in newsrooms and newsroom composition. The critical argument from these studies is that women are underrepresented as media producers and have little real decision-making power (Lichter, Lichter & Rothman, 1986). In research conducted in the United States, Lichter *et al.* (1986) found that 5% of television writers, executives and producers were women, hence the current representations and perpetuation of stereotypes. In the same vein, other researchers have focussed on how women are forming independent media channels that influence representation, and how women construct sites of resistance in different contexts (for example Lloyd, 1994; Byerly, 1995) Ultimately, this research accentuates the ideological influences of the media on the production of content, and the overarching message is that women-led media may contribute towards challenging stereotypes and facilitating women's participation in politics.

3.2.6.2 Media representations of women: Local overview

Squires (2000) argues that global political systems continue to favour male hegemony, and this results in an imbalanced view of the world. It reflects a male-centred public sphere that continues to restrict women's capabilities and power in both their private and public lives. This lack of equality between women and men results in less access by women to the communication space in most African countries, resulting in women's issues and perspectives not being represented in decision making (UN, 2005).

One of the major challenges that have faced women in politics in Africa is the stereotypical representations of women parliamentarians, which restrict them to private roles (Tripp, 2001: 152-153), and that the media tend to be biased toward favouring the elite and support state hegemony (Garnham, 1992). This is despite the fact that African women play key roles in African economies, contributing over two-thirds of the continents' food supply (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 1994), and were active in the independence struggles across the continent (Aidoo, 1998). Patriarchy in many African countries has further marginalised women from mainstream public discourse, and as

Lueck (2004: 98) argues, culture and patriarchy have described femininity in negative and restrictive terms in order to define masculinity as normative. Nkiwane (2000) and Jackson (2002) posit that, despite the legislative framework put in place, most African countries undergoing democratic transitions have experienced internal pressure from culture and patriarchy, which continue to thwart gender equality by reinforcing stereotypes that restrict women's political participation and empowerment.

Despite this, women in Africa have been courageous in the past in challenging patriarchal-dominated governments to demand their rights and social justice (Gatua, Patton & Brown, 2010: 167). Their collective action is also distinct from other interest groups because it is inclusive, and adopts unique ways of linking the struggle to their personal lives (Tripp, 2001). The literature review in this section reveals that media representations and frames therefore cannot be studied outside the context of their linkages to culture and ownership patterns in the media, as media owners and capitalist influences dictate the way and the manner in which issues are covered. This is discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation (Theoretical Framework).

3.2.7 Summary of the pre-digital era

Collectively, the studies on thematic areas emphasised a critical need for a more diverse media catering for the needs of different groups of women, and for the attainment of equal political participation and deliberative democracy for women.

3.3 The digital era

3.3.1 Introduction

Having reviewed the themes of *participation*, *deliberative democracy*, *empowerment*, *public sphere* and *representation* in the pre-digital era, the study now situates all the above arguments in the digital era. The theorisation on *participation*, *deliberative democracy* and *empowerment* in this study is that women carry out distinct political interventions by creating their own personal spaces that contest dominant discourses, media representations and stereotypes in the public sphere (Watkins & Emerson, 2000: 157). In this study, the role of new media in extending the public sphere and enabling personal spaces that facilitate the contestation of male regimes of cultural production is central. Therefore, online media, as a public sphere, are envisaged to solve the problems encountered by women in the pre-digital era.

3.3.2 Participation

3.3.2.1 New forms of political participation

The nature of the internet as a discursive medium has seen a rise in new participation and political activities engaged in by citizens in society. For example, while Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) claim that the internet exacerbates some of the existing social inequalities in offline political participation by the marginalised and lower income groups, the internet's level of interactivity, and the multiplicity of alternative channels, may now circumvent traditional gatekeepers and exemplify a new form of political engagement. These new forms of engagement contribute to a broadening pool of "new" people who could become engaged (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006: 306), including the marginalised and the "untouched citizens".

To illustrate the different forms of participation between women and men, Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010) investigated gender gaps in political participation in 18 advanced Western democracies. Using linear and logistic regression models, they revealed that women are more likely than men to have voted and engaged in "private" activism, while men engaged in direct, collective types of actions and were active members of political parties (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010: 318). Overall, the major highlight of the study by Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010) as it relates to this research is the need to view women as engaging in different types of participation, based on different characteristics. Identifying contextual factors that are (re)defining participation amongst different groups, identities and cultures is therefore key.

Studies have also looked at new possibilities for non-formal political players that form and build communities of practice online, challenging the boundaries of national politics (Couldry, 2012: 120). Couldry (2012) posits that there are new kinds of individual political actor: no longer just the charismatic party leader or the authorised commentator in mainstream politics (journalist), but any individual – without any initial store of political authority – can become a political actor by acting online. Blogging is one phenomenon that has extended the scope of political "commentary", but its specific implications remain uncertain (Couldry, 2012: 121), hence this study.

3.3.2.2.1 Women and political participation online: Global overview

New media platforms, with the addition of the so-called blogosphere,²⁹ have the potential to provide more politically oriented expressive platforms and serve as an additional conduit for political participation (Gil de Zuniga *et al.*, 2010: 38). Various studies are optimistic of new media use by women activists (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Van Doorn & Van Zoonen, 2008; Lievrouw, 2011; Gallagher, 2013; Zobl & Reitsamer, 2013), while others argue that, despite the claims of the internet being a democratising tool for social change by activists, the same institutional hierarchies of power prevalent in reality permeate and reinstate themselves in the blogosphere (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

According to Gallagher (2013: 28), the internet has played a crucial role in women's struggles around the world, as net platforms have allowed women to communicate through their own words and images. She further argues that women's news services on the web, for example, have introduced content and opinions different from those found in traditional journalism. In other words, feminist activists have approached the internet as a means of self-expression and enabling everyday conversations and, as Van Doorn and Van Zoonen (2008: 260) argue, any women's groups and feminist activists can use the internet for diverse goals such as creating support networks and discussing "feminist politics". These activities, according to Gallagher (2013:28), have attracted the attention of policymakers, with signs that policy making can respond to sustained activist effort. For example, Gallagher cites a number of pieces of legislation on violence against women that have been implemented in Spain and Latin American countries as a result of women's counterdiscourses online.

Therefore, activist women-led and feminist media offer participatory forums for debate and the exchange of politically, socially and culturally engaged ideas by those who otherwise are marginalised within mainstream political debates (Zobl & Reitsamer, 2013: 233). The conceptual understanding here is that new media forums controlled by women, with women-defined output, offer a challenge to existing hierarchies of power when they take up specific issues and campaigns.

In their study of women's new media activism in 20 countries, Byerly and Ross (2006: 232) identified a number of pathways through which women's agency has opened up spaces for change in the media. This, they argue, is part of a broader political process in which women media activists seek to influence culture, social policy and, in the process, advances and empowers women. Shade (2002) also illustrates how the internet was used to organise and co-ordinate the Fourth World

²⁹ Blogosphere generally refers to the interconnected conversations in which bloggers link to other bloggers (Gil de Zuniga *et al.*, 2010).

Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and how it also enabled women in Mexico to wage an online uprising against the Mexican Government and to educate the Western world about their cause. Similarly, other research shows how the internet was used for promoting social activism and solidarity with women in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, as well as in other Arab countries (Skalli, 2006).

3.3.2.3 Women and political participation: Local overview

The conditions for and adoption of new media use vary considerably, particularly between the West and the South. While studies in the USA, Europe and most parts of Asia are done against the backdrop of high internet use by the majority of citizens (Strandberg, 2008: 1), the context in Africa is such that internet use by marginalised groups is still relatively low and that there are a host of barriers that make internet inaccessible to all social groups. According to the World Internet Statistics (2015), internet use in Africa was 9,8% as of June 2014, compared to 90.2% in the rest of the world. As such, the few research projects focusing specifically on citizens' use of new media platforms for democracy in Africa have been careful not to generalise, since internet use in Africa is still largely an urban phenomenon (Moyo, 2007: 85). Instead, researchers aim at understanding the ideals of and motivations for such projects, and to place their appropriateness within the sociocultural fabric of African societies (Atton & Mabweazara, 2011: 669).

African scholars are also quick to point out that new media technologies are complementing traditional forms of communications, and the interactions between the two are structured by the broader social structures in which they are deployed. Atton and Mabweazara (2011) further argue that, bearing in mind the dichotomies between new media research in the North and South, what is key to the African continent is that the World Wide Web has become a key platform for political organisation and networking, as in most developing countries. This is particularly so amongst previously marginalised groups, like women, who can now engage with one another in discussions on various issues affecting them, and from their own perspectives – without gatekeeping (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

In addition, there has been a positive correlation between the rise of new media technologies and the representation of women in parliament in some African countries, with Rwanda having the highest number of women parliamentarians worldwide, at 63,8% (UN Women, 2015). Most of the countries in Southern Africa ranged between 9% and 45% in 2015, with the representation of women in parliament in South Africa at 44,8%; Mozambique at 39,2%; Zimbabwe at 31,5%; Zambia at

10,8% and Botswana at 9,5% (UN Women, 2015), arguably an indication of awareness of gender equality.

3.3.2.3.1 Positioning African women in the online public spheres

Positioning African women in the online public sphere needs to be understood from two major arguments that have been proffered by scholars. The first is on the digital divide, broadly between the West and developing countries, specifically Africa. The second is lack of accessibility to the internet by women, due, among other factors, to their social status in society. Despite the divide in access, the impact of the internet in Africa is ironically disproportionately greater than its overall spread (Ott & Smith, 2001). This is attributed to factors within the economic, social, legal and technical spheres.

This argument ties in with views by Atton and Mabweazara (2011: 669), who posit that the innovative use of new technology among Africans hinges on “local cultural values of solidarity, interconnectedness and interdependence”, and that therefore it is possible for people to access the internet and its opportunities without necessarily being directly connected. This is the perspective this study holds, and I concur with Nyamnjob (2005) when he argues that, in many situations, it suffices for an individual to be connected in order for the whole group and communities to benefit.

From this premise, focusing only on the digital divide to assess the impact of online media in Africa, without taking into consideration African values of “interconnectedness” (Atton & Mabweazara, 2011: 669), is not sufficient to understand new media uses by African women. It is for this reason that this study, focusing on blog use by women activists and journalists-turned-activists, takes a context-specific approach, cognisant of the cultural values of the study population and the wider society in which they reside.

3.3.3 Deliberative democracy

3.3.3.1 Women and deliberative democracy online: Global overview

The possibility of the internet – specifically new media platforms as forms of the public sphere supporting the extension of a deliberative democracy by enabling rational communication and public opinion formation that can hold decision-makers accountable – has been of significant interest in contemporary research (Dahlgren, 2011: 5). However, to account for the everyday realities of women, feminist theorising on deliberative democracy adopts the critical approach to deliberation espoused by Mansbridge (1999) and Dryzek (2000), which seeks to move deliberative democracy beyond the

venues of institutional politics and to create space for private interests in public reasoning, allowing for a more individualised notion of politics to emerge (Graham, 2008: 19).

Graham (2008) further argues that the adoption of this approach refocuses deliberation to entail the public sphere and the everyday conversations that constitute it, and by so doing, “everyday informal political talk” enables citizens to become aware and informed, to express and to develop their preferences. In concurrence, Gurevitch *et al.* (2009: 178) posit that the political no longer relates only to institutions of state, but has to describe a range of daily encounters with power that give rise to civic and uncivic responses. They further argue that there is a new relationship between the public and the private, such that civic and political roles have percolated into homes, schools, workplaces, shops and nightclubs.

Therefore, while the deliberation is normally judged on rationality, privileging reason by argumentation as the only relevant criterion (Habermas, 1989; 2006) ignores the realities of everyday conversations and, as such, does not proffer an in-depth understanding of the various discursive practices on the net, particularly in informal and social networks. To counter this shortcoming, deliberative democrats (Mansbridge, 1999; Dryzek, 2000; Young, 2000; O’Neill, 2002; Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010) have allowed emotions and alternative communication forms such as rhetoric, greetings and testimonials, and consequently private interests, a place within the deliberative process, thus breaking the dichotomy between the “private” and the “public”, which has, for a long time, relegated women to the fringes of politics (Graham, 2008: 19).

The critical approach to deliberation, therefore, provides a deeper analysis of the deliberations on online platforms by marginalised groups in society, especially women. The fact that blogs, particularly, allow for emotive content (Deuze, 2003), have a private and public dimension to them, and can purposefully express the bloggers’ private and personal beliefs, while at the same time serving a very public and political purpose, is relevant to answer the central research question.

Scholars, on the other hand, have cautioned against the democratising role of the internet, arguing that it is not distributed equally, but follows well-known factors such as income, education, gender, age and race (Norris, 2001). Thus, instead of balancing the traditional inequality of access to politics, the internet reinforces existing problems. The other argument relevant for this study is that the internet is fundamentally resistant to state regulation (Scott & Street, 2000). In response to this argument, this study concurs with Garrett’s (2006: 214) view that, while it is difficult to regulate the internet, there are a variety of social and technical mechanisms that effectively give a state the powers and ability to regulate, for example in China.

While both arguments on the democratising effects of the internet are acknowledged, the study takes a normative perspective, regarding communication media as always having what Gurevitch *et al.* (2009: 178) call an “emancipatory”, democratic potential as they provide trusted online space, and where the dispersed energies, self-articulations and aspirations of citizens are deliberated in public. The simultaneous public and private nature provided by the internet conversation context may enable people who previously may not have had the outlet to do so, or who may not be comfortable in doing so in interpersonal settings, to participate in political conversations (Stromer-Galley, 2002: 37). This view is relevant when applied to authoritarian and patriarchal environments like Zimbabwe.

3.3.3.2 Women and deliberative democracy online: Local overview

Research on women and online deliberative democracy in Africa is fairly scant. The majority of research in this area focuses broadly on government systems. To include women in the public sphere, this study equates deliberative democracy to dialogue and discussions between subjects – discussions that challenge and resist domination. In addition, the study equates deliberative democracy to “expressions of daily life” (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). For black women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals, but are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community (Collins, 1991: 212). Therefore, according to Collins (1991), people become more human and empowered only in the context of a community, and only when they become seekers of the type of connection, interactions and meetings that lead to harmony. Ultimately, the power of the word, dialogues and conversation (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2011) creates opportunities to learn mobilising information, ponder news or public issues and reach common understandings, all of which are key antecedents of participation.

In Zimbabwe, much of the focus has been on mainstream media, evaluating how a repressive communication environment restricts the attainment of deliberative democracy (for example Moyo, D. 2005, 2007; Moyo, L. 2011), and how the state media, and state domination of the media, have shrunk the discursive arena available for the majority of citizens (for example Rønning, 2004; Chuma, 2005; Moyo, D. 2005). No research as yet has been done specifically on deliberative democracy among marginalised groups such as women.

3.3.4 Empowerment

3.3.4.1 Online media and empowerment: Global overview

McNair (2006: xviii) posits that, in the digital era, power has become more fluid and fragile, and is no longer monopolised by the ruling classes. As such, advocates for the revolutionary effects of online

media, such as Freedman (2014: 90), attribute a range of social, political and economic factors that aid in the revolutionary transformations to the shift in the balance of power. Similarly, Schmidt and Cohen (2013: 6) posit that the most significant impact of the spread of communication technologies will be the way they help reallocate the concentration of power away from states and institutions and transfer it to individuals.

In linking women's activist media on the internet and empowerment, feminists such as Gallagher (2013: 28) argue that, by enabling global networking, raising consciousness and creating knowledge, women's activist media have allowed women to deliberate through their "own words and images, re-telling their personal narratives and restructuring their individual stories, from their own social perspectives – thus personal fulfilment". In this vein, women's news services on the web – for example Women's e-news, World Pulse, Women's News Network, Women's Views on News, and blogs, amongst others, have introduced content and opinions different from those found in the mainstream media (Gallagher, 2013: 28).

The overarching role of online media, from a feminist perspective, is that they are a means of expression and therefore are best understood in terms of their potential for articulating the often contradictory dynamics of political environments (Fenton, 2012: 143). To support this view, Jarvis (2011) argues that the expressive function of the online media has given the public a renewed sense of its purpose and power, and that the power of a public society is a sign of empowerment.

However, there is a growing body of literature that challenges assertions that digital media are incontrovertible tools for equality, liberation and personal fulfilment and empowerment (Curran, Fenton & Freedman, 2012; Fenton, 2012). While the internet is generally viewed as democratising, Curran *et al.* (2012: 180) argue that the empowerment effects of the internet depend on the social contexts and the capitalist system and how its influence is "filtered through the structures and processes of society". It therefore becomes imperative to contextualise the development of the internet.

3.3.4.2 Online media and empowerment: Local overview

Similar to the West, the key features of the democratising potential of the internet are the possibilities for collaboration, networking and participation facilitated by digital communication platforms (Freedman, 2014: 106). Mudhai (2004: 316), however, posits that the distinctiveness of Africa in the majority of research present new media as a threat to African states. This is because Africa, as a continent, is still marked by continued exclusions and marginalisations, and therefore new media reduce state power, transferring it to individuals (Freedman, 2014).

Very few studies (for example Moyo, 2007; Somolu, 2007; Levac, 2013) have focused on online media use for setting the African women's agenda, despite their unique political, economic, social and cultural contexts. Other scholars, such as Nyamnjoh (1999), Mabweazara (2010) and Atton and Mabweazara (2011), have criticised the argument that new technologies are revolutionising Africa. Mabweazara (2010), for example, argues that the imposition of ideals from the North is inapplicable to the South, where conditions are different, and that the appropriation of new technologies in Africa is entwined with the sociocultural fabric of Africans (Atton & Mabweazara, 2011: 669).

Despite these views, there is evidence that the internet is providing benefits for empowerment in Africa. For example, the UN (2005: 13) lists the Multimedia Caravan Project in Senegal, internet skills training for rural women and men in Kenya, and the Uganda Media Women's Association Radio Programme, as empowering women. Therefore, in this study, the empowerment effects of the new media are contextualised to the Zimbabwean political, socio-economic and cultural context, in line with Nyamnjoh's (1999:31) call for a context-specific approach to new technology that allows users to adapt and innovate technologies to their own needs and priorities.

3.3.4.3 Online media and the “untouched citizen”

The “untouched citizen”, referring to women and the “counterpublic” (Fraser, 1990: 67), is evident in unique authoritarian regimes where there are deliberate attempts by the state to shrink the discursive space to lessen protest discourse that challenges the status quo. Hope is then placed on new media platforms to enable deliberative democracy for the “untouched citizens”, in this case women.

Online platforms, free from state control and traditional gatekeepers, have contributed to an increased sense of agency on the part of ordinary citizens (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006). In authoritarian regimes, where the media “diets” of citizens are constrained through the selection of topics covered in the news and through the framing of stories, online communication platforms such as blogs become an alternative information source, one that holds content related to those minority voices (Hussain & Howard, 2012: 214). Such platforms enable people, with no other means of expressing their views publicly, to talk politics, engage others in conversations, learn from others, and reformulate their views on various issues that affect them (Stromer-Galley, 2002: 37).

In this way, new groups of conversationalists may be emerging, thus adding voices to the public sphere. Deuze (2003) argues that the power of blogging lies in its social narrative role in society – how a message permeates a population. For example, one does not necessarily have to have access to the internet to participate or voice concerns on issues, but word of mouth amongst people (whether

they have access to the internet or not) in social conversations offline filter through to the blogs by those who have access to the internet or the platforms. This is particularly important in countries such as Zimbabwe, where, according to D. Moyo (2007), internet use is still urban-based.

Against the background of restricted freedom of expression, which reduces the participation of ordinary citizens in political discussions, this study provides an in-depth understanding of the deliberations in which the bloggers engage through the everyday conversations, and whether these deliberations promote civic discourse on political, socio-economic and cultural problems. As argued by Harris (2008: 484), it is often through less formal activities such as networking around private issues that women engage in politics, and the emotive quality of blogs makes it easy to connect politics to the people. Therefore, this approach is particularly important if women's participation in politics in Zimbabwe is to be accounted for.

Blogs, therefore, empower by giving a voice to the previously silenced. Through story shaping, encouragement, education and words, women promote strong, positive images. However, research on internet politics in Zimbabwe has focused on news websites' reportage on the "Zimbabwean crisis" to determine whether online media act as alternative spheres for Zimbabweans, both at home and in the diaspora (for example Moyo, D. 2007). Other research in the area of new media and the public sphere in Zimbabwe have focused on citizen journalism during Zimbabwe's 2008 elections, and in newsgathering and distribution practices, rather than in the broader society (Moyo, D. 2009; Mabweazara, 2011).

The study closest to this one was done by L. Moyo (2011), with another by Mpofu (2016). L. Moyo (2011) assessed blog use and citizen journalism as enabling citizen rights amongst the Zimbabwean population, which is faced with a highly oppressive regime. The focus was not demographic-group specific, and employed the analytical approach of the alternative media on one blog platform to determine whether the platform is an alternative space for citizens to practise citizen journalism. Mpofu (2016) assessed women's voices, using a few women's blogs in one website.

In sum, the epistemological premise of this study, therefore, is that the people who were studied construct their own identities according to their lived experiences, and that these lived experiences motivate the conversations and kinds of issues women discuss amongst themselves. These lived experiences consequently direct the approach that women and men activists adopt to challenge dominant discourse, thus bringing women's issues onto the public sphere, as was also argued by Sesanti (2009: 215).

3.3.5 Public sphere

3.3.5.1 Online media as counterpublic spheres: Global overview

The emergence of the online public spheres has revived enthusiasm for the political inclusion of all in society, based on a conception of the public sphere as fluid and encompassing meanings by citizens who engage in talk with each other (Dahlgren, 2005: 149). This approach to the public sphere diverges from the classical Habermasian concept of the public sphere, which idealised Western European society, which was exclusionary (Iam-Chong & Oi-Wan, 2013: 247). Iam-Chong and Oi-Wan (2013) posit further that public sphere debates were limited to white, propertied and educated men, while those associated with women and other marginalised groups were ignored. Following the shortcomings of the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, feminists have responded by attempting to make visible counterpublics or oppositional arenas recognising and appreciating differences based on gender, race and class, and circulating counterdiscourses and counterinterpretations (Fraser, 1989, cited in Iam-Chong & Oi-Wan, 2013: 247).

Therefore, the rise of the internet has enabled further voices to be heard that complicate and compromise established norms of political processes. For example, Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) summarised the ways in which the traditional systems of political communication in Western democracies are being destabilised by the emergence of new media platforms. These factors include the massive growth in online media, and the increase in the number of political actors and mediators. Their arguments are based on the characteristics of the internet, especially that it is largely based on information and communication from its users, and that it is multi-faceted, allowing multiple spaces in which citizens belonging to different groups and cultures find participation meaningful (Dahlgren, 2005: 152).

In addition, alternative and counterpublics have been enabled, in which political currents oppositional to the dominant mainstream find support and expression (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). In other words, the internet has been used to challenge established power structures, such that even efforts by authoritarian regimes worldwide seeking to curtail the democratic uses of the internet have not been fully successful (Dahlgren, 2005: 151).

Fraser's (1990) argument on the counterpublic role of online media is relevant to this study's inquiry. Fraser posits that online media break the private/public dichotomy symptomatic of traditional media, arguing that any distinction between the private and public can lead to the de-legitimisation of some interests, views and topics and the valorisation of others. Therefore, the framing of any group

as private is not only a means of marginalising it, but also disempowers it. Similarly, applying the feminist lens, Monberg (1998) supports the fluidity of the internet, arguing that this blurs the fixed distinctions characteristic of traditional media, and hence the creation of new media spaces is as much a creation of social spaces. Monberg (1998: 435) further posits that in order to analyse these social spaces it is essential to apply the public sphere lens so that issues of political consequences that would otherwise remain “submerged and depoliticised” are highlighted. Another technology optimist, Plant (1997), describes the online media as being gender neutral, where social hierarchies entrenched in traditional media are rendered meaningless and where stereotypical gender representations are challenged online, since communication is non-linear. This argument disputes the view by Van Zoonen (2004), that technology is a male domain, embedded in masculine codes and values.

3.3.5.2 Online media as counterpublic spheres: Local overview

Peters (2001: 14) argues that “women’s lives are an untold story in today’s media”. Furthering this argument, Somolu (2007: 482, 486) posits that it is possible that dissatisfaction with how women are represented in traditional media has led to them turning to blogging as a way of portraying the real stories of their lives. The author further argues that the power of blogs as counterpublic spheres does not lie in alerting a Western audience to gender-based injustices happening in Africa, but in its ability to give a voice to the previously unheard and provide them with the tools to comment, with others who share the same concerns, while reaching out to people who might have been unaware of these issues and providing them with a platform on which they can map a strategy for raising the quality of women’s lives in Africa.

Feminists therefore emphasise the need for open dialogue between women across different perspectives, and the development of sites of “critical discourse” both within and between communities (Longino, 1999: 343). Untold stories by women can be manifested through these sites. Examples of such sites in Africa include lobby and advocacy groups such as Women’s Media Watch in South Africa, Women’s Net and Sangonet (Gallagher, 2002: 17).

However, Wajcman (2004) posits that it is the feminist notions and politics, rather than technology itself, that are responsible for changes in the lives of women. This is the view applied in this study as it seeks to understand the cultural and everyday realities of women using online media as counterpublic spheres. How users determine the potential of any technology is contingent upon the country’s communication, legal and institutional structures, the public’s discursive culture, and the people’s readiness to engage actively in the political process using the internet as the medium of

engagement. Therefore, a critical political economy of the internet is relevant to understand how online media, as counterpublic spheres, are benefitting Zimbabwean women.

3.3.6 Media representations

3.3.6.1 Media representations in the digital era: Global overview

New media distort the balance of power that existed until now between the mass media and politics. This pattern of discrediting women permeates itself in all spheres of society in political, economic and socio-cultural institutions. Evidence from the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2015) confirms that public discourse is still a male domain. GMMP (2015) reveals that women are underrepresented in news coverage in contrast to men, and that women's voices are largely absent compared to men's perspectives. Carroll and Hackett (2006: 83) have also extensively critiqued the democratic deficits inherent in corporate-dominated and highly commercialised media systems. These authors have pointed out the inequalities of access, representation and political ideological power, and its economic and structural integration, as some of the impediments of an inclusive society in which every citizen participates in public policy making.

Goertz and Mazur (2008: 79) argue that the link between being a woman and representing women is not about interests and needs, but about social perspectives, especially the way in which people interpret things and events from within their structural social situations (Young, 2000). This argument supports the view that, while women have gained ground in representation in parliaments, and subsequently being in the public sphere, this has not translated to significant participation in public discourse by the majority of grassroots women. The representation of women and women's issues therefore needs to be understood from the social perspectives of women, derived from the structural position that women occupy in society (Young, 2000). Only in this way can women participate positively in public discourse and in the democratic processes in their countries. The media in general, and new media specifically, now constitute the key carriers of democratic public spheres (Muller, 2014: 1), where social perspectives from marginalised groups can be deliberated upon and interpreted. New media allow challengers to avoid the distortion introduced by mass media filters and, in the process, realise new levels of editorial control (Scott & Street, 2000).

3.3.6.2 Media representations in the digital era: Local overview

Media representations are supposed to improve the cultural identities of women and connect the disproportion of women and men in decision-making positions, and more generally improve democracy (Insenga, 2014: 183). However, similar to the West, women in Africa are excluded and

misrepresented in all media content, and this is happening despite women's effective participation in liberation movements (Byerly & Ross, 2006: 7). Also similar to the pre-digital era, women's voices are largely absent in the media, compared to men's (Rabe, 2002). Therefore, in addition to the discussion in section 3.3.5.1, a few studies on representations of women politicians locally are discussed in brief.

A study by Moorosi (2002) analysed the representation of women in television news on South African state television (SABC) and revealed an imbalance of views and weak coverage of women's issues. Another study, on the representation of black young women politicians in South Africa's online newspapers by Manny (2013), revealed that female politicians are given narrow stereotypical coverage. Other major findings of this analysis were that news media coverage made much reference to female politicians' race, gender, age, personality and physical attributes. Similarly, Lowe-Morna *et al.* (2013: 125) posit that women are still poorly represented in senior management in the Zimbabwean media, accounting for only 13% of staff, and that women in the news are more likely to be "seen than heard". In concurrence with this, the Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (2013) revealed that there is stereotypical coverage of women in politics and other spheres, with the media focusing more on gender-based evaluations of dress and demeanour than on women's competencies – thus naturalising these distorted accounts of women.

3.3.7 Summary of the digital era

The review of the five outlined themes in the digital era, namely that of *participation*, *deliberative democracy*, *empowerment*, *public sphere* and *media representation*, reveals the potential of new media to improve democracy, particularly in political, socio-economic and cultural contexts where communication for ordinary citizens is constrained. The literature indicates opportunities for collaborative social and political production online. In addition, the review reveals that the boundaries and dynamics of the public sphere in Habermas's conceptualisation have been transformed as the networking of the public sphere has shifted from a slow process of institutional referral to individual political agency (Couldry, 2012: 125). Lastly, the review also demonstrates that the democratic and empowering role of new media needs to be understood in relation to the political economy of various contexts and from the lived experiences of the studied population.

3.4 Challenges

3.4.1 Introduction

This section discusses challenges that emanate from the discussions of the literature relating to both the pre-digital and the digital eras. Although these challenges differed slightly between the two periods, they generally are similar, hence I decided to combine them in this review to avoid repetition. The challenges identified conform to what Jensen *et al.* (2012: 8) refer to as the three contextual factors that impact on digital media and political participation across political systems. These are the media system, the institutional setting, and the digital divide. The first two factors apply to both the pre-digital and digital eras, while the last is symptomatic of the digital era. The study also includes other political and socio-economic factors.

First, media systems, specifically the political economy of media ownership, followed by the institutional setting and digital divide are discussed. Last, other political and socio-economic factors are discussed.

3.4.1.1 Political economy of media ownership

According to Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), the integration of media structures into political processes differs across countries, with some political processes highly regulated by governments, while others depend for their legitimacy on independence from government. In highly regulated political systems, the media serve a propaganda function, which then limits public spaces for diverse expressions of opinion (Jensen *et al.*, 2012: 8). For example, despite the proliferation of the independent media since the 1990s, the Zimbabwean government still owns the majority of the media, constraining and limiting participation in and engagement with the media by the majority of citizens (Chari, 2009).

Media systems also differ on whether they are driven by a public service charter or primarily are market driven (Curran *et al.*, 2009). Public service market-driven media serve the interest of the capitalist elite, who have the power to shape and dictate the course of media content, frames, and whose views are projected. Hence, in different media systems online, media can play complementary and countervailing roles. This factor is discussed in depth under CPE in Chapter 4 of this dissertation (Theoretical Frameworks).

3.4.1.2 The institutional setting

Jensen *et al.* (2012: 9) posit that institutions in different political contexts can play a facilitative or constraining role in the conduct of both pre-digital and digital political participation. Here, laws are used to curtail free speech. For example, in non-democratic contexts, freedom of expression is curtailed in various ways. In Zimbabwe, a number of laws³⁰ have been enacted to enforce state power and counter oppositional discourses. The government also enacted the Interception of Communication Act (2007) to censor and monitor email, with other cyber laws³¹ currently being crafted. Jensen *et al.* (2012) further point out that even in democratic societies, where freedom of speech is guaranteed by law, government institutions can constrain the practice and exercise of freedom of speech.

3.4.1.3 Digital divide

Following the advent of information communication technologies (ICTs) generally, and the internet specifically, much of the debates in Africa have centred on the developmental effects of these technologies and whether technology can leapfrog Africa to development (Alzouma, 2005). Other studies have focused on the digital divide, proffering optimist and pessimist views (Mudhai, Tettey & Banda, 2009), while other studies have highlighted the shift in the balance of power between states and citizens, especially in developing countries (Ferdinand, 2000).

Access to technology creates differential opportunities for citizens to interact with other individuals, groups, authorities and political structures (Norris, 2001), hence the benefits differ according to context. Internet access also varies across regions, with the highest users found in North America (Freedman, 2014). Poor countries have low access to the internet and lack the ability to use the technology (Jensen *et al.*, 2012: 8). Therefore, the divides in skills use and motivations are greater (Norris, 2001). Despite inequality in access, an important question for this research is whether technology use can involve those citizens interested in politics but who have remained on the sidelines (Boulianne, 2009).

³⁰ These include the Broadcasting Services Act (2001), the Public Order and Security Act (2001) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) (2002).

³¹ Zimbabwe is in the process of crafting three new acts for ICT: The Computer Crime and Cybercrime Bill, the Electronic Transactions and Electronic Commerce Bill, and the Data Protection Bill (Zimbabwe Independent, 2016).

3.4.1.4 Other political and socio-economic factors

A number of other factors that impede on women's political participation identified in the review include: lower access to socio-economic resources by women (Schlozman *et al.*, 1994) and gender socialisation (Burns, 2007). Verba *et al.* (1995) further argue that political participation requires motivation, capacity and mobilisation, and that there is some evidence that the internet may influence all factors. Education is also an important determinant for political participation online, just as it is strongly associated with other forms of political participation offline (Bimber, 2003).

3.5 Gaps the study intends to fill

The major gaps revealed from the review of the related literature are:

- There are different factors that impact on the participation of women and men in politics in different contexts, and there is a need for an expansive approach to incorporate contextual factors.
- Deliberative democracy applies differently in different settings and for different needs. It therefore becomes imperative to integrate indigenous realities and the behaviour of African women into an analytical model to understand women's responses to hegemony.
- Few studies on new media have focused on what the women's expressive content on blogs reveal about how women view themselves and their position in the wider society.
- While there is an increasing volume of research focusing on how the internet has enabled women's empowerment in despotic environments, such as in the Arab world, few studies have focused on how blogging may be used as an empowerment tool by African women to challenge dominant discourses and bring African women's issues onto the public agenda, enabling women's participation in the political process.

This study hopes to achieve the above by focusing on Zimbabwean women in their political, socio-economic and cultural positions and as expressed on the five websites.

3.6 Chapter summary

This chapter reviewed scholarly debates and relevant literature on the importance of media and the way changing technology, particularly the internet, is enabling civic engagement and political participation by citizens, and specifically by previously marginalised groups like women. It is evident from the review that, both globally and locally, the benefits of the internet for the civic engagement

and general empowerment of women is context specific, as various political, economic, social, cultural as well as legal factors need to be taken into account in assessing the uses of the internet. The review reveals that not much research has been conducted on the uses of blogs by women activists in Zimbabwe. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by contextualising Zimbabwean women and men activists against a hostile political, economic, socio-cultural and legal environment.

The next chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks chosen for the study.

Chapter 4

Theoretical Frameworks

“There’s really no such thing as the “voiceless”. There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard” (Arundhati Roy, 2004)

4.1 Introduction

To ascertain how women in Zimbabwe are using blogs as communicative platforms to challenge dominant discourses, this study applies the theoretical frameworks of womanism, feminist critical theory and the critical political economy of the media theory. Womanism is discussed first, followed by a discussion of the next two. In discussing womanism, I first present feminism and feminist theory, to relate how the womanist paradigm evolved as an approach in feminist epistemology.

4.2 Feminism

4.2.1 Definition

Feminism is a “political” and “ideological” project aimed at “deconstructing” the established predominant male paradigms, and “constructing” a female perspective that foregrounds the female experience (Ebunoluwa, 2009: 228). Originating from the Latin word *femina*, which describes women’s issues, feminism revolves around the primary experience of women, not just as a biological category, but the female gender as a social category – thus, according to Ebunoluwa, feminism ties in women’s oppression to their sexuality. Feminism is historically a diverse and culturally varied international movement that has been defined variously. What feminism means to different people depends on their political or sociological observations and goals, their interpretation of the word “woman”, as well as different contexts and historical times, amongst several other factors (Ebunoluwa, 2009: 227).

According to Tong (1998: 1), the fact that the history of feminism has provided its own labels (such as liberal, radical and Marxist-socialist, amongst others), “signals to the broader public that feminism is not a monolithic ideology, that all feminists do not think alike and that feminist thought has a past, a present and future”. There therefore is no precise definition of the term feminism because, as stated above, it is context and issue specific, and takes various forms.

Variants of feminism include liberal, radical, Marxist-socialist, and first-, second- and third-wave feminisms. Liberal feminism focuses on the protection of equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men, by reforming existing norms and systems to include women. Radical feminism describes women's oppression as being grounded in reproduction, mothering, gender and sexuality, while Marxist-socialist feminism focuses on class division as the major factor in women's oppression, calling for the need to overhaul capitalism and patriarchy as systems that are inherently exploitative (Sarikakis, Rush, Grubb-Swetnam & Lane, 2008: 505). In this study, I situate my inquiry within Marxist feminism, where women's oppression is grounded in gender, capitalism and patriarchy.

Feminism has also been identified in waves, which have prioritised specific social demands in different socio-political contexts. For example, the first wave demanded voting rights for women; the second wave sought to expand the legal recognition to women's equality in work, while the third and current wave highlights the differences between and among women (Sarikakis *et al.*, 2008: 506).

However, despite the different approaches to feminism, two major goals of feminism have been identified as (1) the right of women to freedom of choice and the power to control their own lives and bodies to ensure a sense of dignity and autonomy, and (2) the removal of all forms of inequality and oppression through the creation of a more just social, economic and political order in society (Collins, 1991; Mikell, 1997) – in other words, the involvement of women in political, economic and cultural spheres in society. In addition, feminism also grapples with the wider concept of political ideology, focusing on how women's representation is frequently a site on which wider, public meanings are inscribed (Gallagher, 2013: 25). These goals guide the theoretical conceptualisation of this study's inquiry.

4.2.2 Feminist theory and media

Generally, feminist theorists study, describe and analyse issues impacting on women's lives to attain the goals of feminism discussed above. Feminist epistemology therefore offers a methodology to study subordinate positions, and to reveal structures of oppression, the functioning of hegemony³² and the autonomous resistance against mainstream politics (Mohanty, 2003). Feminist theory endeavours to understand gender inequality, with its foci being gender politics, power relations and sexuality, while simultaneously providing a critique of these social and political relations that are

³² According to Gramsci (cited by Barrett, 1994: 239), hegemony represents the status of the most powerful. It entails "cooperation ensured by force: combining social and political supervision, force and consent". This concept is relevant in understanding power relations between states and citizens and, in this study, it augments critical theory.

manifest in society. In addition, the theory acknowledges that women speak with many voices. Warren (1993: 331) uses the “boundaries of a quilt” to describe what she calls the boundary conditions of a feminist ethic. Warren argues that these boundaries

delimit the territory of the piece, without dictating what the interior, the design, the actual pattern of the piece looks like. Because the actual design of the quilt emerges from the multiplicity of voices of women in a cross-cultural context, the design will change over [-] time. It is not something static.

I find this illustration pertinent to defining or seeking to understand feminist theory, and how, like the term feminism, it is also adapted to suit different kinds of women’s needs in different historical times and contexts. The plurality of feminist theoretical approaches demonstrates not only the complexity of feminist thought, as Sarikakis *et al.* (2008: 507) argue, but also its flexibility and responsiveness to the real world of lived, material or other experience.

From this premise, a critical aspect in feminist theory useful for this study is the gender element. Feminist theory and gender seek to explain and change historical systems of sexual difference, whereby women and men are “socially constituted and positioned in relations of hierarchy and antagonism” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1986: 259). Gender has also been perceived as a play of power relations that inscribes women’s and men’s activities as “female” and “male” categories. This is the reason why feminists in the different waves have projected gender as the central focus in their approaches, where they argue that gender is a social or cultural process involving a complex set of relations that interlock with and alter gender relations (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1986: 260). Therefore, the concept of gender in feminist theory is critical in this research to understand new media use from the perspectives and experiences of women and men in Zimbabwe, while at the same time, critiquing the political, economic and social relations.

In sum, despite different applications of feminist theory, it is the broad goal of women’s empowerment that unites different feminist paradigms.

4.2.3 Criticism of Western feminism

Criticisms of Western forms of feminism have been proffered by scholars (for example Rakow, 1986; Collins, 1991; Creedon, 1993; Lueck, 2004; Lyons, 2004). Arguments by these scholars and others guide the discussion in this section.

Firstly, through its ideological link with liberal democratic philosophy, liberal feminism tended to reproduce the elitism, oversights and values of the larger culture and its media, rendering it overly Eurocentric (Creedon, 1993; Lueck, 2004: 65). In doing so, liberal feminism failed to take into account the needs of the black woman (Collins, 1991; Lyons, 2004), leading to its rejection. Furthermore, the Western formulation of a homogenous and unified “sisterhood” has been criticised for not taking into account the socio-structural inequalities of women. Thus Western feminists do not realise that their own interests and the interests of the poor women in the global South are far from being identical (Jacobs, 2011).

Secondly, radical feminism, on the other hand, advocates a separate women’s culture that functions outside patriarchy, a conceptualisation that does not fit women in Africa, who often find that they have more in common with men from their communities than with white American, Anglo or European women (Sarikakis *et al.*, 2008: 506). It therefore can be argued that the goal of radical feminism is not context specific, and therefore abstract for African women.

Lastly, failure by Western feminism to foreground African culture in theorising feminism in Africa is one of the critical drawbacks that have accentuated the need for Afrocentric approaches to bring the relevance of the African woman into feminist discourse. For a long time, African women have been emphasising culturally lined forms of public participation (Mikell, 1997: 4) that connect them to their material. This approach seeks to counter the image of the ahistorical, stagnant “Third World Woman” who seeks individual autonomy projected by Western feminism (Mohanty, 1988: 334).

Thus, in sum, the refusal by Western feminists to engage in activism in favour of utopian theorising renders these theorists superfluous to women in the global South (Jacobs, 2011). Therefore, the quest for a formal theoretical standard of human rights led to the birth of African feminism, also called African womanism, and womanism (Walker, 1983; Ogunyemi, 1985; Collins, 1991; Hudson-Weems, 1993), a distinct type of feminism that takes into consideration “the peculiarities of black females” (Ebunoluwa, 2009: 228). For the purposes of this study, I use the term “womanism”.

4.2.4 Relevance of Western feminism in this study

According to Sarikakis *et al.* (2008), feminism is concerned with women’s empowerment, and feminist theorists describe and analyse issues impacting women’s lives with the goal of advocating for social change. Thus, from this premise, feminism is relevant for this study. In addition, feminism’s preoccupation with gender as its central focus renders it relevant for this study. Thus, the concept of

gender in feminist theory is critical to this research to understand media use from the perspectives and experiences of Zimbabwean women, while at the same time critiquing political, economic and social relations. The womanism approach is discussed next.

4.3 Womanism

4.3.1 Definition

Womanism is a feminist approach that developed following the realisation that African women have different life experiences from those of their Western counterparts. Womanism therefore is a theory that identifies the ethnicity of the African woman, and her cultural identity relating her to her ancestral land base, Africa (Hudson-Weems, 1993: 22-23). Dove (1998: 535) affirms this when she argues that African womanism emphasises the role of the “African mother as a leader in the struggle to regain, reconstruct and create a cultural integrity”. Originally espoused by African American scholars (for example Walker, 1983; Hudson-Weems, 1993; Dove, 1998), this theoretical approach has been supported by African feminists. For example, according to Gqola (2001: 14), womanism is informed by “the interaction of Afrocentric forms of feminism, multicultural and feminist interpretations of political, economic, social and cultural events”. It is therefore a celebration of “black roots and the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced representation of black womandom” (Koyana, 2001: 65).

Mangena (2013: 8) concurs, arguing that womanism allows for a specific discussion of the woman of African descent’s existence in reality and in imagined existence. Therefore, it takes into account African culture in understanding women’s lived experiences. Overall, the definition of womanism as it relates to Africa must challenge the status quo, or how contemporary patriarchies (in which culture plays a critical role) in Africa constrain women and prevent them from realising their potential beyond their traditional roles (Salo, 2001: 60).

In applying the definitions of womanism by Koyana (2001: 65), Mangena (2013: 8) and Salo (2001: 60), one might hypothesise that womanism provides unique and powerful perspectives to conceptualise self-expression and self-assertion by Zimbabwean women through blogs, to challenge dominant discourse and to bring women’s issues onto the public sphere in a hostile political, economic and cultural environment.

One distinct feature of womanism, relevant to this study, is that it argues for women’s rights and empowerment from the premise of African cultural values. Womanism therefore rejects the misuse of African cultures by patriarchal African men, and challenges such misuse (Sesanti, 2009:

214). Furthermore, womanism seeks to achieve a society in which “[a]lthough the sexes may not perform the same duties, or have the same privileges, each is nonetheless indispensable to the activities of the other and the sexes have balanced power spheres” (Sanday, 1996: 93). Therefore, womanism demands that black women engage in activism to facilitate community building, self-determination, compassion, and empowerment for themselves and others (Walker, 1983). Thus, at the core of womanism are the concepts of black female liberation, spirituality, community and dialogue (Tounsel, 2015: 32).

For the purposes of this study, I define womanism as a culturally distinct approach that analyses women’s lived experiences to conceptualise how women use self-expression and self-assertion to challenge dominant discourses and empower themselves and others.

4.3.2 The womanist approach to media

For this study, it is imperative to discuss the womanist approach to media.

In challenging the misuse of African cultures by patriarchal African men, women activists have identified the media as a powerful platform on which to change perceptions and attitudes useful for advancing the status of women in society (Okello-Orlale, cited in Sesanti, 2009: 215). By using the media, women’s issues are no longer confined to the private space, but rather brought onto the public sphere for deliberation. Furthermore, Luke (1994: 33) links women’s political commitment to transformation with the recognition of media misrepresentation and stereotyping. Through the inclusion of some groups and the exclusion of others, media representations, as argued by Kellner and Share (2010: 10), benefit the dominant and positively represented groups in society and disadvantage the marginalised and subordinate ones. This results in a public sphere that is skewed towards the dominant in society.

Consequently, this exclusionary notion of the public sphere, in which male citizens enjoy rights from which women are excluded, has long been central to feminist research (Waylen, 2008: 124) and therefore guides this study in assessing the democratic potential of new media platforms for Zimbabwean women. This is because the importance of the public sphere lies in its societal mode of integration, and this integration should be based on communication, rather than domination (Calhoun, cited in Sesanti, 2009: 216). In addition, because the public sphere should provide a “forum for [the] discussion of diverse, often conflicting ideas and give voice to public opinion” (Graber, 2003: 143), advocating for public dialogue where people can express their opinions freely and share experiences has been one of the focal points for women activists. The internet therefore provides such “public

spheres” for women to dialogue, share experiences of their day-to-day lives, and to politicise the “private” issues and bring them onto the public sphere (Waylen, 2008: 124).

Uses of blogs, in particular, have been proven to be beneficial for black women elsewhere. For example, in the United States, Tounsel (2015: 139) reveals that blogs have enabled the sharing of black womanhood through the sharing of personal stories and reflecting on daily experiences. Similarly, Florini (cited by Tounsel, 2015: 139), posits that black women use blogs as a cultural resource through which they perform their blackness and womanhood. Thus, my argument is that, for Zimbabwean women with restricted access to traditional media, blogs offer platforms to share their thoughts on their daily lives, norms and practices of society, celebrate their achievements and advocate for women’s empowerment. This is because, as Tounsel (2015: 141) argues, when bloggers blog they enact the power of voice and overcome commercial media structures that would otherwise render them silent.

Furthermore, through blogging, women produce content with the intention of creating awareness and empowering not just women, but the entire society, thus the responsibility of the bloggers within the womanist framework is to create content and meanings that benefit black women generally, and not just the self (Tounsel, 2015: 141); in the African setting, this includes men. African womanist scholars (for example Gqola, 2001; Koyana, 2001) have posited that the goal of womanism is to create a just society by incorporating both women and men. Thus, one of the critical elements in my study was to ascertain the motivations for blogging by both women and men to determine whether these align with womanist values.

4.3.3 Criticism of womanist theory

The womanist framework has been accepted by many researchers who have argued that the approach encompasses the totality of the black female self where feminism has failed (Collins, 2006; Mangena, 2013). It therefore speaks to diverse women, while at the same time situating them within their contexts, in which political, economic and social influences are also analysed.

However, despite its inclusive approach, womanism, like other feminist paradigms, has its limitations. While its focus is on black women, and in this instance black African women, it fails to meet the heterogeneity of African women. For example, McWilliams (1995: 103) argues that the female subject is a site of differences – differences that are not only racial, economic or cultural, but all of these together, and often at odds with one another. These differences cannot be collapsed into a fixed identity or a “sameness” of all women as “Woman”.

Other scholars have cited religious differences among black women as impacting on the identities of African black women and their interpretations of the world (for example Mikell, 1995). She gives an example of lesbianism, namely that, while womanism supports the totality of society as a whole, even women's sexual orientation is still seen as a taboo and against African values in some societies. Therefore, the fact that there are sites of differences, even among black women themselves, raises questions whether African feminism, in this case womanism, adequately addresses the needs of the African woman in particular.

4.3.4 Relevance of womanism to this study

Despite the shortcomings outlined above, womanism provides an overarching approach to understanding women's experiences and their interpretations of the world. This approach enables us to understand that gender in the African context needs to be inclusive, as many African women regard communalism and family support highly, and prefer to bring men on board and not alienate them (Kolawole, 2002: 96). From this premise, womanism promotes the positive interdependence of African women and men for survival in a racially hostile environment where the entire black race suffers oppression (Collins, 1991). Thus, despite its shortcomings, as Kolawole (2002) posits, womanism still better accommodates African women's reality, identity and dynamics of empowerment. Furthermore, womanism validates black women's interpretive capacities that are shared through women-to-women networks, and acknowledges personal expressions and storytelling as essential to correct perceptions and attitudes, and represent black womanhood (Tounsel, 2015).

In addition, the womanist theory tends to offer a more far-reaching analysis by advocating for the inclusion of traditionally oppressed and marginalised black women. It argues that black women undergo different life challenges compared with their white counterparts due to issues of race, class and socio-economic status (Ebunoluwa, 2009). Therefore, I have utilised womanism to analyse Zimbabwean women's uses of blogs as countersites to challenge dominant discourse by projecting women's issues and perspectives. The use of this approach is key to my study, as it allows the projection of women's voices, often muted in the African patriarchal society, and consequently empowers women.

Furthermore, womanism is relevant to this study because it does not only afford Zimbabwean women "an opportunity to talk about their lives, but for them to demonstrate all their positive qualities" (Mangena, 2013: 9). The theory also places Zimbabwean women within the larger matrix of key influences, such as the political, economic, cultural and other national considerations impacting on new media use. A critique of these influences adds depth to the understanding of gender

inequalities and power relations. Thus, it is critical to determine the gender dynamics affecting Zimbabwean women and how this limits their participation in decision-making positions.

Few researchers (as the literature review proved) have studied the application of the womanist theory in understanding the relationship between women, politics and online media. Thus, the contribution of womanism is critical not only to understanding experiences of oppression that affect black women in general, and specifically Zimbabwean women; rather, it projects women's interpretive capacities to communicate, represent and share their identities.

The second theoretical paradigm relevant to this study, feminist critical theory, is discussed next.

4.4 Feminist critical theory

4.4.1 Definition

Critical theorising, as a general term, means theories that are critical of capitalism and domination (Fuchs, 2009). The theory emerged from the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and is concerned with the complex set of mediations that interconnect consciousness and society, culture and economy, and state and citizens.

From this definition, critical theory begins with categories of economics and the Marxian critique of political economy – the production and reproduction of society – precisely because the economy continues to play a constitutive role in all areas of social life (Kellner, 1990: 3). Marx identified economic power as the motive behind all social and political activities. Thus, for Marxism, economics is the base on which the superstructure of political, social and ideological realities is built (Tyson, 2006: 54). Therefore, critical theory is concerned with issues of power and injustice and the ways that economics, politics and culture are closely intertwined to construct a social system (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005: 306). Similarly, Meyer-Emerick (2004: 2) posits that critical theory is concerned with people's domination by a false consciousness created and perpetuated by capitalism in order to preserve the hegemony of those in power. Chambers (2006: 221) furthermore points out that the goal of critical theory is the emancipation of humanity from injustice. It achieves this through focusing on power, domination and transformation, and links questions of agency and structure to understand social and cultural reproduction (Kushner & Marrow, 2003: 37).

It is in this preoccupation with emancipation that critical theory resonates with feminism. According to Eagan (2014: 58), because critical theory provides a powerful description and critique

of the status quo as a whole, particularly the human aspects of the status quo that remain unquestionable, feminism therefore adds the problem of the subject to the social dimension of critical theory. In other words, feminist critical theory is concerned with the status of women and seeks to subvert the prevailing values and excesses of a capitalist society to create a just society. Thus, for feminists, understanding the ways one is oppressed enables one to take action to change the oppressive forces. Such oppressive forces include the media, communication, culture and technology (Fuchs, 2009), which arguably play an important role in capitalism – leading to feminist critical theory becoming vital in contemporary critical theory.

From this premise, the feminist critical theory of media, which I adopt in this study, draws on elements of Marxism because it is relevant to women's experience. This approach also explores whether new media empower and engage marginalised groups such as women, the "untouched citizens". This approach is relevant because it considers inequality as a symptom rather than a cause (Fuchs, 2009: 204), and directs the focus to understanding oppression, of which the root cause, as argued by Fuchs, can only be diagnosed in the context of power relations between the sexes in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres.

In applying definitions of the Marxist approach to critical theory of the Frankfurt School, by Kellner (1990), Meyer-Emerick (2004) and Kincheloe and McLaren (2005), I seek to use the feminist approach to critical theory to understand the context of online activism by Zimbabwean women and men and how economic forces have been manipulated by patriarchy (and other oppressive systems) to keep women politically, economically and socially oppressed. One important aspect that distinguishes critical theory generally is its insistence that analytical concepts are formulated not in an abstract manner, as if they are unaffected by historical change. Rather, critical theory dictates that theoretical ideas are judged to have value only in terms of their applicability to the real world (Tyson, 2006: 54). This is why feminist critical theorists, seeking to understand gender relations in different contexts, continuously analyse and critique the basic social structures that maintain oppression and create voicelessness, invisibility, and marginalisation.

4.4.2 The feminist critical theory of communication and media

In addition to perspectives derived from womanist theory, this research incorporates a feminist critical theory approach to capture the complexities involved in new media use by Zimbabwean women and men. This approach not only illuminates the role that gender and class plays within the lives of oppressed women, but also considers historical problems of domination and social struggles that contribute to an increase in activism (Hekman, 2006). This is in line with Marxism, namely that

neither human events (in the case of this study, personal and institutional blogging), nor human productions (blogs) can be understood without understanding the specific material and historical circumstances in which these events and productions occur.

Feminist critical theorists, such as Fraser (1990), appropriated critical theory to suit feminist concerns after realising that the original Frankfurt School of Adorno and Horkheimer, and Habermas later, had paid little attention to gender relations in their critical theory approaches. Thus, the central aim of feminist critical theory is concerned with power relations between sexes and to expose the subconscious processes and ways in which the economy and other social institutions interact to construct a social system (Littlejohn, 1992: 238). The ultimate goal is to expose possibilities for social transformation. One such institution with power to facilitate this transformation, according to feminists, is the media (Calhoun, cited in Sesanti, 2009).

Critical theory generally portrays the media as the informational and cultural arm of a capitalist-bureaucratic state apparatus, with little possibility of reform or democratisation from within (McQuail, 2013: 46). Therefore, media researchers use feminist critical theory to establish whether the media have the ability to empower, to establish a critical democracy, and to engage marginalised people in the rethinking of their socio-political role. Critical theory becomes relevant to feminists because it takes the standpoint of the oppressed and exploited in society and calls for the transformation of structures of oppression and exploitation that benefit certain classes at the expense of others (Fuchs, 2009).

Therefore, the critical theory of communication and media analyses communication, media, culture and technology in the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression and control (Fuchs, 2009). The theory examines information's "institutional, political, and social" context and its "reflexive relationships to material forces and productions" (Day, 2001: 118). The task therefore is to analyse Zimbabwe's political, economic and sociocultural spheres to determine how these influence motivations for blogging, and the usage of online media by marginalised groups to challenge the dominant discourse.

The concern about media is that, in a capitalist economic system, media production has been increasingly commandeered by large corporations and moulded to their interests and strategies (Golding & Murdock, 2000). Thus, a critical approach to communication generally, and to media specifically, is important largely because it assumes that social relations of communication are inseparable from the social relations of power (Good, 1989: 53). Hence, having power in or control over the media is argued to affect the capacity to determine or influence the contents of the media

products and the meaning created by them (Fenton, 2007: 11). For example, how society produces and maintains the distinction between women and men is one of the central elements of meaning production in society, and hence a concern for feminists (Hekman, 2006: 100).

By exploring the processes by which texts, objects and people are come to be associated with particular sets of meanings, critical theory sets out to question the legitimacy of common sense or traditional claims made about experience, knowledge and truth (Malpas & Wake, 2006: x). Therefore, by employing a feminist critical theory paradigm, this study cannot avoid critically exploring the power structures that shape the internet as a medium of communication. This is achieved through situating bloggers and blogs within the context of the analysis of the distribution and dynamics of economic power that keep women politically, economically and socially oppressed. This is because, as Daly (2006: 29) argues, the capitalist economy is first and foremost a power structure.

This is explained next.

4.4.2.1 The capitalist nature of media production

The central assertion of the feminist critical theory of communication and media is that, in the era of digital media, capitalist society is moving to a new level of ideological sophistication using the culture industry (Daly, 2006: 32). This is because industries associated with the production, distribution and consumption of media are central to the broader circulation of capital across the globe, and digital technologies have intensified this influence (Freedman, 2014: 43). Thus, according to Horkheimer (cited in Daly, 2006: 32), culture is now a tool for forming conformism and the possibility of independent art forms is becoming increasingly more compromised by an expanding mass culture. In addition, not only are these cultural artefacts increasingly managed and produced on a mass scale for consumption purposes, but, on a deeper level, they feed into a “self-perpetuating milieu of docility”. Hence, as Daly points out, mainstream media and the internet can be seen to be already in the service of a certain pacifying capitalist culture, playing an ideological role, naturalising the power configuration of the status quo and eviscerating all sense of critique.

In addition, under capitalism, media institutions are intimately connected to what Freedman (2014: 119) terms “networks of prestige and power”, and their outputs are, not surprisingly, associated with a hegemonic project designed to legitimise elite frames and assumptions. Freedman (2014) further argues that powerful interests deploy a range of institutions and instruments, the media central among them, to naturalise their views of the world and to inculcate a common sense of that naturalised view of the world. Therefore, media interests are intimately related to larger parts of the productive activity through the provision of advertising, public relations and access to specialist information

(Freedman, 2014). It is therefore imperative for this study to analyse and understand, from a feminist point of view, the structural inequalities that shape the limits and potential of new media projects in order to assess the possibilities of transformation that blogs offer Zimbabwean women.

While there are claims that online media have dispersed power and control from a handful of dominant providers to a multitude of users, and that individual citizens have been empowered by their appropriation (McNair, 2006), power continues to exert its influence, with media owners continuing to structure, mediate and exploit the interactive nature of online communication (Freedman, 2014: 111). In addition to understanding structural inequalities, this study applied the feminist critical theory approach to discern the transformative possibilities that blogs offer Zimbabwean women and to determine whether blog content shows suppressed possibilities of existence, potential for exchange, questions domination, and expresses the standpoints of oppressed and dominated groups and individuals.

4.4.3 Criticism of feminist critical theory

Despite its goal of analysing capitalism's intrinsic contradictions and uncovering the growing discrepancy between "what is and what could be" (Chambers, 2006: 219), critical theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno have been criticised for explicitly refusing to engage in politics, or to propose reform agendas or talk about political institutions in any specific way. Their critique of capitalism focused more on the realm of culture, which is detached from politics, and then led to abstraction, as scholars did not take into consideration the political conditions under which culture manifested itself. Contemporary critical theorists such as Marcuse, and later Habermas, make up for the political deficit by showing how culture is embedded in social systems of domination. Responding to criticism, Horkheimer (cited in Postone, 2006: 184), in his later work *Authoritarian state*, addresses a new form of capitalism that he characterises as "state capitalism", where the connection between economy and politics is evident. Postone (2006) further points out that arguments on the politics of critical theory were later taken up by feminists, who claimed that the "personal is political" following realisations that culture, in this case mass media, had become embedded in the framework of social domination.

Feminist critical theory faces the same criticism. The theory is criticised for its failure to provide alternative guidelines and solutions to the issues faced by society, and that it is pessimistic about taking any political action (Chambers, 2006: 219). From this premise, therefore, feminist critical theory offers no remedies to the situation prevailing in any particular context. Despite this, however, feminist critical theory unravels the limitations of the system(s) being studied, in this case the news media, and helps to explain how (and why) news media are inclined to support the status

quo, whether intentionally or not (McQuail, 2013: 46). The shortcomings of feminist critical theory outlined above are augmented by the two other theories applied here, namely womanism and critical political economy of the media (CPE; to be discussed last). In this way, this study politicises feminist critical theory by connecting it with the theories of womanism and CPE.

4.4.4 Relevance of feminist critical theory to this study

Feminist critical theory is relevant to this study as it allows for the exploration of cultural production and the communication of meanings in precise and nuanced ways, and from a range of perspectives. The theory questions the ways in which people make sense of artistic, historical or cultural artefacts, and “prompts us to reconsider our beliefs about the ways individuals interact with material things and with each other” (Malpas & Wake, 2006: ix). Feminist critical theory also promotes self-reflexive exploration of the experiences people have and the ways in which they make sense of themselves, their cultures and the world (Malpas & Wake 2006). From the feminist lens that this study adopts, critical theory enables an understanding of gender relations by promoting self-reflexive exploration of the experiences of women in different contexts.

In addition, unlike certain postmodern perspectives that advance subjectivism and relativism, critical theory advances the conception of a critical and normative theory that is committed to emancipation from all forms of oppression and seeks a connection with the empirical analysis of contemporary societies that are attempting to transform themselves (Kellner, 1990). The theory also respects particularity and individuality and allows for a multiplicity of perspectives (Kellner, 1990), for example feminist and Marxian approaches proved relevant for this study.

This study, concerned with women activists’ use of online media as communication platforms to challenge dominant discourse and put women’s issues into the public sphere, situates itself squarely within the feminist critical theory paradigm. The theory attempts to determine how political, economic, social and cultural power determines and cements social relations on the internet.

In sum, feminist critical theory is relevant to this study as it presumes that the media should be of service to society by purging injustices, inequality and false consciousness (McQuail, 2013). However, bearing in mind the shortcomings of critical theory, the use of blogs can only be fully explored within the context of the political, economic and socio-cultural environment in which they are written, hence the critical political economy of the media (CPE) is also applied, and is discussed next.

4.5 Critical political economy theory

4.5.1 Definition

A critical analysis of a society and its communication systems cannot be wholly espoused without understanding the political economy of that context. Generally, the political economy of media theory postulates that nobody has access to a complete range of cultural goods without restriction (Fenton, 2007:12). What this entails is that communication facilities are rarely free; their access is dependent on a person's spending power and disposable income. Therefore social class and educational achievements are critical determinants of audience responses to news texts, and the media consequently can be an obstacle to liberation (Fenton, 2007).

Mosco (2009: 2) defines political economy of the media as encompassing the study of the "social relations, particularly power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources, that including communication resources". Similarly, McChesney, Wood and Foster (1998: 3) posit that the political economy of the media entails two main dimensions. First, it addresses the nature of the relationship of media and communication systems with the broader structure of society, and second, it looks at how ownership supports mechanisms and government policies influence media behaviour and content. However, in an attempt to address the various facets of the theory, political economy has, over time, developed a number of variegated approaches under two major schools of thought – the classical and the critical, with the former grounded in Enlightenment values, which views capitalism as the established order, while the latter questions this established order (Mosco, 2009).

Following criticism of classical political economy perspectives, namely that they fetishise capitalism and see the economy as a separate and specialised domain (Golding & Murdock, 2000: 72-73), a need for a socially critical approach was born that focuses on the relationship between the economic structure and the dynamics of media industries and the ideological content of media (McQuail, 1994: 47). Therefore, the critical political economy of the media (CPE), also called Marxist political economy, is an approach that studies the production, circulation and consumption of information in the context of capitalism, power structures, domination and inequality (Mosco, 2009). Mosco further argues that, in the context of capitalism, media industries operate according to market logic, with a profit motive, and as such outcomes of communication and media production are produced, exchanged and circulated like economic resources. Thus, media products are economic goods to be exchanged.

Similarly, McChesney (2000: 110) posits that CPE is “uniquely positioned to provide quality analysis of the most pressing communication issues of our era”. This is because CPE is holistic in that it examines the relationships between capitalism, communication and democracy and, at its core, CPE is concerned with communication and power in different contexts (McChesney, 2013). This study, concerned with analysing blogging by Zimbabwean women to challenge dominant discourses, situates itself within the paradigm of CPE.

In applying definitions by Golding and Murdock (2000), McChesney (2000) and Mosco (2009), I seek to use CPE to analyse the underlying economic conditions that structure the websites selected for the study, the motivations for blogging, the bloggers’ lived experiences, including their beliefs and knowledge and how these contribute to the bloggers’ production of meaning. This is because, as Babe (2011: 53) argues, belief systems, knowledge, myth, custom and ideology all contribute to the economic exchange of goods.

4.5.2 The CPE approach to media

Critical political economy approaches to media studies are grounded in a long tradition of historical materialism. They search for both direct and mediated connections between economic power and cultural forms leading to questions of media ownership and the role of cultural production itself (Good, 1989: 95). To achieve this, CPE is galvanised by the interaction of two main influences: Marxist thought and democratic politics, and it questions power in communications and the conditions for realising democracy (Hardy, 2014: 188). In this way, CPE, similarly to critical theory, has a genuinely Marxian approach and focuses on commodity exchange as a crucial starting point of analysis, because the media are first and foremost “industrial and commercial organisations which produce and distribute commodities” (Murdock & Golding, 1974: 205-206).

Furthermore, unlike the classical political economy, which has been criticised for undertaking a macro-level analysis of media in society, focusing on institutions, individuals and markets and neglecting the documents these actors produce (Butosi, 2012: 52), CPE incorporates the micro-level analysis, which includes “small and intimate” realms of interactions and communication in generating meaning (Golding & Murdock, 2000: 88). This is because messages, images and other properties associated with content are one form of media through which power gets communicated, enacted and enforced (Butosi, 2012: 52). Mosco (2009: 28-31) extends this argument, proffering that textual production is often motivated by power, and that, in turn, power is embodied in the text produced, therefore understanding texts is an important political analysis of social processes. From this premise, CPE is holistic in its approach.

In addition, the claim advanced by CPE is that different ways of organising and financing communications have implications for the range and nature of media content and the ways in which these are consumed and used – hence analysis of the interplay between the symbolic and economic dimensions of the production of meaning is key (Hardy, 2014: 188). In the same vein, Schiller (2007) argues that, with capitalism now the dominant political economic system, understanding information capitalism is the foundation for any analysis employing CPE.

The above is achieved by investigating the political, economic and cultural conditions for communication practices to determine policies, human decisions and actions that not only reproduce existing inequalities, but also serve other interests, as was also argued by Atton and Hamilton (2008: 24). Through a feminist lens, CPE, in addition to the above, repudiates the inequalities created by capitalism as natural, and instead analyses women's access to the production of media content, as well as to consumption of that content (Mosco, 1996; McKercher & Mosco, 2007). This analysis is then used to identify possible constraints and contradictions in the social organisation of communications, and to identify intervention measures. The ultimate goal is to make a difference in people's lives.

Furthermore, the commercial structure of media encourages the dissemination of ideological content that does not question, but rather affirms, capitalist society and advances reductionist views of and prejudices against minorities (Fuchs, 2011). Murdock and Golding (cited in McQuail, 1994: 47), summed up the above argument, arguing that the effects of economic forces are not random, but work consistently to exclude:

those voices lacking economic power or resources... Thus the voices which survive will largely belong to those least likely to criticise the prevailing distribution of wealth and power. Conversely [,] the most likely to challenge these arrangements are unable to publicize their dissent or opposition because they cannot command resources needed for effective communication to a broad audience.

From this premise, media institutions are considered part of the economic system, with close links to the political system. To illustrate this, media ownership is discussed next.

4.5.2.1 Ownership dynamics in the media and CPE

Media ownership has been a central issue for critical political economy researchers who, for example Mosco (2009: 113), have been “especially concerned with the tendency for fewer and fewer companies that grow ever larger to control more of the media market than ever before”. The result of this media conglomeration is that the number of media outlets is reduced and a range of distinctive voices are restricted, compromising democratic life (Freedman, 2014: 51). In these circumstances, those with economic power are all the more likely to “use their power to advance their political agenda” (McChesney, 2004: 224). This therefore means that the media, since they are partially determined by market forces and constituted by political, economic, social and cultural forces, are more likely to affirm capitalism and domination than to be critical of it (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015: 167). Consequently, media ownership undermines the possibility of a vigorous exchange of competing perspectives and weakens the media’s ability to hold power to account. Thus, according to CPE, media ownership, which Herman and Chomsky (1994) describe as one of the news filters,³³ has emerged as a threat to democracy as it does not only aid in the reproduction of existing inequalities in society, but through ownership structures also serve particular interests – in some cases an individual’s interests, but much more frequently, the interests of a particular class (Atton & Hamilton, 2008: 24).

In the same vein, Bagdikian (2000: 16) describes media ownership as a mechanism for managing the exclusion of certain voices from political power by “treating some subjects briefly and obscurely [,] but others repetitively and in depth”. Earlier, Herman and Chomsky (1988) advanced a similar argument – that news agendas are distorted to suit the agendas of corporate interests and that, in authoritarian states, monopolistic control over the media constitutes one further instrument by which dominant classes maintain their power and restrict opposition.

Therefore, feminists believe that political, economic, social and traditional institutions need to be transformed to ensure that women no longer become dependent and subordinate to men, but rather have a hand in making their own news and project the suppressed alternative perspectives missing from the mass media (Gallagher, 2013). To understand activist websites in which women are making their own news and projecting suppressed alternative perspectives, CPE enables a greater understanding of the nature and implications of relationships between the roles of the media, how

³³ The other news filters espoused by Herman and Chomsky (1994: 2) are (i) advertising as a primary source of income, (ii) reliance of media on information provided by government, business and experts, (iii) flak as a means of disciplining the media, and (iv) anticommunism. Filters relevant to this study are (i) and (ii).

they are organised, their practices, and whose interests are served (Atton & Hamilton, 2008: 25). However, as these scholars argue, there are no causal links in these relationships, and when applied to online media, these relationships become more complex and, in most instances, contradictory. Media ownership therefore helps us to understand the context pressures faced by women's activist websites, for example their operating environment and their source of financing, and how these shape the resulting practice, as also argued by Atton and Hamilton (2008: 25).

4.5.3 Criticism of CPE

The critical political economy of media and communications generally has been criticised for little or no focus on agency, for not proposing alternatives to capitalist media and for viewing audiences as passive (for example Hall, 1986; Grossberg, 1995). Hesmondhalgh (2007) has also dismissed CPE as simplistic, inadequate and outdated. However, these shortcomings are viewed as short-sighted by Fuchs (2012: 52), who argues that CPE scholars stress the potential for resistance to capitalism (for example Adorno, 2005).

In addition, Fuchs (2012: 52) posits that Marxist studies of the media, the internet and technology are not just interested in analysing how class and power structures and domination are embedded in and manifested on the internet, but the interest is in creating an alternative, just and participatory world and in establishing and supporting media that participate in struggles for such a society.

Acknowledging these shortcomings by different scholars, this study shares Golding and Murdock's (2000), McChesney's (2004) and Hardy's (2014) views, which recognise the importance and relevance of Marxism as an explanatory framework to analyse the political, economic, social and cultural implications of online media use.

4.5.4 Relevance of CPE to this study

The relevance of the political economic theory has been greatly influenced by several prominent trends in the media industry and related technology. According to McQuail (1994), propositions on political economy theory have essentially not changed since earlier times, but the scope for its application is much wider with the rise of the internet.

Some of the reasons given for the revival of Marxism include the growth of media concentration worldwide, with more power of ownership being concentrated in fewer hands, the rise of the information economy and the decline in the use of mass media (McQuail 1994: 83). In addition,

there is renewed criticism of capitalism, using socio-economic inequality in the wake of financial crises and movements across the world, as well as national and regional struggles for democracy across authoritarian regimes in Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Hardy 2014: 189). Thus, evolving contextual factors across societies have not only invigorated this theoretical paradigm, but remind us of the fluidity of power and how it is contributing to the complex relationship between capitalism, communication and democracy.

This study seeks to investigate the political, economic, social and cultural conditions for communications practices and uses by both female and male bloggers in Zimbabwe, hence CPE offers an appreciation of the complexities, limitations, contestations, contradictions and problems of the capitalist economy, as argued by Hardy (2014: 194). Furthermore, CPE is closely connected to feminist critical theory in that it searches for both direct and mediated connections between economic power and cultural forms, leading to questions of media ownership and the role of cultural production (Good, 1989: 95). Ultimately, CPE and feminist critical theory, complemented by womanism, offer a holistic analysis of women's and men's lived experiences in Zimbabwe, and of how economics, politics, social and cultural conditions influence specific activists' activities in new media platforms.

4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter gave an overview of feminism and feminist theory to explain womanism as a feminist paradigm and its application to this study. The chapter also discussed feminist critical theory and critical political economy theory, projecting their major strengths and weaknesses, and indicating their relevance to the study. Overall, the chapter explained how the three frameworks complement each other in understanding blog use by Zimbabwean women and men in order to establish whether online media platforms provide Zimbabwean women with spaces for critical communicative interaction in which they can challenge the dominant discourse and increase women's participation in politics.

The next chapter discusses the research design and methodology relevant to this study.

Chapter 5

Research Design and Methodology

“Women make their own lives (and life histories), but they do so under conditions not of their own choosing”

(Marx, cited in Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 5)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and justifies the research methodology used to address the research problem. The selection of the research methodology was guided by the study’s research aim, objectives and research questions. The chapter also outlines the procedures followed in the selection of websites and the sampling of blogs and respondents. Lastly, the chapter describes the ethical considerations.

5.1.1 Qualitative vs. quantitative research

In social sciences research, both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies may be applied. For this study, this researcher applied qualitative methodologies. Quantitative research was not appropriate for this study, as it emphasises the quantification of constructs (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 49) and the analysis of causal relationships between variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 8), which was not the intention of this study.

The choice of a qualitative research approach was informed by Lindlof (1995: 9) and Singleton and Straits (2005: 309), who argue that qualitative inquirers strive to understand their objects of interest, and that qualitative research methods are valuable when researchers wish not to count or measure phenomena, but to understand the character of experience, particularly how people perceive and make sense of their communication experience. Creswell (2014: 186) concurs, adding that the qualitative research methodology aims less at measuring and more at understanding, often from the “inside”, namely the subjects under investigation. In the same vein, Babbie and Mouton (2001: 271) posit that the interest of qualitative research is to describe the actions of the research participants in great detail, and then to attempt to understand these actions in terms of the actors’ own beliefs, history and context.

Applied from the feminist perspective that this study holds, as discussed in Chapter 4 (Theoretical Frameworks), the qualitative research approach illuminates what Babbie and Mouton (2001: 37) describe as the “disjuncture between women’s own personal lived experience and that of the official, impersonal, male dominated organisations and culture that permeates much of their daily

experiences”. One can say that the subjects under investigation in this study, both female and male activist bloggers, are seen as interpretive subjects engaged in the process of making sense of their lives, giving meaning to their actions and understanding their interpretations of social realities.

Compared to quantitative research methods, other key strengths of qualitative research methods relevant to this research are that they “[give] voice” to the silenced (Mies, cited in Bryman, 2008: 396) by giving power to the research participants. This is unlike quantitative research, which “suppresses the voices of women either by ignoring them or by submerging them in statistics”, turning them into “objects” and, by so doing, “subjecting them to exploitation” (Mies, cited in Bryman, 2008: 396). This exploitation is reduced when using qualitative research. Another strength of qualitative research is that it uses naturally occurring data, enabling a deeper understanding in a nuanced way of the studied phenomenon (Silverman, 2011: 17). In addition, there is flexibility in the process of conducting research (Cassell & Symon, 1994: 7) which allows the use of multiple tools of collecting data, thereby enhancing reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 4).

However, despite the major criticism of qualitative research for its lack of ability to generalise findings to larger populations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 53), Jensen (2002: 236) succinctly distinguishes qualitative research by pointing out its three distinctive features, which were useful for this research. These are: *interpretive subject*, *meaning* and the *naturalistic context*. Applied to this study, I sought to understand how Zimbabwean bloggers, as *interpretive subjects*, use blogs as communication spaces to challenge dominant discourse – and as such, I analysed blog use and the creation of *meaning* in the *natural context* of online media.

5.2 The aim of the study and research questions

5.2.1 Aim

The aim of the study was to establish whether online media platforms provide Zimbabwean women with spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge the dominant discourse and increase women’s participation in politics.

5.2.2 Central research question and sub-questions

In order to realise this aim, the study was guided by the following central research question:

- Do online media give Zimbabwean women spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge dominant discourse and increase women’s participation in politics?

The following sub-questions are addressed:

- How are women's organisations and journalist activists (both women and men) in Zimbabwe using blogs as platforms for political discourse?
- How are women's organisations and journalist activists presenting messages to other women on these blogs, including in the narratives used?
- Are the six specific themes of women and democratic politics online (outlined in section 1.5.3 of this study) identifiable on the five websites?
- To what extent is the discourse in the blogs across the five websites indicative of counterpower to established norms?

The methodology employed to achieve the aim and answer the above questions is discussed in the following sections.

5.3 Research design

The research design is an important aspect of the study, as it creates a "roadmap" of how the researcher intends to study and answer the central research question(s) and sub-questions. As Silverman (2011: 42) points out, an effective research design considers the range of methods of data collection researchers can use, making sure the method is appropriate, avoiding too many data collection methods, and lastly making sure that one does not collect too much data.

The way in which researchers develop research designs is affected by whether the research question is descriptive or explanatory, as this affects what information is collected (De Vaus, 2001: 2). Hence, in descriptive research such as this study, the researcher is preoccupied with answering the "what" and "how" questions of the studied phenomenon. Therefore, by thinking through the purpose of the research and the type of evidence needed to answer the research questions, the researcher was able to conceptualise an operational plan to undertake the various procedures and tasks required to complete the study, as espoused by Kumar (2005: 84). The research design also ensured that the evidence gathered answered the research question as unambiguously as possible, and that there was logic in the structure of the inquiry (Yin, 1989: 29). As scholars warn, failure to do this leads to weak and unconvincing conclusions that fail to answer the research question (De Vaus, 2001: 9). To achieve this study's research objective, the researcher chose the collective case study as the research design.

5.3.1 Case studies

The case study is one of several ways of doing social research. Other approaches include experiments, surveys and histories, each with its particular advantages and disadvantages (Yin, 2009: 2). The adoption of case studies follows a decision on what is to be studied and is employed across the social sciences disciplines. Its uses by researchers in different disciplines differ, and hence there are no agreed-on definitions of the term (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000). While there is no consensus on what constitutes a “case” (Babbie, 2010: 309), the term is generally used to refer to an event, a programme, an activity, a process or one or more individuals, usually bounded by parameters such as time and activity (Creswell, 2003).

Mindful of the different uses of the case study, Van Wynsberghe and Khan (2007: 81) argue that the case study is a heuristic device because, “at its most general, [it is] an approach that focuses one’s attention during learning, construction, discovery, or problem solving”. Graebner and Eisenhardt (cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 255) refer to the case study as a research strategy, an argument supported by Yin (2009: 18), pointing out one of its critical strengths, namely that “it investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. Thus, the case study method was the preferred strategy, since this study sought to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, while at the same time encompassing contextual conditions, as these were critical to the phenomenon.

Building on arguments for case study uses by Yin (2009) and Stake (2005), Simons (2009: 21) states that

case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives and the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, programme, or system in a “real life” context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and evidence-led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic.

Another strength of the case study approach is that it allows the researcher to use a variety of sources and types of data, and a variety of research methods as part of the investigation, with data needing to converge in a triangulating³⁴ fashion (Hartley, 2004: 324; Yin, 2009: 18). Yin (2009: 18) further

³⁴ Triangulation is used as a strategy for improving the validity and reliability of research findings (Golafshani, 2003: 603). Creswell and Miller (2000: 126) define triangulation as a “validity procedure where researchers search for

posits that case studies benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. This is unlike other qualitative designs such as grounded theory and ethnography, which presuppose that theoretical perspectives emerge from first-hand data (Meyer, 2001: 331).

Furthermore, Yin (2003: 1-2) uses three terms to describe case studies:

- *Explanatory* – this type of case study is used when researchers seek to answer questions that seek to explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies.
- *Exploratory* – used to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes.
- *Descriptive* – used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real life in which it occurred.

For this study, the case study approach was both exploratory and descriptive in nature. This is because exploratory studies usually lead to insight and comprehension and follow an open and flexible research strategy (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 80-81). This is unlike explanatory studies, in which the focus is to explain causal links in real-life interventions, which was not the focus of this study. However, because exploratory studies do not emphasise the collection of detailed information, this approach was augmented by adopting a descriptive approach, which emphasises description and understanding the event within the concrete, natural context in which it occurs (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 272). This is why the case study was relevant and the logical approach to study women's online media use in Zimbabwe, as it offered an opportunity to explore in depth and to use theories and conceptual approaches to discover and understand new media use by bloggers in Zimbabwe.

5.3.1.1 Collective case studies

This study utilised the collective case study approach. Case studies can involve single or multiple cases (Meyer, 2001: 332; Baxter & Jack, 2008: 549-550). The major problems of a single case study are its limitation and generalisability (Eisenhardt, 1989: 537). To help counter these biases, multi-case or collective case approaches are preferred (Leonard-Barton, 1990: 250). The choice of

convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study". This methodological process is, however, not applied in this study.

collective cases is also supported by Du Plooy (1995), Mark (1996) and Babbie (2010), who argue that a collective study provides an insight into an issue.

One of the strengths of the collective case study approach is that it allows the researcher to use a variety of sources, types of data and research methods as part of the investigation (Denscombe, 2003; Mabry, 2008), enhancing accuracy and reliability of the results of the subject studied (Noor, 2008: 1604).

Furthermore, using more than one case study helps a researcher to validate the stability of constructs across situations (Leonard-Barton, 1990: 258). Despite the disadvantage or lack of generalisations, Singleton, Straits and Straits (1993: 317) recommend collective case studies when the item under study is a single social phenomenon. Therefore, the collective case study approach was appropriate for this study as it enabled a so-called “thick” description of the phenomenon, and in-depth understanding (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 281). Five cases (the five websites) were selected and they are bounded by women activist content posted during the year 2013. This is in line with Stake’s (2005: 444) argument that the case is a bounded system with features, patterns and boundaries, hence a thorough investigation of “the particular” is important, instead of striving for generalisations.

5.4 Research methodology

According to Silverman (2011: 42), there are generally four major methods used by qualitative researchers as opposed to quantitative researchers. They are:

- Observation – In qualitative studies the approach is fundamental to understanding another culture (while in quantitative research the method is preliminary work prior to framing a questionnaire).
- Analysing texts and documents – In qualitative research, qualitative content analysis is used to understand participants’ categories (while content analysis is normally applied in quantitative research to establish sets of categories, and counting the number of instances).
- Interviews and focus groups – In qualitative research, “open-ended” questions asked of small samples (while in quantitative research, surveys are normally used that employ fixed-choice questions and random samples).
- Audio and video recording (and other visual material) – In qualitative research this method is used to understand the organisation of talk, gaze and body movements (in quantitative research the method is used to check the accuracy of interview records).

This study analysed texts (posted as blogs) by using qualitative content analysis (QCA), and also employed semi-structured interviews (SSI). These methods are discussed in the following section, beginning with QCA.

5.4.1 Qualitative content analysis

Written texts are an important data source for researchers searching for “external” realities in the data (Silverman, 2011: 229-230). The advantages of textual data are their richness through presentational subtleties and skills; their relevance and effect in how researchers discern latent meaning; that they are “naturally occurring” as they document what participants are actually doing in the world; and, lastly, their availability (Silverman, 2011: 229-230).

Diaries are one kind of text that are rich in that they detail how people make sense of their everyday lives (Silverman, 2011: 250). In the era of new media technologies, Silverman points out that previously handwritten diaries have been replaced by weblogs written by organisations and individuals that “vividly” represent how people characterise their activities and experiences.

As indicated, this study employed qualitative content analysis (QCA). QCA is one of numerous methods used to analyse text data. Other methods include ethnography, phenomenology and historical research. QCA focuses on characteristics of language and communication, with attention being paid to the content or contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1278). QCA is an approach of empirical, methodological, controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step-by-step models without rash quantifications (Mayring 2000: 2). Hsieh and Shannon (2005: 1278) define QCA as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns”.

Similarly, Zhang and Wildemuth (2005: 1) posit that QCA emphasises an integrated view of texts and their specific contexts and goes beyond counting words to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may be latent in a particular text, allowing the researcher to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner. QCA is adapted and modified from content analysis (CA). Originally, the term content analysis referred to those methods that concentrate on directly and clearly quantifiable aspects of texts (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak & Vetter, 2000: 55). Hence, CA is essentially a quantitative method with the central tool being to systematically categorise information (Titscher *et al.*, 2000: 57-61).

However, earlier critics of CA, for example Kracauer in 1952, argued that the quantitative orientation in CA neglected the particular quality of texts and that it is important to reconstruct

contexts. Kracauer (1952: 639-640) further argued that it is not by counting and measuring that “patterns” or “wholes” in texts can be demonstrated, but by showing the different possibilities of interpretation of “multiple connotations”, and producing descriptions that conform far more closely to the texts. Similarly, later scholars such as Mayring (2000) and Glaser and Laudel (2013) criticised classical CA, arguing that it fails to recognise the latent contents and contexts of text components that do not appear in texts. This resulted in the development of qualitative approaches to content analysis (Mostyn, 1985; Altheide & Johnson, 1996).

QCA, according to Mayring (2000), is a systematic, theory-guided approach to text analysis using a category system. This theory-guided approach enables a deeper analysis of texts than just mere description, and this method has become popular among qualitative scholars doing textual analyses (Bryman, 2004). In addition, QCA offers two unique qualities: the first being that data are pre-existing and thus naturalistic, and the second that data are non-interactive and hence have a built-in level of authenticity (Reinharz, 1992: 147). These characteristics enable a rich description of the texts.

However, Silverman (2011: 66) argues that these advantages come at a cost. He explains that, instead of examining the participants’ deployment of categories within their interactions, QCA uses predesigned categories prior to data analysis, while Atkinson (1992: 459) criticises the coding systems, arguing that coding restricts the capturing of other data that do not fit the categories. Atkinson refers to the deductive³⁵ codes as a “powerful conceptual grid” that is difficult to escape.

Acknowledging this limitation, this study, while it applied predetermined codes in the form of six key themes identified from the literature on women, new media and political participation, as well as theoretical concepts, allowed for other themes to emerge from the raw data by maintaining flexibility, which, according to Cassell and Symon (1994: 7), is synonymous with qualitative research.

In line with this study’s interpretive paradigm approach to understanding the lived experiences of the bloggers, the QCA employed interpretive analysis, the emphasis of which was on meaning produced by the text and the influences that shape the bloggers’ interpretation of their social worlds, as also described by Babbie and Mouton (2001: 28). This perspective posits that the only way to understand social reality is from the perspective of those enmeshed within it (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 17). Since texts are not produced within a vacuum but are products of a given time and space,

³⁵ Deductive codes exist a priori and are identified or constructed from theoretical frameworks, relevant empirical work and research questions (Forman & Damschroder 2008: 48).

cultural norms and values that guide aspects of social life (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007: 229), they offer a deeper understanding of the realities of the people studied.

To apply QCA, the blogs were initially coded. Blogs contain multimedia objects such as photographs, audio and video. For this study, however, only texts in the blogs were coded. Coding entails reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance or that appear to be salient within the social worlds of those studied (Bryman, 2012: 568). Charmaz (1983: 186) defines codes as “devices to label, separate, compile and organise data”. Similarly, Saldana (2008: 3) defines a code as “a word, a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and or evocative attribute for a portion of data”. Therefore, a code represents and captures the datum’s primary content and essence (Saldana, 2009: 3).

In coding the blogs, I employed Miles and Huberman’s (1994: 57) descriptive, interpretive and pattern coding, which enabled the breaking down of chunks of texts into, first, descriptive elements or basic themes, after which these elements were closely examined and compared for similarities. Descriptive coding entailed searching for meanings in texts in line with the six main themes, and labelling these. The six themes relevant to the research questions and identified from the literature review on women, new media and political participation, are: *participation, deliberative democracy, empowerment, public sphere, representation and challenges*.

I used both open and *in vivo* coding, in order to capture the methodological needs of the study’s inquiry. Open coding was used to summarise the primary topic of the datum, while *in vivo* codes involved extracting verbatim codes from the texts. The latter was done to give voices to the bloggers by capturing their own words. After this, the codes or basic themes were interpreted and similar ideas were grouped together under descriptive categories or sub-themes. These served to organise the data. The sub-themes were later analysed to identify their claims, propositions and arguments. This process guided the adaptation of the sub-themes into the six main themes of the study for the conceptualisation and broader description of the phenomenon. This process is illustrated in the table below. The sub-themes were further refined after a pilot study of selected blogs and bloggers. Research findings from both QCA and SSI (discussed in section 5.4.2) were analysed in the order of the themes outlined above.

5.4.1.1 Coding scheme

I developed a coding scheme based on code families – a grouping of several codes reflecting different aspects of a major theme, for example, as shown in Table 5.1 (to follow), the major theme,

PARTICIPATION (first column), includes three basic themes (second column) for all texts referring to *participation* across the five websites and interview transcripts, namely Activism, Awareness and Political participation. Within these basic themes are sub-themes (third column), providing more detail on the basic themes, for example there are three sub-themes under the basic theme Activism: Motivations, Strategies and Benefits and obstacles. The last column is a description of each sub-theme and what guided the coding process. Therefore, the basic themes (representing the views and understanding of bloggers) and their related sub-themes (representing the researcher's interpretations) constitute a code family. These code families are represented by the study's six major themes.

Table 5.1 Coding scheme

Major themes	Basic themes	Sub-themes	Description
PARTICIPATION	Activism	Definitions and motivations	Discussions on definitions for activism (e.g. activism viewed as participation). Also discussions on the reasons and motivations for blogging (e.g. why the websites were established and the type of content), and whether these equate to participation.
		Strategies	Discussions on strategies and approaches to activism that are used by women and women's organisations.
		Benefits and obstacles	Discussions on benefits of participation and obstacles encountered.
	Awareness	Personal level	Discussions on how women are acquiring information for personal use, and how this knowledge is enabling them to participate and make informed choices about their lives.
		Societal level	Discussions on the creation of awareness in society; sharing of information on pertinent issues affecting women generally, and how it enables participation.
Political participation	Few women in politics	Discussions on all background and contextual information regarding women's political participation (e.g. statistics of women elected to office, reasons for lack of participation, and proposed remedies).	
DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY	Transformation	Ideological and cultural change	Discussions on the need to change mind-sets and society's way of thinking about issues, and ideology. Also discussed is the need for a cultural transformation that also accommodates the needs of women, and how this can facilitate democracy.
		Need for new policies	Discussions on the need for policies to attain gender equality and create a just and democratic society.
EMPOWERMENT	Empowerment	Personal level	Discussions on benefits for individual women (e.g. financial remuneration, acquisition of skills, networking, speaking their minds, being recognised).
		Others, groups and society	Discussions on benefits for others and society in general (e.g. the creation of dialogues between women and men), how this is contributing to empowerment.
PUBLIC SPHERE	Online media	Uses and political participation	Discussions on the uses of online media in general. Also, discussions on how new media are facilitating interest in politics by women. There are suggestions for how political participation can be further enhanced (e.g. making sure offline structures work for women too).
		Benefits for individuals and society	Discussions on benefits of online media, and success stories for the individual, community and general society (e.g. ability to express oneself, market businesses, overcome institutional barriers).
REPRESENTATION	Communication strategies	Giving women a voice	Discussions on the need for women to tell their stories and share their lived experiences. This code also includes all the communication strategies that focus on giving women space and voice (e.g. re-telling mothers' stories to reconnect with the past and countering negative representations).
		Redefining womanhood	Bloggers' descriptions of themselves, Zimbabwean women and generally the black African woman - making connections to religion and their spirituality. This code also includes information on the bloggers' spiritual beliefs.
		Language and narratives used	Discussions on how language is used to send the message across, and for impact (e.g. metaphors, vernacular language, feminist), narrative (e.g. first person), use of illustrations, reflections and observations, and information packaging.
CHALLENGES	Patriarchy	Cultural norms that oppress women	Discussions on culture, tradition and patriarchy and how these influence the way bloggers view their worlds. In addition, retrogressive cultural customs disempowering women (e.g. wife inheritance and lobola).
	Gender roles	Challenges faced by women	Discussions on the challenges faced by women by virtue of them being women.
		Societal expectations	Discussions on societal expectations and what is generally considered the norm (e.g. socialisation).
	Gender-based violence	Domestic violence	Discussions on domestic violence, particularly gender-based violence. In addition, women's sexuality and body image.
Political economy		Discussions on challenges that relate to the country's political and economic environment (e.g. poverty, drought, economic crisis, political violence). Included in the discussions are online media challenges.	

5.4.2 Semi-structured interviews with bloggers

To gain a deeper understanding of the themes and issues that emerge from the QCA, semi-structured interviews (SSI) conducted through email were carried out to establish the context of the themes. By their nature, SSI elicit rich descriptions and explanations in identifying local contexts (Denscombe 2010; Creswell, 2013). Therefore, interviews allowed me to delve deeper into social and personal matters (Chilban, 1996; Shklovski & Valtysson, 2012).

The growth of information and communication technologies in qualitative research has, according to James (2007: 963), opened up new opportunities for researchers to examine how traditional research methods can be adapted for effective online research. Specifically, Mann and Stewart (2000) have shown how internet technology can be used to adapt qualitative methods of data collection to obtain rich, descriptive data online and understand human experience. In line with the study's inquiry, online interviews were opted for, instead of face-to-face or telephone interviews. Online interviews are usually conducted via email (Meho, 2006: 1284).

Also, apart from the fact that email interviews are cost effective and enable the participation of geographically dispersed samples of people (Meho, 2006: 1285) compared to telephone and face-to-face interviews, email interviews are less pre-constructed and more discursive and naturalistic (Seymour, 2001: 162), which might increase the richness of the narratives. This is aided by the absence of social presence and reduced visual cues, making participants feel more comfortable about personal disclosure online (James, 2007: 971). James (2007) adds that this encourages participants to open up in a way that would not happen with the spoken word.

The email interviews are also continuous in nature, and not "locked in store" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995: 43). This continuous nature of the interviews means that the questioning was redesigned throughout the project (Rubin & Rubin, 1995: 46-47). For example, while the interview guide was sent in a single email, as suggested by Foster (1994), Curasi (2001), Meho and Tibbo (2003) and Hodgson (2004) suggest, follow-up emails were sent based on the participants' responses. From Rubin and Rubin's (1995) approach to flexible and continuous interviewing it therefore can be concluded that this iterative and conversational approach to the email interviews encouraged more reflection by the participants and offered richer conversation.

However, one major disadvantage of email interviews is the lack of non-verbal cues. Non-verbal information like facial expressions, tone, gesture and eye contact are not available in text-based communication and can lead to misunderstandings of the message by the researcher (Pfeil & Zapharis, 2010: 3). To overcome this, I used my knowledge of the context to build rapport with the interviewees. In addition, the reliance on textual descriptions provided bloggers with the potential to

present themselves unhindered by visual images, and gave them time to reflect on the questions before they could answer them, as also argued by Hardy (2002: 575).

Therefore, methodologically, the use of email interviews in this study was appropriate because the technology itself is part of the phenomenon being investigated. This approach places the interviewees at the centre of their narratives by enabling them to play out their inner selves in the same space (the internet), as described by Salmons (2015: 7). In addition, because the online space can represent a place “beyond the context of the locale that transcends the social and cultural barriers that they encounter in their daily contexts” (Orgad, 2006: 893), it is applicable to the Zimbabwean context, where societal pressures affect daily discourses in the public sphere.

I therefore conducted SSI through email (see Addendum A for the questions) with 20 selected journalist bloggers, gender activists and communication managers from the three websites and two media organisations (sampling of bloggers is discussed in section 5.5). In conducting the interviews, I emailed the interviewees using the subject line *Research Interview*, in which I outlined the details of the project and specified the interview procedure, including information about follow-up exchanges – taking a cue from Meho (2006: 1291) (see Addendum B for this introductory email).

I also emphasised the anonymity of the participants by assuring them that all implicit and explicit links between their names and the data would be removed. This is in line with research ethics prescriptions (ethical clearance is discussed in section 5.8; see example of informed consent form as Addendum C).

In line with the exploratory nature of the study, I utilised what King (1994: 15) refers to as a “low degree of structure” in the interview approach, according to which I adopted the SSI approach using open-ended questions. The use of open-ended questions is in line with the study’s approach and research design, which sought to give participants a greater role and more power to describe their lived experiences in depth. According to Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest and Namey (2005: 41-42), open-ended questions give participants the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than forcing them to choose from fixed responses. They also invoke responses that are meaningfully and culturally salient to the participant, and are rich and explanatory in nature.

The SSI guide therefore comprised twelve open-ended questions, which took the participants at least an hour to answer, as explained in the email to them. The interview guide sent to interviewees as an attachment also gave instructions to the participants on how to complete the interview.

The analysis procedure for the email interviews followed the same coding procedure for QCA as outlined in section 5.4.1. However, a few initial steps were taken before the interview transcripts were uploaded into the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software programme (discussed in section

5.4.3). Email interview responses are in written text, therefore there was no need for transcribing and thereby reducing errors and biases (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 9). I stripped all the identifying information from the interview transcripts and labelled the scripts in numbers, for example “blogger 1”, “blogger 2”. I then typed these labels on the participants’ identifying information and stored this in the project file on my computer. This information was to be used if there was need for further probing of the participants’ perspectives. This is in line with research ethics requirements to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants (see discussion of ethics in section 5.8).

As with QCA, coding for interview texts was done in line with the six identified themes of the study, namely *participation*, *deliberative democracy*, *public sphere*, *empowerment*, *representation* and *challenges*.

5.4.3 Coding and data management using ATLAS.ti

Data management and coding of the blogs on the three websites, WCoZ, Kubatana and HerZimbabwe, and the two media organisations, *The Herald* and *Chronicle*, were done using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program. This allowed the researcher to code the data, retrieve text based on keywords and rename or merge existing codes into categories or themes. Once the blogs and interview transcripts were sampled and converted into Portable Document Format (PDF), they were then uploaded into ATLAS.ti for coding and analysis.

ATLAS.ti was the preferred computer software program because it is user friendly and offers opportunities for the researcher to code, make comments on codes and texts, and to note thoughts as the analysis progresses (Lewins & Silver, 2007: 172). In addition, the researcher also underwent training in ATLAS.ti prior to conducting the study. Through ATLAS.ti, I was able to group together similarly coded data (pattern codes) into smaller numbers of sets and constructs, called families. Based on what they represented, these families were then transformed into the six themes of the study to give a more meaningful unit of analysis of the data.

In addition, ATLAS.ti enabled me to find answers in the coded data using the query tool function to extract specific quotations according to the research questions. Memo writing (the recording of my thoughts and my interpretations of the queried data) aided this process, and these memos were later studied for the final analysis.

5.5 Sampling and sampling procedures

5.5.1 Sampling procedure

Sampling is the process of selecting observations and is a critical part of social research where researchers have to decide what to observe and what not, and a sample is therefore a special subset of a population observed in order to make inferences about the nature of the total population itself (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 164, 202). In research, the population refers to the theoretically specified aggregation of study elements (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 173).

There are generally two types of sampling methods: probability and non-probability sampling. The basic principle in probability sampling (also known as random sampling) is that a sample will be representative of the population from which it is selected if all members of the population have an equal chance of being selected for the sample (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 173). Higginbottom (2004: 13) defines probability sampling as the process by which a selection of the population can be chosen by researchers, as they have characteristics that can be viewed as representative of wider society, albeit in small numbers. Higginbottom (2004: 13) further posits that this type of sampling is applicable to quantitative research.

However, qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding and usually works with small samples, since the goal is not to make generalisations but to look at the process or the meanings individuals attribute to their given social situation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 45). Qualitative researchers therefore employ non-probability sampling techniques to generate small samples for in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon. Researchers thus employ purposive selection methods as they seek out groups, settings and individuals in which the processes being studied are most likely to occur (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 204). This selection used a deliberate plan rather than a statistical approach (Bryman, 1988: 90), and the goal is to choose sources of data that extend the understanding of a particular phenomenon or theory (Eisenhardt, 1989: 537).

According to Babbie (2010: 192) there are four types of non-probability sampling procedures, namely convenience sampling, snowball sampling, quota sampling and purposive sampling (also called selective sampling by Patton, 1990 and Higginbottom, 2004). In convenience sampling, data rely on available subjects; in snowball sampling, data are collected from a few members who then recommend others; in quota sampling, units are selected on the basis of specified characteristics so that the sample has some distribution of characteristics assumed to exist in the studied population; while in purposive sampling, participants who have specific characteristics or features are sampled (Babbie, 2010: 194). Similarly, in selective sampling, the researcher selects people and cases

according to the aims of the research (Patton, 1990). The term selective sampling thus is interchangeable with the term purposive sampling.

Based on the above arguments, purposive sampling, the term that I used, was the preferred method to select the cases, namely the blogs to be analysed, as well as the interviewees. How this was done is discussed next.

5.5.2 Selection of websites

The five cases in this study comprise

- one formal organisational online site owned by women's organisations, with a membership of over 200 women activists and 59 women's groups,
- one non-profit community forum,
- one website run by a female journalist, and
- two online news media organisations.

All five were selected purposively, as they were chosen based on their dedication to political activism and women's issues. However, because these are different organisations, different search criteria were used.

The first website, the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ; www.wcoz.org), was purposively selected using two search strategies on Google. The first search used "women's movement in Zimbabwe", and top of the results list were the following:

WCoZ,
Zimbabwe Women Resource and Network Centre (ZWRNC),
Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), and
Women in Politics and Support Unit (WiPSU).

Another search phrase, "politics and women's movement in Zimbabwe", was used to test the earlier search. The results of these two searches were similar. The researcher then visited these organisations' websites to identify their thrust and activities. The researcher discovered that all these women's organisations belonged to WCoZ. While they focus on various elements affecting women in society, they all have one goal as a coalition, namely that of advancing gender equality and women's political

participation in Zimbabwe. Therefore, by representing the women's movement in Zimbabwe, WCoZ was appropriate to be part of the study sample to help answer the research questions.

The next two websites, Kubatana (www.kubatana.net) and HerZimbabwe (www.herzimbabwe.co.zw), were also purposefully selected, using three search strategies on Google. The first search phrase used was “top Zimbabwe feminist blogs”, and top of result list were the following:

Kubatana,
HerZimbabwe, and
Young Zimbabwean Women Bloggers.

Another search phrase, “top Zimbabwean activist blogs”, was conducted to test the earlier search. The results of these two searches were similar. The last search, using the same phrase, was conducted on the website of a local technology firm, Techzim, which aggregates websites in Zimbabwe. Kubatana and HerZimbabwe were among the top 30 popular websites in Zimbabwe (TechZim, 2015). After this process, I visited the websites to check for the relevance of content in line with this study's requirements.

For the two news media websites, *The Herald* (www.herald.co.zw) and the *Chronicle* (www.chronicle.co.zw), a different search strategy was employed. I drew up a list of all the media in Zimbabwe and visited their online editions to assess whether they have blog platforms. Drawing up a list of Zimbabwean media was not difficult, as the range is fairly small, and I used the Zimbabwe Media Commission's (2015) list of media in Zimbabwe to reduce bias by ascertaining that no media house was left out in this assessment. While three media houses were found to have blog pages, *The Herald*, the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay's* “AMH Voices”, during the period under study, this study found the first two media houses' blog pages relevant to this study as they contained journalistic blogs that the research sought to integrate in the analysis. The blogs are written by different bloggers, both female and male. The assessment also looked at the popularity of the media organisations by accessing their circulation figures. *The Herald*, one of the country's biggest daily newspapers is read by 43% of the urban population (ZAMPS, 2016). It has an online blog platform with 15 bloggers, six of them who are female journalists. The *Chronicle*, another daily newspaper, has a readership of 17% of the urban population (ZAMPS, 2016). The paper has six journalist bloggers, all male. The selected news media organisations are state-owned, and, ideologically, their content is aligned to the interest

of those in power and the state. Relevant to this study was then to integrate how such blogs allow counterhegemonic content to filter through.

5.5.3 Sampling of blogs

The population of this study comprised 287 blogs from the five websites, written by women activists and female and male journalists on “democracy and politics” between January 1, 2013 and December 31, 2013. This period captures the period before and after the Zimbabwe general and parliamentary elections held in July of that year. Different purposive sampling approaches to select blogs from the five websites were applied. The selection of blogs from each website was guided by the nature of the organisation and how content is arranged on their homepages, as well as their navigation tools. The following sections explain how the samples were arrived at on the different sites, beginning with the women’s organisation WCoZ.

5.5.3.1 Sampling blogs from WCoZ

The intention of this study was to analyse online media use by Zimbabwean women, thus the purposive sampling of WCoZ enabled the researcher to access the coalition’s communicative messages to Zimbabwean women. The coalition’s online discussion forum on <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ> therefore was purposively selected, as the forum serves as the mouthpiece for lobbying and the dissemination of information on politics, gender, women’s issues and general human rights issues (WCoZ, 2015). The researcher worked through all the 64 blog posts by WCoZ during the year 2013.

The rules that guided sampling on this site were to discard (i) blogs that just offered a link to a media article without commenting on the issue and (ii) blogs that were event announcements. This resulted in 32 blogs in the sample. The researcher then went through all 32 blogs and selected ten that exhibited opinions on issues by the organisation and proffered solutions to the problems under discussion.

5.5.3.2 Sampling blogs from Kubatana and HerZimbabwe

The purposive sampling approach for these two websites was the same. I used the sites’ homepages to navigate the content relevant to the study. For example, blog content on these sites is clearly categorised. On Kubatana’s homepage (www.kubatana.net) the researcher accessed its archive list, which documents all the blog posts for each month. From the list of categories, the researcher

purposely selected the category “Women’s issues”, on which 34 blogs were posted in 2013. The rules that guided sampling on this site were to discount (i) job vacancies and (ii) blogs that were event announcements. Blogs that fell into the two categories were thus not included. This resulted in 16 blogs in the sample. To select the ten blogs I went through the remaining blogs and selected those that exhibited viewpoints and opinions on issues by the bloggers, and proffered solutions to the problems under discussion.

On HerZimbabwe (www.herzimbabwe.co.zw), the researcher used the navigation panel “Her News”, which led to the category “Politics and Rights”. In addition, following the study’s aim I also navigated another panel, “Her Views”, and subsequently was led to the same category, “Politics and Rights”, with 64 blogs published during the year 2013. This category comprised blogs on various issues, which included reflections on politics, gender and women’s issues. The rules that guided sampling on this site were to discard (i) all blogs that were event and news announcements and (ii) profiles, obituaries and advertisements. This resulted in 34 blogs in the sample. The researcher then went through these 34 blogs to select ten blogs that exhibited the blogger’s viewpoint and opinion on issues, and proffered alternatives or solutions to the problem.

5.5.3.3 Sampling blogs from *The Herald* and the *Chronicle*

The sampling approach for the two newspapers’ websites, www.herald.co.zw and www.chronicle.co.zw, was also purposive. The researcher navigated the homepages of the two sites and observed that the news organisations listed all their bloggers and their areas of specialisation, for example “Gender”, “Business”, “Features”, “Sport”, and “Off the ball”. The journalists that blog on these platforms are line editors and senior reporters who are employed by their news organisations. However, there are also other bloggers who are not employed by the news organisations, and they are also part of the sample. Guided by the study’s aim and research questions, the researcher selected blogs from *The Herald* blog page from the “Gender”, “Business” and “Features” sections. This resulted in 81 blogs. The criteria used to reduce the number of blogs into manageable units were to discard (i) all blogs that were hard news reports, (ii) blogs on relationships, and (iii) blogs on profiles. This resulted in 35 blogs in the sample. I then worked through all the remaining blogs in the three categories and selected ten that exhibited viewpoints and opinions on issues by the bloggers, and proffered solutions to the problems under discussion.

Content on the *Chronicle* blog page is categorised into three, namely “Features”, “Features analysis” and “Off the ball”. The latter section comprises opinions on issues of governance in areas such as sport. There were a total of 44 blog posts in the three categories. The criteria used to reduce

the number of blogs are similar to that applied to *The Herald*, that of discarding (i) all blogs that are hard news, and (ii) blogs on profiles. This resulted in 14 blogs in the sample. I then reworked through the remaining blogs and selected ten that exhibited the bloggers' viewpoints and opinions on issues, and proffered solutions to the problems under discussion.

A total of 50 blogs were therefore sources for the QCA: 30 in total from the three websites and 20 in total from the two news sites (see the list in Addendum D).

The next section discusses the sampling of interviewees.

5.5.3.4 Sampling respondents for the semi-structured interviews (SSI)

For the interviewees to be used for the SSI, recruiting was done according to guidelines for email interviewing. For studies using email interviewing, recruiting is done in multiple ways that include individual solicitations, snowballing, invitations through listservs, discussion groups, and personal research websites (Meho, 2006: 1288). However, Meho (2006) points out that, while recruiting may be easy in some cases, for example in individual solicitations, recruiting online can be daunting because not all potential participants read the invitations. Other scholars share similar findings of high rates of non-delivery (for example Frost, 1998; Meho & Tibbo, 2003), attributing this to the fact that people change their email addresses or internet service providers.

For this study, interview respondents were selected purposively through individual solicitations. These solicitations were done via email, in which I explained my project to the participants. Upon acceptance to participate in the study, second emails, with the consent forms (as per the SU Ethical Clearance Policy, see section 5.8 and Addendum C) attached, were then sent, which participants signed and returned to the researcher. From the 50 blogs that formed the population for QCA, the researcher selected the following authors for the SSI:

- two key respondents from WCoZ;
- eleven bloggers from HerZimbabwe and Kubatana: The researcher selected bloggers with at least two blogs in the sample. To widen the sample, some of the bloggers were also followed on their individual sites, using links on these two websites; and
- seven bloggers from the news media websites.

A total of 20 bloggers were interviewed.

Key respondents, such as communication officers and managers in women's organisations, were selected for being both bloggers and key experts to enable an in-depth understanding of the goals of the platform.

5.6 Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to pre-test both the study's theory and approach. Six blogs were analysed using ATLAS.ti, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with four of the selected interviewees via e-mail (see Addendum E). A pilot study is regarded as pre-testing and trying out a particular research instrument (Baker, 1994: 183), and one of its advantages is that it might give advance warning about where the main research project can be improved.

In this study, the pilot study was used as a trial run for the entire study, in which I tested both the study's theory and approach, as well as the application of ATLAS.ti as a data analysis tool. The research sought to ascertain whether the identified themes of the study, namely *participation*, *deliberative democracy*, *empowerment*, *public sphere*, *representation* and *challenges*, were extractable from the sampled blogs. The other reason to conduct the pilot study was to determine if there were other themes that would surface from the blogs. With regard to the e-mail interviews, the pilot study sought to test how much time it took the respondents to complete the interview guide and to clarify any ambiguities in the questions asked, and also whether there was a need to add more questions. Lastly, through the pilot study I wanted to test the applicability of ATLAS.ti software as a data analysis tool to ascertain if I could use it for the entire study.

First, the selected blogs were converted into portable document format (PDF) and uploaded into the software programme. I then coded the six blogs according to the themes identified for the study. I was, however, open to what other themes could come up, what the new themes may mean to my overall study, and whether I had to incorporate them, or identify and connect them to the existing themes.

Coding using ATLAS.ti was initially difficult, as it was my first exposure to this software tool, although I had attended a course in its application. I experimented with various tools on the software program before I could formally code the blogs. Coding the blogs was an iterative process for me, and the first two stages of the analysis took me long, as I was familiarising myself with coding. However, in the later stages of the analysis I was comfortable with using ATLAS.ti, as I could sort data and review and retrieve important quotes. ATLAS.ti later made it simpler to work through all of the 50 blogs for the study, as I was now familiar with the software.

From the six blogs for the pilot study I was also able to extract all the identified themes of the study. The analysis helped me to identify sub-themes that fed into the abstract themes of the study. In this way I was able to refine my coding scheme so that the major themes were supported by sub-

themes, which also assisted with easier coding. However, one theme that emerged that I did not anticipate, nor identify from the beginning, was gender-based violence. Following further analysis, I was able to place it as a sub-theme under challenges (see Table 5.1).

For the SSI pilot study I sent the research interview guide to four bloggers between November and December 2015. The guide was sent to two female and two male bloggers and all were completed. However, the responses took longer to return than envisaged because of the festive season. I had to constantly remind the respondents and keep rapport with them. With regard to feedback on the research questions (RQ), one of the bloggers suggested that I replace the term “marginalised” with “women” on RQ2, as the word “marginalised” represents a broad group. I also realised from the responses of the bloggers that I needed to add a RQ on motivations for blogging, as they all referred to why they blog. The bloggers revealed that it took 40 minutes to an hour for them to complete the questionnaire, which is the time range I had envisaged. Another observation was that none of the bloggers used the “forward button”, as requested, but preferred to save the research interview guide as an attachment, as this enabled them to respond to the questions at their convenience, rather than in one sitting.

5.7 Quality in qualitative research

There are different ways of testing for quality in qualitative and quantitative research, with the latter found to use instruments that are inapplicable to qualitative research as they are concerned with measurements (Stenbacka, 2001: 552). For example, testing for credibility in quantitative research depends on “instrument construction”, while in qualitative research, “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton, 2001: 14). Enhancing quality in qualitative research therefore lies with the researcher. Another argument that supports the different applications of quality criteria in the qualitative research tradition is that, by nature, qualitative research stresses creativity, exploration, conceptual flexibility and freedom of spirit (Seale, 1999: 467).

It is clear that testing for quality in qualitative research differs from approaches used in the quantitative tradition, and researchers must be mindful of how they guard against biases and enhance quality by ensuring validity and objectivity throughout the research process.

Validity and objectivity in qualitative research are discussed next, beginning with validity.

5.7.1 Validity

Validity is a critical component in any research. However, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011: 48) point out that validity is not a specific entity or end goal that a researcher can achieve, and Brinberg and

McGrath (1985: 13) note that it is not a “commodity that can be purchased with techniques”. Rather, validity is a process in which the researcher earns the confidence of the reader that he or she has “gotten it right” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 48), and in which trustworthiness takes the place of truth (Sandelowski, 1993: 2). It is, like integrity, character and quality, to be assessed relative to purpose and circumstances (Brinberg & McGrath, 1985: 13).

According to Maxwell (2005: 41), validity generally pertains to the relationship between an account and something outside of that account, and whether this relationship can be construed as objective reality. Something out of that account can be participants’ constructions of reality and their interpretations. Hence, in enhancing validity in qualitative research, researchers must strive to follow some basic guidelines to navigate important threats to validity, such as researcher bias (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 48).

In this study, validity was enhanced by having a clear selection of cases and sampling of blogs to match the research questions asked. The research also highlighted the negative responses. In addition, respondents were re-questioned to clarify their responses. This helped to validate the interpretation of the responses.

Objectivity is discussed next.

5.7.2 Objectivity

According to King (1994: 31), qualitative research seeks to describe and make sense of the world, and therefore does not require researchers to strive for objectivity. King further argues that to do so would render qualitative research impossible, as the researcher’s sensitivity to subjective aspects of the studied phenomenon or the relationship with interviewees is an essential part of the research process. Gummesson (cited in Meyer, 2001: 344) suggests that one way to guard against bias is for the researcher to explicitly recognise his or her presuppositions and to make a conscious effort to set these aside in the analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994: 274) point out that one way of doing this to consider rival conclusions in the analysis. Another way to assess objectivity, according to Meyer (2001: 345), is to determine whether other researchers can trace the interpretations made in the study.

To ensure objectivity, this study clearly outlined the data collection strategy employed, the coding of the analysis process steps, the querying of data and how conclusions were drawn, as argued by Miles and Huberman (1994: 266). Objectivity has also been identified as one of the critical ethical issues in qualitative research. How this study deals with this issue is discussed next.

5.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues arise out of researchers' interactions with other people and the environment, especially where there is potential for, or is, a conflict of interest (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 520-521). Because social research often, although not always, represents an intrusion into people's lives, researchers need to take precautions to ensure the ethical aspects of their research. For this study I adhered to ethical procedures by seeking permission to conduct the research from the Stellenbosch University Ethics Committee (see Addendum F). I also sought permission from the owners of the three websites and editors at the two media organisations to access their bloggers (see Addendum G). In seeking permission from the organisations studied, I requested an institutional letter of support from the Journalism Department at Stellenbosch University (see Addendum H). This permission was granted. Additionally, individual permission was sought from the potential participants and informed consent forms were sent to them. These were signed and returned to the researcher. This was done between July 2015 and March 2016. In addition, measures and steps to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview participants were put in place to protect the respondents' interests (see data analysis procedures in section 5.4.2).

One major ethical issue, particularly in e-mail interviews or online interviews, is the question of trust. It is difficult to ascertain that the researcher is communicating with the people identified, and that the respondents genuinely give the researcher their perspectives on the issues under discussion. To overcome this, I built trust with potential interview participants early on in the study by explaining to them my research and interest in the topic. I managed to establish rapport with participants by writing to them individually and responding to them promptly.

Similarly to Botma (2011: 145), I used my journalism background not only to gain the trust of the respondents, having worked with some before, but also to judge and verify truth-claims by respondents and to ensure objectivity. However, being knowledgeable and interested in the phenomenon can pose the challenge of appearing knowledgeable. Priest (1996: 26) warns that researchers "must work hard to be sure they are not imposing their own worldview but gain an understanding of what might be a very different perspective". Therefore, great care was taken not to project my personal views on to the respondents. This was done by also presenting those findings that did not concur with the preconceived themes and concepts.

5.9 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the methodology of the study was outlined, discussed and justified. Aspects of the methodology that were discussed include the research design, data collection instruments, and data

analysis procedures for both QCA and SSI. The merits and demerits of the chosen research approach were explained. Also discussed in this chapter were sampling procedures and selection methods for the websites, sampling of the blogs, the pilot study, quality in qualitative research, as well as ethical considerations, and measures to address these.

The next chapter presents the findings of the study.

Chapter 6

Presentation of Research Findings I

“When we are honest with ourselves, we begin to get somewhere. When we become conscious of our circumstances, we become aware that we can change them. Maybe today we can only change them by just knowing they exist. Maybe tomorrow we can change them in bigger ways we never knew possible”

(blog 21:23:3).

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the research design and methodologies employed in this study. In this chapter the findings of the study are presented. The data were gathered from five selected websites in Zimbabwe, namely the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe (www.wcoz.org), Kubatana (www.kubatana.net), HerZimbabwe (www.herzimbabwe.co.zw), *The Herald* (www.herald.co.zw), and the *Chronicle* (www.chronicle.co.zw). Two instruments were used to collect the data, namely

- blogs from the five websites, and
- semi-structured interviews with selected bloggers.

The qualitative data from both the blogs and interviews were analysed using QCA. This involved grouping data into manageable sub-themes and categories, which served as the basis for the analysis. The data were analysed using ATLAS.ti version 7. Through ATLAS.ti, the researcher was able to group related data into themes, generate relationships between sub-themes, and reflect on the data by memoing. This is explained in section 5.4.1 of this study.

First to be presented are data obtained from the QCA of the blogs to ascertain how these are used as platforms for political discourse. The data are presented thematically in this order: *participation, deliberative democracy, empowerment, public sphere, representation and challenges*. Following this, the findings from the semi-structured interviews with the bloggers are presented in Chapter 7 (Presentation of Research Findings II), where data were also coded according to the themes of the study.

6.2 Research findings from blogs

6.2.1 Participation

There were 148 references to *participation* in the 50 blogs across the five websites. To interpret how the content of the blogs reflects on participation, this theme was broken down into three sub-themes, according to which participation is identified as activism, creating awareness, and as political participation. These sub-themes contain within them codes that were used to group related content together for analysis. Data that relate to this theme are presented according to the order of the blog sources as listed above.

6.2.1.1 Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ)

6.2.1.1.1 Definitions of and motivations for *participation*

WCoZ blogs identify *participation* as activism aimed at increasing women's representation in politics and enhancing equality between women and men in activities, programmes and processes that directly or indirectly contribute towards governance (blogs 3, 5, 7 & 9).³⁶ These blogs further highlight the context and challenges that have resulted in the marginalisation of women from the polity, compelling women to engage in activism.

The motivations for *participation* cited in the WCoZ blogs include the unfavourable political, economic and cultural environment, and that women continue to be battered with images of their worthlessness and helplessness (6:16).³⁷ In addition, blogs 5, 6 and 9 illustrate dissatisfaction over the lack of participation of women in politics and other decision-making bodies, arguing that the need to express this discontent is driving women into activism; as this blogger wrote:

i [sic] became an activist at 12 years, when my cousin³⁸ was murdered by her husband and the police refused to arrest him. He was made to pay two cows to the in-laws for the murder of his wife and he lived happily ever after. When I was in grade seven my niece in the same

³⁶ General references for studied blogs use blog numbers as they appear in Atlas.ti. How referencing from Atlas.ti was adopted in this study is explained in section 5.4.3.

³⁷ The reference for a specific segment of the data within a blog should be read as: quotation ID (blog number and code number). For example, blog 6, code 16 in that document.

³⁸ All references to identification were stripped from the data.

grade, got married off to our teacher as a second wife, my other friend to a temporary teacher and my last, to a gardener next door ... (6:15:1).³⁹

Participation is further described as awareness and sharing of knowledge amongst women themselves, and with the general society. For individual women, awareness includes access to information that relates to women's constitutional rights as enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013⁴⁰ and various other pieces of legislation that affect women, for example the Domestic Violence Act and the Sexual Offences Bill (blogs 1 & 3). Next, strategies for participation are presented.

6.2.1.1.2 Strategies employed for *participation*

Strategies employed for *participation* highlighted in the blogs include identifying platforms for creating awareness of women's issues (blogs 2, 4 & 8). According to the WCoZ (2:12:2), the organisation provides "a platform for proactive, coordinated and collective response to election-related issues in order to build understanding and knowledge among women as candidates and voters". This strategy, arguably, speaks directly to the void created by national structures that discriminate against women. Another strategy emanating from the blogs is that WCoZ works with other stakeholders, like traditional leaders and policymakers, to strengthen participation (blogs 2, 4 & 8). This is in an effort to counter the challenges, discussed next.

6.2.1.1.3 Challenges encountered in *participation*

The challenge discerned from the blogs is that patriarchy continues to valorise male authority (blogs 4, 6, 7, 8 & 9). Further, blogs 4, 7, 8 and 9 highlight that, while Zimbabwean women participated in the liberation struggle, they have not enjoyed the fruits of freedom. In addition, the legislative environment remains hostile to women to participate actively in politics.

³⁹ Referencing a verbatim quote should be read as: quotation ID (blog number and code number) and location of the quote in the data (paragraph).

⁴⁰ The Constitution Amendment (No. 20) was gazetted in May 2013 following a constitutional reform process that began in 1999. Particular clauses referenced in the blogs include: Sections 17 (1) (a) The state must promote the full participation of women in all spheres of Zimbabwean society and (b) That both genders are equally represented in all institutions and agencies of Government at every level; Section 25 (b) Protection of women and men from domestic violence. Other clauses include Sections 56 (2) The right to equal treatment including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres, and section 80(3) All laws, customs, traditions and cultural practices that infringe the rights of women conferred by the Constitution are void to the extent of infringement.

6.2.1.1.4 Summary: WCoZ

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of blogs on WCoZ is biased towards an understanding of politics in the narrow sense of state and representative politics. Another conclusion is that, by voicing women's concerns through activism, the WCoZ encourages other women, the wider society and policy makers to participate in the activism. In addition, WCoZ, which consists of a coalition of women's organisations, is able to voice women's concerns on constitutional rights.

6.2.1.2 Kubatana

6.2.1.2.1 Definitions and motivations for *participation*

The Kubatana blogs identify *participation* as protest and activism that demand better living conditions (blog 15), and as awareness of women's sexual rights and general human rights abuses (blog 12). Other blogs (13, 14, 16 & 18) identify participation as: women contesting parliamentary seats, storytelling that allows for the integration of the past, present and future experiences, conversations that teach, moving beyond the silencing of voices and engaging in political conversations without fear. Lastly, blog 20 defines participation as questioning, querying, probing and re-writing the Zimbabwean narrative.

The motivations for participation cited in the Kubatana blogs include: the hostile political, economic and cultural environment, dissatisfaction over the lack of representation of women and women's issues in politics and other decision-making bodies (blogs 11 & 16). In addition, one blog citation (16:4:1) posits that the intimidating political environment makes it difficult for people to openly discuss "some political topics", and deters some people from entering politics: "people speak in hushed tones when discussing politics in public places" This, according to the data, is because of fear of persecution. Next, strategies for *participation* are presented.

6.2.1.2.2 Strategies employed for *participation*

Strategies employed for *participation* highlighted in the blogs include: training and capacity building to develop a critical mass of women who can articulate issues and effect changes, encouraging women to vote, and encouraging women to participate in advocacy workshops run by civil society organisations (blogs 13 & 14). Other strategies are that women must register to vote, must vote, and that they must vote for other women (blog 13), and the use of mobile phones for creating awareness (blog 18). In addition, Kubatana distributes its content to larger audiences, both online and offline, using promotional materials, namely t-shirts, and offers healing and empowerment workshops for

survivors of torture, violence and rape (blog 14). This blog further highlights that the website shares its content with other women's organisations for wider reach.

Furthermore, Kubatana targets both women and men in its voter registration messages:

... the campaign has different strategies to target the different women in the country. Simuka Zimbabwe [-] not only encourages voter participation but goes a step further to give a wake [sic] call to men and women of Zimbabwe to get up, wake and rise 'n' shine (13:2:1).

Challenges for *participation* in the Kubatana blogs are discussed next.

6.2.1.2.3 Challenges encountered in *participation*

The challenges discerned from the blogs on the Kubatana site are that Zimbabwean women continue to be oppressed under the guise of tradition (blog 12), and that the hostile political environment contributes to a lack of safe spaces to discuss politics (blog 16), which limits political conversations.

6.2.1.2.4 Summary: Kubatana

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the studied blogs on Kubatana also illuminate the issue of representative politics being critical to solving Zimbabwean women's political, economic and cultural challenges. At the same time, *participation* is projected as sharing knowledge and awareness, and equipping women with skills to participate in politics.

6.2.1.3 HerZimbabwe

6.2.1.3.1 Definitions and motivations for *participation*

The HerZimbabwe blogs define and relate *participation* to activism, and also define it as awareness and taking action. There is an appeal for introspection by the self as a first step towards participation, followed by assessing the immediate surroundings, which is the family, and lastly society in general (blog 21). Blog 21 further expresses: "when we are honest with ourselves we begin to get somewhere. When we become conscious of our circumstances, we can become aware that we can change them" (21:23:3).

The motivation for participation cited in the HerZimbabwe blogs is largely the political, economic and cultural environment (blogs 21 & 30). What is clearly projected in the blogs is that women's personal circumstances and experiences, and those of other women, have forced them to

take action and speak their minds. For example, in blog 21 the writer narrates the motivations for activism, initially by noticing “deep flaws in the structure of development work”, which does not “challenge the status quo, or birth new paradigms” (21:6:2). The writer rejects the neoliberal approach of development work in developing countries, saying it does not encourage recipients, especially women, to be self-conscious and critical of their own realities. It is this realisation that led the writer to introspection:

I didn't much enjoy giving presentations because I was talking to less than half of the people in the room since I was almost always with the same people at different events ... we forgot [sic] that behind the statistics, there are real women (21:19:3).

In blog 22, the writer laments the dilapidation of infrastructure in critical institutions such as schools, while blog 26 questions the continued suppression of women's voices in the public sphere by mainstream media as a factor that has driven women to view blogs as safe spaces where they can counter social norms and enable women's existence to be recognised and appreciated.

Next, strategies for *participation* are presented.

6.2.1.3.2 Strategies employed for *participation*

Strategies employed for *participation* highlighted in the blogs include: an appeal to individual consciousness (blogs 22 & 26), the need for change to begin with “small acts” at home, where women, as mothers, need to raise a conscious generation of children sensitive to gender equality (22:20; 22:2). Another strategy for participation raised in blog 25 is that of creating awareness and educating women on the use of new media platforms, so that women are aware of the dangers and risks, as well as have the abilities to use the right tools to shape societies.

Challenges for *participation* in the HerZimbabwe blogs are discussed next.

6.2.1.3.3 Challenges encountered in *participation*

The challenges discerned from two blogs include: lack of resources by women to engage in activist work (blog 21) and fear of engaging in radical feminism in Zimbabwe (blog 28). Blog citation (21:1) highlights that women in Zimbabwe are incapacitated to participate in politics due to a poorly performing economy. The blog further reveals that women activists who question the status quo of gender and power relations are often ridiculed and labelled as Western and imperialist, and not born

of local women's needs and demands. As a result, according to blog citation 28:10, many in the women's movement have distanced themselves from the terminology of feminism, even though their energies are dedicated towards its causes.

6.2.1.3.4 Summary: HerZimbabwe

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the HerZimbabwe blogs regarding *participation* has a slightly different approach to that in WCoZ and Kubatana. Drawing from the above, one can state that there is a deliberate attempt to approach *participation* in politics in the broader sense, where the private is the political, and that women need to start talking and share experiences on issues that affect their personal lives first. Women are encouraged to share their experiences on issues to which traditional media would otherwise not give space.

6.2.1.4 The Herald

6.2.1.4.1 Definitions and motivations for *participation*

The Herald blogs, written by female journalists, identify *participation* as equal representation of women and men in politics, the economy and cultural spheres, as well as the creation of awareness of the need for this balance (blogs 32 & 36). In addition, *participation* is viewed as realising potential, having women's voices in policy making (blog 35 & 38), and equipping women with skills (blog 36).

Motivations for *participation* cited in *The Herald* blogs include: the lack of access to mainstream media by women, while at the same time women's cultural spaces to speak are also disappearing in the traditional family, making it difficult for women to challenge norms and cultures (blog 38). In addition, blog 32 highlights the need of awareness by women that they should identify and claim themselves, first through communicating amongst themselves. Other blogs illuminate the concerns around the misuse of culture and the lack of understanding of some cultural aspects as drivers of women's discourse (blogs 36, 37 & 38).

Next, strategies for *participation* are presented.

6.2.1.4.2 Strategies employed for *participation*

Strategies employed for *participation* highlighted in the blogs include: that women should re-group and continue to nurture other women for political leadership, and that women need to stand up and be resilient (blog 32). Another strategy in the same blog is that women in parliament must be diligent ambassadors, while blog 36 points out the need for seminars for women, and that there should be

mentorship of women at various leadership levels. These strategies, according to the data, are necessary so that women are able to enter politics and other decision-making bodies.

Furthermore, blog citation 38:14 points out that it is critical for women to know where and when to speak, and new media spaces make this possible. The blog content further reveals that, for the effective utilisation of blogs and the projection of feminist discourse, women need to relive the experiences of their mothers in shaping their own resistance.

Challenges for *participation* in *The Herald* blogs are discussed next.

6.2.1.4.3 Challenges encountered in *participation*

The challenges discerned from four blogs include: women's lack of *participation* in the economy, gender roles (blogs 33 & 36), as well as culture, which, according to the data, continue to push women to the peripheries (blogs 37 & 38).

6.2.1.4.4 Summary: *The Herald*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of blogs in *The Herald* highlights the need for communication spaces for women, arguing that women's lived experiences remain untold because of a lack of communication platforms and because there is no deliberate effort to enable women to relive their experiences. However, while the appeal for communication addresses individual women and men, as well as the collective, there appears to be an inclination in the strategies that solutions to women's challenges would come from the state and parliament.

6.2.1.5 *Chronicle*

6.2.1.5.1 Definitions and motivations for *participation*

The *Chronicle* blogs, written by journalists, identify *participation* as equal political representation between women and men (blogs 41 & 42). These blogs also relate participation to taking part in political processes and other decision-making bodies. Other blogs identify participation with mobilising, taking action and acquiring skills (blog 44 & 46).

The motivations for *participation* cited in the *Chronicle* blogs include: to create awareness of the poor representation of women in politics and other decision-making bodies (blog 41), to create awareness of domestic violence (blog 48 & 49), and the need for women to be self-sufficient (blog 46). In contextualising the lack of women in politics, the blogs lament that women's participation is through attending rallies to support men – whom they vote for.

Furthermore, blog citation 41:4 describes with concern how most of the women participating in the 2013 parliamentary elections were basically the same people who were in parliament. The writer's sentiment is that elections are contested by the same people, namely those women who are already in politics. In another blog (42:1), this is attributed to patriarchy in political structures, where there is widespread imposition of candidates in many constituencies countrywide during the primaries.

Next, strategies for *participation* are presented.

6.2.1.5.2 Strategies employed for *participation*

Strategies employed for *participation* highlighted in the *Chronicle* blogs include: that women should vote in large numbers, capacity-building programmes, and campaigns at constituency levels (blogs 42, 44 & 47), as well as raising awareness of democratic and other related rights for individuals (blog 48). All these strategies are aimed at pushing the agenda for equal representation of women in politics.

Challenges for *participation* in the *Chronicle* blogs are discussed next.

6.2.1.5.3 Challenges encountered in *participation*

The main challenge discerned from the *Chronicle* blogs is that of political economy supported by patriarchy, in relation to which the writers' argument is that political parties do not recognise women and fail to implement quotas to ensure women also contest the elections (blogs 42 & 44). These blogs highlight that political parties stifle the *participation* of women by enforcing their own candidates, who are mostly men.

6.2.1.5.4 Summary: *Chronicle*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of *Chronicle* blogs focuses on equality in politics, which is viewed as the ultimate solution to women's challenges. The blogs unequivocally highlight the problems of patriarchy, which are so prevalent in political parties that they limit the *participation* of women.

6.2.1.6 Summary of the theme

Overall, the findings on the theme *participation* across the five websites reveal that *participation* is viewed as equality in politics, creating awareness, sharing personal experiences, networking, acquiring skills, engaging in conversations that teach, probing and querying, protesting, mobilising and voting. Lastly, *participation* is viewed as having political conversations without fear. For

websites that project equality in politics as a tool for participation, the writers stress the importance of elections and voting (WCoZ, Kubatana and *Chronicle*), while those projecting the need for awareness, dialogues and sharing personal experiences emphasise the need for safe spaces (Kubatana, HerZimbabwe and *The Herald*). Different blogs allocate power to women as individuals and as a collective, as well as to the state in offering solutions to the challenges faced by women. In WCoZ, *The Herald* and *Chronicle*, the state is viewed as the solution to improving the participation of women; in Kubatana, both the state, individual women and the collective have a role, while in HerZimbabwe the solutions lie with individual women and men.

6.2.2 Deliberative democracy

There were 91 references to *deliberative democracy* in the 50 blogs across the five websites. To interpret how the content of the blogs reflects on *deliberative democracy*, a sub-theme, transformation, was derived from the content, and two codes, namely ideological and cultural transformation, and policy transformation, were used to group related data that emphasised these two areas. Data that relate to this theme are presented according to the order of the sources as listed in section 6.1.

6.2.2.1 Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ)

6.2.2.1.1 Ideological and cultural transformation

The WCoZ blogs project *deliberative democracy* as advocacy that creates awareness among women of the need for social and structural modifications of Zimbabwean society, particularly in relation to the culture of violence, in order for women to begin enjoying their human rights (blogs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 10). What is discerned from these blogs is that the state, instead of protecting citizens (especially women), entrenches a culture of violence and forcefulness, further contributing to women's oppression, as particularly articulated in blog 1.

In addition, *deliberative democracy* is identified as positive representation of women in the media (blog 2). The key message in blog 2 is an appeal to change societal perceptions of women and women's capabilities, and to support women's equal participation in the public sphere: "[W]e are calling for responsible, balanced and constructive media reporting. We appreciate the effort of profiling women and gender issues" (2:10:2).

In addition, blog 10 posits that the principles of confidentiality, dignity, respect and safety must be ingrained in all the work of service providers, particularly health and security services. These

two institutions have been identified as perpetuating violence and stigma against women (10:11). Furthermore, WCoZ, which is a coalition of women's organisations, advocates for the implementation of the new constitution of Zimbabwe, which was gazetted in May 2013. What is projected is that the implementation of the new constitution, which affirms women's equal participation in decision making, is critical to their advancement (2:1 & 3:8). In addition, according to blog 3, women are appealing for change in the electoral system, which continues to favour men. Rather, women are demanding the adoption of proportional representation, "which has been shown to be the best system in which women have a bigger chance to participate in politics" (3:8:1-2).

Blog citations 5:1, 5:3 and 15:4 urge the president to consider more women in cabinet and also to widen representation to include women politicians from opposition political parties. The argument in the blogs is that most of the women in the 2013 parliament of Zimbabwe are capable of contributing towards a dynamic and vibrant cabinet that will advance the country, but their capabilities are undermined by an ideological system that still views women as incapable.

However, blog 4 alludes to the positives of women's advocacy and awareness programmes that are already bearing fruit at grassroots level for women in some communities. For example, blog citation 4:10 highlights that women who are active in community projects run by women's organisations are now consulted by traditional chiefs, and in some cases participate in advisory committees. However narrow this political participation is, as women are consulted only on women's and children's rights issues, the blog writer argues that this allows women back into the public sphere with traditional power, from where they arguably could influence culture from within. In addition to the ideological and cultural changes, there is a need for policy transformation, which is discussed next.

6.2.2.1.2 Policy transformation

Three WCoZ blogs contained content related to the transformation of the legal framework (blogs 3, 4 & 7). Blog 7 indicates the need for a realisation that women's rights are still violated in Zimbabwe, despite the various pieces of legislation put in place. What is insinuated in the blog is the lack of willpower by the state to enforce the implementation of gender-friendly policies to ensure women benefit and are protected. In addition, there is a need to ensure that all statutes are gender sensitive and that women are consulted in their formulation (4:14:1):

Local leadership is notorious for making decisions that are not favourable to women[,] and if women are consulted or participate in such decision-making, chances are the decisions will become gender sensitive.

Blog 3 highlights the need for change in the electoral system to include a quota system and proportional representation of women. What the blog projects is that the electoral requirements to vote are too cumbersome, as women largely fail to meet them because of the various gender roles they perform.

6.2.2.1.3 Summary: WCoZ

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the blogs on WCoZ relate *deliberative democracy* to raising concerns and creating awareness of the need for the political, social and cultural empowerment of Zimbabwean women. Through awareness, women begin to realise the need for societal ideological transformation, beginning with critical institutions such as the state and the media, to provide a safe environment for women and to project a positive image of women and their capabilities. In addition, the new constitution needs to be enforced and policies need to be gender sensitive and take women's perspectives into account. These changes are viewed as critical in enabling an equal society and strengthening democracy.

6.2.2.2 Kubatana

6.2.2.2.1 Ideological and cultural transformation

Kubatana blogs project *deliberative democracy* as a realisation that a male-centred ideology is still deeply entrenched in Zimbabwe, to such an extent that the state fails to address the core structural issues that continue to subjugate women (blog 11); that society needs to include men in narratives on rape and violence (blog 14); the need for leadership renewal (blog 17); and that people must change and start to care about their country to solve the problems faced (blog 20).

Illustrating the male-centred ideology in the issue of sex work, the writer argues (11:5:1):

[L]aw enforcement misses the point of addressing the core structural issues that have forced women to the streets in the first place, beyond even interrogating if those arrested in these operations are indeed prostitutes.

In addition, by giving sex work a woman's face, the writer argues that government fails to understand and address women's economic imperatives and opportunities (11:6). The main message is that there are underlying problems in the political economy that force women to engage in sex work. Furthermore, blog citation 11:17 projects the need for cultural change in society to also include men, who remain invisible in narratives on sex work.

The above point is reiterated in blog 14, where the writer stresses the need for men to be part of dialogues aimed at eradicating the culture of violence towards women. Lastly, blog 20 emphasises the need for women to be concerned about their specific problems and begin to exercise their agency. The writer's argument is that there needs to be an ideological shift at the individual level, with individual women taking it upon themselves to determine the course of their own lives by influencing political actors.

6.2.2.2.2 Policy transformation

With regard to the theme *deliberative democracy*, the Kubatana blogs made reference to policy transformation (blogs 11, 15 & 19). Blog 11 projects the need for changes in policies and government strategies that relate to women's sexual health issues. For example, in blog citation 11:14, the writer expresses the need for the protection of women sex workers from sexually transmitted diseases, as well as from physical and sexual violence. What is discerned from this point is that the blog suggests policy change.

Blog 15 highlights the need for policy transformations that take into account community livelihoods, especially those of women. In this blog, the writer questions the lack of corporate social responsibility by companies operating in Zimbabwe's diamond mining region, as they are concerned with making profits at the expense of people's living conditions. There is an appeal by the blog writer for women to lobby government to make sure communities benefit from diamond mining.

In addition, blog 19 points out the need for the Zimbabwe technology industry to expand its services even to those with little disposable income so that more people access online services where they can freely express themselves and engage in positive debates.

6.2.2.2.3 Summary: Kubatana

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, content of the blogs on Kubatana revealed *deliberative democracy* as women's preferences in the political, economic and cultural spheres, with the writers expressing the need for an ideological and cultural change of mind set so that society begins to realise

women as autonomous individuals with rights that need to be preserved and protected. What can be deduced from the blogs is the realisation by women that they need to speak out and uplift their status. One could conclude that such actions, according to the data, would enhance *deliberative democracy*.

6.2.2.3 HerZimbabwe

6.2.2.3.1 Ideological and cultural transformation

The HerZimbabwe blogs project *deliberative democracy* as everyday conversations among women and men – conversations that have made women realise the need for an ideological shift, beginning at the individual level in both women and men, followed by a shift on the community level, and lastly in society in general (blogs 21, 22, 27 & 29). For example, the writer in blog 22 writes that *deliberative democracy* would be enhanced if certain changes are implemented:

... so what could, or would happen if the school I visited decided to invest in growing back its lawn? Could a change in at least some of the girls' behavior [sic] be seen? Could such a structural modification challenge the socially driven aspects of their action or inaction? (22:15:2).

The blog further adds (22:21:2): “Zimbabwean society needs a social and structural shake up for women to begin to get somewhere.” Another argument posited in blog citation 27:4 is that empowering women to be aware and exercise their rights and to be assertive and vigilant enough to claim what is theirs would not bear real outcomes, given that men are left out of the conversations. Excluding men from the feminist discourse allows them to perpetuate patriarchal practices (27:4 & 27:7), as women's empowerment is indeed a man's issue too (27:5). This is succinctly summarised:

i [sic] believe that today's progressive men's dialogues value women as partners, challenging norms around the meaning and significance of masculinity and femininity. Present day's men's dialogues question gender roles and differences that stereotype women to the advantage of men (27:11:2).

Blog 29, however, voices concern about the composition of the cabinet, arguing that, although a few Zimbabwean women have made inroads into political structures, they are yet to hold key

“transformative roles”, with the majority of them in “decorative or ornamental” positions (29:7:2). According to the blogs, all these changes could be attained if the country implements the new constitution of Zimbabwe, which is key to the reformulation of policies. This is discussed next.

6.2.2.3.2 Policy transformations

Only two of the HerZimbabwe blogs in which the theme *deliberative democracy* was identified projected policy transformation. The blogs highlight the need for the implementation of the new constitution, which emphasises gender equality. The hope is that the constitution would enable the equal representation of women and men in parliament, along with the advancement of women to key decision-making positions (blog 27). Another blog (29) highlights that Zimbabwe needs “responsible politics” and a ruling party that is “not defensive”, a party that will also reflect upon lessons learnt (29:7:2) and take people’s views into account.

6.2.2.3.3 Summary: HerZimbabwe

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the blogs on HerZimbabwe project *deliberative democracy* as conversations taking place amongst women and men online, creating an awareness of the need for an ideological shift, first at the individual level in both women and men, and then at societal level. According to the blogs, unless this transformation takes place at the individual level for both women and men, outcomes for a democratic society would remain superficial. There is also an emphasis on men to be part of the discourse on women’s empowerment, and a call for the implementation of the new constitution as critical for facilitating democracy.

6.2.2.4 The Herald

6.2.2.4.1 Ideological and cultural transformation

The Herald blogs project *deliberative democracy* as equal participation between women and men in the political, economic and cultural spheres (blogs 35 & 36). The blogs argue that insufficient work has been done to enable this equality (35:8), and that the challenges besetting the economy need an ideological shift and a convergence of minds to attain long-term solutions, hence the need for women and men to work together (35:12). What is projected in these blogs is that equal participation by women in the political, economic and cultural spheres is a key aspect of *deliberative democracy*, as succinctly expressed in 36:16:4: “the project called Zimbabwe needs the full participation of both men and women.”

6.2.2.4.2 Policy transformation

Only three of *The Herald* blogs in which the theme *deliberative democracy* was identified reflected on policy transformation. The blogs highlighted the need for the implementation of the national gender policy and the expediting of other existing empowerment vehicles (blog 34), as well as the need for new policies to rejuvenate the economy (blog 35 & 36).

In blog citations 34:19 and 36:13, the writers express concern about the slow pace of policy implementation, particularly of the existing statutes aimed at uplifting the status of women and facilitating their political participation. Furthermore, citation 35:2 states the need for the promulgation of policies that would rejuvenate the economy.

6.2.2.4.3 Summary: *The Herald*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of *The Herald* blogs relate *deliberative democracy* to equal participation between women and men and emphasise an ideological and cultural shift focused largely on economic recovery as an important step to attaining this equality. The blogs highlight that Zimbabwe needs to effectively implement policies that directly aim at improving the status of women in society. The policies should facilitate the integration of women into the political, economic and cultural spheres. In addition, the emphasis on the economy reflects on policies and strategies that could be implemented to empower women. Such efforts, according to the data, would strengthen democracy.

6.2.2.5 Chronicle

6.2.2.5.1 Ideological and cultural transformation

The *Chronicle* blogs, similar to those in *The Herald*, project *deliberative democracy* as equality between women and men, and focus on the need for society to inculcate a culture of political participation and for the involvement of men in conversations about women and women's issues to reduce negative perceptions and retrogressive patriarchal practices, particularly gender-based violence (41, 44 & 48). This is aptly expressed in blog citation 48:14:4:

another issue is also to make men part of violence prevention and intervention efforts in far more significant ways. This is so because men who are mostly regarded as perpetrators of domestic violence are usually excluded in campaigns and organisations dealing with gender-based violence. Their inclusion in these campaigns and organisations would undoubtedly

make them appear not as potential perpetrators but as allies in efforts to make the world safe for women.

Further, to inculcate a culture of political participation, blog citation 41:9 encourages men to open up political space to enable women to participate in national politics. To open up political space to women needs men to begin to understand and appreciate women's capabilities. According to the blog, this could be achieved by setting and adhering to quotas and implementing policies that are gender-sensitive. This is discussed next.

6.2.2.5.2 Policy transformation

Three of the *Chronicle* blogs in which the theme *deliberative democracy* was identified reflect on policy transformation. The blogs, similar to the content in *The Herald*, also project the need for the transformation of Zimbabwe's political and economic sectors, and point to business strategies as key to equal participation between women and men (blogs 45 & 47). Blog 44 further demands that the transformation of policies should begin with the implementation of the country's constitution. This, according to blog citation 44:9, could begin with all political parties aligning their party constitutions to the new Constitution of Zimbabwe. According to the data, this will promote and facilitate women's political participation and eventually enhance democracy.

6.2.2.5.3 Summary: *Chronicle*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the *Chronicle* blogs, similar to those in *The Herald*, relate *deliberative democracy* to equal participation between women and men, and say that economic recovery is critical for facilitating this equality. The *Chronicle* also appeals for general cultural change in society, where men should begin to share cultural power with women and begin to consider and support women's capabilities.

6.2.2.6 Summary of theme

Overall, the findings on the theme *deliberative democracy* across the five websites indicate that *deliberative democracy* is viewed as awareness and realising the potential to advocate for change, conversations that empower women to fight domination, equal participation between women and men, improving the economy, and the realisation that communication can bring about positive transformation in society if used strategically by both individuals and groups to advocate for positive change in issues that affect them. The changes advocated for in the blog content are the need for a

change in mind sets, both ideological and cultural, as well as changes in policies. The concern expressed in the blogs is that a static view of the world has promoted retrogressive practices in both the political, economic and cultural spheres, practices that have subjugated women more than men, leading to women's immobilisation and oppression and acting to the detriment of *deliberative democracy*.

6.2.3 Empowerment

There were 43 references to *empowerment* in the 50 blogs across the five websites. To interpret how the content of the blogs reflects on empowerment, two sub-themes were deduced from the data, namely empowerment benefits at the individual level and empowerment benefits at societal level. Data that relate to this theme are presented according to the order of the sources as listed in section 6.1.

6.2.3.1 Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ)

6.2.3.1.1 *Empowerment* benefits for individual women

The WCoZ blogs identify *empowerment* as an individual consciousness of noticing inequalities, and these injustices include: gender-insensitive voter education, where there is no adequate time for and information on voter education and registration (blog 6), and women's promotion to stereotypical roles, like ministries of social services (blog 5). In addition, empowerment is identified as a realisation by women that they are constantly "battered with messages of their worthlessness, helplessness and unholiness" (6:18:1).

Furthermore, the blogs identify empowerment as knowledge acquisition, and at the same time being able to reject that knowledge that is not synchronous with women's daily lives. For example, blog 3 educates women on the new Constitution of Zimbabwe. Blog 3 explains women's rights as enshrined in the Constitution in depth. In addition, blog 3 shows how knowledge acquisition is helping women to reject knowledge that oppresses them. Blog 6:18 rejects the notion that men should dominate women, and that women should not question male authority. The writer of this blog is appalled at this, arguing that such a belief is dangerous as it disempowers women. The writer unequivocally declares: "i [sic] refused to accept such messages and still refuse to [do so] (6:18:1).

Furthermore, the acquisition of knowledge and engaging in activism has enabled some individual women to be recognised by the very system that silences them. Blog 4:8 gives instances where women involved in advocacy at community level are being recognised and co-opted into

critical decision-making institutions, such as village development committees (VIDCOs). These committees discuss village development issues, including the allocation of land, distribution of resources and conflict management (4:9:1):

[P]articipation in decision-making in the community is a critical step for women to influence such decisions. Women participating at this level are likely to get confidence to participate at higher levels of decision-making.

Moreover, the growth in women's individual consciousness and self-knowledge is viewed as empowering, as it enables women to gain confidence to participate at higher levels of decision making (4:6 & 4:11) and to be opinion leaders (4:7). Lastly, blogs 7 and 9 posit that women are now able to advocate for the ownership of land in rural and farming areas, bodily integrity, access to maternal health and services, access to education, economic empowerment, access to information, and equal participation in politics, because they, according to the blogs, are aware of these rights. This blog writer sums this up aptly: “[F]or me, that’s the colour of independence I dream of” (7:9:1).

6.2.3.1.2 Empowerment benefits for society

The benefits of *empowerment* for society highlighted in the blogs result from women's personal empowerment (blog 4), societal awareness that the electoral process needs to be changed to enable women to participate in elections (blog 2), and awareness of the need to build co-operation between women candidates and voters (blog 9). In addition, women continue to advocate for human rights, resulting in a powerful women's rights movement fighting for the protection of women's rights, which fight, according to blog 7, is on its own empowering for society.

Blog 4 highlights that empowering individual women gives power to a community and the wider society. For example, blog citation 4:11 points out that, for women, peace is about the personal, the community and the nation, therefore it is critical that challenges to peace be done on all these levels. Involving women in decision making at the local level therefore assists them to influence decisions to promote their human rights, and subsequently to promote peace in the community.

Blog citations 2:10, 8:6; 8:7 and 8:8 allude to the point that awareness of the need for free and fair as well as gender-sensitive elections empowers society to begin to understand that Zimbabwe cannot develop and prosper if there are contested electoral processes and violence, while blog citation

6:15 highlights that denouncing cultural practices that objectify women empowers society with knowledge of women's worth and that there needs to be equality between women and men.

6.2.3.1.3 Summary: WCoZ

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the WCoZ blogs identified *empowerment* as individual consciousness and knowledge acquisition by both individual women and society. In addition, this consciousness has enabled women to realise their potential to change their situations by rejecting that knowledge that disempowers them. Knowledge acquisition has also empowered women to participate in leadership roles at the community level.

6.2.3.2 Kubatana

6.2.3.2.1 *Empowerment* benefits for individual women

The Kubatana blogs identify *empowerment* as being aware and seeking answers to problems faced by women in Zimbabwe and fighting against injustices through protests (blogs 12 & 15), women coming together (blog 15), conversations that occur when women come together (blog 14), and speaking out (blog 16). In addition, women are also being empowered by becoming storytellers and newsmakers (blog 19) and, generally, information sharing empowers individual women (blog 13). Lastly, writing, especially blogging, has become therapeutic (blog 20).

Blog citations 15:4 and 12:5 allude to the point that realising injustices and protesting against these is empowering for women, both as individuals and collectively. In addition, citation 15:4 highlights that women coming together is empowering on its own, as this action exhibits a realisation that they can use their power. Blog citations 14:2 and 16:2 reveal that Zimbabwean women have sought self-knowledge through discussions and sharing their experiences. This, according to the data, is self-fulfilling for women, especially bearing in mind Zimbabwe's political economy and how these conditions severely limit women's abilities to communicate in the public sphere. Blog citation 12:7 points out that awareness is enabling women to begin to fight against cultural and societal norms that oppress them.

6.2.3.2.2 *Empowerment* benefits for society

Empowerment benefits for society highlighted in the blogs are changing societal norms with the goal of developing communities (blog 15), awareness of the need for the protection of human rights, and women's rights in particular (blog 12), as well as identifying aspects of culture that work against the attainment of these human rights. In addition, blog 19 posits that everyone, and not just women, is

now empowered to become a storyteller and newsmaker, and equally, that men have also been empowered to be part of women's discourse by sharing their own stories (blog 14).

In blog citation 14:6, the participation of men in women's storytelling circles is expected to create awareness of the impact of patriarchy on women's lives. Storytelling circles are discussions held on the platform to help change the negative perceptions on women (blog 14).

6.2.3.2.3 Summary: Kubatana

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the Kubatana blogs projects *empowerment* as awareness of injustices, networking, conversations and the taking of action by individual women, and women as a collective. Furthermore, new media are viewed as empowering for both individual women and general society by enabling anyone to be both a storyteller and newsmaker.

6.2.3.3 HerZimbabwe

6.2.3.3.1 *Empowerment* benefits to individual women

The HerZimbabwe blogs identify *empowerment* as the ability to define oneself and that blogs have allowed Zimbabwean women their existence as they know it today (blog 28). In addition, the ability to tell one's story "is the expression of a new kind of freedom whose value cannot, and should not be overlooked" (25:35:4). It therefore can be observed that one positive aspect projected in the two blogs is that individual women and women's organisations are now able to produce their own content, and in the process self-define the Zimbabwean woman:

[P]erhaps the greatest freedom is in how digital technologies have shifted storytelling dynamics by handing the means of news production, as well as consumption, over to the users (25:32:3).

Furthermore, blog citation 23:7 alludes to the fact that new media platforms have enabled women to adopt different methods of expression and self-empowerment, and use their agency in their own preferred way for their own desired goals. The blog further argues in citation 23:8 that it is also empowering for women to be exposed to conversations among other women:

[T]he point is that different women shape and influence our realities, forcing us to interact with our beliefs in what is “right”, “wrong”, aspirational and ultimately what we as individuals and collectives stand for (23:9:2).

6.2.3.3.2 Empowerment benefits for society

The *empowerment* benefits for society highlighted in the blogs include knowledge creation and sharing of information on issues affecting women’s survival as autonomous individuals (blogs 22, 23, 25 & 28). For example, blog citation 22:7 reviews Zimbabwe’s cabinet, expressing dismay that, of the 26 ministers appointed, only three are women. The writer’s argument is that awareness of women’s capabilities is critical for society to improve the participation of women in politics. Further, blog citations 23:9 and 25:32 highlight that women’s self-expressions are also empowering for society in general, and not just for women.

6.2.3.3.3 Summary: HerZimbabwe

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the HerZimbabwe blogs projects *empowerment* as self-definition, self-expression, agency, women producing their own content, and knowledge creation and information sharing. The blogs also reveal that conversations among women are not only empowering for women, but for society in general.

6.2.3.4 The Herald

6.2.3.4.1 Empowerment benefits to individual women

The Herald blogs identify *empowerment* as discovering the self – how Zimbabwean women have discovered their selves through identifying their strengths and capabilities (blog 32), how they have managed to fend for their families with little or no resources (blogs 33 & 34), and how they are now aware of their potential (blog 35).

In blog citation 32:19, the writer identifies the resilience exhibited by Zimbabwean women, particularly in relation to how thousands of women toiled for their families and put food on the table at the height of the economic crisis in 2007, and how they have continued to do so in subsequent years, adding that this is a source of strength and inspiration for young Zimbabwean women faced with economic difficulties. Blog citation 33:19 highlights that one of the critical aspects for women’s entry into political participation and key decision-making positions is economic empowerment.

In addition, the ability to blend gender roles has enabled women to manage households with few or no resources (34:9). Blog citation 35:5 posits that, in her sphere of influence, every woman should be enabled and empowered to realise her potential, and that individual women should be in a position to demand this empowerment. Blog 35 further argues that, despite the fact that women are increasingly becoming academically empowered, very few of them have succeeded.

6.2.3.4.2 Empowerment benefits to society

The *empowerment* benefits for society highlighted in the blogs are that the implementation of a broad-based women's economic empowerment strategy would benefit the majority of people (blog 33), and that women should play a leading role in the country's economic recovery (blog 35).

Blog citation 34:3 highlights empowerment as awareness by society of the need to continue working towards empowering women by effecting policies that have largely remained unimplemented. Blog citation 35:3 urges women to be strategically positioned and to be included in the economic recovery programmes implemented, so that communities' livelihoods are improved.

6.2.3.4.3 Summary: *The Herald*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of *The Herald* blogs projects *empowerment* as discovering the self and identifying strengths and capabilities, economic empowerment and awareness. The blogs highlight that the empowerment of individual women requires improving their economic status. What is also discerned here is that one form of empowerment, for example being aware, is not enough for women to break into the public sphere.

6.2.3.5 Chronicle

6.2.3.5.1 Empowerment benefits for individual women

The *Chronicle* blogs identify *empowerment* as the acquisition of skills for self-sustenance by women so that they are able to fend for themselves and their families (blog 46), as well as the general upliftment of women so that they are afforded the same opportunities as men (blog 47).

In blog citations 46:4 and 46:7, the writer narrates how women in agriculture have managed to increase their yields and provide for their families following training in conservation farming methods. The benefits are summarised by women quoted in the blog: "i [sic] have shrugged off poverty as a result of practising conservation farming ..." (46:7:3). Blog citation 47:8 identifies empowerment as uplifting women through the provision of affordable housing and job creation.

6.2.3.5.2 *Empowerment* benefits for society

The *empowerment* benefits for society highlighted in the blogs are awareness of the need for equal representation of women and men in parliament and other decision-making bodies, and that everyone should have a voice that counts in society (blogs 41 & 43). Furthermore, blog 46 posits that many farmers, and not just women, have benefited from training programmes and have thus improved their farming techniques, resulting in better harvests. Lastly, blog 47 highlights that implementing development projects and improving people's welfare by ensuring job creation empower society.

Blog citation 41:10 explains the new Constitution of Zimbabwe, and how it seeks to empower women and improve their political participation, and to integrate them into the political process, which ultimately benefits society. Blog 43 reiterates the need for awareness of equality (43:9:4):

[N]o one should be excluded from decision-making because they are African, or female, or belong to [a] minority, or worship [a] certain religion, because they are gay, have a disability or particular beliefs. We all have a voice that counts in our societies.

6.2.3.5.3 Summary: *Chronicle*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the *Chronicle* blogs project *empowerment* as the acquisition of skills and elevating women politically and economically by advocating for the equal representation of women and men in parliament. The emphasis in the blogs is on skills acquisition that will improve the individual lives of women and communities. According to the data, creating awareness of the issues highlighted is critical for the empowerment of both individual women and society.

6.2.3.6 Summary of theme

Overall, the findings on the theme *empowerment* across the five websites reveal that empowerment is viewed as individual consciousness and knowledge acquisition by both individual women and society. In addition, empowerment is a realisation by women of their potential to change their situations by rejecting the knowledge that disempowers them. Furthermore, empowerment is projected as awareness of injustices, as networking, as conversations and information sharing, as self-definition and self-expression, as agency and as women producing their own content. In addition, blogs on news media websites project empowerment as discovering the self and identifying strengths

and capabilities, as economic empowerment, as skills acquisition and as uplifting women politically and economically. *The Herald* and *Chronicle* blogs emphasise that the empowerment of individual women requires a recovery of the economy. Media platforms are also viewed as empowering for both individual women and for society in general by enabling anyone to be a storyteller and newsmaker, and lastly, according to the data, creating awareness of the issues highlighted is critical for the attainment of empowerment for both individual women and society.

6.2.4 Public sphere

There were 49 references to *public sphere* in the 50 blogs across the five websites. To interpret how the content of the blogs reflects on the public sphere, two sub-themes were deduced from the data, namely uses of blogs and the benefits of using blogs. Data that relate to this theme are presented according to the order of the sources as listed in section 6.1.

6.2.4.1 Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ)

6.2.4.1.1 Uses of blogs by Zimbabwean women and men activists

The WCoZ blogs identify the following uses of blogs in terms of the theme *public sphere*: to advocate for human rights and access to information (blog 7), to campaign on particular issues that are important for women (blog 8), to mobilise (blog 9), and to lobby against retrogressive cultural practices (blog 6). According to blog 8, the WCoZ, as an organisation, uses blogs to advocate for peace through a campaign using the words “Vote in Peace, Vote for Peace” to create awareness of the need for violence-free elections (8:9:1). Closely linked to this use is that of mobilisation, where blogs were used to encourage women to participate in the 2013 elections (9:7).

In addition, blog citation 6:19 highlights the need to reject domination and other retrogressive cultural practices that continue to oppress women, with this blogger highlighting that blogs provide the space to advocate for activism that rejects such. Furthermore, blog 3 highlights the use of blogs for education and awareness creation. The blog educates women by acquainting them with their rights as enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, gazetted in May 2013.

6.2.4.1.2 Benefits of using blogs

The WCoZ blogs highlight that blogs in the theme *public sphere* are used mainly for the creation of awareness among individual women and society in general (blogs 7 & 8). Consequently, awareness encourages other stakeholders, especially policymakers, to participate in implementing programmes and projects aimed at empowering women (blog 9). An example is given of the Women's Situation

Room, a programme that brings together women activists, organisations and government departments with the goal of enhancing and facilitating women's participation in the electoral processes. Furthermore, there is co-operation from political parties in these programmes (9:8:1). These benefits, according to the data, are enhanced by the use of online media platforms such as blogs.

6.2.4.1.3 Summary: WCoZ

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the WCoZ blogs on the theme *public sphere* reveals that blogs are used to promote and protect the fundamental human rights to which every woman and man in Zimbabwe is entitled. According to the data, this promotion of human rights, particularly women's rights, is facilitated through campaigns and mobilisation online. The benefit to society is largely that of creating awareness of the need to take action, and improving women's participation in the political, economic and cultural spheres.

6.2.4.2 Kubatana

6.2.4.2.1 Uses of blogs by Zimbabwean women and men activists

Kubatana blogs identify the following uses of blogs on the theme *public sphere*: raising awareness (blog 12 & 14), probing and querying (blog 20), storytelling, and sharing stories not ordinarily reported by mainstream media (blog 18 & 19). Blogs also enable freedom of expression, act as an alternative space, are used for positive engagement, to conduct business, and to network (blog 19).

Blog citation 12:8 highlights that raising awareness on issues and programmes that are available for women is critical to improve the visibility of women, their strengths and capabilities. In addition, citation 14:2 reveals that raising awareness is important for women to be aware of the services available to assist them. For example, blog 14:2 raises awareness on the "Tree of Life" workshops, and other events that specifically target women and women's issues. Furthermore, blogs are also used to assess and critique the Government and other political actors as well as government programmes on issues pertinent not only to women, but to society in general (blog 20). This is summed up by the writer: "i [sic] use this platform to ask, probe, query and poke viciously at sleeping dogs" (20:7:1).

Blog citation 19:2 highlights that people now freely express themselves and tell their own stories, which, according to the blog, has enabled an alternative public sphere, where individuals engage in debates and discussions. In addition, blogs enable networking for social and business purposes (blog 19).

6.2.4.2.2 Benefits of using blogs

Kubatana blogs, on the theme *public sphere*, highlight that people are becoming involved in news production, thereby creating diversity in content, which is beneficial for society (blog 19). The other benefit is that ordinary citizens now produce their own news and that journalists no longer need accreditation to practice journalism, as required by the legislative instrument, AIPPA. Thus, anyone can now produce and tell their own stories, foregoing the legal procedures of registering to be a journalist. In addition, according to blog 18, real stories on people's lives are now being told, bringing different perspectives from those stories published by mainstream media.

6.2.4.2.3 Summary: Kubatana

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of Kubatana blogs on the theme *public sphere* reveals a plethora of blog uses by women and male activists, which includes raising awareness on issues and programmes available aimed at helping Zimbabwean women, to question authorities on injustices that women experience in politics, economic and cultural spheres, that blogs are an alternative space for storytelling, for positive engagement, and for business. These uses, according to the data, are beneficial for society.

6.2.4.3 HerZimbabwe

6.2.4.3.1 Uses of blogs by Zimbabwean women and men activists

The HerZimbabwe blogs on the theme *public sphere* identify the following uses of blogs: for self-expression and participation, and for people to access and be exposed to conversations they could not have envisaged before (blog 25), to mobilise on an issue (blog 25), to speak out, to stand up, to learn, to empower women and others, and to have fun (blog 24). For example, blog 25 posits that women need to “grab” the opportunities for self-expression and participation presented by the internet (25:6:1), a goal which HerZimbabwe, as an organisation, seeks to achieve through allowing women to share their lived experiences.

In addition, according to citation 25:18, blogs have allowed people to access conversations that, for a variety of factors, they would not otherwise be exposed to. This is summed up by the writer:

[I]t therefore becomes interesting to imagine and estimate how many of the silent onlookers are women, averting pressure that comes with participation (if they do not want to), but are

able to see the very granular conversations that they would never before have been able to see (25:18:2).

Further, blogs enable women to mobilise on an issue even when everybody is geographically dispersed (25:26), and it provides opportunities for women, if they are equipped with the tools, to first protect themselves, and second to use such platforms to speak out, learn, and empower themselves and others (24:10).

6.2.4.3.2 Benefits of using blogs

The HerZimbabwe blogs on the theme *public sphere* highlight that blogs enable women to overcome physical barriers to interpersonal communication and that they have the ability to transcend the boundaries of the home (blog 25). Blogs also create awareness (blog 27) and enable ordinary citizens to voice concerns and bring the government to account (blog 29).

Blog citation 25:17 highlights that one of the key benefits of blog use is that people are exposed to the messages, even if they do not participate actively. Furthermore, the opening up of spaces for organising offers an opportunity to create groups that identify with each other without altering the space-time continuum (25:25). In citation 25:29, blogs are described as liberating and are perceived as safer, even in real life, because groups can now meet without having to seek police clearance.⁴¹ Other benefits include that Zimbabweans now enjoy certain levels of freedom, especially to self-express (25:30), and that blogging has empowered audiences to produce their own news (25:34).

6.2.4.3.3 Summary: HerZimbabwe

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of HerZimbabwe blogs on the theme *public sphere* highlights self-expression, exposing conversation that otherwise would not be seen and learning as major uses of blogs. The benefit of these conversations is that they are relatively safe, provided women are equipped with the skills to utilise them. In addition, blogs have made organising easier for groups sharing similar interests. These characteristics, according to the data, enable the visibility of women's activism online.

⁴¹ Public gatherings in Zimbabwe are regulated under the Public Order Security Act [Chapter 11:17] of 2007.

6.2.4.4 *The Herald*

6.2.4.4.1 Uses of blogs by Zimbabwean women and men activists

The Herald blogs on the theme *public sphere* identify the following uses of blogs: for managing work, family and relationships, encouraging opportunities for engagement, increasing women's participation, enabling networking, and building new social norms (blog 31). In addition, blogs are used for news gathering (blog 35). The argument posited in blog 31 is that, generally, online media have revolutionised the way people, whether women or men, now manage their work, family and relationships (31:2), and because people are engaging online, new social norms are built in the process (31:5).

Furthermore, blog 35 identifies the use of blogs as that of information gathering by journalist bloggers. The information is used to illustrate the writer's arguments, and to contextualise the women's issue(s) under discussion. Furthermore, what is observed in the blog is that information gathered from online platforms, including blogs, is used to connect local issues to global contexts. However, blogs 31 and 37 highlight that using online media for jokes (31:1) and less trivial issues (31:15) is not beneficial for individual women and for society in general. The writers' argument is that people should begin to realise the potential of new media and utilise them for business-related activities. This is summarised in blog 31: "[I]t's about believing in yourself and grabbing the opportunities when they [sic] see them ... but they choose to ignore them and focus on less trivial matters" (31:15:4).

6.2.4.4.2 Benefits of using blogs

The Herald blogs on the theme *public sphere* highlight that networking for business opportunities and improving women's visibility is enhanced through blog use. In addition, blogs are an endless source of information and allow women to develop relationships with people previously out of reach (blog 31). Blogs are also a source of information for journalists (blog 35). Blog citation 31:7 illustrates how businesses globally are spending less on advertising by using online media. According to citation 31:9, the surge in visibility of women and their capabilities benefits society in that this prominence acts as a catalyst for increased involvement.

Furthermore, in citation 31:11 the writer posits that blogs and other online platforms are useful for women in business faced with difficulties in sourcing capital and accessing key decision makers, as they can demonstrate their expertise online. In addition, women are able to develop relationships

with people previously out of reach (31:12). As a source of information for journalist bloggers, blogs also enhance awareness in society (35:24 & 35:25).

6.2.4.4.3 Summary: *The Herald*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of *The Herald* blogs on the theme *public sphere* reveals that blogs are used for engagement, business networking and political participation by women. In addition, blogs are sources of information, enable women to demonstrate their expertise, and lastly, they widen women's networks. This, according to the data, is positive for society.

6.2.4.5 *Chronicle*

6.2.4.5.1 Uses of blogs by Zimbabwean women and men activists

The *Chronicle* blogs on the theme *public sphere* identify the following uses of blogs: information gathering for journalist bloggers (blogs 43, 44 & 45), and that they provide information for the general public (blog 48). Similar to the blog uses cited by *The Herald* blogs, *Chronicle* blogs revealed the use of online media for research purposes. The information gathered is used to support the bloggers' views and to illustrate the issue(s) under discussion, as well as to connect local issues to global contexts, as expressed in blog citation (45:8:2):

[T]he general manager put across a few interesting points online about how the ministry had lured sponsors into sports as well as arts and culture. What stands out in his writing is that there is support in terms of legislation where companies that pour money into sport get tax rebates.

In blog citation 48:17 there is an appeal for increased awareness of violence towards women, and that the government, opinion leaders, gender activists, churches, schools and every Zimbabwean should condemn gender-based violence and raise awareness of the need to protect women. In addition, the blog appeals for campaigns and advocacy to condemn violence against women (48:18). What is inferred here, according to the data, is the realisation of the critical role of communication platforms, particularly online media such as blogs, in creating awareness.

6.2.4.5.2 Benefits of using blogs

The *Chronicle* blogs on the theme *public sphere* highlight that blogs provide the public with information (blogs 43, 44, 45 & 48). The provision of information contributes towards awareness of local as well as global contexts, and subsequently leads to a realisation by both individuals and society of the need to promote human rights for the benefit of both women and men.

6.2.4.5.3 Summary: *Chronicle*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the *Chronicle* blogs on the theme *public sphere* reveals that blogs are used as an information resource for journalists when writing stories and blogs. Such research supports the contextualisation of the issues under discussion. In addition, blogs are used for information provision and to create awareness on the need for equality between women and men.

6.2.4.6 Summary of theme

Overall, the findings on the theme *public sphere* across the five websites reveal that blogs are used to promote and protect fundamental human rights, in particular women's rights as enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013. Other uses include raising awareness, self-expression, exposing conversations that would not otherwise be heard, questioning authorities on the injustices that women experience in the political, economic and cultural spheres, and acting as an alternative space for storytelling and positive engagement. Blogs are also used for business networking.

What is observed is that blogs on WCoZ project the protection of human rights, while Kubatana and HerZimbabwe project blogs as alternative spaces for individual storytelling and self-expression, as well as for group organising. Blogs on media websites (*The Herald* and the *Chronicle*) project business networking for economic empowerment, creating awareness, and newswriting as some of the key uses. According to the data, these blog uses reveal the possibilities of blogs widening the public sphere to include those marginalised by traditional media.

6.2.5 Representation

There were 126 references to representation in the 50 blogs across the five websites. To interpret how the content of the blogs reflects on representation, a sub-theme, communication strategies, was derived from the content and three codes – giving women a voice, dispelling stereotypes, and

presentation of messages – were used to group related data that emphasised these three areas. Data that relate to this theme are presented according to the order of the sources as listed in section 6.1.

6.2.5.1 Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ)

6.2.5.1.1 How the blogs seek to give women a voice

The WCoZ blogs on the theme *representation* seek to give women a voice by calling for increased space for women to engage with the Zimbabwean leadership (blog 2), highlighting the need for the appointment of women as cabinet ministers, and advocating for women to be given strategic ministries (blog 5). In addition, blog 9 advocates for the amplification of women’s voices and highlights the need for the provision of platforms for co-ordinated and collective responses by women to strategise, plan and respond to issues. Furthermore, project implementation is identified as one of the methods of giving women a voice as well as participation in decision making (blog 4).

Blog citation 2:11 highlights that enabling women to engage with leadership enhances their participation in decisions that are implemented, and facilitates an understanding, by those in leadership, of the issues affecting and of interest to women. Blog citation 5:5 suggests that the appointment of women into cabinet facilitates women’s voices in the implementation of the country’s policies. In addition, blog citation 9:5 refers to the Women’s Situation Room as giving a voice to women with regard to election issues.

6.2.5.1.2 How the blogs dispel stereotypes

The WCoZ blogs on the theme *representation* dispel stereotypes by identifying Zimbabwean women as capable of being leaders (blog 5), special, powerful and spiritual (blog 6), and fighters (blog 7). In blog citation 7:12, the writer posits that Zimbabwean women have continued to fight for their human rights despite the deliberate backlash to restrict them to the household and traditional roles.

In addition, women are highlighted as special because they are “God’s latest creation”, and that they were given the power of creation by carrying and giving birth to human beings (6:17:1-2). In blog citation 6:9 there is an attempt by the writer to dispel stereotypes of women’s position in society by using the Bible to support the need for equality. For example, the writer argues: “[S]he insisted that the bible [sic] asks women to love their husbands wholeheartedly and does not ask the same of the men” (6:12:1).

The writer adds:

this is wrong[,] as in the various sections of the bible [sic] the men are given the responsibility to work for the family and to love their wives unconditionally. In Ephesians 5:25 it says “husbands love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it ... so ought man to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself”. This is a powerful instruction on the men to love their wives and put them in a very high place (6:13:1).

The writer’s argument here is that women need to be positioned equally with men and that men need to respect and love their wives, as the Bible demands.

In blog 5, it is argued that Zimbabwean women are capable of leadership and that is why they deserve to be in cabinet. The writer illustrates this by mentioning women politicians who have served in various political ministries (5:3:1).

6.2.5.1.3 How messages are presented in the blogs

The presentation strategies employed in the WCoZ blogs on the theme *representation* include the use of reflections and personal witness accounts (blog 8), the use of personal stories and the use of the first narrative voice (blogs 6, 7 & 8).

The use of reflections as in citations 8:1 and 8:2 emphasise the writer’s own interpretation of events and how the writer then connects historical events to the current situation. For example, in this blog the writer reflects on the violence experienced during the previous election to bring into context why there is a need to advocate for peace during the Zimbabwe parliamentary elections in 2013. In citations 6:1 and 6:4, personal experiences are used to illustrate the extent of the issue under discussion, and its impact on the day-to-day lives of Zimbabwean women. Lastly, there is also use of research as evidence in advocating for the positive representation of women.

6.2.5.1.4 Summary: WCoZ

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the WCoZ blogs on the theme *representation* highlights the need for women’s engagement at all levels of decision making, their appointment to cabinet, and the implementation of programmes that empower women to organise and strategise on issues affecting them. In addition, women need to understand they hold power to change their situation by refuting stereotypes, and these can be overcome by sharing personal stories, observations and research.

6.2.5.2 Kubatana

6.2.5.2.1 How the blogs seek to give women a voice

The Kubatana blogs on the theme *representation* seek to give women a voice by exposing them to activist content in various media and to examples of women's activism (blog 12 & 15), enabling the sharing of stories by women (blog 18), reporting on women's events and discussions (blog 17), and holding workshops for women and men (blog 14). In addition, the blogs highlight that mobilising women to contest the elections seeks to give women a voice (blog 13), and lastly, by allowing women a voice, the blogs enable women to use their agency to determine the course of their lives (blog 20).

Blog citations 12:9 and 15:8 posit that creating awareness by exposing women to examples of activism, using other media such as films, serves as an inspiration for and realisation of women's potential to solve their problems. In addition, sharing stories creates solidarity and support, thereby enriching lives (18:7). Discussion platforms and workshops also give women a voice and a connection to their spiritual beliefs. One writer says "the Story Telling Circles⁴² allow for the integration of past, present and future experiences, and make a deep connection to spiritual beliefs and traditions" (14:2:1).

6.2.5.2.2 How the blogs dispel stereotypes

The Kubatana blogs on the theme *representation* dispel stereotypes by describing Zimbabwean women as a powerful force and pointing out that they can draw attention if they are determined (blog 15). Further, Zimbabwean women are highlighted as moving beyond the silencing of their voices and ownership of their bodies to claim what is right for them (blog 14). In citation 14:5, the writer argues that women are now speaking of the value of mothering, community, loyalty and love, and the limitations of victimhood. This, according to the blog, has enabled women to walk with respect and dignity.

In addition, blog 20 posits that Zimbabwean women need to tell their story because failure to do so results in people who will gaze at Zimbabwean women with "rose-tinted lenses" (20:9:1). According to the writer, the lived experiences of women, such as enduring sleepless nights waiting to collect water, spending hours queueing at the country's borders to buy groceries in neighbouring countries, and queueing at banks to withdraw a set daily amount of money that "devalues while they

⁴² Story Telling Circles are healing and empowerment workshops facilitated by survivors of torture, violence and rape (blog 14).

queue”, are indicative of the determination of Zimbabwean women and their capability to provide for their families despite the difficulties.

6.2.5.2.3 How messages are presented in the blogs

The presentation strategies employed in the Kubatana blogs on the theme *representation* include using other media, such as films, to expose women to examples of activism (blog 15) and to show how women, especially those in the rural areas, are still treated harshly by culture (blog 12). In addition, the same blogs reveal the use of the narration of events that occurred elsewhere to support the writers’ arguments.

There is also the use of the writers’ experiences in interpreting the reality around them (blogs 16 & 17). For example, in blog citation 17:6, the writer shares her/his experience of how she/he was made to reflect on the need to support the election of women into public office by listening to a discussion by women candidates.

6.2.5.2.4 Summary: Kubatana

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the Kubatana blogs on the theme *representation* highlights that the sharing of stories by women and the creation of platforms that enable the conscientisation of women reinforce the realisation of women’s self-existence, enabling them to use their agency. Giving women a voice offers them an opportunity to dispel stereotypes and project womanhood in a positive light. To achieve this, the blogs employ a number of techniques, such as sharing personal experiences and observations and narrations of events.

6.2.5.3 HerZimbabwe

6.2.5.3.1 How the blogs seek to give women a voice

The HerZimbabwe blogs on the theme *representation* seek to give women a voice by giving men a voice too (blog 27), sharing and publishing women’s stories, personal experiences and observations (blog 28), and projecting the experiences of those women who are unable tell their stories (blog 25).

In blog citation 27:9, the writer highlights that giving men a voice through having forums and platforms and sharing the content of these discussions enhance the understanding of women’s issues, and helps women and men to share their lived experiences. In addition, sharing and publishing individual women’s experiences and stories facilitates an understanding of women’s issues and assists in countering misinformation (28:1 & 28:4). In blog 25, the writer posits that there are some women

who want to join the conversations, but that they have too “small” a voice or cannot overcome the patriarchal dynamics that tend to dominate such platforms (25:36:3).

6.2.5.3.2 How the blogs dispel stereotypes

The HerZimbabwe blogs on the theme *representation* dispel stereotypes by identifying a “new” Zimbabwean woman who is untethered by convention and conformity; the woman who goes for what she wants, and when she wants it (blog 23). In addition, women are identified as leaders with the capacity to hold key and top positions (blogs 29 & 30). Citations 29:4 and 30:1 reveal women’s capabilities that are often overlooked. The writer posits:

[S]he is the kind of woman we want running things. She is a leader who is seen digging around, helping fix roads or driving a two-tonne truck to deliver sanitary pads to women in rural areas (29:4:2).

Furthermore, blog 26 highlights the need to urge girls to take up science subjects and that there should be an interchange of gender roles in the home. Moreover, blog 27 supports the need for the exchange of roles by questioning gender roles and differences that stereotype women to the advantage of men. The blog further highlights women’s successes, and how women have overcome the gender barriers that have traditionally oriented the functional space for women towards the kitchen (27:16).

6.2.5.3.3 How messages are presented in the blogs

The presentation strategies employed by HerZimbabwe blogs on the theme *representation* include observations and research (blog 25), the use of personal stories, experiences and reflections (blogs 24, 26 & 30), the use of eyewitness accounts (blog 27), and anecdotes (blog 30).

Blog citations 26:1, 26:4 and 30:6 show the use of personal stories, experiences and reflections by the writers to support their views and arguments in their blogs. This is achieved through reflecting on the writers’ experiences and how these experiences connect or are informed by occurrences in the environment. In addition, research is used to support facts in the writers’ arguments (25:33).

6.2.5.3.4 Summary: HerZimbabwe

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the HerZimbabwe blogs on the theme *representation* highlights that giving women a voice should entail also giving a voice to men so that the discourse on women’s empowerment also integrates men, along with the entire society. There is

also an emphasis on the sharing and publishing of women's individual stories, as women's experiences are different and unique.

6.2.5.4 *The Herald*

6.2.5.4.1 How the blogs seek to give women a voice

The Herald blogs on the theme *representation* seek to give women a voice by emphasising the need to promote inter-generational dialogues amongst women, assisting women to reclaim their traditional power (blog 40), and promoting equal representation of women and men in the political, economic and cultural spheres (blog 35 & 36).

Blog citations 40:3, 40:4 and 40:7 highlight that recalling mothers' experiences would inform and sharpen women's activist strategies. The citations further espouse that, by connecting with past experiences, women's self-definitions can be shaped by the experiences of mothers in previous generations and subsequently help women to interpret their own challenges. For example, an elderly woman whose story is told in this blog describes women's situations today as that of being "locked up in a cage", rendering women powerless (40:7:3).

Furthermore, citations 40:14, 40:15 and 40:17 posit that the silent voices of mothers require representation, and that women need to understand the realities of their lived experiences. The blogger writes:

the story of my mother is a mirror reflecting the lived experiences of many mothers. It is the memory of their diverse experiences over time, from pre-colonial, to colonial and to the present. There are many angles, voices, places, tears, pain, laughter, dances and music to the memory (39:17:6).

Lastly, according to blog 35, by calling for the equal representation of women and men in the political, economic and cultural spheres there is a realisation that participating in decision-making positions will give women a voice.

6.2.5.4.2 How the blogs dispel stereotypes

The Herald blogs on the theme *representation* dispel stereotypes by identifying Zimbabwean women as resilient in the most difficult circumstances (blog 32) and as role models for children and society

in general (blog 34). In addition, blog 36 identifies femininity as a strength, rather than a weakness, and says that women have the power to speak if they want to (blog 38). Blog 39 describes African women as strong and belonging to the original “Mother Earth” (39:17:6).

Blog citation 37:2 dispels the notion of women as commodities to be owned by men by explaining the meaning of lobola. The blog explains the lobola culture using the biblical story of Jacob and Rachel, emphasising that the lobola is meant to cement relationships between families. To further highlight the power of women, blog citation 38:10 reveals how the writer’s mother stood resolute and defied the culture of wife inheritance.⁴³ Lastly, in citation 40:10, women are projected as having authority through their non-verbal communication.

6.2.5.4.3 How messages are presented in the blogs

The presentation strategies employed in *The Herald* blogs on the theme *representation* include the use of characters, personal stories and illustrations (blogs 32, 33, 34, 37 & 40), the use of sources, official documents, research and statistics (blogs 35 & 36), and the use of dialogues amongst characters in the story, as well as descriptive language (blogs 37, 38, 39 & 40).

In blog citation 32:5, the writer uses illustrations from war-torn countries to show the resilience of women, while in citation 32:18 there is use of the writer’s lived experience to explain the issue under discussion. There is also the use of anecdotes in blog 33, while in citation 34:8, the writer employs the use of observations of how Zimbabwean women struggle and defy all odds to make ends meet. In addition, there is use of metaphoric language in blog 35, where the writer’s argument is centred on women “getting on the bus, with the right numbers and in the right seats” (35:4:2). Likewise, the use of descriptive language in blogs 37, 38, 39 and 40 powerfully projects women’s capabilities.

6.2.5.4.4 Summary: *The Herald*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of *The Herald* blogs on the theme *representation* highlights the need to represent the silent voice of mothers, and that their stories need to be listened to and retold, so that society, especially women seeking equality, can begin to engage in discourse that is informed by past experiences. Another inference is that non-verbal communication

⁴³ A traditional custom where a widow is forced to marry either her deceased husband’s brother, uncle or nephew (blog 38).

is a powerful tool for women who are silenced structurally. Through the storytelling techniques employed, the blogs seek to enable women to realise their strengths and potential.

6.2.5.5 *Chronicle*

6.2.5.5.1 How the blogs seek to give women a voice

The *Chronicle* blogs on the theme *representation* seek to give women a voice by calling for the equal representation of women and men in politics and the need for programmes that empower women with knowledge and mobilise them so that they participate more in elections (blog 44), and by sharing women's stories (blog 46). In addition, the blogs give women a voice by educating women on sexual abuse and advocating for the creation of a safe environment for victims of abuse (blog 49).

Blog citation 44:13 posits that attaining gender equality will enhance the participation of women in politics. Furthermore, in citation 44:14, the writer posits that implementing programmes targeting women facilitates awareness and helps mobilise women to participate in elections. Sharing women's stories therefore gives women a voice to narrate and share their experiences (46:11).

6.2.5.5.2 How the blogs dispel stereotypes

The *Chronicle* blogs on the theme *representation* dispel stereotypes mainly by encouraging women to aim higher, highlighting case studies where women's participation in politics has surpassed that of men, and calling for the appointment of women in decision-making positions (blog 44). In addition, blog 49 dispels the stereotype that men do not suffer from sexual abuse.

In blog 44, the writer encourages women to participate in politics by making reference to Rwanda,⁴⁴ where women outnumber men in parliament (44:15). References are also made to other African countries where women have held powerful positions (44:18). The projection of these case studies, according to the data, is aimed at emphasising the capabilities of women.

6.2.5.5.3 How messages are presented in the blogs

The presentation strategies employed by the *Chronicle* blogs on the theme *representation* include the use of sources (blog 42), reference to other case studies and research (blogs 45 & 49), and the use of official documents and reports (blog 46) and real-life experiences of women (blog 47).

⁴⁴ Rwanda is ranked first in the world for having the highest number of women in parliament, at 63,8%, after the last elections in 2013 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016).

Similarly to *The Herald* blogs, the *Chronicle* blogs make use of news sources that include ordinary citizens and experts, through quotes to support the arguments proffered. In addition, information from sources, and the bloggers' opinions, are supported by official documents and reports, for example in citations 49:7 and 49:17.

6.2.5.5.4 Summary: *Chronicle*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the *Chronicle* blogs on the theme *representation* indicates the need for equal representation of women and men in politics, and for women to be aware that they have the potential to be in influential positions and should not doubt their capabilities. Through the storytelling techniques employed, the blogs seek to enable women to realise their strengths and potential.

6.2.5.6 Summary of theme

Overall, the findings on the theme *representation* across the five websites indicate that representation is viewed as women's engagement in all levels of decision making, their appointment to cabinet, and the implementation of programmes that empower women to organise and strategise on issues affecting them. In addition, there is a need to reconnect with the past by retelling the stories of mothers, as this integration of the past contributes to women's self-definition. Furthermore, the sharing of stories by women, and providing platforms that enable knowledge creation, reinforce the realisation of women's self-existence, which subsequently enables them to use their agency. Another inference is that giving women a voice should entail giving a voice to men so that the discourse of women's empowerment also integrates men, and thus the entire society.

Lastly, women need to understand they hold power to change their situation by refuting stereotypes, and these can be overcome by sharing personal stories, observations and research, and projecting womanhood in a positive light.

6.2.6 Challenges

There were 240 references to *challenges* in the 50 blogs across the five websites. To interpret how the content of the blogs reflect on challenges, three sub-themes were deduced from the data, namely gender roles and challenges faced by women, the impact of culture and patriarchy, and political economy challenges. Data that relate to this theme are presented according to the order of the sources as listed in section 6.1.

6.2.6.1 Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ)

6.2.6.1.1 Gender roles and challenges faced by women

The WCoZ blogs highlight the *challenges* related to gender roles, namely lack of knowledge and access to information (blogs 2 & 9), and that women are subjected to political intimidation and gender-based violence (blogs 4, 5 & 8). In addition, women continue to be restricted to household and other traditional roles (blog 7), and those women that seek to challenge these traditional roles are ridiculed by society (blog 6).

Blog citation 2:2 reveals that women were disenfranchised in the run-up to the 2013 elections due to inadequate time and information on the voter registration process. Consequently, according to blog 9, fewer women than men voted. This is summed up by the writer in 9:3:1:

in Zimbabwe, our elections are accompanied by intimidation and violence. If women associate elections with violence and intimidation, they will shy away from participating. Secondly, the referendum happened during one day and some women might have failed to vote due to gender roles

Blog citations 4:3, 8:2 and 8:5 allude to the fact that women are subjected to intimidation and violence in and outside of the home, while citation 6:3 posits that society expects women to follow the rules and guidelines of their husbands and not question their authority.

6.2.6.1.2 Impact of culture and patriarchy

The WCoZ blogs highlight the *challenges* related to culture and patriarchy, namely that patriarchy has entrenched the subordination of women in Zimbabwe and that this is achieved through physical and emotional violence towards women (blogs 1 & 8), promoting a narrative that women are incapable of leadership (blog 6), and that there is a lack of support and access to health services by victims of violence (blog 10).

According to blog citations 1:2 and 1:6, most Zimbabwean women have experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime. This is in addition to the political violence that women face during election periods (8:4). Furthermore, blog 1, quoting a research study by the Ministry of

Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development,⁴⁵ posits that the home is an unsafe place for women. The writer expresses: “[W]omen are subjected to various forms of violence such as physical violence, economic violence, rape, sexual harassment, harmful cultural and religious practices” (1:7:1).

Blog citations 10:2, 10:5 and 10:9 highlight that stigma, fear and shame deter women from reporting cases of violence. In instances where they do report, women often withdraw their cases due to financial and other societal pressures.

6.2.6.1.3 Political economy challenges

The WCoZ blogs highlight the *challenges* related to the political and economic environment, namely that women fail to vote because they do not have proof of residence, as this are often in their husband's name (blog 2), political violence deters women from participating (blogs 2 & 8), and women do not have access to resources such as land (blog 3).

In addition, blog 7 highlights that Zimbabwean women do not have political and socio-economic independence, including equal participation in politics and decision making on all levels, access to maternal health services and care, access to education, economic empowerment, and access to information. The writer aptly sums this up as follows:

... for me that's the colour of independence I dream of. We have a [C]onstitution that begins to guarantee most of these rights, but we are still a long way to go for [sic] the attainment of independence for Zimbabwean women (7:6:1).

6.2.6.1.4 Summary: WCoZ

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the WCoZ blogs on the theme *challenges* reveals that fewer women in Zimbabwe participate in elections because of a lack of information on the voter registration process, a lack of time because of gender roles, political violence, and gender-based violence that instils fear and reluctance to challenge male dominance. In addition, a lack of

⁴⁵ The study, on GBV (gender-based violence) indicators, was done in conjunction with Gender Links, a South Africa-based gender research organisation, in 2013.

financial resources and the general culture of subordination deter women from participating in politics.

6.2.6.2 Kubatana

6.2.6.2.1 Gender roles and challenges faced by women

The Kubatana blogs highlight *challenges* related to gender roles, namely that women are used as appeasement to avenge spirits and are married off despite their education because their personal choices do not matter (blog 12). In addition, gender roles deter women from participating in the public sphere, as they have to balance community activities with their other roles within the household (blog 15). Furthermore, women are concerned with survival, spending most of their time fending for their families (blog 20).

Blog citation 12:2 highlights societal expectations that women have to be married in order to be valued, posing challenges for some women who may choose not to, while blog citation 20:10 posits that gender roles have restricted women's participation in the public sphere, as they spend long hours queueing to purchase food or travelling long distances to fend for their families.

6.2.6.2.2 Impact of culture and patriarchy

The Kubatana blogs highlight the *challenge* of culture and patriarchy, namely that patriarchy has entrenched the subordination of women in Zimbabwe, and this is achieved through violating women's sexual rights, labelling women sex workers, encouraging sexual power dynamics that favour men, and excluding men from narratives on sex work (blog 11). In addition, patriarchy supports retrogressive cultural practices that disadvantage and devalue women (blog 12). The blog further reveals that women continue to receive unfair treatment in society, and that women are sexually abused under the guise of tradition.

Blog citation 11:4 posits that women have become the target of a major onslaught by the state, aimed at restricting women's movement in the public spaces by arresting them for loitering. This, according to the blog, implies that only women are sex workers and not men. Further, citation 11:7 alludes to the fact that patriarchal society has skewed sexual power dynamics, with men doing the labelling, while citation 12:4 reveals how culture devalues women and how women are exchanged for bags of maize when families face starvation.

6.2.6.2.3 Political economy challenges

The Kubatana blogs highlight *challenges* related to the political and economic environment, namely that the punitive economic environment has resulted in impecunious living conditions for women (blogs 15, 20 & 19), that political violence and lack of support have deterred women from participation (blogs 14 & 17), and that there is a general fear among people to discuss politics in public spaces (blog 16).

Furthermore, a deteriorating economy has also resulted in the government failing to provide basic essentials, like water and electricity, to its people, contributing to women's inability to access services such as online media platforms (19:9). Blog citation 20:11 reveals that the ruling ZANU PF maintains a hegemonic stranglehold on Zimbabwe's liberation struggle narrative, denying the views of other people who remember differently.

6.2.6.2.4 Summary: Kubatana

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of Kubatana blogs on the theme *challenges* reveals that fewer women participate in politics in Zimbabwe because gender roles and economic challenges restrict them to concentrating on the survival of their families. In addition, culture and patriarchy continue to devalue and violate women's rights. Lastly, the hostile political environment, characterised by violence, deters women from participating.

6.2.6.3 HerZimbabwe

6.2.6.3.1 Gender roles and challenges faced by women

The HerZimbabwe blogs highlight *challenges* that relate to gender roles, namely that society naturalises inequalities between women and men (blog 22), media perpetuate stereotypes to attain profits (blog 26), society condones domestic violence (blog 27), and the state fails to challenge women's domination by men (blog 24). In addition, blog 24 reveals how society defines "good" and "bad" women (24:6:2).

Blog citations 22:4, 22:9 and 22:17 illustrate that society naturalises women's domination by men and this is achieved through socialisation in childhood, where there is a separation of the roles of women and men. According to citation 22:9, leadership roles are ascribed to men rather than to women, resulting in a lack of parity and full participation by women in these roles (22:17). Furthermore, the media perpetuate gender stereotypes, resulting in the few women who have made it into influential positions failing to make "enough noise" to make gender equality an issue. They

become “one with the boys” (26:8:2). Furthermore, blog 22 posits that gender roles are manifested by societal expectations, in terms of which anything that sits outside the bounds of normality is deeply criticised. The writer sums it up:

i [sic] recall once hearing a father tell his son not to touch or play with his sister’s pink teddy bear because he would “become gay”. The boy, just five, was obviously puzzled. But therein had begun his socialisation around the colour pink, teddy bears and sexuality (22:13:2).

6.2.6.3.2 Impact of culture and patriarchy

The HerZimbabwe blogs highlight the *challenges* related to culture and patriarchy, namely that patriarchy has entrenched the subordination of women in Zimbabwe, and this is achieved through ridiculing women who enter politics (blog 22), setting standards for “good” and “bad” women (23:10:3 & 24:6:2), perpetuating violence (blog 27), and allowing men more power in relationships (blog 24). Furthermore, patriarchy entrenches cultural practices, which further oppresses women (blog 28).

Blog citation 22:16:2 highlights the social stigma around women who enter politics. This is because, according to the citation, politics is considered a “dirty game”, and the “dirtier” a woman gets, the more she has to “clean herself up” while facing the stigma for her stance. In addition, the idea of “good” and “bad” women indicates a patriarchal bias of morality, which has largely been defined by men (23:10:3). Moreover, discussion spaces and forums are heavily patriarchal and dismissive of women’s voices (27:10). Lastly, blog 24 highlights that Zimbabwe is a patriarchal society in which culture, tradition and socio-economic standing often indicate that women are not allowed power in their relationships with men. The writer aptly summarises: “sometimes going along with demands we don’t agree with is the only way to keep those relationships intact” (24:5:1).

6.2.6.3.3 Political economy challenges

The HerZimbabwe blogs highlight the *challenges* related to the political and economic environment, namely that the political and economic environment is hostile towards women (blogs 23, 25, 27, 24 & 29). Further, they point out the commercialisation of media (blog 26), where, driven by their need for profit, the media market easy-to-understand stereotypes (26:6).

According to blog citation 23:3, the political, economic and social upheaval of the early 2000s resulted in skilled Zimbabweans fleeing the country in search of stability and opportunities. In addition, this hostile environment, characterised by power struggles and corruption, failed to bring the change that women envisaged (27:2). Consequently, women lack financial independence and this restricts their visibility online, as this writer expresses:

the number of followers one has is like social currency that predetermines to what extent what you have to say will be listened to, liked or shared. As a result, those with the financial muscle nowadays can just purchase followers and have their numbers ballooning overnight (25:20:2).

A lack of financial independence also exacerbates domestic violence and impedes women's abilities to navigate their sexuality and make independent and informed choices; as this writer argues: "[I]f only this woman was financially independent, I thought to myself. She probably wouldn't have been trapped in such an abusive relationship ..." (27:3:1).

Furthermore, most communication infrastructure, especially online media, is owned by the governments and therefore they have the power to turn it off (25:28). In addition, "freedom" may be thwarted on the internet through regulations (25:31:1), while citation 25:27 posits that people, particularly women, may be victimised for their online actions. There are also representational limitations in online media, with this writer succinctly concluding:

[S]uch platforms tend to just be [a] digital extension of the worlds they emerge from, complete with their intrinsic prejudices and politics. Considerations of issues like access to relevant technologies and the kinds of political, or even domestic circumstances that women live in [,] therefore become important (25:24:3).

6.2.6.3.4 Summary: HerZimbabwe

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of HerZimbabwe blogs on the theme *challenges* reveals that gender roles for women and men are so entrenched by patriarchy that any action that is regarded as outside the bounds of what is normal, according to culture, is chastised. Thus, women who seek to challenge oppression are scorned. In addition, the hostile political and

economic environment has further eroded women's opportunities for participation, as the state uses its political power to dominate and oppress women through violence, intimidation and limiting their voices in the public sphere.

6.2.6.4 *The Herald*

6.2.6.4.1 Gender roles and *challenges* faced by women

The Herald blogs highlight the *challenges* related to gender roles, namely that there is low representation of women in politics, and that women find it difficult to garner support from constituencies, in contrast to men (blog 32). Furthermore, the changing economic environment has stretched gender roles for women, making it difficult to balance work and family pressures (blog 33). Women are also expected to perform household chores and have little time to meet and socialise for personal growth (blog 34).

Blog citation 32:13 highlights that men are given a competitive edge over women and that it is easier for them to garner support from their constituencies. According to citation 32:15, this is the reason women fail to participate in primary elections. In addition, citation 32:20 posits that women manage several responsibilities – of being a wife, mother, employee, counsellor, family caregiver and breadwinner – thus restricting their time to participate in politics. Despite this, the writer further argues that women still manage to smile and look forward to a new day with hope for the future (32:20).

Citation 33:2 highlights that the changing economic environment, in which some women are now financially independent, has seen some men renege on fending for their families, assigning the burden to women, which results in a situation where, “instead of celebrating their continuing ascendancy into the country's economic echelons, women feel their work and life balance has just been stretched to a breaking point ...” (33:23:4).

In addition, citation 36:10:3 posits that women “leave before they leave”, choosing family over career development.

6.2.6.4.2 Impact of culture and patriarchy

The Herald blogs highlight the *challenges* related to culture and patriarchy, namely that patriarchy has entrenched the subordination of women in Zimbabwe and that this is achieved by embedding the belief that women can only be partners in the home (blog 33), and instituting practices, norms and attitudes that oppress and disempower women (blogs 34, 37, 38 & 39).

Blog citation 33:26 states unequivocally that women can only be helpers in the home, but can never take up the role of fending for the family, while citations 37:13 and 37:15 reveal that culture still positions women below men, restricting their voices, for example in marriage rites: “[S]he was ordered to pack her clothes in the suitcase on top of the wardrobe. She did as she was told, without saying a word” (37:15:5).

Furthermore, citation 38:2 highlights cultural practices that oppress women, such as wife inheritance, while citation 39:6 reveals patriarchal biases where women are blamed and ostracised for infertility, and not men.

6.2.6.4.3 Political economy *challenges*

The Herald blogs highlight the *challenges* related to the political and economic environment, namely that few women are fielded as candidates by political parties (blog 32) and that women now manage both motherhood and fatherhood – the latter a role that was once the preserve of men (blog 33). In addition, women constitute a huge percentage of people who are unemployed, with the majority living below the poverty datum line (blog 34). The blog further highlights that women lack education, are unable to access funding for income-generating projects due to lack of collateral, such as immovable property (34:7), and that women in positions of power face challenges where they are viewed by their male colleagues as incompetent and products of affirmative action policies (36:13).

Blog citation 33:17 posits that, while the economic challenges have forced men to embrace appeals for gender equality as fending for families is proving cumbersome, the burden to keep families afloat in a hostile environment becomes unbearable for the majority of women, who continue to “labour right into the grave” (34:10:3).

Furthermore, the rigidity of socially ascribed gender roles and women’s limited access to power, education, training and productive resources, along with domestic violence, increase women’s problems (34:12). Moreover, advertising has a negative impact on the beliefs and self-esteem of African women (39:16), while citation 35:7 reiterates that women’s voices are still muted across sectors.

6.2.6.4.4 Summary: *The Herald*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of *The Herald* blogs on the theme *challenges* reveals that women manage several responsibilities, making it difficult for them to participate in politics. In addition, the hostile political and economic conditions deter women from participating, as

they spend their time fending for their families. Other political and economic impediments, such as a lack of employment, financial independence and education, limit women's access to power.

6.2.6.5 *Chronicle*

6.2.6.5.1 Gender roles and *challenges* faced by women

The *Chronicle* blogs highlight *challenges* related to gender roles, namely that women in rural areas resort to labour-intensive farming methods in order to provide for their families (blog 46), fending for families is increasingly becoming challenging (blog 47), and women suffer from domestic violence (blog 48). Furthermore, blog 49 highlights that socialisation contributes to the challenges faced by women, as women and men grow up conditioned to fulfil the specific roles ascribed by society.

Blog citation 48:5 points out that societal prejudices work against women and encourage domestic violence. The writer further says that most of the victims of domestic violence are unemployed and therefore are reluctant to report perpetrators, who are normally breadwinners (48:9). Similarly, blog 49 denounces gender socialisation, arguing that societal norms inculcate in boys that they need to grow up as “real men” and should be “dominant”, especially in sexual matters (49:8:3). This, according to the writer, contributes to domestic violence.

6.2.6.5.2 Impact of culture and patriarchy

The *Chronicle* blogs highlight the *challenges* related to culture and patriarchy, namely that society has not invested trust in women (blog 44), and that there are cultural repercussions for women who report their husbands for domestic violence (blog 48). In addition, the patriarchal influence results in men observing and perpetuating gender stereotypes more than women, and this supports their domination of women (blog 49). However, the same blog also points out the need for society to understand that men also suffer from abuse (49:2).

Blog citations 48:3 and 48:15 highlight that women suffer more from domestic violence, and because culture condones the domination of women by men, victims suffer in silence.

6.2.6.5.3 Political economy *challenges*

The *Chronicle* blogs highlight the *challenges* related to the political and economic environment, namely that women lack resources to participate in politics (blog 41), and that women lack political, economic, social and cultural rights (blog 43). In addition, there is a lack of political will by men (blog 44), and a poorly performing economy (blogs 45, 46 & 47).

Blog citations 41:2 and 44:8 posit that women lack the resources to participate in political campaigns. Other impediments cited by blog 41 are that political parties do not involve women equally in processes in which candidates are vetted and planning is done (41:22), and that few women opt for nomination (41:15). Furthermore, citation 47:3 highlights that the harsh economic environment has resulted in poor living conditions, unemployment and poverty for women. In addition, the public infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, is dilapidated, there is a shortage of medication, along with inadequate funding for service delivery institutions (47:4) and corruption (47:6).

6.2.6.5.4 Summary: *Chronicle*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis, the content of the *Chronicle* blogs on the theme *challenges* reveals that societal prejudices work against women through supporting the domination of women by men, and by encouraging domestic violence. These prejudices also promote the stereotype that women cannot be leaders – hence their participation in politics remains low. In addition, women are faced with economic hardships and lack resources and political support to participate in politics.

6.2.6.6 Summary of theme

Overall, the findings on the theme *challenges* across the five websites reveal that fewer women in Zimbabwe participate in elections because of a lack of information, a lack of time due to gender roles, political and gender-based violence that instils fear, and reluctance to challenge male dominance. In addition, the political violence, lack of financial resources and the general culture of subordination deter women from participating in politics. Thus, women who seek to challenge oppression are scorned. In addition, the hostile political and economic environment has further eroded women's opportunities for participation, as the state uses its political power to dominate and oppress women through violence and intimidation, and by limiting their voices in the public sphere. Other impediments that emanate from the poorly performing economy include the lack of employment, financial independence and education, which consequently limit women's access to power.

6.2.7 Summary of findings from blogs

Overall, the findings of the analysis across the five websites and the six themes highlight that blogging is a form of political participation by Zimbabwean women, as it facilitates the inclusion of both women and men in discussions on various issues of national interest, affording them an opportunity

to air their concerns, contribute to national debates, and share information. The findings reveal that, through blogs, Zimbabwean women and men are able to:

- share personal experiences,
- engage in conversation that teach,
- have political conversation without fear and
- protest.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that, through blogging, women have been able

- to engage in conversations that empower them to fight domination and
- to demand ideological and cultural change to eradicate practices that have immobilised and oppressed them.

In addition, blogs

- are platforms for self-expression,
- expose conversations that would otherwise not be heard,
- are an alternative space for storytelling and engagement, and
- reinforce the realisation of women' existence, enabling them to use their agency.

However, the findings also reveal that women are deterred from participating in politics by

- lack of access to information.

Further, the blogs highlight that

- the hostile political environment characterised by violence, as well as gender-based violence, deter women from participating in politics.

Lastly, the lack of

- financial resources due to the poorly performing economy dissuade women from participating in politics.

6.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the qualitative content analysis of blogs to ascertain how these are used as platforms for political discourse. The data were presented for each website thematically, in this order: *participation, democracy, empowerment, public sphere, representation and challenges*.

The next chapter presents findings from the interviews.

Chapter 7

Presentation of Research Findings II

“The ability to tell one’s story is the expression of a new kind of freedom whose value cannot, and should not, be overlooked” (blog 25:35:4)

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, an account is given of the interviews with the bloggers. The interview questions are attached as Addendum A. The bloggers’ identities are protected, and the reasons they were selected are outlined in section 5.5.3.4. The responses to questions are presented according to their relevance and connectedness to the themes of the study, as outlined in section 6.1. They will thus now be presented in that order, namely *participation, deliberative democracy, empowerment, public sphere, representation* and *challenges*. As discussed in Chapter 5 (Research Design and Methodology), the interviews were analysed with ATLAS.ti version 7, a qualitative data analysis software program.

7.2 Research findings from interviews

7.2.1 Participation

There were 65 references to the theme *participation* by the 20 bloggers across the five websites. To interpret how the bloggers reflected on *participation*, three questions were asked – on (1) issues discussed, (2) motivations for blogging, and (3) whether blogging improves civic and political participation by women (see Addendum A, Questions 1, 2 and 3). Responses to questions 1 and 2 are combined in this presentation, as they relate to each other.

7.2.1.1 Issues discussed and motivations for blogging

The issues discussed with regard to *participation* highlighted by the 20 bloggers are women and women’s issues, and specifically women’s rights issues, women’s health and constitution (bloggers 4, 10, 13 & 15), political and economic rights, governance issues and democracy (bloggers 1, 2, 14, 18 & 20), sports (blogger 5), education and environment (blogger 6), sexual and reproductive health (blogger 7), domestic violence (blogger 8), and social, cultural and religious issues (blogger 9). Other issues are feminism, empowerment, gender equality, womanhood and sexuality (bloggers 11, 13, 17 & 19), challenging the political, cultural, social and legal structures that legitimises the subjugation

of women, as well as gender roles (blogger 16), opposition politics and women's participation in politics (blogger 3).

The motivations for blogging identified by the interviewees include a lack of access to information and the harsh environment that thwarts freedom of expression (bloggers 2 & 11), to share their thoughts in public spaces and with the greater world, the lack of use of new media, and the lack of popular feminist discourse (4:30). Blogger 4 further posits that the alienation of women, particularly young women, from women's rights discourse in Zimbabwe is another motivation. On the need for information dissemination, blogger 2 said: "i [sic] see new media platforms as a means to bridge this information gap[,] at the same time offering an opportunity for exchange of information, engaging in debate and space for online discussions" (2:2:2015).⁴⁶

Blogger 11 further writes:

the new media platforms that are now readily available are helping the ordinary people access information that under normal circumstances would not be readily available. This has created vibrant citizen journalism from ordinary people, who are now deciding on what readers can access, creating debate around different issues (11:1:2016).

Other motivations highlighted are: to express views and share opinions on national issues (bloggers 5, 6, 13 & 17), to share life experiences (blogger 8), to reclaim what was good in the past, and to dispel myths and non-progressive attitudes (blogger 9), and to contribute to national discourse on politics (blogger 12). Bloggers 14 and 15 point out that they blog to create awareness and motivate women to join the women's movement, while blogger 16 writes that she blogs to deconstruct stereotypes and socially constructed norms of what womanhood entails in patriarchal Zimbabwe, and to challenge the status quo. Another motivation, according to blogger 18, is to give marginalised groups in Zimbabwe an opportunity to be "seen" (18:7:2016). This is because traditional media are elitist, with mainstream newspapers focusing heavily on party political issues and giving less priority to important issues experienced by "ordinary" citizens, such as the right to access water and the right to security by women (18:7:2016).

⁴⁶ Verbatim quotes from interview transcripts should be read as: quotation ID (blogger number and code number), and the year the interview was conducted. For example, blogger 2, code 2 in that interview transcript, and year 2015.

According to citation 8:4, this blogger highlights that her personal life experiences and those of others motivate her to blog on these issues in the public interest. The motivation, according to the blogger, is to demand support for and answers on some of the issues of concern from the authorities responsible. This view is supported by blogger 4, who also expressed the need for support as a major motivation to blog. According to this blogger:

writing about offline violence online does not mean that offline reality immediately changes. But it does mean that one is able to express themselves [sic] and as a result, gain support, solidarity, critique and other important feedback (4:24:2015).

Blogger 16 states unequivocally:

i [sic] am someone who refuses to be gagged by the traditions that tell me that my womanhood obscures my humanity. My writing is a woman's interpretation of the world. In a world where the woman's voice is considered irrelevant – I use words to give voice to thoughts because when I write, no-one can shut me up (16:2:2016).

7.2.1.2 Perceptions of whether blogging improves civic and political participation by women

There were mixed views on whether blogging improves civic and political participation by women in Zimbabwe, with 14 of the bloggers (bloggers 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17 & 19) of the view that blogging indeed facilitates women's entry into politics and improves their participation in political debates, while six (bloggers 1, 4, 11, 16, 18 & 20) categorically highlighted the need to transform the structural systems that continue to oppress women and emphasised the importance of new media in this transformation process.

The bloggers who view blogging as facilitating entry for women into politics posit that online media platforms can improve the civic and political participation of marginalised groups such as women, especially in a polarised state like Zimbabwe (blogger 2). The view of this blogger is that

online media have enabled individuals and political parties to bypass laws⁴⁷ that hinder freedom of assembly and expression (2:6). Blogger 6 alludes to the fact that the online presence of women's groups discussing various issues of interest is an indication of their participation in civic and political issues.

Bloggers 8 and 9 concur that online media have created greater accessibility for both women and men to participate in the political, economic and social spheres, with an increasing number of women having blogs in which they discuss their concerns (8:2). Furthermore, women can express themselves and comment on issues without identifying themselves – thus the protection of their identities is a motivation for them to engage in political debates (9:2).

Similarly, blogger 12 alludes to the fact that the silence of women's voices in traditional media, be they as sources of news or in the authorship of political content, is rectified in online media, where women can express themselves without relying on gatekeepers, and this, according to this blogger, has ensured that their voices find a place in Zimbabwean politics. Blogger 17 concurs that, in traditional media, women are predominantly seen but not heard, thus online media offer women the opportunity to harness their potential to express themselves in ways that they have historically not been able to do before, and that women are already raising issues of poor service delivery and governance.

However, blogger 16 highlights that the political terrain in Zimbabwe will not be transformed by online media platforms, unless those platforms become accessible to the majority and can be leveraged to influence political discourse. In addition, the blogger accentuates that there is a need for a critical mass of women online – those women with the social capital and influence offline – to articulate alternative political views to the dominant male-informed ones. The blogger writes:

i [sic] don't think the existence of new media platforms will necessarily improve civic and political participation of women in Zimbabwe, unless those new media interactions can impact and transform offline realities. ... What new media platforms can do is afford women spaces to articulate themselves and re-frame narratives that have often obscured their perspectives and failed to take into account their circumstances (16:3:2016).

⁴⁷ Laws that hinder freedom of assembly and expression include the Public Order Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA).

This view is also supported by blogger 4, who writes that online media cannot change the structural systems without offline civic and political participation. Blogger 11 observes that the majority of women do not participate in political discussions online. The blogger writes that, while women are present online, they hardly make their opinions known. Similarly, blogger 18 is of the view that, in order to contribute to improved civic and political participation, new media platforms need to exist in an enabling political environment, which is not provided in Zimbabwe. The blogger further writes that Zimbabwe is both significantly patriarchal, discouraging and dismissive of female participation in politics, and there also is a great fear of sharing one's views on political matters. Consequently, the blogger notes, instead of using online media to participate more robustly in the political discourse, women would rather use new media platforms for fun and social purposes, rather than for civic and political participation.

7.2.1.3 Summary of theme: *Participation*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis of the interview transcripts, the content related to the theme *participation* reveals that issues that bloggers focus largely on women and women's issues that relate to their constitutional rights, such as participation in the political, economic and social spheres, access to information, education, health, sexual and reproductive rights, and governance. The motivations for blogging are to disseminate information that people will not ordinarily have access to, to freely express oneself, to deconstruct stereotypes and social norms that oppress women, and to challenge the male-dominated view of society. In addition, another motivation is to hold the government and those in power accountable.

With regard to whether online media improves women's participation in politics, the perceptions of the bloggers are that there are benefits of online media participation by Zimbabwean women in that women's voices are now freely expressed, their views and interpretations of experiences are in the public domain, and that this presents a platform for discussion and debate amongst women themselves, as well as with men and other stakeholders. In addition, online media are enabling women to engage in politics by challenging their status in society. However, the bloggers are mindful that the use of online media alone would not transform the status of the Zimbabwean woman, arguing that the offline reality must be modified for online media to empower women politically, economically and socially.

7.2.2 Deliberative democracy

There were 30 references to the theme *deliberative democracy* by the 20 bloggers across the five websites. To interpret how the bloggers reflected on *deliberative democracy*, three questions were asked on (1) what activities the organisations do, specifically targeting women and women's issues, (2) how women are encouraged to participate in discussions on national issues, and (3) recommendations for change that are required to ensure democracy (see Addendum A, Questions 4, 5 and 6).

7.2.2.1 Organisational activities specifically targeting women

The civic activities specifically targeted at women undertaken by the studied organisations on the theme *deliberative democracy* as outlined by the bloggers include: providing a platform to enable women to write articles, comment on issues, blog and receive information (bloggers 1, 11 & 18), promoting access to information and stimulating women's participation in decision-making bodies (bloggers 2 & 13), and encouraging reporters in traditional media to report on women's issues and to advocate for a gender balance in news sources (blogger 3). Other activities include advocacy on issues such as child marriages and creating spaces within news pages where gender issues are discussed (bloggers 5 & 6), questioning the status quo of many issues (blogger 19), as well as creating space for women to collectively initiate and participate in strategies and actions that lead to their empowerment (blogger 10). Blogger 10 further writes that this is attained through mobilising and organising women to lobby and advocate for their rights (10:29).

In addition, blogger 9 highlights that writing about ordinary people's lives and how social change affects their lives is another way of engaging with and discussing issues that affect women, while blogger 12 says that mainstreaming women's expression and highlighting the work they are doing is part of the organisation's focus in targeting Zimbabwean women and the issues that affect them.

7.2.2.2 How women are encouraged to participate in discussions on national issues

The bloggers use a number of methods to encourage women to participate in organisational activities aimed at assisting them to engage in national debates, including magnifying the voices of women who are actively involved in discussing national issues by sharing articles about them with other civic organisations (blogger 1), publishing critical and particular issues that focus on women (blogger 3 & 19) and training women in new media use, especially on blogging and digital security (blogger 4).

Blogger 4 added that “critical conversations”, which are offline discussions on various themes around women and media, are also held to widen access to debates to those women who may not have access to online platforms (4:19:2015).

Furthermore, blogger 7 writes that articles from the general public are solicited, especially from women, while others are commissioned on particular themes regarding women’s issues. The blogger writes: “though we may not publish all articles we receive, we at least get an idea of the particular issues of utmost relevance to women” (7:6:2016). Bloggers 11, 14 and 18 concur with this view, writing that encouraging women to submit their written opinions on different matters, and commenting on articles, informs society of the issues that are pertinent to women, as well as of their perspectives on these issues. In addition, highlighting the work women are doing despite the challenging economy (blogger 12), engaging in offline activities such as capacity building of women to effectively use online media tools, and monitoring sexism in media coverage to enable a more gender-sensitive press (blogger 17), are some of the strategies used by the bloggers to enable the equal participation of women and men in the public sphere.

However, bloggers 5 and 8 said that there is no deliberate effort to encourage women in particular to participate in the discussions, but it is envisaged that women, just like any other reader, would become involved in feedback on the blog content.

7.2.2.2 Recommendations for change required to enable democracy

The recommendations for the change that is required to enable the participation of women in a democracy, as outlined by the bloggers, are that: government should improve women’s representation in decision-making bodies and conduct capacity-building training programmes, especially on the use of new media as an alternative voice for information dissemination (bloggers 2 & 5), there should be a gender balance in sources, and government should provide funding for women so that they can be economically independent (bloggers 3 & 13). In addition, government should create a stable political and economic environment (blogger 4).

Furthermore, society should begin to accept that women’s perspectives on issues matter, should begin to work towards including women in decision making (blogger 7), and should expose women’s issues and the challenges they face in the political and economic environment (blogger 14). In addition, there is a need to have course modules on gender in tertiary education (blogger 6) and improved access to the internet for women in rural areas (bloggers 8, 9 & 10), while blogger 18 writes that society should speak openly about women’s issues and experiences so that these are addressed.

Blogger 19 writes that citizens should demand policies that will make technology, and specifically the internet, accessible to all.

With regard to providing funding to women, blogger 3 writes that:

“women will not depend on men for them to accomplish their goals, hence with economic power, women will too have confidence to participate fully in decision-making and also influence [sic] other women that gender equality is attainable” (3:3:2016).

Blogger 13 concurs, adding that, if women can access funding, they will be able to widen their advocacy platforms to include more women and share information on various issues. According to this blogger, this would consequently enable women to support other women and female politicians through capacity-building projects, increasing women’s political participation in the process (13:18:2016). Furthermore, blogger 5 emphasises the importance for women to understand that new media can be used to share information on how politics and the economy are affecting their well-being and living conditions, “so that they get assistance if need be” (5:20:2015).

Bloggers 8, 9 and 10 highlighted the need for the provision of access to the internet as critical to enable women to harness the potential of online media. Citation 8:16 emphasises the need to co-opt women, especially rural women, into political debates, and to empower them to participate in national politics. This, according to citation 10:22, could be achieved if policymakers and service providers increase access to the internet grid, even to the poor. However, blogger 10 warns that society should be mindful of the dangers of online media, and train women adequately to guard against these dangers if they are to benefit from the use of these media. The blogger writes:

the same access to online media has increased exposure to cyber bullying and has the impact of spreading violence against women at a wider scale. There is therefore need to start addressing how online media have [the] capacity to transfer the same violations that occur in society and how users, particularly women [,] should be adequately prepared to ensure their personal security and bodily integrity through safeguards (10:23:2016).

7.2.2.3 Summary of theme: *Deliberative democracy*

According to the ATLAS.ti analysis of the interview transcripts on the theme *deliberative democracy*, the bloggers revealed that information dissemination on women's issues is a key activity their organisations focus on – to ensure that women have a voice and a platform to share their perspectives and to advocate for their inclusion in the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. To facilitate the inclusion of women in politics, the bloggers emphasised the need for women to have access to funding so that they are economically independent and empowered to further their political and economic goals, and that they should be trained in online media use for political participation. In addition, the bloggers highlighted the need to provide a stable political and economic environment in order for women to realise their full potential. Lastly, the provision of access to the internet by the majority of citizens, especially women in rural areas, was emphasised, with the bloggers arguing that access to online media would facilitate and enhance information sharing and participation in national debates, enabling *deliberative* democracy.

7.2.3 Empowerment

There were 47 references to the theme *empowerment* by the 20 bloggers across the five websites. To interpret how the bloggers reflected on *empowerment*, two questions were asked, one on the empowerment potential of online media for Zimbabwean women and society in general, and the other on how online media can be a solution to overcoming the barriers that Zimbabwean women face (see Addendum A, Questions 7 and 8).

7.2.3.1 The empowerment potential of online media for Zimbabwean women and society

On whether online media empower Zimbabwean women, there was a sense of optimism from 15 bloggers (bloggers 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19 & 20) that, as a platform for meeting and sharing views and experiences, online media have facilitated women's political, economic and social empowerment. Specifically, the bloggers wrote that online media empower women by providing them with the opportunity to “stand with each other in sisterhood” (1:14:2016), present their side of the story and share experiences (blogger 3), bring new perspectives and challenge old notions of what is accepted as normative truth (blogger 4), express themselves freely and connect with the rest of the world (blogger 5), and self-organise, discover and be discovered (blogger 19).

Furthermore, the empowerment potential of online media for women is that information can be shared confidentially (bloggers 6 & 20), and that the freedom of expression granted by online

media “gives a voice to the voiceless” (blogger 7:2:2016). Blogger 7 further writes that women are now able to tell their own stories, sharing them with the world without legislative barriers. According to blogger 7, this is crucial in stimulating debate on development in a holistic manner, with women’s issues being part of the agenda. In addition, blogger 7 writes that online media amplify women’s voices and give women a chance to influence public opinion. Online media also “give women options and access to alternative information which can boost their learning and give them power to fight all patriarchy-induced barriers” (7:12:2016).

Bloggers 9 and 10 highlight that online media have the potential to empower those who have access to it, including women’s organisations, while blogger 11 writes that online media have the potential to empower women, especially in business, and to enable women to be aware of social ills such as gender-based violence. According to blogger 13, some of the economic opportunities presented by online media include skills training for women writers/bloggers and journalists, where they also are given the opportunity to interact with experienced women and share ideas. Journalists are also empowered through the generation of story ideas and skills enhancement (13:12).

Furthermore, blogger 4 gives an example of how women are becoming economically independent through employment opportunities that have been created on online media platforms. This blogger states that it would be naive to believe that online media, on their own, can achieve empowerment without a societal transformation that would open up political spaces to women. Rather, the blogger posits that, in an economic crisis where employment opportunities are few, it is important to focus on how online media can grow to become a sustainable sector that yields jobs and income. The blogger expresses:

i [sic] am interested to understand what new work areas can arise from online media and how these can empower women financially and economically. ... I really believe that beyond looking at the socio-political potential of online media, it is necessary to start thinking about this as a sector that can create gainful employment and augment Zimbabwean women’s financial streams. That to me is a more tangible form of empowerment for the time being (4:41:2015).

Another empowerment benefit is that information accessed online allows women to make informed decisions about their personal, professional, business and academic lives, and helps women realise that gender equality is possible and attainable, giving them the confidence to venture into areas they

previously would not (blogger 14). The blogger writes: "... information is power. Access to information, experiences in other countries and continents, and stories by women who have made it, are factors that enable online media to overcome the barriers that women face in general" (14:12:2016).

However, while bloggers 2 and 17 argue that women's increased participation is attributable to the level of empowerment, they point out the factors that militate against this empowerment. Blogger 2 writes that, because of Zimbabwe's economic situation there are few women who can access online media due to cost and technology limitations, and because a large percentage of women live in the rural areas. As a result, only a few women living in towns can take advantage of online media. Blogger 17 warns that just because the political and economic climate has transformed since the 1990s and early 2000s, this does not mean that the conditions that women face have become better. The blogger adds that Zimbabwe is "a very dangerous landscape" for women in politics, and remains so (17:9:2016). The blogger further writes that political violence has forced women with potential to stay away, and those already in the system to start to disengage. The blogger aptly summarises her view:

empowerment is meaningless when the rules of the game are unfair, change constantly and are tipped against women. One needs a lot of financial muscle to fully participate especially in the political space, and a lot of Zimbabwean women do not have this or cannot get it without compromising themselves or their reputations (17:10:2016).

With regard to societal empowerment, the bloggers highlighted that citizens are empowered to participate in national debates and also to set an agenda, that people can interact with government officials and air their views (blogger 3), and that online media harness the voices of diverse people (blogger 7). Furthermore, blogger 11 writes that online media have created a vibrant citizen journalism by ordinary people who are now able to decide what readers can access and who create debates on different issues.

Furthermore, alluding to the nature of the Zimbabwean media system, blogger 5 writes that online media platforms have given a voice to what were previously marginalised groups with no access to the mainstream media. The blogger gives examples of online communities that enable people who come from those communities to connect with each other and the rest of the world, and to discuss various issues affecting their communities.

The other potential for the empowerment of the general society identified by the bloggers is that, by creating dialogues on power relations between women and men and challenging gender norms and values, online media can positively influence the minds of the general public (blogger 7). In addition, online media are potentially transformative in that they facilitate sharing by one or more women with more people than they would reach if they were depending on mainstream media (blogger 10). In a similar vein, blogger 11 writes that online media are an empowering tool in that they transcend the limits imposed by bureaucratic processes by enabling citizens to make themselves heard.

7.2.3.2 How online media can be a solution to overcoming the barriers faced by Zimbabwean women

The bloggers highlight that online media can be a solution to overcoming the barriers that Zimbabwean women face by offering spaces for discussion and information dissemination (bloggers 2, 6, 9, 13, 14 & 15), giving women power to communicate (bloggers 3, 4 & 20), enabling women to solicit support from other women elsewhere by telling their stories (blogger 5), and challenging gender norms and values (blogger 7).

Other bloggers write that women are able to voice issues of concern (blogger 8), and that online media enable the removal of barriers at the level of self, and on the institutional, cultural and legal level (blogger 10), break barriers to communication (blogger 12), and encourage debate on the importance of political participation.

However, blogger 18 is of the view that, while online media enable women to share experiences and discuss solutions and ideas, as well as enabling women to realise that gender equality is possible and attainable, it is difficult to advance key political goals and objectives. The blogger writes that it is important that the root causes of gender inequality are addressed with seriousness. This blogger writes: “what use is being connected to the internet when society that you live in views women as second-class citizens?” (18:1:2016).

7.2.3.3 Summary of theme: *Empowerment*

According to the ATLAS.ti analysis of interview transcripts on the theme *empowerment*, the majority of the bloggers highlighted that online media empower individual women and society by giving women a voice and enabling them to play their agential role in society through sharing information and expressing views on national issues, sharing personal stories, advocating for their rights, and challenging the status quo. In addition, online media have empowered women economically through

employment creation, skills building and networking. Women furthermore are able to contribute to the deconstruction of stereotypes and other societal norms by telling their own stories.

For the general society, bloggers highlight that online media have enabled the sharing of information by diverse groups and that citizens are now able to create their own news. Furthermore, the gender discourses online are contributing towards a general understanding by society of the need for gender equality. Lastly, by providing spaces for discussions and information dissemination, online media have enabled women to overcome the barriers they face.

7.2.4 Public sphere

There were 68 references to the theme *public sphere* by the 20 bloggers across the five websites. To interpret how the bloggers reflected on *public sphere*, two questions were asked: (1) on the uses of online media platforms by Zimbabwean bloggers, and (2) on bloggers' perceptions of whether online media are platforms for political discourse by Zimbabwean women (see Addendum A, Questions 9 and 10).

7.2.4.1 The uses of online media by Zimbabwean bloggers

Bloggers use blogs for a variety of reasons, but critical to this study are the following uses identified under the theme *public sphere*: to magnify the voice of women and the previously marginalised who are actively discussing national issues (bloggers 3, 4, 5 & 9), to bridge the information gap (bloggers 2, 6, 11 & 20), to promote women's participation in decision making and to enable women to tell their own stories (blogger 7). Other uses identified by the bloggers were to help women participate in developmental issues (blogger 8), to provide an alternative space to access information and engage in advocacy (bloggers 10 & 19), to offer unfettered democratic expression (blogger 12), for engagement between citizens and governments (blogger 13), and to shape national discourse (blogger 14). Furthermore, online media afforded women the opportunity to tell their own stories and create counternarratives (blogger 16). Women were also finding their voice online to speak on issues they historically could not (bloggers 17 & 19), while at the same time, blogs offered women opportunities for comment, critique and debate (blogger 18).

According to blogger 4, online media have expanded the scope for interaction and have served as an alternative space for Zimbabweans to hold the state to account. This blogger, however, is quick to point out that, while online media have performed an important role in enabling voice amplification, the question many should posit is whether these voices are being listened to in ways that can effect change. The blogger succinctly writes:

i [sic] dare say, however, that inclusion into these spaces is still largely predicated upon who you know, particularly in the offline world. So there is still a heavy bias towards offline interaction which again privileges those who navigate multiple physical spaces (4:2:2015).

Blogger 10 writes that, despite granting individuals access from the comfort of their homes to participate in two-way communication on issues of concern, online media have enabled women to identify:

“institutional barriers (distance, negotiating with gatekeepers for access, delving through systems and procedures that are restrictive), cultural barriers (patriarchal beliefs, values, attitudes and norms), content of constitutions, laws and by-laws and gives those campaigning for gender equality increased space to analyse the gaps and make recommendations” (10:19:2016).

With regard to enabling freedom of expression, blogger 12 writes that online media give Zimbabweans an opportunity to debate on contemporary politics in ways that would not be possible in the traditional media, where state censorship remains enforced on both professional journalists and writers of opinion (12:1:2016). This (male) blogger sums up his view, expressing: “online media can and is overcoming these barriers by providing an arena for uncensored self-expression and self-promotion where women use their blog presence to break the barriers of communication” (12:12:2016).

Similarly, women are utilising spaces to express themselves on issues of governance, which rarely happens in the mainstream media (blogger 13). Blogger 13 further writes that, usually, the media seek comments from men, with columnists and commentators on national issues being men (13:3:2016). Blogger 14 highlights that women have made “significant strides” in the political and socio-economic front through utilising online media, where their concerns have been “heard and acted upon” (14:14:2016).

In addition, blogger 16 writes that, by creating counternarratives online, women are able to document their own version of reality, as their voices very often are ignored in the mainstream media. The blogger writes: “the visibility of women and the centrality of their lived experiences in national

discourse is [sic] easier to mobilise on online media platforms because there are fewer barriers to publishing one's point of view..." (16:22:2016). Lastly, blogger 19 writes that women are able to hear, read and be exposed to new ideologies and ways of thinking that can influence or be influenced by their thinking (19:1:2016).

7.2.4.2 Perceptions of whether online media are platforms for political discourse

On whether online media are platforms for political discourse, the bloggers emphasised several aspects of uses and characteristics of online media that are beneficial to women in relation to the *public sphere* theme, especially in the Zimbabwean context, where the political, economic and social environment is unfavourable for women to enjoy the same rights as men. These factors are namely that online media have enabled the inclusion of various issues, including democracy and women's issues, in the public domain – issues that previously did not have a platform for discussion (blogger 1).

In addition, the fact that online media "tends to make people feel safe" when accessing news online, especially on politics, has enabled people to engage in discussions on national issues and contribute to the formulation of policies (blogger 2:4:2016). Consequently, this has facilitated the discussion of political issues, including opposition politics and women's participation in politics in Zimbabwe (blogger 3). The fact that online media enhance discussions amongst people has also brought to the fore important issues that matter in the everyday lives of Zimbabweans (blogger 4:11:2015). Blogger 4 further points out that one can find a range of topics on these platforms about which "we do not apologise for unpacking or talking about" (4:33:2015).

Furthermore, according to blogger 5, online media platforms have presented more people with space to express their views and contribute to development issues in the country, and specifically to debate about issues of governance and service delivery, thus opening up the democratic space. The blogger further writes that the fact that women can now actively advocate for action on a particular issue of interest to them qualifies online media as platforms for political discourse. The blogger gives the illustration of the public online outcry by Zimbabwean women about a published cartoon that was deemed to be "sexist", and this led to the suspension of the cartoonist. The blogger argued that this incident exhibited political engagement on the issue by the women (5:6:2016). In addition, people can interact online and learn from each other's experiences, resulting in interest in and inspiration to engage further in political debates (blogger 5:12:2016).

More so, the fact that online media give voice to the voiceless (blogger 9), are accessible to both women and men to participate in discussions on political, economic and social issues (bloggers 8, 13 & 14), and offer uncontested space for free expression (blogger 12) renders the platform useful for shaping the political consciousness required in a democracy (blogger 7). Blogger 9 concurs with this view, positing that women blog about personal and other issues of national interest that might not be overtly political, but political nonetheless, thus according to the blogger, women's activist content online is political (9:7). Furthermore, blogger 10 argues that Zimbabwean women have been able to widen their reach through advocacy on women's issues and have used online media to break the barriers at the level of the self, and also on the institutional, cultural and legal levels, enabling more women to find their voice and engage in matters of interest to them.

Despite the positive uses of online media platforms for political discourse, however, bloggers 4 and 5 believe that the Zimbabwean political, economic, socio-cultural and legal spheres have to be transformed to enable participants in these spaces to be more receptive to deeper engagement. Blogger 4 writes: "i [sic] generally don't feel that civic and political spaces are open to change and [activists and women's organisations] tend to frame conversations that warrant deeper analysis in very static language and contexts" (4:26:2015), while blogger 5 writes that "online media simple [sic] gives women the platform, but tangible gains are hard to see as not all policy makers engage in online platforms" (5:15:2016).

7.2.4.3 Summary of theme: *Public sphere*

According to the ATLAS.ti analysis of the interview transcripts on the theme *public sphere*, the bloggers highlighted that online media are used as an alternative space for free expression and to create counternarratives by citizens with no access to traditional media, and that these online media platforms offer privacy and are relatively safer for individuals to engage in political discourse without fear of reprisals from the government. Other findings were that online media are used to give voice to the voiceless, especially for women to express concerns on issues that affect them and to advocate for their empowerment and inclusion in the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. Overall, the perception of the bloggers is that online media are a platform for political discourse by Zimbabweans, as they have facilitated the inclusion of both women and men in discussions on national issues.

7.2.5 Representation

There were 59 references to the theme *representation* by the 20 bloggers across the five websites. To interpret how the bloggers reflected on the theme representation, two questions were asked – (1) on the communication strategies, language and narratives employed by the bloggers to encourage online discussions amongst women and (2) on the bloggers’ perceptions of Zimbabwean women activists’ approaches to women’s issues (see Addendum A, Questions 11 and 12).

7.2.5.1 Communication strategies, language and narratives employed by the bloggers

The communication strategies employed by the bloggers under the theme *representation* include: sharing articles written by women with other civic organisations and women’s websites so that the writers receive more exposure and wider responses in the form of comments and other feedback (bloggers 1 & 20), and reserving space for women and women’s issues, and enabling comments and feedback to the writers (blogger 2). Blogger 2 further writes that, by providing space for discussions and lobbying and providing information that relates to economic opportunities, sexual reproduction and political participation, women are able to engage in online discussions.

Other communication strategies include: publishing critical or particular issues focusing mainly on women, publishing the real-life stories of women (bloggers 3 & 11), and giving women a “free and open” platform to interrogate a range of issues about women’s position in society (4:20:2015). In addition, blogger 4 points out that writing about women, and expressing those perspectives that are often marginalised, have enabled bloggers to generate interest from women. Other strategies include using women’s voices in the stories, using pictures and graphics to illustrate points and arguments, adding humour to “hard-to-approach” subjects such as women’s sexuality and social relationships with men and with other women (19:8:2016), enacting gender policies within news organisations (blogger 5), enabling the formulation of strategies by women on the changes needed to attain gender equality (bloggers 6 & 12), and publishing newsletters, postcards, stickers and leaflets on thematic issues to share information (bloggers 7 & 18).

Blogger 19 further highlights that writing from a very personal and open standpoint enables other women to relate to the writer’s struggles, which they often share. Blogger 10 emphasises the use of traditional media techniques in addition to online media, namely verbal interpersonal communication, phone calls and the use of drama, while blogger 14 writes that holding competitions and events offline encourages women to participate online.

With regard to language and narratives, all the bloggers use the English language, with additional use of local languages, especially Ndebele and Shona, by bloggers 10 and 18. Bloggers 1, 4, 16 and 18 write that their narrative is feminist because they present issues and tell stories from a woman's point of view, while bloggers 1 and 18 add that they employ the first person narrative in the content. According to blogger 1, she/he uses observations, witness accounts and narration of personal experiences. Furthermore, blogger 4 employs what she terms "the language of feminism" and "overtly feminist language" (4:27:2015), while blogger 16 refers to the language used as "introspective language". This is because, according to the blogger, "my lived experience informs a lot of what I think" (16:17:2016). Blogger 9 identifies her language as "political", employs satire and irony, and uses characters to tell the story or to express an opinion (9:6:2016), while blogger 14 writes that she utilises "gender-sensitive language" (14:8:2016).

7.2.5.2 Perceptions of how Zimbabwean women activists present women's issues

With regard to how Zimbabwean women activists present women's issues under the theme *representation*, blogger 9 pointed out that Zimbabwean women, including activists, are occupied with focusing on survival and therefore there is competition for scarce resources. The blogger further writes that the Western feminist approach, employed by some women's organisations and activists, often fails to represent Zimbabwean women's issues because the approach does not specifically recognise culture (9:14). Furthermore, efforts to ensure the representation of issues pertinent to women have been fragmented, with women's organisations and activists not supporting each other (bloggers 1, 8 & 14). This view is supported by blogger 16, who writes that achieving a specific aim requires goal-sharing among activists. Blogger 16 further writes that women's organisations and activists sometimes assume that sharing the same sex means that women will want the same things – therefore conversations are rarely held between women activists with regard to what exactly women (in their diversity) want, and to find areas of consensus from shared desires. Furthermore, blogger 16 argues that there is stratification along class lines and limited consultation, resulting in some activists being more prescriptive in their approach to advancing and articulating women's issues.

Blogger 13 expands on the views above, writing that there is a lack of African literature on gender and feminism, with most of the literature from the West, and that this presents its own set of challenges on how Zimbabwean women represent themselves. The blogger writes that consequently, women organising to advocate for social change in Zimbabwe have centred on personalities rather than issues. Other views are that, instead of focusing on women's issues, activists politicise their

campaigns, courting the suspicions of government (blogger 6), while blogger 5 writes that the political affiliations and ideologies of women activists tend to impact on how women's issues are presented and represented. Blogger 11 writes that the approach is too elitist and only for the urban woman.

However, bloggers 4, 7, 10 and 20 highlight positive views with regard to the fragmentation of strategies by women activists, arguing that non-consensus enables robust engagement and critique of issues (blogger 4) and that organic solidarity does not expect women in their diversity to have the same narrative on how patriarchy has affected them, how they are coping, and what should be done (blogger 10). Therefore, according to blogger 7, it is inevitable that activists will differ in their presentation of issues, although the ideological position is the same. Lastly, bloggers 3 and 12 write that Zimbabwean women are now focused and organised on what they want, and that there is growing solidarity amongst women in online platforms.

7.2.5.3 Summary of theme: *Representation*

Overall, according to the ATLAS.ti analysis of the interview transcripts, the content related to the theme *representation* reveals that bloggers utilise various communication strategies, namely sharing articles with other civic organisations in their networks, publishing critical and particular issues not normally covered by traditional media, using women's voices in the blogs, and expressing women's perspectives. Another strategy is printing newsletters, leaflets and postcards on similar online content and distributing these to women who might not have access to online media. These publications distributed offline are also in the local languages, Ndebele and Shona.

The narrative employed is mostly feminist, in which the bloggers tell stories from a woman's point of view and employ the first person voice. In addition, the analysis show that bloggers share personal experiences, those of others, as well as their observations, and that the language used is feminist and introspective, with the use of characters to tell the story. With regard to perceptions of the representation of women's issues in Zimbabwe by activists, the bloggers feel that the absence of African literature on gender and feminism has resulted in a situation where activists utilise the Western feminist approach, which fails to recognise African culture. Consequently, according to these findings, this leads to a narrow representation of women's issues, based on the belief that all women want the same thing. Therefore, according to the bloggers, activism in Zimbabwe tends to be prescriptive and fragmented.

7.2.6 Challenges

There were 75 references to the theme *challenges* by the 20 bloggers across the five websites. To interpret how the bloggers reflected on the theme *challenges*, one question was asked, namely on what the challenges are that influence Zimbabwean women's engagement in civic issues and political participation (see Addendum A, Question 13).

7.2.6.1 Challenges that influence Zimbabwean women's engagement in civic issues and political participation

The *challenges* that impede women's participation in politics identified by the bloggers are the hostile political environment (bloggers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 & 19), the impact of socialisation (bloggers 1, 7, 8, 9 & 14), culture and patriarchy (bloggers 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 18 & 20), the poor economy (bloggers 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10 & 11), lack of representation in decision-making bodies (blogger 2), lack of support from government (blogger 8), and lack of information (blogger 2). In addition, poor representation of women in the media (blogger 13), the negative portrayal of women in the media (blogger 17), and lack of access to traditional media by women are cited as impediments to women's engagement in civic and political participation.

With regard to the political landscape, the bloggers write that the Zimbabwean environment is not supportive of women's empowerment politically, economically and socially. The bloggers expressed concern about political party structures that do not cater for women (1:17), and that the Zimbabwean political landscape has been and still is shaped by men dominating in all spheres (2:11). Blogger 14 further reveals that men own the means of production, hence have influence over development in the political, economic, religious, legal and other spheres.

Blogger 10 concurs, writing that there are ideological and physical barriers in the form of lack of access to those spaces in which participation occurs, and psychological barriers where violence or fear of violence have resulted in women staying away from participating (10:14). Bloggers 5, 16 and 19 write that the threat of violence in the form of insults, cyberbullying, revenge porn and other forms of harassment, deter women from engaging in civic and political participation online. Blogger 19 writes that the frequency with which "women AND men" (blogger's own emphasis) who attempt to participate are suppressed through arrests and incarceration confirms the fear.

In addition to the hostile political environment, blogger 7 writes that breaking patriarchy and its "solid systems" is the major challenge that Zimbabwean women confront today, adding that patriarchy is so strong that not even women seem to have faith and confidence in female leadership

(7:10:2016). Blogger 8 concurs, arguing that some women are denied entry into politics by their husbands, that women are not naturally “brave”, and that most of them are culturally instituted to stay at home and nurture children. Similarly, blogger 10 writes that women lack the confidence, information, knowledge and assertiveness to participate, even when opportunities occur. In addition, blogger 12 writes that the few women who challenge these patriarchal attitudes tend to have their moral standing questioned.

With regard to the economy, the bloggers highlight that women suffer from poverty and therefore have no access to online media (blogger 1), are pre-occupied with survival (bloggers 4 & 10), and therefore do not have resources to participate in politics (blogger 3). Furthermore, women’s organisations and activists experience funding pressures and align themselves with the goals of funders rather than having a transformational perspective (blogger 4). This blogger adds that this contributes to failure by women’s organisations to represent women’s interests, with women only included in certain conversations. This inclusion is not as a direct result of these spaces consciously engaging them to be included, but only to meet quotas, targets and funders’ requirements (4:42:2015). Blogger 4 further writes that this results in poor advocacy, where activists do not speak with women, but at them (4:43:2015).

Other challenges identified are that online media is too elitist (bloggers 5 & 11), that there is a lack of co-ordination among women activists (blogger 14), and a lack of trust of the blogging platform by policymakers who view it with suspicion (blogger 5). This, according to blogger 7, contributes to poor reception of online discourse by policymakers. From this premise, blogger 7 writes that online media could, therefore, be a “capitalist pacifier” only meant to “blindfold” women with “unrealistic shades of transformation when it is actually taking them back[wards]” (7:9:2016).

Another challenge identified is that women lack training in online media use (bloggers 13 & 17). Blogger 17 explains that the internet in general has provided opportunities for increased participation, but women often lack the technological knowledge of how to use these spaces effectively. The blogger gives an example of how social media, for instance, give the impression that they are easy-to-use platforms, and yet it takes time and effort to grasp how to get privacy settings in the right form, and how to grow and maintain an audience (17:13:2016). Accordingly, blogger 16 writes that, as a result of digital illiteracy, online media platforms remain dominated by, and frequently reflect the views, experiences and interests of, the middle class and elites.

7.2.6.2 Summary of theme: *Challenges*

According to the ATLAS.ti analysis of interview transcripts on the theme *challenges*, the bloggers highlighted the hostile political environment, characterised by violence, fear and intimidation, as well as stringent laws and regulations. A poorly performing economy, which had a greater effect on women by virtue of their social class in society and put financial pressure on women's activist organisations, along with patriarchy and culture, were highlighted as affecting Zimbabwean women's engagement in civic issues and political participation. Other challenges identified are the negative portrayal of women in traditional media, technological shortcomings such as skills deficits, a lack of co-ordination amongst women, a lack of socialisation and a lack of trust in online media platforms by policymakers.

7.2.7 Summary of findings from interviews

Overall, the findings from the interviews highlight that blogging is a form of political participation by Zimbabwean women, as it facilitates the inclusion of both women and men in discussions on various issues of national interest, affording them an opportunity to air their concerns, contribute to national debates and share information. The findings reveal that, through blogs, Zimbabwean women and men are able to:

- disseminate information that people, especially women, would not ordinarily have access to,
- freely express themselves,
- deconstruct stereotypes and social norms that oppress women, and
- challenge the male-dominated view of society.

In addition, the findings also highlight that blogs

- serve as an alternative space in which women's voices are expressed, enabling their views and interpretations of experiences to be in the public domain.

Furthermore, the findings

- highlight that, by affording women a voice and enabling them to play their agential role in society, online media and blogs in particular are empowering Zimbabwean women.

In addition, the bloggers

- reveal that, by sharing their personal stories and advocating for their rights and challenging the status quo, Zimbabwean women are able to contribute towards the deconstruction of stereotypes and delegitimisation of other societal norms.

However, the results also highlight that, to facilitate the inclusion of women in politics, there is

- a need for women to have access to funding so that they are economically independent and empowered to further their political and economic goals, and that they
- should be trained in online media use for political participation.

In addition, the bloggers emphasised

- the need to provide a stable political and economic environment in order for women to realise their full potential.

Lastly, the provision

- of access to the internet by the majority of citizens, especially women in rural areas, was emphasised, with the bloggers writing that access to online media would facilitate and enhance information sharing and participation in national debates, thus enabling democracy.

7.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the findings from the qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts were presented. The responses to the questions were presented according to their relevance and connectedness to the themes of the study, in this order: *participation, deliberative democracy, empowerment, public sphere, representation and challenges*.

The next chapter analyses and discusses the findings of the study.

Chapter 8

Analysis and Discussion

“The first exercise of a free woman is to devise her own mode of revolt, a mode which will reflect her own independence and originality.”

(Greer, 1970: 20)

8.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses and discusses data based on the research findings presented in the previous two chapters, Chapters 6 and 7.

The objective of this study was to establish whether online media platforms provide Zimbabwean women with spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge the dominant discourse and increase women’s participation in politics. To realise this goal, the study was guided by the following central research question:

- Do online media give Zimbabwean women spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge dominant discourse and increase women’s participation in politics?

The resultant following sub-questions were addressed:

- How are women’s organisations and journalist activists (both women and men) in Zimbabwe using blogs as platforms for political discourse?
- How are the women’s organisations and journalist activists presenting messages to other women on these blogs, including in the narratives used?
- Are the six specific themes of women and democratic politics online (outlined in section 1.5.3 of this study) identifiable on the five websites?
- To what extent is the discourse in the blogs across the five websites indicative of counterpower to established norms?

To answer the sub-questions, the researcher sought for meanings in blogs and interview transcripts in line with six main themes as relevant to the research questions and identified during the conceptual framework, namely

- *participation,*
- *deliberative democracy,*
- *empowerment,*
- *public sphere,*
- *representation and*
- *challenges.*

Analysis and discussion of the findings are in the order of the research themes above. The findings are simultaneously also discussed within the framework of the three conceptual frameworks, namely womanism, feminist critical theory, and critical political economy theory. To contextualise the analysis, a brief summary of the three theories is first provided.

8.2 Summaries of theoretical paradigms

8.2.1 Womanism

According to Gqola (2001: 4), womanism is a feminist approach that is informed by the interaction of Afrocentric forms of feminism with multicultural and feminist interpretations of political, economic, social and cultural events. The theory identifies the ethnicity and cultural identity of the African woman (Hudson-Weems, 1993: 22-23), and allows for the specific discussion of the existence of the women of African descent in reality and in imagined existence (Mangena, 2013: 8). Therefore, womanism differs from Western feminism in that it provides an overarching approach that allows for an understanding of women's experiences and interpretations of the world. For example, the approach enables an understanding that gender in the African context needs to be inclusive, since women prefer to include men and not alienate them (Kolawole, 2002: 96). Womanism therefore promotes the positive interdependence of African women and men for survival in a racially hostile environment where the entire black race suffers oppression (Collins, 1991). Womanism therefore is a consciousness that incorporates racial, cultural, sexual, national, political and economic considerations (Walker, 1983).

Furthermore, womanism argues for women's rights and empowerment from the premise of African cultural values, and advocates for a society in which women and men have balanced power spheres (Sanday, 1996: 93). To achieve this, the womanist approach to media views access to communication platforms as critical to facilitate the balanced power spheres, in which discussions of "diverse, [and] often conflicting ideas" by both women and men take place and voice is given to

public opinion (Graber, 2003: 143). Thus, advocating for public dialogue in which people can express their opinions freely and share experiences has been one of the focal points for women activists. In sum, as Smith (2016) argues, the womanist perspective unapologetically prioritises black women's experiences, voices, traditions and concerns as legitimate sources of dialogue and knowledge. Thus, for women in authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe, where the mass media are largely in the hands of the state and the elite (Chuma, 2005), the internet therefore provides such "public spheres" for women to dialogue on issues that are culture-specific, share experiences of their day-to-day lives, and to politicise "private" issues and bring them onto the public sphere (Waylen, 2008: 124).

8.2.2 Feminist critical theory

Critical theory generally focuses on issues of power and justice and the ways that economics, politics and culture are closely intertwined to construct a social system (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). Therefore, the goal of critical theory is the emancipation of humanity from injustice (Chambers, 2006: 221). This is achieved through focusing on power, domination and transformation, and linking questions of agency and structure to understand social and cultural reproduction (Kushner & Marrow, 2003: 37). Thus, for feminist critical theorists, understanding the ways one is oppressed enables one to take action to change the oppressive forces. Such oppressive forces include the media, communication, culture and technology, which arguably play an important role in capitalist societies – hence their critique becomes vital in contemporary critical theory, as also argued by Fuchs (2009).

Feminist critical theory portrays media as the informational and cultural arm of a capitalist-bureaucratic state apparatus, with little possibility of reform or democratisation from within (McQuail, 2013: 46). Therefore, feminist critical theory assesses whether the media have the ability to empower, to establish a critical democracy, and to engage marginalised people in the rethinking of their socio-political role. The theory becomes relevant for feminists because it takes the standpoint of the oppressed and exploited in society and calls for the transformation of structures of oppression and exploitation that benefit certain classes at the expense of others (Fuchs, 2009). Feminist critical theory is used to analyse Zimbabwe's political, economic and socio-cultural spheres, and to determine how these influence the motivations of marginalised groups and their usage of online media to challenge the dominant discourse. The theory is also used to identify contradictions, which Kellner (1992: 144) terms "competing ideologies" that the online media promote.

8.2.3 Critical political economy

According to McChesney (2013), critical political economy (CPE) examines the relationships between capitalism, communication and democracy, and at its core is concerned with communication and power in different contexts. CPE is galvanised by the interaction of two main influences – Marxist thought and democratic politics – and it questions power in communications and the conditions for realising democracy (Hardy, 2014: 188). In this way, CPE, similarly to feminist critical theory, has a genuinely Marxian approach. This is because it focuses on commodity exchange as a crucial starting point of analysis, because the media are, primarily, “industrial and commercial organisations which produce and distribute commodities” (Murdock & Golding, 1974: 205-206) – thus media ownership, amongst other factors, becomes key for the critical political economy of the media theorists.

Furthermore, CPE incorporates micro-level analysis (Golding & Murdock, 2000: 88). This is because messages, images and other properties associated with content are one form of media through which power is communicated, enacted and enforced (Butosi, 2012: 52). Feminists therefore believe that political, economic, social and traditional institutions need to be transformed to ensure that women no longer become dependent and subordinate to men, but rather have a hand in making their own news and to project the suppressed alternative perspectives missing from mass media (Gallagher, 2013).

This chapter now proceeds to analyse and discuss the research findings. In order to contextualise the discussion of the findings, the analysis and discussion of each theme commences with an overview of the findings of that theme. This is followed by an analysis and discussion of the findings within the womanist, feminist critical theorist and critical political economy paradigms respectively.

8.3 Analysis of findings from blogs and interviews

8.3.1 Participation

8.3.1.1 Overview of major findings on participation from both blogs and interviews

The findings on the theme *participation* from both the blogs and interviews reveal that women use blogs for self-expression, sharing personal experiences, information dissemination to create awareness, networking, acquiring skills, engaging in conversations that teach and empower women to fight domination, probing and querying, protesting against practices that promote oppression and

inequality, mobilising, and voting. In addition, participation is perceived as engaging in political conversations without fear.

For websites that project representative politics as a tool for participation, the writers stress the importance of elections and voting (WCoZ, Kubatana & *Chronicle*), while those projecting the need for awareness, dialogues and sharing personal experiences emphasise the need for safe spaces (Kubatana, HerZimbabwe & *The Herald*). Different blogs allocate power to women as individuals and as a collective, as well as to the state in offering solutions to challenges faced by women. In WCoZ, *The Herald* and the *Chronicle*, the state is regarded as the solution to improving the participation of women; in Kubatana, the state, along with individual women and the collective, has a role, while in HerZimbabwe, the power is in individual women and men. These different strategies therefore indicate the complexity and heterogeneity of women's lives.

8.3.1.2 The womanism theory analysis

The findings show that blogs serve as platforms that unite women based on the Zimbabwean experience. The bloggers participate in politics by enacting this particular experience, through sharing their thoughts, and by connecting womanhood to activism, while at the same time illuminating and recognising history and the role of Zimbabwean women's identity in the changing environment. Following Obadare and Willems's (2014: 16-17) affirmation of blogs constituting arenas in which people shape identities of the self and communities, I postulate that the traditionally emasculated and subjugated groups in Zimbabwe, particularly women, are being enabled by online media to redefine, shape and reaffirm their identities and begin to question the societal norms that continue to oppress them.

Furthermore, considering that gender roles for Zimbabwean women have become interwoven with the political, economic, social and cultural spheres, thus relegating women – whether formally educated or not, whether traditional or modern – to lesser roles in the public arena and therefore to less participation (Nkiwane, 2000), online media are enabling Zimbabwean women to re-ignite their individual consciousness and begin to recognise their potential. Thus, as also argued by Geisler (2004) from a womanist approach, this consciousness of knowing the self is a critical step towards emancipation for Zimbabwean women who have faced years of silence and retribution.

In addition, the findings reveal that blogs enable women to participate through sharing experiences and specific knowledge relevant to their own culture that they would not ordinarily access. Therefore, similar to Collins's (1991) argument that sharing knowledge is a vitally important aspect of resistance, I argue that, through sharing personal stories and those of other women, as well

as opinions on the various issues of national interest from their own perspectives, Zimbabwean women are reclaiming their visibility and, in turn, their agency. Consequently, I postulate that, by using women's concrete experiences and women-centred perspectives on issues as criterion for creating meaning, Zimbabwean women validate this knowledge as legitimate and worthy of recognition, dialogue and interventions. This conforms to the womanist perspective that validates women's everyday experiences as a distinct type of political behaviour, particularly in settings where political, economic, cultural and other social institutions subjugate women (Thomson, 2014).

Thus, for Zimbabwean women there is a realisation that the "individualised politics" (Graham, 2008: 19) of sharing private interests in public for reasoning and engagement allows for sharing knowledge and information that ultimately will facilitate the de-masculinisation of politics. Consequently, as Di Genaro and Dutton (2006: 311-12) posit, this knowledge sharing broadens the pool of people (in this case, marginalised and "untouched citizens") who could become engaged.

In addition, while a few blogs, particularly those of the WCoZ and *Chronicle*, identify participation with representative politics, a broader conceptualisation of political participation that manifests in the majority of blogs and all the interviewees refers to everyday women's struggles, storytelling and having conversations without fear. Considering that marginalised groups in Zimbabwe, such as women, have been denied access to communication platforms and freedom of expression, these forms of political participation therefore constitute the everyday experiences and realities of women. This conceptualisation of participation conforms to Dahlgren's (2007: ix) view that participation is in "more personal values", and Arnstein's definition of participation as "citizen power" (cited in Van Deth, 2014: 353). This is why, according to the bloggers, signing up to a cause, or simply following online communities that advocate for women's causes, is projected and viewed as political participation. This arguably is because, in particular environments like authoritarian regimes, "silent activism" may be the available safe option for women's resistance. This concurs with the womanist perspective that, however passive women's role may seem, identifying with women's causes affirms the reality that the blogs and bloggers are projecting. This finding is similar to Tounsel's (2015: 139-40) argument that, when black women "like" each other's messages, pictures and re-tweet each other's twitter messages, they affirm the testimonies of black womanhood that are shared in digital media.

Thus, sharing personal perspectives and those of others who might not actively write, reveals the trajectories of different participatory modes for African women as these relate to their environment at a particular point in time. Therefore, for Zimbabwean women, the use of the voices of village women and others to support meanings connects women in their diversity (especially as

this relates to, amongst other factors, access to online media, age, historical background, rural, urban and political affiliations), and brings to the fore a new discursive practice, that of integrating women's past and present, to understand their present realities and formulate strategies for change.

Furthermore, Zimbabwean women may not be comfortable in sharing personal experiences in interpersonal settings, as also argued by Stromer-Galley (2002: 37). Therefore, I postulate that sharing everyday struggles online enables the social connections of the Zimbabwean woman's identity – the identity that is enabling women to feel solidarity and begin to open up and talk about their lived experiences as a way of advocating for a democratic culture. Connectedness and solidarity are values propagated by womanism (Collins, 1991: 212). In addition, this finding confirms affirmations by Ott and Rosser (2000), as well as Ott and Smith (2001), that in Africa the impact of the internet is ironically disproportionately greater than its overall spread, in that it is possible for people to access the internet and its opportunities without necessarily being directly connected (Atton & Mabweazara, 2011: 669). Womanism, therefore, is better situated to contribute to theorisation on new media use by women in Zimbabwe.

From a womanist perspective, blogs therefore give Zimbabwean women power to communicate amongst themselves and with the outside world. As one blogger expresses: "I use words to give voice to thoughts because when I write, no-one can shut me up" (16:2:2016). In other words, Zimbabwean women are able to share their thoughts and experiences in a public space, and hold conversations on these experiences. This act, arguably, is an important step to take towards participating in politics. For the bloggers, writing and sharing women's lived experiences do not mean that the Zimbabwean reality will change immediately. For instance, one blogger reflects that writing about offline violence online does not mean that the offline reality immediately changes. However, it does mean that they are able to express themselves and, in the process, gain support from family and society, solidarity from people sharing the same interests, and critique and other important feedback – tenets that are important for women's resistance, and again advocated for by womanism.

Furthermore, the fact that the blogs and bloggers advocate to work with traditional leadership emanates from the realisation that women's collective resistance stands a better chance if culture is fought from within, where women have to identify those aspects of culture that need preservation and those that are now incompatible with current identities. For example, one blogger highlights the need for Zimbabwean women to reclaim their power in the African tradition, writing that this is an important step for women's self-actualisation and agency. This is because, as Couldry (2010: 130) argues, people first need to be visible before they can be recognised as having a voice; they must first be regarded as part of the landscape in which the struggle for voice goes on. For Zimbabwean women,

reclaiming their traditional power enables them to be advocates of culture, but at the same time be critical of those aspects of it that continue to subjugate them. At the same time, these everyday conversations enable them to be visible, and their discourse to be in the public sphere and to begin competing with normative discourses. Closely linked to this perspective is the aspect of working together with men in an attempt to influence patriarchy in the long term, which helps women to regain their traditional power.

8.3.1.3 The feminist critical theory analysis

An examination of the motives for blog use by journalist activists and women's organisations reveals that women use blogs as alternative spaces to expose those conversations and voices that are silenced in society. This follows a realisation that social structures in Zimbabwe, including the media, continue to make it difficult for women to access communication channels and have their own versions of reality documented. For instance, one blogger (17:2:2016) highlights that women are "predominantly seen, but not heard". The blogger further writes that women are rarely media owners, decision makers or sources, and when they make it to the front page, "it's usually a scandal or wife of [a] prominent someone and in rare cases they have achieved something unusual". What therefore is discerned from this premise is that women's voices are ignored by the mainstream media and that their concerns occupy the periphery in national discourses.

Thus, this context of blogging by women activists truly illuminates the positive aspect of blogs as alternative spaces. In particular, in environments such as Zimbabwe, blogs hosted by certain websites therefore afford women, individually and as collectives, spaces to articulate themselves and re-frame narratives, bringing to the fore a multiplicity of perspectives that have been obscured.

This critical approach to online media provides a window necessary to identify those democratising aspects that are largely informed by the culture-specific traits of a social phenomenon. In addition, the finding that women use blogs for conversations that empower them to fight domination and to challenge the male-dominated view of society conforms to the feminist critical theory perspective that critiques the basic social structures that maintain oppression and create voicelessness and invisibility (Avis & Turner, 1996). Zimbabwean activists use blogs to critique political, economic and cultural structures that continue to subjugate women. In so doing, there is a conscientisation of both individual women and society to be aware of the disparities, and to begin to engage in what Kellner (1992: 232) terms a "political struggle" for transformation.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that, through blogging, women are able to identify social structures that need transformation and advocate for an overhaul of these structures that still oppress

them. For example, the findings reveal that the barriers that women face in terms of active political participation are not barriers that can simply fall away because there are new media platforms or “new media conversations” are taking place, but require unlearning of the oppressive socially constructed norms of what womanhood entails (blogger 16:18:2016). The findings further support the patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean society, which instils fear in sharing one’s views on political matters, silencing women in the process. Therefore, from a feminist critical theory perspective, women are using self-reflection to identify patriarchy and those systems that oppress them. According to feminist critical theorists, this action alone contributes to learning, which is a vital aspect for resisting domination.

However, because feminist critical theory is “critical” of communication and technology in general, as it sees the media (in its entirety) as an arm of capitalism with very little possibility of reform or democratisation from within (McQuail, 2013: 46), the finding that blogs are participatory for marginalised women does not conform to this theoretical perspective. This is because feminist critical theory views technology, and online media specifically, as embedded in the power structures of society (Fuchs, 2012), and therefore perpetuating the same privileges for women and men that obtain in the offline world. The bloggers actually highlight how women, because of their social position in the offline world, find it difficult to access, afford and acquire the digital literacy and discursive skills required to participate – resulting in such platforms being accessible only to those with the means to access it, afford it, and those with the literacy to harness it, therefore expressing the views and perspectives of the elite. This contradictory aspect of blogs as widening the scope for political participation and democratic debate is subtly overshadowed by the power influences from politics, economy and culture that continue to exert pressure on the function and effects of online media, rendering the participatory modes exclusionary.

8.3.1.4 The critical political economy analysis

Critical political economy (CPE) is concerned with communication and power in different contexts (McChesney, 2013) and, more specifically, with the fact that media owners have power to control communication channels and news content, and who participates in them. From this premise, the fact that individual women activists and women’s organisations provide spaces for women’s voices is indicative of the role of blogs in balancing the power spheres between women and men, and confirms the intricate relationship between communication and power in the quest for gender equality. In addition, the provision of spaces for women’s voices by feminist media owners reveals the particular political, economic and cultural environment to which Zimbabwean women have been subjected. For example, women have been denied access to communication spaces, limiting their freedom of

expression, a fundamental human right (UN Women, 2015). Thus, the provision of communication spaces facilitates freedom of expression and validates women's discourses as a source of knowledge. This, arguably, amplifies women's voices and agency.

Further, the finding that women are able to share their experiences, and those of other women, demonstrates the valorisation of everyday resistance, particularly by individual bloggers and feminist media owners on the studied websites. The women activists exercise their power as selves and institutions to validate the humanity of the marginalised – those that have been depoliticised by the political, economic and cultural ideologies imposed by capitalism and those in power, as also argued by Obadare and Willems (2014: 19). Therefore, these platforms are a critical step towards women's participation in politics, as they enable public discussions by the masses on certain topics in a country in which freedom of assembly and expression is thwarted and criminalised (blogger 2).

However, similarly to feminist critical theory, even though blogs might offer possibilities for participation according to the findings of this study, critical political economy theorists are of the view that online media can be considered oppressive and reproduce existing hierarchies of power due to factors such as the ownership, use and control of information (Fuchs, 2012). To support the above assertion, the findings reveal that Zimbabwean women face online violence that seeks to silence them and “put them in their places” (blogger 16:20:2016). Hence, from a critical political economy perspective, I proffer that the Zimbabwean political, economic and cultural environment continues to be an impediment to the effective utilisation of new media platforms, such as blogs. This is because, as Fuchs (2012) argues, online media are embedded in the power structures of society. Consequently, one can conclude that women battling for recognition as autonomous individuals, to have authority to speak and to be listened to, and power to be accepted in the home and society, face similar hurdles online.

The analysis and discussion of the findings on the theme *deliberative democracy* are next.

8.3.2 Deliberative democracy

8.3.2.1 Overview of major findings on deliberative democracy

Overall, the findings on the theme *deliberative democracy* across the five websites and interview transcripts indicate that deliberative democracy is perceived as awareness, as realising the potential to advocate for change, and as conversations that empower women to fight domination and promote equal participation between women and men. Deliberative democracy is further perceived as

improving the economy, and as the realisation that communication can bring positive transformation by society if used strategically by both individuals and groups to advocate for positive change in issues that affect them. The changes advocated for in the blog content are the need for a change of mindsets, both ideological and cultural, as well as a change in policies. With regard to activities aimed at integrating women into all spheres of life, the bloggers revealed that information dissemination on women's issues is a key activity their organisations focus on – to ensure women have a voice and a platform to share their perspectives. Similarly, the changes advocated for by the bloggers include the stabilisation of the political and economic environment, access to funding by women, training in online media use, and provision of access to the internet by women in rural areas.

8.3.2.2 The womanism theory analysis

The findings reveal that blogs are used for information dissemination on women's issues. According to the findings from both the blogs and interviews, creating awareness is a vital aspect of self-introspection and realisation of the potential to change one's circumstances. There is a realisation by journalist activists and women's organisations that sharing information is critical to women's resistance. Collins (1991) reminds us that knowledge sharing is repressed because it offers skills essential to challenge the very tenets of the system of domination and oppression. Therefore, from a womanist perspective, I proffer that Zimbabwean women have identified this particular muting and obliterating of their voices, and appreciate the need to re-surface these voices through women's everyday stories and narratives. Thus, blogs enable Zimbabwean women to express agency within the hostile, political and cultural environment, and advocate for an equal society in which women and men enjoy the same privileges.

The findings on deliberative democracy further show that Zimbabwean women are conscious that communication, if used strategically, is vital to transform culture and the ideologies that suppress them, and therefore is the ultimate liberator. What is discerned from the findings is that, while there is no conscious effort by the bloggers to prompt other women to participate, the fact that bloggers tell stories that resonate with the majority of Zimbabwean women allows for conversations and explorations, with greater nuance, of the narratives that have been obscured from dominant discourse.

8.3.2.3 The feminist critical theory analysis

One of the fundamental aspects of feminist critical theory as it relates to media and communication is whether media empower and engage citizens to rethink their socio-political role (Fiske, 1993; Giroux, 1997). The goal of feminist critical theorists therefore is to investigate the potential of any

communication platform to enable participation by those excluded from broader discourses, and whether they are able to begin to identify this exclusion and engage on those social systems that oppress them. The findings of this study indicate that blogs enable women to rethink their social political role. This is because, by reliving their daily experiences together with other women, and with a wider audience, Zimbabwean women are able to identify those institutions and systems that oppress them. In the process of utilising this network of similar and individually distinct voices, women are able to advocate for the transformation of Zimbabwean society. For example, blogs by WCoZ, HerZimbabwe and Kubatana, as shown in Chapter 6 of this dissertation, reveal that they have facilitated awareness of and learning on social and structural impediments, such as the culture of violence and patriarchy. What is observed is that through these everyday conversations between and amongst women and men, Zimbabwean women are able to identify the ideological shift(s) required of both the self, the community, and the entire Zimbabwean society. Further, the news media blogs *The Herald* and the *Chronicle* identify a poorly performing economy as exacerbating women's oppression, and therefore advocate for transformation of policies that will have a direct impact on positive change in the economy.

Similarly, as shown in Chapter 7 of this dissertation, bloggers support the finding that women are able to identify the system(s) that oppress them. For example, blogger 16 highlights the harassment and violence that filters through online, writing that this is symptomatic of the realities in the offline world. What is discerned here is that fear of violence oppresses women in that it forces them to self-censor or avoid controversial or emotive political and social issues. However, while this is a negative aspect of blogging, the fact that women are able to identify how this violence manifests contributes to their knowledge and learning and better equips them in reformulating their resistance strategies. Therefore, I argue that the aspect of blogs providing knowledge and enhancing learning conform to critical theory of the media, as it enables the affirmation of blogs (as an aspect of broader technology) as playing a positive role in the democratisation process. Kellner (1992: 223) reminds us that it is important for critical theorists to ascertain which aspects of technology are beneficial, and which are not, and under what conditions.

With regard to the democratic potential of blogs to ensure equality between women and men, the findings indicate that the Zimbabwean political environment will not be changed by the new media platforms unless the platforms become accessible to the majority, as well as if there is a critical mass of women who are "politically conscious" to articulate alternative political visions to the dominant male-informed ones, and that this critical mass of women should hold social capital as well as some influence offline (blogger 16). This finding indicates that, while blogs are democratic in the

sense that they are an open space for diverse voices, it would take more than conversing online to transform the Zimbabwean political, economic and cultural spheres – and subsequently the lives of women. To illustrate this, one blogger writes that it would be naive to believe new media platforms can improve engagement with marginal groups “without” (blogger’s emphasis) more introspection on how political organising takes place offline (blogger 4).

The finding on the need for an ideological transformation of Zimbabwean society and its social institutions, particularly the media, concurs with Williams and Delli Carpini’s (2010) argument that the transformation of the “media regime”, that is the historically specific institutions, norms, processes and actors that determine the gates through which information about culture, politics and economics passes through to shape the discursive environment, is required if marginal voices are to be incorporated. This is because an ideology is culturally constructed, rather than a natural, simple reflection of reality (Alcoff, cited in Collins, 1990: 14), thus possibilities for a political, economic and cultural transformation brought about by women’s resistance on new media are a necessary condition for democracy.

8.3.2.4 The critical political economy analysis

The examination of blogs and the interviews with bloggers on the democratic potential of blogs as communication platforms revealed that blogs are used as sites for resistance to power by both bloggers and website owners. The content of the blogs presents a reality of agitation and discontent about political, economic and cultural power, with the key message being that a transformative agenda needs to be embraced by both individuals and society, beginning by recognising women’s potential and subsequently improving their participation in the public sphere. Thus, through these conversations, women are able to stimulate “political consciousness” (Thomson, 2014: 109) and begin to resist oppression by expressing their political, economic, social and cultural preferences. Therefore, this finding affirms Patterson’s argument (cited in Mule, 2007: 289), that women’s places of agency “not only depict social interaction and political events[,] but implies the possibility of radical change”.

In one blog, the writer (blogger 4) notes that, unless there is a transformation of the mind-set, first within the self, at home and in the wider society, very few women would participate in politics. This follows the realisation that, unless women and men operate on the same level in the political, economic and cultural spheres, women would remain confined to private spaces. The blogger gives an example of how participation in politics requires resources and, because women lack such

economic power as a consequence of Zimbabwe's political economy, the political arena remains a preserve for those with financial resources.

In addition, by projecting the realities of Zimbabwean women's daily struggles, the findings reveal the complex interplay of individual human agency, circumstances and other socio-economic imperatives that affect these struggles. This analysis supports earlier findings by Mule (2007), namely that African women are neither passive recipients nor mere victims. Therefore, from a critical political economy perspective, what is discerned in this study is that blogs enable women to exhibit their power as individuals and as collectives. Subsequently, this power, which is influenced and enforced by their circumstances, is enabling them to chart their own historical path, as was also argued by Marx (1976).

Furthermore, the findings reveal that the institutional websites control the content and what women should discuss on the online platforms. Although only one website, HerZimbabwe, was explicit that it does commission content on a regular base, it was, however, evident from the analysis that blogging for institutional websites conforms to certain standards, in line with the organisation's mandate. I therefore argue that this discriminatory tendency of the studied websites, to use their power [as institutions] to prioritise certain topics over others, arguably limits the presence of women on these online platforms, and ultimately restricts "new acts of cooperation" and a "new" story that can motivate co-operation among those who have not worked together before (Dewey, cited in Couldry, 2010: 145). The nature of media ownership and these institutional structures therefore constrains the democratic potential of online platforms such as blogs.

The analysis and discussion of the theme *empowerment* are next.

8.3.3 Empowerment

8.3.3.1 Overview of major findings on empowerment

The findings on the theme *empowerment* from both the blogs and interview transcripts reveal empowerment to include individual consciousness and knowledge acquisition by both individual women and society. In addition, empowerment is a realisation by women of their potential to change their situations by rejecting the knowledge that disempowers them. Furthermore, empowerment is projected as awareness of injustices, networking, conversations and information sharing, self-definition, self-expression, agency, and women producing their own content. In addition to discovering the self, blogs on news media websites project empowerment as economic empowerment, skills acquisition and uplifting women politically and economically by identifying their strengths and

capabilities. *The Herald* and *Chronicle* blogs emphasise that the empowerment of individual women requires a revitalisation of the economy. Similarly, the majority of the bloggers highlighted the confidentiality accorded by blogs as giving women a voice and enabling them to play their agential role, and a giving them a chance to challenge the status quo. Lastly, blogging has empowered women economically through employment creation.

8.3.3.2 The womanism theory analysis

In this study, womanism was applied to examine how women express agency within the hostile political, economic and social environment and, through this theoretical application, this study searches for the voices, actions and opinions and stories of women whose actual stories remain remote, as argued by Taylor (1998). As highlighted in Chapter 7 of this dissertation, 15 of the 20 bloggers perceived blogs as facilitating a positive change in Zimbabwean women's lives, particularly because they are able to renegotiate their political, economic and cultural marginalisation through awareness and individual consciousness. This is in line with the womanist goal of improving the social and material conditions of women, and promoting empowerment (Mangena, 2013). Therefore, I contend that, by enabling information sharing, self-definition, self-expression, the production of own content and, ultimately, agency and voice, the bloggers, through their writing, are rejecting what Collins (1991: 230) refers to as the "dimensions of knowledge". These dimensions of knowledge being rejected by the women include knowledge at the personal, cultural or institutional levels that perpetuates objectification and dehumanisation. Thus, through blogging, Zimbabwean women are validating that which is part of their everyday lives, and that which ultimately seeks to improve their conditions. In other words, it is the recognition of this pre-existing potential to speak, express one's self, and critique cultural and other social systems that limit one's ability that is empowering for Zimbabwean women, as they are now able to project their own lives, and where they want to see themselves.

Furthermore, as Thomson (2014) posits, self-identification is both an act of resistance and a moment of consciousness; thus, through sharing stories online, women have rejected remaining "motionless on the outside" (Collins, 1991: 224). Rather, as the findings show, Zimbabwean women are revealing that self-knowledge and the ability to voice their concerns publicly, despite the conditions that severely limit them to do so, are imperative for their existence. In addition, self-knowledge is enabling women to gain the confidence needed to realise their potential within the public space. For example, as shown in Chapter 6 of this dissertation, women leaders are becoming recognised and co-opted into critical decision-making institutions at the community level –

opportunities that are empowering for both individual women and society and, arguably, opening up public spaces for women.

Furthermore, what is discerned is that the self-definitions by journalist activists and women's organisations, informed by the daily realities of the hostile political environment and harsh economic conditions, indicate how the Zimbabwean woman is projected as a symbol of "strength" and "resilience" (blog 32:6 & 32:19). This finding is supported by the womanist perspective, which values self-definitions, as these show existence, survival, power and determination to exercise that power in punitive environments, as argued by Hudson-Weems (1993). The fact that Zimbabwean women are sharing these experiences, celebrating their strengths and articulating their concerns in a public arena is indicative of empowerment.

8.3.3.3 The feminist critical theory analysis

Generally, critical theorists posit that knowledge is power (for example Littlejohn, 1992; Kellner, 1992). From this premise, feminist critical theorists such as Swai (2010) argue that power is based in knowledge, with the production of knowledge depending on power in order to receive acceptability in society. Thus, for this study, it was imperative to examine this intricately intertwined relationship to assess whether blogging empowers Zimbabwean women. From this premise, this study's finding – that empowerment is awareness of injustices – supports the feminist critical theory perspective that it is essential for women to share knowledge in their resistance. This is because, by sharing their experiences that emanate from their relationships with the political, economic and cultural environment, Zimbabwean women are able to identify and create meanings for those aspects that are oppressive. In this regard, Bannerji (1995) argues that knowledge that allows an end to oppression requires a consideration of history and social relations to trace the reasons for, and the forms of, oppression. Therefore, through sharing and interpreting their lived experiences, Zimbabwean women become aware of how and where oppression manifests itself, and they ultimately are equipped with strategies to transform such institutions and practices. In the process they are "experiencing a feeling of power", as argued by Swai (2010: 169). For example, as highlighted in Chapter 6 of this dissertation, women are able to question the electoral process, which is discriminatory and gender insensitive (blog 17). There is also a realisation that fewer women participate in politics and the economy, and that women's rights continue to be violated under the guise of tradition.

Furthermore, awareness empowers women to demonstrate the contradictions that emanate from culture. For example, through sharing their lived experiences, women are able to deliberate on aspects of culture that are no longer compatible with their current identities. What is observed is that,

while bloggers affirm the benefits of culture and tradition, they similarly identify the contradictions of cultural practices, such as wife inheritance, which continue to oppress women. I therefore argue that, equipped with such knowledge, Zimbabwean women are empowered to challenge the status quo and advocate for societal transformation, which is the ultimate goal of feminist critical theory.

8.3.3.4 The critical political economy analysis

Castells (2011) posits that, how people perceive the institutions under which they live, and how they relate to the culture of their economy and society, defines whose power can be exercised and how it can be exercised. From this premise, Zimbabwean women are able to identify the power within them, to reject the male-dominated view of society, and to be the “voice for the voiceless” (blogger 16:24:2016) by sharing everyday experiences of encounters with the institutions and culture under which they live. This finding conforms to the critical political economy perspective, namely that power motivates textual production and, in turn, that power is also embodied in the text (Butosi, 2012). Similarly, Castells (2011) argues that the social power in digital media operates primarily in the construction of meaning in the human mind. I add that, because women are able to construct their own meaning, they are contributing towards shaping the communication agenda and including women’s narratives in the public sphere. This view affirms Castells’ (2011) argument that, in the digital media, not only government elites, but also editors and journalists, set the communication agenda. Individual activists and women’s organisations are agents of social change to transform societal norms.

The findings also reveal the absence of legislative barriers and bureaucratic processes involved in content production online, allowing women to enhance their learning and acquire power to fight patriarchy-induced barriers. This is in contrast to Zimbabwe’s traditional media, in which women’s access to the media is limited and fraught with structural impediments that silence women’s voices (blogger 17). Therefore, this finding does not conform to critical political economy theory, as it indicates that blogging does circumvent the pressures associated with media ownership and provides Zimbabwean women access to the production and consumption of media content.

Another finding identified under this theme is that blogging enables employment opportunities and empowers women financially. Therefore, in an economy in which women endure poverty more than men (Garatidye, 2014), blogging is also a source of income for Zimbabwean women. However, while financial empowerment is positive for women under the conditions they face, this finding also indicates how, in a poor economic environment and from a critical political economy approach, activism is torn between genuinely performing a transformational agenda and

pushing the ideals of capitalism by chasing only themes that interest funders. Therefore, these particularities of the Zimbabwean political economy ultimately shape the form of activism being implemented.

The analysis and discussion of findings on the theme *public sphere* are next.

8.3.4 Public sphere

8.3.4.1 Overview of major findings on the public sphere

The findings on the theme *public sphere* across the five websites and interview transcripts reveal that blogs are used to promote and protect fundamental human rights, in particular women's rights, as enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013. Other uses include: raising awareness, self-expression, exposing conversations that would otherwise not be heard, questioning injustices, and acting as an alternative space for storytelling and positive engagement, as well as for business networking.

The WCoZ blogs project the protection of human rights, while Kubatana and HerZimbabwe project blogs as alternative spaces for individual storytelling, self-expression and group organising. The news media websites (*The Herald* and the *Chronicle*) project business networking for economic empowerment, creating awareness and newswriting purposes as some of the key uses.

8.3.4.2 The womanism theory analysis

From a womanist perspective, protecting and promoting women's rights emanates from an understanding of the existence of women as full human beings, despite the hegemonic ideologies that have and continue to consecrate male superiority in society. By utilising blogs as alternative spaces for storytelling and promoting women's rights, blogs authenticate the particular situation confronting Zimbabwean women, especially under a culture that mutes women's voices and a political environment fraught with violence and intimidation (blog 15). Blog use therefore supports the womanist approach in that, by enabling self-expression and political conversations away from patriarchy, they act as a cultural resource and document women's lived experiences that have never been documented before. Thus, circulating women's perspectives and meanings of everyday life extends the discursive practices to include a "new" story and, in the process, widens the public sphere (Couldry, 2010: 145).

In addition, the fact that blogs allow for the discussion by both women and men of specific issues that are relevant to Zimbabwean women affirms Monberg's (1998: 435) optimistic view of

online media as offering new spaces for narrative exchange, and widening the public sphere, especially as issues that would otherwise remain “submerged and depoliticised” are now being highlighted.

8.3.4.3 The feminist critical theory analysis

Women’s storytelling brings to the public arena “the woman’s untold story in today’s media”, as argued by Peters (2001: 14). Therefore, the approach to women’s lived experiences adopted in this study is akin to that of Fraser (1990), who argues that counterdiscourses and counterinterpretations from women are emerging online, compromising and complicating the already established norms of political processes. Thus, through storytelling, blogs offer women opportunities to participate, directly and indirectly, in national discourse by sharing their perspectives of the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. In this way, blogs, as alternative spaces, motivate co-operation and enable counterpublics, in this case women as individuals and as collectives, as an opportunity to find support (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). This concurs with Etling, Faris and Palfrey’s (2010) argument that, while political organising in a strong democracy is driven by organisations with strong networks, political change in authoritarian regimes is more likely to be enabled by more decentralised associations with loose networks. From a feminist critical theory perspective, therefore, blogs, by providing alternative understanding of the situation, contribute towards challenging the established norms and status quo and, as emphasised by the bloggers, transformation may not occur overnight, but this sets in motion the process of resistance. The assessment of feminist critical theory of blogs as alternative spaces for counternarratives augments other, similar findings on online news media published by Zimbabweans in the diaspora (Moyo, 2007; Chari, 2009).

However, despite the positive aspects of blogs facilitating counternarratives, the data reveal that masculine power continues to infiltrate online media. For example, blogger 9 writes that women bloggers suffer from cyberbullying and other forms of hostility for their views. This is an indication that online spaces are still not receptive to deeper engagement on women’s issues, owing to entrenched patriarchy. Ultimately, from a feminist critical theory perspective, this reproduction of power structures and continued hindering of counterhegemonic insights constrict online spaces to the classical Habermasian public sphere, in which digital media, similar to mainstream media, remain the preserve of the politically, economically and culturally powerful.

8.3.4.4 The critical political economy analysis

An examination of how Zimbabwe's political, economic and cultural environment impacts on online media use, and specifically blog use by women on the five websites, reveals different projections from the studied websites, an indication that highlights the different political and economic dynamics that intersect with media ownership. For example, the news media sites *The Herald* and *Chronicle*, which are owned by the state, project the business networking and entrepreneurial aspect of blogs as crucial for women. The emphasis is that women should seek business opportunities and market their expertise to new audiences (blog 31).

I therefore argue that there is a deliberate effort to avoid radicalising online media for counterdiscourses. Rather, there is a cautious approach by the state-owned news media websites not to project blogs as political spaces, but rather to highlight the commercial aspect of online media use. This is in line with editorial policies that guide the content, and affirms the notions of Curran *et al.* (2009) that market-driven media systems serve the interests of the capitalists. I further postulate that, in authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe, the political ideology shapes and dictates the course of media content, particularly in state-owned media – thus narrowing the paradigms of arguments (Fraser, 1990).

This approach of media websites differs from that of the women's activist websites, WCoZ, Kubatana and HerZimbabwe. The three websites unequivocally highlight that they are alternative platforms allowing the discussion of themes missing from the traditional media, with one stating that "we [HerZimbabwe] do not apologise for unpacking and telling the truth" (blogger 4:33:2015). In other words, the women's activist websites distinctly reveal their responses to domination and, in the process, expose the injustices facing Zimbabwean women. Ultimately, this sense of injustice, according to the Personal Narratives Group (1989), is critical for political action. However, similarly to the news media websites, the approach of the women's activist websites is informed and motivated by their organisational goals, and ultimately those of the funders. What is discerned from this finding is that the internet's political economy is driven by commercial interests that characterise traditional media, as argued by Dahlgren (2005) and Fuchs (2012).

Furthermore, the study reveals that blog content reproduces power structures inherent in society. For example, the study found that the websites' administrators and managers decide on the content by commissioning blog articles on selected themes (blogger 4). This supports the commercial motive of activist media. From a critical political economy perspective, and in concurrence with Fuchs's (2012) argument, this study suggests that the Zimbabwean political, economic and cultural

environment continues to be an impediment to the effective utilisation of new media. This is because, as Fuchs (2012) argues, online media are embedded in the power structures of society. In other words, online media, as posited by Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006), are an extension of the offline world.

Despite the political, economic and cultural factors that impede on the utilisation of blogs for women's activism, I proffer that the provision of spaces for women's voices, enabling public discussions on certain topics in a country where freedom of assembly and expression is thwarted and criminalised, broadens the public sphere. In addition, by valorising everyday resistance, feminist media owners of the studied websites exercise their power as selves, and institutions validate the humanity of those who have been "short-changed, up-staged or displaced" by the political, economic and cultural ideologies imposed by capitalism and those in power (Obadare & Willems, 2014: 19).

The analysis and discussion of findings on the theme *representation* are next.

8.3.5 Representation

8.3.5.1 Overview of major findings on representation

Overall, the findings on the theme *representation* across the five websites and interview transcripts highlight representation as women's engagement at all levels of decision making, including their appointment to cabinet, and implementing programmes that empower women to organise and strategise on issues affecting them. In addition, representation includes women's self-definitions, which are done through reconnecting with the past and retelling the stories of women as mothers. Furthermore, these self-definitions enable women to understand that they hold power to change their situation by refuting stereotypes and projecting womanhood positively. The findings further reveal that the sharing of women's stories by women, and the provision of platforms that enable knowledge creation, reinforce the realisation of women's self-existence, which subsequently enables them to use their agency. Another inference is that giving women a voice entails giving voice to men so that the discourse of women's empowerment also integrates men, and thus the entire society.

The study furthermore reveals communication strategies that are employed by the individual bloggers and websites to project these representations. These include using stories of their lives and sharing these within a wider network, targeting particular and critical issues not normally covered by traditional media and using women's voices in the blogs. Other strategies include packaging and distributing blog content to offline audiences and adopting feminist narrative and language.

8.3.5.2 The womanism theory analysis

According to Migraine-George (2008), while African communities lost their power of self-representation during the colonial era, African women experienced a double loss of self-representative agency, both as members of their communities and as women expected to conform to new forms of gender discrimination. Thus, as Squires (2000) posits, politics and power are formalised and institutionalised by male public actors, rendering women invisible. The finding that blogs act as sites for self-definition and representation therefore indicates possibilities for re-integrating women into what was previously known as male spaces (Segall, 2013), particularly decision-making positions. This is because there is more room for women to define and package their content and to express their perspectives on issues of interest and unique to them through blogs. This assessment affirms Migraine-George's (2008) argument that the marginalisation of African women does not come from the fact that they cannot represent themselves, but rather from the fact that there are only a few, as well as limited, spaces for them to speak and be seen. Thus, from a womanist perspective, I argue that blogs are enabling Zimbabwean women to escape their patriarchal confines, which limit their participation in mass media spaces, to exhibit and validate their self-existence and celebrate their strengths and skills in these online spaces – creating new and alternative knowledge in the process. In other words, I postulate that blogs are a celebration by Zimbabwean women of their womanhood and existence in the face of adversity arising from the political, economic and cultural turmoil by which they are faced.

Furthermore, the representation of womanhood through women's lived experiences unearths Zimbabwean women's power at a particular historical moment and acts as an appeal to other women, and to society as a whole, to re-engage in political, economic and culture-specific issues that are impacting on women's positioning in Zimbabwean society. Therefore, as Mikell (1997) argues, Western feminism does not address specific issues experienced in African societies, hence the womanism approach affords an understanding of how, through blogging, Zimbabwean women use their experiences to select, reject, renegotiate, represent and position themselves despite the restrictive political, economic and cultural environment. For womanism, the opportunity to speak and be visible in an environment where "freedom of expression is a dangerous enterprise" (blogger 12) and very often criminalised is on its own liberating for both the self and the wider society.

Lastly, by using the voices of other women, particularly mothers, in the blogs, the bloggers not only promote inter-generational dialogue, which is critical in womanism, but are able to integrate the past with the present. The resultant message is that women can represent themselves better if they

learn from their mothers, and there is a reconnection with history (blogs 37 & 38). Through the voices of mothers, Zimbabwean women represent themselves as courageous, resilient, determined, hard-working, powerful, spiritual and inseparable from their villages. Overall, these representations, which conform to the values of womanism, speak of the complexities of Zimbabwean women's lives – “ordinary, yet extraordinary” lives (blog 36:20:6).

8.3.5.3 The feminist critical theory analysis

The media are important actors of change in the contemporary dynamics of democracy, as they are, amongst others, one of the social institutions used to maintain the continuity of the status quo. This is achieved through the collective frames of reference they foster (Dahlgren, 2009). For feminists, such frames, riding on culture and patriarchy, have defined femininity in negative and restrictive terms, thus it is important for critical theorists to understand the potential of any media to transform such frames to accommodate both women and men. In this study, blogs are highlighted as providing an opportunity for the representation of femininity, and specifically womanhood – thus, what is discerned is that, contrary to the feminist critical theory view that the media solely are an arm of the elite, perpetuating capitalist ideologies (Fiske, 1993), blogs offer possibilities for reform, both in the way individual women perceive themselves and in the way society regards women.

In addition, the findings reveal that Zimbabwean women are publishing on particular, critical and “taboo” issues that are not normally covered by mainstream media, for example abortion, sex and sexuality, amongst other issues annihilated from traditional media frames (blogger 4:32:2015). This indicates that, through blogging, Zimbabwean women are able to bring to the public space these critical issues that affect their lives from their own perspectives, thus bifurcating the public and the private spheres, as argued for by Dahlgren (2009). I further proffer that Zimbabwean women therefore are able to identify and locate themselves, both as individuals and collectives, within the pertinent socio-cultural issues obtaining in Zimbabwe. This assertion refutes the critical theory perspective that the media creates voicelessness and invisibility; rather, this study shows an aspect of online media that enables an understanding of how the public sphere can be influenced by the socio-cultural struggles occurring in the private sphere, particularly in contexts where communication is restricted.

Furthermore, by reflecting on the experiences of mothers in interpreting the current political, economic and socio-cultural conditions in which Zimbabwean women find themselves, the bloggers are able to actualise their experiences and, in the process constitute these into what the Personal Narratives Groups (1989: 65) calls “new cultural possibilities”. In this way, activists identify aspects of culture that oppress them, as advocated by feminist critical theory. For example, in blog 38:7:3,

the blogger writes that “civilisation has locked women in a cage” by obliterating dialogues between generations, arguing that there is a need to represent previous realities in order to interpret the current ones because “the voices of our mothers also speak about our current lives”.

8.3.5.4 The critical political economy analysis

Media representations and frames cannot be studied outside the context of their linkages to culture and ownership patterns in the media, as media owners and capitalist influences dictate the way and the manner in which issues are covered (Freedman, 2014). The findings of this study reveal that, through blogs, Zimbabwean women are able to project femininity as a strength and not a weakness, and that they are able to join the public and private spheres, revealing how their political, economic and socio-cultural experiences result in permeability between the two spheres. Thus, what I further discern here is that, by sharing the lived experiences of how they have overcome, and struggle with, the challenges of being a woman in Zimbabwe, the bloggers highlight tenets of self-representation, while at the same time voicing concerns about socio-cultural aspects that hinder women’s self-representation. From this premise, and in line with Couldry’s (2004) assertion that representation is tied to media power, the bloggers utilise their embodied power not to act as society expects them to, but to represent the Zimbabwean woman and facilitate the emergence of Zimbabwean feminist politics in the public arena.

Furthermore, the results indicate that journalist activists and women’s organisations distribute their content to larger audiences, both online and offline, through sharing with other organisational websites in the wider civic society and using other information communication technologies such as Twitter. This indicates that blogs, as communication platforms, afford bloggers, as both individuals and institutions, the power to produce and distribute their own content, packaged according to their own preferred frames, as argued for by Gallagher (2013).

However, even though blogs might offer possibilities for self-representation of and engagement by Zimbabwean women, this study discovered various differences amongst the studied websites on how women and women’s issues are represented, largely owing to media ownership. For example, there is a higher level of personalisation on the three women’s activist media sites (WCoZ, Kubatana and HerZimbabwe), which is missing from the news media blogs. What could be discerned from this is that, by personalising issues by either using the self and other people, or connecting to wider society, bloggers politicise issues and seek deeper engagement with their audiences. This was not the case for the two news media sites, *The Herald* and *Chronicle*, whose purpose is to disseminate information. In addition, while the three women activist media sites use ordinary women’s stories,

observations and events as illustrations, the majority of the news media blogs have experts conversing through the blogger, limiting personal opinion. This finding highlights and confirms how, through media ownership and other structural elements, existing hierarchies and systems of power can be appropriated to serve the interests of those in power (Feenberg, 2010).

The analysis and discussion of findings on the theme *challenges* are next.

8.3.6 Challenges

8.3.6.1 Overview of major findings on challenges

The findings on the theme *challenges* across the five websites and interview transcripts reveal that fewer women in Zimbabwe participate in elections because of a lack of information, a lack of time due to gender roles, political violence and gender-based violence. In addition, a lack of financial resources and the general culture of subordination discourage women from participating in politics. The hostile political and economic environment has further eroded women's opportunities for participation, as the state uses its political power to dominate and oppress women through violence, intimidation and limiting their voices in the public sphere. Other impediments that emanate from a poorly performing economy include lack of education, employment and financial independence, which consequently limits women's access to power. Lastly, laws and regulations, as well as a lack of access to the internet and technological skills, impede women's political participation.

8.3.6.2 The womanism theory analysis

Womanism is a feminist paradigm that serves the improvement of the social and material conditions of women and promotes empowerment. According to Taylor (1998), to achieve this the theory advocates for the expansion of women's perceptions and for increasing action towards realising alternative possibilities. As revealed in this study, one of the challenges generally contributing to fewer women in politics is a lack of information. This finding conforms to the womanist perspective, as it enables the study to uncover, through the meanings created by bloggers, the underlying objective of creating consciousness and knowledge amongst women. In analysing lived experiences, this study was able to discern the social experiences of Zimbabwean women, especially a lack of access to mainstream media, both as sources of news and as content producers, owing to their social positions ascribed by patriarchy.

The womanist lens also enables the identification of how gender roles affect women's participation in politics. The particularities of the Zimbabwean women's culture dictate and restrict

women to the household and other traditional roles. While this is common in other African settings (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994), what is unique to Zimbabwe is that this form of patriarchy is entrenched and achieved through physical, emotional and economic violence towards women (blogs 1 & 8). Thus, the roles of a woman, as dictated by society, often work against women's participation in the public sphere. Therefore, by enabling women to express their agency in a public space, blogs collapse the physical barriers that restrict and confine women to the private sphere.

8.3.6.3 The feminist critical theory analysis

Through an examination of the challenges that affect women's presence in the public sphere, and subsequently in politics, the study found that the political environment systematically entrenches a male, and capitalist, ideology, suppressing and annihilating voices of women from national discourse. By restricting communicative space through a plethora of legislation, the Zimbabwean media act as instruments of social control, thereby serving the interest of domination (Kellner, 1992). Through a critical assessment of blog content and meaning-making by the bloggers, this study discovered that, to a certain extent, blogs conform to structural rigidities similar to those observable in traditional media. This is because blog content is framed within specific thematic areas targeted by the websites, and their selection is derived from political, economic and cultural factors.

Furthermore, what is discerned from this study is that women's activist organisations, as well as news media websites, use their power to perpetuate particular narratives and versions of reality at the expense of others. For example, one blogger highlights that project proposals by the majority of women's activist websites tend to be crafted from a top-to-bottom perspective, whereby those at the grassroots level have less contribution on what to prioritise and are treated as though they have no agency, ideas or voice. Thus, the "voice of [the] voiceless" emanating from this type of approach (blogger 16:2016) leaves little room for women's lived experiences and diversity, which are important aspects in feminist critical theory, as it is through experiences that women are able to identify how and where oppression occurs.

In addition, because Zimbabwean women lack economic resources, and therefore power, they find it difficult to access communication spaces, and for aspiring women politicians this incapacitates them when campaigning for office (blog 32). Consequently, women fail to make it to the first round of primary elections (blog 32). Subsequently, the general culture of subjugating women prevents women's entry into the political and economic sectors.

8.3.6.4 The critical political economy analysis

An analysis of the challenges discerned from women's lived experiences reveals a complex interplay of political, economic and socio-cultural conditions, including laws and regulations that continue to affect media structure, functions and behaviour, and ultimately who gets to communicate. Chari (2009) reminds us that, despite the proliferation of the independent media since the 1990s, the Zimbabwean government still owns the majority media, thus constraining and limiting participation in and engagement with the media by the majority of citizens, an argument affirmed by Moyo (2011). Both Chari and Moyo conclude that online media are therefore an alternative. However, while this study attests to the participatory and integrative nature of blogs, it also highlights how online media are susceptible to the offline social organisation of cultural production, with state manipulation consequently silencing critical voices and maintaining the status quo. This is because, as one blog highlights, most of the online communication infrastructure is owned by governments, and they have the power to "turn it off" (blog 25:28:3), thereby curtailing freedom of speech and association. This concurs with Feenberg (2005), who posits that technologies are inherently political, since they are designed for a specific purpose that fosters certain a appropriateness more than others. In addition, the political environment restricts the communicative space through regulations and other forms of intimidation, such as cyberbullying and harassment by both state and society. Women therefore self-censor for fear of criminalisation and victimisation, while others disengage from emotive political issues (blogger 16).

This study furthermore found that a poorly performing economy reduces the communicative power of women. As expressed in the blogs and interview transcripts, Zimbabwean women lack economic and financial independence. This impairs their ability to make independent and informed choices about their lives, and also makes it difficult for them to enter into decision-making positions and politics. This affirms findings by Schlozman *et al.* (1999) and Bimber (2003), who identified a lack of access to socio-economic resources and education, respectively, as impediments to political participation, both online and offline. In addition, women are living in a society in which government is failing to provide basic essentials like water and electricity (blog 19), and there is a high unemployment rate and poverty (blog 47). Therefore, for Zimbabwean women, faced with the burden of caring for families under such difficult circumstances, survival becomes their prime activity, rather than accessing digital platforms for public engagement. Thus, by virtue of them being mothers, Zimbabwean women have been forced by the economic conditions to become breadwinners. This reversal of gender roles, while positive, arguably further burdens women more than men. The economic conditions do not only influence women's individual power to engage in the public sphere,

but also that of women's activist websites. Faced with market pressure, these organisations constantly have to find ways of funding their activities and growing traffic to their websites.

Zimbabwe's political economy environment furthermore is such that online activism is limited to those with access to online platforms using smartphones, or laptops with internet connection, and therefore is controlled by access to resources, amongst other factors. In addition, the study reveals that a lack of technological skills to effectively utilise the online media spaces is a challenge to women's engagement online, as also argued by Norris (2001).

8.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the findings of the study presented in Chapters 6 and 7 of this dissertation were analysed and discussed according to the six themes of the study and within the frameworks of the three theoretical perspectives, namely womanism, feminist critical theory and critical political economy theories.

Overall, the analysis of the findings on the theme *participation* reveals that Zimbabwean women are now able to develop a voice of their own as individuals and as a group, while regarding *deliberative democracy* the analysis reveals that, while it would take more than conversing online to transform the Zimbabwean political, economic and cultural spheres, women are beginning to engage in a political struggle for transformation. With regard to *empowerment*, the analysis reveals that blogs enable women to identify their agential selves and they therefore are empowered to challenge the status quo, while on the theme *public sphere* the analysis indicates that, despite the online media's embeddedness in power structures in society, blogs enable Zimbabwean women to be content creators who facilitate the entry of counternarratives into the national discourse – thereby widening the public sphere. On *representation*, the analysis shows that blogs validate Zimbabwean women's existence and womanhood and that they are framing their own narratives. On the theme *challenges*, the analysis reveals that Zimbabwean women face political, economic, legislative and other socio-cultural impediments in their quest to participate in politics.

The next chapter offers concluding remarks and recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 9

Conclusions and Recommendations

“The more clearly the forms of oppression emerge in her understanding, the more clearly she can see the shape of future action”

(Greer, 1970: 20)

9.1 Introduction

This study set out to examine whether online media platforms, specifically blogs on five websites, provide Zimbabwean women with spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge the dominant discourse and increase women’s participation in politics. Thus, the epistemological premise of this study was concerned with women activists’ use of blogs as communication platforms to challenge the dominant discourse and bring women’s issues into the public sphere, and whether the “untouched citizens” can attain deliberative democracy online.

This last chapter provides a summary of the research project, a summary of the findings, draws conclusions, and discusses the contributions of this study on the empirical and theoretical levels. Lastly, I offer recommendations for future research.

9.2 Summary of research project

In **Chapter 1** I introduced the research by outlining the foundation and motivations for the study. I discussed and contextualised the research problem, specifically how state control of the mainstream media has left Zimbabwean women with no alternative communicative spaces to articulate their own agendas and to participate in the public sphere. Further, I situated the study in Zimbabwe, which has a unique political, economic and socio-cultural environment in which the representation of critical issues is limited to the elites in the political, economic and social spheres, excluding the views and participation of the majority of citizens such as women, thus rendering them to become “untouched citizens”.

In **Chapter 2** I identified and discussed major developments in the history of the democratisation process that have had political significance for Zimbabwean women’s activism since the 1990s – at the height of media liberalisation and the growth of technology – to the 2013 general elections to provide the necessary context and foundation for the study. In this chapter I also defined and reviewed the key concepts of the study.

Chapter 3 provided a comprehensive literature review on democracy, new media use and political participation by women, as well as on women's activist media globally and locally. The literature review was divided into two periods: the pre-digital and digital. This was premised on the fact that the study investigated online media use, hence the pre-digital era served to contextualise the inquiry.

Chapter 4 discussed the theoretical frameworks chosen for the study, namely womanism, feminist critical theory and critical political economy theory. In this chapter I explained how the three frameworks complement each other and offer a holistic understanding of women's and men's lived experiences in Zimbabwe, and how politics, economics and social and cultural conditions influence specific activists' activities on new media platforms.

In **Chapter 5** I discussed the research design and methodology chosen for the study. I used a qualitative research approach employing a collective case study to collect data. I analysed the data by qualitative content analysis (QCA), using the qualitative data analysis and software programme ATLAS.ti Version 7.

The presentation of the research findings was separated into two chapters, **Chapters 6 and 7**, to allow for the presentation of findings from each of the five websites. In **Chapter 6** I presented the study's findings from the blogs according to the research themes, while in **Chapter 7** I presented the findings from the interviews, also according to the research themes.

The findings of the study were discussed and analysed in **Chapter 8** from within the frameworks and themes of the reviewed literature, and on the basis of the three theories, namely womanism, feminist critical theory and critical political economy theory.

This chapter, **Chapter 9**, now proceeds with a brief summary of the findings of the study according to themes.

9.3 Overview of the findings

Participation: The findings from both the blog and interview analysis on the theme *participation* show that blogging is a form of political participation by Zimbabwean women, as it facilitates the inclusion of both women and men in discussions on various issues of national interest. In addition, blogging affords Zimbabwean women the opportunity to air their concerns, contribute to national debates and share information. Furthermore, women are able to develop a voice of their own as individuals and as a group. Through sharing their personal stories and perspectives and those of others

to support understandings, the bloggers connect women in their diversity, and in the process reveal the complexities of Zimbabwean women's lives.

Deliberative democracy: The findings from both the blog and interview analysis on the theme *deliberative democracy* reveal that, through blogs, Zimbabwean women and men are able to share personal experiences and those of others, protest, and engage in conversations that enable the sharing of knowledge, creating awareness in the process. It is the creation of awareness and knowledge that enables this study to position women as citizens, conversing with the entire society for a democratic culture. However, while Zimbabwe's political, economic and cultural situation may not be transformed by blogging alone, the positive aspect of blogs is that women are beginning to engage in a political struggle for change.

Empowerment: The findings from both the blog and interview analysis on the theme *empowerment* show that blogs enable the dissemination and sharing of information that people, especially women, would not ordinarily have access to and that, through identifying their agential selves, women are able to identify social norms that oppress them, thus enhancing their ability to challenge the male-dominated view of society.

Public sphere: The findings from both the blog and interview analysis on the theme *public sphere* reveal that blogs are platforms for self-expression and serve as an alternative space where women's voices are expressed, enabling their views and interpretations of experience to be in the public domain. The findings also show that, despite their embeddedness in power structures, blogs enable Zimbabwean women to be content creators, facilitating the entry of counternarratives into the national discourse and thereby widening the public sphere.

Representation: The findings from both the blog and interview analysis on the theme *representation* show that blogs validate Zimbabwean women's existence and womanhood. The bloggers achieve this by deconstructing and delegitimising stereotypes and employing frames and narratives that support women's existence, as well as their strengths and capabilities.

Challenges: The findings from both the blog and interview analysis on this, the last theme, namely *challenges*, reveal that women are deterred from participating in politics by lack of access to information and by the hostile political, economic and cultural environment. The argument in both the blogs and interviews is that a stable political and economic environment is critical for women to realise their full potential. Furthermore, a stable political and economic environment would facilitate economic independence for women and enhance accessibility to the internet, which remains a major

challenge for Zimbabwean women. The findings on this theme also highlight the need for women to be trained in online media use for political participation.

In the next section, conclusions based on the findings of this study are discussed. These conclusions are addressed in terms of the research questions in the order in which they are outlined in section 1.4.3.2 of this study. The study's themes are also incorporated into the conclusions.

9.4 Conclusions

9.4.1 Conclusions on the central research question

Central research question: *Do online media give Zimbabwean women spaces for critical communicative interaction where they can challenge dominant discourse and increase women's participation in politics?*

This study concludes that blogs, as a communication platform, invoke a sense of community for Zimbabwean women in their diversity, a community that is rooted in the Zimbabwean experience and bound by the shared goals and aspirations of political, economic and socio-cultural emancipation. I argue that, through sharing everyday struggles online, blogging enables the social connections of the Zimbabwean woman's identity – the identity that is enabling women to feel solidarity and begin to open up and converse about their lived experiences as a way of delegitimising and denaturalising women's position in society. Consequently, this enhances their *participation* in the public sphere and politics. Thus, through a womanist, feminist critical theory and critical political economy theoretical lens, I argue that, to a certain extent, blogs are enabling *empowerment* for Zimbabwean women, as they are now able to escape their patriarchal confines, which limit their participation in mass media spaces, and to exhibit and validate their self-existence, thereby creating new and alternative knowledge in the process.

Furthermore, through everyday conversations, blogs, as forms of the *public sphere*, offer women opportunities to participate direct and indirectly in national discourse by sharing their perspectives on the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. Therefore, Zimbabwean women's voices are beginning to emerge, contributing to the understanding of issues within the public space. This conclusion, which concurs with the feminist critical theory approach, affirms Fraser's (1990) assertion that the counterinterpretations that are emerging online are compromising and complicating established norms of political processes. I therefore conclude that by offering alternative understanding of the situation, blogs push for political, economic and cultural conditions favourable

for Zimbabwean women – the “untouched citizens” – and are ultimately contributing towards challenging the dominant discourse and status quo.

9.4.2 Conclusions on sub-question 1

Sub-question 1: *How are women’s organisations and journalist activists (both women and men) in Zimbabwe using blogs as platforms for political discourse?*

From a womanist point of view, this study concludes that blogs do not simply chronicle women’s daily lives and experiences, but make it possible to locate how and under what circumstances such everyday conversations transform from non-political to political. Furthermore, the study concludes that, from women’s everyday conversations, one is able to decipher events, occurrences and social conditions external to women that have an effect on their lived experiences. These external influences include political, economic and cultural occurrences. This conclusion is supported by feminist critical theory and critical political economy theory, which allow for the identification of external influences that subjugate women.

In addition, blogs provide alternative entry routes into politics, enabling Zimbabwean women to reclaim their space in the political, socio-economic and cultural spheres. Through sharing their experiences, Zimbabwean women are now able to develop a voice of their own as individuals – a voice that is also visible to the entire society that has access to digital technology. Thus, the findings on the theme *participation* leads the researcher to conclude that, as safe spaces for engaging in conversations, the blogs across the five websites enabled women to begin to engage, to learn, to network and to participate in public discussions by introducing their views. Womanism therefore confirms the study’s findings and conclusions that, for women, the personal is inextricably linked to the societal, and this is why women’s personal expressions on the blogs simultaneously map out political problems and *challenges*. The bifurcation of the private and the public is therefore enabled through blogging, contributing to literature on the interrelationships between various forms of domination that women experience in their diversity, and how this ultimately shapes their lives.

Furthermore, from a feminist critical theory and critical political economy theoretical perspective, the findings on *deliberative democracy* also lead to the conclusion that, through sharing experiences, Zimbabwean women are becoming conscious of their oppression and are beginning to engage in a struggle for political transformation. This creation of consciousness transforms women from being mere users of technology to citizens as they are appealing to the entire society to delegitimise women’s oppression. In this way, this study provides the opportunity to more clearly

recognise how Zimbabwean women are undertaking the co-creation of democracy, through blogging. Furthermore, in relation to the findings on *empowerment*, I argue that blogs enable women to participate in politics by identifying their agential selves and, subsequently, challenging the status quo. From the *public sphere* perspective, I proffer that blogs facilitate the entry of previously marginalised groups by breaking the participatory barriers between women and men, thereby enabling the entry of women's views into the national discourse. Therefore, despite the gendered nature of the blogosphere (Harp & Tremayne, 2006), as well as other views on the embeddedness of blogs in power structures (Fuchs, 2012), the application of womanism, feminist critical theory and critical political theory leads to the conclusion that blogs offer Zimbabwean women a political platform for *representation* to voice their concerns and counternarratives and have their version of reality documented, and also to raise awareness. These three theories therefore confirm this study's conclusions that, in an authoritarian environment such as Zimbabwe, the alternative space function of blogs tends to override the negatives associated with digital communication platforms. This, one can conclude, is because, first and foremost, Zimbabwean women are for the first time able to converse on platforms about that which forms and affects their very existence.

9.4.3 Conclusions on sub-question 2

Sub-question 2: *How are women's organisations and journalist activists presenting messages to other women on these blogs, including in the narratives used?*

The studied blogs reveal the reality of the humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe and how it is negatively affecting the lives of women by virtue of their political, economic and socio-cultural standing in society. To project this, the bloggers use the first person narrative to address an audience directly and, from a critical political economy perspective, this gives the bloggers power. This leads the researcher to conclude that, by employing the first person narrative, bloggers appeal to the audience's conscious thought and, in the process, encourage women to speak out and to create awareness and share knowledge amongst themselves and with society, thus enhancing *participation*. This conclusion concurs with the theoretical views of womanism, feminist critical theory and critical political economy theory that, by creating awareness, narratives surface that have been obscured from the dominant discourse.

From a critical political economy theoretical perspective, I also argue that bloggers utilise the power of knowledge to challenge the dominant discourse and to change the status of women, which enhances *deliberative democracy*. In other words, in creating meaning through their blogs, bloggers exercise some form of power to impose their view of the world onto society as a whole. This affirms

Swai's (2010: 152) assertion that the production of knowledge depends on power in order to receive acceptability in the greater society. Furthermore, by writing about their lived experiences and personalising issues, Zimbabwean women are able to self-introspect and are *empowered* to be more open and to give honest accounts and *representations* of the self, while simultaneously seeking deeper engagement with their audiences.

Nevertheless, in my study, although the presentation and communication strategies differ across the five websites, it is the shared goal of empowering Zimbabwean women that provides the contextualised understanding of Zimbabwean women's lived experiences. For example, WCoZ employs a formalist narrative, appealing more to a specific class of audience, namely the elite, other women activists and policy makers; Kubatana and HerZimbabwe utilise a radical approach and are overtly feminist in nature, while the news media employ a news information dissemination approach.

9.4.4 Conclusions on sub-question 3

Sub-question 3: *Are the six specific themes of women and democratic politics online as outlined in section 1.5.3 of this study [and summarised above], identifiable on the five websites?*

All five websites illuminated the six themes – of *participation, deliberative democracy, empowerment, public sphere, representation* and *challenges* – to varying degrees. All six themes were highly visible on Kubatana and HerZimbabwe, although the discourse varied greatly in approach to and illumination of issues. In addition to the six themes, WCoZ also revealed a new theme, that of *gender-based violence (GBV)*, as a critical element in understanding women and political participation in Zimbabwe. This study therefore concludes that GBV, which was not part of my original focus, is the real-life experience of Zimbabwean women. This conclusion, although not sought for in my study, complements womanism theory, which supports the validation of women's lived experiences. Furthermore, the conclusion complements feminist critical theory and critical political economy theory, which also support the identification of systems that oppress women, as well as the re-assertion by women of selves and as collectives.

The six themes were less visible in the news media studied, namely *The Herald* and the *Chronicle*. Only four themes were discerned in *The Herald*, namely *empowerment, public sphere, representation* and *challenges*, while at the *Chronicle* the themes were *participation, empowerment* and *challenges*. The identification of the above themes in the two news media websites, which are state-owned (and supporting the status quo), is critical in this study, as it offers opportunities to identify counterhegemonic instances within their content. The fact that there are occurrences of

counter hegemony within state-owned media in Zimbabwe, particularly in relation to women empowerment and advocacy, indicates how blogging by news media may arguably resurface women and women's issues. However, despite the possibilities for women empowerment within news media blogs, one thus can conclude that the two news media websites contained the fewest of the themes identified, largely because of the nature of the media and the journalistic norms and values journalist bloggers have to follow. This intrinsically confirms that the news media blogs, while they expose the bloggers' views on the issue(s), are typically written in journalism style, with sourcing, and there is minimal use of personal stories.

From a feminist critical theory and critical political economy theoretical perspective, the study concludes that the news media avoid politically radicalising issues on their blogs, and instead project the poorly performing economy and, in a few instances culture, as exacerbating women's oppression. However, despite this, the overall conclusion on the emancipatory potential of the internet across the five websites projects a positive view of the possibilities of new spaces such as blogs to offer opportunities for women to mediate new forms of resistance.

Furthermore, I argue that blogs break the barriers within the self, enabling Zimbabwean women, faced with a hostile political environment, a debilitating economy and patriarchy, to re-ignite their individual consciousness and begin to open up and converse about their lived experiences. This is a critical step towards emancipation. Taking cognisance of other researchers' cautions on the overly optimistic view of new media (for example Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012), this study interpreted the results in the context of the Zimbabwean environment, which allowed the identification of positive aspects of blogs, particularly for women.

9.4.5 Conclusions on sub-question 4

Sub-question 4: *To what extent is the discourse in the blogs across the five websites indicative of counterpower to established norms?*

The study concludes that blogs are used as sites for resistance to power by both bloggers and website owners. I argue that blogs present a reality of agitation and discontent about the political, economic and cultural power of men, with the key message being that a transformative agenda needs to be embraced by both individuals and society, beginning by recognising women's potential and subsequently improving their *participation* in the public sphere. The application of womanism, which demands community and connectedness, allows for the identification of those lived experiences that benefit women at large, and the entire society, not just the individual self.

Furthermore, the study concludes that the bloggers use blogs as sites of expression and record distinct perspectives – in essence, counternarratives that have been obscured from the dominant discourse. As deciphered from the blogs and interview transcripts, the observation that very few Zimbabwean women would participate in politics unless there is a transformation of the mindset, first within the self, and then at home and in the wider society, leads the researcher to proffer that, as places of agency, blogs not only chronicle women’s lives, but offer possibilities for social transformation and ultimately for *deliberative democracy*. This view is synonymous with those of the proponents of feminist critical theory and the critical political economy theory, who view dialogues as stimulating “political consciousness” (Thomson, 2014: 109). In addition, the study concludes that the process of individual *empowerment* to challenge, or resist, the status quo is rooted in one’s willingness and ability to speak out against such.

Furthermore, the study concludes that the provision of spaces for women’s voices by feminist media owners is indicative of the political and economic environment to which Zimbabwean women have been subjected. For example, women have been denied access to communication spaces, particularly in the *public sphere*, thereby limiting their freedom of expression, which is a fundamental human right (UN Women, 2015). Thus, the provision of spaces for women’s agency validates knowledge as the ultimate amplifier and liberator. By valorising everyday resistance, both feminist media owners and media managers of the studied websites exercise their power as selves, and as institutions, to validate the humanity of the marginalised, particularly women. This conclusion conforms to the critical political economy theory that media owners have power to control communication. Therefore, I argue that, by enabling public discussions by the masses on certain topics in a country where communicative spaces are restricted to the minority of citizens, these platforms are a critical step towards the validation of women’s self-existence and *representation*.

However, despite the findings that support the feminist critical theory view of blog technology as being embedded in the power structures of society (Fuchs, 2012), and the critical political economy theoretical view that online media can be considered oppressive to women, I argue that blogs have facilitated the participation of Zimbabwean women in politics by bringing the public sphere to their homes and other private spaces, overcoming the barriers of personal and other structural impediments.

9.5 Overall conclusions of the study

The overall conclusion of the study is that blogs offer Zimbabwean women – the “untouched citizens” – opportunities to participate, directly and indirectly, in national discourse by sharing their perspectives on events in the political, economic and cultural spheres. In this way, blogs, as alternative

spaces, motivate co-operation and enable counterpublics – in this case Zimbabwean women – an opportunity to find support. In addition, the researcher concludes that, by being a platform for counterpublics, blogs provide an alternative understanding of the situation, contributing towards the challenging of established norms and of the status quo. Furthermore, the potential for empathy and solidarity, and the open-endedness and creativity of storytelling on blogs, are all critical elements of what Dahlgren (2009: 90) terms “indispensable resources for the vitality of democratic politics”. I thus argue that, while deliberative democracy may not happen overnight, blogging by Zimbabwean women can set the transformation process into motion.

Furthermore, the epistemological premise of this study was concerned with women activists’ use of blogs as communication platforms to challenge the dominant discourse and bring women’s issues into the public sphere. Through their lived experiences, the women activists shape the way in which issues are discussed amongst themselves. Thus, from the theories of womanism, feminist critical theory and critical political economy, the overall assessment is that women’s everyday conversations online enable critique, empathy and solidarity from people sharing the same interests.

In addition, by sharing personal perspectives and those of others who might not actively write, the study concludes that blogging therefore connects Zimbabwean women in their diversity, and in the process, highlighting the complexities of Zimbabwean women’s lives.

While this study attests to the participatory and integrative nature of blogs, it also highlights how online media remain dominated by, and frequently reflect the views, experiences and interests of, the middle class and elites. In sum, while this argument indicates that platforms such as blogs may not be liberating, blogging offer possibilities for the “untouched citizens” to create deliberative democracy online, as emphasised in one blog: “the ability to tell one’s story is the expression of a new kind of freedom whose value cannot, and should not, be overlooked” (blog 25:35:4).

9.6 Contribution

This study contributes to womanist scholarship, with the findings of this study extending the body of literature on women, new media and political activism, specifically in Zimbabwe, and also generally in Africa.

Firstly, the study pronounces contextual factors that are specific to Zimbabwe and that uniquely impact on women’s participation in politics. These factors are also the political weapons informing and directing women’s activism online. In addition, focusing on contextual factors such as political, economic and cultural conditions facilitates a better understanding of the themes *participation*,

deliberative democracy, empowerment, public sphere, representation and challenges and how they are experienced by people in authoritarian regimes such as Zimbabwe. This is because the six identified themes apply differently in different settings and with different needs. For example, taking a cue from Mbembe (2011), who says that the forms that democracy takes derive from the underlying social struggles, the same could be argued for the other five themes, as proven by the empirical findings of the study.

Secondly, this study focused on how blogging, as a platform, may be used by Zimbabwean women to challenge dominant discourses and bring women's issues into the public agenda. Previous research on blogging in Zimbabwe has not taken into account the complex realities faced by Zimbabwean women in order to appreciate the alternative sites of agency for women. In addition, the identification of alternative sites of agency for women within state-owned media is another revelation of this study. Therefore, by highlighting how blogs might help reconfigure the way power is organised and proposing alternatives to the existing conditions of women in Zimbabwe, knowledge is contributed on the potential of political participation by women using activist and news media blogs in an authoritarian regime.

Thirdly, while other scholars contend that empowerment through blogging remains theoretically weak and empirically unsubstantiated (for example Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012: 370), the application of womanism, an overarching feminist approach that validates women's interpretive capacities and acknowledges personal expressions and storytelling, better accommodates the understanding of the empowerment effects of blogging for Zimbabwean women. Further, womanism also offers a general understanding of the relationship between women, politics and online media.

This study thus contributes to knowledge on women, new media and political activism by adding empirical findings to test the empowerment effects of blogging, and has blended this with theory. While these findings are not generalisable to all women in Zimbabwe, they indicate the possibilities and challenges that women face in the quest for democracy in particular contexts.

Lastly, as will be shown in the next section, this study has raised questions that have opened up possibilities for further study. First, however, recommendations are made for women's activist organisations to strengthen their activism strategies and foster social change in Zimbabwe.

9.7 Recommendations

9.7.1 Recommendations for women's activist organisations

- One of the findings of this study is that the poorly performing economy has exacerbated women's oppression, and therefore there is a need for the transformation of the policies that will have a direct effect on positive change for women. The researcher thus recommends that an audit of specific policies aimed at empowering Zimbabwean women be undertaken to determine their impact and potential shortcomings. Such research will equip and direct activism strategies by women's organisations on related women's issues.
- In addition, the study has revealed that blogging is mainly urban-based and therefore dominated by a few bloggers who appear to be opinion leaders and a "voice for the voiceless" (blogger 16:24:2016). The researcher therefore recommends that institutional websites make an effort to include women from the rural areas in their content if they are to holistically reflect the reality of Zimbabwean women in their diversity.
- Another finding is that the studied websites use their power to prioritise certain topics over others, and certain narratives over others, as was concluded by the feminist critical theory analysis. Therefore, women's organisations need to be wary of activism that is not genuinely performing a transformational agenda, but rather pushing the ideals of capitalism.
- The researcher further recommends that women's activist organisations train women in technological skills to effectively utilise online media spaces, since blogger 17 posits that women lack the technological knowledge to use online spaces effectively, to maintain an online audience and to safeguard themselves against cybercrime.

9.7.2 Recommendations for further study

This study raises questions that warrant further study, as outlined below:

- This study was confined to blogging and only analysed five websites (three women activist sites and two news media sites). There hence is room to expand the scope of the study to include other social media tools such as Twitter, as well as more women activist websites and news media organisations that have blog pages, to get a more comprehensive overview of new media and women's activism in Zimbabwe.
- Further research could also be done to interrogate women's voices in the state-owned media and compare them with those emerging from private-owned media.

- As indicated by the findings, the emergence of the theme *gender-based violence* (GBV) is a manifestation of the real-life experiences of Zimbabwean women and how this confirms the secondary role of women in society, especially in terms of how they face masculinity and patriarchy. It therefore is imperative to determine the role of the media in the struggle against gender-based violence. The researcher therefore recommends that a further study be conducted on the role of the media in highlighting GBV in Zimbabwe, focusing on both mainstream and social media.
- In the same vein, the researcher further recommends an analysis of online violence specifically, of how it manifests and how it then impacts on the content of and discussions on women's activist websites. Further research may focus on how open communication platforms such as blogs, while giving more freedom to women, at the same time render them (women) more susceptible to digital violence.
- Furthermore, the epistemological premise of this study was concerned with women activists' use of blogs as communication platforms to challenge dominant discourse and bring women's issues into the public sphere. However, this study did not proceed to analyse the feedback that these bloggers receive from their audience(s) in an audience reception study in order to ascertain whether these responses are positive, neutral or negative. The researcher therefore recommends an analysis of readers' comments to give an indication of the nature of debates that manifest therein. This analysis would give a holistic picture of blogging and its effects, or whether the communication strategies employed by the bloggers are widening engagement on women's issues and are empowering women.

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Addendums

Addendum A: Semi-structured interview guide for bloggers

Semi-structured Interview Guide for Bloggers

Are “untouched citizens” creating their deliberative democracy online?

A critical analysis of women’s activist media in Zimbabwe

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study on women and blogging. This study investigates the impact of new media platforms such as blogs and community forums on deliberative democracy, with a special focus on how women in Zimbabwe use these platforms to discuss women’s issues and engage with wider society to influence public debates and political processes. It is hoped that the results of this study can add knowledge on strategies for women’s activism in Africa.

As you know, your identity will be 100% protected according to Stellenbosch University’s ethical policy processes, and your responses will be identified without any reference to your identity.

The questions will take you approximately 45 minutes to complete, based on an allocation of 3-4 minutes per question. Note that, for your convenience, I used semi-structured questions to gather data. I would, however, be grateful if you allow me to contact you to clarify any of your responses.

Once again, thank you for your valuable contribution.

Sincerely yours

Sibongile Mpofu

Doctoral student: Stellenbosch University

Please type the answers in the space provided.

- 1.** What issues are discussed on your blog platform/website?
- 2.** In your view, what are the motivations for blogging on these issues?
- 3.** Do you think new media platforms will improve civic and political participation of women in Zimbabwe? If so, in what ways?
- 4.** Explain the civic activities that your organisation/website undertakes, specifically targeting Zimbabwean women and women's issues.
- 5.** How are women encouraged to participate in the discussions on national issues on your website?
- 6.** What recommendations for change are required to enable the participation of women in a democracy?
- 7.** Do you think that online media have the potential of empowering Zimbabwean women, in all forms? Explain your answer.
- 8.** In what ways can online media be a solution to overcoming the barriers that Zimbabwean women face generally in society as they seek to attain gender equality?
- 9.** From your own perspective, how do you see the role of new media platforms in development in Africa generally, and in Zimbabwe specifically?
- 10.** Do you think these online conversations among women can spur a deeper interest and involvement in political and civic issues? Explain your answer.
- 11.** Explain the communication approach that you use on your blog platform/website in disseminating information and encouraging discussions amongst women. Here, amongst other issues, refer to information packaging, language and narrative used.
- 12.** Zimbabwean women activists (women's organisations and activists) have in the past been blamed for failing to build consensus on issues that unite them, and hence failing to move forward. What is your view on this?
- 13.** What challenges impact on Zimbabwean women's engagement in civic issues and political participation generally?

Addendum B: Introductory email to bloggers

Introductory Email to Bloggers

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study on women and blogging. This study investigates the impact of new media platforms such as blogs and community forums on deliberative democracy, with a special focus on how women in Zimbabwe use these platforms to discuss women's issues and engage with wider society to influence public debates and political processes. It is hoped that the results of this study can add knowledge on strategies for women's activism in Africa.

As you know, your identity will be 100% protected according to Stellenbosch University's ethical policy processes and your responses will be identified without any reference to your identity.

The questions will take you approximately 45 minutes to complete, based on an allocation of 3-4 minutes per question. Note that, for your convenience, I employ semi-structured questions to gather data. I would, however, be grateful if you allow me to contact you to clarify any of your responses.

NB: The interview guide is sent to you as an attachment for your convenience. When you have completed this interview guide, email to me (bongie.mpofu5@gmail.com).

Once again, thank you for your valuable contribution.

Sincerely yours

Sibongile Mpofu (Lecturer - NUST)
PhD Fellow
Department of Journalism
Stellenbosch University
P. Bag X1 Matieland 7600. Stellenbosch
South Africa
Phone: 0027 81 071 8743 or 00 263 772 332 762

Addendum C: Informed Consent Form



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STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Are “untouched citizens” creating their deliberative democracy online? A critical analysis of women’s activist media in Zimbabwe

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by **Sibongile Mpofu, from the Journalism Department at Stellenbosch University**. As part of my doctor of philosophy research, the results will contribute to my thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are or have been involved with and/or are knowledgeable about some aspects of the topic/subject of this research.

1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to establish how women journalists-as-activists and women’s organisations are using new media as critical spaces of communicative interaction, with a view to ascertain whether new media enable women to challenge the dominant discourses and participate in public policy opinion-making and politics.

2. Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Complete an electronic questionnaire that will be emailed to you;
- Read the instructions on how to complete the questionnaire, which will be written at the beginning of the questionnaire;
- Answer as honestly as possible;
- As soon as you have completed the questionnaire, email it back to the sender as soon as possible, or any other addresses indicated on the questionnaire; and
- Remember to press the FORWARD button, not the REPLY button, as this would lead to your losing all your valuable responses.

It should take you approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

3. Potential risks and discomforts

None

4. Potential benefits to subjects and/or to society

You may benefit from the study directly, as the research seeks to add to the understanding of how women use new media platforms for empowerment and political participation. The identification of communication narratives and frames may help you re-align your messages and strategies in your programmes.

The study will add to scholarship on the understanding of the use of online media for women's empowerment and political participation in African in general, and Zimbabwe in particular.

The study will also enrich debates on the subject of how new media can be used to empower marginalised groups such as women, and this will arm policy makers and women's organisations with knowledge on new media communication strategies.

5. Payment for participation

You will not receive payment for your participation in the study.

6. Confidentiality

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using codes to identify the participants. Individual identifiers such as names of participants, their addresses and ID numbers will not be disclosed. Instead, each participant will be assigned a number for identification purposes. This therefore means that each returned questionnaire will be assigned a number.

The data will be kept in both computerised files, which will be assigned security codes, as well as on an external hard drive. The security codes will only be known to the Principal Investigator.

The information will be released to my supervisor, Professor L. Rabe, for purposes of supervision, and to other relevant scholars, such as external examiners, for examining the completed study.

The researcher intends to publish parts of the study in the future. Individual identifiers such as names, addresses and ID numbers will not be disclosed.

7. Participation and withdrawal

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

8. Identification of investigators

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Principal Investigator Ms Sibongile Mpofo, Department of Journalism, University of Stellenbosch, P/Bag X1, Matieland, Stellenbosch, 7602 (Phone 021 808 3488, email: bongie.mpofo5@gmail.com or 16763335@sun.ac.za).

You can also contact the supervisor, Professor L Rabe, Department of Journalism, University of Stellenbosch, P/Bag X1, Matieland, Stellenbosch, 7602 (Phone 021 808 3488; email: lrabe@sun.ac.za).

9. Rights of research subjects

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

The information above was described to [me] _____ by **Ms Sibongile Mpofo** in English and *I am* in command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Subject/Participant

DATE

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to _____ . [He/she] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in English and no translator was used.



Signature of Investigator

Date

13/05/2015

Addendum D – List of blogs from the five websites

1. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (November 25, 2013). Ending gender-based violence – we all have a role. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/675513575813709>. [Accessed 16 September 2015].
2. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (August 01, 2013). Interim statement on women and the 2013 harmonised elections. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/617140661651001>. [Accessed 16 August 2015].
3. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (February 01, 2013). Ten reasons why women should vote yes. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/533455656686169>. [Accessed 16 August 2015].
4. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (February 06, 2013). The key to women' empowerment is participation in decision-making in their communities. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/539138856117849>. [Accessed 16 August 2015].
5. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (September 04, 2013). Cabinet formation. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/633752849989782>. [Accessed 16 August 2015].
6. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (July 29, 2013). No title. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/609669169064817>. [Accessed 16 August 2015].
7. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (April 17, 2013). Zimbabwe celebrates 33 years of independence. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/569786236386444>. [Accessed 16 August, 2015].
8. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (July 17, 2013). No title. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/65541871810880>. [Accessed 16 August 2015].
9. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (April 03, 2013). Women should participate more effectively in the 2013 elections. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/564232496941818>. [Accessed 16 August 2015].
10. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (February 1, 2013). Access to health in times of political violence: Is it achievable? Available: <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ/posts/533450773353324>. [Accessed 08 March 2016].
11. Kubatana (August 23, 2013). Sexual stereotypes not helping Aids fight. Available: <http://www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/sexual-stereotypes-not-helping-aids-fight-26604/>. [Accessed 24 September 2015].

12. Kubatana (September 03, 2013). Exploring the dark side of culture. Available: <http://www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/exploring-the-dark-side-of-culture-11850/>. [Accessed 25 September 2015].
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16. Kubatana (July 30, 2013). Zimbabweans start to speak out. Available: <http://www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/zimbabweans-start-to-speak-out-58575/>. [Accessed 25 September 2015].
17. Kubatana (July 26, 2013). Breasts, vaginas and public office. Available: <http://www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/breasts-vaginas-and-public-office-79668/>. [Accessed 25 September 2015].
18. Kubatana (May 22, 2013). Sharing stories enriches lives. Available: <http://www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/sharing-stories-enriches-lives/>. [Accessed 25 September 2015].
19. Kubatana (September 30, 2013). New media and positive debate @ Shoko festival. Available: <http://www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/new-media-and-positive-debate-shoko-festival-24590/>. [Accessed 05 April 2016].
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21. HerZimbabwe (February 04, 2013). Does development work develop us? Available: <https://fungaineni.wordpress.com/2013/02/04/does-development-work-develop-us/>. [Accessed 24 September 2015].
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24. HerZimbabwe (July 08, 2013). Navigating sexuality in the new media era. Available: <http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2013/07/navigating-sexuality-in-the-new-media-era/>. [Accessed 24 September 2015].
25. HerZimbabwe (October 07, 2013). Freedom: A cost or credit for women online. Available: <http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2013/10/freedom-a-cost-or-credit-for-women-online/>. [Accessed 24 September 2015].
26. HerZimbabwe (October 09, 2013). The media has power; but so do we. Available: <http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2013/10/the-media-has-power-but-so-do-we/>. [Accessed 24 September 2015].
27. HerZimbabwe (July 21, 2013). Women's empowerment is also a men's issue. Available: <http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2013/07/womens-empowerment-is-also-a-mens-issue/>. [Accessed 24 September 2015].
28. HerZimbabwe (July 08, 2013). Shemurenga: telling her story of struggle. Available: <http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2013/07/shemurenga-telling-herstory-of-struggle/>. [Accessed 24 September 2015].
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Addendum E: Pilot Study Semi-structured interview questions

Interview Guide for Bloggers (Pilot Study)

Are “untouched citizens” creating their deliberative democracy online?

A critical analysis of women activist media in Zimbabwe

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my pilot study on women and blogging. This study investigates the impact of new media platforms such as blogs and community forums on deliberative democracy, with a special focus on how women in Zimbabwe use these platforms to discuss women’s issues and engage with wider society to influence public debates and political processes. It is hoped that the results of this study can add knowledge on strategies for women activism in Africa.

As you know, your identity will be 100% protected according to the Stellenbosch University’s ethical policy processes and your responses will be identified without any reference to your identity.

The questions will take you approximately 45 minutes to complete, based on an allocation of 3-4 minutes per question. Note that for your convenience, I used semi-structured questions to gather data. I would, however, be grateful if you allow me to contact you to clarify any of your responses.

NB: Please do not REPLY when you complete this interview guide, but FORWARD the email to me (bongie.mpofu5@gmail.com), otherwise the answers will get lost.

Once again, thank you for your valuable contribution.

Sincerely yours

Sibongile Mpofu

Doctoral student: Stellenbosch University

1. What issues are discussed in your website?
2. Do you think new media platforms will improve civic and political participation of marginalised groups in Zimbabwe? If so, in what ways?
3. Explain the civic activities that your organisation/website does, specifically targeting Zimbabwean women and women's issues.
4. How are women encouraged to participate in the discussions on national issues, on your website?
5. What recommendations for change are required to enable the participation of women in a democracy?
6. Do you think that online media has the potential of empowering Zimbabwean women, in all forms? Explain your answer.
7. In what ways can online media be a solution to overcoming the barriers that Zimbabwean women face generally in society as they seek to attain gender equality?
8. From your own perspective, how do you see the role of new media platforms in development in Africa, generally, and Zimbabwe, specifically?
9. Do you think these online conversations among women can spur a deeper interest and involvement in political and civic issues? Explain your answer.
10. Explain the communication approach that you use on your blog platform/website in disseminating information and encouraging discussions amongst women. Here, amongst other issues, refer to information packaging, language and narrative used.
11. Zimbabwean women activists (women's organisations and activists) have in the past been blamed for failing to build consensus on issues that unite them, and hence fail to move forward. What is your view on this?
12. What challenges impact on Zimbabwean women's engagement in civic issues and political participation generally?

Addendum F: Research Ethics Approval Letter



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Approval Notice Progress Report

21-Apr-2016
Mpofu, Sibongile S

Proposal #: DESC/Mpofu/May2015/20

Title: Untouched citizens creating their deliberative democracy: Women, politics and new media in Zimbabwe

Dear Mrs Sibongile Mpofu,

Your Progress Report received on 12-Apr-2016, was reviewed by members of the Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities) via Expedited review procedures on 13-Apr-2016 and was approved.

Please note the following information about your approved research proposal:

Proposal Approval Period: 13-Apr-2016 -12-Apr-2017

Please take note of the general Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

Please remember to use your **proposal number** (DESC/Mpofu/May2015/20) on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your research proposal.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Also note that a progress report should be submitted to the Committee before the approval period has expired if a continuation is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary).

This committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research, established by the Declaration of Helsinki and the Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes 2004 (Department of Health). Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.

National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) registration number REC-050411-032.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research.

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at 218089183.

Addendum G: Organisational permission

i. WCoZ



28 Wigtown Road, Avondale West, Harare, Zimbabwe, Cell: 0775 708 657, E-mail: coalition@zol.co.zw;

website: www.wcoz.org

7 July 2015

To whom it may concern

This is to confirm that I have had discussions with Sibongile Mpofu, a student at your institution, concerning her PhD. I have given her permission to approach bloggers, communication managers and officers at Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) and its member organisations with regard to interviewing them on her thesis topic: "Are untouched citizens creating their deliberative democracy online? A critical analysis of women's activist media in Zimbabwe". Obviously the permission of the interviewees will also be sought by Ms Mpofu.

If you require more information, do not hesitate to contact the undersigned.

Yours sincerely



Virginia Muwanigwa
Chairperson

ii. HerZimbabwe



3 August 2015

Department of Journalism,
Stellenbosch University
P.B. X1
Matieland
Stellenbosch, 7602
South Africa

To whom it may concern

Re: Authorisation for access to Her Zimbabwe staff and bloggers as research subjects

This is to confirm that I have had discussions with Sibongile Mpofu, a student at your institution, concerning her PhD study. I have given her permission to approach bloggers and staff at Her Zimbabwe with the intent of interviewing them on her thesis topic: "Are untouched citizens creating their deliberative democracy online? A critical analysis of women's activist media in Zimbabwe".

The permission of interviewees will additionally be sought by Ms Mpofu in her personal capacity.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fungai Machirori', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Fungai Machirori
Director, Her Zimbabwe

Email: fungai@herzimbabwe.co.zw
www.herzimbabwe.co.zw

iii. **Kubatana**



Kubatana.net

~ An online community for Zimbabwean activists

Web: www.kubatana.net

Blog: www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana

Email: admin@kubatana.net

23 July 2015

To whom it may concern

This is to confirm that I have had discussions with Sibongile Mpfu, a student at your institution, concerning her PhD. I have given her permission to approach bloggers at Kubatana Trust with regard to interviewing them on her thesis topic: "Are untouched citizens creating their deliberative democracy online? A critical analysis of women's activist media in Zimbabwe". Obviously, the permission of the interviewees will also be sought by Ms Mpfu.

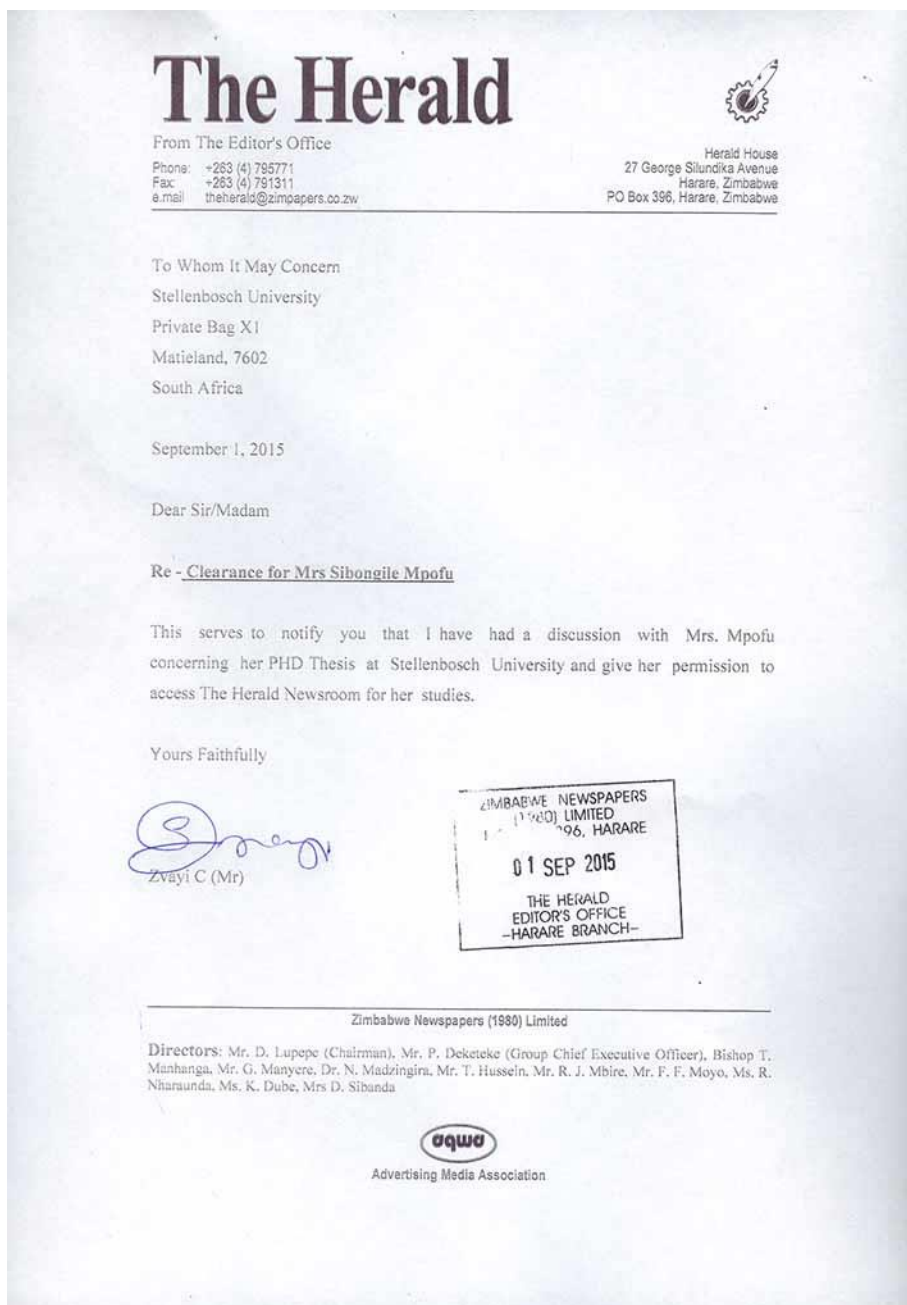
Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bev Clark', written in a cursive style.

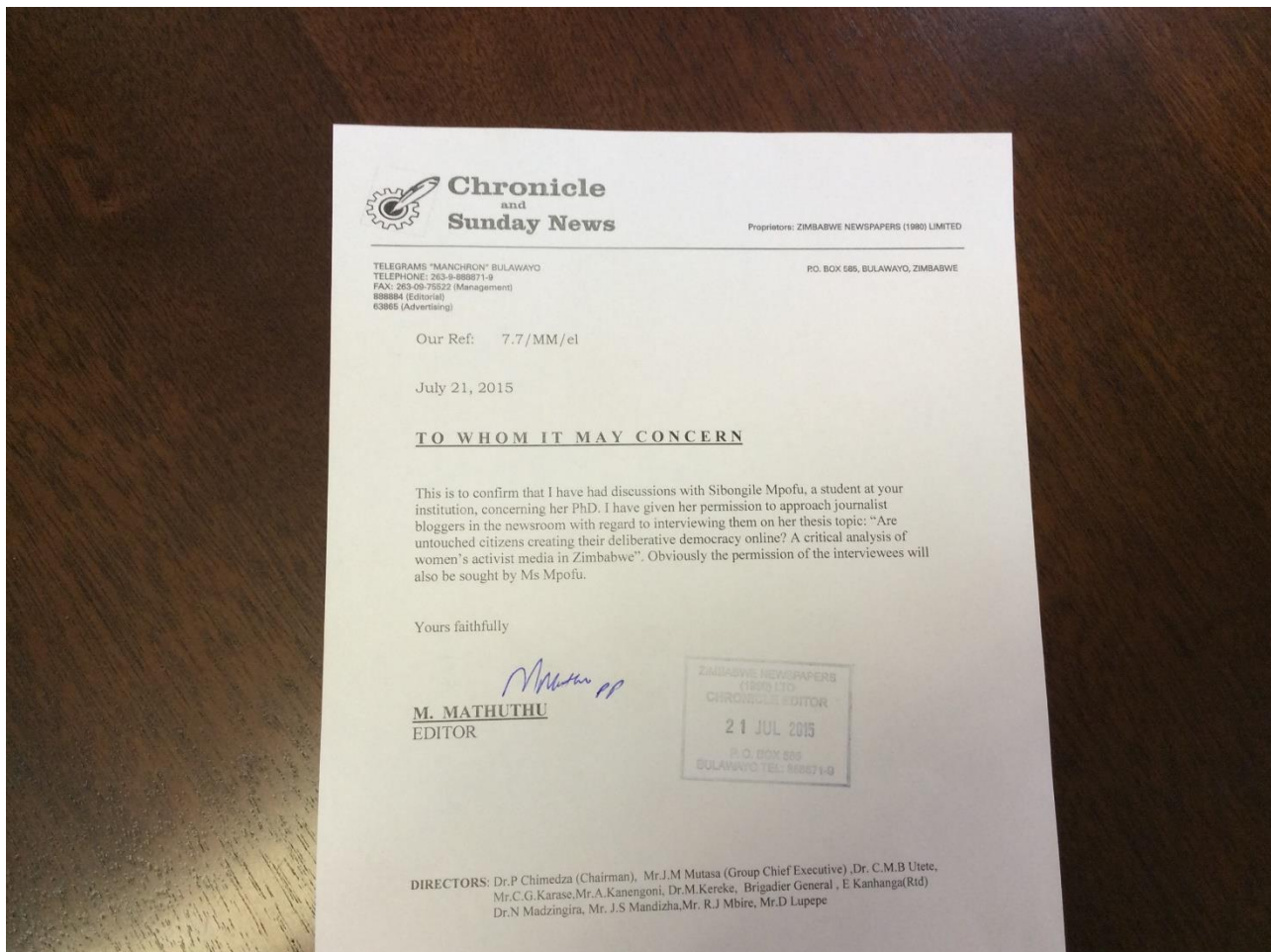
Bev Clark, Programme Director

human rights.you have some

iv. *The Herald*



v. *Chronicle*



Addendum H: Journalism Department Letter



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15 July 2015

To whom it may concern

This is to confirm that Ms Sibongile Mpofo, student number 16763335, is a registered student at this institution within our Faculty's Graduate School and that she is currently working towards her PhD.

We request you to assist her in terms of the gathering of data for this purpose, and confirm that she will do her research, subject to the University's Ethical Clearance policy.

Thank you for your kind assistance

Regards,

Prof. L. Rabe
Chair: Department of Journalism