

“Politics as usual?”-The Influence of the Internet on Political Attitudes, and Behaviour in South Africa: A Mixed-Methods Approach

by

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Declaration

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Abstract

The last two decades have seen an impressive growth in Internet and Communication Technologies (ICTs) around the world, affecting almost every aspect of citizens' lives, including politics. Soon after these technologies became widely available to the public, scholars have expressed a growing interest in how they might affect citizens. Since then, a new body of literature has emerged that seeks to measure relationships between Internet use and political attitudes and behaviour. Opinions differ largely between 'cyber-optimists' who believe that the Internet has the potential to increase citizens' involvement in politics and foster positive political attitudes, and 'cyber-pessimists' who contend that the medium has done little to change the way citizens perceive politics and that it may even decrease levels of involvement.

Yet, these studies have been conducted mainly in advanced democracies with almost universal access to the Internet and little is known about how the Internet and social media are utilised in the South African context. Given the effective utilisation of social media during the South African university hashtag movements in 2015 and the recent interruption of Internet access in countries such as Zimbabwe and the DRC in response to civilian unrest, it is surprising that only a few scholars have devoted attention to investigate the way in which Internet use affects citizen attitudes in Africa.

With the aid of the Afrobarometer Round 6 survey of 2015 and a focus group discussion, this study seeks to fill this gap by utilising a mixed-methods approach to determine how the use of the Internet and social media affect political attitudes and behaviour of South Africans. It draws from a large body of the global, western literature to develop a framework that fits the context of the research. First, the study makes use of a quantitative approach to measure associations between Internet and social media use and political attitudes and behaviour. The correlations are suggest that growing Internet access in South Africa has begun to have an impact on citizens' political attitudes and behaviour. Thereafter, the study attempts to determine underlying factors that might support statistical outcomes through the aid of a focus group discussion with students from Stellenbosch University. The global literature, in conjunction with the findings of this research study, suggests that the most active users are predominantly educated, young people. Therefore, university students are considered to be a suitable target group to conduct focus groups. The outcome of this research study intends to mark a step

toward a closer investigation by South African scholars on how ICTs might shape citizen political attitudes and opinions.

Opsomming

In die afgelope twee dekades is daar wêreldwêld 'n indrukwekkende groei in internet en kommunikasietegnologieë (IKT's), wat byna elke aspek van die lewens van die burgers beïnvloed, insluitende die politiek. Kort nadat hierdie tegnologieë vir die publiek beskikbaar geword het, het wetenskaplikes 'n toenemende belangstelling uitgespreek oor hoe dit burgers kan beïnvloed. Sedertdien het 'n nuwe literatuur ontstaan wat poog om die verhoudings tussen internetgebruik en politieke houdings en gedrag te meet. Menings verskil grootliks grootliks tussen 'kuber-optimiste' wat meen dat die internet die potensiaal het om burgers se betrokkenheid by politiek, en positiewe politieke houdings te bevorder, en 'kuber-pessimiste' wat beweer dat die medium weinig gedoen het burgers se ervaring van politiek te verander en dat dit selfs die betrokkenheidsvlakke kan verlaag.

Tog is hierdie studies hoofsaaklik uitgevoer is in gevorderde demokrasieë met byna universele toegang tot die internet, en daar is min bekend oor hoe die internet en sosiale media in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks gebruik word. Gegewe die effektiewe gebruik van sosiale media tydens die gedurende hashtagbewegings van die Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite in 2015 en die onlangse onderbreking van internet toegang in lande soos Zimbabwe en die DRK in reaksie op burgerlike onrus, is dit verbasend hoe min geleerdes navorsing gedoen het oor die manier waarop internetgebruik burgergesindhede in Afrika beïnvloed.

Hierdie studie poog om leemtes te vul wat bestaan oor die invloed wat die gebruik van internet and sosiale media het op die gedrag en politieke houdings van die Suid-Afrikaanse burgers. Daar word gebruik gemaak van 'n gemengde-metodes-benaadering wat met die behulp van die *Afrobarometer Round 6* opname van 2015 en fokusgroep bespreking. Westerse literatuur word gebruik om 'n raamwerk daar te stel wat by die konteks van die navorsing pas. 'n Kwantitatiewe benadering word gevolg om internet en sosiale media te gebruik om politieke houdings en gedrag te meet. Geen duidelike bewyse kon egter gevind word nie. Tog kan daar in mate aangeneem word dat die groeiende internet toegang in Suid-Afrika reeds begin het om 'n invloed uit te oefen op die politieke houding en gedrag van sy mense. Uit die literatuur blyk dit duidelik dat die aktiefste gebruikers van internet jong en professionele persone is. Daarom kan studente by universiteite as 'n geskikte teikengroep uitgesonder word, om die rol van fokusgroepe te vervul. Die uitkoms van die studie is daarop gerig om 'n bydrae te lewer tot verdere navorsing oor die invloed wat IKTs op politieke menings, houdings en gedrag het.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

1.1 Background and rationale

Part of the backbone of any democracy is the freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Only when independent media can operate freely within a country, spread accurate political information, provide citizens with a pluralistic account of events and monitor the performance of government, can a political system be defined as democratic. In the traditional sense, media are responsible for providing ordinary citizens with information about the outcomes of political decisions by their political representatives. Thereby, media allow citizens to make informed decisions and thus increase their “political awareness, responsibility and trust in representative democracy” (Ceron & Memoli, 2015:227). Thus, the media are a powerful tool that can shape political attitudes and values by “influencing public perception about the nature and importance of issues and problems” (Heywood, 2013:179). The more information is available, the better voters can monitor politicians. Therefore, much like opposition parties, the media function as a political ‘watch-dog’ that protects against abuses of power, facilitates political accountability and uncovers corruption (Camaj, 2013).

Although some argue that the negativity of the media, and the coverage of politics as “horse-race” can lead to lower levels of trust and cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Robinson, 1997; Heywood, 2013:185), it is generally agreed upon that the media is beneficial for democracy. Norris (2000) talks about the “virtuous circle” of trust in democratic institutions that is facilitated through media coverage. The more an individual is exposed to political information, the more he or she will be interested in politics, have increased knowledge about politics and will become more likely to participate (Dalton, 1996; Norris, 2000). In short, the media – while acknowledging that some pursue a biased agenda that may lead to fabricated information – is a beneficial tool for democracy by increasing internal and external levels of efficacy.

What about online media? Manuel Castells, a Spanish sociologist whose research and academic contributions focus on the formation and rise of the information society, introduced his ideas concerning online networks and information in the late 1990s. Succeeding his work on the knowledge society – elicited by the change in social structures such as the economy and labour processes – Castells claims that we have now entered the age of the network society. Living in what he calls the “information age”, of which the primary characteristic is the “spread of

networks linking people, institutions and countries", he believes that social structures are bound to change (Webster, 2014:101). Castells (2015:102-103) asserts that the consequences of such a society are two-fold; on the one hand, divisions will be heightened while on the other, integration in global affairs will increase. He traces the roots of the network society back to the information age in the 1970's, a time marked by the end of the post-war settlement and the "capitalist crisis". During this time, the growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) laid a new foundation for commercial activity. In short, a time he calls the "information revolution" (Castells, 2002).

His focus does not lie so much with the content of ICTs, but rather its consequences for society. Castells argues that the very nature of access to these technologies determines whether one will be able to play a full part in the network society. Furthermore, he believes that Internet networks will finally replace mass communication networks such as the television, because it "individuates and allows interaction", an important characteristic that combines the Internet and politics. Most importantly, however, Castells (2015:106) contends that the Internet with its "technologically and culturally embedded properties of interactivity and individualisation" will lead to the formation of a virtual community and finally lead to an "interactive society".

With the rise of the Internet and its users, scholars have begun to express an interest in the relationship between the web and democracy. Opinions about such a relationship are inconsistent. While some argue that it strengthens citizen demand for democracy (Norris, 2011; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014), commitment to democratic governance (Swigger, 2013) and satisfaction with democracy (Bailard, 2012), others highlight the null to negative relationship between the web and democratic regimes, participation, and political awareness (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Falk, Gold & Heblich, 2012).

Boullianne (2009) sheds some light on these inconsistent findings. In a meta-analysis of 38 studies on the Internet and its effects on democracy, she concludes that findings show overall beneficial effects for democracy. It should be noted that these effects only hold when the web is "expressly used to gather news and retrieve information" (Boullianne, 2009:201). In other words, when it functions in the sense of traditional media. This seems only logical when considering that the web can be accessed for several purposes that are non-political. There is no reason to expect that Internet usage as such will have any effect – positive or negative – on democracy. What seems to be the common denominator between traditional media and the

Internet is political information. Therefore, the level of measurement, i.e. using the Internet to acquire political news or information, is important when trying to determine relationships.

The initial optimism regarding the sheer number of available sources online has quickly been rejected by scholars, who argue that people are more likely to expose themselves to “politically-like minded sources” (Mutz & Young, 2011:1025). Thereby, their likelihood of being exposed to different viewpoints that could make citizens more critical and/or tolerant decreases and instead, they find themselves in environments that reinforce existing beliefs and foster identity politics.

While some authors believe that people tend to expose themselves to echo chambers online (Conover, Ratkiewicz, Francisco, Goncalves, Menczer & Flammini, 2011; Tarbush & Teytelboym, 2012), others contend that social media are the perfect platform to facilitate “cross-cutting exposure” to different viewpoints (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015:28). These mixed findings may suggest that the decision to expose oneself to opposing views depends solely on the individual and their intention to retrieve meaningful, diverse information.

This begs the question as to why the Internet should be any different in shaping citizens’ political attitudes and behaviour than traditional media and that it closely resembles a “politics as usual” environment (Stanley & Weare, 2004:504). Bailard (2012:157) provides a simple answer to this question by arguing that “the potential political influence of the Internet hinges on its capacity to make communication, information retrieval, and information dispersion more efficient”. This argument is further strengthened considering the “high speed, low cost and broad scope” of information that is available online as well as the variety of alternating viewpoints that traditional media do not necessarily broadcast (Ceron & Memoli, 2015:229). Therefore, the sheer amount of data on the Internet and its pluralistic nature allow users to diversify their sources and through this shape their opinions in a way that traditional news might not.

The impact of the Internet on politics has mostly been studied in more advanced economies where access is almost universal. However, online behaviour and its relation to politics is largely unexplored in the South African context. Research has been limited to qualitative analyses of hashtag movements in protest action (see Bosch, 2013; Luescher, Loader & Mugume, 2017; Bosch and Mutsvairo, 2017; Bosch, Wasserman & Chuma, 2018; Gwaze, Hsu, Bosch & Lockett, 2018). Therefore, measurable relationships between Internet penetration and citizen political attitudes and behaviour are speculative.

1.2 Problem statement

In South Africa, there is increasing evidence to suggest that the Internet and social media may have far-reaching influences on politics and society. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have aided in the mobilisation of cause-oriented participation among South Africans as Bosch (2012; 2013) and colleagues have shown. These include the recent student hashtag movements and other public protests which heavily relied on ICTs to spread and rally supporters. Although Internet access in South Africa is not as pronounced as in western democracies, there is increasing evidence to suggest that it is growing and reaching almost all segments of the population.

Research by the Pew Research Center indicates that in the world's largest economies, the millennial generation's (term used to usually describe those individuals reaching adulthood in the early 21st century) access to the Internet is nearing almost 100%. By comparison, fewer than six in ten South African millennials indicated that they have access to the Internet (Poushter, 2016:10). However, at the time of writing, strong evidence for a digital divide could be found, where younger people had higher access to the Internet. Of all respondents aged 18-24, 62.2% indicated that they had access to the web compared to a third of 45-54-olds. Almost two-thirds of respondents with higher levels of education versus a mere quarter of respondents with less education reported having access to the Internet and there were large differences between lower-income (22%) and higher-income (57%) participants (Poushter, 2016:11). In South Africa therefore, differences in terms of access based on age, education, and income are apparent. Malowa (2009) claims that many townships, inhabited by mostly black South Africans, are negatively affected by the digital divide, insofar that their levels of access are significantly lower than of other race groups.

Despite these relatively low country-levels of Internet usage, the Pew Research Center found that 73% of respondents who use the Internet are using social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, etc.), which constitutes 27% of the entire population (Poushter, 2016:21). According to BusinessTech (2017), 30% of South Africa's entire population is signed up on Facebook and 6.5% have a Twitter account. This may account for the fast spread of the 2015 and 2016 student protests in South Africa, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Tanja Bosch, a leading researcher in media studies, has published various articles that show the use of social media in protest mobilisation in South Africa. According to her research, many

citizens are experiencing a “major shift in communication and lifestyle patterns thanks to the rapidly increasing use of social media” (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017:73). Those shifts include faster means of communicating with others via the web and text messages and a more comfortable lifestyle enabled through easier access to goods and services online. In addition, the use of “hashtag politics” has gained strong momentum in the pursuit of mobilising the masses (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017:76).

In March 2015, students from the University of Cape Town called for the “decolonisation” of the university which included *inter alia* the removal of the statue of British imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes. Under the hashtag movement #RhodesMustFall, a group of students organised themselves on social media. In October later that year, students of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg responded to a government announcement about an increase in tuition fees with the #FeesMustFall movement which later spread throughout South African universities. (Mudavanhu, 2017). These protests sparked off later movements such as #OpenStellenbosch at Stellenbosch Universities which demanded the removal of Afrikaans as a tuition language.

Luescher *et al.* (2017:231) argue that through these movements “activism in South Africa has taken on characteristics of [internet-aged] network social movements”. The use of Internet-based communication, particularly social media such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the like “signals the advent of a new way of mobilising and organising political power” (Luescher, *et al.*, 2017:231). The growing access to the Internet and social media (mostly via mobile phones) in South Africa has been utilised by many activists who seek to facilitate change (see Bosch, 2013; Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017; Bosch, Wasserman & Chuma, 2018; Gwaze, Hsu, Bosch & Lockett, 2018).

Alongside increased Internet access, scholars have also noted changes in the political attitudes and behaviour of South Africans. This is portrayed through studies that show that support for democracy is in decline while support for authoritarian rule increased since 1994 (Steenekamp, 2017). These trends are accompanied by declining levels of confidence in the government and lower levels of support for political process (Steenekamp, 2017). Additionally, there appears to be a decline in institutional trust, perceived low levels government performance (Gouws, Schulz-Herzenberg, 2017; de Jager and Steenekamp, 2019), and declining levels of voter turnout (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2014). While these trends are likely to be due to poor government performance, it is possible that they may be reinforced through increasing online access. Global

evidence that suggests that Internet access has an influence on political attitudes and behaviour, might also be relevant for the South African context.

Using the last four waves of the World Values Survey (1995, 2001, 2006, 2013), Steenekamp (2017) looks at the political culture in the country by analysing levels of support for democratic rule and support for authoritarian rule since 1995. Although support for democratic rule remained consistently high between 1995 and 2006 since the country's democratic transition, it dropped significantly in 2013. This decrease in support for democracy was accompanied by an increase in support for authoritarian rule. Steenekamp (2017:67) concludes that there "appears to have been a value shift" in the country where the "gap between support for democratic rule and authoritarian rule has narrowed".

Similarly, de Jager and Steenekamp (2019:159) use the last four waves of the WVS to determine the "relationship between quality of governance, legitimacy and support for democratic regimes". The results show that South Africans place a high value on the instrumental aspects of democracy as reflected in their dissatisfaction with government's inability to deliver predominantly economic goods, which in turn leads to declining support for the incumbent government. As such, South Africans still hold strong materialist value priorities (de Jager, Steenekamp, 2019:161). This confirms the work of Mattes (2008) who has previously shown that South Africans value democracy instrumentally, rather than intrinsically, which may have far-reaching consequences for the reconciliation of the country.

Gouws and Schulz-Herzenberg (2017) show that political trust in South Africa is in decline evidenced by a decline in both specific and diffuse support for democracy and an increase in scepticism toward politicians and institutions between the years of 2006 and 2014. The implications thereof gives rise to concerns as diffuse support is a critical component in the process of reconciliation in newly established democracies. A decline in diffuse support would eventually lead to a decline in support for the political community which may have negative effects on democracy and the process of nation-building. Gouws and Schulz-Herzenberg (2017:224) fear that the erosion of diffuse support will lead to government resorting to "more authoritarian action or attempts to conceal poor government decision making", which will eventually erode legitimacy, a concept crucial for any successful democracy.

As such, findings suggest a simultaneous decline in perceptions of government performance, institutional confidence, and levels of trust that translates into low levels of diffuse support (Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2016, 2017), which tends to "render citizens more likely to

reject the existing political system and support parties of the extreme Right or Left” (Garcia-Rivero, Kotzé & du Toit, 2002:172). This suggests that a legitimacy gap in South Africa exists, which makes “the country vulnerable to radicalism” (de Jager & Steenekamp, 2019:165).

Electoral participation has also declined in South Africa. Schulz-Herzenberg (2014) finds that turnout among the eligible voter population has declined since 1994 despite a growing eligible voting age population. The decline in turnout levels is particularly strong among younger South Africans and reflect global trends in declines in political participation among young people (Henn & Weinstein, 2006; Mattes, 2012; Seekings, 2014; Wattenberg, 2015; Mattes & Richmond, 2015).

Most scholars attribute these changes in political attitudes and behaviour as reflected in the declining levels of trust, support, performance evaluation, and turnout levels to government’s inability to deliver economic goods, rising levels of corruption and mismanagement, amongst other factors. While this cannot be disputed, another aspect that may affect these changes is the influence of the Internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The impact of the Internet remains largely unexplored in the South African context. The evidence presented by the global literature that supports the notion that the Internet affects political outcomes, speaks for an evaluation of the role of the Internet in South African politics.

Norris (2001), argues that the Internet fosters postmaterialist value preferences among its users through the exchange of ideas and beliefs that foster the creation of social capital (Martin, 2008). Johnson and Kaye (2008) show that strong Internet use fosters positive political attitudes through online exposure to information that is related to politics. Stoycheff and Nisbet (2014) on the other hand, believe that increasing access to the Internet, especially in developing countries, leads to a process the authors call “window opening”. This allows users to gain more exposure to the way in which politics works in other countries and potentially make citizens more critical of their own government. Yet, other scholars assert that Internet use may lead to a decrease in, or have no effect on, political involvement at all (Hoffman, Lutz & Müller, 2017; Johnson & Kaye, 2003).

Despite these differing points of views regarding Internet use and its effects on politics, it cannot be denied that politicians around the globe have increasingly moved their campaigns online, and South Africa is no exception. South African politicians such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Julius Malema, Helen Zille and Mmusi Maimane consistently update their statuses on social

media. These incumbents realise that in recent years much attention has shifted online, and it is likely that this is where they are hoping to find support.

Swigger (2012:590) argues that virtual relationships have the potential of altering “the way an individual responds to community and social life”, as online socialisation creates a dynamic different from those of traditional agents of socialisation. Therefore, particularly young people may be subject to different processes of socialisation, apart from the traditional agents of socialisation that consist of interpersonal, institutional and mass media sources of political learning (Mannheim, 1982). Young people’s political opinions and beliefs may be shaped in a new way that social scientists have yet to explore. While institutional learning might not change severely, mass media learning is likely to take on new dimensions for young people. Given that old media (television, radio and newspapers) only present a “one-to-many way of communication”, new media present a “many-to-many way of communication” (Mounk, 2019:182) and it is here where future problems may arise.

Due to a lack of understanding and/or disagreement stemming from the literature, coupled with the observed changes in South African’s political attitudes and behaviour pointed out above, the needs and wants and therefore the political attitudes of young people might be severely misunderstood and misinterpreted. The lack of research in South Africa relating to Internet and social media consumption and its possible implications for political attitudes and values and therefore political behaviour could result in a mismatch between the democratic demand of young people and the democratic supply of incumbents. Considering the tremendous growth of the web in recent years, it is the strong belief of the researcher that substantially more attention should be paid to the possible correlation between the web and political outcomes.

1.3 Summary literature review

1.3.1 Effects of Internet use on political attitudes

The global literature suggests that the increasing use of ICTs has impacted on political attitudes and behaviour. These studies focus predominantly on advanced economies and to date, there is little academic research that explores the influence of the Internet on political attitudes and behaviour in South Africa. Below, some primary findings are discussed. These lay the foundation upon which the research questions and hypotheses of this study are formed.

Norris (2001) argues that cyberspace is dominated by people holding postmaterialist value preferences, where users are more concerned with self-actualisation and issues concerning

quality of life, self-expression, individual freedom, cosmopolitanism, and participatory democracy. Therefore, she argues, postmaterialist values tend to spread faster among those people who frequently use the Internet. In relation to previously expressed arguments that the Internet may facilitate new forms of social capital (Martin & Schmeisser, 2008:5) through interactivity and exchange, the content creator and the content consumer “merge” in the absence of hierarchies (Yildiz, 2002). It becomes clear that emancipative values indeed seem to be popular online.

Johnson and Kaye (2003:27) suggest that the use of the Internet serves as a “strong predictor of positive political attitudes”. Through the exposure to political information online, citizen interest in politics is heightened and as a result, citizens develop attitudes that are conducive to strengthening political efficacy and a willingness to engage in politics. Satirical news, for example, may heighten citizen interest in politics as they “may intersect with, or even affect” viewers’ perceptions of politicians as well as their attitudes and beliefs about political systems (Johnson & Kaye, 2003:28). The combination of comedy and serious political topics seems to appeal to many viewers and as a result might lead to increased political knowledge, efficacy as well as increased criticism toward politicians. Rill and Cardiehl (2013:1742) agree that this could be an indication that viewing “satirical political news programs” leads to increased political knowledge as well as cynicism among viewers. Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain and Morey (2011) also find that political satire, whether it spreads via the Internet or television, results in increased criticism and distrust toward politicians and politics in general.

Stoycheff and Nisbet (2014) believe that increased Internet exposure results in citizens becoming more critical and aware of politicians in their respective country. Through the process of “window-opening” and “mirror-holding”, people are exposed to different regime types and can compare these to their own. Consequently, they begin to see democracy as a favourable political system and thus demand more democracy in their own country, while also perceiving a lower supply. Therefore, Stoycheff and Nisbet (2014) believe that Internet access leads to the rejection of authoritarian rule.

1.3.2 Effects of Internet use on political behaviour

In light of a decline in overall political participation, especially among younger generations in western democracies, some arguments have been made that heightened use of the web might be responsible. Bakker and de Vreese (2011:453) disagree and believe that many of such assumptions are “biased by a disproportional focus on institutional and limited measures of

participatory behaviour”. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) have shown that participation has several dimensions and that different kinds of participation depend on time and resources available to citizens. The Internet, however, lowers opportunity costs of participation to a variety of users, most importantly the youth. Bakker and de Vreese (2011:465) also find that various types of Internet use are “positively linked to measures of political participation”.

Below, four theses will be briefly discussed that seek to explain the effects of Internet use on political participation. The most positive view is held by “cyber-optimists”, who emphasise the possibilities of online activities for the “involvement of ordinary citizens in (...) democracy” (Norris & Curtice 2006:2). This view is called the “mobilisation thesis” and suggests that online activities may serve as a substitute mechanism for the facilitation of alternative channels of civic engagement. This could be achieved through political chatrooms, remote electronic voting in elections, referenda, and the mobilisation of virtual communities which could have the potential to “revitalise levels of mass participation” (Norris and Curtice, 2006:2).

Norris and Curtice (2006:12), using the British Social Attitudes Survey of 2003, find that people who spend more time online are also more likely to vote and to engage in offline forms of political participation. Additionally, they find evidence for the existence of a “digital divide” among Internet users where younger people are more active, and that usage is “skewed toward the well-educated and more affluent social sectors”.

Other theories proposed by “cyber-pessimists” challenge this view by arguing that the Internet will eventually “reinforce existing inequalities of power and wealth, generating deeper divisions between the information rich and poor” (Norris & Curtice, 2006:3). This “reinforcement thesis” maintains that the Internet may further contribute to a participation gap between “engaged and disengaged citizens” (Hoffman, Lutz and Müller, 2017:1). At worst, the Internet could create a “digital divide” by increasing the power of the elites who have higher access and thus control online content, while disenfranchising the poor who have little access to it (Johnson & Kaye, 2003:10).

The “normalisation thesis” also represents a rather pessimistic view and proposes that the appearance of the knowledge society has had little impact on changing the participation gap between engaged and disengaged citizens. It further states that technology has done little to change the political *status quo* and that radical change is unlikely to happen as the Internet will eventually reflect a “politics as usual” scenario, where participation will be skewed towards more educated and wealthier users (Norris & Curtice, 2006; Hoffman, *et al.* 2017).

Finally, the “displacement hypothesis” suggests that “time spent online could displace time formerly devoted to social and political purposes” (Hoffman, *et al.* 2017:1). This view holds that the more time an individual spends on the Internet or operates technological devices, the less likely he or she is to devote remaining leisure time to pursue civic activities. As a result, Internet use should contribute to the weakening, instead of the strengthening of citizen’s civic and political engagement.

Of all theses, the mobilisation and reinforcement theses stand out in the literature and have gained the most support of all four theses. Although opinions differ largely in terms of measurement and what merits the label “online political participation”, it becomes clear that despite a lack of consensus, the Internet does exert a considerable influence on its users.

1.3.3 Internet access in South Africa

There are few studies that examine at Internet access in South Africa in relation to politics and have rather focused on access to the web. The literature suggests that the digital divide in South Africa is quite large and runs across several sociodemographic variables. For example, evidence shows that the Internet is dominated by English content that many South Africans do not understand and therefore they cannot browse the web in a meaningful way (Wasserman, 2002). Furthermore, educational attainment stands in the way of technological literacy for mostly black and coloured citizens. White and Indian South Africans are the most likely to have higher levels of education that provide them with an advantage to engage with the Internet through technological literacy and higher levels of income (Statistics South Africa, 2016).

These financial inequalities also impact accessibility in South Africa because not everyone can afford to go online due to the high costs (Bosch, Wasserman & Chuma, 2018). Beger and Sinah (2012) point out that the digital divide in South Africa is still dominated by race, socioeconomic status and geographical location. This can be attributed to apartheid policies which foresaw that only 10% of urban dwellers – who were mostly white and living in prosperous neighbourhoods – benefited from ICT developments (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017:74). As a result, many disadvantaged groups in South Africa did not reap the immediate benefits from the introduction of the Internet in 1994, as they had little to no access and therefore largely remained technologically illiterate. According to Statistics South Africa (2016), the black population in South Africa still falls behind in terms of educational attainment, while whites and Indians have the highest proportion of tertiary level of education. Both groups also have the lowest proportion of individuals with the lowest levels of education. This indicates that

although there has been a substantial growth in the black middle class in South Africa, the black population still faces hardships in terms of education and income, which in turn reflects on their access to the Internet and possibly their ability to search for meaningful information online.

Furthermore, Poushter (2016) shows that the digital divide in South Africa is characterised by age. The statistics in this study indicate that roughly two thirds (62.6%) of 18-24-year olds frequently use the Internet to source political news compared to 31% of 45-54-year olds or 19.8% of 55+-year olds. Thus, it appears that by virtue of their higher levels of usage, some population groups (e.g. young, white people) are more likely to be affected by Internet and social media than others.

1.4 Research questions and hypotheses

1.4.1 Research question 1

This section provides the research questions and relating hypotheses that inform this study. Each formulated hypothesis stems from the global literature and findings of scholars whose work focuses on the influence of the Internet on politics. Before any associations between Internet use and political attitudes and behaviour are established, it is useful to test who Internet and social media users in South Africa are. Therefore, research question one explores demographic usage.

Research Question 1: Which demographic groups predominantly use the Internet and social media to source political news?

Previous research about the Internet has revealed a gap where users of a higher socioeconomic background, and higher levels of education are most active, commonly referred to as the reinforcement thesis. Furthermore, younger generations appear to be more present on social media platforms and the Internet in general due to their early introduction to technology and their ability to adapt and utilise it (Rainie, 2012). Research (Norris & Curtice, 2006; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Rainie, 2012; Smith & Duggan, 2012a, 2012b; Steinberg, 2015). This, in turn, could have implications for members of different groups of society. In short, it is important to determine who Internet users are and how Internet use may affect their political attitudes, values, and behaviour.

Thus, in relation to Research Question 1, the following hypothesis arises:

Hypothesis 1: regular Internet users tend to be younger, and more educated.

These findings emanate from advanced economies, where smaller income and equality gaps exist. However, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world with a Gini coefficient of 0.65 measured in 2015, with the black population predominantly suffering from poverty and low standards of living (Statistics South Africa, 2016). While there has been an impressive growth of South Africa's black middle class, which has increased from 1.6 to 6 million within the last five years and is now larger than the white middle class (Korhonen, 2018), it can nevertheless be expected that access is determined by race, as Bosch (2018) argues.

Hypothesis 2: There is a difference in terms of access to Internet and social media based on race.

According to research released by Statista (2017), men (51%) in South Africa have only a slightly higher access to ICTs than women (49%) with a mere 2% difference in access and/or usage. This, combined with decreasing costs as well as increasing ease of accessing the Internet, leads to the third hypothesis of this study:

Hypothesis 3: Gender does not determine access to or frequency of Internet and social usage.

Studies have shown that certain segments of the population have uneven access to the Internet, with rural areas being less likely to have an Internet connectivity, neither through a land line nor through a cellular phone (Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010; Beger & Sinah, 2012). This is because broadband providers are not as quick to enter rural markets because of lower profitability as a result of limited customers, as well as the difficulty of building technological infrastructure on uneven terrain. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis in line with Research Question 1 states:

Hypothesis 4: Internet and social media users are more likely to live in urban, rather than rural areas.

1.4.2 Research question 2

The literature review in this study outlines the comparative, global research on the observable shifts in political attitudes and values and a marked difference in the political behaviour of Internet users and non-users. Building on the premise of such differences, the second research question looks at where political attitudes and behaviour differ.

Research Question 2: Is there a measurable difference between Internet and social media users versus non-users in terms of their political attitudes and behaviour?

A number of scholars (de Vreese, 2007; Moeller, de Vreese, Esser and Kunz, 2014; Velasquez & La Rose, 2015) believe that the Internet plays an increasingly important role in informing citizens in terms of politics and fostering a sense of political efficacy. People who spend more time browsing the web are more likely to be exposed to political information, whether they intentionally search for it or not, than people who spend less time online. This results in a heightened sense of political interest and efficacy, reflected in more political discussions with family and peers. In relation to Research Question 2, the following hypotheses stand;

Hypothesis 5: frequent Internet and social media users are more likely to discuss and be interested in politics than non-users.

The content that is shared on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, varies significantly. Users may choose to post or tweet their own opinions in the form of visual or written content and can share articles containing news, lifestyle, politics, or recreation. Swigger (2012:590) argues that the rise of Web 2.0 and especially social networking sites have a significant impact on the values that individuals hold. He argues that individuals, who are actively sharing information have begun to "value the right of free expression more and the right of privacy less". His research provides evidence that the Internet, while becoming a fundamental aspect of most people's everyday lives, has begun to shape and change the way people perceive a number of things, including values and beliefs. Following Norris (2001) argument that the Internet is dominated by people who embrace postmaterialist values where users are more concerned with self-actualisation and issues concerning quality of life, self-expression, individual freedom, cosmopolitanism, and participatory democracy, Hypothesis 6 is formed.

Hypothesis 6: regular Internet users are more likely to express a preference for emancipative values (less deference to authority posed by government) than non-users.

Nisbet and Stoycheff (2014) conducted a study examining the relationship between Internet access and perceived supply and demand for democracy. Results confirmed that the more access individuals had to the Internet, the more likely they were to perceive a low supply of democracy in their country and consequently display higher demand for democracy. Through the process of “window-opening”, Internet users are exposed to the way governments function in other countries, and as a result, form ideas about roles and responsibilities of citizens and states and then compare these to conditions in their own countries through the process of “mirror-holding” (Bailard, 2012a, 2012b). Through these processes, individuals become more likely to prefer democracy over any other kind of government. At the same time, citizens become more informed about scandalous events some politicians are involved with and tend to have lower levels of trust in their incumbents. Consequently, the following hypotheses are formed:

Hypothesis 7: Internet and social media users tend to perceive low levels of supply of democracy and are more likely to be critical and distrustful of government and political actors than non-users.

Hypothesis 8: Internet users are more likely to express a preference for democracy over any other form of government.

The significance of Web 2.0 platforms is that users can participate in the flow and exchange of information, instead of a mere passive absorption of information. The interactive nature of such discussions allows for almost immediate feedback, and participation in such discussions is unrestrained by time, and users’ geographical location. Furthermore, they represent an opportunity to obtain information at a much lower cost in terms of time and resources than conventional sources of information. Therefore, Web 2.0 may have significant impacts on the mobilisation of civil society. In the South African context, this could be observed especially among tertiary education students who instigated movements such as ‘Fees Must Fall’, ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, or ‘Open Stellenbosch’, the mobilisation of which primarily took place on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Thus, the following research question arises:

Hypothesis 9: the more time someone spends online, the more likely they are to be engaged in offline political participation¹, thus providing evidence for the mobilisation thesis.

1.4.3 Research question 3

Yet, solely looking at associations between Internet and social media use and political attitudes and behaviour without including sociodemographic variables limits the scope of the study because only the mobilisation thesis can be tested. In order to determine whether Internet and social media use has implications for the social dynamics in South Africa an investigation of correlations on a within-group level is required. This allows to test other hypotheses such as the reinforcement and normalisation thesis which presuppose that increased online exposure will affect groups within a population differently.

Thus, it seems important to analyse within-group differences to determine whether Internet and social media users differ in terms of their political attitudes and their behaviour based on age and race. The South African literature suggests strong indicators of a digital divide which is likely to affect the way in which political online content influences different groups in South Africa. Thus, the third and final research question guiding this study is formed.

Research Question 3: Are there measurable differences between Internet and social media users versus non-users in terms of their political attitudes and behaviour based on age and race?

Research Question 3 will make use of the hypotheses relating to Research Question 2, the only difference being that age and race are included as a third variable.

Building on previous findings that suggest that young people globally and in South Africa are more likely to use the Internet and social media (Norris and Curtice, 2006; Poushter, 2016), this research study looks at whether reading political news online affects age groups differently. This would also provide further insight into understanding how young people might engage with politics in the future.

The researcher is aware that class and education would seem like better alternatives to race as a third variable. However, race is preferred for two reasons; firstly, the Afrobarometer does not provide an objective measure of the class or income of the respondent, and the data is simply

¹ Such as voting, attending community meetings or raising an issue, and being active in campaigns

not available. Yet, in the South African context, race can often be a proxy for class and education. According to Statistics South Africa (2017), roughly three out of every five black people (64.2%) were living below the upper-bound poverty line of R992 per person per month (UBPL) in 2015, while 41.3% of coloured people were living below the UBPL. In comparison, only 5.9% of the Indian population and a mere 1% of the white population were living below UBPL. Thus, the white and Indian populations tend to have a higher monthly income and are thus occupying higher socioeconomic statuses than the black or coloured population (Statistics South Africa, 2017). This likely reflects on their levels of Internet and social media use where white and Indian people are possibly more likely to go online than black or coloured people. Secondly, race is chosen over education because it only consists of four categories, whereas education consists of 10. Thus, testing relationships based on the education of the respondent would require a longer analysis and interpretation that cannot be achieved in this study due to length limitations.

1.5 Methodology and operationalisation

To address these research questions and related hypotheses, this research study follows a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches each have strengths and limitations. The main advantage of a mixed-methods approach is the fact that inferences can be made based on quantitative outcomes and can be studied in further detail through qualitative research. Thus, while both approaches differ significantly, they can complement each other and yield benefits to the overall research and its findings. Ragin (1994a:92) explains that

“most quantitative data techniques (...) condense data in order to see the bigger picture. Qualitative methods, by contrast, are best understood as data enhancers. When data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects more clearly”.

Nie and Erbring (2000) suggest that time individuals spend online is less important than what they are doing online, i.e. which websites they visit and how they engage with those websites. The quantitative research of this study will only provide information on whether people who do use the Internet for political news, are in some way influenced by it. However, it cannot explain in what way they engage with the news they read online and whether they receive them from reputable sources. This gap is filled by the qualitative aspect of this research in that it seeks to determine *how* students engage with content online which may, in turn, have a potential impact on their political values, attitudes and behaviour.

1.5.1 Part I: Quantitative analysis

Using quantitative data analysis, inferences will be made about possible associations and relationships between Internet use and political attitudes and participation. The data used in this study to measure relationships derives from the Afrobarometer Round 6 Questionnaire of 2015. Therefore, a cross-sectional approach will be taken in terms of the quantitative research.

1.5.1.1 Dependent variables

The dependent variables in this study measure numerous political attitudes, values, and behaviour. Using the Afrobarometer Round 6 data, question items pertaining to each variable will be grouped together under attitudes, values, and behaviour. (See Chapter 3 and Appendix A, page 135 for a full outline of question items)

1. **Political values** are measured through a battery of questions where respondents were asked with which statement they agree the most. Specifically, emancipative value preferences will be tested. Furthermore, respondents are asked questions pertaining to their valuing of democracy based on Nisbet's and Stoycheff's (2014) findings.
2. **Political attitudes** are measured by looking at questions that measure views of democratic processes in South Africa, citizens' views and evaluations of government and the country, as well as views of political institutions.
3. **Political behaviour** is measured by looking at respondents' turnout, their campaign and communal activity, as well as protest action.

1.5.1.2 Demographic variables

Demographic variables will be employed to determine any sociological differences in usage based on age, gender, race, location, and education. The demographic variables used in this research study are age, gender, race, education and location of respondent. The categories for age and education of respondent will be collapsed into fewer categories in order to make the analysis clearer.²

1.5.1.3 Independent and control variable

Contrary to most research that looks at the effect of many independent variables on one dependent variable, this research will use three independent variables (Internet and social media use for political news, and a scale consisting of both, social media and Internet use for

² For detailed description of the new variables, please see Chapter 3

acquiring political news) and their effects on a large number of dependent variables (political values, attitudes, and behaviour). This study will distinguish between Internet and social media *users* and *non-users* (see chapter 3 for a detailed description for the criteria of determining usage). The distribution of Internet users (48.8%) and non-users and social media users (47.8%) and non-users (52.3%) represents a more or less equal distribution of respondents, which is important for statistical tests.

1.5.2 Part II: Qualitative analysis

Once associations based on quantitative analysis have been determined, the second part of the research aims to focus on qualitative data collection through focus group discussions with students at Stellenbosch University. Following Hypothesis 1's assumption that Internet users tend to be younger and more educated, a young, university-based focus group seems appropriate to offer valuable insight into the nature of engagement with the Internet. These students might also offer useful insight into the political behaviour of this cohort, which appears to be less engaged in conventional politics than its older counterparts (Schoemann & Puttergill, 2007; Mattes 2012; Seekings, 2014; Mattes & Richmond, 2015; Tracey, 2016; Resnick & Casale; Malila, 2016; Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019).

In order to recruit participants, ethical clearance was sought from Stellenbosch University first, followed by a request at the University to allow the researcher to conduct focus group discussions with students within the Department of Political Science. Once ethical clearance was granted, a focus group discussion consisting of 12 participants took place. The focus group serves to enrich the outcome of this study through more in-depth discussion of Internet and social media use. It is aimed at gaining a better understanding of the way in which university students engage with online political content and how this affects their attitudes, values, and behaviour.

1.6 Significance of the study

If Hypothesis 1 which assumes that regular Internet users tend to be younger, and more educated, holds true, then this could have major implications for future democratic processes in South Africa. Younger generations will possibly have greater access to a vast array of information that could potentially influence their values and attitudes towards democracy in the country, as well as their levels of mobilisation and participation. Given the large youth bulge in the country with a median age of 26 (Statistics South Africa, 2016), closer attention

needs to be paid to the ways in which this cohort shapes its attitudes and values and how their political behaviour may develop. Swigger (2012:590) argues that virtual relationships have the potential of altering “the way an individual responds to community and social life”, as online socialisation creates a dynamic different from those of traditional agents of socialisation. If young people are more active online, this may imply that the Internet emerges as a new agent of socialisation and shapes young South Africans differently than their older counterparts.

Depending on the content that is viewed online, Internet users can utilise the information to form their own opinions and make informed decisions by comparing different sources that are widely available. Provided that users do engage in a critical assessment of various sources, this may imply that citizens will be able to make more informed decisions. However, if less educated people also have lower access to the Internet, their levels of access to information may put them in an even more disadvantaged position. This means that if web usage is dominated by more educated people, there may be an increased inequality gap that transcends to Internet usage. Less educated people may thus have less access to information and may be left out in the formation of Castells’ information society. This will confirm his prediction that on the one hand, divisions will be heightened, and on the other, integration in global affairs will be increased, however only for those who form part of the information society (Webster, 2014:102-103). As such, a gap in terms of availability of information in South Africa may ensue which will also be prevalent among rural versus urban areas where urban dwellers will have higher access to the Internet than rural dwellers (Hypothesis 4).

Hypothesis 2 states that there is a difference in terms of Internet access based on race. If this hypothesis finds support, then increased race cleavages in South Africa, based on technological advancement could develop. Depending on whether people from different race groups have differing levels of access, then Castells’ thesis of increased divisions will further run along racial and class lines in South Africa, “generating deeper divisions between the information rich and poor”. This implies that some groups in South Africa may be left behind in the process of modernisation and globalisation and that “existing inequalities of power and wealth” will be reinforced (Norris & Curtice, 2006:3). This would also apply to Hypothesis 4 (Internet users are more likely to live in urban rather than rural areas); if this hypothesis receives support then those people who live in urban areas are benefitting more from ICT development than those people who live in rural areas. Rural dwellers, therefore, might find it difficult to be included in the growing exchange of information.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that gender does not determine access to or frequency of Internet and social media usage. Should this hypothesis obtain support, South Africa may finally experience a closing gap in terms of access based on gender. Women and men might have equal access to technology which might further reflect on more equal opportunities in other areas of life.

Following Castell's (1998) line of thinking on the appearance of an "information society", Webster (2014) introduces the concept of a "network society" that has emerged through the fusion of capitalism and the "information revolution".³ Webster (2014) explains that the formation of the network society bears certain cultural consequences, some of which social scientists have yet to grasp. However, the implications of the network society for politics are clear; in order to be an active participant in politics, one must have access to the network. As such, the network society and politics have embarked on a new relationship, which is increasingly moving online. Hypothesis 5 states that Internet users are more likely to discuss and be interested in politics than non-users, implying that levels of usage determine levels of political interest and/or efficacy. If Internet usage turns out to be an indicator of political interest, then this may have positive implications for levels of turnout during elections, and political engagement, ultimately leading to more engaged citizens, especially among young people. This would also confirm Hypothesis 9 which states that Internet users are more likely to be engaged in offline political participation. If Webster's (2014) argument holds true for South Africa, then those who spend more time online reading political news are also more likely to play a bigger part in politics. As such, the rise of the web may positively affect the quality of democracy in South Africa, by producing a more informed citizenry that shows an active interest in politics.

If the study finds support for Hypothesis 6, which states that Internet users are more likely to express a preference for emancipative values this might mark a value shift in South Africa towards more post-materialist value preferences. Mattes (2008) and Steenekamp (2017) contend that South Africans still value democracy instrumentally, rather than intrinsically which is reflected in their higher rankings of economic compared to democratic goods. Van Deth and Scarbough (1995:29) argue, based on various definitions of values that there "appears (...) to be a broad consensus that values are significant in their bearing to action". In this vein, the origin of a change in attitudes about government and politics can be found in the notion of a change of values. Thus, values impact attitudes, which function as the "building blocks of

³ The information revolution refers to the rapid development and evolution of ICTs in the second half of the 20th century (Melinkov and Semenyuk, 2013:10).

political activity” and may potentially serve as a predictor of behaviour (Manheim, 1982:8). Therefore, a shift from more materialist to emancipative/ post-materialist values may indicate a change in political behaviour in the country.

Welzel (2006:871) argues that “democratization is essentially an emancipative process, for it manifests human freedom by empowering people with civil and political rights”. Such an emancipative process, he argues, leads to mass attitudes of “liberty aspirations” which are more powerful in facilitating progress toward democratization than any other indicators such as GDP or social capital. If going online more often translates into greater support for emancipative values, then this could mark an important step toward reconciliation in South Africa. Gouws and Schulz-Herzenberg (2017) show that levels of diffuse support are declining in South Africa, which is worrisome as it could potentially lead to a regime that loses legitimacy and accountability. However, the spread of emancipative values through the Internet could mean a renewed sense of diffuse support for democracy among those who go online more frequently. This would be a heartening finding which could renew hopes for more successful reconciliation.

If Hypothesis 6 and 7 hold true, then Nisbet’s and Stoycheff’s (2014) study finds support. Through the process of “window-opening” and “mirror-holding” that is enabled through online activity, users can compare their own political system and processes to those elsewhere and thereby increasingly become more distrustful and critical of government performance. At the same time, it may enforce the view of democracy being ‘the only game in town’ and thereby strengthening preferences for democracy over any other form of government. As a result, there could be a reversal and gradual decline in the recent rise in support for authoritarian rule as demonstrated by Steenekamp (2017) and de Jager and Steenekamp (2019) and rising levels of diffuse support for democracy.

The qualitative part of this study which seeks to gain insight into young people’s online activity may make a major contribution in the study of online media and citizenship in South Africa. It is particularly important to explore the impact of the Internet on younger South African generations given that their political participation at elections has been declining, and their political behaviour now strongly resembles that of other younger generations in advanced democracies (Henn and Weinstein, 2006; Dalton, 2008; Mattes, 2012; Seekings, 2014; Wattenberg, 2015; Mattes and Richmond, 2015; Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019). This behaviour does not conform to conventional forms of participation but has been shaped in a way that is

more pro-active. Online campaigns have seen a rise in support among young people who wish to influence immediate change in politics, rather than hoping to exert change by voting for representatives that might or might not represent their interests. Due to forces exerted through generational replacement, it is crucial to determine the driving forces behind changes in value preferences and attitudes that might influence voting decisions and patterns of political behaviour. Furthermore, given the successful utilisation of social media during the student hashtag movements, it is likely that South Africa's younger cohorts will make use of such platforms in the future.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the research study through an introduction and background of what constitutes today's network society and the role of the Internet and ICTs in politics. Furthermore, it provides a problem statement which is that the political attitudes, values and political behaviour of South Africans are changing and that given the rise of heightened Internet access, online influences might be an explanatory factor. This chapter also outlines the research questions and related hypotheses that guide this research study and briefly touches on the methodologies used in order to answer these questions. It concludes by explaining the significance of this study, which is that significant relationships between Internet and social media use and political attitudes, values and behaviour, point to ICTs as an important political component in South Africa's democracy that needs further study in order to understand South African political behaviour.

If we are to study and understand the political behaviour of citizens, we need to consider all possible influences that may affect their political attitudes and values. The Internet and social media are increasingly becoming intertwined in our everyday lives and are thus an integral part in the way political opinions and ideas are shaped. Therefore, it is essential that scholars begin to regard it as a significant and important influential component. This study hopes to mark the beginning of filling the gap that exists in the literature regarding Internet use and South African politics.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review examines research that explores the relationship between the Internet and politics, and political attitudes and behaviour. The first section examines how the web has infiltrated politics, how it has gained increasing relevance for politicians and how they use online platforms to their advantage in the pursuit of gaining support and connecting with citizens. The second section explains how the web might influence political value and attitude formations. The third section provides the reader with an overview of the four dominating theses that relate to the Internet and political behaviour, those being the mobilisation, reinforcement, normalisation, and displacement theses. Each thesis is examined separately, and different case studies are provided to demonstrate their findings. Thereafter, an explanation of the dynamic of the Internet and its users sheds some light on the causal relationship between the medium and the user. Furthermore, the spread and use of the Internet in the South African context is explained. Finally, the review will assess the literature which seeks to explain the interconnectedness of each standpoint relating to political attitudes, values, and behaviour.

2.2 The Internet and politics

In the last two decades, the Internet has increasingly gained relevance in political deliberation and exchange in most democracies. Politicians progressively move their public announcements to online platforms, most notably social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media has also become a popular means of raising support in presidential campaigns. The 2008 United States presidential bid serves as an excellent example to demonstrate how effective the Internet and new media were in securing Barack Obama the presidency. The Democratic National Committee (DNC) invested a considerable amount of its advertisement budget on online advertising campaign that was specifically targeting younger voters. In a DNC-organised advert broadcast on YouTube, Obama could be seen sending out his message to his followers,

“Today, you have a chance once again to defy the conventional wisdom that we can’t overcome the cynicism of our politics. But we can overcome the special interests and the big money. You can prove one more time that change comes from the bottom up. Together, we can keep moving this country forward” (Fifield, 2010).

With an advertising campaign of US \$2.5m, the DNC placed videos on popular websites among young people, such as Facebook, MTV, Comedy Central, and YouTube, in order to mobilise

voters. The USA does not serve as the only example demonstrating the beneficial effects of the Internet for political campaigns. During the 2011 Russian presidential election, blogs for example, were a popular means of raising support (Carty, 2017) while YouTube served as another popular source of mobilisation during the 2007 Australian election (Gibson and McAllister, 2011).

In Sweden, an entirely new party – the Pirate Party – was formed online and quickly gained political momentum and even gained a seat in the European Parliament in 2009 (Li, 2009:307). Even the United Nations has acknowledged the need to include individual experts online that make meaningful contributions toward policy formation through online research on how individual users influence one another through the exchange of information (Sha’ban, 2005:238). This goes to show that the Internet has gradually eroded the dominance of certain powerful groups, and channels political influence to individual citizens.

Bertola (2010) even claims that the Internet has not only equalled the playing field of candidates as Bode and Dalrymple (2016) argue, but that it may redistribute power as a whole. She explains that throughout the twentieth century, power has shifted from single large entities such as governments to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have “replaced traditional, hierarchical power relationships with horizontal and distributed interactions” (Bertola, 2010:327). This process, which has particularly been pushed by the Internet, has now placed power in the hands of individuals, not in the sense of traditional power but in terms of an “avalanche effect” that can be created by a single person “using collaborative internet platforms to promote political stances” and thereby affect an entire political system (Bertola, 2010:327).

This avalanche effect was accentuated through Trump’s election which was shortly followed by the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In early 2018 it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica allegedly illegally gathered and sold data from over 87 million Facebook users, using a quiz which collected information from users’ friends online. The data was employed for US President Trump’s 2016 election campaign by analysing voters’ preferences which in turn would predict their voting behaviour. Cambridge Analytica, which has now filed for insolvency is, at the time of writing, under investigation by the FBI (Reuters, 2018).

Until a few years ago, states and media companies possessed an oligopoly over mass communication. Through this, they could set the limits of acceptable political discourse among citizens and control a narrative that was considered suitable for the overall population. In a

functioning democracy, this meant to suppress false information and discriminatory content and thereby strengthening democracy. In dictatorships, on the other hand, this meant to censor any type of criticism aimed at leaders and through this, prevent any type of democratization (Mounk, 2019:182).

With the rise of the Internet and social media, however, the technological advantage of political elites has gradually been eroded. In authoritarian countries, the democratic opposition is gaining increasing traction in furthering their message to overthrow dictatorships. Yet, the Internet and social media are surprisingly effective tools in spreading hatred and false information. A recent study by Gunther, Beck, and Nisbet (2018) suggests that the spread of fake news online may have caused Trump to win the presidency. The study suggests that about 4% of Obama's 2012 supporters may have been dissuaded from voting for Clinton in 2016 by belief in fake news stories (Gunther, Beck, Nisbet, 2019:2). Using a YouGov survey, the authors inserted three popular fake news stories into the questionnaire, which about a quarter of Obama voters believed to be true. Of those who believed at least one of the fake stories, 45% voted for Clinton compared to 89% of Clinton supporters who did not believe in any of them. Although no causation between loss of support and fake news could be found in the study, the study's data strongly suggests that fake news did have an impact on the outcome of the election.

Citizens are becoming aware of the role of social media in political campaigns. The Pew Internet and American Life Project survey of 2011 revealed that during the 2010 campaign in the US, 22% of adult Internet users reported using Twitter and other social media websites for political purposes. As Larsson and Moe (2011:729) put it, "in purely quantitative terms, Twitter contributes to a broadening of public debate: it constitutes a novel arena for mediated public communication" testified by the sheer number of tweets.

This argument is supported by the recent shutdown of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter in Zimbabwe in January 2019, amid violent protests in the country due to a rise in the price of fuel. The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum accused the Zimbabwean authorities of having cut off the Internet in the country to "mask the massive human rights violations" (BBC, 2019). Other examples of Internet shutdown in 2019 in Africa include the Democratic Republic of Congo, due to a disputed presidential election, Gabon in response to an attempted coup, and Sudan, which blocked social media "amid growing calls for its long-time president to step down" (News24, 2019).

The use of social media has gained increasing popularity among young adults and in many instances is preferred as a source of political information (Rainie, 2012). Arguments have been raised that social media such as Facebook and Twitter do not necessarily represent a source of news since the focal point of such websites is personal interaction and the likelihood of encountering political news is slim. However, research has shown that most young people prefer obtaining political news as well as expressing their political views and opinions on such platforms, thereby creating user-generated political content (Rainie, 2012; Smith & Duggan, 2012a, 2012b). Therefore, by virtue of online friends and their expressions on the Internet, the likelihood of encountering political content online grows significantly, even if one is not interested in politics nor deliberately searches for information (Yamamoto, Kushin & Francis, 2015).

Having established that the Internet has gained increasing importance as a political tool for political parties, candidates and citizens, the question remains how the Internet is used and influences citizens. To understand how the Internet will affect politics in the future, a closer look at how it has already facilitated changes in society and politics provides further insight. To understand how the Internet will affect politics in the future, a closer look at how it has already facilitated changes in society and politics provides further insight.

2.3 The Internet and political values and attitudes

Values are fundamental in guiding one's decisions in life as they "presumably shape attitudes and behaviour" (Dalton, 2008:87). They are an indication of what is important to an individual and thus function as a "reference standard for making decisions". However, values in a society are not fixed and contemporary societies have recently displayed shifts in their value priorities, which has led to a "new style of citizen politics" (Dalton, 2008:87; Inglehart and Abrahamson, 1994). In particular, "emancipative values" as Inglehart and Welzel (2010:44) describe them, have recently gained rising global popularity. As a result of improved levels of education, exposure to political information, and the spread of technology, these values gradually begin to replace "hierarchical relationships and deference to authority" (Dalton, 2008:87) and stress "equality, tolerance, autonomy, and expression", as well as quality of life (Welzel & Inglehart, 2009:129).

Attitudes, on the other hand, are the "building blocks" of political activity (Manheim, 1989:8). They have the potential to predict or serve as an "indicator of behaviour" since they function

as a “predisposition to respond to a particular stimulus in a particular manner” (Manheim, 1989:8). When receiving a particular message or being exposed to certain stimuli, attitudes serve as a tool to make sense of information in such a powerful way that the very nature of the message itself may change because the context within which it is received, is highly individualised. Thus, the study of political attitudes is an important tool for social scientists as it serves to predict political behaviour. As such, attitudes flow from values and can be seen as a prelude to political behaviour and will be discussed first.

With the rise of Web 1.0 (mostly websites providing information that users cannot interact with) and Web 2.0 (social networking websites) platforms, researchers have begun to question whether the rapid spread of information facilitated through such websites, may have a significant influence on the way in which individuals form or in fact change their values and attitudes. As discussed above, the exchange of opinions, feelings, ideas, and attitudes has been made significantly easier through ICTs and users may choose to download or upload these at their own convenience without restrictions posed by time or space. To quote Bode and Dalrymple (2016:315) once more, “users are likely to influence and be influenced by their respective networks”, the functions of which are similar to those of agents of socialisation.

Anduiza, Cantijoch and Gallego (2009) believe that although changes in attitudes and values among Internet users might not be directly linked to politics, they can affect citizens’ perception of it. Attitudinal changes, so Anduiza, *et al.* (2009:867) contend, are the result of an “interiorization of the new skills or relational forms that are characteristic of the Internet”. Through interactions that span across location, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other sociodemographic differences, users interiorize certain interactive practices (these are not necessarily limited to political purposes but can include, but are not limited to, information searching, leisure, contacts, or general exchange) which then foster attitudinal changes that have an effect on political attitudes and activities (Anduiza, *et al.*, 2009:868). Thereby by virtue of interacting with others online, users might undergo attitudinal changes that affect political attitudes and behaviour.

In 2014 Stoycheff and Nisbet explored the way in which Internet use impacted citizens’ perceptions of demand and supply of democracy. Using data from the 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, the authors looked at data from 34 countries that have recently transitioned to democracy or possess autocratic regimes. Their findings reveal that those citizens who have greater access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) express a greater

demand for democracy, as well as a perceived lower supply of democracy than those who do not. It thus follows that ICT use impacts the way in which citizens demand and perceive democracy. Those who are more exposed to information online, tend to be more critical of their regime and express a higher demand for democracy. Therefore, the Internet can be considered to have significant impacts on political attitudes and value formation.

In relation to previously expressed arguments that the Internet may facilitate new forms of social capital through interactivity and exchange (Martin & Schmeisser, 2008:5), the content creator and the content consumer “merge” in the absence of hierarchies (Yildiz, 2002:54). Yildiz (2002) argues that the reason why the Internet is so attractive to many users is that it does not pose restrictions and boundaries in terms of what can be said, done or shared. The complete absence of a central authority that regulates content and information resonates with postmaterialist values.

It becomes clear that postmaterialist/emancipative values seem to be on the rise. The theory on the formation of social capital suggests that through interaction on Web 2.0 platforms, users influence one another through the exchange of information, thereby impacting each other’s value orientations (Loader, 2007; Martin & Schmeisser, 2008). Furthermore, Norris (2001:55) argues that cyberspace is dominated by postmaterialist value priorities, where users are more concerned with self-actualization and issues concerning quality of life, self-expression, individual freedom, cosmopolitanism, and participatory democracy. Thereby, postmaterialist and emancipative values are more likely to spread faster among Internet users than non-users.

Shawney (2017) makes similar arguments by claiming that contemporary social interaction via social media, especially among younger generations, has drastically changed. Young people today whom she calls “generation too much information” have been born into “a new age of transparency”, one in which individuals are readily giving up privacy for the sake of convenience, be it through ordering products or communicating with others online (Shawney, 2017:26). The continuing practice of going online and being connected has turned into what she calls a “ritualized documentary practice” of individuals’ lives, which has gone so far that the “notion of privacy has become completely meaningless”. What has become problematic, according to Shawney (2017) is the fact that some of the websites, particularly social media, are a space where users are becoming increasingly hostile, toxic, and unforgiving. The notion of free speech has gone so far that it has turned into a “shaming culture”, one in which not even politicians are left out (Shawney, 2017:26). A small mistake can have damaging repercussions

to public figures and the fact that every single information that has ever been posted online can be accessed at any time, adds to the unforgiving nature of the Internet.

Swigger (2012) argues that a change in the basic value sets of citizens may lead to a number of policy changes that no longer protect the right of privacy, since this is decreasingly becoming a priority of users, paying tribute to Inglehart's scarcity hypothesis. Furthermore, virtual relationships have the potential of altering "the way an individual responds to community and social life", as online socialisation creates a dynamic different from those of traditional agents of socialisation (Swigger, 2012:590). Yet, some countries such as Britain are taking active steps in policymaking that allow citizens to force companies that dominate the web (Facebook, Twitter, Google) to delete personal information that has been posted (Shawney, 2017).

Despite the Cambridge Analytica scandal and users' openness to sharing personal information online, the evident preference for the right to freedom of expression among social media users supports Norris' (2001) argument that the Internet is dominated by users holding postmaterialist values. Kim (2006) found that individuals who hold more postmaterialist values also appear to be more interested in politics and are more likely to participate in alternative forms of political movements than individuals who hold materialist values. What is especially noteworthy is the fact that postmaterialists express high levels of political interest amid arguably declining political engagement. As such, Kim's (2006) findings can be drawn back to Norris (2001) argument of the overrepresentation of postmaterialist individuals on the Internet; if the Internet is in fact dominated by such individuals and if one is to believe Martin's and Schmeisser's (2008) argument on the formation of social capital online, then a rise in alternative forms of political movements can be expected.

Yet, Knobloch-Westerwick and Johnson (2015:185) believe that studies on values pertaining to the Internet and social media are somewhat misinterpreting the contemporary "opinion climate" online. They believe that Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory should be given more consideration when testing relationships. This theory proposes that people form their attitudes based on the information that they are exposed to, such as interpersonal interactions and media coverage. However, if individuals perceive that their attitudes and beliefs are regarded as unpopular in their respective society, they become less likely to express them and "censor themselves in order to avoid sanctions and isolation" (Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2015:185). On the other hand, those people who find that their opinions reflect those of others are more likely to express them publicly. Therefore, Knobloch and Westerwick

(2015) warn that an overrepresentation of opinions of some groups and the censoring of other might subsequently lead to a misinterpretation of other attitudes and that researchers should tread lightly when making assumptions.

The majority of research examining the relationship between the spread of ICTs and levels of democracy focuses on the “macro relationship between Internet penetration and government institutions and the political process” rather than the formation of individual’s values, attitudes, and behaviours (Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014:250). The consequences of the omission of research on such formations is that researchers have yet to grasp the full potential and impact of the web on attitudes, values, and behaviour. Nevertheless, Johnson and Kaye (2003) found evidence to support the notion that the Internet may have strong influences on attitude formations and changes. Even though the dynamic between the web and attitudes has not yet been fully established, Johnson and Kaye (2003:27) believe that the use of the Internet serves as a “strong predictor of positive political attitudes”. Through the exposure to political information online, citizen interest in politics is heightened and as a result they develop attitudes that are conducive to building political efficacy and the willingness of citizens to engage in political matters.

In this sense, two dominating theories regarding media consumption and political efficacy can be applied. The first theory, the media malaise theory (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Mutz and Reeves, 2005) argues that the overall negative coverage on politics generates “cynicism and malaise” and leads to more “negative attitudes toward political institutions” (Chang, 2018:1001). The virtuous circle theory (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Norris, 2000; 2001) on the other hand, claims that enhanced exposure to political information via the media leads to heightened interest in politics and more positive attitudes toward political institutions. Chang (2018) explores the applicability of these two theories on Internet use and other forms of media and finds that people who frequently read the newspaper, listen to the radio and use the Internet for political more information are more interested in politics (internal efficacy) and are also more likely to feel like they can impact political outcomes (external efficacy).

Anduiza *et al.* (2009:866) argue that the dynamic between the Internet and changes in attitudes depends on the notion of selective exposure. In this sense, even though politically related information may be readily available to Internet users, it is still up to the individual to decide whether to access that information. For example, receiving news bulletins and newsletters requires active subscription, therefore users need to take active steps to access these websites. Davis (2017:280) writes that research has shown that people tend to “reside in echo chambers

online”, meaning that they only tend to follow others who share their own views and beliefs and generally do not read articles that do not support their existing perception of reality or mindsets. The reason for this, so Davis (2017:280) explains, is because agreeing with someone else and have that person agree with us, is a satisfying experience and thereby prevents people from critically assessing the things they see online.

Runciman (2018:149) refers to this as “groupthink” – “people join because other people join: they want to be where the action is.” This “groupthink” can eventually lead to a “sense of tribalism” and identity politics and therefore all “social reinforcement” works in favour of our already existing attitudes and beliefs (Davis, 2017:149). Based on this, Anduiza *et al.* (2009:866) believe that “the consequences for behaviour and political attitudes would only be valid for certain Internet users”, which demonstrates support for the reinforcement thesis, discussed below.

Furthermore, there is a tremendous amount of user generated content that relates to politics, most of which relates to political satire. During the 2012 United States presidential campaign, Obama’s team realised the advertisement niche on social media, particularly YouTube. Of approximately 600 000 videos that were posted on the platform, only 5% of the views associated with the content were content from the official presidential campaigns, the rest being associated with user-generated videos (Waxman, 2012). Rill and Cardiel (2013:36) assert that despite differing opinions on the impact of the Internet on political behaviour of citizens, it is undeniable that “satirical news programming may intersect with, or even affect” viewers’ perceptions of politicians as well as their attitudes and beliefs about political systems (see also Brewer & Cao, 2006; Holbert *et al.* 2011; Harrington, 2012).

In fact, there has been a rise in preference for satirical news and comedy programs, particularly the United States. Animated programs such as *The Simpsons*, or *Family Guy* have gained increasing popularity and shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report* have begun to overtake conventional news programs as a source of political information (Lewis, 2002; Olbrys, 2005; Purdum, 2011). Rill & Cardiell (2013:1742) believe that this may be an indication that viewing “satirical political news programs” may lead to increased political knowledge as well as cynicism among viewers. Holbert, *et al.* (2011) agree that political satire, whether it spreads via the Internet or television, results in increased criticism toward politicians and politics in general. This in turn, negatively affects levels of trust in politicians and political institutions.

2.4 *The Internet and political behaviour*

Dalton (2008), provides an overview of modes of political participation through which citizens can become engaged and involved in politics. Using Verba and Nie's (1972) and Verba, Nie, and Kim's (1978) work, Dalton (2008:38) provides six modes of political participation, the last two of which he adds himself. These modes consist of voting (casting a ballot at elections); campaign activity (promoting political candidates among other potential voters); contacting officials directly (perhaps to express feelings of dissatisfaction); communal activity (working with a group in the community); and finally protest action and other forms of unconventional modes of political action, as well as Internet activism. Therefore, Internet platforms can be seen as a facilitator of several modes of political participation and political movements. This becomes apparent when considering the crucial role the Web played for mobilisation during the Arab Spring (see Burlacu & Tiganus, 2012), or trending expressions of solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* on Twitter after two terrorists killed 10 members of the French magazine (Herrera-Viedma, Bernabé-Moreno & Martinez Sanchez, 2015).

It is reasonable to assume that a change in political values and attitudes is likely to cause a change in political participation (Anduiza, *et al.*, 2009:858). Since the Internet has become available to the general public in the mid-1990s, scholars have been studying its effects on the political participation of citizens. Arguments vary between an optimistic view of the possible benefits of the Internet and sceptical claims that the Internet may even widen the gap between the "haves and have nots" (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenhart & de Vreese, 2013:904).

Three main perspectives can be identified in the literature those being the mobilisation thesis, the reinforcement thesis, as well as the normalisation thesis. However, recently a fourth theory, the displacement thesis, has been introduced. Below, each thesis will be briefly discussed, and some case studies will be introduced, which made differing findings that support as well as reject the theories introduced here. Since there is "no agreement with regard to the measurement of political participation" online, there is hardly any overarching support for a single theory provided here and some studies even found support for various theses (Vissers & Stolle, 2014:938).

2.4.1 *Mobilisation thesis*

The most positive view is held by "cyber-optimists", who emphasise the possibilities of online activities for the involvement of "ordinary citizens in (...) democracy" (Norris & Curtice

2006:2). This view is called the “mobilisation thesis” and suggests that online activities may serve as a substitute mechanism for the facilitation of alternative channels of civic engagement. This could be achieved through political chat-rooms, remote electronic voting in elections, referenda, and the mobilisation of virtual communities which could have the potential to “revitalise levels of mass participation through the empowerment of new groups” (Stanley & Weare, 2004:506). This view argues that the more time an individual spends online searching for political information, the more likely that individual becomes to be engaged in offline forms of participation such as voting or signing petitions.

Research by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press has shown that an increasing amount of US citizens have turned to the Internet for political news due to a dissatisfaction with traditional news (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Respondents reported that the reason for a preference for Internet use is because it enables individuals to search for any kind of information, rather than receiving selected themes in newspapers and television news. Drawing data from the 1996, 1998, and 2000 American National Election Studies, Tolbert and McNeal (2003:182) explore the impact of the Internet on political participation. Their findings show strong support for the mobilisation hypothesis as “individuals who use the Internet for political news are more likely to participate”. Not only do individuals who use the Internet for political news report higher levels of participation, but access to the web alone was a predictor of political engagement. As such, they find evidence for the “mobilizing potential of the Internet during elections” (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003:184).

In light of a decline in political participation especially among younger generations in western democracies, coupled with the rise of the Internet, some arguments have been made that the web itself might be responsible for such a decline. However, Bakker and de Vreese (2011:453) believe that many of such assumptions are “biased by a disproportional focus on institutional and limited measures of participatory behaviour”. As Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) have shown, participation has a number of dimensions and the kind of participation depends on time and resources available to citizens. The Internet, however, lowers opportunity costs of participation to a variety of users, most importantly the youth. Furthermore, online participation appears significantly more attractive to younger citizens than traditional forms of participation. Therefore, the notion that young people are disinterested in politics and show no motivation to become involved, is overstated (Wring, Henn, Weinstein, 1999; Pirie & Worcester, 2000; Dermody & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2004; Quintelier, 2007; Martin & Schmeisser, 2008; Cammaerts Bruter, Banaji, Harrison & Anstead, 2014). In fact, Bakker & de Vreese (2011:465) found that

various types of Internet use are “positively linked to measures of political participation”. Although the causal direction of the relationship is unclear in their study, it remains that online activity may have beneficial effects on participation.

Building on similar findings that Internet users tend to be younger and more educated, Yamamoto *et al.* (2015) conducted a web survey of university students in the US. Paying attention to social media and traditional media use, and online and offline political expression and participation, the authors explored the mobilising effect of web-based content. Their findings show support for the mobilisation thesis as a positive overall effect of the Internet on offline participation was measured. Respondents who frequently consume political news online were more likely to participate offline. Specifically, online expression had a mobilizing effect on participation. Yamamoto *et al.* (2015) explain that expressing political views online may increase levels of both, internal and external efficacy which in turn increase turnout (see also Velasquez and LaRose, 2015).

De Vreese (2007:214) asserts that “it is not time spent online (...) that matters but rather the activities that are undertaken”. Therefore, whether an individual spends more time on average on the Internet than someone else does not predict whether he or she is more likely to be politically active, both, offline and online. What is of importance is the way in which such an individual engages with content that is seen online and whether that content stimulates participation. As such, differentiations need to be made in terms of studying political behaviour in relation to Internet activity. However, it is difficult to measure such differences as most surveys question respondents more on whether they spend time online and less about what they do when they search the web.

Research on the Internet and political behaviour so far has predominantly yielded support for the mobilisation thesis. Scholars believe that the Internet has far-reaching consequences not only in terms of society but politics, too. Meaningful political involvement requires an informed citizenry; with the rise of the Internet, citizens are increasingly able to freely access any kind of information, ranging from political news to entertainment and recreation. Through this increased access to information and interconnectedness enabled by the Internet, so scholars believe, individuals are able to make informed decisions and are more capable to engage in politics.

2.4.2 Reinforcement thesis

Other theories proposed by “cyber-pessimists” challenge the mobilising effects of the Internet by arguing that the web will eventually “reinforce existing inequalities of power and wealth, generating deeper divisions between the information-rich and poor” (Norris and Curtice, 2006:3). Furthermore, this “reinforcement thesis” maintains that the Internet may further contribute to a participation gap between “engaged and disengaged citizens” (Hoffman, Lutz, Müller & Meckel, 2017:1). This participation gap is skewed toward the more affluent and educated and therefore, those power dynamics are likely to transcend to the Internet as well because elites can “control the diffusion, design and use of new technologies” (Stanley & Weare, 2004:506). At worst, the Internet “could create a digital divide by increasing the power of the elites while disenfranchising the poor who have little access to it” (Johnson & Kaye, 2003:10).

Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2010) explore the relationship between the Internet on both online and offline political participation. Their findings reveal results similar to those of Norris and Curtice (2006), pointing toward a digital divide that is strongly influenced by socioeconomic status. In this regard, online participation strongly mirrors offline participation as Internet access reflects socio-economic status components critical for political participation. In other words, less affluent individuals are commonly less likely to be politically active compared to more affluent people, a trend which is also prevalent in online participation (e.g. sharing political news, inviting others to join a political group online, following a politician on social media, donating campaign money online). Therefore, the authors found strong support for the reinforcement hypothesis on online political participation. Furthermore, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2010) argue that close attention needs to be paid to what exactly merits the label of online participation, as such actions do not necessarily render the same effect as collective offline action. They therefore agree with Norris’ (2001:230) argument that if political participation that has been facilitated through the Internet derives from the same kinds of people that are already active, “then a possible consequence of the process is the replication – or even – exacerbation of existing political inequalities”.

Sylvester and McGlynn (2010), although finding support for the mobilisation thesis, had an interesting approach to demonstrate how the digital divide impacts participation. The authors found that while access to the Internet increases one’s likelihood of contacting government officials, location is a strong predictor of low Internet access. The consequences thereof show

that people living in rural areas are less knowledgeable about how to navigate the web, therefore they are also less likely to seek information online, including political content. Therefore, individuals who live in rural areas are less likely to contact officials online. As such, their findings support the reinforcement thesis, albeit their primary focus does not rest on income, age, and education, but location. This presents a new and distinct approach to Internet research and political behaviour, as most research in this field focuses on demographic variables such as age, income, race, and education. It should be noted, however that their political participation variables that showed significant relationships are limited to contacting government officials. This poses an important omission of possible other findings and limits their results.

Ikeda, Richey and Teresi (2013), while acknowledging the positive impacts of the Internet on political participation, believe that such beneficial effects will be eradicated by the introduction and increased the spread of smartphones. The authors believe that through the rising usage of “smart technologies”, which are intended to reduce and eventually even “eliminate the need for browsing” will result in users using mobile phones in a rather “homogenous” way, one which is limited to the applications that are installed on their smartphones (Ikeda, *et al.* 2013:306-307). As such, exposure to other news information that is often promoted through the use of Personal Computers (PCs) and the act of browsing the Internet, is non-existent on mobile phones. In their research, Ikeda *et al.* (2013) provide evidence for a “mobile divide” where young, less educated and less wealthy people tend to use mobile phones more than their counterparts. Therefore, due to limited exposure to political information, they are less likely to be informed about politics and thus less likely to participate. Their findings thus support elements of the reinforcement thesis; younger and less educated and less wealthy people tend to use mobile phones more than PCs for Internet access, thereby “reinforcing existing inequalities in power and wealth” (Norris & Curtice, 2003:3).

The reinforcement thesis, although receiving large support in the early years of the Internet, seems to pose a rather weak stance in the overall literature and more recent research demonstrates the closing gap of the digital divide in established democracies (Vissers & Stolle, 2015; Bode & Dalrymple, 2016). Given the fact that Internet access becomes available to a larger number of people through mobile phones (which also pose lower costs in terms of online activity), whether someone searches the web is no longer predetermined by their socio-economic status and age. While the reinforcement thesis may certainly be found true in less

developed countries, the same cannot be said in more advanced industrial democracies (Nam, 2010). However, this might not be the case in less affluent societies.

2.4.3 Normalisation thesis

The “normalisation thesis”, also represents a rather doubtful view, by proposing that the appearance of the knowledge society has had little impact on changing the participation gap between engaged and disengaged citizens. It further states that technology has done little to alter the political status quo and that radical change is unlikely to happen as the Internet will eventually reflect a “politics as usual” scenario, where participation will be skewed towards more educated and wealthier users (Norris & Curtice, 2006; Hoffman, *et al.* 2017). As such, this thesis is quite similar to the abovementioned reinforcement thesis.

Contrary to previous findings, Steinberg (2015:114) finds evidence for a decline of the digital divide where socioeconomic factors such as income, education, and race “do not appear to be as strongly associated with cyber participation as they are with traditional participation”. Additionally, he finds that engagement in cyber participation enabled by the cheaper and easier means of engagement leads to a significantly increased likelihood of voting. Therefore, Steinberg (2015) suggests that the access gap is closing, thereby challenging the reinforcement hypothesis. Yet, while access to and the use of the Internet has widened and expanded, he maintains that there remains an “issue of usage, whereby access does not necessarily lead to meaningful [political] usage” (Steinberg, 2015:114). Therefore, he finds evidence in support of the normalisation hypothesis where individuals who are more politically active offline, are also more likely to be politically active online.

The normalisation thesis has received some support from a number of scholars, who believe that offline behaviour will strongly reflect online behaviour. A study conducted by Feezell, Conroy & Guerrero (2016) focusing on young people and their online behaviour, shows that those individuals who have a more “dutiful” sense of citizenship tend to use the Internet in ways that support those attitudes than those who use it in an “actualizing” way. The former refers to political participation, motivated by “a sense of civic obligation”, while the latter refers to independent citizen action, while still “maintaining a concern for others” (Feezell, *et al.* 2016:97).

While the normalisation thesis may seem like the most plausible approach to explain the relationship between Internet use and political participation, it does not seem to receive overall support from scholars. There appears to be agreement among researchers that the effects of the

Internet are either mobilising or reinforcing in nature. Whether these findings are due to wrongful measurement or actual evidence is yet to be established as there is no strict consensus on how to measure Internet use in relation to political participation.

2.4.4 Displacement thesis

Finally, the “displacement hypothesis” suggests that “time spent online could actually displace time formerly devoted to social and political purposes” (Hoffman, *et al.*, 2017:1). This view holds that the more time an individual spends on the Internet or operating technological devices, the less likely he or she is to devote remaining leisure time to pursue civic activities. As a result, Internet use would contribute to the weakening, instead of the strengthening of citizens’ civic and political engagement. Yet, there exists little evidence to support this hypothesis.

Some argue for negative implications of the Internet where users are increasingly becoming alienated from the outside world and consequently shut themselves out from actual political events that are relevant, thereby refocusing their value priorities (Davis, 1999; Noveck, 2000) which ultimately leads to a “generation lost to mediated isolation and irresponsibility” (Malila, 2016:78). However, many of these claims have been found to be untrue in more recent studies.

Hoffman *et al.* (2017:2) explored the way in which escapism – “a key motivation for media use that describes a temporary escape from life” – affects online political participation in their study which included over 700 Facebook users in Germany. Findings revealed that while the majority of respondents predominantly use Facebook for escapist purposes, they are likely to be confronted with political information. Particularly those users who use it for productive purposes are likely to become politically engaged while those who use the platform in a passive, non-interactive way shy away from online political participation. While these findings hold true for social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter, they apply less to platforms such as Snapchat or Instagram (whose main focus lies on the publishing of pictures, rather than written content). Therefore, Hoffman *et al.* (2012), while finding some evidence for the displacement thesis also found overwhelming evidence for the mobilisation thesis. These findings reveal that while users might visit these platforms for non-political reasons, they are likely to be exposed to content that may spark political interest and engagement.

As the case studies in this literature review demonstrate, there is little evidence to suggest that the Internet has a displacing impact on citizens and their political involvement. Even if individuals use the Internet for recreational purposes only, this does not imply that they are

participating less in politics as a result of limited time, taken up by searching the web. There are few if any studies that fully support the displacement thesis and even those who take its possible effects into consideration make findings that show stronger support for other theses as the case study of Hoffman *et al.* (2017) demonstrates.

2.5 Understanding the dynamic between the Internet and individuals

The Internet is a technology developed through human knowledge and is arguably a form of “social capital” on its own. (Delli Carpini, 2011). The Internet has had a significant breakthrough in since it was launched, demonstrating its potential for transformation across various fields, ranging from technology, economy, and society. As it continues to grow, it “promotes change at the heart of the social structure: in politics, and the distribution of power across society” (Bertola, 2010:323).

The Internet itself functions under a quite distinct architecture from that of traditional telecommunication networks, such as the telephone, television, or even telegraph. Contrary to these traditional networks which are controlled by a single few operators, constraints in terms of access of the Internet are quite different – instead of a one-way kind of communication, the Internet enables users to connect in a near-infinite number of ways (Bertola, 2010:324).

To date, researchers have struggled to determine the direction of the causal relationship between the Internet and political attitudes, values, and behaviour. It can be argued that the reason why it is so difficult to establish the direction of such a relationship is that it entails a cycle of interaction, creation, and observation where users become consumers as well as creators through means of interaction. When a user uploads information online, he/she creates content, thereby becoming a content creator in the formation and discussion of information. However, while uploading information online, users also see other information, which they themselves have not generated, thereby becoming consumers, something Jenkins (2006) refers to as “participatory culture”. Through the “immediate and inexpensive access to media” across the globe, information online is becoming increasingly diversified, not to mention the relatively low levels of monitoring that enable users to freely express themselves, thereby exchanging differing views and ideas, up to a point where a number of governments have begun to “centralise content control over the internet” (Bertola, 2010:326).

This argument is supported by Bode and Dalrymple (2016:315) who argue that social media “users are likely to influence and be influenced by their respective networks”. Therefore,

influential actors such as political candidates, are likely to have a “great amount of influence over” their followers, who in turn may influence their own followers. It is, therefore, worth pointing out that the Internet should be regarded in terms of its functions as a medium through which changes in attitudes, values, and behaviour are being enabled, rather than simply looking at the content which users upload. In other words, it can be seen as a facilitator of changes in attitudes, values, and behaviour.

Looking at the rise of new media, it becomes clear that its emergence is very recent in comparison to that of old media. The Internet has come a long way in a very short time since the creation of the first computer in 1958. Therefore, research on the medium has generated inconclusive results, with scholars and scientists disagreeing on what the impact of new media on the population may be. Taking into consideration that new media has only begun to emerge post-2004 with the launch of Facebook and YouTube, research on the medium has only been conducted for just over a decade.

2.6 Internet use in South Africa

The effects of Internet and social media use on democracy remain largely unexplored in the South African literature. Therefore, it is a relatively new field of research in the country. Existing research has mainly focused on qualitative approaches that seek to determine how hashtags are used to mobilise protestors. This gap may largely be attributed to low access rates to the Internet in the country compared to advanced democracies that have almost universal access. Thus, findings analyse who are the haves and the have nots in the development and emergence of the South African network society. As such, the literature cannot be divided into the various theories that revolve around Internet use and democracy. However, there are certain themes that stand out.

There appears to be a consensus in the global literature that individuals with a higher socioeconomic standing are more likely to have greater Internet access. This does not only apply to broadband connections but also cellular and wireless connections (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010; Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2010; Nam, 2010).

In the South African context, there is also a strong focus on the digital divide that points out who has the highest levels of access to the Internet. Thus, there is a need to consider which segments of the South African population go online before any generalisations or assumptions about impacts and effects can be made. Wasserman (2002) suggests that the Internet, a

technology constructed by western, developed countries, is dominated by English websites. According to Internet World Stats (2018), English is the most spoken language online, constituting a quarter of all content, followed by Chinese and Spanish. Yet, English does not even fall among the top three languages spoken in South Africa (BusinessTech, 2015). Although English is the language mostly used in public life and the media, it is not as widely spread and understood. According to the South African Household Survey (2017), only 1.4% of black, 21.8% of coloured, 39.2% of white, and 91.5% of Indian South Africans speak English at home. In total, only 17.6% of all South Africans speak English outside the household. Therefore, it is likely that large segments of the population cannot access the Internet in a meaningful way because they do not understand the languages spoken on various platforms and websites.

Beger and Sinah (2012) point out that the digital divide in South Africa is still dominated by race, socioeconomic status and geographical location. This can be attributed to apartheid policies which foresaw that only 10% of urban dwellers – who were mostly white and living in prosperous neighbourhoods – benefited from ICT developments (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017:74). As a result, many disadvantaged groups in South Africa did not reap the immediate benefits from the introduction of the Internet in 1994, as they had little to no access and therefore largely remained technologically illiterate. According to Statistics South Africa (2016), the black population in South Africa still falls behind in terms of educational attainment, while whites and Indians have the highest proportion of post-secondary level of education. Both groups also have the lowest proportion of individuals with the lowest levels of education. This indicates that although there has been substantial growth in the black middle class in South Africa, the black population still faces hardships in terms of education and income, which in turn reflects on their access to the Internet and their ability to search for meaningful information online.

Other factors that may shape the extent of access to the web are monetary costs. According to World Bank (2018), South Africa remains one of the most unequal economies in the world, with a Gini coefficient of above 0.6 in 2015. Furthermore, the richest 10% of South Africans hold approximately 71% of net wealth while the bottom 60% hold about 7%. Bearing these statistics and the generally high costs of Internet access in South Africa in mind, conclusions can be drawn that not everyone in the country can afford to go online as frequently as the upper classes, not even via mobile phones. Conducting a study on South African activists' use of nano media and digital media for mobilisation purposes, Bosch, Wasserman and Chuma (2018)

find that the use of social media is not as popular as recent hashtag movements lead to believe. While Twitter is mostly used to inform journalists of planned activities such as protests, it is not a popular tool for mobilising the masses. One activist interviewed mentioned that “they rarely use their social media accounts because Internet access is expensive and poor citizens often do not have money to purchase data, even when they have access to smartphones or tablets” (Bosch, Wasserman & Chuma, 2018:2164).

The digital divide further spans across age groups in South Africa. Research by the Pew Research Center indicates that in the world’s largest economies, the millennial generation’s (term used to usually describe those individuals reaching adulthood in the early 21st century) access to the Internet is nearing almost 100%. By comparison, just about half of South African millennials indicated that they have access to the Internet (Poushter, 2016). However, at the time of publication, strong evidence for a digital divide could be found, where younger people had higher access to the Internet. Of all respondents aged 18-24, 52% indicated that they had access to the web compared to a third of 35+-year-olds.

Therefore, it is evident that there are several barriers that stand in the way of universal access to the Internet in South Africa. These barriers include language, geographical location, and severe economic, material and educational inequalities, coupled with age and high costs of going online. Due to these factors, there might be different segments of the population that have different levels of access and as a result, the web’s effects on political attitudes and behaviour might differ as well.

2.7 Assessment of the literature and conclusion

There appears to be a consensus that the Internet has facilitated a change in attitudes and value preferences among its users. The web itself, which has arguably pushed the process of globalisation to new dimensions, has aided in the spread of ideas and beliefs, which have consequently impacted the formation of attitudes and values. Stoycheff’s and Nisbet’s (2014) study confirms that people in newly established democracies and autocratic regimes, who use the Internet frequently are becoming increasingly critical of their own government, thereby changing their attitude positions towards politicians and politics. These attitude positions often reflect low levels of trust and rising levels of criticism toward incumbents and political institutions. Post-material and emancipative values are receiving rising support, especially among younger generations, who frequently visit the web. The absence of hierarchies on several platforms makes the Internet an attractive venue for discussion and deliberation for

young people and through these processes; postmaterialist values are spreading faster and are adopted more frequently. The absence of hierarchies on several platforms makes the Internet an attractive venue for discussion and deliberation for young people and through these processes, postmaterialist values are spreading faster and are adopted more frequently.

Norris (2001) made the argument that the Internet is dominated by postmaterialists, as it is an attractive platform for those individuals who oppose certain hierarchies to express themselves. The overarching presence of such emancipative values is thus likely to enforce similar, already existing values among users which creates a stronger sense of postmaterial value priorities through the formation of social capital online (Martin, 2008). At the same time, regular Internet users appear to be far less reluctant to share personal information on the web and thereby their value of privacy declines as argued by Swigger (2012) and Shawney (2017). The Cambridge Analytica scandal pays tribute to the wide array of personal information individuals are ready to make available to anyone who wishes to access it.

When it comes to the Internet and political behaviour, opinions differ widely; proponents of the mobilisation thesis maintain that the Internet has a large potential to mobilise citizens to engage both online and offline. The increased amount of information available to the public could lead to a more informed citizenry that makes better-informed decisions. Proponents of the reinforcement thesis disagree and believe that already existing socioeconomic inequalities will be reflected by Internet usage where more wealthy citizens will reap the benefits of the web by having better access than poorer classes. Supporters of the normalisation thesis, on the other hand, believe that online political participation will reflect offline participation as those who are more likely to be engaged offline will also be engaged online. The displacement thesis predicts a quite different effect and maintains that the Internet will have a distorting effect on political participation as time that could be used to engage in democratic action will be spent online. By reviewing the literature, it becomes clear that the mobilisation thesis has received the most support, albeit with mixed results. Researchers appear to be undecided about the exact effect of the web on political behaviour due to the fact that research has yielded mixed outcomes. Taking into consideration that the web is a recent development in human history, it is likely that its exact effects will only be established in the future as its dynamic still needs to be understood in full.

In terms of the South African context, only assumptions based on the effects of the Internet on political attitudes and behaviour can be made. Research in the country has shown the existence

of a strong digital divide, where mostly young white and Indian people have the highest levels of access. Thus, it is plausible that these groups are affected the most by the Internet and social media as they are most likely to go online, compared to coloured or black people.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Surveys have been revolutionised since their introduction in the 1940s and have fundamentally changed the way research is conducted. New research technology has since enabled the simplified measurement of public opinion and political culture based on empirical observations (Kavanagh, 1983:13) and statistical analysis tools now allow for the identification of behavioural and attitudinal patterns in relation to sociodemographic variables. The work of Almond and Verba (1963) and their colleagues have shown the immense value of survey research in political science and today, many researchers make use of survey analysis to demonstrate findings and substantiate hypotheses.

Qualitative research through interviews or focus groups, on the other hand, highlights the value of social interaction in bringing forth new ideas or approaches to certain issues. Topics can be explored in far more detail than through limited survey questions because the dynamic within this type of research is far more flexible and dynamic. Yet, qualitative research is limited because it does not allow for generalisations about a larger population (Burnham, Gilliland, Grant & Layton-Henry, 2008).

In combination, both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies have the capacity to complement each other by making up for the other's shortcomings. This research follows a multi-method approach which combines quantitative with qualitative analysis. This will be done through an analysis of quantitative survey data, obtained from the Afrobarometer Round 6 survey of 2015, and complemented by a qualitative analysis of a focus group discussion with students from Stellenbosch University.

3.2 Phase I: Quantitative analysis

3.2.1 Quantitative methods

Quantitative data analysis is one of the most popular ways of collecting data among social scientists. Data is obtained through means of survey questions from a relatively large sample of respondents that are representative of a larger population group. Answers are then given numerical values and transferred into a "computer-readable format" (Neuman, 2008:14). The value of quantitative data analysis is that it allows to make generalisations about an entire population and generate evidence of how two variables might be connected, thereby providing

crucial insight into social patterns that are useful to government and other organisations (Blaikie, 2010:23-24). Dependent and independent variables are clearly defined through hypotheses that seek to “test and validate theories through falsification⁴” (Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2011:8). Quantitative studies typically use deductive⁵ approaches to analysis, meaning that hypotheses are formed, followed by the gathering and analysis of data based on “existing assumptions about knowledge” (Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2011:9).

Survey research has been widely used since the 1940’s and has proven to be a particularly useful tool to collect data and provide evidence about social phenomena. Since then, surveys have revolutionized social sciences; Brady (2000:47) explains that sample surveys have the capacity to gather data about almost any topic so that only a few thousand randomly selected respondents can accurately represent opinions of populations reaching the millions. Brady (2000:47) further explains that surveys are not only useful to provide descriptive accounts, but they can also “assess causes and impacts of events” thereby having the power to provide explanations for events or changes within societies. Consequently, he believes that surveys score very high on the following dimensions of research: “*Range of Applicability*” (the amount of data that can be gathered using this method); “*Linkage to Theory*” (the strength of the relationship between theory and method and whether both complement each other); “*Conceptual Richness*” (the flexibility of the method to study theoretical concepts and its ability to aid in the development of new ones); “*Capacity for Confirming Theories about Politics*” (referring to the method’s power of making causal inferences and confirming theories); and finally “*Policy Relevance*” (the ability of surveys to address policy questions) (Brady, 2000:48).

Mattes (2013) notes that while there is a considerable amount of quantitative research carried out in South Africa by psychologists and sociologists, there is a lack of contributions made by political scientists. Of those who do publish their work on South African politics, society, and democracy, very few are situated in South Africa or are in fact South Africans. Mattes (2013:488) believes that this is not due to a lack of interest by researchers but rather due to a “lack of basic numeric literacy (...) and statistical skills”. This research study seeks to

⁴ Falsification refers to the manipulation of data or information so that the final outcome of analysis does not reflect accurate results (Wheeldon and Ahlberg, 2011).

⁵ Theorising in a deductive direction means to begin one’s research on the basis of a “theoretical proposition that outlines the logical connection among concepts” and then moving on to concrete evidence or findings that stand to support or oppose already existing theories (Neuman, 2008:59).

contribute to the filling of this gap or “minority tendency” through secondary data analysis of the Afrobarometer Round 6 survey.

Neuman (2008:30-333) lists further advantages of secondary data analysis. One of such advantages is that researchers can use the data to test their own independent hypotheses to determine trends within given populations. Furthermore, it is a cost-effective type of research as it relies on already obtained data, consisting of numerous variables (Singleton and Stratits, 2009:9-10).

However, some disadvantages are that researchers sometimes use data that is not suited to measure particular research questions or hypotheses and therefore should always consider which type of secondary data they are using (Neuman, 2008:333). Researchers also face the risk of ecological fallacy where units of analysis do not match, i.e. the units of analysis “for which the researcher has empirical evidence and the units for which he or she wants to make statements” (Neuman, 2008:169). Other risks that may be encountered on secondary quantitative data analysis are the issues of reductionism⁶ and spuriousness⁷. Additionally, the researcher should be wary of the way in which data were gathered and documented and should thus make use of reputable survey organisations (Neuman, 2006:306).

3.2.2 Survey research: *The Afrobarometer survey*

The quantitative analysis of this research is done on a cross-sectional⁸ level that only looks at data obtained from the South African Afrobarometer Round 6 survey (which incidentally included 36 African countries) and theorises in a deductive direction, drawing from secondary data. The theoretical aspects that have been outlined in the literature review serve as a foundation upon which research questions and hypotheses are formed. An analysis of the survey data is intended to contribute to the theory by determining whether one or more theories of Internet use and political attitudes and behaviour apply to the South African context.

Afrobarometer is a “pan-African, non-partisan research network” that focuses on conducting public attitude surveys focusing on democracy, governance, and economic conditions in 37

⁶ Reductionism refers to the efforts of a researcher to explain “macro-level events using evidence about individuals”, thereby using evidence of an individual to make generalisations about the population (Neuman, 2008:169)

⁷ Research outcomes are considered spurious when a researcher believes to have discovered a relationship between two variables, but actually oversee a third variable or factor that is the real cause (Neuman, 2008:171).

⁸ A cross-sectional design looks at information involving a large number of cases at a single point in time in order to determine relationships between variables (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008:59).

African countries (Afrobarometer, 2018). It was founded in 1999 by Dr Michael Bratton, Dr Robert Mattes, and Dr E Gyimah-Boadi and initially surveyed 12 countries, including South Africa (Afrobarometer, 2018). Fieldworks are conducted through face-to-face interviews based on a random sampling method of up to 2,400 people. The sample is intended to represent a cross-section of the voting age population in all countries. The sample design is a “clustered⁹, stratified¹⁰, multi-stage¹¹, area probability sample¹²” to ensure the inclusion of all population groups. All interviewers are trained prior to the beginning of their fieldwork and teams consisting of four interviewers and one field supervisor, are deployed to ensure high-quality data (Afrobarometer, 2018). The survey is designed to tap several societal themes, ranging from tolerance, governance, and political participation to gender equality and identity.

Therefore, the Afrobarometer is considered a suitable source of secondary data analysis, as it follows the procedures to ensure a true representation of the entire population and makes use of trained interviewers which lowers the risk of falsified outcomes. Data from the Afrobarometer is used in hopes of overcoming the above-mentioned limitations of quantitative survey analysis.

3.2.3 Operationalisation of variables

All variable items and their respective coding categories can be viewed in Appendix A (page 135)

3.2.3.1 Independent and control variable

Contrary to ordinary research that looks at many independent variables and how they affect one dependent variable, this research will focus on three independent variables (Internet and social media use for political news, and a scale consisting of both, social media and Internet use for acquiring political news) and how it affects a large number of dependent variables (political values, attitudes, and behaviour). Question twelve of the Afrobarometer Round 6 asks

⁹ Clustered sampling is a random sampling technique that consists of several stages and is used to include large geographic areas in which aggregated units are selected on a random basis of which samples are drawn (Neuman, 2006:233).

¹⁰ Stratification improves the accuracy of a sample because relevant information about the population already exists, which enables the division of the sample into “homogenous groups or strata” of which random samples are taken (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008:104).

¹¹ Multi-stage sampling is similar to that of stratified sampling in the way that the population is divided into groups or areas from which the samples are drawn. Countries are usually divided into constituencies of which a sample is drawn and then “a sample of voters within the selected constituencies” (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008:104).

¹² Area probability sampling refers to the equal likelihood of all people living in the same of being included in a sample (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008:103).

respondents “How often do you get news from the following sources?” A) “Radio”, B) “Television”, C) “Newspapers”, D) “Internet” and E) “Social Media such as Facebook or Twitter”. This research will only focus on the responses provided by response category D) and E). Answers will be filtered by respondents who indicated D) Internet and E) Social Media and will then be divided into *users* and *non-users*. The question measures usage on a 5-point scale coded 0) “Never”, 1) “Less than once a month”, 2) “A few times a month”, 3) “A Few times a week”, and 4) “Everyday”. Those respondents who indicated answers 4) to 1) will be regarded as Internet and Social Media *users*, whereas respondents who indicated 0) will be regarded as *non-users*. Most respondents that fall into the user category indicated that they use the Internet to obtain political news at least a few times a week (Internet 12.7%) or every day (Internet 24.4%). “Don’t know” categories will be removed from inferential statistical tests (non-descriptive analysis) to ensure that data results only represent users and non-users. The distribution of Internet users who indicated either 4), 3), 2), and 1) (48.8%) versus non-users (51.2%), and Social Media users (47.8%) versus non-users (52.3%) will thus represent a more or less equal distribution of respondents, which is important for statistical tests.

Furthermore, a scale variable consisting of both Internet and social media use (IntSocMe) is calculated and treated as a third independent variable¹³. A scale measuring both Internet and social media use might offer some additional insight that could tell whether a combined use of Internet and social media for political news influences political attitudes and behaviour of respondents.

¹³ SPSS allows its users to collapse two or more indicators into a single variable by computing a new index. This is a useful tool when one wishes to measure a single concept through a set of indicators, to assess the degree to which concepts are conceptually different, to reduce a large number of variables or indicators to a smaller and more relevant list, and to aid in the process of constructing an index or separate variable (Field, 2009:629). However, even though the wording in some questions in a survey might be similar, this does not imply that they measure the same concept so prior to creating a new variable or scale, it is paramount to conduct a factor analysis to determine whether there exist clusters of attitudes amongst respondents. Prior to creating a separate variable consisting of measures of Internet and social media use for obtaining news, a factor analysis was conducted and the suitability of data for factor analysis was assessed. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed that the coefficient of both variables took on a value of .771. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .5, while the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance of .000. The principal component analysis revealed the presence of two components, one of which had an eigenvalue exceeding 1 (1.771), explaining 88.57% of variance. The component matrix revealed strong loadings (.941) for factor one. Additionally, a reliability analysis was performed, showing strong reliability statistics (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .870$) of the two separate variables. After performing a factor analysis and reliability analysis, it can be concluded that both variables are strongly related and thus allow for a creation of a scale.

3.2.3.2 Demographic variables

To test Hypothesis 1, 2, 3 and 4, demographic variables will be employed to determine any sociodemographic differences in usage based on age, gender, race, location, and education. *Age* is measured as a scale variable ranging from 18 to 95. For the purpose of a simplified analysis, age will be recoded into a new variable, grouping different age cohorts together. The new variable will measure respondents' age in five different categories representing 1) 18-24, 2) 25-34, 3) 35-44, 4) 45-54, 5) 55+ age groups. *Gender* is a dichotomous variable, with male coded 1) (49.9%) and female coded 2) (50.1%). *Race* is a 5-point variable representing black/African, white/European, coloured/mixed race, South Asian/Indian, and other respondents. Because very few cases represent "other" race groups, and because no specific groups are named, this attribute will be removed from the analysis. *Education*¹⁴ is measured on a 10-point scale ranging from no formal education to post-graduate education, which will be recoded into 4 categories coded 1) *Primary or less*, 2) *Incomplete secondary school*, 3) *Completed secondary school*, 4) *Post-secondary/tertiary education*,. *Urbanity* is a dichotomous variable, with urban coded low (66%) and rural coded high (34%).

3.2.3.3 Dependent variables

The variables chosen for this study closely reflect those used in previous studies. This study mostly draws from Stoycheff's and Nisbet's (2014) methodological approach, discussed in Chapter 2 but also considers the measures used by other researchers. These methodologies primarily make use of survey results and therefore quantitative analysis. Below, the dependent variables are listed in relation to each hypothesis that is tested.

Hypothesis 5: Interest in politics

Table 3.1 lists the variables used to measure Hypothesis 5.¹⁵ Johnson and Kaye (2003) measure political attitudes by looking at respondents' political interest and campaign interest. Similarly, this study looks at participants' interest in public affairs, and the frequency of discussing politics with others.

¹⁴ Original variable consisting of 1) *No formal schooling*; 2) *Informal schooling only*; 3) *Some primary schooling*; 4) *Primary school completed*; 5) *Some secondary school / high school*; 6) *Secondary school / high school completed*; 7) *Post-secondary qualifications, other than university*; 8) *Some university*; 9) *University completed*; 10) *Post-graduate*

¹⁵ For a detailed description of all variables used in this study and their relating response categories along with their relevant coding, please see Appendix A.

Table 3.1: Question items used to measure Hypothesis 5

Q13: Interest in public affairs
Q14: Frequency of discussing politics

Hypothesis 6: Emancipative values

The variables employed to test Hypothesis 6 are listed in Table 3.2. Swigger (2012:590) argues that the rise of Web 2.0 and specifically social networking sites have a significant impact on the values that individuals hold. He argues that people, who are actively sharing information have begun to “value the right of free expression more and the right of privacy less”, therefore demonstrating a tendency toward emancipative values. His research provides evidence that the Internet, while becoming a fundamental aspect of most people’s everyday lives, has begun to shape and change the way people form values and beliefs. Norris (2001:55) also argues that cyberspace is dominated by postmaterialist value priorities, where users are more concerned with self-actualization and issues concerning quality of life, self-expression, individual freedom, cosmopolitanism, and participatory democracy. Thereby, postmaterialist values are more likely to spread faster among Internet users than non-users.

This study looks at variables that measure emancipative value preferences that look at respondents’ opinions regarding government control and female leadership. It also looks at the extent to which participants prefer different types of governments besides democracy.

Table 3.2: Question items used to measure Hypothesis 6

Q16: Government restrictions vs. freedom to join any organisation
Q17: Media should be free to publish anything vs. government restrictions
Q18: Men make better leaders vs. women should have equal chances of becoming leaders

Hypothesis 7: Supply of democracy and trust in institutions and officials

Stoycheff and Nisbet (2014) also include measures of demand for democracy and perceived supply of democracy in their research to determine whether Internet exposure influences citizens’ perceptions of democracy. To determine whether there is a difference in attitudes towards politicians among participants, measures of trust toward politicians and democratic institutions are included. These measures are based on findings that suggest that Internet users are more sceptical of political leaders and their intentions (see Tedesco, 2007; Knobloch-

Westerwick and Johnson, 2014; Vissers and Stolle, 2014). The question items used to measure Hypothesis 7 are listed in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Question items used to measure Hypothesis 7

Q40: Perception of extent of democracy
Q41: Satisfaction with democracy
Q52 a,b,e,f,g,m,n: Trust in democratic institutions and officials ¹⁶
Q53a-g: Perceptions of government officials' involvement in corruption ¹⁷

Hypothesis 8: Demand for democracy

Following the findings of Steenekamp (2017) this study measures respondents' approval of differing forms of government. This serves to determine whether there is a relationship between increased Internet use in South Africa and rising disapproval of democracy as a form of government in the country. It is also closely linked to Stoycheff's and Nisbet's (2014) findings as discussed above. Table 3.4 displays the question items used to measure Hypothesis 8.

Table 3.4: Question items used to measure Hypothesis 8

Q28: Approval of differing forms of government
Q30: Perception of democracy

Hypothesis 9: Political participation

As mentioned in previous chapters, Dalton (2008:38-39) lists six types of political action that citizens can take. Citing Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) Dalton (2008) lists 1) *voting*, 2) *campaign activity*, 3) *contacting officials directly*, and 4) *communal activity* as four general types of political behaviour and adds 5) *protest and other forms of contentious*

¹⁶ Trust has been recoded into a scale variable consisting of four separate variables measuring trust in government institutions and officials. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients above .3. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .788, which meets the recommended value of .6, while the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance of .000. The principal component analysis revealed the presence of one component, which had an eigenvalue exceeding 1 (2.804), explaining 56.07% of variance. The component matrix revealed strong loadings (Q52a=.862; Q52b=.844; Q52f=.837; Q52e=.764) for factor one. Additionally, a reliability analysis was performed, showing strong reliability statistics (Cronbach's α = .785) of the separate variables. After performing a factor analysis and reliability analysis, we can conclude that the variables (Q52a; Q52b, Q52f, Q52e) are strongly related and thus we can move on to creating a scale measuring trust.

¹⁷ Corruption has been recoded into a scale variable consisting of seven separate variables measuring trust in government institutions and officials. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients above .3. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .877, which meets the recommended value of .6, while the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance of .000. The principal component analysis revealed the presence of one component, which had an eigenvalue exceeding 1 (3.948), explaining 56.39% of variance. The component matrix revealed strong loadings (Q53a=.773; Q53b=.834; Q53c=.845; Q53d=.765 Q53e=.710; Q53f=.657 Q53g=.649) for factor one. Additionally, a reliability analysis was performed, showing strong reliability statistics (Cronbach's α = .872)

politics as well as 6) *Internet activism*. Table 3.5 lists the question items used to measure Hypothesis 9. This study closely follows Dalton's (2008) identified modes of political participation by looking at participants' membership in groups or organisations and their attendance at community meetings, whether they voted, their campaign activity, how often they contact officials or leaders about an issue, and finally citizen action (which includes requesting action from government, contacting the media, contacting a government official to ask for help or make a complaint, and participating in a demonstration or protest march). Norris and Curtice (2006) take a particularly close look at voting, campaign-, cause-, and civic-oriented forms of participation by grouping several modes of participation into one of these categories. Sylvester and McGlynn (2010) attempt to measure how Internet use affects contacting officials, while Vissers and Stolle (2010) focus more on protest and other forms of contentious politics.

Table 5: Question items used to measure Hypothesis 9

Q19: Membership in religious groups or voluntary organisations
Q20: Attending community meetings, raising an issue
Q21: Voting (reasons for not voting) ¹⁸
Q23a-d: Campaign activity
Q24a-d: Contacting officials/ leaders about an issue ¹⁹
Q27a-e: Citizen action

3.2.4 Statistical tests

In order to measure relationships between the dependent and independent variables, this study makes use of the computer programme *Statistical Package for Social Scientists* (SPSS). This

¹⁸ Voting has been recoded into dichotomous variable with categories presenting "voted" (1) and "did not vote" (2). The original coding of the variable is 8) "You were too young to vote", 0) "You were not registered to vote", 1) "You voted in the elections", 2) "You decided not to vote", 3) "You could not find the polling station", 4) "You were prevented from voting", 5) "You did not have time to vote", 6) "You did not find your name in the voters' register", 7) "Did not vote for some other reason", 9) "Don't know". Categories 8), 0) and 2)-7) are recoded to represent a single category named 2) "Did not vote", whereas category 1) is maintained. Category 9) was treated as a missing value.

¹⁹ Contacting officials and leaders has been recoded into a scale variable consisting of four separate variables measuring frequency of contacting government officials. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients above .3. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .768, which meets the recommended value of .6, while the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance of .000. The principal component analysis revealed the presence of one component, which had an eigenvalue exceeding 1 (3.948), explaining 56.39% of variance. The component matrix revealed strong loadings (Q24a=.701; Q24b=.771; Q24c=.823; Q24d=.817) for factor one. Additionally, a reliability analysis was performed, showing strong reliability statistics (Cronbach's α = .737) of the variables. After performing a factor analysis and reliability analysis, we can conclude that the variables (Q24a, b, c, d) are strongly related and thus we can move on to creating a scale measuring contact.

is a statistics computer programme which allows researchers to perform several statistical analyses in order to test hypotheses.

Before the appropriate statistic to determine relationships is chosen, it must first be inspected whether the data in the sample is normally distributed. This needs to be done because the appropriate measures of correlation depend on the distribution of the data (Pallant, 2016:55). Inspection of the values of skewness and kurtosis show that the data used in this sample is non-parametric, therefore non-parametric measurements are used. In this case, Spearman's rho is employed to determine relationships. Spearman's rho is especially useful because it can be used to calculate correlations between ordinal by ordinal and ordinal by scale variables (Field, 2009:179).

The choice of correlation coefficients (summary statistics) is based on the levels of measurement of different variables. On an ordinal by ordinal level, Spearman's rho is used and on an ordinal by nominal level, Gamma is considered. The correlation coefficients determine the strength and direction of the associations or relationships between two variables and significance level (the significance level must be less than $p=.05$) which suggests that the probability of obtaining results by chance is less than .05% and allows one to reject the null hypotheses (that there is no relationship between the variables) (Bryman & Cramer, 2011)

To make the analysis clearer and to reduce cases, scale variables will be computed for measures of contacting officials, trust, and perceptions of corruption. This is done by first conducting a factor analysis (or extraction) to determine which variables represent clusters of attitudes among respondents. Kaiser's criterion²⁰ is used to assist in the decision concerning how many factors are retained for building a scale. Additionally, scree tests²¹ are used for a visual representation of the eigenvalues of each factor. Furthermore, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO)²² is included as is the Barlett's Test of Sphericity²³. In the correlation matrix, only variables with a correlation coefficient of .3 and above are

²⁰ Kaiser's criterion or the eigenvalue rule presents factors and how they load together. Only factors with an eigenvalue of 1.0 or above are retained. The eigenvalue of a factor represents the proportion of total variance explained by each factor (Field, 2009:640). It is kept in mind that Kaiser's criterion faces some criticism in the sense that it tends to "overestimates the numbers of factors to retain" (Field, 2009:641). However, this obstacle is overcome with the aid of scree tests.

²¹ A scree test plots each factor's eigenvalue and thus allows for an inspection of the plot to determine at which point the curve changes its direction (Field, 2009:641).

²² The KMO statistic can take on values between 0 and 1. A value of .6 and above is considered to represent "distinct and reliable factors" (Field, 2009:647).

²³ Barlett's measure tests the null hypothesis that "the original correlation matrix is an identity matrix" and therefore tests for levels of significance (Field, 2009:660).

selected to be included in the creation of a scale. In order to determine the reliability of each scale, Cronbach's alpha is used and only values of .7 or higher are deemed acceptable in proceeding to build a scale (Field, 2009:675).

Furthermore, crosstabulations are employed to enquire about the possible differences in Internet use and demographic groups. Crosstabulations are the most popular way to demonstrate bivariate analysis and provide an appropriate statistical measure to summarise data and direction of the correlation. The value of crosstabulations is that they can be used descriptively to compare groups by looking at and comparing frequencies that fall into each category, as well as inferentially to examine a relationship between two variables through statistical tests (Bryman & Cramer, 2011).

In order to answer Research Question 3, the split file command in SPSS is activated. In some cases, a variable can consist of inherently different categories that have little in common other than their common denominator. For instance, a researcher might want to find out whether there is a difference in attitudes among religious men and women regarding abortion. In this case, the researcher would want to compare correlations between the two (religious) genders. To do this, *split file* command in SPSS is activated. This function splits a single variable into its categories. Once this option is activated, SPSS will produce an output of a correlation for each category of the split file variable. This means one is presented with three different variables; the dependent, independent, and split variable. This way, it can be determined whether the correlation between religiousness and attitudes toward abortion differ between men and women, for example (Field, 2009:191). In this research study, age and race are used as a split file. This means that all bivariate correlations will be calculated according to the various categories within the age and race variables (e.g. this will show us the bivariate correlation between Internet use and interest in public affairs for black, white, coloured, and Indian respondents, or respondents aged 18-24-years old, 25-34-years old, and so forth).

Unfortunately, this research is confined to using correlations to test whether there are relationships between Internet and social media use for political news consumption and political attitudes and behaviour. Yet, it might be useful to apply a regression model to the data to predict the outcome of political attitudes and behaviour based on Internet and social media use to source political news. Additionally, a multiple regression model might be telling in terms of whether there is an interaction between age, Internet use and political interest, for example. However, this would require the creation of a scale variable to meet one of the requirements of

a regression analysis (Field, 2009:198-211). Yet, due to spatial limitations, these tests could not be performed as this would have required the omission of the qualitative analysis of this research.

3.3 Phase II: Qualitative analysis

3.3.1 Qualitative methods

Qualitative research assumes that meaning is “personal and subjective and to be best understood through social interaction” (Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2011:80). It typically relies on individual accounts to make sense of phenomena and events and research is conducted in an inductive²⁴ direction. Qualitative research involves several research techniques, including interviews, focus group discussions, or direct observations, to name a few (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2006). This study makes use of focus group discussions to enrich the quantitative findings.

Previous research on the relationship between the Internet and political behaviour predominantly relies on quantitative measures that explore the *what* in the relationships between predetermined variables. In other words, this type of research only explores whether relationships exist between two variables and not whether there might be other underlying factors that surveys do not necessarily measure. This limits researchers’ findings as they are confined to use strictly defined variables in surveys instead of exploring the possibility of the existence of other important variables. This research study seeks to fill the gap in qualitative research in the overall literature by exploring the *how* and the *why*.

Litosseliti (2003:1) defines focus groups as a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment”. Focus groups serve to explore specific topics and participants’ views, attitudes and experience relating to that topic through group interaction. Because they represent a more natural environment based on conversation flow and exchange, they offer some advantages over methods such as interviews and participant observation. Just like in real life, members of the group discussion are likely to influence and be influenced by others. Therefore, the emphasis of focus groups rests primarily on the interaction among individuals. What makes this so unique and valuable

²⁴ Inductive reasoning seeks to either develop or confirm a theory by exploring empirical evidence and working “towards more abstract concepts and theoretical relationships” (Neuman, 2006:60). Part of an inductive reasoning is *grounded theory* building which involves the formulation of new theoretical ideas, rather than testing already existing ones (Wheeldon and Ahlberg, 2011:9).

is that this might allow the researcher to “uncover new, open-ended pathways for discussion” through minimal intervention (Litosseliti, 2003:3,5).

Most importantly, while focus groups should follow a set line of questions, they do allow for flexibility. This means that the moderator does not need to follow a strict questionnaire as is often the case in formal interviews but can deviate somewhat from the prescribed questions if an interesting topic should arise (Litosseliti, 2003:17).

The interaction among individuals can be very helpful for researchers to understand how some individuals feel about a certain topic. Participants “bounce ideas off each other and can agree or disagree”, thus demonstrating different views or stimulating thought among other participants who will, in turn, present their view in the discussion (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008:130). Therefore, topics can be explored in far more detail than in a survey because no strictly prescribed set of questions are asked, but new ideas and viewpoints can be explored that the researcher may previously not have thought of (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008:129-132).

Like all research methods, focus groups have limitations. One limitation is that it is impossible to be certain of how representative the groups are of the overall population. Therefore, representativeness cannot be guaranteed and “results are qualitative and indicative, rather than valid for the whole population” (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008:134). Thus, they can by no means replace surveys to make predictions about behaviour. Furthermore, over-dominant group members can distort data as they leave little room for other members to express their views (Berg, 2001:188). Litosseliti (2003:21) suggests that the best method to deal with over-dominant participants is to moderate them firmly, yet non-intrusively and to fall back to the topic guide to make sure the discussion remains on track. Furthermore, rules of behaviour should be clearly outlined prior to the discussion as to ensure that all participants are aware of certain ground rules, such as “asking people not to talk at the same time” or interrupting each other (Litosseliti, 2003:21).

Additionally, participants should be carefully selected in accordance with the research question or hypotheses in order to “avoid a disruptive mismatch among participants and between topics” (Litosseliti, 2003:22). It is also possible that group members may withhold certain information or provide misinformation to avoid embarrassment or to admit to a lack of knowledge. It, therefore, requires a good moderator to “grasp the various contextual parameters” by paying attention to people’s language, body language, and emotional or visual cues (Litosseliti, 2003:24). This can be achieved through a friendly and open environment and by ensuring

participants that there are no right or wrong answers, that every contribution is valid and to encourage them to be forthcoming with their views and opinions.

The advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative research approaches respectively are debated, and each appears to have its own strengths and limitations. Neuman (2006:13) contrasts both approaches and points out their differences; a quantitative approach measures objective facts with a focus on variables while the qualitative approach focuses on social reality and cultural meaning. Furthermore, quantitative research places a high emphasis on the reliability of outcomes and the absence of values, the separation of theory and data, and an independence of context, while qualitative research places emphasis on authenticity, is not opposed to the presence of values, allows data and theory to be fused and is situationally constrained. The largest difference between the two approaches is the number of cases; qualitative research studies few cases and subjects and places its analysis on subjects whereas quantitative research relies on statistical analysis (Neuman, 2006:13). Thus, the main advantage of a mixed-methods approach is that inferences can be made based on quantitative outcomes and can be studied in further detail through qualitative research and vice versa.

3.3.2 Focus groups

The use of the Internet and social media has gained particular popularity among younger generations and is in many instances preferred as a source of political information over newspapers, television, or radio news (Rainie, 2012). Research (Norris & Curtice, 2006; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Rainie, 2012; Smith & Duggan; 2012a, 2012b) has shown that most young people prefer obtaining political news as well as expressing their political views and opinions on such platforms, thereby creating user-generated political content.

Shawney (2017) argues that contemporary social interaction via social media especially among younger generations has drastically changed. Young people today whom she calls “Generation too much information” and “netizens” have been born into “a new age of transparency” in which individuals are readily giving up privacy for the sake of convenience, be it through ordering products, or communicating with others online (Shawney, 2017:26). The continuing practice of going online and being connected has turned into what she calls a “ritualized documentary practice” of individuals’ lives.

The evidence presented in the literature suggests that young people are significantly more likely to use the Internet than older generations. Therefore, they appear to be a suitable target group

to conduct focus group discussions with. As an extension of the third research question which seeks to measure differences in usage based on the age and race of the respondent, the quantitative analysis focuses on young people and how they engage with the Internet and social media. Ideally, the outcome of this study should answer the following questions; *how* do young university students engage with political information online? *Why* is the web more appealing to them than conventional news media?

Once relationships based on quantitative analysis have been determined, the second part of the research study aims to focus on qualitative data collection through focus group discussions with students at Stellenbosch University. Following Hypothesis 1's assumption and the evidence presented in the global literature that Internet users tend to be younger, this seems to be an appropriate focus group that could offer valuable insight into the nature of young people's engagement with the Internet. It might also offer useful insight into the political behaviour of this cohort, which appears to be less engaged in politics than its older counterparts (Schoemann & Puttergill, 2007; Dalton, 2008; Mattes 2012; Resnick & Casale, 2014; Seekings, 2014; Mattes & Richmond, 2015; Wattenberg, 2016; Tracey, 2016; Malila, 2016; Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019).

In order to recruit participants, ethical clearance was sought from Stellenbosch University first, followed by a request at the University to allow the researcher to conduct focus group discussions with students from the Department of Political Science. This served to determine whether there exist differences in the way students engage with the Internet and social media. For the purpose of this research study, a focus group discussion was conducted with humanities postgraduate students at Stellenbosch University.

Burnham, *et al.*, (2008:133) suggest that the best method to record the data during the focus group is to video and tape-record the discussion. This makes it easier for the researcher to "identify the contributions of each individual" and to "capture the enthusiasm, intensity and dynamics of group interactions" (Burnham, *et al.*, 2008:133). This method also makes the transcription and analysis of data easier for the researcher. Therefore, this study made use of video recordings during group discussions. The information obtained during these discussions was handled with confidentiality and participants were guaranteed anonymity. Participants were asked for permission to video record the group discussion for research purposes. Any data that has been collected during the interviews that could disclose participants' identity or otherwise sensitive information is stored on a password-secured personal computer which only

the researcher has access to. The venue for discussions should ideally be an open, friendly, and neutral environment that enables members of discussions to feel comfortable and safe. This requirement was met to the best of the researcher's abilities.

3.3.3 Why focus groups?

As mentioned in previous chapters, the Internet and social media have become particularly popular among young people who were born at a time where Internet access has increasingly become a part of citizens' everyday lives (Shawney, 2017). Previous studies have shown that the Internet and social media are preferred as a source of political information and news among this generation (Norris & Curtice, 2006; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Rainie, 2012; Smith & Duggan; 2012a, 2012b). The evidence presented in the literature and the findings of this research study suggest that young people are significantly more likely to use the Internet than older generations. This coupled with the fact that South Africa's population contains a large youth bulge, makes this cohort is a suitable target group. Such an analysis could also offer useful insight into the political behaviour of this cohort, which appears to be less engaged in politics than its older counterparts (Schoemann & Puttergill, 2007; Dalton, 2008; Mattes 2012; Resnick & Casale, 2014; Seekings, 2014; Mattes & Richmond, 2015; Wattenberg, 2016; Tracey, 2016; Malila, 2016; Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019).

In short, focus group discussions serve to enrich the outcome of this study through a more in-depth discussion of the Internet and social media use. They are aimed at gaining a better understanding of the way in which university students engage with content online and how this affects their attitudes, values, and behaviour. Despite the weaknesses of focus group discussions mentioned above, the focus groups provided rich and meaningful information and valuable insights.

3.3.4 The value of focus groups

Litosseliti (2003:1) defines focus groups as a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest". Focus groups serve to explore specific topics and participants' views, attitudes and experiences relating to that topic through group interaction. Because they represent a more natural environment based on conversation flow and exchange, they offer some advantages over methods such as interviews and participant observation. Just like in real life, members of the group discussion are likely to influence and be influenced by others. Therefore, the emphasis of focus groups rests primarily on the interaction among individuals. What makes this so unique and valuable is that this might allow the researcher to

“uncover new, open-ended pathways for discussion” through minimal intervention (Litosseliti, 2003:3-5).

Most importantly, while focus groups should follow a set line of questions, they do allow for flexibility. This means that the moderator does not need to follow a strict questionnaire as is often the case in formal interviews but can deviate somewhat from the prescribed questions if an interesting topic should arise (Litosseliti, 2003:17). Therefore, the flexibility of focus groups allows researchers to elaborate on certain points that seem to be important while at the same time, consider other aspects that the researcher has previously not thought of.

3.3.4 Discussion procedure

The focus group discussion consisted of 12 participants. Upon arrival at the venue of discussion, all participants were handed consent forms which they were asked to read and sign to affirm that they understand what the research is about, their role in the study, as well as possible risks associated with participating. Before the discussion was initiated, participants were given labelling stickers on which they were asked to write their first names to make it easier to engage with each other on a first-name basis. Thereafter, participants were requested to be seated in one of the chairs provided in the setting and to quickly introduce themselves to others to get to know one another. Seats were organised in a rectangle so that participants all faced one another and doughnuts were freely available.

Before the discussion was initiated, the moderator provided an overview of the purpose of the focus group and the expected duration of the discussion. Furthermore, ground rules which were also outlined in the consent form were established. Those rules stated *inter alia* that participants were free to leave the discussion at any given time if they felt uncomfortable. Everyone present was reminded that should anyone at any point during the interview insult or attack another participant on grounds of race, gender, background, political affiliation or other, he or she will be asked to leave immediately. All students available were encouraged to engage with each other in an open, polite, and orderly fashion and in a way that allows everyone to participate and to be heard. Participants were reminded that everyone has different opinions and that no single point of view would be discredited, discarded, or seen as unimportant or irrelevant. Participants were also informed that the discussion was to be videotaped for the sole purpose of research. Assurance was given that recordings were only available to the researcher and her supervisor.

The information obtained during the discussion was handled with confidentiality and participants were guaranteed anonymity. Participants were asked for permission to video record the group discussion for research purposes and had to sign a consent form, informing them of the aim of the research and possible risks. Any data that was collected during the interviews that could disclose participants' identity was stored on a password-secured personal computer which only the researcher had access to. The venue for discussions was an open, friendly, and neutral environment that enables members of discussions to feel comfortable and safe.

The researcher is aware that the small sample size of focus group participants raises the concern of limited findings. Furthermore, recruiting participants from the Department of Political Science possibly results in biased findings as this demographic group is likely to be prone to be more politically engaged. The reason for the small, limited sample size is mainly due to the fact that the process of recruitment was rather challenging. Requests have been made to other departments at Stellenbosch University to recruit participants, however none came forward, not even given the opportunity to win a cash prize. More diversity in the sample could have resulted in findings that could have been more accurate, and representative of the average educated South African. However, the qualitative study mainly serves the purpose of further testing results of the qualitative study which presents the heart of the overall research study.

3.3.6 Focus group questions

To make focus group discussions take on a more natural flow, Krueger (1998:21) distinguishes between five different types of questions with distinct purposes. This method was also applied to this research study. These categories are opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions. The opening question is designed to be answered quickly and to give each participant an opportunity to speak before moving on to more in-depth questions. This type of question is not intended to give any useful insight to by measuring attitudes of respondents but rather create a "sense of community in the group" (Krueger, 1998:23).

Introductory questions "introduce the general topic of discussion" and often give participants an opportunity to think about their experience related to the research topic. These types of questions are designed to spark conversation among participants but are not necessarily designed to be analysed. Usually, they are open-ended questions that allow members of focus group discussions to tell others what they think or how they feel about the topic (Krueger, 1998:24).

Transition questions quite simply serve to link introductory and key questions by asking participants to go into more detail about their experiences with, or feelings about the topic at hand. These questions typically “make the connection between the participant and the topic of investigation” (Krueger, 1998:25).

Key questions constitute the body of focus group discussions and typically consist of two to five questions. They are the ones that require the most attention in the analysis and therefore the most amount of time throughout the discussion as these questions seek to tap the underlying aspect that the researcher is trying to measure (Krueger, 1998:25).

Finally, ending questions “bring closure to the discussion” and allow participants to reflect on previous comments (Krueger, 1998:26). These questions can either be “all-things-considered” questions that can help participants clarify their point of view, “summary questions” where the moderator gives participants a short summary of the key points that emerged from the discussions and asks them whether it is accurate, or “final questions” which functions as a type of insurance question (Krueger, 1998:25-26).

Following Krueger’s (1998) guideline on formulating focus group questions, the section below provides an overview of the questions that were asked during the focus group discussion of this research.

Opening Questions:

- Tell us who you are, where you are from, and what you are writing your research project on.

Introductory Questions:

- Do you have a social media account?
- Do you have access to the Internet outside of university?

Transition Questions:

- Where do you primarily get your political news from?
 - Why do you prefer the Internet and social media as a source of political news?

Key Questions

- Would you say that the Internet and social media have made you more critical and distrusting of politicians and institutions?

- Do you think the Internet and social media have made you more politically active and informed?
 - Would you say that social media has the potential to dissuade you from voting?
- Do you think the Internet and social media have the potential to improve democracy?
- Thinking about your own beliefs and views, do you sometimes expose yourself to different points of view that do not reflect your own?

Ending Question

- What is your favourite and least favourite thing about social media?

3.4 Multi-methods research

3.4.1 Combining quantitative and qualitative methods

In his book, *Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*, Morgan (2014:4) warns his readers of the difficulties related to combining different methods in a research study. He explains that the use of two methods not only involves more work but integrating them effectively so that each complements the other is a challenge on its own. Simply presenting more results or different kinds of results does not necessarily improve the quality of one's work. Particularly the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can be challenging because researchers are often seduced by the distinct strengths of each approach and fall into the trap of methodological eclecticism, or “an anything-goes approach” and in the end fail to integrate both findings in a meaningful way (Morgan, 2014:4).

It is therefore essential to identify the kind of integration of methods that is suitable for a specific research study. Morgan (2014:10-11) mentions three types of mixed methods approaches that each have distinct characteristics and strengths. The first one is a *convergent* approach, where the same research question is addressed “using both a survey and qualitative” approaches. The second methodology of using mixed methods is that of *additional* coverage, where “different methods (are assigned) to different purposes” so that the project can “pursue a wider range of research goals” than would be possible with any single method (Morgan, 2014:73). Finally, *sequential* contributions work quite similarly to additional coverage, however, the former assigns different purposes to each method while the latter uses the “results of one method to enhance the effectiveness of another” (Morgan, 2014:11).

Therefore, this research study makes use of sequential and additional coverage. The insights gained through the quantitative analysis serve as a foundation upon which focus group questions are formulated. In other words, statistical outcomes should give insight on which areas to investigate further in order to pose meaningful questions to group participants. Yet, both quantitative and qualitative findings are assigned equal importance in the outcome of the study and serve the purpose to enrich overall findings.

Blaikie (2010:218) explains that some writers regard the use of mixed methods as a “third methodological movement”, apart from quantitative and qualitative studies. He summarises the advantages of mixed methods. First and foremost, the combination of quantitative and qualitative research can mitigate the shortcomings of one method through the strengths of another and thus produce “more comprehensive evidence” that compliments each other (Blaikie, 2010:219). Mixed methods also help to answer several aspects of a research question that cannot be answered by a single approach. This means that depending on whether the researcher seeks to investigate in an inductive or deductive direction, mixed methods can help to produce results in all of these directions at the same time by offering abductive reasoning²⁵.

Miles and Huberman (2002:396) suggest that,

“both quantitative and qualitative inquiry can support and inform each other in important ways. Narratives and variable-driven analyses need to interpenetrate and inform each other. Realists, idealists and critical theorists can do better by incorporating other ideas than remaining pure.”

Nie and Erbring (2000) suggest that time individuals spend online is less relevant than what they are doing online, i.e. which websites they visit and how they engage with those websites. This is because meaningful interaction with politically related information is required to impact values, attitudes, and behaviour. Therefore, the quantitative aspect of this study aims to answer whether people who do get their news online differ from those who obtain them elsewhere, whereas the qualitative aspects seek to answer how individuals are shaped by their online experiences.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the methodologies used to measure the relationship between the Internet and social media and civic attitudes, values and political behaviour. It

²⁵ Abductive research on the other hand, can answer both, the ‘what’ and the ‘why, however it tends to answer the ‘why’ by “producing understanding rather than an explanation” (Blaikie, 2010:85-88). Abductive reasoning typically relies on the “expertise, experience, and intuition of researchers” (Wheeldon, Ahlberg, 2011:117).

outlines the benefits and shortcomings of both, quantitative and qualitative research in the social sciences. Furthermore, the chapter lays out the methodological foundations upon which this study is based, and the specific steps undertaken to obtain reliable outcomes for the quantitative data analysis and points out which variables will be used to test the hypotheses. Lastly, this chapter explains the discussion procedure of the qualitative focus group discussions and which questions will be asked during the session and finally argues that if used together, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies can complement each other by mitigating each other's shortcomings. The following chapter focuses on the quantitative analysis of data obtained from the 2015 Afrobarometer Round 6 survey.

Chapter 4: Quantitative Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 explores relationships between Internet and social media use and political attitudes and behaviour by employing quantitative measures to explore correlations between the dependent and independent variables. The first section addresses Research Question 1 and therefore the demographic aspects of Internet and social media use by looking at age, education, gender, race and location of the respondent. The findings are discussed and interpreted in relation to the global literature. Following this, Research Question 2 and 3 are addressed followed by the interpretations of the findings.

4.2 Research question 1

Research Question 1 of this study asks, “Which demographic groups predominantly use the Internet and social media to source political news?”. Table 4.1 below shows the correlations (Spearman’s rho) between each demographic variable and Internet, social media, and the scale consisting of Internet and social media use (IntSoc).²⁶

Table 4.1: Correlations for demographic variables

Age 18-24 (1); 25-34 (2); 35-44 (3); 45-54 (4); 55+ (5)	Internet	-.295**
	Social Media	-.358**
	IntSoc	-.348**
Education Primary or less (1); Incomplete secondary schooling (2); Completed secondary schooling (3); Post-secondary/tertiary education (4)	Internet	.475**
	Social Media	.427**
	IntSoc	.486**
Gender Male (1); Female (2)	Internet	-.058**
	Social Media	-.026**
	IntSoc	-.047*
Race ²⁷ Black/African (1); White/European (2); Coloured/mixed race (3); South Asian/Indian (4)	Internet	.254**
	Social Media	.123**
	IntSoc	.187**
Location Urban (1); Rural (2)	Internet	-.205**
	Social Media	-.147**
	IntSoc	-.187**

Correlations significant at the 0.05* and 0.01** level

²⁶ It should be noted that in this case, the demographic groups will be treated as independent variables since Internet or social media use cannot affect one’s likelihood of being male or female, for example.

²⁷ Relationships measured using gamma as a measure of association

4.2.1 Hypothesis 1: age and education

Hypothesis 1 states that regular Internet and social media users are more likely to be younger and more educated than non-users. The strong, negative correlations displayed in Table 4.1 between Internet, social media, and the Internet-social media scale indicate that use decreases as age increases. This means that young people are more likely to read their political news on the Internet and social media. Given that the correlations between age and social media are stronger than for age and Internet, it appears that young people particularly use social media to stay informed. Similarly, there are strong correlations between the education of the respondent and Internet and social media use. The more educated the respondent, the more likely he or she is to use the Internet or social media to source political news. Therefore, there is support for Hypothesis 1 and the existence of a digital divide in South Africa that is dominated by age and education.

Bakker and de Vreese (2011:452) point out that Internet use is “not a unidimensional concept and thus does not – if at all – affect all groups in society similarly”. Instead, its effects depend on a variety of “personal and social characteristics” that are unique to each individual and how they choose to access the medium. South Africa is no exception when it comes to distinct characteristics that determine access and use of the Internet and social media. One group that appears to be a consistent predictor of Internet use throughout the literature are young people. Rainie (2012) claims that the use of social media has gained increasing popularity among young adults and is often preferred as a source of political information. Norris and Curtice (2006) believe that a “digital divide” of online activity among Internet users has ensued, where younger and more educated people appear to be more active. Yamamoto *et al.* (2015:895) share this opinion and claim that particularly young adults make advanced use of social media to grow social capital that develops “user-generated political content” by expressing political views and engaging in debates online.

Hoffman *et al.* (2017) also find that people who use the Internet more frequently tend to have higher levels of education. Moeller, de Vreese, Esser and Kunz (2014:696) support this statement by claiming that “digital natives” or “netizens”, i.e. people who spend a lot of their time browsing the Internet, tend to be more educated. These findings hold for most studies and find support in this research study. There appears to be a digital divide in the South African context as already pointed out by various scholars (Bosch, 2010; 2012; Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017; Gwaze, Hsu, Bosch & Lockett, 2018; Bosch, Wasserman & Chuma, 2018; Bosch, 2018),

where younger and more educated people are more active online. There is also some support for the reinforcement thesis which states that people with higher levels of education benefit more from online activity and are also more likely to be active online.

4.2.2 Hypothesis 2: gender

Hypothesis 2 states that the gender of the respondent does not determine access to or frequency of Internet and social media use. As can be taken away from table 4.1, the correlations between Internet and social media use and the gender of the respondent suggest that men are slightly more likely to go online. While the correlations are significant, they are also weak, indicating that there is only a slight difference in terms of usage between men and women.

This finding supports comparative research when it comes to the gender of the respondent. Although men have slightly more access globally than women, their interaction with the medium does not differ remarkably. Published data by Statista (2017) shows that Internet access in terms of gender in South Africa displays no large differences. Men (51%) have only slightly higher access to ICTs than women (49%). This may also explain the small differences in Internet and social media usage to source political information among men and women. Given that men have slightly higher access, they are also slightly more likely to use the Internet or social media to obtain political news. Hypothesis 2 is therefore largely supported.

4.2.3 Hypothesis 3: race and class

Hypothesis 3 expects to find that there is a difference in terms of Internet and social media use based on race. The findings presented in table 4.1 suggest weak to moderate correlations between race and using the Internet to source political news and a weak correlation between using social media and a mix of Internet and social media and race. Table 4.2 shows the frequency of usage for each race group (using crosstabulation). The first significant finding is that the large majority of white respondents (70.8%) uses the Internet either every day, or a few times a week, compared to 48.8% of Indian, 37.7% of coloured, and 32.6% of black respondents. The bar chart in Figure 1 below also shows that for black respondents, the proportion of those that never use the Internet is significantly larger than the proportion of any other race category. By comparison, the gap in terms of frequency of usage narrows for all other race groups and for white respondents, the proportion of those who use the Internet every day is larger than any other proportion. Therefore, the race groups that use the Internet to source political news most frequently are white and Indian respondents. The groups that are the least likely to use the Internet are coloured and black respondents.

The same pattern applies to social media use. Of all respondents, black people are the least likely to use social media to source political news, followed by coloured and Indian respondents. White respondents are significantly more likely to use social media every day than any other race group (Cramer's $V = .152$; $p = .000$).

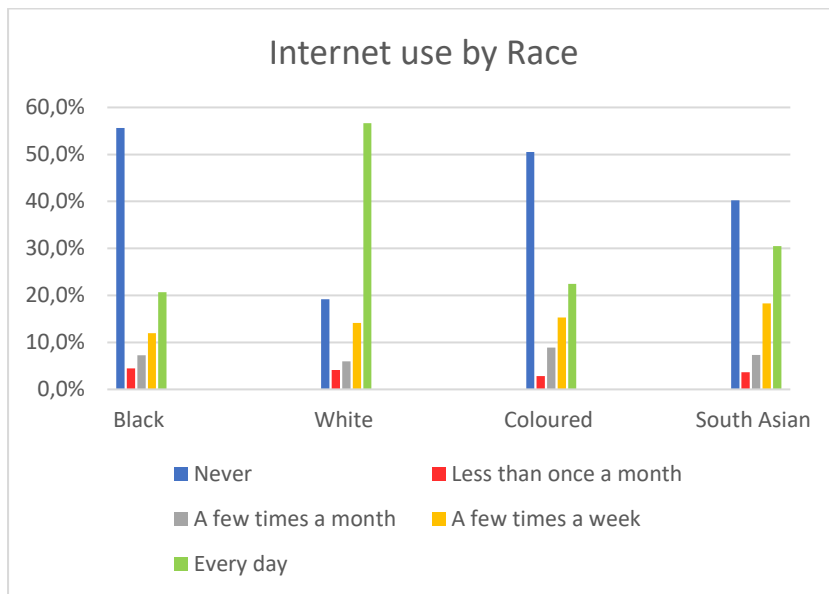
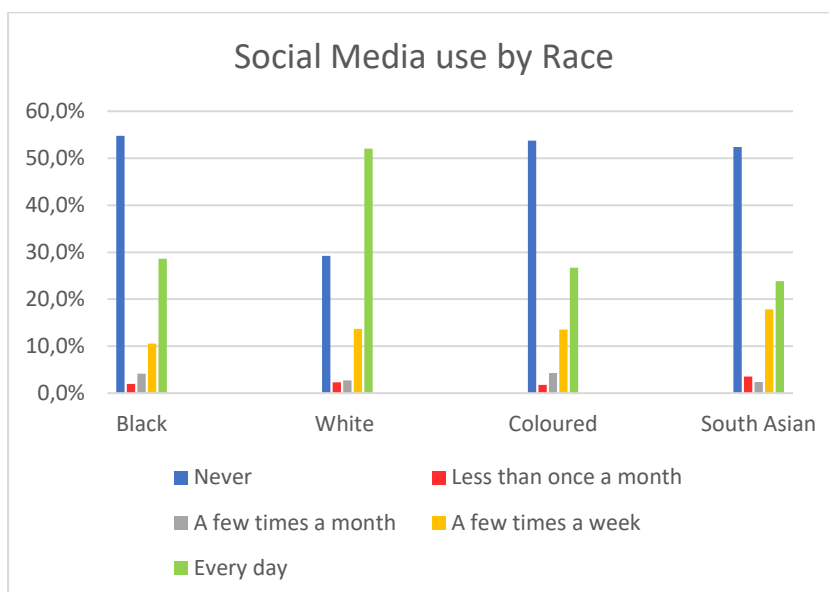
Therefore, there is a difference in terms of Internet and social media use based on race, where white respondents are most likely to go online, followed by Indian respondents. Therefore, Hypothesis 3, which expects to find differences in terms of use based on race, therefore finds support. The Afrobarometer Round 6 survey does not measure the income or class of respondent, therefore no direct relationships can be measured. However, as mentioned in section 1.4.3 of this study, race often serves as a proxy for socioeconomic standing in the South African context. Therefore, white and Indian respondents (people with a generally higher socioeconomic standing/ class) are more likely to use the Internet frequently than black or coloured respondents (people with a generally lower socioeconomic standing/ class).

Table 4.2: Crosstabulation for Internet use by race

	Never	Less than once a month	A few times a month	A few times a week	Every day	Total
Black	55,6%	4,5%	7,3%	11,9%	20,7%	100,0%
	82,1%	80,0%	74,7%	70,6%	63,6%	75,5%
White	19,2%	4,1%	5,9%	14,2%	56,6%	100,0%
	3,5%	9,0%	7,5%	10,2%	21,3%	9,2%
Coloured	50,5%	2,8%	8,9%	15,3%	22,4%	100,0%
	11,7%	8,0%	14,4%	14,2%	10,8%	11,8%
Indian	40,2%	3,7%	7,3%	18,3%	30,5%	100,0%
	2,7%	3,0%	3,4%	5,0%	4,3%	3,5%
Total (N)	1214	100	174	303	583	2374
	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Cramer's $V = .152^{**}$

Margin of error: 2.05%

Figure 4.1**Figure 4.2:**

As already pointed out in previous chapters, black people in South Africa still face difficulties in terms of educational attainment, while whites and Indians have the highest proportion of post-secondary level of education. Both groups also have the lowest proportion of individuals with the lowest levels of education (Statistics South Africa, 2016). Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017:74) point out that the digital divide in South Africa “mostly reflects one’s race, socioeconomic status and geographical status”. This indicates that although there has been substantial growth in the black middle class in South Africa, the black population still faces hardships in terms of education and income, which in turn appears to affect their access to the

Internet and their ability to search for meaningful information online. This provides support for the reinforcement thesis which states that previous socioeconomic inequalities are reflected by Internet use as well.

4.2.4 Hypothesis 4: rural versus urban location

Hypothesis 4 suggests that Internet and social media users are more likely to live in urban, rather than rural areas. There is a negative correlation between Internet and social media use and the location of the respondent. The bar chart for Internet use by location displays a clear linear relationship between Internet use and the location of the respondent. As usage increases, the proportion of respondents who live in rural areas decreases. While the proportions of rural and urban respondents fluctuate for social media use, urban respondents remain more likely to use social media than rural respondents. Hypothesis 4, therefore, finds support.

Figure 4.3:

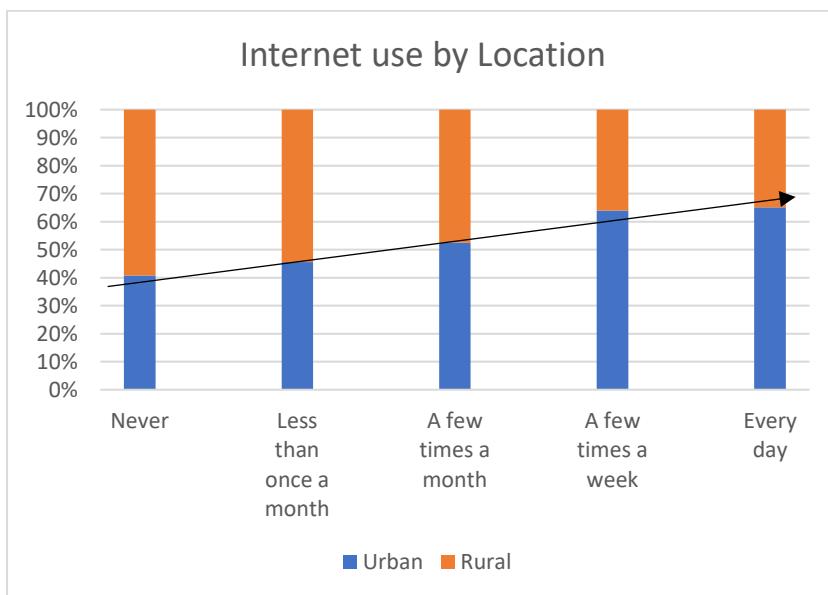
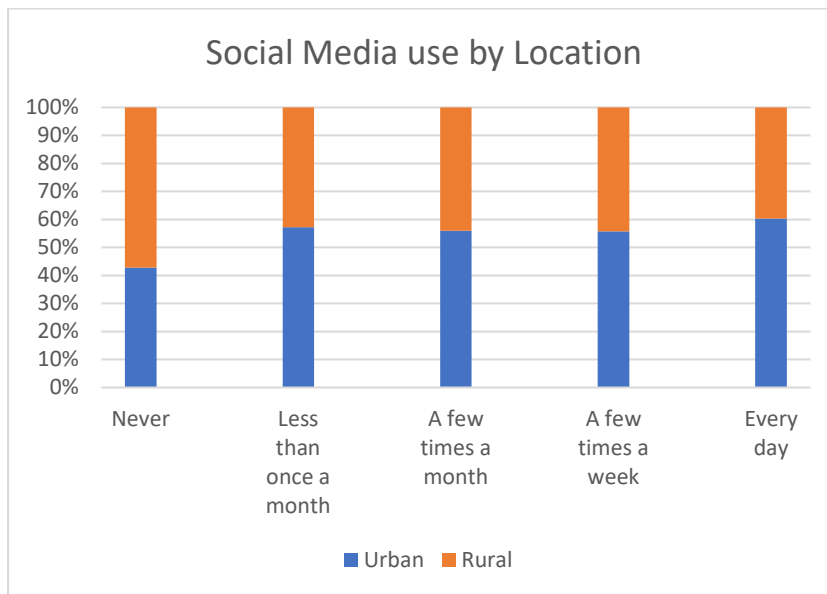


Figure 4.4:

Sylvester and McGlynn (2010) have shown that certain segments of the population, especially those living in rural areas, have lower access to ICTs than people living in urban areas. This may be caused by the difficulty of setting up broadband connections in rural areas due to a lack of infrastructure and uneven terrain. This claim finds support in the results above, although to a somewhat lower extent than anticipated. This might be because several people in rural areas utilise their mobile phones to access the Internet and social media for political information. However, other studies need to determine the exact circumstances of this trend. The analysis showed quite a distinct linear relationship between Internet use and location and thus seem to confirm findings by Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017:74). The authors assert that during the apartheid era, only those living in “prosperous urban areas” benefited from ICT developments, and after the “introduction of commercial Internet services in 1994”, only those living in those prosperous areas truly benefitted. The unequal access to ICTs and now Internet and social media is thus still affected by location.

The findings relating to Hypothesis 1 to 4 allow to answer Research Question 1, “Which demographic groups predominantly use the Internet to source political news?”. Overall, Internet and social media use seems to be determined by age, education and the race of the respondent. Those who live in urban areas are also more likely to use the Internet and social media to source political news. More specifically, those people who source their political news on the Internet and social media tend to be younger, more educated, white and Indian and live in urban areas.

4.3 Research question 2

Having established which demographic profiles are more likely to read their political news on the Internet and social media, the study moves on to determine whether the Internet and social media do influence political attitudes and behaviour of citizens. Research Question 2 of this study asks, *Is there a measurable difference between Internet and social media users versus non-users in terms of their political attitudes and behaviour?*

4.3.1 Political efficacy

Table 4.3 displays the bivariate correlation for measures of political attitudes and behaviour and Internet and social media use and the Internet-social media scale. It immediately becomes clear that correlations are weak and mostly statistically insignificant. However, a few noteworthy correlations are worth pointing out. There appears to be an association between Internet and social media use to source political news and political efficacy. The more South Africans use the Internet and social media to source political news, the more likely they are to discuss politics and be interested in public affairs.

4.3.2 Trust

Furthermore, reading political news online seems to affect South Africans' trust in officials and institutions and perceptions of corruption. This indicates that the more they use the Internet and social media, the less likely they are to trust officials and institutions (negative correlation) and the more likely they are to believe that most officials are involved in corruption. Additionally, increased Internet and social media use to read political news appears to decrease South Africans' approval of one-party rule and apartheid. Therefore, there are some significant correlations between using the Internet and social media to source political attitudes.

4.3.3 Political behaviour

There are also some noteworthy associations between Internet and social media use for political news and measures of political behaviour. Firstly, increased use of the Internet and social media to read political news increases respondents' likelihood to be a member of a religious group and voluntary association. It also increases South Africans' likelihood to vote and contacting the media about an issue.

Therefore, Internet and social media use to source political news appears to have overall positive effects on South Africans' political attitudes and behaviour. With the exception of trust

and perceptions of corruption (which appears to decrease and increase, respectively the more someone reads their news online), respondents seem to be positively affected by reading political news online. These findings present overall support for the mobilisation hypothesis which states argues that the more time citizens spend online searching for political information, the more likely they become to be engaged in offline forms of participation such as voting or signing petitions, therefore supporting findings made by Norris (2001), Tolbert & McNeal (2003), De Vreese (2007), Bakker and de Vreese (2011) and Yamamoto *et al.* (2015).

Table 4.3: Correlations between Internet and social media use and measures of political attitudes and behaviour

	Dependent variables	Internet	Social Media	IntSoc
Political efficacy and interest in politics	Interest in public affairs “Not at all interested” (0); “Not very interested” (1); “Somewhat interested” (2); “Very interested” (3)	.074**	.059**	.074**
	Discussing politics “Never” (0); “Occasionally” (1); “Frequently” (2)	.119**	.106**	.120**
Emancipative values	Freedom to join organisations ²⁸ “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	.017	.033	.025
	Freedom of press ²⁹ “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	-.023	-.026	-.028
	Female leadership ³⁰ “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	.041*	.010	.027
Supply of democracy and trust	Extent of democracy “Not a democracy” (1); “A democracy, with major problems” (2); “A democracy, but with minor problems” (3); “A full democracy” (4)	-.024	.010	-.007
	Satisfaction with democracy Not at all satisfied (1); not very satisfied (2); Fairly satisfied (3); Very satisfied (4)	.002	.037*	.020
	Trust (Scale) Not at all (low); a lot (high)	-.099**	-.069**	-.101**
	Corruption (Scale) None (low); all of them (high)	.101**	.082**	.092**
Rejection of authoritarian regimes and support for democracy	Reject one-party rule “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	-.066**	-.063**	-.072**
	Reject military rule Strongly disapprove (1); disapprove (2); Neither approve nor disapprove (3); approve (4); Strongly approve (5)	-.005	-.013	-.010
	Reject one-man rule Strongly disapprove (1); disapprove (2); Neither approve nor disapprove (3); approve (4); Strongly approve (5)	-.034	-.033	-.033

²⁸ Statement 1: “Government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.” Statement 2: “We should be able to join any organization, whether or not government approves of it.”

²⁹ Statement 1: “The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.” Statement 2: “The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.”

³⁰ Statement 1: “Men make better political leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women.” Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.”

	Reject apartheid “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	-.051**	-.043*	-.050**
	Member of religious group “Not a member” (0); “Inactive Member” (1); “Active member” (2); “Official leader” (3)	.082**	.060**	.076**
	Member of voluntary association Not a member (0); Inactive Member (1); Active member (2); Official leader (3)	.060**	.069**	.064**
	Attend a community meeting Would never do this (0); Would if had the chance (1); Once or twice (2); Several times (3); Often (4)	-.034	-.042*	-.041*
	Member of voluntary association “Not a member” (0); “Inactive Member” (1); “Active member” (2); “Official leader” (3)	-.044*	-.033	-.040*
	Voting Voted (1); Did not vote (2)	-.088**	-.104*	-.103**
	Attend a campaign meeting No (0); Yes (1)	.006	.037*	.017
	Attend a community meeting “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	-.020	.001	-.007
	Persuade others to vote No (0); Yes (1)	.007	.015	.011
	Work for candidate or party No (0); Yes (1)	.013	.025	.020
	Join others to raise an issue “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	-.013	.001	-.004
	Request government action Would never do this (0); Would if had the chance (1); Once or twice (2); Several times (3); Often (4)	.015	.006	-.004
	Contact media Would never do this (0); Would if had the chance (1); Once or twice (2); Several times (3); Often (4)	.088**	.116**	.108**
	Attend a campaign rally No” (0); “Yes” (1)	.037	.060**	.049*
	Attend demonstration or protest Would never do this (0); Would if had the chance (1); Once or twice (2); Several times (3); Often (4)	.011	.056**	.035*

Correlation is significant at the 0.05* and 0.01** level

These findings allow to answer Research Question 2 – *Is there a measurable difference between Internet and social media users versus non-users in terms of their political attitudes and their behaviour?* – yes, there are some measurable differences. However, while there are some significant correlations between using the Internet and social media to source political news and political attitudes and behaviour, they are not particularly strong.

De Vaus (2013:262) points out that social scientists often have to grapple with the reality that most of their statistical findings show weak relationships. One reason is that expectations often do not match reality. The social behaviour and attitudes of respondents “are highly complex and influenced by many factors”, therefore researcher should not expect that one attitudinal or behavioural variable strongly predicts another. It is important to “accept the notion of multiple causation” that underlie the “complexity of human social behaviour” (De Vaus, 2013:262).

Therefore, de Vaus' (2013) arguments should be taken into consideration when conducting further analyses and interpretations. In this case, the weak correlations could indicate that Internet penetration in South Africa is not yet strong enough to exert any effects on the population. Alternatively, the political attitudes and behaviour of South Africans that read their political news on the Internet and social media are not affected by the content, or the results indicate that there are other underlying causal factors that influence the results. In this case, it is tested whether the age and the race of the respondent has an impact on how online political news affect their political attitudes and behaviour.

Furthermore, looking at Internet and social media use to source political news without including any sociodemographic variables only allows for measuring the mobilisation hypothesis. It does not allow to test the reinforcement (existing inequalities will be reinforced online) or normalisation hypothesis (online participation will reflect a 'politics as usual' scenario) which assume that Internet and social media use will affect different groups of a population in a different way.

4.4 Research question 3

The literature suggests that young people use the Internet and social media more frequently (Norris and Curtice, 2006; Poushter, 2016) and that inequalities in terms of race limit some groups' access to online content (Beger & Sinah 2012; Bosch, Wasserman & Chuma, 2018; Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017). This, coupled with the need to investigate how different groups in the population are affected by Internet and social media use in order to test other theses relating to Internet use and political attitudes and behaviour, leads to the third research question – *Are there measurable differences between Internet and social media users versus non-users in terms of their political attitudes and behaviour based on age and race?* The tables below present the findings for the bivariate analysis for Internet, social media, and a scale of Internet and social media use and political attitudes and behaviour by age and race.

4.4.1 Hypothesis 5: political efficacy and political interest

Hypothesis 5 states that people who spend more time online reading political news are more likely to discuss politics and express an interest in public affairs. Table 4.4 displays the bivariate correlation between Internet, social media, and the Internet-social media scale and interest in public affairs and frequency of discussing politics across age groups. The table shows that people aged 55+ are the most likely to be influenced by reading their news online.

There are moderate, positive relationships for all independent variables. The more time 55+-year olds spend online reading political news, the more likely they are to be interested in public affairs and discuss politics. People aged 35-44 show the second strongest correlation, followed by 25-34-year olds. 18-24- and 45-54-year-olds show almost no correlations at all. The effects of Internet and social media use on internal levels of efficacy mostly hold for older age cohorts, particularly those 55 and older. However, there are also some positive correlations for those aged 25-34 and 35-44. Therefore, there is support for Hypothesis 5 in terms of age.

Table 4.4: Political efficacy and political interest by age

		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Interest in public affairs “Not at all interested” (0); “Not very interested” (1); “Somewhat interested” (2); “Very interested” (3)	Internet	-.023	.111*	.131**	.018	.154**
	Social Media	.022	.060	.128**	.035	.110*
	IntSocMe	-.001	.099*	.138**	.033	.138**
Discussing politics “Never” (0); “Occasionally” (1); “Frequently” (2)	Internet	.005	.170**	.080*	.097*	.278**
	Social Media	.033	.109**	.121**	.076	.231**
	IntSocMe	.018	.155**	.108**	.078	.264**

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

Table 4.5 displays the bivariate correlation between Internet, social media, and the Internet-social media scale for measures of internal efficacy based on the race of the respondent. The group which seems to be most affected by reading online political news are Indian respondents who show moderate to strong, positive correlations for both dependent variables. Internet and social media use appear to only affect black and coloured respondents in terms of discussing politics and being interested in public affairs. There are no significant correlations for white respondents at all.

When it comes to race, there is overall support for Hypothesis 5. Apart from white respondents, the likelihood of all other race groups to discuss politics and be interested in public affairs tends to increase the more they use the Internet and social media (or a combination of both).

Table 4.5: Political efficacy and political interest by race

		Black	White	Coloured	Indian
Interest in public affairs “Not at all interested” (0); “Not very interested” (1); “Somewhat interested” (2); “Very interested” (3)	Internet	.110**	.046	.068	.204**
	Social Media	.083**	.012	.089	.117
	IntSoc	.105**	.038	.071	.189*
Discussing politics “Never” (0); “Occasionally” (1); “Frequently” (2)	Internet	.126**	-.076	.166**	.247**
	Social Media	.102**	-.052	.246**	.298**
	IntSoc	.122**	.012	.200**	.304**

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the competing theories relating to media consumption and political attitudes. The media malaise theory (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Mutz and Reeves, 2005) argues that the overall negative coverage on politics generates “cynicism and malaise” and leads to more “negative attitudes toward political institutions” (Chang, 2018:1001). The virtuous circle theory (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Norris, 2000; 2001) on the other hand, claims that enhanced exposure to political information via the media leads to heightened interest in politics and positive attitudes toward political institutions.

This study finds support for the virtuous circle theory in relation to interest in politics. The more both sociodemographic groups (race and age) use the Internet and social media to read political news, the more likely they are to be interested in and discuss politics with others. Specifically, respondents above the age of 24 show higher levels of internal political efficacy, which may also be attributable to socialisation and lifecycle effects. In terms of race, black, coloured and Indian respondents show a heightened interest in public affairs and an increased likelihood of discussing politics. Therefore, most age and race groups seem to be part of a virtuous circle through searching for political news on the Internet and social media. This raises the question as to whether these findings set Internet and social media apart from traditional mass media such as newspapers, or TV. Further studies will need to investigate whether there are large differences between online media and traditional media and how they affect citizens in South Africa.

Furthermore, the findings also lend support for the mobilisation hypothesis which highlights the overall beneficial effects of Internet news consumption on political attitudes and behaviour. Contrary to arguments raised by proponents of the reinforcement thesis, these mobilising effects do not hold for those people who are considered to be part of more advantaged groups (in this case white people). Instead, black, coloured and Indian respondents show positive results in terms of increased by Internet and social media use and increased levels of internal political efficacy. Yet, it should be noted that it is not clear from these findings whether Internet use for political news facilitates and increase in interest in politics or whether those people who already are interested in politics use the Internet and social media more frequently to stay informed. Thus, the causality underlying these relationships remains unclear.

4.4.2 Hypothesis 6: emancipative values

Hypothesis 6 expects that Internet and social media users express greater support for emancipative values (less deference to authority posed by the government) than non-users.

Table 4.6 provides the correlations for the dependent and independent variables by age. While the correlations are weak, there are a couple of key findings. Reading political news online seems to mostly affect 18-24-year olds in terms of declared support for female leadership. The more they read political news on the Internet and social media, the more likely they are to support the notion that women should have equal opportunities to be elected as political leaders as men.

The findings relating to young people and their belief that women should have the same chance of being elected as political leaders as men closely reflect a global trend pointed out by Inglehart and Baker (2000:28). The authors explain that over the past few decades, new gender roles have emerged that “enable women to enter the same occupations as men”. One of the most contested issues revolving around this topic is whether men make better political leaders than women. While the majority of people around the world believe that men make better political leaders than women, this notion is rejected by a growing number of people in advanced democracies “and is overwhelmingly rejected by the younger generation within these societies” (Inglehart & Baker, 2000:28). This raises the question of whether the Internet and social media are contributing to young South Africans’ sentiments of female empowerment in politics, or whether such attitudes are simply a reflection of global trends.

The other significant finding is that all respondents aged are affected by reading political news on either the Internet or social media (or both) and their belief in freedom of joining groups. There is a positive correlation between all three independent variables for 35-44- and 55+-year olds and the desire to join any organisation without government restrictions. This indicates that the more they read their political news on the Internet, the more likely these groups are to believe that one should be able to join any organisation. The same applies to 18-24- and 45-54-year-olds and the use of social media to source political news. The more these cohort reads political news on social media, the more likely they are to agree that one should be able to join any organisation. Although there are significant correlations for other age groups, they are rather weak. As such, there is some support for Hypothesis 6, but this mainly applies to people aged 18-24 and 55+ in terms of freedom of expression for older people and gender equality for young people.

Table 4.6: Emancipative values by age

		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Freedom to join organisations “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	Internet	.037	-.069*	.073*	.046	.121*
	Social Media	.110*	-.053	.072*	.097*	.122*
	IntSoc	.074	-.064	.074*	.065	.115*
Freedom of press “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	Internet	-.044	-.027	.025	-.012	-.060
	Social Media	-.034	-.072*	.018	.046	-.037
	IntSoc	-.055	-.047	.022	.005	-.067
Female leadership “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	Internet	.166**	.048	-.008	.009	.002
	Social Media	.135**	.014	-.041	-.023	-.066
	IntSoc	.158**	.035	-.022	-.021	-.024

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

Table 4.7 below displays the bivariate correlation between emancipative values and sourcing political news on the Internet and social media by race. Again, Indian respondents display the strongest correlations. The more they use the Internet to read political news, the more likely they are to believe that one should be able to join any organisation without government restrictions. There is a significant, negative correlation for Indian respondents between Internet use and the IntSoc scale and freedom of the press. This means that the more this group of respondents goes online to retrieve political information, the more likely they are to believe that the press should be able to publish anything without government control. There is also a similar pattern among white respondents. The more they use social media, the more likely they are to believe that one should be able to join any organisation and the more they use the Internet to source political news, the more they support freedom of the press. There are no significant relationships for coloured or black respondents.

When it comes to the race of the respondent, there is overall support for Hypothesis 6. White and Indian respondents are positively affected by Internet use for political news and support for emancipative values. There are significant correlations for white and Indian respondents who appear to believe that one should be able to join any organisation without government restrictions and it is also these respondents who reject the notion of government control on the media and the press.

Table 4.7: Emancipative values by race

		Black	White	Coloured	Indian
Freedom to join organisations “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	Internet	-.032	.085	.000	.236*
	Social Media	-.012	.134*	-.028	.012
	IntSoc	-.015	.152*	-.006	.166
Freedom of press “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	Internet	-.007	-.134*	-.076	-.279**
	Social Media	-.028	.061	-.007	-.063
	IntSoc	-.015	.082	-.050	-.216**
Female leadership “Agree very strongly with statement 1” (1); “Agree with statement 1” (2); “Agree very strongly with statement 2” (3); “Agree with statement 2” (4)	Internet	.015	.024	.101	.206*
	Social Media	.015	-.039	-.056	-.057
	IntSoc	.014	-.007	.023	.109

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

Norris (2001:55) argues that cyberspace is dominated by postmaterialist value priorities, where users are more concerned with self-actualization and issues concerning quality of life, self-expression, individual freedom, cosmopolitanism, and participatory democracy. Thereby, postmaterialist values are more likely to spread faster among Internet users than non-users. Considering the findings of this study that young people in South Africa are more likely to be active online than their older counterparts, they are more likely to be exposed to postmaterialist value priorities that are possibly reflected by their belief that women should have equal opportunities of being elected into office as men. Future studies need to determine the causal relationship between these findings.

Welzel (2006:871) argues that “democratization is essentially an emancipative process, for it manifests human freedom by empowering people with civil and political rights”. Such an emancipative process, he argues, leads to mass attitudes of “liberty aspirations” which are more powerful in facilitating progress toward democratization than any other indicators such as GDP or social capital. There is overall support for measures of emancipative values for both, age and race, however not as pronounced as findings in advanced economies. These rather weak correlations could also tell another story, which is that South Africans are simply not as influenced by postmaterialist/emancipative values online as people in other democracies might be. It is quite possible that because South Africans tend to value democracy instrumentally rather than intrinsically (Mattes & Bratton, 2007), postmaterialist and emancipative value preferences are not as widely spread despite increasing levels of Internet access in the country.

4.4.3 Hypothesis 7: supply of democracy and trust

Hypothesis 7 states that the more time someone spends online seeking political information, the more likely they are to perceive a low supply of democracy and are more likely to be critical and distrustful of government. Table 4.8 displays the correlations for Internet and social media use for perceptions of supply of democracy and political institutions and incumbents. It appears that the more time people aged 18-24 spend online to source political news, the less likely they are to trust³¹ officials and incumbents and the more likely they are to believe that they are involved in corruption.³² Internet use is correlated with trust and corruption perceptions of people aged 25-34. The more they read their political news on the Internet, the more likely they are to believe that most incumbents are involved in corruption. Similar but weaker effects hold for all other age groups, however mostly for those aged 45-54 and 55+. On the other hand, the more time people aged 55+ spend online reading political news, the less likely they are to trust officials and incumbents. Extent of and satisfaction with democracy only display weak correlations for age groups.

The findings suggest that Internet and social media use for political news affects people's trust in politicians but does not necessarily have an impact on their perceived supply of democracy. Therefore, findings do not fully correspond with those made by Nisbet and Stoycheff (2014). Even though increased online exposure seems to result in higher levels of criticism and lower levels of trust toward incumbents among users, it does not appear to affect their perceptions of supply of democracy. Therefore, findings suggest partial support for Hypothesis 7, and are primarily limited to 18-24 and 55+-year-olds.

Table 4.8: Supply of democracy and trust in incumbents by age

		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Extent of democracy “Not a democracy” (1); “A democracy, with major problems” (2); “A democracy, but with minor problems” (3); “A full democracy” (4)	Internet	-.088*	.007	-.076*	.026	.041
	Social Media	-.051	.050	-.043	.045	.040
	IntSoc	-.082	.034	-.073*	.040	.040
Satisfaction with democracy “Not at all satisfied” (1); “Not very satisfied” (2); “Fairly satisfied” (3); “Very satisfied” (4)	Internet	.082	.047	-.084*	.020	-.056
	Social Media	.078	.100**	-.033	.041	-.029
	IntSoc	.081	.083*	-.069	.045	-.050
Trust (Scale) Not at all (low); a lot (high)	Internet	-.096*	-.007	-.090*	-.115*	-.160**
	Social Media	-.104*	-.022	-.026	-.019	-.127*
	IntSoc	-.103*	-.011	-.068	-.069	-.161**
	Internet	.102*	.105**	.094*	.097*	.083

³¹ For detailed description of the computation of trust as a scale variable, please see Chapter 3.

³² For detailed description of the computation of corruption as a scale variable, please see Chapter 3.

Incumbents' involvement in corruption (Scale) None of them (low); all of them (high)	Social Media	.177*	.067	.036	.096*	.061
	IntSoc	.140**	.096**	.076*	.110*	.087

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

Table 4.9 displays the bivariate correlation based on race. When it comes to extent of democracy, white people who spend more time on the Internet and social media to search for political information tend to believe that South Africa is a democracy. Indian Internet users, on the other hand, show opposite effects; the more they use the Internet to source political news, the less likely they are to believe that South Africa is a full democracy. Furthermore, findings suggest weak to moderate positive correlations between Internet and social media use to source political information and satisfaction with democracy for coloured and Indian respondents. The more they use social media and a combination of social media and Internet, the more they tend to be satisfied with democracy in South Africa.

There are only weak correlations for black respondents and their levels of satisfaction with democracy, trust, and perceptions of corruption. However, the data does suggest that the more time this race group spends online reading political news, the more likely they are to be satisfied with democracy, the less trusting they are of government institutions and officials and the more likely they are to believe that these institutions and officials are involved in high levels of corruption. While these correlations are significant, they do appear rather contradictory.

Therefore, there is only weak support for Hypothesis 7, however only for black respondents. Apart from Indian respondents, it appears that the more time people from most race groups spend online seeking political information, the more likely they are to believe that South Africa is a full democracy and the more likely they are to be satisfied with democracy.

Table 4.9: Supply of democracy and trust in incumbents by race

		Black	White	Coloured	Indian
Extent of democracy “Not a democracy” (1); “A democracy, with major problems” (2); “A democracy, but with minor problems” (3); “A full democracy” (4)	Internet	.010	.197**	.036	-.231*
	Social Media	.020	.151*	.127*	-.046
	IntSoc	.016	.170**	.084	-.160
Satisfaction with democracy “Not at all satisfied” (1); “Not very satisfied” (2); “Fairly satisfied” (3); “Very satisfied” (4)	Internet	.052*	.013	.082	.095
	Social Media	.041*	.104	.159**	.203*
	IntSoc	.049*	.046	.122*	.184*
Trust (Scale) Not at all (low); a lot (high)	Internet	-.042*	.072	-.100	-.026
	Social Media	-.049*	.082	-.047	-.160
	IntSoc	-.049*	.117	-.096	-.081
Incumbents involvement in corruption (Scale) None of them (low); all of them (high)	Internet	.078**	-.061	-.015	-.089
	Social Media	.096**	-.118	-.031	-.071
	IntSoc	.095**	-.086	-.016	-.034

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

Although black respondents who use the Internet and social media to read political news have low levels of trust in democratic institutions and officials, they do tend to be satisfied with democracy. This suggests that while they tend to be satisfied with the way democracy works in South Africa, they also tend to distrust democratic institutions and officials which is an indication of low levels of specific support.

Justwan, Baumgaertner, Carlisle, Clark and Clark (2018) pay particularly close attention to so-called “echo chambers” on social media sites and the way in which they affect users’ satisfaction with democracy. Echo chambers online represent “ideologically congruent and homogenous environments” in which political opinions are enforced rather than debated (Justwan, *et al.*, 2018:425). This means that individuals are more likely to engage with groups of people that represent their own point of view, rather than with people that would challenge those views. Due to these reinforcing and “ambivalence-reducing properties”, social media echo chambers have the strength to impact satisfaction with democracy; more specifically, they tend to boost satisfaction with democracy among supporters of a victorious party and reduce satisfaction among supporters of a losing party (Justwan, *et al.* 2018:426). This stands in contrast to Stoycheff’s and Nisbet’s (2014) argument about the “window-opening” properties of the Internet, where people who spend more time online are more likely to be dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country.

Yet, there are mixed results that relate to the supply of democracy and levels of trust and perceptions of corruption. The correlations between Internet and social media use suggest that people who spend more time reading political news online have lower levels of trust in officials and believe that most of them are involved in corruption. These findings also contradict previous results that speak for the virtuous circle theory and instead support the media malaise theory. If anything, people who are satisfied with democracy should be more likely to trust government officials, but the opposite seems to be true. Those aged 18-24 show a simultaneous distrust of politicians and a belief in high levels of corruption.

Gibson (2004) argues that trust in and the acceptance of the legitimacy of state institutions is an important component in the process of reconciliation. If trust in those institutions declines, “a corresponding erosion of belief in the validity of the reconciliation project is likely” (Jolobe, 2016:242). The low levels of trust in institutions and politicians among young people are

therefore somewhat troubling. If citizens already display low levels of trust at a young age, their support for institutions and officials might remain low at later stages.

However, because the correlations for age groups between trust and corruption and Internet and social media use are stronger than the correlation between satisfaction with democracy and social media use, it can be concluded that people who go online more frequently to find political news are more distrustful and critical of government officials. This stands in support of Stoycheff and Nisbet's (2014) argument about the "window-opening" properties of the Internet, where people who spend more time online are more likely to be dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country.

4.4.4 Hypothesis 8: Demand for democracy

Hypothesis 8 states that Internet users are more likely to express a preference for democracy over any other form of government. Table 4.10 displays the bivariate correlations by age. The findings suggest a link between Internet and social media use and rejection of authoritarian regimes and appear to be strongest for people aged 45-54 and 55+. There is a negative correlation between all three independent variables and support for one-party rule, indicating that the more time these age cohorts spend online, the less likely they are to support one-party rule. Social media use for political news seems to affect 18-24-year olds when it comes to one-man rule; the more frequently this cohort uses social media to read political news, the more likely they become to reject one-man rule. Similar effects can be observed in terms of Internet use for people aged 45-54 and 55+ years old. There is also disapproval for apartheid among the 35-55+ age groups. The more these groups obtain their political news from the Internet, the more likely they are to disapprove of apartheid.

Additionally, the negative correlations between Internet use for the 55+ and 25-34 age groups indicate lower levels of support for democracy, the more they obtain their political news from the Internet.

Therefore, when it comes to age, Hypothesis 8 is neither proven nor disproven. The age groups that show the strongest rejection of authoritarian rule are those aged 18-24, 45-54 and 55+. However, for the 55+ age cohort, there is a decline in support for democracy the more they use Internet and social media to read political news.

Table 4.10: Rejection of authoritarian regimes and support for democracy by age

		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Reject one-party rule “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	Internet	-.038	.002	-.027	-.231**	-.218**
	Social Media	-.114*	-.052	-.077	-.108*	-.161**
	IntSoc	-.064	-.026	-.018	-.187**	-.205**
Reject military rule “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	Internet	-.002	.060	-.024	-.084	-.057
	Social Media	-.090*	.042	-.012	-.101*	.010
	IntSoc	-.024	.057	-.020	-.099*	-.037
Reject one-man rule “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	Internet	-.071	-.028	.045	-.111*	-.170**
	Social Media	-.204**	-.024	.029	-.028	-.087
	IntSoc	-.136**	-.027	.048	-.068	-.149**
Reject Apartheid “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	Internet	.007	.058	-.122**	.088	-.095*
	Social Media	-.077	.050	-.140**	-.153**	-.106*
	IntSoc	-.028	.062	-.149**	-.105*	-.102*
Support for democracy “Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government” (3) “In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable” (2) “For someone like me, it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have” (1)	Internet	.066	-.057	.035	.027	-.104*
	Social Media	-.016	-.069*	-.023	.005	-.065
	IntSoc	.036	-.059	.005	.023	-.109*

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

Table 4.11 displays the bivariate relationship between Internet and social media use and support for authoritarian regimes and for democracy across age groups. Very few noteworthy correlations appear. Based on the negative correlation for military rule and Internet use, the more Indian respondents use the Internet to read political news, the more likely they are to reject military rule. Similarly, there is a negative correlation between all three independent variables and the rejection of apartheid for coloured respondents. The more time this group spends on the Internet and social media to read political news, the less likely they are to approve of apartheid.

There are weak, negative correlations for black respondents between using the Internet and social media and rejecting one-party rule. This suggests that the more time this group devotes to searching for political news online, the less likely they are to approve of one-party rule, indicating that black South Africans who frequently go online demand more party diversity in a democratic system. Yet, given the weak nature of the correlations, no real inferences can be made and interpretations only rest upon assumptions.

Therefore, there is some support for Hypothesis 8 in terms of race. There is a rejection of apartheid among coloured respondents and rejection of military rule among Indian respondents, who frequently go online. However, there are no other significant correlations that could lead to the conclusion that Internet and social media use increases race groups' support for democracy and lowers support of authoritarian regimes in South Africa.

Table 4.11: Rejection of authoritarian regimes and support for democracy by race

		Black	White	Coloured	Indian
Reject one-party rule “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	Internet	-.044*	-.051	-.042	-.075
	Social Media	-.064*	-.015	-.003	-.016
	IntSoc	-.059**	-.014	-.026	-.064
Reject military rule “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	Internet	-.010	-.080	-.021	-.276**
	Social Media	-.030	-.028	.011	-.101
	IntSoc	-.022	-.066	-.055	-.220*
Reject one-man rule “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	Internet	-.016	-.042	-.049	-.048
	Social Media	-.034	-.037	-.016	.141
	IntSoc	-.020	-.049	-.038	.028
Reject Apartheid “Strongly disapprove” (1); “Disapprove” (2); “Neither approve nor disapprove” (3); “Approve” (4); “Strongly approve” (5)	Internet	-.012	.105	-.136*	.013
	Social Media	.014	.065	-.161**	.171
	IntSoc	.003	.092	-.164**	.076
Support for democracy “Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government” (3) “In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable” (2) “For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have” (1)	Internet	.032	.053	.016	.003
	Social Media	.011	.049	-.080	-.190
	IntSoc	.026	.053	-.031	-.084

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

The analysis of the variables relating to Hypothesis 8 (Internet and social media users are more likely to express a preference for democracy over any other form of government) show overall support for Nisbet's and Stoycheff's (2014) arguments. The more people obtain their political news from online sources, the more they tend to disapprove of authoritarian regimes. This holds mostly for older age groups but there are some noteworthy associations between social media use and a rejection of one-man rule among those aged 18-24. Steenekamp (2017:67) finds that there “appears to have been a value shift” in the country where the “gap between support for democratic rule and authoritarian rule has narrowed”. One could speculate that South Africans still reject any form of authoritarian rule, yet there are few significant findings that suggest that those South Africans who read their news on the Internet, are overly supportive of democracy.

4.4.5 Hypothesis 9: *political behaviour*

Table 4.12 displays the bivariate correlation for measures of political behaviour and Internet and social media use based on age. At first glance, using the Internet and social media to source political news predominantly affects people aged 25-34 and 35-44 and their group membership. There are moderate, positive correlations between Internet, social media and the IntSoc scale for membership of a religious group and membership of a voluntary association or community group. This indicates that the more these groups use the Internet or social media, the more likely they are to be a member of a group.

When it comes to attending a community meeting and joining others to raise an issue, there are negative correlations for 45-54 and 55+-year-olds, suggesting that the more they search for political news online, the less likely they are to do either of those things. Dalton (2014:39) argues that communal activity requires a considerable effort of citizens. As such it seems plausible that older people become less likely to participate in such activities because they might not be as energized or motivated as younger people.

However, there is a positive correlation between Internet and social media use and working for a candidate or party for those aged 55+. This means that the more they use the Internet and social media to obtain political information, the more likely they are to work for a candidate or party. Internet and social media use only show an effect on voting for people aged 45-54. There is a positive correlation between these variables, indicating that the more time this cohort spends online sourcing political information, the more likely they are to vote. Dalton (2014:40) explains that voting “is democracy in action”. Taking into consideration that the 45-54-year-old cohort was between the ages of 20 and 29 during the first South African democratic elections, it is likely that they were a big part of the young resistance generation that called for an end of apartheid in South Africa. Therefore, the act of voting has possibly been deeply entrenched in their political behaviour and increased online exposure might reinforce those sentiments. This aspect, coupled with findings that suggest that middle-aged people have the highest rate of electoral turnout (Dalton, 2014; Gallego, 2007) support the notion that these findings are not due to chance.

Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between the independent variables and contacting the media for those aged 55+, showing that Internet and social media use increases their likelihood to contact the media. The same effects can be observed for the 18-24-year-old cohort and some weak, positive associations for the 24-35, and 35-44-year-old cohorts. There is also

a positive, moderate correlation between Internet and social media use and contacting an official for help for people aged 18-24, also showing that Internet and social media use increases their likelihood of contacting an official. Contacting the media or a politician directly is a form of direct expression of support or opposition. Dalton (2014:49) explains that the introduction of emails has made such acts significantly easier and that “congressional email statistics (...) show a sharp increase in communications from constituents”. Therefore, it is unsurprising to find associations that suggest that increased online exposure tends to lead to an increased likelihood of contacting the media or officials.

Overall, each group is positively affected by Internet and social media use in terms of political behaviour in one way or another. Apart from the 45-54 and 55+ cohorts, who are negatively affected by reading political news online in terms of their likelihood of attending a community meeting and raising an issue, there seem to be some mobilising effects of the Internet and social media use. Therefore, the results show partial support for Hypothesis 9 in terms of age.

Table 4.12: Political behaviour by age

		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Member of religious group “Not a member” (0); “Inactive Member” (1); “Active member” (2); “Official leader” (3)	Internet	.114*	.181**	.120**	.026	-.016
	Social Media	.023	.151**	.133**	.043	-.056
	IntSoc	.082	.182**	.139**	.016	-.015
Member of voluntary association “Not a member” (0); “Inactive Member” (1); “Active member” (2); “Official leader” (3)	Internet	.021	.175**	.115**	-.045	-.018
	Social Media	.057	.155**	.149**	-.045	-.014
	IntSoc	.030	.182**	.134**	-.065	-.025
Attend a community meeting “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.027	-.039	.044	-.080	-.121*
	Social Media	.039	-.058	.033	-.118*	-.091*
	IntSoc	.035	-.048	.035	-.113*	-.118*
Join others to raise an issue “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	-.003	-.055	.024	-.028	-.127**
	Social Media	.072	-.040	.038	-.061	-.137**
	IntSoc	.044	-.047	.032	-.050	-.123*
Attend a campaign rally No” (0); “Yes” (1)	Internet	-.050	.006	.032	-.095*	-.046
	Social Media	-.025	.050	.078*	-.031	-.017
	IntSoc	-.025	.034	.054	-.073	-.044
Attend a campaign meeting No” (0); “Yes” (1)	Internet	-.052	-.028	-.006	-.033	.050
	Social Media	-.017	.010	-.005	-.029	.050
	IntSoc	-.037	-.008	-.009	-.026	.051
Persuade others to vote “No” (0); “Yes” (1)	Internet	-.020	.013	.029	-.033	.054
	Social Media	.012	.005	.029	.016	.040
	IntSoc	-.006	.012	.029	-.024	.054
Work for candidate or party No” (0); “Yes” (1)	Internet	-.040	.019	-.006	.053	.107*
	Social Media	.056	-.009	-.001	.095*	.143**
	IntSoc	-.005	.007	-.006	.069	.112*
	Internet	-.045	-.010	.050	-.011	.009
	Social Media	-.077	.003	.087*	.007	.023

Contact ³³ (Scale) Never (low); Often (high)	IntSoc	-.060	.002	.068	-.008	.006
Voting ³⁴ Voted (1); Did not vote (2)	Internet	-.004	.011	.002	.132**	-.011
	Social Media	.052	.009	-.031	.117*	.014
	IntSoc	.015	.009	-.008	.148**	-.013
Request government action “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.070	.092**	.002	-.012	-.008
	Social Media	.060	-.050	.009	.023	.041
	IntSoc	.078	-.074*	.003	.002	.002
Contact media “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.110*	.053	.033	.077	.141**
	Social Media	.094*	.088*	.108**	.081	.141**
	IntSoc	.112*	.082*	.065	.083	.148**
Contact official for help “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.138**	.044	.057	-.021	.043
	Social Media	.153**	.070*	.106**	.034	.024
	IntSoc	.155**	.063	.071*	-.001	.046
Attend demonstration or protest “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	-.064	-.080*	-.002	.006	.056
	Social Media	-.027	-.020	.023	.057	.102*
	IntSoc	-.034	-.052	.000	.028	.069

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01** level*

Table 4.13 indicates a positive effect of reading political news online on group membership for coloured people, meaning that the more they use the Internet and social media, the more likely they are to be a member of a group. The same effects seem to hold for black respondents to a weaker extent and only social media positively affects Indian membership of religious groups. Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between attending a community meeting and all independent variables for coloured and Indian respondents, and social media use negatively affects the likelihood of white respondents to attend a community meeting.

When it comes to attending a campaign rally, black respondents seem to be positively affected by all three independent variables, however, the correlations are very weak. White respondents are negatively affected by social media use and attending a campaign rally, indicating that the more time they spend on social media to source political information, the less likely they are to attend a campaign rally.

On the one hand, going online seems to increase coloured people’s likelihood of contacting government officials. On the other hand, Internet use decreases Indian people’s likelihood of contacting officials while IntSoc decreases the likelihood of white respondents. Black people appear to be affected the most when it comes to voting. The positive correlations indicate that the more time this race group spends online, the more likely they are to vote, however these

³³ For detailed description of the computation of contact as a scale variable, please see Chapter 3

³⁴ Voting has been recoded from a nominal variable reflecting nine responses into a dichotomous variable. For detailed description, please see Chapter 3.

relationships are weak but significant. Furthermore, reading news on social media seems to increase white people's likelihood of voting while the same appears to be true for Indians and reading political news on the Internet.

The next striking finding that can be taken away from the table is that Internet and social media use show a moderate correlation between citizen action for white people. The more white respondents read political news on the Internet and social media, the more likely they are to request government action, to contact the media, to contact an official for help and to attend a demonstration or protest march. Similar effects apply to Indian respondents with partially strong, highly significant correlations. Internet and social media use also positively affects coloured people's likelihood of doing either of those things, except attending a demonstration or protest march. For black people, on the other hand, there are only weak correlations, yet they are highly significant.

In comparison to all other race groups, Indian people appear to be especially affected by Internet and social media to obtain political news. This mostly applies to requesting government action, contacting the media and contacting an official for help. This might be related to their higher levels of education relative to black and coloured people for example. However, more research will have to be conducted to determine the full extent of this relationship.

Apart from white people, who are less likely to attend a community and campaign meeting the more they read political news online, Internet and social media use for political news appears to have a strong mobilising effect on other race groups. This includes group membership, attending community and campaign meetings and rallies, contacting incumbents about an issue, voting, requesting government action, contacting the media and contacting officials for help, and attending a demonstration or protest march. Therefore, when it comes to race, there is overall strong support for Hypothesis 9.

Table 4.13: Political behaviour by race

		Black	White	Coloured	Indian
Member of religious group "Not a member" (0); "Inactive Member" (1); "Active member" (2); "Official leader" (3)	Internet	.108*	-.045	.268**	.141
	Social Media	.063**	-.035	.231**	.209*
	IntSoc	.091**	-.038	.261**	.197*
Member of voluntary association "Not a member" (0); "Inactive Member" (1); "Active member" (2); "Official leader" (3)	Internet	.081**	.099	.254**	-.071
	Social Media	.081**	-.049	.253**	.016
	IntSoc	.081**	-.004	.258**	-.043

Attend a community meeting “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.023	.009	.175**	.234*
	Social Media	-.021	-.127*	.208**	.195*
	IntSoc	.000	-.082	.192**	.260**
Join others to raise an issue “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	-.005	-.023	.208**	.202*
	Social Media	-.023	.005	.226**	.097
	IntSoc	-.013	-.007	.220**	.193*
Attend a campaign rally No” (0); “Yes” (1)	Internet	.041*	.031	.068	.152
	Social Media	.062**	.019	.122*	.174
	IntSoc	.057**	.016	.091	.164
Attend a campaign meeting No” (0); “Yes” (1)	Internet	.018	-.049	.040	.014
	Social Media	.026	-.198**	.083	.057
	IntSoc	.029	-.165**	.058	.031
Persuade others to vote “No” (0); “Yes” (1)	Internet	.043*	-.020	.001	.000
	Social Media	.039	-.094	.015	.000
	IntSoc	.043*	-.093	.002	.000
Work for candidate or party No” (0); “Yes” (1)	Internet	.037	.042	.062	.000
	Social Media	.038	-.040	.073	.000
	IntSoc	.040*	-.033	.065	.000
Contact ³⁵ (Scale) Never (low); Often (high)	Internet	.040*	-.096	.193**	-.208*
	Social Media	.011	-.082	.266**	-.082
	IntSoc	.031	-.127*	.233**	-.167
Voting ³⁶ Voted (1); Did not vote (2)	Internet	-.085*	-.010	.004	-.211*
	Social Media	-.108**	-.118*	-.042	-.057
	IntSoc	-.105**	.049	.024	-.144
Request government action “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.015	.171**	.188**	.384**
	Social Media	.003	.193**	.174**	.287**
	IntSoc	.012	.183**	.182**	.382**
Contact media “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.088**	.145*	.197**	.477**
	Social Media	.109**	.166**	.204**	.330**
	IntSoc	.102**	.173**	.217**	.474**
Contact official for help “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.042*	.164**	.202**	.333**
	Social Media	.042*	.155*	.273**	.217*
	IntSoc	.038	.145*	.245**	.328**
Attend demonstration or protest “Would never do this” (0); “Would if had the chance” (1); “Once or twice” (2); “Several times” (3); “Often” (4)	Internet	.061**	.160*	.058	.196*
	Social Media	.083**	.257**	.075	.076
	IntSoc	.075**	.238**	.064	.188*

Correlation is significant at the 0.05* and 0.01** level

Jensen (2013:250) believes that group formations and group mobilisations online hold great potential because theoretically, “every person or group can advocate their opinions or ideas to a potentially unlimited audience”. Schlozman *et al.* (2010:490) agree by claiming that the Internet reduces “almost to zero the additional costs of seeking to organize” groups, no matter their nature (e.g. political, religious, scientific,). This does not only include online groups but also offline groups. An Internet user who seeks to join a community or group of their interest

³⁵ For detailed description of the computation of contact as a scale variable, please see Chapter 3

³⁶ Voting has been recoded into a dichotomous variable. For detailed description, please see Chapter 3.

can simply search for related information online and be presented with a wide array of possible options that would fit their interest. Many organisations post their information and contact details online by creating their own websites, thereby allowing potential new members to locate and contact them easily. This study finds support for these claims. People who go online more frequently, tend to be more involved in religious groups or voluntary associations and are more likely to attend community meetings. This could be because the ease of accessing information that relates to such activities is made significantly easier through the Internet.

Bosch (2010:270) points out that networking sites such as Facebook are increasingly being used to recruit members. *Amandla! People's Media's* Facebook group, for example, directs members to “its print publications, radio and TV items and events” while the *Social Justice Coalition* Facebook group raises awareness by inviting online members to events and addresses issues around which their campaigns run. In a different study, Bosch (2013:127) shows that a number of focus group participants in her study use Facebook to “engage with religious interest groups” and that “religion often became a proxy for a sense of community and civic identity”. Her findings receive support in this study as well, particularly regarding the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups and coloured respondents.

When it comes to certain political activities, many scholars have found that online and offline forms of participation or engagement complement each other or even have equivalents. Anduiza *et al.* (2009:862) for example, find that contacting government officials or the media, can be done through many mediums, ranging from telephone, letter, or email, the latter of which presents itself with the lowest cost or effort (see also Tolbert & McNeal, 2010; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010). In this research study, there are some significant associations and correlations between contacting officials and the media, showing that Internet and social media users are more likely to do so than non-users. Therefore, one could assume that Internet and social media users take advantage of these mediums by tweeting at or emailing news agencies or politicians.

Similar trends hold true for citizen mobilisation online; Kim (2006:40) finds that the rise of the Internet coincided with a rise of demonstrations and protest activities in South Korea. This trend can be attributed to the new opportunities provided to citizen empowerment through the web. The perhaps most popular example that highlights the relationship between social media and protests is the Arab uprising in late 2010. Tufekci and Wilson (2012:369) find that people who participated in the protests, mostly learned about it through a “certain type of media use”

and that social media use significantly increased their likelihood of attending protests. More recent cases highlight the power of the Internet and social media to mobilise. These examples include Sudan, which blocked social media “amid growing calls for its long-time president to step down” (News24, 2010), and Zimbabwe and the DRC which cut the Internet connection in their countries in response to civilian unrest related to political dissatisfaction. In the South African context, this study finds support for the relationship between Internet and social media use and attending a demonstration or protest, especially among students who mobilised online to protest an increase in student fees and to advocate for the removal of Afrikaans as a tuition language at the Stellenbosch University. Therefore, the findings regarding the positive correlation between social media use and participating in a demonstration or protest march and joining others to raise an issue, represent plausible outcomes that are reflected in past events and the existing literature.

Exploring within-group differences for different age and race groups reveals some significant results. The 55+ age group seems to consistently show significant correlations, indicating that the strongest relationships between online news consumption and political attitudes are the strongest for this cohort. Indian and coloured respondents also show the strongest correlations compared to other race groups. It was expected that this would hold for white and Indian respondents, considering that these groups are the most likely to have access to the Internet, based on the digital divide in South Africa. Nevertheless, the findings presented above allow to answer Research Question 3 - *Are there measurable differences between Internet and social media users versus non-users in terms of their political attitudes and behaviour based on age and race?* - with yes, there are statistically significant differences. However, given the low penetration rate of the Internet in South Africa compared to more advanced democracies, these relationships are weak to moderate in strength. Future studies may show stronger effects for Internet and social media use for political news on South Africans.

4.5 Summary of findings

This section summarises the findings of the quantitative analysis which examine significant correlations between political attitudes and behaviour and using the Internet and social media to source political news.

4.5.1 *Demographic findings*

There are two main observations. One, although young people are the most likely to use the Internet and social media, they are the least likely to be influenced by them. Two, although white people are more likely to use the Internet or social media every day, they seem to be least affected by them. Internet and social media users tend to be

- Younger
- More educated
- White and Indian and
- Live in urban areas

4.5.2 *Political attitudes and values*

- Internet and social media seem to increase interest in public affairs and the likelihood of discussing politics especially among 25-34, 35-44 and 55+-year olds as well as black, coloured and Indian respondents.
- There are positive, weak correlations between Internet and social media use and support for gender equality in terms of leadership among 18-24-year olds.
- The more time they spend online reading political news, the more 55+-year olds and Indian respondents tend to disagree that the government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.
- Indian respondents also believe that the media should have the right to publish any views without government control the more they read political news online.
- Overall, Indian respondents appear to be the most positively affected by Internet and social media use when it comes to emancipative values.
- Increased use of the Internet and social media appears to erode trust in politicians and increase perceptions of corruption, and especially among 18-24-year olds. This also holds for black respondents.
- Internet and social media use negatively affects levels of trust for those aged 55+ and it increases the likelihood of 25-34-year olds to believe that officials and institutions are involved in corruption.
- The more time white respondents spend browsing the Internet and social media for political news, the more likely they are to believe that South Africa is a full democracy;

yet the more time Indian respondents spend on the Internet, the less likely they are to believe that South Africa is a full democracy.

- Internet and social media use increase the likelihood of 45-54- and 55+-year olds to reject one-party rule and apartheid.
- The more time Indian and coloured respondents spend on the Internet and social media, the more likely they are to disapprove of military rule and apartheid, respectively.

4.5.3 Political behaviour

- There is an association between Internet and social media use and the likelihood of those aged 25-34 and 35-44 to be a member of a religious group or voluntary association.
- This also holds for coloured and Indian respondents. They are also more likely to attend a community meeting and join others to raise an issue.
- Internet and social media use appear to increase the likelihood of those age 55 and above to work for a candidate or party and it also increases the likelihood of those aged 45-54 to vote.
- Increased Internet use appears to increase coloured respondents likelihood to contact an official or institution and black, white and Indian respondents appear to become more likely to vote the more time they spend online reading political news.
- All race groups appear to become more likely to request government action and contacting the media or contacting an official for help. This correlation is especially strong for Indian respondents relative to all other race groups.
- Internet and social media use also appears to positively affect 18-24-year olds in terms of contacting the media and officials; this also applies to those aged 55 and above in terms of contacting the media.
- Lastly, white respondents appear to be affected the most when it comes to Internet and social media use and their likelihood of attending a demonstration or protest. Indian respondents also seem to be positively affected.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter provides an analysis of the various associations between using the Internet and social media to source political information and political attitudes and behaviour. This study finds mixed results in terms of support for the mobilisation and reinforcement theses and agrees

with Stanley and Weare (2004:506) that the two are not mutually exclusive and therefore “pose a false dichotomy”. While it is true that the Internet may at times strengthen existing inequalities through limited access of some population groups, it can also be used as a tool for empowerment by disenfranchised groups who experience mobilising effects. The evidence in this research study suggests that while younger, white and more educated people tend to use the Internet for political news more frequently than black, coloured and less educated people, the latter show stronger correlations that suggest that these groups are more likely to be positively affected by Internet use for political news. Therefore, future research should focus on a broader research methodology.

However, the results do not indicate what causes these associations and they also do not indicate the causal direction of the relationships. For example, does Internet and social media use increase the likelihood of people to be interested in public affairs or are those who are interested in public affairs more likely to read their political news online? It is quite possible that these findings reflect arguments raised by Stanley and Weare (2004:521) that many people who are already politically active, are attracted to new opportunities to broaden their intake of information. Therefore, the results are descriptive but are limited in their explanatory power.

The researcher is aware that applying a multiple regression model to the data would have provided further useful insight into the relationship between the given variables. However, this would have required the creation of scale variables to meet one of several assumptions of multiple regression analysis and due to page length limitations, this could not be performed. Future research exploring the relationship between Internet use for political news consumption and political values, attitudes and behaviour for South Africans might find it useful to perform more advanced statistical tests. For the time being, the outcome of this study suggests that there are some significant correlations between Internet and social media use for political news and political attitudes and behaviour of South Africans that deserve further exploration. In time, as Internet access in South Africa grows, these correlations might grow stronger, providing further justification for exploring the Internet’s impact on South Africans’ political attitudes and behaviour.

Chapter 5: Qualitative Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the focus group discussion that served as an additional source of data for the overall study. First, the benefits of focus groups to the research study are laid out and why a focus group is considered to be a suitable additional methodology to explore the research question. Thereafter, the focus group procedure is outlined, which involves the discussion procedure as well as the transcription process. The main section deals with the overall findings of the focus group discussion and is structured according to the most prominent themes that arose during the discussion. The prominent themes include 1) the use of social media and the Internet as a source of political information, 2) social media, trust and perceptions of politicians, 3) social media, democracy and selective exposure and 4) social media and online hierarchies. Finally, the chapter concludes by summarizing findings.

5.2 Transcription

The first step that needs to be taken in the analysis of focus group discussions is the transcription. During this process, video or tape recordings are replayed and each respondent's contribution is written out in full. During this process, it is possible that the transcriber may have to pick up "incomplete sentences, half-finished thoughts, parts of words, odd phrases" and other features that come through face to face discussions (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007:111). While it may be quite easy for someone listening to understand these incomplete phrases or thoughts, they can be difficult to follow once written out. Some editing might be required to fill gaps in the spoken word however, it is important that the essence of respondents' comments remain.

While transcripts reflect the content of the discussion, they may at times fail to convey the character of the discussion; that is the tone of respondents, nonverbal communication, and gestures that can significantly alter the entire message of a statement and therefore its interpretation. For this reason, the moderator may add further observational data to the transcript such as non-verbal cues that might give further insight to the interpretation of the message (Stewart, *et al.*, 2007:111).

The transcription of the focus group discussion for this research also required some alterations and editing. This included grammar, incomplete sentences and odd wording. It should be noted that these alterations were simply made for the purpose of an improved reading experience and

a high value was placed on ensuring that the meaning and essence of a contribution did not get lost in the process of editing it.

Due to the distinct dynamic of each focus group discussion, participants may find certain topics more appealing or more interesting than other topics. In some cases, a participant may bring up an entirely new point of view that the moderator wants to know more about and encourage people to elaborate on that view. For this reason, the moderator may wish to terminate some topics or expand others or even introduce completely new questions that fit the overall discussion (Stewart, *et al.*, 2007:113). This was the case in this study's focus groups as well. Although close attention was paid to follow the overall guiding questions, there were some variations to adapt to comments some participants made. In some cases, respondents were asked to elaborate on some of the points they have raised which encouraged other participants to add comments. Litosseliti (2003:92) notes that throughout the analysis and transcription process, certain trends and patterns arise. While the researcher may ask specific questions, participants tend to fall back on previous comments or bring up reoccurring themes that are important to them. While the group discussion closely followed a given set of questions, one building upon another, the findings are mostly guided by general themes that arose during the discussion.

5.5 Findings

The questions that were asked during the discussion were based on the quantitative findings of this research. The most significant findings outlined in Chapter 4 related to young people's use of the Internet and social media to source political news. Therefore, focus group questions probed what makes online news so appealing to young people. Furthermore, significant correlations between Internet use and levels of trust and perceptions of corruption were found. Hence, more investigation is required to determine why social media and the Internet lowers young people's trust in politicians and institutions. Additionally, there were some significant correlations relating the rejection of authoritarian regimes, suggesting that this cohort supports democratic rule and the discussion probed their opinions relating to the beneficial (or detrimental) influence of the Internet and social media on democracy. In the same vein, some respondents brought up the issue of selective exposure, something that cannot be measured through quantitative methods, which gave some useful insight into the content this cohort exposes itself to online.

5.5.1 Social media and the Internet as a source of political news

When asked where they primarily get their political news from, all participants agreed that their primary source is social media. A probing question was asked about why participants prefer online news media over conventional news sources, Thoko* said,

“I think online is better because when things pop up you go ahead and read it. But in my free time, I won’t go and turn on the radio.”

Other participants also remarked that they prefer the Internet and social media to find political news because they feel less controlled and politically aligned. This has to do with the fact that participants believed that news that are covered in conventional sources such as the newspaper, radio or television, need to undergo a screening process by government institutions which decide whether these news are appropriate for publication. Although some government control over news publication is required to avoid partisan bias and hateful messages, this, in turn, leads to their belief that political news covered in newspapers or television are biased and do not present all relevant details.

Yet, participants seemed to be aware of the dangers that online news articles pose. Some pointed out that fake news is a real threat that one needs to be aware of. Others claimed to make active attempts at debunking certain information that is shared online. On the other hand, some participants asserted that they used mobile news apps such as News24, Eyewitness News or BBC News. However, they also said that they mostly just looked at the first few headlines of notifications on their devices and only read articles that sparked real interest. Therefore, a lot of important political information may go unnoticed to readers if the headlines do not speak to them. Others mentioned the diversity of information online. In relation to comparing online news and conventional news obtained through radio or television, Lucas*, for example, finds that

“... you cannot really control what you are hoping to learn. You know if you google something you can get straight to the point. If I want to know about a certain issue I’m not just going to sit and wait until it pops up on TV or the radio.”

Social media also seems to be a tool for participants to inform themselves about politicians and parties. Masego* pointed out that it is much easier to go on someone’s Twitter account and read up on their policies, rather than spending too much time going on their website and reading their manifesto. Therefore, social media seems to be used as a time-efficient, easy to navigate tool to source information. Chris* said that,

“I personally don’t just go on google to find out something about someone; I tend to go on social media to get informed. For example, with political parties, you can usually see immediately what they stand for. I prefer that over reading long manifestos on their websites.”

Most political parties and candidates who have a social media account inform their followers about what they stand for and what their ideals and objectives are. Therefore, it appears that focus group participants prefer to use politically related social media accounts as a shortcut to get informed as opposed to reading long manifestos. Even though this might appear to be an effective and time-efficient method to get informed, there may be some negative implications associated with this.

One implication is that simple Twitter posts only allow a text to be 280 characters long. Therefore, posts are extremely simplified and often cannot bring across an entire message. Furthermore, most party social media accounts only provide a brief snapshot of what they stand for and what their agendas are. Information about parties or incumbents may be lost or even misinterpreted by readers. Although party manifestos, constitutions or agendas can span several pages, they do not only provide a snapshot of those parties but often go into depth about how certain changes, policies or agendas are to be achieved, an integral part of what constitutes politics.

This finding also supports the claim that voters are “cognitive misers” who search for “informational cues and mental shortcuts” in order to reach a voting decision (Gunther, Beck & Nisbet, 2019:1). In-so-doing, voters tend to pay more attention and are also more likely to be influenced by negative information as opposed to positive information (see also Lau, 1982; Zaller, 1992; Redlawsk, 2004).

5.5.2 Social media, trust, and politicians

A general reoccurring theme throughout the discussion was the relationship between social media and politicians’ images. Participants placed a high value on politicians’ integrity based on their social lives. When asked whether the Internet and social media have made them more critical and distrusting of politicians, there was a general agreement among participants. Grace* found that there has always been distrust toward politicians in the past, however, the rise of social media has amplified that distrust and now reassures her to “be right to distrust them”. Ruvimbo* mentioned that even though an official might have done something wrong that could cloud her perceptions, she still believes that “the basic quality of honesty should be there”.

When an incumbent has done “something wrong”, she believes that “their being honest about it instead of denying the obvious”, heightens her perception of them.

Furthermore, the integrity and honesty of politicians appeared to be a determining factor for respondents when it came to supporting them and whether they would be seen as fit for office.

James* pointed out that

“If you are able to hurt the people closest to you, I don’t expect you to have compassion or empathy for the people as a whole. So, your character in your personal life shows me what you are capable of and your ability to look after the population. Because I don’t want someone that is vindictive. If they are going to be in power, they are going to have to be close to perfect if I am going to trust them at all.”

There also seems to be some sense of immediacy when it comes to politicians and their performance. Although most participants agreed that most if not all politicians are corrupt and not trustworthy, there was some value placed on their competence and their ability to perform well in office. Olivia* for example, said that

“In politics, we are never going to find anyone that is perfect, so we choose the better devil. So, I think it is based on who is going to give me what I need the quickest or who is nearer to bringing me closer to the goal that I want to achieve for my country and myself as well.”

This indicates that there is a need for immediacy of achieving goals in order for participants to support incumbents. Whoever can bring the desired change the fastest is seen as fit for office. Others such as Mary* believed that people place too much value on politicians’ personal life than their ability to run the country.

“Looking at a politician’s personal life seems to shape people’s opinions on him dramatically when he’s a cheater or a sexist. And to me that doesn’t mean that he is a bad politician. I mean, what does his personal life have to do with his job? I just think that people focus too much on these things instead of on what he is meant to do which is run the country.”

Yet, despite social media’s ability to uncover cases of corruption and misbehaviour of politicians, Hannah* felt like it has also empowered politicians and took away power from traditional, reputable news media. She said that,

“It’s interesting how it allows them to control the narrative. For example, when a news story breaks on a Thursday and the paper only comes out on a Sunday, they can tweak the information before you can even form an opinion before there is even news cover it.”

Indeed, many politicians are often quick to resort to social media to make their stances known to the public. Political figures such as US President Donald Trump, EFF leader Julius Malema or ANC leader and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa are known to update their Twitter statuses on a regular basis to provide a direct link to the general population. However, this

statement somewhat contradicts previous statements about conventional news being controlled and “politically aligned”. Statements made by politicians online are bound to be politically aligned and to follow an agenda of gaining more support. Therefore, it appears that participants seem to think that any form of news or political information they come across are in some way controlled and do not provide all necessary details.

An interesting point raised by Thoko* was that the constant posting of information online and “all that noise” make her “not want to vote anymore”. Upon this, a probing question was asked, “do you believe that social media has the potential to dissuade you from voting?”. Most participants agreed and said that they thought that it “has the potential for that”. Njabulo* summarised it quite clearly,

“You see all these political parties and politicians posting online, one flaming the other and saying how bad they all are. And at the same time, I just think to myself that none are better than the other. They are all corrupt and dishonest in one way or another. So, who am I going to vote for? I feel like sometimes there isn’t even a real choice.”

Masego* added to the aspect of social media and politics that,

“It is not a one-way street. Of course, you have that aspect of increased level of sharing of ideas. But I think it is a tool that can inhibit a desire to be politically active due to the nature in which politics is discussed and conducted.”

These findings suggest some support for the media malaise theory which states that coverage of politics as “horse-race” can lead to lower levels of trust and cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Robinson, 1997; Heywood, 2013:185). Indeed, participants did display low levels of trust and cynicism toward politicians and politics as a whole. The findings support the quantitative findings of the study where particularly respondents aged 18-24-years old had low levels of trust in politicians and institutions and believed that most of them are involved in corruption.

The results of the focus group discussion make it difficult to determine whether conventional news such as newspaper or radio or new media such as online news make participants more distrustful and critical. On the one hand, participants believed conventional news to be controlled and on the other, they closely monitor incumbents’ online behaviour which also appears to make them less trusting. It appears that regardless of the source which covers political news, focus group participants naturally hold negative attitudes toward incumbents and regular coverage on cases of corruption or even personal scandals reinforce their beliefs that politicians are not to be trusted.

5.5.3 *Social media, democracy and selective exposure*

A central theme to the discussion was the relationship between social media and democracy. When asked whether participants believed that social media and the Internet have the potential to improve democracy, Tendani* said,

“I definitely think so. I think social media creates a space for people to have easy access to knowledge but also engage with it and form their own opinions. It creates a platform of accountability, for example, if something starts to trend on Twitter and maybe that politician who is involved can be held accountable.”

Some felt like the potential of social media is that it creates exposure and therefore increases political involvement. For example, seeing a party’s agenda on their social media account provides them with immediate knowledge about that party which they can in turn use to inform and influence family and peers about voting choices.

Yet, others believed that social media can give a “false representation of how politically involved someone is”. Because of the ease of sharing information on such platforms, there might be an overestimation of the political involvement of users. James* finds that social media can be more polarising in some respects. He justifies this by claiming that,

“(…) if we think about how algorithms dictate what we get to see and the opinions we see. So, you get a perception that everyone is kind of the same but due to these algorithms, we do not necessarily get to see many other aspects.”

The group discussions also suggested that most participants are subject to selective exposure and online echo chambers. When asked whether they sometimes expose themselves to content online that does not reflect or complement their own beliefs and opinions, participants generally admitted that they primarily follow content that reflects their own beliefs. Raïsa* mentioned that while she does find herself unfollowing people that do not share her own views, she knows that she is not exposing herself to different points of views.

“I think the world is better when you just hear the news you want to hear. When I look at Facebook news that I don’t want to hear I get angry and I get frustrated, so I find myself deleting my Facebook friends that I don’t agree with. And now I think to myself don’t do it; you have to be exposed to it. And you see it on Twitter as well. Do I follow people I don’t agree with? No! And I think a lot of people feel the same way, especially when they are not taught to think critically.”

On the other hand, some participants felt like there is no way around seeing content online that they do not support or do not agree with. Because they are connected to so many people, they are bound to be exposed to opinions that are not their own. Furthermore, participants also seem to follow politicians on Twitter, not for the sake of support but rather amusement and

entertainment. One participant admitted to following US President Trump because he “sounds like a little boy throwing a tantrum” which is sometimes “quite entertaining”. Hannah* said that when it comes to South African politics, she tries to follow all relevant parties not because she likes or supports them, but because she wants to see what they have to say. She added,

“What I find in South Africa is that there are a lot of fear-inducing pages that are really racist that create this conversation that South Africa has a genocide. Now I am wary of people who come into my space and like this stuff. For example, if I see someone that I feel neutral about post something that I do not agree with, my perception of that person tends to change completely, and I start to dislike them and unfollow them.”

Therefore, there is reason to assume that participants tend to expose themselves to reinforcing social environments that agree with their point of views. Davis (2017:280) explains that the reason for residing in echo chambers is because agreeing with someone else and have that person agree with us, is a satisfying experience and thereby prevents people from critically assessing the things they see online. As referred to in Chapter 2, this “groupthink” can eventually lead to a “sense of tribalism” and identity politics and therefore all “social reinforcement” works in favour of our already existing attitudes and beliefs (Davis, 2017:149). Therefore, finding that most participants do not expose themselves to opposing viewpoints may have negative implications in the sense that identity and group politics might be strengthened by social media. Yet, generalisations about the entire population cannot be based on these findings because they were sourced from a small sample of young people.

5.5.4 Social media and online hierarchies

The final question “what is your most favourite and least favourite thing about social media” which was intended to conclude the topic, brought up a range of new avenues to explore. Initially, respondents only gave short ended questions such as “It’s endless”, “It’s fast and it allows me to stay informed and connected with my friends” and “I love the videos”. However, Raïsa’s* comment sparked off a new conversation.

“The fact that much of the internet is uncensored. If someone tweets something they have just witnessed, then I get that raw information instead of waiting for the filtered coverage by newspapers.”

Upon this, several participants responded that it also depends on who provides that raw material. Lucas* said that

“It really depends on who is posting updates on Twitter for example, because you see that some people really dominate the Twittersphere and have different agendas and intentions.”

When asked to elaborate, he continued that there are different factions on Twitter.

“You have all these different kinds of Twitter sections. You get black Twitter, feminist Twitter, right Twitter, left Twitter, trans Twitter, music Twitter, or political Twitter. And each section has some sort of thought leaders that dictate what the new trend is that everyone should follow.”

Thinking back to previous arguments in the literature which stated that online, the content creator and the content consumer “merge” in the absence of hierarchies (Yildiz, 2002), a probing question was asked. “So, would you say that there is some sort of hierarchy on social media where, whenever an online influencer ‘calls the shots’, everyone follows?”. This sparked overall agreement in the room with participants nodding, murmuring and responding with “yes, definitely”. Ruvimbo* added,

“I think that is one of my least favourite things on social media. I mean everyone has different interests and ideas and beliefs so everyone has a different kind of attitude to certain things. But it feels like sometimes things are brought up that are not in your immediate interest and if you don’t jump on that bandwagon, you can be singled out. I mean it’s easier to point fingers at someone online than in person and it’s easier to start a fight or argument in the comment section. So, it can get really toxic really quickly if you don’t know how to distance yourself from certain topics that are sensitive.”

It appears that Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) spiral of silence theory finds support in contemporary online deliberation in the context of this research study. This theory suggests that people form their attitudes based on the information that they are exposed to through interpersonal interactions and media coverage. If individuals perceive their attitudes and beliefs to be dominant within a society, they are more likely to express them publicly. On the other hand, if they perceive the opposite to be true, they tend to “censor themselves in order to avoid social sanctions and isolation”. The overrepresentation of some groups may subsequently lead to a misinterpretation of an “opinion climate, which reinforces the silence of opinion groups that seem to be the minority” (Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2015:185). Based on the statements of the focus group participants, it appears that some respondents are experiencing a kind of love-hate relationship with social media. On the one hand, social media allows for immediate consumption of information, news and updates and on the other, there are certain trends that need to be followed online in order to maintain one’s status. Njabulo* added, “I think we have to make a distinction here based on who people are and what is an opinion. Because there is bigotry and then there is an opinion.” When asked to elaborate, he continued,

“Well, I really think it depends on who those so-called influencers are because some of them have valid opinions and others have somehow made it to the top of social media with millions of followers who are susceptible to any kind of news they see online. Doesn’t matter if it is backed by evidence or not. So, I think it is becoming increasingly important to maintain a critical approach to everything you see online because with the spread of fake news you can’t take anything at face value anymore.”

This leads to the assumption that some participants are wary of the content they see online and how they let it affect their values and attitudes. It is indeed a positive finding considering the spread of fake news online and hateful speech that is prevalent in chat rooms and comment sections. Yet, it must be kept in mind that this caution of online content might only be limited to educated individuals who have acquired critical thinking skills. The almost endless capacity of online information naturally takes on positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, the Internet facilitates the spread of information and allows its users to inform themselves on important topics. On the other hand, there is a vast amount of hate speech and false information that seeks to create divisions within society and lead to conflict.

5.6 Summary of findings

The findings of the focus group discussion lend some support the quantitative findings of this research study. Although no generalisations can be made concerning the entire population, some notable similarities can be highlighted

- Focus group participants prefer to obtain their political news from social media. Some of them use the Internet to verify information that they come across on Twitter or Facebook, however, they are more likely to resort to being informed on social networking sites.
- Some participants make use of news apps for political news, however only to the extent that they browse through the headlines and only read those articles that spark real interest.
- The reason why online political news is preferred over conventional news sources is because the Internet allows them to search for any information about which they wish to find out more.
- It appears that social media and online political news has made participants more critical and distrustful of politicians. They seem to believe that social media gives them a justification for being distrustful of them because incumbents are exposed more easily.
- If incumbents are seen as unlikeable or have a negative personal history, participants are less likely to support them. While some respondents agreed to this statement, others expressed that their personal life does not matter to them if they do their job right. However, this only seemed to be a minority.

- The sheer amount online and the partial negative content relating to politicians and political parties seem to discourage some respondents from voting.
- Participants generally believe that the Internet and social media have the potential to improve democracy by providing more information to the public but are also wary of the information they see online.
- Participants seem to be subject to selective exposure, where they prefer to only expose themselves to information, ideas and beliefs that resonate with their own. The personal image of someone else also seems to be easily influenced by the way they conduct themselves online.
- Some respondents appear to have a love-hate relationship with the Internet. On the one hand, they enjoy many aspects of social media and the Internet. On the other, they dislike the fact that some thought leaders dictate what is trending.

5.8 Conclusion

The focus group discussion served to enrich the outcome of the overall study in several aspects. It offered insights into why young people tend to prefer online political news over conventional news. The primary reason is that the content is not restricted, and participants can read up on anything that they wish to know more about. Furthermore, social media appears to have made participants more distrustful of politicians because it exposes political scandals more quickly and therefore adds to and enforces the reservoir of existing negative opinions about them. Furthermore, incumbents' personal life seems to be of high importance to participants, due to the belief that if someone does not treat those around him or her well, then they might not treat citizens well either. There is a consensus that the Internet and social media have the potential to improve democracy and democratic outcomes through transparency and accountability that access to information provides. However, at the same time, participants appear to be prone to selective exposure which has the potential to enhance identity politics and alienation from different points of view, an aspect that can have a detrimental impact on democracy. Lastly, participants seem to have mixed views about social media. On the one hand, they enjoy the possibilities it offers and on the other, they dislike its polarising properties and the need to follow online influencers.

Future research needs to be conducted in order to find out more about aspects of trust, selective exposure and online hierarchies to determine the exact impact they might have on young

people. However, it is believed that the discussion above marks an important first step in the South African context by providing researchers with relevant topics for future investigation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the research study by summarising the findings and possible consequences and implications. First, this chapter provides a brief summary of the statistical outcomes and potential implications thereof. Thereafter, it builds on the findings of the quantitative evidence and compares them to the results of the focus group discussion. It finally concludes with a list of shortcomings of this research study and recommendations for future research.

6.2 Quantitative findings and implications

6.2.1 Demographic findings

Chapter 4 explores associations between Internet and social media use for obtaining political news and political attitudes and behaviour. It begins with examining correlations between Internet and social media use and demographic variables. The findings indicate strong correlations between Internet use and education and age of respondent, suggesting that younger and more educated people are more likely to use the web to obtain political news than older and less educated respondents. The same findings hold for the race of the respondent; white and Indian respondents appear to be more likely to use the Internet and social media to source political news than coloured or black respondents. This indicates that in South Africa, much like other advanced industrial societies, a digital divide exists that runs across age, education and race.

As pointed out previously, (Swigger, 2012:590) argues that virtual relationships have the potential of altering “the way an individual responds to community and social life”, as online socialisation creates a dynamic different from those of traditional agents of socialisation. The higher Internet use of young people suggests that this cohort is subject to different kinds of information than older people, given the broad scope of available news and data online. This means that their opinions and views are likely to be shaped in a way that differs to that of older counterparts. Considering traditional agents of socialisation that consist of interpersonal, institutional and mass media sources of political learning (Mannheim, 1982), young people might experience socialisation processes differently. Given that one can communicate with a range of people online that one does not necessarily have to know personally, new modes of interpersonal sources of political learning arise. Young people’s political opinions and beliefs

may be shaped in a new way that social scientists have yet to explore. While institutional learning might not change severely, mass media learning is likely to take on new dimensions for young people. Given that old media (television, radio and newspapers) only present a “one-to-many way of communication”, new media present a “many-to-many way of communication” (Mounk, 2019:182). Therefore, online mass media and its interactive nature ought to be studied in more detail to determine the way in which they potentially shape citizens’ public opinions.

The suggestion of a digital divide that runs across education and race implies that South Africa’s severe inequalities also transcend to access to information and technological know-how. Castells’ (1998) argument about the formation of the information society and information revolution and the differing benefits and disadvantages, finds support in this study. Those advantages are increased access to information that provides greater inclusion in society and politics, while the disadvantages are that existing societal divisions will be heightened. This study presents some evidence that there are already growing divisions between those who have high levels of access – white, Indian people with higher levels of education – and those who do not – coloured and black people with lower levels of education. Therefore, this study finds support for the reinforcement thesis where existing inequalities of power and wealth are deepened. Given that politics is increasingly moving online, where officials monitor opinions based on comments by citizens, some South Africans may be left out in the process, generating inconsistencies relating to public opinion due to the inability of some people being unable to voice their opinions and concerns online.

Fortunately, this study found little evidence of gender-based access inequalities. Although correlations in terms of access for men are slightly stronger than for women, overall gender correlations are weak. This finding also applies to people who live in rural and urban areas. While urban respondents are only slightly more likely to use the Internet for political news, there are fluctuations between urban and rural users and accessing social media for political news. This substantiates Bosch and Mutsvairo’s (2017:74) concern that rural dwellers have lower access but it may not be as stark as initially thought. Yet, there is still evidence to suggest that urban dwellers still reap the benefits of broadband access to a higher degree than rural dwellers.

6.2.1 Political attitudes

Research Question 2 asked whether there are measurable differences between Internet and social media users versus non-users in terms of their political attitudes and behaviour. The correlations between Internet and social media use for political news and the independent variables were rather weak and did not provide conclusive results. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that Internet and social media use for political news consumption increases respondents' internal political efficacy. The more they read their political news online, the more likely they become to be interested in public affairs and to discuss politics. Above all, Internet and social media use for political news bear positive implications for the political efficacy of black, coloured and Indian people. Even though these groups are the least likely to retrieve their political news from the Internet and social media, they are the most likely to be positively affected, providing further support for the mobilisation theory.

These findings lend some support for the mobilisation thesis. However, increased use of social media and the Internet to source political news appears to decrease users' trust in officials and increases their perception that most of them are involved in corruption. Therefore, it could be argued that online political news makes participants more critical. On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest that reading political news online makes participants more likely to be part of a religious group and voluntary association. It also increases their likelihood to vote and to contact the media about an issue. However, Research Question 3 and the methodology employed to measure within-group associations were more telling.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that people who frequently use the Internet and social media are more likely to discuss and be interested in politics. Exploring correlations across age groups showed that people starting at the age of 25 are more likely to discuss and be interested in politics the more they browse the Internet and social media to read political news. These findings can likely be attributed to life-cycle effects that assume maturational processes. The older a person grows and the more that person establishes their role in society, the more likely they are to show an interest in politics (Abrahamson, 1979). Therefore, the findings imply a positive impact of the Internet and social media on internal efficacy, providing support for the mobilisation theory.

The findings in relation to Hypothesis 6 which predicted that Internet and social media users tend to express a preference for emancipative values, supports Norris' (2001) notion that the Internet is dominated by postmaterialists. This predominantly applies to older, white and Indian people and their belief that one should be able to join any organization without government

interference, white and Indian people and their support of the freedom of the press and young people and their support of gender equality in terms of political leadership. This might indicate a gradual shift from materialist to postmaterialist value preferences among South Africans. According to Welzel (2006:871), this potential gradual shift toward emancipative values might result in increased “liberty aspirations” in the future and possibly lead to growing levels of diffuse support for democracy. However, it is too early to state with absolute certainty that these findings will continue and be supported by the Internet. Even given the possibility that the Internet increases emancipative value aspirations, those who do not have access to it will likely not experience such value shifts to the same extent.

The findings relating to Hypothesis 7 (Internet and social media users tend to perceive low levels of supply of democracy and are more likely to be critical and distrustful of government and political actors than non-users) lend some support to Nisbet’s and Stoycheff’s (2014) arguments about the process of “window-opening” and “mirror-holding”. While the within age correlations do not show strong correlations that suggest that increased Internet use for political news leads to lower levels of perceptions of supply of democracy, it does lead to lower levels of trust and perceived higher levels of corruption. On the other hand, the within race group correlations provided evidence that contradicts Nisbet’s and Stoycheff’s (2014) findings. It suggests that every race group perceives higher levels of supply of democracy the more they use the Internet and social media. This is shown in their belief that South Africa is a full democracy and their higher levels of satisfaction with democracy.

The outcomes of Hypothesis 8 (Internet users are more likely to express a preference for democracy over any other form of government) do lend partial support to Nisbet’s and Stoycheff’s (2014) argument that increased online exposure results in a preference for democracy and rejection of authoritarian regimes. Respondents of both, age and race groups, tend to reject all forms of authoritarian rule. However, there are few noteworthy correlations that suggest that they are particularly supportive of democracy.

6.2.3 Political behaviour

The overall findings relating to Hypothesis 9 which predicted that the more someone uses the Internet and social media to source political news, the more likely they are to participate in politics, provide overall support for the mobilisation thesis. This also lends support to the findings of Tolbert and McNeal (2003), Norris and Curtice (2006), De Vreese (2007), Jensen (2013) Velasquez and LaRose (2015) and Yamamoto *et al.* (2015) who make similar arguments

about the beneficial impacts of the Internet on political behaviour. Overall, each age cohort displays some kind of involvement in political activities, whether they relate to group membership, attending meetings, joining others to raise an issue, contacting the media or an official, or voting. In terms of race, the strongest mobilising effects of the Internet and social media can be found among coloured and Indian respondents. Even though coloured respondents are the second group that is least likely to use the Internet or social media to read political news, they display some of the strongest correlations. This is another positive finding made in this study, indicating that using the web to source political news leads to increased levels of involvement even among those who barely have access to it.

6.3 Qualitative findings

The results of the quantitative findings revealed that young people tend to obtain their political news from the Internet and social media more than their older counterparts do. Therefore, the qualitative analysis focused on reasons that make online news more appealing to young people than offline news. The findings of the focus group show that there are several reasons for this. 1) participants of the focus group felt that conventional news sources such as television or radio are politically aligned and controlled and only cover details of an event that the government allows to be covered. Therefore, participants seemed to be somewhat distrustful of conventional news sources. 2) participants explained that online news presents a wider diversity of information than limited articles in a newspaper. 3) they also use social media profiles to inform themselves about political parties or representatives, thereby using them as a shortcut to information. This finding also supports the claim that voters are “cognitive misers” who search for “informational cues and mental shortcuts” in order to reach a voting decision (Gunther, Beck and Nisbet, 2019:1).

Furthermore, quantitative findings suggest that people aged 18-24 who use the Internet and social media to read political news tend to be more critical and distrustful of government officials and institutions. The results of the focus group discussion suggest that the reasons for such distrust and criticism are two-fold. On the one hand, the Internet and its potential in uncovering cases of corruption and abuses of power tend to reinforce and confirm already existing attitudes of scepticism toward incumbents. The transparency that is often prevalent online (along with increasing cases of false information) results in participants forming rather negative views. On the other hand, participants felt like politicians tend to control their own narrative through their social media profiles, making participants unsure what to believe. This

often negative coverage of political information online also seemed to decrease participants willingness to be politically involved, lending support for the media malaise theory (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Robinson, 1997; Heywood, 2013:185).

Given the quantitative outcome that young people tend to reject authoritarian regimes, questions in the focus group discussion probed whether participants believed that the Internet can be a beneficial democratising tool. Overall, participants seemed to agree that the Internet has the potential to improve democracy by providing users with more political information that allows them to make better-informed decisions. Yet, others suggested that social media give a false account of how politically involved some people really are. Furthermore, despite agreeing that the range of information available on the Internet and its potential to improve democratic outcomes, the findings suggest that participants tend to be prone to selective exposure online. Some admitted that they only follow accounts of people or institutions that represent their own views and do not expose themselves to content that contradicts those views, lending support to Davis' (2017) and others' account of echo chambers online.

Lastly, the discussion gave further insight into the prevalence of online hierarchies. Despite claims made by Yildiz (2002) and Martin and Schmeisser (2008) that the Internet is attractive to many users because of the lack of a central authority, participants did not necessarily agree. While there is no single authority online, participants do appear to perceive some form of hierarchies. They find that online influencers who have acquired many followers, tend to have a strong saying in what the newest trends and opinions are. In order to maintain one's status, one needs to follow those trends which did not seem to agree with many participants. It is the strong opinion of this researcher that a considerable amount of attention needs to be paid to Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory when it comes to online interaction and deliberation. This theory becomes considerably more applicable to new media studies considering Shawney's (2017:26) statements about an online "shaming culture", where Internet users are becoming increasingly hostile, toxic and unforgiving and do not shy away from actively pursuing the flaws of others online. Attitudinal evaluations of Internet users might not represent the true attitudinal climate online because some groups might overrepresent and thus overstate the prevalence of certain opinions.

Overall, the focus group discussion provided some valuable insight into the overall outcome of the study. It issued possible reasons that account for the attractiveness of the Internet to young users, their general distrust and criticism of political leaders, and their opinions relating

to online hierarchies. However, what this study also made clear is that little is known about online cultures in the social sciences and the modes of interaction that are unlike personal, face-to-face interactions and traditional media.

6.4 Shortcomings and recommendations

This study found mixed results in terms of support for the mobilisation and reinforcement theses and agrees with Stanley and Weare (2004:506) that the two are not mutually exclusive and therefore “pose a false dichotomy”. While it is true that the Internet may at times strengthen existing inequalities through limited access of some population groups, it can also be used as a tool for empowerment by disenfranchised groups who experience mobilising effects. The evidence in this research study suggests that while younger, white and more educated people tend to use the Internet for political news more frequently than black, coloured and less educated people, the latter show stronger correlations that also suggest that these groups are more likely to be positively affected by Internet use for political news. Therefore, future research should focus on a broader research methodology that does not assume that results could indicate support for one argument or another. Instead, they should be viewed in relation to the way in which mobilising and reinforcing effects of the Internet interact simultaneously and do not exclude one another.

While the study did offer new, valuable insight into the way in which the Internet and social media might affect South Africans, it was not without its shortcomings. First, the Afrobarometer Round 6 survey was conducted in 2015, almost four years prior to the date of this study. Taking into consideration the rapid development of ICTs, it is likely that the survey was somewhat outdated regarding Internet and social media usage.

Furthermore, given the low penetration rate of Internet access in South Africa, this study was possibly conducted too early to make any large findings. While there were some highly significant correlations, they were weak to moderate and therefore did not reflect strong relationships found in studies conducted in more advanced democracies. Future studies need to monitor and investigate the growing influence of Internet behaviour in South Africa to determine whether the technology has far-reaching consequences for the future.

Furthermore, it might have been useful to apply a multiple regression model to the data to determine the influence of multiple variables simultaneously, whilst controlling for key predictors. Due to length limitations, however, a multiple regression could not be performed.

However, future studies that seek to determine relationships might find it useful to employ both, correlation coefficients and multiple regression models.

The qualitative analysis of this research was limited by the absence of more than one focus group. More discussions might have given richer, more in-depth information about young people's interaction, attitudes, and views of the Internet. It might have also been beneficial to conduct additional focus groups with older generations to determine where the differences between the cohorts or generations lie. This might have revealed more about the attitudes and behaviour of the cohorts and how increased use of the Internet and social media to source political news influences those political attitudes and behaviour.

Additionally, more focus group discussions and/or personal interviews need to be conducted, not just on a South African but global scale. It appears that there remains little knowledge about the way in which online relationships shape citizens' attitudes and opinions and the majority of academic research rests on quantitative measures and not on personal accounts or experiences.

One finding that was supported with certainty is the fact that being online erodes political trust among young people as both research approaches found evidence to support this claim. Simultaneously, younger people are also more likely to believe that most officials and institutions are involved in cases of corruption. As such, the Internet and social media might negatively affect democracy in the long run through a gradual erosion of younger cohorts' trust in incumbents. Officials running for office might do well to determine what deems them trustworthy in the eyes of potential young voters if they wish to uphold higher levels of turnout.

Furthermore, research should focus on certain online influencers and their followers to further examine statements by scholars such as Yildiz (2002) about the absence of online hierarchies might require some reconsideration. Although it might be true that there is no governing body online that establishes rules on how to behave, there nevertheless appear to be certain personalities that set trends and standards for their followers. Who those influencers are and what their follower demographic looks like will have to be determined in order to gain a clear understanding of certain online groups and how their political attitudes and behaviour might differ.

6.5 Conclusion

This study finds some evidence to suggest that increased Internet use has implications for the political attitude and value formation and the political behaviour of South Africans. Significant correlations suggest an association between Internet and social media use and internal political efficacy, emancipative values, rejection of authoritarian rule, low levels of trust and supply of democracy as well as aspects of political behaviour. Positive political attitudes and increased participation are linked to Internet and social media use, but causality remains unclear. It might be that people who use these platforms to stay informed already hold such attitudes and merely use online news media as an expansion of information sources.

The aim of this research study is to provide a first step toward filling the theoretical and empirical gap in the existing South African literature about the effects of Internet use on political attitudes and behaviour. The mixed-methods approach offered a valuable and rich insight that links both quantitative and qualitative research. This insight suggests that Internet use is linked to positive political attitudes and heightened participation of South Africans. Yet, a gap in the African literature only allows for assumptions and speculations regarding the findings. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that monitor changes over time. It should also pay closer attention to an Internet-based generation of young people, whose political behaviour differs from their older counterparts. Such research should not only rest on quantitative approaches but should take active steps toward finding a deeper understanding of this cohort through qualitative methods.

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Appendix A: Question items

Independent variables

12. How often do you get news from the following sources?						
	Never	Less than once a month	A few times a month	A few times a week	Everyday	Don't Know
A. Newspaper	0	1	2	3	4	9
B. Television	0	1	2	3	4	9
C. Newspapers	0	1	2	3	4	9
D. Internet	0	1	2	3	4	9
E. Social Media such as Facebook or Twitter	0	1	2	3	4	9

Demographic variables

Hypothesis 1

1. How old are you? [scale recoded into categories]	
18-24	1
25-34	2
35-44	3
45-54	4
55+	5

97. What is your highest level of education?	
No formal schooling	0
Informal schooling only	1
Some primary schooling	2
Primary school completed	3
Intermediate school or some secondary school / high school	4
Secondary school / high school completed	5
Post-secondary qualifications, other than university	6
Some university	7
University completed	8
Post-graduate	9
Don't know	99

Hypothesis 2

102. Respondent's gender	
Male	1
Female	2

Hypothesis 3

102. Respondent's race	
Black / African	1
White / European	2
Coloured / Mixed race	3
South Asian / Indian	4
Other	9

Hypothesis 4

URBRUR Location of respondent	
Urban	1
Rural	2

*Dependent variables**Hypothesis 5*

13. How interested would you say you are in public affairs?	
Not at all interested	0
Not very interested	1
Somewhat interested	2
Very interested	3
Don't know	9

14. When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters	
Never	0
Occasionally	1
Frequently	2
Don't know	9

Hypothesis 6

16. Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose statement 1 or statement 2.			
Statement 1: Government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies		Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it.	
Agree Very Strongly With Statement 1 (1)	Agree with Statement 1 (2)	Agree Very Strongly With Statement 2 (3)	Agree with Statement 2 (4)

Agree with Neither	5
Don't know	9

17. Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose statement 1 or statement 2.			
Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.		Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society	
Agree Very Strongly With Statement 1 (1)	Agree with Statement 1 (2)	Agree Very Strongly With Statement 2 (3)	Agree with Statement 2 (4)
Agree with Neither			5
Don't know			9

18. Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose statement 1 or statement 2.			
Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women.		Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.	
Agree Very Strongly With Statement 1 (1)	Agree with Statement 1 (2)	Agree Very Strongly With Statement 2 (3)	Agree with Statement 2 (4)
Agree with Neither			5
Don't know			9

Hypothesis 7

40. In your opinion how much of a democracy is South Africa today?	
Not a democracy	1
A democracy, but with major problems	2
A democracy, but with minor problems	3
A full democracy	4
Don't understand the question/ do not understand what 'democracy' is	8
Don't know	9

41. Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in South Africa? Are you:	
South Africa is not a democracy	0
Not at all satisfied	1
Not very satisfied	2
Fairly satisfied	3
Very satisfied	4
Don't know	9

52. How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?						
	Not at all	Just a little	Somewhat	A lot	Don't Know / Haven't heard enough	Computed into scale variable (don't know excluded)
A. The President	0	1	2	3	9	
B. Parliament	0	1	2	3	9	
A. Your Local Government Council	0	1	2	3	9	
B. The ruling party	0	1	2	3	9	

53. How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?						
	None	Some of them	Most of them	All of them	Don't Know / Haven't heard enough	Computed into scale variable (don't know excluded)
A. The President	0	1	2	3	9	
B. Members of Parliament	0	1	2	3	9	
C. Government officials	0	1	2	3	9	
D. Local government councillors	0	1	2	3	9	
E. Police	0	1	2	3	9	
F. Tax Officials	0	1	2	3	9	

Hypothesis 8

28. There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?						
	Strongly Disapprove	Disapprove	Neither Approve or Disapprove	Approve	Strongly Approve	Don't Know
C. Only one political party is allowed to stand for election	1	2	3	4	5	9

and hold office						
D. The army comes in to govern the country	1	2	3	4	5	9
E. Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the President can decide everything	1	2	3	4	5	9
F. If the country returned to the old system we had under Apartheid	1	2	3	4	5	9

30. Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?	
STATEMENT 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government	3
STATEMENT 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable	2
STATEMENT 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have	1
Don't know	9

Hypothesis 9

19. For each group, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member or not a member					
	Not a Member	Inactive Member	Active Member	Official leader	Don't Know
F. A religious group that meets outside of regular worship services	0	1	2	3	9
G. Some other voluntary association or community group	0	1	2	3	9

20. Here's a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things in the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?						
	Would never do this	Would if had the chance	Once or twice	Several times	Often	Don't Know
A. Attended a community meeting	0	1	2	3	4	9
B. Got together with others to raise an issue	0	1	2	3	4	9

21. Understanding that some people were unable to vote in the most recent national election in May 2014, which of the following statements is true for you		<u>Recorded</u>
You were too young to vote	8	2 Did not vote 1 Voted 2 Did not vote
You were not registered to vote	0	
You voted in the elections	1	
You decided not to vote	2	
You could not find the polling station	3	
You were prevented from voting	4	
You did not have time to vote	5	
You did not vote because you could not find your name in the voters' register	6	
Did not vote for some other reason	7	
Don't know	9	

23. Thinking about the last national election in May 2014, did you:			
	No	Yes	Don't know
A. Attend a campaign rally	0	1	9
B. Attend a meeting with a candidate or campaign staff	0	1	9
C. Try to persuade others to vote for a certain presidential or legislative candidate or political party?	0	1	9
D. Work for a candidate or party?	0	1	9

24. During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?						Computed into scale variable (don't know excluded)
	Never	Only once	A few times	Often	Don't Know	
A. A local government councillor	0	1	2	3	9	
B. A Member of Parliament	0	1	2	3	9	
C. An official of a government agency	0	1	2	3	9	

D. A political party official	0	1	2	3	9	
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27. Here's a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things in the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

	Would never do this	Would if had the chance	Once or twice	Several times	Often	Don't Know
A. Joined others in your community to request action from government	0	1	2	3	4	9
B. Contacted the media, like calling a radio program or writing a letter to a newspaper	0	1	2	3	4	9
C. Contacted a government official to ask for help or make a complaint	0	1	2	3	4	9
D. Refused to pay a tax or fee to government	0	1	2	3	4	9
E. Participated in a demonstration or protest march	0	1	2	3	4	9