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# SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH AFRICA'S 2014 GENERAL ELECTION

## ABSTRACT

*Political engagement through social media is not limited to adults, but there is evidence that young people increasingly use social media for online political participation (Yang & DeHart 2012). This article highlights some aspects of the role of social media in young people's political engagement during South Africa's 2014 general election. The uses and gratifications theory, as well as the information society theory, provides the theoretical framework against which the findings are analysed. Questionnaires were distributed to 200 students from the University of Fort Hare. The participants were selected systematically in order to present the University's population at the time of the study. The results of the study indicate that young people are not apathetic to politics and that the use of social media as part of a political campaign was considered to have a positive effect on young people's voting decisions.*

**Key words:** social media; political engagement, political communication; youth; South Africa; political participation; uses and gratifications; information society

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Social media has had a significant impact on almost all areas of society, including political life. Politicians use social media as an effective tool to reach out to potential voters with political campaign messages (Baker 2012; Chadwick & Howard 2010; Biswas *et al.* 2014); while at the same time citizens use social media to access political information, keep abreast of the latest political developments, and engage in the political process (Yang & DeHart 2016).

It is important to note that political engagement through social media is not limited to adults, but that there is evidence that young people increasingly use social media for online political participation (Yang & DeHart 2012). Wei (2016: 180) states that the use of mobile media in making political decisions is becoming popular in many countries. Especially younger people are using social networking platforms such as Twitter to develop a new biography of citizenship, which is characterised by a more individualised form of activism that

deliberately situates their struggles outside the party political realm. While there is evidence that South African youth may not be participating actively in mainstream party politics, their political participation indicates that they are politically active in different ways (Mutsvairo 2016: 163). For example, during the 2015 #FeesMustFall campaign and the #RhodesMustFall movement, social media played a crucial role.

Mukhongo and Machaira (2016) argue that social media platforms enable the user to be proactive in the sense that they do not only consume information, but also produce or create content, thus making them drivers of change. Allen and Light (2015: 1) suggest that social media platforms might have transformed the nature of relationships and the balance of power between political institutions and the youth. This article argues that there is a growing trend amongst young South Africans to communicate information about their political engagements using social media platforms. This is contrary to Briggs' (2016) views that political participation is often considered to be a pursuit of older generations.

South Africa is a young democracy and development will only be possible when citizens are involved and encouraged to participate in political activities, which in turn will lead to the improvement of government policies aimed at developing the country and improving the lives of citizens, especially young people. However, most young people do not realise yet that their right to vote is important for the future of the country. According to Milan (2005), young adults are less likely to vote compared to people over the age of 30. During the 2014 general elections in South Africa, it became evident that political parties view social media as an important element of their campaigns. The aim of this article is to explore some aspects of young people's use of social media to engage politically.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article employs the uses and gratifications theory as theoretical framework. The uses and gratifications theory argues that media users seek out a media source that best fulfils their needs and desires. Deuze (2011) writes that this theory examines consumer behaviour with regard to new media products and services. It is also used for the description and classification of audience behaviour. Deuze (*ibid.*) further states that there are five basic uses and gratifications that people receive from using the media products, namely, surveillance of the environment, decision-making, entertainment and diversion, and self-understanding. For many young people, social media provides in all five aforementioned areas.

To highlight the link between social media and uses and gratifications, Matei (2010) says that a medium such as social media or social networking sites will be used as long as the motive for its selection and use gratifies the user and leads to their satisfaction. When applied to the context of this article, this means that politicians will select and use social media for their election campaigns as an important way to reach especially younger members of the voting public. This transactional relationship is mutually beneficial as politicians fulfil their task of reaching voters, while potential voters (in this case, young people on social media) satisfy their need for political information. Social media thus affords both parties the opportunity to engage (Council of Europe 2016).

In addition to the uses and gratifications theory, the article is underpinned by the information society theory. Considering the nature of the relationship that political parties now have with their voters, these authors argue that the youth are actually practicing the values of a media-society or information society. McQuail (2010: 104) writes that there is an increasing use of technology for communication in society, which is evident in the continuous technological developments in the society. The information society theory is characterised by interactive communication platforms, which allow the potential voter and the political candidate to disseminate information and provide feedback to one another.

## Youth in South Africa's context

The National Youth Policy (2009-2014: 12) describes youth as those between the ages of 14 and 35. This population now comprises the born frees, those people who were born after 1994. It must be noted that apartheid South Africa did not provide recognised channels for political participation and this played a significant role in shaping youth people's political options towards political events and outcomes at the time. The country's youth was therefore highly politicised during the years of resistance from the mid-1970s. This experience shaped the context for youth participation and also the manner in which they would relate to institutions during the post-apartheid era. This is evident in recent events and protests such as the #FeesMustFall campaign and the #RhodesMustFall movement. Julianna (2008) argues that the political context of the local environment, as well as the level of education, determines the level of youth participation in political events. According to Swartz and Arnot (2014: 2), lack of schooling contributes to young people's exclusion from civic privileges and democratic participation.

The South Africa youth population comprises significant differences across the social strata. For instance, rural, poverty-stricken and unemployed youth do not have the same access to social media that has become prominent in Africa. However, Southern Africa has witnessed a significant growth in access to mobile communication and, more recently, the expansion of mobile Internet has introduced a variety of affordable messaging genres. Mobile instant messaging and chat platforms can be considered platforms for political participation; this involves new political players with the role of both gate openers and gatekeepers to content and participation on social media sites.

## Political participation amongst the youth

Political participation is defined as the actions by members of a population aimed at influencing the decisions of government officials, such as voting in elections, meeting with community members, communicating with political representatives, and involvement in co-operative action such as strikes (Resnick & Thurlow 2015). As mentioned earlier, South African youth have never been passive when it comes to various forms of activism in communities. Apart from physical protests, young people are increasingly active on social networking sites to develop a new biography of citizenship that is not passive but engaging towards ensuring development. In essence, this is what participation is all about, allowing people to take part in decision-making on issues that affect them, and providing platforms for debate on such issues

towards solving problems and ensuring development. This should be the case in any democratic system as citizens have the right to voice their opinions to capture the attention of policy makers towards addressing events or topical issues in the public sphere (Briggs 2016).

Political participation has three prominent features, namely voting attendance of national elections, partisan attachments, which is the feeling of closeness and loyalty by members of a party, as well as protest activities, which are usually a way to show dissatisfaction by members of the community to their leaders (Utter 2011). It can be argued that participating in politics through social media supplements the traditional behaviour of participation, rather than replacing it, especially amongst young people. For an example, over the course of the 2008 Presidential Election in the United States, adolescents who engaged in political activities on social networking sites were likely to engage in offline partisan events, and politically oriented social media use predicted growth in offline participation over the course of the election cycle. In addition, research has shown that viewing candidates' pages on social networks appears to increase political effectiveness and engagement. While there are some notable exceptions, research has found positive implications of social media use on political participation (Utter 2011: 55).

Political campaigning amongst the youth is another important aspect. Resnick and Thurlow (2015: 1) argue that the importance of campaigning amongst young people is based on the notion that as much as young people are considered to be agents of change, they are also seen as a lost generation who have a narrow mind-set that is based on their economic vulnerability.

## Social media campaigns

Politicians have recognised the potential of canvassing through the Internet. Therefore, the simple brochure information model paved the way for a new model whereby candidates are able to influence traditionally isolated voters (for instance, younger voters), and communicate with possible groups of voters and provide them with a platform to become involved in campaigns (Utter 2011: 55). In terms of social media and modern political campaigns, there are four distinctive patterns of emergent campaign practices that have been facilitated by digital and social media, namely micro-targeting, personalisation, interactivity, and sustained engagement (Ridout 2013: 85).

Micro-targeting of voters is fuelled by advances in communication and database technology, through which campaigns can now target certain people with specific information. By doing this, campaigns have a better chance of appealing to the specific issues that are most important to different voters. For example, campaigns have created targeted websites that focus on a certain voter demographic, such as students, the elderly, Catholics, etc. (*ibid.*). The aim here is to reach out to the public and get them to like and, subsequently, vote for the party.

The second trend of modern campaigns relates to the personalisation of politics, which involves a growing trend in political campaigns to depoliticise politics. This is where candidates use niche media, such as biographies, comedy talk shows and

other casual media to promote information about the personality of the candidate. This trend can be extended to the types of information disclosed on social media. It brings about a connection between voters and the candidate, which can lead to increased political support and participation (Utter 2011: 55).

The third aspect that campaigns are embracing is increased interactivity. Network-based technological advances allow voters to communicate directly with the campaigns and get additional control over their involvement. Initially, interactivity took the form of asynchronous messaging between voters and campaign staff, for example, voters emailing a campaign office or posting on a campaign website and staff responding later to the issues posted to them. In this period, candidates often avoided online interaction with voters because they feared they would lose control over the campaign messaging. However, through social media this strategy provides voters with real-time communication with the campaign. Candidates are no longer seen as just faces on the television, but as people with whom voters interact. When done successfully, supporters will develop a sense of community and connectedness with the candidate and fellow supporters (Ridout 2013: 85).

The fourth aspect is sustained engagement, where candidates maintain the connection with their supporters or party members through the use of networking sites (Ridout 2013: 86). This means that voters are now able to engage with would-be office holders and policy-makers as they map a way forward towards a successful government that will prioritise the development of the citizens. The general belief is that pre-election communication should be sustained after the election to provide the electorate with the opportunity to be involved in their own development as they are allowed to communicate their views and opinions through the same channels as during the campaigning period. This engagement is essential for the citizens or voters, as they have gained a sense of trust in the candidate they voted for, and because they had the opportunity to communicate directly with the candidate during the campaign period, a connectedness was created with him or her as a person. Social media therefore provides politicians and the electorate with a sustained and fitting platform where they go beyond the campaigning or pre-election period to the post-election era where the citizens are able to express their opinions and views on certain issues of concern to the society or their communities (Lileker 2013).

## South Africa's political generations

South Africa's post-apartheid society consists of five different political generations. While all South Africans were shaped by the dominant trends within each era, they were also affected in different ways depending on their racial classification. The first generation is the pre-apartheid generation. This is the oldest and smallest group. The pre-apartheid generation reached their politically formative years before the historic victory of the National Party (NP) in the 1948 election and the burden of the system of racial classification and segregation. While this unit still constituted a significant proportion of the electorate in 1994, they have since shrunk to less than two percent of all voters (Mattes 2012: 137).

The second generation is the early apartheid generation. This group include persons who turned 16 between 1948 and 1960, meaning that they have no working memory of life before the rise of the NP and the imposition of legislation enforcing racial classification and separation. Although this generation would have had some experiences with various forms of popular protest against apartheid, such as bus boycotts, pass protests, the Kliptown Congress and the creation of the Freedom Charter, almost all of these protests were planned to plea to the scruples of more rational fragments of white opinion to affect political reorganisation (Meredith 2010).

The third generation is the grand apartheid generation, consisting of those who turned 16 between 1961 and 1975. Their early memories are filled with the stirrings of internal black resistance, such as the Peco uprising, the marches that led to the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 and foreign news of gathering decolonisation, and even Kenya's Mau-Mau rebellion. This generation's memories of late adolescence and early adulthood also carry the recollection of the post-Sharpeville reaction of the NP government, which banned all black political movements and imprisoned prominent leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo (Mattes 2012: 137).

However, white confidence and African quiescence came to an abrupt end in 1976 with the rise of the Black Consciousness movement and the Soweto uprising, an event that ushered in the Struggle generation, consisting of people who turned 16 between 1976 and 1996 (Mattes 2012: 137). The principal theme of this era was violent resistance and reaction (Mattes 2012: 138).

The fifth generation is the born free generation. The generation is exposed to an entirely diverse world, which differs completely from that of their parents. They are not constrained by any boundaries as to where they can go, work or live, and which race they may date or marry. They consume news provided by a reformed public broadcaster and have access to privately-owned radio and television broadcast news, as well as to satellite television and social media. This period also witnessed the rapid expansion of a new black middle class (Mattes 2012: 138).

## METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research approach was followed in this study. Two-hundred questionnaires were distributed to gather information from a sample of randomly selected youths, who are students at the University of Fort Hare's Alice Campus. The students served as the target population. Data was analysed quantitatively and presented through charts, mostly using simple percentages. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University Research and Ethics Committee (UREC) at the University of Fort Hare and individual consent was obtained from the participants.

Systematic sampling was used, which involves that the elements of the population are listed and every  $n^{\text{th}}$  element on the list is chosen (systematically) for inclusion in the sample (Beiske 2007). Information obtained from the University Student Admission Office indicated that the population of Fort Hare students in the year 2014 was 8536. A list of student numbers was obtained and participants were contacted via email. In this manner, 40 students were selected from each level of study: first years, second years,

third years, fourth years and postgraduate students, which brought the total to 200 participants. The choice to select participants from the different levels of study was to ensure the participation of different age groups from 18 to 30 years.

The questionnaire covered different aspects in terms of the effects of social media in the political decisions taken by these respondents during South Africa's 2014 general elections. Issues, such as the forms of social media they were exposed to, and how and if social media succeeded in changing their perspectives, were examined. All 200 questionnaires were returned. The respondents were not required to fill any personal details, such as name or student number, and their participation was voluntary.

## Data analysis

### *Age distribution*

From the 200 questionnaires distributed and received back for analysis, 20 respondents (10%) were in the 17 to 19 year age bracket, 146 (75%) in the 20 to 25 year age bracket, and 34 (17%) in the 26 to 30 year age bracket.

### *Gender distribution*

The gender distribution consisted of 72 (36%) females and 128 (64%) males.

### *Level of study*

Of the 200 respondents, 48 (24%) were first-year students, 42 (21%) second-year students, 54 (27%) third-year students, 24 (12%) fourth-year students, and 32 (16%) postgraduate students.

### *Access to the Internet and use of social media*

When asked about access to the Internet, and specifically how they preferred to access political information, 70 (35%) of the 200 students indicated that they used mobile phones, 40 (20%) used smartphones, 28 (14%) used tablets, 38 (19%) used personal laptops and 24 (12%) used computers in the University's computer laboratories.

This question sought to establish the various social networks that were most accessible for the youth to engage politically. A total of 106 (53%) of the respondents used Facebook for engagement, 46 (23%) respondents used YouTube, while 48 (24%) used a combination of channels to expand their political information.

### *Social media's impact on voting*

Here, the respondents were asked whether they considered social media effective in engaging the masses in campaigning and elections. Most of the respondents indicated that they considered social media effective as a way to engage large groups of people, based on their experience during political campaigning in the run-up to the 2014 elections. Of the 200 respondents, 76 (35%) strongly agreed that social media was effective in engaging citizens, and 82 (41%) agreed, while 28 (14%) disagreed, and 14 (7%) strongly disagreed with the statement that social media was effective in engaging citizens.

### *Social media's influence in choosing a political party and political engagement*

When asked to comment on whether social media influenced their decision in the process of choosing a political organisation to lead the country, the participants responded as follows: 126 (63%) answered "yes", 40 (20%) answered "no", and 34 (17%) were "not sure". When asked about their view on social media as a form of political communication, 152 (76%) respondents indicated that they perceived social media as having a positive effect on political engagement with young people, while 48 (24%) of the respondents indicated that they viewed the Internet as a negative channel for political engagement.

### *Voting participation*

In terms of the 2014 general elections, 152 (76%) of the respondents indicated that they voted in the elections, while 48 (24%) did not vote.

### *Motivating factors for voting*

Of the 200 participants, 38 (19%) indicated that their voting decision was influenced by information on social media, 108 (54%) based their voting decision on the history of a specific political organisation; 20 (10%) indicated that they were influenced by their families, friends and the community, and 34 (17%) said that they were resistant to political engagements.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is evident from the findings that social media campaigns play an important role in political campaigns and most respondents confirmed that they accessed information online during the 2014 elections. This is in line with the findings that most of the respondents have access to the Internet and are active users. Incorporating social media into a political campaign or political communication strategy, especially to reach young people, is thus a crucial element. Respondents indicated that, in their experience, social media made it possible for voters to engage with policy makers, be involved in their own development, and enabled them to communicate their views and opinions through the same channels during the campaigning period. Most of the respondents indicated that they considered social media the best way to engage young people politically.

The participants were also asked to indicate what they view as threats or opportunities for using social media as a tool for political engagement. Most of the respondents were of the view that social media contributed towards facilitating political activities, rather than inhibiting these activities. This is partly attributed to transparency in information dissemination. However, some participants indicated that social media also has the potential to be harmful as reputations can be destroyed.

It was the view of most of the respondent that political parties' use of social media and the information posted online were motivating factors for them to be interested in politics, the campaign process, as well as the desire to vote.

Although small, this study serves as indication that social media is of special interest for political campaigns and political communicators in reaching and engaging with young people. This ties in with the findings of Yang and DeHart (2016) that social media provides an effective platform for the youth be involved in political engagement, considering their availability online.

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