

## **Influence of social media usage on students' political participation in a selected university in South Africa**

Siyavuya Vukani<sup>1</sup>, Emeka Emmanuel Obioha<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa

\*Corresponding author: emekaobioha@gmail.com

### **ARTICLE INFO**

**DOI:**10.46223/HCMCOUJS.soci.en.14.3.3074.2024

Received: November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Revised: December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Accepted: February 02<sup>nd</sup>, 2024

*Keywords:*

influence; political participation; social media; students; South Africa

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper articulates the influence of social media on university students' political participation in a South African University. The aspects of political participation the study will be examining are the voting process, political awareness, political debates, mass meetings, and political campaigns. The objectives of the study are to investigate the extent of social media usage by students and how social media influences the political participation of students. Dalton's theory on cognitive mobilization theory of civic literacy and participation is employed in this study to explain social media's influence and political participation. The study utilised the mixed-method approach, where 120 respondents were drawn from the target population through stratified sampling techniques. On the one hand, for the quantitative strand of the study, data were collected through a survey and analysed using relevant descriptive analytical tools. On the other hand, thematic and content analysis was utilised to analyse semi-structured interviews. While a huge majority of the participants indicated that they used various social media platforms, it is evident that WhatsApp is the preferred social media application used by respondents. It is also evident that social media usage influences students' political participation, especially for males. The findings also suggest that most students, especially females mainly use their social media platforms for entertainment purposes, exhibiting low rates of political participation. A few recommendations are made in the study regarding the issues of low rates of political participation among university students.

### **1. Introduction**

Social media applications have penetrated all levels of the information society and catalysed democratization and political development. Omotayo and Folorunso (2020, p. 132) posit that "the media, a modern trend in information and knowledge dissemination, has taken communication beyond the limitation of the traditional way of communicating and socializing, making it an essential part of the people's lives, affecting their social, political and economic activities." In addition, Al-Quraan, Anu-Shanab, Banitaan, and Al-Tarawneh (2017, p. 48) suggests that "one of the major applications of social media is social networks, where millions of people are connected to utilize an open domain for interacting with others and socializing with all types of media such as text, voice, images or videos".

The use of social media in politics has increased in recent years, offering people a platform for expressing their opinions, engaging in political debates, and mobilizing support for

various reasons. However, the extent to which social media use influences students to participate in politics remains unclear. It is, therefore, against this backdrop that the research topic remains important, in that it will reveal the various mechanisms used through social media for the political participation of students. However, it is not only through politics that social media has had an impact. Higher education is also one of the beneficiaries of social media usage. Tarantino, McDonough, and Hua (2013, p. 03) suggest that “the rapid development of information and communication technologies has sparked the creative incorporation of social media into current pedagogical applications and processes.” This is sparked by social network services such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace which are typical applications for Web 2.0 technology and have gained huge popularity and widespread use in higher education among multiple age groups in the same or different educational institutions, places, and countries over the past few years (Mbodila, Ndebele, & Muhandji, 2014).

Political participation, as defined by Resnick and Thurlow (2015, p. 172), includes “the citizens’ actions which are intended to influence the policies and decisions of government and its officials through voting, party meeting and communicating with elected representatives, and going on strikes or protests to express dissatisfaction against leaders’ actions and inactions.” Additionally, Utter (2011, pp. 02-03) reiterates that “political participation has three distinguished features which include taking part in voting during elections, party affiliation, membership and protestation against dissatisfaction.” Moreover, political participation consists of “numerous types of political engagements such as voting in an election, involvement in activities of political parties, other voluntary organizations, conversations concerning politics, and protests against constituted authorities” (Badaru & Adu, 2021, pp. 01-24). Political participation, therefore, refers to all activities citizens undertake to influence the government and officials in decisions and policies.

This study is aimed at exploring the relationship between social media use and students’ involvement in political activities, by exploring the influence of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in political activism. Furthermore, the study clarifies the mechanisms through which social media platforms promote students’ political participation. These mechanisms may include the sharing of political content, participating in political debates, and admiration of politicians which affect students’ willingness to actively participate in the political process. Ultimately, the study provides valuable insight into the relationship between social media use and partaking in students’ political participation. Thereby, highlighting the role social media plays in shaping students’ political engagement.

Considering this, the study aims to establish the various online mechanisms through which social media platforms are used to lure students into political participation in a selected University situated in one of the rural places in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Therefore, it is imperative to study and document the usage of social media platforms by students from the selected university, as the available data shows that there are no prior studies that focused on the current topic in the selected university. The available literature appears to not cover the usage of social media platforms for political participation in the selected university, and this is despite that students are actively involved in political formations, which are instrumental for the student governance structures. The study’s research questions, therefore, are: What is the extent of social media usage by students? How does social media use influence students’ political participation? The study used a mixed-method research approach. The makeup of this paper consists of an Introduction section, followed by the literature review, theoretical framework, and methodological approach. Data analysis and empirical findings are thereafter presented, followed by the discussion, conclusion, and implication of the study.

## 2. Theoretical basis

The study is grounded in the cognitive mobilization theory of civic literacy and participation, as espoused by Dalton (1984); Onuigbo, Eme, and Asadu (2018). More importantly, Cognitive mobilization theory is the process through which people receive their cognitive cues to decisions on voting and participation in other political activities (Dalton, 1984). According to cognitive mobilization theorists, political education aids people in overcoming the bureaucratic barriers that impede voting processes. Cho (1999, pp. 1140-1155) notes that “it is not higher education per se that increases one’s likelihood of voting, but rather the socialization process that is provided through education.” Furthermore, the Cognitive mobilization theory of political literacy argues that political education increases engagement in politics by developing the citizens’ cognitive skills, enabling them to process complex information about the political system and enhance their feeling of civic duty (Denny & Doyle, 2008). Dalton, in demonstrating the cognitive mobilizing capacity of political education agencies such as mass media, argues that “the development in technology and mass media have increased the public’s political ability” (Dalton, 2002, p. 19). According to Daltons’ theory, “In Western democracies, the availability of mass media has equipped the electorate with greater information resources and increased their overall political sophistication as a result” (Onuigbo, Eme, & Asadu, 2018, pp. 246-256). Therefore, this equips citizens with new technological skills to deal with all the complex issues surrounding politics, allowing them to make their own political decisions because of cognitive mobilization theory.

The arguments above, therefore, suit the study because they provide theoretical explanations for social media’s influence on political participation. However, the theory is relatively known for its advanced literature on social media’s influence on political involvement. This theory argues that an individual’s literacy determines political participation and political knowledge. Furthermore, it is believed that political education is the one that empowers individuals to learn about politics and political issues. For individuals to participate in politics and political activities, they must mobilize their cognitive knowledge of politics. Conversely, students without sufficient education on social media knowledge tend to exhibit less political participation awareness than those with high levels of social media.

Although the theory adopted for this paper was developed before the advent of social media, the theory has evolved over the years and, as such, remains relevant to the current discourse on the usage of social media and political participation by students. For instance, Dalton (1984) rightfully argues that democracies have been strengthened through the availability and increased usage of mass media for the purpose of educating the electorates about political participation. Within the South African context, we have observed and taken note of political parties that have students movements such as SASCO aligned with the ANC and EFF Student Command which is aligned with the EFF have their footprints in the social media platforms and they use these platforms to raise political awareness, participation and recruitment of the students’ population.

## 3. Methodology

This study is a cross-sectional study aimed at providing informed and detailed information on social media use by students and their political participation at Walter Sisulu University. The target population of the study was undergraduate students, from their second year of study to their final year of study within the 05 faculties offered at the Mthatha Campus. A

sample of 120 participants was drawn from the target population by a non-probability sampling method. For the purpose of this study, the researchers provided the students with 07 working days to allow them to decide on whether to participate in the study. A total of 600 students received the informed consent and participation information sheets regarding the study, from where 120 students volunteered to form part of this study as they returned the signed informed consent forms. Participants who knew about social media were identified to the satisfaction of the researcher. In order to reach the volunteered students, a quota sampling was adopted, where a specific number of participants were drawn from the student political party population strata based on party size (see the political party affiliation in Table 1). A maximum of 35 and a minimum of 25 participants were allocated. The use of a quota system enabled the researchers to assemble a representative sample, satisfy the sample size adequately, and also allowed the researchers to observe and explore the subject matter in-depth. This type of non-probability technique was administered due to its relatively inexpensive nature and ease of use, which is desirable in satisfying the population proportions required in the study.

In this study, a concurrent embedded strategy was applied. According to Creswell Hanson, Clark, and Morales (2007), a concurrent embedded strategy of mixed-method research can be identified by using one data collection phase, during which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously. The survey instrument (questionnaire) was used to collect the required data from the chosen participants. The instrument consisted of socio-demographic data of the respondents and other key questions relating to the subject matter of the research. An In-depth interview guide was used for the qualitative strand of the research, using semi-structured interviews aimed at the Mthatha campus SRC members. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized for the quantitative strand of the data, while thematic analysis was used for the qualitative strand of the data. The Dependent variable of the study was the Political Participation of students, while the independent variable was their Social Media use.

For this study, the researchers obtained Ethical Clearance from the Walter Sisulu University Ethics Committee with ethics number (REC/06(xii)/2022). The study participants were assured of privacy and confidentiality that their participation in the study was voluntary and they may withdraw their participation at any phase of the study. The students were provided with the informed consent form and participation information sheet that outlined the aim and objectives of the study.

## **4. Result and discussion**

### **4.1. Result**

#### *4.1.1. The study's participants' attributes*

The targeted group was the undergraduate students at Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha campus. Table 1 presents the percentage of the respondents according to their demographic information: Gender, Age, Level of Study, Faculty, Municipality of Origin, and their Student Union Political Affiliation. The table reveals that most respondents were males making up 55.8% of the total respondents, while there were 44.2% of female respondents who partook in the study. In terms of the respondents' age, most of them were between 15 and 25 (85%), followed by 26 - 36 (15%).

**Table 1**

Socio-demographic information of respondents

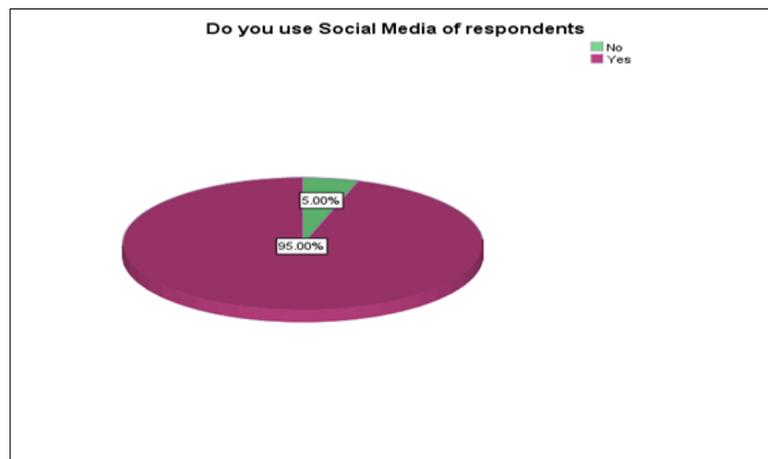
| <b>Demographic characteristics</b>               |                                      | <b>(n = 120)</b> | <b>(%)</b> |
|--|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Gender   | Male                                 | 67               | 55.8       |
|  | Female                               | 53               | 44.2       |
|  | <b>Total</b>                         | 120              | 100.0      |
| Age  | 15 - 25                              | 102              | 85.0       |
|  | 26 - 36                              | 18               | 15.0       |
|  | 37 - 47                              | 0                | 0.0        |
|  | 48+                                  | 0                | 0.0        |
|  | <b>Total</b>                         | 120              | 100        |
| Level of Study                                   | Level 2                              | 37               | 30.8       |
|  | Level 3                              | 42               | 35.0       |
|  | Level 4                              | 33               | 27.5       |
|  | Level 5                              | 6                | 5.0        |
|  | Level 6                              | 2                | 1.7        |
|  | <b>Total</b>                         | 120              | 100.0      |
| Faculty  | Commerce and Administration          | 25               | 20.8       |
|  | Educational Sciences                 | 23               | 19.2       |
|  | Health Sciences                      | 19               | 15.8       |
|  | Humanities, Social Sciences, and Law | 34               | 28.3       |
|  | Natural Sciences                     | 19               | 15.8       |
|  | <b>Total</b>                         | 120              | 100.0      |
| Municipality of Origins                          | From Eastern Cape                    | 98               | 81.7       |
|  | Outside Eastern Cape                 | 22               | 18.3       |
|  | <b>Total</b>                         | 120              | 100.0      |
| What is your student Union Political Affiliation | SASCO                                | 25               | 20.8       |
|  | ANCYL                                | 35               | 29.2       |
|  | PASMA                                | 32               | 26.7       |
|  | EFFSC                                | 28               | 23.3       |

NB: South African Students Congress (SASCO), African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), Pan Africanist (PASMA), Economic Freedom Fighters Students Congress (EFFSC)

In further analysis, the level of study of respondents revealed that level 3 respondents were the highest-represented group with (35%), followed by level 2 with (30.8%), level 4 (27%), and after that levels 5 and 6 were tied at (1.7%). An analysis of the faculty in which the respondents studied found that most students came from the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Law (28.3%), followed by Commerce and Administration (20.8%), while Educational Sciences (19.2%), and after that Health Sciences and Natural Sciences both had (15.8%). The municipality in which the respondents came from revealed that most respondents were from Municipalities originating from the Eastern Cape (81.7%), while (18.3%) were respondents who were from municipalities outside the Eastern Cape. Since political participation plays a key role in the study, the researcher saw it necessary that the respondents' student union political affiliation be studied. The findings reveal that most respondents were affiliated with the African National Congress Youth League (29.2%), followed by the Pan Africanist Student Movement (26.7%), The Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (23.3%), after the South African Student Congress Organisation with 20.8%.

#### 4.1.2. *The extent of usage, duration, types, and reasons for social media usage*

This section presents the extent to which students make use of their social media platforms, including duration, types, and reasons for use. The various ways in which they used their social media platform were explored. The use of social media pertained to Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents who used social media. The figure illustrates that 95.0% of the respondents used social media, while only 5.0% indicated that they did not use social media. As the results suggest a significant gap in terms of percentage, it is evident that social media was a large part of the respondents' lives.



**Figure 1.** Extent of Social media usage

The duration of social media usage for the study involved the period respondents have been using social media. Social media is a platform that allows users to connect and communicate. Therefore, it was important for the researcher to know the duration of social media usage, as it is only a given for some respondents to have used social media simultaneously. Specifically, the study looked at the duration of social media usage by students in the study. The study found that, in terms of gender, males have been on social media longer than females, (see Table 2). Proportionately, the study analysed the student union's political affiliation. The study reveals that the organisation with the most respondents who have been on social media for more than 18 months, is the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (96.4%), followed by the South African Student Congress Organisation (96%), Pan Africanist Students Movement of Azania (93.8%), after that the African National Congress Youth League (80%).

**Table 2**

Duration of social media usage

| <b>Gender of Respondents</b>               | <b>0 - 6</b> | <b>6 - 12</b> | <b>12 - 18</b> | <b>18+</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Chi-Sq.</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|--|--------------|---------------|----------------|------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| MALE                                       | 1 (1.5)      | 1 (1.5)       | 4 (6.0)        | 61 (91.0)  | 67 (100)     |                |            |
| FEMALE                                     | 1 (1.9)      | 3 (5.7)       | 1 (1.9)        | 48 (90.6)  | 53 (100)     |                |            |
| <b>Total</b>                               | 2 (1.7)      | 4 (3.3)       | 5 (4.2)        | 109 (90.8) | 120 (100)    | 2.755          | 0.431      |
| <b>Student Union Political Affiliation</b> |              |               |                |            |              |                |            |
| SASCO                                      | 0 (0.0)      | 0 (0.0)       | 1 (4.0)        | 24 (96.0)  | 25 (100)     |                |            |
| ANCYL                                      | 1 (2.9)      | 4 (11.4)      | 2 (5.7)        | 28 (80.0)  | 35 (100)     |                |            |
| PASMA                                      | 1 (3.1)      | 0 (0.0)       | 1 (3.1)        | 30 (93.8)  | 32 (100)     |                |            |
| EFF  | 0 (0.0)      | 0 (0.0)       | 1 (3.1)        | 27 (96.4)  | 28 (100)     |                |            |
| <b>Total</b>                               | 2 (1.7)      | 4 (3.3)       | 5 (4.2)        | 109 (90.8) | 120 (100)    | 12.266         | 0.199      |

Social media is seen as a global phenomenon by people, especially youth. As a result, countless social media applications are used in the world. However, for this study, the researcher focused on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. These platforms were mainly used for entertainment and current affairs. Table 3, therefore, illustrates the relationship between gender and students' union political affiliation of respondents against social media platforms used by respondents. Regarding gender, the study reveals that male respondents mainly used WhatsApp (58.2%), as did female respondents with 60.4%. This could be fostered by the fact that; more females are more inclined to post and affectionately communicate with their friends and family, which is possible through Instagram and WhatsApp. In contrast, Twitter and Facebook may be seen as more open spaces for current affairs and debates about sports and entertainment.

**Table 3**

Types of social media platforms used

| <b>Gender</b>                    | <b>Facebook</b> | <b>Twitter</b> | <b>Instagram</b> | <b>WhatsApp</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Chi-Sq.</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| MALE                             | 23 (34.3)       | 3 (4.5)        | 2 (3.0)          | 39 (58.2)       | 67 (100)     |                |            |
| FEMALE                           | 17 (32.1)       | 1 (1.9)        | 3 (5.7)          | 32 (60.4)       | 53 (100)     |                |            |
| <b>Total</b>                     | 40 (33.3)       | 4 (3.3)        | 5 (4.2)          | 71 (59.2)       | 120 (100)    | 1.173          | 0.760      |
| <b>Student Union Affiliation</b> |                 |                |                  |                 |              |                |            |
| SASCO                            | 9 (36.0)        | 1 (4.0)        | 1 (4.0)          | 14 (56.0)       | 25 (100)     |                |            |
| ANCYL                            | 11 (31.4)       | 1 (2.9)        | 2 (5.7)          | 21 (60.0)       | 35 (100)     |                |            |
| PASMA                            | 12 (37.5)       | 2 (6.3)        | 0 (0.0)          | 18 (56.3)       | 32 (100)     |                |            |
| EFF                              | 8 (28.6)        | 0 (0.0)        | 2 (7.1)          | 18 (64.3)       | 28 (100)     |                |            |
| <b>Total</b>                     | 40 (33.3)       | 4 (3.3)        | 5 (4.2)          | 71 (59.2)       | 120 (100)    | 4.604          | 0.867      |

Furthermore, the student union's political affiliation and use of social media platforms relationship were explored. The data reveals that, of all the student union organizations, WhatsApp was the preferred method of communication, while Instagram was the least used social media platform. However, in terms of comparison, EFFSC used WhatsApp 64.3% and Instagram 7.1% more than other student unions. In contrast, PASMA slightly used Facebook and Twitter, with a higher percentage of (37.5%) and (6.3%) respectively. This means that EFFSC is more appealing to primarily WhatsApp and Instagram students. This could also result from the organization's philosophy on broader society, as has been the case since its inception. EFFSC has appealed mainly to youth through their social media accounts. This is also the case with PASMA, where most of its history and mother organization is displayed on Facebook, where you can read and listen to songs and discourses on the political ideologies of the organization.

Among higher education institution students, reasons abound for the use of social media. Social media has many different uses. For example, people can use social media to create applications, text, blogs, or video call friends and family. However, for the study, social media use connoted entertainment and news/current affairs. Entertainment may be seen by many as social media activities that people enjoy, which allows them to relax, for instance watching football or playing music on Spotify. In contrast, News and Current Affairs are seen as news channels or social media platforms where you can get important information about the weather, news, or the economic state of the country.

Respondents provided their views on what they mostly use social media for (Table 4). The study found that more females 66.0% were inclined to use their social media platforms for entertainment. This means that they use social media for pleasure, for instance, listening to music, going on Instagram, posting pictures online, or having affectionate communication with families and friends. The study also reveals that males 50.7% were more slightly inclined to use their social media platforms for News/Current affairs. This aligns with Vermeren (2015), who indicates that males use social media to gather the information they need to build influence. The information usually comes through reading and understanding current affairs, such as the state of the economy, politics, and market-related information.

**Table 4**

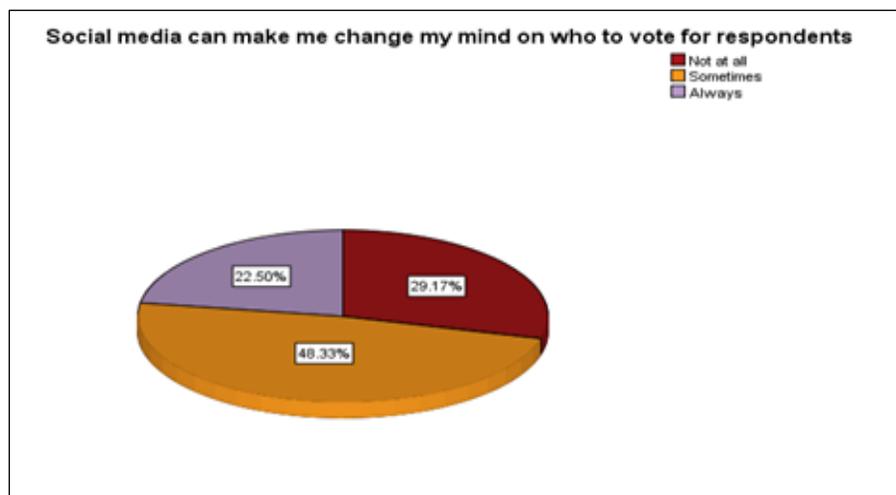
Reasons for most use of social media platforms

| <b>Gender</b>                              | <b>News/ Current Affairs</b> | <b>Entertainment</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Chi-Sq.</b> | <b>Sig</b> |
|--|------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| Male                                       | 34 (50.7)                    | 33 (49.3)            | 67 (100)     |                |            |
| Female                                     | 18 (34.0)                    | 35 (66.0)            | 53 (100)     |                |            |
| <b>Total</b>                               | 52 (43.3)                    | 68 (56.7)            | 120 (100)    | 3.395          | 0.065      |
| <b>Student Union Political Affiliation</b> |                              |                      |              |                |            |
| SASCO                                      | 9 (36.0)                     | 16 (64.0)            | 25 (100)     |                |            |
| ANCYL                                      | 17 (48.6)                    | 18 (51.4)            | 35 (100)     |                |            |
| PASMA                                      | 14 (43.8)                    | 18 (56.3)            | 32 (100)     |                |            |
| EFFSC                                      | 12 (42.9)                    | 16 (57.1)            | 28 (100)     |                |            |
| <b>Total</b>                               | 52 (43.3)                    | 68 (56.7)            | 120 (100)    | 0.943          | 0.815      |

Student union political affiliation and what they mostly use social media for are under scrutiny in this study. The study discovered that all the student unions were more inclined to use their social media platforms for entertainment purposes. This may be the best strategy to rope new members or voters into their organisation. In most cases, new students have no political affiliation in their first few years at university. Therefore, entertaining and showing them that you are a relatable organisation would make them more inclined to vote for your organisation. Although all student union organisation expressed that they are more inclined to use social media for entertainment, Sasco had the highest percentage (64.0%) of social media users, and Sasco members also accounted for the lowest number of members who use social media for news and current affairs.

#### 4.1.3. Social media usage influence on student political participation

Figure 2 below demonstrates the ability of social media to influence students' political choices particularly when it comes to voting, political activities, followership of political characters, political awareness, and inculcating political activism. In determining who to vote for, as revealed in Figure 2, proportionally, respondents indicated some level of influence from social media use. This is shown by the percentage of 77.5% of respondents who were inclined to be influenced by social media on who to vote for.

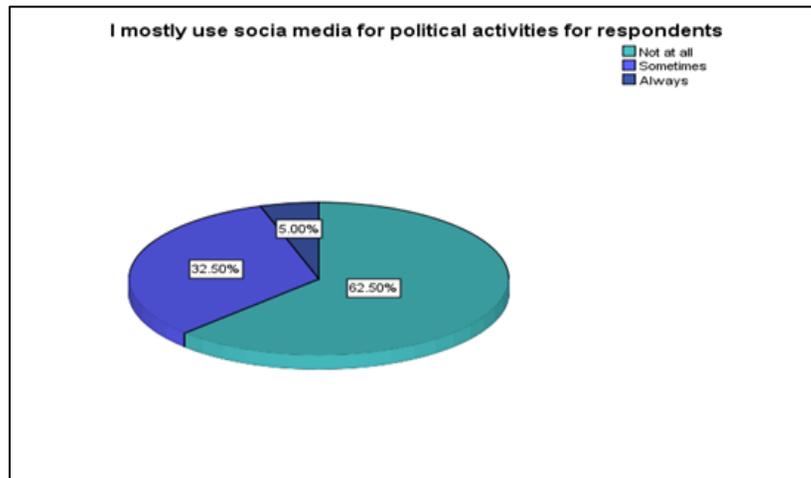


**Figure 2.** Social media influence on voting

During an in-depth interview, one of the SRC members had this to say regarding social media influences on students' political views.

A lot of it has influenced student politics because, some people gain popularity through social media, and popularity is something we never wish for in terms of the posture of the leadership going into elections. But through social media, populists gain momentum, so social media has the greatest influence in political view because as much as we can decide that we need so and so in the SRC leadership, there will be a populist who will try and de-campaign others and campaign others, so it usually changes the view of how people think. So, when people de-campaign others they have a chance of changing other people's views so they can influence others.

Regarding political activities, the percentage of respondents that indicated some level of influence from social media is presented in Figure 3, as relates to social media usage for political activities. The results show that 62.5% of respondents did not use their social media platforms for political activities.

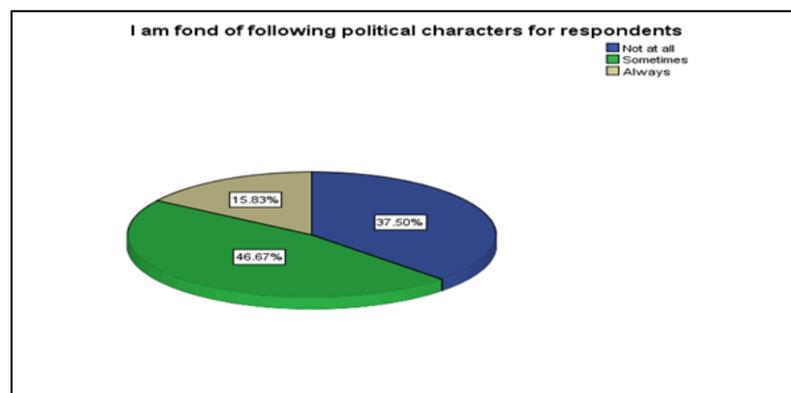


**Figure 3.** Social media usage for political activities

One of the SRC members had this to say regarding indicators of political activities.

*Firstly, we release communiques through WhatsApp or any other social media platform to organize mass meetings. Then once there is a plan for a mass meeting, we immediately release communication for the preparation of the meeting. We then use social media to indicate to the student populace that there is a mass meeting, then table the issues that will be discussed in the meeting, sort of an agenda.*

Political characters pertain to political leaders seen in society as popular or charismatic. These leaders have a substantial following and are seen to be influential, and because of their influence, people are more likely to be interested in them. These include Julius Malema, Jacob Zuma, and Mmusi Maimane who are leaders in their respective political parties. Regarding this indicator, the ratio of respondents' fondness for political characters is shown in Figure 4. The percentages indicate that 62.5% of respondents leaned towards some form of influence from social media. In addition, 46.67% of respondents indicated they sometimes follow political characters, while 15.83% indicated they always follow political characters.

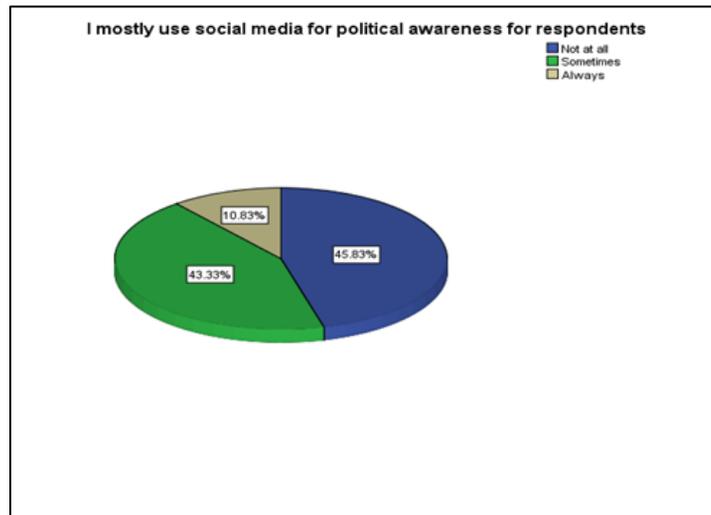


**Figure 4.** Fondness of following political characters

From the SRC's perspective concerning the following political characters. This is what they had to say.

*No, I am not fond of following political characters because, in politics, we must not be loyal to an individual but rather to the organization. Nevertheless, some people gain popularity through social media, which must be handled internally because we need quality leaders, not populists.*

Figure 5 illustrates respondents' views on social media usage and political awareness. This is shown in the percentage, where 45.83% of respondents reported that their social media platforms were not used for political awareness. However, in terms of proportion, the data suggests that 54.16% of respondents leaned towards the influence of social media for political awareness. This is indicated by 43.33% for sometimes and 10.83% for always using social media for political awareness.



**Figure 5.** Social media usage for political awareness

Relating to organising student elections, the SRC President had this to say:

*The use of social media in terms of organizing student elections, first begins with campaigning, using social media. Then, we try and organize the posture of the elections. Regarding campaigning, we know the candidates we must send and what strategies we must use through social media to gain momentum from different people. After that, faces will be put on social media of people who wish to contest the SRC elections. However, this strategy begins with campaigning. Nevertheless, social media is instrumental in this because, most of the time, elections are online and not venue-based. Therefore, having social media platforms help with links for voting and mobilizing during elections.*

#### **4.2. Discussion**

The purpose of the paper is to understand if students used social media, and if they did, what type of social media platforms did they use. The study has found that most students 95% used social media. In contrast, the leading social media platforms employed in the study were WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The duration was also tested to see how long respondents have used social media. Social media are considered an effective communications channel for information exchange, opinion statements, social network enabling, decisions influencing, and business promotion (Karatsoli & Nathanail, 2020). Based on the data analysis results, some conclusions can be made regarding the extent of social media usage.

The study found that males used social media more than females, although with slight differences. In comparison, Vermeren (2015) focused on Men and Women and raised questions to reveal who is more active on social media between the two genders. Her study revealed that women used social media less than men for business reasons. In contrast, females use social media to share more personal information than men, revealing more about their lives. She further explains that, generally females use social networking sites to make connections and stay in touch with family or friends. Men, by contrast, use social media to gather the information they need to build

their influence. With this view, the researcher can hypothesize that for this study, males used social media more than females because the study was more focused on political affiliation and political awareness, it can be alluded to the fact that males used social media for knowledge bases and building themselves rather than for personal communication and entertainment purposes.

Regarding student union political participation, all political parties within the study indicated their social media usage. The EFFSC and SASCO indicated higher social media usage and longer duration. Interestingly, previous literature also corroborates that 90% of the EFF followers are on social media (Du Preez, 2018). It is for this reason that this study acknowledges social media's influence in transmitting and giving access to information to people who may not be aware of such events.

The type of social media platforms used played a massive role in the study. The study looked at four social media platforms based on popularity and ease of use. These social media platforms were WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. However, it is essential to first distinguish between these social media types. The findings of this study indicated that WhatsApp was the most used social media platform. In a study conducted by Barhoumi (2015) on the effectiveness of WhatsApp Mobile Learning Activities Guided by Activity Theory on Students' Knowledge Management. He indicated that WhatsApp (from the English phrase "What's up?", meaning "What's new?") is an instant messaging application for smartphones (Barhoumi, 2015). It is therefore, against this backdrop that this study has brought light into new literature, where WhatsApp was the most used social media platform within the study area of this study.

Concerning social media use and student political participation, the study displays that political leaders and organizations increasingly use social media platforms to gain political membership and votes. More political information becomes easily accessible to respondents. Because of such exposure, more people are likely to positively perceive politics through social media. This is in line with Yaseen, Mamdani, and Siddiqui (2018, pp. 90-108), who note, "There is no gainsaying the fact that the mass media and the news media are very influential in shaping the individual's perception of the world in general and politics in particular." One of the many ways in which students could be influenced through social media is through political views via social media. The study found that 77.5% of respondents were influenced by social media in choosing who to vote for.

Furthermore, political activism, which is seen as bestowing a sense of pride in actively participating in political thought and engagements, uses social media as a vehicle through which political information can be a driving force to participate in politics. Most organisations prefer using social media to lure people into participating in politics. This aligns with Badaru and Adu (2021, p. 03), who notes, "Citizens' understanding of politics and other politically related issues was shaped and developed by their exposure to political information, especially through the media." In their view, Anwar and Jan (2010, p. 216) illustrate that "the media and, more importantly, the digital technologies have become very instrumental in raising students' awareness about political affairs and increasing their participation in political activities." However, the study revealed that 52.5% of respondents did not use their social media platforms for political activism. One of the contributing factors could be the low rate of political awareness of respondents. The study revealed that 45.83% of respondents reported that their social media platforms were not used for political awareness, even though Kuotsu (2016, pp. 190-197) found that "political awareness played a critical role in explaining the variation in political participation", which resonates with the later findings of Badaru and Adu (2021, p. 04) who submitted further that, "a higher level of political awareness would certainly lead to a greater increase in participation".

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions are drawn directly from the results of the study, suggesting, and proposing solutions based on the results of the study. The study found that social media had a relatively small role in Influencing undergraduate students' political participation. Respondents in the study highlighted that they did use social media. However, most respondents indicated that they do not use their social media platforms for political participation. Concerning student union political affiliation, the EFF Students Command, was the most social media-inclined political party. This is in line with available literature, that the Economic Freedom Fighters are more social media inclined than any other political party in South Africa. The study also reveals that WhatsApp was the preferred social media application by respondents, while Facebook was the second most preferred application. Respondents mainly used their social media platforms for entertainment, rather than current affairs. The study further displays that concerning political participation, respondents generally had a low rate of political awareness and political activism. Using the patterns of student political participation, the study found that undergraduate students mainly participated in politics by voting in student elections and attending mass meetings. However, they were not necessarily active members. In conclusion, social media played a relatively small role in undergraduate students' political participation as revealed in the study. This study, therefore, recommends:

- Policies be made by university administrators, educators, and the government so that a political education curriculum can be developed that will enforce political participation among undergraduate students at the university.
- Ensure that political activism and political activities at the university are alive and vibrant.
- The study hopes that there will be more studies in this specific research area about political participation among undergraduate students at university.

Lastly, it is the hope of the research that with the implementation of the political education curriculum, university students will increase their interest in political participation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers acknowledge the financial support provided by the Walter Sisulu University Research Directorate towards the postgraduate programme of the first author, Mr Vukani. In addition, the meticulous proofreading of this manuscript by Mr Nqaba Sobola is appreciated by the researchers.

---

## References

- Al-Quraan, H., Abu-Shanab, E., Banitaan, S., & Al-Tarawneh, H. (2017). Motivations for using social media: Comparative study based on cultural differences between American and Jordanian students. *International Journal of Social Media and Interactive Learning Environments*, 5(1), 48-61.
- Anwar, M., & Jan, M. (2010). Role of media in political socialization: The case of Pakistan. *Dialogue (Pakistan)*, 5(3), 212-227.
- Badaru, K. A., & Adu, E. O. (2021). The political awareness and participation of University Students in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 6(3), 1-24.
- Barhomi, C. (2015). The effectiveness of WhatsApp mobile learning activities guided by activity theory on students' knowledge management. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 6(3), 221-238.

- Cho, W. K. T. (1999). Naturalization, socialization, participation: Immigrants and (non-) voting. *The Journal of Politics*, 61(4), 1140-1155.
- Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Clark Plano, V. L., & Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative research designs: Selection and implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 236-264.
- Dalton, R. J. (1984). Cognitive mobilization and partisan dealignment in advanced industrial democracies. *The Journal of Politics*, 46(1), 264-284.
- Dalton, R. J., & Wattenberg, M. P. (Eds.). (2002). *Parties without partisans: Political change in advanced industrial democracies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Denny, K., & Doyle, O. (2008). Political interest, cognitive ability and personality: Determinants of voter turnout in Britain. *British Journal of Political Science*, 38(2), 291-310.
- Du Preez, M. (2018). *The use of social media by politicians and political parties*. Cape Town, South Africa: News24.
- Karatsoli, M., & Nathanail, E. (2020). Examining gender differences of social media use for activity planning and travel choices. *European Transport Research Review*, 12(1), 1-9.
- Kuotsu, K. (2016). Political awareness and its impact in political participation: A gender study in Nagaland, India. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 5(8), 190-197.
- Mbodila, M., Ndebele, C., & Muhandji, K. (2014). The effect of social media on student's engagement and collaboration in higher education: A case study of the use of Facebook at a South African university. *Journal of Communication*, 5(2), 115-125.
- Omotayo, F., & Folorunso, M. B. (2020). Use of social media for political participation by youths. *JeDEM-eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government*, 12(1), 132-157.
- Onuigbo, R. A., Eme, O. I., & Asadu, I. (2018). Political education in Nigeria: The mobilisation theory thesis perspective. *Art Human Open Acc Journal*, 2(5), 246-256.
- Resnick, D., & Thurlow, J. (Eds.). (2015). *African youth and the persistence of marginalization: Employment, politics, and prospects for change*. New York, NY: 711 Third Avenue Routledge.
- Tarantino, K., McDonough, J., & Hua, M. (2013). Effects of student engagement with social media on student learning: A review of literature. *The Journal of Technology in Student Affairs*, 1(8), 1-8.
- Utter, G. H. (2011). *Youth and political participation: A reference handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Vermeren, I. (2015). *Men vs. women: Who is more active on social media*. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/men-vs-women-active-social-media/>
- Yaseen, M., Mamdani, K. F., & Siddiqui, M. (2018). The role of political talk shows in raising political awareness among youth: A case study of University of Karachi. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies (IJHCS)*, 5(3), 90-108.

