

The social media revolution and political activism. A case study of Zimbabwe

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**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Media and Communication for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy, Bournemouth, 31 December 2024**

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Degree: PhD in Political Marketing And Communication

Department: Faculty in Media and Communication

Subject: The social media revolution and political activism. A case study of Zimbabwe.

Research interests: Parties, Democracy, Elections, Social media, Artificial intelligence, Data analytics, Autocracy

Date of Submission: 31 December 2024

Word Count: 88,352

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This study significantly contributes to the academic discourse by revealing how ZANU PF leveraged its unrestricted access to public and private communication spaces to shape voter decision-making and consolidate its political messaging. In contrast, the CCC and other progressive forces, constrained by state repression, adopted alternative strategies that heavily relied on social media platforms to bypass censorship and engage with the electorate. The findings illuminate the transformative potential of social media in disrupting authoritarian practices, amplifying dissent, and maintaining political dialogue in a context where physical spaces for free expression were systematically eroded. Notably, this research highlights how the CCC utilized WhatsApp's widespread reach to ensure that narratives critical of ZANU PF such as the government's use of legal harassment, resonated with voters, even in marginalized and rural areas. This study deepens scholarly understanding of social media as a critical tool for progressive groups in circumventing ZANU PF's dominance over state-controlled media and physical electoral spaces.

It underscores the dual role of social media for the ruling party: both as a challenge to its historical monopoly on political communication and as an opportunity to adapt to a more competitive and pluralistic media environment. The research also examines innovative tactics employed by progressive activists, such as using "ghost accounts" to anonymously critique the government and evade state surveillance. These strategies highlight the creativity of opposition actors in utilizing social media to resist repression. The findings also emphasize the transformative power of hashtags, which became essential tools for countering state propaganda, fostering calls for transparency, and promoting democratic engagement within the electoral process. The study demonstrates that social media played a double-edged role in Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian state during the 2023 election campaign. For opposition groups and progressive actors, platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter disrupted ZANU PF's monopoly on political messaging, empowering them to directly communicate with voters and challenge state-controlled narratives. In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on the role of social media in semi-authoritarian states such as Zimbabwe.

ABBREVIATIONS

CCC: Citizen Coalition for Change

ZANU-PF: Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front

ZPF: Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front

ZAPU: Zimbabwe African People's Union

ZUM: Zimbabwe Unity Movement

MDC: Movement for Democratic Change

MDC Alliance: Movement for Democratic Change Alliance

MDCA: Movement for Democratic Change Alliance

MDCT: Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai

ZIPRA: Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army

ZIPA: Zimbabwe People's Army

LHA: Lancaster House Agreement

GNU: Government of National Unity

GPA: Global Political Agreement

Acknowledgements

The journey to completing my PhD was a long and challenging one, filled with hard work and dedication over the course of four years, plus an additional year spent at the beginning carefully selecting the right university to conduct my research. After considering more than ten universities, I narrowed my choices down to three before ultimately selecting Bournemouth University for my PhD studies.

The primary reason for choosing Bournemouth University was its reputation as one of the leading institutions in the United Kingdom for political research, particularly research that is supported by technology. At Bournemouth University, I selected Professor Darren Lilleker as my Lead Supervisor due to his pioneering work in political communication, with a specific focus on political party and candidate communication and its connection to citizen and voter engagement. I also chose Dr. Antje Glück as my Joint Supervisor because of her expertise in digital media.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Darren Lilleker and Dr. Antje Glück for their support and guidance throughout this long and sometimes stressful journey towards achieving my PhD. Professor Lilleker provided invaluable assistance and was a guiding presence throughout my studies, while Dr. Glück offered insightful perspectives that helped shape the direction of my research.

Finally, I am proud to have completed my PhD, which was the culmination of thousands of hours of research over the course of four years.

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I dedicate my PhD study to my parents.

To my father, Joseph Nyambiya, for his unwavering encouragement and for instilling in me the mantra that "you never stop learning."

To my mother, Petronella Nyambiya, for "building" and "shaping" me into the man I am today.

Secondly, I dedicate this PhD to my wife, Jo, who was my pillar of strength throughout this journey, offering love and compassion during the long and arduous process.

Thirdly, this research is dedicated to my son, Bradley, and my daughter, Gabrielle, for their patience and understanding throughout this journey.

Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my siblings, Isabel, Esther, and Misheck.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 Democracy and Sub-Saharan Africa

In recent years, Sub-Saharan Africa has increasingly been recognized as a key global player, driven by factors such as rapid population growth, consistent economic development, expansive free trade areas, diverse ecosystems, and vast natural resources worth trillions of dollars (International Monetary Fund, 2023; Katoka & Dostal, 2022; Dietz, 2017). This growth in both population and economy has coincided with a significant rise in the use of social media by citizens and social movements to mobilize in Sub-Saharan Africa, while political parties have begun leveraging digital technologies for election campaigns (Olorunnisola and Douai, 2013). However, the situation is complex and fragmented, with studies focusing on usage in different countries and by various actors but lacking a comprehensive view across nations or the Sub-Saharan African region. The role of social media in advancing democracy depends heavily on the participation of people in Sub-Saharan Africa, as seen in Ghana, where digital platforms have been used effectively to mobilize voters during elections (Dzisah, 2018). Digital platforms play a crucial role in mobilizing citizens to focus on important issues and shaping public opinion in many African countries, thus engaging them in the political processes of governance and democratization (Kalyango, 2011; Montero, 2009). The strategic use of digital technologies was notably demonstrated during the contested 2007 Kenya election, where social media showcased its potential to assist in monitoring elections, mobilizing citizens, and encouraging political engagement (Nyabuga and Mudhai, 2009). Furthermore, digital technologies have become integral to everyday life in Kenya, where platforms like X, Facebook, and WhatsApp are used to create and share political narratives, often without the fear of censorship that characterizes offline communication (Nyabola, 2018; Otieno and Mukhongo, 2015).

This case study lays the foundation for understanding the influence and impact of digital technologies in the semi-authoritarian democracies of Sub-Saharan Africa. To fully grasp the social media revolution and political activism, the study shifts focus from a broad Sub-Saharan African perspective to examining political campaigns in young, fragile, and unstable

democracies. It is crucial to understand this revolution within the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, where digital platforms have sparked uprisings across countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Malawi, Uganda, Chad, Sudan, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The continent has long been considered economically and socially underdeveloped compared to the rest of the world. Initially, authoritarian regimes effectively controlled the media space using legal and extralegal measures, successfully managing traditional media like radio, television, and newspapers (Kalyango, 2011; Moyo, 2009). However, the advent of digital technologies has democratized and expanded access to information, with social media flourishing across the continent and being widely accessed via mobile phones (Bisschoft, 2017; Sebeelo, 2020). This shift has sparked significant debate among scholars about whether social media can provide a platform for diverse views in repressive states. This study offers an opportunity to explore the limits of the social media revolution within semi-democratic regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa. It also builds on earlier literature that positioned social media as a potential alternative platform for expression in the face of repression, examining how new media might foster democracy (Kupe, 2004; Moyo, 2009; Mudhai, 2004).

This case study from a Sub-Saharan African perspective underscores that digital technologies have been harnessed to articulate political demands for human rights, accountability, and good governance (Gukurume, 2017). Social media has empowered the youth, making digital platforms an integral part of daily life for many Africans. This, in turn, has attracted political parties eager to exploit social media for political communication. The importance of social media is highlighted by research showing that as urbanization expands in Sub-Saharan Africa, a growing, tech-savvy youth is adopting innovative technologies to demand transparency from political elites, aiming to improve their lives and communities (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019a). The younger generation, driven by technology, is at the forefront of demanding transparency from semi-authoritarian regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars in the region have also explored whether there is a correlation between youth engagement on social media and their interest in politics (Kamau, 2017; Mukhongo, 2014; Mukhongo and Macharia, 2016; Otieno and Mukhongo, 2015). Studies have found that platforms like Facebook provide youth with access to

political information in appealing formats, and digital media is believed to have reinvigorated political participation among educated urban youth (Otieno and Mukhongo, 2015). Given that youth are the largest demographic in Sub-Saharan Africa and are deeply engaged with digital technologies, they have become a critical target for both political parties and civil society in efforts to influence electoral outcomes. Youth have become a decisive factor in election campaigns, as demonstrated by the strategic use of social media by opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema, which played a key role in his 2021 presidential victory in Zambia. Therefore, there is a clear need for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of digital technologies in the context of elections across Sub-Saharan Africa.

1.1.1 Difficulties in Leveraging Social Media in Sub-Saharan Africa

While there is evidence that social media has positively influenced democratization in some countries, this study also examines the challenges of a social media revolution within semi-democratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa. Research shows that governments in these regions are utilizing digital technologies to conduct surveillance on citizens (Karekwaivanane, 2019) and employing other repressive tactics to undermine the effectiveness of digital platforms. Indeed, digital technologies have posed new challenges to authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa, which previously had near-absolute control over the flow of information through direct influence and manipulation of traditional media. These technologies have allowed citizens to access unrestricted and uncensored information on governance and political matters, unsettling autocratic regimes as the informed citizenry began to hold their governments accountable. The increased access to information by citizens has led authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa to view digital technologies as a threat to their grip on power (Sebeelo, 2020). The perceived threat from the democratization of information and the creation of new alternative spaces that could enable freedom of expression forced these regimes to develop strategies to undermine the power of social media.

As a result, authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa have implemented various repressive measures, such as introducing a social media tax in Uganda and frequently shutting down the internet in countries like Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Furthermore, regimes in countries like Ethiopia, Uganda, Madagascar, and Tanzania have justified their attempts to control and regulate social media by citing the need for peace and national security (Sebeelo, 2020). This underscores the fact that because social media platforms have provided citizens in sub-Saharan Africa with opportunities to access information, organize, and hold their governments accountable, authoritarian regimes perceive digital technologies as a national security threat. Consequently, citizens' online activities are being closely monitored using advanced surveillance technology imported from China and Israel by governments in countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, and Rwanda (Srinivasan et al., 2019). Additionally, authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa have blocked digital communications and monitored online content (Sebeelo, 2020). For instance, the Sudanese government established a 'Cyber-Jihad' unit to monitor online activities and dissent from activists and civil society leaders (Lamoureaux and Sureau, 2019). The severe crackdown on online users is evident from the numerous instances where political opponents and online activists have been jailed or even killed in various countries, demonstrating the fear that social media instills in African political elites (Sebeelo, 2020). However, on the other hand, these autocratic governments have also benefited from the increased use of digital platforms by citizens, as they can now more efficiently monitor and conduct surveillance on individuals using social media (Ayalew, 2019).

1.2 The Role of Civil Society and the Potential Impact of Social Media in Sub-Saharan Africa

1.2.1 The Potential Impact of Social Media Utilization by Civil Society

Social media has been shown to significantly facilitate protests and political engagement in authoritarian regimes, particularly where online communication is widespread, compared to

societies with limited digital activity (Skjerdal and Gebru, 2020). Platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) play a crucial role in mobilizing citizens for collective action and shaping political debate during protests (Howard et al., 2011; O'Donnell, 2011; Piechota et al., 2020). Mobilization is defined as the process by which a passive group of individuals in a society is transformed into an active collective pursuing common goals or coerced into political participation by an authoritarian government (Cox et al., 1998). Scholars argue that social media is evolving into what has been termed the "new protest drums" (Mare, 2014). Through its extensive connectivity, social media has the power to unite large groups around a single cause or rally support for protests and other forms of resistance (Beck, 2016). Digital platforms have become essential tools for protesters to organize, strategize, and gather, regardless of time and place (Gukurume, 2017). In particular, scholars have described the Arab Spring uprisings as "Twitter and Facebook revolutions" to highlight the unique ways protesters used social media (Cottle, 2011). However, some scholars caution against overly optimistic views of social media's role in resistance, warning that it may be naive to believe that access to digital platforms alone can influence protests (Wasserman, 2010; Willems, 2005).

The use of social media by civil society for political purposes is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa (Iwata, 2015), leading to significant debate among researchers about the effectiveness of digital technologies for political communication in semi-authoritarian democracies. This case study offers a framework within the sub-Saharan African context to explore how social media enhances civil society's influence. Digital platforms have been described as enabling protests or "mini revolutions" that challenge government policies or spotlight important issues (Daniels, 2016). Moreover, studies suggest that digital technologies have contributed to strengthening civil society in sub-Saharan Africa (Salgado, 2012). Political uprisings facilitated by online participation have occurred across the region, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Chad, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, where university students demanded free education (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2017). Protests have been defined as a popular mobilization tool for people with collective grievances (Alexander, 2010) and have sometimes arisen in response to macroeconomic policies that primarily affect the youth (Chiumbu, 2015). In South Africa,

protests often combine traditional mobilization methods, such as toyi-toying (a militant march-dance), stay-aways, road blockades, and sit-ins, with media engagement to convey their message to a broader audience (Chiumbu, 2015). Protests have become a frequent occurrence in South Africa, where many of the poor feel excluded from the benefits of democracy. These protests are often organized by activists using social media to broadcast their activities, occasionally drawing attention from mainstream media (Bosch, Wasserman, and Chuma, 2018). In countries like Nigeria, youth have effectively used social media applications to mobilize protests, asserting their influence in shaping protest discourse and re-engaging with their communities (Iwilade, 2013). However, studies note that authoritarian governments are often reluctant to broadcast news of emerging protests, with such information frequently reaching the public first through social media channels, long before official media outlets decide how to frame the events (Skjerdal and Gebru, 2020).

1.2.2 The Potential Impact of Social Media in Sub-Saharan Africa

The increased use of digital platforms has been strengthened in contexts where traditional media has fallen short, with social media-driven citizen journalism empowering democratic processes in certain nations within sub-Saharan Africa (Kpaduwa, 2014). Digital technologies have emerged as crucial battlegrounds for information, with the potential to drive Afrocentric political transformations (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019). In countries like Malawi and Zambia, social media has played a significant role in transitions from autocracy to democracy, leading some to describe these changes as a social media transformation (Mutsvairo, Ragnedda, Orgeret, 2021). The influence of social media is argued to be reshaping the economic, cultural, social, and political landscapes of sub-Saharan Africa (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019a; Mutsvairo & Ronning, 2020; Nothias, 2020), although this digital revolution is occurring at varying speeds across the diverse continent.

Researchers have thus described the internet as a medium of liberation, enabling users to create, publish, and disseminate information without needing to pass through traditional gatekeepers (Diamond, 2010). Importantly, studies have indicated that social media platforms serve as

venues for political debate and alternative spaces where civilians gather, allowing significant movements to gain the attention of global NGOs and activist organizations (Anderson et al., 2018). Social media provides users with platforms to express their political views and engage with issues they consider important (Selnes and Orgeret, 2020). Scholars assert that digital technologies have demonstrated the capacity to enhance political mobilization and foster political change in sub-Saharan Africa (Kalyango and Adu-Kumi, 2013). For instance, social media has provided Ugandans in the diaspora with a communication platform that supports the free flow of information and promotes participatory democracy (Javuru, 2012). In South Africa, research has shown that digital platforms became a focal point for activists and citizens who used social media to voice their concerns about political repression and economic mismanagement (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017). However, the full potential of social media has not been thoroughly explored or realized across the subcontinent, and this study aims to investigate its potential as a vehicle for change within the context of highly autocratic regimes.

1.3 Zimbabwe as a Relevant Case Study for Exploring the Further Potential of Social Media in Sub-Saharan Africa

1.3.1 Zimbabwe: A Relevant Case Study

Scholars have argued that social media holds significant potential to enhance democracy in Zimbabwe, even under an authoritarian regime (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019). Furthermore, research indicates that the use of social media for political purposes in Zimbabwe has become deeply embedded among political parties and citizens, a trend confirmed by studies conducted in other parts of the world (see Gukurume, 2017; Manganga, 2012; Mare, 2018; Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2014). Despite geographic and class disparities—where radio is more prevalent in rural areas among poor farmers, and television and social media are more popular in urban areas with youth and the working class—digital technologies are playing a crucial role in Zimbabwe. These platforms not only facilitate the sharing of information but also provide a space for diverse voices to meet and debate the future (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017). The use of social media in political campaigns has been increasing, with political parties strategically utilizing digital platforms in recent election cycles (Chibuwe, 2020). Social media can serve as a platform where

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citizens engage, and democracy thrives as they exercise their right to free expression online (Mutsvairo, 2013). Studies have highlighted that civil society in Zimbabwe has increasingly relied on social media to reach young and first-time voters in recent elections (Mare, 2018), leading to significant debate among researchers about the effectiveness of social media in a semi-authoritarian democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. This case study uses the Zimbabwean context to explore how social media enhances civil society's influence in the region.

Moreover, this case study serves as a foundation for understanding the influence and impact of digital technologies in a semi-authoritarian democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. To gain a clearer understanding of the social media revolution and political activism, the study narrows its focus from the broader sub-Saharan African perspective to the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe. Gathering empirical data on the so-called social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe is critical, as digital technologies now pose a significant challenge to politicians, with more people using social media to access information and interact with others (Chibuwe, 2020). This has sparked debate among scholars about whether the use of digital platforms by political parties can influence voter decision-making in a semi-authoritarian democracy. This case study, from a sub-Saharan African perspective, offers an avenue to investigate how social media impacts the campaign strategies of major political parties, such as ZANU PF (ZPF) and Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). Additionally, as Zimbabwe remains a repressive state, digital technologies have become the best option for Zimbabweans, both domestically and abroad, to freely and openly discuss national and political issues (Moyo, 2009; Mpofu, 2013; Peel, 2009). Digital platforms can be tools for political parties, civil society, and citizens to voice their opinions in Zimbabwe's pseudo-democratic environment, where repression is prevalent (Mutsvairo, 2013).

The use of digital technologies by political actors in Zimbabwe has largely been driven by the "bandwagon effect," where political competitors with an online presence pressured others to follow suit (Ward and Gibson, 1998). As Zimbabwean political actors increasingly adopt social media for political communication, research has shown that the social and political context in

which parties operate has significantly changed in the 21st century. This is especially true with the global rise of social media, which offers numerous opportunities for meaningful and equal participation (Van Gyampo, 2017), leading to genuine changes in political communication and the distribution of power. This research offers insights from a Zimbabwean perspective on how social media influences discourse, agenda-setting, and the flow of influence around elections. Studies indicate that digital technologies have been used as tools for bringing about change and liberating oppressed populations in sub-Saharan Africa (Mutsvairo, 2020). The social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe provide a compelling case study of a semi-authoritarian democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, where the use of social media for political communication has dramatically increased. Research has shown that internet-based political activities, such as posting and distributing campaign information and consuming political content, have the potential to increase political participation in Zimbabwe (see Gukurume, 2017; Manganga, 2012; Mare, 2018; Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2014). Moreover, studies have found that social media can be effectively used for digital political campaigns linked to offline activities, such as doorstep campaigns, to positively impact citizen mobilization (Mare, 2015). Ultimately, digital technologies in Zimbabwe offer opportunities to open political space and foster the growth of democracy in a country where political repression is evident (Chibuwe and Ureke, 2016).

1.3.2 The Potential Challenges Social Media Poses to the Authoritarian Regime in Zimbabwe

While there are hopes that digital technologies could be leveraged to democratize Zimbabwe, this outcome is not assured. Studies indicate that the authoritarian regime continues to employ repressive tactics to diminish the influence of digital technologies on national politics. Indeed, earlier research found that by the late 1990s, the Zimbabwean government had already begun policing the media and silencing dissenting voices, leading to the internet becoming a critical alternative space for citizens to gather and discuss shared concerns (Moyo, 2009). Consequently, Zimbabwe serves as a pertinent case study of citizens migrating online in response to repression. This is supported by research suggesting that if the previous political climate was characterized

by a restricted public sphere with controlled media and limited participation, the emergence of decentralized, citizen-driven online media represents a fundamentally different sphere (Skjerdal and Gebru, 2020). This shift has sparked significant debate among scholars over whether social media can truly function as a public sphere offering diverse views in a semi-authoritarian democracy. This study provides a framework within the Zimbabwean context to explore the limitations of the social media revolution in semi-democratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, the Zimbabwean government continues to engage in subtle forms of communication surveillance, which significantly shapes the nature and tone of online political discourse (Mare, 2015). Furthermore, the government monitored and attempted to control citizen protests in 2016, with social and political movements like #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka using Facebook and WhatsApp to mobilize dissent against Robert Mugabe's 37-year rule (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2017). To fully understand the challenges Zimbabwe faces in transitioning to a democracy, it is crucial to comprehend the country's political context.

1.4 The Zimbabwean System: Political Actors, Political Parties, and Civil Society

1.4.1 Background on Zimbabwe

Formerly known as Rhodesia, named after the imperialist Cecil Rhodes, Zimbabwe was part of the British Empire from 1890 and only gained independence in April 1980 after a prolonged armed struggle against white minority rule, led by ZANU PF and PF ZAPU. The country's birth through conflict significantly shaped its political landscape. Initially, Zimbabwe had a ceremonial president, but the legacy of conflict led to the establishment of an executive presidency in 1987, which retained a war-like mentality and was used to consolidate absolute power. Today, the executive branch includes the President, Vice President, Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Attorney General, and Prosecutor General. The Parliament comprises 270 members in the House of Assembly, with 210 members directly elected from single constituencies and 60 women elected through proportional representation from ten six-seat constituencies based on the country's provinces. The Senate has 80 members, including 60 elected through proportional representation using party lists, which must alternate between men and women with a woman at

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the top. Additionally, 20 seats are reserved: two for people with disabilities and 18 for traditional chiefs. Zimbabwe also has a directly elected local government system consisting of both urban and rural councils, with elections for the Presidency, Parliament, and local government held every five years.

Moreover, the judiciary system in Zimbabwe is headed by the Constitutional Court, followed by the Supreme Court, High Court, and lower courts overseen by magistrates. The state security apparatus includes Intelligence services, the Police, Air Force, and Army. Although Zimbabwe is officially a constitutional democracy, it operates in practice as a semi-authoritarian regime where the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF/ZPF), has captured the state, judiciary, and security services. This state capture enables the ruling party to employ repressive tactics, including the persecution of political opponents and suppression of freedom of speech and association. Additionally, state capture allows ZANU PF to interfere with the Zimbabwe Elections Commission (ZEC) to secure favorable electoral outcomes (Aljazeera, 2023b; AU Observer Mission, 2023; EU Observer Mission, 2023, SADC Observer Mission, 2023). The ruling party also maintains direct control over state media, including the country's only TV station, radio stations, and print media. Furthermore, ZANU PF exerts indirect influence over most private media organizations through ownership by party elites, ensuring that its political narrative dominates traditional media, marginalizing opposition voices and progressive forces.

1.4.2 The Ruling Party: Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF)

Zimbabwe's ruling party was established on August 8, 1963, originally known as the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). The party emerged from a split with the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) due to internal conflicts and differing strategies on how to end white minority rule in what was then Southern Rhodesia. On August 22, 1963, ZANU's founding president, Ndabaningi Sithole, outlined the party's vision, stating that once in power, it would implement land reform and ensure majority democratic rule. ZANU distinguished itself from other nationalist movements by adopting a more confrontational stance against white minority

rule. The party subsequently initiated an armed struggle aimed at gaining independence from the British Empire, achieving black majority rule, and ensuring equitable land redistribution. The liberation struggle was jointly fought by ZANU and ZAPU under the Patriotic Front (PF) banner, opposing the white minority government until a negotiated settlement was reached in December 1979 through the Lancaster House Agreement.

During the 1980 general election campaign, however, the PF parties contested separately as ZANU–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) and Patriotic Front–ZAPU (PF–ZAPU). ZANU–PF, led by Robert Mugabe, won the election, while Nkomo and his PF–ZAPU maintained a strong base in the Matabeleland provinces. ZANU PF’s victory in 1980 was largely attributed to its role in reclaiming the nation from British rule and seizing power from white settlers. This victory led to Robert Mugabe’s 37-year rule, characterized by repressive tactics, until Emmerson Mnangagwa assumed power following a coup on November 24, 2017. Mnangagwa then legitimized his rise to power by winning a controversial election on July 30, 2018, amid accusations of election rigging, thus beginning his elected term in office.

Since 1980, ZANU PF’s governance has been marked by repression, resulting in a prolonged economic, social, and political crisis over the past 20 years. In the 2023 presidential election, President Mnangagwa narrowly secured victory, and the ruling party nearly achieved a two-thirds majority, despite widespread allegations of election rigging in a poll deemed neither free nor fair by election observers (Aljazeera, 2023b; AU Observer Mission, 2023; EU Observer Mission, 2023; SADC Observer Mission, 2023).

1.4.3 The Main Opposition: Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC)

On the other hand, the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), was founded in September 1999 with the late Morgan Tsvangirai as its first president. The MDC provided ZANU PF with its first significant electoral challenge since the ruling party's formation more than twenty years earlier. After a long battle with colon cancer, Tsvangirai passed away on February 14, 2018. His death triggered a power struggle among the three MDC-T Vice

Presidents, but Nelson Chamisa, a charismatic 40-year-old pastor-turned-lawyer, successfully outmanoeuvred his rivals, Thokozani Khupe and Elias Mudzuri, to take control of the party's structures. Chamisa was formally appointed party president by the MDC-T national council and later elected by party structures at the Congress in February 2019.

Continuing Tsvangirai's legacy, Chamisa allied with seven smaller political parties and contested the 2018 elections under the banner of the MDC Alliance. Chamisa and the MDC Alliance lost the 2018 election to Mnangagwa amid widespread allegations of intimidation and electoral rigging, which led to an unsuccessful challenge in the Constitutional Court. Due to internal conflicts within the MDC Alliance, Chamisa and his supporters eventually formed a new party, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), on January 22, 2022 (Moyo, 2022). In the 2023 presidential election, Chamisa narrowly lost, and the CCC secured 103 seats in Parliament, although the election was widely criticized as flawed by various observer missions (Aljazeera, 2023b; AU Observer Mission, 2023; EU Observer Mission, 2023; SADC Observer Mission, 2023).

1.4.4 The 2023 Election Campaign in Zimbabwe

The 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe mirrored the 2018 election, once again pitting the 80-year-old Mnangagwa leading ZANU PF against the much younger 45-year-old Nelson Chamisa, who led the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). The campaign was particularly captivating, taking independent observers, politicians, civil society, and citizens on a rollercoaster ride through the complex and often contentious political landscape dominated by ZANU PF and the CCC. The campaign unfolded amidst allegations of an uneven playing field, where the ruling party had extensive access to the electorate through physical spaces and traditional media, while the opposition encountered significant barriers in door-to-door campaigns and had limited media access. Chamisa and the CCC aimed to solidify their strongholds in urban areas, Matabeleland, and reclaim support in Masvingo and Manicaland. Additionally, Chamisa sought to diminish ZANU PF's dominance in its strongholds across the Mashonaland provinces and the Midlands. However, President Mnangagwa and ZANU PF resorted to repressive tactics, including vote-

buying, intimidation, and violence in rural areas (AU Observer Mission, 2023; EU Observer Mission, 2023; SADC Observer Mission, 2023). The ruling party was also criticized for abusing state resources, using vote-buying, and leveraging incumbency by deploying security services to hinder and interfere with the opposition's campaign (AU Observer Mission, 2023; EU Observer Mission, 2023; SADC Observer Mission, 2023).

The CCC faced significant restrictions during the campaign, including being largely barred from running advertisements on state media. As a result, Nelson Chamisa and the CCC had to rely heavily on digital technologies to communicate and engage with voters, citizens, and the international community. The CCC used social media to broadcast its political programs and policies to its supporters. Additionally, the opposition leveraged its global supporter base to conduct online fundraising activities for its campaign on platforms like X (The Zimbabwean, 2023b). Meanwhile, ZANU PF utilized its activists on social media to propagate the narrative that it was the only patriotic party genuinely serving the interests of the citizens, while portraying the opposition and civil society as puppets of the West.

1.4.5 Civil Society in Zimbabwe

Civil society played a crucial role in the 2023 Zimbabwe election campaign, where it was accused by the ruling party of serving Western interests, while the main opposition portrayed civil society as a watchdog of the country's unstable, fragile, and semi-authoritarian democracy. Civil society can be broadly defined as the collection of non-governmental organizations and institutions that encompass various cultural, religious, and special interest groups, representing and advocating for the interests and will of citizens, as well as enforcing social norms (Cooper, 2018). During the 2023 election cycle, a citizen group called Team Pachedu led an aggressive and persistent social media campaign to hold the Zimbabwe Elections Commission (ZEC) accountable, as the commission faced allegations of voter suppression and manipulation of the voters' roll (Ndebele, 2023).

Another significant group, Project Vote 263, effectively used social media to pressure ZEC into revising its voter registration figures upwards after initially providing misleading information about the low number of registered voters (Chino'no, 2022). Project Vote 263 utilized social media to advocate for elections and voter registration. Additionally, Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, a network of over 350 non-governmental organizations, used its collective voice to highlight issues of violence, an uneven electoral playing field, and the need for transparency within ZEC through social media platforms.

1.5 General overview

This introduction has outlined the research focus on the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe. The case study is structured as follows: The Literature Review chapter explores the frameworks and theories that underpin this research; the Methodology chapter analyses the use of a mixed-method research design through both quantitative and qualitative approaches; the Analysis chapter presents and examines the empirical data; and the Conclusion interprets the findings on the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe.

The Literature Review chapter delves into the frameworks and theories that form the foundation of this research. It begins by exploring how digital technologies have the potential to enhance political communication for parties and candidates, with a focus on how social media allows political actors to directly engage with the electorate, especially when physical meetings are challenging due to life commitments or political barriers. The primary goal of political communication is to secure electoral victories and access resources to gain voter support (Jackson, Lilleker, and Pack, 2010). Next, the chapter discusses theories on how digital technologies facilitate direct interaction between political actors and supporters, providing new opportunities for self-publicity aimed at traditional media (Samuele and Simone, 2020; Ward & Vedel, 2006).

The chapter then examines the potential of social media as a campaign tool, highlighting studies that show increasing reliance on social media for various aspects of life, including

communication, entertainment, financial transactions, news updates, education, and government services (Leong, 2019). This section also investigates the potential of hashtags as mobilization tools, the use of WhatsApp, and the impact of disinformation campaigns. Following this, the chapter explores frameworks on how social media might alter power dynamics in politics between elites and ordinary citizens, with research indicating a widespread adoption of social media among political actors and citizens alike (Bright et al., 2017). The same section considers theories on social media's potential to level the political playing field and provide a platform for diverse viewpoints, offering numerous possibilities for meaningful and equal participation (Van Gyampo, 2017).

The next section analyses how digital technologies might create the conditions for a public sphere to emerge, with research suggesting that social media can contribute to the formation of alternative public spheres where citizenship is expressed in different ways (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020). The chapter also looks at theories on social media's potential to bolster political influence within the sub-Saharan African context, where digital platforms have opened up new opportunities for political engagement and campaigning (Ndavula and Mueni, 2014). This section examines how authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa perceive digital technologies as a threat, the challenges of using social media on the continent, the potential for digital platforms to spread disinformation for political gain, and social media's role as a public sphere facilitating divergent views in the region.

The chapter then turns to frameworks that explain how social media could increase civil society's influence in sub-Saharan Africa, with research showing that digital technologies can strengthen democracy and civil society (Salgado, 2012). It explores theories on how digital technologies can be used as tools for mobilization by civil society, how social media can encourage online political participation, and how hashtags can be used as mobilization tools by civil society in the region. Lastly, the chapter examines theories on social media's potential to enhance the effectiveness of political campaigns in Zimbabwe, with scholars suggesting that digital technologies could be game-changers in promoting democracy in a repressive state

(Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019). This section looks at theories on how digital technologies can amplify political actors' influence in Zimbabwe, social media's role as a public sphere for diverse views, the use of hashtags by civil society for mobilization, and the strategic use of digital technologies for disinformation by political actors in Zimbabwe. The chapter concludes by identifying research gaps.

The next chapter outlines the Methodology, explaining how the thesis employs critical realism to understand the world through an objective and scientific framework, building on this understanding to explore how individuals interpret phenomena and their impact on practices and culture (Greene and Caracelli, 1997). The study also used extensive qualitative research as a data collection tool, conducting semi-structured interviews during the pre-election period and email interviews in the post-election period. Additionally, a limited quantitative approach was used to analyse data on political actors and citizens, such as the number of X followers, growth in follower numbers, and engagement data, which were cross-referenced with other sources, including media reports. Furthermore, a content analysis of WhatsApp messages was conducted, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The thesis contributes to the understanding of the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe, a semi-authoritarian democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, and is structured around the following objectives:

- a) To analyse how social media influences discourse, agenda-setting, and the flow of influence during elections.
- b) To investigate the impact of social media on the major political parties, specifically ZANU PF and Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC).
- c) To explore how social media enhances the influence of civil society.
- d) To examine the limitations of the social media revolution within semi-democratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa.

The thesis employs a mixed-methods research design, where a limited quantitative analysis is used to map out the landscape, while qualitative research is utilized to gain deeper understanding and explanations (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). This approach allows the study to incorporate both deductive and inductive reasoning to explore the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe.

The Analysis Chapter presents a comprehensive range of findings, including direct quotes from interviews with political actors, civil society leaders, and political activists, as well as excerpts from citizens' X accounts and an analysis of the ripple effects of social media posts on WhatsApp groups. Additionally, data on the number of X followers, the growth in follower numbers, and engagement metrics were analysed to corroborate statements made in interviews, with this data being cross verified using other sources such as media reports. This chapter delves into the influence and impact of social media's political use in a semi-authoritarian democracy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Furthermore, the Analysis Chapter highlights the crucial role of hashtags as key tools in supporting political campaigns during the 2023 election cycle. The strategic use of social media significantly aided progressive forces in their efforts to level the political playing field during the elections. The WhatsApp platform also played a decisive role as the largest social media space during the Zimbabwean voting campaign.

The Conclusion Chapter unpacks the empirical data related to the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe. This case study helps to understand the influence and impact of social media during an election campaign within a semi-authoritarian democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. The research was conducted to shed light on how digital platforms were utilized by major political parties and civil society during the 2023 Zimbabwe election campaign to influence voter decision-making.

Importantly, the thesis focuses on Zimbabwe, a semi-authoritarian democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, which is part of the Global South and exhibits different political dynamics compared to the more extensively studied countries of the Global North. The study addresses the complexities between political parties and civil society during an election in a context where there is limited understanding of these interactions.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction.

The Literature Review chapter explores the frameworks and theories that underpin this research. It begins by examining models that illustrate how digital technologies can improve political communication for parties and candidates. Social media can significantly enable political actors to communicate directly with the electorate, particularly when face-to-face interactions are hindered by personal commitments or political obstacles. The main goal of political communication is to win elections and secure resources, which are then used to garner more votes (Jackson, Lilleker, and Pack, 2010). Additionally, this chapter explores theories on how digital technologies can enable political actors to engage directly with supporters and citizens. These technologies have primarily improved communication between parties and their supporters and offered politicians new avenues for self-promotion in traditional media (Samuele and Simone, 2020; Ward & Vedel, 2006).

The chapter further explores several key areas. It examines frameworks regarding social media's potential as a campaign tool. Research indicates that people increasingly rely on social media for various aspects of life, including communication, entertainment, financial transactions, news, education, and government services (Leong, 2019). This section delves into theories about hashtags as tools for mobilization, the potential use of WhatsApp, and the impact of disinformation campaigns.

Next, the chapter analyzes how social media could shift power dynamics between political elites and ordinary citizens. Studies show a significant rise in social media use among all types of political actors and citizens (Bright et al., 2017). This section also looks at theories on social media's ability to level the political playing field and offer a platform for diverse viewpoints, with research highlighting its capacity to foster meaningful and equal participation (Van Gyampo, 2017).

The chapter then examines frameworks on how digital technologies might foster the emergence of a public sphere. Research suggests that social media could help form alternative public spheres where citizenship is practiced differently (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020). Another section focuses on the potential for social media to bolster political influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, where digital platforms have provided politicians new ways to engage with citizens and conduct campaigns (Ndavula and Mueni, 2014). This part also considers how digital technologies are perceived as threats by authoritarian regimes in the region, the challenges of using social media in Sub-Saharan Africa, and its potential to spread disinformation while serving as a public sphere for diverse views.

Furthermore, the chapter analyzes how social media could amplify civil society's influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Research highlights digital technologies' role in supporting democracy and strengthening civil society in the region (Salgado, 2012). This section explores theories on how civil society could use digital technologies and social media for mobilization and encouraging online political participation, including the use of hashtags.

Lastly, the chapter reviews theories on how social media might enhance the effectiveness of political campaigns in Zimbabwe, where digital technologies have been seen as potential game changers in promoting democracy within a repressive state (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019). It examines the potential for digital technologies to increase political actors' influence in Zimbabwe, function as a public sphere for diverse views, serve as mobilization tools for civil society, and be used strategically for disinformation by political actors. The chapter concludes with an in-depth look at the research gaps.

2.2 The Transformative Potential of Digital Technologies in Enhancing Political Communication

Digital technologies possess a profound potential to revolutionize communication between political actors and the electorate. In particular, social media has emerged as a dynamic and

versatile platform, enabling political figures to expand their reach and engage in meaningful interactions with a diverse and wide-ranging audience (Peeters et al., 2023). As Lilleker observes, “Political parties have increasingly adopted digital tools to engage, persuade, and mobilize voters, recognizing the potential for real-time interaction and feedback” (Lilleker, 2015, p. 54). This shift represents a significant departure from traditional methods of political communication, which were often one-dimensional and non-interactive. Political actors now deploy emotional appeals and carefully crafted narratives on social media to advance their agendas, critique adversaries, and garner public support (Borah, 2016; Metz, Kruikemeier, and Lecheler, 2020). Furthermore, Reinemann et al. (2020) emphasize the transformative role of these tools, stating, “Without social media and other digital communication tools, the mobilization of populist supporters would be much slower and less extensive, highlighting the importance of these tools for modern political actors” (Reinemann et al., 2020, p. 153). The internet has fundamentally enhanced the ability of parties to communicate with their supporters while simultaneously providing political figures with unprecedented opportunities for self-promotion through traditional media channels (McLoughlin, 2020; Ward & Vedel, 2006).

In today’s fast-paced world, where immediacy often defines success, digital platforms are essential for political figures striving to connect effectively with their audiences. These tools offer solutions to the constraints of traditional, in-person communication by providing alternatives that are both time-efficient and far-reaching (Chadwick and Dennis, 2017). The accessibility and versatility of digital technologies have opened up new channels for political actors to interact directly with potential voters, breaking down barriers that once separated representatives from their constituents (Elmer, Langlois, and McKelvey, 2012; Larsson, 2016; Wen, 2014). By leveraging the power of social media, candidates can bypass traditional news outlets and present their narratives unfiltered, reaching followers directly and amplifying their messages (Kreiss, 2016; Metz, Kruikemeier, and Lecheler, 2020). Moreover, these platforms enable individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to form connections with both acquaintances and strangers, a feature that political actors exploit to develop targeted and

personalized engagement strategies through email, websites, and social media campaigns (Lalancette and Tourigny-Koné, 2017).

Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) are increasingly viewed as tools capable of influencing public debates and shaping media narratives in the offline world (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner, 2019). These technologies significantly narrow the gap between political figures and citizens, fostering more direct and interactive representation that strengthens democratic engagement (McLoughlin, 2020). Social media platforms also provide political actors with opportunities to craft relatable public personas, enhancing perceptions of authenticity and intimacy with their electorate (McGregor, 2018). The overarching aim of these digital strategies is twofold: to solidify the loyalty of existing supporters and to propagate political agendas and narratives to the broader public, including media organizations (Kreiss, 2016; Kruikemeier, Gattermann, and Vliegenthart, 2018). This shift underscores the growing imperative for political actors to adopt digital tools as central components of their communication and engagement strategies (Elmer, Langlois, and McKelvey, 2012).

The integration of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube into political campaigns has further transformed the landscape of political communication. These platforms allow visitors to interact directly with parties and candidates by leaving comments, asking questions, and even engaging in debates that others can read and respond to, creating a dynamic, participatory environment (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016). Beyond interaction, websites serve a functional purpose, acting as hubs for resource generation, member recruitment, donation collection, and supporter mobilization (Jackson, 2006). Voters who actively engage with well-designed and informative political websites are more likely to develop positive perceptions of the political process (Mochla & Tsourvakas, 2023). Furthermore, the participatory nature of modern websites means that control over their evolution is no longer solely in the hands of designers. Visitors now share ownership of these platforms, influencing their development through their interactions and contributions (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009).

As digital platforms continue to evolve, political parties have had to adjust their communication strategies. The emphasis has shifted from merely disseminating information to fostering user participation and interaction, reflecting a broader trend toward inclusive and dialogue-driven communication (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). However, despite the growing reliance on social media for campaign purposes, political actors still face challenges in fully understanding and leveraging the unique capabilities of each platform (Veneti, Lilleker, and Jackson, 2022). As Lilleker highlights, “Campaign strategies now focus heavily on digital persuasion, with social media offering a platform for direct engagement with voters on a mass scale” (Lilleker, 2015, p. 72). The internet’s multifaceted nature allows it to fulfill various functions, adapting to the ever-changing demands of political communication (Beck, 2016). Research indicates that these platforms enable political actors to forge connections based on shared policy interests or geographic proximity, further enhancing their outreach efforts (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009b).

Digital technologies have also proven instrumental in facilitating deliberative and civic activities that drive political mobilization. As Lilleker & Jackson explain, “Online campaigning enables a form of co-creation, where citizens become active participants in the communication process, often contributing content” (Lilleker & Jackson, 2007, p. 244). This participatory approach has transformed websites into key vehicles for political communication. They now serve as platforms where parties and candidates can present their branding, highlight their personnel, and showcase key policy proposals in an unmediated and highly controlled digital environment (Jackson and Lilleker, 2013). Over time, websites have evolved from static information repositories into dynamic platforms featuring rolling news feeds, blogs, and seamless integration with social media profiles (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016). At an organizational level, the democratization of information facilitated by social media has fundamentally altered the nature of political communication, empowering individuals to shape their digital identities and engage in global discourse (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Morozov and Bria, 2018).

The internet holds transformative potential for reshaping political communication and campaigning strategies. According to Lilleker and Malagón (2010), digital platforms offer

political actors novel avenues for engaging with audiences, fundamentally altering traditional campaign practices. Cohen and Kahne (2012) argue that participatory politics on digital platforms mobilize large audiences for specific causes by facilitating dialogue and enabling the circulation of political information. Participatory politics, defined as interactive, peer-driven actions through which individuals and groups seek to influence public issues, have become an essential aspect of modern political communication (Cohen and Kahne, 2012). The internet operates as a multifaceted platform, linking organizations and institutions in ways that traditional communication mediums cannot replicate (Beck, 2016). Campaigns increasingly incorporate digital tools such as websites, Facebook, and Twitter into their strategies to overcome communication barriers, extend their reach, and minimize resource costs (Lilleker et al., 2014). This shift reflects a broader professionalization of political communication, wherein the integration of online and offline strategies has the potential to revolutionize voter engagement (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016). As noted by Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner (2019) and Park and Perry (2008), such integration enables digital engagement to translate into tangible offline activism, including attendance at rallies, volunteering, and other forms of political participation.

Digital platforms also function as powerful mobilization tools. They enable users to donate funds, join political parties, register as supporters, and volunteer as activists (Lilleker et al., 2011). However, digital political engagement varies significantly among demographic groups. Older generations tend to use platforms such as Facebook to discuss political issues and exchange views, whereas younger users often demonstrate varying levels of engagement influenced by social factors, including family background and socioeconomic conditions (Bosch, 2013; Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2014; Oyedemi, 2015). As Lilleker and Jackson (2011) assert, “The emergence of social media has shifted political campaigning towards a more interactive, participatory, and networked approach” (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011, p. 165). These platforms empower users to engage with campaigns on their terms, facilitating dialogue and community-building across digital spaces.

The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign of Barack Obama marked a watershed moment in the use of social media for targeted voter mobilization. Obama's campaign blended traditional community organizing techniques with digital fundraising and engagement strategies across multiple platforms, setting a precedent for digital political communication (Jonathan and Lilleker, 2023; Ceccobelli, 2018). His campaign prioritized inclusivity by allowing website visitors and social media users to interact directly with campaign content, fostering a sense of ownership and participation (Jackson and Lilleker, 2013). This approach transformed party websites from static repositories into dynamic tools for mobilization. As Lilleker et al. (2016) note, "Digital platforms enable micro-targeting strategies that allow campaigns to deliver personalized messages directly to segmented groups of voters" (p. 232). The success of Obama's campaign demonstrated the efficacy of complementing traditional offline efforts with innovative online strategies (Jackson, Lilleker, and Pack, 2010). For instance, the campaign encouraged public participation by inviting users to comment on the Obama news feed, creating a feedback loop that strengthened voter engagement (Jackson and Lilleker, 2013).

Similarly, Donald Trump capitalized on social media during his election campaigns, using platforms like Twitter to broadcast his messages and rally public attention around his agenda (Kenski, Kim, & Jones-Jang, 2022; Wells et al., 2016). By sharing speeches and emotional reactions in real-time, Trump fostered a sense of immediacy and connection with his supporters, making them feel as though they were participating in campaign events (McLaughlin and MacAfee, 2019). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also effectively employed social media to engage with voters, further demonstrating the global applicability of these strategies (Ofei et al., 2024). Loyal supporters amplify such campaigns by sharing content within their networks, effectively acting as digital advocates (Norris and Curtice, 2008). The relationships forged between campaigns and their supporters both online and offline expand the reach of political messages and foster deeper connections within social circles (Jackson and Lilleker, 2013).

Innovations in digital campaigning mimic localized marketing efforts, enabling network members to promote candidates both online and offline (Jackson and Lilleker, 2013). Obama's

strategy of inclusivity in online spaces mirrored his offline efforts, reinforcing a sense of unity among his supporters (Jackson and Lilleker, 2013). By fostering connections between citizens and campaigns, digital platforms increase exposure to political communication, theoretically boosting participation rates as voters become more informed and engaged (de Zuniga et al., 2009). As Lilleker (2013) explains, “Digital political campaigning has evolved from static web pages to dynamic interactions that mimic traditional face-to-face canvassing” (p. 31). However, despite these advancements, many political parties remain hesitant to fully embrace digital strategies. Concerns over message control, demands for detailed policy explanations, and adherence to traditional political practices often deter parties from exploiting the full potential of digital tools (Lilleker, Pack, and Jackson, 2010; Schweitzer, 2011; Stromer-Galley, 2004).

In summary, digital technologies have introduced a paradigm shift in political communication, enabling more personalized, participatory, and efficient interactions between political actors and the electorate. By leveraging these tools, political figures can transcend the limitations of traditional media, fostering deeper connections with voters and enhancing their ability to mobilize support. However, as these platforms continue to evolve, political campaigns must adapt and innovate to maximize their potential. Future research must address how these transformations affect democratic processes and explore strategies for mitigating the risks associated with digital communication, such as misinformation and the erosion of public trust. Ultimately, while digital platforms offer immense opportunities for political actors to disseminate their messages and mobilize supporters, there is still significant untapped potential in utilizing these tools for deeper voter engagement and activism. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, future campaigns must innovate and adapt to balance transparency, participation, and message control effectively.

2.3 Digital Technologies and Opportunities for Political Interactivity

The rise of digital technologies has revolutionized the landscape of political engagement, creating unprecedented opportunities for interactivity between political actors and citizens. These technologies can not only marshal support but also enable direct communication between politicians, their supporters, and the broader public. Research from the early 1990s already highlighted the transformative potential of digital tools to enhance the relationship between politicians and citizens, as emphasized by scholars like Rheingold (1993) and Stone (1996). Stanyer (2007) further elaborates on this point, noting, “Political parties have become increasingly reliant on digital platforms to sustain engagement with their bases, especially in election cycles, as traditional methods of mobilization no longer suffice in the digital age” (p. 87). These platforms have grown to serve as global stages for political mobilization, fostering interaction and engagement among leaders, parties, and constituents (Telles et al., 2024).

Similarly, Howard (2006) underscores the role of social media, stating, “Political actors use the web and social media to improve campaign outreach, moving beyond traditional media to directly engage supporters” (p. 21). As digital technologies proliferate, they continue to reshape global communication, education, and information-sharing practices (Cariolle et al., 2024). Their ability to disseminate information and facilitate dialogue has proven crucial in building stronger ties between political entities and their audiences.

The motivations behind adopting interactive online tools in the political sphere are multifaceted. These tools are deployed to achieve goals such as winning elections, fostering closer relationships with constituents, mobilizing resources, and crafting policies (Jackson, Lilleker, and Pack, 2010). Numerous studies have demonstrated that political parties can effectively use digital technologies to encourage both online and offline participation (Bentivegna, 2006; Gibson, 2009; Dutton, 2013; Kindra et al., 2013; Lilleker and Jackson, 2013; Samuele and Simone, 2020; Stanyer, 2005). Moreover, the rise of digital platforms has sparked new political

activities, including grassroots anti-establishment movements that have profoundly influenced mainstream electoral processes (Gavazza et al., 2019). These technologies have also created new avenues for political self-promotion, allowing figures to engage with both their supporters and traditional media in innovative ways (Samuele and Simone, 2020).

Crucially, digital technologies offer a wealth of information sources, connecting communities across the globe and transforming the world into an interconnected digital society (Telles et al., 2024). Woolley and Howard (2018) highlight the enhanced feedback mechanisms enabled by social media, stating, “Social media’s role in political campaigns goes beyond messaging; it enables real-time feedback loops between politicians and their supporters” (p. 33). This dynamic was vividly demonstrated during Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, widely regarded as the first to effectively harness digital technologies for political engagement (Lilleker, 2016). The campaign’s innovative use of digital tools exemplified interactivity in ethos and structure, even though some of these technologies had been pioneered earlier (Greengard, 2009; Stirland, 2008). Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign similarly used social media to broadcast events, creating a sense of virtual participation among supporters (McLaughlin and MacAfee, 2019). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also leveraged digital technologies to engage with his base, further cementing their role in contemporary politics (Ofei et al., 2024).

However, despite these advances, there are notable limitations to political interactivity online. Research reveals that many political parties restrict genuine interaction to maintain control over their messaging, as unpredictable voter feedback may pose risks (Mochla & Tsourvakas, 2023). For example, during the 2001 French presidential election, digital tools were primarily used for disseminating information rather than fostering two-way communication, with interactivity largely absent (Villalba, 2003). This trend of constrained interactivity persists across regions, including Northern Europe (Jankowski et al., 2005). Even when tools for voter engagement are implemented, they are often tightly managed, limiting the potential for genuine dialogue (Foot and Schneider, 2006; Kluver et al., 2007; Stromer-Galley, 2014). Even in the social media era,

few political campaigns fully embrace the co-creational and interactive possibilities of digital technologies (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011; Lilleker, 2013; Lilleker, 2016).

Digital technologies have also introduced new norms of interactivity, reshaping how users and organizations communicate (Burgess, 2014). Scholars widely acknowledge that these technologies can foster engagement and participation (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016). To truly bridge the gap between organizations and audiences, entities must prioritize relationship-building through interactive online experiences (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). As Kioussis (2000) notes, interactivity is characterized by multidirectional communication that allows participants to exchange ideas and share control, fostering collaborative communities (MacDonald, 2003). The internet has lowered barriers to participation, encouraging diverse forms of interactivity (Youngs, 2007).

Connectivity, a cornerstone of digital technologies, has been explored extensively by scholars such as van Zyl (2009), Hanna et al. (2011), Kietzmann et al. (2011), Van Dijck (2013), and Miller (2016). Web 2.0, Web 3.0, and emerging Web 4.0 ecosystems enable users to engage, socialize, and establish shared norms within digital communities (Cho, 2007; Patel, 2013). O'Reilly (2005) aptly describes interactivity as an “architecture of participation,” emphasizing collaboration and shared ownership of content within Web 2.0 applications. Web 3.0 advances these principles by focusing on data integration and semantic connectivity, while Web 4.0 introduces a symbiotic relationship between humans and machines (Patel, 2013). Looking ahead, Web 5.0 aims to combine the features of Web 2.0 and 3.0 to create an interconnected, intelligent, and emotionally responsive digital environment (Michulek and Gajanova, 2023).

Interactivity transcends its technological function to become a dialogic process among users and creators (Lilleker and Malagón, 2010). As Kioussis (2002) observes, it incorporates communication technologies while emphasizing user agency in modifying content. Interactivity disrupts traditional top-down communication models, replacing them with horizontal, egalitarian exchanges (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). In essence, digital technologies hold the transformative

power to enable direct engagement between political actors and citizens, as they allow political actors to strategically leverage both traditional and modern media for their messaging.

2.4 The Potential Of Social Media As A Campaigning Tool

2.4.1 Political Actors Utilize Old and New Media To Influence Voters

Decisions

Digital platforms offer the opportunity for direct engagement between political actors and citizens, with the integration of traditional and digital media now playing a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and redefining the way campaigns are run. This fusion creates a dynamic interplay where old and new media complement one another, enabling politicians to maximize their outreach and impact. As Stanyer (2007) highlights, “without the use of modern communication technologies, political parties would struggle to effectively mobilize and rally their supporters. These technologies are critical for organizing campaigns and reaching a wide audience quickly” (p. 54). By leveraging the advantages of both media formats, political actors establish direct and multifaceted connections with electorates, forming what Chadwick (2013) terms the hybrid media system. Wright notes that “The hybrid media system acknowledges the interplay of old and new media in political communication, where digital and traditional platforms co-exist and influence political outcomes.” (Wright, 2015, p. 415). This system, characterized by the blending of traditional and digital media practices, allows political actors to adapt to the rapidly evolving communication landscape. Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign exemplifies this hybrid approach, as it “dominated traditional television while exploiting the interactive capabilities of digital platforms” (Chadwick, 2013, p. 42).

The hybrid media system framework offers a critical lens for understanding the interplay between older and newer forms of communication. Through this framework, the dual function of digital and traditional platforms in political campaigning becomes apparent: while television and newspapers provide broader public exposure, digital platforms enable granular targeting and

two-way interaction. Wong and Wright also point to empowerment of new political actors when they argue that “Hybrid media systems challenge the dominance of established political actors by enabling alternative voices and movements to gain visibility through digital means.” (Wong and Wright, 2020, p. 1743). However, scholars have raised concerns about its complexity and the potential overemphasis on media convergence, which may not fully account for variations in media usage across different regions or political contexts. Moreover, applying the theory empirically on a global scale poses significant methodological challenges, underscoring the need for localized adaptations to better understand its relevance in diverse settings. This theoretical critique reflects broader concerns in media studies, where universal models often struggle to accommodate the distinct socio-cultural and political nuances of different regions.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the transformative potential of social media as a tool for fostering engagement between political actors and voters. Kenski, Kim, and Jones-Jang (2022) emphasize the role of social media in cultivating positive relationships with followers, which can enhance voter loyalty and campaign effectiveness. Moreover, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are specifically designed to capture and retain user attention, creating unique opportunities for both elite and non-elite actors to influence political decision-making (Van Bavel et al., 2024; Reilly & Vacari, 2021). The algorithms underpinning these platforms prioritize content that generates high engagement, often amplifying political messages to broader audiences. In this context, social media is not just a broadcasting tool but a participatory medium where users actively engage with and amplify political messages. This evolution reflects the growing significance of social media in shaping public perception, with studies indicating that over half of Americans now consume news through a combination of digital and traditional media platforms (Jang, Barrett, & McGregor, 2023).

The accessibility and widespread adoption of digital platforms have transformed how political communication unfolds, offering politicians direct and interactive channels to engage with the electorate (Peeters et al., 2023). Social media’s unique ability to foster immediate and interactive communication has redefined the dynamics of political engagement. As Vicari and Kirby (2023)

observe, “digital platforms as socio-cultural artifacts provide spaces where both elite and non-elite actors can engage, share, and interpret information” (p. 1735). These platforms also serve as innovative tools for gauging public sentiment, often outperforming traditional opinion polls in terms of immediacy and responsiveness (Gong et al., 2020). The proliferation of digital platforms and their increasingly sophisticated analytics have provided political actors with valuable insights into voter behavior and preferences, enabling highly targeted and responsive campaign strategies. The rapid expansion of social media usage now exceeding 5.04 billion users globally, with 266 million new users joining annually underscores its unparalleled reach and influence in modern political campaigns (Chaffey, 2024; Van Bavel et al., 2024).

This unprecedented growth in social media adoption has profound implications for the democratic process. Scholars have increasingly explored the long-term impact of social media on knowledge acquisition, agenda-setting, and voter mobilization (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Lee & Xenos, 2019). Social media’s transition from a supplementary tool to a central component of campaign strategies has enabled political actors to influence electoral discourse and mobilize support in unprecedented ways (Bright et al., 2017; Stromer-Galley, 2014). At the same time, the potential for misinformation on these platforms has raised concerns about their role in undermining democratic principles (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This tension highlights the dual nature of social media as both a democratizing force and a potential source of disruption. The participatory nature of these platforms, while empowering, creates vulnerabilities where misinformation and disinformation campaigns can thrive, undermining trust in democratic institutions and processes.

Digital technologies have also integrated online and offline political activities, enabling new forms of dialogue, association, and organization. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter create spaces for the formation of online partisan groups and political communities, fostering loosely tied but highly engaged networks (Karlsson & Åström, 2018; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). This shift reflects broader changes in the structure of political participation, where traditional hierarchies are increasingly supplemented or in some cases replaced by decentralized, networked

forms of engagement. The campaigns of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 are illustrative of how digital tools can be used to craft compelling political narratives, mobilize voters, and build a positive public image. These efforts marked the beginning of what Chan (2018) terms the “Obama phenomenon” in online political communication. Scholars note that Obama’s strategic use of social media played a key role in enhancing his relationship with American voters, setting a precedent for future campaigns (Vaccari, 2013; Woolley, Limperos & Oliver, 2010).

Since Obama’s campaigns, the use of digital platforms in political communication has intensified, particularly during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Donald Trump’s campaign demonstrated the power of Twitter as a direct communication channel with voters, bypassing traditional media filters. The rise of “Twitter politics” exemplifies how digital platforms can serve as both a stage and an actor in political discourse, shaping not only the message but also the dynamics of its dissemination. As Kenski, Kim, and Jones-Jang (2022) note, Trump’s campaign “effectively used digital platforms to convey messages and capture public attention”. During this period, Facebook emerged as the leading source of political information, surpassing even established news outlets like Fox News, CNN, and major national newspapers. This shift underscores the centrality of social media in modern electoral strategies, where platforms are not merely tools but critical arenas of political contestation.

Interactive engagement on social media has been shown to correlate with improved electoral outcomes. Studies highlight the importance of integrating digital tools into broader campaign strategies, emphasizing their role in fundraising, organizing, and voter mobilization (Androniciuc & Cuza, 2017; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). Digital platforms’ ability to foster real-time interactions allows for a more personalized approach to campaigning, creating stronger emotional connections between political actors and their supporters. While social media alone cannot determine the outcome of elections, it serves as a critical complement to traditional campaign activities, enhancing the overall effectiveness of political communication (Bruns & Moon, 2018). However, it is essential to recognize that the effectiveness of social media

strategies depends on the broader socio-political context, the resources available to political actors, and the specific characteristics of the electoral landscape.

Ultimately, the strategic use of social media has become an indispensable element of contemporary political campaigns. Its ability to influence voter decisions, shape public discourse, and amplify political narratives highlights its transformative impact on the electoral process. However, as digital platforms continue to evolve, scholars and practitioners must remain vigilant about their implications for democracy, ensuring that these tools are used to foster informed engagement rather than perpetuate polarization or misinformation. The challenge lies in balancing the democratizing potential of social media with the need to mitigate its risks, creating a digital ecosystem that supports rather than undermines democratic values. In summary, the fusion of traditional and digital media has become crucial in shaping public opinion, while digital activism offers political actors a powerful tool for online mobilization.

2.4.2 The Potential Use of Digital activism to Mobilize Online

The integration of traditional and digital media by political actors now plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, with social media offering significant potential for online mobilization. Both social movements and political actors are leveraging digital media to influence public discourse, demonstrating the transformative power of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in fostering political engagement. Sivitanides and Shah (2011) highlight the key attributes of digital activism speed, reliability, scalability, and cost-effectiveness which establish the internet as a cornerstone of modern political participation. These attributes are essential for the success of digital activism, enabling it to thrive across diverse socio-political contexts.

The growing accessibility and affordability of digital technologies have expanded opportunities for political innovation, paving the way for new forms of citizenship and activism (Bisschoft, 2017). Unlike traditional media, digital platforms provide an open, unrestricted space for a diversity of opinions, free from geographic or state-imposed constraints. The rapid spread of information across these platforms empowers political actors to mobilize supporters effectively,

particularly during election periods. This aligns with the principles of connective action theory, which argues that digital platforms facilitate decentralized, self-organizing movements that quickly adapt to changing circumstances (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). By amplifying diverse voices, the connective nature of digital activism equips movements with the flexibility to navigate and respond dynamically to evolving political environments.

However, the theory of connective action is not without criticism. Critics argue that its reliance on viral and short-lived campaigns often undermines its capacity to sustain long-term, meaningful change. Movements driven by social media may lack the cohesion and organizational infrastructure needed for prolonged activism. Sebeelo (2020) points out that while social media-based activism excels in spreading messages rapidly and reaching extensive audiences, its transient nature may limit its broader impact. Nevertheless, the immediacy of digital platforms continues to empower ordinary citizens, providing them with what Sebeelo terms the “consciousness of opportunity” to communicate, organize, and resist.

Digital platforms have significantly enhanced access to information and fostered citizen interactions. They provide avenues for discussions, debates, and the formation of opinions, laying the groundwork for informed political engagement (Dahlgren, 2013). Through these interactions, citizens become more involved in governance, influencing state policies and decisions. Research indicates that citizen participation in decision-making processes not only enhances government performance but also improves the legitimacy of decisions, fosters responsiveness, and strengthens trust in direct democracy (Berman, 1997; Feltey & Susel, 1998; Walters et al., 2000). Stanyer highlights the evolving role of technology in political mobilization, stating, “Political parties now use an array of technologies not just for mobilization but to create a constant feedback loop with their supporters, shaping messages that resonate through real-time data” (Stanyer, 2007, p. 102).

Mobilization is a central aspect of political participation, as highlighted by Goldstein and Ridout (2002), who identified three key elements influencing voter turnout: the overall mobilization

rate, the effectiveness of contact methods, and shifts in mobilization targeting. Intense and targeted mobilization correlates positively with increased voter engagement, while declines in these efforts reduce their impact. These findings underscore the importance of deliberate and sustained mobilization strategies, particularly in leveraging digital platforms for political purposes.

Langton (1978) categorizes citizen participation into four distinct types: citizen action (e.g., protests and lobbying), citizen involvement (e.g., surveys and public hearings), electoral participation (e.g., voting and campaigning), and obligatory participation (e.g., paying taxes and jury duty). Various techniques, such as advisory councils, neighborhood meetings, and public hearings, serve as mechanisms to foster citizen involvement (King et al., 1998; Wang, 2001). Digital platforms have expanded these traditional mechanisms, offering innovative ways to engage citizens in political processes.

Furthermore, digital platforms are increasingly viewed as tools for liberation from undemocratic politics and processes (Dahlgren, 2013). By enabling users to express their opinions and engage in political discourse, these platforms democratize the exchange of ideas (Ikechukwu & Chinedu, 2023). Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) argue that digital technologies simplify the coordination and organization of political events, boosting online civic engagement and activism on a global scale. Despite this optimism, some scholars, like Gladwell (2010), remain skeptical, arguing that revolutions have historically occurred without the aid of social media. This critique challenges the notion of digital platforms as indispensable tools for activism. Sebeelo (2020) counters that the structure of the internet aligns seamlessly with the tactics of online activists, emphasizing that even simple tools like hashtags can serve as powerful mobilization instruments.

The integration of digital activism into political campaigns represents a significant shift in how political actors and citizens interact. As platforms continue to evolve, their potential to mobilize and empower citizens remains a critical area for exploration, offering both opportunities and challenges for the future of political engagement.

2.4.3 Hashtags as Platforms for Emerging Voices

Digital platforms have become indispensable in mobilizing political campaigns and hashtags have potential to become tools for emerging voices. Among these tools, hashtags stand out for their distinct potential to provide platforms where new voices can emerge and challenge dominant power structures. Hashtags, defined as the “prefixing of a keyword or phrase with the # symbol” (O’Reilly & Milstein, 2012, p. 43), are no longer merely organizational tools but have evolved into critical instruments for driving engagement in both digital and physical mobilization campaigns. By empowering users to share critical information about unfolding events, hashtags enable the rallying of support from geographically dispersed audiences (Reilly & Vacari, 2021).

The Contentious Publicness framework offers a theoretical lens for understanding this dynamic. This framework highlights the inherently contested nature of public spaces, where various actors state and non-state alike compete for visibility, legitimacy, and influence (Kavada & Poell, 2020). In this context, digital platforms become arenas where marginalized voices can challenge hegemonic power and introduce alternative narratives into public discourse. The key premise of Contentious Publicness is that digital tools, such as hashtags, provide opportunities for the emergence of new actors and perspectives, thus reshaping the public sphere (Kavada & Poell, 2020). However, critics of this framework point to its inherent complexity, its potential overemphasis on digital platforms, and the empirical challenges associated with applying it across diverse socio-political contexts, which may limit its practical utility.

The concept of hashtags was initially introduced in 2007 by Chris Messina as a simple “tagging system” for organizing content on X (formerly Twitter). However, hashtags quickly gained recognition for their utility in marketing, public engagement, and activism. When deployed strategically by political actors, hashtags can significantly enhance the visibility of campaigns and attract public attention to specific issues, making them indispensable tools for mobilization (Christensen, 2013). Beyond their practical uses, hashtags also carry considerable symbolic weight. They influence power dynamics, shape public discourse, and frame the production of

knowledge, thereby playing a vital role in the construction of meaning within digital spaces (Sauter & Bruns, 2015).

Research into political hashtag usage underscores their democratizing potential. Vicari and Kirby argue that “Twitter enables the emergence of traditionally non-elite actors, who can engage in public discourse, particularly in topics neglected by mainstream media” (Vicari, 2018, p. 1722). This highlights the capacity of hashtags to amplify marginalized voices, giving traditionally excluded groups the opportunity to contribute to and influence mainstream debates. By lowering the barriers to entry in political discourse, hashtags democratize public engagement and broaden the scope of participation in political and social debates.

Additionally, hashtags serve as powerful tools for framing narratives and validating specific viewpoints. They are imbued with inherent connotations that can either reinforce dominant narratives or challenge entrenched ideologies, thereby influencing public opinion (Rambukkana, 2015). Hashtags operate across multiple structural levels within digital ecosystems, organizing extensive networks of content, offering users contextual insights, and simplifying information retrieval (Sauter & Bruns, 2015). This organizing capacity is particularly evident during crises or disasters, where hashtags function as markers for public conversations and often become primary sources for mainstream media coverage (Bruns et al., 2012). Over time, hashtags have evolved into standard tools for aggregating content, identifying trending topics, and generating searchable datasets (Bruns & Burgess, 2015).

Furthermore, hashtags enhance inclusivity and promote democratic participation by granting equal access to digital tools and information (Enli & Simonsen, 2018). They are frequently used to categorize commentary on real-time events, including breaking news, political movements, and humanitarian crises, making them critical tools for public engagement (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2012; Hughes & Palen, 2009; Small, 2011). The global impact of hashtags is evident in their role in high-profile protests and social movements. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was instrumental in galvanizing activism against police brutality, particularly following the 2014

events in Ferguson, Missouri. Similarly, the #MeTooMovement in 2017 provided an international platform for raising awareness about sexual abuse and advocating for gender equality (Johnson, 2020). These movements demonstrate the potential of hashtags to connect individuals across diverse geographic and social contexts, fostering a sense of shared purpose and community.

Hashtags have also demonstrated their capacity to foster global solidarity during moments of tragedy. For instance, hashtags such as #prayforparis and #jesuisparis expressed worldwide support following the terrorist attacks in Paris. Likewise, #jesuischarlie emerged in January 2015 as a symbol of solidarity with the victims of the Charlie Hebdo attack (Garcia & Rime, 2019; Giglietto & Lee, 2017). These examples illustrate the emotional resonance and symbolic power of hashtags. They enable users to transcend cultural and geographic boundaries, creating a sense of collective identity and community that extends beyond immediate local contexts. By providing alternative spaces for dialogue and mobilization, these digital tools enable activists and political actors to connect with diverse audiences, mobilize supporters, and amplify dissenting voices, thereby reshaping the dynamics of political communication in constrained environments. In summary, hashtags hold significant potential as tools for amplifying emerging voices, while WhatsApp offers an expansive platform for disseminating political messages to a broader audience.

2.4.4 The Possible Use of WhatsApp For Greater Visibility And Influence

While hashtags have been recognized as powerful mobilization tools for political campaigns, emerging research highlights the growing influence of WhatsApp on electoral decision-making. Mobile instant messaging apps like WhatsApp are increasingly utilized by ordinary citizens for political activities, creating a democratized avenue for engagement (Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu & Casero-Ripollés, 2021). WhatsApp's accessibility and user-friendly interface have facilitated its adoption as a significant platform for political protests, activism, and election campaigns (Pang & Woo, 2020). Its ability to reach diverse audiences has transformed it into a vital tool for political actors to convey messages directly to voters on an unprecedented scale. The Mediation

Opportunity Structure framework underscores this phenomenon by emphasizing the agency of political actors in strategically navigating media ecosystems to amplify their visibility and influence (Cammaerts, 2012). This theory stresses the importance of understanding media logics, negotiating power relations, and strategically engaging with media tools like WhatsApp. By leveraging these principles, political actors can maximize their visibility and influence within both formal and informal political spaces. However, the framework is not without criticism, with scholars pointing out its complexity, overemphasis on media strategies, and challenges in its universal applicability.

WhatsApp has become deeply embedded in the social and political lives of citizens worldwide, showing remarkable penetration in countries where it serves as a primary platform for political propaganda, youth activism and electoral campaigning (Caetano et al., 2018, Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). Scholars argue that “the decentralized nature of social media allows for the creation of micro-democracies where individuals can participate in political discourse outside traditional hierarchical structures” (Bhanye, Shayamunda, & Tavirai, 2023, p. 115). WhatsApp reflects this shift by enabling decentralized, grassroots participation that bypasses traditional media gatekeepers. It is now considered an indispensable communication tool for political parties and movements, as it caters to the daily communication needs of a vast number of smartphone users (Nizaruddin, 2021).

A key strength of WhatsApp lies in its unique communication architecture, which blends one-to-one, one-to-many, and group communication through private chats, broadcasts, and both private and public group chats (Seufert et al., 2016). Unlike other platforms, its encrypted nature allows for the private sharing of news and discussions, shielding users from public scrutiny (Swart et al., 2019). This level of privacy has led some scholars to liken WhatsApp groups to “small digital rallies” where political mobilization can occur without interference from external actors (Bursztyn & Birnbaum, 2019).

Political actors in countries such as the UK, Israel, India, Spain, and Australia have leveraged WhatsApp to influence voter behavior during elections (Caetano et al., 2018). This platform has reshaped political engagement, enabling politicians to debate, make decisions, and foster relationships in real-time (Durant, 2022). In addition to its role in elections, WhatsApp is widely used in countries such as Malaysia, Brazil, Chile, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Spain, where large portions of the population use the app weekly to find, share, or discuss news (Newman et al., 2017).

The global adoption of WhatsApp has been fueled by its promise of low-cost communication and the convenience of group chats. It has grown to become the world's most popular mobile messaging app, boasting approximately two billion monthly active users (Bursztyn & Birnbaum, 2019; Dixon, 2024). Its influence on political communication is profound, with research showing that political groups use WhatsApp for text messaging at significantly higher rates than non-political groups (Caetano et al., 2018). Scholars have emphasized the unique space WhatsApp occupies within broader political communication structures (O'Hara et al., 2014). Its capability to share news on a massive scale has positioned it as a key platform for political mobilization (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Gil de Zúñiga & Goyanes, 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2019).

WhatsApp is often referred to as one of the “technologies of life,” reflecting its integral role in shaping daily interactions and influencing political behaviors in various regions (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020). Its private nature and absence of algorithmic content filtering features that distinguish it from other social media platforms have made it especially popular for news sharing (Caetano et al., 2018). WhatsApp facilitates strong communication among politically like-minded individuals, transforming groups into highly active “digital rallies” that parallel physical assemblies (São Paulo, 2018).

Despite its benefits, WhatsApp is not without challenges. State actors and ruling parties have exploited the platform to disseminate misinformation. Research indicates that false stories shared on WhatsApp can achieve significant reach, often convincing voters of their authenticity (São

Paulo, 2018). This underscores the dual-edged nature of WhatsApp as a tool for political campaigns: while it can mobilize and inform, it can also be strategically used to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion.

In conclusion, WhatsApp has emerged as a transformative tool in modern political communication, offering unique opportunities for visibility, engagement, and influence. Its ability to connect individuals within private, secure networks makes it a powerful platform for mobilization. However, the potential for misuse through misinformation highlights the need for critical engagement with its role in shaping electoral and political outcomes.

2.4.5 The Ability of Social Media To Disseminate Disinformation for Political Gain

While WhatsApp may facilitate political engagement, the broader scope of social media platforms reveals their strategic use by political parties and candidates to disseminate disinformation, aiming to gain political advantages. Social media has become an effective tool for spreading false information to manipulate societal groups, often with far-reaching consequences (Marsden, Meyer & Brown, 2020). For example, during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated changes in voting processes to enhance safety, which some political actors exploited to propagate false narratives. President Trump and his allies used digital platforms to disseminate numerous claims about voter fraud, attempting to suppress voter turnout. Even after the election results were declared, President Trump continued leveraging social media to promote unfounded allegations that the election had been “stolen” (Craig & Gainous, 2024; Miro & Jonathan Anderson, 2024). These incidents underscore the capacity of social media to become a vehicle for disinformation campaigns aimed at influencing political outcomes.

Disinformation, distinct from misinformation, refers to the deliberate spread of false or misleading information with the intent to deceive (Patterson, 2016). It systematically disrupts the flow of accurate information by introducing deceptive content that appears credible to its

audience (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). This intentional inaccuracy is at the core of disinformation campaigns, designed to manipulate beliefs and shape public opinion in ways that align with political agendas (Guo & Vargo, 2018).

Scholars have extensively documented how political parties and candidates deliberately use social media to spread disinformation as a strategic tool for political gain (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). Disinformation thrives on high-engagement posts that receive likes, shares, and comments, significantly increasing their visibility and dissemination (Thorson, 2008). This phenomenon has serious implications for democratic systems, as disinformation campaigns can rapidly reach millions of users, influencing electoral outcomes and undermining trust in democratic institutions (Shao et al., 2017; Wang, 2017). These campaigns often employ automated bots, which mimic human users to amplify the spread of false narratives and further obscure the line between truth and deception (Ferrara, 2017).

Fake news, closely related to disinformation, is defined as intentionally fabricated information designed to deceive and influence public reactions (Lazer et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). Digital platforms facilitate the spread of fake news by providing cost-effective and rapid means of dissemination. Motivations behind fake news vary, ranging from financial profit to advancing political ideologies (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). Financial incentives, in particular, drive much of the fake news ecosystem, with online advertising revenue providing significant rewards for those who create sensational, false stories (Braun & Eklund, 2018; Nounkeu, 2020). However, ideological objectives, such as reinforcing partisan divides or discrediting opponents, also play a critical role in the propagation of fake news (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

Importantly, the deliberate nature of disinformation sets it apart from other forms of misinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Social media's ability to rapidly disseminate false information makes it increasingly difficult for users to discern credible sources (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Recent studies show that social media has surpassed traditional television as

the primary source of news for many individuals. However, this shift has also made it easier for false information to proliferate unchecked (Wingfield et al., 2016). Fake news often takes the form of journalistic content, further blurring the distinction between legitimate reporting and fabricated stories (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

While digital platforms provide accessibility, affordability, and speed in disseminating information, they also create fertile ground for the rapid spread of fake news (Shu et al., 2017). Numerous studies link the prevalence of fake news to election campaigns, where it is used to sway voter behavior and undermine opponents (Ferrara, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). One particularly significant framework addressing misinformation is the “backfire effect,” explored by Tandoc et al. (2018). This theory highlights the paradoxical outcome where attempts to correct false beliefs can inadvertently strengthen them, particularly in the context of deeply held ideological views. Tandoc argues, “The backfire effect occurs when corrections of misinformation reinforce rather than rectify the misperception” (Lee & Tandoc, 2018, p. 3). While the framework offers valuable insights into the psychological, cultural, and media-related factors influencing misinformation correction, it also faces criticism for potentially overestimating the frequency of such effects, leading to an overly pessimistic outlook on corrective efforts.

Political actors have increasingly capitalized on the persuasive and manipulative power of social media to spread disinformation. By leveraging these platforms, they strategically influence public opinion, mobilize voters, and secure electoral victories. The deliberate and organized nature of disinformation campaigns underscores the urgent necessity for robust strategies to curb their proliferation and reduce their adverse effects on democratic systems. Nevertheless, social media possesses the transformative capacity to redefine power dynamics in political arenas, challenging traditional relationships between elites and ordinary citizens.

2.5 Social Media's Capacity to Reshape Power Dynamics in Politics

Disinformation can potentially be leveraged for political advantage, while social media has the transformative power to disrupt traditional political dynamics, shifting the balance of power between elites and ordinary citizens. The widespread adoption of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped societal structures, playing an essential role in how individuals engage as citizens, family members, and community participants. As observed by Schwanholz and Graham (2018), the deep integration of digital technologies into everyday life is redefining societal, political, and economic institutions, significantly influencing the distribution of power.

Social media, online forums, and digital communities have democratized information, providing marginalized voices with unprecedented amplification (Lauer, 2024). These platforms enable broader participation, challenging hierarchical power structures and contributing to a more inclusive democratic process. The concept of internetization, which refers to the integration of internet technologies into societal functions, has bolstered democracy by enhancing citizen participation, increasing government transparency, and improving accountability in public policy (Passaris, 2020). This transformation is encapsulated in the argument by Trice and Jones (2020) that “Social media facilitates the decentralization of political power by empowering citizens to act as media producers, creating content that reflects their political realities” (p. 132). By enabling individuals to produce and share politically relevant content, social media disrupts the traditional gatekeeping role of elites, fostering a more participatory political culture.

Research underscores that digital platforms extend offline political engagement into virtual spaces, reflecting the dynamics of community-based political life in digital ecosystems (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). This digital extension of political engagement positively influences democratic outcomes, particularly by promoting the ideals of freedom of expression, access to information, and freedom of association (Diamond, 2010; Jha and

Kodila-Tedika, 2020; Saleh, 2012). Passaris (2020) further highlights that 21st-century digital and electronic connectivity has introduced structural changes that enhance democracy by ensuring global outreach and connectivity. These shifts allow for more equitable access to information and broaden opportunities for engagement, thereby strengthening pluralism and inclusivity in governance.

The transformative nature of the internet is evident in its reshaping of communication, information dissemination, and public discourse (Lauer, 2024). Research shows a significant increase in social media usage across all political actors, including elites and citizens, fostering greater interaction and accountability (Bright et al., 2017). Digital technologies have facilitated pluralism by granting both citizens and political elites' access to critical information, thereby enabling informed decision-making on governance and political issues. Moreover, as Chitanana and Mutsvairo (2019) argue, the accessibility of diverse viewpoints through digital platforms enriches political dialogue, both online and offline. This growing interactivity between political actors and the public marks a shift towards a more engaged and informed electorate.

While the internet has introduced profound benefits, it has also exposed certain vulnerabilities within democratic systems. Hindman (2008) warns that digital technologies can exacerbate electoral inequalities, often favoring elites over ordinary citizens. For instance, well-funded campaigns can leverage advanced digital tools to micro-target voters, potentially creating an uneven playing field. Nonetheless, the broader trend suggests that social media platforms, by facilitating direct interactions and enabling grassroots mobilization, can mitigate such inequalities and foster pluralism. Smaller or fringe political parties, often early adopters of digital tools, have demonstrated the potential of the internet to level the political playing field (Gibson and Ward, 1999; Jackson, 2006). By engaging directly with supporters through social media, these parties bypass traditional media gatekeepers, ensuring that diverse political perspectives reach the electorate (Telles et al., 2024).

The dual nature of digital technologies offering empowerment while exposing vulnerabilities reflects their complex impact on democracy. On one hand, social media has democratized access to political discourse, enabling citizens to hold political actors accountable (Passaris, 2020). On the other hand, the rise of electronic espionage, misinformation campaigns, and election tampering poses significant challenges to democratic integrity. Despite these risks, the potential of digital technologies to strengthen democracy remains substantial. Platforms like social media provide tools for engagement that can help ensure all political actors operate on a more equitable footing.

In established democracies with free and fair elections, digital platforms have become vital for political mobilization. Smaller parties, in particular, have capitalized on these technologies to expand their reach and interact more dynamically with their supporters (Gibson and Ward, 1999; Jackson, 2006). The result is a more diverse political information environment, empowering voters to make informed decisions. As Lauer (2024) highlights, the rapid evolution of digital technologies is transforming public spheres, creating new avenues for political participation and communication. This transformation underscores the capacity of social media to deepen democratic practices by fostering inclusivity, transparency, and interactivity.

However, political parties and elites often resist fully embracing digital tools, fearing the loss of narrative control and increased scrutiny from a more engaged and informed electorate (Stromer-Galley, 2000; Tedesco, 2007). This reluctance can hinder the transformative potential of social media. As Passaris (2020) observes, the broader democratizing effects of digital technologies depend on their equitable implementation and adoption by all political actors. In this context, social media must not only serve as a platform for communication but also as a mechanism for ensuring accountability and inclusivity in political processes.

In conclusion, social media and digital technologies possess transformative potential to alter power dynamics in politics, challenging traditional hierarchies and fostering a more participatory democracy. While risks such as misinformation and digital inequality persist, the overarching impact of these platforms has been to amplify marginalized voices, enhance accountability, and broaden access to political engagement. As the 21st century continues to witness rapid technological advancement, the role of digital tools in shaping the political landscape will undoubtedly expand, demanding ongoing research and adaptive strategies to fully harness their democratic potential. Social media possesses the ability to redefine traditional political dynamics, redistributing power between elites and ordinary citizens. Additionally, digital platforms have evolved into influential arenas, functioning as modern public spheres.

2.6 Social Media's Role as a Public Sphere for Democratizing

Social media has the capacity to reshape traditional political dynamics, redistributing power from elites to ordinary citizens. In addition, digital platforms have emerged as significant spaces, acting as contemporary public spheres that promote the exchange of diverse viewpoints and bolster democratic processes. A robust public sphere, where citizens can openly share and debate ideas, is foundational to the functioning of any democracy (Fischer and Jarren, 2024). This concept aligns with Noelle and Castells' assertion that "The interaction between civil society and the state in the public sphere is crucial for democratic legitimacy, allowing citizens to hold governments accountable" (Noelle & Castells, 2012, p. 398). As societies embrace digital platforms, research has highlighted their potential to create alternative public spheres, allowing individuals to express their citizenship in new and varied ways (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020). These spaces are communicative arenas where the free circulation of ideas, debates, and political discussions can occur, often transcending geographical and social boundaries (Fischer and Jarren, 2024).

The theoretical foundation of the public sphere originates from Habermas (1989), who defined it as a domain where private individuals come together as a public, employing reason to foster critical knowledge and initiate political change. This concept transcends mere media channels or platforms; it includes the cultural and informational resources that underpin public discourse (Castells, 2008). To ensure inclusivity and equity, the public sphere should ideally operate free from state censorship and private monopolies, fostering open debate and facilitating unbiased public opinion formation (Habermas, 1991; Fuchs, 2014).

As described by scholars, the public sphere is not just a venue for opinion exchange but a mechanism for shaping collective societal views. It serves as a neutral space for news production, a cultural arena where representations are constructed, and a repository of ideational resources for politics and policymaking (Mann, 1986, 1993; Giddens, 1979). The democratizing potential of social media has been explicitly recognized in recent studies. Bhanye, Shayamunda, and Tavirai (2023) note, “Social media has democratized access to political information, allowing marginalized voices to be heard in a decentralized public sphere” (p. 143). This decentralization of political communication enables citizens to engage in the formation of public opinion on societal and political issues, fostering a more reflective and participatory societal view (Imhof, 2011).

Political institutions play a critical role in maintaining the constitutional framework for orderly and productive debates within the public sphere (Castells, 2008). By bridging the interaction between citizens, civil society, and the state, the public sphere serves as an alternative space that balances the dual imperatives of societal stability and social change (Castells, 2008). A well-functioning public sphere should encourage inclusive citizen participation, empowering individuals to engage in discussions that promote societal advancement (Fischer and Jarren, 2024). Conversely, failures in communication or blocked pathways to dialogue can precipitate a legitimacy crisis, where citizens feel alienated from societal institutions, potentially destabilizing the democratic framework (Habermas, 1976; Sassen, 2006).

Historically, the development of the public sphere has been rooted in physical spaces such as town halls, universities, and cultural institutions, where public opinion was forged through dialogue and deliberation (Low and Smith, 2006). The institutional design of modern democracies reflects this legacy, integrating citizen autonomy, democratic participation, and the independence of the public sphere as an intermediary between state and society (Habermas, 2006). Fraser (1992) posits that the public sphere functions as a theater for political participation through dialogue, while Fischer and Jarren (2024) argue that it serves as a system of social mediation. Fundamental to this concept is the ability to reason and speak freely in a shared space, free from political censorship or persecution (Habermas, 1989). Habermas' vision encompasses all forums for political debate, from newspapers and journals to informal venues like coffee houses, emphasizing rational deliberation and consensus-building as essential to forming political will (Calhoun, 1992).

The rise of digital platforms has radically transformed the public sphere, creating new avenues for discourse and engagement. As Fischer and Jarren (2024) highlight, the digital age has ushered in new forms of media provision and usage, enabling uncensored debate among diverse stakeholders. Social media platforms have become dominant arenas for public discourse, reshaping access to information and the production of political content (Smyrnaio & Baisnée, 2023). These technologies are not merely tools for communication but critical sociopolitical organizers that empower citizens to articulate their views and influence political institutions (Castells, 2008). As platforms for user-generated content, social media fosters the sharing of ideas and facilitates political discussions, extending the traditional boundaries of the public sphere (Drury, 2008).

The evolution of the public sphere in the digital age reflects broader trends of social differentiation, digitalization, and the institutionalization of online platforms (Fischer and Jarren, 2024). By offering additional spaces for engagement, digital platforms enable citizens to interact with officials, participate in political debates, and share diverse viewpoints, including those of minority and marginalized groups (Bosch, 2013; Mare, 2014, 2016, 2018; Clarke, 2010). This

democratizing potential allows for contested public spaces where different actors can vie for influence and representation, contributing to a more pluralistic democratic process.

However, while digital platforms have expanded the public sphere, challenges persist. The commodification of digital spaces by private corporations and the manipulation of public discourse through misinformation and polarization underscore the vulnerabilities of these platforms. Despite these issues, the potential of digital technologies to democratize information and foster inclusive dialogue remains significant. Platforms like social media provide a dynamic and participatory alternative to traditional public spheres, encouraging citizens to engage in the ongoing reshaping of democratic practices.

In conclusion, social media's role as a public sphere lies in its ability to democratize access to information, amplify marginalized voices, and facilitate political discourse. By transcending traditional boundaries and fostering inclusive participation, digital platforms have the potential to transform democratic engagement. However, the realization of this potential requires addressing structural inequalities and ensuring that digital spaces remain free, open, and accessible to all. Digital technologies will continue to advance, further shaping the public sphere, while social media holds the potential to amplify the influence of political actors throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

2.7 The Potential of Social Media to Amplify the Influence of Political Actors in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2.7.1 Potential Use of Social Media to Shaping Public Opinion

The ongoing evolution of digital technologies will progressively redefine the public sphere, with social media offering significant potential to expand the reach and impact of political actors across sub-Saharan Africa. By facilitating unprecedented access to information, digital technologies offer powerful tools to amplify political visibility and reach. Historical analyses, such as Schattschneider's foundational study, emphasize that the central aim of political actors

and parties has always been the acquisition and maintenance of power or, at the very least, the ability to shape the decisions of those in power (Schattschneider, 1942). In recent years, political actors in sub-Saharan Africa have turned to digital platforms to achieve these objectives, as underscored by Chibuwe, who states: “Political campaigns in sub-Saharan Africa have embraced social media, not only as a communication tool but also as a strategy for shaping public opinion and mobilizing voters” (Chibuwe, 2020, p. 140).

This adoption of digital technologies by political actors reflects a strategic response to the evolving media landscape, a phenomenon explained by the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework. This theory highlights the ability of political actors to navigate media ecosystems in ways that enhance their visibility and influence (Cammaerts, 2012). The rise of mobile internet usage in the region has significantly contributed to the proliferation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, which have become integral to political communication strategies (Bosch et al., 2020). As of 2024, internet usage in sub-Saharan Africa has reached approximately 601 million users, reflecting a dramatic increase over the past decade (Chari, 2024). This growth is paralleled by advancements in infrastructure, such as the increase in fixed-broadband subscriptions from 2 per 100 inhabitants in 2002 to 39.7 in 2022, and mobile-cellular subscriptions from 12.4 to 86.3 per 100 inhabitants during the same period (Cariolle et al., 2024). These statistics underscore the rapid digital transformation in the region and its implications for political engagement.

Social media has become an indispensable tool for political communication and electioneering in sub-Saharan Africa. By enabling direct and interactive engagement with citizens, these platforms bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms, creating new opportunities for political actors to reach their constituencies. Amankwah and Mbatha (2019) note that digital platforms are increasingly central to political campaigns, while Chitanana and Mutsvairo highlight their democratic potential: “Citizen journalism has the potential to ‘put democracy back into people’s hands’ in authoritarian contexts where media is controlled by the state” (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019, p. 17). This assertion underscores the role of social media in empowering citizens to

participate in political discourse, particularly in regions where conventional media outlets are state-controlled.

Digital platforms allow political actors to connect with diverse demographic groups, especially the youth, who represent a significant portion of the electorate and are among the most active social media users. This aligns with connective action theory, which emphasizes the role of digital technologies in facilitating rapid information dissemination and the mobilization of supporters across geographic and social boundaries (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Scholars such as Bhanye, Shayamunda, and Tavirai argue: “Social media platforms enable citizens to participate in decentralized forms of democracy by offering spaces for dialogue that are free from traditional media gatekeeping” (Bhanye, Shayamunda, & Tavirai, 2023, p. 125). The internet has thus evolved into a global marketplace for political interactions, extending beyond sub-Saharan Africa to impact campaigns worldwide (Aminu, 2024; Kreiss, 2016; Stromer-Galley, 2014). However, while significant academic focus has been placed on digital campaigning in the United States, Europe, and Asia, sub-Saharan Africa presents a unique context where social media adoption is deeply intertwined with infrastructural and socio-political challenges.

In semi-democratic states within sub-Saharan Africa, where electoral systems often fall short of being open, fair, and transparent, social media has emerged as a critical alternative for political engagement. These platforms provide spaces for opposition parties and activists to articulate dissenting views, particularly in environments where access to traditional media is restricted. According to Chitanana and Mutsvairo, “The internet has become a key battleground in Africa’s democratization efforts, providing tools for political activism in contexts where media freedom is limited by authoritarian regimes” (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019, p. 44).

The strategic use of digital platforms for campaigning and mobilization has been particularly evident in countries where opposition parties face systematic exclusion from state-controlled public media (Mare, 2018). In such contexts, activists repurpose narratives presented in

traditional media to shape counter-narratives on digital platforms, thereby influencing public opinion and mobilizing support, embodying the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) of blending digital and offline elements.

The transformative impact of social media on electoral campaigns and political advocacy in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be overstated. Digital platforms have redefined traditional methods of campaigning by offering cost-effective and far-reaching tools for political mobilization (Kalyango & Adu-Kumi, 2013; Skogerbø, 2013). They empower citizens to report news, express opinions, monitor elections, and organize protests, thereby democratizing political discussions and influencing electoral outcomes (Diamond, 2010; Ndavula & Mueni, 2014). Scholars such as Ofei et al. (2024) argue that the growing use of social media in the region has fundamentally reshaped political discourse, creating new avenues for participation and advocacy.

Case studies from countries like Kenya and Zimbabwe illustrate the extensive use of digital media for political campaigns and activism (Kamau, 2017; Mare, 2018; Nyabola, 2018). In Ghana, the 2012 and 2016 elections witnessed intense competition between major parties on social media platforms, a phenomenon described as a “social media war” (Dzisah, 2018). This trend highlights the pivotal role of digital technologies in enhancing political participation and shaping election outcomes. The concept of the hybrid media system, as proposed by Chadwick (2013), aptly captures this dynamic, wherein traditional and digital media converge, allowing political actors to strategically blend both formats to engage diverse audiences. However, the fragmented nature of social media poses challenges, such as information overload and difficulties in targeting specific voter groups effectively (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016; Druckman et al., 2014).

While social media offers immense potential to enhance the influence of political actors in sub-Saharan Africa, it also presents significant challenges, particularly for authoritarian regimes wary of the power of digital mobilization. The ability of these platforms to facilitate rapid and widespread political engagement threatens entrenched systems of control, prompting some

governments to adopt restrictive measures, including internet shutdowns and censorship. Nonetheless, the resilience of digital activism in the region underscores the transformative capacity of social media to reshape political landscapes, even in the face of systemic obstacles. The use of social media by political actors holds the capacity to influence public opinion across sub-Saharan Africa. However, the increasing reliance on digital platforms has led authoritarian regimes in the region to view them as a considerable threat to their authority.

2.7.2 Perceptions of Social Media as a Threat Among Sub-Saharan African Governments

Social media serves as a powerful tool for political actors to shape public opinion across sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, the growing prevalence of digital platforms has prompted authoritarian regimes in the region to regard them as a significant challenge to their control and authority. Over the past decade, platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter have seen rapid adoption across the region. This growth is particularly notable among citizens, civil society groups, and opposition actors, who increasingly rely on social media to engage in political discourse, share information, and mobilize support (Hodzi & Zihnioğlu, 2024; Dendere, 2019). This shift reflects the limitations and barriers inherent in traditional media systems in the region, which are often under state control.

The migration of political discourse to digital platforms has largely been driven by the restricted access that opposition groups, government critics, and civil society actors face in physical and traditional media spaces. This phenomenon aligns with the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework, which highlights how marginalized groups strategically navigate media systems biased against them to amplify their voices and overcome barriers to communication (Cammaerts, 2012). Social media has thus emerged as a crucial avenue for circumventing these constraints, enabling these groups to challenge narratives propagated by state-controlled media and expose governance issues often hidden from public scrutiny.

However, this growing reliance on digital platforms has prompted authoritarian governments in the region to view social media as a direct threat to their control. For instance, in Uganda, Dr. Stella Nyanzi was arrested for her critical posts about President Yoweri Museveni, illustrating the perceived threat posed by social media to entrenched power structures (Rukundo, 2018). As Dendere observes, “Governments in many sub-Saharan African countries strategically control media outlets to suppress dissenting voices and limit public access to independent information” (Dendere, 2019, p. 50). These regimes see digital platforms as undermining their propaganda machinery, empowering citizens with alternative sources of information, and exposing governance failures.

In response to the perceived threat of social media, many sub-Saharan African governments have implemented various measures aimed at curbing its influence. Countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Madagascar, and Tanzania have introduced policies to regulate social media use, often citing national security and public order as justification. One prominent example is Uganda’s imposition of a social media tax, a financial barrier designed to reduce citizens’ engagement with digital platforms (Sebeelo, 2020; Mutsvairo, 2020). These measures reflect the broader strategies of semi-authoritarian states seeking to maintain control over the flow of information.

By introducing such policies, these governments aim to stifle the democratizing potential of social media, which empowers citizens to gather, analyze, and disseminate information independently. As Hodzi and Zihnioğlu (2024) explain, these digital tools disrupt traditional state monopolies on information dissemination, posing a profound challenge to authoritarian control.

Beyond restrictions on access, governments in sub-Saharan Africa have increasingly turned to surveillance technologies to monitor and suppress online dissent. Many of these technologies are imported from countries with advanced surveillance industries, such as China and Israel. Governments in nations like Sudan, Ethiopia, and Rwanda have reportedly deployed these tools to track opposition voices and monitor citizens’ online activities (Srinivasan et al., 2019).

The Sudanese government's establishment of a "Cyber-Jihad" unit exemplifies the militarization of digital surveillance. This specialized unit monitors online spaces to identify and suppress dissenting voices, effectively extending state control into the digital realm (Lamoureaux & Sureau, 2019). As Sebeelo notes, "Social media platforms have been subjected to intense government scrutiny and restrictions in countries like Egypt and Ethiopia, especially during times of political unrest" (Sebeelo, 2021, p. 104).

The dual role of social media as a tool for empowerment and a mechanism for state surveillance creates a complex dynamic. While platforms provide spaces for democratic engagement, they are also exploited by regimes to consolidate power. Chitanana and Mutsvairo argue: "Despite the potential for social media to empower democratic movements, authoritarian regimes in Africa have also used these platforms to consolidate power by monitoring and restricting opposition activities" (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019, p. 69).

Internet shutdowns have emerged as a common strategy for suppressing dissent in sub-Saharan Africa. These disruptions are often deployed during times of political unrest or electoral cycles to limit citizens' ability to organize protests and share information. Countries like Chad and Cameroon have experienced some of the longest internet shutdowns globally, reflecting the extent to which governments are willing to disrupt connectivity to maintain control.

In Zimbabwe, for instance, the government has repeatedly resorted to internet shutdowns as a means of curbing protests and controlling civil unrest, particularly during contentious electoral periods. Sebeelo notes, "The Zimbabwean government has repeatedly used internet shutdowns as a means to control protests and civil unrest, particularly during electoral cycles" (Sebeelo, 2021, p. 96). These actions, often justified under the guise of national security, effectively curtail political engagement and suppress dissent, demonstrating the lengths to which regimes will go to neutralize perceived threats from digital platforms (Marchant & Stremlau, 2020; Ayalew, 2019).

While digital technologies and social media platforms offer transformative opportunities for political participation, information dissemination, and activism in sub-Saharan Africa, they also face significant challenges from authoritarian governments. These regimes perceive social media as a destabilizing force capable of disrupting their autocratic rule and exposing their governance shortcomings. As a result, they have implemented a range of measures, from direct censorship and social media taxes to surveillance and internet shutdowns, to curtail the influence of these platforms.

The tension between the democratizing potential of digital technologies and the repressive measures of authoritarian states highlights the complex and contested role of social media in the region's political landscape. Despite these challenges, social media continues to provide a critical space for political engagement, underscoring its significance as both a tool for empowerment and a site of contention in the struggle for democratization in sub-Saharan Africa. Essentially, the increasing prominence of digital platforms has led authoritarian regimes in the region to view them as a serious threat to their control and authority. Meanwhile, social media has provided political actors with a means to conduct disinformation campaigns for political advantage.

2.7.3 The Potential for Social Media to Disseminate Disinformation for Political Advantage in Sub-Saharan Africa

While digital technologies offer numerous opportunities for political engagement, they are also accompanied by significant challenges, including surveillance and the propagation of disinformation in sub-Saharan Africa. Research demonstrates that political actors frequently exploit social media platforms to deliberately spread political disinformation for strategic gains (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019). These platforms serve as highly effective environments for the dissemination of misinformation, particularly among users who are politically active and more likely to share unverified or inaccurate information (Ahmed et al., 2023). In the region, both online platforms and traditional methods, such as doorstep campaigning, have been weaponized to promote disinformation, illustrating how hybrid media systems system (Chadwick, 2013) of blending digital and offline elements to facilitate these practices.

Disinformation, defined as the intentional dissemination of false information designed to deceive or harm, is a critical tool employed by political entities for manipulation (Tully et al., 2022; Abiodun, 2024). The broader concept of fake news, which encompasses both disinformation and misinformation, has been weaponized to achieve various political objectives. These include undermining informed decision-making, exacerbating political polarization, and diminishing public trust in democratic institutions (Abiodun, 2024; Arnaudo, 2017; Lees, 2018; Martens et al., 2018; Qin et al., 2017; Rolston, 2020; Wasserman, 2020). Although the use of fake news is not a novel phenomenon, its reach has been significantly amplified by the widespread adoption of digital technologies, including smartphones and social media platforms (Moyo, Mare, and Mabweazara, 2020). Even traditional media outlets occasionally contribute to the spread of disinformation, often during specific events, which underscores the transient and event-driven nature of fake news in this context (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018; Carlson, 2018; Wahutu, 2019a; Munoriyarwa & Chambwera, 2020).

The production and dissemination of fake news in sub-Saharan Africa are closely tied to propaganda and rumor mongering, practices that exploit unrestricted access to media platforms to manipulate public opinion (Moyo, Mare, and Mabweazara, 2020; Gumede, 2018). Political actors, including governments and opposition parties, use fake news as a strategic tool to challenge opposing narratives, mobilize their bases, and influence undecided voters. These efforts often involve deploying cyber troops and automated bots to shape public opinion, create echo chambers, and amplify specific messages (Moyo, Mare, and Mabweazara, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach that includes media literacy initiatives, robust fact-checking systems, and legislative measures to regulate the spread of false information (Abiodun, 2024).

Notably, misinformation predates its current prominence in sub-Saharan Africa, having long been a feature of the region's political landscape. However, the proliferation of mobile technology and messaging applications like WhatsApp has significantly amplified its impact,

enabling false information to reach vast audiences across the continent (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021). Both online and offline channels, including word-of-mouth networks, are used to disseminate disinformation. Governments and political parties alike leverage platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to propagate fake news, often tailoring messages to specific audiences for maximum effect (Abiodun, 2024; Wahutu, 2019a). This phenomenon underscores the dual nature of digital technology as both a democratizing force and a vehicle for manipulation.

The rise of disinformation is further complicated in semi-authoritarian democracies, where traditional media outlets also serve as arenas for the spread of fake news, particularly during election periods (Mare, 2020b). In some cases, governments in the region have appropriated the term “fake news” as a means to stifle dissent, curtail free expression, and legitimize draconian cybersecurity laws and internet shutdowns (Mare, 2020a; Ayalew, 2019). This weaponization of the term highlights the broader challenges associated with combating disinformation while preserving democratic freedoms.

The challenges posed by fake news in sub-Saharan Africa are not limited to online platforms but extend to offline activities as well, creating a complex and multifaceted problem. Despite its potential to amplify diverse voices, social media in this region has also emerged as a powerful tool for spreading false information, thereby undermining democratic processes and public trust. Combating this issue requires not only technological solutions but also a broader societal commitment to fostering informed and critical digital citizenship. Addressing the proliferation of disinformation will necessitate a concerted effort involving governments, civil society, and international stakeholders to ensure that the benefits of digital technology are not overshadowed by its misuse. In essence, social media offers political actors a tool to spread disinformation for political gain, while digital platforms hold the potential to democratize political communication in sub-Saharan Africa.

2.7.4 The Potential Of Social Media To Serve As A Public Forum That Democratizes Information In Sub-Saharan Africa

Social media enables political actors to engage in disinformation campaigns for political gain, while digital technologies have the transformative potential to serve as public forums that foster diverse viewpoints and democratize access to information in sub-Saharan Africa. Social media, in particular, has expanded opportunities for free expression and interactive engagement, offering citizens new avenues to participate in political discourse and social debate (Moyo, 2020). Scholarly research highlights how digital platforms create alternative public spaces where citizenship can be expressed in multifaceted ways, circumventing the restrictions often imposed by state actors or geographic limitations (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020). These platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of information, enabling political actors to mobilize support and organize campaigns across vast distances. Such practices align closely with connective action theory, which posits that digital platforms empower movements to rapidly and efficiently mobilize supporters irrespective of physical boundaries (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

The concept of the public sphere, as articulated by Habermas (1989), emphasizes the role of private individuals coming together to use reason and dialogue as tools for advancing critical knowledge and fostering political change. Social media has redefined this concept by enabling citizens to engage with political issues in real-time, consuming news, participating in online debates, and even engaging in digital activism (Ahmed et al., 2023). These platforms offer citizens in sub-Saharan Africa opportunities to transcend traditional barriers, amplifying voices that might otherwise be marginalized in conventional media spaces.

The recent surge in digital political engagement across sub-Saharan Africa has been largely driven by the widespread adoption of mobile internet, which has exponentially increased access to digital platforms in the region (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020). Social media, in particular, bridges the gap between citizens and political figures, fostering more direct forms of interaction and accountability (Skjerdal and Gebru, 2020). In contexts where traditional media are either unreliable or heavily censored, social media platforms emerge as alternative public spheres,

providing an uncensored medium for sharing news, opinions, and critical information (Skjerdal and Gebru, 2020). These dynamics underscores the vital role of an independent and free press in ensuring democratic processes, particularly during elections. A well-informed electorate is crucial for elections to be deemed free, fair, and credible, and digital technologies are increasingly filling this informational void (Howard, 2005; Kpaduwa, 2014; Uzuoku, 2014).

In contexts where democratic spaces are constrained, digital platforms can function as public spheres that enable political engagement and interaction between citizens and leaders. Bosch (2016) observes that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter empower citizens to organize grassroots movements, thereby decentralizing and enhancing political participation. Bhanye, Shayamunda, and Tavirai (2023, p. 121) further highlight that “through platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, citizens are able to organize grassroots movements, enhancing the decentralization of political participation.” Digital technologies also provide censorship-free arenas for political discussions, offering opportunities for citizens to express grievances about systemic issues such as corruption, governance failures, and economic hardships (Nyabola, 2018; Gukurume, 2017). Beyond political discourse, these platforms also serve as tools for personal connectivity and civic engagement, blurring the lines between private and public spheres (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020).

The potential of digital technologies to decentralize and invigorate political debate is widely acknowledged in academic discourse (De Zúñiga et al., 2014; Holt et al., 2013; Valenzuela, 2013). Social media can disrupt mainstream narratives, creating spaces for dissent and fostering regional and temporal flexibility in political mobilization (Fraser, 1992; Gerbaudo, 2012; Lim, 2012; Ndlovu and Mbenga, 2013; Squires, 2002). Such dynamics are particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa, where citizens have actively utilized digital platforms to carve out public spheres for robust political engagement.

Examples of these phenomena abound across the region. In South Africa, the #MustFall movement effectively used social media to challenge elite-driven politics and bring pressing

issues to the forefront of national discourse (Daniels, 2016). In Kenya, social media platforms have facilitated public debates on the performance of devolved county governments, providing an alternative space for political dialogue (Srinivasan et al., 2019). Similarly, in Rwanda, charismatic individuals have gained substantial followings through gossip websites and online tabloids, shaping public opinion and political conversations. In Zimbabwe and Zanzibar, social media has played a pivotal role in fostering political debates and mobilizing voters during election campaigns (Srinivasan et al., 2019). Kenya provides yet another illustrative case, where the use of social media for political purposes has created an alternative public sphere, enriching the diversity of political debate and democratizing access to information (Brinkman, 2019).

Ultimately, digital technologies hold immense potential to act as public forums that amplify a broad spectrum of viewpoints in sub-Saharan Africa. By offering alternatives to traditional media, these platforms enhance civil society's capacity to influence political processes, challenge authoritarian practices, and advocate for accountability. However, realizing this potential requires a concerted effort to ensure that digital spaces remain inclusive and accessible, particularly for marginalized groups. Digital technologies hold the potential to act as tools for democratization, while social media has the capacity to wield significant influence in sub-Saharan Africa.

2.8 The Potential of Social Media to Enhance Civil Society's Impact in Sub-Saharan Africa

2.8.1 The Potential of Social Media to Amplify Civil Society's Influence in Sub-Saharan Africa

Digital technologies possess the potential to serve as democratizing forces, while the rise of social media has created a valuable opportunity to enhance the impact of civil society in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, social media platforms have provided a critical means for civil society organizations and activists to bypass traditional media constraints imposed by state-controlled broadcasting networks. This ability to communicate freely beyond national borders

has not only facilitated the globalization of local issues but has also allowed marginalized voices to be heard more widely (Hodzi & Zihnioğlu, 2024). Despite the challenges posed by limited access in some rural areas, evidence suggests that civil society groups across sub-Saharan Africa are increasingly relying on highly digitalized campaigns to raise awareness, mobilize support, and advocate for political change (Mare, 2018).

The role of digital technologies, especially social media, has been vital in providing spaces for civic engagement and political mobilization in regions where traditional media is tightly controlled by the state. As Chitanana & Mutsvairo (2019) note, “Digital technologies, especially social media, have been crucial in creating spaces for civic engagement and political mobilization in repressive regimes, where traditional media is state-controlled” (p. 43). The decline in the cost of smartphones and the availability of free access to social media through mobile phones have further contributed to the widespread adoption of digital platforms, significantly enhancing the capacity of civil society to convey their messages directly to the electorate and influence political discourse (Srinivasan et al., 2019).

In sub-Saharan Africa, social media has redefined communication, allowing individuals to create, share, and modify ideas within virtual communities that transcend physical boundaries (Bhanye et al., 2023). Digital platforms have especially empowered communities in remote areas, which were previously excluded from the reach of traditional media outlets, thus democratizing access to information across vast and diverse geographical spaces (Kalyango & Adu-Kumi, 2013). Digital platforms have become arenas where marginalized voices can challenge hegemonic power and introduce alternative narratives into public discourse. This aligns with the key premise of Contentious Publicness in that digital tools provide opportunities for the emergence of new actors and perspectives, thus reshaping the public sphere (Kavada & Poell, 2020). Social media has thus become an important platform for political expression in sub-Saharan Africa, enabling individuals to voice political opinions and engage with issues that they deem crucial. Bhanye, Shayamunda, & Tavirai (2023) observe, “Decentralized democracy is strengthened when social media tools enable the rapid dissemination of alternative political

narratives that challenge state-controlled messaging” (p. 129). These tools facilitate the swift exchange of information and foster more direct and personal interactions between citizens and political actors, further strengthening the democratic process. The growing influence of digital platforms has allowed civil society to overcome communication barriers, rapidly disseminating messages that challenge state-sanctioned narratives and pushing for democratic reform (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2017).

Furthermore, civil society organizations in sub-Saharan Africa have harnessed digital technologies to advance causes such as human rights, government accountability, and the promotion of good governance (Gukurume, 2017). Social media has provided an effective space for political activism during critical moments, such as elections or political conflicts, where it has allowed citizens to express dissatisfaction and demand change (Iwata, 2015). The region’s growing urbanization and the increasing tech-savviness of youth have further amplified this trend, as young people leverage digital platforms to demand greater transparency and accountability from political leaders (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019a).

Research also highlights the symbiotic relationship between the youth’s engagement in digital platforms and their heightened political awareness and participation. Studies show that social media has played a pivotal role in rejuvenating political participation, particularly among educated, urban youth in the region (Otieno & Mukhongo, 2015). As digital technologies continue to proliferate across sub-Saharan Africa, they provide these youth with new means of political engagement that transcend traditional forms of participation, making digital platforms a vital tool for both political expression and mobilization.

In parallel to these developments, sub-Saharan Africa’s growing prominence on the global stage is evident in factors such as rapid population growth, steady economic development, extensive free trade areas, and abundant natural resources (Dietz, 2017; Katoka & Dostal, 2022). These shifts have been accompanied by an increase in civil society’s digital engagement, which has played a crucial role in inspiring movements for political reform in countries like the Democratic

Republic of Congo, Malawi, Uganda, Chad, and Sudan (Srinivasan et al., 2019). The use of digital platforms has thus not only facilitated political mobilization but has also contributed to shifts in public opinion, which have been pivotal in galvanizing citizens and fostering greater political engagement (Kalyango, 2011; Montero, 2009).

A key aspect of this transformation has been the ability of civil society groups to mobilize through digital means, paralleling the efforts of political parties using social media for electioneering. For example, Ghana's growing democratic landscape exemplifies the potential of social media as a mobilization tool, enabling citizens to engage politically and demand reforms (Dzisah, 2018). These digital platforms serve as an accessible medium through which civil society can express concerns and contribute to political discourse, significantly shaping the trajectory of political development in the region (Kalyango & Adu-Kumi, 2013).

Moreover, scholars have increasingly emphasized the role of digital technologies in enabling Afrocentric political transformations, highlighting the battleground for information that these platforms have created. Chitanana & Mutsvairo (2019) assert that "digital technologies have become a crucial battleground for information, with the potential to enable Afrocentric political transformations." The potential for political change via digital platforms has already been demonstrated in sub-Saharan Africa, as seen during the 2007 Kenyan election, where civil society leveraged digital tools to monitor the election, mobilize citizens, and promote greater political engagement (Nyabuga & Mudhai, 2009). Kenya, recognized as one of the most digitally advanced countries in the region, has used platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to transform the political landscape, giving citizens the opportunity to craft and share their political narratives in spaces that are less constrained by government censorship (Nyabola, 2018).

Despite the promising potential of social media to foster democratic change, the effectiveness of digital platforms in enhancing civil society's influence remains a topic of ongoing debate. While many studies highlight the critical role of social media in facilitating political participation and mobilization, others caution that the impact of social media on democratization may be

overstated. Some scholars argue that social media's role in fostering genuine political change is still uncertain, emphasizing the importance of considering the specific political and social contexts in which these platforms are used (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Studies from Uganda, for example, indicate that although citizens engage in political discussions online, their offline political participation remains relatively limited (Grönlund & Wakabi, 2015). Similarly, research in Kenya suggests that while young adults use social media for civic participation, much of their online activity centers on entertainment and socializing rather than political engagement (Jäntti, 2015).

In conclusion, while social media offers significant potential to enhance civil society's impact in sub-Saharan Africa by promoting political engagement and discourse, the effectiveness of these platforms as tools for mobilizing protests and achieving substantial political change is still an area requiring further research and critical analysis. Despite these challenges, digital technologies continue to play a growing role in influencing political outcomes and amplifying the voice of civil society in sub-Saharan Africa, underscoring the transformative power of social media as a mobilization tool.

2.8.2 The Potential of Civil Society to Leverage Social Media as a Mobilization Tool in Sub-Saharan Africa

Digital technologies have the potential to amplify the voice of civil society, and their growth in sub-Saharan Africa offers a valuable opportunity for civil society organizations to strengthen their mobilization efforts. Research suggests that these digital tools can unite large, often dispersed, groups around common causes, thereby facilitating protests and other forms of collective resistance (Beck, 2016). Social media platforms, by enabling decentralized engagement, have enhanced political participation in the region, allowing citizens to actively engage with political issues in ways that were previously difficult or impossible (Bhanye et al., 2023). The concept of mobilization, as discussed by Cox et al. (1998), refers to the transformation of passive individuals into active participants in a collective movement. Digital

platforms have facilitated this transformation by providing tools that allow civil society actors to organize, express grievances, and hold governments accountable.

This phenomenon aligns with the Contentious Publicness where digital platforms have become arenas where marginalized voices like civil society and activists to challenge hegemonic power and introduce alternative narratives into public discourse (Kavada & Poell, 2020). Social media's real-time communication capabilities have given considerable momentum to citizen-led mobilization efforts, enabling individuals to advocate for political, social, and economic changes. In recent years, sub-Saharan African democracies have made notable progress in expanding suffrage and political freedoms, yet authoritarian regimes in some countries continue to suppress freedom of expression and restrict civil society activities. In such contexts, digital technologies play a vital role in providing independent information, organizing protests, and raising awareness about government corruption and human rights abuses (Cariolle et al., 2024).

In sub-Saharan Africa, digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have become essential spaces for individuals to express their opinions without fear of censorship or repression, which is common in traditional, offline spaces. According to Aminu (2024), these platforms serve as digital arenas for political engagement, allowing people to discuss, mobilize, and challenge existing power structures. Social media has thus evolved into a central tool for resistance, replicating the roles of physical protests, civil disobedience, and other forms of social activism in the digital space (Aminu, 2024). As such, social media platforms have become more than just channels for communication; they have become vital tools for political engagement, especially in regions where traditional forms of protest and expression are suppressed.

Civil society organizations in sub-Saharan Africa have increasingly turned to social media to mobilize support for political uprisings. Countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Uganda, Chad, Zimbabwe, and South Africa have seen social movements harness the power of digital platforms to rally citizens for political change (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2017). A key distinction can be made between social movements, which tend to be large, formally

organized, and long-term, and protest movements, which are more spontaneous and short-lived (Adeniyi, 2022). The term “social media revolution” has been used to describe the innovative ways in which civil society organizations have employed digital technologies to facilitate uprisings and protests across sub-Saharan Africa (Cottle, 2011). These digital tools have proven effective in organizing mass mobilization efforts that challenge government policies or expose critical issues such as corruption, inequality, and human rights violations (Daniels, 2016).

Social media has proven to be a powerful force in organizing protests and uprisings. Notable examples include the #OromoProtests in Ethiopia, which were instrumental in demanding greater political rights and ultimately led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn (Hodzi & Zihnioglu, 2024). Similarly, in Nigeria, younger generations have used social media creatively to mobilize protests, re-engage with political discourse, and influence the broader political narrative (Iwilade, 2013). The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, which called for the disbandment of a notorious police unit, further exemplified the power of social media in galvanizing citizens to act, with digital platforms playing a crucial role in rallying support and organizing protests (Uwalaka, 2024).

In South Africa, civil society has increasingly integrated traditional mobilization methods with digital tools to amplify their message. The toyi-toyi (a militant march-dance), stay-aways, road blockades, and sit-ins have been combined with digital activism to extend the reach of protests, conveying political messages to a wider audience (Chiumbu, 2015). Studies have shown that digital technologies have also been used by student movements advocating for free education in South Africa, helping to amplify their voices and garner attention for their cause (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2017). The frequency of protests in South Africa has increased, driven by marginalized communities seeking to redress socio-economic inequalities and political exclusions. Civil society and social movements use social media platforms to broadcast these activities, often drawing the attention of mainstream media and the wider public (Bosch, Wasserman & Chuma, 2018).

However, it is important to acknowledge that the role of social media in mobilizing protests is not always straightforward. Authoritarian governments are often reluctant to cover emerging protests in mainstream media, and information about these events frequently spreads through social media channels before being acknowledged by traditional news outlets (Skjerdal & Gebru, 2020). The political environment plays a critical role in determining how effective social media can be in fostering collective action. Some scholars argue that labeling events like the Arab Spring as a “Facebook revolution” oversimplifies the situation, as multiple factors beyond social media contributed to the protests (Khondker, 2011). While social media played an undeniable role in spreading information and inspiring action, the underlying social, economic, and political conditions were essential for the success of these movements. This complexity is reflected in the political contexts of sub-Saharan Africa, where the effectiveness of social media in mobilizing protests often depends on the broader political environment in which it operates.

In conclusion, social media holds considerable potential as a mobilization tool for civil society in sub-Saharan Africa. It has the ability to foster online participation, facilitate collective action, and challenge entrenched power structures. Despite the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes and the political environment, social media continues to play a transformative role in sub-Saharan Africa’s political landscape. As more citizens gain access to digital platforms, the potential for social media to drive political change will only increase, providing a powerful tool for civil society to hold governments accountable and advocate for political reform. In essence, digital platforms have the potential to serve as tools for mobilization and promote online political engagement by civil society in sub-Saharan Africa.

2.8.3 The Potential of Digital Activism to Promote Online Participation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Social media holds the potential to serve as a mobilization tool, while digital platforms have emerged as transformative instruments capable of encouraging online political participation by civil society in sub-Saharan Africa. Social media, in particular, has become a vital avenue for citizens to challenge prevailing stereotypes, such as the “dark continent” narrative, that have long

characterized the region (Bhanye et al., 2023). With the advent of digital technologies, sub-Saharan Africa has entered the 21st-century technological era, empowering citizens to engage in digital activism to critique and improve their socio-political and economic realities (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2017).

This transformative shift is intertwined with ongoing democratic transitions and economic developments across the region, which have also facilitated substantial growth in traditional media networks, such as radio and television (Dendere, 2019). The increasing penetration of digital media has further expanded access to information and created new pathways for democratization and political engagement (Ikechukwu & Chinedu, 2023). Digital technologies have transcended socio-economic divides, establishing themselves as indispensable tools for fostering inclusive participation in the region's information society.

Youth activists and civil society organizations in sub-Saharan Africa have integrated digital platforms into their strategies for networking, information sharing, and public engagement. These technologies offer activists the means to connect with broader audiences, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and amplifying their political narratives. Digital platforms have become arenas where marginalized voices can challenge hegemonic power and introduce alternative narratives into public discourse in synch with the Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020).

A growing body of research underscores the pivotal role of digital communication in advancing political activism in sub-Saharan Africa (Bosch, 2016a, 2016b; Klopp and Orina, 2002; Mano, 2010; Mare, 2013; Moyo, 2009, 2011; Mudhai, 2013; Mutsvairo and Sirks, 2015; Smyth and Best, 2013). Among these studies, a recurring theme is the central role of the younger generation in embracing social media as an alternative platform for political engagement (Bosch, 2013; Mare, 2014; Mutsvairo and Sirks, 2015). Platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp have become critical spaces where citizens engage in discussions, advocate for reforms, and participate in voter registration initiatives. Kenyan citizens, for example, have

demonstrated significant levels of digital engagement through campaigns and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting voter participation and addressing pressing social issues (Abiodun, 2024).

The impact of digital activism is not confined to Kenya. In Malawi, for instance, scholars have documented the growing role of online platforms in mobilizing citizens around issues of governance and accountability (Gaynor, 2011; Mutsvairo and Harris, 2016). Similarly, South Africa has witnessed a resurgence of social activism fueled by the challenges confronting its young democracy, including corruption, inequality, unemployment, and inadequate public service delivery (Bosch, Wasserman, and Chuma, 2018). Environmental activism in Malawi has also gained traction, with digital media serving as a crucial tool for organizing and disseminating information to drive collective action (Luhtakallio and Tavory, 2015).

Despite its growing significance, digital activism in sub-Saharan Africa faces notable challenges that limit its ability to drive systemic change. Scholars argue that while digital platforms enhance mobilization, they are insufficient on their own to achieve substantial political reform (Cook et al., 2014; Bosch et al., 2020). Moreover, the empowering potential of the internet is not confined to activists; authoritarian regimes also exploit these technologies to suppress dissent and surveil opposition movements (Morozov, 2012). This dual-use nature of digital technologies underscores the complexity of leveraging online platforms as tools for civic empowerment.

Nonetheless, the potential of digital activism to catalyze online political participation remains significant. The integration of hashtags, for example, has proven to be an effective strategy for mobilizing communities and amplifying advocacy campaigns. While digital activism may not serve as a standalone solution, it complements broader efforts toward political and social engagement in sub-Saharan Africa. By fostering participation, raising awareness, and challenging oppressive structures, digital activism continues to play an essential role in advancing civil society's goals across the region. Digital platforms have become powerful tools for promoting online political participation among civil society, while hashtags have emerged as effective instruments for mobilizing civic engagement in sub-Saharan Africa.

2.8.4 The Potential of Hashtags to Serve as Tools for Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa

Digital platforms have become influential tools for fostering online political participation among civil society, while hashtags have evolved into powerful instruments for mobilization, enabling civil society in sub-Saharan Africa to drive social change and hold political leaders accountable. These digital markers serve as powerful rallying points for collective action, enabling the rapid organization and dissemination of information. Social media platforms, particularly those like X (formerly Twitter), have increasingly become indispensable tools for activists, advocacy groups, and social movements aiming to address pressing socio-political and economic challenges in the region (Nartey & Yu, 2023). Digital platforms have become arenas where marginalized voices like civil society and activists to challenge hegemonic power and introduce alternative narratives into public discourse (Kavada & Poell, 2020). Hashtags provide users with a means to share real-time information, engage in discussions, and make well-informed decisions about ongoing societal issues. They act as digital bridges, linking individuals to broader conversations and fostering collective action in ways previously unimaginable (Reilly & Vacari, 2021). According to Marres (2012), hashtags are effective tools for public engagement, as they facilitate meaningful participation by connecting people with shared interests and concerns.

The phenomenon of “hashtag activism” has been coined to describe this form of digitally driven social mobilization, which has gained significant traction in sub-Saharan Africa (Sebeelo, 2020). This emergent form of activism enables diverse and inclusive participation in public discourse, transcending traditional barriers of geography, class, and access to formal communication channels. In this context, hashtags have been instrumental in amplifying voices advocating for feminist ideals, tackling systemic political corruption, demanding improved access to education, and addressing broader social injustices across the continent (Sebeelo, 2020).

Furthermore, digital media platforms have revolutionized communication paradigms in sub-Saharan Africa, fostering a sense of collective presence and enabling widespread contributions to civic discussions. For instance, in Kenya, the hashtag #WhatWouldMagufuliDo became a

unifying tool for citizens on X to critique their government, drawing comparisons to the reformist policies of Tanzanian President John Magufuli during his tenure (Srinivasan, 2019). This case illustrates the potential of hashtags to serve as instruments of political accountability and public critique.

Similarly, in Ghana, the hashtag #FixTheCountry was at the forefront of a significant civic movement highlighting economic challenges and advocating for systemic reforms. This campaign not only galvanized massive online participation but also translated into tangible offline protests, demonstrating the ability of digital activism to drive real-world change (Nartey & Yu, 2023). These instances reflect the transformative potential of hashtags as catalysts for collective action, enabling citizens to channel their frustrations into cohesive demands for accountability and progress.

The impact of hashtag activism in sub-Saharan Africa is further evidenced by high-profile movements such as #CatchKony in Uganda, #MenAreTrash in South Africa, #BringBackMutharika in Malawi, and #BringBackOurGirls in Nigeria (Sebeelo, 2020). Among these, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign exemplifies the global reach of hashtag-driven movements. Initially focused on raising awareness about the kidnapping of schoolgirls by Boko Haram, the campaign gained international attention, mobilizing global figures such as former U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama to lend their voices to the cause (Sebeelo, 2020). The ability of hashtags to transcend physical and cultural boundaries underscores their effectiveness as tools for both local and international advocacy.

However, while hashtags offer significant promise as mobilization tools in sub-Saharan Africa, they are not without limitations. In some cases, they risk being reduced to performative gestures, generating awareness without necessarily translating into concrete action. Furthermore, the same platforms that empower civil society can also amplify the influence of political actors, as demonstrated by recent developments in Zimbabwe. Despite these challenges, the continued rise

of hashtag activism reflects a shifting landscape of digital civic engagement and holds the potential to enhance the influence of political actors in Zimbabwe.

2.9 The Potential of Social Media to Enhance the Effectiveness of Political Campaigns in Zimbabwe

2.9.1 The Potential of Digital Platforms to Amplify the Influence of Political Actors in Zimbabwe

Hashtags can serve as powerful tools for mobilizing civil society in sub-Saharan Africa, while digital technologies offer significant potential to enhance the influence of political actors in Zimbabwe by providing innovative channels for engagement, communication, and increased visibility. Political actors in the country have actively embraced digital platforms to enhance their political influence and public profiles in line with the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework, which emphasizes how political actors can strategically navigate media ecosystems to maximize their visibility and exert greater influence (Cammaerts, 2012). Such strategic engagement underscores the proactive use of digital media by political actors in Zimbabwe to reshape the dynamics of political communication and participation.

Chibuwe observes, “Social media has revolutionized the political communication landscape in Zimbabwe, allowing political parties to engage with voters directly and circumvent traditional media channels” (Chibuwe, 2020, p. 133). The advent of social media has democratized political discourse, empowering individuals to navigate the political environment with significantly greater autonomy. It bypasses traditional gatekeepers such as newspaper editors, political parties, and interest groups (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020). This capability to circumvent conventional barriers underscores social media’s transformative potential in enabling political actors to directly engage with their constituencies.

A contextual analysis reveals the increasing prevalence of social media in Zimbabwean politics, shifting from a broader sub-Saharan African framework to a localized examination. Recent

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studies reveal a sharp rise in the use of social media for political campaigns, fuelled by the exponential growth of internet users in Zimbabwe. The number of internet users now exceeds 8.4 million, constituting over half of the population (Chari, 2024). This digital connectivity has created fertile ground for political communication, particularly during the 2023 elections. Social media platforms provided political actors with direct access to voters, offering a means to disseminate messages more effectively and personally (Ureke, 2024).

Research also highlights the dual challenge and opportunity digital technologies pose for political actors. As more people rely on social media for information and interaction, political campaigns must adapt to this evolving landscape (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Despite these advancements, traditional methods of political campaigning—such as rallies, slogans, and broadcast media—continue to play a vital role in Zimbabwe (Willems, 2016). This dual reliance reflects the country’s socio-economic and geographical disparities, where radio remains a primary information source for rural farmers, while urban youth and working-class individuals gravitate toward television and social media (Mare, 2018).

The potential of social media to influence discourse and shape political agendas during the 2023 elections is a pivotal aspect of this digital transformation. Scholars have argued that digital technologies could serve as “game-changers” in advancing democratic ideals within an authoritarian context (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019). However, Zimbabwe’s authoritarian regime has actively resisted these changes by cracking down on civil society organizations, arresting activists, and curbing civic participation (Abiodun, 2024). Political activists continue to face harassment and imprisonment, a trend that persisted throughout the 2023 election cycle (Ureke, 2024).

Nonetheless, social media remains a crucial platform for citizens to share information and debate the nation’s future. Scholars Bhanye, Shayamunda, and Tavirai emphasize, “Social media’s ability to connect citizens directly with one another challenges centralized governance, enabling the emergence of more participatory and decentralized democratic practices” (Bhanye,

Shayamunda, & Tavirai, 2023, p. 132). This connectivity inspires hope for transformative change akin to the Arab Spring, as citizens increasingly exercise their democratic rights through digital platforms (Langmia, 2014). These platforms provide Zimbabweans with a vital tool for political engagement and democratic expression, mirroring global trends that link social media with enhanced political participation (Gukurume, 2017; Manganga, 2012; Mare, 2018; Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2014).

Despite these advancements, the extent to which social media can shape opinions and influence political preferences in Zimbabwe remains contested. Activities like posting campaign information and consuming political content online contribute to political engagement but do not singularly drive it (Gukurume, 2017; Manganga, 2012; Mare, 2018; Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2014). Chibwe further asserts, “Social media offers a unique platform where political actors can directly engage with citizens, bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of the mainstream media” (Chibwe, 2020, p. 139). Additionally, digital platforms foster creative political expression, enabling the dissemination of diverse content, including videos, images, and text (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020).

In Zimbabwe’s semi-authoritarian context, social media emerges as a complementary tool to traditional political processes, particularly for youth activists. While it cannot independently drive political change, it plays an instrumental role in amplifying voices and challenging repression (Mutsvairo, 2013; Mare, 2015). During election campaigns, these platforms are pivotal for circulating public opinion and disseminating information (Moyo, 2009).

The increasing reliance on social media by major political parties such as ZANU PF and Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) underscores its growing importance. Earlier studies indicate that political actors have adopted social media partly due to external influences and competitive pressures (Ward and Gibson, 1998). In recent elections, these platforms have served as critical channels to connect with young and first-time voters (Mare, 2018). As Chibwe notes, “The

introduction of social media in political campaigns has significantly lowered the cost of political marketing, allowing even smaller parties to reach broader audiences” (Chibuwe, 2020, p. 156).

However, despite these advancements, Zimbabwe remains deeply entrenched in militarized authoritarianism. Even after Robert Mugabe’s removal in 2017, the political landscape remains repressive, with stringent regulations limiting internet access and freedoms (Hodzi & Zihnioğlu, 2024). The Public Order and Security Act, alongside periodic internet shutdowns, restricts citizens’ rights to freedom of association and assembly (Karekwaivanane and Msonza, 2021).

In response to this repression, the use of pseudonyms and anonymous accounts has become a prominent feature of Zimbabwean political campaigns. As Chibuwe highlights, “The use of pseudonyms and anonymous accounts during political campaigns on platforms such as Twitter has become a prominent feature of Zimbabwean elections, shaping the discourse around political legitimacy” (Chibuwe, 2020, p. 147). Despite these challenges, platforms like WhatsApp remain essential for grassroots mobilization, especially in rural areas (Chibuwe, Mpofu, & Bhowa, 2021, p. 26).

Ultimately, social media provides a space for Zimbabweans at home and abroad to freely discuss national issues, highlighting its potential to amplify diverse voices and influence political dynamics (Moyo, 2009). This underscores the transformative role digital technologies can play in fostering democratic participation and reshaping Zimbabwe’s political landscape. Digital technologies have the capacity to enhance the influence of political actors in Zimbabwe, while social media can serve as public spheres that provide platforms for diverse perspectives and dialogue.

2.9.2 The Potential of Social Media to Serve as a Public Sphere that Democratizes Information in Zimbabwe

Digital technologies have the capacity to strengthen the influence of political actors in Zimbabwe, while social media can act as virtual public spheres, creating spaces where diverse

opinions can be shared freely, overcoming the geographical, social, and political barriers that have historically restricted access to information in the country. These platforms create avenues where state censorship is circumvented, allowing information to spread rapidly and enabling marginalized groups to strategically navigate media systems biased against them to amplify their voices and overcome barriers to communication embodying the Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012). In this context, social media functions as more than just a medium for communication, it represents a tool for reconfiguring civic spaces and democratizing access to information.

Research underscores the transformative role of social media in creating new civic spaces that promote and strengthen democracy. Stoker (2006) and Jackson & Lilleker (2009) highlight how modern technology facilitates the redefinition of citizenship by providing platforms for active engagement and discourse. Specifically, social media can create alternative public spheres where citizenship is practiced in multifaceted ways, enabling the articulation of dissent and the reimagining of democratic participation (Bosch, Mare, and Ncube, 2020). In Zimbabwe, social media platforms have proven particularly effective as spaces for political discourse, especially for dissenting voices critical of political and economic elites (Ureke, 2024).

Public spheres, as conceptualized by Dahlgren (2005), are communicative spaces within society that allow for the free circulation of information, ideas, and debates without restrictions or coercion. Ideally, these spaces are free from state control and corporate influence, providing an environment where public opinion can form through open dialogue (Fuchs, 2014). In authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe, digital technologies function as subaltern public spheres, offering alternative spaces where citizens can bypass state constraints and surveillance (Gukurume, 2017). These platforms provide critical opportunities for political parties and civil society organizations to campaign, mobilize, and engage with their audiences.

The emergence of these digital public spheres represents a stark contrast to Zimbabwe's historical political climate, characterized by a heavily restricted public sphere. In this climate,

traditional media outlets like radio, print, and television have often been co-opted by the ruling party, serving as platforms for propagating its political narrative while censoring opposing views. Repressive laws empower the authoritarian regime to police public speech, ban gatherings, arrest journalists, and shut down privately owned newspapers and radio stations (Karekwaivanane, 2019). This monopolization of traditional media has left limited room for diverse political expression, thereby intensifying the importance of social media as a relatively open and decentralized space for civic engagement.

However, the rise of social media in Zimbabwe has not gone unchallenged. The government has collaborated with China to train officials in cyber intelligence, with Chinese companies like Huawei providing surveillance technologies aimed at curbing internet-based activism (Hodzi & Zihnioglu, 2024). These developments reflect the regime's attempts to suppress the growing power of digital platforms by monitoring and limiting online activities. Despite these challenges, social media continues to thrive as a critical arena for political communication.

The importance of social media as an alternative public sphere is exemplified by platforms like the Facebook page Baba Jukwa, which became a popular space for citizens to challenge repressive laws and openly criticize the government (Karekwaivanane, 2019). This page served as a virtual public sphere where users could candidly discuss national issues, exposing the corruption and mismanagement of the political elite. Similarly, hashtags and other digital tools have allowed citizens to shift public debate from physical spaces where repression is pervasive to the relative safety of virtual communities (Gukurume, 2017). These virtual spaces have become critical for raising awareness, advocating for change, and challenging authoritarian rule.

Social media platforms thus represent a new form of the public sphere that democratizes information and amplifies diverse voices. This dynamic is particularly significant in Zimbabwe, where traditional avenues for political engagement are tightly controlled. By facilitating the free exchange of ideas, social media has the potential to shape discourse, set political agendas, and influence election dynamics. Moreover, these platforms provide citizens and civil society with

tools to organize, protest, and hold political actors accountable. As such, hashtags and other digital strategies have emerged as effective instruments for mobilization in Zimbabwe, further highlighting the transformative role of social media in democratizing information and fostering political engagement.

Ultimately, this study will examine how social media platforms function as public spheres in Zimbabwe, particularly in the context of election campaigns and political mobilization. By analyzing the interplay between digital technologies and political processes, the study aims to explore the broader implications of these platforms for democracy and governance in semi-authoritarian contexts. Social media can serve as public spheres that provide platforms for diverse perspectives in Zimbabwe, while hashtags offer significant potential for civil society organizations, acting as a bridge between traditional grassroots campaigning and digital election strategies.

2.9.3 The Potential to Utilize Hashtags To Blend Offline And Online Activities In Zimbabwe

Social media has the potential to act as public spheres, enabling the expression of diverse viewpoints in Zimbabwe, while hashtags present a valuable tool for civil society organizations, serving as a bridge between conventional grassroots campaigning and modern digital election strategies. This dual utility allows hashtags to function as connectors between physical and virtual spaces, creating synergies that can amplify the reach and impact of political campaigns in the context of hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013). Research has demonstrated that hashtags serve as vital tools of engagement, enabling individuals to connect with broader communities and participate in public discourse. Marres (2012) highlights that hashtags facilitate public engagement by creating virtual spaces where users can congregate and share ideas. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) exemplify the power of hashtags in coordinating swift and unstructured interactions, as observed by Giglietto and Lee (2017). By combining the social networking concept of people gathering around a shared topic with the algorithmic efficiency of computer-mediated communication, hashtags operate as powerful mobilization tools (Bruns &

Burgess, 2015; Rambukkana, 2015). Further studies have shown that hashtags serve a dual function: they meet citizens' information needs during critical events while simultaneously enhancing situational awareness (David et al., 2016; Potts, 2014; Reilly & Atanasova, 2016). These multifaceted functions have sparked debates among scholars regarding the extent to which hashtags can exert political influence, particularly in semi-democratic contexts like Zimbabwe.

The mobilization potential of hashtags has been notably demonstrated in Zimbabwe through high-profile campaigns such as #ThisFlag. As Gukurume (2017) notes, this hashtag garnered over 10,000 views within a single day, underscoring its power to galvanize public interest and engagement. The #ThisFlag movement, spearheaded by Pastor Evan Mawarire, emerged as a social media-based platform that directly challenged the Zimbabwean government over issues such as economic decline, political corruption, and widespread governance failures (Sabao & Chikara, 2020). Mawarire reinterpreted the Zimbabwean national flag's symbolism, using it as a visual critique of the nation's deteriorating state under Robert Mugabe's regime. By wearing the flag around his shoulders, Mawarire transformed a national emblem of liberation and self-determination into a poignant protest symbol (Hodzi & Zihnioğlu, 2024). This act not only connected his personal grievances to broader societal issues but also inspired citizens to reclaim the ideals represented by the flag, including accountability, transparency, and social justice (Murisa, 2019).

The #ThisFlag campaign's success in mobilizing citizens exemplifies the ability of hashtags to transform online activism into offline political action. By using social media, Mawarire and his supporters were able to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and directly engage with Zimbabweans, rallying them to demand accountability from an authoritarian regime. This campaign not only called attention to widespread corruption but also pressured the government to fulfill its promises to citizens (Gukurume, 2017). Similarly, the #ThisGown movement highlighted the Zimbabwean government's failure to create employment opportunities for graduates, further illustrating the potential of hashtags to spotlight pressing socioeconomic issues.

While the effectiveness of hashtags as mobilization tools is evident, it is important to acknowledge the dual-edged nature of social media in Zimbabwe's political landscape. On the one hand, hashtags provide civil society with a means to organize and amplify their voices in the face of repression. On the other hand, the same platforms can be exploited to disseminate disinformation, as discussed in Section 2.9.4. The potential for hashtags to be co-opted by political actors underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of their role in Zimbabwean politics.

This study offers an opportunity to explore how hashtags may enhance civil society's influence by linking traditional grassroots campaigning with digital activism. The blending of offline and online activities through hashtags aligns with the broader trends observed in hybrid media systems, where the boundaries between traditional and digital communication are increasingly blurred. Hashtags offer substantial potential for civil society organizations in Zimbabwe, serving as a bridge between traditional grassroots campaigning and digital electioneering. At the same time, digital technologies have opened new pathways for political actors in Zimbabwe to employ disinformation campaigns as strategic tools for achieving political advantage.

2.9.4 The Potential Strategic Use of Disinformation for Political Gain in Zimbabwe

Hashtags hold significant potential for civil society organizations in Zimbabwe, offering a means to bridge the gap between offline and online activities and digital platforms create new avenues for political actors in Zimbabwe to conduct disinformation campaigns as part of their strategies to achieve political gain. Disinformation, defined as deliberately misleading or false information designed to deceive audiences (Patterson, 2016). Scholars have established that the deliberate weaponization of false information serves political, cultural, and economic interests (Moyo, Mare & Mabweazara, 2020). Digital media technologies amplify this phenomenon, providing political actors with unprecedented tools to influence public opinion, manipulate societal groups, and undermine opposition voices. Political actors can strategically amplify disinformation for

their own benefit and undermine prodemocracy groups in Zimbabwe embodying the Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012). As Marsden, Meyer, and Brown (2020) argue, the intentional use of disinformation on digital platforms can create societal divides and mislead the electorate for political advantage. While disinformation is a subset of the broader “fake news” phenomenon, which encompasses a variety of falsehoods, its deliberate nature distinguishes it as a weapon of political warfare. Importantly, scholars note that the concept of “fake news” is not a product of the digital age but has historical precedence predating the online news era (Mare et al., 2019; Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2019; Rodney-Gumede, 2018). However, digital media’s reach and speed have exponentially increased its impact, particularly in fragile political environments like Zimbabwe.

Research has further demonstrated that political parties and candidates in Zimbabwe have strategically harnessed social media to spread disinformation during election campaigns. Both the ruling ZANU PF and the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) have been implicated in employing disinformation as a tactical tool to manipulate public perception and delegitimize opponents. Ncube (2019) highlights how both parties have used fake news to influence electoral outcomes, undermine voter confidence in the democratic process, and even discredit the legitimacy of elections themselves. These tactics have significant implications for democratic governance, as they erode public trust in institutions, media, and the political process.

The implications of disinformation campaigns extend beyond immediate political gains. They also shape the broader information ecosystem, making it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish credible information from fabricated content. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) argue that social media platforms, by their very nature, are particularly susceptible to the spread of political disinformation. Algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy, amplifying sensationalist and divisive content that reinforces existing biases and polarizations. This dynamic exacerbates the challenges faced by voters in Zimbabwe, where traditional media is already constrained by political and economic pressures.

The strategic use of disinformation in Zimbabwe underscores the evolving tactics of political actors in semi-authoritarian regimes. As Ncube (2019) notes, the intent behind these campaigns often goes beyond securing immediate electoral victories; it also aims to delegitimize opposing parties, stoke fear among voters, and undermine the credibility of democratic institutions. The hybrid media system provides a fertile ground for these activities, enabling the blending of offline and online campaigns to maximize reach and impact. Political actors exploit this system to disseminate carefully crafted narratives, often blending partial truths with outright fabrications to make their disinformation more plausible and difficult to refute.

The implications of these practices warrant further scholarly attention, particularly regarding their long-term effects on political stability, democratic governance, and social cohesion in Zimbabwe. The rise of digital platforms as tools for political disinformation represents both a challenge and an opportunity for researchers. While these platforms enable unprecedented levels of political engagement and mobilization, they also pose risks to the integrity of information and the democratic process. By examining the strategic use of disinformation in the Zimbabwean context, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the role of digital media in shaping political outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa.

Ultimately, the use of social media as a tool for spreading disinformation highlights the dual-edged nature of digital technologies in political communication. While these platforms offer opportunities for greater political participation and engagement, they also serve as avenues for manipulation and control by political elites. In essence, digital technologies have opened new opportunities for political actors in Zimbabwe to carry out disinformation campaigns as a tactic to advance their political agendas.

2.10 Conclusion

In summation, this literature review on the social media revolution and its relationship with political activism in Zimbabwe establishes a foundational framework for exploring the role of digital platforms in shaping discourse, setting agendas, and influencing electoral processes.

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Historically, Zimbabwe's political environment has been overwhelmingly dominated by the ruling ZANU PF party, which exerts significant control over traditional media outlets. This dominance allows the party to manipulate public perception, suppress dissenting voices, and sustain its authoritarian grip on power. Within Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian system, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) has adeptly utilized both legacy and digital media platforms to consolidate its political influence and advance its narrative. This phenomenon aligns with the conceptual framework of the hybrid media system, which highlights the convergence of traditional and digital media formats, enabling political actors to strategically integrate these channels to enhance audience engagement (Chadwick, 2013). On the other hand, progressive entities such as the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society organizations, systematically excluded from traditional media access, are compelled to rely heavily on digital platforms to communicate with voters. This bifurcated media landscape has ignited robust academic debates, particularly within the context of authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa, where the implications of hybrid media systems remain contested and under-researched.

Furthermore, social media platforms like WhatsApp have become indispensable communication tools for both political entities and the electorate in Zimbabwe. The platform's widespread accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and extensive reach make it a crucial medium for political engagement, especially for major actors such as the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). This study provides an opportunity to critically assess the transformative potential of WhatsApp in reshaping Zimbabwe's electoral dynamics and, by extension, the broader political landscapes of semi-democratic states in sub-Saharan Africa. While the platform's ability to rapidly disseminate information to wide audiences presents opportunities for disrupting entrenched political hierarchies, scholarly opinion remains divided on whether this potential is sufficient to catalyze substantive change. The Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012) serves as an invaluable theoretical framework for analyzing how political actors tactically navigate and exploit evolving media ecosystems to bolster their visibility and influence. This perspective

underscores the importance of interrogating whether platforms like WhatsApp can act as transformative instruments in politically restrictive environments characterized by constrained democratic practices and limited media freedoms.

The socio-political landscape in which opposition parties and civil society operate has undergone significant transformation in the twenty-first century. The rapid global proliferation of social media has opened new pathways for direct interaction between political actors and their constituencies. This paradigm shift has intensified scholarly debates concerning the efficacy of digital strategies employed by opposition parties and civil society actors in political campaigns, particularly within semi-democratic contexts. The contested nature of public spaces, where state and non-state actors compete for legitimacy, visibility, and influence, is central to these discussions (Kavada & Poell, 2020). Digital platforms have emerged as arenas where marginalized voices can contest dominant narratives and introduce alternative perspectives into the public discourse. In Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian setting, this study seeks to examine how digital platforms create opportunities for emerging actors like the CCC and civil society organizations to redefine the public sphere. Such an inquiry is critical for understanding the evolving strategies employed by political actors in restrictive regimes, where new media presents unique possibilities for circumventing traditional barriers to participation.

Additionally, the use of hashtags in mobilizing political support represents a growing area of scholarly inquiry and debate. Existing research demonstrates that hashtags can serve as powerful instruments for rallying support around specific causes, including political activism (Olorunnisola and Douai, 2013). However, questions persist regarding the tangible political impact of hashtags, particularly in authoritarian or semi-democratic contexts where state-imposed censorship and surveillance mechanisms may undermine their efficacy. The theoretical framework of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) offers critical insights into how digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of information and enable the mobilization of geographically dispersed supporters. This study will explore how social media platforms,

especially through the use of hashtags, empower civil society actors in Zimbabwe to address pivotal issues such as electoral transparency and accountability.

The interplay between global social media advancements and political activism in Zimbabwe is both intricate and transformative. As digital platforms continue to challenge traditional power structures and redefine modes of political engagement, understanding their role within the Zimbabwean context becomes increasingly imperative. By critically examining the intersection of social media and political activism in Zimbabwe, this study aims to provide valuable insights into regional and global trends. Through this analysis, it seeks to contribute meaningfully to ongoing scholarly debates regarding the transformative potential of digital platforms within semi-democratic regimes. The subsequent section will delve deeper into these themes, focusing on the evolving dynamics between social media and political activism in Zimbabwe's complex political landscape.

CHAPTER 3. Methodology

3.1 Methods Overview

This research aims to critically examine the interplay between the social media revolution and political activism within the Zimbabwean political landscape. To rigorously address this objective, the study integrated both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, employing an exploratory case study approach specifically focused on Zimbabwe. The research adopted critical realism as its guiding philosophical framework, as it offers “an invaluable meta-theoretical framework for social sciences, providing a bridge between positivist and interpretivist methodologies by addressing both empirical phenomena and underlying causal mechanisms” (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 96). A key advantage of critical realism lies in its capacity to move beyond mere empirical observations to uncover the deeper, generative mechanisms driving social phenomena (Edwards et al., 2014).

The study concentrated on Zimbabwe; a Global South nation characterized by distinct political dynamics in contrast to the extensively researched Global North. There remains a limited understanding of the complex interactions between political parties and civil society during election campaigns in this context. Interviews were conducted with two political figures, one from the opposition Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC) and another from the ruling ZANU PF (ZPF) both of whom demonstrated innovative use of social media in their political strategies. In addition, interviews were held with three leaders of civil society organizations and ten political activists who strategically leveraged digital technologies to engage with voters during the 2023 election campaign. The research engaged political actors across three key segments of Zimbabwe’s political ecosystem: two politicians, ten political activists, and three civil society leaders. This multi-actor approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe. The temporal scope of the study focused on the use of digital platforms by two Zimbabwean political campaigns between January 1, 2022, and December 31, 2023. The research critically investigated how these actors utilized social media during the 2023 elections to innovate political communication and engagement.

This methodological framework, therefore, combined a predominantly qualitative approach with supplementary quantitative data to investigate the role of social media in shaping political activism within Zimbabwe. The following section will articulate the specific research objectives underpinning this inquiry.

3.2 Research Objectives

Research, as defined by Sekaran (2003), involves the systematic pursuit of solutions to complex problems through thorough study and analysis. This exploratory research was initiated to deepen our understanding of the social media revolution's influence on political activism in Zimbabwe.

The research is structured around the following objectives:

- a) To analyze how social media shapes discourse, agenda-setting, and influence during elections.
- b) To investigate the impact of social media on Zimbabwe's major political parties, specifically ZANU PF (ZPF) and the Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC).
- c) To examine how social media enhances the role and influence of civil society.
- d) To explore the limitations of the social media revolution within semi-democratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa.

3.3 Philosophical Position

This study adopted the philosophical framework of critical realism, as it offers a robust meta-theoretical approach in the social sciences, bridging the often-divergent positivist and interpretivist paradigms by simultaneously addressing empirical data and underlying causal mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2002). Critical realism is particularly well-suited for this research, which seeks to explore the role and limitations of social media revolutions in semi-democratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa during election periods. This approach was selected because of its unique strength: the ability to go beyond surface-level empirical observations and examine the deeper generative mechanisms underlying social phenomena (Edwards et al., 2014). As Mingers aptly highlights, "Critical realism's key contribution is its recognition of the real

mechanisms operating independently of our perceptions, which can help in explaining not just what happens, but why it happens” (Mingers, 2000, p. 1257).

Originating from Roy Bhaskar’s conceptualization in the 1970s, critical realism emerged as a philosophical strategy aimed at reconciling the objectivity characteristic of the natural sciences with the interpretive elements inherent to the social sciences. This philosophical framework posits that reality is stratified into three domains: the empirical, encompassing observable events; the actual, where events occur regardless of observation; and the real, which includes the deeper structures and mechanisms that generate these events (Bhaskar, 1978). Within this framework, this thesis aimed to collect qualitative data through interviews, focusing on how social media has empowered civil society to exert greater influence during the 2023 election campaign. Importantly, critical realism also integrates interpretivist perspectives, emphasizing the necessity of identifying and understanding the deep causal mechanisms that, although not directly observable, can be inferred through their observable effects.

At its core, critical realism rejects both positivism, which confines knowledge to empirically observable phenomena, and constructivism, which posits that reality is entirely socially constructed. By adopting this philosophical stance, this study monitored events during Zimbabwe’s 2023 elections, with an understanding that critical realism recognizes the existence of an objective reality while acknowledging that our understanding of this reality is shaped by social and cultural contexts (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, & Norrie, 1998). For any scientific inquiry to be meaningful, the object of study must possess real, manipulable internal mechanisms capable of producing specific outcomes (Bhaskar, 1978). As Archer asserts, “Critical realism’s framework permits the identification of underlying social structures that condition action while recognizing that human agents also have the ability to transform these structures” (Archer, 1995, p. 142). This makes critical realism particularly valuable for social science research, where scholars must navigate the complex interplay between structural constraints and human agency, while critically reflecting on the ways in which power dynamics shape knowledge production.

The ontological depth of critical realism enables researchers to uncover causal powers and understand the specific conditions that either enable or constrain them, making it an ideal framework for interdisciplinary research. Fleetwood emphasizes that “Causal powers, understood through the lens of critical realism, allow us to perceive tendencies that remain latent or only partially manifest in social phenomena” (Fleetwood, 2001, p. 201). In this study, interview data was analyzed with a recognition that each participant provided insights rooted in their individual experiences. To avoid accepting claims at face value, evidence from platform usage reports and other empirical data was triangulated with interview findings. This approach aligns with the critical realist aim of uncovering the causal power of social structures and their emergent properties, which exist independently of individuals but can be modified through collective action (Elder-Vass, 2010).

Specifically, this study investigated the impact of social media on both the ZPF and CCC during the 2023 elections, leveraging the critical realist framework to gain a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms were used to challenge entrenched political power structures. By embracing critical realism, this research adopted an inclusive philosophy of science that considers both the material world and the interpretive dimensions of human action (Gorski, 2013). Furthermore, critical realism has demonstrated its applicability across a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, economics, and education, offering a sophisticated and holistic approach to analyzing complex social phenomena (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). This study’s findings contribute to this tradition by demonstrating how social media campaigns in semi-authoritarian contexts are shaped by both structural constraints and the agency of civil society actors.

3.4 Research Strategy

3.4.1 Consideration of Mixed Methods

The application of mixed methods in this study on the use of digital platforms during the 2023 political campaign within the semi-authoritarian state of Zimbabwe offers several significant

benefits. A mixed methods approach integrates both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, providing a more comprehensive analysis by triangulating data, thus enhancing the validity of the research and delivering deeper insights into complex social phenomena, such as political campaigning in restrictive environments. Consequently, to adequately and thoroughly address the research question, this study adopted a mixed methods design, leveraging the quantitative approach to outline the landscape, while employing qualitative research to explore and explain underlying dynamics (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner, 2007; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Mixed methods facilitate the integration of qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for a richer understanding of intricate social phenomena like political campaigns in constrained contexts, such as Zimbabwe. As Creswell (2011) points out, mixed methods enable researchers to “draw on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In essence, mixed methods research involves using two or more research methodologies, often incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2008; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009).

In semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe, where data might be subject to censorship or manipulation, triangulation through mixed methods strengthens the validity and reliability of research findings. Denscombe (2008) characterizes mixed methods as a means to ensure “cross-validation” of data derived from different sources (Denscombe, 2008, p. 273). In this study, mixed methods were chosen due to the capacity of qualitative and quantitative frameworks to complement each other, utilizing their “harmonising strengths” while mitigating their respective weaknesses (Morgan, 2007; Shannon-Baker, 2016). Political campaigns, particularly in states like Zimbabwe where political freedom is limited, necessitate capturing both macro-level influences such as social media engagement metrics, and micro-level aspects like the personal experiences of campaigners. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2011) assert that mixed methods are vital for addressing the “complexity of social phenomena” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2011, p. 19). Scholars have argued that employing a mixed method design is often superior to a single-method approach, as it enhances understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, compensates for

the limitations of either qualitative or quantitative methods when used independently, facilitates data triangulation, and reveals insights that may not be accessible through one method alone. Additionally, it allows researchers to concurrently address multiple dimensions of a research question and supports the development of more robust inferences (Creamer, 2018; Greene, 2005; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009).

Moreover, a key justification for using mixed methods is its ability to provide a more nuanced understanding of a phenomenon that would be otherwise unattainable through a single methodological approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Morse & Niehaus, 2009). Research that utilizes mixed methods capitalizes on the combination of methodologies at various stages of the study (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2006), and this integration can occur either sequentially or simultaneously (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Nevertheless, in many mixed-methods studies, where both qualitative and quantitative data are gathered, the actual blending of these methodologies is often minimal (Alise and Teddlie, 2010; Bryman, 2007; Yin, 2006).

3.4.2 The Case Study Method

The case study method is particularly well-suited to this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the use of social media by two political campaigns in Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian context. Case studies are inherently flexible, making them ideal for political research that involves dynamic elements such as the evolving role of social media. The complexities of Zimbabwe's media landscape, including state interference and media regulation, further support the choice of this method, as it offers a contextual analysis that other approaches might overlook (Mpofu & Mare, 2020). This method enables a detailed investigation of the intricate social and political dynamics at play, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of how social media operates in a politically charged environment like Zimbabwe. Flyvbjerg (2011) argues that case studies provide the flexibility to account for "nuanced reality" in complex contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 301). This is crucial for understanding how social media is utilized within Zimbabwe's unique political environment. The aim of this study is to explore the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe, and case studies are particularly

appropriate when researchers seek to understand the interaction between a phenomenon and its specific context (Jacobsen, 2002). Case study methodology is especially valuable for descriptive or exploratory research (Barnes et al., 2012; Meredith et al., 1988). In this case, the study focuses on the semi-authoritarian state of Zimbabwe and the use of social media during the 2023 election campaign. Case studies facilitate an in-depth examination of complex social and political processes, making them particularly effective for analyzing contemporary events in real-life contexts, where the distinction between the phenomenon and the context is blurred (Yin, 2009). In semi-authoritarian states like Zimbabwe, political dynamics and restrictions vary considerably, making case studies an ideal approach for researchers seeking to gain a detailed understanding of the context and to explore the “why” and “how” of events, especially within specific political settings (Stake, 1995, p. 3).

However, a common challenge associated with case study methodology is the risk of addressing a question that is too broad (Baxter and Jack, 2008). To mitigate this, it is important to establish boundaries around the case (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). These boundaries may encompass location (Creswell, 1998), definition and context (Miles and Huberman, 1994), as well as time and activity (Stake, 1995). For this exploratory study, the boundaries are defined by the use of digital platforms by two political campaigns in Zimbabwe between 1 January 2022 and 31 December 2023. In order to fulfill the objective of analyzing the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwean politics, the primary research focused on fifteen key actors in Zimbabwe. Given that a comprehensive examination of social media across the entire country would be beyond the scope of a single study, the decision was made to focus on the activities of politicians, civil society members, and political activists who could be characterized as “ahead of the curve” or “thought leaders” in this field.

3.5 Research Design

3.5.1 Pre-election: Semi-Structured Interviews

In the pre-election phase, the study utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well-suited for studying political campaigns in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe due to their flexibility and capacity to delve deeply into complex social phenomena. The adaptability of semi-structured interviews enables them to capture rich, detailed narratives while maintaining enough consistency for comparative analysis across interviews (Longhurst, 2003). In politically sensitive contexts such as Zimbabwe, this flexibility allows interviewees to exercise control over the conversation, addressing only topics they feel comfortable discussing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This is especially significant in sensitive political environments, where the open-ended nature of the conversation can elicit responses that might be withheld in more structured formats (Kvale, 2007, p. 11). Moreover, as Bryman (2012) points out, “Semi-structured interviews allow for the exploration of perceptions and experiences, which can be especially valuable in sensitive political contexts where individuals may not express themselves freely in other formats” (p. 470). The method also enables researchers to explore emerging themes that arise during the conversation. According to Gill et al. (2008), “the flexibility of this approach allows for the exploration of new issues that may not have been anticipated by the researcher” (p. 292). Semi-structured interviews are especially useful in studying the rapidly changing use of social media in political campaigns, as they allow questions to be adapted to address new digital strategies as they emerge (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This method facilitates deeper engagement with participants, uncovering the nuances of political and media behaviours that quantitative methods might overlook (Blee & Taylor, 2002).

Qualitative researchers often rely on interviews as a key method for understanding the perspectives of others, as interviews are a common and highly effective tool for gathering insights into human behaviour and decision-making processes (Fontana & Frey, 2003; Bryman, 2004). They are particularly effective for investigating the underlying motivations behind complex behaviours and decisions (Hassan et al., 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1991).

Roulston's (2010) constructionist approach to semi-structured interviews was adopted in this study, involving the following steps:

1. In the first step, both the researcher and the interviewee collaboratively generate data during the semi-structured interview, creating situated accounts and other pathways for discussing the research topic. This is facilitated through open-ended questions posed by the researcher.
2. In the second step, the researcher interprets how both the interviewer and interviewee have understood the research topic and constructed their narratives. This is achieved through follow-up questions that build on the initial responses.
3. In the final step, the study uncovers alternative perspectives on the topics discussed, achieved through quick analysis of the follow-up responses, and the researcher ties up relevant issues with a concluding question.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted as personal conversations that utilized extensive probing to encourage politicians, civil society leaders, and political activists to speak openly, revealing their detailed opinions and feelings about their use of digital technologies and the internet (Webb, 1995). Additionally, during the interviews, the researcher digitally recorded the conversations, observed interactions, and captured notes. After the interviews, these notes and recordings were analysed to extract insights from the discussions.

3.5.2 Sampling

The research employed purposive sampling with elements of convenience to select interview participants, based on their geographic proximity and willingness to be interviewed. This approach allows for the intentional selection of individuals who have insights into political behavior, making it particularly useful in the context of political campaign research in constrained environments (Tongco, 2007). Purposive sampling is especially appropriate for examining the use of social media in political campaigns within semi-authoritarian states like

Zimbabwe. Bryman (2012) notes, “In political contexts where access is limited, purposive sampling is an effective strategy to ensure that participants with direct knowledge or experience relevant to the study are included” (p. 418). This method enables the researcher to deliberately choose participants who possess relevant experience, ensuring that the data gathered is both rich and contextually relevant. Patton (2002) explains, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study” (p. 230), which is crucial when analysing complex topics such as political communication in restrictive regimes. The participants in this study were identified as being particularly advanced in their use of digital technologies for political purposes (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), especially during the 2023 election campaign. Purposive sampling enables the study to focus on individuals directly involved in political campaigns or highly active on social media, thereby enhancing the relevance and depth of the research. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) observe that “Purposive sampling is instrumental when the researcher aims to gain insights from a specific group, such as political campaigners or social media users, who may be difficult to identify through random sampling in semi-authoritarian settings” (p. 2). As shown in Table 1, the selected participants regularly posted political content, maintained large followings, actively engaged with audiences, disseminated campaign messages, and linked online activities to offline political campaigns. The key advantage of purposive sampling lies in its ability to target specific population characteristics that are most relevant to answering the research questions (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2013).

The research sought to explore how social media influences political discourse, agenda-setting, and the dynamics of influence during elections. Specifically, it aimed to examine the impact of social media on the major political parties, ZANU PF and Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), to assess the limitations of social media within semi-democratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa, and to evaluate how social media is affecting civil society. Accordingly, the study concentrated on politicians, civil society leaders, and political activists with deep expertise in using social media for political purposes within the Zimbabwean context. The qualitative data collection involved in-depth interviews with one politician from ZANU PF and one from the CCC. Additionally, interviews were conducted with three civil society leaders from Team Pachedu,

Project Vote 263, and Crisis in Zimbabwe, as well as ten political activists, selected through purposive sampling with elements of convenience. The ten political activists were identified as being at the forefront of using digital technology for political purposes (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) during the 2023 election campaign.

Importantly, the two politicians interviewed are considered elites key informants whose firsthand perspectives are valuable for corroborating facts and providing additional insights (Tansey, 2007). Elites are typically those with close proximity to power or policymaking, including elected officials, organizational executives, and senior state employees (Lilleker, 2003). Delaney (2007) further emphasizes that interviewing elites provides a unique opportunity to understand the worldview of those wielding significant influence.

Initial contact with participants was made via email. Specifically, nine election candidates, six civil society members with an interest in the electoral process, and thirty-five political activists involved in Zimbabwean politics were approached to participate in this case study. The aim was to investigate the role of social media in political activism within Zimbabwean politics. Out of the nine election candidates, four initially agreed to participate, but two later withdrew due to the demands of their campaign schedules. From the six civil society members, five initially confirmed their participation, but two later dropped out due to heavy work commitments. Among the thirty-five political activists, fifteen initially agreed to participate; however, three later withdrew due to connectivity issues, and two others dropped out at the last minute due to power outages. As summarized in Table 1, interviews were conducted with two politicians, three civil society leaders, and ten political activists.

3.5.3 The Research Agenda and Interview Processes

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conferencing. Utilizing video conferencing as a method for data collection, particularly when investigating the deployment of social media by two political campaigns in the semi-authoritarian state of Zimbabwe, presents several advantages. It ensures the safety of participants, mitigates geographic constraints, and

offers flexibility for conducting remote interviews. In politically sensitive research contexts, video conferencing reduces risks for both researchers and participants by minimizing the need for physical travel and face-to-face interactions (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). As Salmons (2015) highlights, video conferencing provides a secure and convenient platform for qualitative research, particularly in politically unstable environments where travel and in-person meetings might present significant hazards. Gray et al. (2020) further notes that “video interviews offer a practical solution for reaching participants in different locations and can provide a more comfortable environment for participants to speak openly” (p. 129). Conducting interviews through video conferencing in politically sensitive contexts, such as Zimbabwe, enhances safety and privacy by allowing participants to engage from the security of their own locations (Nehls, Smith, & Schneider, 2015). This method is particularly advantageous in semi-authoritarian contexts, where political sensitivities may inhibit in-person interviews. Video conferencing enables researchers to build the necessary rapport and personal connection required to explore sensitive political issues, even in remote settings (Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016).

Additionally, video conferencing facilitates the collection of non-verbal cues, including facial expressions and body language, thereby enriching the quality of qualitative research conducted remotely (Janghorban et al., 2014). Archibald et al. (2019) assert that “video conferencing can effectively support qualitative data collection by enabling synchronous interaction between researcher and participant, while also reducing travel costs and logistical constraints” (p. 2). Moreover, video conferencing closely mirrors the dynamics of a face-to-face interview, with the primary distinction being the physical separation of the researcher and participant (Nehls et al., 2015). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the researcher was unable to travel from the United Kingdom to Zimbabwe, where the participants were based, thus necessitating the use of video conferencing as the preferred method of communication. In the context of the global pandemic, online interviews should be considered a viable alternative to face-to-face interviews, not merely a secondary option (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). The video conferencing method facilitates real-time communication, allowing for both audio and visual interaction between the researcher and participants (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Synchronous video interviews retain the interactive quality

of traditional face-to-face interviews while offering the flexibility to accommodate participants' schedules and reducing the logistical complexities associated with in-person meetings (Seitz, 2016).

TABLE 1: Final Anonymous Participants of the pre-election video interview process

<u>Folio</u>	<u>Different</u> <u>Actors</u>	<u>Interview</u> <u>Minutes</u>	<u>X</u> <u>Followers</u>	<u>X</u> <u>Posts</u>
1	ZPF Politician	84	122,900	62,900
2	CCC Politician	67	4,900	3,049
3	Team Pachedu	30	17,600	40,100
4	Project Vote 263	31	5,800	38,900
5	Crisis in Zimbabwe	45	35,100	14,300
6	CCC Activist	72	129,900	73,600
7	CCC Activist	36	34,700	4,039
8	CCC Activist	39	93,100	91,300
9	CCC Activist	36	11,200	7,493
10	Independent Activist	38	34,100	48,900
11	ZPF Activist	52	9,900	90,700
12	ZPF Activist	43	80,900	165,500
13	Independent Activist	31	8,200	8,874
14	ZPF Activist	39	25,600	3,358
15	ZPF Activist	40	35,900	87,400

Social media statistics as of 31 December 2023

As shown in Table 1, the study conducted a series of interviews during the pre-election period, with each interview lasting a minimum of 30 minutes and up to two hours. The interviews took place following the “mini-national election” of 143 by-elections for Members of Parliament (MPs) and Councillors on 26 March 2022, and before the Harmonised National Elections scheduled for 23 August 2023. Crucial insights gleaned from the interviews with politicians, political activists, and civil society leaders prompted the researcher to further engage key political activists in Zimbabwe, thereby uncovering alternative perspectives.

3.5.4 Post-election: E-mail interviewing

During the post-election phase, the research employed email interviews as a method for qualitative data collection, following up on the interviews conducted before the election. As indicated in Table 1, two politicians, three civil society leaders, and ten political activists participated in follow-up interviews conducted via email after Zimbabwe's election on 23 August 2023. Email interviewing provides significant advantages in terms of flexibility, privacy, and safety for participants, which is particularly important in politically sensitive environments such as Zimbabwe. This method is especially effective for engaging populations that are geographically dispersed or politically constrained, as it eliminates the need for physical presence and offers a secure mode of communication (Meho, 2006). James and Busher (2009) observe that "Email interviews allow participants to respond at their own pace, providing more thoughtful, reflective responses, which can be particularly important when discussing sensitive political issues" (p. 49). Moreover, email interviewing supports confidentiality and security, which is critical when researching politically sensitive topics in semi-authoritarian contexts (Curasi, 2001). In Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian environment, email interviews offer a platform for the type of non-coercive, egalitarian dialogue that Habermas describes as an 'ideal speech situation'—free from internal or external coercion and marked by equal opportunity and reciprocity in participant roles (Boshier, 1990, p. 51).

Email interviewing was chosen because it is not limited by geographic location or time zone, and proximity between the interviewer and interviewee is not a requirement (Opdenakker, 2006). This method also eliminates the need for transcription, as the data analyzed is exactly what the interviewee has written (Selwyn and Robson, 1998). Electronic research methods are increasingly recognized as valuable tools for generating qualitative data (O'Connor & Madge, 2017), with many scholars attesting to their equivalence with traditional in-person methods (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014; Weller, 2016). Email interviewing is particularly effective for accessing participants in geographically dispersed or hard-to-reach locations, especially in contexts where travel is restricted (Hawkins, 2018). The relevance of electronic research methods has only increased in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lobe et al.,

2020; Teti et al., 2020) and growing concerns about climate change. In response, some researchers are reevaluating their reliance on in-person meetings and travel, while others are exploring how to conduct “sustainable science” (Santana et al., 2021) through more resource-efficient research designs.

In this way, email interviewing helps to overcome some of the traditional biases associated with interview techniques (Selwyn and Robson, 1998). For instance, the potential for shyness or discomfort that might occur in face-to-face interviews is often reduced when participants communicate via email (Roberts et al., 1997). Email interviewing also diminishes the influence of interviewer effects, such as those arising from visual or non-verbal cues, or from status differences between interviewer and interviewee (Selwyn and Robson, 1998). Importantly, email interviewing allows researchers to use open-ended introductory questions, follow-up inquiries, and cross-fertilization of multiple interviews conducted simultaneously (Dahlin, 2021). Scholars have argued that email interviews can be used effectively for conducting in-depth interviews (Meho, 2006) and generating rich qualitative data (Costello et al., 2017; Illingsworth, 2006; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Moreover, research has shown that email interviewing can capture the complexities of social practices on the internet (James, 2016), and feedback from email interviews can be highly informative (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Gibson, 2010; James, 2007; Mann, 2016).

3.5.4.1 E-mail Interviewing: Questions

The email interviews began with an open-ended introductory question designed to elicit descriptive responses (Spradley, 1979). This approach emphasized the participant’s narrative, remaining open to what the participant considered important, rather than redirecting the conversation to a predefined set of questions. The aim was to allow participants to “tell their story as they see it, feel it, experience it” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 339).

Follow-up questions were then developed based on each participant’s initial response. Given the asynchronous nature of email interviews, the study had the opportunity to carefully plan

subsequent questions. This allowed the researcher to review notes, reflect on participants' responses, and design follow-up inquiries tailored to the information received.

TABLE 2: Final Anonymous Participants of the post-election email interview process

Folio	Political Actors
1	ZPF Politician
2	CCC Politician
3	Team Pachedu
4	CCC Activist
5	CCC Activist
6	CCC Activist
7	ZPF Activist
8	Independent Activist
9	ZPF Activist

The email interview process involved 15 participants from the pre-election interviews, including two politicians, three civil society leaders, and ten political activists. However, as shown in Table 2, six participants dropped out of the email interviews due to failing to respond by the deadline of 31 December 2023. Ultimately, the participants included two politicians, one civil society leader, and six political activists.

3.5.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The research employed thematic analysis to examine the qualitative data collected. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a methodological approach used to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns or themes within the data. This technique is particularly valuable for uncovering patterns in political communication and exploring the influence of social media in such contexts. Thematic analysis is not only a means of reflecting reality but also serves to deconstruct the layers of perceived 'reality,' making it a crucial tool for studying political campaigns in controlled environments like Zimbabwe (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, thematic analysis is especially apt for interpreting sensitive political issues, as it allows the researcher to extract deeper meanings from participants' responses. As Nowell et al.

(2017) assert, “Thematic analysis offers a systematic approach to handling data, while also allowing flexibility in coding and identifying themes, which is critical when dealing with politically sensitive or context-specific data” (p. 3). This adaptability is particularly useful in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe, where participants might employ subtle or coded language when addressing sensitive topics.

The versatility of thematic analysis makes it an ideal method for the iterative nature of qualitative research, enabling researchers to continually reflect upon and refine emerging themes throughout the process of analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasize, “Thematic analysis can be applied across a range of theoretical frameworks, making it adaptable for exploring complex social phenomena, such as the intersection of politics and social media” (p. 594). It provides a framework for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes that emerge from qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). During the interview analysis, several key themes were identified, including the role of hashtags in shaping the election cycle, the cascading effects of screenshots from X (formerly Twitter) to WhatsApp, the ways in which social media helped to level the political playing field, and the broader influence of social media on the 2023 election campaign.

In addition, the thematic analysis of WhatsApp data revealed a specific theme: the ‘cascading effects of screenshots from X to WhatsApp,’ which was further subdivided into four sub-themes: lawfare, political violence, disinformation and election campaigning. These thematic insights allowed for a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in Zimbabwe’s 2023 election and the role social media platforms played in shaping political discourse and action.

3.5.6. Thematic Analysis: Interviews

Thematic analysis is an extensively employed and adaptable method for examining qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, making it particularly suitable for studying social media use in political campaigns within a semi-authoritarian context like Zimbabwe. Thematic analysis offers interpretive flexibility, enabling the researcher to manage large datasets and is especially

effective when exploring the cultural and social dynamics of politically sensitive environments (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). It can be applied to investigate how social media is discussed and framed in such environments, shedding light on the underlying political power structures (Guest et al., 2012). By organizing interview transcripts around key themes, thematic analysis enables the researcher to gather different or similar perspectives from participants (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This method provides a rich, detailed, and intricate understanding of the data, allowing it to adapt to the fluid nature of political campaigns and social media interactions. Thematic analysis can capture both explicit and implicit meanings within the data, which is critical for engaging with the nuanced political discourse that arises in complex environments (Joffe, 2012).

The thematic analysis process followed Bogdan and Biklen's (2003) two-step procedure:

Step One: The initial stage involves organizing the data into manageable units (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In this research, manageable units were categorized into the following themes:

- a) First, consistent with earlier studies on Zimbabwe's primary opposition party, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), it was observed that challenger political parties can ascend from relative obscurity to prominence through the innovative use of digital technologies (Weisskircher, Hutter, & Borbáth, 2023).
- b) Second, as Zimbabwean political parties increasingly utilize digital technologies for campaigns, research has shown that the socio-political context within which these parties operate has drastically shifted in the 21st century, particularly with the global emergence of social media, which offers new avenues for meaningful and equitable participation (Van Gyampo, 2017).
- c) Third, various actors in Zimbabwe's 2023 election campaign deployed hashtags, echoing prior research that demonstrated the critical role hashtags play in mobilizing support for diverse political issues (Olorunnisola & Douai, 2013).
- d) Fourth, numerous actors employed WhatsApp for the 2023 political campaign, corroborating earlier findings that WhatsApp is an integral communication tool for many

smartphone users and has become a central platform for political communication (Nizaruddin, 2021).

Step Two: The second phase begins once the data has been categorized into manageable chunks through the coding process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This stage overlaps with data collection and coding and may continue beyond the data collection phase (Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005).

After organizing the data into codes, the next stage entails sorting and analyzing the codes, with the key objective being to interpret the data while coding (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Subsequently, data within each code undergoes thorough analysis, and linkages between codes are identified, leading to the emergence of overarching themes (Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005). A critical component of qualitative data analysis involves documenting decisions and revelations through memos (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, & Gardner, 1991).

Memos, in this context, can be understood as internal dialogues that capture the insights gained during the research process, along with directions for further investigation (Ely et al., 1991). Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasize that memos serve as repositories for analytic ideas, which are organized according to the themes that structure the analysis chapter. Qualitative data, collected through interview transcripts and field notes, were transcribed into extensive, single-spaced documents. Coding was then applied to systematically organize the data. Coding refers to the process of deconstructing and categorizing data into meaningful concepts (Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005). The researcher's expertise and perspective were instrumental in identifying patterns within the data, with paragraphs segmented according to the emerging codes or ideas.

3.5.6.1 Reliability Testing - Interviews

Ensuring reliability in thematic analysis is essential to maintain the credibility and consistency of qualitative data interpretation, such as interviews. When studying the use of digital platforms in Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian political campaigns, it is imperative to account for the complex socio-political landscape that may influence the data. As noted by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey

(2012), “Inter-coder reliability involves ensuring that multiple coders interpret data consistently, which is particularly crucial when analyzing politically sensitive material” (p. 50). Reflexivity and transparency throughout the analysis process are key to preserving reliability and validity, particularly in politically sensitive contexts (Flick, 2014). Furthermore, a clear coding framework and consistent application across the dataset are vital for ensuring reliability in thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “Reliability in qualitative research is enhanced by detailed descriptions of the researcher’s coding process and reflexive practices” (p. 260). Additionally, triangulation, which involves combining different methods and approaches, is crucial for ensuring reliability when analyzing interview data in contested environments (Patton, 2002).

3.5.7. Thematic Analysis: WhatsApp

Thematic analysis is a well-established and versatile method for examining qualitative data, such as screenshots from X cascading to WhatsApp, making it highly appropriate for analyzing the use of social media in political campaigns within semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for research aimed at understanding social phenomena, such as the strategic deployment of WhatsApp in political campaigns where communication is often deliberately framed (Guest et al., 2012). It allows for the identification of patterns and themes within the data, enabling the researcher to interpret communication dynamics in politically sensitive contexts such as Zimbabwe. In environments with restricted political freedoms, WhatsApp provides a relatively private channel of communication, offering valuable insights into political strategies and behaviors. Thematic analysis offers a framework for understanding how digital platforms like WhatsApp facilitate political discourse in settings where public speech is limited (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Clarke and Braun (2013) emphasize that “Thematic analysis allows researchers to explore underlying meanings and social phenomena, making it well-suited to studying political discourse within semi-authoritarian contexts, where open political expression may be curtailed” (p. 121). Thematic analysis facilitates an in-depth examination of themes that emerge from digital platforms such as WhatsApp, which often serve as crucial spaces for political communication under restrictive regimes (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic analysis offers flexibility in data interpretation, making it especially suitable for analyzing digital data like WhatsApp screenshots, where both visual and textual elements must be contextualized (Clarke & Braun, 2013). It provides a systematic yet adaptable approach to coding and theme identification, which is particularly valuable when dealing with complex, multi-dimensional data such as WhatsApp conversations (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis can capture both explicit and implicit meanings, a critical feature when decoding the nuanced language used in political campaigns conducted through platforms like WhatsApp (Joffe, 2012). This approach is particularly effective for studying politically sensitive topics, providing a robust framework for analyzing social media content like WhatsApp, where users often employ coded language to discuss political issues (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the analysis of three WhatsApp groups, the thematic analysis process revealed the overarching theme of ‘cascading effects of screenshots from X to WhatsApp,’ which was further divided into four sub-themes: lawfare, political violence, disinformation campaigns, and election campaigns.

3.5.7.1. Thematic Analysis: Codes in WhatsApp Group One

In ZANU PF-aligned WhatsApp group one, the thematic analysis identified four key themes: lawfare, disinformation, political violence, and election campaigns. As outlined in Table 3, the lawfare theme was further subdivided into the following codes: Kasukuwere Presidential Bid, CCC MP Candidates, CCC Council Candidates, CCC activists, and civil society activists. The disinformation theme was broken down into codes related to the ruling party’s disinformation strategies, including fake news, character assassination, astroturfing, trolling, and conspiracy theories.

TABLE 3: Themes of Screenshots of X posts cascading to WhatsApp Group One

	Group One: WhatsApp Screenshots Themes			
	Lawfare	Disinformation	Political Violence	Election Campaign
1	Kasukuwere Presidential	Fake news	Activists Fear	ED Presidential
2	CCC MP Candidates	Character assassination	Citizen harrasment	VP Chiwenga Presidential
3	CCC Council Candidates	Astroturfing		ZPF MPs campaigns
4	CCC Activists	Trolling		ZPF Council
5	Civil Society Activists	Conspiracy theories		Chamisa Presidential

The political violence theme encompassed the following sub-themes: fear among activists and citizen harassment. Similarly, the election campaign theme was split into sub-headings that included the ED Presidential campaign, VP Chiwenga’s Presidential campaign, ZPF MP campaigns, ZPF Council Candidate campaigns, and Chamisa’s Presidential campaign. Presidential campaign.

3.5.7.2. Thematic Analysis: Codes in WhatsApp Group Two

In CCC-aligned WhatsApp group two, the thematic analysis revealed the same four themes: lawfare, disinformation, political violence, and election campaigns. As shown in Table 4, the lawfare theme was further subdivided into the following codes: CCC MP Candidates, CCC Council Candidates, CCC activists, civil society activists, and citizens. The disinformation theme was categorized into codes reflecting the ruling party’s strategies, including selective disclosure, imposture accounts, echo chambers, fake news, and character assassination.

TABLE 4: Themes of Screenshots of X posts cascading to WhatsApp Group Two

	Group Two: WhatsApp Screenshots Themes			
	Lawfare	Disinformation	Political Violence	Election Campaign
1	CCC MP Candidates	Selective disclosure	Activists Killings	Chamisa Presidential
2	CCC Council Candidates	Impostore accounts	Activists Beatings	CCC campaign
3	CCC Opposition Activists	Echo chamber	Activists Intimidation	CCC MPs campaign
4	Civil Society Activists	Fake news	Activists Fear	CCC Council Campaign
5	Citizens	Character Assassination	Citizen harrasment	ED Presidential

The political violence theme was divided into the following sub-themes: killings, beatings, intimidation, fear among activists, and harassment of citizens. Additionally, the election

campaign theme was divided into sub-headings, which included Chamisa’s Presidential campaign, the CCC party campaign, CCC MP campaigns, CCC Council Candidate campaigns, and the ED Presidential campaign.

3.5.7.3. Thematic Analysis: Codes in WhatsApp Group Three

The thematic analysis of WhatsApp group three, which included both ZPF and CCC supporters, identified the same four primary themes: lawfare, disinformation, political violence, and election campaigns. As depicted in Table 5, the lawfare theme was subdivided into codes such as MP Candidates, Council Candidates, opposition activists, civil society activists, and the Kasukuwere Presidential bid. The disinformation theme was categorized into sub-themes such as clickbaiting, character assassination, astroturfing, and fake news.

TABLE 5: Themes of Screenshots of X posts cascading to WhatsApp Group Three

	Group Three: WhatsApp Screenshots Themes			
	Lawfare	Disinformation	Political Violence	Election Campaign
1	MP Candidates	Clickbating	Activists Killings	Chamisa Presidential
2	Council Candidates	Character assassination	Activists Beatings	ED Presidential
3	Opposition Activists	Astroturfing	Activists Intimidation	ZPF MP & Council
4	Civil Society Activists	Fake news	Activists Fear	CCC MP & Council
5	Kasukuwere Presidential	Conspiracy theories	Citizen harrasment	Others

The political violence theme was broken down into the following sub-headings: killings, beatings, intimidation, fear among activists, and harassment of citizens. The election campaign theme was divided into the Chamisa Presidential campaign, ED Presidential campaign, ZPF and CCC MP campaigns, ZPF and CCC Council Candidate campaigns, and others.

3.5.7.4 Reliability testing - WhatsApp

Ensuring reliability in thematic analysis, particularly when examining WhatsApp screenshots related to political campaigns in semi-authoritarian Zimbabwe, demands a rigorous methodology to guarantee consistent and credible interpretations. Reflexivity is especially important in politically sensitive research, such as analyzing political campaigns, to maintain the reliability of insights drawn from WhatsApp data (Flick, 2014). The complexity of WhatsApp communication, including the use of informal language and various media formats, presents

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unique challenges in coding. Inter-coder reliability is critical to ensure that multiple researchers interpret the often complex and informal WhatsApp conversations consistently (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Establishing clear coding frameworks is essential for managing data that encompasses different media types, such as images and text. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data,” which is adaptable for multimedia content such as WhatsApp screenshots. Consistent coding practices are paramount when handling diverse media in social media research. Triangulation enhances a study by integrating various methods and approaches, which is particularly important when interpreting data from multiple platforms such as WhatsApp (Patton, 2002).

3.6 Quantitative Approach

This study adopted a quantitative approach to achieve its research objectives by empirically assessing the flow of influence across various actors, including politicians, civil society leaders, political activists, and ordinary citizens. Such an approach enables the capture of broad patterns in social media usage and its subsequent influence on political behavior, providing empirical findings that can be generalized across similar contexts. As Bryman (2016) points out, “Quantitative research is particularly useful for providing a macro-level understanding of patterns and trends, such as the spread and impact of social media in political campaigns” (p. 33). In contexts such as Zimbabwe, where political freedoms may be constrained, quantifying social media interactions offers a way to reveal significant behavioural patterns without direct engagement with politically sensitive figures. According to Creswell (2014), “A quantitative approach is one in which the investigator primarily uses postpositivist claims for developing knowledge (i.e., cause and effect thinking, reduction to specific variables and hypotheses, use of measurement and observation, and the test of theories)” (p. 4). This approach is highly suitable for measuring the impact of social media on political engagement and voter behavior, enabling objective analysis of these influences.

Quantitative methodologies also provide a range of statistical tools to assess the relationships between variables. As Neuman (2014) argues, “Quantitative research emphasizes precise, objective measurement and the statistical analysis of variables to uncover relationships, making it ideal for studying large-scale social media interactions” (p. 167). In this study, quantitative analysis was not seen as an endpoint in itself but as a necessary step in organizing, interpreting, and making sense of the data to answer the research questions (Jones, 2015). The goal was to deepen the understanding of the social media revolution’s role in Zimbabwean political activism and to produce clear, objective data that could be communicated via statistical representations (Hiller, 2016).

In validating the qualitative data from interviews, quantitative analysis was employed to assess secondary data, particularly on the social media activity of key political actors, such as CCC leader Nelson Chamisa and ZANU PF leader Emmerson Mnangagwa. This included metrics such as the number of social media posts, daily campaign activity during the month preceding the election, follower counts, engagement metrics, the number of people followed, and how these posts were linked to offline campaign activities. Additionally, quantitative analysis was conducted on the social media activity of both a ruling party politician and an opposition figure, alongside data from ten political activists. Importantly, quantitative data from three civil society leaders was also analysed. The overall quantitative analysis relied on reliable secondary data and was relatively straightforward, with results presented through graphs and tables.

Visual representations, such as graphs, are instrumental in summarizing findings, while well-organized tables provide condensed information in a clear and systematic manner (Hoare & Hoe, 2013). Microsoft Excel was employed to assist with the quantitative data analysis, particularly for structuring the data into interpretable formats. The research included analysis of followers and posts on the X platform, though it is important to note that social media accounts are inherently fluid, with accounts being created or deactivated at any given moment. The quantitative analysis spanned different periods of the 2023 election cycle, with a focus both before and after election day.

3.7 WhatsApp Content Analysis

Content analysis is a robust method for evaluating WhatsApp screenshots within the context of an election campaign in a semi-authoritarian state such as Zimbabwe. This method facilitates the systematic exploration of communication patterns, symbols, and political messages transmitted through social media platforms like WhatsApp. Krippendorff (2018) asserts that content analysis is particularly useful for investigating “latent content” within texts, allowing researchers to infer the strategic communication employed in political contexts, which is crucial for understanding political messaging in restricted environments like Zimbabwe. Content analysis is highly effective for analyzing digital communication because it supports “quantifiable analysis of patterns in communication” through the systematic coding and categorization of message content (Neuendorf, 2017). In the realm of political campaigns, this approach is invaluable in identifying how political actors use platforms like WhatsApp to mobilize voters or influence public opinion. Additionally, content analysis enables a nuanced understanding of political messaging in semi-authoritarian regimes, offering insights into the covert strategies used by political figures to navigate censorship and exert control over social media (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

For this study, content analysis was applied to WhatsApp screenshots, which underwent both qualitative and quantitative scrutiny. Specifically, the analysis involved identifying recurring words, organizing key terms and phrases, searching for metaphors and analogies, and making constant comparisons across cases (Becker 1970; Patton 2002; Peters & Wester 2007). The research employed theoretical sampling, selecting examples of WhatsApp screenshots that stemmed from the X platform, which were then analyzed iteratively, with the researcher determining the next steps in data collection based on emerging findings (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). This approach was particularly relevant during the 2023 election campaign. As illustrated in Table 3, qualitative data was gathered in the form of screenshots of X posts that were shared on WhatsApp. These were then transcribed into single-spaced text documents, and the researcher used coding to categorize and organize the data.

Coding, as defined by Jacelon and O'Dell (2005), involves breaking down data and arranging it into conceptual ideas. In this case, the researcher's insights and interpretations were leveraged to identify relevant concepts within the data, which were then divided into meaningful segments. Furthermore, the collection of memos analytic reflections stored and organized according to emerging themes helped to document the researcher's ongoing analytical process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As reflected in Table 3, these emergent themes provided the structural foundation for the WhatsApp content analysis, which focused on lawfare, disinformation, political violence, and the election campaign.

Moreover, quantitative analysis was conducted on secondary data to assess the use of WhatsApp by key political figures, civil society leaders, and political activists. The primary objective of this quantitative approach was to gain a deeper understanding of the 2023 Zimbabwean election campaign and to present objective data through clear statistical and numerical evidence (Hiller, 2016). Ultimately, data from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses were charted over a 24-month period, spanning from January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2023. This comprehensive analysis allowed for a detailed and multifaceted examination of social media's role in political activism and campaign strategies.

3.8 Summary

This study is anchored in the philosophical paradigm of critical realism, which asserts that researchers can acquire an understanding of the world by applying an objective, scientific framework, and subsequently building on this knowledge to explore how individuals within that world perceive and interact with phenomena, as well as how these perceptions shape their practices and cultural norms (Greene & Caracelli, 1997). The qualitative component of this research relied on primary data, collected in the form of interview transcripts, which were analysed using a systematic approach that involved weighting the evidence and applying various analytical tools. On the quantitative side, the study drew on secondary data collected from politicians, civil society leaders, and political activists. This analysis delved into the internal

dynamics of participants' social media accounts, with findings presented through comparative line graphs and tables.

Thus, the research findings provided a comprehensive view of the extent to which digital platforms were utilized during the election campaign. The quantitative analysis highlighted patterns in the data, while the qualitative analysis underscored the strategic importance of social media in local political campaigning.

The secondary data were validated through careful attention to reliability, as it was drawn from credible sources, such as participants' web analytics. The credibility of the primary data was ensured through several measures: maintaining prolonged engagement with interviewees, seeking feedback on key issues both before and after the interviews, systematically assessing the evidence presented in the transcripts, and offering rich descriptions of the findings. These steps aligned with established protocols for enhancing credibility in qualitative research, as proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989).

3.9 Ethics: Interviews

Participants in this study were fully informed about the research objectives and voluntarily consented to participate. While they initially agreed to be named, their identities were anonymized for safety reasons, given that Zimbabwe operates under a semi-authoritarian regime where freedom of speech is not assured. The study's primary aim, as communicated to participants, was to investigate how social media influences political discourse, agenda-setting, and the flow of influence during elections, with a specific focus on the roles of the major political parties, ZANU PF and Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). Additionally, the research explored how social media amplifies the role of civil society and analyzed the limitations of the social media revolution within semi-democratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa.

The research adhered to a solid ethical framework, ensuring that no participant endured mental distress. The level of risk associated with the interviews was carefully managed, ensuring that the

benefits of the research far outweighed any potential harm. Given Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian political climate, the risk to participants was carefully considered. This risk was mitigated by recognizing that interview data reflect a co-constructed reality between the interviewer and the interviewee (Rapley, 2004). Interviews were conducted via video conferencing, offering a secure environment where participants could select a safe location. Before the interviews, participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time. As the researcher, I continuously reflected on the appropriateness of the questions posed, being mindful not to overstep ethical boundaries, in line with Toch's (1971) analogy of interviewers as either supplicants or invaders. A predetermined plan was in place to terminate interviews if any indication arose that continuing could cause harm or danger.

3.9.1 Risk to Participants

In repressive regimes, even anonymized data carries the risk of being pieced together by state actors, potentially identifying and punishing individuals engaged in political discussions. Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda (2017) emphasize the need for researchers to remain vigilant against "unintentional harm" to participants. In such political contexts, participants may face severe repercussions if their identities are disclosed, particularly in environments where political dissent is not tolerated (Denscombe, 2014). To mitigate this risk, researchers must enforce "strict confidentiality protocols" to anonymize interview data and use pseudonyms to protect identities (Denscombe, 2014). Ess (2020) stresses the importance of informed consent, ensuring participants fully understand the risks involved, allowing them to make informed decisions about their participation.

3.9.1 Risk to Researcher

Conducting research on social media's role in political campaigns within a semi-authoritarian state like Zimbabwe poses significant ethical risks to the researcher, particularly concerning safety, confidentiality, and informed consent. In environments where political repression is commonplace, researchers may be subject to monitoring or targeted by authorities. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) warn that researchers in politically sensitive environments may face

“personal risks, including surveillance, harassment, or even legal action” if the research is perceived as oppositional to the state. To safeguard against these risks, researchers must employ “secure data storage and encryption practices” to protect both themselves and the participants from surveillance (Denscombe, 2014). Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda (2017) further advise using encrypted communication tools when conducting interviews on sensitive political topics to protect interviewees from potential retaliation by ensuring their data remains secure.

3.10 Ethics: WhatsApp

The Bournemouth University ethics committee granted approval for a waiver of informed consent requirements for participants in three WhatsApp groups. This waiver was justified because the study exclusively focused on analysing content derived from Twitter/X posts shared within these WhatsApp groups, rather than on the behavior or identities of individual participants. Academic research often provides a rationale for not notifying WhatsApp group participants about ongoing studies when the primary focus is on analysing overarching content trends rather than the behaviours, identities, or interactions of individual users. Such approaches align with ethical frameworks that prioritize the study’s intent to aggregate and examine shared material within broader communicative patterns rather than targeting personal data or identifiable behaviours (McKee & Porter, 2009). The study did not engage in the analysis of personal behavior, nor did it collect or examine any personal content shared by the members of the WhatsApp groups. As such, there was no identification of group participants or members, and no personal data was collected or scrutinized.

The research sought to explore how public social media content, specifically from Twitter/X, is disseminated within private group settings. However, it was strictly limited to the public content shared on Twitter/X and did not involve collecting or analysing personal information or behavior of WhatsApp participants. The ethical obligation to obtain explicit consent is significantly mitigated when rigorous data anonymization techniques are employed, effectively eliminating identifiable information from datasets. This approach is particularly justifiable when the research does not prioritize individual identities or behaviours but rather focuses on aggregated patterns or phenomena. By removing any link between the data and specific individuals, the risk of harm is

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minimized, aligning with established ethical principles in digital research (Venturini et al., 2018). The research focused solely on content that was already within the public domain, i.e., Twitter/X posts that had been reposted within these WhatsApp groups. Ultimately, the waiver for obtaining informed consent from participants in WhatsApp groups is supported by precedents found in the studies by scholars Barbosa & Milan (2019) and Chagas (2022).

3.10.1 Justification for Waiver of Consent

3.10.1.1 Public Domain Content:

The central focus of the study was public Twitter/X content, which is already accessible to the general public. Therefore, the posts shared within the WhatsApp groups did not constitute private communications but rather public social media content available to anyone on the platform.

3.10.1.2 No Analysis of Participants' Behaviour:

The study was strictly confined to the analysis of publicly available content and did not involve the analysis of personal content, opinions, or behavior of the participants in the WhatsApp groups. Consequently, the privacy and confidentiality of the group members were not compromised, as no personal data was examined or reported.

3.10.1.3 Minimal Risk:

Given that the research focused solely on publicly available information, there was minimal risk posed to the participants in the WhatsApp groups. The study did not involve the collection or use of identifying information from the group members, thereby ensuring their privacy.

3.10.1.4 Practical Challenges:

Acquiring consent from all participants in the WhatsApp groups could have posed significant practical difficulties and might have hindered the research without offering any substantial additional protection to the participants, especially since the content being analyzed was public, non-personal data.

3.10.2 Data Protection and Confidentiality:

3.10.2.1 Anonymity:

The identities of the WhatsApp groups were not disclosed in any of the research outputs. The study referenced only the public Twitter/X posts without linking them to specific individuals or identifying members of the WhatsApp groups.

3.10.2.2 Data Security:

All data collected, such as screenshots, were securely stored and were accessible only to the researcher. Additionally, all data were anonymized to ensure that no individuals within the WhatsApp groups could be identified.

3.10.2.3 Ethical Considerations:

The research adhered to Bournemouth University's ethical guidelines, ensuring the protection of participants' privacy and rights despite the waiver of consent. Although consent was not required, the study maintained a high standard of ethical responsibility by focusing solely on public content and safeguarding participant confidentiality throughout.

In conclusion, the ethical considerations regarding WhatsApp content analysis were carefully managed to ensure that the investigation of the social media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwean politics adhered to both ethical and methodological standards. This section of the research thus provides the findings that address the study's objectives while maintaining participants' privacy and minimizing risk.

CHAPTER 4. Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a nuanced analysis of the transformative role of social media in political campaigns, with a particular focus on its use during the 2023 Zimbabwean elections. The discussion draws from a comprehensive dataset that includes direct quotes from interviews with politicians, civil society leaders, and political activists, alongside citizen accounts shared on Platform X and the dissemination patterns of social media content within WhatsApp groups. The primary aim is to critically examine the political application of social media within the case study. Existing literature has demonstrated that social media has become an indispensable tool in modern political communication, serving as a bridge between politicians, political parties, and the electorate. Its role in election campaigns has grown exponentially over the years (Alperin et al., 2018).

In Zimbabwe's evolving political landscape, social media has increasingly become a central tool for political actors. Research indicates that the political deployment of these platforms is shaped by external competitive pressures. As Ward and Gibson (1998) argue, the "bandwagon effect" compels political actors to adopt similar strategies as their rivals. This study corroborates this assertion, revealing that two politicians, three civil society leaders, and ten political activists adopted social media to compete effectively in the digital sphere. The findings illustrate a rapid surge in social media usage among citizens and its strategic adoption by political actors during the 2023 election cycle. This observation aligns with Chibwe's (2020) analysis of the growing role of digital technologies in Zimbabwean political campaigns. Additionally, the widespread availability of affordable data bundles tailored for platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, provided by local mobile service providers, has significantly expanded internet accessibility (Mare, 2018).

The chapter critically examines the dynamics of the 2023 Zimbabwe election campaign to establish a framework for understanding the role of digital technologies in shaping electoral

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campaigns within repressive states in sub-Saharan Africa. To contextualize the interplay between social media and political activism in Zimbabwe, the analysis adopts a regional perspective on sub-Saharan Africa, while honing in on the unique challenges of conducting an election campaign in a politically fragile and semi-authoritarian state.

In the semi-authoritarian setting of Zimbabwe, social media emerged as a transformative tool for opposition groups, particularly during the 2023 elections. For progressive actors like the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society, digital platforms provided an essential alternative to state-controlled traditional media, enabling them to bypass restrictions and directly engage with voters. With limited access to conventional media outlets, the CCC innovated by prioritizing digital campaigning, leveraging platforms to connect with a broader audience. This strategic pivot to digital engagement helped the CCC offset its constrained physical presence, ensuring its inclusive message of change, epitomized by the hashtag #ForEveryone, reached a wide online audience. The campaign utilized WhatsApp's extensive penetration in Zimbabwe to counteract oppressive state tactics, disseminating information that challenged the ruling party's narrative and amplifying the opposition's influence even in marginalized regions.

For the ruling party, ZANU-PF, the growing prominence of social media posed a significant challenge to its traditional dominance over political communication. The decentralized nature of digital platforms disrupted the ruling party's historical ability to monopolize narratives. However, ZANU-PF's adoption of social media during the campaign underscores its acknowledgment of the platforms' widespread integration into Zimbabwean society. Despite these efforts, social media undermined ZANU-PF's traditional communication monopoly, compelling it to compete with the CCC and civil society for online engagement. This shift reflects broader implications for political communication in Zimbabwe, where digital platforms are reshaping the strategies of both progressive and authoritarian actors in an increasingly contested information ecosystem.

This chapter thus situates the findings within the broader discourse on the role of digital technologies in election campaigns, offering critical insights into how social media platforms are transforming political engagement in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe.

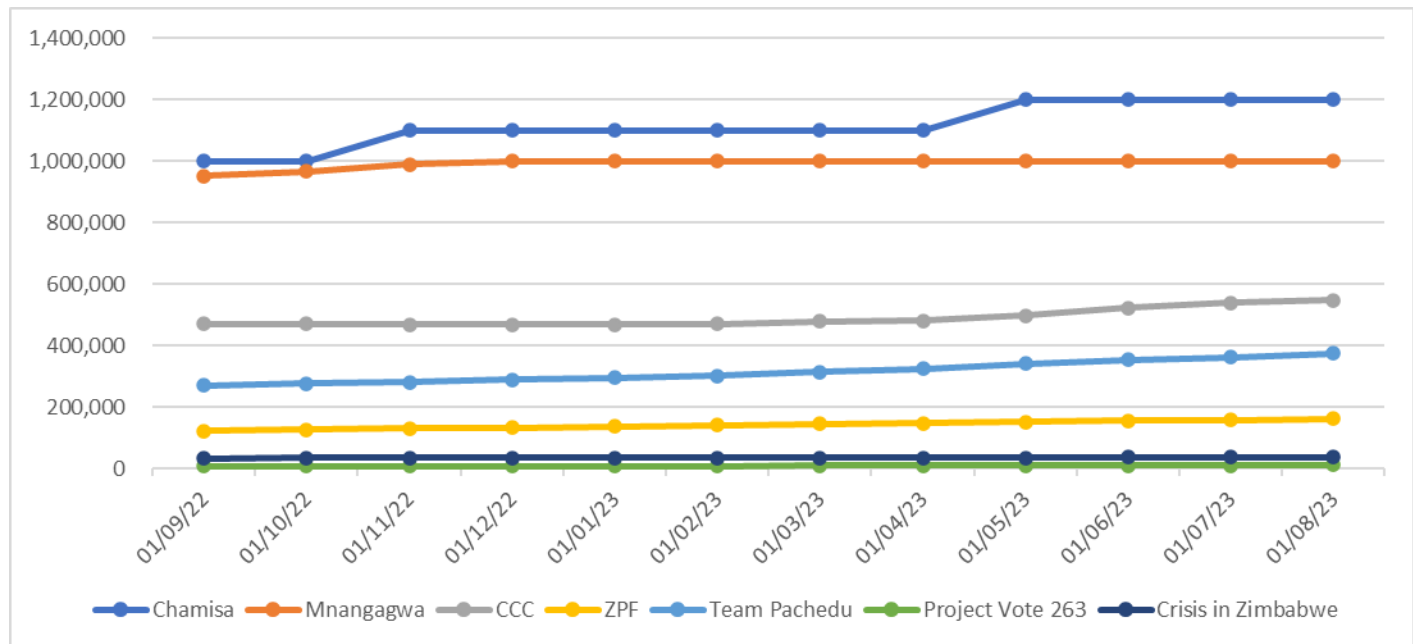
4.2 Social Media Statistics For Political Actors In The 2023 Election Campaign

4.2.1 Social media: Presidential Candidates

Analysis of social media platforms reveals that both Emmerson Mnangagwa, leader of the ZANU PF, and Nelson Chamisa, president of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), commanded substantial followings on digital platforms during the 2023 election campaign. The size of their online audiences enabled their political messaging to reach a broad segment of the electorate, with content being further disseminated through platforms such as WhatsApp, thereby extending its reach. Chamisa maintained a verified account on platform X under the handle @nelsonchamisa, while Mnangagwa operated his verified account under the handle @edmnangagwa.

More significantly, as demonstrated in Figure 1, the X platform served as a key tool for both presidential candidates, documenting the growth in their followings over the 12 months leading up to August 2023. Figure 1 highlights how, as the 2023 election campaign intensified, both leaders experienced a notable increase in their number of X followers. Chamisa saw a significant rise in followers, from 1,000,000 in September 2022 to 1,200,000 by May 2023. In contrast, Mnangagwa's growth was more gradual, with his followers increasing from 951,600 in September 2022 to 1,000,000 in November 2022 but plateauing thereafter. While these figures provide a comparative overview of follower growth, Figure 1 does not delve into the quality of engagement or the volume of interactions, such as comments or retweets. Moreover, it focuses exclusively on the X platform, without considering broader digital marketing strategies, including search engine optimisation or integrated campaign efforts.

Figure 1: X followers for Political Actors during a 12-month period



Source: X platform (2023), ZEC (2023). Social Media statistics as of 30 August 2023

Both Chamisa and Mnangagwa utilised their X accounts as part of their 2023 election campaigns. Chamisa used his social media platforms to engage followers through personalised messages and behind-the-scenes glimpses into his campaign, fostering a sense of inclusivity among voters. In contrast, Mnangagwa's social media activity primarily involved broadcasting party positions and government policies.

4.2.2 Social media: Main Political Parties

As Figure 1 illustrates, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) established a strong digital presence, with a significant following on platform X under the handle @ccczimabwe. ZANU PF, meanwhile, maintained a more modest digital footprint under the handle @ZanuPF_Official. Over the 12 months leading up to the 2023 election, the CCC's following on X grew steadily, from 470,500 in September 2022 to 548,000 by August 2023. ZANU PF experienced a slower but consistent increase, rising from 124,300 followers in September 2022 to 164,000 in November 2022.

The CCC harnessed social media to engage its supporters, broadcasting political meetings, educating followers about party policies, and countering propaganda from opposing parties. In contrast, ZANU PF employed social media not only to communicate its official positions but also to disseminate disinformation aimed at confusing voters, while reinforcing its historical narratives.

TABLE 4: 2023 election results and vote share

Folio No	Political Parties	MP Result	Vote Share	Senate Result	Vote Share	Presidential Result	Result %
1	ZANU PF	137	65	33	55	2,350,711	53
2	CCC	73	35	27	45	1,967,343	44
	Total	210	100	60	100	4,318,054	97

Source: *Aljazeera, (2023b); ZEC (2023)*

As illustrated in Table 4, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) secured 73 parliamentary seats and 27 Senate seats, while ZANU PF emerged with 137 parliamentary seats and 33 Senate seats in the contested 2023 election (Aljazeera, 2023b; ZEC, 2023). Moreover, as highlighted in the subsequent section of Table 4, CCC leader Nelson Chamisa repudiated the presidential election outcome, characterising it as a monumental fraud, following his narrow defeat to the incumbent President Emmerson Mnangagwa (Aljazeera, 2023b).

4.2.3 Social media: Civil Society

As shown in Figure 1, Zimbabwean civil society organisations also experienced growth in their social media presence during the 2023 election cycle. Team Pachedu, a leading election watchdog, saw a sharp increase in X followers, from 270,400 in September 2022 to 375,700 by August 2023. The Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition witnessed a more modest rise, growing from 36,000 followers in September 2022 to 37,900 in August 2023. Project Vote 263, a voter mobilisation initiative, had lower follower numbers, increasing from 8,349 in September 2022 to 12,200 by August 2023.

Figure 1 provides insights into how these civil society organisations leveraged the X platform to amplify their voices. Team Pachedu, despite having a smaller following than the presidential candidates, surpassed ZANU PF in terms of followers. Team Pachedu used social media to expose electoral malpractices by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). Similarly, the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition employed digital platforms to unify and amplify the efforts of civil society, lobbying for free and fair elections. Project Vote 263 focused its social media efforts on promoting voter registration and mobilisation.

4.3 Digital Technologies Enhancing the Political Influence of Actors

4.3.1 Perception of Social Media

The Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), Zimbabwe's primary opposition party, was acutely aware of its limited access to traditional forms of media. In this context, the party identified social media as a transformative mechanism for amplifying its political messaging during the 2023 election campaign. Historically, political communication in Zimbabwe had been dominated by state-controlled outlets, including radio, print, and television, which often acted as extensions of the ruling ZANU PF party. However, CCC leaders regarded digital platforms as a critical avenue to bypass these restrictions and directly engage with the electorate. Pre-election, CCC leadership viewed social media not only as a communication tool but as a democratic equalizer, aligning with scholarly analyses that posit digital technologies as potential disruptors of entrenched authoritarian practices in Zimbabwe (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019).

During the campaign, CCC officials emphasized the instrumental role of digital platforms in shaping voter perceptions and behaviors. A prominent CCC leader remarked that digital technologies were poised to fundamentally alter the electoral process, driven largely by the active participation of younger demographics through platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. Reflecting on the potential of these tools, the leader stated:

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“It’s (social media) going to be a game changer (in the 2023 election). I hope by then a good number of our young people, and even those in the rural areas, will have access to WhatsApp and Facebook so that messaging reaches out to every corner of this country.”

Post-election analysis revealed that while social media had indeed played a significant role in shaping public opinion in both urban and rural regions, it did not singularly determine the electoral outcome. The same leader nuanced his earlier position, acknowledging that social media was one of several factors influencing voter behavior rather than the definitive “game changer” anticipated. Nevertheless, CCC activists continued to regard social media as a vital tool for navigating the country’s restricted political landscape. Digital platforms offered them safer spaces to disseminate their messages, an assertion supported by academic research highlighting the protective role of virtual environments for activists operating under authoritarian regimes (Mutsvairo, Ragnedda, & Orgeret, 2021).

From the CCC perspective, social media was not only a reflection of grassroots political dynamics but also a barometer for gauging public sentiment. Activists were particularly convinced that digital engagement would be decisive in determining the 2023 election results, as both the opposition and ruling party sought to dominate online narratives and influence voter opinion.

In contrast, the ruling ZANU PF party faced significant challenges in establishing its narrative within the digital realm. The opposition’s strong online presence forced ZANU PF to engage reluctantly with social media, a medium it had previously dismissed as marginal. Despite this, ZANU PF leaders, including President Emmerson Mnangagwa, recognized the growing importance of digital platforms. Mnangagwa urged party members to counter the opposition’s online influence, emphasizing the necessity of adapting to digital campaigning. One ZANU PF official reflected on the evolving role of social media, stating:

“I think it depends on what is happening on social media. I think that it is the duty of government to ensure that well, first of all, like I said, for government officials to embrace social media, because it’s not going to go away, it is the new way of doing things of communicating government successes and failures.”

Despite these acknowledgments, ZANU PF largely maintained that social media could not fully capture the realities of rural communities, where face-to-face interactions remained the dominant form of political engagement. This skepticism was echoed by a ZANU PF activist who downplayed the influence of digital platforms by remarking:

“My mother is not on Twitter, she’s not even on Facebook.”

For ZANU PF, the limited reach of social media among rural populations underscored its belief that physical interactions were more impactful in mobilizing voters. Some party members, however, conceded that social media’s growing relevance, particularly among younger voters, posed challenges to the party’s traditional methods of political communication. This shift reflects broader trends in African electoral politics, where digital technologies are increasingly reshaping how campaigns are conducted (Mutsvairo, Ragnedda, & Orgeret, 2021). Nonetheless, ZANU PF’s downplaying of social media’s impact was consistent with its reliance on authoritarian tactics, including intimidation, vote-buying, and election rigging, as noted by observer missions (AU, EU, SADC Observer Missions, 2023).

Civil society actors offered perspectives that closely aligned with those of the opposition. Many activists viewed social media as a pivotal force in Zimbabwean politics, with some predicting its decisive role in the 2023 elections even before the official results were announced. Reflecting on the opposition’s reliance on digital platforms, one civil society activist noted:

“The opposition may have lost but their entire campaign was being coordinated via social media.”

The adoption of social media as a primary campaign tool was further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which curtailed traditional face-to-face interactions and pushed political communication into digital spaces. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp became essential for mobilizing support and disseminating information to both urban and rural populations. Drawing on Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) Connection Action Theory, political actors across the spectrum, including CCC activists, civil society groups, and even ZANU PF members, utilized social media to organize and amplify their campaigns.

In Zimbabwe's constrained democratic environment, social media emerged as a crucial space for political engagement, allowing opposition groups to share ideas, policies, and messages directly with voters. Scholars like Chitanana and Mutsvairo (2019) have emphasized the potential of digital platforms to enhance democratic participation by providing a forum for diverse voices. Ultimately, during the 2023 elections, social media functioned as a double-edged sword: it empowered opposition and progressive groups to challenge ZANU PF's monopoly on political messaging, while simultaneously exposing the ruling party's difficulties in adapting to a rapidly evolving political communication landscape.

4.3.2 The Positive Influence of Social Media on Political Actors in Zimbabwe

The ruling ZANU PF party and the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) offered contrasting views regarding the transformative impact of social media on Zimbabwe's political environment. Despite their differing stances, both parties recognized that digital platforms had markedly enhanced their political influence. For the CCC, social media's effectiveness stemmed from its perceived ability to accurately mobilize its supporters. By increasing their visibility and connecting more effectively with the electorate, the CCC utilized digital platforms to influence Zimbabwe's electoral trajectory significantly. This was particularly evident during the March 2022 by-elections and the 2023 general elections, where CCC activists effectively employed the Connective Action as articulated by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) to disseminate their inclusive electoral message, thereby broadening their appeal to voters.

An illustrative example of this was offered by a politician defeated by the CCC's Willias Madzimure in the Kambuzuma Constituency during the March 2022 by-election. Reflecting on his loss, the politician attributed the outcome to the opposition's overwhelming online engagement, noting the strong alignment between digital discourse and tangible electoral results. This acknowledgment underscored the growing significance of social media as a tool for shaping political outcomes in Zimbabwe.

Further evidence of social media's transformative power was provided by a female CCC activist interviewed for this study. She recounted how digital platforms elevated her political profile, propelling her from relative obscurity to a position of national and international recognition. Her political activities even attracted attention in the British Parliament (Hansard UK, 2023). This trajectory aligns with previous research, which highlights how social media has enabled politicians to move from marginality to public prominence, thereby enhancing their influence (Mutsvairo, Ragnedda, & Orgeret, 2021). She noted that before the rise of social media, many progressive activists faced significant challenges in achieving visibility due to the ruling party's control of traditional media outlets. However, digital platforms created new opportunities for sharing content that resonated with the electorate, enabling her and other activists to gain prominence. Reflecting on her personal experience, she remarked:

"(I think it has increased my political influence) because before I started being so active on Twitter, people didn't even know my name. We used to do so much work on the ground, but we didn't post it on social media."

The consensus among CCC activists highlighted that social media allowed them to amplify their offline efforts by integrating them into broader opposition narratives online. For instance, campaign messages during the 2023 elections, symbolized by the hashtag #ForEveryone, resonated deeply with supporters and facilitated widespread grassroots mobilization across Zimbabwe. This demonstrates how CCC activists and politicians effectively bridged the divide between digital and offline engagement, thereby enhancing their political efficacy.

Interestingly, even as the ruling ZANU PF party expressed skepticism about the overall relevance of social media, they too acknowledged that digital platforms had expanded their reach and influence. ZANU PF often sought to downplay the notion that social media accurately reflected real-world political dynamics, arguing that the CCC's popularity online did not necessarily equate to widespread grassroots support. This narrative allowed the ruling party to emphasize its traditional strengths in rural areas, where conventional campaigning methods remain dominant.

Nevertheless, individual ZANU PF politicians admitted that social media had significantly enhanced their personal visibility. One ruling party politician candidly reflected on how digital platforms enabled him to extend his political reach beyond his immediate constituency, offering him a global audience for his perspectives:

“I think certainly, that as a politician, I’ve gained (political influence) in quotation marks ...because I have tools that enable me to express myself in terms of my own perspective, on issues I’ve also gained in that those who are in my constituency, are able to talk to me and take me to task on issues that I’m able to respond to them. But beyond that, I have ceased to just being an MP or politician who is confined to, so if I speak to somebody in America, in Australia, Canada, UK, South Africa, where many people are, they’re able to hear and see what I am saying, I can make the judgement about myself based on what I’m putting into the public domain.”

Civil society organizations also acknowledged the significant role of social media in enhancing their political influence. Activists noted that, in a context where the ruling party-maintained dominance over traditional media, digital platforms provided an essential alternative for visibility. A civil society activist from Team Pachedu, a prominent social media-based group, recounted how these platforms elevated his organization's profile from obscurity to national and international prominence. He cited instances where Team Pachedu's work had been discussed in

the UK Parliament and featured in major international media outlets (Hansard UK, 2023; The Zimbabwean, 2023). The activist attributed the organization's ability to shape both domestic and international political discourse primarily to social media's unparalleled reach.

These findings underscore the profound influence of social media on political communication in Zimbabwe. For opposition politicians and activists, digital platforms have become essential tools for reaching audiences and advancing their political agendas. Conversely, for the ruling ZANU PF, social media represents both a challenge and an opportunity, as it disrupts their historic monopoly on political communication and compels adaptation to a more decentralized, competitive media environment. Ultimately, this evolution highlights the critical role of digital technologies in reshaping political narratives, fostering transparency, and challenging authoritarian practices in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe.

4.3.3 Social Media Enhanced the Opposition's Political Influence

Across the political spectrum, interviewees unanimously acknowledged that social media significantly amplified the CCC's political influence. There was widespread recognition that the main opposition strategically employed digital platforms to such an extent that it outperformed its rivals in Zimbabwe's political landscape. A crucial observation was made regarding the CCC's meteoric rise: despite being launched on January 24, 2022, from the remnants of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), with minimal access to traditional media and its rallies frequently disrupted by police, the party quickly ascended from obscurity to become the primary opposition force within just three months. This rapid ascent can be understood through the lens of the Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012) where the CCC leveraged on digital platforms to navigate against restricted access to public media and lack of access to the electorate in physical spaces. The CCC's remarkable rise within three months can largely be attributed to its adept use of social media for political mobilization. As a CCC activist accurately articulated,

“CCC doesn’t have access to the national broadcasting platforms, so it got launched on social media where there are other political parties, several of them over 50 political parties, but it managed to get to attract its supporters on social media and even managed to surpass other opposition parties that were there to become the main opposition in Zimbabwe.”

Before social media’s integration into political communication, Zimbabwe’s opposition employed more traditional campaign strategies, such as door-to-door canvassing. While effective, this approach was time consuming and drained the already scarce resources of the opposition. Other tactics included distributing printed flyers via helicopters and airplanes across major cities like Harare, Mutare, Gweru, and Bulawayo. Although this method yielded some success, it proved financially unsustainable for the opposition, especially in comparison to the ruling party’s ample resources. The emergence of social media around 2008 was, therefore, a transformative development for the opposition, enabling it to reach thousands if not millions of Zimbabweans with a single digital post.

The CCC’s enhanced political influence through social media became even more pronounced during the 2023 election season, where many of the party’s rallies were banned by a partisan police force. This forced the opposition to rely heavily on digital platforms for its campaign activities. In contrast, the ruling party and its allies enjoyed unrestricted access to face-to-face rallies and door-to-door campaigning, which led them to place less emphasis on digital campaigning. A ZPF activist asserted that social media had increased the CCC’s political influence, enabling the opposition to engage with voters online despite restrictions on its rallies:

“CCC leader Nelson Chamisa did not do much groundwork (due to being banned). But his campaigns were mainly based on social media. So, it really helped him as he was not always on the ground.”

This dynamic is supported by earlier studies, which show that social media empowers politicians to craft and disseminate their political narratives in alignment with their overall campaign strategy, sometimes even leading to an exaggerated portrayal of their electoral prospects (MacAfee, McLaughlin, Rodriguez, 2019). In essence, social media bolstered the CCC's political influence during the 2023 election, compensating for its lack of access to traditional media and the widespread bans on its physical rallies. This scarcity of traditional avenues of communication pushed the opposition to innovate by leveraging social media, which allowed the CCC to reach a broader, online audience of millions of potential voters.

By facilitating direct communication between the CCC and the electorate, social media substantially enhanced the opposition's political influence. Historically, before the widespread adoption of digital platforms, the CCC had limited means of directly engaging with voters. However, during the 2023 election campaign, social media granted the opposition unprecedented access to the public. The CCC capitalized on this by aligning its online activities with its offline strategies, reflecting its belief that what transpired on the ground mirrored social media dynamics. Ultimately, the evidence suggests that digital technologies significantly augmented the CCC's political influence, as social media enabled the party to directly market its election manifesto to Zimbabwean voters throughout the 2023 campaign.

4.3.4 The Multifaceted Impact of Digital Technologies on the Ruling Party's Political Influence

Interviews with ruling party activists revealed a consensus that social media had enhanced the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front's (ZPF) political influence within the context of Zimbabwean politics. This perspective aligned with ZPF's overarching narrative of achieving its electoral objectives and consolidating its political presence. A central element of ZPF's discourse on social media was the assertion that its impact was primarily concentrated in urban areas, where the use of digital platforms was more widespread, in contrast to rural regions where access remained limited. Activists and their affiliates contended that ZPF had successfully utilized social media to penetrate the main opposition's urban strongholds, exposing urban voters

to the ruling party's policies and achievements. This strategic use of digital technologies, they argued, allowed ZPF to counterbalance its traditionally weaker urban presence. One activist highlighted how social media facilitated the party's direct engagement with urban electorates, stating:

"I think Zanu PF gained (political influence due to social media) and the gain is mainly in the urban setting, because they are now more exposed or rather more available to or connected to the urban electorate, or even the diaspora. There are people now who had this kind of image of ZANU PF that they hate, and they see a different one via social media."

According to these activists, social media provided ZPF with an additional platform to extend its influence beyond traditional media channels. They argued that ZPF effectively leveraged a hybrid media system, as conceptualized by Chadwick (2013), to integrate traditional and new media in disseminating its election message of patriotism. This dual approach allowed ZPF to dominate the 2023 election narrative, as the ruling party simultaneously utilized state-controlled traditional media and digital platforms to reinforce its political messaging. Activists further noted that the opposition's limited access to traditional media created an imbalance, enabling ZPF to maintain an advantage in shaping public opinion during the election period. However, interviewees acknowledged that both major political parties ZPF and the CCC had leveraged digital technologies to enhance their political influence by using these platforms to engage voters and control narratives.

In contrast, progressive commentators argued that social media had disrupted ZPF's dominance in information warfare, substantially weakening the ruling party's political influence. They highlighted that, prior to the advent of social media, ZPF had unrivaled control over Zimbabwe's political narratives, primarily through its near-monopolistic control of traditional media outlets. This centralized control enabled ZPF to restrict opposition access and maintain a firm grip on the flow of information. However, the rise of social media introduced a transformative shift in the

political communication landscape. New actors, including opposition parties and civil society, emerged as influential participants, challenging ZPF's ability to control information dissemination. A CCC activist articulated this shift, stating:

"I think it has weakened greatly (ZANU PF political influence), because number one, I'm sure you know that in Zimbabwe, we have one media station, you know, and the greater populace of Zimbabwe used to rely on ZBC and Power FM. And now with the coming of social media and now our generation is always on social media, you know, it has managed to redirect the focus of where people get the news, people now get the news on social media."

This perspective underscores how social media disrupted the ruling party's traditional advantage by diverting the electorate's attention away from state-controlled media outlets like ZBC and Power FM. Progressives contended that ZPF was caught unprepared for this shift and lacked the strategic capacity to adapt effectively to the new digital environment. This failure to adjust left the ruling party vulnerable to opposition narratives that were disseminated and amplified online. Consequently, ZPF's inability to counter the CCC's online messaging was seen as a significant factor in the erosion of its political influence, particularly in urban and diaspora communities where social media engagement was highest.

Civil society interviewees echoed these sentiments, emphasizing that social media fundamentally altered Zimbabwe's political communication landscape. They argued that the migration of political discourse to digital platforms undermined ZPF's previously uncontested dominance over information dissemination. By enabling the opposition and civil society to reach voters directly, social media leveled the playing field and allowed for greater competition in shaping political narratives. This democratization of information access was seen as beneficial for the electorate, as it provided voters with more diverse and transparent sources of political information, ultimately empowering them to make more informed choices during the 2023 election.

In summary, while ZPF activists celebrated social media's role in enhancing their party's ability to engage with urban voters and the diaspora, progressives and civil society underscored how digital platforms disrupted the ruling party's traditional control over information flows. Social media not only introduced greater competition in political communication but also forced ZPF to contend with alternative narratives that challenged its historical dominance. The 2023 election campaign vividly demonstrated this duality, as ZPF both gained and lost influence in a rapidly evolving digital political landscape.

4.3.5 Social Media's Role in Undermining Traditional Media's Authority

A shared perspective emerged between Zimbabwe's two major political entities, the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) and the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZPF), regarding the transformative impact of social media. Both parties recognized that the increasing accessibility and influence of social media platforms had precipitated a significant decline in the public's reliance on traditional media for political communication. Even ZPF activists, whose party has historically dominated traditional media and maintained tight control over its content, reluctantly admitted that the influence of traditional media was waning. This shift was further highlighted by progressive forces, including CCC activists and civil society organizations, who strategically utilized digital platforms to circumvent ZPF's hegemony over traditional media. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020), they challenged the ruling party's monopoly by leveraging social media to communicate their political messages directly to voters during the 2023 election campaign.

ZPF's ambivalence towards social media reveals a critical paradox in its approach. While party activists acknowledged the pervasive role of social media in reshaping Zimbabwean politics, they simultaneously sought to downplay its influence within local communities. This inconsistency raises fundamental questions about the extent of social media's reach and impact. If digital platforms have become ubiquitous in Zimbabwean political discourse, how can they not exert significant influence in the very constituencies where they are actively used? A ZPF

politician encapsulated this contradiction while acknowledging the diminishing role of traditional media:

“Social media really lessens dependence on traditional media, if there’s such a term in the sense that almost everyone becomes a journalist.”

From the perspective of the ruling party, the decline in traditional media’s authority can be attributed to social media’s democratizing effect on the flow of information. Digital platforms have effectively transformed ordinary citizens into citizen-journalists, enabling them to document and share real-time events without the need for the resources traditionally required by professional media outlets. The smartphone, in particular, has revolutionized the dissemination of information by empowering individuals to capture photos and videos, which can then be rapidly shared on social media and amplified to reach broad audiences. This technological shift has redefined news production and consumption, reducing the public’s dependence on state-controlled traditional media outlets.

On the other hand, CCC activists approached social media’s erosion of traditional media from a contrasting perspective. They argued that, prior to the advent of digital platforms, traditional media served as the primary and often exclusive conduit for political communication. This centralized model of information dissemination ensured that breaking news was filtered through traditional channels, such as radio and television, which were predominantly controlled by experienced journalists. These professionals, however, were not always impartial; their narratives could be manipulated to align with the political agendas of the media outlets they represented. In Zimbabwe, this dynamic was particularly pronounced, as state-controlled television and radio stations were firmly aligned with ZPF, presenting narratives that favored the ruling party.

In addition to broadcasting, print media was similarly compromised. The largest newspaper publisher, Zimpapers, is state-owned and primarily echoes ZPF’s political stance, further limiting

the opposition's ability to communicate effectively through traditional channels. Consequently, prior to the rise of social media, the public had little choice but to consume information that reinforced the ruling party's narrative.

The emergence of social media radically disrupted this dynamic. Digital platforms not only allowed for the rapid dissemination of news, bypassing the bureaucratic delays inherent in traditional media, but they also democratized access to information. Social media enabled ordinary citizens to bypass institutional gatekeepers and directly contribute to the creation and distribution of political content. This shift empowered individuals to actively engage with and challenge existing narratives, undermining traditional media's authority in the process. By enabling faster, more decentralized, and more inclusive communication, social media provided an alternative that resonated with a population increasingly disillusioned with state-controlled outlets.

In conclusion, the growing accessibility of social media has fundamentally reshaped Zimbabwe's political communication landscape, diminishing the dominance of traditional media. Both CCC and ZPF acknowledged the transformative power of digital platforms, albeit with differing interpretations of their impact. For ZPF, social media's erosion of traditional media represented both a challenge and an opportunity to adapt. For the opposition, it symbolized liberation from the constraints of state-controlled narratives, enabling them to engage directly with voters and present unfiltered political messages.

4.3.6 Political Actors' Role in Agenda-Setting During the Election Campaign

Ruling party activists presented an inconsistent narrative when they claimed that both their party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZPF), and the opposition Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) were dominant forces in shaping political discourse on social media and the principal actors in setting the agenda for the 2023 election campaign. While this perspective was a recurring theme among ZPF supporters, it also revealed an inherent contradiction in the ruling party's broader strategy. ZPF had consistently portrayed the CCC as a mere "social media party," implying that its influence was limited to online platforms and

disconnected from grassroots realities. However, the very admission that social media discourse was shaped by both parties undermined this portrayal, suggesting a deeper contestation over the control of political narratives in Zimbabwe's digital spaces. ZPF activists gradually acknowledged that both the ruling party and the opposition played pivotal roles in agenda-setting for the 2023 election, with this influence extending beyond the virtual sphere into local communities where both parties engaged actively. One ZPF activist highlighted this binary dynamic, observing:

“(The two parties that set the agenda in Zimbabwean politics are) CCC and ZANU PF. I think if you check, especially on Twitter, you can see the binary, the binary world that we actually live in, you know, in terms of us, people that support Zanu PF and then those that support Nelson Chamisa.”

This acknowledgment ran counter to ZPF's longstanding narrative that social media activity was largely inconsequential to on-the-ground realities. The ruling party's public messaging aimed to minimize the importance of digital platforms, particularly as a means of countering the CCC's growing popularity. Yet, ZPF activists themselves undermined this claim by admitting that both parties wielded considerable influence online and offline, as evidenced by their substantial social media followings and grassroots support.

Interestingly, CCC activists echoed a similar sentiment, acknowledging that both major parties were instrumental in shaping political narratives during the 2023 election campaign, both in digital spaces and at the community level. Drawing on the hybrid media system framework (Chadwick, 2013), activists from both political factions employed a combination of digital media and doorstep campaigning to shape the political agenda and sway voter preferences. However, the opposition faced notable constraints in accessing and operating within the physical spaces of rural areas. CCC interviewees argued that the dual dominance of ZPF and CCC in political discourse on social media reflected the electoral outcomes. They pointed to the popularity of their respective leaders, Nelson Chamisa and Emmerson Mnangagwa, both of whom

commanded significant followings on platforms like Twitter, with each amassing over a million followers. This digital prominence was mirrored in local communities, as evidenced by the fiercely contested 2018 presidential election and the similarly close 2023 election, in which Mnangagwa narrowly secured a controversial victory (African Union Observer Mission, 2023; EU Observer Mission, 2023; SADC Observer Mission, 2023).

However, CCC activists exhibited inconsistencies in their narrative. While they conceded that ZPF had a notable social media presence, they simultaneously argued that the opposition led the agenda-setting on digital platforms. This tension highlighted the complexities of political propaganda and the factual distribution of influence in Zimbabwe's political sphere.

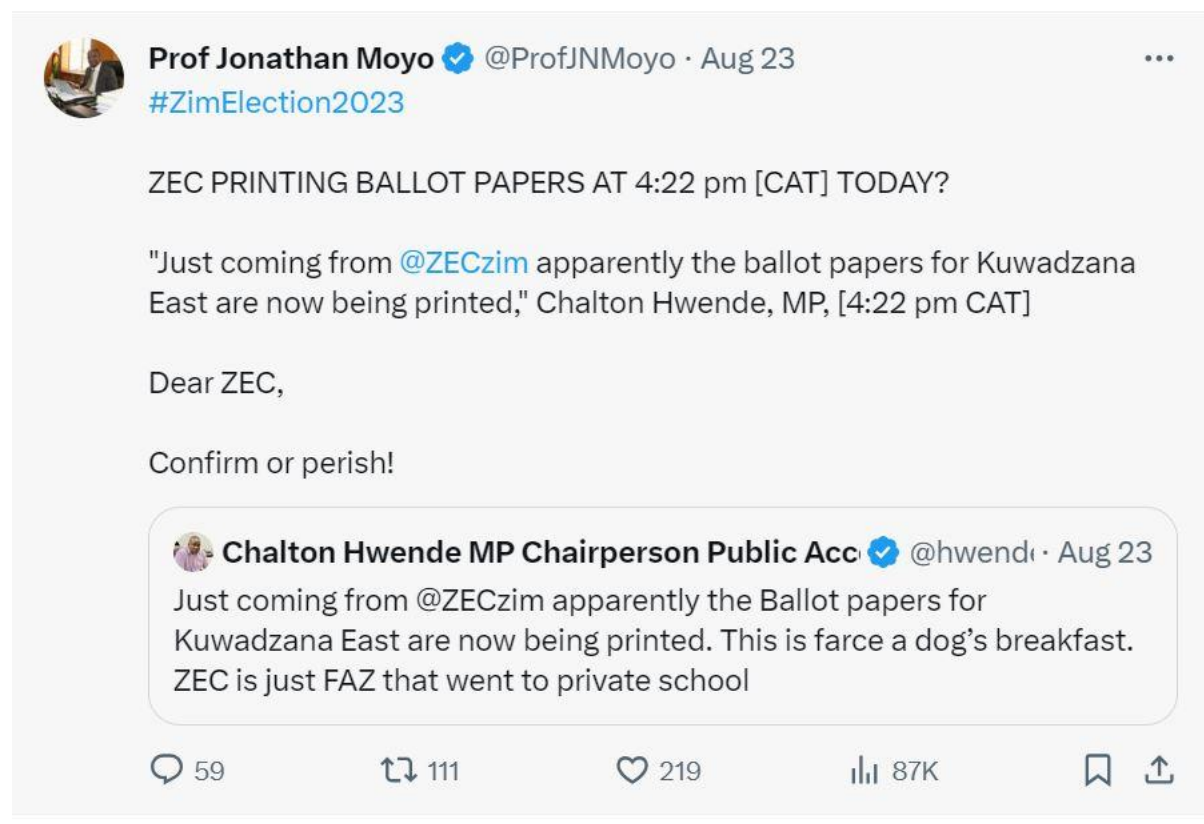
The narratives advanced by both CCC and ZPF on social media often clashed with the broader political realities in Zimbabwe, exposing a dichotomy between the so-called "political truth" and party-driven propaganda. From the CCC's perspective, the political truth was that both parties engaged in a struggle for dominance over digital platforms, shaping the agenda through strategic messaging. Conversely, ZPF appeared reluctant to acknowledge that their digital influence extended beyond the virtual realm and was reflected in tangible political outcomes, as demonstrated by the highly contested results of the 2023 election.

Independent activists offered a more nuanced analysis, emphasizing that while political parties were pivotal in agenda-setting on social media, they were not the sole influencers. One activist highlighted the significant contributions of social media influencers like Jonathan Moyo and the late Alex Magaisa, who played critical roles in shaping political discourse through their substantial online followings. The activist remarked:

"I think it's Jonathan Moyo. He always has something to say or setting the tone of what's going on. Then number two, we have obviously Alex Magaisa from his BSR to the tweets that he makes, he has a huge following people follow what he says. And listen to his key

messaging advice to the opposition. We have Freeman, of course. He also plays that influential role, sets the tone raises on debates on these issues."

This observation underscored the agenda-setting role of not just political parties but also academics and public intellectuals in shaping voter perceptions. Figures like Jonathan Moyo, with over 954,000 followers on X (formerly Twitter), wielded substantial influence by engaging directly with citizens and crafting narratives tailored to align with their political objectives.



Date: 23 August 2023

For instance, Moyo's commentary on voter suppression in opposition strongholds, such as Harare, as shared in a widely circulated post on August 23, 2023, resonated broadly across social media. His insights were shared by hundreds of users, amplifying his reach and informing voters about critical electoral issues. Similarly, independent activists highlighted the pivotal role of journalists like Hopewell Chin'ono in shaping public discourse during the 2023 election

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campaign. Chin'ono, through his investigative reporting and active social media presence, contributed significantly to informing and mobilizing citizens.

In conclusion, the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe demonstrated that social media served as a crucial platform for agenda-setting. While ZPF and CCC were the dominant actors, the contributions of independent influencers, intellectuals, and journalists proved equally significant in shaping the political discourse. Together, these actors utilized digital platforms to contest narratives, mobilize voters, and influence the electoral process.

4.3.7 Social Media Amplified Political Messages for Broader Reach

Both ruling party and opposition interviewees concurred that social media played a pivotal role in significantly expanding the reach of political messages during the 2023 election campaign. Activists aligned with the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZPF), emphasized the transformative shift brought by social media when compared to the pre-digital era. Before the proliferation of digital platforms, ZPF primarily relied on newspapers to communicate with citizens in both urban and rural areas. However, the financial inaccessibility of newspapers posed a considerable obstacle, as many Zimbabweans could not afford them. This was particularly pronounced in urban areas, where unemployment rates were alarmingly high, with an estimated 95% of the economically active population unemployed (BBC, 2017). The situation was even more dire in rural areas, where poverty and extremely low incomes rendered newspapers virtually unattainable. Consequently, the economic landscape severely curtailed the reach of traditional print media. Reflecting on this shift, one ruling party activist noted:

“Social media now allows people in different geographical regions to respond or to participate in a political debate or something. It is rich, and it’s interactive, widespread, rich, and interactive.”

Similarly, activists from the Citizens’ Coalition for Change (CCC) shared the ruling party’s view, agreeing that social media substantially enhanced the dissemination of political messages

during the 2023 election campaign. Leveraging the Connection Action theory (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), political actors from the CCC and civil society organizations effectively utilized digital platforms to mobilize voters and expand their outreach to the electorate in both urban and rural settings. Platforms like WhatsApp, which reached nearly half of Zimbabweans with internet access, became instrumental during the campaign.

However, CCC activists interpreted the transition from the pre-social media era to the current digital age through a distinctly oppositional lens. During the pre-digital period, opposition parties faced immense challenges in accessing traditional media, which was tightly controlled by the ruling party. This forced opposition activists to rely on arduous and resource-intensive methods such as holding physical meetings and distributing flyers to convey their messages. These approaches were not only labor-intensive but also financially draining, thereby limiting the opposition's capacity to reach a broad audience. In contrast, the advent of social media provided an unprecedented platform for the dissemination of diverse political perspectives to a vastly larger audience, reshaping Zimbabwean political discourse.

For CCC activists, social media emerged as a game-changing political tool, enabling them to connect with demographic groups that had been largely inaccessible during the pre-social media era, characterized by a tightly controlled political environment and restricted access to state media. The rise of social media disrupted the ruling party's monopoly on information dissemination, allowing the opposition to bypass traditional barriers and engage with a broader electorate. One CCC activist highlighted this shift, stating:

“Social media gives us the main advantage that it has, it gives us a chance to reach out to the young generation, which is the majority, you know, the voting majority that we know spend a lot of time on social media. So obviously, if you want to engage with someone, you look for them where you can find them. I cannot find them in their homes, when they're not there. They're on social media, some of them will be in school but online on social media.”

The CCC's use of social media was deeply integrated into their 2023 election strategy, which prioritized mobilizing the youth to register as voters and participate in large numbers. This strategy was grounded in the recognition that Zimbabwe's younger generation, the largest voting bloc in the country, constituted the majority of social media users. Highly adept with technology, this demographic was identified as crucial for the opposition's success. Historically disengaged from politics and plagued by indecision, Zimbabwe's youth were a central focus of the CCC's digital campaign, which aimed to engage them at scale through relatable and aspirational messaging.

To resonate with this audience, the CCC crafted the campaign slogan #ForEveryone, a phrase designed to embody the youth's aspirations for transformation and inclusivity. This slogan was further tied to concrete policy promises, including the creation of employment opportunities an issue of paramount importance to Zimbabwe's youth, who face significant challenges due to the nation's enduring unemployment crisis.

The overarching implication of the opposition's approach was that social media provided the CCC with a highly efficient, cost-effective, and persuasive means to engage with young voters. By leveraging digital platforms, the CCC not only broadened their reach but also deepened their influence, utilizing targeted messaging to galvanize support and mobilize voters during the 2023 election campaign.

4.3.8 Digital Technologies Facilitated the Spread of Disinformation for Political Gain

The role of social media in the 2023 Zimbabwean election extended beyond mere political communication to include the widespread dissemination of disinformation, a tactic increasingly employed to achieve strategic political advantage. Activists from the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) argued that the proliferation of disinformation campaigns was exacerbated by the extensive reach and speed of social media platforms, particularly in the most recent electoral

cycle. They expressed concerns about how rapidly disinformation could be disseminated, potentially misleading and manipulating thousands, if not millions, of their supporters. Due to the fast-paced nature of social media, disinformation could often evade timely scrutiny, leading audiences to mistake it for credible news. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of information disorder, which highlights the challenges posed by the velocity and volume of false information, making it increasingly difficult for the public to discern legitimate sources from deceptive ones (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Social media also served as fertile ground for orchestrating smear campaigns that sought to discredit political opponents through fabricated narratives. This point was illustrated by a ruling party politician, who lamented the damage caused by false information circulated online:

“I think the biggest disadvantage is the dangers of fake news. I think it’s a big negative for social media. In this country, I’ve been a victim of it as a minister, where people, for example, tried to disparage my character.”

Opposition activists from the CCC, however, perceived their party as the primary target of these disinformation campaigns, which they attributed to the ruling party and its allies. According to CCC activists, the ruling party often initiated disinformation efforts in traditional media outlets under its control, disseminating anti-opposition messages designed to undermine public confidence in the CCC. These narratives were subsequently amplified through social media platforms by ruling party supporters, ensuring their broad circulation and maximum impact. This dynamic aligns with the hybrid media system framework, which underscores the interplay between traditional and digital media in shaping public discourse (Chadwick, 2013).

A recurring theme in the ruling party’s disinformation campaigns was the portrayal of the CCC as an inauthentic political entity beholden to Western powers (Dendere, 2022). By framing the opposition as a puppet of foreign interests, the ruling party sought to delegitimize the CCC and diminish its credibility among Zimbabwean voters. This strategy was particularly evident during

the 2023 election cycle, as noted by a CCC politician who stated that such tactics aimed to position the ruling party, ZPF, as the sole legitimate representative of Zimbabweans' aspirations, while portraying the opposition as an agent of external influence. The opposition also acknowledged that these narratives sometimes succeeded in sowing confusion and fostering disillusionment among voters, many of whom accepted the false claims as truth. This dynamic reflects the backfire effect theory, which posits that attempts to correct misinformation can, paradoxically, reinforce the original misperception (Lee & Tandoc, 2018).

Nevertheless, CCC activists recognized social media as a powerful tool for countering disinformation, allowing them to swiftly challenge false narratives and present alternative perspectives. A key aspect of their strategy was framing the CCC as a grassroots-driven movement focused on addressing local concerns, a message encapsulated in the party's full name, Citizens' Coalition for Change. This proactive approach to debunking disinformation was instrumental in bolstering the party's visibility and appeal, contributing to its rapid growth since its formation on 24 January 2022. For example, the CCC won 19 parliamentary seats in the March 2022 by-elections and secured 103 seats in the 2023 general elections. The ability to promptly counteract disinformation through social media emerged as a cornerstone of the opposition's success. One CCC politician elaborated on this strategy, emphasizing its importance:

"The other advantage of social media is that it can help correct assumptions. Yeah, where for example, the CCC being labelled a puppet of the West you can package material to ensure that people understand that this is propaganda meant to discredit an otherwise indigenous institution with the objective of enhancing or improving the welfare of the people of this country."

Interestingly, the persistent disinformation campaigns targeting the CCC appeared to yield unintended consequences, as activists noted that the negative publicity often generated free exposure for their party. Rather than undermining the opposition, these efforts increased the

CCC's visibility and even enhanced its popularity among voters. Activists highlighted how traditional media, dominated by the ruling party, frequently propagated false narratives about the CCC, which were then amplified on social media by ZPF supporters. These narratives often went viral, inadvertently creating opportunities for the CCC to inject its own messages into the broader discourse. This tactic effectively allowed the opposition to "hijack" the conversation, ensuring that their campaign themes reached wider audiences.

In conclusion, while the ruling party's disinformation campaigns during the 2023 election cycle sought to manipulate voter perceptions and delegitimize the opposition, they also presented an opportunity for the CCC to assert its narrative of change. By leveraging social media to counter these efforts, the CCC was able to effectively communicate its political message, broaden its reach, and consolidate its position within Zimbabwe's contested electoral landscape. This dual-edged dynamic underscores the complexities of digital technologies in political campaigning within semi-authoritarian contexts, where both risks and opportunities abound.

4.4 Social Media Complemented Political Activities

4.4.1 Digital Technologies Enabled the Opposition to Access Voters Directly

Zimbabwe's ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZPF), has long maintained a firm grip over the nation's traditional media landscape. Since the advent of black majority rule in 1980, Zimbabwe has operated with only one national television broadcaster and a limited number of radio stations, all heavily influenced by the ruling party's agenda. ZPF's dominance extends to print media, with its significant stake in Zimpapers, the largest newspaper company in the country. This control has consistently marginalized the opposition, including the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC), which faced profound barriers in accessing traditional media outlets to disseminate its political message of change, symbolized by the hashtag #ForEveryone during the 2023 election campaign. These limitations forced the CCC to reevaluate its approach to voter engagement, leading to a strategic shift toward leveraging digital platforms to overcome the communication challenges imposed by state-controlled media in line with the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework (Cammaerts, 2012). Digital platforms

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became indispensable for the CCC in circumventing the ruling party's control over public media and its physical dominance in electoral spaces. An opposition activist interviewed during the study emphasized that while in-person engagement remained central to political campaigns, digital technologies offered crucial support by amplifying outreach efforts. As the activist remarked:

“Social media in Zimbabwe’s politics, I will not take it as a substitute or substitute institution to face-to-face, but I will take it as a complementary platform.”

The CCC identified social media as an essential and cost-effective tool for engaging with voters during the 2023 election campaign, particularly given its constrained access to traditional media channels. Activists noted that while platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp were instrumental in reaching large audiences, these digital tools could not completely replace the effectiveness of traditional campaign tactics, such as door-to-door canvassing. They argued that physical interactions remained vital for fostering trust and building confidence between voters and political candidates. A CCC politician elaborated on this perspective, asserting that while social media could enhance campaign efforts, it could not entirely supplant face-to-face engagement:

“It [social media] can be used as a substitute, but perhaps beyond that, it can be used as a complementary tool [to face-to-face meetings] because my idea of a substitute is that you are getting rid of one to replace it with another.”

Furthermore, CCC activists acknowledged that voters, as inherently “political humans,” valued the tangible connection of personal interactions in physical spaces. This understanding shaped the opposition’s election strategy, particularly as it sought to navigate the restrictions imposed by the ruling party’s control over traditional media. The CCC viewed the instinct for human interaction as a strategic opportunity to amplify its political messaging. While voters were initially engaged through social media platforms, they were subsequently encouraged to step out

of the digital realm and participate in physical interactions, such as rallies, community meetings, and other offline events, to further disseminate the CCC's message of change.

Civil society activists supported the notion that social media was a critical complementary tool, particularly for the opposition, which lacked access to state-controlled traditional media. They observed that during the 2023 election campaign, digital platforms became the primary source of political news for a significant portion of the population, especially younger Zimbabweans who spent considerable time online. Civil society representatives noted that the influence of traditional media was waning as citizens turned to social media for uncensored and unfiltered information about the electoral process. Newspapers, in particular, were cited as being in decline due to high costs, limited accessibility, and overt bias toward the ruling party. One civil society activist went so far as to suggest that traditional media had become almost obsolete, stating:

“I think social media has taken over in Zimbabwe, no one listens to the radio, for example, no one watches TV.”

This perspective, while hyperbolic, highlights the growing popularity and reach of digital platforms, which have attracted millions of users both domestically and within the Zimbabwean diaspora. Social media's ability to transcend the geographic and financial limitations of traditional media offered the CCC a powerful channel for voter engagement, enabling it to bypass the ruling party's control over information dissemination.

In conclusion, the longstanding dominance of ZPF over traditional media compelled the CCC to innovate and adopt digital technologies as a means of reaching voters directly. By integrating social media into its broader campaign strategy, the opposition effectively complemented its offline political activities, overcoming barriers imposed by the semi-authoritarian media environment. This shift not only expanded the CCC's ability to connect with the electorate but also underscored the transformative potential of digital platforms in reshaping political communication in Zimbabwe.

4.4.2 Social Media Facilitated Diverse Views

Participants from the ruling ZANU PF party interviewed during this study acknowledged that social media served as a vital alternative platform for the opposition Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) to connect with its supporters, particularly in light of the restrictive political environment characterizing Zimbabwe's 2023 election campaign. ZANU PF activists conceded that the opposition faced near-total exclusion from traditional media, leaving social media as the only practical avenue through which the CCC could engage the electorate. This perspective was articulated by a prominent ruling party activist who highlighted how the opposition's restricted access to both traditional media and public venues compelled them to rely on digital platforms. The activist remarked:

"State-owned newspapers and media houses, which we all know are biased towards obviously the ruling party. But these days now the CCC can say whatever they want to say (on social media)."

Traditional media's suppression of opposition narratives effectively barred the CCC from significant coverage, forcing the party to depend heavily on social media for its 2023 election campaign. Similarly, progressive civil society organizations, which often challenge the status quo by advocating for transparency and accountability, also faced exclusion from traditional media. This shared marginalization reflects the authoritarian nature of Zimbabwe's political environment, where the ruling party not only monopolized the media but also employed legal measures to constrain physical political activities, such as rallies and door-to-door campaigning. According to Ndlela (2023), the ZANU PF government deployed legal mechanisms to ban or severely restrict the CCC's physical campaign events, leaving the opposition with little choice but to amplify its message through digital means. The European Union Observer Mission (2023) reported that the CCC used social media as a critical platform to disseminate its #ForEveryone campaign message during the 2023 election cycle.

These limitations on both traditional media and physical spaces prompted progressive voices to migrate to social media platforms, enabling the CCC to dominate the political discourse within the digital sphere throughout the 2023 election consistent within the lens of the Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012). In response to this digital shift, ZANU PF leader Emmerson Mnangagwa encouraged party youth to actively participate in online discourse, characterizing social media as a digital battleground requiring active engagement. This convergence of CCC and ZANU PF supporters on social media platforms created a more open exchange of political views, fostering what scholars like Selnes and Orgeret (2020) describe as the democratization of political information. Digital platforms, therefore, emerged as spaces where a range of political voices could be articulated without censorship or overt control.

A ZANU PF activist recognized the restrictive environment as a catalyst for the opposition's online presence, noting how social media empowered the CCC to broadcast its message of change. The opposition's effective use of social media was evident in the March 2022 by-elections, where the CCC secured a majority of contested seats, as well as in the 2023 general election, where the party won 103 parliamentary seats despite being significantly outspent by the ruling party. This success highlighted the transformative potential of social media as a political tool, particularly for marginalized groups operating in authoritarian contexts.

The shift by ruling party activists from exclusive reliance on traditional "on-the-ground" activities to active participation on social media during the 2023 election introduced a broader diversity of voices into Zimbabwe's political discourse. Castells (2008) argues that digital platforms serve as public spheres where individuals can freely exchange ideas and debate differing political interests. However, within ZANU PF, this transition revealed internal contradictions: while some members dismissed social media as insignificant or disconnected from societal sentiment, others advocated for its integration into the party's long-term communication strategies. This tension was encapsulated by a ruling party politician who, while promoting the use of social media, simultaneously minimized its impact on traditional political methods, stating that it complemented rather than replaced conventional practices. Despite such

ambivalence, ZANU PF's increasing involvement in digital platforms reflected an acknowledgment of social media's deep integration into Zimbabwean society and its critical role in contemporary political engagement.

In an environment like Zimbabwe's, where freedom of speech is heavily curtailed, social media has become a vital space for political activists to express themselves without the immediate threat of state reprisals. The 2023 election campaign underscored this reality, as opposition activists and civil society groups faced heightened persecution for engaging in physical campaign activities. Many were arrested or detained without due process, forcing them to rely on digital platforms to continue their work. A ZANU PF activist remarked on the relative safety provided by social media, suggesting that it reduced the apprehension often associated with in-person political engagements:

"I think it's [social media] just a complementing... (it encourages diverse views) I think it [social media] eliminates the apprehension or anxiety that might come with an in-person meeting depending on who is interacting."

This repression of free speech in physical spaces drove activists to innovate online strategies to sustain political dialogue. One CCC activist emphasized the critical role social media played in enabling political engagement during a time when physical meetings were prohibited, stating:

"Physical meetings were banned, we managed to utilize social media, which also provided a critical role of disseminating information."

To evade state surveillance, many political activists adopted covert strategies, including the use of anonymous or "ghost" accounts, which allowed them to critique the government without fear of identification or persecution. A civil society activist explained this tactic, observing:

“People on social media use ghost accounts to express themselves because they are afraid to put their real names.”

These anonymous accounts became vital for facilitating free speech, enabling activists from across the political spectrum to participate in politically sensitive discussions without risking state retaliation. Even within ZANU PF, activists acknowledged that ghost accounts helped ensure a diversity of perspectives within Zimbabwe’s political landscape, contributing to the country’s fragile democracy. The state’s efforts to surveil and suppress online dissent proved only partially effective, as digital platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter provided secure channels for political communication and the dissemination of opposition messages.

In conclusion, the convergence of opposition and ruling party supporters on social media during the 2023 election marked a significant shift in Zimbabwe’s political communication. By providing a relatively open space for diverse voices to be heard, social media emerged as a critical platform for democratizing political information in a context where traditional avenues of engagement remained tightly controlled.

4.4.3 Digital Platforms Empowered Citizens to Voice Their Concerns

During the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe, physical spaces became zones of intimidation and repression, effectively silencing citizens who wished to express their views on governance, policy, and political issues. The state’s security apparatus, including law enforcement and intelligence agencies, systematically targeted individuals critical of the regime. This included the arbitrary arrest and detention of political opponents, journalists, civil society leaders, and ordinary citizens who dared to challenge state policies (Mutsaka, 2022). Additionally, access to state-controlled media outlets, such as radio and television, was restricted to voices aligned with the ruling party, excluding opposition figures and critical citizens. These limitations on traditional media and public spaces forced opposition leaders, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens to migrate to social media platforms, which provided an alternative space for expressing dissent. This trend reflects a broader pattern in semi-authoritarian states, where digital

technologies create opportunities for marginalized voices to challenge authoritarian control (see Kalyango & Adu-Kumi, 2013).

Civil society activists interviewed in this study highlighted the extensive restrictions imposed on physical political activities during the 2023 campaign period. They pointed out that the opposition was frequently denied police permission to hold public meetings, effectively suppressing their ability to engage with voters. Activists also noted the systemic persecution of progressive forces, particularly those raising concerns about widespread corruption within the government. This repression extended beyond opposition leaders to ordinary citizens, many of whom retreated into digital spaces as a safer means of voicing their opinions. One activist described the pervasive atmosphere of fear among citizens, noting that social media, especially anonymous accounts, provided a critical outlet for political expression. He remarked:

“In a country like Zimbabwe, many people are afraid to express themselves. There is no freedom of expression, no freedom of speech... many people on social media use ghost accounts to express themselves because they are afraid to put their real names. So it was quite important in a country like Zimbabwe that social media has provided a platform for so many people to express themselves.”

While citizens found a semblance of freedom on social media, the state responded by extending its surveillance apparatus to digital platforms. Research in other authoritarian regimes confirms this pattern, where governments actively monitor online activity to suppress dissent and maintain control (Rega & Medrado, 2023). In Zimbabwe, the state’s digital surveillance targeted prominent opposition figures and critics. For instance, CCC spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere was arrested for a tweet deemed a threat to state security. Similarly, investigative journalist Hopewell Chin’ono faced imprisonment for his social media posts exposing high-level corruption, and opposition leader Job Sikhala was jailed for over a year on charges linked to his online activism.

Despite the state's efforts to stifle digital dissent, citizens and political activists adapted by employing innovative strategies to sustain their engagement during the 2023 election campaign. Recognizing the risks of using their real identities online, many activists created “ghost accounts” to critique the government anonymously and hold it accountable in synch with the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework (Cammaerts, 2012). Initially, activists emphasized the importance of maintaining a visible online presence using their real identities to inspire broader public participation. The rationale was that visible leadership would motivate citizens to overcome their fear and engage in political discourse.

Activists argued that courageous leadership could galvanize public movements for change, drawing parallels with historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr., who inspired collective action through personal example. Civil society leaders viewed their digital presence as an opportunity to guide the public and set the tone for political debates. Despite the risks associated with using their real names, opposition leaders believed that demonstrating bravery in the face of repression was essential to mobilizing ordinary citizens and encouraging them to demand accountability and improved governance.

In addition to visible leadership, activists adopted covert methods to amplify their messages both domestically and internationally. Recognizing the dangers of confronting the state directly, particularly on sensitive issues like corruption, many activists resorted to anonymous strategies to protect themselves and their families. Since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, the government has consistently persecuted individuals who exposed corrupt practices, making anonymity a necessary tool for survival.

Pseudonymous Social Media Accounts: Skilled Rebhara



Date: 31 December 2023

One notable strategy involved the creation of pseudonymous social media accounts, such as the influential “Skilled Rebhara” account, which played a pivotal role during the 2023 election cycle by disseminating the opposition’s messages. By the end of 2023, this account had amassed over 230,700 followers, demonstrating its reach and influence. Another significant example was “Team Pachedu,” an anonymous group that used social media to pressure Zimbabwe’s electoral commission to uphold free and fair election standards. These covert efforts enabled activists to address critical issues like corruption and electoral integrity without exposing themselves to the state’s oppressive measures.

In summary, the use of digital platforms during the 2023 election campaign allowed Zimbabwean citizens and activists to navigate a highly repressive political environment. By adopting both visible and anonymous strategies, they ensured that critical issues, such as governance, corruption, and state accountability, remained central to political discussions. These efforts not only sustained public discourse but also contributed to shaping the electorate’s perceptions and decisions leading up to election day. Social media thus emerged as a crucial tool for democratizing political expression in a context where traditional avenues of engagement were severely constrained.

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4.4.4 The Role of Social Media in Informing Citizens

During Zimbabwe's 2023 election campaign, a rare convergence of perspectives emerged among the ruling party, the main opposition party, and civil society actors regarding the critical role social media played in keeping citizens informed about political developments. Despite their typically divergent political narratives and conflicting objectives, all actors acknowledged the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping public awareness. The ruling party, however, maintained a paradoxical position. On one hand, it downplayed the impact of social media, arguing that its reach was limited to the digital realm and lacked significant influence on local communities. On the other hand, questions arose about how citizens could remain informed on pressing political issues particularly during such a pivotal election if social media truly lacked tangible impact on the ground.

This contradiction in the ruling party's stance underscored a disconnection between its public rhetoric and the realities within the communities where it actively sought votes. Even within the ruling party, some activists admitted the undeniable contribution of social media in informing citizens. One such activist candidly stated:

“But honestly, we can never also underestimate what social media has actually done in terms of also informing people, it has done a lot in terms of informing people.”

Another activist within the ruling party further acknowledged that while digital engagement could not entirely replace traditional face-to-face interactions, it served as an indispensable tool for disseminating political information. This perspective aligns with existing scholarship, which highlights the complementary role of social media in informing citizens during electoral processes (see Selnes and Orgeret, 2020). According to this activist, digital platforms enabled political actors to reach their supporters efficiently, bridging gaps in physical engagement. He explained:

“Yes, it (social media) cannot be a perfect substitute. But it can be used in situations where people want to send, you know, politicians want to send messages to their supporters without physically going on the ground. So, it really is, has that influence.”

This recognition of social media’s strategic value was shared by activists from the main opposition party, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), who emphasized its role in complementing offline activities, particularly in urban areas. The CCC skillfully employed the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) to integrate doorstep campaigning with its online presence. This strategy aimed to enhance the electorate’s awareness of campaign activities during the 2023 election cycle, demonstrating how social media could mirror and amplify offline political engagement.

For the CCC, however, their reliance on digital platforms was not solely a matter of strategy but also a response to the restrictive political environment. The ruling party’s prohibition on opposition gatherings especially in rural areas during the campaign period forced the CCC to adapt, using social media as a vital tool to inform citizens about its activities and campaign messages. The hashtag #ForEveryone became a centerpiece of the opposition’s online strategy, ensuring that their messaging reached voters despite the state’s attempts to curtail their movements. Reflecting on these circumstances, one CCC activist noted:

“During the lockdown, you know physical meetings were banned, we managed to utilize social media, which also provided a critical role of disseminating information in managing, keeping up with the electorate.”

The opposition’s digital strategies extended beyond information dissemination to include covert tactics designed to evade state surveillance. For instance, the CCC employed decoy announcements, publicizing fictitious political meetings to mislead state security forces and divert their attention from actual campaign activities. Another innovative approach involved presenting past meetings as though they were current events, causing state forces to respond to

empty venues. These strategies frustrated state security efforts and, over time, diminished their willingness to act on opposition announcements.

One CCC activist described how the party turned these restrictions into an opportunity to enhance its digital outreach. By leveraging social media to counteract the state's legal and logistical barriers, the CCC was able to engage its supporters and sustain its campaign efforts. He elaborated:

“Social media is not more of substituting but is a critical tool in terms of complimenting and covering in the gaps where we are being blocked legally by government, paranoid government.”

In conclusion, while the ruling party and the CCC approached social media with differing political agendas, both recognized its indispensable role in keeping citizens informed during the 2023 election campaign. The ruling party acknowledged its utility in extending their messaging reach, while the opposition relied on it to navigate a repressive environment and amplify their campaign strategies. Ultimately, social media emerged as a vital tool in bridging the informational gap, augmenting offline efforts, and ensuring that political activities reached the electorate despite significant constraints.

4.4.5 Social Media as an Essential Tool for Resisting Repression

Since Zimbabwe's independence, the ruling party, in conjunction with its security forces, has been widely criticized for employing violent and intimidating tactics to suppress political dissent and silence opposition voices. This collaboration was particularly evident in the systematic closure of political spaces, especially in rural areas regarded as the party's strongholds. These regions became zones of fear, where state-orchestrated violence and intimidation, often carried out with the assistance of security forces, ensured that opposition parties could not freely campaign. The political strategy of the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), in coordination with state security apparatus, was to maintain a facade of peace and

controlled freedom of movement in these strongholds for much of the electoral cycle, often lasting up to four years.

During this ostensibly peaceful period, the ruling party assessed the organizational structure and strength of the opposition, particularly focusing on the newly formed Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). It is argued that this calculated calm allowed ZANU PF and its security partners to gather intelligence on opposition activities, identifying key leaders and vulnerabilities. However, a counterargument posits that the opposition, well aware of the risks posed by this surveillance, operated cautiously and strategically to avoid compromising its operations. This view suggests that the CCC approached the calm period as an opportunity to expand its reach while remaining vigilant against potential infiltration and state interference.

In response, the CCC strategically utilized this limited period of relative freedom to communicate its political agenda to the electorate, anticipating the inevitable crackdown as the 2023 elections drew closer. To avoid direct exposure to state surveillance, the opposition employed an innovative tactic: dispatching party leaders from other provinces to assist in developing local structures and educating voters on their election message, encapsulated in the #ForEveryone slogan. This strategy not only protected the party's local leadership from scrutiny but also obscured its grassroots campaign strategies, leaving ZANU PF with limited actionable intelligence. However, true to historical patterns, the ruling party gradually reimposed restrictions as the election period approached, systematically closing down physical spaces for political activity in its strongholds.

These escalating restrictions on physical political spaces forced CCC activists and supporters to shift their activities into digital spaces, which offered relative safety compared to the heavily monitored and dangerous physical realm. In repressive contexts like Zimbabwe, where freedom of speech and assembly is severely curtailed, digital platforms become indispensable tools for disseminating political messages and mobilizing support (Gukurume, 2017).

The ruling party's strategy of restricting political activity was closely coordinated with the state's security forces, who selectively enforced legal measures to obstruct opposition efforts. These measures ranged from the misuse of legal frameworks to outright illegal actions, such as arbitrarily banning CCC meetings. Meanwhile, smaller "puppet parties" allied with the ruling party were granted unfettered access to public spaces. These puppet parties, often created to divert votes away from the main opposition, played a key role in weakening the CCC's electoral influence. One CCC activist highlighted how these restrictions on physical campaigning compelled the opposition to migrate to digital platforms, using social media to amplify their election message of #ForEveryone:

"Physical meetings were banned; we managed to utilize social media ... (for) disseminating information."

The dynamics of the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe underscored a clear binary contest between ZANU PF and the CCC. On one side, ZANU PF enjoyed the overwhelming advantages of state resources, including near-unlimited financial support, unrestricted access to traditional media outlets, and the ability to organize physical rallies led by its president, Emmerson Mnangagwa. The ruling party skillfully employed the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), combining traditional and digital media with grassroots efforts such as doorstep campaigning to convey its patriotic election message to voters. This multifaceted approach was reinforced by extensive advertising across various media platforms, ensuring its dominance in the information landscape.

Conversely, the CCC operated in a vastly different and more challenging environment. The opposition faced numerous barriers, including legal harassment, violent intimidation of its activists and supporters, and restricted access to physical campaigning spaces. These repressive tactics forced the CCC to rely heavily on digital platforms to sustain its campaign. Social media became an essential medium for disseminating their message of change and mobilizing voters, embodying the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework (Cammaerts, 2012). This framework

proved instrumental in enabling the CCC to counteract restricted access to public media, political violence, and state-imposed barriers to physical campaigning. Earlier studies have shown that repression often compels political actors to retreat from unsafe physical spaces to the relative safety of digital platforms to share and amplify political discourse (Mare, 2015). One CCC activist emphasized the party's reliance on social media under such oppressive conditions:

“When we cannot do face to face, we use social media to speak out to meet where we cannot meet because of entrenched military dictatorship due to military state capture bans on meetings and gathering we use social media.”

In conclusion, the binary nature of the 2023 election campaign between ZANU PF and the CCC reflected two starkly contrasting realities. While ZANU PF capitalized on its unrestricted access to both physical and digital spaces, the CCC was forced to adapt by migrating much of its campaign to social media platforms. This shift in political engagement, driven by state repression, empowered not only opposition activists but also ordinary citizens to voice their dissent in the relatively safer domain of digital platforms. As a result, social media emerged as a critical tool for challenging repression, amplifying voices of dissent, and sustaining political discourse in an environment where physical spaces for free expression were systematically dismantled.

4.4.6 Digital Technologies as Drivers of Democratizing Information Access

Despite over four decades of black majority governance, Zimbabwe's media landscape remained heavily monopolized, with only one national television station and a few radio outlets, all under the direct control of government and ruling party elites. The print media sector was similarly dominated by state-aligned interests, most notably through Zimpapers, a government-owned entity that published the country's two largest newspapers: The Herald in Harare and The Chronicle in Bulawayo. Even ostensibly independent national publications, such as The Financial Gazette, Daily News, The Independent, and Newsday, were compromised through the infiltration of ruling party-linked individuals who acquired significant stakes in these enterprises.

This systematic consolidation of media ownership eroded the diversity of perspectives, enabling ZANU PF politicians and their allies to suppress dissent and marginalize critical viewpoints.

As the 2023 election campaign approached, this suppression became even more evident. Trevor Ncube, the proprietor of three prominent private newspapers (The Independent, The Standard, and Newsday), took to the social media platform X to voice strong opposition to Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) leader Nelson Chamisa. Ncube's overt criticism of the opposition, combined with his history as a former presidential advisor to Emmerson Mnangagwa, cast significant doubt on his newspapers' ability to provide impartial election coverage. Although he later resigned over concerns about government corruption and mismanagement, questions lingered about the integrity of his media outlets.

Similarly, Daily News, once perceived as an opposition-leaning publication, underwent a striking editorial transformation after shares were acquired by individuals with ties to the ruling party. The newspaper shifted its stance to become a pro-government voice, sidelining the CCC while amplifying the narratives of smaller opposition factions aligned with ZANU PF. This editorial shift mirrored a broader strategy by the ruling party to dilute the independence of privately owned media through strategic share acquisitions, effectively suppressing platforms that could present a national pro-opposition stance.

With traditional media platforms increasingly inaccessible, the CCC turned to digital technologies to counteract the ruling party's dominance. The party utilized social media to amplify its campaign message of #ForEveryone, navigating barriers such as restricted access to public media, harassment, and limited opportunities for physical campaigning, particularly in rural areas consisting with the Mediation Opportunity Structure proposed by Cammaerts (2012).

A ruling party activist inadvertently highlighted the critical role of social media in circumventing traditional media constraints, stating:

“If people want to send the correct information of what’s going on the ground, they will just post it on social media and within a few seconds, basically you know what exactly is on the ground.”

Within this context, social media emerged as a transformative and complementary tool, facilitating the free exchange of diverse perspectives that were otherwise censored in traditional media. It allowed political activists and citizens to share information directly, engage in open debates, and bypass the ruling party’s propaganda machinery. ZANU PF’s near-total control of state media had inundated traditional outlets with pro-government narratives, leaving opposition voices marginalized or framed in negative contexts. Consequently, both political activists and voters migrated to social media platforms in search of unfiltered information.

A CCC activist highlighted the value of social media as a platform for unrestricted public discourse, stating:

“I think social media provides that space for Zimbabweans, you get to meet a lot of Zimbabweans from different walks of life, and you get to hear their experiences, you know, even if it’s not, politically but socially, you know.”

In conclusion, ZANU PF’s dominance of traditional media not only suppressed the opposition’s voice but also drove citizens to seek alternative information sources on social media during the 2023 election campaign. Ironically, the ruling party’s attempt to monopolize the media narrative backfired, as activists and ordinary citizens increasingly relied on digital platforms to access unbiased information, engage in political dialogue, and resist repression. Social media thus became a pivotal space for democratizing information access, challenging state-controlled narratives, and empowering citizens during Zimbabwe’s contested electoral process.

4.5 Hashtags as Mobilization Tools

4.5.1 Hashtags Deployed to Mobilize Citizens

The 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe served as a pivotal moment in the country's political history, as it witnessed a remarkable alignment of efforts among various actors within the political and civic sphere to foster citizen participation in the democratic process. During this period, civil society organizations, opposition parties, and even a relatively cautious ruling party leveraged digital platforms to encourage broader engagement in the electoral process. The adoption of social media as a strategic tool marked a significant shift in how political actors approached voter mobilization in Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian context.

Insights derived from interviews reveal that political activists, together with ordinary citizens, assumed a central role in employing social media platforms to galvanize public participation. They actively encouraged individuals to register to vote, turn out on election day, and uphold the credibility of the voting process. Through these efforts, citizens not only supported their preferred candidates and political parties but also contributed to fostering a broader culture of civic engagement during the 2023 elections (Mukundu, 2023).

The 2023 Zimbabwean election campaign unfolded across four distinct yet interrelated phases, each requiring a tailored and strategic approach from political stakeholders. These actors included opposition groups, the ruling party, and non-governmental organizations, all of whom sought to achieve their respective objectives. Across all phases, hashtags emerged as potent tools for organizing and framing political discourse on social media. They provided an effective medium for mobilising and delivering targeted political messages directly to the electorate, illustrating the utility of the Connective Action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

The initial phase of the campaign prioritized the critical task of mobilizing citizens to register as voters, thereby establishing the foundation for meaningful political participation and engagement. This phase underscored the importance of civic readiness as a precursor to broader

electoral involvement. Two prominent hashtags emerged as rallying points during this stage: #RegisterToVoteZw and #DiasporaVoteNow. These hashtags not only captured the essence of the campaign's objectives but also helped in creating widespread awareness and building momentum within both local and diaspora communities.

The second phase shifted focus to addressing governance-related concerns, including anti-corruption measures. During this stage, hashtags such as #DisbandZEC, #HowFar, #GoldMafia, #FreeMako, and #FreeWiwa became central to the discourse. These hashtags encapsulated pressing issues within the socio-political context, drawing attention to institutional weaknesses and instances of corruption while amplifying the plight of political prisoners and activists. This phase highlighted the dual role of social media as a tool for advocacy, demonstrating its strategic utility in shaping public opinion in Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian landscape.

The third phase, which reached its peak on election day, concentrated on encouraging voter turnout and ensuring active engagement from the electorate. By this stage, the campaign sought to translate digital mobilization into tangible electoral action. Hashtags such as #2023I'mVoting, #ForEveryone, #NgaapindeHakeMukomana, #VoteED, and #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo played a pivotal role in energizing the voter base and reinforcing the narrative of collective responsibility in nation-building. This phase emphasized the importance of converting online enthusiasm into real-world participation, a critical challenge in any political campaign operating under semi-authoritarian constraints.

The final phase was dedicated to safeguarding the integrity of the election outcomes, focusing on the principles of transparency, accountability, and democratic fairness in the post-election period. The hashtag #DefendTheVote became the cornerstone of this phase, encapsulating the campaign's commitment to ensuring that the electoral process remained credible and reflective of the people's will. This stage involved heightened vigilance and proactive measures to prevent potential manipulations or disputes over the results, demonstrating the enduring role of social media in post-election advocacy and oversight.

4.5.2 Mobilization for Voter registration #RegisterToVoteZw

The initial phase of the 2023 electoral campaign in Zimbabwe focused primarily on voter registration mobilization, revealing distinct political strategies from the two main parties. The voter registration drive during this period was structured around a central hashtag, #RegisterToVoteZw, which served as a digital tool for disseminating information on why, how, and where to register. Hashtags, as noted by Bruns et al. (2012), are effective in rallying focus on key issues across digital platforms, in this context mobilised citizens to register to vote in time for the 2023 Zimbabwe election. The opposition party perceived this campaign as aligned with their strategic goal of engaging first-time voters. Civil society groups were also pivotal in this endeavor, particularly in encouraging youth participation, as evidenced by the following post, achieving a low engagement of 659 views.

ProjectVote263 tweeted:

“Today, we celebrate the REAL winners of the year! 🏆📁 Project Vote 263’s #RegisterToVoteZW Initiative, running from Sept 2021 to May 2023, created a positive impact that deserves recognition. Let’s highlight the major beneficiaries and their incredible efforts! 🌟🌟”

▮Our initiative focused on empowering young people from marginalized communities, universities, high-density suburbs, and all those on social media. Through our social media platforms, especially Twitter, with over 150,000 monthly reach, we controlled the digital narrative and created trends that positively influenced voter numbers. 📱💻

▮By providing timely information, engaging posts, and hosting interactive Spaces, we ensured that young people exercised their constitutional right to vote and expressed their voices through the ballot. Together, we shattered apathy and built a stronger democracy. 🗳️🌍

▮To all those who registered and showed up to vote on August 23, YOU are the true champions of the year! 🎉🌈 Your dedication and commitment to making a difference in

Zimbabwe's future are commendable. The increased number of registered voters is a positive sign for democracy and a cause for celebration. 🎉

Through your participation, we witnessed a transformative shift in the electoral landscape. By amplifying your voices and encouraging active engagement, we collectively made a lasting impact. Your actions have set the stage for a more inclusive and representative democracy. ZW 🙌

Today, let's applaud every young person who seized the opportunity to register and cast their vote. Together, we have taken significant steps towards a brighter future. Your efforts have made a difference, and we are immensely proud of you! 🙌👏👏

#ProjectVote263"

Time: 9:08 AM, Date: Dec 20, 2023, Views: 659, Likes: 11, Retweets: 3

The Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) activists regarded first-time voters, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 35, as pivotal to their electoral success. Consequently, the opposition was highly proactive in utilizing the #RegisterToVoteZw hashtag to galvanize young voters to register, with the hope that this would shift the 2023 election in their favor.

The optimism of CCC activists regarding the youth vote was largely informed by the 2021 Zambian election, where opposition candidate Hakainde Hichilema secured a landslide victory, obtaining 59.02% of the vote, primarily due to significant support from young voters. A CCC activist claimed that this experience shaped the CCC's 2023 election strategy, which heavily targeted the youth demographic, encapsulating their message within the theme of change.

During the 2023 electoral campaign, Zimbabwean youth were predominantly preoccupied with the severe issue of unemployment, with individuals aged 18 to 35 facing exceedingly high unemployment rates estimated between 70% and 90%. This dire economic context led the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) to strategically leverage the #RegisterToVoteZw hashtag, aiming to position voter registration as a pivotal pathway toward political transformation. This transformation, the CCC argued, could potentially address the issue of unemployment by

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ushering in a new administration dedicated to job creation. Consequently, the opposition mobilized its campaign around the #RegisterToVoteZw hashtag, urging young Zimbabweans to seize their electoral agency to effect government change and secure a more promising future. The following tweet illustrates this approach, although it recorded moderate engagement with 10,900 views, 210 likes, and 98 retweets.

Citizens' Coalition for Change tweeted:

@CCCZimbabwe

“🟡 Young people, here's an opportunity to change your future. You need to register as a voter for the betterment of your future. Voter registration will run from today until the 21st of March 2023. Visit your nearest voter registration centre now.”

#RegisterToVoteZW #OnePlusFive #RegisterToVoteZW

Time: 7:54 AM, Date: Mar 12, 2023, Views: 10.9K, Likes: 210, Retweets: 98, Replies: 4

Notably, a week before election day, the opposition's spokesperson posted on X (formerly Twitter), appealing to young voters by highlighting the role that electing the CCC could play in fostering job creation. The strategic use of the #RegisterToVoteZw hashtag in the voter registration campaign was acknowledged by an opposition activist, who stated,

“Number one is the current trending hashtag which is on the voter registration that is #RegisteredToVoteZw.”

The Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in its 2023 election campaign, as evidenced by its ability, in collaboration with other significant stakeholders, to mobilize nearly one million first-time voters to register (Election Guide, 2023; The Herald, 2023). This notable accomplishment can be attributed to a multifaceted voter mobilization strategy that seamlessly integrated digital advocacy with actionable grassroots efforts. A key element of this strategy was the use of the #RegisterToVoteZw hashtag, which became an indispensable conduit linking online political engagement to practical, on-the-ground

initiatives. These efforts included logistical coordination, such as organizing transportation for citizens to reach Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) registration centres.

The campaign received substantial support from various actors, most notably prominent journalist and anti-corruption advocate Hopewell Chin'ono. Chin'ono's unwavering advocacy over the course of nearly a year significantly amplified the campaign's visibility and impact. His persistent efforts resonated strongly with Zimbabweans both within the country and abroad, with reports indicating that some Zimbabwean expatriates were motivated to return home specifically to register to vote. This outcome exemplifies the transformative power of sustained digital advocacy in semi-authoritarian contexts, where traditional campaigning methods often face significant limitations.

The hashtag #RegisterToVoteZw proved instrumental in directly engaging and mobilising eligible citizens to take the critical step of registering to vote ahead of the 2023 elections, in consistency with the Connective Action as articulated by Bennett and Segerberg (2013). Hopewell Chin'ono's impact is further underscored by his social media activity. One of his tweets advocating voter registration garnered moderate engagement, with 26,800 views, 397 likes, and 113 retweets, reflecting the ability of influential figures to shape public discourse and mobilize action in politically restrictive environments.

Hopewell Chin'ono tweeted:

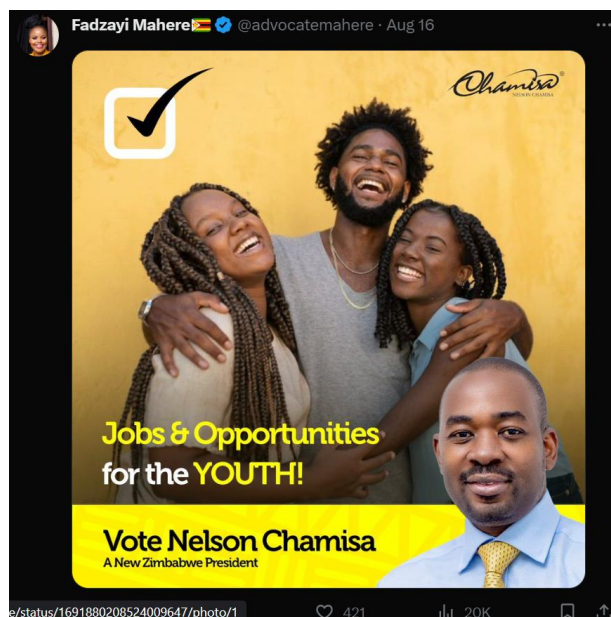
@daddyhope

"These messages make me realize that I didn't waste my time investing in the #RegisterToVoteZW campaign. Here is someone who is flying all the way from South Africa to only come and register to vote. What stops you to go and register to vote when you live in Zimbabwe?"

Time: 11:58 AM, Date: Mar 22, 2023, Views: 26.8K, Likes: 397, Retweets: 113, Replies: 12

While the opposition embraced the hashtag, their main rival, ZANU-PF (ZPF), displayed hesitation in capitalizing on the digital mobilization strengths of the hashtag. ZANU-PF's reluctance to adopt the hashtag appeared consistent with its strategic focus on older voters. ZPF activists believed that their core support base resided among individuals aged over 40, while the CCC's was rooted in the younger "born frees" (those born post-independence in 1980). Consequently, ZANU-PF's engagement with voter registration campaigns occurred mostly offline, as they presumed their older supporters were less active on social media.

The underlying rationale of the ruling party was that embracing the #RegisterToVoteZw hashtag could inadvertently bolster the opposition's base, given that the youth primarily CCC supporters were more active online. Thus, ZANU-PF favoured traditional voter outreach methods, such as door-to-door campaigns targeting older voters. However, this approach reflected a fundamental flaw: if ZANU-PF's support base continued to dwindle with an aging population, while the CCC's youthful supporters expanded, ZANU-PF's electoral market would progressively shrink.



Date: Aug 16, 2023, 20K views, Likes: 421

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Nevertheless, ZANU-PF's scepticism of digital mobilization was aligned with its broader strategy, which encompassed voter intimidation, violence, vote-buying, and election rigging. This strategy, though antiquated, was deeply intertwined with ZANU-PF's overarching political goal of securing an electoral victory despite the odds. In summary, as highlighted, tweets disseminated by the CCC party, its senior officials such as Fadzai Mahere, and influential figures like Hopewell Chin'ono in support of the hashtag #RegisterToVoteZW generated significant engagement, with interactions exceeding nearly sixty thousand. In contrast, tweets from civil society organizations garnered comparatively low engagement, reaching only a few hundred. However, the broader implication of this disparity is that the hashtag succeeded in gaining recognition and resonance among the electorate, indicating its effectiveness in penetrating public consciousness.

4.5.3 Mobilization for the Diaspora Vote: #DiasporaVoteNow

The issue of the diaspora vote became one of the most contentious and politically charged topics in the 2023 election campaign, with the two main political factions engaged in intense debates, leading to a deadlock. This controversy echoed the unresolved 2018 Constitutional Court case, brought forward by Gabriel Shumba, which challenged the Zimbabwean government's position on diaspora voting. The case reaffirmed the lack of immediate prospects for a resolution. Civil society highlighted the reluctance of ruling party politicians to address the diaspora vote, citing political self-interest, achieving 782 views, 16 likes and 8 retweets in a tweet.

ProjectVote263 tweeted:

*"What is stopping the diaspora vote is not a lack of laws but lack of political will. S67 extends voting rights to all Zimbabweans, whereas the electoral act doesn't provide for it. The electoral act is inconsistent with the constitution (s2 of constitution)
#DiasporaVoteNow"*

Time: 7:30 AM, Date: May 19, 2023, Views: 782, Likes: 16, Retweets: 8, Replies: 1

The Constitutional Court ruled that for Zimbabweans residing abroad to vote, the onus was on Parliament to legislate for the diaspora vote. This effectively shifted the political dilemma from the judiciary to the legislature, where deep divisions persisted among politicians on the matter.

During the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe, the ruling ZANU-PF party firmly upheld its policy of denying voting rights to Zimbabweans living abroad. The party maintained that members of the diaspora should remain excluded from participating in the country's electoral process, a stance it justified by citing logistical and political concerns. As a result, ZANU-PF abstained from utilizing or endorsing the #DiasporaVoteNow hashtag, which had been widely adopted by other political actors to advocate for diaspora voting rights. This deliberate non-engagement highlighted the ruling party's broader reluctance to extend democratic participation to external voters, despite significant advocacy efforts.

In stark contrast, the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) took a progressive position on this issue, actively supporting the call for diaspora voting rights. Fadzayi Mahere, the CCC spokesperson at the time, publicly lauded the widespread backing for the #DiasporaVoteNow campaign. She emphasized the fairness of granting voting rights to Zimbabweans abroad, particularly given their critical role in sustaining the nation's economy through remittances. Mahere's remarks underscored the CCC's commitment to inclusivity and its recognition of the diaspora as an integral part of the country's democratic fabric.

The #DiasporaVoteNow hashtag emerged as a pivotal tool for amplifying calls to extend voting rights to Zimbabweans residing outside the country. Through social media, the campaign effectively disseminated messages that challenged the government's exclusionary stance, embodying the principles of the Connective Action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Fadzayi Mahere's engagement with the hashtag exemplified this strategy. One of her tweets advocating for diaspora voting garnered notable attention, with 47,300 views, 453 likes, and 212 retweets. This level of engagement reflects the role of social media not only as a communication tool but

also as a means of rallying collective action and fostering transnational solidarity in semi-authoritarian political contexts.

Fadzayi Mahere tweeted:

@advocatamahere

“WEEK IN REVIEW: This week, we talk about the Diaspora Vote, remember citizen hero @tinochiremba, take a peep into the @CCCZimbabwe’s soon to be launched Diaspora Policy & look at how diaspora remittances should work in a functional economy.”

Time: 10:40 AM, Date: Feb 11, 2023, Views: 47,300, Likes: 453, Retweets: 212, Replies: 25

ZANU-PF activists argued that Zimbabweans in the diaspora, particularly in Western countries, should not be allowed to vote because these nations had imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe, making it difficult for ruling party officials to campaign. The countries in question included the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and the United States. However, critics contended that this was a misleading narrative, noting that most Zimbabweans abroad resided within Africa, with only a small fraction in the West. Moreover, the sanctions imposed by Western countries targeted only a select group of ZANU-PF officials, meaning the majority of the party’s representatives could, in fact, campaign in those countries if the diaspora vote were allowed. The ruling party’s refusal to capitalize on the #DiasporaVoteNow hashtag was seen as an acknowledgment that its mobilization potential would favor the opposition. Furthermore, the rationale behind ZANU-PF’s resistance to the diaspora vote was rooted in the belief that many of those in the diaspora were economic migrants who had fled due to the lack of employment opportunities and blamed the ruling party for the country’s economic decline.

Conversely, civil society groups actively employed the #DiasporaVoteNow hashtag to rally both domestic and international communities in their calls for legislative action to allow the diaspora vote. A civil society activist emphasized the importance of the hashtag in mobilization efforts, stating that the hashtag was instrumental in conveying the message that the diaspora vote was crucial for Zimbabwe’s democratic progress. He remarked,

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Anonymous Interviewee:

"#DiasporaVoteNow... is one of the two most important hashtags in the election process."

The primary opposition party, the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC), strategically harnessed the momentum from the #DiasporaVoteNow campaign, collaborating with influential civil society groups, including Team Pachedu, the Election Resource Centre, and ProjectVote263, to advocate for the enfranchisement of Zimbabweans abroad. Election watchdog ProjectVote263 emerged as a prominent voice in the #DiasporaVoteNow movement, actively campaigning for diaspora voting rights while simultaneously motivating youth to participate in voter registration, as illustrated by the following tweet. The tweet captures this advocacy approach, achieving moderate engagement with 3,268 views, 62 likes, and 26 retweets.

Project Vote 263 tweeted:

@ProjectVote263

"Let us register to vote, let us encourage each other to mobilize other young people in a peaceful manner. Peace begins with me, you, and all of us. 2023 is a year of VOMO, young people it's either you Vote or Miss Out #RegisterToVoteZW"

"#GoEducateMobilizeVoteZW, #DiasporaVoteNow"

Time: 7:49 AM, Date: Jan 19, 2023, Views: 3,268, Likes: 62, Retweets: 26, Replies: 4

Despite raising the issue in Parliament, the CCC was unable to advance the legislation due to ZANU-PF's control of the legislature, holding nearly a two-thirds majority. The stalemate over the diaspora vote underscored that this critical aspect of Zimbabwe's democratic framework would likely remain unresolved until a broader political settlement was reached. As previously noted, tweets shared by senior officials of the CCC party, such as Fadzai Mahere, in support of the hashtag #DiasporaVoteNow achieved substantial engagement, with interactions surpassing forty thousand. Conversely, tweets from civil society organizations, such as Project Vote 263,

recorded significantly lower levels of engagement, reaching only a few thousand. Despite this disparity, the overarching significance lies in the success of the hashtag #DiasporaVoteNow in gaining visibility and resonance among the electorate, demonstrating its efficacy in influencing public awareness and discourse.

4.5.4 Demand for Transparency and Impartiality in ZEC:

#DisbandZEC

Since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, its electoral processes have been persistently fraught with accusations of corruption, coercion, and vote-buying practices. These allegations have been primarily directed at the ruling party, which has retained control for the past 43 years. Opponents contend that the ruling party's consistent electoral victories stem from systematic manipulation favouring its interests. Central to these allegations is the claim that the ruling party secures its objectives by exerting indirect influence over the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). The ZEC commissioners are appointed via Parliament, where the ruling party holds a nearly two-thirds majority, thereby enabling significant sway over these appointments (The Zimbabwean, 2023). In fact, during the selection process for commissioners overseeing the 2023 election, several candidates who performed poorly in interviews were nevertheless appointed, raising further concerns about bias. Additional allegations surfaced, suggesting nepotism in the appointments, with commissioners reportedly related to influential figures within the ruling party (Ndoro, 2022).

This influence is particularly apparent in cases such as Commissioner Jasper Mangwana, related to the prominent Mangwana family, with Nick Mangwana as the government spokesperson and Paul Mangwana as the ZANU PF legal secretary. Similarly, Catherine Mpofu, daughter of the ruling party's Secretary for Administration, Obert Mpofu, was appointed to the ZEC despite her lack of electoral management experience (Open Parly, 2023). Additionally, Abigail Mohadi, daughter of Vice President Kembo Mohadi, also secured a commissioner position. Critics argue that these appointments were strategically made to tilt the 2023 election in favour of the ruling party (Ndoro, 2022). The perception is that senior ZEC appointees with connections to the ruling

party are likely to select lower-level employees biased towards the ruling party. Amid widespread public discontent regarding the influence exerted by the ruling party, opposition groups allege that ZEC consistently overlooks the ruling party's overt manipulation in areas like vote-buying and intimidation, particularly in rural strongholds (The Zimbabwe Mail, 2022).

This historical tainting of ZEC's credibility has positioned it as an apparent extension of the ruling party, fuelling calls for reform under the hashtag #DisbandZEC. This campaign aimed to pressure ZEC into adopting transparent, impartial, and equitable practices in managing the 2023 election. A political activist articulated this sentiment, stating:

"#DisbandZec that is actually coming from the fact of whatever the anomalies that are being announced by ZEC, you know that we have Team Pachedu monitoring the voters roll."

Notably, civil society organizations, such as Pachedu, leveraged the #DisbandZEC hashtag to organize information and underscore the importance of unbiased election oversight. Activists also highlighted the hashtag's role in pushing for equitable conditions in the 2023 election, fostering a balance between the ruling party and opposition CCC. In the post-election period, some activists reflected that, despite incremental gains, the #DisbandZEC campaign had limited success in influencing ZEC to ensure fair practices. Nonetheless, before the election, civil society groups successfully pressured ZEC to revise voter registration figures, demonstrating the potential influence of the campaign (Chino'no, 2022). Team Pachedu, for instance, highlighted some of these tissues in a tweet with over sixty-eight thousand views, including ZEC's refusal to address questions about constituency boundaries:

Team Pachedu tweeted: @PacheduZW

*“Justice Chigumba has refused to respond to a simple Yes/No question from The Standard journalists on the Final Delimitation Report. Instead, she referred them to Mr. Silaigwana, who also refused to comment, citing leave.
ZEC is no longer in charge of the report! @ZECzim”*

Time: 11:51 AM, Date: Feb 19, 2023, 68.1K views, Likes: 1200, Retweets: 560

Political activists responded to such revelations by echoing the #DisbandZEC hashtag, emphasizing the need for transparency. His tweet received 81 views. One opposition activist echoed:

Arshavin Ashley replied to the Team Pachedu tweet above:

“#DisbandZec”

Time: 12:18 PM, Date: Feb 19, 2023, 81 Views

As the 2023 election approached, Zimbabwe’s dominant political parties, ZANU-PF (ZPF) and the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), finalized their nominations for various electoral positions. During this critical period, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) released an updated voter roll that was quickly criticized for numerous inconsistencies. Civil society organizations, led by the advocacy group Pachedu, publicly exposed these irregularities, pointing out that identification numbers from the 2013 voter roll had been inexplicably reassigned to new identities in 2023 (Ndebele, 2023). This revelation raised serious concerns about the credibility of the electoral process, sparking widespread debate on social media platforms.

The #DisbandZEC hashtag emerged as a focal point for these discussions, amplifying civil society’s critiques and bringing greater visibility to the problems surrounding voter identification. By leveraging this digital tool, activists and advocacy groups effectively extended their influence, consistent with the principles of the Contentious Publicness framework (Kavada & Poell, 2020). The controversy over the flawed voter roll became emblematic of the

deep-seated rivalry between Zimbabwe's main political parties. Social media posts utilizing the #DisbandZEC hashtag played a crucial role in drawing public attention to these issues, highlighting the ZEC's alleged role in facilitating electoral manipulation. These posts, often shared by opposition activists, further intensified the polarization between the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition CCC, framing the election as a contest not only of votes but of legitimacy.

One such activist used the hashtag to suggest that the electoral process had been deliberately manipulated, voicing concerns about the transparency and fairness of the election. Her tweet, though receiving relatively modest engagement with 959 views, underscored the role of social media in documenting and disseminating claims of malpractice. This incident highlights the growing importance of digital platforms in Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian political landscape, where they serve as critical spaces for challenging dominant narratives and mobilizing dissent.

CCC activist Priscilla tweeted: @Ppungwe

"Dear @ZECzim, Only a thief comes at night to steal & destroy! Following a flawed process right from delimitation & denying with the voters Roll, you declare a loser to be the winner! You are unfit for purpose! You have betrayed the Will of the masses! Shame on you #DisbandZEC"

Time: 12:24 AM, Date: Aug 27, 2023, 959 Views

CCC activists reasoned that high youth registration numbers benefitted the opposition, and, by extension, low youth registration favoured the ruling party. This belief spurred CCC activists to rally younger voters under #DisbandZEC, aiming to shift the election outcome. Hashtags, thus, serve as pivotal digital tools in political and governance arenas, aiding in mobilization and influencing organizational decisions (Berman, 1997; Feltey & Susel, 1998; Walters et al., 2000).

Conversely, the ruling party remained opposed to the #DisbandZEC campaign, perceiving ZEC as an entity that would ensure a fair, transparent, and impartial election in its favor. The ruling party's stance underscored its confidence in ZEC's alignment with its interests. Ultimately, while

the ruling party rejected the call to dismantle ZEC, given its influence over the commission, progressive groups continued supporting #DisbandZEC, viewing it as their only recourse to counteract the ruling party's dominance over the electoral process (The Zimbabwean, 2023). As previously noted, tweets disseminated by Team Pachedu in support of the hashtag #DisbandZEC garnered significant traction, with interactions exceeding sixty-eight thousand. This high level of engagement highlights the broader significance of the hashtag's effectiveness in achieving extensive visibility and resonance among the electorate.

4.5.5 Advocacy for the Release of Political Prisoners: #FreeMako #FreeWiwa

For over 43 years, Zimbabwe's ruling party has deployed covert and coercive tactics to sustain its grip on power. Among the methods used by ZPF has been the strategic imprisonment of political opponents when perceived threats to its authority emerge. This practice dates back to the early years of Zimbabwe's republic in the 1980s when the ruling party jailed prominent members of the main opposition, ZAPU. Such repressive tactics eventually pressured ZAPU into signing the Unity Accord in 1987, merging with ZANU to form a single-party state. Critics contend that this agreement was a forced capitulation, with ZAPU leaders detained, rather than a genuine political coalition (Solidarity Peace Trust, 2009). They argue that this union was not a merger of equals but a forced assimilation, with ZANU retaining its identity and the opposition losing its distinctive presence. The ruling party defended its stance, citing its electoral successes since independence as justification for absorbing ZAPU; critics, however, see this as a deliberate strategy to eliminate opposition within Zimbabwe's political landscape.

The 1987 Unity Accord effectively created a one-party state, reducing opposition presence for over a decade until the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999. With the MDC's formation, the ruling party resumed its historical tactics, such as imprisoning opposition leaders, including Morgan Tsvangirai and Tendai Biti, as the party gained influence. With the rise of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) in March 2022, the pattern persisted, with numerous CCC leaders facing ongoing legal charges that, critics argue, amount to

politically motivated persecution. Government critics claim President Mnangagwa is employing “lawfare” to dismantle opposition through state-sponsored legal harassment (Ndlela, 2023).

During the 2023 election campaign, activists from the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) anticipated that the ruling ZANU-PF party would continue to employ repressive tactics that have historically been used to consolidate power in Zimbabwe. These measures, which include arbitrary arrests, harassment, and the frequent banning of opposition rallies, significantly constrained the CCC’s ability to campaign effectively and connect with voters (Reuters, 2023). This hostile environment placed the opposition in a precarious position, forcing its members to navigate a political landscape fraught with state-sponsored obstacles designed to undermine their electoral prospects.

In response to these challenges, progressive activists within the CCC resolved to mobilize widespread citizen support to challenge what they described as the regime’s abuse of state power in Harare. Recognizing the strategic potential of digital platforms for amplifying their message, CCC activists launched a series of targeted social media campaigns. One such initiative centred around the hashtag #FreeMako, which was used to draw attention to the imprisonment of prominent CCC activist Makomborero Haruzivishe. Leading up to the 2023 election, the hashtag became a focal point for highlighting Haruzivishe’s prolonged detention without trial, effectively galvanizing public discourse around issues of political persecution and the broader suppression of dissent (VOA, 2022).

The #FreeMako hashtag served as a powerful digital tool to advance the campaign for the release of political prisoners, including Haruzivishe, aligning with the Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012). This framework emphasizes the potential of social media to provide alternative spaces for political advocacy, especially in semi-authoritarian contexts where traditional channels are heavily restricted. By leveraging the hashtag, CCC activists not only amplified Haruzivishe’s plight but also underscored systemic injustices faced by opposition members and civil society actors under ZANU-PF rule.

Preceding the 2023 election, #FreeMako was strategically employed to organize grassroots campaigns and stimulate widespread discourse on what activists described as “political persecution.” Through this effort, CCC supporters sought to generate domestic and international pressure on ZANU-PF-led authorities to release Haruzivishe and address broader issues of repression. Political activist Nance Njenge publicly acknowledged the efforts of a group of activists behind the #FreeMako initiative, reinforcing its role in mobilizing collective action. Her tweet, while modest in engagement with 19 likes and 4 retweets, symbolized the persistence of opposition voices in a highly restrictive environment. This campaign reflects the growing importance of social media in Zimbabwe’s electoral politics, providing opposition movements with vital platforms to resist state control and advocate for political change.

Nancy Njenge tweeted:

@nancyjenge

“I’m so happy for you my guy! Hats off to the lawyers for fighting so hard.

We advocated for #FreeMako because you did the same for us every time, and this, to us, is worth celebrating 🎉🔥👏”

Time: 4:58 PM, Date: Oct 3, 2022, Retweet: 4, Likes: 19, Replies: 1

Njenge’s tweet was a response to Makomborero Haruzivishe, who expressed gratitude to activists, lawyers, and supporters. His original tweet garnered 225 likes and 74 retweets.

Makomborero Haruzivishe tweeted: @MakomboreroH

“To citizens of Zimbabwe who stood with me through years of persecution advocating for #FreeMako, to @ZLHRLawyers @obeyshava1 & Kossam Ncube, to prison officers who risked to help me, to mabhanditi who stood with me through the worst, to @SAHRDNetwork; THANK YOU 🙏” #MakoMonday

Time: 4:43 PM, Date: Oct 3, 2022, Retweet: 74, Likes: 225, Replies: 9

A Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) activist asserted that the widespread dissemination of the hashtag #FreeMako significantly elevated international awareness of the plight of political prisoners in Zimbabwe, particularly that of activist Makomborero Haruzivishe. The campaign's impact extended beyond national borders, drawing the attention of the United Kingdom parliament, where Haruzivishe's case was discussed, thereby highlighting the broader issue of political repression in Zimbabwe (Hansard UK, 2021). The activist further claimed that Haruzivishe's eventual release from prison was a direct result of the global outrage and pressure generated by this campaign.

"The #FreeMako campaign forced the military to get ... (Makomborero Haruzivishe) out of prison, it was reaching parliaments of foreign governments."

The success of the #FreeMako campaign underscores the pivotal role of social media in mobilizing attention toward the issue of political prisoners in Zimbabwe. By leveraging digital platforms, CCC activists succeeded in amplifying the campaign's visibility and reach. #FreeMako served as a bridge connecting grassroots activism to international advocacy, thereby exerting substantial pressure on the Zimbabwean government to act. For example, the digital newspaper TheNewsHawks amplified the campaign's message by tweeting about CCC leader Nelson Chamisa's public response to Haruzivishe's release. This tweet, which garnered 132 likes and 30 retweets, demonstrated how digital media not only disseminated critical information but also validated the opposition's achievements in resisting state oppression. By combining localized activism with international advocacy, the #FreeMako campaign illustrates the transformative potential of social media in challenging authoritarian regimes and amplifying the voices of marginalized political actors. This case highlights how platforms like Twitter can serve as critical tools in reshaping public discourse and mobilizing global support for political change in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe.

TheNewsHawks tweeted:

@NewsHawksLive

“Zimbabwe’s main opposition MDC Alliance leader Nelson Chamisa has welcomed the release of militant party cadre and activist Makomborero Haruzivishe after months in jail.”

Time: 12:24 PM, Date: Jan 9, 2022, Retweet: 30, Likes: 132, Replies: 5

The British parliament’s discussion of Haruzivishe’s imprisonment highlighted the issue of political detainees in Zimbabwe, drawing international attention that arguably pressured the government to act (Hansard UK, 2021). The implication of leveraging #FreeMako was that CCC activists and allied groups transformed a national issue into an international call to action, exposing the ruling party’s repression and advocating for the release of political detainees.

As the 2023 campaign gained momentum, the ruling party continued obstructing the CCC by arresting its members. Following the alleged killing of a CCC activist by a ZPF supporter in Chitungwiza, tensions rose, leading to clashes between party supporters, though only CCC affiliates were detained. CCC and civil society groups responded by coining a new hashtag, #FreeWiwa, to advocate for the release of detained CCC leaders. Activist Simbarashe Munhembamba tweeted about Job Sikhala’s prolonged detention, tagging high-profile figures to amplify awareness, garnering 5 likes and retweets.

Simbarashe Munhembamba tweeted:

@real_simbamun

“563 days in pre-trial detention for representing a family in mourning.

@HHichilema, @CyrilRamaphosa @PaulMashatile & @UN_HRC, @peterndoro Job Sikhala is a political prisoner.

#FreeWiwa

With a prison month being 21 days, he has been behind bars for 26+ months. Why?”

Time: 12:43 PM, Date: Dec 30, 2023, Retweet: 5, Likes: 5, Replies: 0

#FreeWiwa became a focal point for mobilizing citizen support and spotlighting the conditions of detained CCC leaders, as critics decried the judiciary's alleged bias, noting that CCC activists were repeatedly denied bail despite minimal flight risk (Africa News, 2022). The campaign drew attention to the arrest of Sikhala and 16 others, with the hashtag widely used to underscore selective law enforcement by ZPF authorities. Former CCC spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere tweeted #FreeWiwa achieving 54,000 views and significant engagement.

Fadzayi Mahere tweeted:

@advocatmahere

“ Free Wiwa. #WiwaWednesdayZW”

Time: 3:40 PM, Date: Nov 22, 2023, Views: 54.3K, Retweet: 402, Likes: 2,100, Replies: 38

Notably, the combined impact of #FreeWiwa and diplomatic pressure directed international attention toward Zimbabwe's pretrial detention practices concerning Sikhala and other CCC members (Hansard UK, 2023). As pressure mounted, many of the detained activists were released over time, though Sikhala remained in custody (Africa News, 2022).

The ruling party and its affiliates contend that hashtags like #FreeMako and #FreeWiwa did not influence the release of CCC detainees, asserting that Zimbabwe's judiciary operates independently. CCC activists, however, view these hashtags as pivotal in drawing diplomatic pressure that ultimately led to political releases. This debate underscores the contentious impact of digital activism in Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian environment, raising questions about the effectiveness of social media in compelling government action. As previously observed, tweets shared by the CCC party and its spokesperson, Fadzai Mahere, in support of the hashtag #FreeWiwa gained substantial traction, with interactions surpassing fifty thousand. In contrast, the hashtag #FreeMako generated minimal traction, with only a few hundred retweets. This notable level of engagement underscores the broader significance of these hashtags in achieving widespread visibility and fostering resonance among the electorate.

4.5.6 Demand for an End to Corruption: #HowFar and #GoldMafia

Corruption emerged as a prominent issue in Zimbabwe's 2023 electoral discourse, deeply embedded within the socio-political fabric of the nation. Since gaining independence, Zimbabwe has witnessed numerous corruption scandals, with the ruling party ensuring that implicated politicians frequently face negligible consequences. Critics of the government contend that ZPF employs a "catch and release" approach, whereby politically connected individuals accused of corruption are briefly detained but later released without formal charges. One of the most notorious corruption cases in Zimbabwe's history is the Willowgate scandal (1988-89), wherein high-ranking officials illicitly sold vehicles at inflated profits (Maier, 1989). Despite the gravity of this scandal, involved officials merely resigned and subsequently resumed their lives without penalization.

By 2023, figures associated with the Willowgate scandal, such as Frederick Shava, who received minimal repercussions for his actions, were appointed to high-ranking positions, with Shava serving as Foreign Minister despite his record. Similarly, Jacob Mudenda, another individual implicated in the scandal, resigned but eventually ascended to the role of Speaker of Parliament. Charles Ndlovu, likewise, implicated, faced no punitive action and subsequently held multiple ministerial positions. Meanwhile, Geoffrey Nyarota and Davison Maruziva, journalists responsible for exposing the scandal, faced professional repercussions, being removed from their positions as editor and deputy editor of *The Chronicle*. Government critics suggest that powerful, politically affiliated individuals in Zimbabwe are often rewarded despite criminal activity, while those who expose corruption face retaliation. In an especially egregious case, Minister Prisca Mupfumira was implicated in a \$100 million corruption scandal involving NSSA funds in 2019 (Al Jazeera, 2019). Although dismissed by the president, Mupfumira later claimed mental illness and, by 2023, contested in ruling party primaries and was subsequently appointed as a government minister post-election.

Amidst this backdrop of governmental inaction against corruption, civil society activists, frustrated by the government's lack of accountability, launched the hashtag #HowFar to highlight unfulfilled promises regarding anti-corruption measures. Specifically, activists used #HowFar to remind the president of his 2018 campaign commitment to tackle corruption as the 2023 election campaign gained momentum. The hashtag functioned as a digital tool for disseminating critical information, empowering citizens to hold the government accountable for its failure to implement an impartial anti-corruption initiative. Approximately one month before the election, ZIMCODD, the originators of #HowFar, articulated in a tweet that the hashtag was designed to promote government accountability amidst escalating corruption, though the tweet received limited engagement.

ZIMCODD retweeted:

@ZIMCODD1

"#TakeAction is a call beyond the #HowFar question. Report issues of corruption which increase citizen vulnerability. Find jobs & other opportunities on the #CitizenApp. Download iOS: [link]; Android: [link]."

Time: 11:05 AM, Date: July 5, 2023. Views: 274, Retweets: 1, Likes: 1, Replies: 0

A civil society leader, expressing disappointment at the government's delayed response to corruption, explained that #HowFar aimed to pressure authorities for progress updates on anti-corruption efforts, stating,

"The hashtag #HowFar has to do with socio-economic issues from Zimcod, and from its name (#HowFar) it is a way to ask government, you promised this, but you have not done it."

The #HowFar campaign expanded beyond digital realms, with billboards across Zimbabwe and active social media dissemination. This mobilization reflects the hybrid media system that merges physical and digital domains, thus responding to the evolving media environment and

facilitating new platform analyses (Chadwick, 2013). A notable activist, Tapiwanashe Chiriga, utilized #HowFar on Twitter, addressing the Finance Minister's prior commitment to affordable garrison shops for security personnel. The tweet achieved 881 views, seven retweets, and eleven likes.

Tapiwanashe Chiriga tweeted:

@tapiwa_chiriga

"In February 2020, @MthuliNcube promised to establish cheaper garrison shops for the security services to shield them from the harsh effects of inflation. #HowFar"

Time: 10:55 AM, Date: July 3, 2023. Views: 881, Retweets: 1, Likes: 1, Replies: 2

As the 2023 election intensified, international broadcaster Al Jazeera unveiled a consequential exposé, the Gold Mafia investigation, implicating Zimbabwean gold-smuggling networks with alleged connections to President Mnangagwa and his family. These networks reportedly engaged in extensive gold laundering operations that drained billions from Zimbabwe (Al Jazeera, 2023). Civil society and opposition figures seized upon this revelation, utilizing the hashtag #GoldMafia to spotlight corruption within government ranks and implicate top officials and the First Family in the scandal. An activist tweeted about experiencing a deteriorating highway and criticized the redirection of funds, as highlighted by Al Jazeera. This tweet garnered substantial engagement, with over 85,000 views and significant public interaction.

Baynham Goredema Tweeted:

@bayhaus

"I got to experience the Beitbridge to Masvingo highway I had heard so much about, and unfortunately, it made me realise that as Zimbabweans we have set the bar very low for ourselves. For all the rave I had heard, I wasn't impressed at all! After seeing #GoldMafia, that road is subpar."

Time: 10:05 PM, Date: April 9, 2023. Views: 86.9K, Retweets: 50, Likes: 80, Replies: 50

Progressive actors, including CCC activists and civil society organizations leveraged the Al Jazeera exposé, integrating #GoldMafia across social media platforms to emphasize the potential benefits of redirected funds towards infrastructure, education, and healthcare, reflecting the principles of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). Following the premiere of the Gold Mafia series, the Zimbabwean government remained silent, an opportunity the CCC exploited by amplifying #GoldMafia to expose the alleged illicit gold exports conducted by well-connected officials. This practice reportedly deprived Zimbabwe of foreign exchange, with profits stashed abroad and taxes evaded. Civil society organization ROHR Zimbabwe utilized the hashtag to demand the prosecution of individuals implicated in the Gold Mafia affair, receiving moderate engagement with 738 views.

ROHR ZIMBABWE tweeted:

@ROHRZimbabweorg

“@edmnangagwa the #ChiefLooter & #GoldMafia is the one that has destroyed Zimbabwe. How Far have we gone with bringing to book #GoldMafia perpetrators. Propaganda will not save Zimbabwe. @edmnangagwa & his government must step down. We need new leaders.”

Time: 8:49 AM, Date: May 23, 2023. Views: 738, Retweets: 13, Likes: 11, Replies: 1

The CCC and civil society’s social media campaign eventually elicited responses from government representatives, including Nick Mangwana and George Charamba, who announced asset freezes on Gold Mafia affiliates (Al Jazeera, 2023). Ruling party supporters, however, countered by asserting that gold exports to Dubai were essential for circumventing sanctions. The opposition maintained that Gold Mafia activities drained critical revenue. Ultimately, both #HowFar and #GoldMafia galvanized citizens around corruption issues, pressuring the government to acknowledge the public’s concerns and pledge to investigate (Al Jazeera, 2023). As previously highlighted, tweets disseminated by Baynham Goredema in support of the hashtag #GoldMafia experienced significant levels of engagement, with interactions exceeding 90,000. In contrast, the hashtag #HowFar generated minimal traction, with only a few hundred views.

The substantial engagement with #GoldMafia illustrates the strategic importance of specific hashtags in attaining extensive visibility within the digital landscape.

4.5.7 Mobilizing for High Voter Turnout: #2023I'mVoting

Proponents within the ruling party perceived that a diminished voter turnout, particularly in urban regions dominated by opposition supporters, would strategically serve their goal of securing an electoral victory despite existing obstacles. Consequently, the Zimbabwean Patriotic Front (ZPF) chose not to support the #2023I'mVoting campaign, a movement designed to motivate broad-based voter engagement, especially within urban populations, on election day. Instead, ZPF affiliates sought to undermine the #2023I'mVoting initiative, aiming to curb opposition turnout by disseminating propaganda through social media platforms that aimed to deter youth participation in the election. Senior government officials and ruling party supporters frequently orchestrated these disinformation tactics to consolidate political power (Mukundu, 2023). The narrative promoted suggested that voting was ineffectual, as the electoral outcome was ostensibly preordained to favour the ruling party. This approach was based on the perception that younger voters constituted a significant portion of the opposition's base, and thus by dissuading this demographic from voting, the ruling party anticipated an increased probability of electoral success.



Date: Aug 22, 2023, 36K views, Likes: 1200, Retweets: 182, Replies:24

As demonstrated in an X (formerly Twitter) post by Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere, the main opposition party fully embraced the hashtag #2023I'mVoting as a strategic tool to galvanize youth and the broader electorate to participate in the electoral process. This campaign post, which garnered moderate engagement with 36,000 views, highlighted the opposition's focused efforts to drive voter turnout, particularly among younger demographics.

The X post in question featured an image taken during the CCC's final rally, held on the eve of the 2023 election. In the photograph, CCC leader Nelson Chamisa is depicted alongside party spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere, addressing a large crowd of supporters. The inclusion of the hashtag #2023I'mVoting in this post underscored its centrality as a mobilization tool, aimed at encouraging a significant turnout among opposition supporters. The hashtag played a critical role in disseminating the CCC's campaign message, urging voters to come out in force during the election embodying with the Connective Action as articulated by Bennett and Segerberg (2013). The CCC also demonstrated strategic awareness of ZANU-PF's disinformation campaigns, which were specifically designed to dissuade youth participation. In response, the opposition

implemented counter-mobilization strategies that focused on empowering young voters and emphasizing the importance of their role in shaping the country's political future. The hashtag #2023I'mVoting served as a digital rallying cry, offering a platform for activists and supporters to amplify their message and combat narratives aimed at voter suppression.

One such example of grassroots activism was a tweet shared by an anonymized young CCC activist, here referred to as Tamuka, who used the hashtag to remind Zimbabweans of the worsening political and economic crises since President Mnangagwa's military-backed rise to power. Tamuka's tweet explicitly called on citizens to vote for transformative change, emphasizing the urgency of active electoral participation. However, this particular tweet achieved very low engagement, with only 32 views, highlighting the challenges of gaining traction in a highly competitive and manipulated information ecosystem. Despite this, such efforts exemplify how social media served as a battleground for competing narratives in the 2023 election, enabling marginalized voices to persist in advocating for change amidst a semi-authoritarian political landscape.

Tamuka Mukudzei tweeted:

"17 November 2017 marked an escalation of our problems as a nation. The dictatorship in place has no shame, no remorse, it's superbly retributive. We are in for a disaster. We must correct this! #2023imvoting"

Time: 3:25 PM, Date: Jul 12, 2023, 32 Views, Likes: 0, Retweets: 0, Replies: 0

During the 2023 election campaign, CCC capitalized on hashtags to communicate the necessity of electoral change through the slogan #ForEveryone, emphasizing the rationale behind #2023I'mVoting. This message of change, embodied in the hashtag #2023I'mVoting, resonated deeply with the high unemployment rates and economic distress in Zimbabwe, advocating that if voters pursued change, the opposition would prioritize job creation and economic recovery. As previously emphasized, tweets posted by CCC party spokesperson Fadzai Mahere in support of the hashtag #2023imvoting garnered substantial engagement, with interactions exceeding thirty-

six thousand. This level of engagement underscores the broader significance of the hashtag's success in achieving visibility and recognition among the electorate, thereby demonstrating its effectiveness in permeating public consciousness.

4.5.8 The 2023 Election: Chamisa's Digital Strategy – #ForEveryone

In Zimbabwe, election campaigns typically launch nearly a year before election day, with candidates for positions such as Councilors, Members of Parliament, Senators, or the Presidency beginning to assess the political climate through modest campaign activities. Academic literature highlights that political campaigns are generally short-lived, concentrated on immediate electoral outcomes, and lack the enduring structure of political parties, often dissolving or scaling back after the election period (Scarrow, 2015). However, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) approached the 2023 campaign differently, leveraging the March 2022 by-elections as a preliminary test of their strategies against the long-established ZANU-PF. This allowed CCC, as a newly formed party originating from the dissolved MDC, to assess its electoral apparatus against the established ruling party, which has held dominance since its founding in 1963. Despite facing an experienced adversary, CCC held its position by retaining its seats and even capturing some from ZANU-PF, which activists viewed as a preview of the challenges and strategies required for the 2023 election.

In the March 2022 by-election, ZANU-PF aimed to curb the rise of CCC by leveraging the state's resources, promoting a weaker opposition faction led by Douglas Mwonzora (Magaisa, 2022). With state backing, Mwonzora gained the MDC title through legal channels, while Chamisa and his allies founded CCC (Tagwireyi, 2022). ZANU-PF utilized the divide within opposition ranks, attempting to bolster Mwonzora's MDC while portraying the Chamisa-led CCC as aligned with Western interests (Magaisa, 2022). Throughout the campaign, CCC faced numerous restrictions, with rallies banned and supporters frequently targeted by police through arrests and prohibitions on gatherings (Mashingaidze, 2022). Conversely, Mwonzora's faction faced no such restrictions, benefiting from state media access and unrestricted rallies, though

ultimately, Mwonzora's faction failed to secure any council or parliamentary seats (Magaisa, 2022).

Amid heightened repression in 2022, CCC activists introduced the hashtag #NgaapindeHakeMukomana to strategically promote Chamisa's leadership to the public. This hashtag, translating roughly to "Let the young man take office," quickly gained momentum, resonating with an electorate eager for change. A CCC tweet illustrating the popularity of the hashtag garnered 136,300 views, 427 retweets, and 2,400 likes.

Citizens' Coalition for Change tweeted:

"No one can stop an idea whose time has come". #NgaapindeHakeMukomana

Time: 8:11 PM, Date: Aug 25, 2023, Views: 136.3K, Retweets: 427, Likes: 2400, Replies: 38

The phrase symbolized the public's desire to see younger leadership, with Chamisa, 42, offering a stark generational contrast to the 85-year-old President Mnangagwa. Studies affirm that strategic hashtag use effectively amplifies information, increasing visibility and engaging target audiences (Christensen, 2013). A CCC activist articulated this sentiment, explaining that:

"#NgaapindeHakeMukomana is people seeing themselves getting inside, it's more like amplifying their voices."

CCC activists attributed the hashtag's popularity to their success in the by-election, as it elevated the CCC brand, enhancing public recognition and gathering significant support that ultimately translated into electoral victories (Ndoro, 2021). Sinikiwe, a prominent CCC-aligned account, reinforced Chamisa's legitimacy through a tweet that alleged the election had been rigged but affirmed that Chamisa was the rightful winner. This post achieved 5,550 views, 65 retweets, and 245 likes.

Sinikiwe  **tweeted:**

“Anorwadza vakawanda uyu (Nelson Chamisa makes opponents to be jealous about him due to popularity). Many want him to fail but he keeps going 🍊. And better yet, he’s the actual winner of the recent election.”

#NgaapindeHakeMukomana  

Time: 1:07 PM, Date: Sep 10, 2023, Views: 5,550, Retweets: 65, Likes: 245, Replies: 15

In preparation for the 2023 election, CCC sought to adapt its strategy, selecting a hashtag that resonated with current socio-political narratives. Reflecting the challenges of 2022, ZANU-PF reprised tactics aimed at limiting CCC’s public visibility, using measures like rally bans and police harassment to reduce CCC’s face-to-face interactions with voters. CCC activists observed that these repressive strategies mirrored those used in the by-elections, underscoring the continuity of state restrictions on the opposition.

In response, CCC emphasized the differences between its candidates and those aligned with the ruling party. Chamisa framed himself as a principled leader committed to integrity and accountability, contrasting his values with the corruption scandals involving Mnangagwa and his allies. Chamisa’s digital posts portrayed him as a God-fearing candidate, while highlighting Mnangagwa’s authoritarian tendencies.



Time: 18:30 PM, Date: Aug 03, 2023, Views: 22,300, Retweet: 425, Likes: 1,184, Replies: 62

Within the context of Zimbabwe's tightly controlled media landscape, where opposition parties are systematically denied equitable access to public broadcasting platforms, Nelson Chamisa strategically employed the hashtag #ForEveryone to communicate the Citizens Coalition for Change's (CCC) vision for inclusive governance. This digital strategy served as a direct counterpoint to the ruling ZANU-PF party's governance model, which Chamisa and his party frequently criticized for privileging a small, elite class at the expense of the broader population. By utilizing #ForEveryone, Chamisa effectively positioned the CCC as an advocate for fairness and equal opportunities, resonating with the public's growing frustration over economic inequalities and political exclusion.

The hashtag #ForEveryone became a cornerstone of the CCC's campaign narrative, symbolizing the party's commitment to equitable resource distribution and democratic accountability,

Darlington Nyambiya

Email: dnyambiya@bournemouth.ac.uk

embodying the Connective Action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). The hashtag not only amplified the CCC's messaging but also fostered a sense of collective identity among supporters by emphasizing inclusivity and national unity as core campaign themes. Two months before the 2023 election, Chamisa leveraged the momentum of this hashtag in a significant tweet announcing the CCC's candidate lineup. The tweet garnered substantial engagement, amassing over 221,000 views. This high level of visibility underscores the effectiveness of #ForEveryone as a mobilization tool, enabling Chamisa and the CCC to disseminate their vision of governance to a broad audience despite the state's media dominance.

By utilizing social media to articulate an inclusive political agenda, Chamisa demonstrated the potential for digital platforms to redefine the dynamics of political campaigning in semi-authoritarian states. The hashtag #ForEveryone not only bolstered the opposition's efforts to reach disenfranchised voters but also served as a unifying symbol for a movement that sought to challenge entrenched systems of inequality and political favoritism. In doing so, it underscored the transformative power of social media in creating alternative pathways for political expression and engagement in restrictive environments.

Nelson Chamisa tweeted:

*"We met with all the 340 Candidates (MPs & Senators) -The Citizens Winning Team
#ForEveryone"*

Time: 4:41 PM, Date: Jun 29, 2023, Views: 222.1K, Retweet: 1,200, Likes: 5,400, Replies: 411

The strategic use of #ForEveryone underscored the distinction between Chamisa's inclusive vision and Mnangagwa's governance, which, according to CCC, benefited only a select few. An activist pointed to an influential hashtag, stating:

"There is an influential hashtag called #ForEveryone which was founded by President Nelson Chamisa."

Through #ForEveryone, CCC highlighted its differentiation strategy, distinguishing its presidential and parliamentary candidates from the ruling party. Facing ZANU-PF's attempt to sponsor rival candidates under CCC branding, Chamisa used social media endorsements to identify genuine CCC candidates. This strategy effectively mitigated confusion among voters, as genuine candidates promoted via Chamisa's digital endorsements performed markedly better than ZANU-PF proxies, particularly in urban strongholds and rural areas where CCC made inroads. Two days before the election, former CCC spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere emphasized this strategy with a tweet encouraging citizens to support only party-endorsed candidates.

Fadzayi Mahere tweeted:

*“🟡 **PRESIDENT** @nelsonchamisa reminds citizens not to be confused by double candidates. He calls on every citizen to vote for change. Police officers, soldiers - let's all vote for change. A big win for the CCC is a big win #ForEveryone!ZW”*

Time: 3:04 PM, Date: Aug 21, 2023, Views: 23.9K, Retweet: 10, Likes: 571, Replies: 411

In the end, candidates endorsed under the #ForEveryone campaign generally outperformed ZANU-PF-sponsored counterparts, an effect termed the “Chamisa digital effect.” The endorsement from Chamisa and the strategic use of CCC digital platforms proved critical, with endorsed candidates showing improved electoral outcomes, especially in opposition-leaning regions and gaining traction in traditionally ZANU-PF-aligned rural areas. As previously noted, tweets shared by the CCC party, its leader Nelson Chamisa, and its spokesperson Fadzai Mahere in support of the hashtag #NgaapindeHakeMukomana achieved considerable traction, with interactions exceeding one hundred and forty thousand, while the hashtag #ForEveryone garnered over two hundred and forty thousand views. This substantial level of engagement highlights the broader significance of these hashtags in securing extensive visibility and fostering strong resonance among the electorate.

4.5.9 The 2023 ZPF Election Campaign – #VoteED

Zimbabwe's ruling ZPF party is a political entity with a long-established electoral framework, dating back to its foundation in 1963. The party has governed continuously since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, transitioning through only two leaders, former President Robert Mugabe and current President Emmerson Mnangagwa. After Mugabe's resignation in November 2017 prompted by a military intervention Mnangagwa ascended to the presidency. Formed as a revolutionary party in alliance with ZAPU, ZPF used armed conflict as a platform to push for negotiations with the white-minority government, eventually attaining power through the landmark 1980 elections. Over the past four decades, ZPF has refined its electoral tactics, yet it remains a subject of criticism from opposition and human rights advocates who allege that the party frequently employs heavy-handed strategies, similar to those it utilized during the liberation struggle. Allegations include coercive tactics, voter intimidation, and vote-buying practices that critics argue violate Zimbabwe's constitutional principles (Ndebele, 2023b). Consequently, ZPF's campaign approach has evolved over nearly sixty years, with a pronounced reliance on in-person canvassing, particularly in rural regions where exerting social pressure is more feasible under conditions of limited visibility. The rise of digital platforms, however, presents challenges for ZPF, which has encountered difficulties integrating these tools with its traditional, door-to-door campaign strategies.

Despite the party's initial resistance to adopting digital platforms, President Mnangagwa and ZPF leveraged a mix of social media and traditional media channels in the 2023 election campaign to engage the electorate. The ruling party strategically employed traditional media to promote its electoral message centered on fostering patriotism, while simultaneously leveraging social media platforms to disseminate its political narrative during the 2023 election campaign, reflecting the dynamics of a hybrid media system, as conceptualized by Chadwick (2013). Throughout the campaign, ZPF broadcast its messages across both conventional and digital platforms, with Mnangagwa leading efforts on social media, where he amassed over a million Twitter followers and called upon supporters to expand the campaign's influence online. In response to Mnangagwa's directive, several high-profile ZPF officials, including former

spokesperson Tafadzwa Mugwadi, government spokesperson Nick Mangwana, and presidential spokesperson George Charamba, took to digital platforms to propagate the ruling party's message.

As part of this digital strategy, ZPF activists drew upon the party's historical legitimacy rooted in the liberation struggle to devise a resonant hashtag, #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo, aimed at affirming the party's role as the true custodian of Zimbabwean sovereignty and dismissing opposition parties like CCC as external agents. Activists used this hashtag to frame the ruling party as the only authentic choice for governance, given its members' sacrifices during the liberation war. This framing was reinforced by popular ZPF activist Kudzai Mutisi, who tweeted to emphasize the ruling party's commitment to instilling patriotism in Zimbabwe's youth, receiving mild engagement (24 retweets, 41 replies, and 74 likes).

Kudzai Mutisi tweeted:

"With the #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo philosophy deepening roots in the young generation, President @edmnangagwa is creating a new type of CONFIDENT & PATRIOTIC youth, very unlike the embarrassing low self-esteem 50 yr olds who kowtow to Western imperialists."

Time: 4:20 PM, Date: Sep 30, 2022, Retweet: 24; Likes: 74; Replies: 41

The #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo hashtag underscored the ruling party's stance that Zimbabwe should be built by its own citizens, free from foreign intervention. Empirical studies suggest that hashtags serve as effective tools for engaging political supporters, fostering online communities, and disseminating aligned messaging (Lilleker, 2015). ZPF activists leveraged this hashtag to underscore their party's legacy of sacrifice, positing it as a historical right to govern Zimbabwe and frame themselves as guardians of the nation's future. The account ZANUPF Patriots, a prominent pro-ZPF handle, emphasized the party's commitment to national projects in a tweet, signaling the tangible outcomes of ZPF's governance to the electorate and receiving moderate engagement.

ZANUPF Patriots tweeted:

“#MatNorthProjectsUpdate!! Construction of the Lupane University Male hostel.

● Project Status: Completed the construction of Lupane University Male Hostels

● Benefit: Increased access to decent accommodation by learners.”

#NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo #IlizweLakhiwaNgabanikaziBalo

Time: 3:42 AM, Date: Apr 26, 2023, Views: 3,785, Retweet: 1; Likes: 19; Replies: 4.

The #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo hashtag was central to the ruling party’s 2023 election campaign, attempting to consolidate support within rural constituencies and facilitating engagement with citizens around themes of patriotism and national development. Furthermore, ZPF activists believed that the hashtag effectively communicated the party’s mission to urban voters, asserting that only those dedicated to Zimbabwe’s sovereignty and future should govern.



Time: 7:03 PM, Date: Mar 22, 2023, Retweet: 33; Likes: 83; Replies: 197

Given that the hashtag #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo targeted primarily rural areas through in-person outreach, ZPF activists introduced the hashtag #VoteED to resonate with urban youth voters, aiming to counter the CCC's appeal among younger demographics. Through #VoteED, ZPF sought to educate urban voters on Mnangagwa's governance achievements, despite sanctions, and to underscore the ruling party's resilience and focus on self-sufficiency. In line with this objective, ruling party supporter Kundayi Masekesa tweeted in support of Mnangagwa's leadership, though this post attracted limited engagement (248 views, 24 retweets, 41 replies, and 74 likes).

Kundayi Masekesa tweeted:

"Despite sanctions, Zimbabwe's agricultural, mining, and manufacturing sectors have grown under the Second Republic. We are resilient and committed to self-sufficiency.

#EDPfee #VoteZANU_PF #VoteED #Zimbabwe #Mnangagwa."

Time: 8:24 AM, Date: Aug 20, 2023, Views: 248, Retweet: 1; Likes: 2.

ZPF strategists viewed #VoteED as an instrument to engage youth by addressing relevant social issues and allowing feedback through social media, thus shaping their 2023 election messaging to appeal to younger demographics. Activist Archford Moyo echoed this sentiment, engaging youth through a narrative of loyalty and enjoyment of ZPF's party activities, including the camaraderie seen in campaign gatherings. His tweet garnered modest interaction, with 968 views, 12 retweets, 6 replies, and 12 likes.

Archford Moyo tweeted: @moyo_archford

"Vakomana ndati kuZanu PF kune vanhu vanozvifarira havo. (ZANU PF supporters are happy ruling with party politics) Tarisai muone maGET DOWN akarohwa nemaCdes paTongogara Shurugwi apo.(Look at the dancing of happy supporters in the settlement Tongogara in Shurugwi district)" #EDPfee, #VoteED

Time: 8:15 AM, Date: Aug 21, 2023, Views: 968, Retweet 12; Likes: 33; Replies: 6

In summary, despite ZPF's initial hesitation to integrate digital media, hashtags #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo and #VoteED gained traction, reflecting a substantive impact on Zimbabwe's political discourse. Evidence of their effectiveness surfaced as the opposition party CCC responded to ZPF's messaging, challenging the ruling party's stance by accusing ZPF leaders of exploiting national resources for personal gain rather than genuinely serving the people (Mhaka, 2022; The Guardian, 2023).



Date: July 22, 2023

The CCC spokesperson, Fadzayi Mahere, countered ZPF's portrayal of patriotism by advocating for a government that benefits all citizens, encapsulated in the CCC's #ForEveryone campaign. The opposition narrative questioned how a party accused of corruption could authentically embody Zimbabwe's national interests, prompting a public debate on ZPF's legitimacy as a government concerned with the prosperity of all Zimbabweans (VOA, 2023; Mhaka, 2022). As previously noted, tweets posted by the government spokesperson, Nick Mangwana, in support of the hashtag #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo garnered significant engagement, with interactions exceeding fifty thousand, whereas the hashtag #VoteED achieved only a few hundred interactions. This disparity highlights the broader effectiveness of #NyikaInovakwaNeveneVayo in attaining substantial visibility and resonating with the electorate, while #VoteED demonstrated limited impact in comparison.

4.5.10 Implementing Anti-Rigging Initiatives: #DefendTheVote

Since achieving independence in 1980, Zimbabwe's electoral processes have consistently been overshadowed by allegations of manipulation and malpractice, predominantly attributed to the ruling party, ZANU-PF. Over the past 43 years, these recurring claims have raised significant concerns regarding the integrity of the country's democratic systems, while opposition parties have struggled to effectively counter these alleged interferences. This sustained inability to thwart electoral manipulation has frequently resulted in outcomes that favour the ruling party, further entrenching its political dominance.

Against this historical backdrop of alleged rigging and systemic challenges faced by opposition groups, the newly established Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) approached the 2023 election with a renewed focus on addressing these enduring issues. To this end, the CCC implemented a series of innovative mechanisms aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process. Central to these efforts was the introduction of the hashtag #DefendTheVote, which emerged as a critical tool for organizing and mobilizing support against potential electoral fraud. According to CCC activists, the hashtag functioned as a digital platform to rally voters and activists around the cause of protecting the electoral process from manipulation.

The #DefendTheVote campaign exemplifies the strategic use of social media as a tool for political resistance in semi-authoritarian environments. In line with the Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012), the hashtag provided a space for progressive groups, particularly the CCC, to advance their anti-rigging agenda and engage citizens in a collective effort to safeguard their democratic rights. By leveraging this platform, the CCC aimed to counteract the structural barriers imposed by a repressive political environment, amplifying its calls for transparency and fairness in the electoral process.

A significant example of the campaign's digital engagement came from an opposition spokesperson's tweet using the #DefendTheVote hashtag. The post outlined the CCC's commitment to implementing robust anti-rigging measures and urged citizens to participate in

monitoring the electoral process. This tweet achieved substantial engagement, amassing 61,300 views, 1,300 likes, and 558 retweets. These metrics underscore the hashtag's role not only as a means of disseminating information but also as a rallying point for collective action, highlighting the potential of social media to empower opposition movements within the constraints of Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian political landscape.

Fadzayi Mahere tweeted:

@advocatamahere

"VOTERS' ROLL: Every CCC candidate is currently seized with the task of combing through the voters' roll, presenting irregularities to ZEC multi-party liaison committees. We've engaged experts to analyse it & do some modelling as well. Legal advice is being taken. #DefendTheVote"


Time: 12:58 PM, Date: Jul 25, 2023, Views: 61,300, Likes: 1,300, Retweets: 558, Replies: 71

The CCC's primary use of the hashtag *#DefendTheVote* was intended to expose how the ruling party allegedly distorted the electoral process to its advantage and galvanize supporters to volunteer as party agents.

Critically, the opposition engaged the electorate by discussing the ruling party's historical tactics, anticipated strategies for the current election, and the preventive measures necessary to counter such manipulation. By 2023, evidence suggested that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) was under significant influence from quasi-state security entities, notably with the involvement of the covert intelligence group FAZ, an NGO registered to support ZANU PF by organizing rural voter mobilization and intimidation (Mukundu, 2023). Opposition activists emphasized that a vital aspect of the *#DefendTheVote* campaign was to enlist volunteers as party agents during and after the election to safeguard electoral integrity. The commitment of the opposition party to preventing rigging is evident in their proactive online presence, aimed at highlighting attempts to manipulating the election process.. The tweet achieving an engagement with 149,200 views, 1200 likes, and 419 retweets.

Citizens' Coalition for Change

@CCCZimbabwe

“ ELECTION UPDATE: We have received reports of attempts to bribe polling agents into signing new V11s long after the voting process has concluded. We urge all citizens to remain vigilant and protect the integrity of the vote. We will not allow such actions to occur under our watch. #DefendTheVote”

Time: 9:38 AM, Date Aug 25, 2023, Views: 149,200, Likes: 1,200, Retweets: 419, Replies: 45

Another significant element of the *##DefendTheVote* campaign was its capacity to engage the electorate, enabling the opposition to interact meaningfully with its supporters and enhance voter confidence that their votes would be safeguarded by the party's infrastructure. As highlighted earlier, tweets shared by the CCC party and its spokesperson, Fadzai Mahere, in support of the hashtag *#DefendTheVote* achieved remarkable engagement, with interactions surpassing two hundred thousand. This significant level of engagement underscores the broader importance of the hashtag's success in attaining widespread visibility and recognition among the electorate, thereby exemplifying its efficacy in influencing public awareness and discourse

4.6 The Role of Social Media in the 2023 Electoral Campaign

4.6.1 Digital Platforms as a Tool for Balancing Political Narratives Amid Information Control

The longstanding control exercised by Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF (ZPF) over traditional media has enabled it to dominate political narratives since the nation's independence. ZPF ensured its hold over the largest media conglomerate, Zimpapers, which, as a state-owned enterprise, remained under the influence of ZPF-appointed editors who aligned with the party's goal of saturating print media with favorable news and programs. This influence extended to Zimbabwe's only national television station, ZBCTV, where key positions were occupied by allies of the ruling party, turning the station into a vehicle for broadcasting content supportive of ZPF's political objectives.

The ZANU-PF party (ZPF) strategically leveraged its control over state-run radio stations to disseminate its political messaging, particularly targeting rural constituencies where access to television and timely newspaper distribution remains limited. This approach allowed the ruling party to dominate the information landscape in areas with restricted media access, ensuring its narratives reached the most politically significant and often underserved demographics. As the 2023 election campaign gained momentum, ZPF relied heavily on traditional media channels and selectively incorporated social media platforms to further amplify its portrayal as the sole legitimate custodian of Zimbabwe's liberation legacy. The party positioned itself as a champion of citizens' interests while simultaneously framing opposition parties, particularly the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC), as proxies for Western powers pursuing foreign agendas.

ZPF activists adeptly applied the principles of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), integrating traditional broadcast media with digital platforms to create a cohesive and far-reaching campaign strategy. This dual approach enabled ZPF to blend the reliability and reach of traditional state-controlled media with the immediacy and engagement potential of social media,

tailoring their messages to resonate across diverse voter bases. The hybrid strategy emphasized patriotism and continuity, appealing to older generations familiar with liberation narratives while cautiously engaging younger voters who are more active on digital platforms.

However, this extensive use of both traditional and digital media effectively marginalized opposition voices, civil society, and independent critics. ZPF's dominance in the state media sphere, combined with its ability to exploit digital technologies, left limited room for alternative narratives to emerge. The party's monopolization of media resources not only restricted the opposition's access to these platforms but also suppressed dissenting viewpoints, consolidating its control over the national political discourse. This approach underscores the challenges faced by opposition movements like the CCC in navigating an electoral landscape heavily skewed in favor of the incumbent ruling party.

Since 1980, ZPF's dominance over traditional media has characterized every election, with the 2023 campaign proving no different. Consequently, the opposition and civil society, faced with constrained access to traditional media, were compelled to rely heavily on digital platforms. One CCC activist noted the opposition's adaptation, stating:

"Social media really paved the way for the opposition to have a voice in a country where they don't have a platform to speak from traditional media."

Thus, throughout the 2023 election campaign, CCC strategically employed digital platforms to challenge the ruling party's message, which positioned itself as the only authentic defender of Zimbabwe's legacy and citizens' interests, while painting the opposition as foreign aligned. A CCC activist explained that social media allowed the opposition to offer a counter-narrative, asserting that ZPF no longer prioritized citizens' welfare and was instead mired in corruption scandals. The implication is that ZPF saturated traditional media with its narrative, while the CCC countered on digital platforms, leading to a political messaging struggle aimed at capturing voters' support.

Digital platforms granted the opposition direct access to voters, partially balancing the disparities in political messaging power during the 2023 campaign, where ZPF's dominance on traditional media was countered by opposition and civil society voices on social media. This dynamic was affirmed by another CCC activist, who stated:

"I would say social media is the only platform that the opposition can use to have their voice heard."

The implication is that digital platforms were the opposition's primary means to challenge the ruling party's narratives, significantly contributing to leveling the field of political messaging in the ongoing information warfare.

As the campaign progressed, the government enacted legislation, announced through traditional media, classifying pricing for goods and services supplied to the Ministry of Health as a state secret due to "national security" (Matiashe, 2023). Government spokesperson Nick Mangwana led efforts to frame this as a security necessity. However, the CCC, civil society, and critics on digital platforms disputed the secrecy justification, contending that it would enable corruption by obstructing transparency. Social media critics argued that Zimbabwe's constitution mandates transparent use of public funds and citizens' right to information on tax spending. This social media-based resistance pressured the government to retract the law within 48 hours (Matiashe, 2023). In summary, this rapid policy reversal highlights the effectiveness of digital platforms in challenging government narratives, serving as a balancing tool in political messaging during the 2023 campaign, where government narratives on both traditional and digital media faced swift opposition on social media. ZPF's extensive use of traditional media, bolstered by digital technologies, left little space for the opposition, civil society, and critics to communicate alternative narratives. ZPF's campaign exemplifies how semi-authoritarian regimes employ a hybrid media system to consolidate power. By blending traditional propaganda methods with modern digital outreach, the ruling party maintained its hegemonic grip on political

communication, further complicating efforts to democratize Zimbabwe's media landscape and ensure fair electoral competition.

4.6.2 Social Media as a Mechanism for Citizen Accountability in the 2023 Campaign

In Zimbabwe, traditional media has primarily functioned as an instrument for political elites to reinforce their dominance over power, often limiting accountability to the electorate. Ruling party officials, over time, have cultivated ties with journalists, which has ensured them greater access to traditional media, disadvantaging citizens who remain underrepresented. This traditional media landscape is dominated by the ruling party and its affiliates, with minimal space allocated to privately-owned progressive outlets. As a result, there is limited critical scrutiny of government transparency and accountability within Zimbabwe's media sphere. Moreover, the predominance of state-controlled traditional media has prevented it from fulfilling its duty of enabling citizens to question politicians rigorously. Instead, traditional media has shielded ruling party figures from public scrutiny regarding their performance, while often denying opposition figures access. Prior research corroborates this pattern, noting that the watchdog role of traditional media is generally compromised in political systems characterized by strong parallelism, where media, political entities, and economic power converge, with media ownership linked to dominant political parties (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015).

With the proliferation of digital technologies, Zimbabwean citizens have experienced an unprecedented transformation in their ability to engage directly with political leaders from both ZANU-PF (ZPF) and the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC). During the 2023 election campaign, social media emerged as a powerful tool that enabled the electorate to hold politicians accountable for their policies and campaign promises. This digital engagement became a pivotal channel through which the marginalised voices of citizens exercised their agency to question political figures and demand transparency. Utilizing the framework of the Contentious Publicness as conceptualized by Kavada & Poell (2020), social media functioned as an integral

mediator in the political discourse, enabling citizens to challenge candidates from both the ruling party and the opposition. By fostering direct access to politicians, these platforms substantiated earlier research indicating that digital media facilitates unprecedented interactions between the public and political elites (Kamau, 2017). Within this campaign period, social media did not merely provide a forum for accountability but also redefined the relationship between ordinary citizens and influential political actors, enhancing the depth and immediacy of their interactions.

The accessibility provided by social media was especially significant, given that traditional media in Zimbabwe rarely provides ordinary citizens the opportunity to challenge those in power. As the 2023 campaign progressed, CCC's presidential candidate Nelson Chamisa exemplified this new dynamic by frequently engaging with voters and articulating his campaign platform of inclusive change (#ForEveryone). This innovative approach allowed Chamisa's social media following to exceed one million during the election season. Digital platforms thus fostered a new mode of interaction between the electorate and powerful figures, as evidenced in a tweet where Chamisa laid out his commitments to addressing Zimbabwe's power supply issues and an ordinary citizen directly held him accountable:

Nelson Chamisa tweeted

@nelsonchamisa:

"SECURITY OF ELECTRICITY SUPPLY... Give us a chance to guarantee the security of electricity supply and access to power for everyone. Our #powerZimbabweplan will transition Zimbabwe into an energy surplus and energy self-sufficient country in no time. #Tryus #ChangeisKenge"

Date: May 14, 2023, Time: 08:29 AM

Reply by an ordinary citizen, Scarfmore Tongombeya @scarftongombeya:

“Ko macandidates how far, vanhu vanozowana time to campaign here if you delay further?”

(Translation & context: Regarding CCC candidates for the 2023 election, when will the final list be announced? Will selected candidates have enough time to campaign if it's delayed further?)

Date: May 14, 2023, Time: 08:31 AM

Response by Nelson Chamisa @nelsonchamisa:

“We are not operating in a normal environment!”

Date: May 14, 2023, Time: 10:10 AM

This exchange between a presidential candidate and an ordinary citizen highlights how digital platforms enabled the public to demand accountability from powerful political figures. Taking place within the context of the 2023 campaign, this interaction illustrated Chamisa's efforts to promote his policy on electricity while an engaged citizen redirected the conversation to pressing concerns about the candidate selection process for the upcoming election. Chamisa's response pointed to the challenges posed by Zimbabwe's politically restrictive environment, which he argued had necessitated a more cautious approach.

The above interaction, where an ordinary citizen could question a prominent politician and receive a direct response, underscores the role of social media as an equalizing force in political dialogue during the campaign, where face-to-face meetings were not required for the electorate to engage with leaders. This interaction exemplifies how social media provided a forum where the presidential candidate, focused on his election bid, could be directly confronted by citizens regarding his campaign's organizational delays as the election date approached. This incident also underscores how social media allowed citizens to engage political figures instantaneously on

matters of immediate relevance, a form of discourse that is virtually absent on traditional media platforms, where ruling party figures are shielded and opposition figures largely excluded. Thus, in the 2023 campaign, digital platforms significantly broadened citizen participation, creating an environment in which social media served as an effective counterbalance in political discourse, enabling voters to hold political elites accountable. The overarching conclusion is that social media, informed by traditional media narratives, served as a critical medium through which citizens exercised their power to question and demand transparency from politicians.

4.6.3 Civil Society Leveraged Social Media as a Mechanism to Balance Political Discourse Throughout the Campaign.

The primary political forces in Zimbabwe, the CCC and ZPF acknowledged civil society's critical influence within the nation, particularly during election cycles. Activists within both camps concurred that civil society was instrumental in the electoral process, especially in the recent 2023 election. According to ZPF-affiliated activists, the ruling party had come to recognize civil society's substantial impact on voter behaviour during elections. This realization had prompted the ruling party, via governmental channels, to engage with civil society in the lead-up to the 2023 election campaign. The government's main goal in this engagement was to foster relationships with civil society actors in an attempt to mitigate critical voices during the 2023 campaign. Conversely, CCC activists viewed civil society as allies in the struggle for democratic governance in Zimbabwe. The 2023 election campaign saw the opposition strengthening its alliances with certain civil society organizations to oversee the election process, in light of longstanding accusations that the ruling party manipulated past elections.

The implication here is that civil society found itself at the centre of a political struggle between the ruling party and the opposition during the 2023 campaign, with activists on both sides agreeing on civil society's essential role in the electoral framework. However, civil society representatives interviewed framed this competition for their support as a testament to their significant role in advocating for a fair, transparent, and credible election process. Civil society activists emphasized that their goal was not to align with any political party but to act

independently in ensuring an equitable electoral playing field between the major political contenders.

Throughout the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe, the ruling party meticulously maintained its dominance over traditional media outlets, effectively suppressing opposition and civil society narratives. This monopoly on conventional media channels created significant barriers for alternative voices, compelling civil society actors to pivot toward digital platforms as their primary means of communication. Social media became a vital tool for disseminating messages, enabling civil society to reach not only the domestic electorate but also regional and international audiences. In the context of an election characterized by the ruling party's continued control of traditional media, digital platforms emerged as a crucial space for raising election-related concerns and fostering a more inclusive political discourse. Civil society strategically employed social media to raise their voice and to hold the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) accountable, aligning their efforts with the Contentious Publicness proposed by Kavada & Poell (2020). These platforms served as indispensable channels for voicing demands for transparency in electoral processes and amplifying marginalized perspectives. Furthermore, in the semi-authoritarian context of Zimbabwe, social media played a pivotal role in drawing critical international attention to the political dynamics at play, providing a space for all key stakeholders to engage in a democratized political discourse.

This view was corroborated by a prominent civil society activist who observed during interviews that:

“Social media has helped us on the international platform; we have seen so many international organizations, international people engaging us on issues of the election process.”

The inference here is that the ruling party's sustained grip on power was bolstered by its control over traditional media. However, the rising prominence of digital platforms has allowed all

political entities in Zimbabwe to engage with the electorate directly, positioning social media as a tool that democratized the political dialogue within the campaign.

Digital platforms provided civil society actors with an essential venue to articulate their perspectives on the electoral process during Zimbabwe's 2023 election campaign. Civil society activists noted during interviews that, although barred from traditional media, social media amplified their message beyond national boundaries, not only raising awareness within Zimbabwe but also encouraging peaceful, fair, and transparent elections across regional and international communities (Haves, 2022). The expanded reach of digital platforms allowed civil society's voice to be heard both domestically and internationally, as one activist observed:

“(Social media has given us a platform where international organizations are) actually inviting us to help other countries in other authoritarian countries in terms of elections, governance, and to promote democracy.”

Groups like Team Pachedu and ProjectVote263 utilized digital platforms to advocate for transparency in the electoral process, thus leveling the political dialogue during the campaign. However, the ruling party's advantage as the incumbent allowed it to employ repressive tactics that heavily skewed the election in its favor.

Of particular note was the election-monitoring organization Team Pachedu, which emerged as a leader in using digital platforms to balance the political dialogue, countering the ruling party's dominance in traditional media. Team Pachedu's activists acknowledged that the ruling party's control over the media landscape stemmed from its expansive access to traditional media, which helped suppress progressive voices on social platforms. To counter this, Team Pachedu strategized that social media could serve as a balancing tool, countering the ruling party's traditional media narrative through focused digital campaigns. This approach is evident in an X post where Team Pachedu highlighted the ruling party's resistance to mobilizing young voters but took the initiative to encourage youth participation:

Team Pachedu tweeted:

@PacheduZW”

“Good news from Thailand. Pita Limjaroenrat (42 years) has won the election against the military-backed ruling party. Thai youths voted in their millions. Zimbabwe is next if youths vote! Young people, let’s do this”

“Date: May 16, 2023, Time: 6:22am”

“Reply by an ordinary citizen: Tirus@Tirus56131185”

“They must have had a free and fair election”

Date: May 16, 2023, Time: 6:38am

Team Pachedu responds @PacheduZW

“There were many irregularities, but the opposition won because many youths turned out to vote. Rigging has a limit. It’s important for Zim youths to vote in their numbers.”

Date: May 16, 2023, Time: 6:40am

The original post by Team Pachedu during the 2023 election campaign can be understood against the backdrop of the ruling party’s narrative, which promoted the belief that Zimbabwe should be led by an older, experienced president. Moreover, this messaging implied that the youth vote was insignificant, with the notion that election outcomes were predetermined in favor of the ruling party. Team Pachedu utilized social media to challenge this narrative, both in traditional and digital contexts, asserting that in Thailand, a military-supported candidate had been defeated due to significant youth turnout. Team Pachedu’s response to the citizen underscored that, if Zimbabwe’s youth mobilized similarly, even potential vote-rigging by the ruling party would be insufficient to prevent the opposition from prevailing.

In sum, civil society activists harnessed social media as an equalizing force within the 2023 election campaign’s information warfare. They strategically used digital platforms to disseminate

an alternative narrative, contesting the ruling party's messaging across both traditional and digital media spheres. Furthermore, in the semi-authoritarian context of Zimbabwe, social media played a pivotal role in drawing critical international attention to the political dynamics at play, providing a space for all key stakeholders to engage in a democratized political discourse.

4.6.4 Social Media Empowered Female Political Actors During 2023 Election Campaign

Women represent a majority within Zimbabwe's population and wield substantial influence in its electoral processes. Based on the World Bank's latest data (2023), women comprise nearly fifty-three percent of the population; however, this demographic strength has not been mirrored in political representation. Only twenty-three women were directly elected to Zimbabwe's National Assembly out of a total of 210 seats (Zimfact, 2023). Recognizing this disparity, women's rights advocates argue that women should occupy at least 50% of positions within government bodies and state institutions to ensure proportional representation (DW, 2023). The fact that women represent just over ten percent of those elected in the 2023 Parliament highlights the continued struggle for gender parity in Zimbabwean politics (Matiashe, 2023b). The prevalence of male politicians in the tenth Parliament of Zimbabwe underscores this gender imbalance, as men hold the majority of elected seats.

This underrepresentation becomes even more pronounced when examining those directly elected to Parliament by the Zimbabwean electorate. According to Zimfact (2023), only twenty-three women were directly elected in 2023, a decrease from twenty-six in 2013 and twenty-five in 2018. These twenty-three women join an additional sixty women appointed through a gender quota, resulting in a total of eighty-three women in the lower house, or approximately 30.7% of the seats. This modest figure highlights the limited political influence of women, as barely ten percent of seats in the lower house are held by directly elected women. Women's rights organizations contend that such underrepresentation is a consequence of entrenched gender inequality and the persistent influence of patriarchy in Zimbabwean society (DW, 2023). The main opposition party, CCC, has taken steps toward addressing gender imbalances by appointing

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female mayors in Masvingo City and Epworth Town and a female deputy mayor in Harare. The CCC has also placed women in senior positions within the party and Parliament, yet these efforts fall short of the fifty-percent gender parity target. Similarly, President Mnangagwa has faced criticism for appointing only 26% women to his cabinet following the 2023 elections, with both the ruling and opposition parties remaining distant from the fifty-percent representation demanded by women's rights advocates (Matiashe, 2023b).

Despite these limitations in female representation, many women in Zimbabwe perceive digital platforms as crucial channels for amplifying their voices and directly connecting with voters. During the 2023 election campaign, female activists strategically employed social media to circumvent traditional media gatekeeping, allowing them to communicate unfiltered messages to the electorate. Research has demonstrated that women's rights activists use digital platforms to prioritize women's rights issues in the national political discourse (Yüce & Çatalbaş, 2023). Female political activists have argued that traditional media's limited support for women impedes their visibility and competition with male politicians during election campaigns. Many contend that restricted access to traditional media has enabled men to dominate political discourse, while social media has emerged as a critical equalizer, providing a platform for women to counterbalance male influence in the political arena.

The systematic exclusion of women from traditional media platforms during Zimbabwe's 2023 election campaign compelled female politicians to turn to social media as an alternative channel to ensure their voices reached the electorate on a national scale. By adopting digital platforms, female political actors were able to raise marginalized voice and establish direct communication with voters, a strategy consistent with Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020). This shift to digital engagement was exemplified by a newly elected CCC Women's Proportional Representative Member of Parliament, who explicitly credited her political success to the strategic use of social media:

“Before I started being so active on Twitter, people didn’t even know my name. We used to do so much work on the ground, but we didn’t post it on social media.”

The absence of traditional media coverage meant that the activist’s extensive grassroots efforts remained largely invisible to the broader electorate. However, through a calculated and consistent use of digital platforms to document and share her activities, she significantly enhanced her political visibility both within her local community and at the national level. This strategic approach to social media usage propelled her political trajectory, elevating her profile to prominence within Zimbabwean politics.

Drawing on the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), the CCC female politician adeptly combined on the ground campaigning with digital outreach to influence voter decision-making during the election. Social media enabled her not only to spotlight her grassroots initiatives but also to engage directly with citizens across the nation, thereby extending the reach of her campaign messages far beyond her immediate constituency. This digital engagement proved pivotal in broadening her appeal and fostering a national following, ultimately securing her appointment as a CCC Women’s Proportional Representative Member of Parliament.

Despite the continued underrepresentation of women, the successful use of digital platforms in the 2023 election by female activists underscores the potential of social media to contribute to a more balanced political discourse, challenging the historical dominance of men in Zimbabwean politics. This is exemplified by Fadzayi Mahere, one of Zimbabwe’s most influential female political figures, who skillfully employed digital platforms to carve out a space in the male-dominated political landscape. Her substantial presence on the X platform, where she had over 730,000 followers during the 2023 election campaign, illustrates the significant role social media played in amplifying her influence and reach.



Date: December 31, 2023, Time: 11:30am

Fadzayi Mahere's entry into Zimbabwean politics began as an independent parliamentary candidate in the 2018 elections. Though she was ultimately defeated by a candidate from the then-main opposition party, the MDC Alliance, Mahere's campaign marked a significant moment on the national political scene, as it was characterized by her innovative and strategic utilization of digital platforms. Her adept use of these platforms not only underscored her campaign's effectiveness but also set the stage for her subsequent political ascent, leading to her appointment as the national spokesperson for the primary opposition party.

In her role as the CCC national spokesperson, Mahere played a pivotal part in the 2023 election campaign, where she adeptly harnessed digital platforms to propagate the opposition's central message of change under the hashtag #ForEveryone. Mahere's engagement on digital media allowed the CCC to leverage social platforms as a counterbalancing tool within the political dialogue of the campaign, countering the ruling party's extensive deployment of traditional media, which it used aggressively to advance its own political messaging and to undermine the opposition's narrative of #ForEveryone. The broader implication here is that, throughout the 2023 election campaign, digital platforms proved invaluable in affording women direct access to

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voters, offering an unprecedented channel for female political actors to communicate with the electorate. This access not only facilitated a direct engagement with voters but also empowered women to navigate the information landscape on more equal footing with their male counterparts, thus contributing to a more balanced political discourse during the electoral process. Female political actors' effective utilization of social media underscores its potential as a counterbalancing force against traditional media exclusion, particularly within the semi-authoritarian context of Zimbabwe's political landscape. It also demonstrates how a well-crafted digital strategy can empower marginalized political actors to overcome systemic barriers and reshape the dynamics of political participation and representation.

4.6.5 Social Media Enabled The CCC to Challenge ZPF's Political Dominance

During the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe, CCC activists operated within a restrictive political context marked not only by strategic obstacles imposed by the ruling party but also by a significant lack of access to traditional media outlets. This limitation was particularly evident as the ruling party's politicians maintained near-exclusive access to state-controlled radio, newspapers, and television networks. In contrast, the CCC's representation in these media channels was largely constrained and often limited to negative portrayals intended to discredit them before the electorate. The ruling party's dominant presence within the media landscape became a pivotal advantage, allowing it to craft narratives unchallenged by opposition perspectives or civil society voices. This pattern persisted through the 2023 election cycle, where the traditional media space was saturated by ruling party figures. Within the narrow margin available to opposition voices, it was primarily elite members of the CCC who appeared, leaving little to no room for grassroots activists within the main opposition to publicly engage. Furthermore, these limitations on media access were compounded by various obstructive tactics employed by the ruling party to curtail the CCC's broader political activities.

Confronted with limited access to traditional media and operating under difficult conditions on the ground, activists from the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) increasingly turned to social

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media as a critical complement to their offline political engagements especially in urban areas. In interviews, many activists emphasized that digital platforms complimented their grassroots activities during the 2023 election, serving as an indispensable medium to broadcast their campaign's message of inclusivity and transformation. Employing the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), CCC activists skillfully linked offline activities in urban areas to digital campaigns to disseminate the opposition's core election narrative, which was centered on the promise of equitable economic opportunities for all, encapsulated in the hashtag #ForEveryone.

These activists recognized social media as a revolutionary tool that provided direct, unmediated access to the electorate, enabling them to engage audiences not only within Zimbabwe but also internationally. By cultivating a strong online presence, they overcame geographic and structural barriers imposed by restrictive media regulations. This transformative potential of social media is exemplified by an activist who, prior to adopting digital platforms, had remained relatively obscure within the political arena. Reflecting on her strategic use of social media for political engagement, she stated:

"When I got the post of I decided to create an account for political mobilization. So, I created an account on that. And I wanted people to know, activities in the rural areas, people to know what it was. And when I took that account, I started myself, okay, people were reacting to the things that I was doing."

By leveraging social media to document and share her political activities, particularly those in rural areas, this activist significantly expanded her visibility and influence. Her digital engagement fostered meaningful connections with voters both nationwide and abroad, showcasing the potential of social media to reshape Zimbabwe's political landscape. This testimony underscores that digital platform provided her direct access to voters during the 2023 campaign, allowing her to effectively disseminate her party's message of change under the slogan #ForEveryone across Zimbabwe. Through social media, CCC activists were able to circumvent traditional media, which remained dominated by ruling party elites, and engage

directly with the electorate. The expanding role of digital platforms allowed a more balanced dialogue, democratizing access to political discourse within the campaign context. Consequently, these technologies empowered opposition forces with the tools to contest the ruling party's hegemony within the sphere of information warfare throughout the 2023 election. This sentiment was echoed by another CCC activist, who emphasized how social media significantly enhanced her visibility as a political figure, explaining,

“(When I started using social media) ...People started seeing me, of course, as an influencer, in our politics, and people started viewing me as a politician.”

The influence of social media in empowering political activists was clearly seen in Zimbabwe, where prominent CCC figures such as Makomborero Haruzivishe emerged as key actors in advancing Zimbabwe's democratic struggle on the international stage, leveraging social media to draw global attention (Hansard UK, 2021).

A CCC activist attributed the political rise of Makomborero Haruzivishe in Zimbabwe to his strategic use of both traditional and digital media platforms, which allowed him to directly engage not only with a domestic audience but also with regional and global communities (Hansard UK, 2023). This activist argued that digital platforms had effectively displaced the traditional media's influence, enabling progressive voices to reach voters directly during the 2023 election campaign and disseminate their message of change, centred on the #ForEveryone theme. This trend underscored the role of social media as a balancing force in political communication, with prominent CCC figures like Netsai Marova, Makomborero Haruzivishe, and Celia Chimbiri achieving heightened visibility and more direct voter access. The activist further stated that social media functioned as a crucial tool in equalizing political messaging by providing CCC activists with direct connections to both local and international audiences.

This accessibility to a broader audience was underscored by a post from Haruzivishe on the X platform as the 2023 election campaign intensified, where he brought attention to Zimbabwe's

democratic struggle, extending the message not only to Zimbabweans but to a global audience. The tweet garnering moderate engagement of 115,000 views, 406 retweets and 1,100 likes.

Makomborero Haruzivishe original X post @MakomboreroH

“We protested #FreeJobSikhala today as he clocked 365 days as a political prisoner in Chikurubhi Maximum Prison. It was a protest against tyranny, a demand for #JusticeForMoreblessingAli, a demonstration against the continued unjust imprisonment of Jacob Ngarivhume, the @Zinasuzim 6 and the @mthwakazi_mrp 9. Solidarity is the language of the oppressed and yes, right thinking citizens of the world have to raise voices higher in demand for freedom of all political prisoners. Thanks to all who organised, participated, turned up, protested on social media, those who prayed and to @CatharineHoey and @jonny_oates for the solidarity with the persecuted people of Zimbabwe. Pleased click the link below to join the #WiwaOneYear Spaces in solidarity with #FreeAllPoliticalPrisonersInZimbabwe
<https://twitter.com/i/spaces/1rmGPkYdZkEKN>”

Date: June 14, 2023, Time: 1710, Views: 115.6K, Retweets: 406, Likes: 1,100, Replies: 92

This post underscored the repression faced by progressive actors in Zimbabwe, including opposition activists, civil society members, trade unionists, and student advocates. Additionally, Haruzivishe’s tagging of UK Members of Parliament Catharine Hoey and Jonny Oates highlighted how the digital platform linked local struggles to international awareness, allowing foreign allies to spotlight these issues in the British Parliament and create platforms for Zimbabwean activists to present the challenges facing democratic forces in their country. The context of this post reflects a reality in which opposition leaders, including Job Sikhala and Jacob Ngarivhume, were imprisoned on charges widely condemned as politically motivated. The X post echoed data collected from CCC members and civil society activists, indicating that the ruling party routinely employed coercive tactics to stifle the opposition’s activities and curb dissenting voices.

The Zimbabwean government, in response, faced accusations from CCC activists of systematically weaponizing the judiciary against its opponents in a tactic known as ‘lawfare,’ whereby political adversaries are arrested and imprisoned on questionable charges. Haruzivishe’s post highlighted this repressive approach, describing how three government critics were detained under restrictive conditions for peaceful protest, only to have charges dismissed due to insufficient evidence after three years of legal entanglement. This digital narrative reinforced the role of social media in providing activists with direct access to the electorate and, more broadly, suggested that social media served as a balancing mechanism in political messaging throughout the 2023 election cycle. Ultimately, digital platforms offered the opposition a channel to communicate its message of change #ForEveryone directly to voters, circumventing traditional media restrictions and expanding the campaign’s reach. Social media not only allowed them to bypass restrictive traditional media structures but also enabled them to communicate directly with a broader audience, amplify their inclusive message, and galvanize support for their campaign. This underscores the critical role of social media as a democratizing force, empowering opposition actors to challenge entrenched power dynamics and broaden their impact on political discourse.

4.6.6 Social Media Facilitated a Democratic Political Discourse for both ruling party elites and ZPF activists

During the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe, social media emerged as a tool that facilitated a more participatory and democratic political discourse by enabling both ruling party elites and ZANU-PF (ZPF) activists to establish direct connections with the electorate. For ZPF activists, however, this development presented a strategic challenge: how to reconcile the ruling party’s dominance in traditional media with a coherent and effective approach to digital platform utilization in their campaign efforts. Officially, the ZPF dismissed social media’s significance in influencing grassroots political dynamics. Yet this dismissal was inconsistent with the party’s extensive engagement in online political messaging, particularly by its activists. This

contradiction gave rise to a critical question: if social media were truly insignificant, why did ruling party supporters rely so heavily on these platforms for campaign activities?

The ruling party's mixed messaging revealed a deeper strategic inconsistency. While dismissing social media's impact rhetorically, ZPF's actions reflected a recognition of its importance. The effectiveness of digital platforms in political communication was particularly evident in the prominent online presence of President Mnangagwa, who utilized platforms such as Facebook and Twitter extensively during the campaign. By the election period, Mnangagwa had amassed nearly two million followers across these platforms, underscoring his strategic use of social media to engage with voters. This digital outreach stood in stark contrast to the party's official stance, further highlighting the internal contradictions within ZPF's approach to digital campaigning.

President Mnangagwa's use of social media during the 2023 campaign echoed his efforts in the 2018 election. Notably, he had previously encouraged ZPF youth activists not to cede social media spaces to opposition forces, urging them to actively participate in shaping the online narrative. Despite these efforts to enhance its digital presence, ZPF's continued reliance on its traditional media stronghold indicated the persistence of a hybrid media strategy, as conceptualized by Chadwick (2013). This strategy allowed the party to leverage the strengths of both traditional and digital platforms, countering opposition messaging while maintaining control over key narratives in the media landscape.

Historically, even before social media, opposition activists faced barriers in accessing traditional media due to ZPF's control. This pattern continued in 2023, with traditional media largely accessible to ruling party elites while opposition groups, civil society, and government critics were sidelined. Studies in other regions have shown that political elites' dominance over traditional media facilitates their continued power grip (Gandy et al., 1992). Consequently, many local activists felt compelled to modernize their outreach by incorporating online platforms alongside their physical campaign efforts. This was also reflected within the ruling party, as ZPF

activists used social media during the 2023 campaign to engage directly with voters, bringing a new platform for previously marginalized voices within traditional media. A leading ZPF activist emphasized this shift, stating:

“When I went on social media, it helped me because I had a platform where I would speak my views.”

This observation highlights that ZANU-PF (ZPF) activists, much like their counterparts in the Citizens’ Coalition for Change (CCC), faced restrictions in accessing traditional media platforms. However, social media provided these activists with an alternative avenue to balance political messaging by enabling direct communication with voters. For lower-ranking party activists, traditional media channels were primarily reserved for senior party officials, significantly limiting their opportunities to gain visibility or participate in public discourse. Social media, in contrast, acted as a democratizing force during the 2023 election campaign by broadening access to political dialogue and creating opportunities for grassroots activists to engage with the electorate.

This shift also catalyzed the rise of previously lesser-known ZPF activists, who managed to carve out a more significant presence in Zimbabwean politics through the strategic use of digital platforms. Ruling party activists used social media not only to communicate directly with the electorate but also to construct their own pathways to prominence within Zimbabwe’s complex political landscape during the election period. A striking example of this phenomenon is Nick Mangwana, whose trajectory illustrates social media’s transformative power in Zimbabwean politics. Despite belonging to a prominent ruling party family, Mangwana’s personal political profile was modest before his rise. For years, he lived an ordinary life in the United Kingdom, working as a nurse while supporting ZPF from abroad. It was through social media that Mangwana, like other activists who might have otherwise remained peripheral figures, successfully elevated his political visibility. By strategically engaging with digital platforms, Mangwana was able to amplify his political messaging, connect with diverse audiences, and

establish himself as a significant actor in Zimbabwean politics. This case underscores social media's capacity to empower individuals who lack traditional media access or high-ranking political connections, allowing them to transcend conventional barriers and gain prominence in public discourse.



Date: December 31, 2023, Time: 11:30am

Nick Mangwana's ascent to the prominent role of chief government spokesperson was driven not solely by his family background but also by his adept use of social media, which enabled him to amass over 600,000 followers on X (formerly Twitter) by the end of 2023. The implication is that Mangwana's strategic engagement with digital media significantly contributed to his appointment, showcasing social media's role in democratizing political communication during the 2023 election campaign, as it allowed a previously lesser-known ZPF activist to reach the electorate directly. Mangwana's rise underscores the transformative power of social media: he evolved from a minor figure in the ruling party into a central voice in the 2023 election, tasked with promoting the government's achievements and supporting the ZPF's re-election efforts, even amidst controversial circumstances.

One of Mangwana's X posts during the campaign, aimed at highlighting the Mnangagwa administration's accomplishments, garnered notable engagement with 93,400 views, 58 retweets, 196 likes, and 622 replies. The post read:

Nick Mangwana tweeted:

@nickmangwana

'In less than a year, 40 boreholes have been drilled in 40 villages in Binga. 15 out of 17 chiefs have had boreholes drilled and installed as well. Imagine how this place will be in 2 years! How about 5 more years?'

#FiveMoreYears #OneGoodTermDeservesAnother

Date: May 27, 2023, Time: 4:45 pm, Views: 93.4K, Retweets: 58, Likes: 196, Replies: 622

In response, an ordinary citizen under the username "Yat-sen" questioned the sufficiency of boreholes as a government accomplishment, stating:

"Are boreholes the future for a government to ululate about ... government should think outside the box we deserve better."

Mangwana replied by redirecting the focus to the essential need for water, criticizing opposition-led urban councils for their failure to provide this resource, thereby implying the government's interventions were more effective:

"It's not about the system of delivery. It's about the water. In opposition run urban councils this commodity is not even there. Imagine."

This exchange took place in the context of a highly contested region, as the ruling party had lost the Binga parliamentary seat to the opposition in both the 2018 general election and the 2022 by-election led by Nelson Chamisa's CCC. Mangwana's post indirectly addressed critiques that saw the government's borehole initiative as a form of vote-buying under the guise of developmental

aid. This issue also raised legal concerns, as Zimbabwean law requires that traditional chiefs remain apolitical, yet the ruling party was observed providing gifts to chiefs, ostensibly to secure their loyalty (Matiashe, 2023c). Mangwana's campaign messaging thus leaned on this borehole project as a promise of progress to garner support for five more years of Mnangagwa's leadership, despite public skepticism that voiced demands for more substantial development initiatives beyond boreholes.

In his response to this critique, Mangwana further intensified the campaign by positioning the government's approach as superior to the perceived failures in opposition-governed areas, where basic services like water were allegedly lacking. This interaction illustrates how social media democratized the political discourse in Zimbabwe's 2023 campaign by offering a platform through which both high-ranking officials and grassroots activists within the ruling party could communicate directly with the electorate, circumventing traditional media barriers.

In conclusion, the ZANU-PF's (ZPF) strategic engagement with social media during the 2023 election campaign underscores the increasing complexities of political communication within Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian framework. While maintaining its reliance on the dominance of traditional media as a central pillar of its strategy, the ZPF simultaneously encountered the disruptive potential of social media to challenge entrenched power dynamics and facilitate more immediate and interactive exchanges between political elites and the electorate. This interplay between conventional media and emergent digital platforms highlights the evolving nature of political campaigning in Zimbabwe, as well as the broader difficulties associated with navigating a rapidly transforming information ecosystem.

4.7 The Role of WhatsApp in Expanding Political Access During the Election Campaign

In Zimbabwe, the proliferation of WhatsApp has established the platform as a central tool in political communication, particularly during the 2023 election campaign. Its widespread adoption is primarily attributed to its affordability relative to alternative digital platforms, coupled with its ability to transmit diverse forms of media, including text, images, and videos, even in areas where internet connectivity is unreliable. WhatsApp's accessibility was further enhanced during the 2023 elections through affordable data bundles, which significantly broadened its reach to citizens in both urban and rural settings. This platform facilitated private and secure communication through text messages, video calls, and voice calls, thereby creating an environment conducive to uninhibited interactions. Additionally, WhatsApp's group chat feature, which accommodates up to 1,024 participants, proved instrumental in fostering extensive discussions among citizens, enabling debates and interactions centered on political themes. Scholars have likened the mobilization potential of WhatsApp groups to "small rallies" (Bursztyn & Birnbaum, 2019). In Zimbabwe, this potential was evident in the formation of WhatsApp groups dedicated to political discourse, where participants actively engaged in discussions and shared information regarding the 2023 elections. Remarkably, some of these groups included members of both the ruling and opposition parties, facilitating unprecedented exchanges of perspectives and fostering dialogue across political divides (Mukundu, 2023).

The study identified three distinct categories of politically oriented WhatsApp groups within Zimbabwe. The first type comprised activists affiliated with both major political parties, ZPF and CCC. The second group was predominantly composed of activists from the opposition CCC, while the third was dominated by ruling party activists from ZPF. Across these groups, a diverse array of participants—including ordinary citizens, civil society members, political leaders, and activists engaged in dialogue and disseminated campaign-related information. The open exchange of political views and the widespread sharing of campaign materials on WhatsApp positioned the platform as a critical instrument for political actors seeking to mobilize support

and create virtual spaces that emulated digital political rallies. WhatsApp's global prominence, particularly in the Global South, has further solidified its role as a cornerstone of political communication (Caetano et al., 2018). In Zimbabwe, its usage has grown exponentially, increasing from 5.2 million users in 2017 to accounting for nearly 50% of internet users among the country's 17 million residents (STARTUPBIZ, 2023). This remarkable penetration underscores WhatsApp's significance as a dominant communication platform, with the application accounting for approximately 44% of mobile internet usage in the country, making it indispensable for both personal and political engagements (Khalil, 2024).

A key factor driving the rapid adoption of WhatsApp during the 2023 election campaign was its capacity to amplify content originating on X (formerly Twitter) and disseminate it across WhatsApp groups, thereby reaching audiences in both urban centers and remote areas. This phenomenon illustrates the concept of a "hybrid media system," in which content seamlessly transitions between platforms to engage diverse audiences strategically (Chadwick, 2013). Despite X's limited direct influence in Zimbabwe, with a penetration rate of approximately 1.9% as of early 2023 (Dataportal, 2024), it remained a key platform for politicians, activists, journalists, and other public figures. The high cost of internet access prevented many rural citizens from directly accessing X, yet they relied on WhatsApp to receive information shared by opinion leaders. Activists from both the ruling and opposition parties bridged this gap by circulating screenshots of tweets within WhatsApp groups, thereby ensuring broader accessibility to critical political messages. Prior studies have highlighted WhatsApp's role in political campaigns as a vital medium for disseminating information and propaganda, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Caetano et al., 2018). In Zimbabwe, this capacity proved invaluable in remote regions, where political messaging from influential figures was made accessible through WhatsApp, shaping political discourse and strategies.

During the 2023 election campaign, the intensified use of WhatsApp by political parties to propagate competing narratives led to a dramatic increase in platform activity. A significant aspect of this information transfer from X to WhatsApp involved the ruling party's strategic

deployment of legal instruments to curtail opposition voices. Zimbabwe's longstanding history of restrictive policies on freedom of expression has frequently resulted in the persecution of political activists, a pattern that continued throughout the 2023 campaign (Ureke, 2024). Interviews with members of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society advocates revealed that the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZPF) strategically leveraged legal constraints to suppress opposition activities while maintaining its dominance within the electoral landscape. The CCC, in particular, faced significant obstacles during the campaign, operating within a politically hostile environment characterized by limited access to public media and constraints on traditional grassroots campaigning. Despite these challenges, the CCC effectively utilized digital platforms like WhatsApp to advance its campaign efforts, aligning with the theoretical framework of the Mediation Opportunity Structure, as proposed by Cammaerts (2012).

4.7.1 Progressives Leveraged WhatsApp to Expose Lawfare Tactics of the Ruling Party

In the context of Zimbabwe's 2023 election campaign, political opponents of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZPF) strategically harnessed WhatsApp as a central communication platform to disseminate information originally sourced from X (formerly Twitter). This calculated strategy aimed to shed light on the ZPF's systematic exploitation of legal mechanisms as a tool to marginalize opposition forces and stifle dissenting voices. WhatsApp's role was particularly impactful due to its extensive penetration across Zimbabwe, where it reaches nearly half of the country's estimated population of 17 million (Dube, 2023). The platform's ubiquity allowed for the rapid circulation of posts originating from X, which exposed the ruling party's repressive tactics. This seamless transfer of content from X to WhatsApp enabled activists to potentially influence and inform hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of citizens nationwide.

Activists from the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), the primary opposition party, effectively employed both X and WhatsApp as interconnected platforms within a broader

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communication strategy. By doing so, they were able to expose and critique the ZPF's calculated misuse of the legal and judicial systems referred to as "lawfare." This concept encapsulates the deliberate weaponization of legal processes to target and undermine political adversaries, turning what should be neutral legal frameworks into instruments of repression. CCC activists being able to raise their marginalized voices against repressive tactics by the ruling party illustrate the dynamics of the Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020).

The term "lawfare" became central to opposition discourse during the election period, as it provided a powerful rhetorical and analytical frame for describing the systemic legal abuses perpetrated by the ruling party. Progressive groups, including civil society organizations and opposition activists, leveraged this concept to mobilize public sentiment and resistance. By highlighting the ZPF's manipulation of the judicial system, they sought to frame these actions as emblematic of broader authoritarian practices, thereby rallying political support and raising awareness both domestically and internationally.

The strategic utilization of WhatsApp to amplify content initially posted on X underscores its pivotal role in Zimbabwe's political communication landscape. By leveraging the platform's extensive reach, opposition actors ensured that critical narratives such as the ZPF's legal harassment gained significant traction, even in remote and marginalized areas. This approach not only challenged the government's dominance in traditional media but also exemplified how digital platforms could be mobilized to foster accountability and resistance in a semi-authoritarian state.

4.7.1.1 Team Pachedu's Original X Posts Disseminated Across Category 2 WhatsApp Groups

In the context of Zimbabwe's 2023 general election, Category 2 WhatsApp groups emerged as pivotal spaces for political engagement and information dissemination, particularly among activists and supporters of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). These groups, largely composed of individuals committed to advancing opposition objectives, exhibited remarkable

activity levels, often sharing content initially sourced from X (formerly Twitter) at significantly higher rates than other WhatsApp categories. For instance, during August 2023 alone, these groups facilitated the distribution of an impressive 410 screenshots of posts from X, underscoring their central role in amplifying opposition narratives.

A substantial portion of this activity revolved around exposing the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZPF)’s alleged use of “lawfare.” Specifically, CCC activists shared posts on X that detailed how the ruling party sought to exploit legal mechanisms to undermine opposition campaigns. One prominent instance involved the ZPF’s attempt to disqualify twelve CCC parliamentary candidates in Bulawayo during the 2023 election through what opposition activists and observers described as dubious legal tactics. The widespread sharing of such posts within these WhatsApp groups exemplifies the strategic integration of multiple media channels to expand the reach of opposition messaging. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), wherein traditional and digital media platforms intersect to enhance the dissemination of political content.

Out of the 410 screenshots shared in these groups, approximately 100 explicitly focused on “lawfare.” These posts detailed how judicial processes were weaponized to target opposition politicians, outspoken government critics, and key figures within civil society. A notable example occurred on Saturday, July 29, 2023, at 07:40, when Team Pachedu’s X post on lawfare was actively circulated in Category 2 WhatsApp groups. This post, and others like it, provided a framework for opposition and progressive groups to highlight the ZPF’s systematic legal harassment, reinforcing the term “lawfare” as a powerful rallying cry for resistance and public mobilization in Zimbabwe’s semi-authoritarian political environment.



Date: July 29, 2023, Time: 07:40

The case highlighted in Team Pachedu's X post pertained to the ruling party's legal challenge against twelve CCC parliamentary candidates in Bulawayo, accusing them of submitting their nomination documents after the 4 pm deadline (Zimlive, 2023). Initially, the court ruled in favor of the ZPF's application, disqualifying the CCC candidates. However, subsequent scrutiny revealed that some ruling party candidates had also failed to meet the nomination deadline. This contradiction raised questions about the impartiality of the legal proceedings and sparked public discourse on the selective enforcement of electoral rules.

Political activists, as noted in interviews, underscored the critical role of social media platforms like X in generating content that was subsequently shared on WhatsApp to broaden its reach. This process enabled the CCC and its allies within civil society to inform the public and galvanize support against what they perceived as an overt manipulation of legal systems by the ruling party (Zimbabwe Mail, 2023; Zimlive, 2023). One opposition activist highlighted WhatsApp's unparalleled accessibility in Zimbabwe, stating:

"(The biggest social media platform is) WhatsApp, it's WhatsApp. OK, so you see what's up, one, number two, Facebook ..."

Ultimately, the Supreme Court overturned the lower court's ruling, affirming that the CCC candidates had submitted their nomination papers within the required timeframe (Zimfact, 2023). This legal victory underscored the significance of exposing irregularities in the judicial process through social media. Team Pachedu's X post, shared almost four weeks before the election, exemplifies how such content traversed platforms to reach diverse audiences via Category 2 WhatsApp groups.

Unlike X, which requires internet access and familiarity with its interface, WhatsApp's widespread adoption and user-friendly nature made it especially effective in disseminating political information to Zimbabweans, including those in remote areas. The dissemination of this X post via WhatsApp not only highlighted the ruling party's willingness to employ legal strategies for political gain but also showcased the opposition's ability to counteract such measures by leveraging digital platforms. This strategic use of WhatsApp allowed progressive groups to engage with a broader electorate, fostering awareness and resistance against perceived electoral injustices during the 2023 campaign.

4.7.1.2 CCC Harare Province's Original X Post Circulates to Category 2 WhatsApp Groups

The Harare Province branch of Zimbabwe's main opposition party, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), posted on X about alleged instances of lawfare. This post was subsequently disseminated within Category 2 WhatsApp groups on Friday, August 18, 2023, at 08:34. The content of this X post reinforced claims made by opposition activists during interviews, where they argued that the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZPF) government systematically employed selective legal enforcement as a deliberate tactic to hinder and obstruct the political activities of its rivals.

Social media platforms, particularly X and WhatsApp, provided critical avenues for political actors in Zimbabwe to strategically construct and communicate narratives designed to resonate with specific audiences (see Cohen and Kahne, 2012). In this instance, CCC activists utilized

WhatsApp to disseminate the X post widely, drawing attention to the alleged legal abuses and political persecution perpetrated by the ZPF-led government. The timing of this post was particularly significant, as it appeared five days before the pivotal August 23, 2023, election. It followed the arrest of 42 CCC activists, including candidates, who were detained while engaging in door-to-door campaigning in Glen View. These activists maintained that their detention on charges of disorderly conduct was unfounded, asserting that the arrests were a pretext for political suppression, given that they were participating in lawful electoral activities.



Date: August 18, 2023, Time: 08:34

The X post shared by CCC Harare Province proved instrumental for progressive factions, as it mobilized public sentiment by disseminating information through WhatsApp screenshots. This approach had the potential to reach millions of Zimbabweans both domestically and internationally. By disseminating this content, CCC activists aimed to raise public awareness about the ruling party's misuse of legal systems, emphasizing the arrest of the 42 activists as a symbol of widespread systemic oppression. This approach aligns with Kavada & Poell's (2020) concept of Contentious Publicness, where CCC activists leveraged their marginalized voices and

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strategically utilized digital platforms to resist and expose the ruling party's repressive tactics. A political activist underscored the significance of this dissemination strategy, noting,

"WhatsApp penetrates every corner of the country."

This observation corroborates accounts from CCC activists, who highlighted how the ZPF leveraged "lawfare" to stifle opposition campaigns and restrict their visibility, while simultaneously enjoying unimpeded access to the electorate. The detained CCC activists endured 10 days in custody and were only granted bail on August 24, 2023, a day after the election. The original X post, which circulated extensively among Category 2 WhatsApp groups, provided a vital channel for exposing the selective application of the law by the ZPF government as a means to suppress opposition activity.

The inferences drawn from the circulation of this X post suggest that the ruling party strategically weaponized the legal system to undermine opposition efforts. In response, progressive forces effectively countered by leveraging WhatsApp's expansive reach to disseminate their narratives, using the platform to challenge and resist the ZPF's restrictive tactics throughout the 2023 election cycle. This strategic use of social media highlights the interplay between digital platforms and grassroots activism in politically constrained environments.

4.7.1.3 CCC Original X Post Disseminated to WhatsApp Groups in Category 2

An X post by the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) on the misuse of "lawfare" reinforced claims made during interviews with CCC activists that the Zimbabwean government strategically deployed legal mechanisms to suppress opposition activities. This practice extended into the post-election period, demonstrating the persistent use of legal harassment as a political weapon. The X post was distributed to WhatsApp Groups categorized under Category 2 on Wednesday, September 13, 2023, at 12:26. It was shared within these groups against the backdrop of intensified legal actions targeting prominent opposition figures following the disputed election.

This X post highlights the CCC's calculated use of digital platforms to expose the ongoing persecution of its key figures by the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), even after the election had concluded. By publicizing instances of harassment and legal intimidation through social media, the CCC emphasized the government's selective application of legal processes. This tactic not only aimed to stifle opposition activities but also burdened political adversaries with protracted and disruptive court cases. A key example cited in the post was the dropping of charges against CCC Member of Parliament Maureen Kademaunga, who faced allegations of attempted murder and malicious property damage. Her case became emblematic of systemic oppression and reinforced the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework (Cammaerts, 2012), which explains how opposition actors utilize media to challenge authoritarian practices.



Date: September 13, 2023, Time: 12:26

Interviews with activists further confirmed that the ruling party employed “lawfare”—the strategic weaponization of selective legal prosecutions—alongside other unlawful tactics to limit opposition mobilization. The X post functioned as a pivotal medium for CCC activists to disseminate these accounts of abuse to a broad audience via WhatsApp, ensuring that both local and international communities were made aware of the ongoing repression. This dissemination strategy was corroborated by a civil society leader, who observed,

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“Our posts on Twitter ... we see them posted on WhatsApp.”

The allegations against Kademaunga, who was elected Member of Parliament for the Sunningdale constituency, illustrate this pattern of legal harassment. Shortly after the election, she was accused of attempted murder and malicious property damage. However, the case collapsed in court due to insufficient evidence and was ultimately dropped by the Prosecutor General. The collapse of these charges further substantiated claims made by opposition activists that the ZANU PF government systematically misused the legal system to intimidate and suppress political opponents.

The circulation of this X post within Category 2 WhatsApp Groups exemplifies how activists leveraged WhatsApp’s extensive reach to amplify politically significant narratives. By combining the immediacy of X with WhatsApp’s ability to disseminate information to geographically dispersed and remote audiences, activists ensured that key reports of legal harassment reached millions.

The eventual dismissal of the charges against Kademaunga lent credibility to claims that selective legal enforcement was a deliberate strategy employed by the ZANU PF government to weaken opposition forces. In response to these repressive measures, CCC supporters strategically utilized WhatsApp to counteract the government’s tactics, ensuring that reports of such abuses were widely circulated throughout Zimbabwe during the 2023 election period. This strategic use of hybrid media platforms not only mobilized public awareness but also demonstrated the potential of social media to challenge authoritarian regimes and promote accountability in politically constrained environments.

4.7.2 The Ruling Party's Use of WhatsApp for Disinformation During the 2023 Election

The Zimbabwean government, primarily operating through the ruling party, ZANU PF, systematically orchestrated disinformation strategies during the 2023 election campaign to reinforce its grip on political power. Although misinformation featured throughout the electoral process, the principal purveyors of disinformation were not independent actors or private individuals, but government officials and key operatives affiliated with the ruling party. This highly coordinated campaign involved sophisticated methods, such as the deployment of drones to monitor opposition gatherings. Footage obtained from these drones was subsequently manipulated to misrepresent and undermine opposition events (Mukundu, 2023). The ruling party employed a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to execute its disinformation agenda.

A significant component of the disinformation strategy revolved around leveraging traditional media platforms, including television, radio, and print outlets, to propagate distorted narratives and, in some instances, outright fabrications during the campaign period. Research has consistently demonstrated that state-controlled media often collaborates with ruling parties to disseminate misinformation, particularly during election periods (Nizaruddin, 2021). This strategy extended beyond digital tactics, incorporating in-person interventions such as disseminating rumors and distributing pamphlets on the eve of the election. These materials falsely claimed that the opposition had withdrawn from the election, a narrative designed to sow confusion and suppress voter turnout among opposition supporters.

Simultaneously, ZANU PF collaborated with government communication teams to deploy online trolls tasked with targeting opposition leaders and civil society organizations. This coordinated attack sought to discredit opposition figures while amplifying pro-regime propaganda (Mukundu, 2023). The misinformation campaign, particularly the fabricated claims of an opposition boycott, was heavily concentrated in urban areas where opposition support is traditionally robust. This targeted approach aimed to deter opposition voters from participating in the election, thereby skewing the electoral outcome in the ruling party's favor.

In rural constituencies, ZANU PF adopted a more personalized approach to spreading falsehoods. Senior party officials engaged directly with rural populations, disseminating deliberate misinformation designed to intimidate and coerce voters. One notable tactic involved claims that polling stations were equipped with hidden cameras capable of recording individual voting behavior. This narrative aimed to instill fear among rural voters, suggesting that any support for opposition candidates would be discovered and met with punitive consequences. This strategy played on the lack of access to reliable information in rural areas and exploited existing power dynamics to suppress dissent and opposition support.

The third pillar of ZANU PF's disinformation strategy relied on the strategic deployment of social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp, to circulate and amplify false narratives favoring the ruling party. Scholarly studies have highlighted the rapid and wide-reaching nature of disinformation on social media, where false content often deceives significant numbers of users (Wang, 2017; Shao et al., 2017). Interviews with political activists revealed that the ruling party capitalized on the speed and accessibility of social media to effectively disseminate disinformation, rendering it challenging for opposition forces to mount timely counter-narratives.

Ruling party operatives displayed a sophisticated understanding of social media's potential to amplify disinformation campaigns. ZANU PF supporters strategically repurposed posts from prominent figures on X (formerly Twitter), converting them into shareable images for distribution via WhatsApp. This approach exemplifies the principles of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), enabling the ruling party to disseminate disinformation across diverse communication channels. By leveraging WhatsApp's intimate and viral nature, the ruling party effectively spread propaganda targeting the opposition to secure political advantages. Scholars highlight that WhatsApp's closed-group structure enhances its effectiveness as a tool for disinformation, as forwarded messages are often perceived by recipients as credible and trustworthy (São Paulo, 2018).

By investing significant resources into crafting and disseminating falsehoods across these channels, ZANU PF successfully manipulated voter perceptions during the 2023 election campaign. The party's calculated exploitation of WhatsApp and other communication tools underscores the platform's pivotal role in shaping electoral dynamics in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe (France24, 2023; Ndlovu, 2023).

4.7.2.1 Dissemination of Stella's Original X Post to Category 1 WhatsApp Groups

Category 1 WhatsApp groups were comprised of political activists representing both of Zimbabwe's dominant political parties, the Zimbabwe Patriotic Front (ZPF) and the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC). Within these groups, the frequency of shared screenshots from X (formerly Twitter) was relatively moderate compared to their distribution in Category 2 WhatsApp groups, which exhibited a significantly higher volume of such activity. During August 2023, for instance, three prominent Category 1 groups collectively recorded the circulation of 410 screenshots sourced from X posts. Of these, 52 screenshots contained deliberate disinformation crafted by the ZPF, targeting key opposition figures, vocal government critics, and prominent civil society organizations.

One illustrative example of this disinformation strategy is evident in an X post authored by Stella Rangwani, a ruling party activist. This post was disseminated within Category 1 WhatsApp groups on Sunday, 12 August 2023, at approximately 07:55, a mere ten days before Zimbabwe's election day. The timing and context of this dissemination highlight its integral role in the ZPF's broader disinformation campaign, a calculated effort to manipulate public perceptions and secure electoral victory.



Date: August 12, 2023, Time: 07:55

The systematic sharing of such posts underscores findings from prior research, which assert that authoritarian regimes often deploy disinformation as a tactical weapon during election cycles to consolidate power (Nizaruddin, 2021). In Rangwani's X post, the ruling party activist strategically used social media to propagate a false narrative, suggesting that ZPF enjoyed substantial support within Harare, a region historically dominated by opposition parties. According to corroborating reports, this illusion was achieved by transporting rural supporters into urban areas to artificially inflate rally attendance figures (France24, 2023). The rally, staged in the heart of Harare, served as a calculated attempt by ZPF to convey a misleading image of increasing urban support, despite persistent opposition dominance in these areas.

Interviews with political operatives revealed the strategic amplification of disinformation through social media platforms like WhatsApp. A ruling party activist recounted an instance when his own tweet was circulated widely on WhatsApp, even receiving a screenshot of it from his mother:

"My mother ...sometimes ...sends me a screenshot of my Twitter via (WhatsApp)"

This anecdote illustrates the expansive reach of WhatsApp as a dissemination tool, enabling disinformation to travel across various audience segments, including those less active on X.

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Rangwani's X post, distributed via screenshots on WhatsApp, exemplified this dynamic. It succeeded in deceiving parts of the electorate by portraying ZPF rallies in urban opposition strongholds as evidence of growing urban support. Such tactics align with theoretical frameworks, such as Wang (2017) and Shao et al. (2017), which posit that disinformation often compels targeted groups to react in ways that inadvertently benefit its originators.

This manipulation proved particularly impactful in creating anxiety among CCC supporters and activists, who were forced to counter these misleading narratives. To combat the false perception that ZPF was gaining urban traction, opposition activists relied heavily on social media, including WhatsApp, to inform the public of the ruling party's use of bussed rural supporters to artificially bolster urban rally attendance (Ndlovu, 2023). Interviews with CCC activists revealed the significant effort required to dispel these falsehoods, as they utilized WhatsApp to share counter-narratives that exposed the ZPF's tactics.

The circulation of Rangwani's post from X on WhatsApp was not an isolated instance of misinformation but rather a deliberate element of ZANU PF's comprehensive disinformation strategy. By exploiting the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), the ruling party strategically distributed disinformation across multiple communication channels, capitalizing on the personal and trust-based nature of WhatsApp to shape voter perceptions during the 2023 election. This particular disinformation effort, which falsely portrayed an increase in urban support for the ruling party, was designed to undermine opposition morale while simultaneously reinforcing the regime's perceived legitimacy.

However, progressive actors, including CCC activists and civil society organizations, harnessed WhatsApp's capabilities to mount a robust counter-campaign. They used the platform to challenge ZPF's narratives, educate voters about the realities of manipulated rally attendance, and expose the ruling party's disinformation machinery. As Mukundu (2023) observes, some activists even experimented with emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, to develop cost-effective and innovative counterstrategies. The interplay between disinformation

and counter-disinformation during Zimbabwe's 2023 election underscores the dual-edged nature of social media in semi-authoritarian contexts, where platforms like WhatsApp serve both as tools for manipulation and resistance.

4.7.2.2 Dissemination of ZANU PF Activist Gabriel Chaibva's Original X Post in Category 3 WhatsApp Groups

Category 3 WhatsApp groups were predominantly composed of activists affiliated with the ruling Zimbabwe Patriotic Front (ZPF), and these groups exhibited the lowest volume of shared screenshots originating from X (formerly Twitter) compared to the other two categories of WhatsApp groups. In August 2023, the three Category 3 groups collectively recorded the dissemination of 410 screenshots sourced from X posts. Among these, 20 screenshots explicitly contained disinformation orchestrated by the ZPF, targeting opposition figures, government critics, and civil society organizations.

One notable example of this disinformation is an X post authored by Gabriel Chaibva, a prominent activist aligned with the ruling party. This post was widely circulated in Category 3 WhatsApp groups on Saturday, 30 August 2023, at 16:39, as ZPF escalated its disinformation efforts in the critical two weeks leading up to election day on 23 August 2023. The timing of the post underscores its calculated nature, serving as part of a broader strategy to influence voter perceptions during the election period.



Date: August 05, 2023, Time: 16:39

In a post on X, Chaibva spread a fabricated allegation claiming that the deputy spokesperson of the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) was a relative of the opposition leader's wife. This misinformation was crafted to mislead voters into perceiving the opposition as nepotistic, thereby undermining its credibility and public image. The subsequent circulation of Chaibva's post on WhatsApp highlights the strategic application of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) to amplify disinformation. This act was not an isolated occurrence but a calculated component of ZANU PF's wider agenda to deploy disinformation as a political tool.

The primary objective of this particular disinformation campaign was to create an impression that the CCC, under the leadership of Nelson Chamisa, favored familial ties over meritocracy. The false claim implied that Chamisa had appointed his wife's brother to a senior party position. This was particularly ironic, as the ZPF itself faced widespread public criticism for overt acts of nepotism during the post-election period, such as President Mnangagwa's appointment of his son and nephew to deputy ministerial positions. These actions led to allegations that Mnangagwa was running the government like a family enterprise, sparking public outrage (The Guardian, 2023).

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Research underscores the significant influence of disinformation shared via platforms like WhatsApp, as recipients often regard such messages as credible (São Paulo, 2018). Consequently, many voters were likely misled by Chaibva's claims, further complicating the opposition's efforts to maintain its reputation. The circulation of screenshots of Chaibva's X post on WhatsApp allowed the ruling party to reach a wider audience and deepen misconceptions about the opposition. The reach of such disinformation was corroborated by a ruling party official during an interview, who explained:

"Yes. Sometimes one can post something expecting it will be confined to the group. But somebody can extract it from the group and send it to somebody who is outside the group."

This statement highlights how disinformation, once shared on closed platforms like WhatsApp, can rapidly escape its original confines and reach unintended audiences, amplifying its impact. Despite the widespread dissemination of Chaibva's post, there was no evidence to support the claim of a familial connection between Chamisa's wife and CCC deputy spokesperson Gift Siziba. In reality, Siziba's rise to prominence within the CCC was rooted in meritocracy. He was democratically elected as Secretary General of the MDC Alliance Youth Chapter and later emerged as a key leader in the formation of the CCC on 22 January 2022.

To counter the disinformation spread by ruling party operatives, CCC activists and civil society organizations employed social media platforms, including WhatsApp, to correct the false narratives. As Mukundu (2023) notes, some activists even utilized Artificial Intelligence to craft cost-effective responses to such disinformation campaigns. Interviews with opposition activists revealed that they actively emphasized Siziba's meritocratic rise within the party, noting that his leadership roles were the result of democratic elections and widespread support among opposition members (The Zimbabwe Mail, 2019).

The intent behind Chaibva's X post was clear: to depict the opposition as nepotistic and undermine its claims of ethical governance. However, progressive forces leveraged the expansive reach of WhatsApp to dismantle these narratives, using the platform to inform voters about the lack of evidence supporting the ruling party's claims. CCC activists worked diligently to counteract the disinformation, highlighting Siziba's legitimate qualifications and achievements while exposing the ruling party's hypocrisy in propagating false allegations of nepotism.

By strategically using WhatsApp to combat the ZPF's disinformation campaign, opposition activists turned the platform into a tool for resistance, effectively addressing the spread of falsehoods and engaging voters throughout the 2023 election period. The episode demonstrates the dual role of social media in Zimbabwean elections, serving both as a vehicle for disinformation and a medium for counter-narratives that challenge the ruling party's manipulation of public discourse.

4.7.2.3 Dissemination of Chief Government Spokesperson Nick Mangwana's Original X Post to Category 3 WhatsApp Groups

On Sunday, 10 August 2023, at 11:32, an X post authored by Nick Mangwana, the chief government spokesperson, was widely disseminated within Category 3 WhatsApp groups. Shared approximately two weeks before Zimbabwe's election, this post represented a deliberate effort by the ruling Zimbabwe Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) to manipulate voter perceptions. It formed part of a coordinated disinformation campaign designed to undermine the opposition's credibility, particularly in urban strongholds.

Extant research underscores the potent impact of disinformation on social media, illustrating how it can cloud public understanding and make it increasingly challenging for citizens to distinguish between credible news and deliberate falsehoods (see Tandoc et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). In the X post in question, Nick Mangwana exploited this phenomenon by spreading misleading information intended to influence voter attitudes during the 2023 election cycle. Specifically, Mangwana falsely claimed that the government had plans to renovate Rufaro Stadium, one of

Zimbabwe's most iconic sports venues, which had fallen into disrepair due to alleged mismanagement by the opposition-led Harare City Council



Date: August 10, 2023, Time: 11:32

This post, which cited statements from the ruling party's presidential candidate, was strategically designed to create the impression that ZANU PF was taking proactive steps to address long-standing urban infrastructural issues. By propagating this narrative, the ruling party aimed to enhance its appeal among urban voters, many of whom had grown increasingly disillusioned with the dilapidation of critical infrastructure in opposition-controlled areas.

Research underscores the amplified impact of disinformation when disseminated through platforms such as WhatsApp, where recipients often perceive messages as genuine (São Paulo, 2018). Mangwana's post on X was subsequently redistributed by ruling party supporters across various WhatsApp groups, exemplifying the principles of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). This strategic sharing significantly expanded its reach, reinforcing a misleading narrative regarding the ruling party's alleged dedication to infrastructure development. The deliberate spread of such content aligns with ZANU PF's broader strategy of leveraging social media to

shape voter perceptions. This tactic was validated during interviews with ruling party activists, one of whom emphasized the exponential audience growth enabled by WhatsApp:

“If you send a message to your WhatsApp group, your audience may increase two, four, seven or eight (fold).”

However, the claims made in Mangwana’s X post were ultimately discredited. The opposition-led Harare City Council had already initiated renovation work at Rufaro Stadium, with progress nearing completion in preparation for the upcoming football season. The ruling party’s assertion was therefore an attempt to obscure the council’s efforts and reframe them as achievements of ZANU PF.

In response to this disinformation, Citizens’ Coalition for Change (CCC) activists quickly mobilized to counter Mangwana’s narrative. Leveraging the same digital platforms used to spread the falsehoods, CCC activists clarified that the Harare City Council had been responsible for the renovations, not the central government. They further emphasized the hypocrisy of the ruling party, pointing out that the National Sports Stadium under the central government’s jurisdiction had been left in a state of neglect and required urgent repair.

The broader context of Mangwana’s X post reflects a strategic effort to portray ZANU PF as actively addressing urban challenges, even when the facts contradicted this narrative. Progressive forces, including opposition activists and civil society organizations, utilized WhatsApp to expose this manipulation and educate voters about the realities on the ground. Their counter-campaigns not only refuted the specific claims surrounding Rufaro Stadium but also highlighted the broader pattern of disinformation employed by the ruling party during the election period.

As Mukundu (2023) notes, social media has become a critical tool for Zimbabwean citizens seeking to challenge state-sponsored disinformation, with some leveraging Artificial Intelligence to enhance the efficiency and cost effectiveness of their efforts. In this case, WhatsApp served as

a vital platform for disseminating factual information, correcting false claims, and reinforcing the credibility of the opposition.

The ultimate goal of Mangwana's X post was to construct a narrative that depicted ZANU PF as the driving force behind major urban development projects, thereby undermining the opposition's credibility. However, progressive actors effectively used WhatsApp to challenge and dismantle this narrative, ensuring that voters were informed of the opposition-led council's actual achievements. By exposing the ruling party's disinformation tactics, CCC activists and civil society groups not only countered the immediate falsehoods but also contributed to broader efforts to promote transparency and accountability in Zimbabwe's political discourse.

4.7.3 Progressive Use of WhatsApp to Expose Repressive Tactics During the Election Campaign

The history of Zimbabwe is deeply intertwined with political violence, a phenomenon that has persisted for at least five centuries. Historical accounts from indigenous communities and early foreign traders detail conflicts over land and resources, which later escalated with the advent of British colonization. This colonial period, marked by violent conquest beginning in 1890, persisted until Zimbabwe's protracted armed struggle for independence culminated in 1980 (Zimbabwe Government, 2023). The legacy of using violence as a tool for maintaining political power has remained entrenched in Zimbabwean politics even in the post-independence era. Notably, ZANU PF, the ruling party established in 1963, has been a central actor in perpetuating this culture of violence since its formation.

Since gaining independence, Zimbabwe's elections have consistently been marred by violence and intimidation, with ZANU PF frequently initiating hostilities against political opponents. The ruling party has deployed a range of coercive tactics designed to secure its hold on power, often targeting opposition parties and their supporters. For example, Forever Associates Zimbabwe (FAZ), a ZANU PF-aligned organization, systematically infiltrated rural governance structures by exerting undue influence on traditional leaders and local councilors, coercing them into

mobilizing communities to vote for the ruling party (Mukundu, 2023). ZANU PF's repertoire of tactics has included intimidation, fearmongering, physical violence, and, in extreme cases, killings. These actions are often accompanied by narratives that invoke historical fears, suggesting that any loss of power by ZANU PF would plunge the country into chaos.

A stark example of this occurred during the 2018 elections, when security forces killed multiple civilians protesting what they perceived to be election fraud (Barron, 2018). These incidents underscored the extent to which the ruling party has relied on violence as a political tool.

During the 2023 election campaign, ZANU PF continued to rely on authoritarian tactics to influence the electoral process. However, the growing prominence of social media forced the ruling party to adapt its approach to minimize exposure. Social media platforms have increasingly provided citizens with the means to document and share evidence of electoral malpractice, including acts of violence, under the relative safety of digital anonymity (Mukundu, 2023). This shift compelled ZANU PF to adopt more covert methods of repression, aiming to maintain its image of legitimacy, particularly in the eyes of international observers.

Progressive forces, including Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) activists and civil society organizations, leveraged the Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020), to counteract these tactics. They utilized WhatsApp's extensive reach to inform citizens about the ruling party's repressive activities across both urban and rural areas during the 2023 election campaign. While instances of overt violence were less visible compared to previous elections, repression persisted, particularly in rural regions where the lack of social media penetration allowed ZANU PF to operate with relative impunity. In urban centers, sporadic incidents of violence, often instigated by the ruling party, were also reported.

Although physical violence, property destruction, and even killings of opposition supporters were documented during the campaign period, election day itself was marked by relative calm. Election staff generally managed the process effectively, despite logistical challenges such as

ballot shortages in certain areas (Carter Center, 2023). The apparent reduction in overt violence can be attributed to the expanded access to social media among the electorate, which heightened the likelihood of such incidents being captured and disseminated to regional and international audiences. ZANU PF was acutely aware of the potential repercussions of visible violence, particularly concerning the assessments of entities such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union. To avoid jeopardizing their legitimacy, the ruling party prioritized covert methods of control over overt acts of repression.

However, on election day, ZANU PF's reliance on subtle tactics was increasingly challenged by heightened social media activity. Ordinary citizens, empowered by the accessibility of digital platforms, actively monitored and reported irregularities. Research indicates that the proliferation of social media enables citizens to assume quasi-journalistic roles, documenting events in real-time (Reilly and Vacari, 2021). This phenomenon was evident as voters shared images online of FAZ members visibly stationed outside polling stations, engaging in acts of voter intimidation designed to sway the electorate toward ZANU PF (Civicus, 2023).

Despite numerous allegations of voter suppression and intimidation in opposition strongholds, ZANU PF ultimately secured a majority of votes in the 2023 elections (Ureke, 2024). WhatsApp proved to be a crucial platform for progressive forces during this period, allowing them to expose the ruling party's repressive tactics and counter its disinformation campaigns. By disseminating accurate information and highlighting instances of electoral abuse, these actors played a vital role in challenging the authoritarian practices that have long characterized Zimbabwe's political landscape.

4.7.3.1 Dissemination of Zimbabwe Human Rights Monitors' Original X Post in Category 1 WhatsApp Groups

Category 1 comprised WhatsApp groups involving politically active individuals from Zimbabwe's two principal political parties: ZANU PF (ZPF) and the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC). These groups served as dynamic communication hubs during the highly charged

political atmosphere of August 2023, the month of the general elections. Over this period, members of these three groups shared 410 screenshots of posts originating from X (formerly Twitter). Of these, 20 screenshots specifically highlighted incidents of political violence allegedly perpetrated by the ruling party against its opposition. One such post by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Monitors, a prominent civil society organization, was widely disseminated to Category 1 WhatsApp groups on Thursday, August 3, 2023, at 19:22. Although overt violence appeared to be less frequent during the 2023 electoral cycle compared to previous elections, the content of this X post emphasized that the ruling party continued to deploy intimidation and, in some cases, direct violence as a strategy for political control.



Date: August 03, 2023, Time: 1922

The X post in question by Zimbabwe Human Rights Monitors leveraged the platform to document and expose alleged instances of political violence attributed to ZANU PF against CCC supporters. The post detailed an incident that took place approximately three weeks before the general election scheduled for August 23, 2023. Specifically, it accused ruling party affiliates of inciting political violence that culminated in the death of Tinashe Chitsunge, a prominent CCC activist. Reports suggested that Chitsunge was stoned to death by ZANU PF supporters during a doorstep campaign in Harare, a key opposition stronghold, as tensions peaked in the final weeks of the election campaign.

This X post played a pivotal role in raising awareness by allowing activists and civil society members to capture screenshots of the content and redistribute it via WhatsApp. This

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redistribution extended the message's reach, significantly amplifying public exposure to the political violence allegedly instigated by ZANU PF. Progressive actors, such as CCC members and civil society activists, effectively leveraged digital platforms to denounce the ruling party's oppressive tactics, aligning with the principles of Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020). Through this approach, they strategically informed and mobilized the electorate about Chitsunge's death and ZANU PF's purported involvement in perpetuating such violence during a doorstep campaign. The utility of this strategy was further validated during interviews, where one opposition politician remarked:

"I would also share one such X screenshot (to WhatsApp)."

The widespread adoption of WhatsApp for political communication in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections aligns with findings from previous studies that underscore the platform's role as a central medium for political engagement and campaigning (Caetano et al., 2018). In this specific case, the circulation of content detailing Chitsunge's death via WhatsApp played a pivotal role in reinforcing narratives that ZANU PF continued to rely on political violence to achieve its objectives.

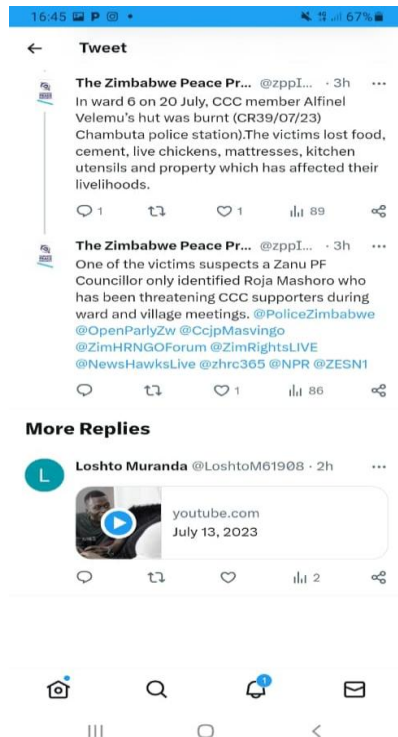
Notably, the accessibility of low-cost WhatsApp data bundles in Zimbabwe facilitated the platform's penetration into economically marginalized urban and rural areas. This significantly expanded the reach of political messaging, enabling shared posts from X to reach even remote regions, thereby providing citizens with alternative sources of information that were often suppressed in mainstream media. The original X post highlighted the severe tactics allegedly employed by ZANU PF activists and security forces, including intimidation, physical assaults, and killings, all intended to suppress dissent and silence critics of the government. These claims were corroborated by testimonies from opposition and civil society actors, who described the ruling party's continued reliance on "stone-age" methods to distort the electoral process.

The broader implication of this X post and its subsequent dissemination on WhatsApp was its role in counterbalancing the dominant narratives promoted by the ruling party. By exposing incidents of political violence, progressive forces utilized WhatsApp's extensive network and wide reach to counteract repressive tactics employed by ZANU PF. This redistribution of content across platforms underscored WhatsApp's critical function in providing a decentralized avenue for disseminating counter-narratives and challenging authoritarian control during the 2023 election cycle.

4.7.3.2 Dissemination of Zimbabwe Peace Project's Original X Post to WhatsApp Groups in Category 2

Category 2 WhatsApp groups were primarily composed of political activists affiliated with Zimbabwe's opposition, particularly supporters of the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC). Among the three identified WhatsApp group categories, these groups were by far the most active, reflecting a heightened level of engagement among opposition members during the election period. During August 2023, the critical month of the general elections, these Category 2 groups witnessed an extraordinary volume of activity, including the sharing of 410 screenshots derived from X (formerly Twitter) posts. Of these, 39 screenshots focused explicitly on incidents of political violence allegedly instigated by the ruling ZANU PF against opposition supporters.

One prominent example of this pattern of violence was highlighted by a post from the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), originally shared on X. This post, which was subsequently circulated within Category 2 WhatsApp groups on Friday, July 28, 2023, at 15:47, exemplifies how digital platforms served as conduits for exposing alleged state-sponsored political repression. The redistribution of this post within these WhatsApp groups played a pivotal role in fostering collective awareness among opposition supporters about the repressive tactics employed in the lead-up to the elections.



Date: July 28, 2023, Time: 15:47

The referenced X post by the Zimbabwe Peace Project utilized the platform to publicly document and denounce incidents of political violence attributed to ZANU PF operatives, particularly in rural areas where opposition supporters were more vulnerable. Drawing on interviews conducted with opposition members and civil society organizations, the post detailed reports of intimidation and violent coercion orchestrated by ruling party affiliates, often with the tacit or active support of security forces. One particularly harrowing incident described in the post involved a ruling party official who was accused of setting fire to the property of a known CCC supporter in a rural community.

Interviews with opposition activists and civil society representatives highlighted recurring patterns of fear-inducing tactics, including acts of physical violence and property destruction. These methods were reportedly concentrated in rural areas, where the ruling party aimed to reinforce its control by targeting suspected opposition supporters through coercion and reprisals. The widespread dissemination of this X post was amplified by CCC activists, who systematically

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shared screenshots on WhatsApp, broadening its audience significantly. This strategic use of WhatsApp by CCC activists was aimed at raising awareness among the electorate about the ruling party's acts of repression, illustrating the concept of Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020). Through this method, opposition supporters and organizations such as the Zimbabwe Peace Project were able to inform and mobilize voters regarding the arson attack on a CCC activist's home, allegedly carried out by ZANU PF affiliates. The effectiveness of this approach was confirmed in interviews with opposition figures. One politician noted:

"I have received some screenshots of my tweets from family ... through WhatsApp."

The destruction of a CCC supporter's home was widely interpreted as a deliberate act of intimidation aimed at deterring rural communities from expressing support for the opposition. This incident underscored the broader use of fear, violence, and coercion as political tools by ZANU PF to suppress opposition momentum, particularly in its rural strongholds.

The circulation of this X post within WhatsApp Groups in Category 2 further reinforced the CCC's argument that social media offered an unvarnished portrayal of the challenges faced by Zimbabwean communities during the election period. The post also lent credibility to CCC activists' claims that the 2023 election cycle was deeply compromised by the ruling party's reliance on archaic, repressive methods to secure favorable outcomes.

The dissemination of such content demonstrates how portrayals of ZANU PF-led violence transitioned seamlessly from X to WhatsApp, enabling progressive forces to harness the extensive reach of WhatsApp as a counterweight to the ruling party's propaganda. This approach allowed activists and civil society organizations to challenge the ruling party's oppressive tactics and ensure that critical narratives of political violence gained traction during the 2023 election campaign.

4.7.3.3 Dissemination of Change Radio's Initial X Post to WhatsApp Groups in Category 2

The following case involves a post-election X (formerly Twitter) screenshot shared by Change Radio, an outlet affiliated with the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC), which was widely circulated within Category 2 WhatsApp groups on Tuesday, 03 September 2023, at 12:34. The content of this post centered on incidents of politically motivated violence and was disseminated within these groups after the election. This aligns with testimonies from progressive activists, who consistently claimed that the ruling ZANU PF party resorted to violence to secure its political objectives during and after the electoral process.

In this instance, Change Radio strategically utilized the X platform to inform not only Zimbabwean citizens but also regional and international stakeholders about the persistence of politically motivated violence in the aftermath of the 2023 elections. The post alleged that the ruling party continued to target opposition supporters, often deploying suspected state agents to perpetrate acts of violence and intimidation. Specifically, the post detailed the alleged abduction and torture of prominent CCC activist Womberai Nhende by suspected state operatives in Harare, a city widely recognized as an opposition stronghold. This incident underscored the ruling party's continued use of coercive measures to suppress dissent, particularly in areas where opposition support was most pronounced.



Date: September 03, 2023, Time: 12:34

The X post from Change Radio was strategically shared on WhatsApp by CCC activists as part of a concerted campaign to highlight the ongoing violence targeting opposition figures during the post-election period. By leveraging digital platforms, CCC activists effectively raised awareness of the ruling party's repressive tactics, aligning their efforts with the principles of Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020). This approach ensured that critical details about the alleged abduction and torture of Nhende reached the electorate, fostering greater public awareness. The intentional use of WhatsApp significantly expanded the accessibility and reach of such information, as emphasized during interviews with activists. One opposition supporter remarked:

“People can (easily) access WhatsApp... so I believe WhatsApp is effective.”

The timing of this alleged attack—approximately one week after the election—was particularly significant, as it coincided with the release of key observer mission reports from international bodies such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union (AU), and the European Union (EU). These reports unanimously concluded that the 2023 Zimbabwe election failed to meet the standards for being free and fair (African Union Observer Mission, 2023; EU Observer Mission, 2023; SADC Electoral Observation Mission, 2023). Among their findings were documented instances of voter suppression in opposition strongholds, coercion in rural areas, enforced voting, and a general lack of transparency in the electoral process.

The allegations detailed in Change Radio's X post complemented these observer mission findings by presenting specific examples of post-election violence, reinforcing CCC activists' claims that the ruling party employed violence as a strategic tool against its political opponents. The post implicitly suggested that the ruling party, potentially acting through state security forces, sought to suppress dissent and silence opposition leaders in the aftermath of the disputed election. This strategy of intimidation was aimed at curbing any organized resistance to the contested election results.

Nevertheless, progressive forces, including CCC activists and civil society organizations, effectively harnessed WhatsApp's extensive reach to counter these oppressive tactics. By ensuring the widespread dissemination of information like Nhende's alleged abduction and torture, they were able to challenge the ruling party's narrative and highlight the realities of post-election repression. WhatsApp's accessibility and popularity across Zimbabwe's urban and rural areas provided a vital platform for amplifying these messages, making it a crucial tool for progressive actors seeking to expose and resist the ruling party's repressive strategies throughout the 2023 election cycle.

4.7.4 Utilization of WhatsApp by Zimbabwe's Ruling and Opposition Parties as a Campaign Tool in the 2023 Election

The 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe unfolded within a political framework shaped by the dominance of two principal parties, a pattern entrenched since the nation's independence in 1980. From its inception, the political landscape featured ZANU PF (ZPF) and PF ZAPU as the primary contenders. However, this changed with the 1987 Unity Accord, which consolidated Zimbabwe into a one-party system dominated by ZPF for over a decade. The late 1990s marked the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), a labor union-driven opposition party that maintained its position as ZPF's primary challenger for more than two decades. In January 2022, the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) replaced the MDC as the main opposition force (Moyo, 2022). By the 2023 election, the MDC had all but disappeared from the political scene, firmly establishing CCC as the opposition to ZPF's continued grip on state power for another five years.

This electoral cycle revealed a complex battleground that spanned both digital and physical spaces. The campaigns of the ruling ZPF and the opposition CCC leveraged a blend of online and offline platforms to engage voters. Social media emerged as a transformative tool, amplifying public discourse and facilitating civic engagement on socio-political issues (Mutanda, 2024). Both parties significantly expanded their digital strategies, reflecting the growing

importance of digital tools in shaping modern political campaigns. Online platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp allowed political actors to disseminate their messages independently of traditional media, creating alternative spaces for political dialogue, particularly for voices marginalized by the state (Ward & Vedel, 2006; Ureke, 2024).

The 2023 election witnessed intensified digital engagement, particularly through WhatsApp, which proved pivotal in mobilizing citizens across urban and rural regions. In urban areas, activists and political figures from both parties used social media to disseminate narratives and counter their opponents. This shift was evident in ZANU PF's Youth Secretary, Cde Tinoda Machakaire, encouraging ruling party youth to engage actively on social media platforms to challenge opposition messaging (Harare Post, 2022). Meanwhile, in rural areas, where access to traditional media was limited, WhatsApp became a central medium for distributing campaign messages. Activists shared screenshots of posts originating on X to extend the reach of campaign messages. This strategy proved effective, as WhatsApp allowed the rapid circulation of political content, including images and text, to millions of Zimbabweans, fostering greater participation in political discourse (Bursztyn & Birnbaum, 2019; Ureke, 2024).

Both ZPF and CCC adeptly employed the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) to integrate digital tools like X and WhatsApp into their broader campaign strategies. This approach enabled both parties to inform and mobilize the electorate effectively during the election period. However, the political contest in 2023 was characterized by significant inequities. While ZPF enjoyed unfettered access to traditional media and held unrestricted rallies nationwide, the CCC encountered numerous barriers to reaching voters. Interviews with political activists revealed that CCC activists faced media blackouts and frequent disruptions of their rallies, particularly in rural areas. Security forces were reportedly deployed to block opposition rallies, intensifying as the election date approached. These restrictions compelled the CCC to rely on alternative campaign methods. Leveraging the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework (Cammaerts, 2012), CCC activists utilized WhatsApp to circumvent these challenges. By strategically disseminating

campaign messages through WhatsApp, the opposition mitigated the restrictions imposed by the ruling party and expanded its outreach.

Social media has been increasingly recognized as a crucial component of modern political communication, facilitating interactions between politicians, political parties, and the electorate while reshaping electoral campaigns (Alperin et al., 2018). Given the CCC's limited physical access to voters in rural areas, WhatsApp emerged as an indispensable tool for sharing campaign content. Prior research underscores WhatsApp's capacity to host political discourse and foster engagement (Bursztyn & Birnbaum, 2019). CCC activists capitalized on this capability, sharing X screenshots from prominent opposition figures to extend their reach to both urban and rural audiences (France24, 2023).

By effectively combining digital platforms such as X and WhatsApp, Zimbabwe's major political parties navigated the constraints and opportunities of the 2023 election campaign. For CCC, WhatsApp's widespread accessibility and affordability in Zimbabwe allowed them to counter the ruling party's dominance and connect with voters in areas otherwise inaccessible due to state-imposed restrictions.

4.7.4.1 Nelson Chamisa's X Post Disseminated to WhatsApp Groups in Category 1

Category 1 WhatsApp groups were composed of politically active individuals aligned with Zimbabwe's principal political parties, creating dynamic forums for political engagement and the exchange of campaign content. During the critical election period of August 2023, these groups collectively shared 410 screenshots of posts originating from X (formerly Twitter). Among this total, Group One alone accounted for 71 screenshots specifically focused on election campaign messaging. An illustrative example of this activity is captured in an X post by Nelson Chamisa, leader of the main opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). This post, shared in Category 1 WhatsApp groups on Friday, 11 August 2023, at 02:11, circulated almost two weeks before the election. In this post, Chamisa sought to galvanize support for his nationwide rallies, leveraging the hashtag #ForEveryone as a central pillar of his campaign strategy.



Date: August 11, 2023, Time: 02:11

The timing and dissemination of this X post underscore the opposition’s comprehensive social media strategy, which prominently featured the inclusive slogan #ForEveryone. According to interviews conducted with key CCC activists, Chamisa used this hashtag to articulate a vision of governance aimed at benefiting all Zimbabweans, positioning his campaign as a stark contrast to that of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, whose administration was widely perceived as favoring a narrow group of politically connected elites.

Using the slogan #ForEveryone, the CCC’s campaign emphasized its commitment to fostering equitable opportunities and inclusive development for all citizens. In an X post, Chamisa critiqued the ruling party’s decades-long dominance, accusing it of enriching the political elite while neglecting the needs of ordinary Zimbabweans. This framing galvanized CCC activists, who strategically shared the post on WhatsApp to amplify its inclusive message and challenge the ruling party’s narrative. This effort exemplified the principles of Contentious Publicness (Kavada & Poell, 2020), as activists sought to reshape the political discourse. The campaign’s

focus on equality and inclusivity, symbolized by #ForEveryone, resonated deeply with diverse audiences, particularly in a socio-political landscape defined by entrenched inequality. The strategic advantages of sharing Chamisa's X post on WhatsApp were reinforced in interviews with opposition politicians, one of whom remarked,

"I've seen my messages being shared on Facebook and also on WhatsApp."

This remark highlights the broader accessibility and reach of WhatsApp compared to X, especially during the 2023 election campaign. The dissemination of Chamisa's campaign message from X to WhatsApp in Category 1 groups illustrates the complementary relationship between these platforms. While X served as a primary outlet for original content creation and initial engagement, WhatsApp expanded the reach of such content, engaging a much larger audience within Zimbabwe's electorate.

The inclusive messaging embedded in the CCC's hashtags—#ForEveryone, #ZimbabweForEveryone, and #PresidentForEveryone—reinforced the party's overarching vision to represent the collective interests of all Zimbabweans. These hashtags contrasted sharply with ZANU PF's hashtags, such as #Teachers4ED, #YoungWomen4ED, and #Varakashi4ED, which critics viewed as narrowly targeted efforts to reward specific groups aligned with the ruling party's political agenda.

The amplification of opposition messaging through WhatsApp enabled the CCC to counteract these ruling party slogans and reach a more diverse audience, effectively challenging the status quo. By harnessing WhatsApp's widespread user base and seamless integration with X, CCC activists succeeded in crafting and disseminating a campaign narrative rooted in inclusivity, equity, and the promise of change. This approach not only strengthened the opposition's digital presence but also fostered a sense of solidarity and shared purpose among its supporters leading up to the election.

4.7.4.2 Original Post by Forever Associates Zimbabwe Disseminated to WhatsApp Groups in Category 3

Category 3 WhatsApp groups were predominantly populated by individuals aligned with ZANU PF, Zimbabwe's ruling party. These groups exhibited a relatively low frequency of screenshot sharing compared to other categories, with only 22 election campaign-related screenshots observed during the study period. Within this context, an election campaign post originating from Forever Associates Zimbabwe (FAZ), an organization closely linked to ZANU PF, was disseminated to these groups on Sunday, August 5, 2023, at 16:53, approximately three weeks before the general election.

The timing of this post aligns with insights from interviews with political and civil society activists, which indicated that both ZANU PF and the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), Zimbabwe's primary opposition party, were deeply engaged in competitive crowd mobilization strategies during the 2023 election campaign. The FAZ X post exemplifies the ruling party's calculated use of social media platforms to advance its political objectives, with ZANU PF centering its digital campaign on the hashtag #VoteED. This hashtag was instrumental in promoting the reelection bid of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, projecting an image of widespread support, particularly in rural constituencies.



Date: August 05, 2023, Time: 1653

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As evidenced in academic research, hashtags are powerful tools for consolidating and disseminating political messages, enabling the creation of thematic content that can mobilize supporters (Bruns et al., 2012). Interviews with activists revealed that ZANU PF's digital strategy heavily emphasized its purported stronghold in rural regions, while simultaneously attempting to increase its influence in urban areas where opposition support has traditionally been more concentrated.

Notably, the FAZ campaign displayed an evolution in its use of hashtags. While earlier strategies employed targeted hashtags such as #Teachers4ED, #YoungWomen4ED, and #Varakashi4ED each aimed at specific demographic groups the ruling party shifted to broader, more inclusive slogans like #VoteED, #VoteZANUPF, and #23AugEDPfee. This transition reflected a deliberate effort to unify the ruling party's messaging and broaden its appeal, reinforcing the incumbent's position across diverse segments of the electorate.

The FAZ X post was subsequently cascaded onto WhatsApp, extending ZANU PF's messaging to a broader audience. By distributing the post via WhatsApp groups, ruling party advocates were able to amplify the narrative of robust rural support. However, allegations arose during interviews with activists suggesting that ZANU PF's rallies, ostensibly demonstrating large-scale rural backing, were often attended by the same groups of supporters transported from different provinces to artificially inflate crowd sizes.

ZANU PF activists circulated FAZ's X post across WhatsApp platforms, illustrating the dynamics of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). This tactic effectively boosted the ruling party's narrative, despite persistent claims that its displays of popular support were overstated. The extensive reach of WhatsApp was highlighted by a ZANU PF activist who observed:

"It appears most Zimbabweans are available on WhatsApp"

Furthermore, interviews with political activists suggested that ZANU PF's adaptation of its hashtag campaign may have been a direct response to counter-narratives propagated by the opposition. This underscores the dynamic interplay between the ruling party and opposition forces, with progressive factions leveraging WhatsApp's extensive accessibility to effectively challenge ZANU PF's digital dominance and its constructed narratives.

4.7.4.3 CCC Original Tweet Distributed to WhatsApp Groups in Category 2

Category 2 WhatsApp groups were primarily composed of political activists who were overwhelmingly affiliated with the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). These groups demonstrated the highest levels of engagement, with a particularly high frequency of screenshots of X posts shared within them compared to other categories. Among the 21 election-related screenshots observed in these groups, one notable example is an X post from CCC Harare Province, shared in these WhatsApp groups on Tuesday, 29 August 2023, at 15:47, five days after the election. This post reflected the opposition party's intensification of its social media activity as it sought to reject the election results, which it argued were illegitimate.

The X post in question, shared shortly after the controversial election, captured the CCC's reaction to the disputed results. This response was framed by widespread allegations of electoral irregularities, which were corroborated by both regional and international observer missions that deemed the election neither free nor fair. The CCC contended that the 2023 election had been rigged in favor of the ruling ZANU PF, leading the opposition to demand a rerun of the election. This demand was accompanied by a strategic social media campaign centered on two hashtags: #FreshElectionsZW and #CitizensFreshElectionCampaign. The X post, as shared in WhatsApp groups, included a statement from CCC Deputy Spokesperson Gift Siziba, who announced at a press conference that the party was formally calling for a rerun of the election. This demand drew support from the reports of observer missions from SADC, the African Union, and the European Union (African Union Observer Mission, 2023; EU Observer Mission, 2023; SADC Electoral Observation Mission, 2023).



Date: August 29, 2023, Time: 15:47

The CCC’s post-election advocacy, anchored on the hashtags #FreshElectionsZW and #CitizensFreshElectionCampaign, sought to capitalize on the documented irregularities highlighted by these observer missions. By distributing a screenshot of the X post on WhatsApp, CCC activists aimed to amplify the party’s message beyond the confines of traditional media. This dissemination strategy was particularly important in informing a broader audience, including both domestic supporters and international stakeholders, of the CCC’s rejection of the election results. Through the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), the CCC seamlessly integrated its campaign efforts across X and WhatsApp, strategically leveraging the latter’s extensive reach to convey its position that the elections were fundamentally flawed and to reiterate its call for fresh elections. The effectiveness of this approach was validated in interviews with CCC activists, one of whom stated:

“(Campaign messages) will reach a wider audience if ... circulated in WhatsApp groups to reach people.”

Furthermore, the screenshot of this X post substantiated claims from political and civil society figures interviewed during the study, who emphasized that elections in Zimbabwe have consistently been marred by allegations of manipulation and bias in favor of the ruling party. By sharing this content on WhatsApp, CCC activists reinforced their stance that the election was

neither transparent nor democratic. The strategic aim of distributing this post on WhatsApp was not only to bolster domestic opposition to the election results but also to communicate the CCC's narrative to regional and international audiences.

This targeted use of WhatsApp highlights the platform's crucial role as a tool for bypassing traditional media restrictions, allowing the opposition to counter ZANU PF's claims that the election had been conducted freely and fairly. The CCC's digital campaign thus underscores how social media, particularly WhatsApp, served as an essential medium for political communication and advocacy in the semi-authoritarian context of Zimbabwe.

4.8 Conclusion

This analysis of Zimbabwe's 2023 election campaign provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the transformative role of digital technologies in shaping electoral strategies within the context of a semi-authoritarian regime in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings reveal that social media served as a critical tool for the opposition, facilitating direct voter engagement and significantly expanding their reach and influence. Unlike traditional media, which remains tightly controlled by the state, digital platforms offered opposition politicians and activists an alternative avenue to disseminate their messages effectively. In particular, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) demonstrated remarkable adaptability by prioritizing digital engagement in response to their limited access to conventional media outlets. This strategy allowed the party to connect with a broader online audience, overcoming the physical and logistical constraints imposed by the repressive political environment.

The digital-first approach adopted by the CCC during the 2023 campaign exemplified their innovative use of social media to amplify their influence. By focusing campaign efforts on online platforms, the CCC was able to offset its limited physical presence, ensuring that its manifesto and inclusive message of change reached a wide audience of potential voters. The opposition skillfully leveraged WhatsApp's extensive reach and affordability to counter the ruling party's

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narrative, ensuring that critical information about governance failures and oppressive tactics resonated widely, even in remote and marginalized regions. Consequently, social media became an efficient, cost-effective, and impactful tool for CCC activists to engage with Zimbabwe's predominantly youthful population, significantly broadening their political base and influence during the electoral process.

For the ruling party, ZANU-PF, the growing prominence of digital platforms posed a substantial challenge to their traditional control over political communication. The decentralized nature of social media disrupted the ruling party's longstanding monopoly on messaging, compelling ZANU-PF to navigate a more dynamic and competitive information landscape. Although the ruling party actively participated on social media platforms, this engagement reflected a tacit acknowledgment of the platforms' deep integration into Zimbabwean society and their widespread use among citizens. Nevertheless, social media diminished the ruling party's traditional dominance, as ZANU-PF was forced to compete with the opposition for voter engagement in the digital realm.

Despite their divergent political objectives, both ZANU-PF and the CCC recognized the indispensability of social media in informing and influencing public opinion during the campaign. Beyond the two parties, influential opinion leaders such as Jonathan Moyo and Hopewell Chin'ono played critical roles in shaping the political discourse on social media, further underscoring the platforms' agenda-setting capabilities. The pervasive use of ghost accounts by opposition supporters and civil society activists also highlighted a response to the state's surveillance and repression of online political activities. These accounts, along with more secure communication channels like WhatsApp, allowed activists and citizens to sustain critical discussions on governance issues, ensuring that the political discourse remained vibrant despite the repressive environment.

In this context, social media has emerged as a powerful force, challenging the traditional media's authority and reshaping the dynamics of political communication. Digital platforms offer the advantage of rapid information dissemination, bypassing the bureaucratic and regulatory constraints that often stifle conventional media. Moreover, social media democratizes access to

information, enabling citizens to actively participate in the production and distribution of political content. This shift from physical to online spaces for political debate reflects broader societal adaptations to repression, encompassing not only opposition activists but also government critics and ordinary citizens with dissenting views.

Ultimately, the 2023 election campaign became a battleground of competing narratives, with ZANU-PF saturating traditional media while the CCC and civil society countered this dominance through strategic use of digital platforms. This contest over political messaging created a more balanced communication landscape, as social media granted the opposition direct access to voters, mitigating the ruling party's overwhelming control of state-run media. Social media thus acted as a critical counterbalance in the political messaging landscape, enabling diverse voices to challenge the ruling party's hegemony during the 2023 election.

In concluding this investigation into the role of social media in Zimbabwean political activism and its influence on the electoral process, the following section will propose actionable solutions that address the study's objectives and offer a pathway for further research.

CHAPTER 5. Conclusion Chapter

5.1 Introduction

The case study of Zimbabwe established a foundation for analysing the role of digital technologies in election campaigns within a semi-authoritarian context in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, there is considerable debate regarding the effects of social media on election campaigns across sub-Saharan Africa, where political conditions often strongly favour the ruling party, and opposition entities face numerous obstacles in reaching voters. To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of social media and political activism in Zimbabwe, this study transitioned from a broad sub-Saharan African context to focus specifically on the 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe. Prior studies have highlighted a marked increase in the use of social media within political campaigns in recent years (Chibuwe, 2020).

The Zimbabwean case study offers insights into the role of social media in election campaigns within a semi-authoritarian democracy. This research sought to elucidate the ways in which digital platforms were employed by political actors, major political parties, and civil society during the 2023 Zimbabwe election campaign, aiming to sway voter decisions. The pivotal influence of digital technologies in shaping public discourse, steering political agendas, and controlling the flow of information surrounding the 2023 election is underscored by Chitanana and Mutsvairo (2019) who characterize social media as a game changer in advancing democratic principles. However, scholars also highlight its inherent limitations, particularly its inability to effectively deter the manipulation of electoral processes within the context of Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian political environment. This study further aimed to explore how digital platforms used by civil society in the 2023 election contributed to shaping voter behavior.

Significantly, the research concentrated on Zimbabwe, a nation in the Global South with unique political dynamics, distinct from the extensively studied contexts of the Global North, and where there is limited understanding of the complexities between political parties and civil society during election cycles. In addition to generating empirical data on the phenomenon of the social

media revolution and political activism in Zimbabwe, this study underscores the growing importance of social media in election campaigns. Social media now presents a substantial challenge to political actors, as previous research indicates a rising trend of individuals using social media to obtain information and communicate with personal networks (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). The primary data for this research was derived from direct quotes from interviews with politicians, leaders of civil society, and political activists, as well as an analysis of the cascading impact of social media posts in WhatsApp groups. This dataset incorporates both secondary data and statistics from social media platforms to assess the extent of social media's influence on political activism during Zimbabwe's 2023 election campaign. The study employed a mixed-methods research design, with quantitative analysis mapping the broader landscape and qualitative research offering a deeper explanation of unfolding events (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner, 2007; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003).

The 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe was characterized by the integration of modern digital technologies with traditional strategies, such as doorstep canvassing and political advertising in conventional media. This hybrid approach emerged in the context of Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian democracy, where both the opposition and ruling parties faced differing constraints and opportunities. Scholar Norris (2000) categorizes the evolution of political campaigning into three distinct phases: "premodern," "modern," and "postmodern." In the premodern era, political campaigns were heavily influenced by political parties and grassroots mobilization. The modern phase saw a shift to television-centric campaigns, while the postmodern era has embraced diverse, multimedia-based strategies that leverage digital platforms alongside traditional media (Norris, 2000). The 2023 election campaign in Zimbabwe epitomized the postmodern approach, with actors from progressive groups, such as the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society organizations, innovatively employing social media to engage voters directly. Meanwhile, ZANU PF, the ruling party, maintained a dominant presence across physical, digital, and public traditional media spaces, reflecting its extensive control over the political landscape.

This study significantly contributes to the academic discourse by revealing how ZANU PF leveraged its unrestricted access to public and private communication spaces to shape voter decision-making and consolidate its political messaging. In contrast, the CCC and other progressive forces, constrained by state repression, adopted alternative strategies that heavily relied on social media platforms to bypass censorship and engage with the electorate. The findings illuminate the transformative potential of social media in disrupting authoritarian practices, amplifying dissent, and maintaining political dialogue in a context where physical spaces for free expression were systematically eroded. Notably, this research highlights how the CCC utilized WhatsApp's widespread reach to ensure that narratives critical of ZANU PF such as the government's use of legal harassment, resonated with voters, even in marginalized and rural areas.

Furthermore, this study deepens scholarly understanding of social media as a critical tool for progressive groups in circumventing ZANU PF's dominance over state-controlled media and physical electoral spaces. It underscores the dual role of social media for the ruling party: both as a challenge to its historical monopoly on political communication and as an opportunity to adapt to a more competitive and pluralistic media environment. The research also examines innovative tactics employed by progressive activists, such as using "ghost accounts" to anonymously critique the government and evade state surveillance. These strategies highlight the creativity of opposition actors in utilizing social media to resist repression. The findings also emphasize the transformative power of hashtags, which became essential tools for countering state propaganda, fostering calls for transparency, and promoting democratic engagement within the electoral process.

The study demonstrates that social media played a double-edged role in Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian state during the 2023 election campaign. For opposition groups and progressive actors, platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter disrupted ZANU PF's monopoly on political messaging, empowering them to directly communicate with voters and challenge state-controlled narratives. Simultaneously, the ruling party faced challenges in adapting to the demands of a

dynamic and decentralized communication environment, which eroded its ability to control the narrative unilaterally. The findings reveal that, in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe, social media represents both a challenge and an opportunity for ruling parties. It disrupts their historical dominance over political communication while compelling them to engage in a more contested and diversified media environment.

This research also highlights the broader impact of social media on marginalized political actors. By bridging the informational gap and complementing offline efforts, digital platforms enabled political campaigns to reach voters despite significant barriers to free expression during the 2023 elections. The study further underscores the success of progressive forces, including CCC activists and civil society organizations, in using social media to counteract ZANU PF's control over traditional media.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on the role of social media in semi-authoritarian states such as Zimbabwe. It demonstrates how CCC and civil society actors leveraged the extensive outreach capabilities of platforms like WhatsApp to ensure that critical narratives such as the ruling party's legal harassment gained significant traction, even in remote and marginalized communities. Ultimately, this research underscores that social media can serve as a powerful enabler for marginalized voices in political communication within semi-authoritarian contexts.

5.2 Research Objectives

The principal objectives of this study were to investigate the multifaceted role of social media in shaping electoral discourse, agenda-setting, and flows of influence during political campaigns; to analyze the extent to which social media has transformed campaign strategies employed by the dominant political entities, namely the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC); to evaluate whether social media enables civil society organizations to exert a more substantial influence within restrictive political systems; and to identify the inherent limitations of the so-called social media revolution

within semi-democratic regimes across sub-Saharan Africa. In pursuit of these goals, the research focused specifically on Zimbabwe's 2023 general election. It critically assessed the role of digital platforms in shaping the strategic communication and mobilization tactics of major political stakeholders, examined their influence on political actors, and interrogated the extent to which social media amplifies civil society's agency while identifying structural barriers imposed by authoritarian governance models prevalent in semi-authoritarian African contexts.

The political landscape in Zimbabwe, which can be characterized as a semi-authoritarian democracy, has historically been dominated by ZANU PF, a ruling party that exercises overwhelming control over traditional media infrastructures, including state-owned television, radio, and print outlets. This extensive and often repressive control has afforded the ruling party the ability to construct dominant political narratives, manipulate public opinion, marginalize opposition voices, and secure a persistent grip on political power. The ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) effectively leveraged both traditional and digital media platforms. In contrast, progressive groups such as the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society were largely excluded from accessing public media. During 2023 election, ZANU PF's unrestricted access to both traditional media and digital platforms created a stark imbalance, systematically denying the main opposition party and civil society groups a fair opportunity to convey their messages to the public. The hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), in this instance, exposed the inequities inherent in Zimbabwe's political communication landscape, where the ruling party's access to state-controlled media allowed it to dominate the political narrative while marginalizing opposition viewpoints.

Operating under severe structural constraints typical of Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian environment, the CCC utilized digital platforms as a critical tool for circumventing ZANU PF's monopolistic control over state media and physical campaign spaces. Given the systemic suppression of freedoms and barriers to public visibility, progressive political actors, including the CCC and allied civil society groups, drew on the Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012) to navigate and exploit opportunities presented by the digital media

landscape. This framework elucidates how political actors identify and act upon openings within restrictive environments to counterbalance dominant power structures. By leveraging this strategic approach, the CCC was able to mitigate the significant limitations imposed on their campaigning activities, sustain meaningful political engagement, and amplify their visibility despite ZANU PF's repressive media and political apparatus.

Digital platforms became essential tools for the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society activists, enabling them to challenge the long-standing hegemony of political messaging maintained by ZANU PF. In the highly restrictive and polarized political landscape of Zimbabwe, digital platforms played a transformative role in mobilizing political support, disseminating real-time information, and fostering political participation across both urban and rural constituencies. This dynamic aligns with Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) Connection Action, which underscores how digital networks enable collective action and decentralized communication among political actors. Social media has increasingly functioned as a democratizing force, providing marginalized actors and opposition groups with the capacity to challenge deeply entrenched power structures, redefine the flow of political communication, and reshape the broader dynamics of political engagement in semi-authoritarian contexts.

The Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society utilized digital platforms to amplify their concerns about electoral manipulation orchestrated by ZEC under the indirect influence of the ruling party. This strategic use of digital tools aligned with the Contentious Publicness framework (Kavada & Poell, 2020), wherein marginalized actors harness digital platforms to challenge dominant power structures and raise awareness among both domestic and international audiences. Predictably, the ruling party rejected calls to reform or dismantle ZEC, given its strategic leverage over the commission. Conversely, CCC and civil society groups viewed the #DisbandZEC campaign as their primary means of counteracting the ruling party's dominance over the electoral process.

In conclusion, the interplay between digital and traditional campaigning in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections highlights both the opportunities and challenges posed by the rise of social media in semi-authoritarian states. While social media has emerged as a critical tool for opposition parties and civil society to counter dominant narratives and engage broader audiences, its effectiveness is still constrained by systemic barriers inherent to semi-democratic governance structures.

5.3 Social Media's Impact in Semi-Authoritarian Zimbabwe During an Election Campaign

5.3.1 The Hybrid Media System: Highlighting ZANU PF's Dominance in Traditional Media and CCC's Strategic Adaptation via Multi-Platform Engagement

This study underscores that during the 2023 electoral campaign in Zimbabwe, characterized by its semi-authoritarian political environment, the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), skillfully utilized both traditional and digital media to advance its agenda. Conversely, progressive entities, such as the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and allied civil society organizations, faced systemic exclusion from accessing state-controlled public media, limiting their ability to broadcast their message through conventional channels. Within this constrained environment, the hybrid media system emerged as a critical framework, illustrating the convergence and mutual reinforcement of traditional and digital media formats in contemporary political campaigns (Chadwick, 2013).

The hybrid media system enables political actors to strategically exploit both established and emerging communication platforms to engage with and influence diverse audiences. It highlights the interplay between "old" media, such as television, radio, and print, and "new" digital platforms, including social media and online forums, in shaping political communication (Chadwick, 2013; Wright, 2015). This framework is particularly salient in semi-authoritarian settings like Zimbabwe, where the interplay between these media systems can serve to amplify

dominant narratives while simultaneously offering limited alternative spaces for opposition voices. Through the hybrid media system, dominant parties such as ZANU PF can capitalize on state-controlled traditional media while simultaneously harnessing the expansive reach of digital platforms to bolster their messaging.

While the hybrid media system thrives in pluralistic, open societies, particularly in the Global North, its utility is significantly limited in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe. In such environments, structural constraints ensure that access to traditional media, particularly state-controlled outlets, is largely monopolized by the ruling party. During election cycles, ZANU PF's unrestricted access to both traditional media and digital platforms created a stark imbalance, systematically denying the main opposition party and civil society groups a fair opportunity to convey their messages to the public. The hybrid media system, in this instance, exposed the inequities inherent in Zimbabwe's political communication landscape, where the ruling party's access to state-controlled media allowed it to dominate the political narrative while marginalizing opposition viewpoints.

In leveraging the hybrid media system, ZANU PF demonstrated a sophisticated strategy by combining traditional media, such as state-controlled television and radio, with digital platforms to craft and disseminate a unified political narrative centered on patriotism, stability, and continuity. This dual approach enabled ZANU PF to consolidate its influence and maintain its dominance in the political discourse surrounding the 2023 election cycle. The ruling party's comprehensive control over traditional media provided it with an unparalleled ability to shape public opinion, while its adoption of digital platforms further amplified its messaging to reach broader audiences, including urban and rural constituencies.

The ruling party also engaged in orchestrated disinformation campaigns through its state-controlled traditional media outlets, which often propagated anti-opposition narratives. These narratives, crafted to undermine public trust in the CCC, were amplified on social media by ZANU PF supporters, effectively expanding their reach and impact. A recurring theme in these

disinformation campaigns was the characterization of the CCC as a proxy for Western powers, a narrative designed to delegitimize the opposition.

In response, the CCC utilized social media as a dynamic tool to counter such narratives, enabling the party to challenge disinformation in real time and offer alternative perspectives to the public. Social media became a critical platform for the CCC to contest ZANU PF's attempts to manipulate voter perceptions during the 2023 election cycle. By leveraging these platforms, the opposition party communicated its vision for change, reached a broader audience, and strengthened its political presence in Zimbabwe's highly contested electoral environment. This interplay between traditional media and emerging digital platforms underscores the rapidly evolving dynamics of political campaigning in Zimbabwe, highlighting the challenges of navigating an increasingly complex information ecosystem.

During the 2023 election campaign, ZANU PF enjoyed extensive advantages, including access to state resources, unrestricted financial backing, dominance over traditional media outlets. The ruling party skillfully combined traditional media and digital platforms to disseminate its patriotic message. This multifaceted strategy was further bolstered by an expansive advertising campaign across multiple media platforms, consolidating its dominance in the information landscape.

In contrast, the CCC, constrained by state repression and limited access to traditional media, redirected much of its campaign to social media platforms. This digital shift not only empowered opposition activists but also enabled ordinary citizens to express dissent in the relatively secure online space.

This study highlights how WhatsApp emerged as a pivotal platform for progressive groups to engage with diverse audiences, foster awareness, and challenge perceived electoral injustices during the 2023 campaign. Political opponents of ZANU PF strategically leveraged WhatsApp to disseminate content originally sourced from X (formerly Twitter), creating a seamless flow of

information across platforms. This tactic allowed opposition groups to connect with audiences in both urban and remote areas, exemplifying the strategic use of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013).

A significant factor driving the adoption of WhatsApp during the campaign was its ability to amplify content from X, enabling widespread distribution within WhatsApp groups. This approach exposed and critiqued ZANU PF's repressive tactics, including the deliberate misuse of legal and judicial systems, referred to as "lawfare." Lawfare, a concept denoting the manipulation of legal processes to suppress political opponents, was a prominent strategy employed by the ruling party to consolidate power. Civil society organizations and opposition activists capitalized on this concept to mobilize public sentiment and resistance against the regime.

The ubiquitous nature of WhatsApp allowed for the rapid circulation of critical narratives originally shared on X, reaching potentially millions of citizens across Zimbabwe. This seamless content transition from X to WhatsApp enabled opposition groups to highlight issues such as ZANU PF's legal harassment and other repressive tactics, ensuring these narratives gained traction even in remote and marginalized communities. This strategic use of WhatsApp not only challenged the government's dominance in traditional media but also demonstrated how digital platforms can be instrumental in fostering accountability and resistance in a semi-authoritarian state.

In conclusion, this study makes a substantive contribution to the academic discourse by illustrating how ZANU PF capitalized on its unrestrained access to both physical and digital spaces to shape voter perceptions and influence electoral outcomes. Concurrently, the research illuminates the adaptive strategies employed by the CCC, which, in response to systemic repression, positioned social media as a central platform for voter engagement and political communication. These findings emphasize the transformative potential of social media in contesting state-sponsored repression, amplifying alternative voices, and sustaining political

dialogue within an environment where physical spaces for free expression were systematically eroded during the 2023 electoral period.

Moreover, this analysis highlights the strategic use of platforms like WhatsApp by opposition actors to disseminate critical narratives, such as exposing ZANU PF's use of legal harassment as a tool for political suppression. The platform's pervasive reach enabled these messages to penetrate even the most marginalized and underserved regions of Zimbabwe, ensuring that opposition voices-maintained visibility despite significant structural barriers.

Finally, this research underscores the limitations of the hybrid media system, as conceptualized by Chadwick (2013), in semi-authoritarian regimes such as Zimbabwe. Here, structural inequalities and institutional controls severely restrict access to traditional media, particularly state-controlled outlets, which remain firmly monopolized by the ruling party. This monopolization curtails the hybridization process, compelling opposition groups to rely almost exclusively on digital platforms to counter the dominant narratives perpetuated by the state.

5.3.2 The Mediation Opportunity Structure: Social Media as a Transformative Tool to Circumvent Repression

This study asserts that digital platforms have become transformative tools for progressive political actors operating in repressive environments, enabling them to bypass traditional constraints and directly engage with the electorate during election campaigns. The Mediation Opportunity Structure theory posits that political actors can strategically advance social and political reform, even within hostile or restrictive media ecosystems, by leveraging alternative communication platforms (Cammaerts, 2012). Through this framework, political actors are able to amplify their visibility and influence, navigating repressive systems to communicate effectively with diverse audiences (Cammaerts, 2012). While this theory finds significant application in pluralistic, open societies particularly those in the Global North, it is also highly relevant in the semi-authoritarian state of Zimbabwe. Here, progressive groups, including the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society, utilized it to overcome barriers such as

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restricted access to public media, closed physical spaces, persecution, and the suppression of free expression. The 2023 general election serves as a critical case study, demonstrating how actors across the political divide employed the Mediation Opportunity Structure to disseminate their messages through digital platforms.

The mediation opportunity structure provides marginalized political actors, such as the CCC and civil society, with the tools to circumvent traditional barriers to communication and connect directly with the electorate via social media. For both the CCC and ZANU PF, digital platforms enhanced their visibility and deepened their engagement with voters. Both actors effectively leveraged these platforms to significantly influence the political trajectory of Zimbabwe, particularly during the March 2022 by-elections and the 2023 general elections.

During these pivotal electoral periods, the CCC adeptly employed the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework (Cammaerts, 2012) to convey a political message of inclusivity and transformation that resonated with diverse voter demographics. In Zimbabwe, where physical campaigning spaces are often restricted under a semi-authoritarian regime, digital platforms became indispensable tools for opposition politicians and activists seeking to advance their political agendas. For the ruling ZANU PF, the rise of social media presented both a challenge and an opportunity. On one hand, it disrupted the party's historical monopoly on political communication; on the other, it required the party to adapt its messaging strategies to a more fragmented and competitive media environment. By employing a dual strategy that blended traditional and digital media, ZANU PF reinforced its political dominance, even in the face of growing opposition visibility online. This evolution in Zimbabwean political campaigning underscores the critical role of digital technologies in reshaping narratives, promoting transparency, and contesting authoritarian practices.

The CCC's strategic use of hashtags illustrates how social media became a tool for engaging the electorate and shaping public consciousness within a repressive political context. Hashtags emerged as powerful mechanisms for organizing and framing political discourse, enabling

progressive groups to disseminate targeted messages directly to the public. For instance, the hashtag #DisbandZEC became a central rallying point for civil society's criticisms of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), particularly concerning allegations of voter roll manipulation. By deploying this hashtag, activists and advocacy groups extended their reach and influence, consistent with the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework (Cammaerts, 2012). This sustained digital advocacy exemplified the transformative potential of social media in contexts where traditional methods of political engagement were constrained.

Similarly, the hashtag #DefendTheVote exemplified the strategic deployment of social media to foster political resistance in semi-authoritarian environments. Aligned with the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework (Cammaerts, 2012), this hashtag served as a rallying point for progressive actors, especially the CCC, to advocate for transparency and fairness in the electoral process. By leveraging #DefendTheVote, the CCC overcame structural barriers imposed by the state and engaged citizens in collective efforts to protect democratic rights. The widespread use and resonance of such hashtags underscore their importance in amplifying calls for accountability and fairness in the electoral process, even within repressive contexts.

This research also underscores the critical role of digital platforms in enabling the CCC to circumvent ZANU PF's dominance over public media and physical campaigning spaces. Unlike ZANU PF, which enjoyed unrestricted access to state-controlled media and physical venues, the CCC faced numerous constraints, including legal persecution, violent intimidation, and limited access to public spaces for campaign activities. The CCC's rapid rise from its inception in January 2022 demonstrates the transformative potential of digital platforms in overcoming traditional barriers. Within three months of its formation, the CCC transitioned from obscurity to becoming Zimbabwe's principal opposition force, a trajectory largely attributed to its strategic use of social media for voter engagement and political mobilization.

For example, during the 2023 election campaign, the CCC adopted the hashtag #ForEveryone to encapsulate its inclusive political vision. Lacking access to traditional media, the party relied

heavily on digital platforms to directly communicate its election manifesto to voters. This adaptation enabled the CCC to sustain its political engagement and navigate the repressive political environment, aligning with the principles of the Mediation Opportunity Structure (Cammaerts, 2012).

Furthermore, activists and citizens employed innovative strategies to maintain their presence on digital platforms despite the state's efforts to suppress dissent. Recognizing the risks of state surveillance, many activists created anonymous "ghost accounts" to critique the government while avoiding detection. This approach reflects the adaptability of individuals and groups within the Mediation Opportunity Structure framework, demonstrating how they sustain political discourse in hostile environments. By employing both visible and anonymous strategies, these actors ensured that critical issues such as corruption, governance, and electoral malpractice remained at the forefront of public discussions.

In summary, this study advances the scholarly understanding of how social media has emerged as a vital instrument for marginalized political actors operating within semi-authoritarian regimes such as Zimbabwe. The findings illuminate the dual functionality of social media, serving as both a tool of empowerment for progressive forces and a mechanism through which authoritarian regimes can adapt and consolidate their dominance. While opposition groups and civil society utilize digital platforms to challenge state hegemony, ruling parties exploit these same technologies to reinforce their control and disseminate state-aligned narratives.

Through the strategic use of hashtags, innovative digital campaigns, and social media platforms, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society organizations demonstrated the potential of digital technologies to disrupt repressive practices and cultivate democratic engagement, even within the constraints imposed by an authoritarian system. This underscores the transformative possibilities of digital activism in contexts where traditional avenues for political participation and free expression are systematically curtailed.

The applicability of the Mediation Opportunity Structure theory (Cammaerts, 2012) is particularly evident in the Zimbabwean context. The theory effectively captures how progressive actors, such as the CCC and civil society, have leveraged digital platforms to surmount structural barriers, including limited access to state-controlled media, the closure of physical spaces for dissent, political persecution, and widespread suppression of free expression. This demonstrates the adaptability of digital media in creating alternative spaces for political engagement and challenging authoritarian power dynamics.

5.3.3 The Connection Action: Social Media Empowered Activists to Challenge ZPF's Monopoly on Political Messaging

This study argues that social media platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp played a pivotal role in transforming political mobilization and communication strategies across urban and rural constituencies in Zimbabwe's tightly regulated political environment during the 2023 election campaign. These digital platforms became essential tools for the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society activists, enabling them to challenge the long-standing hegemony of political messaging maintained by ZANU PF. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Connective Action as articulated by Bennett and Segerberg (2013), this research demonstrates how these platforms facilitated the rapid dissemination of information and allowed diverse groups to mobilize supporters effectively across varying geographic and social contexts.

Connective Action theory highlights the transformative impact of digital technologies in democratizing access to communication, empowering individuals and groups to organize collectively without relying on traditional hierarchical structures. This theoretical framework is particularly applicable to semi-authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe, where political activity is heavily constrained. Despite these limitations, CCC and civil society activists leveraged social media to circumvent state-controlled communication channels, disseminate their political messages, and engage with supporters in both urban areas and rural communities.

The democratizing influence of social media became increasingly apparent as CCC activists and civil society organizations used platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp to amplify their messages and cultivate grassroots engagement. For CCC campaigners, social media offered an unprecedented opportunity to bypass the strict censorship imposed on traditional media and directly communicate with the electorate. This was particularly critical in an environment where state-controlled media offered little or no space for opposition narratives. Through WhatsApp, a platform accessible to nearly half of Zimbabwe's internet users, CCC activists coordinated campaign activities, shared real-time updates, and maintained communication with supporters in remote areas, where state media infrastructure is limited and often skewed in favor of the ruling party.

During the 2023 elections, the dual role of social media as both a tool for democratic participation and a mechanism for disrupting entrenched political power became increasingly evident. On one hand, platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter enabled CCC and civil society activists to mount significant challenges to ZANU PF's control over political messaging. On the other hand, ZANU PF's reliance on traditional media outlets and its inability to fully harness the potential of digital platforms underscored its shortcomings in adapting to a rapidly evolving communication landscape. As the ruling party intensified efforts to suppress dissent through state-controlled media, an increasing number of citizens turned to social media for uncensored and alternative information. This shift not only amplified the voices of CCC and civil society actors but also expanded their influence across the political spectrum.

Among social media platforms, WhatsApp warrants particular attention due to its widespread accessibility and effectiveness in fostering direct communication. Unlike other platforms, WhatsApp's closed-group functionality enabled intimate and secure conversations, making it an indispensable tool for grassroots mobilization. CCC campaigners, for instance, effectively utilized WhatsApp to connect with younger, tech-savvy voters, a demographic historically disengaged from conventional political processes. Through strategic and innovative messaging tailored to this audience, CCC activists not only extended their outreach but also cultivated

deeper engagement, transforming passive observers into active participants in the electoral process. WhatsApp's ability to penetrate rural constituencies, traditionally dominated by ZANU PF due to its control over state resources, further disrupted established political dynamics and introduced new opportunities for political contestation.

Ironically, ZANU PF's efforts to maintain its dominance over political narratives by monopolizing state-controlled media inadvertently accelerated the migration of political discourse to digital platforms. In seeking to suppress alternative voices, the ruling party created a vacuum that social media platforms rapidly filled, becoming alternative public spheres where CCC and civil society activists engaged in open dialogue and shared uncensored information. This digital migration marked a significant disruption of Zimbabwe's historically controlled media ecosystem, illustrating social media's capacity to function as both a tool of resistance and a means of political empowerment.

In this context, social media emerged as a democratizing force that challenged entrenched power structures while providing marginalized voices with the opportunity to actively participate in the political discourse. For CCC and civil society organizations, the strategic use of platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp not only amplified their campaigns but also transformed the broader dynamics of political communication in Zimbabwe. The transition from traditional to digital media demonstrated the adaptability and resilience of opposition movements in navigating and countering systemic restrictions imposed by semi-authoritarian regimes.

In conclusion, this research significantly enhances academic discourse on the role of social media in political campaigns within semi-authoritarian contexts by elucidating its dual impact during Zimbabwe's 2023 elections. Social media emerged as a transformative tool that empowered the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society actors to challenge ZANU PF's entrenched dominance over political narratives. At the same time, the study underscores the ruling party's inability to fully adapt to the decentralized and fluid nature of digital communication platforms, which disrupted its traditional control over messaging.

These findings demonstrate that in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe, social media functions not only as a counterbalance to state-controlled narratives but also as a catalyst for enhanced political engagement and broader contestation of power. The broader implications of this dynamic extend well beyond Zimbabwe, offering critical insights into how digital platforms are redefining political communication and activism in semi-authoritarian and transitional democratic systems globally.

The concept of Connective Action, as articulated by Bennett and Segerberg (2013), proves particularly relevant to the Zimbabwean context. It illustrates how, in environments where political activity is severely restricted, digital platforms provide vital avenues for CCC and civil society actors to disrupt the ruling party's longstanding hegemony over political messaging. This theoretical framework further underscores the capacity of social media to facilitate collective action and foster alternative spaces for political discourse in restrictive regimes.

5.3.4 The Contentious Publicness: Social Media as an Enabler for Underrepresented Voices

This research emphasizes the pivotal role played by social media as a tool for empowering marginalized voices within semi-authoritarian states such as Zimbabwe, particularly during the highly contested 2023 election period. The theoretical framework of Contentious Publicness provides an essential lens for understanding this dynamic, as it conceptualizes public spaces as inherently contested arenas. In these spaces, various actors, both state and non-state, compete for visibility, legitimacy, and influence over public discourse (Kavada & Poell, 2020). Within this context, digital platforms emerge as transformative arenas where marginalized voices can challenge dominant hegemonies and introduce alternative narratives into the public sphere. The central premise of the Contentious Publicness framework posits that digital tools facilitate the emergence of new actors and perspectives, thereby reshaping the contours of public engagement and discourse (Kavada & Poell, 2020). While this framework has been primarily applied to pluralistic and open societies, particularly in the Global North, it also holds considerable

applicability in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe. In these environments, where opposition parties and civil society organizations encounter systemic repression, digital platforms become vital channels for communicating directly with citizens and the international community, circumventing traditional state-controlled media structures.

In the politically repressive landscape of Zimbabwe, the 2023 election unfolded amidst widespread skepticism regarding the impartiality of the Zimbabwe Election Commission (ZEC). This skepticism stemmed from the perception that ZEC, under the influence of key appointments linked to the ruling ZANU-PF party, would likely manipulate the electoral process in favor of the incumbent government. Historically, since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, electoral processes have been marred by persistent allegations of corruption, voter coercion, and vote-buying. These allegations extended into the 2023 election, where ZEC was accused of manipulating the election processes in favor of the ruling party. Consequently, progressive groups such as the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society organizations regarded ZEC as an extension of the ruling party's apparatus. This perception led to widespread calls for electoral reforms under the viral hashtag #DisbandZEC.

The management of the election thus became a contested public arena, exemplifying the principles of the Contentious Publicness framework (Kavada & Poell, 2020). Within this contested space, state actors such as ZANU-PF claimed that the electoral process was fair, while progressive entities like the CCC and civil society groups argued that it was opaque and biased under ZEC's leadership. Through the hashtag #DisbandZEC, these progressive actors demanded that ZEC adopt transparent, impartial, and equitable practices for managing the 2023 elections. By leveraging digital platforms, the CCC and civil society amplified their concerns about electoral manipulation orchestrated by ZEC under the indirect influence of the ruling party. This strategic use of digital tools aligned with the Contentious Publicness framework, wherein marginalized actors harness digital platforms to challenge dominant power structures and raise awareness among both domestic and international audiences. Predictably, the ruling party rejected calls to reform or dismantle ZEC, given its strategic leverage over the commission.

Conversely, CCC and civil society groups viewed the #DisbandZEC campaign as their primary means of counteracting the ruling party's dominance over the electoral process.

Moreover, within Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian democratic framework, the ruling party employed additional methods of electoral manipulation, such as the strategic misuse of legal mechanisms to marginalize opposition forces and suppress dissenting voices. This practice, widely referred to as "lawfare," involved the deliberate weaponization of judicial and legal systems to target progressive groups, including the CCC and civil society organizations. During the 2023 election period, the concept of lawfare gained prominence within opposition discourse as a powerful analytical and rhetorical tool to describe the systematic legal abuses perpetrated by the ruling party. Progressive groups used social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), to disseminate key posts and screenshots highlighting instances of lawfare. These posts were further circulated via WhatsApp groups to reach a broader audience, including grassroots voters and the international community.

In this context, WhatsApp emerged as a critical virtual public sphere where CCC and civil society activists could contest the ruling party's narrative that the 2023 election was conducted fairly. By underscoring ZANU-PF's manipulation of judicial processes, these actors framed such practices as emblematic of broader authoritarian tendencies, thereby mobilizing political support and raising awareness of electoral injustices both domestically and globally. The strategic deployment of WhatsApp enabled progressive groups to engage with a diverse and dispersed electorate, fostering a sense of resistance and collective awareness against perceived electoral malpractices during the campaign period.

In conclusion, this study makes a significant contribution to the expanding body of literature on the role of social media in semi-authoritarian regimes, with a focus on the Zimbabwean context. It highlights how marginalized actors, including the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) and civil society organizations, strategically utilized the expansive reach of platforms such as WhatsApp to amplify critical narratives, such as exposing the ruling party's use of legal

harassment as a tool of political suppression. These efforts ensured that dissenting voices resonated even in remote and marginalized communities.

Ultimately, this research underscores the transformative potential of social media as a critical enabler for marginalized actors in political communication within semi-authoritarian environments. The applicability of the Contentious Publicness framework (Kavada & Poell, 2020) is particularly evident in contexts like Zimbabwe, where systemic repression limits access to traditional media. In such settings, digital platforms emerge as essential channels through which opposition parties and civil society actors can directly engage with citizens and the global community, bypassing the entrenched structures of state-controlled media. This dynamic illustrates the capacity of social media to subvert authoritarian control and foster alternative spaces for political engagement and discourse.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study was constrained by a variety of practical and methodological challenges, which made it unfeasible to engage a statistically representative sample of Zimbabwean citizens regarding the influence of social media during the 2023 election campaign. Instead, the research prioritized a targeted examination of a relatively limited sample of participants, focusing on the role and utilization of digital technologies within the electoral context during the specific period spanning from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2023. This narrower focus enabled in-depth exploration but limited the broader applicability of the findings.

The pre-election phase of the study, which relied primarily on video interviews, encountered a range of logistical and contextual challenges. A significant limitation stemmed from participants' evident apprehension during interviews, driven in part by the tense political climate in Zimbabwe, which made respondents wary of expressing opinions that could be perceived as controversial or oppositional. Additionally, securing appointments proved particularly difficult, as numerous individuals either declined invitations to participate or failed to respond altogether. Notably, certain respondents, particularly politicians and political activists, demonstrated a

tendency to tailor their responses in alignment with their respective political party positions, which introduced a layer of bias that had to be carefully navigated.

Consequently, during the video interview phase, only four out of nine initially contacted electoral candidates expressed a willingness to participate in the study. However, two of these candidates later withdrew, citing overwhelming demands on their time due to the intensity of their campaign schedules. Similarly, among the six representatives from civil society organizations who initially indicated interest in participating, five confirmed their willingness to contribute. However, two of these individuals were later forced to withdraw, attributing their unavailability to demanding workloads and scheduling conflicts. Furthermore, out of thirty-five political activists initially approached for participation, fifteen agreed to take part in the study. However, three of these participants later withdrew due to persistent internet connectivity challenges, while two others were unable to proceed with the interviews due to unexpected power outages, which are recurrent challenges within Zimbabwe's infrastructure landscape.

In the post-election phase, the research team transitioned to email interviews in an effort to mitigate some of the logistical challenges encountered earlier. Nevertheless, the response rate remained limited, as only nine out of the original fifteen participants provided substantive replies. The final cohort of respondents from this phase comprised two politicians, one leader from civil society, and six political activists, reflecting the continued constraints on broader representation within the study sample.

Another significant limitation of this study was the inability to identify and engage with various WhatsApp communities that could have provided a more inclusive cross-sectional representation of Zimbabweans utilizing digital technologies during the 2023 election campaign. WhatsApp, as a widely used platform for political communication and mobilization in Zimbabwe, represents an essential space for digital interaction; however, its closed-group structure and lack of publicly accessible data presented challenges in locating and analyzing relevant communities. This

shortcoming further underscores the constraints of the study in capturing a fully representative understanding of the digital campaign dynamics.

Thus, the primary limitation of this research lies in the absence of a statistically representative sample of the Zimbabwean population. Given the study's reliance on a relatively small and targeted participant pool, the findings inherently lack generalizability and should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, the insights derived from this research remain valuable, as they offer a preliminary understanding of how social media was utilized in the 2023 Zimbabwean electoral process. These findings provide an empirical basis for forming tentative conclusions that can inform the development of more comprehensive, large-scale research studies in the future. By addressing these limitations and building on the foundational insights offered here, subsequent investigations can generate more robust and widely applicable findings

5.5 Possible Areas for Future research

Given the acknowledged limitations of this study, particularly the absence of a statistically representative sample, future research should prioritize the implementation of a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous survey that examines the utilization of digital technologies during election campaigns in Zimbabwe. Such a survey would aim to provide a more inclusive and representative cross-section of Zimbabwean citizens who engage with social media during electoral periods. By expanding the scope of data collection to include participants from diverse demographics rural and urban populations, age groups, and socioeconomic backgrounds future studies could generate empirically grounded insights into patterns of access, engagement, and utilization of digital platforms in semi-authoritarian electoral contexts. This approach would yield a more nuanced understanding of how social media influences electoral participation, voter decision-making, and political mobilization across Zimbabwe's complex socio-political landscape.

Future research could also delve more specifically into the dynamics of information flow within WhatsApp groups, particularly those that are explicitly associated with election campaigns.

Given WhatsApp's centrality as a communication tool in Zimbabwe, such a study could reveal significant insights into the ways voters receive, process, and disseminate political messages. A critical focus could be placed on examining the strategic methods employed by political parties to leverage WhatsApp for targeted political messaging, voter mobilization, and agenda setting during campaign periods. By capturing the specific mechanisms through which information spreads within these digital communities, such research could uncover the extent to which WhatsApp serves as both a tool of political empowerment and manipulation in semi-authoritarian regimes. To enhance the robustness of the findings, future studies should aim to include a broader and more diverse range of WhatsApp communities, ensuring that various political affiliations, socio-economic groups, and geographic regions are represented to capture a holistic picture of digital platform engagement during elections.

Given that approximately 30% of Zimbabwe's population currently engages with digital technologies, there is an emerging need for longitudinal studies that examine trends and shifts in digital engagement over extended periods. Such longitudinal research could provide a comparative analysis of the evolving role of social media in Zimbabwe's electoral processes across multiple election cycles. By tracking changes in digital access, usage patterns, and the effectiveness of online political strategies over time, these studies would offer deeper insights into the long-term impact of digital technologies in semi-authoritarian electoral environments. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could identify whether increasing digital literacy, expanding internet access, and shifts in platform usage are fostering greater democratization of political communication or whether they are reinforcing existing power imbalances within repressive political systems.

Additionally, future research might investigate the intersection of digital technology usage with traditional offline political campaigning to assess their complementary or conflicting roles in electoral processes. This approach would allow for a more integrated understanding of how political actors navigate hybrid media systems where both traditional and digital media coexist within contexts like Zimbabwe. It could also explore how voters engage with different media

formats to form opinions and make electoral decisions, thereby shedding light on the complex interplay between online and offline political communication strategies.

In conclusion, by addressing the limitations of this study and expanding the scope of future research to include comprehensive surveys, targeted analyses of WhatsApp dynamics, longitudinal studies, and hybrid media investigations, scholars can contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the role of social media in electoral campaigns within semi-authoritarian states like Zimbabwe. These proposed avenues of research would not only fill existing knowledge gaps but also offer critical insights into the broader implications of digital technology on political participation, mobilization, and democratization in restrictive political environments.

5.6 Future of Democracy in Zimbabwe and the Prodemocracy Movement

The trajectory of democracy in Zimbabwe is likely to remain entrenched in a repressive state apparatus within the broader sub-Saharan African region. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), as the incumbent ruling party, is expected to continue leveraging the substantial advantages of incumbency to manipulate electoral processes and deploy repressive tactics to maintain its dominant grip on power. These tactics are likely to ensure that public media, and a significant portion of private traditional media, will remain tools for propagating the ruling party's political narrative, systematically marginalizing progressive entities such as opposition parties, government critics, and civil society. The harassment, imprisonment, or intimidation of political activists and dissenters is also anticipated to persist as a primary strategy for silencing opposing voices. Furthermore, ZANU PF is likely to maintain its established practice of using traditional leaders as intermediaries to coerce rural communities into voting for the ruling party through both implicit and explicit forms of pressure.

Conversely, the future of Zimbabwe's pro-democracy movement, encompassing the main opposition parties and civil society, will continue to be shaped by the need to adapt to systemic

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repression. Faced with restrictions on physical campaigning spaces and state-controlled media, progressive forces will increasingly rely on social media as a critical tool for mobilizing voters, amplifying dissent, and fostering political discourse. In an environment where free expression in physical spaces is systematically dismantled, social media platforms will remain essential for opposition politicians and civil society actors to reach their constituents, communicate alternative narratives, and sustain their agendas. This digital space will serve as a vital medium for challenging state repression, enabling Zimbabwe's pro-democracy movement to engage with the electorate, circumvent the ruling party's control over media, and reshape the dynamics of political communication in the semi-authoritarian state.

Platforms such as WhatsApp will likely play a particularly pivotal role in Zimbabwe's constrained political landscape. Its widespread use and extensive reach across urban and rural constituencies make it a highly effective tool for disseminating critical information and engaging with diverse audiences. Progressive forces will continue to rely on WhatsApp to circulate narratives highlighting ZANU PF's electoral manipulation, legal harassment, political violence, and systemic corruption. By enabling direct communication with citizens, WhatsApp will remain indispensable for fostering awareness, mobilizing political support, and ensuring that critical messages penetrate even the most marginalized and geographically isolated communities.

In addition, the strategic deployment of hashtags on social media platforms will continue to be an essential tool for Zimbabwe's pro-democracy movement. Hashtags offer a mechanism for amplifying dissenting voices, raising awareness, and engaging the public on key electoral issues, including governance failures and injustices. Within Zimbabwe's repressive political environment, hashtags will remain a highly visible form of digital activism, capable of penetrating public consciousness and mobilizing public opinion on a national and international scale. The effectiveness of such tools lies in their ability to foster solidarity, mobilize grassroots support, and drive political discourse in contexts where traditional avenues of engagement remain suppressed.

Nevertheless, while digital platforms offer critical avenues for progressive groups to circumvent restrictions on public media and physical campaign spaces, they remain limited in their capacity to counteract the manipulation of electoral processes by the ruling party. For example, the state's ability to shut down internet access or restrict social media during critical moments such as election cycles represents a significant challenge to the sustainability of digital political engagement. Despite these limitations, pro-democracy movements can still leverage social media to inform both the electorate and the international community about instances of electoral manipulation, suppression of dissent, and state-imposed restrictions on digital platforms. This transparency not only raises awareness but also enhances the legitimacy of progressive movements domestically and internationally.

In conclusion, while Zimbabwe's future political landscape is likely to remain dominated by a repressive ruling party that exploits both traditional and digital media to maintain its hold on power, the pro-democracy movement has significant opportunities to utilize social media as a transformative tool. By leveraging platforms such as WhatsApp and strategically deploying hashtags, opposition groups and civil society can continue to challenge state repression, amplify alternative narratives, and engage diverse constituencies. Although digital activism cannot entirely dismantle systemic barriers or prevent electoral manipulation, it provides critical avenues for sustaining political engagement, informing the public, and garnering support from international stakeholders. As such, the continued evolution and strategic deployment of digital technologies will remain central to the pro-democracy movement's resilience and capacity to influence Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian political landscape.

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