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The Impact of Social Media on Social Cohesion in South Africa

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Abstract: Social cohesion is an important policy issue with social, political and economic consequences in South Africa. Given the country's diverse population comprised of different races, ethnicities and migrants from around the world, its history of violence and the persistent incidences of xenophobia, social cohesion has become a prominent issue. The study foregoes discussing the challenges of achieving social cohesion to examine the nexus between social media and social cohesion promotion. Since lockdown was introduced in March 2020, social media has become a means for daily communication, bridging racial, ethnic, class and geographical boundaries. Against this background, this study explored the impact of social media on social cohesion in South Africa? The main objective was to examine the role played by social media in fostering social cohesion. A systematic review of relevant academic literature and research reports on social media and social cohesion was adopted in gathering data. By examining the social media social cohesion nexus, an illustration of social media as an essential determinant of social cohesion can be delineated. Teasing out these aspects is vital in enriching the current literature on understanding social cohesion. The study found that social media has become an essential platform for nation-building, potentially bridging racial, ethnic, cultural, and geographical gaps in South African society. However, due to the threats of misinformation and insensitive use, social media can hamstring social cohesion and cause instability. The study recommends that social media be used appropriately and sensitively in strengthening interpersonal relationships that transcend race, culture, ethnicity, nationality, and religion.

Keywords: *Social-Media, Social Cohesion, South Africa, Public Sphere, Solidarity.*

1. Introduction

The young democracy of South Africa has not yet emerged as the cohesive society (Kiguwa & Langa, 2015; Patel, 2021b) envisioned at independence over two and a half decades ago. Persistent social movements, routine xenophobic violence, continuous service delivery protests and growing unemployment, widening racial inequalities and pervasive race wars on social media, among other things, illustrate the cleavages that characterize the country's political landscape and indicate the need for cohesion. Given the complex diversity of the South African population, comprised of African, Coloured, Indian and White races; over 11 ethnic groups and immigrants from the continent and beyond (Statistics South Africa, 2019, 2021), social cohesion has become a critical policy agenda. The conceptual underpinnings of social cohesion suggest that a "glue" must bind society together (Jakubowicz, 2007; Burns: et al., 2018; Njozela, Shaw & Burns, 2021). This glue is akin to a shared sense of identity, ideas and values to resolve distinctions among individuals within groups and commonality in goals to ensure cooperation and unity between different groups. Jakubowicz utilizes the phrase "the building and demolition of social capital" to describe processes that encourage people to unite and divide respectively (Jakubowicz, 2007). At the same time, he asserts that social capital includes "bonding processes that build links within groups," and "bridging processes that build links between groups."

This study conceptualizes social cohesion in the South African context in fuller detail in the literature review. Nevertheless, the study broadly defines the concept as the process of forming a collective and, simultaneously, the level of interrelatedness in a society from the development perspective. Social cohesion is idealized as a solution to many social ills; therefore, it is measured by the levels of the connectedness of populations in society, inequality and poverty *inter alia*. Taking note of the aspects of interrelatedness and connectedness, the mass media, in general, have always been utilized to build or demolish social capital over the years. In particular, social media have evolved to dominate the construction and communication of culture and meaning in the public sphere of society on a global scale. The study conceptualizes social media as the means of transmission over the internet through public applications. Applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Facebook Messenger and Instagram provided by Meta; Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn define the purview of social media under this study. The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and the subsequent policy

response of national lockdowns catapulted the uptake of social media in the public sphere of day-to-day life, prompting interest in the social media and social cohesion nexus.

This research seeks to answer the question, what is the impact of social media on social cohesion in South Africa? The study's main objectives are to delineate the role(s) played by social media and analyze if social media has enhanced or diminished social cohesion in South Africa. By examining the nexus between social media and social cohesion in South Africa, an illustration of social media as both a key determinant and essential facilitator of social cohesion in contemporary South Africa can be delineated. Teasing out these aspects can enrich the current literature on understanding social cohesion. It also opens up avenues and debates around achieving greater cohesiveness in South Africa and, by extension Africa.

2. Literature Review

Social Cohesion in the South African Context: Achieving social cohesion is one of the more elusive policy challenges that the post-apartheid South African state faces (Kiguwa & Langa, 2015; Burns: et al., 2018; Njozela, Shaw & Burns, 2021; Patel, 2021a). Racial inequalities, the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the diversity of the population are some of the factors that feed into this challenge. Social cohesion is a longstanding concept, yet it appeared fairly recently during the last two decades of South Africa's democracy (Palmary, 2015). It can be traced to the 2004 Social Cohesion and Social Justice in South Africa report on the dangers of racism, class and social inequality to unify the country (Dexter, 2004). The concept also featured in political speeches like former President Zuma's 2009 address that reiterated the post-apartheid goal of building a unified democratic South Africa and the 2011 National Planning Commission's diagnostic document on social cohesion (Department of Arts and Culture South Africa, 2012: 2). The term has been intricately tied to the concepts of 'Ubuntu' and the 'rainbow nation' ever since. However, the question remains, what is social cohesion in the South African context? Although social cohesion is essential, there is little consensus on what the term entails (Chan, To & Chan, 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Emile Durkheim conceptualized social cohesion as characterized by the absence of social conflict and the vital force that unites society (Fonseca, Lukosch & Brazier, 2019).

The concept has received much scholarly conflicting attention ever since (Maxwell, 1996; Jenson et al., 1998; Chan, To & Chan, 2006 and OECD, 2011), among others. The lack of definitional consensus can be attributed to the politicization of social cohesion and conceptualization from distinct policy domains. For instance, the focus of social cohesion for the World Bank was on economic development. For the European Union, social cohesion was understood in relation to economic instability *inter alia* (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), "… the OECD's vision for social cohesion emphasizes the right to economic well-being, the Council of Europe stresses democratic citizenship, and the EU, solidarity" (Jeannotte, 2000). Distinct conceptualizations of social cohesion are also notable on the African continent. Notwithstanding the lack of definitional consensus, the term has been utilized by policymakers, academics, thinktanks and scientists in relation to development and in the formulation of policies aimed at addressing challenges in society (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Consequently, social cohesion has been vaguely constructed as an all-encompassing concept for most if not all societal challenges. For instance, while noting the complexities of defining social cohesion, the HSRC describe the concept as, "… the extent to which a society is coherent, united and functional, providing an environment within which its citizens can flourish" (Dexter, 2004). The best way of conceptualising social cohesion has been to characterise an incohesive society.

Which has often been marked by conflict, social unrest, violence, social inequality and marginalization of minority portions of society (David et al., 2018; Meiring, Kannemeyer & Potgieter, 2018). The absence of social cohesion can be associated with authoritarian regimes mainly because practices of coercion and social exclusion characterize them. Therefore, social cohesion is conceptualized as intricately tied with democracy, social inclusion, social justice, cooperation, economic growth, unity and open access, among others. There are five measures of social cohesion: affiliation/isolation, which forms identity or shared values; insertion/exclusion, which is the availability of access to economic opportunities; participation/passivity in public affairs; acceptance/rejection; and legitimacy/illegitimacy (Jenson et al., 1998). These characterizations show the complexity of defining social cohesion. To delineate the meaning of social cohesion within this

article, we employ three definitions that speak to the context of South Africa. First, "The term social cohesion seems to group all pressing social issues – racism, income inequality, civic responsibility, etc. – into one overarching question: how can South African citizens be brought to think and act in solidarity, in the interests of everyone and the nation as a whole?" (Struwig et al., 2013, 401). The above description speaks to the inclusive nature of social cohesion as an umbrella term for resolving most social ills. The element of solidarity implies that social cohesion depends upon the cooperation of members of society.

Second, "A cohesive society works towards the well-being of all of its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization. It entails three major dimensions: fostering cohesion by building networks of relationships, trust and identity between different groups; fighting discrimination, exclusion and excessive inequalities; and enabling upward social mobility" (OECD, 2011, 52-3). And third, "A process of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community" (Maxwell, 1996). The last two definitions encapsulate the essence of solidarity and cooperation of members of society in actively addressing the challenges they face for the benefit and equality of all. They also speak to developing a social identity where community members feel valued, and their participation is required. The above definitions help give the scope of the envisioned social cohesion in South Africa. Similar to other nations, the post-apartheid democratic state of South Africa has experienced increased threats to social cohesion since independence in 1994. To understand the importance of attaining social cohesion in the country, it is important to look at the diversity of the South African social, political and economic landscape aptly dubbed the rainbow nation.

Understanding the Diversity of the South African Social Landscape: South Africa is a diverse country with a population that is comprised of African, Coloured, Indian and White races; over 11 ethnic groups and immigrants from the continent and the world, making social cohesion a vital policy agenda (Statistics South Africa, 2019, 2021). The South African constitution reflects the diversity of the country and also calls for equality for all people that live in the country as it declares, "We the people of South Africa believe that South Africa belongs to everyone who lives in it, united in our diversity" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 | South African Government, no date) indicating the importance of a socially cohesive post-apartheid South African democratic nation. However, Palmary asserts that on a closer inspection of the constitution, social cohesion has been constructed around citizenship. As a result, it becomes a source of social fragmentation since the policy is exclusionary of groups that are non-citizens (Palmary, 2015). For instance, Chapter Nine of the constitution speaks of inclusivity between the state and its citizens and not necessarily groups that are non-citizens such as migrants.

Palmary notes that this is an example of negative social cohesion since encouraging social cohesion amongst citizens ignores and excludes the existence of immigration. A consequence of this has been the sporadic outbreaks of xenophobia that have plagued the post-apartheid democracy of South Africa, but it does not end there. Incidents such as basic services delivery protests, increasing youth unemployment, xenophobic attacks on African migrants and anti-migrant protests, spatial exclusion, institutionalized racism, and sexism, among others, point out the social divisions in the rainbow nation (Struwig et al., 2013). The population has been fragmented on the lines of race, unequal social classes, ethnicity, language, the spatial division between the urban and rural, migration status and religion, to name a few. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) conducted a national public opinion survey, the South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB), in 2019, which showed that over 70 percent of South Africans pointed to the apartheid regime as the source and cause of poverty in the country today (IJR, 2019).

The apartheid system segregated and discriminated against the majority South African population that was non-white and comprised of black and colored groups. All non-whites were excluded from meaningful employment, which was controlled by the white minority population. Social interaction or contact between whites and non-whites was forbidden, resulting in unequal educational standards and even denied the participation of non-whites in the government unless they were represented by a white South African, to name a few. By the time independence came in 1994, most of the population was economically, politically and socially disadvantaged, while the minority controlled and owned most of the country. According to the (IJR, 2017), South Africans are economically insecure and disadvantaged, which is one of the major causes of

fragmentation within the country. Considering the aforementioned state of social cohesion in South Africa, this research seeks to understand the impact social media has had on social cohesion in the country.

3. Methodology

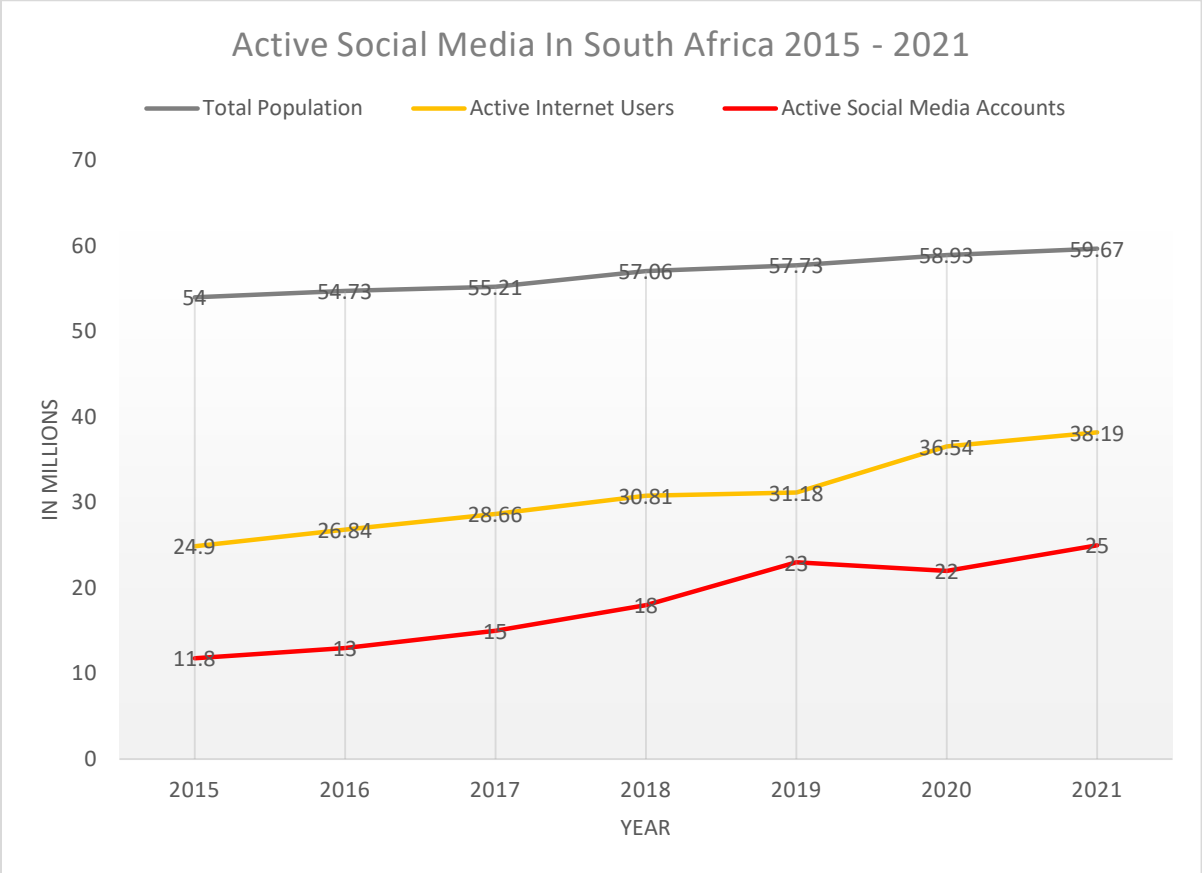
The study used a documentary research methodology to review the literature and social media databases. A systematic literature review was adopted to gather data on relevant academic articles, research reports, newspapers and online blogs on social media and social cohesion in South Africa. The study examined the We Are Social and Hootsuite digital reports from 2015 to 2021, databases such as Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), Statista and Hello Yes Marketing, among others, to determine social media usage trends in South Africa during the COVID19 crisis from 2020 to midyear 2021. The study also analyzed data on critical aspects of social cohesion, such as the level of inequality and cooperation among citizens in the country and the use of social media in bringing South Africans together during the time mentioned above. The study also considered the challenges to building a socially cohesive society associated with using social media in the country.

4. Results and Discussion

The modern public domain is influenced by media more generally and social media more specifically. This is true for the South African public domain, given the number of social media users. Based on the We Are Social & Hootsuite's Most Used Social Media Platforms in South Africa Report in January 2020, South African internet users between the age of 16 to 64 reported using the following social media platforms: WhatsApp being the most used platform with 89 percent, followed by YouTube with 87 percent, Facebook 83 percent, FB Messenger 61 percent, Instagram 61 percent, Twitter 44 percent, Pinterest 42 percent and LinkedIn with 41 percent to name a few (Kemp, 2020). The implications social media has on social cohesion are therefore manifold. Ideally, the roles of social media are to provide both local and international platforms for the production, dissemination, negotiation and consumption of societal meaning (Jakubowicz, 2007). According to Curran, Morley and Walkerdine (1996), since the media are, in essence, tools of mass communication in any society, media is neutral, meaning it can be utilized to either promote social cohesion or fuel social conflict. We consider some of the implications of social media on social cohesion below.

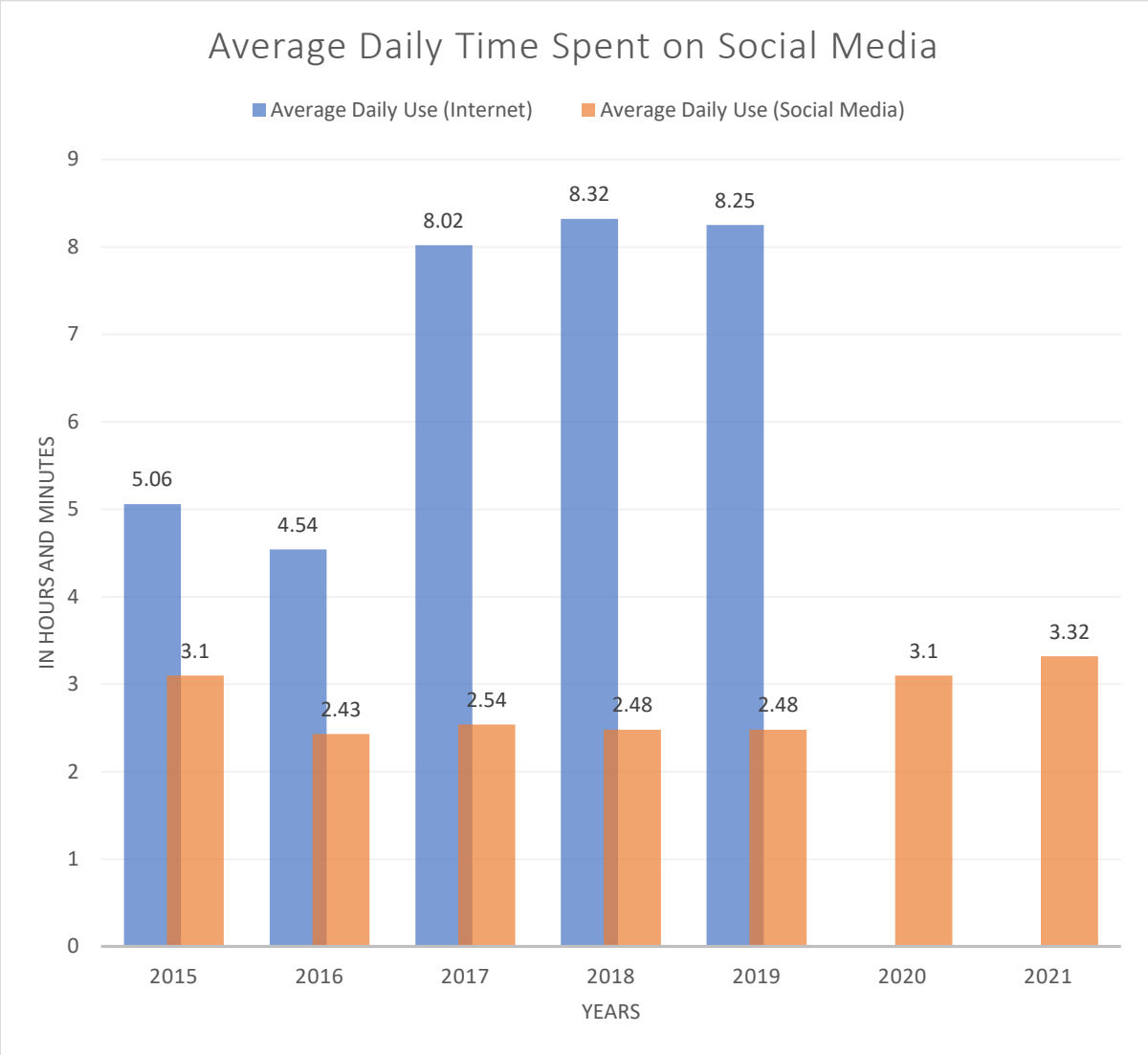
The Influence of Social Media on South Africa's Public Sphere: For social media to significantly impact social cohesion in South Africa, utilization of the former by a considerable number of the country's population must be established. An examination of the internet and social media activity against the total population in South Africa as of 2021 shows that 64% of the population were active internet users, and about 41.9% were active social media users (Kemp, 2021). Therefore, the utilization of social media has a strong bearing on social cohesion in the country. Below are Figure 1 and Figure 2 showing the utilization of the internet and social media against the total population and the average daily use of the internet and social media from 2015 to 2021, respectively. The figures are a conflation of the Digital Reports from We Are Social & Hootsuite from 2015 to 2021 to establish if a reasonable section of the population is utilizing social media to have any real impact on social cohesion.

Figure 1: Internet and Social Media Users from 2015 - 2021



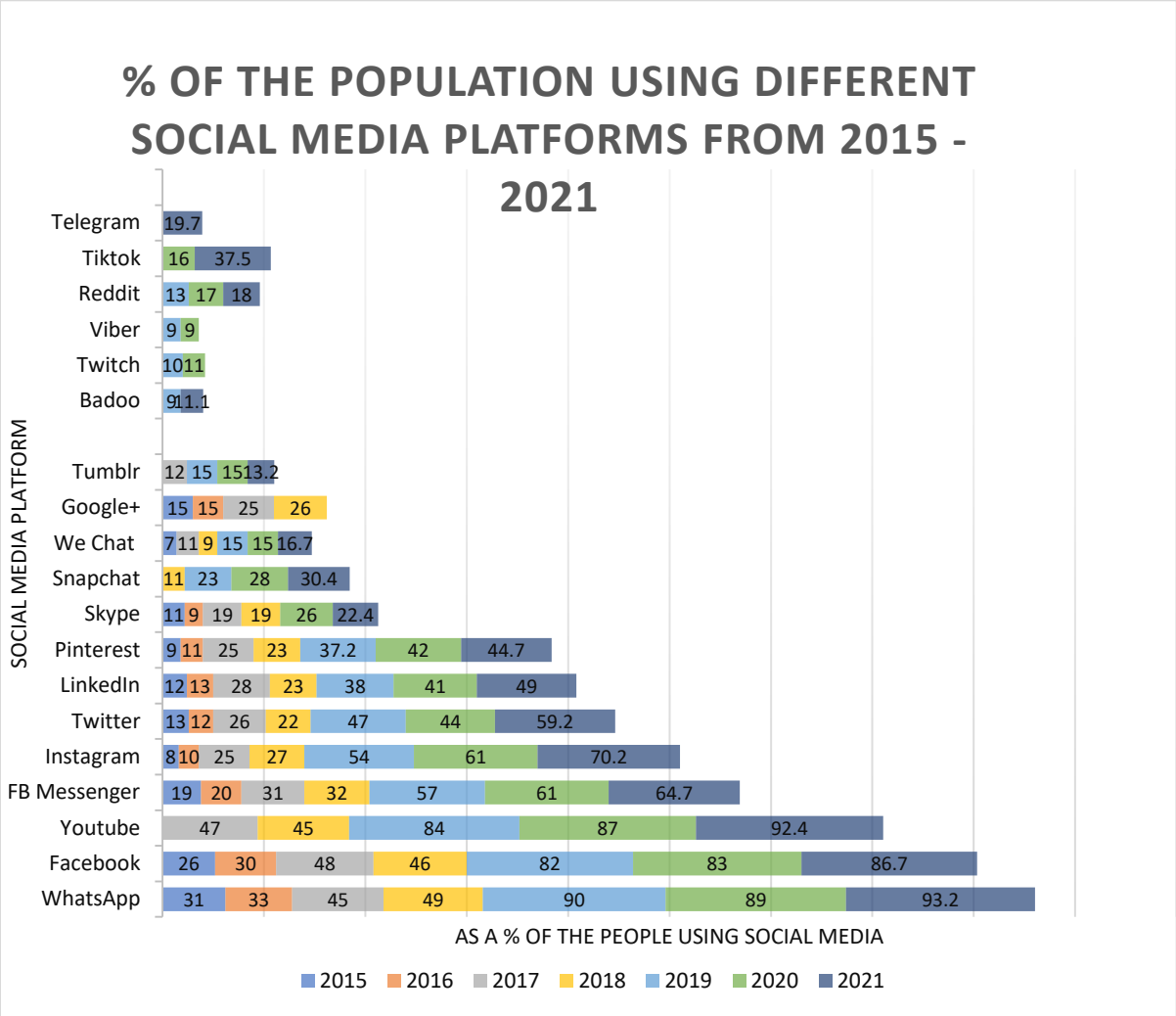
The data shows a steady increase in the number of people using social media from 11.6 million in 2015 to 25 million in 2021. The SA Social Media Landscape Report (2021) also concurs that there are around 38 million internet users and approximately 25 million social media users in the country. This increase illustrates the growing influence of social media on the public sphere, where social cohesion occurs on one hand and the migration of people from the physical to the virtual public sphere on the other hand. Comparing the number of people using social media amounting to around 25 million and the total population of close to 60 million establishes the implications of social media on social cohesion to be worth considering and potentially significant since close to half of the population engages on social media. The data further supports this observation because it shows an increase in social media utilization. Additionally, Figure 2 below illustrates that the daily average time spent on social media rose from an average of 2.6 from 2015 to 2019 to 3.1 in 2020 and 3.32 in 2021.

Figure 2: Average Daily Time Spent on the Internet and Social Media from 2015 - 2021



The Purpose for Social Media Use in Relation to Social Cohesion and its Implications: More significant than the number of people using social media is to interrogate how social media is used and for what purpose. While the aforementioned increase in social media users and usage is not an explicit indication of social cohesion in the broad sense, it does illustrate that the internet and social media are expanding as a virtual public sphere. A public sphere is open to everyone, and the purpose of a public sphere is critical debate (Habermas, 1989). The public sphere is a neutral platform for political communication – where the civil society and the state, the government and governed engage (Habermas, 1989; Gillwald, 1993). This engagement, if carried out successfully produces a cohesive society. Determining the purpose of social media usage is challenging however, examining which social media platforms are being utilized may offer insights on whether social cohesion is being advanced. Figure 3 below tries to capture this.

Figure 3: Percentage of the Population Using Different Social-Media Platforms from 2015 - 2021



The data shows that since 2015 several social media platforms have been utilized from those that are entertainment-oriented like Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram and Badoo, to business-oriented platforms like telegram, LinkedIn, Google+ and Skype as well as instant messaging platforms which are engagement-oriented like Twitter, Facebook, Messenger, YouTube and WhatsApp. More significant to this discussion is that the data shows that first there has been more utilization of instant messaging social media platforms which are engagement oriented as opposed to entertainment platforms. Second, there has been a significant increase in the number of people utilizing instant messaging platforms. These observations suggest that social media has the potential to enhance social cohesion since these platforms allow for engagement on a plethora of themes from politics, the economy, society, sports and businesses to name a few. These platforms are also characterized by interest aggregation since people with similar interests and views can form communities that transcend race, culture, ethnicity, nationality, and religion. These engagements reflect the aspect of cooperation which is a part of social cohesion.

Inequality: Intra-Group Cohesion as Opposed to Inter-Group Cohesion: The COVID-19 pandemic distorted the nature of the public domain – the national lockdowns in response to the pandemic resulted in the migration from the physical public domain to a virtual and digital one (Patel, 2021b; The SA Social Media Landscape Report, 2021; Businesstech, 2021). While digital technologies had already been transforming social interactions, they also enhanced the inequality that existed between social groups through exposure to the digital divide (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017). While a shared vision of 'building back better' characterized the global scene, in South Africa, societal cleavages further widened as the social class divide

between rich and poor, the racial division between black and white, and anti-African migrant sentiment in the country deepened. Despite this, social cohesion was promoted as social mobilization became more localized and more accessible.

According to the SA Social Media Landscape Report (2021), an increase of 59% of respondents asserted that social media is an effective mode of public interactions and relations. However, this interaction tended to be more intra-group rather than intergroup meaning social cohesion occurred on a smaller scale in most cases. An investigation into the use of social media in South Africa in 2019 found that there are preferences in terms of social media type and usage (Budree, Fietkiewicz & Lins, 2019) which has an implication for cohesion. A good example of this is Black Twitter, which is Twitter for black South Africans. Inclusion into or exclusion from the group is based on the 'blackness' of the person and the implications thereof is that while the identity of blacks is being formed and there is social cohesion within the group, simultaneously the group is excluding every other group that is non-black therefore impeding social cohesion on a national scale.

The Threat of Mis-Information: The increased utilization of social media has, however, also resulted in the sharing and spread of misinformation which has negative implications on the attainment of social cohesion. Misinformation comes in various forms but the most common are fake news and cyber-propaganda – these have the potential to cause societal fragmentation and exclusion with far-reaching consequences. Africa is amenable to this threat of misinformation posed by social media due to poor infrastructure to support, maintain and regulate the flow of information on social media platforms and this has been the major impediment to social cohesion in South Africa (Adegoke, 2018). According to Fischer et al. (2021), a cross-sectional study of the use of technology during lockdown showed that the use of web searches and social media platforms as opposed to government websites increased the likelihood for the population to access and spread health misinformation. In addition, there was an increase in cyber-crime in the form of online fraudsters during the pandemic (TransUnion, 2021) and this made people less likely to communicate with each other. However, during the COVID-19 public health emergency, the South African government was able to leverage social media in two mitigating strategies namely the elevation of social media as an essential service for communication and actively overwhelming communication channels with up-to-date information on managing lockdown and the pandemic. Citizens have also worked tirelessly in the management of the pandemic through social media.

According to Bosch (2020), members of the South African society were using 'coveillance' or rather, they were watching each other through social media posts to stay updated on compliance with lockdown restrictions, sharing critical health information and news material and publicizing people who were contravening lockdown regulations. This was an expression of people coming together because some of the social media posts tagged the government and even the police to take action - a mark of solidarity and unity of purpose. To mitigate the threat of misinformation, the government took advantage of the plethora of social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and others by compiling very short and timely, easily digestible and attractive media that they circulated on social media to keep the South African population informed on the unfolding of the pandemic. According to the South African Government (2020), Minister Mthembu praised the role of media in providing vital information on the pandemic both locally and internationally, thanking journalists and think tanks for their devotion to engagement on social media. This has largely been a success in reducing the level of misinformation and fake news present on the internet as a whole. According to Trifonova (2020), there are generally four reasons for using social media namely to pass the time, for entertainment, and to stay up to date with news – the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a demand for relevant information on the unfolding of the pandemic which translated into a greater utilisation of social media.

Implications for Policy - The Impact of Social-Media on Social Cohesion: The implications for the impact of social media on social cohesion in South Africa are complex and multifaceted. From the above discussion, it is clear that social media is both contributing to the problem of attaining social cohesion since it is used in some cases to enhance societal cleavages and social conflict - Yet simultaneously, it is also working as a tool to potentially solve the problem of social cohesion. Since the media has been strengthening interactions both within and across groups during the COVID-19 pandemic and this has been true in the South African experience. Given the difficulty in defining social cohesion, the South African government must identify and

focus on key factors such as social inequality, poverty and social exclusion of people based on race and or gender that influence social cohesion in the country. Measuring these factors will facilitate the government in the formulation of key policies that are designed to materially achieve social cohesion. According to scholars like Burns: et al. (2018) and (Patel, 2021b) inter alia, social cohesion can only be achieved so long as equality of economic opportunities and social inclusion is attained in society, therefore, prioritizing solving poverty and inequality should be the first step towards social cohesion.

Additionally, social media has demonstrated its significance in the construction, communication and consumption of meaning which are the foundational ingredients of a socially cohesive society (Lama, 2020). Therefore, national plans to enhance social cohesion such as the South African National Development Plan 2030 should be developed with the role of social media laid out since it forms the greater part of what the contemporary South African society considers the public domain as has been experienced in 2020 until current. Furthermore, there needs to be the development of regulatory frameworks to guard against the negative effects of social media in the public domain. "A truly transformed media can play a greater and more meaningful role in ensuring that citizens have greater access to information," (*SANews*, 2018).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Social media and social cohesion are intricately related social concepts in South Africa. Despite the absence of a standard definition, the essence of a cohesive society is rooted in the endeavors to address the vestiges of apartheid in South Africa namely institutionalized racism, social class inequalities and exclusion, anti-migrant sentiments and marginalization of minority groups like women and children to name a few. Social cohesion is, therefore, an expression of an ideal participatory democracy. The proliferation of ICTs that have rapidly evolved in recent years, revolutionizing how people communicate through social media, has had various implications for social cohesion. In recent years, there has been a greater uptake of social media as a communication tool in the public domain. The dominance of social media in the public domain has exposed the impact of social media to be a double-edged sword used to promote social cohesion on one hand and the other, used as a tool for social conflict. Given the unique nature of social media as dominating social interaction in the public sphere, as well as its potential to be utilized in the manner seen fit by different social forces, interests and social groups, the government of South Africa must actively incorporate social media into national plans aimed at enhancing social cohesion. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that social media positively enhances social cohesion if utilized in the interest of the public good.

Recommendations

- The government of South Africa must intensify efforts to conceptualize social cohesion in South Africa - The IJR has already begun developing a Social Cohesion Index for South Africa utilizing data from SARB – the index measures three indicators of social cohesion namely equality and social inclusion, social and institutional trust, and shared identity (IJR, 2017b). Social cohesion can only be achieved if the government has laid out targets and this is dependent on a definitive conceptual framework of the concept.
- Research has shown the continued widespread use of social media is likely to continue after the crisis of COVID-19 has passed. Working from home and using social media for work and for bridging social interests and social groups has become a norm in the past year and a half. Therefore, national plans to enhance social cohesion such as the South African National Development Plan 2030 should be formulated with the role of social media clearly laid out since it forms the greater part of what the contemporary South African society considers the public domain as has been experienced in 2020 until current.
- Additionally, it is critical to have government regulation that protects the privacy of personal information and the circulation of misinformation. The implementation of POPIA is a positive step in the right direction that has to be augmented.
- To achieve social cohesion, the government needs to address the issue of inequality in the country. Ameliorating this problem has the potential to coincide with an equal and opposite increase in social

solidarity since members of the South African population can communicate on an equal economic footing.

Further Research

- Social cohesion is a broad area of study that requires continued research in fleshing out the impediments to achieving social cohesion in the country. Research into the perceptions of people at the grassroots level and their inputs to create a more unified and cohesive society should be conducted. The fact that South Africa has not yet emerged as a socially cohesive society almost three decades into its independence is a testament to the work that must be carried out to achieve social cohesion in the country.
- Social media has been on the rise in recent years and never has this fact been truer than in the last year and a half. Social media has come to dominate the public domain of social interaction, culture reformulation, operation of business and promotion of solidarity through the mass communication of shared meanings. Further research must be conducted to identify the means of enhancing the positive roles of social media in society and ameliorating the negative ones.
- Tracer studies should be conducted over some time to track trends and patterns of social media use in promoting social cohesion in South Africa;

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