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## Though alert to its dangers, Zimbabweans embrace social media and demand unrestricted access

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 463 | Stephen Ndoma, Simangele Moyo-Nyede, and Jonathan Kugarakuripi**

### Summary

Social media is having a huge impact on the daily lives of people throughout the world. A popular tool in both personal and professional life (Breen, 2015), social media allows users to stay updated and connected with little regard for geographical borders, and is competing with traditional media as the go-to source for information (Digital School of Marketing, 2019).

In Zimbabwe, social media platforms such as WhatsApp swiftly disseminate news and have consequently gained popularity in both urban and rural areas. In some instances, however, users have posted sensational information about topical issues that turns out to be “fake news,” thus misleading the public.

What do Zimbabweans think of social media? Does it add value to their lives, or do its drawbacks outweigh its benefits?

Findings from a new Afrobarometer survey in Zimbabwe show that a majority of citizens are familiar with social media, and a significant proportion of the population depends on news from social media. Among those who have heard of social media, a majority believe that its overall impact on society is largely positive. Even so, many Zimbabweans voice concerns about the negative effects of social media, including the dissemination of false information and the promotion of intolerance for opposing views.

### Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe in April 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

### Key findings

- Eight in 10 adult Zimbabweans (80%) say they have heard about social media.
- More than four in 10 (42%) citizens say they get news from social media “every day” or “a few times a week.”

- Among those who have heard about social media:
  - The vast majority (91%) say social media helps keep people informed about current events.
  - Half (49%) believe that social media helps people have more impact on political processes.
  - But seven in 10 (71%) also see social media as making people more likely to believe false information, and 44% say it makes people more intolerant of opposing views.
  - Overall, six in 10 (61%) say the effects of social media on society are “somewhat positive” or “very positive.”
  
- Two-thirds (65%) of Zimbabweans say social media and the Internet help make people more informed and active citizens, and hence unrestricted access to these platforms must be protected.

### Heard about social media

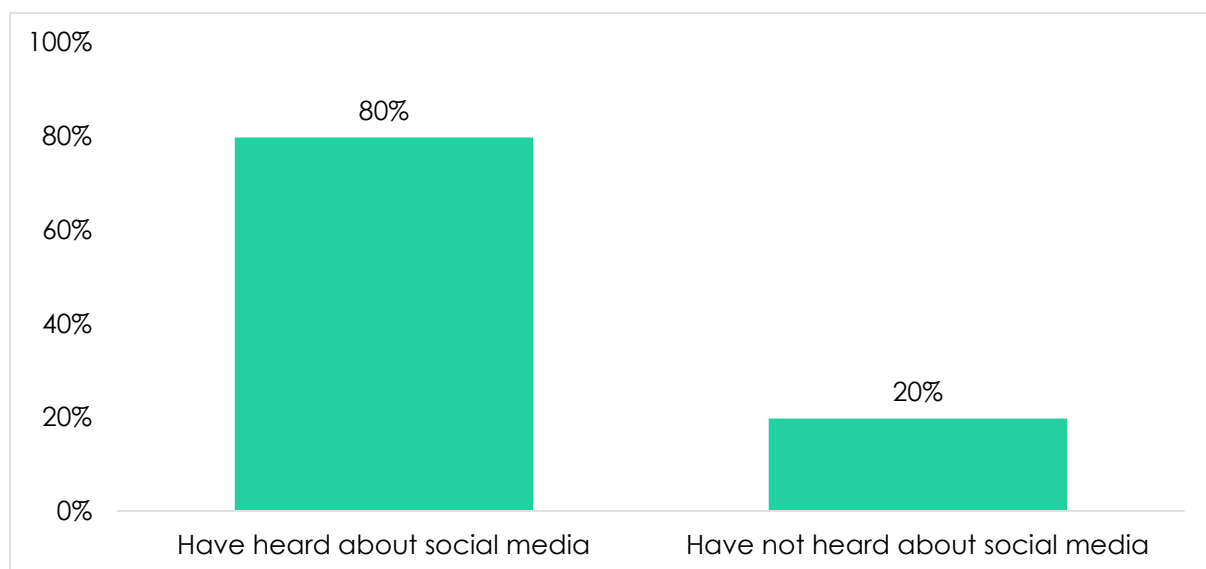
Eight out of 10 Zimbabweans (80%) say they have heard about social media (Figure 1). Men (82%) are more likely than women (77%) to be familiar with social media, as are urban residents (93%) compared to their rural counterparts (72%) (Figure 2).

A large generational gap manifests itself: Awareness of social media is considerably less common among older citizens (58% of those aged 56 and above) than among the middle-aged (80%) and youth (86%).

The data suggest a positive relationship between education and awareness of social media: While almost all respondents with post-secondary education (98%) have heard of social media, only 56% of those with primary schooling or no formal schooling have.

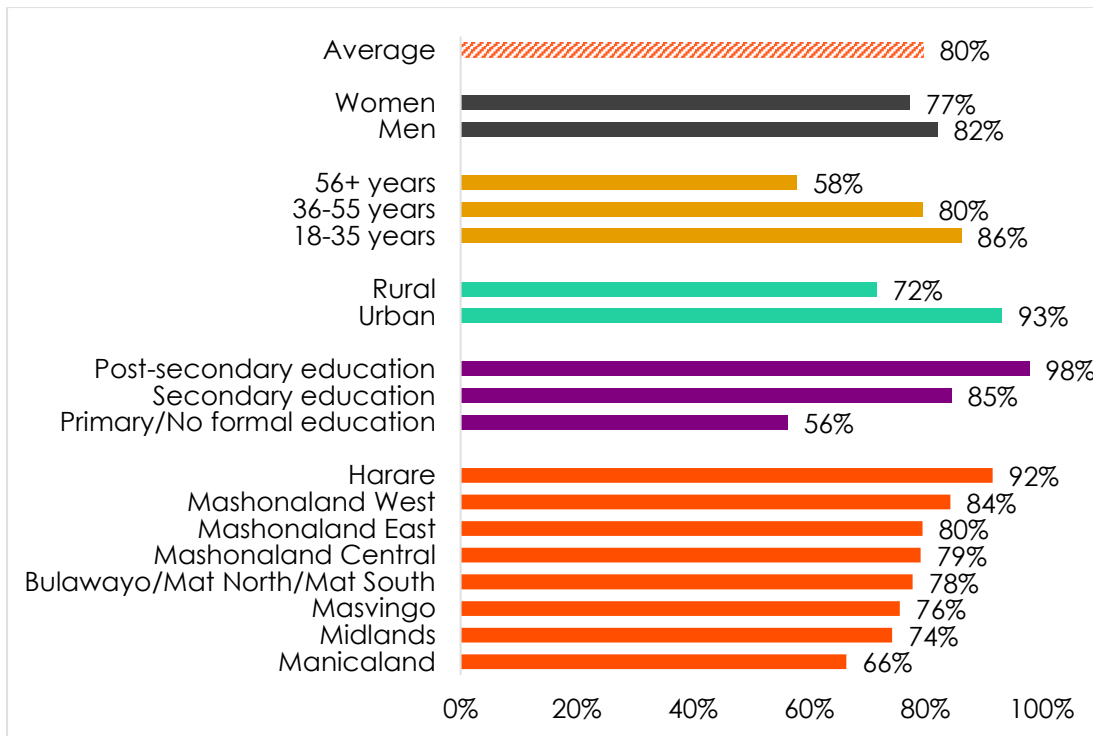
A provincial breakdown shows that awareness of social media is far more common among Harare residents (92%) than in Manicaland province (66%).

**Figure 1: Have you heard about social media? | Zimbabwe | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about social media, for example, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp?

**Figure 2: Have heard about social media** | by socio-demographic group  
 | Zimbabwe | 2021

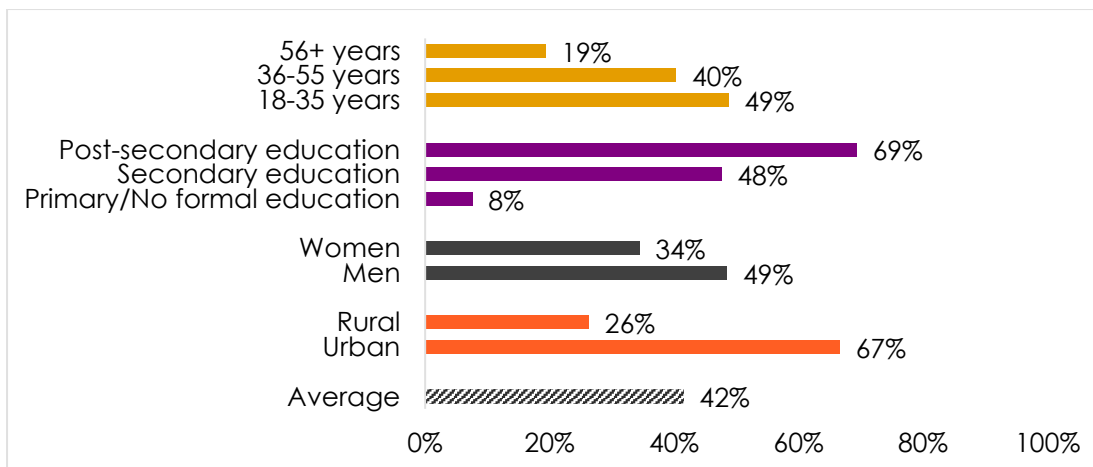


**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about social media, for example, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp? (% "yes")

### Social media as a source of news

Social media has become an important source of news for Zimbabweans: More than four in 10 citizens (42%) say they get news from social media "every day" or "a few times a week" (Figure 3). The use of social media as a regular news source is far more common in cities (67%) than in rural areas (26%), and men are more likely to turn to social media for news than women (49% vs. 34%).

**Figure 3: Regularly get news from social media** | Zimbabwe | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources: Social media? (% 2ho say "every day" or "a few times a week")

Again, young (49%) and middle-aged citizens (40%) are considerably more likely to regularly obtain news from social media than their elders (19%). And only about one in 12 people with less than secondary education (8%) regularly use social media for news, compared to 69% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

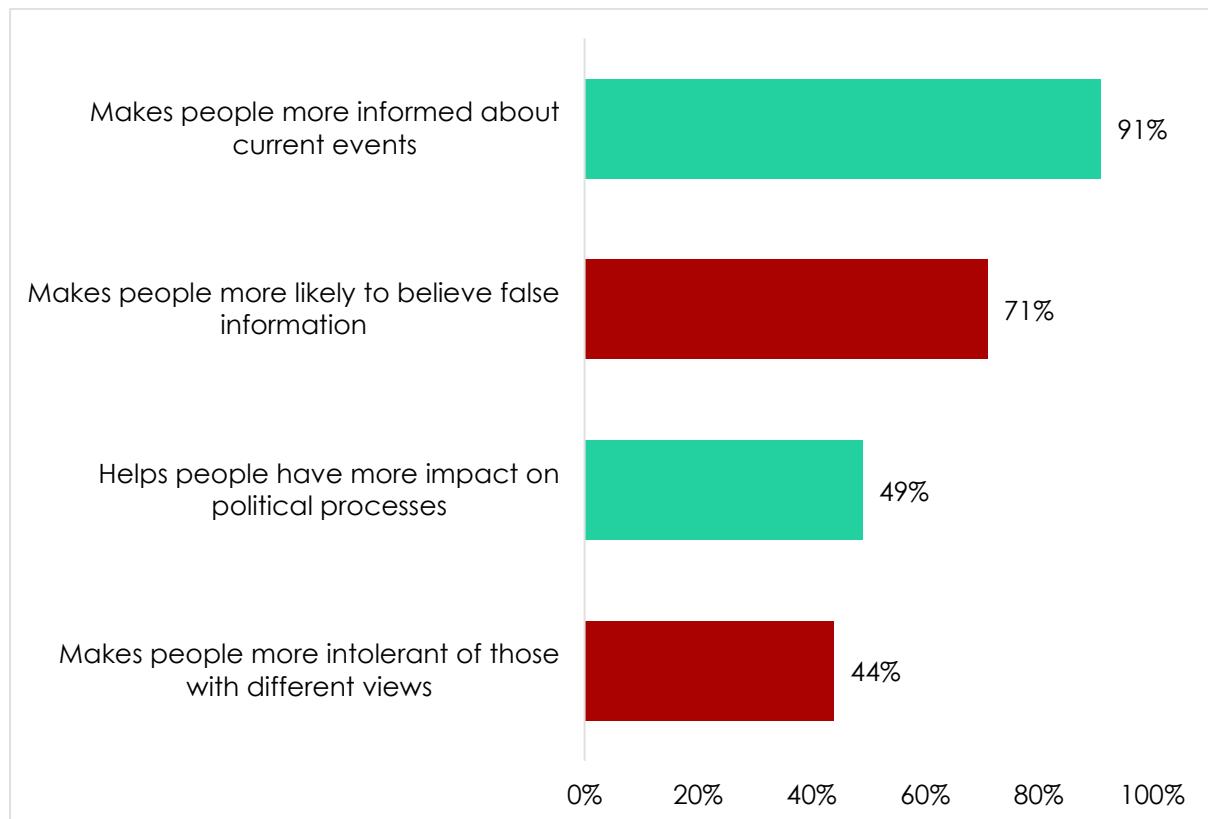
### Effects of social media

Asked about the effects of social media, Zimbabweans see both benefits and drawbacks (Figure 4).

The overwhelming majority (91%) of those who have heard about social media “agree” or “strongly agree” that social media keeps people informed about current events. About half (49%) also think that social media helps people have more impact on political processes.

On the downside, a large majority (71%) see social media as making people more likely to believe false information, while 44% say it makes people less tolerant toward others who hold different views.

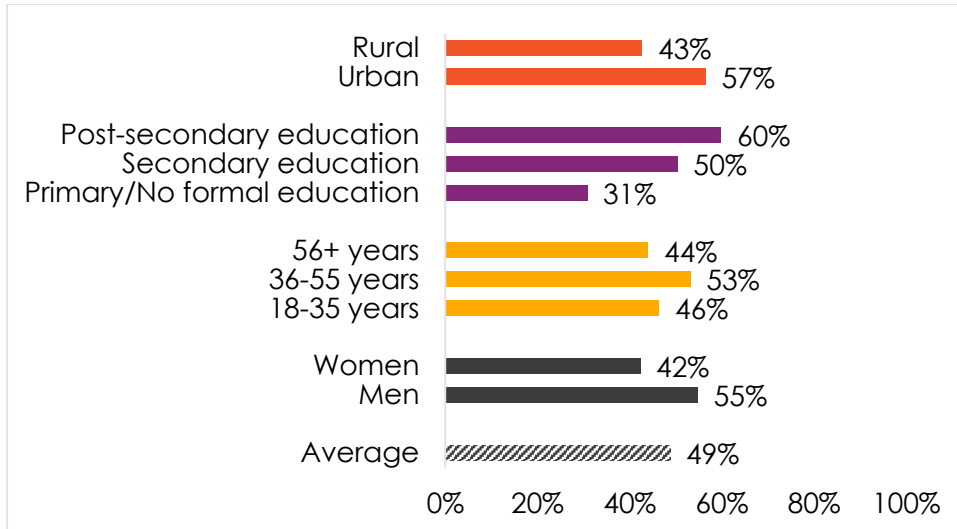
**Figure 4: Positive and negative effects of social media | Zimbabwe | 2021**



**Respondents who say they have heard of social media were asked:** Regardless of whether you personally use social media yourself, please tell me whether you agree or disagree that social media. ... (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

The belief that social media helps people have a greater impact on political processes is more prevalent among urban residents (57%), men (55%), and more educated respondents (60% of those with post-secondary qualifications) (Figure 5).

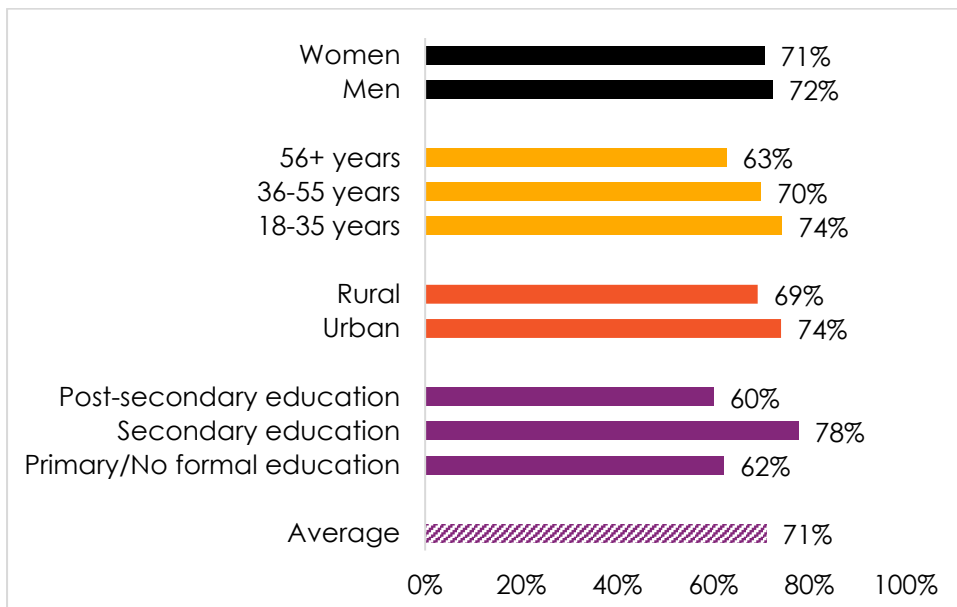
**Figure 5: Social media helps people have more impact on political processes** | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



**Respondents who say they have heard of social media were asked:** Regardless of whether you personally use social media yourself, please tell me whether you agree or disagree that social media helps people have more impact on political processes? (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

On the other hand, the perception that social media makes people more likely to believe false news is more common among young respondents (74%) than their elders (63%-70%) and is less common among the most educated (60% of those with post-secondary schooling, compared to 78% of those with secondary qualifications) (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Social media makes people more likely to believe false news** | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



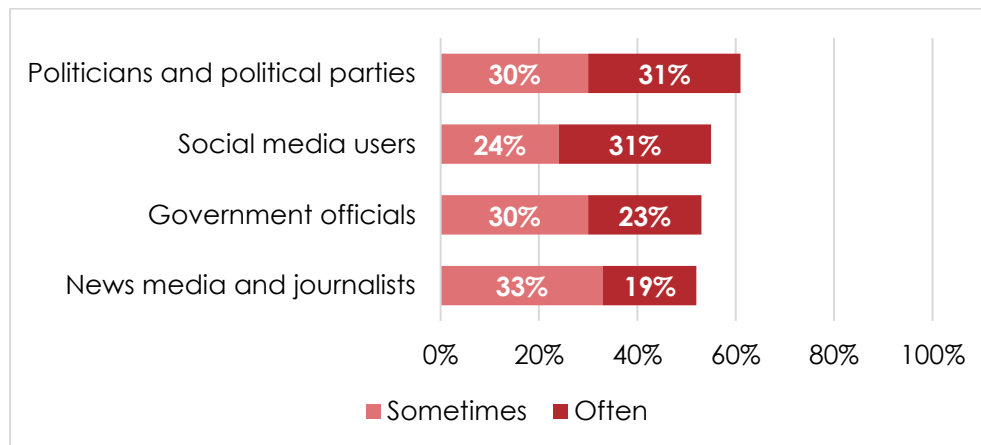
**Respondents who say they have heard of social media were asked:** Regardless of whether you personally use social media yourself, please tell me whether you agree or disagree that social media makes people more likely to believe false news? (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

## Social media and misinformation

Among all respondents, regardless of whether they use social media, more than half (55%) believe that social media users “sometimes” or “often” spread information that they know is false (Figure 7).

But even more (61%) blame politicians and political parties for knowingly disseminating false information, whether through social media or other channels. And majorities say the same thing about government officials (53%) and the news media (52%).

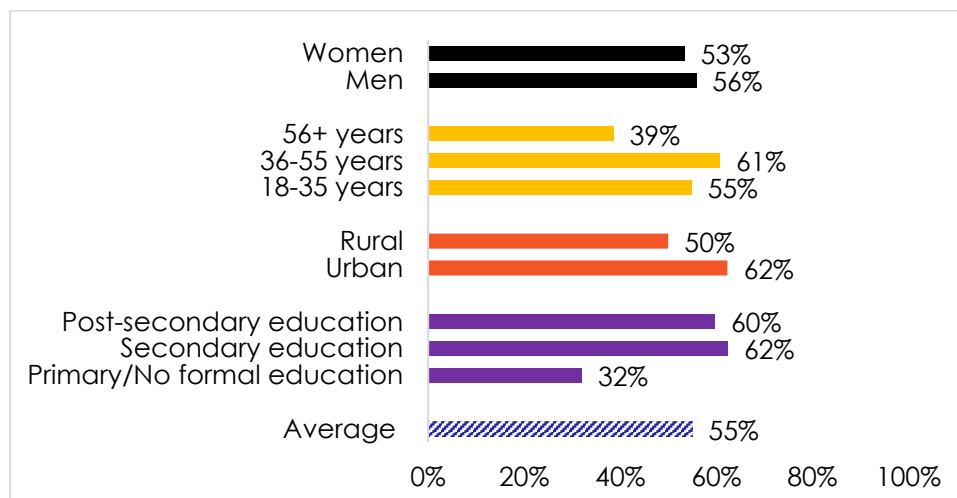
**Figure 7: Who spreads false information? | Zimbabwe | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me how often, in this country, you think people from each of the following groups spread information that they know is false?

The belief that social media users knowingly spread “fake news” is stronger than average among citizens with at least a secondary education (60%-62%), urban residents (62%), and the middle-aged (61%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Social media users spread false information | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me how often, in this country, you think people from each of the following groups spread information that they know is false: Social media users? (% who say “sometimes” or “often”)

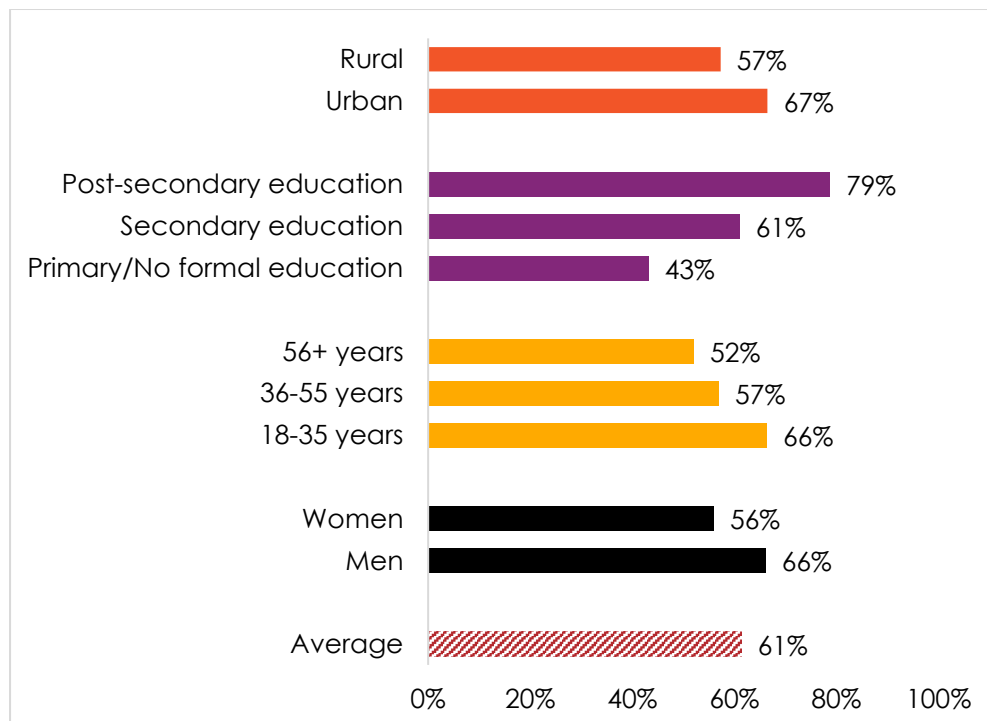
## Is overall impact of social media on society positive or negative?

Despite the widespread belief that social media is used to spread lies, six out of 10 Zimbabweans who have heard about social media (61%) see the overall impact of social media on society as “somewhat positive” or “very positive.”

This assessment is more common among men (66%) than women (56%), and among urbanites (67%) than among rural residents (57%) (Figure 9).

Young people (66%) are more likely to see the impact of social media as positive than their elders (52%-57%), as are the most educated (79%) compared to their less educated counterparts (43%-61%).

**Figure 9: Overall effects of social media on society are positive** | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



**Respondents who say they have heard of social media were asked:** Overall, do you think that the effects of social media on society are mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say “somewhat positive” or “very positive”)

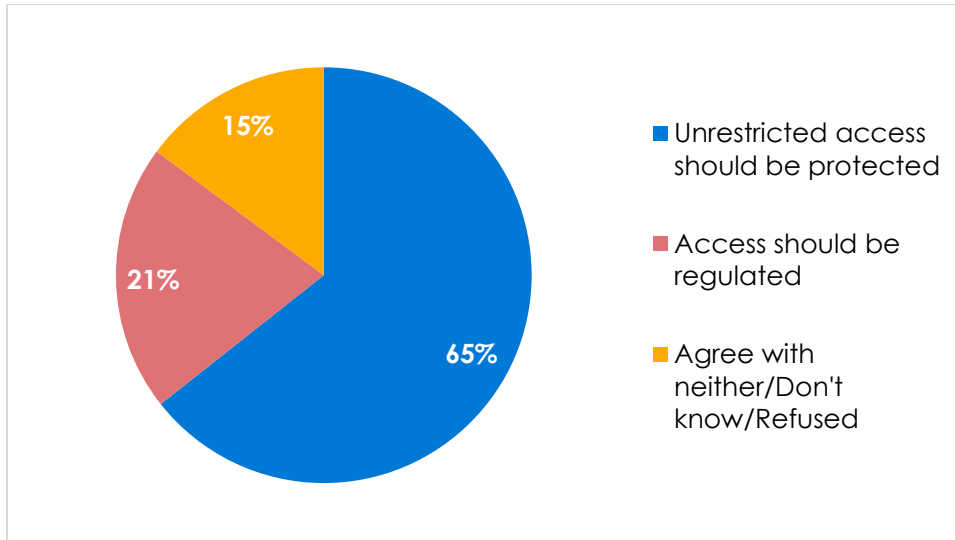
## Support for unrestricted access to social media and the Internet

Despite their reservations about some of social media's negative effects, two-thirds (65%) of Zimbabweans believe that unrestricted access to social media and the Internet helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and thus should be protected (Figure 10). This includes more than four in 10 (42%) who “agree very strongly” with this view. Only one in five (21%) say information shared on the Internet and social media is dividing Zimbabweans, so access should be regulated by the government.

Advocates for unrestricted access to the Internet are more common among the most educated citizens (87%), urban residents (74%), young and middle-aged respondents (70% and 67%, respectively), and men (69%) (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Should access to social media and the Internet be regulated?**

| Zimbabwe | 2021



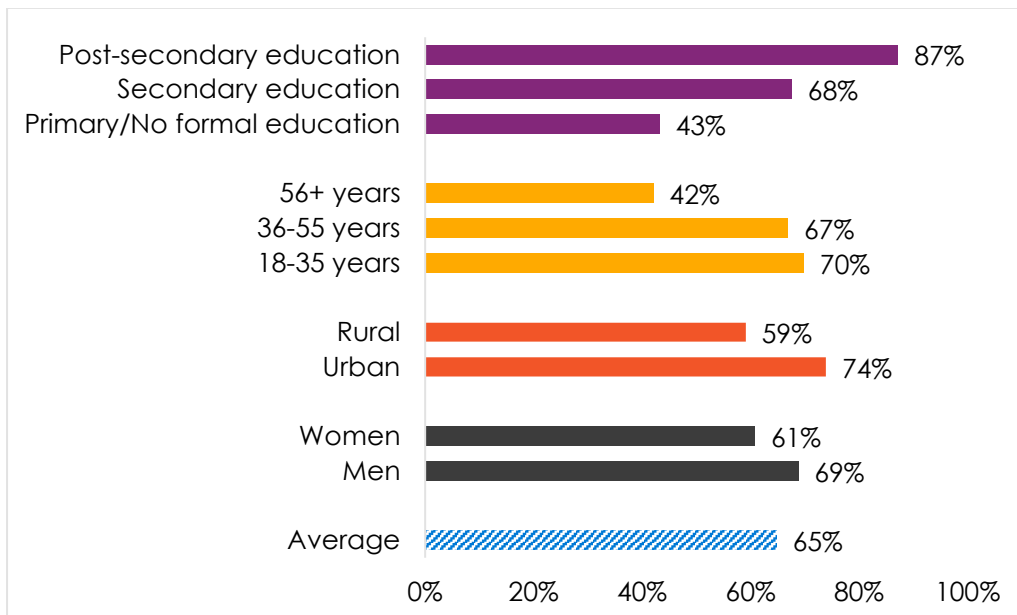
**Respondents were asked:** Which statement is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected.

Statement 2: Information shared on the Internet and social media is dividing Zimbabweans, so access should be regulated by government.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

**Figure 11: Support for unrestricted access to social media and the Internet | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Which statement is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected.

Statement 2: Information shared on the Internet and social media is dividing Zimbabweans, so access should be regulated by government.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that unrestricted access should be protected)



## Conclusion

Zimbabweans clearly understand that social media is a tool that can be put to good use but can also be abused by almost anyone. Overall, they judge its effects on society to be more positive than negative. And as almost half of them regularly turn to social media for their news, they strongly favour unrestricted access to social media and the Internet over government regulation.

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