# Engaging and disengaging with political disinformation on WhatsApp: A study of young adults in South Africa

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# Information Disorder: Old News?

- There is widespread concern that the world is experiencing a global "**information disorder**" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017):
    - Characterized by a large-scale contamination of the public sphere with rumor, hate speech, conspiracy narratives, and orchestrated campaigns of deception.
    - Seen as a confluence of a rapidly changing media ecology and an increasingly fractious, populist, and decentered political environment.

- Global concerns about false and misleading information, especially on social media and messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, keep growing, but…
    - disinformation has been **impacting society and politics in the Global South for a long time**. In South Africa, political processes have for a long time been marred by various forms of harmful information (Dwyer & Molony, 2019).

# The primacy of context

- While disinformation is a global problem, it is **best be understood within particular contexts**. We can only fully understand why mis/disinformation appeals to audiences, how they consume and spread it, when we understand the particular social, political, economic, and historical context within which it appears.

- This is also the case when considering political disinformation. Although agents seeking to influence elections may operate across different countries or regions (e.g., "Team Jorge"), the success of this meddling often depends on **exploiting local social, cultural or political dynamics**.
    - In South Africa, the PR firm Bell Pottinger focused on persistent economic inequalities with their "white monopoly capital" campaign.
    - In Kenya, during the 2022 elections, TikTok disinformation drew on existing ethnic polarization and potential electoral violence.

# Political disinformation in South Africa

- When considered as a form of social and cultural practice, it becomes clear that, in South Africa, disinformation in its contemporary manifestations has its roots in much **older histories of colonialism** and **post-colonial authoritarianism**.

- Unlike other countries in the Global South, where authoritarian governments restrict freedom of the media, **South Africa has strong constitutional protection for media freedom**. Moreover, trust in South African news media is also relatively high.

- The **threat of disinformation** was identified during the 2021 municipal elections. Local fact-checkers teamed up with the Electoral Commission and secured the cooperation of social media platforms to identify and eliminate disinformation. WhatsApp was not part of the project.

# Foreign dimensions on political disinformation

- While the dissemination of false information by nation states as a tool to influence other nation states is one of the oldest forms of political disinformation (Lasswell, 1927), in recent years we've seen a resurgence of these practices across Africa.

- Some countries, from Russia to France and the United States, have been involved in **covert (dis)information activities** across the African continent, particularly around electoral periods, and more recently, the War in Ukraine.

- In other cases, **the activities are overt**. China is a good example of this. In South Africa, Chinese media have contributed to spreading disinformation. Some South African media have also "laundered information" produced by Chinese political actors (Madrid-Morales, 2021).

# Audience engagement/disengagement

- There's a general belief that there are **two types of vulnerable populations** to disinformation: older adults and people living in rural areas. Younger adults (people in their 20s and 30s) are thought to be media savvy and, thus, less vulnerable.

- However, younger adults have also been noted to **disengage from the news media** and to find less resonance in mainstream news media, which may render them vulnerable to disinformation on messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, where verification and fact-checking is more difficult.

- Our own research has shown that, overall, South African tend to engage with content they find online (true or not) with relative high frequency, and that they **high levels of perceived exposure to disinformation** (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

# Research questions

1.  Under which circumstances do young adults in South Africa decide to **engage or disengage** with political disinformation on WhatsApp?

2.  How often do young adults in South Africa **encounter political disinformation** from foreign actors on WhatsApp?

3.  To what extent do different groups of young adults in South Africa **experience political disinformation on WhatsApp differently**?

# Method

## Focus groups (August-September 2022)

- We convened 7 focus groups with72 university students and other learners at higher education institutions in the Western Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape.

- This was part of a project with Africa Check to develop new misinformation literacy materials to be used at South African high schools.

## Online survey (October 2022)

- We surveyed 770 South Africans aged between 18 and 35. The survey was conducted online and mirrored census data along gender, age and place of residence.

- This was part of a multi-country study including Angola, Ethiopia and Zambia on foreign political disinformation online.

# Preliminary findings

**Perceptions of rumours and disinformation as pervasive and ubiquitous**

**News exposure on WhatsApp is prevalent, but other platforms come ahead**

**Meanings of "political" differ, but most talk of "politics of everyday life"**

# Rumours/disinformation are ubiquitous

"I was in Pretoria with my family. And there was this thing going around in the news that there were like a 1 million graves dug up by the government in Pretoria and most of the people in Pretoria, like, were not vaccinating. What are those graves that up for they're obviously planning to kill us with the vaccination? So, what's going on? It was on the news also. **It was trending on Facebook, on WhatsApp on like almost every social media platform.** Because even I know about that. In the communities, that's how things go around. **Someone sees it on Facebook, and they send it on WhatsApp. "Oh, did you see this?"** Yeah, then that's how it's spreads."
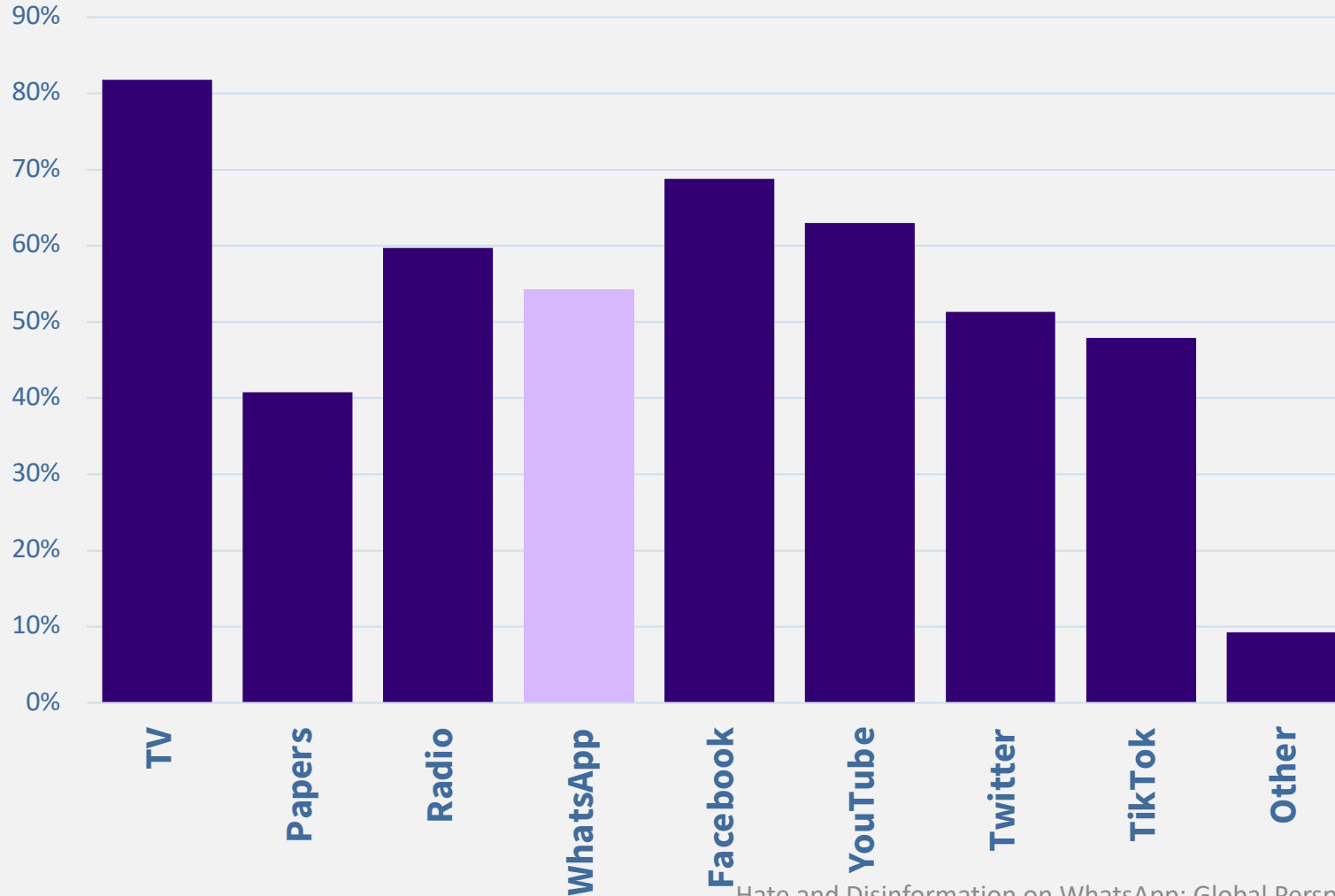
(CPUT undergraduate student)

**Perceptions of rumours and disinformation as pervasive and ubiquitous**

# Many sources of news

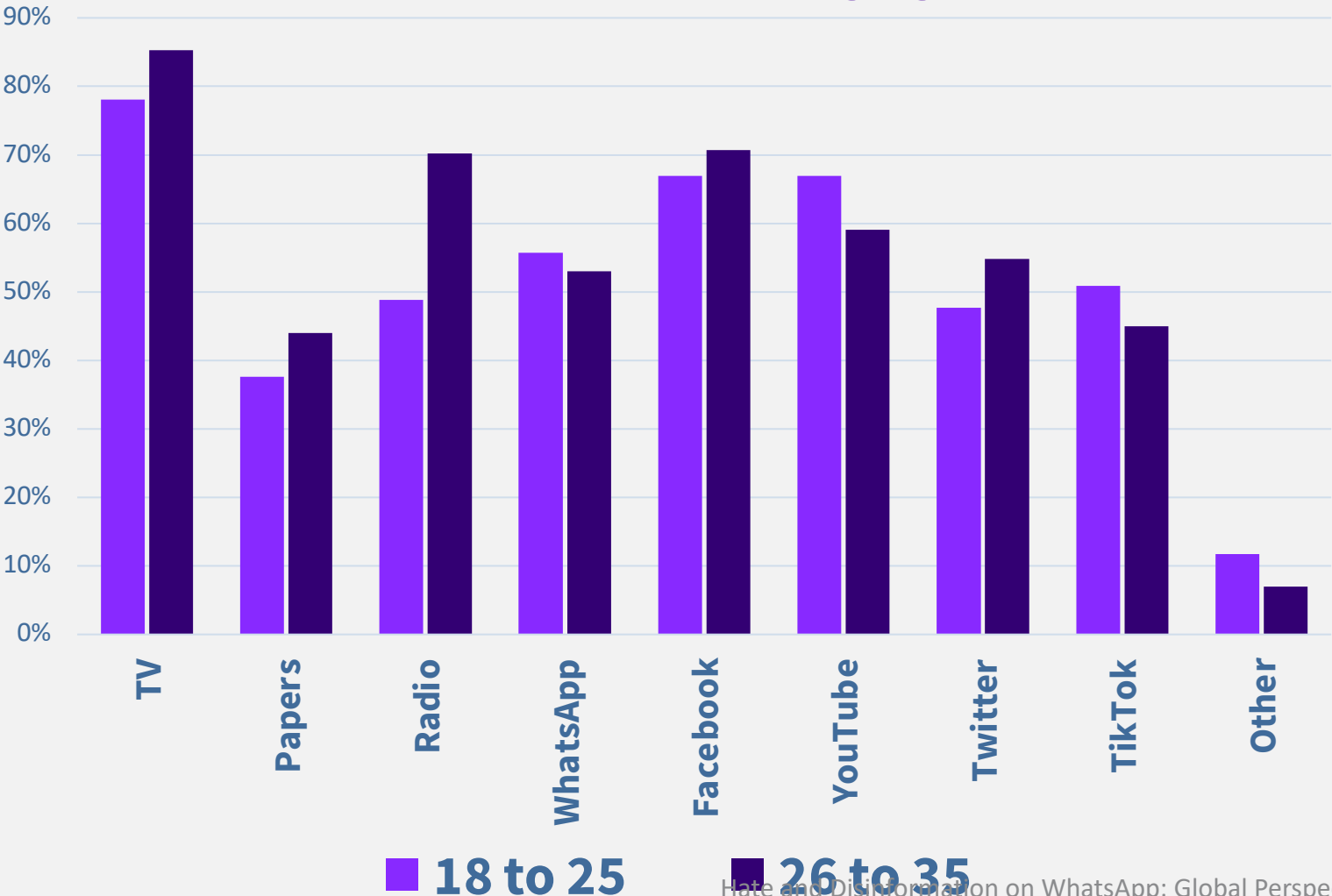## Sources of 'news' in the past 7 days



Bar chart showing sources of 'news' in the past 7 days:
- TV: ~82%
- Papers: ~41%
- Radio: ~60%
- WhatsApp: ~54%
- Facebook: ~69%
- YouTube: ~63%
- Twitter: ~51%
- TikTok: ~48%
- Other: ~9%

**News exposure on WhatsApp is prevalent, but other platforms come ahead**

# Many sources of news

## Sources of 'news' by age group



| Source | 18 to 25 | 26 to 35 |
|--------|----------|----------|
| TV | 78% | 85% |
| Papers | 37% | 44% |
| Radio | 49% | 70% |
| WhatsApp | 56% | 53% |
| Facebook | 67% | 71% |
| YouTube | 67% | 59% |
| Twitter | 48% | 55% |
| TikTok | 51% | 45% |
| Other | 12% | 7% |

■ 18 to 25    ■ 26 to 35

**News exposure on WhatsApp is prevalent, but other platforms come ahead**

# Many sources of news

## Sources of 'news' by political interest
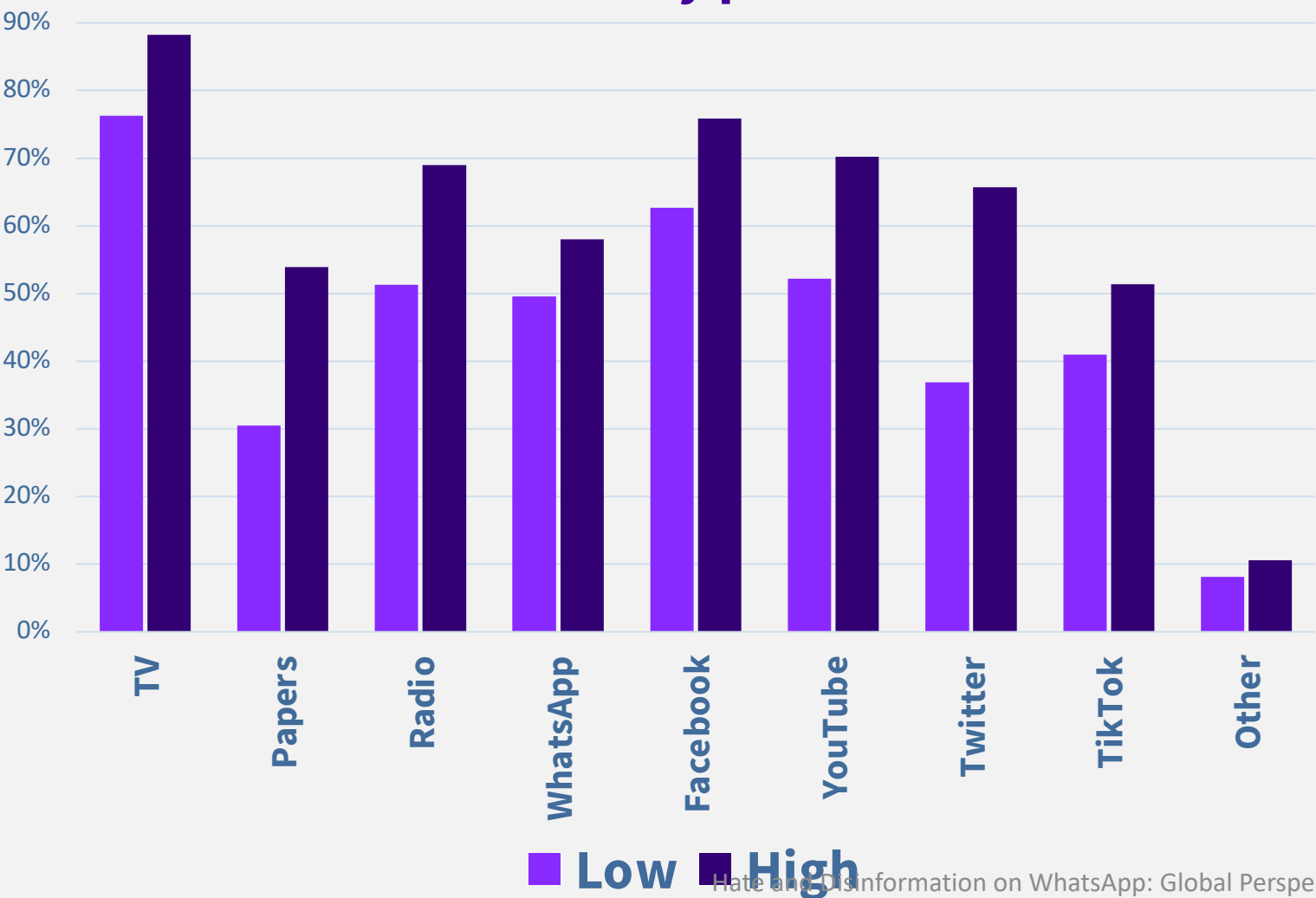


| Source | Low | High |
|--------|-----|------|
| TV | 76% | 88% |
| Papers | 30% | 54% |
| Radio | 51% | 69% |
| WhatsApp | 49% | 58% |
| Facebook | 62% | 76% |
| YouTube | 52% | 70% |
| Twitter | 37% | 66% |
| TikTok | 41% | 51% |
| Other | 8% | 10% |

**Low** **High**

**News exposure on WhatsApp is prevalent, but other platforms come ahead**

# Rumours/Disinformation are pervasive

"So maybe like the DA, for instance, just an example that **they are going to do certain things for the community**. So yeah, just for the community members to vote for them, especially during the voting period. They would be like we are going to supply of water and sanitation for everyone."

(CPUT undergraduate student)

"There's that **fake Takealot survey** that constantly pops up. And there is obviously an incentive that's offered on it. And, so, people think it's true. So, they shared and shared and shared because it says you have to share it to about 10 people. "

(UKZN Honours student)

**Meanings of "political" differ, but most talk of "politics of everyday life"**

# Preliminary findings

**Range of forms of engagement and disengagement; the latter is predominant**

**Family members are the gateway to political (dis)information on WhatsApp**

**Disinformation also comes from abroad, but not from the 'usual suspects'**

# Disengagement is prevalent

"They [parents and family members] were the problem mostly because, you know, they don't even check. They're just they don't get scared and panic even more. So, yeah, **I've had to block them** and just call them if I need anything."

(UKZN Honours student)

"If you're talking to older family members and you try and tell them that it's fake, you know, it's fake and then they argue with you and they're like you're too young, you don't know anything, I'm right, you're wrong and then **you just ignore it afterwards** because you don't want to get into a fight."

(CPUT undergraduate student)

**Range of forms of engagement and disengagement; the latter is predominant**

# Family as gateway to disinformation

"My aunt sent it me. Someone talking about the Bible and Jesus. Why is this video so long? [It] was like eight minutes long. **My mommy gets it and I just look at it.** I didn't share it. I never finished it. It was like 8 minutes long. Scaring people off, like he's going to come... he's going be holding a knife or what whatever. "

(CPUT undergraduate student)



**Family members are the gateway to political (dis)information on WhatsApp**

# Disinformation from abroad
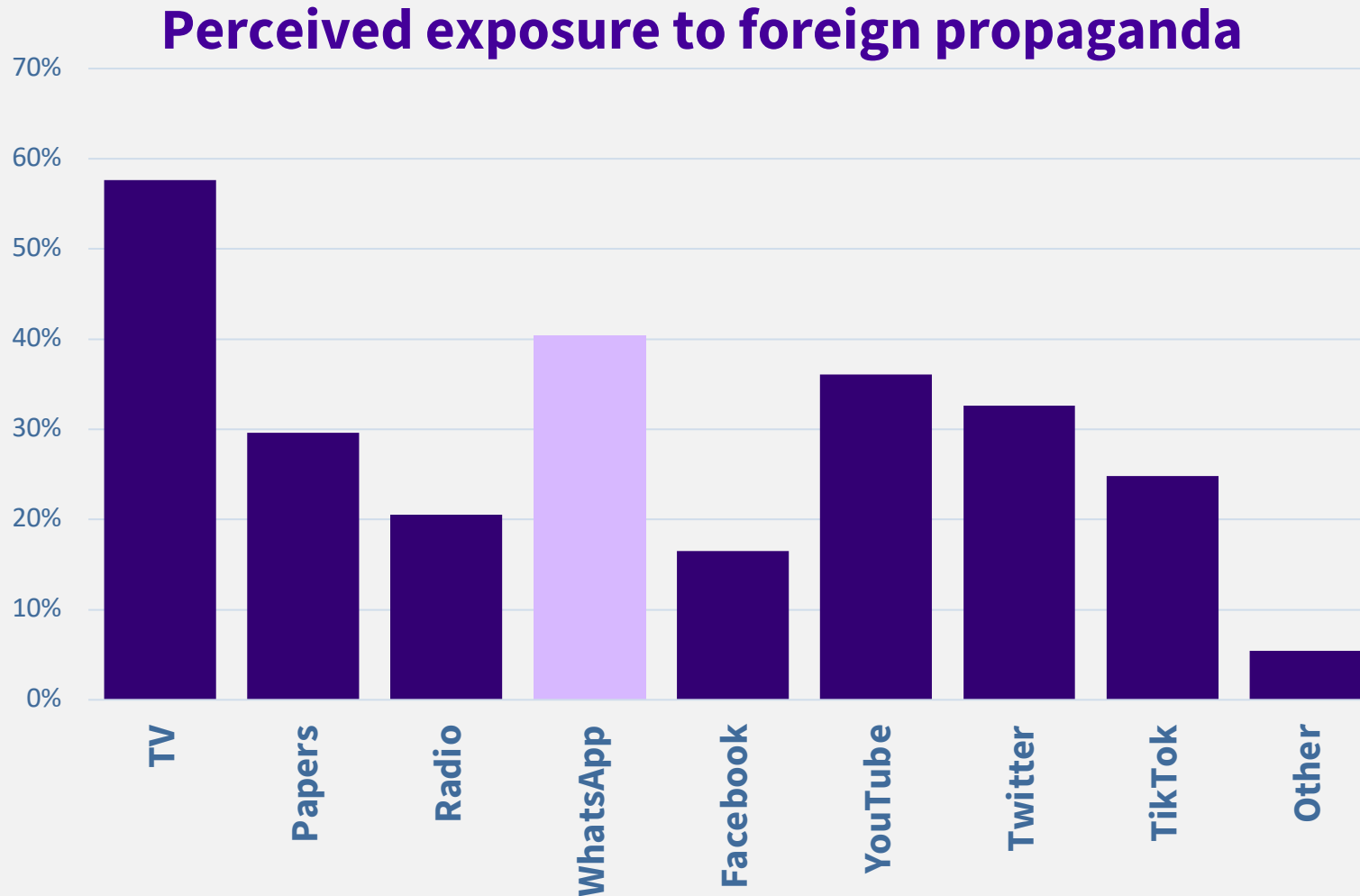
## Perceived exposure to foreign propaganda



**Disinformation also comes from abroad, but not from the 'usual suspects'**

# Disinformation from abroad

[Question: The war on Ukraine… Do you follow news around that? ]

"I stopped! Not anymore. **I lost interest! Because also I think we realize that it, okay, it affects us, but it's not going physically affect us.** I feel like all of us were on it because we were scared about "Oh my gosh! these people are going to attack; these people are going to whatnot." And then as soon as we saw that, it's sort of a them affair. And we were just like "Okay!""

(UFS Honours student)



**Disinformation also comes from abroad, but not from the 'usual suspects'**

# Disinformation from abroad

[Question: You said that maybe foreign powers might influence you? Which country is it?]

"USA! I think because obviously like they are the kings of marketing and advertising and journalism, so **whatever agenda they feel that they want to drive, that's what they'll push**, regardless of how it affects other countries, as long as they get to push a narrative that suits [them]."
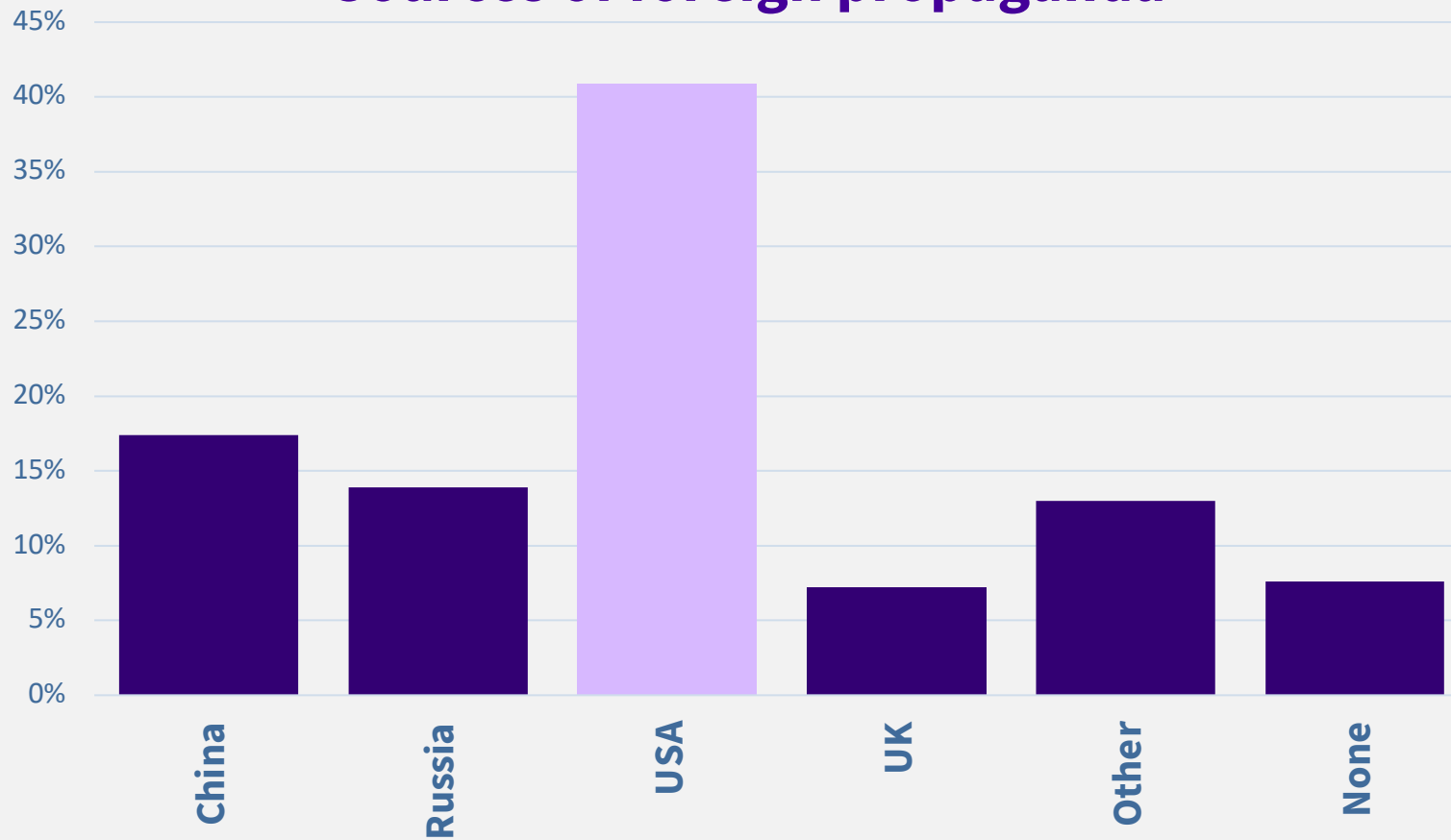
(UFS Honours student)

**Disinformation also comes from abroad, but not from the 'usual suspects'**

# Disinformation from abroad

## Sources of foreign propaganda



A bar chart showing percentages for: China ~17%, Russia ~14%, USA ~41%, UK ~7%, Other ~13%, None ~8%.

**Disinformation also comes from abroad, but not from the 'usual suspects'**

# Preliminary takeaways

1. While an important source of information (not necessarily a source of "news") to some young adults in South Africa, WhatsApp is predominantly **a tool for social connections**, which influences the ways in which individuals engage with the content (accurate or inaccurate) that reaches them through the platform.

2. WhatsApp is not a go to source of news, but it is a site for incidental exposure of information and place of social interaction, which "forces" users to make regular decisions on **when and how to engage or disengage** with content.

3. Some form of **disengagement** is common among young adults, whether it is because of fears of the social consequences of engaging with the content (i.e., creating problems in family relations) or because of apathy or lack of interest in certain expressions of politics.