Seeking political information
Investigating students' information behaviour leading up to the Brexit referendum.

JOSEFIN BROSTRÖM

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Att söka politisk information: En användarstudie av studenters informationsbeteende innan Brexit-omröstningen.

JOSEFIN BROSTRÖM

2018

The outcome of the Brexit referendum sparked a discussion in the media about ill-informed voters. There are few studies that investigate the information behaviour of voters, and even fewer of referendum voters. This thesis explores a small population of students at Scottish universities to gain insight in how they sought, received, and communicated information before the Brexit referendum. The aim is to investigate the students' information behaviour before they voted. Twenty-two students were interviewed, using a survey interviewing technique that also included open questions. The findings show that students were active, and interested, information seekers, but that they experienced a lack of quality information. Instead of trusting media sources, they turned to friends and family for information, although few changed their mind from their original conviction. The conclusions show that political awareness affected the information behaviour of the students, which is supported by Zaller’s Receive-Accept-Sample model, and that there was a high level of political awareness among the participants, in part because of the previous Scottish independence referendum. Wilson’s model of information behaviour was applied, and the analysis shows that intervening variables such as environment, role relations, and source characteristics affected information seeking, as well as other intervening variables like the lack of information and distrust of information sources.

Informationsbeteende, Opinionsbildning, Skottland, Studenter, Brexitomröstningen, Informationsresurser.
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1. Introduction

In June 2016, the United Kingdom held a referendum on whether to remain in or leave the European Union. To the surprise of many Britons, and the rest of the world, the majority voted to leave. It was a campaign filled with unclear messages and scare mongering. After the fact, media were filled with reports of people who had voted to leave without understanding what exactly they were voting for (Gore, 2016, June 27). The day after the referendum, the phrase “what is the EU?” was googled by a large number of people in the United Kingdom (Google Trends, 2017). It brings up the question of how humans receive and understand information and what they do with it, both for those who consider themselves well-informed, as well as those who feel they lack information. To answer this question this thesis will examine a small sample of those affected by the Brexit referendum and the way they interacted with information about Brexit, leading up to when the referendum took place. It is an information-behavioural study of the voting behaviour of students at Scottish universities. I will use a theoretical framework derived from both the field of information behaviour within information science, as well as the study of opinion formation or mass opinion from political science.

The Eurobarometer, which monitors the public opinion in the European Union member states on different issues, revealed in its latest survey of 2010 that the United Kingdom is one of lowest countries on the EU awareness scale. 82% stated that they knew nothing or little about the EU. Persons with a higher education were more knowledgeable but only 27% felt they knew quite a lot about the EU (Flash Eurobarometer, 2011). Many seemed to think that there was not enough information about the EU or that the information available was difficult to understand. However, few were interested in learning more about the EU, only four out of ten wanted to receive more information about the EU. Few voted in the 2004 European elections, 34 percent, whereas 70 percent voted in the domestic election of 2005. (Flash Eurobarometer, 2007) According to the Eurobarometer (2011), British citizens are not interested in politics. Only 22% stated that they were and 45% said they occasionally were. Of those Brits asked, 48% stated they never discussed politics with friends and family. Scotland and Wales, however, has had a higher percentage of voters in the European elections. These are strong indicators that the British population was not very interested in the EU to begin with. According to the Electoral Reform Society only 16% said they were well informed or very well informed about the referendum at the start of the Brexit referendum campaign in February. This rose to 33% a week before the referendum (Brett, 2016). The referendum had forced upon them a need to become informed, albeit on a topic they did not find very interesting.

This thesis will investigate the information behaviour of 22 students in relation to the Brexit referendum. It is important to point out that when I use the term information behaviour I refer to Case’s (2016) definition:
“Information behavior encompasses information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviors (such as glimpsing or encountering information), as well as purposive behaviors that do not involve seeking, such as actively avoiding information” (p. 6).

A majority of the previous research on political information seeking has been conducted in other fields than information science. Most research on young voters has been conducted within political sciences and communication studies. The aim of that research is often to improve communication to voters to gain politically minded citizens or to create research for future campaigns (Hobolt, 2005; Winchester, Binney and Hall, 2014). This study, however, wishes to take on an information scientific approach. There is a void in the information behaviour research regarding voting behaviour. Savolainen (1995) has studied humans in their everyday information seeking life, and Chatman and Pendleton (1995) have studied the information world of the poor, but few have focused on those with the special aim of voting. Within the area of information literacy, however, there has been a focus on political information and how, especially young people, search and evaluate it. That specific research will be accounted for and compared to in the discussion section of this thesis.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to monitor voter’s information behaviour due to the massive spread of information sources that have been created with the advent of the internet and social media. Social media have made the voter a more active information participant (although perhaps not a more active information seeker) and it is increasingly important to monitor how, where, and why young voters interact with information.

1.1 Aim

The main aim of this study is to identify how university students seek and receive political information before voting in a referendum. I aim to investigate how students at Scottish universities searched for, and received, political information in the time leading up to the Brexit referendum. Furthermore, I wish to investigate what they thought of the information they sought and received and which information sources they trusted and distrusted and why. In addition to this I will examine if becoming informed on an issue can make voters change their minds.

1.2 Research questions

The main research question posed in this thesis is: What is the information behaviour of students at Scottish universities when faced with a political referendum? To answer this question, four sub-questions have been constructed, and are based on the combination of the theoretical frameworks by Wilson (1999) and Zaller (1992).
1. Which sources did students use when seeking information on the Brexit issue?

2. To what extent did students actively search for information?

3. With whom did they discuss the issue, and who influenced their opinion the most?

4. To what extent were they able to change their minds either on the vote or issues concerning the vote?

1.3 Methodology

The ontological position of this research is, on one hand, that our social reality is constructed by ourselves, meaning that social reality is not fixed, but fluid. Social realities are interpreted and constructed by the people who inhabit and create them. The interaction between researcher and participant is one example of a new construction of a reality (Bryman, 2016). This ontological position separates the physical from the social, but it is not denied that there is a physical world within which the interpretation takes place. This physical world can also contribute to the research, which this thesis uses by applying a mixed methods approach. This is because it follows the fundamental principle of mixed research; that all methods have their flaws and their strengths (Johnson & Turner, 2003).

Therefore, the epistemological and ontological position of this research is pragmatic. Information needed to be gathered from the social participants in order to understand their interaction with, in this case, the social phenomenon of the Brexit referendum. By choosing to conduct quantitative studies as well as qualitative, it takes on a pragmatic theoretical approach. Pragmatism sees knowledge as being both constructed and based on the reality of our world. It rejects the binary choices of, for example, constructivism and positivism and instead aims to embrace ideas from both sides (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

I claim that the research questions can be answered by using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Thus, a quantitative approach was deemed most appropriate to collect information on, for example, the use of different media in reaching a decision on how to vote. A qualitative approach was adopted for exploring, for example, what sources of information respondents trusted and why. The findings from both data collecting methods were used to see if they corroborate one another. However, a dominant qualitative approach was deemed appropriate since, to larger extent it could provide detailed information about feelings and attitudes, which was, and still is, a major issue in the debate about the Brexit referendum.

1.4 Outline

Firstly, concepts important to the study will be explained. Thereafter, previous research will be accounted for, focusing both on the information behaviour of young voters and opinion formation during previous European referendums. Thereafter the theoretical framework will be illustrated. Before presenting the
results, the method of data collection and chosen analysis will be explained in
detail. Thereafter the results will be presented followed by analysis and
discussion. Lastly, there will be a conclusion.

1.5 Concepts

The Brexit election presented, perhaps in a wider sense than before, the
handling of misinformation and “false news” and greater need for information
of good quality (Brett, 2016). However, is there such a thing as information of
quality? And to widen the scope even more; what is information? And what
exactly happens when we encounter it? What does it mean when the public
becomes informed? How is the information presented? Concepts important for
this thesis will be explained below, both those important to voting behaviour
studies and to information behaviour studies.

1.5.1 Mass opinion

The idea of a democracy is that the public becomes informed on political issues
and elects the candidate that best represents their interests. In reality, few have
that kind of knowledge on political matters and Visser, Holbrook and Krosnick
(2008) indicate that this process is not as simple as it sounds. It requires
citizens to keep up with political events and then store the gained information
for later use. They must be able to differentiate between different candidates
and comprehend their different political standpoints and make an informed
decision on where they themselves stand politically. So, how much do citizens
know about their government and politics in general? According to Visser et
al.: not much. They account for research which shows that most American
citizens are not especially informed on political issues or how their
governmental body operates. But one should not generalise the knowledge of
the public. As Downs (in Zaller, 1992) phrases it: Most Americans are ignorant
when it comes to politics, but they differ greatly in their ignorance. This thesis
deals with the United Kingdom and Britons’ awareness of the EU where
statistical research indicates similar awareness levels (Flash Barometer, 2011).

1.5.2 Framing

Chong and Druckman (2007) speak of the “framing effect” (p.2) which occurs
when a large part of the population changes opinion due to a small change in
the presentation of an issue. To illustrate, they use the example by Sniderman
and Theriault (in Chong & Druckman, 2007) where a group of people were
asked if they would allow a hate group to hold a political rally. When adding
the phrase *given the importance of free speech* after the question, 80% of the
respondents would allow it. When adding the phrase *given the risk of violence*
only 45% would allow it. It is the same question, except it is framed
differently. Another example is to say a country has 90% employment rather
than 10% unemployment. Zaller (1992) argues that those with a high level of
political awareness are better at resisting framing.
1.5.3 Political awareness

Political awareness is an important concept for this thesis, but it is difficult to define. To be politically aware can mean that one is aware of, and understand, the different currents of society: its political actors and especially the power relationships that are at play. Marx (1986) argues that to be politically aware is to be self-aware. For this study, however, the concept of political awareness is interpreted as fluid. The participants will be asked if they see themselves as politically aware and therefore, it is difficult to establish what that entails to each participant. For this study, to be politically aware will be defined simply as: to be aware of, and have some knowledge of, politics.

1.5.4 Information

When one decides how to vote it is imperative to become informed. But what does it mean to become informed? For some, it is enough to read a news article, for others it means meticulous reading of articles, watching of debates and having discussions with other people. However, is there such a thing as “true” information? The concept of information is fluid. To enable a clear vision of the aim of this study, how students sought after information, the concept of information should be explained further.

According to Floridi (2010, p. 31) information is well formed and meaningful data. However, the definition of information changes depending on the context. The way most people understand “information” is that it relates to “knowledge, news or intelligence, given and received, so that someone becomes informed” (Bawden & Robinson, 2012, p. 64). Scholars from many disciplines have tried to define the concept of “information” - information scientists most of all. However, there is not one definition which is held to be true. Instead, a variety of definitions on information must be accounted for.

It is often difficult to describe information as just one thing, and scholars often divide it into categories. Buckland’s (1991) definition of information is perhaps the easiest to understand. He argues that there are three types of information:

1. “Information-as-process: When someone is informed, what they know is changed.
2. Information-as-knowledge: ‘Information’ is also used to denote that which is perceived in ‘information-as-process’.
3. Information-as-thing: The term ‘information’ is also used attributively for objects, such as data and documents that are referred to as ”information’ because they are regarded as being informative…” (p. 351)

Buckland (1991) claims that information-as-knowledge is impossible to measure, since it is subjective, and that it therefore must be described and by doing so it takes on a physical form as a signal, text, or communication, and in the process becoming information-as-thing. He also argues that information can be viewed as evidence, that information is used as evidence when learning
– “as the basis for understanding” (p. 353). It is similar to information-as-thing because it is as passive. Evidence does not do anything on its own, things are done with it or to it. It can be misunderstood, understood, used or misused, just like information-as-thing. Information-as-process and information-as-knowledge are too situational, and Buckland denotes them in favour of information-as-thing which he explains can be used directly by any information system. In the case of political information, it may be the only reliable way to view information, albeit difficult, since it will always be part of information-as-process and information-as-knowledge. Political information is not passive.

Information can also be understood from a semiotic viewpoint. Bawden and Robinson (2012) categorises information into four levels:

- Empiric: the physical transmission
- Syntactic: the language or coding used
- Semantic: the meaning of the message
- Pragmatic: the significance of the message to a recipient in a particular context (p. 70).

Bawden and Robinson (2012) argue that in the area of library and information science the levels that are important are the syntactic level – for organising information – and the semantic and pragmatic – to create meaning and significance of information. In the context of voting the levels we would be most interested in would be the semantic and pragmatic levels of information. The semantic because of the importance of the meaning of the messages in a political context and the pragmatic because of how the messages are perceived in the context of a political referendum.

Dervin (1994) emphasises that when it comes to information in a democracy it does not matter if all information is “good” because there is no such thing as a complete, or “good” person. She criticises what she calls the “Information ↔ Democracy narrative” (p. 369) because it assumes that a rational person will seek out good information, which in turns means that if good information were available to all, those living in a democratic society would automatically become well-informed. She criticises this notion and claims that there is no such thing as a rational person: “We are not always centered, always conscious, always ordered… As individuals we constitute and are constituted by our societies; our societies constitute and are constituted by us” (p. 382). Today, twenty-four years after the publication of her article, probably few are worried that there is not enough information available to citizens. Dervin realised early on that it does not only matter if information is “good”, whatever that means, but that the construction of the society we live in affects how information is perceived and accepted.

In her encyclopedia article on information Bates (2010) outlines previous definitions of information. Her conclusion is that information can be many things, such as:

- a proposition, a structure, a message, or an event
• as requiring truth or indifferent to truth
• as socially embedded and under perpetual re-interpretation, or as measurable in bits
• as a worn-out idea deserving of dispatch, or as an exciting conception understandable in terms of evolutionary forces (p. 2357).

Bates (2010) compares the status of the term information in information sciences as the same as communication for communication sciences, which also is closely associated to voting behaviour. This further underlines how closely all three (including political science) disciplines are connected. Bawden and Robinson (2012) highlights the fact that some see information as a communication between people, instead of a static thing. However, information is not seen as this complex when measuring peoples’ opinion formation.

For this thesis, Buckland’s definition of information has been adopted. For the remaining part of the paper, when I speak of information, I speak of two of the types of information that he presents: information-as-process and information-as-thing. I will be seeking information about the use of information sources; those being ‘information-as-thing’. The students’ use of the information sources to gain knowledge therefore is the ‘information-as-process’. I do not include ‘information-as-knowledge’ precisely for the same reason that Buckland denounces it; because it is so difficult to measure.

I make no claim that there is information or knowledge which is “right” or “wrong” and I am aware that within the process of becoming informed lie several problems. These will be explored in this study.

1.5.5 Information behaviour

One can say that the research of information behaviour focuses on the human relationship with information. This includes, for example, how we interact with, react to, assess, ignore and seek information.

Wilson (2000) defines the term as:

“the totality of human behaviour in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use. Thus, it includes face-to-face communication with others, as well as passive reception of information as in, for example watching TV-advertisements, without any intention to act on the information given” (p.49).

Early research within the field of information seeking studies put much focus on how to improve the information seeking services available to the user, such as different library services like catalogues, and in more recent times digital libraries, search engines and systems of different kinds (Wilson, 2000). Although the user was studied, he or she was perceived to be a tool for improving the information seeking experience, albeit for that user. However, there was a shift towards the study of the user behaviour in the 1980s when Wilson (1981) shifted research from examining information sources and systems to examining the information user’s everyday life. There was a
realisation that each user was different and that the user was not just an empty bucket in which one could throw a brick and there it would stay (Dervin, 1998). Many factors can change how people interact or perceive information, such as social, demographic, or role-related factors (Bawden & Robinson, 2012). As discussed earlier, information is a subjective term and can mean something different to every individual, which also makes it a problematic term.

The term “information behaviour” has been debated by some (Savolainen, 2007, Bates, 2010). Savolainen (2007) argues that the term is too narrow as he thinks the word behaviour is too closely associated to psychological cognitive behaviour. Instead, he uses the term information practice. Although he admits that the two terms basically deal with the same things; what people do with information, he argues that information practice primarily deals with activities that are socially and culturally constructed, whereas information behaviour primarily deals with needs and motives. Bates (2010) prefers the term information related behaviour, because, she argues, the information scientist is primarily interested in the information and only secondly in the behaviour related to it.

That said, the term information behaviour will be used in this study, since it is a widely accepted term and it includes both more and less active information activities, because such behaviour does not only encompass the active search for behaviour but can be much broader than that.

Wilson (2000) has also stated that information behaviour can encompass not only passive and active information behaviour but behaviour where information is even avoided. In this thesis it has been important to identify such behaviour.

1.5.6 Information need, seeking, and use

Information behaviour consists mainly of three components: Information need, information seeking and information use.

An information need is what activates the process of seeking information. Bawden and Robinson (2012) explain that there have been numerous suggestions which have to do with the “idea of a need being some kind of ‘recognized gap’ between what one knows and what one wants to know: associated with a desire to seek answers, reduce uncertainty, or make sense” (2012, p. 189). Wilson (2000) argues that it is not possible to establish what the information need is for each individual since it is a highly subjective experience which cannot be easily measured from the outside. In the case of this study the information need was clear. The students’ information need was to determine the pros and cons about staying or leaving the European union.

In contrast to information need, information seeking is a purposeful activity with a specific goal (Wilson, 2000). It is the action taken when there is an information need. When seeking information different resources may be used and part of the aim of this thesis is to find out which information resources
were used by students in Scotland while seeking information. Kuhlthau (1993) suggest there are different levels or stages in the information seeking process where one moves from uncertainty to understanding and that it is a constructive process. It can be likened to Dervin’s (1983) Sense-Making approach, which cannot, however, be limited to the concept of information seeking but should be applied to all three components, information need, seeking and use. Dervin argues that information seeking and use are “posited as "constructing" activities - as personal creating of sense” (Dervin, 1983, p. 5) She argues that information seeking is when someone makes sense of something and that information is merely a series of ‘constructings and reconstructings’.

As well as information needs and information seeking, information use is something which occurs every day in regular situations. Kari (2010) finds that information use is, in fact, all of these things: information search; information processing; knowledge construction; information production; applying information and effects of information. If we accept this assumption then information use is the most important concept for this paper, as it contains so many of the aspects that are to be investigated. Kari articulates information use as:

- information practices - almost any kind of human interaction with information.
- information search - the processes of information seeking and information retrieval.
- information processing - information is interpreted, analysed and modified.
- knowledge construction - mental constructs are shaped or designed to function as a basis for thinking.
- information production - creating an expression of knowledge which others can also observe.
- applying information - information functions as a resource in some process.
- effects of information - changes brought about by information.

In the context of seeking information in preparation to vote we will see that participants used information in all the ways described above.

2. Literature review

The topic of this thesis is how young voters seek political information when faced with a referendum. There is a large amount of research on young adults’ general political information seeking within the fields of politics and communication studies. There is also research on this topic, albeit not as much, within the area of information literacy studies. That research often has the focus on the role of the school libraries and how information literacy can be
taught, which is not the focus of this paper. To become informed on previous findings, research from all these fields will be presented. There is, however, little research combining information behaviour and voting behaviour. This thesis is a contribution to filling that research gap.

Much of the previous research has been taken from communication studies and political science. The focus within these academic fields often lies on how voters seek information, but with the goal of identifying how to change the messages, the communication, the information (e.g. Winchester et al., 2014). The aim within those fields is often to help those who are sending the messages; the political elite (Hobolt, 2005). This paper, however, has an information behavioural approach which means that the research attempts to explore the experience of the receiver of information, i.e. the person having to make the decision before casting a vote.

The literature that will be presented is divided into two parts: The first part outlines research on young voters and how they seek and perceive political information. This part includes research from political studies, communication studies and information literacy studies. The second part presents research from political science and communication studies which explores how humans react to and interact with political information when faced with a referendum.

To illustrate the volume, or rather the lack of, articles on this topic within library and information science I will account for searches that were performed in three different databases: Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), Library and Information Science and Technology Abstracts (LISTA) and Web of Science. Below each search are the number of hits as well as how many were relevant and how many were published in information science papers. LIS stands for Library and Information Science and means that the relevant article found was published in a scientific paper within that field. When there were more than a hundred hits only the first 20 hits were examined. There was some research on the information seeking of politicians, but they were not considered relevant for this thesis.

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These searches often produced the same relevant articles over and over, in total there were about 8 relevant LIS articles and 15 relevant articles in general. They were all read but some were not considered relevant enough to include in the literature review.

To find the articles from other fields two different methods were used. Firstly, by conducting an online search, using Google and Google Scholar. This often led to relevant articles that were locked in databases which I could access through the university. Most relevant articles could be found in Wiley Online Library, SAGE Journals and Taylor & Francis Online where I then, secondly, conducted searches using the same search terms seen above, which generated a slightly better result. When, for example, I used the search term “information seeking" AND “political information” in Taylor Francis Online it generated 283 hits, out of the first 20 retrieved 10 were considered relevant.

2.1 The information seeking behaviour of young voters

In this part I will account for research on young voters and their interaction with political information.

In 2015 the Institute of Education at University College London did a study on young adults and politics in Britain (Keating, Green & Janmaat, 2015). Their findings showed that although young adults were distrustful of politicians – 80% said they were – they were still interested in politics but not very engaged, only 44% voted in the general election in 2010. However, there seemed to be an increase in political engagement since 50% of respondents said they were very likely to vote in the 2015 election and 25% said they were fairly likely to vote.

Kitchens, Powell and Williams (2003) report that information seeking does not actually affect how citizens vote. Their results indicate that those who express high information seeking behaviour also possess great political knowledge or interest. It is often those with already strong partisan alliances who have an interest in seeking information, which in turn means that they are less inclined to let that information seeking affect how they vote, as they view the information from an already set political position. Those who are undecided, on the other hand, are often content with seeking or receiving a small amount of information before either reaching a decision or deciding to not decide at all. Kitchens et al. argue that voters with a small amount of knowledge should be those who seek more information, but his research shows that this is not the case: “Political information is sought, not for decisional utility, but for reinforcement and surveillance purposes” (Kitchens et al. 2003, p. 78).
Winchester, Binney and Hall (2014) investigate young adults’ voting behaviour; what they believe influences it, as well as which communications they find the most engaging come election time. They attempt to examine which internal and external influences young voters have as well as which information sources and communications they use before an election. They interviewed 29 Australians from the Melbourne area within the ages of 18 to 25. The interviews were thematically analysed, and the findings show that when it came to seeking political information young adults often expressed passive information seeking behaviour. Some experienced that they gained information anyway because of the large amount of information around them during a political campaign, conversely others experienced being surrounded by so much information they began to ignore it as it was too much to take in. Some were cautious regarding the value of the political information, not always trusting it. Some noted that they did not feel very knowledgeable about politics and had the feeling that the political information they found was often aimed at an older generation which made them lose interest and feel excluded. Others agreed that they did not have a lot of knowledge but that they felt comfortable that the knowledge they had was enough to make an informed decision. When it came to the issue of trust some had faith in the political system and politicians and others did not.

This study found that young adults mostly felt confident with their decision how to vote. Considering external influences or information sources the researchers found that media played an important role and so did family, but not to the same extent. All participants commented that media influenced them. Traditional news sources like newspapers were used to a wide extent whereas newer media sources, like social media, were often rejected or not considered serious enough, at least when it came to finding specific political information. Television and print media had the most influence and thereafter came the internet and social media. Media were often perceived with caution, however, particularly so when different campaign messages were broadcast, particularly when they were negative. Reading print media meant an active information seeking behaviour whereas watching TV was a more passive interaction with information. Many participants commented that politicians should use social media more to reach younger voters, unaware that most politicians already do. The influence of family varied. Some were quite influenced by their families. Those with politically conscious parents were especially politically interested and tended to vote similarly to their parents. Others felt that they did not have enough knowledge to make an informed decision and therefore leaned quite heavily on the experience of their (older) parents. Still, only a few of the participants said they voted simply the same as their family and very few participants mentioned friends as an important influence.

Wells and Dudash (2007) examine how young voters gain political knowledge and ask the following questions: which information sources do they use, and which do they deem credible? Do they feel knowledgeable enough to vote, i.e. do they have enough confidence? Lastly, does increased political knowledge
lead to political efficacy among young voters? To answer these questions, thirteen focus groups were conducted with students at six universities in four different states in the USA. After careful examination of the transcripts seven information source categories were identified; “discussion or talk (117; 28.5%), Internet (74; 15%), cable news (59; 14%), newspapers (41; 10%), radio (33; 8%), local news (21; 5%), and campaign advertisements (17; 4%)” (p. 1282). Discussing with other people was the most used way of gaining political information, although many different sources were used too.

It was difficult for Wells and Dudash (2007) to establish which sources the students deemed most credible. Most students regarded sources that were not controlled by an American news corporation as the most credible. A lot of students sought information elsewhere, such as foreign news like the BBC, or non-corporation news, like National Public Radio (NPR). Information sources were deemed either credible or not credible. The students did not appear to believe that an information source could have a scale of trustworthiness. Several of the students gained information from entertainment sources, like the Daily Show or Saturday Night Live, although they felt embarrassed by it. Xenos and Becker (2009) argue that comedy shows like the Daily Show can in fact be gateways to further political information seeking and knowledge.

Wells and Dudash (2007) also examine the students use of the internet, without separating the various information sources that exist on the internet. Instead the internet as a whole is regarded one information source. Some students did not trust the internet as a credible source for political information, others noted that the internet is just like every other information source; some information on the internet is trustworthy, some is not, and it is up to the individual to determine the credibility of the information. However, the focus group results show that the internet is used more frequently than other traditional information sources. The main result of this study, however, is that young voters turn to family and friends to discuss when they want to gain political information. They do not, however, always deem their friends and family as credible sources. The students of this study claim that they have sufficient knowledge to make an informed decision but that they often find that the information available to them is confusing with conflicting messages.

In contrast to Wells and Dudash (2007) who did not differentiate between different usages of the internet, Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) focus on how social media were utilised by young voters in the 2008 presidential election in the United States. During the 2008 election campaign there had been an increase in political actors’ presence on social media. Kushin and Yamamoto suggest that an active social media use among young voters is positively associated with political self-efficacy and political involvement. Since young adults acquire political information through friends and family, the political postings from friends, family and acquaintances could therefore be a major influence politically. Their findings, however, do not support this hypothesis. Instead they found that there was a positive link between the use of traditional information sources online and political self-efficacy and political involvement.
among young voters but they could not establish a link between political self-
efficacy and political involvement and social media use. The reason for this,
they argue, could be that users were unaware of the political platforms on
social media that presented what they call correct information. In conclusion,
they argue that user-generated content that social media provide will become
influential information in future political campaigns but that, at the time of the
release of their article, what most influenced young adults was traditional
online media news, which still supports their claim that the internet is an
important factor in the political information seeking process and how young
voters are affected.

There has been some research focusing on political information seeking within
the area of information literacy, often with the intention to improve information
literacy education. Smith and McMenemy (2017) have studied a younger group
of people, high school students in the age group 14 to 15. They have looked at
young people's conceptions of political information and how they experience
and evaluate different information sources. They argue that to be able to take
part in the political process, meaning elections or referendums or similar
activities, citizens need to be able to make informed decisions based on a range
of different information sources. Their study shows that young people use
several different political information sources, but that the information
behaviour varied from participant to participant and there was a great variation
of how young people experienced political information. Sources like family,
friends, TV, TV news, comedy shows, radio shows, social media, newspapers
and even community meetings were utilised.

A large number of participants believed the quality of information is an
important factor when deciding to use it or form an opinion from it. However,
participants were often not able to describe what they meant by quality
information, or even gave incorrect answers as to what it was. Often, they rated
information sources which provided the most information as the most reliable.
Therefore, sources like Google were ranked as reliable sources. The
participants all preferred to receive political information from other people, and
they trusted those with the most experience. People their own age were
disregarded since they felt they knew as little as themselves whereas parents
and grandparents were seen as more knowledgeable because they had, as one
participant put it "been around for longer" (Smith & McMenemy, p. 889).

Emotional responses affected how some viewed information sources and how
they chose them. Some said that they avoided TV news and newspapers
because it made them sad. Others said that they actively received political
information from satiric comedy shows because it put them in a good mood
whilst learning about current issues. This, according to Smith and McMenemy,
supports Wilson’s (1981) theory that affective factors are as influential as
cognitive factors in the information seeking process. They also attempted to
identify the constructs behind the evaluation of information. Characteristics
that they identified as aids for the pupils included the amount of information,
it’s perceived truth, currency, clarity, relevance and accuracy.
In general, the main characteristic that pupils sought was the information’s trustworthiness, “in that the information being communicated is the accurate ‘truth’” (Smith & McMenemy, 2017, p. 885). They also tried to determine how pupils determined the authority of an information source. Those that were ranked high in authority were so because they were considered “knowledgeable”, “experienced”, “trustworthy” and “well-intentioned” (Smith & McMenemy, p. 887). In relation to trust, the intention of the information source was important to some pupils. When speaking to another person, the perceived experience of that person was considered important, as mentioned earlier. Friends their same age were not considered as trustworthy due to their lack of experience. Other important factors when determining the trustworthiness of a source was that it was based on facts, not opinions, that it was not out of date, and if based on opinions, that they were transparent. The last one was important to many of the pupils. Online sources were often not considered trustworthy, unless it was posted by a celebrity they respected. When evaluating information, the role of the trusted parent was key to a majority of the pupils. Among the participants it varied greatly how they assessed and evaluated the political information and Smith and Mcmenemy (2017) argue that there is an awareness about information among young people that should be supported and others who are not as good at evaluating information that need tools to learn to do so.

In another article by Smith (2016) she suggests that the school libraries should be the main instrument for teaching information literacy among young people. The question is, according to her, especially current at this point in time after the Brexit referendum, the Scottish independence referendum, and the 2015 British general election. She investigated Scottish school libraries’ information literacy support in the time leading up to the Scottish independence referendum and The British general election 2015, as well as how much, how often and how students made use of their school library to gain knowledge on those issues (Smith, 2016). The results show that there was much greater interest in the independence referendum than the general election. 68% of the participants (library workers) reported that students had sought information on the independence referendum, whereas only 32% of the participants said that students had sought information on the general election. Apart from going online on the computers in the library or reading books about politics several library workers stated that students asked them about their opinion on the issue, reaffirming previous research that states that conversation with others is a highly valued approach to seeking information. However, young people feel insecure about their information seeking skills, so they turn to trusted authority figures, like parents, other family members, teachers and librarians. However, since teachers and school librarians are not allowed to express political opinions it led to frustration among the young people because they often wanted opinions, as well as facts. According to Smith “young people want to learn about, be involved in and influence politics”. (Smith, 2016, p. 19)
Levinsen and Yndigegn (2015) explore the implications of discussion between young people and their friends and family and how they experience political discussions in their everyday life. They argue that although young people may pay little attention to politics they seem to be very concerned about their own position in society and their own chances of getting a good job and how politicians handle things like climate change, increasing unemployment and immigration. Those who considered themselves politically aware stated that family and friends were their main sources for political interaction. Often, those families where there seemed to be a constant political debate created political aware, and politically interested, children.

The authors found that there is a gender bias when young people discuss politics within the family. The dominant discussion partner when it comes to politics is the father; 28% of the interviewees stated that they always talked politics with their father, whereas only 15% of the respondents talked politics with their mother. When it comes to talking politics with the father Levinsen and Yndigegn recognise two types of experiences: Either the children look up to their father and agree with what he says, or they disagree with their father and often have arguments when they discuss politics. This led to their other findings that some avoid talking politics at home because they disagree with their parents’ political beliefs. In their conclusion they stress that political discussions are avoided if there is any chance of disagreement, even if it is within the more comfortable sphere of the family.

As already exemplified, there is some discussion whether young people are interested in politics or not and whether they consider whether information is of good quality or not. The Scottish independence referendum allowed voters from the age of sixteen. Baxter, Tait, McLaverty and McLeod (2015) conducted a study looking into how young people engaged in politics in the time leading up to referendum and whether it had made them more politically active after the referendum. Their findings show that in conformity to earlier research a large number of young people stated that they had not been very politically interested before the referendum, but that the referendum increased their political interest. After the referendum this interest in politics seemed to have manifested itself in engagement with political parties. However, it was through political groups that were not connected to political parties that they were engaged leading up to the referendum. Of the 21 students they interviewed 10 actively campaigned for Yes Scotland. Eleven students joined a political party afterwards, of whom 9 joined the Scottish National Party (SNP). However, by the time the 2015 general election came around interest had dwindled. Baxter et al. conclude that their findings show that young people can be politically mobilised depending on the situation. If the circumstances are right, like the case with a referendum that interested many people, young people can become politically active and aware.

Lenker (2016) speaks of motivated reasoning, which he describes as “a frequently unnoticed tendency to (1) avoid or dismiss new information that challenges existing beliefs and (2) to readily accept new information that
appears to conform with prior beliefs” (Lenker, 2016, p. 512) His research into motivated reasoning aims to improve information literacy theory and practice and he argues that motivated reasoning is an obstacle to a democratic informed society. He describes that our prior beliefs have a large influence on how we evaluate information about politics and that “we tend to screen out information that challenges our existing opinions” (Lenker, 2016, p. 516). That means that it does not matter if there is large amount of “good” information available, as it will be disregarded due to previous convictions.

Lenker refers to the article by Dervin (1994) previously mentioned and claims that this argument is similar to her notion of the “incomplete person” (Dervin, 1994, p. 382). According to Lenker, it is not just the way we evaluate information but also how we seek information that is affected by motivated reasoning. He points at research by Taber and Lodge (in Lenker, 2016) who in their study found that the majority of the participants, who were undergraduates at university, tended to seek out information sources that confirmed their prior beliefs and convictions. When they were asked to seek information on the issue of gun control, politically conservative participants tended to seek information from the National Rifle Association and the Republican party. The phrase Lenker uses to describe these sources is ‘sympathetic sources’. What is interesting is the finding that those of the participants who were politically aware, were those who tended to seek out sympathetic sources. Lenker argues that motivated reasoning has a harmful effect to the information seeking and evaluation process and that awareness of the issue needs to be included in information literacy education in schools.

2.2 Referendum voting behaviour

This part explores previous research on information and opinion formation in connection to referendum voting in the EU.

Hobolt (2005) emphasises the importance of political information on the process of voters’ opinion formation. She has devoted much of her research to referendums dealing with the European Union and has in the past year concentrated on opinion formation regarding Brexit. She argues that political awareness is an imperative factor on how individuals digest political information. However, she underlines that the way the referendum campaigns are presented to the voter also plays an important part. For example, if the campaign is intensive it creates a larger amount of information which in turn creates more nuanced information which helps voters in their decision. By looking at data from previous referendums in Norway, Denmark and Ireland she analyses the voting behaviour at an individual and a contextual level. She argues that the individual’s political awareness acts as a mediating factor when making up his or her mind on issues relating to the referendum. On a contextual level, the intensity of the campaign is a significant factor since more intense campaigns create more information which, according to Hobolt, makes the choices of voters more sophisticated.
One of her essential arguments is that voters’ decisions are based on one of two things: Either they make up their mind based on national issues, for example by listening to their favourite party’s arguments or by listening to arguments that will affect their own country or they vote based on their attitudes towards the European Union. In short, she has found that those with a higher level of political awareness are able to look beyond the closest issues, for example, national issues, and rely on their attitudes towards European issues whereas those with a lower political awareness rely more on issues closer to home.

In general, however, she finds that the more information that becomes available to the voter, the better decision they can reach, based on their own judgement, rather than following elite cues and falling for framing, which is when facts are presented from a certain angle. However, her survey data also suggests that government satisfaction affects how citizens choose to vote and in these cases political awareness does not have as big an impact on their voting behaviour. Her research also shows that referendums can often go either way, it is not unusual that the outcome goes against what polls have shown, which was also the case with the Brexit referendum.

“Why will voters sometimes follow elite cues, whilst at other times voting contrary to the recommendations of their parties” (Hobolt, 2005, p. 87)? The conclusion she reaches is that the imperative factor is not elite cues, but how the political information is presented, that is, how it is biased.

In a subsequent article, published after the Brexit referendum, Hobolt (2016) analyses the motives behind the opinion formation of the British citizens. This time she discusses the “second-order” theory (Reif and Schmitt, in Hobolt, 2016) when voters use their vote to signal dissatisfaction with the government. She also points toward research that speak of the divide between the winners and losers of globalization. “In a nutshell, the ‘winners’ of globalization – the young, well-educated professionals in urban centres – favour more open borders, immigration and international co-operation, whereas the ‘left behind’ – the working class, less educated and the older – oppose such openness” (p. 1265). The way one votes in referendums is according to the second-order theory not driven by ones’ feelings and attitudes toward the issue at hand, in this case whether to stay in the European Union, but, instead, is driven by feelings and attitudes towards the political establishment, in most cases the sitting government. In other words, the referendum vote is used as an opportunity to punish the sitting government. Hobolt argues that it makes sense that those with a strong national identity, especially those with a strong English identity tended to vote leave. The leave side framed the referendum as a battle between the people and the “corrupt elite” (Hobolt, 2016, p.1266). The Brexit vote divided the country and the dividing lines were class, education, generations, and geography. The winners of globalization often feel positively towards European integration and the so-called losers are often against it. Finally, she presents four factors that affected vote choices: socioeconomic factors; geographical identities; feelings about the domestic political establishment; and policy attitudes.
LeDuc (2002) argues that in contrast to regular elections, referendum campaigns can result in a massive change in public opinion and often the results differ from what the polls have shown before the campaign period, meaning that campaigns have a significant effect on the voters. He points out that referendums tend to split parties internally. Voters, who in general elections are used to taking elite cues from their preferred parties, are now receiving mixed signals or conflicting messages. This, he argues, in combination with the fact that referendums often deal with issues that are new to many, make referendum campaigns more unstable or inconsistent. Campaigns in which there is little partisan or ideological basis are most volatile. It is especially in these cases, he argues, that voters find it harder to form an opinion. It takes longer and the outcome of the referendum is often more unpredictable.

So far, most research mentioned emphasises the importance of information to voters and that political information is a mediating factor in opinion formation. Dvořák (2013) agrees to a certain point but he also considers other factors. In particular, he contests the argument that framing mostly affects ill-informed voters. In fact, even well-informed politically aware people (the winners of globalisation, to use Hobolt’s (2016) phrasing) can be affected, especially when it comes to the actual phrasing of the referendum proposal. Dvořák points at research which shows that when countries have voted twice on the same issue it is not that public opinion has shifted but that the proposal has been phrased differently, or there has been, as he puts it: “qualitative shifts in the underlying value interpretation linked to referendum proposals” (p.367). He also questions whether an intensive campaign automatically means more information which equals informed citizens. There have been referendums in which opinion has swayed right at the end although the campaign had been information intensive and therefore, according to Hobolt (2005), should have provided stable, well informed citizens. This can be compared to the Brexit campaign where, perhaps for the first time, the campaign was extremely intensive, but the outcome was uncertain.

3. Theoretical framework

Two different models from two fields of research have been chosen for this thesis because they offer two methods of approaching the data. Zaller (1992) gives us the model of how we can reject, receive, or accept information, and what variables decide who does what. According to Zaller those with very little, or no, political awareness can be influenced by political information and change their mind from their original stance, if they have one. Wilson's model of information behaviour focuses on what supports and hinders individuals’ information seeking and receiving whilst trying to satisfy an information need. Both models have helped create the research questions which in turn helped gather data, and both models have been used to create codes that have been applied during the thematic analysis. Wilson’s information behaviour model is appropriate for information behaviour research whereas Zaller’s model is appropriate for voting behaviour research. Since this thesis attempts to
combine these two areas, combining the two models can help meaningful data emerge and help fill the gap of research on voters’ information behaviour.

One research question was created to determine if any of the students did change their minds and whether it is connected to low political awareness, as Zaller argues. The other research questions incorporate several of the activating mechanisms and information variables found in Wilson’ model such as active information search, context and source characteristics, to name a few. Before starting the coding process of the thematic analysis, several codes were created using the theory of Zaller and Wilson and then later applied when the coding took place. This enabled the research to not expand too far of topic and from becoming unmanageable and enhanced the possibility of answering each question.

3.1 Zaller’s RAS model

“Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some sort of conclusion about it.” (Zaller, 1992, p. 6)

With his Receive-Accept-Sample model Zaller (1992) aims to explain how people form political preferences. He argues that political information is, above all, conveyed through mass media and his theory tries to show how individuals evaluate this mass of information. He points at four ideas that should be considered to understand his theory:

1. Citizens care in different degrees about politics or public affairs and their knowledge set will therefore always be different from each other. Their habits will vary and they will have different exposure to media.
2. One can only be critical of topics where one has prior knowledge.
3. Citizens do not have fixed ideas on every issue, but they can vary from one time to another. If confronted with a new issue, they can create “opinion statements” (Zaller, 1992, p. 1).
4. When creating these “opinion statements” they will use ideas that they have thought of most recently, they will use ideas that are “at the top of their head” (Zaller, 1992, p.2).

In general, to gain information, we have to trust others. When it comes to information about politics or public affairs these ‘others’ are, according to Zaller (1992), the political elite. A large number of people can be included in this group: politicians, activists, journalists, officials, specialists on different topics etc. Zaller points out that even when we receive information from friends or family members, that information is most often second-hand information from the political elite. In many instances, what reaches the public is a simplified version of the original information. Zaller calls it stereotyped information. Most of the time it is not possible to keep the information in its pure form, since the information may be lost due to it being too difficult to understand. This simplified version of information is what was previously explained as framing. Zaller argues that the fundamental question about
“frames of references” (p.8), as he calls them, is whether the public is given a choice between alternative issues.

To understand what Zaller (1992) means, let us look at one of the examples he gives, the example of the changing racial attitudes in the United States. Those who earlier thought that the black population was inferior to the white population were not stupid. In fact, their views on the issue were supported by science. Racial biologists said this was so, and who are we to trust if not scientists? As scientific researchers started to change their minds and say that they, basically, had been wrong, the public started to change their attitude towards the black population – because the political cues had changed. Zaller argues that opinions on topics which people might have actual experience of, poverty for example, will still be influenced by elite political cues. How people interpret the political elite cues is determined by what he calls their political predispositions which can consist of values, experiences, or interests.

Zaller (1992) rejects the idea that individuals have fixed opinions which are revealed when surveyed. Most individuals have a low political awareness so when they are confronted with political communications they are unable to assess it critically and just accept partial ideas and arguments. When asked about a specific question they reach inside their heads and pull out the most recent considerations they have received. A more politically aware person can filter the political information being targeted at them and more carefully choose ideas and arguments which are consistent with their political predispositions or values.

Zaller’s (1992) model has four axioms:

1. Reception – If you are politically aware, you are more likely to receive (and digest) political information.
2. Resistance – If you are politically aware, you are more likely to resist arguments that are inconsistent with your own predispositions.
3. Accessibility – The more recently a political consideration has been received, the easier it is to access.
4. Response - People tend to reach for the more recently accessed political considerations, those that are at the top of their heads. (p. 49)

Zaller describes it like this: “Opinion statements, as conceived in my four-axiom model, are the outcome of a process in which people receive new information, decide whether to accept it, and then sample of the moment of answering question” (p. 51). This gives us the RAS model.

Zaller’s (1992) theory states that information is the variable that effects voters most, but that the political awareness of the individuals determines the effect. He defines political awareness as something which “refers to the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered” (p. 21) Those who are the least aware are those that can change their mind quickly and become influenced by political cues through
media whereas those who are more aware are not as affected by media exposure, their pre-existing values stay the same.

3.1.1 Critical response to Zaller’s RAS model

Due to its influence on mass opinion studies there has been a critical response to Zaller’s RAS model. Feldman, Huddy and Marcus (2013) criticise Zaller’s idea that the public need elite cues to become informed and that those who are politically unaware are unable to reject them, making them completely passive. They believe that citizens, under certain circumstances, can evaluate information independently without elite cues. Friedman (2013) contests Zaller’s description of the political elite, since he believes journalists should not be part of that group. Zaller (2013) himself has revised his theory, stating that although the RAS model on its own is sound, the effect of elite cues on citizens has been exaggerated and that he has left out certain types of voters, who instead have been bundled together.

In fact, Zaller revised his first theory as early as 1998, arguing that the media and the elite cues do not have as big a power over the less aware as he once thought, and that people are able to resist political cues and media messages even if one does not have a large political awareness. He based this new argument on the fact that Bill Clinton’s popularity was not damaged by the Monica Lewinsky affair and argued that this was because people could see beyond the affair and see that the country was in a solid political state due to Clinton’s leadership. This may be so, but recent political events (e.g. The US 2016 election, the Brexit referendum, the rise of far-right political parties in Europe) have shown that Zaller’s model is still topical. Voters today seem to be easily persuaded by new messages, although the notion of a political elite is changing. Zaller’s original theory is still considered a fundamental touchstone for research on public opinion (Bartels, 2013) and it is therefore used as the theory of this study.

3.2 Wilson’s expanded model

The reason Wilson’s (1999) expanded model is suitable for this thesis is because it is not merely focused on active information seeking but also on, as Case (2016) puts it: “passive attention, passive search, active search and ongoing search” (p. 137). The reason it is called the expanded model is because it was developed from his earlier models of information behaviour. Let us quickly look at some of those first.

The model below is a variation of the first 1981 model. It proposes that the information-seeking behaviour comes from an information need, and to satisfy the need the information seeker utilizes various information sources or services. This information process will either be successful or unsuccessful. What Wilson (1999) wanted to show with this model was that there was little research on what the information seeker did with the information and how the informal information transfer between individuals looked. The model has been developed, he argues, to: “provide a map of the area and draw attention to gaps
in research” (p. 251) but that is, according to him, ultimately also its weakness, as it does not offer any hypotheses to be tested.

Figure 3.1: Wilson’s information behaviour model

Wilson’s (1999) second model of 1981 incorporates Ellis’ information behavioural model where eight features of information seeking behaviour are identified. Wilson suggests that information need is a basic kind of need, not a primary need as others have suggested, and that when an individual is trying to satisfy this need he or she will encounter different barriers. Depending on the context the barriers may be different. The context can depend on the person itself, the social role, the work role or in what environment the individual resides, either privately or professionally. The model therefore offers the hypotheses that “information needs in different work roles will be different, or that personal traits may inhibit or assist information seeking” (p. 252-253). With this model Wilson seeks to explain how information needs arise and what prevents and aids the seeking of information.
The model which will be used for this study is Wilson’s (1999) expanded model of 1996. It draws upon research from several fields outside of information science, such as “decision-making, psychology, innovation, health communication and consumer research” (p. 256). It was chosen “because it is comprehensive, applicable to various contents, roles and disciplines, and is well established in the field; as such, it is applicable in different contexts, roles and disciplines” (Tury, Robinson & Bawden, 2015, p. 314). As seen in his earlier models upon which this model is built, the focus is still on the information need of the person in context. He presents three activating mechanisms, which also are theories: Stress/coping theory, which can explain why some individuals decide to not seek information even though they have an information need, risk/reward theory which can explain why certain sources are chosen and used and social learning theory which focuses on self-efficacy, the determination to execute the information seeking behaviour needed to satisfy the information need. Case (2016) thinks of these activating mechanisms as motivators. “What motivates a person to search for information and to what extent” (p. 137)? The model also uses intervening variables to represent what can support and hinder the individual’s information seeking behaviour process. These are psychological, demographic, role-related or interpersonal, environmental and source characteristics. The intervening variables will play an important role in the analysis of the interviews.

Finally, when looking at both models, one can see also that they are compatible because Zaller deals with specific areas of Wilson’s theory. For example, Zaller is obviously concerned with the media of communication, which may be
searched for deliberately or which may be happened upon. The notion of “receive, reject, accept” fits in with Wilson’s box of information use - these are, in effect, decisions taken before the information is used – it is received as a result of a search or simply through reading the news media, and, before it affects decisions, it is rejected or accepted. The other aspect of Zaller’s model is the idea of awareness. In Wilson’s theory, this fits into the idea of an intervening variable relating to the choice of information source. Finally, Wilson’s idea of person-in-context fits into Zaller’s idea that depending on your previous political education or interest it will affect how information is received and evaluated.

4. Method

To reach the aim of the study, which is to identify how university students seek and receive political information before voting in a referendum, a mixed method has been employed. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) many of the research questions of the kind found in this thesis are best answered through mixed methods. All four of the sub-questions can be answered using both quantitative and qualitative methods as both methods can provide corroborated evidence to answer the questions. Because I wanted to find out about the participants’ attitudes, influences, the extent of knowledge etc. it was determined that this could be examined by using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

This thesis uses a concurrent style of data collection, which means that the quantitative and qualitative data is collected simultaneously, not sequentially. Advantages of a concurrent design is that it can help obtain complementary data on the same topic, which either turns out to be different or complementary, of which both can be valuable to the research. For this thesis using the concurrent design meant that findings of both the qualitative and quantitative could become enriched, clarified, but most of all; illustrated (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). I wanted to interview and observe but supplement these observations with an instrument with closed-ended questions to measure certain factors that might be relevant.

The design used is called an embedded design, since the quantitative data collections methods are embedded in the qualitative. However, according to Creswell and Clark (2011) when using an embedded design, it is assumed that the embedded data will play a secondary role. This is the case in my research design. The quantitative data is primarily supplemental. Since the quantitative data merely will be described, not properly statistically analysed, it is mainly used as a tool to highlight and illustrate the qualitative data where the main analysis will take place.

The chosen method of data collection is interviews which consist of both open and closed questions. An interview schedule was used with closed questions that were followed by several open questions (See appendix). The closed questions helped create simple descriptive statistics while the open questions
derive from the semi-structured interviewing technique which created a large amount of textual data to analyse. This chapter presents the choices of methods, both the data collection as well as the choice of analysis method. Sampling strategy, possible bias, and research ethics will also be discussed.

4.1 Data collection: survey interviewing

To collect data for this study, the research process of survey interviewing was chosen which, according to Brenner, Brown and Canter (1985), “permits the collection of the most extensive data on each person questioned” (p. 3). Survey interviewing uses both structured and unstructured modes of interviewing. In contrast to unstructured interviewing, where the interviewer can adapt the style of questioning to accommodate each interviewee (Ruane, 2006), the same questions, presented in the same neutral way, were put to each participant by using an interview schedule. The schedule included both predetermined closed and open questions. Gillham (2008) describes this approach as creating a skeleton (closed questions) which is then filled with meat (open questions).

4.1.1 Qualitative data collection

There were two kinds of open questions; the predetermined questions and follow-up questions, which varied depending on the answer the participant gave. Therefore, the qualitative part of the interview schedule used a semi-structured style of interviewing. According to Gillham (2008) semi-structured interviews entail that the same questions are put to all participants; the questions are open and follow-up questions are asked when the participant does not give an exhaustive enough answer.

Most of the time, open questions came right after a closed question, but open questions were asked on their own too, with probing questions to follow. No closed questions were ever asked without an ensuing open question.

The benefit of the interview as a research method is that both the researcher and the participant can find meaning in the exchange (Brenner et al. 1985). If the interviewer does not understand an answer, and the interviewee, a question, it can be cleared up on the spot, which is not possible when conducting self-completed surveys where the participant ticks all the answers themselves (Luo & Wildemuth, 2009). Although the schedule used for this study was quite restricted, the style of interviewing showed similarities to semi-structured interviewing, since it kept the conversation on topic but could always be broadened if needed. In this case the schedule served to bring back the participant to the planned narrative of the interview. The semi-structured interview allows the researcher to steer the focus of the dialogue in the desired direction, while leaving space for the interviewees to freely express their thoughts (Luo and Wildemuth, 2009). Even though there were questions to which all participants replied, the open questions led each interview in a completely unique direction.

Luo and Wildemuth (2009) recognises three central features to the research interview: the dichotonic nature of the interview; the clear purpose of the
interview and the different roles played by those taking part. According to Robson (in Luo & Wildemuth, 2009) the semi-structured interview…

“…has predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based upon the interviewer’s perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included” (p. 233).

This is certainly true when it comes to the interviews conducted for this study, with the exceptions that questions were never excluded but often included. As can be seen in the design of the interview schedule (see appendix) some questions were omitted depending on a participant’s previous answer, but that has to do with the design of the instrument and not the reaction of the interviewee. However, there is a significant difference between the semi-structured interview approach and the survey interviewing approach. The follow up questions are already written down in the survey questionnaire, whereas I was allowed to go off-script, so to say, and then to come back to it.

4.1.2 Quantitative data collection

When conducting a structured interview, using an interview schedule, it opens up for the collection of quantified data of the sample population (Ruane, 2006). Since I wanted to show examples of people's attitudes, behaviour, and opinions I deemed it appropriate to create descriptive statistics and to do so I needed a structured approach to collect data. This way it was easy to discover, for example, which information sources were most used by the students or how much knowledge they felt that they had about the EU. An interview schedule with both closed and open questions was designed. To answer the closed questions the participant received, for example, a card with different options to tick or they chose one or more options after I had read them out aloud.

4.1.3 Preparations and conducting the data collection

When preparing how to conduct my survey interviews I followed Brenner’s (1985) instructions. He underlines the importance of avoiding bias at all times. The person asking the questions must always leave it to the respondent to give the answer, without giving leading questions, which can affect the answer. He stresses that:

“the interviewer must maintain a neutral stance; whatever the topic of the conversation, he must not express his personal views about the issues under consideration, as this amounts to an explicit interviewer effect on the respondent, which might endanger, as in the case of leading and directive questioning, the validity of the information reported” (p. 16).

Therefore, I always tried to monitor myself so that my wording did not affect those I interviewed. Before going to Scotland to conduct the interviews, I interviewed one British person and two Americans, in their case changing the questions slightly to fit the previous American election, so that I could practice
my interviewing technique. I also took note as to whether they did not understand my questions and asked them if anything was unclear. Thereafter I made changes to the schedule. I recorded the interviews and listened to myself to see if I could detect any signs of bias or certain expectations on my part, as recommended by Bryman (2016). When I found any signs of bias or leading questions, I tried to not repeat it in the next pilot interview and repeated the procedure three times. For example, a few times my own political conviction shone through when I listened back to the recordings, which I did not think was evident while I conducted the interviews.

When conducting the interviews, I followed Brenner’s (1985) instructions carefully. He stresses the importance of never changing the wording of the set questions in the questionnaire so to get the most accurate data possible. However, he points out that the interviewer-responder relationship is a social interaction and that the interviewer must be involved and sympathetic towards the participant to obtain a maximised answer. If the interviewee does not understand a question it must first be repeated in the same wording, and if more clarification is needed, it must clarified neutrally. One should ask questions slowly and use the correct intonation so that each participant understand the questions the same way. Before continuing to the next question, one should make sure that the answer has been understood. He lists many rules which I used as a guideline when conducting the interviews. He lists a number of nondirective probes for open questions, which I used extensively:

Anything else?
Can you think of any other reason?
Can you tell me more about it?
In what way?
Can you explain this a little more?
Can you be more specific about this?
Why do you feel that way?
Can you tell me more about your thinking on that?
Why is this?
Are there any other issues involved?

(p. 25-26)

Saldana (2011) encourages his readers to always treat those being interviewed with courtesy and respect, in part to get the best possible research data, but also because they are doing us a great favour by agreeing to be interviewed. Gillham (2008) stresses the importance of showing that you’re listening carefully what the participant is saying by interposing encouraging words and questions. To be able to do means that the interviewer needs to know it’s interview guide, or schedule, well so they can keep their focus on the person being interviewed and not be distracted by the next question.

Twenty-four interviews were conducted and 22 were used for this study. The interviews were relatively short, around 20 minutes. This allowed me to
conduct several interviews in one day. Participants were also more inclined to agree to being interviewed if they knew the interview would not take too long. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcription was made in detail, including different sounds that participants made, such as coughing, laughing, snickering etc. Bryman (2016) points out that it is not just what people say, but how they say it. Therefore, all things that coloured a statement were included, so that it could be interpreted correctly.

4.2 Sampling

When choosing the sampling frame, the first step was to define the population of interest (Perryman & Wildemuth, 2009). The population of interest in this case was the student population of Scotland. To narrow the sample population, but keep it relatively broad, participants from three different universities were chosen, in two different cities; Glasgow and Edinburgh. The universities were the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, and the Caledonian University.

Students were selected by the researcher, which means that the sampling strategy was generic purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is when the researcher does not seek participants on a random basis (Bryman, 2016). Generic purposive sampling is when “the researcher establishes criteria concerning the kinds of cases needed to address the research questions, identifies appropriate cases, and then samples from those cases that have been identified” (Bryman, 2016, p. 413). Wildemuth and Cao (2009) point out that it is important to define exactly who should be included in the groups. The cases, or context, identified for this study were students studying at a Scottish university. It was decided that it did not matter whether they had voted or not, but that the focus would lie on the information seeking and interaction of the students regarding the Brexit referendum. Interesting findings could arise from those who had a little interest in the referendum. I chose not to make any age, or study-level limits. Anyone who was studying at the selected universities in Scotland could take part in the study. The sample, therefore, had a wide range in age and on what level they were studying, ranging from first year students to doctoral candidates. No faculties and courses were excluded.

The contexts in which participants were to be selected were the three university campuses. Part of the reasoning behind the selection was to make it as random as possible. Students were approached in common areas of the universities and were asked if they were willing to be interviewed. However, it is possible that personal bias controlled how participants were picked, even if I was not aware of it. For the most part, participants were selected to achieve as much variety as possible in relation to the characteristics I wished to represent in the data, i.e., sex, age, subject discipline, etc. (Bryman, 2016). I approached individuals in different parts of the universities, where different departments were located, and looked for people who fitted the characteristics I was looking for. Some of them refused to participate which also affected the sample. It should be mentioned, however, that most of those who were asked to participate, agreed to
be interviewed, even though they themselves did not believe that they could contribute much. In other words, not only those who were interested in the issue were those who agreed to be interviewed.

Twenty-four students were interviewed but two were not included for analysis as they did not fit in the context of my chosen sample, i.e., they were not students, but worked in the university. When deciding on the sample size several factors were considered. One factor was how much time I had to spend conducting interviews in Scotland. Another was the number my supervisor advised. Thirdly, I looked at similar research and the sample sizes in those studies. Based on those three factors I decided to conduct 20 to 25 interviews.

4.3 Analysis of qualitative data

Since interviews produce a large amount of unstructured data, the analysis is not always straightforward. There are, however, guidelines and several variations of analysis approaches (Bryman, 2016). It is up to the researcher to interpret the data. Saldaña (2011) writes: “The primary task is researcher reflection on the data to capture the essence and essentials of the experience that make it what it is” (p. 8). It is important to remember that depending on who conducts the analysis the result will always be different. This is both the positive and negative side of qualitative analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). To be able to reflect on the data in the best possible way a thematic analysis has been adopted for this study. Braun and Clarke (2006) explains a theme like this:

"A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke, p. 10).

Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative content analysis which allows the researcher to detect patterns, categories, and themes within the data. By using coding, different themes will arise from the text. To detect themes, Ryan and Bernard (2003) recommend looking for repetitions, categories, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, missing data, and theory-related material. A coding scheme should be developed from three sources: the data, previous research and theories (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The coding scheme for the analysis of the interviews in this study used all three sources, especially the data and theories.

Activating mechanisms and intervening variables from Wilson’s information behaviour theory as well as the four axioms of Zaller’s RAS model created codes. I therefore already had codes for the coding scheme which I could try to detect in the data. However, I did not want the theory to limit the analysis, so themes and categories were also allowed to develop from the data inductively (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The theory was used as a guide and affected how the text was read and how codes were phrased. Zhang & Wildemuth (2009) calls this approach directed content analysis “in which initial coding starts with a theory or relevant research findings. Then, during data analysis, the
researchers immerse themselves in the data and allow themes to emerge from the data” (p. 309). The research questions partly derived from theory and the questionnaire was designed based on the research questions, which ultimately meant that theory was already submerged in the questions, which then might have affected how participants reacted to them and how they chose to answer.

Each transcribed interview was read carefully. In the margins, codes were written down, either codes that had been generated from the theory, or phrases and words which summarised a chunk of text, which varied in length. After each interview had been coded I wrote down all the codes in another document and followed the instructions by Ryan and Bernard (2003), looking for repetitions, metaphors, similarities etc. Following an example by Bryman (2016) I created a number of themes from the codes. After having analysed the 22 interviews I examined the themes and created subthemes. From this analysis four main themes emerged. These four main themes are presented in the results section and will be corroborated with quotes.

4.4 Analysis of quantitative data

Quantitative data were obtained on the participants’ attitudes towards, and use of, information sources relating to the referendum, influences on their decisions, the extent of knowledge on the referendum, both initially and just before the referendum, and the extent to which their minds were changed.

The results of these closed questions in the interview schedule was put into an Excel document where diagrams, mostly bar charts, were created. Bar charts were chosen because they very clearly demonstrate findings and are easy to understand. Descriptive statistics helps us to present the data in a meaningful way. The most logical option was to create descriptive statistics as the sample was too small to create meaningful inferential statistics. Measures of central tendency was instead used as I was always seeking the average for a distribution of values (Bryman, 2016).

4.5 Possible bias

According to Saldaña (2011) there can be underlying and unspoken power dynamics between the researcher and the person being interviewed. Either the researcher can be perceived as the expert, making the participant feel inferior and willing to please the researcher with its answers. Or, the participant is perceived as the expert, which puts the researcher in an inferior position. These power dynamics can influence how questions are asked or answered. For this study, I do not believe this was a problem. Since it was a student interviewing other students trust was quickly established. However, it is possible that participants wanted to seem more knowledgeable than they were, and wanted to please the researcher by searching out cues about the aim of the research and adjusting their answers thereafter. This is called the social desirability effect (Bryman, 2016). If participants were apologetic while answering questions I assured them that my research would profit from all kinds of different information behaviour and if they had shown no interest in finding information
before the referendum, this was interesting to me. I did not have to reassure those who had been active information seekers during the campaign. Brenner (1985) recognises that of all sources of bias, the participant - the person being interviewed - poses the biggest threat to accurate data. The interviewer ultimately does not control what information the participant is willing to give. If the interviewer attempts to pressure or control the participant, then bias would have been created on the interviewer’s part (Brenner, 1985). Ultimately, the person conducting the interview can only accept what the respondent is willing to give.

Purposive sampling was the chosen sampling method, which means that the risk for potential bias is higher. Since it relies on the person selecting the sample, that person’s previous experiences and view of the world will affect the sample (Wildemuth, 2009). However, for this study, I strove to create as much variety as possible in the characteristics of the respondents. Towards the end of interviewing I started choosing selectively to get a varied sample. However, since many declined to participate I could not control who would take part, which reduced the risk of bias.

4.6 Ethics

The Swedish Research Council (2002) has articulated four ethical principles to consider when using interviews as the method of data collection in research. The ethical principle of information demands that the researcher informs the participant about the aim of the research and what they, as participants, will contribute to the research. They should therefore be informed about all parts of the research and be made aware that their participation is voluntary (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). The ethical principle of consent demands that the researcher makes sure that the participant gives their consent to be part of the study. They should be made aware that they can stop their participation at any time. That means that the researcher cannot pressure the participants or demand anything from them (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). The ethical principle of confidentiality demands that the researcher make sure that the personal information of participants is kept confidential and stored where unauthorised persons do not have access (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). Lastly, the ethical principle of usage demands that the information provided by the participants can only be used for research (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002).

For this study to meet these demands, each participant was informed orally, face to face, about the aim of the study; that they might be quoted but would be so anonymously; and that they would be recorded but could stop the interview at any time, without having to give any reason. Thereafter, they signed a consent form where they ticked boxes stating they had been informed about the above facts. See consent form in the appendix. Each questionnaire was numbered and paired with a consent form which meant that they could be stored separately from each other, so that names were not connected to the data. The recordings were also given a number and therefore all personal details of the participant were kept hidden.
4.7 Methodological limitations

Since purposive sampling was used there was a higher risk of bias on the behalf of the researcher, as discussed above. There was also a risk of bias during the thematic analysis as the researcher might construe too much. As pointed out earlier, the analysis will be different depending on who conducts the analysis. This is both a positive and a negative (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). A positive; if it opens up for many interpretations. A negative; if the researcher brings too much of their own experience into the analysis.

Obviously, an effort was made to stay as neutral as possible and to follow the guidelines of thematic analysis to ensure an unbiased analysis. I am, however, aware, that the analysis I have done is socially construed.

The sample I have used is quite small for using a quantitative method, which in turn has created superficial data. Since it is merely used as a supportive element in the research it has been included, but I am aware of its limitations.

There were a few practical problems which I encountered. Although I practiced before I started interviewing people, I still made mistakes in the first few interviews, like not knowing my questions well enough, and failing to ask the right follow-up questions. I should perhaps have practiced a few more times before starting the real interviews. After the first three interviews, however, I felt confident and when transcribing the first interviews it was not apparent that they were any different from the others apart from a few details.

Some of the answering options could have been formulated clearer. For example, the answers to the question: “to what extent did you yourself search for information about Brexit?” had the answer options “a large extent”, “some extent” and “not at all”. It became evident that this were too few options and that there should have been at least two more to get a more nuanced picture. For example, between “not at all” and “some extent” there should have been added “a small extent”. “Some extent” should have been replaced with something else as it can be interpreted in many ways.

A smaller problem was that English is not my first language. This is evident in the forming of one of the questions in the questionnaire, the second one: "How did you vote?" It is a direct translation from Swedish, which is perhaps not the clearest wording in English. A clearer way to put it could have been: "What did you vote for? It did create some confusion among some of the participants, who instead answered where and how they had voted. After the first few interviews, I changed the wording, which means I did not follow the questionnaire meticulously, but the meaning of the question stayed the same.

5. Results

5.1 General results

This section presents the results of the data analysis. The four themes which emerged from the interviews will be presented and supported with quotes and
simple descriptive statistics. This section only provides the findings. They will be discussed and analysed in the following section.

Twenty-two students at three universities were interviewed. The three universities are far apart in the world ranking. University of Edinburgh coming in at the 27th highest ranking university in the world, University of Glasgow at ranking 88 and Glasgow Caledonian University lying between place 601 and 800 (Times Higher Education, 2017), which created a broad spectrum of students to choose from. Out of those interviewed 12 went to Glasgow Caledonian University, 8 to University of Edinburgh and 2 to University of Glasgow. Each interview lasted around 20 minutes, the shortest was 12 minutes and the longest 35 minutes. Out of the 22 participants 4 did not vote. Fifteen voted to remain and 3 voted to leave. Nine participants were female and 12 were male. Ages ranged from 18 years old to 38 years old. The average age was 24. The different nationalities were:

Scottish: 16 participants
English: 4 participants
Northern Irish: 1 participant
German/English: 1 participant

Of these students, most claimed that they tried to find information on the pros and cons of leaving the European Union. See figure 5.1 below.

![Figure 5.1](image)

During the debate, did you try to find information on the pros and cons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.1**

Most participants claimed to have been quite, or very interested in the referendum as can be seen in the graph (figure 5.2) below:
A few took a large interest in the issue and 3 participants claimed that they searched for information about Brexit to a large extent. Most participants searched for information to some extent. However, the response options to the question should have been formulated differently, since “some extent” can hold a wide array of information seeking. Some might consider reading a few newspaper articles to be “to some extent”, others might have read things about Brexit every day and also consider it to be “to some extent”. This should be considered when reflecting on the data. Two participants replied that they did not seek information at all. The graph below (figure 5.3) shows the results of this question.

To use Zaller’s theory, students were asked if they considered themselves to be politically aware. The greater majority, 17 respondents, described themselves as politically aware, while 4 claimed not to be, and 1 person responded "maybe". Several said that the previous Scottish independence referendum had influenced them to become more politically aware.

5.2 Themes

Four main themes emerged from the thematic analysis:

- Distrust and trust
• Lack of information
• Mind made up
• Main sources of information: family, friends, and online resources

Each theme will be explained and supported with quotes and descriptive statistics.

5.2.1 Distrust and trust

It quickly became apparent that the students trusted few information sources. To distrust was more common than to trust. These findings derived from the answers to the questions of which sources they trusted most; of whether there was a person they trusted more than others; or if there was someone they did not trust at all. A large number of participants had a negative response to these questions. When asked who they trusted, a majority of the participants replied: Nobody. One participant said:

“I don’t think I really trusted any of them (laughs). You kind of got to take what they say and make your own mind up about it, like”.

When asked if there was anyone they did not trust, one participant replied:

“I’ve got a notepad. Basically, we’re Scottish, we’re inclined not to trust any politician”. (8)

To emphasise how strong the theme of distrust is, it is worth mentioning that the theme of scepticism was brought up often without any probing needed. Scottish students, especially, were suspicious of the information coming from the media. Many had lost faith in the media due to the news coverage of the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, which was considered by many to have been biased against independence. Even though most of the participants voted, or would have voted, to remain in the Brexit referendum, some felt that certain media, especially the BBC, was once again one-sided and too pro-remain. Even though that meant that they had the BBC on their side this time around, many were disappointed by the lack of impartiality they expected from the BBC. When asked the very first question of the interview, how they went about finding information, one participant replied:

“Google search, so kind of online, trying to find kind of resources and actual hard data from credible sources rather than kind of BBC. After the whole Scottish independence referendum.”

Another said:

“I tried to avoid the BBC as much as possible... Because, well, em, I didn’t trust them after the previous referendum that we had in Scotland, the independence referendum.”

Not all students distrusted the BBC. It was mentioned several times as a source used when looking for information and those who mentioned the BBC as a trustworthy source were both English. However, the BBC was not the only
distrusted media source. When asked which sources they had used, participants would give examples but often add that most information sources were biased. There was an awareness of the fact that the sources they utilised could not always be trusted. This awareness, however, was not extended to their own family and friends, whom they often trusted without hesitation. No one, on the other hand, trusted politicians. A large number gave politicians as their answer when asked if there was someone they did not trust. When asked what sources they trusted one participant replied she only trusted sources that were not aligned with a political party. Another participant avoided politics to the point that he wanted nothing to do with it at all. When asked if he considered himself to be politically aware, he said no, because he tried to avoid politics wherever he could. Some other selected voices, among many, about politicians:

“I don’t think you can believe much of what they say. I think they got an agenda so in general I don’t trust them.”

“Don’t know, just. I just think they’re all just… Yea everything, the truth is always, like, bent, isn’t it? Do you know?”

Family and friends was by far the most common used sources of information. Participants were also asked who they thought influenced them the most. Again, a large number replied family and friends, parents in particular. The graph (figure 5.4) below illustrates the results.

![Figure 5.4](image)

When speaking about Brexit with other people, who do you think influenced you the most?

When asked why, the reply was often that they believed their parents to be knowledgeable, or that their opinions were similar. “I trust, like, my parents’ opinions,” one participant stated and when asked why she said:

“Just because I know they have, like, a good knowledge, and that they’re, that they’re, like, you know, they got reliable sources and they have, like, a good solid knowledge.”
Another trusted his grandparents because they “had been through it all” and had life experience. Several participants had family members who were politically active, and therefore strongly believed that they were reliable. One said that his father had taught him his political views and that was why he trusted him.

Most other participants found it difficult to explain why they trusted their friends and family. When asked why, they often said they did not know. One participant trusted a certain friend because they were rational but honest. A few commented that the rest of the family were more knowledgeable about politics than them, and that made them trust them. Most participants trusted family and friends because they had similar political opinions to themselves.

Politicians were often mentioned when asked if there was anyone they did not trust. Some also avoided political parties. As soon as they realised the information came from a political party they were no longer interested. This was not the case with all participants, some were very involved in certain parties, especially the Scottish National Party.

There were some who trusted alternative sources. One participant said that he trusted some Youtubers because they added references to their videos. Another participant, because he had studied communications, felt that the media always had an agenda:

“Partly with my undergrad and partly with my sort of reading of newspapers going into the independence referendum, it just really put me off. The extent of the kind partisan biased most newspapers have. Even the ones that actually agrees with me I don’t tend to enjoy reading it because I find it’s far too apparent that they got a very strong agenda.”

In conclusion, almost all participants trusted their friends and families. Almost all participants distrusted politicians. Almost all participants were highly suspicious of several information sources, even those which corresponded with their own political views. A large number of Scottish students distrusted the BBC due to its news coverage during the Scottish independence referendum, whereas none of the other nationalities mentioned the BBC as an unreliable source. The English participants even mentioned it as a trustworthy source. Few could explain why they trusted family and friends the most, but the fact that they have similar opinions was important. Life experience and political knowledge were also important factors.

5.2.2 Lack of information

During the interviews, it became apparent that the Brexit referendum campaign created a general feeling of confusion. Several believed both sides were unable to present facts to help the voters with their decision. Instead of a balanced discussion, balanced being a word that many use, it was more about scare mongering, another word frequently mentioned by those interviewed.
“I think all the information, like, I don’t probably… both sides weren’t very honest, and I think it was more like kids squabbling in a playground than adults actually giving you good information.”

Several students complained that there had been no real discussion. Some were of the opinion there had been too much information, that there was so much information it was difficult to differentiate between unbiased quality information and lies. One participant said:

“Like I said, it was constant, it was in all the papers and all the television programmes but again the information that was given wasn’t of good quality, it wasn’t anything you could really rely on.”

Another said:

“I think there was a hell of a lot of information. I don’t know if all of it was correct.”

When asked if they felt that there had been enough information at hand, 5 replied that they though so, and 16 replied “no”. When asked if they felt there had been too much information at hand 9 replied “yes” and 12 replied that there had not been. These answers are evidence of the confusion among voters. Even some of those who though there was not enough information at hand, replied that there was too much information at hand. Words like correct, quality, good, or proper were often used in combination with the word information. That was what was lacking, according to most participants: information with actual value. Some, however, saw information as something which is supposed to be of good quality in itself, and that there was no need to add the word “good” in front of it. So, for them, information was indeed lacking, since they could not make use of most of the information they found. Others, like those quoted above, made the distinction between information – which can be anything – and quality information – which might give you actual knowledge. In correlation to the theme of distrust, several participants were aware of the large amount of misinformation circulating:

“There was a lot of misinformation, facts being appeared or appearing slightly different from both parties.”

Most of the participants voted remain, not because they had been convinced by the arguments of the remain campaign but because they were strongly against the arguments of the leave campaign, which many perceived as un-nuanced and racist. Several of the participants wanted more information about the EU, especially the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the EU. Instead, they observed that all they got was scare mongering from both sides, instead of actual facts. Scare mongering was a common phrase when participants described the information campaign. Some participants felt that there was too much focus on negative issues. One person said that he felt like the only things that were being discussed were the negative aspects of leaving or not leaving the EU. Another participant said that emotional arguments were more common than factual arguments. Several felt let down by those responsible for the
remain campaign, especially after the results of the vote came out. One participant thought that the government was so overconfident that they would stay in the EU, that they did not even try to convince people to vote remain. “Brexit will never happen, so why bother giving proper information,” is how she imagined the government’s reasoning. Another participant was of the same opinion:

“I feel like it was more of a kind, this will never happen so let’s just vaguely talk about the people that think it will, rather than telling us a kind of broken down, this is, this will happen if we stay, this is what will happen if we don’t.”

Several participants wanted more information about the EU. Although a majority of the interviewees regarded themselves to be politically aware, most of them did not regard themselves as knowledgeable regarding the EU. When asked how much knowledge they had about the EU before the referendum campaign began, this is how they responded (see figure 5.5):

![Figure 5.5](image)

And when asked how much knowledge they had about the EU right before voting this is how they responded (see figure 5.6):

![Figure 5.6](image)
As seen in figure 5.6 above, there was not a massive change. This issue was brought up several times by the participants. One participant argued that there was too much focus on the parties instead of the issue of the EU and added:

“I think that was another problem, I didn’t really feel anyone talked about what the purpose of the EU was as such.”

Another felt that there had been too much focus on people instead of on the issues: “Well, the entire political campaign was based around characters”.

Another participant commented that to understand information and know its true origin one must have a constant critical eye:

“I feel like almost all the outlets we get information from have some sort of a bias. So, it’s, you almost have to do everything on two levels. One, you have to find the information and then you have to also decide what the opinion of the person giving you that information is.”

The word bias was used often. In fact, every single participant mentioned it at least once in each interview. If all information sources came across as biased, it is no wonder the participants had the impression that there was no good information.

To sum up, the information provided by the referendum campaigns leading up to the vote led to a general feeling of confusion among a majority of the students. There was a lack of clear or direct information from both sides, according to participants. Many were disappointed with the lack of information about the EU and both campaigns’ attempts to discredit the other side rather than providing good arguments. Information in general was often perceived as biased.

5.2.3 Mind made up.

Few changed their minds from their original conviction. All participants were asked if they knew what they were going to vote when the referendum was announced, and whether they had changed their mind come voting day. The results of those questions are illustrated in the figures below (figure 5.7 and figure 5.8):
Of the 19 participants who said that they had an idea how they would vote, only 3 of them changed their mind. See figure 5.8.

Figure 5.7

Looking at these results we can see that only three people changed their mind, which confirms the theme.

Although both referendum campaigns confused participants, it did not influence them to vote differently from their initial decision. In fact, for some students, the confusing information campaigns reinforced their original conviction:

“There was just not, I think a lot of people probably chose remain because there wasn’t enough information to do anything else.”

For most participants, it was not the remain campaign that convinced them what to vote, but rather the leave campaign that failed to persuade them to vote differently.

“I had a gut feeling” was a statement made by more than one person. Many students claimed they were content with their current situation, which, for them, was a good reason to remain in the EU. Some participants wanted to remain out of convenience, arguing that to leave the EU was too much of a gamble. Some participants could not explain why they wanted to remain but
stated that they just knew that they wanted to. Some of those with a gut feeling still tried to get information from both sides but were never persuaded to vote any other way. When asked why people did not change their minds, one participant answered:

“It was generally an issue where people felt strongly about their position and weren’t really going to give any ground on that issue.”

As stated previously, 5 out of 22 students replied that no one influenced them. Even though they perhaps had discussed the issue, with people with different and similar opinions, they had already made up their mind and no one could influence that decision. One of the participants explained why she was not influenced by anyone on the issue:

“Because I think I’d really made my own mind up when it was announced, like, before, like we’d seen any media about [inaudible] I just knew how I wanted to vote.”

One participant explained that during the Scottish independence referendum campaign she was trying to see things from both sides but for the Brexit referendum she did not even bother:

“I had a gut feeling for that one, but I wanted to get both sides of the argument. But for this one I was just so convinced of my own opinions and I was so certain of it anyway that I didn’t feel the need to.”

Not all participants were certain how to vote. One participant said that she wavered between the options. The more information she received the more uncertain she became. In the end, she voted remain because it felt like the safest option.

Some of the more politically aware students could imagine a Britain separate from the EU. One argued that perhaps he could have voted leave if the option had been a British socialist government but instead he claimed that they appeared to be “doomed to descend into endless Tory hell.” So that was not an option for him. Another was convinced to some extent by the leave side’s argument about democratic deficit between the British and the EU parliament, because that was how she felt about the Scottish and UK parliament, but it was not enough to convince her to vote differently. She, too, did not like who it would benefit:

“I saw it very much as a sort of power grab by the conservative party in general.”

One participant voted on principle. He always voted for change, no matter what he voted for. He could not be persuaded to vote any differently and adamantly repeated that he did not try to influence anyone else.

When asked if there was any aspect of the campaign that made them change their minds, a few mentioned the bus ad that said that 350 million pounds were spent on the EU every week and that the money would go to the NHS instead.
It made some at least consider the thought to vote leave, but in the end, they did not.

One participant made an interesting observation. He said that in many areas in the west of Scotland voters would choose their vote in accordance to the politics of their own football team. According to him, Rangers supporters – who are traditionally protestant and pro-union – voted to remain in the United Kingdom in the Scottish independence referendum, whereas Celtic supporters – who are traditionally catholic and closely associated with Ireland – voted to become independent. In his opinion, this was also the case with the Brexit vote. Rangers supporters whose club is traditionally aligned with the protestants – and England – voted to leave the EU, whereas the Celtic supporters, traditionally bound to Ireland voted to remain. He claimed that in some areas of Scotland, which football team you supported was more important than anything else when it came to form an opinion:

“Rangers and Celtic, protestants and Catholics. I think that had a massive bearing on the way that people voted rather than any kind of media outlet would have had.”

The theme of having one’s mind made up and not changing it was a prominent one during the interviews. A large number of the participants did not change their mind. When asked if they had spoken about the issue with someone who had a different opinion from them 16 replied that they had and 6 that they had not. Most participants, however, had only discussed with one, maybe two, people with different opinions. They were never convinced by their arguments. Most participants, however, believed that they influenced others on the issue, as many as 6 participants thought they had and as many as 9 figured that they maybe influenced someone else. See results in the figure below (figure 5.9):

![Figure 5.9](image)

To conclude, only 3 of 20 who initially had decided what to vote changed their mind. The lack of information reinforced their initial decision in many cases. Some had a gut feeling and no information changed that feeling. Others voted out of principle and one argued that some people in the west of Scotland voted according to which football theme they supported. Several experienced that it
was not the remain campaign that convinced them to vote remain but the leave campaign that failed to convince them to vote any differently.

5.2.4 Main sources of information: family, friends and online resources

When accessing information, be it passively or actively, online resources and family and friends were the most used and trusted information sources among the participants. During the interview they were asked to choose which sources they had used when they were looking for information. There were multiple choices. The graph below (figure 5.10) shows which information sources they chose:

![Graph showing information sources](image)

**Figure 5.10**

As can be seen in figure 5.10 all the sources presented had been used by at least one of the participants, TV, online newspapers, social media, family and friends being the ones more widely used. Thereafter they were also asked where they believed they *received* the most information from. Most participants only chose one option here, some two. The graph below (figure 5.11) illustrate their replies:
Comparing the two graphs it is apparent that the participants were aware of the difference between seeking and receiving information. When asked this question, although a large number of the participants chose the option TV, it very rarely came up in the discussion. Each participant was asked to elaborate on each option and explain which TV-programmes, radio-programmes, newspapers etc. they had accessed, as well as why they had chosen them. TV was often just brushed off. Although many got information from TV, they did not consider it very important information, it was just on in the background. When it came to what they thought of as “proper” information they more often mentioned online newspapers and family and friends.

Online newspapers as well as social media were the most used online resources, especially Facebook and Twitter. Those who used Twitter actively as a source of information spoke highly of it. When asked which information source they found most useful, several answered Twitter. When asked why, they stated it was because they could follow many different people and they could be redirected to public figures they would not normally follow or read articles they would not normally read. In comparison to Facebook they experienced Twitter to be more nuanced. One explained why they thought Twitter was the most useful social media information source:

“Because I feel like Facebook was more just people posting snippets of their personal view and I think on Twitter people were trying to educate others”.

Most participants were active on social media, especially on Facebook, but their opinions on its usefulness were divided. Social media was either avoided or described as the standard source of information. When asked how they went about searching for information one replied:

“Eh, newspapers articles, um, visiting both campaign’s sites. Then your standard Facebook and Twitter.”
Whereas another person said:

“I tended to avoid it because I feel social media will put their own opinions in too much, so I don’t really feel that information was that accurate.”

The most common social media sources were Facebook and Twitter. Only 3 participants claimed to use other social media sources. See figure 5.12:

![Figure 5.12](image)

Although 17 of the participants stated that they used social media to seek information, only 8 said that they shared things regarding Brexit on social media, and often it had just been once. Fourteen responded that they had not shared anything about Brexit on social media.

In the beginning of the interview the participants were asked to describe how they went about finding information. Very often, they would say that they, among other things, talked to family and friends. One participant explained that he found his own opinion among other peoples’ opinions. By constantly considering whether he agreed with what was being said, he formed an opinion on the issue. To discuss the issue with family and friends was often described as “safe”. Many experienced that when talking about Brexit with people who were one step away from this group of people, the discussion could get heated and conflicts could arise, and many tried to avoid that. One participant, who said he just pretended to agree with everyone, regardless of their opinion, explained that he did not enjoy discussing the issue with friends, but that he did enjoy discussing with his family:

“Like I said, I think I avoid it sometimes with friends I know, that don’t necessarily agree, or I don’t agree with what they think. I think it just causes arguments, so we were more open and more aligned in, kind of, our political views around the household”.

Another participant, who viewed himself as very politically aware and who was politically active, favoured discussions with those who were closer to him, but for the opposite reason:
“I think it’s because when you discuss something with someone that you know less well, then you’re more conscious in wanting to avoid offending them or causing it to turn into an argument, whereas if it’s someone who’s a friend or a partner, I could, you could, disagree, kind of, more strongly with someone and know that it’s not going to affect your relationship as much because you sort of trust each other a bit more.”

Others were aware of the fact that the people around them often had the same opinions as themselves. One person said: “It was hard to find somebody with different opinions…everybody here tends to vote or think in a similar way”.

When asked why they picked specific sources it was often explained that they were chosen out of convenience, because they had always read that newspaper, or it was the first one that came up online, or that it had been a link on Facebook etc. One participant looked for information only shortly before the vote, spending a few hours reading the Daily Mail and the Guardian. “They were just the first ones that came up and quite honestly I got so sick of politics after those two that I just called it quits.” When one participant was asked why she read the Guardian she replied: “It’s just the newspaper I tended to read in the past. A bit of the Independent as well.” One participant said that he read the Daily Mail. When asked why he explained that it just seemed like the one he could access. When asked to elaborate he answered: “On Twitter and on stuff it came up”.

Most students had similar reading habits and they often mentioned the same newspapers such as the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Scotsman, the Independent, with a few exceptions. One participant, who voted leave, read the Daily Mail often but, in general, this was a newspaper which was looked down upon by most participants. Print newspapers were not popular and those who read them often did so when they visited their parents or if someone had left a newspaper on the bus. Most information was accessed online. However, a large proportion of the sources they used online were conventional ones, meaning that they had already existed before going digital, like newspapers or TV channels. When it came to social media, very few mentioned other social media than Facebook and Twitter. But some did. Those who came across as very interested in the issue and who often described themselves as politically aware, used and accessed more unconventional sources like Youtube, LinkedIn and Al Jazeera. Alternative radio like Leading Britain’s Conversation (LBC) or blogs such as Bella Caledonia were mentioned by another. In fact, conventional information sources were not his first choice. When asked how he went about finding information he replied:

“A mixture of mostly online I would say. But I’d say, other media that I used, some blogs, some podcasts, some of the more sort of mainstream news sites as well.”

The participants were asked to look at what information sources they had chosen and explain which information source had been the most useful to them. Their replies differed. Most participants said friends and family had been
the most useful to them. Others argued for social media, especially Twitter but a few Facebook. Some mentioned that they found the comment section under articles in online newspapers, or things posted on social media, very useful because it gave, as they perceived, a more truthful image of people’s opinions. Several found online newspapers the most useful because they gave a more balanced picture of an issue, or they liked to compare articles on the same topic in different papers.

Family and friends were common sources of information. Reasons for this were often the same among the participants, like, as found earlier, the fact that they trusted their family and friends, or that they saw them as reliable sources. When asked why, they often said that their parents had much knowledge, or they were able to explain things better than the media. One participant said about her father:

“He’s one of those people to say that he just seems to know a lot, but he kind of was able to kind of clarify points I wasn’t too sure about”.

To speak with the people around us is also very convenient and it was probably one reason for its popularity. Several participants had parents which they described as politically knowledgeable, which made them an important information source for them. Others had politically active friends who they sought information from.

In conclusion, almost all the participants found their information online or among their friends and family. Some of them shied away from discussions with people who were not close to them and several enjoyed discussing the issue with friends and family. Some social media was used, especially Twitter, and the online sources that were accessed were often chosen out of convenience. Online newspapers were found useful, but some also used less conventional online resources.

5.2.5 Summary of results

The four themes give us a picture of confused, annoyed, and disillusioned voters. They turned away from many sources of information from the outside and instead turned to friends and families for information. Almost all participants distrusted politicians and were highly suspicious of several information sources. The previous independence referendum in Scotland made Scottish students distrust the BBC due to its news coverage during the Scottish independence referendum, although people of other nationalities trusted the BBC. Distrust, scepticism and awareness of biased sources were dominant issues.

Confusion was another dominant emotion among the students. What they saw as a lack of clear political information made them disorientated. There was no clear information from either campaigns and information was often perceived as biased. Most students voted remain but not because they were convinced by the remain campaign but because they were appalled by the leave campaign. Another problem was that there was too much information, which made it
difficult to get objective information about the EU and its advantages and disadvantages.

What the students saw as a lack of clear political information made them disorientated which, in turn, forced them to stay put in their first initial opinion. Only 3 out of the 20 who voted changed their mind from the first opinion. They had an initial reaction when it was declared there was going to be a referendum and very few swayed from it. This is described as a "gut feeling". In general, most said that the lack of information dissuaded them from changing their mind.

The most used information sources when looking for information before the referendum were the people around them, like family and friends. It was more common to discuss the issue with people they felt comfortable with than discussing it with people where conflicts could arise. Online newspapers were most used as well as social media and television, although those two information sources were not as trusted. Most often, information sources were chosen out of convenience.

6. Discussion

In this section, the findings of the results section will be interpreted and discussed. Certain conclusions will be drawn with the help of previous research and Wilson’s (1999) and Zaller’s (1992) models. I will attempt to answer the research questions posed at the beginning. The aim was to investigate the information behaviour of Scottish students when trying to form an opinion about the Brexit referendum. Which sources did they use? To what extent did they actively seek information? Who did they discuss with and who influenced them the most? Did they know from the beginning how they were going to vote and if so, did anyone change their mind? The narrative of the discussion will be answering these questions while reviewing the themes.

6.1 Information sources, discussion, and influences

The findings that family and friends are the most utilised source of information is no surprise. Wells and Dudash’s (2007) results also show that discussion and talk was the most used information source. Bawden and Robinson (2012) write that: “the law which governs information behaviour has been found, over and over again, to be Zipf’s law of least effort. Familiarity of sources, and ease of access and use, is usually (though not invariably) more important than perceived quality” (p. 204). To speak about an issue with friends and family is certainly an easy way to gain access to information. Since convenience was a reoccurring theme, also when it came to other information sources, it is evident that this study is in line with previous research regarding the link between information seeking and convenience.

The students themselves did not, however, connect family and friends with convenience. For them, family and friends meant reliability, familiarity, credibility, and safety. Or, as Smith and McMenemy (2017) also found, they
meant authority. However, as Zaller (1992) points out, information that comes from those around us is second-hand information which has changed from its original form to become a simplified, sometimes framed, message. The participants seemed aware that the media often give framed, biased messages, but seemed to trust their parents completely without stopping to think where that information came from. Some of the participants had politically active parents and friends, which might give them more insight, but in general, since almost all participants were influenced by their family and friends, they still received second-hand information from the political elite, only one step further away, filtered through one more person.

This supports the claim by Dvořák (2013), that framing affects not only ill-informed voters, but also those who are politically aware and well-informed. Even those who are politically aware are not immune to framing. It is interesting that the participants were aware of the biased media sources but unaware that the information they received from friends and family often derived from the same sources. It might have to do with presentation. Family and friends can perhaps present information in a way that it is understandable. It is possible that the negative campaigning was off-putting, whereas the discussion with someone trusted created “better” information, the kind of information the students wanted. Therefore, it can be argued that friends and family helped students receive information. Trust and distrust can be interpreted as what Wilson (1999) calls supporting and hindering variables. The trusting of family and friends became supporting intervening variables during the information seeking process before the referendum. In contrast to Levinsen and Yndigegn’s (2015) research which showed that young people tended to avoid political discussion within the family if there was any chance of disagreement, my research shows that most participants felt that they could discuss politics within the family, even if they had opposing political positions.

We can also look at the intervening variables that Wilson (1999) presents in his model. One of them is role-related or interpersonal. In the relationship between a child and a parent, the two have predetermined roles, which affect how information is regarded during an information transfer between the two. Information coming from an authority figure, who also has given the person much of his or her understanding of the world, will have significant value and supports the claim that the trust of family is a supporting variable, as also argued by Smith and McMenemy (2017).

Only one participant completely disregarded his family’s opinion, but he showed no interest in the Brexit referendum at all. With friends, it seems to be a bit more complicated as some regarded friends as a safe zone for discussion, and others avoided discussion with friends, since they did not share the same opinion. This means discussion with friends can be interpreted as both a hindering and supporting variable.

The environmental intervening variable (Wilson, 1999) shows that environment can be both a hindrance and support. In the case of the participant
who just agreed with what everyone said, his environment was hindering him from thinking independently. Whereas in the case of the participant who enjoyed discussing with close friends without conflicts arising, gained from his environment. However, although a large number of participants stated that they had discussed the issue with someone with a different opinion, that often occurred only once, which indicates that they resided in a homogenous environment. When only getting input from people with similar views it can narrow the information available. Again, that can make the environment variable a hindering one, as argued by Lenker (2016).

Another intervening variable of Wilson’s (1999) model is source characteristics. The characteristics of the sources can also support or obstruct the information seeking. Considering that almost all the participants found the information available confusing and disorientating, it suggests that the characteristics of the sources were flawed, making the variable an obstacle instead of support. ‘Unbalanced’ and ‘biased’ were the words used. The fact that it was difficult for the participants to distinguish which sources were reliable supports this. Still, not everyone distrusted all sources. Certain online newspapers were widely utilised and trusted. The Guardian was one of the most popular newspapers, even if many perceived it as biased towards remaining in the EU. Again, convenience often dictated which online newspapers were read but certain sources, like the Daily Mail, were actively avoided. Social media was trusted by some of the participants, but not by many. It was completely avoided by some, while most participants used social media but did not characterise as a reliable source. This supports the study by Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) that found that traditional information sources online, like online newspapers, were more effective when it came to increasing political knowledge among young adults. It seems as if source characteristics were significant as to which sources were picked, which is always the case in everyday information seeking. In this context, however, source characteristics played an even bigger role, since the participants of this study were so adamant as to which sources should be avoided.

6.2 Active and passive information seeking

The results show that there was a relatively strong interest in the Brexit referendum and that most participants believed that they had actively sought information. The majority were pro-remain. It is important to consider the context in which the participants belong. They are, as Hobolt (2016) puts it, the “winners of globalisation” in that they are young, well-educated people residing in urban centres. It was my personal impression that more students at Glasgow Caledonian University came from a working-class background whereas the students at the university of Glasgow and Edinburgh were middle class. That said, the students at Glasgow Caledonian University are still part of that group “winners of globalisation” since they are young academics living in an urban centre (Hobolt, 2016). There was no difference in political awareness or information behaviour between students at the three universities, they all displayed a varied information behaviour.
The students exhibited different kinds of information behaviour, which can be found in Wilson’s (1999) model: active search, passive search, and passive attention, but another active behaviour became evident during the interviews and that was active *avoidance*, which Case (2016) includes as a relevant behaviour in the term information behaviour.

The fact that a question was asked during the interviews regarding whether there were any sources they avoided, has obviously contributed to it being a major theme in this study. However, several students brought it up independently, before that question had been asked. Therefore, it can be established that the students exhibited active seeking behaviour as well as active avoidance behaviour. Some avoided only certain sources whereas others avoided seeking information in general. However, passive attention was also evident since a majority stated that they received information from television and radio but that they rarely actively sought information from those sources, instead, it was just on in the background. Social media seemed to have been considered a way of passively receiving information, although most participants were sceptical of social media. Few mentioned that they avoided speaking to family members, even when they disagreed, which, again, contests Levinsen and Yndignen’s (2015) claim that young people avoid discussions in the family if it could lead to conflict.

Smith and McMenemy (2017) found that young people tended to avoid information sources that put them in a bad mood and seek out those that made them happy, like comedy shows. This, whether they felt happy or sad, was not mentioned as a reason for avoiding sources by the participants of this study. However, it is obvious that, in line with Smith and McMenemy’s findings, participants often chose information sources that made them feel at ease, like family and friends, where no (real) conflicts would arise, or online newspapers, whose political views they shared. According to Lenker (2016), this has a harmful effect on people’s information seeking because they continue to choose “sympathetic sources” instead of sources that challenge already existing beliefs. According to him, this leads to unconscious avoidance of information as well as conscious dismissal of information that could have been useful. If this is considered, to rely too much on familiar information sources could be a hindering variable, as it narrows the information intake.

However, the question posed was to what *extent* students actively searched for information. A majority replied that they sought information only to some extent. Only three participants replied that they sought information to a large extent. The research by Winchester et al. (2014) shows that young voters demonstrated a passive information seeking behaviour and one of the reasons was because of the oversaturation of information, - there was just too much to take in, - which corresponds to the findings of this study. However, most participants thought that there was too much “unbalanced” information and a lack of “good” information. It did indeed create confusion, but whether it created a more passive information seeking behaviour is hard to say. It is possible, though. Certain sources were avoided when it came to seeking
information about the referendum, like the BBC, or social media, but that does not mean that they were avoided completely, which may have led to information passively being received.

6.3 Political awareness

Zaller (1992) argues that political campaigns do not have a big impact on decided voters, that they hardly ever change their minds. Since only three participants claimed to have changed their minds, his argument is supported in this study.

A large proportion of the students were aware of media’s attempts at simplifying, or as Zaller calls it, framing. The fact that they often seem to have been able to resist the different messages also supports Zaller’s theory that people who are more politically aware are less affected when fed with information that does not conform to their previous political convictions. Zaller also argues that those who are politically aware can be persuaded differently if confronted with facts, whereas those who are not politically aware can be persuaded when confronted with any kind of information, even if flawed. In this study, it became obvious that many really wanted proper facts. Several voted remain because they could not be persuaded by the leave argument, rather than being persuaded by the remain argument. If neither side can present decent facts, then no one will be persuaded to diverge from that first “gut feeling” that has been mentioned by several of the participants.

As previously mentioned, Lenker’s (2016) research indicates that those who are politically aware are the same people that tend to choose “sympathetic sources” when looking for information. He argues that motivated reasoning leads to “good” information being disregarded due to previous political convictions. Kitchens et al. (2003) argue that those with low political knowledge should be the ones who seek more information since they have a larger information need. Their research shows that this is not the case and that those who already have political knowledge seek more information, and that they, in accordance with Lenker’s (2016) findings, tend to seek information that reinforces their previous beliefs. When looking at the findings of this study it is apparent that motivated reasoning is present in the information behaviour of the participants. It can be argued, however, that motivated reasoning should not be blamed for the participants’ homogenous information seeking behaviour, but also the lack of quality information. A few of the participants tried to seek and evaluate information that did not confirm to their previous political convictions, but they found it difficult to navigate in the overload of information.

The idea that an intensive political campaign creates nuanced information and in turn helps the voter decide, as argued by Hobolt (2005), is not confirmed by this thesis. Dervin’s (1994) theory of the irrational person, which Lenker builds much of his argument on, points out that individuals are constituted by their societies. In the case of the Brexit referendum, it was perhaps easier than ever
to not be a rational person, since the participants experienced the campaign to have been so irrational.

Visser et al. (2008) claim that few citizens are genuinely politically aware. In contrast to this claim, 17 participants in this study considered themselves to be politically aware. Participants also expressed high levels of interest in the referendum. Obviously, to consider oneself to be politically aware and to actually be politically aware, are two different things. The Scottish context, however, can support the claim that the students indeed were politically aware. It can be argued, with the support of Zaller’s (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample model, that the fact that there had been a Scottish independence referendum only two years before the Brexit referendum made the political awareness level higher among participants. The Scottish independence referendum, which had had an intensive and relatively balanced campaign (Brett, 2016) prepared the Scottish young voters for the Brexit referendum. The voting age was 16, which means that all participants in this study had been eligible to vote in the Scottish referendum. In contrast to the Brexit referendum, 90% felt they had a lot of knowledge what the Scottish independence referendum was about after it had taken place (Brett, 2016). Baxter et al. (2015) found that the Scottish independence referendum led to politically interested and active young people, even after the referendum.

A large majority of young voters voted for an independent Scotland (The Scotsman, 2014), which means they had already experienced a disappointing outcome from a referendum. The Scottish participants had gained knowledge of how referendum campaigns work, and how the media presents information in such a context. The BBC had been perceived as too openly against independence in their broadcasting, and this certainly affected how they were perceived in the next referendum. Zaller (1992) argues that one can only be critical of topics where one has prior knowledge. When asked if they were politically aware, several participants said that they had become politically aware during the independence referendum. Smith’s (2016) findings shows that a large number of young people sought information on the Scottish independence referendum in their school libraries, more so than on the general election that took place just one year later. When seeking and receiving information they had therefore possibly gained knowledge how to interpret various information.

One could argue that the Scottish independence referendum was a supportive and preventive intervening variable in the information behaviour leading up to the Brexit referendum vote. It can be argued that the high political awareness among, particularly the Scottish, students affected the information behaviour of the participants in this study. It certainly became more active. Since those with high political awareness are, according to Zaller (1992), able to reject information which challenges previous convictions, information sources were scrutinised and disregarded to a higher degree than they would have been, had the participants not been politically aware. This affected how they chose to search for information, which sources they found credible and how they
interacted with the information sources. For example, some participants read articles in newspapers they considered respectable with a critical eye, others did not trust the news on the BBC, and others utilized alternative media sources. In other words, in some instances preferred information sources became more varied.

Most participants knew from the start how they were going to vote, and very few changed their minds. Considering the oversaturation of information and what the participants saw as a lack of clear truthful information, it is no wonder that they did not change their minds from their original conviction. To put all their trust on family and friends, who probably already shared their political or moral convictions, also contributed to a homogenous decision. It is possible that the lack of information contributed to so very few changing their mind. A nuanced and less biased political discussion might have swayed more voters from their original gut feeling.

Perhaps some voters’ minds were made up depending on which football club they supported. One participant’s claim that people in the west of Scotland voted according to whether they were Rangers or Celtic supporters might be accurate and resonates with Dervin’s idea that individuals constitute and are constituted by their societies. It is true that the two football clubs have some of the most devoted supporters in the world and that the catholic Celtic football club is associated with left wing, socialist politics, and the protestant Rangers Football club with unionism and conservatism (“Scottish football’s symbiotic rivalry”, 2016), which are indicators that Rangers supports would prefer to vote to leave the EU and Celtic supporters to remain. Considering how strong the divide between the two groups of football supporters still is in Glasgow (Smith, 2016, July 4), it is possible that it affected how people voted, and that the community determined what they should vote, and that allegiances with football clubs obstructed any chance of changing one’s mind. If this is true, then the environmental variable would in this case be a hindering one, as information seeking is obstructed due to environmental impact.

6.4 Themes as intervening variables

As demonstrated in the results section, the students were confronted by many barriers while looking for information. All four main themes that have emerged from the empirical material can be interpreted as intervening variables (Wilson, 1999). Apart from those presented by Wilson, that the information seeking is affected by demographics, psychology, environments etc. These themes also affected how students interacted with, viewed and valued information.

It was more common to distrust sources than to trust them which must have created barriers in the students’ information seeking. If participants were constantly disregarding information sources, the information seeking process must have taken longer and must have felt unsuccessful. That is; if they were interested in seeking information. Some were not. Trust, was, however, also a main theme which will have the helped the information seeking process. Those sources that were trusted might have had an extra validity to participants. In the
study conducted by Smith and McMenemy (2017) young people trusted information sources with high authority, which resonates with the findings of this study. Participants in this study trusted family members and friends. Parents, because they were politically knowledgeable and friends for the same reason. Parents and grandparents had life experience which were considered important to many, similar to the findings of Smith and McMenemy. Smith (2016) also shows that young people wanted to know the opinions of the information sources, especially when talking to someone. This, for them, increased the trustworthiness of the source. However, other sources were considered trustworthy if they were only based on facts, not opinions. This was an issue among the participants in this study as well, especially among the Scottish ones, who deemed the BBC to be an untrustworthy source of information due to, what they experienced, it’s lack of unbiased reporting. Family members and friends, on the other hand, may have been considered trustworthy because the participants were aware of their opinions.

It should be pointed out, that when it comes to influence, five out of the twenty-two participants replied that no one influenced them. This echoes the research by Winchester et al. (2014) which found that young adults were influenced by their families to a different degree. They also found that young people felt confident with their decision how to vote. This was also the case with many of the participants of this study. They might have trusted certain people, but in the end, they only trusted themselves. To trust one’s own judgement should definitely be considered a supporting variable in the information seeking process.

The theme of ‘lack of information’ must be regarded as an obstacle in the information seeking process. Looking at the results we could see that few thought they had learned something about the EU, which is quite astounding considering what the referendum was about, and considering the high levels of interest that participants displayed. We have established that a majority of the participants were politically aware and still, few felt confident that they were knowledgeable about the EU. It is evident that it was not because of lack of trying. Many said that they wanted clear information about the EU but that it got lost in the negative campaigning, which mostly focused on scare-mongering. “Kids squabbling in playgrounds” as one participant expressed it.

The negative campaigning led to what participants experienced as ‘too much information’ or ‘misinformation’. The ‘lack of information’ theme can only be a hindering variable in the information seeking process. Not one participant gained from the oversaturation of false or unclear information. The lack of information was undoubtedly a serious threat to the information seeking process and an important component to the information behaviour of the students in general, as it affected how they went about finding information. This reaffirms Smith and McMenemys’s (2016) theory that affective factors, as presented by Wilson (1981), are influential when it comes to people’s information behaviour. The state or quality of the information that was available created negative feelings among the participants, which in turn meant
they avoided it. In this case, it meant that they instead turned to people they knew and trusted, and that they turned their back on politics and the media.

The third theme; to have one’s ‘mind made up’, is interpreted as a hindering variable. The gut feeling, that so many of the participants claimed to have had, decreased the activating mechanisms to seek information. This may have led to fewer demands on information sources which, in turn, may have led to the information seeking process failing. Or, as Lenker would call it, it may have led to motivated reasoning. And if the whole information seeking process fails, then it is natural to rely on the initial gut feeling, which many participants did.

The theme of the most used sources, family, friends and online information sources, is interpreted as a supporting variable. Those sources that were found most useful were especially online newspapers. Traditional sources like newspapers, albeit retrieved online, demonstrated to still be the most reliable ones. That, in combination with talking to friends and family, proved to be the most helpful during the information process of deciding how to vote in the Brexit referendum.

7. Conclusion

The aim of the thesis was to identify how young voters sought information before the Brexit referendum took place. It was decided to examine the information behaviour of students at Scottish universities. The overarching research question was: What is the information behaviour of students at Scottish universities when faced with a political referendum? To try and reach the aim and answer the research question four sub questions were posed. Those were:

- Which sources did students use when seeking information on the Brexit issue?
- To what extent did students actively search for information?
- With whom did they discuss the issue, and who influenced their opinion the most?
- To what extent were they able to change their minds either on the vote or issues concerning the vote?

This thesis mixed several disciplines. It is an information behaviour study, but research on voters' use of information was taken from both information science and other areas of research, like political science and communication studies.

Not just research but part of the theory was also collected from political science. One of the theoretical models used in this study was Zaller's Receive-Accept-Sample model. The other was Wilson's expanded model of information behaviour. The two were chosen because each model helped create research questions and therefore codes for the thematic analysis when attempting to answer those questions. Zaller's model was better suited to explaining the results regarding students not changing their mind on the Brexit issue. Wilson's model was better suited to answering the other research questions, so they
complemented each other. That said, the analysis and discussion was conducted from an information behavioural point of view.

In order to gather data about the information behaviour of the students, interviews were carried out. Students were approached on campus and asked if they wanted to take part in the study. Purposive sampling was used, meaning that I, the researcher, tried to choose participants to make a varied selection. In this case, I tried to choose different kinds of people, but the selection of participants also depended on whether or not they wanted to take part of the study, which helped randomise the selection, although purposive sampling can never be random (Bryman, 2016). One could say that strict semi-structured interviews were conducted, in that there was an interview schedule with set questions, but that there was room for new questions and that each closed question was followed by an open one. This type of interviewing made qualitative analysis possible.

The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. The analysis brought forward four main themes: Distrust and trust, lack of information, mind made up, and main sources of information; family, friends, and online resources.

Results show that there was a lack of information in general and this effectively affected the information behaviour of the students. Negative campaigning, scare-mongering and unclear messages turned voters away from several media sources. Instead, voters turned to friends and family to seek, receive, and discuss information. Participants trusted their friends and family more than other sources because they had similar views and they felt they could discuss more openly with them as few conflicts arose from those discussions. Online resources like online newspapers and social media were widely used, but distrusted by some and trusted by others. Most participants knew how they wanted to vote from the beginning and had not changed their mind when it was time to vote. Throughout the interviews there was a strong sense of scepticism among the participants towards the information that had been available, especially among the Scottish participants.

The conclusion of the thesis is that the students encountered obstacles during their information seeking process. But they were also aided along the way. By applying the model by Wilson (1999) several intervening variables have been identified. Source characteristics, role relations and environments were either supporting or hindering variables. The themes themselves were also identified as either hindering or supporting variables. Lack of information, however, was seen as a hindrance only, because of the confusion it caused and because it slowed down the information seeking process, or in some instances, stopped it completely.

It was determined that most participants saw themselves as politically aware and that it was probable that many of them were. The referendum on Scottish independence two years earlier may have helped create more politically aware young voters in Scotland. According to Zaller (1992), those who are politically
aware are better at rejecting information which conflicts with their previous prepositions. It was therefore argued that political awareness was, in itself, an intervening variable that could affect how students received and responded to information.

The aim of this study was to identify student's information behaviour. Certain types of behaviour can be distinguished, such as talk and discussion with trusted friends and relatives. There was avoidance and a lack of trust regarding information coming directly from politicians and from almost all media. Both passive and active information seeking behaviour were identified, although active seeking and active avoidance were dominant. Furthermore, we can see interested young citizens who were asking for better, clearer information. To conclude, young voters wanted information, but good enough information was not provided.

7.1 Study limitations

There were limitations to this study. The lack of previous research on this topic, both within information science and other disciplines, made it difficult to determine which direction the research should head. When starting the research, I focused too much on politics and communications studies, since I found more research within those areas. It made my original research aim too broad. This, in turn, affected the design of the interview schedule, that included some questions that, as it turned out, was not relevant for the aim of the study. Other questions could have been asked in their place. It was not until the analysis of the transcriptions that I realised this. As an example, if one looks at the schedule (see appendix) it is evident that I wanted to identify whether different social groups had different opinions, by asking about opinions in the workplace and the difference of opinions between colleagues and friends at university. It was all transcribed, but the data derived from those questions were not considered relevant for this study and were excluded from the thesis. It was not accounted for in in the results section, except in those cases where it fitted one of the themes. Therefore, time was devoted, both in the interviews and in the transcribing process, which could have been devoted to relevant research. Other, more relevant, data could instead have been collected. For example, it could have left me with more time to conduct more interviews, leaving me with more qualitative and quantitative data which would have given me less superficial quantitative data.

The quantitative data that is presented in this thesis is not very large and this on its own is a limitation. It would not, however, have been that limited had this been an exclusively quantitative study. Obviously, a larger sample would have benefited the study, but the time limit hindered a larger sample. The interviews were carried out during a specific timeframe in a country I did not reside in. Although I was content with the number of interviews and the data I collected it meant that I was unable to return and continue doing interviews if I had wanted to.
There is a strong regional focus in this thesis, which can be both a negative and a positive. The fact that the research was conducted in Scotland meant that interesting findings arose, for example about the Scottish students’ distrust of the BBC as a consequence of their reporting of the Scottish independence referendum. On the other hand, it limits the results of this thesis, as it makes it harder to apply the study to other groups of students in the United Kingdom, Sweden or other areas in the world.

7.2 Suggestions for future research

When trying to find research for this thesis there was not as much research in information science as in other areas, like political science and communication studies. The concept of information is becoming an increasingly important topic in our society, with the evolution of the internet and digital services. As we have seen in both the Brexit referendum and the American election and possibly in the Swedish election to come, the transference and reception of information in society is becoming a more important topic than ever.

Information has for a long time been the prime focus within information science (as the name reveals) and I believe it is important that it continues to be so. It is always good to integrate disciplines but researchers within information science should be at the forefront on the research on information in our society. This thesis can only offer a small-scale study of something very large. In the future, perhaps similar studies can be conducted but from a quantitative perspective. My study was conducted after the referendum had taken place, and the future Swedish election offers a great opportunity to study how voters seek information before an election takes place.
References


Appendix A

Consent form

Interview consent form.

“Scottish students’ information seeking behaviour regarding the Brexit referendum”

Josefin Broström, Masters student, University of Borås

1. I have been given sufficient information about this research project. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project has been explained to me and is clear.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw anytime, without giving reason.

3. I agree to take part in the above study.

4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.

5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.

_____________________________   ___________________   ___________________
Name of Participant          Date           Signature

_____________________________   ___________________   ___________________
Name of                       Date          Date         Signature
Appendix B

Interview schedule

Interview schedule: Information behaviour and opinion formation regarding Brexit.

Date: _____________  Participant no: _______________  University: __________________

1. Did you vote in the referendum?  
   N ☐ Y ☐

   1.2 May I ask how you voted?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

   1.3 Why not?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

2. During the debate, did you try to find information on the pros and cons?  
   N ☐ Y ☐

   2.2 Can you describe how you went about finding information?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

   2.3 Why not?

   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
3. How interested were you in the referendum? *Would you say you were:*  
Very interested □  Quite interested  □  A little interested □  Not interested at all □  
3.2 Why was that?  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  

4. How much knowledge did you have about the EU before the referendum campaign began?  
A lot □  Quite a lot □  Some □  A little □  Not at all □  
4.2 Could you say what __________ means to you?  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  

5. How much knowledge did you have right before voting?  
A lot □  Quite a lot □  Some □  A little □  None at all □  
5.2 Could you say what __________ means to you?  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  

6. In general, would you describe yourself as politically aware?  
N □  Y □  
6.2 In what way?  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________  
________________________________________________________________________
6.3 Why is that?

______________________________

7. To what extent did you yourself search for information about Brexit?
A large extent□ Some extent□ Not at all □

7.2 Could you say what __________ means to you?
______________________________

8. Which of these sources did you use when looking for information? Give out card.
TV□ Radio□ Online newspapers□ Print newspapers□ Social media□
Political websites□ Blogs□ Friends□ Family □ Colleagues□

8.2 Did you use any other sources that are not mentioned here?
______________________________

9. Which of these social media sources did you use? Give out card.
Facebook□ Twitter□ Instagram□ Snapchat□

9.2 Did you use any other sources that are not mentioned here?
______________________________
10. You said you used: *repeat back their chosen sources*, which of these sources did you find most useful?

TV□ Radio□ Online newspapers□ Print newspapers□ Social media□
Political websites□ Blogs□ Friends□ Family □ Colleagues□ Facebook□
Twitter□ Instagram□ Snapchat□

10.10 Why was that?

11. Which newspapers, which TV programmes, which websites etc. Why these ones? *Ask about each source. Ask what pages (BBC, The Guardian etc) they follow on social media.*

12. Which of these sources did you trust the most?
12.2 Why?

____________________________________________________________

13. Were there any sources you avoided?

____________________________________________________________

13.2 Why?

____________________________________________________________

13.3 Why not?

____________________________________________________________

14. In general, where do you feel you received the most information from? Give out card.
   TV □ Radio □ Online newspapers □ Print newspapers □ Social media □
   Political websites □ Blogs □ Friends □ Family □ Colleagues □

14.2 Why is that?

____________________________________________________________

15. Did you share things regarding Brexit on social media?
   N □ Y □

15.2 How often?
   Daily □ Weekly □ Monthly □

15.3 What kind of things did you share?
15.4 Why not?

16. How often did you discuss Brexit with other people?
Not at all □ Occasionally □ Often □

16.2 How often was occasionally/often? Like daily, weekly?

16.3 Why not?

17. How active was the discussion among the students, do you think?
Very little discussion □ Occasional □ Frequent □ Very frequent □

17.2 How much is ________? Occasional for example.

18. When speaking about Brexit with other people, who do you think influenced you the most?
Family member □ Friend □ Teacher □ Work colleague □ Other:

18.2 Why this person?
19. Was there anyone you trusted more than others? Public figures or someone you knew? ______
____________________________________________________________
19.2 Why this person?
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

20. Was there anyone you didn’t trust?

20.2 Why this person?
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

21. Did you discuss the issue with someone who had different opinions from you?

21.2 With whom?
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

20.3 Why do you think that is? Can you think of any other reason? 
*background, geography, subject, WHAT ELSE?*

21. Out of your Facebook friends, could you take a guess at how many voted remain and how many voted to leave percentage wise?

22. Do you work?

21.2 Was Brexit discussed in the workplace?

21. Did people hold the same opinions there as among your fellow students?
N □ Y □ Some □

21.2 Why do you think that was?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

23. Did you have an idea how you would vote before the campaign?

N □ Y □

23.2 Did you change your mind?

N □ Y □

22.3 Why?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

23.3 Why not?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

24. Were there aspects of the campaign where you changed your mind?

N □ Y □

23.2 What were they and why?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

23.3 Why not?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
25. Do you think you affected others on the issue?
   N □ Y □ Maybe □
   24.2 In what way?
   ________________________________
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24.3 Why do you think that is?
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26. Do you feel there was enough information at hand?
   N □ Y □
   26.2 N: Explain?
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27. Do you feel there was too much information at hand?
   N □ Y □
   27.2 Y: Explain?
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28. During this interview has anything come to your mind that I haven’t mentioned? _________
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_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

Sex: ___________________________ Subject: ___________________________
Age: ___________________________ Nationality: _______________________
Department: ___________________