

**Hashtag Activism: Assessing the Perceived Value of Online Activism
Campaigns Among UKZN (PMB) Students.**

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

HASHTAG ACTIVISM: ASSESSING THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF ONLINE ACTIVISM CAMPAIGNS AMONG UKZN (PMB) STUDENTS.

The phenomenon of online activism is relatively new and thus, there is little in the way of research on the subject, particularly in the African and, more specifically, the South African context. This dissertation aims to analyse the emotional reactions and behaviours of students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg) regarding online activism. To do this, this dissertation focuses on the concepts of the public sphere, networks, participatory culture and activism, both traditional and online, discussing how these concepts have evolved and how they intermingle in order to allow for online activism to be a viable form of activism. In order to analyse this, data collected from students will be analysed and discussed in relation to the aforementioned concepts. From this, conclusions will be drawn relating to whether students engage in online activism, whether students believe online activism is a meaningful form of engagement or whether they believe it to be a lazy substitution as critics do and finally, whether students believe online activism is capable of creating tangible change in the real-world.

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1. Introduction

The notion of activism, while a fairly recent term itself (Cammaerts, 2007), is an integral part of democracy. Through activist efforts, people are able to air their grievances in hope of attracting the attention of those in power in order to make change. Activism today however, is not necessarily the same as when the term was introduced in the mid-1970s (Cammaerts, 2007). This is due to activists now employing new methods of activism, particularly that of online activism.

Online activism is a newer concept as it has emerged with the advancement of new media technologies (Castells, 2004) which have allowed for activists to expand their repertoires through the use of platforms such as the internet. Despite many arguing that online activism has its merits, there are numerous critics who believe it to be a shallow way for people to contribute to a cause (Budish, 2012).

As this is a relatively new concept, there has been little research into why people engage in activism in the online space, particularly in the African context. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to try and discern whether people, specifically students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal on the Pietermaritzburg campus, choose to engage in online activism as well as their reasons for doing so. This is an important issue to research as the issue of online activism is a topical one, especially in South Africa, where the #FeesMustFall hashtag has been a matter of public discussion since late 2015, through 2016, with numerous proponents and a number of critics. Therefore, the issue of online activism in the context of Africa is a salient one.

This research is pertinent as it pertains to an issue which is not only socially salient, but also one which is currently is the consciousness of South Africans, but moreover, the world at large with campaigns such as #Kony2012, #BringBackOurGirls and #BlackLivesMatter receiving global mainstream media coverage in recent years. Therefore, it is important and in fact necessary to try and understand the feelings, ideologies and behaviours surrounding online activism by everyday people.

This dissertation will aim at trying to discern students' views of online activism. In particular, the aim is to research whether students believe that online activism is a valuable tool in the repertoire of an activist or whether their views align with critics who believe it to be nothing more than a shallow attempt at engaging in activist efforts.

In order to do this, this dissertation will discuss the topics of the public sphere, networks, participatory culture and activism; both 'traditional' and online. The reason for this is because it is necessary to try and illustrate how certain notions, ideas and ideologies have shifted and overlapped in order for online activism to exist and be a viable form of activism.

While research into online activism does exist, there is little in the way of research regarding the views and feelings of people concerning online activism. This dissertation is not solely interested in whether people are engaging in online activism, but more especially it is attempting to discover why they engage or why they abstain. This is where there is a gap in current understanding and literature concerning online activism; it tends to focus on whether people are engaging online but not particularly why they feel compelled to do so, whether their engagement ends online or extends into the real world and if it does end online, why this is so.

The aim is for this dissertation to aid in creating a greater understanding about the nuances of engagement in terms of online activism, particularly in the African context.

As expected, on the internet online activism has many proponents, such as Berlatsky (2015) who acknowledges that the mainstream media treats social media like a “buzzing hive of useless outrage”, perhaps incorrectly so. Berlatsky (2015) notes that activists he has encountered have expressed that online activism is an integral part of their repertoire. For example, in his interview with American activist DeRay McKesson, Berlatsky (2015) notes that McKesson uses social media as part of his activist efforts because McKesson believes social media helps raise awareness for his cause, spread information quickly and also enables him and fellow activists to document events as they unfold.

Despite numerous first-hand accounts of the power of online activism from activists, online activism still has a number of critics. For example, Lo (2013), who argues that the most attractive part of online activism is the idea that one has participated in a good cause however, has expended minimal effort in doing so. The idea that online activism is a shallow means of engagement is a criticism which is levelled against online activism by a number of detractors (Budish, 2012).

With so many conflicting ideas surrounding whether online activism is successful, useful or meaningful, there has been little done to actually consult those who engage in online activism to try and discern why exactly they believe it to be a viable way for them to engage in activist efforts. This is one of the driving forces of this dissertation – attempting to delve deeper into the issue past the inclination to focus on the superficial aspects of online media such as whether

it is deemed successful according to scholars and theorists. The aim is to try and understand why everyday people are choosing to engage in online activism in addition to or as an alternative to traditional activist actions such as protests and marches. It also aims to discern why those who do not engage in online activism choose to refrain from doing so.

Therefore, this dissertation will aim to analyse whether students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg), firstly, engage in online activism, and secondly, if they view online activism as a worthwhile form of engagement or if they consider online activism as “slacktivism” (a term generally used by critics who claim online activism is a lazy substitution for more meaningful forms of engagement). In addition, this dissertation explores if students believe that efforts made online have the ability to create actual change in the real world.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to the existing knowledge surrounding activism, especially in regards to the changing methods employed by activists, particularly concerning why online activism may present new avenues for activists and others to engage in politics in a manner which was not possible pre new media technologies. It is also hoped that this research will provide greater insight into the ideologies surrounding online activism and that it will contribute research that has an African perspective as there does not seem to be a wealth of information regarding the way in which Africans engage with activism in the online realm.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to discern students' perceptions of online activism campaigns, focusing primarily on hashtag campaigns. However, in order to do this, it is necessary to outline the framework which has allowed for hashtag activism to exist. Therefore, in this chapter, four main topics will be focused on: networks, the public sphere, participatory culture and activism, both offline and online.

For networks, the focus will first be on outlining the conception of networks, then focusing on the shift from 'networks' in the literal sense to the more abstract way in which the term is used contemporarily and, finally, the section will focus on how social networks have emerged from offline social networks.

The next section on the public sphere will focus on the work of Jürgen Habermas, taking into account the critiques of his theorisation of the public sphere. There will also be discussion on how the conception of the public sphere has shifted from Habermas' to an alternate view.

The chapter will then move on to discuss participatory culture in an attempt to illustrate how networks and public spheres are used to foster groups where people come together as a way of creating a community (of sorts) wherein there is support for each other and for creation by community members.

Lastly, the main focus of the literature review will focus on activism, particularly in the online space. The discussion will begin by discussing conventional offline activism in order to draw on how it has influenced the development of online activism, and discuss important differences in the two types of activism.

The aim of this literature review is to create a ‘road map’ of sorts, to illustrate how these concepts all work together to create an environment in which online activism can occur and to discuss various ideas and criticisms of online activism.

2.2. Networks

2.2.1. The Conception of Networks

The term ‘network’ has its roots in computer science, used to refer to the connections which are made between computers and other electronic devices (Castells, 2004). However, before delving into discussing networks as conceived in computer sciences, it is beneficial to discuss earlier conceptions of networks. For this, the conception of rhizomic structures by Deleuze & Guattari (1988) is essential.

Deleuze & Guattari’s (1988:8) conception of a rhizomic structure was based on the way the roots of plants, weeds, trees and other flora grow, stating that “there are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root”. They argue that a rhizome can assume diverse forms in all directions and can be connected to anything else at any point. Rhizomes can be broken or “shattered” at any point, but it will start up again on an existing line or, alternately, on a new line (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Deleuze & Guattari (1988) provide an alternative name for a rhizome - a multiplicity - due to the fact that rhizomes are

constituted of multiple connections. They state further that a rhizome has no beginning nor an end, that it is “always in the middle” (1988:25). In other words, this structure does not exist on a linear plane between two points, but rather, as the name ‘multiplicity’ implies, exists on multiple interconnected levels.

Guerin (2013) builds on Deleuze & Guattari’s (1988) conception of the rhizome by noting that it spreads in all directions, and is characterised as multiple, non-hierarchical, proliferating and non-dualistic. According to Guerin (2013:138), rhizomic knowledge is based on “principles of connection and heterogeneity; any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be”. This is because rhizomic structures rely on, and benefit from, being interconnected in order to allow for the free flow of information, for example. The concept of a rhizome is, in fact, a metaphor that can be applied to the conception of networks as it is in computer sciences because they consist of a collection of interconnected entities such as mobile phones, computers, laptops and other computerised devices (Coyne, 2008). These devices are able to interface with one another in order to share and exchange information between systems - it is this connection and the multitude of other interconnected links such as this which form what is considered a network (Castells, 2004; Galloway & Thacker, 2007). Explained by Kane, Alavi, Labianca & Borgatti (2014:3-4): “A network is a set of nodes interrelated by dyadic ties. The nodes, or actors, can consist of any kind of entity, from individuals to collectives (e.g., organizations, countries)”. They state further that these ties are not independent, but rather link-up in order to form paths. Indeed, these networks are not independent, but rather interdependent as they rely on one another for support and communication. These nodes can be considered the “crossroads” through which information can move (Coyne, 2008) and are connected to every other node within the network in every direction and without an actual beginning or end point (Guerin, 2013).

Networks have become an efficient way for the sharing of information and connecting and communicating with one another. Castells (2004) believes that this is due to three key characteristics of networks:

1. Flexibility;
2. Scalability; and
3. Survivability

According to Castells (2004), networks are able to reconfigure themselves accordingly to suit changing environments, therefore they are flexible. Networks also possess the ability to shrink or expand in size with little to no disruption to communications and are therefore scalable. Finally, as they possess no true centre, they are able to survive attacks, such as viruses, on their individual components and, therefore, possess survivability.

Networks are also considered to be multiplicitous (Galloway & Thacker, 2007) because, while they can exist as an individual entity, they are almost always more than that, being made up of a number of connections which amalgamate to form a network. Networks therefore possess the necessary qualities to be considered rhizomic structures as they fulfil the criteria of rhizomes as outlined by Deleuze & Guattari (1988).

2.2.2. The Evolution of the Network – From Literal to Abstract

When one considers the way in which the term ‘network’ has evolved, it is evident that there has been a shift away from its meaning in computer science to the way in which it is used socially. As Coyne (2008) notes, a network serves as a descriptor of a technical system; it has social, cultural and political uses. The reason for the shift is that the term “network” has now

become a trope – that is, the term is no longer necessarily used in its literal sense, but rather, in a metaphorical one. Speaking on this change, Gane & Beer (2008:15) argue that:

“Network, at least in its contemporary usage, is a trope insofar as its meaning has shifted as it has passed from computer science [...] into the social sciences, where it has come to signify a new societal arrangement characterized by a culture of individualism and the accelerated mobilities of people, commodities, capital, signs and information across the globe”.

According to them, many of the properties of computer networks have been developed into metaphors for thinking about the day-to-day operation and underlying basis of contemporary society. Galloway & Thacker (2007) offer a similar account for considering networks in the abstract, stating that they can be composed of almost anything, ranging from computers and the internet, to people and their methods of communication, to the food chains of animals. Ergo, networks no longer only apply to the literal use of defining the connection between electronic devices. Consequently, it becomes important to discuss the way in which these societal structures, which are also referred to as ‘networks’, have come into being.

Even though the term ‘network’ has its roots in computer science, the way in which they can be seen to organise human behaviour has been in existence for an innumerable amount of time. Castells (2004) notes that historically, networks have always been a pervasive part of human life and that they constitute a fundamental pattern of life because human beings form and function within social networks. ‘Social networks’ here refers to the offline social connections which are formed and shared between people, rather than online social networking sites (Kane et. al, 2014). Networks form an integral part of societies and individual daily lives with Dorogovtsev & Mendes (2003:2) stating “their influence on us is incredible. They are part of our life, of our world. Our present and our future are impossible without them”.

Thanks to social media, people were given the ability to take these social relations and connections to new levels as “most social media platforms also integrate formal social networks whereby [...] individuals create formal ties to other users of their choosing” (Saxton & Wang, 2013:852). Thanks to this, there has been the formation of what Castells (2004) labels the ‘network society’, in which social structures are created by networks powered by information and communication technologies. He defines the network society as a social structure which is based on networks that are “operated by information and communication technologies based in microelectronics and digital computer networks that generate, process, and distribute information on the basis of the knowledge accumulated in the nodes of the networks” (Castells, 2008:7), further highlighting that it is a society constituted of networked individuals.

Society shapes technology according to the needs, interests and values of those who are engaging with the technology (Castells, 2008). Advancements and innovation in the field of technology have been a driving force that has allowed for new avenues of interaction and formation of new networks in unprecedented ways. Due to the increase in ubiquitous wireless communication, computing capacity and devices (Castells, 2004) and these devices’ ability to interface with one another (Gane & Beer, 2008), social networks and social media have been created and popularized within the online world. Ubiquity of devices, such as computers and mobile phones, which have the ability to connect users to each other through the internet has allowed, and continues to allow, a great number of people to join social networking sites with relative ease.

2.2.3. From Offline to Online.

Due to ubiquity of devices, there is an ever-growing number of users gaining access to the internet (Castells, 2004) and growth in the number of social networking and social media sites in which people extend their offline networks into the online realm has increased. These digital networks are created through an interconnected group of devices (Sivitanides, 2011). Sivitanides (2011) argues that these networks connect people to each other, allowing for large groups to easily link to one another in order to exchange content and coordinate acts. This links to Castells (2004) who argues that online relations are not disconnected from the real world, but rather they are a single facet of a wider set of socially networked relations within which an individual is located.

One of the ways in which a person can create or reinforce existing networks is through the use of social media. The term ‘social media’ is used to describe a platform which is fairly large, in terms of scale, and which allows for the collaborative creation and sharing of media (Collin et. al., 2011). Such interaction is enabled by new media devices that allow individuals to interact anywhere and at any time due to devices’ abilities to interface with one another and exchange and share information (Gane & Beer, 2008).

With the introduction of social networking websites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*, to name a few, people are constantly connected to each other and use this connection for a number of purposes such as sharing pictures, status updates and videos – a feat which was achievable with earlier new media technologies, but one that is now far-reaching through social networking sites. According to Kane et. al. (2014), there has been a rapid proliferation of information technologies, which are commonly referred to as “social media” in recent years on

internet-based platforms. It is these new media technologies which allow millions of people to connect to the various social networking sites and these social networks have transformed the processes of communicating as well as social interaction (Collin et. al., 2011).

One of the important features of social networking sites and social media is the ability for individuals to be able to reach a multitude of people with relative ease. As Kane et. al. (2014) notes, in terms of a “traditional” network, a physical object can feasibly only occupy a single space at any given time within that network, however, when it comes to digital networks, that object can be copied, manipulated and represented in a multitude of ways, any number of times, in a number of different spaces. This allows for connections to be made with large numbers of users and for the rapid distribution of information and content among them. It is thanks to these new digital electronic technologies that there has been an increase in the capacity to process information, not only in terms of volume, but in terms of the speed of communication (Castells, 2004). Castells, (2008:16) argues that societies are now built around communicative and information technologies and that “digital networks are woven into the fabric of everyday life”. These online networks allow for users to connect with other users with whom they are familiar in the offline world, but also allows for them to connect with strangers who may share similar ideas and values with them.

Boyd & Ellison (2007:1) note that social network services support pre-existing social relationships, however, they also “help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities”. This allows for users on social networking sites to be able to create familiar networks with people they know personally and also build new networks with new people based on shared values and interests. These digital networks are integral because they are “woven into the fabric of everyday life” (Gane & Beer, 2008:16) and users come to depend

on them. Computers and handheld devices which can connect to the internet allows users to grow their networks exponentially online and thus, create and share with a possibly endless number of people. It would be remiss, however, to think that due to the ever-increasing number of users on social networking sites that there is global availability and access to devices which enable social network use as this is not the case. In fact, there is a digital divide and the number of people without such technology far outweighs the number of people with access to it (Castells, 2004; 2008). However, this divide is becoming smaller which is why the impact of social networks becomes increasingly important.

Perhaps the most beneficial feature of social networking sites is the fact that it allows for the creation of connections which may not otherwise be possible due to physical barriers, for example. In terms of creating networks, the internet and new technology has rendered certain barriers, like physical distance, a nonfactor. This technology has the power to join anybody with access to a device and an internet connection to millions of other users from around the world – a feat which would not necessarily be possible otherwise (Goldsborough, 2011). Castells (2004; 2008) states that this is because of the nature of digital networks – they are global networks, they have no bounds in terms of their capacity and they are able to overcome the historical limits of offline networks. He believes that this connection to people around the world has allowed for a global network and thus, a global society.

2.3. The Public Sphere

2.3.1. The Conception of the Public Sphere

The public sphere is a critical component of modern societies and consequently, is important in terms of how social networks operate. It is a forum within which to discuss relevant issues

in a place which allows citizens to become informed about socially salient matters (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010).

Prior to discussing the functions of the public sphere however, it is necessary to first consider the various ways the public sphere has been discussed previously. One of, if not the, earliest conceptions of the public sphere comes from Jürgen Habermas (1989) in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. While Habermas' conception of the public sphere is the main focus of this section, there will also be discussion on newer ideas, namely those by Kemmis & McTaggart (2007) and Gerhards & Schafer (2010).

Habermas (1989) and Habermas & Seidman (1989), base their conception of the public sphere on a domain of social life in which public opinion can be formed. A 'public opinion' can be defined as a consensus, of sorts, reached by a group. Habermas & Seidman (1989:231) state that the term 'public opinion' "refers to the functions of criticism and control of organised state authority that the public exercises informally". This hinged upon the presumption that the public sphere was autonomous and free from the influence of economics and politics. Habermas & Seidman (1989) argue that citizens act as a public when they deal with issues of general interest without being subjected to coercion, which guarantees that they assemble and express their opinions freely. The public sphere was conceptualised as private people coming together to create a public. 'Public' here refers to the state and 'private' refers to the market and familial unit (Dean, 2003).

Habermas' (1989) considered the public sphere to be a specific part of so-called 'civil' society. The necessity for a forum where information and personal views could be exchanged equally, free from political and economic control drove the formation of the public sphere, illustrated by Habermas (1989:3) who states that the public sphere was "constituted in discussion". According to him, "only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all. In the discussion among citizens, issues were made topical and took on shape" (Habermas, 1989:4).

Coffee houses and salons constituted early versions of what we understand the public sphere to be, as it was in these places that private people came together to engage with each other and discuss social issues (Habermas, 1989). Through the process of discussion, the state was made aware of the needs of society through public opinion and acted as a mediator between the public and the state (Habermas & Seidman, 1989).

Within salons and coffee houses, everyday people engaged in critical debate which was sparked by literature and art, and was later extended to include issues such as the economy and political matters, but, were free from the powers of economy and politics (Habermas, 1989). Habermas (1989) notes that within these coffee houses and salons, the majority of the population tended to be men. Despite differing in terms of size and composition of their publics, the proceedings, nature of their debates and topics all shared commonalities, that is, they all allowed for a forum for discussion of relevant social issues among private persons that tended to be on-going (Habermas, 1989).

As private persons began coming together in these environments to discuss socially salient matters, a public sphere was formed because they began to act as a public body that was able to confer in a manner that was unrestricted (Habermas, 1989). It was understood that such a forum guaranteed that individuals were free to assemble, associate with peers and to express their opinions about matters of general interest (Khan, Gilani & Nawaz, 2012). Habermas (1989) argues that this public sphere was not created by the public authorities, but rather was formed as an alternative to official channels in order to engage authorities in debate over the rules with which they governed. This type of discussion was necessary because despite the matters of the authorities and their rulings essentially being private, the rules were publically relevant as they affected citizens (Habermas, 1989).

Habermas (1989) notes that prior to the public sphere assuming explicit political functions, ‘intimate spheres’ were formed within familial units. These intimate spheres were a type of public on their own as familial units engaged in discussion amongst themselves - these publics provided the training ground for people to be able to engage critically in public reflections which, in turn, allowed them to come together and create a larger public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Building on the conceptualisation of Habermas (1989) and Habermas & Seidman (1989), Kemmis & McTaggart (2007:305-315) discuss ten features which they argue constitute a public sphere. They highlight that most, if not all, versions of public spheres will have the following features:

1. Constituted as an actual network of communication among actual participants;
2. Self-constituted;

3. Frequently come into existence in response to legitimation deficits;
4. Constituted for communicative action and for public discourse;
5. Aim to be inclusive;
6. Tend to involve communication in ordinary language;
7. Presuppose communicative freedom;
8. Generate communicative power;
9. Do not affect social systems directly;
10. Frequently arise in practice through, or in relation to, the communication networks associated with social movements.

Essentially what Kemmis & McTaggart (2007) argue in this list of features is that one should not consider the public sphere to be singular, but rather as numerous spaces in which individuals from various societies are able to explore particular issues freely. It is important to note that whereas Habermas (1989) refers to the ‘town’, Kemmis & McTaggart (2007) refer to “various spaces”. This is due to the difference in context within which these authors were writing. Habermas’ conception of the public sphere was rooted in 18th century France and therefore, his theorisation reflects a more singular viewpoint, whereas Kemmis & McTaggart’s (2007) conception is a more generalised one which they believe can be extended to any version of the public sphere.

Kemmis & McTaggart (2007) argue that each of these spheres are formed by people who elect to get together of their own volition. The citizens and the public spheres they form are separate from the state and are, therefore, autonomous. Frequently, public spheres come into existence because people feel that the existing laws, policies or practices are not legitimate. Those who do not agree with systems in place aim discussion toward exploring ways in which to overcome

these “legitimation deficits” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007:307) by finding ways to change the unsatisfactory laws, policies or processes.

Additionally, public spheres are no longer limited by physical space. Now, thanks to new media technologies, people are able to create public spheres on the internet whose purpose mirrors that of offline public spheres. Kemmis & McTaggart (2007:308) believe that “public discourse in public spheres has a similar orientation to communicative action in that it is oriented toward intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding, and unforced consensus about what to do”.

Public spheres aim to facilitate a communicative space, however, the aim is to not only include those groups who are directly affected by social issues but also those who have been excluded from the relevant discussions which affect them (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). As part of this inclusive nature, people aim to dissolve the barriers of participation which have been formed by the use of what Kemmis & McTaggart (2007) call ‘specialist discourses’ as well as the modes of address. They believe these modes are intrinsic to the importance of speakers and therefore, there is an importance to what certain individuals have to contribute. Public spheres also tend to have weak distinctions between who is considered an “outsider” and who forms part of the group because the boundaries of membership are relatively permeable (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). This is because the topics under discussion will generally dictate who forms part of a public sphere at any given time and citizens can choose to participate or not at any given time. Citizens can also leave and re-join the public sphere any time they choose without repercussions to themselves. Within public spheres, participants also have the freedom to choose which discursive roles they fill, whether that is speaker or listener (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). They also have the freedom to withdraw themselves from discussion at any

point. In such cases, both participation and nonparticipation are completely voluntary and a person or persons may choose either without repercussion.

Viewpoints and ideas which are developed through discussion within a public sphere will generally be respected by all parties involved – not due to obligation, but rather due to ideas and conclusions being arrived at by mutual understanding as well as consensus of the involved parties (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). It is because of this mutual understanding and consensus that a sense of legitimacy of ideas is fostered – the ideas and viewpoints are shared among those who occupy particular public sphere.

Though they engage in critical debate about politics and the economy, public spheres usually do not have any direct power or influence on institutions, such as the government, as the aim is to change the climate of debate, how things are discussed and how they are understood. Therefore, any impact that may be caused is incidental and indirect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). The aim is to generate a sense that there are alternatives available to the status quo and that there are alternate ways of conducting processes (such as legal processes) and that these alternatives are feasible within the applicable context. This is not to ignore the fact that there are also public spheres where the aim is to maintain the status quo.

It is important to be cognisant of the fact that the ideas proposed by Kemmis & McTaggart (2007) are idealistic as is the public sphere. Whether such a version of the public sphere exists is wholly dependent on the context in which it exists and functions – and even then, it would be open to debate as to whether it truly fulfilled all the criteria of what they deem to be a ‘public sphere’. Perhaps then, a more useful way to consider the public sphere is based on Gerhards &

Schafer's (2010) three forums. The first forum they refer to as the encounter public, the second forum they define as public events and the third forum is the mass media.

The first forum consists of face-to-face conversations in which citizens engage in with each other. Gerhards & Schafer (2010) contend that this type of communication would occur on the streets, for example and has no fixed organisational structure. It allows citizens the opportunity to discuss various issues but the impact of this forum on society is weak and the number of people reached is limited.

The second forum is that of public events. The organisation structure in this forum is minimal and it may be dominated by those who possess specialist knowledge or who are considered opinion leaders (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010). This forum has a slightly more far-reaching impact than that of the first. The last of the three forums is that of the mass media. According to Gerhards & Schafer (2010), this forum is the most far reaching of the three due to the fact that it possesses fully-fledged technical and organisational infrastructure. However, it tends to be dominated by those with specialist knowledge such as journalists, experts and collective actors. They note that the audience is relegated to assuming the role of being the receiver because of this domination by experts.

It is interesting to note that Gerhards & Schafer (2010) consider the mass media to be a forum of the public sphere as there are numerous countries in which the mass media is used as a tool of the government for a host of reasons, such as the distribution of propaganda material, for example. In such a case, this puts their conception in direct contention with other ideas of the public sphere because, as mentioned, the public sphere is meant to exist as a separate and autonomous entity from the state. It would perhaps depend on the context in which their

conception is applied that would be important when deciding whether it is contradictory to more established arguments such as Habermas', in relation to the public sphere.

2.3.2. Critiques of Habermas' Theory of the Public Sphere

While Habermas' conception of the public sphere is invaluable, there are theorists who have levelled a number of critiques against it. As an overarching critique, Habermas' (1989) conception of the public sphere is too idealistic (Matačinskaitė, 2011). Two specific issues with Habermas' conception is that he fails to (1) outline the inherent problems that are present in the bourgeois public sphere and (2), to create a suitable post-bourgeois model of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990). Susen (2011) concurs with this assertion stating that while Habermas' conception of the public sphere provides useful insights in the early modern period, it does little to provide an adequate framework for understanding the public sphere as it existed in late modern societies. One of the main issues with Habermas' model of the public sphere is the fact that it was conceptualised on based on the public groups of 18th century France (Matačinskaitė, 2011). Therefore, it has been criticised as being myopic and taking a "Western" view of what constitutes a public sphere even though numerous public spheres existed outside of Europe (Eder, 2006).

The public sphere as theorised by Habermas (1989) was a place where people came together to discuss and debate social issues. In order for them to do so, there had to be a shedding of hierarchy and perceived differences between group members so that all involved were considered to be equals. The reason for this is so that no contribution was deemed to be more important than another. However, this ideation of the public sphere was highly exclusionary in nature because as Fraser (1990:59) puts it "the claim to open access in particular was not made

good” due to society’s fragmentation of class and gender which resulted in competing ideologies among various class groups.

Fraser (1990) asserts that while Habermas’ account of the public sphere claimed that it was open and accessible to all, this was not the case and that complete accessibility was never realised. Fraser (1990:60) argues that,

“This network of clubs and associations - philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural - was anything but accessible to everyone. On the contrary, it was the arena, the training ground, and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men, who were coming to see themselves as a "universal class" and preparing to assert their fitness to govern.”

Indeed, an inclusive public sphere could not be achieved in such circumstances where the so-called “elite” were at the centre and a number of groups were excluded entirely. These groups included women, men who were not highly educated (who Fraser refers to as “plebeian”) and non-white ethnicities. In addition to this, children and those who did not own property were also kept out (Eder, 2006; Matačinskaitė, 2011). The ideologies generated within the bourgeois public sphere were reflective of those who were part of the most powerful and privileged social groups: educated, wealthy, mostly white and predominantly male (Susen, 2011). Consequently, one can conclude that it is impossible to theorise Habermas’ conception to be a universal public sphere when marginalised groups were excluded because even though it claimed universality, it was founded on “a monolithic account of public life” (Susen, 2011:55).

Another issue regarding Habermas’ conception of the public sphere and its claim of universality is that it relies on the notion of private people coming together to form a public. Susen (2011) argues that different societies produce different forms of what is defined as ‘private’ life and ‘public’ life, further stating that the relationship between the two is malleable

and, therefore, it varies between societies and also over time. What is key here is that because of this variation, the ideologies surrounding what is private and what is public is wholly dependent on the specific context of a society and therefore, it cannot be universally applied (Susen, 2011). Susen (2011:52) argues that,

“To reduce the complexity of the modern public sphere to the singularity of the bourgeois public sphere means to underestimate the sociological significance of alternative - i.e. non-bourgeois - collective realms that contribute to a rational-critical engagement with the world.”

thus, disqualifying Habermas’ Eurocentric, bourgeois conception.

Fraser (1990) also notes that excluded groups still needed to engage critically with social issues and because they were excluded from the bourgeois public sphere, had to create their own public spheres, which she termed “subaltern counterpublics”. The reason for this is that she viewed these alternate public spheres as parallel discursive arenas whereby people from the aforementioned marginalised groups were able to create and discuss alternate discourses which were applicable to them, thus permitting them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1990). These subaltern counterpublics are a space for members of society who feel as though they are disenfranchised to be able to engage critically and deliberate on common affairs with each other as well as other public issues which they may feel excluded from.

2.3.3. The Internet as A New Public Sphere.

As has been discussed, the public sphere was conceptualised in reference to physical locations, such as the salons and coffee shops of 18th century France, for example. However, with the advancement of technology, and new media technologies in particular, the public sphere has extended into the online realm (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007). Therefore, in order to highlight this, it is necessary to discuss the internet as a new form of public sphere.

Matačinskaitė (2011) argues that the internet is a forum where opinions can be shaped and where people can participate in discussions and find information to support arguments. Ubayasiri (2006) contends that the internet has been thought of as one of the most important developments in terms of contemporary communication ability and, because of the internet, there has been the creation of a global public sphere where “every individual has access to a global forum where they are able to express their arguments without mediation, selection or censorship” (Ubayasiri, 2006:4). In theory, the idea of a global public sphere is a possibility, due to the ubiquitous nature of computers and mobile new media devices (Castells, 2004), however, it is also necessary to remember that certain countries like China, for example, have restrictions in place to limit the way in which people are able to use and engage on the internet. Morozov (2009) notes this as well stating that the majority of authoritarian states eagerly exploit the internet for their own purposes, such as North Korea which has been accused of ambitions relating to cyberwarfare.

This means that an online global public sphere cannot be possible as it stands right now as any limits imposed by outside forces clashes directly with the idea of an autonomous public sphere, separate from government and institutions. One must also consider that even if there was free and open access to the internet worldwide, there would still be no guarantee that there would be the formation of a global culture and thus, a global public sphere. It is also worth noting that there are numerous governments who currently use the internet to produce and disseminate content, so the question of whether there can ever be online autonomy from governing powers remains. Regardless, for those who do have unrestricted access to the internet, the need for physical locations within which to meet and debate and discuss such as the coffee houses and salons of the past are now obsolete as cyberspace provides a place for people across the world to easily come together and critically engage in debate and dialogue (Ubayasiri, 2006:9).

There has been a so-called “new” public sphere created thanks to the internet which aids in bridging the gap of temporal and spatial barriers. Thanks to communicative networks on the internet, people are able to communicate across physical borders which previously separated them (Khan et al, 2012). It is also thanks to these communicative networks that new subaltern counterpublics can be created to cater to any number of people with relative ease. Michaelson (2011) argues that in restricted media societies, the online media acts as a forum for the voices which may not necessarily be represented by the mass media and, thus, it takes on the form of a subaltern public sphere. The internet provides alternate communicative spaces where information can develop and circulate and is, therefore, a parallel to offline public spheres, though it is not typically identical to them (Bennet, 2003).

Gerhards & Schafer (2010) note that numerous theorists and scholars believe the internet has the potential to change the way people communicate and because of this, the internet makes a better public sphere than ‘old’ mass media. They contend that this belief is based on the fact that there are fundamental differences between the internet and old mass media, namely that the gatekeepers of old play a lesser role or may be non-existent. This may cause people to be more at ease when presenting themselves and/or their issues online (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010).

The hope was that the internet would be a way to achieve a model which more closely resembled the idealised version of the public sphere due to its accessibility (Dean, 2003; Gerhards & Schafer, 2010); however, one must consider that this is not entirely possible when one considers the digital divide (Castells, 2004). In fact, Castells (2004) and Castells & Cardoso (2008) say that a majority of people are excluded from the internet due to the digital divide. Therefore, the question must be raised as to how the ‘global public sphere’ can be attained or

realised when there is such a great deal of exclusion based on the inability to afford new media technology.

In addition, Dean (2003) is critical of the idea of the internet, however. Dean (2003) notes that early concerns about the internet appeared to echo the same concerns of the bourgeois public sphere – it was dominated by young, white men and seemed to exclude women, ethnic and racial minorities and the working class. She notes that as new, less experienced users became active online, hostile environments emerged, causing her to question whether cyberspace was too racist, sexist and offensive. For Dean (2003), the key issue was inclusivity; if the internet was to be the new public sphere, all it needed to do was be more inclusive and in her opinion this has yet to be achieved.

Dean (2003:106) further argues that the internet is what she deems a “zero institution” saying that it enables conflicting constituencies to view themselves as connected to everyone else yet, at the same time, is a space where networks conflict.

2.4. Participatory Culture

2.4.1. What is Participatory Culture?

Prior to the advent of the internet, media tended to flow in only one direction (Taplin, 2008), that is, from the media producers (TV and radio broadcasters, film studios and newspaper publishers) to the receivers of the media. This is corroborated by Saxton and Wang (2013:852) who note that, “earlier technology primarily exhibits one-way communication from the organisation to the constituents”. Delwiche and Henderson (2013) describe this as the institutions having had a monopoly on media production.

Saxton and Wang (2013) argue that since the advent of the internet however, there has been a shift in this paradigm as there is no longer a monopoly on content production. Delwiche and Henderson (2013) claim that these institutions have been usurped by new forms of media sharing such as video sharing sites and fan-sharing entertainment sites. Consequently, there has been a move away from the previous model of media production where few produce and many consume, to one where people have greater incentive to create because they have a “more active stake in the culture that is produced” (Jenkins, 2006:12). The reason for this shift is that there are now tools available for media consumers to become media producers themselves which has led to what is deemed a participatory culture.

The idea that the internet has usurped the power of production however, seems to be presumptuous. The fact of the matter is that while there is greater opportunity for consumers to now create and share content, there is still a monopoly when it comes to mainstream production. Money and power still lies predominantly, if not solely, with traditional media.

Even so, participatory culture encourages and thrives on the creation and production of content by the members within it. Jenkins (2006) argues that for a culture to be considered participatory, it should meet the following criteria:

1. There must be low barriers to engagement (both artistic and civic);
2. Within the community, there should be strong support for creating and sharing those creations with others;
3. There needs to be a sense that all participants' contributions are of value;

4. There should be sense of mentorship where those with greater experience and knowledge help to educate those who may be considered novices; and
5. While all members of the community do not necessarily have to contribute, they must feel that they are free to contribute at any time.

Within such a space there is emphasis on the creation and sharing of content but also the sharing of ideas and information. Participatory culture has been able to flourish due to advancements in new media and technology (Castells, 2004; Kane, Alavi, Labianci & Borgatti, 2014), particularly with the meshing of technology and culture. Jenkins (2006:8) argues that participatory culture is emerging due to culture absorbing and responding to the “explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content”. What is meant by this is that the tools such as new media technology devices have the capability of connecting and allowing for the creation and sharing of content. However, actually enabling people to participate and engage meaningfully is dependent on specific factors such as the context within which people find themselves, socially or politically for example. If participation is not encouraged and/or supported, there is no incentive for one to make the initiative to participate.

Advancements in technology which aid in the process of fostering a participatory culture include, but are not limited to, mobile phones and computers with the ability to capture video, audio, pictures, edit content as well as access the internet. The internet may be the greatest of these advancements due to the fact that it allows users to connect with one another, share content and communicate on an unprecedented scale (Castells & Cardoso, 2008; De Michiel, 2008).

2.4.2. Participatory Culture and Creation

As aforementioned, technological advancement has been one of the main driving forces in aiding the creation of participatory culture because it has allowed for a radical change in the world of communication, especially in the way people communicate (Tubella, 2008). This, in turn, has allowed for the transcendence of former barriers to connecting, such as physical distance, for example, as it allows for people to connect in unprecedented ways (Castells, 2004; Castells & Cardoso, 2008; Tubella, 2008).

The transcending of barriers has allowed for users to create online networks with others who hold similar values and ideas to themselves (Saxton & Wang, 2013). Boyd & Ellison (2007) argue that most sites support the maintenance of offline social networks, but there are those who help strangers to connect based on similarly-held views or beliefs. This is not to imply or suggest that people only connect with those who hold viewpoints or values that are congruent to their own, but rather that they are more inclined to do so. Within these networks, people are able to communicate as well as share information and content at an ever-accelerating rate (Delwiche & Henderson, 2013). As De Michiel (2008:10) puts it: “Global networks of like-minded people can now cluster and form communities online”.

In terms of media production, new media technologies and social networking services have allowed for the ease of creation as well as distribution, with De Michiel (2008) noting that users are now free to exchange and share ideas because there is no need for expensive equipment, distributors or broadcasters to release content to the consumer. Now anyone who wishes to publish media need only create a website or upload what they desire as there is limited

gatekeeping to determine what reaches the audience (Taplin, 2008). There is, however, no guarantee that any content will even reach an audience despite this.

Technology is also shaping the way in which people are becoming informed and interacting with one another (Garcia-Galera & Valdivia, 2014). The content that is produced by consumers is referred to as ‘user generated content’ (UGC) (Collin et. al., 2011) which refers to original creative content, as well as ‘remixed’ content which involves taking existing work and reworking or repurposing it. Waldron (2013:258) notes that UGC refers to “digital artefacts created by ordinary people acting on their own behalf”. Waldron (2013) further argues that because self-generated content is created with the intention to share, UGC can, and indeed often does, function as a platform for participation and debate. Collin et. al. (2011) believe that the interrelationship between social networking services and social media has been a key motivator in the creation and sharing of self-generated content. The reason for this is that within a participatory culture there is a strong incentive to create and share content, motivated by other users who create and who encourage creation.

With the ability to create self-generated content, people are no longer merely passive consumers; they are capable of being active producers as well (Waldron, 2013). This in turn has led to the rise of what is known as the ‘prosumer’ - a portmanteau of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ (Waldron, 2013; Garcia-Galera & Valdivia, 2014). Garcia-Galera & Valdivia (2014:10) argue that “digital media allows some recipients to frequently occupy the role of senders, capable of transmitting and sharing content without renouncing the role of media consumer. The prosumer has not usurped the position of the mainstream entirely; instead, prosumers work alongside traditional media producers (Delwiche & Henderson, 2013).

Prosumer creations (by individuals or clusters of people) have the ability to contribute to public discussion and debate because they “will become part of the larger flow of cultural images, ideas and evolving patterns of dialogue” (De Michiel, 2008:14).

2.4.3. Affinity Spaces

Participatory culture allows for the creation of public spheres as it allows for individuals to come together (for example, on the internet) not only to create content, but also to discuss social matters in forums such as chat rooms, with Breindl (2013:6) noting that “internet use has shown that the assemblage of various internet elements allows like-minded individuals to connect, find, produce and transmit politically-relevant information”. Jenkins (2006) labels these spheres as ‘affinity spaces’ and defines them as a place (online or offline) which allows for informal learning to occur. Jenkins (2006:10) states that these affinity spaces are “sustained by common endeavours that bridge the differences, be it age, race, gender or educational level and because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests”. What this means is that within these spaces, there is an emphasis placed on education and creation based more so on the similarities of people rather than focusing on differences. As with the Habermasian model of the public sphere, there is a shedding of the perceived differences when one is in an affinity space.

Affinity spaces can be highly beneficial to individuals who feel as though they are marginalised or not represented in mainstream media (Goldsborough, 2011). As Tubella (2008:258) states: “both the sense of oneself and the sense of belonging are shaped by the values, beliefs and forms of behaving [...], but [are] also highly influenced by symbolic materials transmitted by

media”. Therefore, for those who feel like they are not represented or given a platform in the mainstream media, they are able to form online affinity spaces of their own which, to use Fraser’s (1990) term, serve as subaltern counterpublics. This allows for the establishment of a space in which to discuss and engage with matters that are relevant to individuals but which may not be represented or discussed in the available mainstream media. Affinity spaces give people a space in which to experiment with issues such as identity, culture and social practices through the processes of mentoring, discussion and debate (Kahn & Kellner, 2005). It also serves to make information easily available to a great number of people, from a wide variety of sources (Kahn & Kellner, 2005). Collin et. al. (2011) believe that because of this, collaborative creative content production within these affinity spaces plays a significant role in developing a sense of identity and community.

In terms of content creation, there is a cyclic process that occurs: creative content production encourages the formation and the strengthening of bonds which, in turn, encourage people to produce content and so on. This process can be empowering to individuals who feel marginalised as it provides them with a space to create content and discuss issues that are specific to them (Collin et. al., 2011). User generated content is integral in a participatory environment and in turn, a participatory environment enables people to “engage in creative content production, empowering them with the means of creating and sustaining connections with others” (Collin et. al., 2011:9). Affinity spaces may be the only place in which some people are afforded the opportunity to tackle certain issues in their lives as Collin et. al. (2011:17) note that “for some, particularly those who are marginalised or otherwise socially isolated, online relationships provided a significant, and sometimes the only, opportunity for such socialisation”.

However, before progressing further with this discussion, it would be beneficial to discuss briefly what exactly is meant by “identity” in the context of this dissertation. Identity is an expansive topic with far too much detail and nuance to be accurately and fully discussed in this dissertation, however, it is necessary to highlight how this research has used the concept of “identity” in order to discuss the role it plays in participatory culture.

Buckingham (2008) states that identity is something that is unique to each person and that it distinguishes us from other people. It is the traits, characteristics, social relations, roles, and memberships in social groups which define who one is (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012). Oyserman et. al. (2012:69) argue that when individuals negotiate or formulate their identity, they focus on the past conception of themselves. In other words, they understand themselves in light of what used to be true of themselves, what is true of themselves now and the person they expect or hope to become, the person they may feel obligated to try to become or the person they fear they may become.

Identity is not merely just something that one forms or defines introspectively however, as Buckingham (2008:1) notes that people seek identification and validation of identity from external sources based on social, cultural, and biological characteristics, as well as common values, personal histories and interests. While identity is developed by an individual and that an individual may make certain claims about their own identity, it has to be recognised and confirmed by others because identity is something that is also accomplished through one’s continual interaction and negotiation with other people (Buckingham, 2008:6; Oyserman et. al., 2012).

Oliver et. al. (2003) introduce identity by discussing it in relation to individuals and groups. They argue that individual identities consist of what people think of themselves, and collective identities concern what groups think of themselves. Oliver et. al. (2003) also introduce the notion of a “movement identity”. They note that people may think of themselves as integrally part of, or defined by a larger group. According to them, an individual’s movement identity is focused on the extent to which an individual’s self-identity includes identification with a social movement. They believe that when one engages in a movement of any kind, their identity and sense of self can become merged with the movement. This is why people’s involvement in any type of activist effort cannot be understood in simple cost or benefit terms (i.e. how a movement will cost or benefit them), but rather, they engage in movements because they view it as a way to preserve, maintain and protect their identity and sense of self (Oliver. et. al, 2003).

Further elaborating on their explanation of a movement identity, Oliver et. al. (2003) argue that when an individual possesses such an identity, their sense of self is merged with the movement at large – this is because their actions can be understood as a way of preserving and maintaining their identity and sense of self.

Due to the collaborative nature of creation and sharing within these communities, affinity spaces help to foster strong connections between the people involved in them. Collaborative content creation and sharing efforts play a major role in cultivating a sense belonging and one of identity (Collin et. al., 2011). Tubella (2008) expands on this stating that when considering identity, there are two types that are relevant, namely: individual identity, which refers to the sense one has of one’s self as an individual and the characteristics of this, and collective identity

which refers to one's sense of one's self in relation to being part of a collective social group because collective identity brings a sense of belonging.

2.4.4. Participatory Culture and Civic Engagement

Affinity spaces can be used not only to engage in content creation, but also to engage in critical political dialogue. The internet provides ease of communication as well as the freedom of communication therefore, it is relatively easy to find people or groups who are politically like-minded. It also claims to provide safe spaces for those who feel more comfortable to communicate in an online capacity rather than offline. One must remember, however, that while this is the claim, there is no guarantee that the space is necessarily safe from predation or attack by those with different or opposing views or ideologies. Castells (2008) notes that networked people can communicate with one another without needing to go through 'official' channels set up by social institutions for socialised communication because this type of communication bypasses the mainstream media entirely and is self-directed mass communication. "It is mass communication because it is diffused throughout the Internet, so it potentially reaches the whole planet" (Castells & Cardoso, 2008:13). However, as aforementioned, there is no guarantee of communication reaching an audience – the potential to reach wide audiences does not mean anything more meaningful or substantial. One must also consider the time frame within which Castells & Cardoso conceptualised this. In 2008, *Facebook* and *Twitter*, for example, were fledgling websites with a significantly smaller user base than they possess currently. In fact, social networking sites are so popular today that it can be argued that sites such as those are now part of the mainstream rather than being an alternative to it.

Even so, new technology and the internet have had a transformative impact on the way in which people conceive discussion surrounding political discourse. As Castells (2008:14) notes:

“Since politics is largely dependent on the public space of socialized communication, the political process is transformed under the conditions of the culture of real virtuality. Political opinions, and political behavior, are formed in the space of communication.”.

People are now able to form networks with others who may be separated from them physically, but with whom they identify due to their political or ideological stance (Breindl, 2013) – a feat which was not necessarily possible on the scale it is today pre-internet. These networks can be formed in chat rooms or other social networking services such as *Facebook* or *Twitter* which allow for instant messaging between individual users or groups. Social networks like Facebook allow users to join groups started by other users for a specific cause or to easily create their own groups. Other users are able to find these groups and the number of possible users in any one group can range from relatively few to millions.

Groups of this nature can provide a forum for open debate and discussion which, for many, can be empowering. Jenkins (2006:12) notes that “empowerment comes from making meaningful decisions with a real civic context. We learn the skills of citizenship by becoming political actors and gradually coming to understand the choices we make in political terms”. With the tenet of mentorship in participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), those who are more politically knowledgeable can help to disseminate information to those who may be less politically inclined and to educate them about the relevant issues. This can help those who may not be otherwise politically inclined to become more aware of issues and to become engaged with

political discourse through learning from others as well as self-directed learning (Collin et. al., 2011).

Hampton et. al. (2011:4) conducted a study of American social networking service users (choosing to focus specifically on *Facebook* users) over the November 2010 elections to determine whether they were more politically engaged than those who did not use *Facebook*.

Of the sampled population:

“10% of Americans reported that they had attended a political rally, 23% reported that they had tried to convince someone to vote for a specific candidate, and 66% reported that they had or intended to vote. Internet users in general were over twice as likely to attend a political meeting, 78% more likely to try and influence someone’s vote, and 53% more likely to have voted or intended to vote. Compared with other internet users, and users of other SNS platforms, a Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day was an additional two and half times more likely to attend a political rally or meeting, 57% more likely to persuade someone on their vote, and an additional 43% more likely to have said they would vote”.

While this is a specific case and cannot be used as an argument to definitively prove that social networking site users are more civically engaged, especially when considering that the results hinge on the selected sample (sample size, sampling method, etc.), it is a fairly good indicator to support the supposition that participatory culture formed within online spaces can possibly cause a higher number of people to become politically engaged because they have the ability to engage with others who share similar political ideologies, engage in learning from the vast amount of information available on the internet and engage in critical debate with other people

in online forums. Whether individual users actually use the afforded spaces for their suggested purposes, however, is arguable.

2.5. Activism

2.5.1. Traditional Activism.

Prior to delving into online activism, and hashtag activism in particular, it is necessary to first discuss what exactly is meant by what this dissertation terms “traditional” activism. This to get a clear idea of the differences of these types of activism and also why activism is considered to be necessary in the first place.

In a democracy, it is argued that the governing powers have a duty to maintain legitimacy and transparency because they are elected by the citizens through a system of free and fair elections at regular intervals (Norris, 2009). While citizens are not involved in public policy making, they do hold power in the form of having the ability to, as Norris (2009:630) calls it, “throw the rascals out” during the election process. If citizens feel as though elected officials are not meeting expectations, they have the democratic right to exercise their power through the election process to replace them. This process of voting can be classified as a political activity and is, in fact, one of the most important parts of maintaining a democracy (Norris, 2004). However, periodic elections are not the only way in which people can try and exert their influence on the political landscape. For citizens who feel slighted or who feel a sense of injustice, there are other methods at their disposal which they can employ to voice their concerns and grievances. They may do so in the form of activist efforts.

According to Cammaerts (2007), the term “activism” is a relatively new one, having been introduced in the mid-1970s, and refers to the ability of people to act and make or change history. Breindl (2013:5) argues that activist campaigns are a “series of activities which aim to achieve a particular goal regarding a predefined target” and Cammaerts (2007:217) defines activism as “intentional action to bring about social or political change”. From this perspective, activism represents the struggle for change and can be fuelled by reactionary tendencies and aims (Cammaerts, 2007). These aims are progressive in nature as they focus on fostering social change through direct action, building communities and altering lifestyles and social identities, just as much as through shaping policy-making processes and laws (Norris, 2004; Norris, 2009).

Activist efforts can take on a number of different forms, ranging from non-violent to violent. Forms of activism include, but are not limited to: political mobilisation, protests, mass demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, consumer boycotts and non-violent civil disobedience (Bayat, 2000; Cammaerts, 2007; Norris, 2009). Other forms of activism include judicial activism, which is the act of challenging the state or companies through the legal system in an attempt to influence legislators or governments (Cammaerts, 2007).

An example of activism in action is illustrated in a case study provided by Biggs & Andrew (2015). In it, they highlight a group of African American students who performed multiple sit-ins at a local diner which refused to serve them due to them being African American – this took place in the 1960s during the American Civils Rights Movement. Biggs and Andrew (2015) note that the sit-in tactic was developed in the 1940s and 1950s by the Congress of Racial Equality and the NAACP, which involved the physical occupation of segregated public spaces

with the aim of disrupting the normal operation of business. They further note that this tactic was employed against numerous targets including restaurants, libraries, public beaches, churches and bus stations as a form of protesting the laws of separation and segregation. Land (2009:221) argues that “even the very act of forming or joining a group can be a significant threat to political authority”. The sit-ins led to further mass meetings, picket lines, boycotts and other related movement activities by both African Americans as well as non-Black allies of the cause (Biggs & Andrew, 2015). Protest actions such as these work to damage a target’s economic viability by preventing businesses from either selling a product or delivering a service (Biggs & Andrew, 2015).

Activism does not only seek to target those who are the perpetrators of injustice however, as Cammaerts (2007) argues that the idea behind activism is to attempt to change attitudes, values, behaviours, hearts and minds of citizens which will then, ideally, permeate into formal political agenda which will hopefully lead to changes in the law. This coincides with Norris’ (2009) argument that the aims of activism tend to focus on more than merely changing the laws of governance, but also aim to change the way in which citizens think about social issues and with Oliver, Cardena-Rosa & Strawn’s (2003) belief that movements have dimensions which involve the public’s consciousness, beliefs and practices. Essentially all three argue that it is not enough to tackle laws which may be unjust; it is also necessary to try and change public opinion and ideologies regarding social issues. Oliver et. al. (2003:222) provide a useful outline illustrating the aims of activist efforts:

“Movements not only develop rational and strategic actions, they continuously draw from cultural memories and repertoires, from values and moral principles to redefine situations, events, and relations in ways that would legitimate action, sanction inaction, gain bystanders’

sympathy, reduce governments' ability to use social control resources, and attract media attention to reach distant publics. They attempt to redefine what is going on and why. Social movements are not only mobilizations of protesters, displays of force, and threats of disruption of public order.”

Generally, it is thought that citizens are inspired to engage in activist efforts due to a sense of social injustice. This may be due to personal experiences, upbringing or even events which occur on a local or global scale (Milligan, Kyle, Bondi, Fyfe, Kearns & Warner, 2008). Additionally, it is likely that if an individual's family or social group is involved with activist efforts, that the individual themselves may be more inclined to become involved. Milligan et. al. (2008) argue that in such cases, people develop an acute sense of injustice through activities and discussions which take place within the family or friend unit. Norris (2004) agrees with this assertion arguing that generally habitual patterns of political behaviour are acquired during one's formative years in the family, school, workplace and local community, going on to say that these habits will, in time, rigidify. Additionally, events (local or global) can elicit emotional responses from people, ranging from anger to frustration which can be the catalyst for individuals to become politically involved (Milligan et. al., 2008).

People who choose to engage in activism often do so because social issues affect them – either directly or indirectly and they, therefore, have a vested interest in the matter. How exactly an issue affects an individual or, rather, how an individual believes an issue affects them can be tied to the individual's identity and how they view themselves in relation to the world socially.

The way in which people think about activism today has changed, however. Norris (2007) contends that the way in which activism is viewed today is not the same as it was previously, going so far as to call the current thinking of activism “dated”. Norris (2007) and Oliver et. al. (2003) note that activist actions such as protests and demonstrations were once regarded as radical, but now have become mainstream and widespread. This does not necessarily mean that the tools and methods employed by activists have changed but, rather, the way in which activist efforts are thought about has shifted significantly. What used to be considered extreme is now a regular facet in the activists’ arsenal (Norris, 2007). Norris (2004) further notes that activists today tend to employ mixed repertoires or ways in which actions are used for political expression. These repertoires are a combination of traditional repertoires (as discussed above) and alternative modes such as online networking.

Not all activist efforts include the aforementioned methods, however. There is also what is referred to as ‘nominal’ activism or ‘token’ activism (McCafferty, 2011; Kristofferson, White & Peloza, 2014). These include wearing pins, ribbons or bracelets, placing bumper stickers on vehicles or hanging banners outside one’s home dedicated to a specific cause in order to show support. Kristofferson et. al. (2014: 1150) use the label ‘token’ support because they argue that these acts “allow consumers to affiliate themselves with a cause in ways that show support to themselves or others with little associated effort or cost”. They contrast nominal support with meaningful support which they argue are acts which require great cost or behaviour change and which they believe make tangible contributions. Meaningful support efforts can include acts of volunteering time, providing needed skills and donating money to causes in need (Kristofferson et. al., 2014).

An example of a nominal support effort listed by Kristofferson et. al (2014) is the act of wearing a ribbon for cancer awareness. They argue that the wearing of these ribbons has become a trendy and high-profile way for one to present a positive image of themselves but if they do not donate money to a cancer research organisation, for example, there is no meaningful contribution being made.

Activism is not perfect, however. Budish (2012:760-762) levels two critiques against it:

1. Polarisation and Toxicity; and
2. Declining Participation in Casual-Tradition Groups.

Polarisation and toxicity relies on the argument that participants of traditional activism are constantly under pressure to adopt more extreme positions (Budish, 2012). Budish (2012) argues that this creates two toxicities. Firstly, moderates within the group are driven out and secondly moderates outside of the group see activism as too extreme for them to engage in. He further argues that these work to repel both current and possible future participants. Due to this, members either conform their views to the more extreme ones or risk feeling isolated. Budish (2012) believes that eventually because of this only a fraction of the group will remain and that will consist of radicals as all those who refuse to radicalise drop out.

The second critique is that of declining participation. Budish (2012) argues that casual-traditional groups have struggled to maintain membership. He says that, like with online activism, traditional activists tend to use mailing lists, emails and phone calls to increase their membership numbers, but this does little to create meaningful ties between participants and the

group. Due to these weak ties, members are more likely to drop out and are also less likely to participate in activities as they do not feel a sense of attachment to the cause or organisation (Budish, 2012). Without strong ties and deep participation, commitment to a cause by an individual may not be sustainable (Land, 2009).

2.5.2. Online Activism

As Norris (2004) has noted, so-called traditional activists have begun to employ mixed repertoires which includes the mixing of traditional modes of activism with new forms such as online activism. Online activism has multiple faces, with some naming it hashtag activism, clicktivism and slacktivism. This dissertation however, uses the term to refer to any online activist campaigns which used social media and online hashtags such as #FeesMustFall or #Kony2012 for activist purposes.

As mentioned, the internet allows for near-instantaneous transmission of information which tends to be low cost and free from the usual barriers (such as gatekeepers) of traditional media (Michaelson, 2011). Due to the ease of use and communication, it is relatively easy to spread information, educate the ignorant and raise awareness surrounding issues through the internet (Scott, 2014). Bakardjieva, Svensson & Skoric (2012) argue that because of this, there are new possibilities for mobilisation, organisation and discussion.

What makes this form of participation popular is the fact that it is a low risk and low cost activity according to Lee & Hsieh (2013). Online campaigns often seek to make participatory action by regular people easy so as to attract and encourage a higher level of support and

engagement (Lee & Hsieh, 2013) with Budish (2012:763) arguing that “a unique feature of the internet is that it makes it possible to divide a job into incredibly small tasks which only takes seconds”, therefore, it is easier for people to participate.

Hsin-Yi (2013) argues that online activism can help those who feel as though they are voiceless and helpless to make changes thus, inspiring people who may have never engaged in prior activism to share posts and join discussions. This may be due to the fact that the internet reduces the barriers to participation (Michaelson, 2011; Lee & Hsieh, 2013).

One of the tools incorporated into the repertoire of online activists is hashtags. Originally, hashtags were a method of indexing information. It can be used to locate information within a specific conversation and allows for the quick retrieval of information (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). For example, by clicking on a tweet that contained the hashtag #FeesMustFall, one could find every other post that included that hashtag on the platform. Bonilla & Rosa (2015) argue that hashtags have the intertextual ability to link a wide range of posts on any given topic to form an intertextual chain. Bonilla & Rosa (2015:5) further argue that hashtags not only provide a system for the indexing and retrieval of information, but also function semiotically by “marking the intended significance of an utterance”. Hashtags are now a way to shape a conversation, to provide a frame around it. For example, when discussing the issue of police brutality, one may use the hashtag ‘#BlackLivesMatter’. This hashtag may not be directly linked to what the post is about, but it helps to frame the post as it links it to the larger conversation surrounding the ‘Black Lives Matter’ campaign.

There are some who use the number of posts containing a particular hashtag as a way to gauge how successful a hashtag campaign is however, Bonilla & Rosa (2015) recognise the limitations to this method. They argue that just because there is a large number of posts containing a hashtag, does not mean that there is substance to a campaign. They note that it is difficult to try and assess the utterances as there is no way of accurately telling where the tweets are coming from (i.e. supporters or opponents of a cause). Beyond knowing that people have included the hashtag in their post, there is no way of knowing the intentions behind the post exactly (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Despite this, Bonilla & Rosa (2015) are not completely critical of hashtags noting that before such stories were picked up by the mainstream media, hashtags were a way of bringing attention to underreported issues such as police violence.

2.5.3. Critiques of Online Activism

Online activism has opponents who believe it to have little to no value to activist campaigns. Breindl (2013) argues that people are quick to disqualify online activism as it is seen as low-input action. Some go as far as to proclaim it a narcissistic pronouncement used as a substitute for actual engagement (Berlatsky, 2015). In addition, opponents of online activism believe it is “slacktivism” and it endangers activism and activists because it promotes oversimplification of issues and it relies on traditional activism (Budish, 2012).

The term “slacktivism” is a portmanteau of the words “slacker” and “activism” and is generally, although not always, used in a pejorative sense by those who are critical of online activism as they view it as a lackadaisical or nonchalant form of participating in activist efforts. They deem it to be so-called “arm-chair” activism because it is seen to expend no personal sacrifice

(Budish, 2012). Goldsborough (2011) argues that one of the keys to slacktivism is that there is no real effort put in and, therefore, it has no real effect. He believes that slacktivists take personal satisfaction in feeling as though they're helping despite them never engaging meaningfully.

Budish (2012) claims that while online activism can encompass an array of activities, the easiest of these have become the most popular. Examples of this includes changing one's profile picture to show support, 'signing' web petitions and forwarding emails (Goldsborough, 2011). Goldsborough (2011) argues that this type of nominal support is not solely found online noting that people have been using bumper stickers, T-shirts, wristbands, and the like for years to show support. This allows them to announce their support for a cause and feel good about themselves without actually doing anything. Schlumpf (2012) argues that traditional activists look down on online activists because of this as they view it as 'activism lite' and believe the engagement in online activism to be more about one's own online image and self-esteem than it is about their contribution to the cause. Schlumpf (2012) further argues that online activists are not motivated enough to participate in high-risk activism such as protest action.

As aforementioned, there are a number of criticisms levelled against online activism. These include:

1. That it is slacktivism;
2. That it poses danger to activists;
3. It leads to oversimplification of issues; and
4. It relies on traditional activism.

Essentially, critics deem online activism to be a lazy substitution that has come at the expense of more meaningful forms of engagement such as donating time and money and participating in actions such as protests, for example (Goldsborough, 2011; Budish, 2012; Breindl, 2013). Budish (2012) believes that this is one of the strongest criticisms of online activism. He notes that, for example, one is able to ‘sign’ an electronic petition simply by clicking a button. He believes that this has made joining a cause a trivial matter. Budish (2012) notes that because of this, organisations can lay claim to having supporters which range into the thousands or even millions, but whose sole contribution was nothing more than clicking a button or forwarding an email.

The second criticism of online activism is that it poses a danger to activists. The issue lies with the fact that online activists use and rely on tools (for example social networking sites) which they do not have control or power over (Budish, 2012). Changes to these tools, whether with malicious intent or otherwise, by those who control them can have negative impacts on the activists and their efforts. One of the major concerns is that these tools may become corrupted which leaves the activist vulnerable to unknowingly being under surveillance or having access to their tools limited or cut off (Budish, 2012). Morozov (2009:12) echoes this argument stating:

“As it happens, both Twitter and Facebook give Iran’s secret services superb platforms for gathering open source intelligence about the future revolutionaries, revealing how they are connected to each other. These details are now being shared voluntarily, without any external pressure. Once regimes used torture to get this kind of data; now it’s freely available on Facebook.”

One of the issues when relying on tools such as the internet and social networking sites is that they may be unavailable when they are most needed and this disconnects activists from their networks of supporters and allies. Online activists rely heavily upon being able to disseminate and receive information across these networks and therefore, not being able to access them can be a serious blockade to online activist efforts. Not only this, but online actions are not entirely detached from the offline world and thus, can have real-world consequences and repercussions for online activists. While Lee & Hsieh (2013) contend that online activism is low cost and low risk, Budish (2012) argues that online activism can be dangerous. Budish (2012) argues that for those in Western countries, the greatest threat they may face is posting something which may be considered embarrassing, whereas in countries where the governing regime is non-democratic, online activities can have serious offline repercussions for people.

One example provided by Budish (2012) is that of journalist Hamza Kashgari in Saudi Arabia, who tweeted that he had ‘mixed feelings’ about the Prophet Muhammad. This led to Kashgari being accused of apostasy – a charge punishable by death. He was forced to delete the tweets in question, deactivate his Twitter account and fled to Malaysia. Kashgari was extradited back to Saudi Arabia to face trial and was only able to secure his release by repenting before a court.

The third critique levelled against online activism by Budish (2012) is that it can lead to oversimplification of serious issues. He claims that online activists are often in a rush to try and attract the attention of millions of users, but in doing so they run the risk of reducing complex issues to slogans and memes. While simplicity is not necessarily a bad thing, it can be if they are sacrificing the complexity of the issue (Budish, 2012). Reducing complex geopolitical issues to Facebook status updates or 140-character tweets means that it possibly

loses important pieces of information that could aid in educating people and providing a holistic view of the issue at hand (Budish, 2012). Hsin-Yi (2013) argues that because of the oversimplification of issues, it may give the impression that solutions to problems take nothing more than the click of a mouse – that is, there is no need for more critical engagement with issues. He further argues that this is an enticing feature of online activism as people who engage in it believe that they are engaging meaningfully.

Morozov (2009:12) argues that people turn to sites like Twitter as a shortcut to keep in touch with current events. He argues however, that Twitter only succeeds in “adding to the noise” as it is impossible to add much context into a 140-character tweet.

The final noted critique by Budish (2012) is the idea that online activism relies on traditional activism. This is the notion that online activism efforts cannot bring about tangible results without relying on the acts of traditional activism such as collection of money and protest action. On its own, online activism efforts cannot produce the necessary results. Budish (2012) argues that generally, online campaigns overlay internet tools on top of existing offline social networks.

Another issue is that, while it is relatively easy to reach an unprecedented number of people in hopes of them joining a cause, there is no guarantee that they will engage meaningfully or even that they will remain with it for a significant period of time (Land, 2009). Land (2009) notes that participation of any individual is usually fairly limited and that only a small percentage of those who mobilise develop a sustained commitment to the cause.

There are some critics who take the criticism of online activism further and claim that rather than it being an alternative to traditional activism, online activism may hurt traditional activism. Lee & Hsieh (2013) note this criticism, stating that rather than online activism being an alternative or an aid to traditional activism, it may instead be used as a substitute for it. They argue that people possibly use online activism, and sometimes nominal activism, as a way to satisfy their desire to participate or align themselves with a movement, but that their participation usually ends without them ever engaging in more meaningful forms of activism.

Consequently, Lee & Hsieh (2013) introduce the concept of “moral balancing” in an attempt to qualify the actions of people following participation in whichever form of online activism they engage. The idea of moral balancing is that before people partake in civil actions, they will “not only consider the costs and benefits, but will also draw on their past behaviours as references” (Lee & Hsieh, 2013:815). This leads to two possible outcomes: either one will be likely to follow up with more meaningful forms of civic engagement, such as volunteering time or donating money because they want to keep their behaviour consistent. Alternately, due to the fact that they have participated in some form of nominal activism prior, such as changing their profile picture, they may be less likely to engage in subsequent traditional activism as they view their participation as being a sufficient contribution to the cause which warrants no further engagement. Reardon (2013) concurs with this idea and says that online activism may cause people to subsequently donate less money to causes for the aforementioned reason.

Kristofferson et. al. (2014) take the concept of moral balancing a step further, again using the contrast between token participation and meaningful engagement but additionally take into account the level of observability of the action by the public. They argue that if one engages in

a form of token or nominal engagement and the level of observability is low, they may be more likely to engage in subsequent meaningful engagement. However, if the opposite is true and the initial token action receives a high level of observation, they may be more likely to not further engage in meaningful action. Kristofferson et. al. (2014) believe that in terms of online activism, social observability is a key determinant in whether one will further engage in a meaningful way.

The key for them here, as aforementioned is social observability. They argue that people often engage in online campaigns in order to present idealised versions of themselves. If a large amount of people witness their initial effort, it satisfies their desire to be viewed as having contributed to a cause and therefore, they are not compelled to engage any further or more meaningfully. However, if the initial act has low observability, this desire remains unsatisfied and this may compel them to engage in more meaningful activities.

Morozov (2009) is extremely critical of online activism. He argues that whether technology is actually a driving force for protests remains unknown. Morozov (2009) further states that those in the West find the idea of supporting the development of democracy in authoritarian countries through the internet to be an endearing concept however, there is little to no basis to show that using the internet has any positive effect in situations like these.

4.3 Online Activism vs. Traditional Activism

Critics of online activism tend to create a separation between online activism and traditional activism. McCafferty (2011) notes that the debate has been positioned as activism versus online

activism - perhaps incorrectly so. In reality, it is far more feasible to view them, not as oppositional, but rather to see them as complimentary. Budish (2012) notes that there are even similarities between traditional activism and online activism in terms of civic action: both impose costs and risks (albeit on a lesser scale for types of online activism), both rely on large numbers of people to reach their goal and both are aimed at collective good. It would be incorrect to view these two forms of activism as oppositional when there have been documented cases of online activism acting as a supplement to traditional activism.

Constanza-Chock (2012) notes that during the “Occupy Wall Street” movement in 2011, social media and hashtags played a vital role. Occupiers were able to produce and circulate media texts across all available social networking platforms with the hashtag “#OccupyWallStreet”. This allowed for people to share self-documented accounts on what they were experiencing at the protests and for people to stay up to date with events as they unfolded. Another example is that of the 2011 Arab Spring where protestors shared updates which helped to inform others about the future protests and allowed for them to co-ordinate rallies and demonstrations (Hsin-Yi, 2013). Hsin-Yi (2013) notes that defenders of online activism believe that it has the power to generate public interest and discussion, citing that the sharing of information about the events of the Arab Spring aided in stimulating global discussion about the uprising. Dodge (2012) however, argues that the role that the internet and other new media technology played in the events of the Arab Spring is inconclusive, pointing to the fact that older forms of technology powered the demonstrations which drove protest from Tunisia into Libya and Egypt. Dodge (2012:66) highlights the important role that radio stations played in these events, stating “Arab satellite stations played a key role in recreating a region-wide Arab public sphere, which amplified the demonstration effect of Ben Ali’s departure”.

Ayodele (2014) notes that for the #KONY2012 campaign, the hope was for awareness to be generated around Joseph Kony and his crimes so that it would cause governments to try and apprehend him; however, this never came to fruition. While the #Kony2012 and “#MakeKonyFamous” campaign succeeded in generating millions of views and dollars, Joseph Kony was never actually caught. Ayodele (2014) believes however, that the fact that the United States government deployed the Special Forces to track Kony is a testament to the power of online campaigns.

Bonilla & Rosa's (2015) *#Ferguson* discusses the way in which social media was used in relation to protests which occurred after two African American youths, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, were murdered by police officers on separate occasions in the United States. The attention that these stories received on social media was tremendous, with Bonilla & Rosa (2015:4) noting that in the initial week of protests “3.6 million posts appeared on Twitter documenting and reflecting emerging details surrounding [Michael] Brown's death”. Social media allowed for people to document the aftermath of the murders, to publicise the protests as well as bring attention to the militarised police action that followed. What can be concluded from these examples is that social media has been vital in prompting outcry as events are shared with broad audiences. At the same time however, Bonilla & Rosa (2015) recognise that simply relying on the number of posts containing a specific hashtag as an indicator of success is not entirely accurate as there is no way of assessing the intention behind each of these posts.

However, these accounts help to illustrate the link between traditional and online activism. While it may be easy to reduce online activism efforts to nothing more than token or nominal actions or “arm-chair activism”, it is necessary to try and discern whether these so-called token

actions are really as small and ineffective as some critics claim them to be. Perhaps, the idea that online activism is a substitute for traditional activism needs to be revisited before it is possible to fully assess the value that online activism may hold. The fact that users can be jailed for the content they post online helps to “legitimise online activism and proves that governments fear social media’s disruptive potential” (Budish, 2012:747).

McCafferty (2011), in his attempt to assert that traditional activism is superior argues that activism hinges on people, specifically those who show up. This seems to be a fallacy considering his assertion that if activism is at its core about people, then it is also possible to assert that online activism may be more powerful than traditional activism due to the fact that it has the ability to reach an infinite number of people, people who due to unprecedented ability to engage in dialogue are able to assume roles as informed agents of change (Budish, 2012).

If one considers that the aim of online activism campaigns revolves around spreading awareness and educating people who may be unaware of certain social issues, then it is possible to say that online activism is indeed successful because as Schlumpf (2012) argues, if the intended purpose of online activist efforts is to bring like-minded individuals together, bring attention to issues, and to demonstrate the power in numbers, then it can make a difference.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

As mentioned, the aim of this dissertation is to attempt to gauge the views and feelings of students in regards to online activism; specifically, whether they believe that it is an effective form of activism. In order to do this, data needed to be collected from a sample group so that it could be analysed and used to answer the main research questions of the dissertation, but also to relate it to pre-existing literature surrounding the public sphere, networks, participatory culture and activism, both traditional and online, to discern whether student responses supported or challenged existing theories.

In this chapter, the following facets of the study will be outlined and discussed:

1. The type of study;
2. The method in which data was collected;
3. Sampling method;
4. The method in which data was analysed; and
5. The limitations of the study.

3.2. Study Type

When one conducts data collection, there is the option to collect quantitative or quantitative data, or a combination of both. For the purposes of this study, both quantitative and qualitative data needed to be collected. The reason for this is because the aim was not only to analyse how many students engage in online activism, for example, but also to explain their reasoning for

doing so. Therefore, in order to collect data which extends past just quantitative, the research was conducted as an ethnographic study as this encompasses both quantitative and qualitative data collection (Whitehead, 2004). As defined by Reeves, Kuper & Hodges (2008), ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organisations, and communities. This dissertation aims to study this in regards to students and online activism and therefore, an ethnographic approach was selected as the method of study. Ethnography is useful, especially in regards to this study, as it allows for the analysis of more than merely the superficial, allowing for researchers to take into account factors which may not be considered in other methods of approach, such as the contexts which shape a specific group as well as the ideologies present in the group.

The group designated as the sample population for this study were students, in particular students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus. The aim is to assess whether these students believe that online activism is actually capable of producing real-world change, or whether their views align with critics who view online activism to be a nominal form of engaging in activism as opposed to the meaningful engagement online activism's proponents claim it to be.

3.3. Data Collection Method

The aim is to collect data from the sample group, covering a range of issues relating to activism, in order to answer the main research questions of this dissertation. The three main research questions are:

1. Do students at UKZN engage in online activism?
2. Do they view online activism as "slacktivism"?

3. Do they think that online activism can cause real-world change?

In order to answer these questions, students were provided with questionnaires which comprised of questions related to online activism in order to try and discern their perceptions of it. Bird (2009:1307) notes that questionnaires are fundamental tools for acquiring information on public knowledge and perception. Further, Bird (2009) says that within social science, the questionnaire is a well-established research tool for acquiring information on participants' social characteristics, behaviour or attitudes and beliefs and reasons for action with respect to the topic under investigation.

Questionnaires were selected as they provide the opportunity to collect data on a large scale, relatively easily. Questionnaires also allow for the questions being presented to respondents to be presented in a manner which is identical (Bird, 2009). This ensures that there are no differences in the way in which questions were posed to participants, as they may be in an unstructured or semi-structured interview, for example. Data can be purely quantitative, qualitative or a combination of both. The questionnaires employed for this study were designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

The questionnaires consisted of seven 'Yes/No' questions. Each question provided a blank box next to the 'yes' and 'no' options within which students could make a checkmark indicating their answer. Each question also provided respondents with a blank space wherein they were able to elaborate on why they selected the option they did. The 'Yes/No' component of the questionnaire served to collect quantitative data and the portion where students expressed their reasoning served to collect qualitative data.

The questions contained in the questionnaire were devised based on the criticisms of online activism with the aim of discerning whether students' perceptions of online activism aligned with proponents or those who are critical of online activism.

3.4. Sampling Method

A total of sixty students formed part of the sample group for this study. Each participant was provided with the following:

1. A questionnaire;
2. An information sheet which detailed the study, explained the aims of the study and also provided them with the contact details of the researcher and ethics office which they could use if they had any questions relating to the study or felt that any part of the study was unethical;
3. A consent form which provided blank boxes where students could make a checkmark indicating whether they were willing to participate in answering the questionnaire, as well whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview should there be one. Students had to read over this consent form, make checkmarks where applicable, print their name in the space provided and sign it before participating in the study.

A copy of the information sheet, consent form and a blank copy of the questionnaire, which were handed out to participants, can be found attached as appendices A, B and C respectively.

Thirty questionnaires were handed out on the main campus of the university, fifteen outside the psychology lecture room and fifteen in the area surrounding the commerce block on the Golf Road campus. The reason for distributing the questionnaires this way was an attempt to

get a more representative sample, which would not necessarily happen if the questionnaires were all distributed in a single place.

Numerous methods of data collection were considered when collecting data however, simple random sampling was selected. Simple random sampling, as defined by Finch & Gordon (2013:6), “indicates that the mechanism used in obtaining the sample is based on probability, and not on conscious or unconscious preferences. [...] A simple random sample is a random sample selected by a method which ensures that all possible samples, of a given size, are equally likely to be chosen.”

As illustrated by this quote, simple random sampling was selected for two main reasons. Firstly, it was an attempt to curb any bias on the part of the researcher who may, whether consciously or not, favour one type of participant over another. The other reason is that the aim of this research is to analyse the views and feelings of all people relating to online activism. While it is not possible to use the entire student population of the university as a sample group, the closest one can come is to randomly select participants in the hope of creating a sample which is as representative of the population at large.

Initially, the study had designated specific students to form part of the sample group, such as only students who were in their third year of study and who actively use social media however, from the perspective of what this dissertation aims to analyse, this would not have been a truly representative sample and would have possibly skewed findings. Therefore, simple random sampling was employed as it was deemed the most effective way to achieve a representative sample for the purposes of this dissertation.

3.5. Analysis of Data

Upon completion of data collection, the questionnaires were prepared for analysis by numbering them from 1-60. These numbers were given so that they could be used to identify participants and linked them to the answers they provided, without risking or compromising their identity by including their names. Therefore, when a participant is quoted, they are simply referred to as “Participant” with a number after their name, like “Participant 53” for example. In compiled data groups, participant numbers were also used instead of the participants’ real names. This was deemed to be the most efficient way as it works to both protect the identity of the respondents, but also to organise data in a manner which is easy to retrieve and cross-reference at a later point, should the need arise.

Data was organised in the following way:

To begin with, quantitative and qualitative data were separated in order to be analysed separately. All Yes/No questions were collated into one group and the long-form explanations provided by respondents were collated into separate group.

Firstly, the number of respondents who answered ‘Yes’ were counted, as were the number who answered ‘No’. For example, for the first question it was calculated that 24 respondents had selected ‘Yes’ and 36 had selected ‘No’. This was done for all seven questions which appeared on the questionnaire. This process was necessary because these figures were used to create the tables which were used to illustrate the manner in which students answered questions. This was also used to calculate the percentage of students who fell into both groups. For example, rather than stating that “24 students said yes”, a percentage of 40% was used instead. This not only makes it easier to then draw conclusions about the sample group, but also to make assumptions

about the population as a whole. These figures also allow for the creation of graphs or other visual aids which can aid in helping to illustrate one's point.

Qualitative data was separated in a similar manner, with participant responses separated according to question as well as response. For example, for the first question, all respondents who answered 'Yes' were collated and those who answered 'No' were collated. This was repeated for each of the seven questions. The reason for doing this is that it allows for comparison of those who answered similarly, but also for comparison between the two groups as a whole.

Once participants' answers were collated, each data set was scanned for recurrent words and themes in responses. For example, in the data batch for question 1, one is able to see which hashtag campaigns were the most popular among respondents, or how many respondents indicated apprehension of protest action due to the violent nature for question 3. Finding recurring themes and patterns in data is essential in order to analyse and draw conclusions.

In regards to scanning the data for the main emergent themes, all long-form answers were read over while looking for words, phrases or notions which were repeatedly expressed by students. The main recurring themes were that of awareness and participation, both in terms of online engagement as well as physical participation. All mentions of "awareness" were highlighted red and "participation" was highlighted blue. Using this method enabled for the number of times these words were mentioned to be counted, but it also allowed for these words to be viewed in relation to what students were saying about these two issues specifically.

From this analysis, conclusions about the views and behaviours of students regarding online activism could be drawn and related to other student answers, as well as to theories covered in the data analysis chapter.

3.6. Limitations of Study

The following limitations have been recognised in this study. An effort to provide possible solutions to these limitations has also been made:

Firstly, the sample size of this study was 60 students. It is possible that, due to this being a relatively small sample group, that it may not be representative of the demographics of the students who attend the University of KwaZulu-Natal. If future research is conducted, it may be prudent to increase the sample size.

Another concern is the barrier that language may have played. The University of KwaZulu-Natal is a diverse tertiary institution and therefore, there are a number of students whose first language is likely not English. Despite efforts to phrase questions as clearly as possible, there is a possibility that some participants may have not completely comprehended all the concepts or questions present in the questionnaire which was disseminated. Possible solution for future study would be to have the questionnaire translated into other languages, such as isiZulu. However, if this were to happen, it may pose further issues:

- a) Information may not necessarily be represented as intended when translated; meanings could possibly be changed.

- b) If questionnaires are answered in a language other than English, it is possible that, upon translation to English, that what respondents have stated can be accidentally changed or lose its intended meaning.
- c) Due to the sampling method of this study being random sampling, it is not necessarily possible to predict whether respondents would require a questionnaire in a different language.

Due to the manner in which questions were phrased, it is possible that students may have been led to believe that the questionnaire was seeking answers solely in relation to the #FeesMustFall hashtag campaign and not online campaigns in general. This may have influenced students' answers. If similar research is conducted in future, it is necessary to be as clear as possible so as to not unintentionally confuse the participant or ask potentially leading questions.

Additionally, questions relating to traditional activism provided examples of protests and marches. It is possible that students may have been unaware of other actions which may be considered "meaningful engagement" such as donating time, money or skills and answered accordingly when asked about online activism versus traditional activism. Future studies may benefit from outlining these alternatives for students.

Finally, protest action related to the #FeesMustFall campaign disrupted university operations numerous times throughout the second semester, making it difficult to conduct data collection. It is unclear whether results of the study may have differed had these protests not occurred, however, it is important to note their occurrence.

4. Data Analysis

In this chapter, the data which has been collected from the sample group will be analysed. What will be focused on is the qualitative data collected where students provided information regarding their feelings and behaviours concerning online activism in regards to whether they engage in it, whether they believe it to be ‘slacktivism’, whether they believe it to be effective and whether they believe it is capable of creating real-world change.

To begin with, an outline of the data which has been collected will be outlined. This will involve the use of tables in order to illustrate student responses, the data in these tables will then be elaborated on in order to provide an explanation of why students responded in the way they did. Secondly, themes which emerge from the outlined data will be analysed and discussed. This analysis will also be discussed in relation to existing theories which have been discussed in the literature review chapter, where applicable. Finally, the analysed data and emergent themes will be discussed in order to draw conclusions about the views and behaviours of students regarding online activism. This is an attempt to discern whether students engage in online activism, whether they view it as ‘slacktivism’ as it has been labelled by critics of online activism and whether students believe online activism is capable of creating real-world change.

The intention of this process is to answer the main research questions of this project so as to discern whether students believe online activism to be a valuable facet of an activist’s repertoire. In this chapter, the terms “students”, “participants” and “respondents” are used interchangeably.

4.1. Outline of Collected Data

In this chapter, participant responses will be expressed in percentages. These percentages were calculated using the following equation:

$$\frac{n}{t} \times \frac{100}{1}$$

Where n equals the number of students with a particular response and t equals the total number of respondents.

To begin with, participants were asked whether they have participated in online activism campaigns. The following data was collected:

	Response	No. of Students (n)	Percentage (%)
	Yes	24	40
	No	36	60
Total		60	100

Figure 4.1.1.

As illustrated by figure 4.1.1, it was found that 40% ($n = 24$) of students participated in hashtag campaigns. From the responses provided, the four most popular campaigns students participated in were #FeesMustFall ($n = 17$), #BlackLivesMatter ($n = 3$), #BringBackOurGirls ($n = 3$) and #DataMustFall ($n = 2$), illustrated in the following graph:

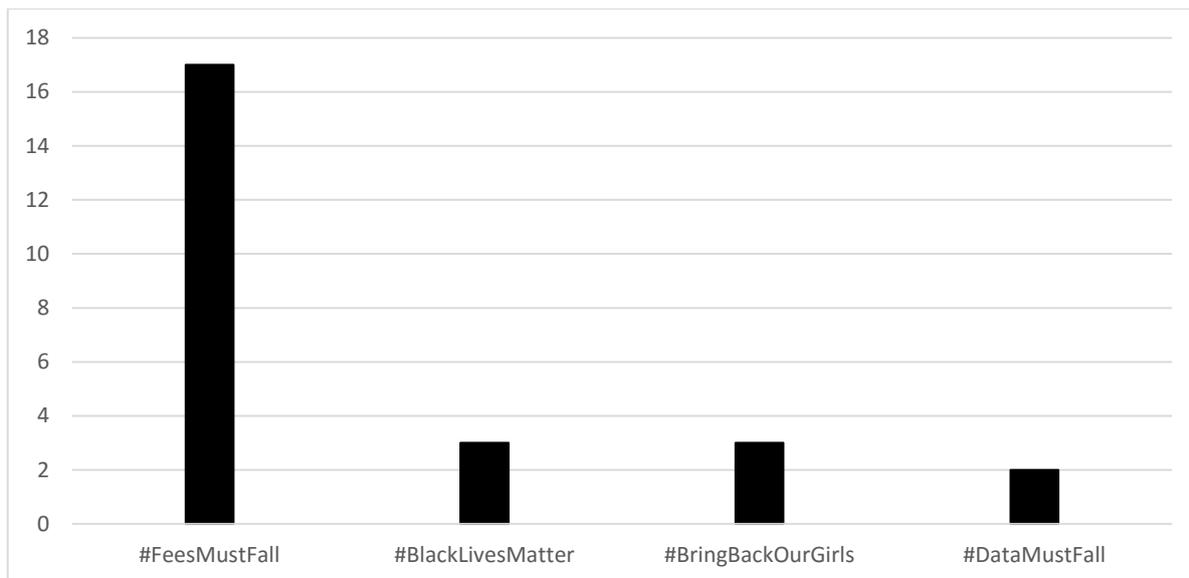


Figure 4.1.2.

The majority of students who were engaged with hashtag campaigns stated that the reason for their participation was because they felt directly affected by the issues that the campaigns were dealing with. In relation to #FeesMustFall students said they felt compelled to participate because they are either directly affected by the issue of university fees being too high or because they believed that education is a right for all and that monetary issues should not be a barrier to acquiring higher education: “I felt directly affected since it was my fellow students who were financially excluded for being poor.” (Participant 51). “I am a student, things like fees affects me so I felt the need to add my voice to the cause” (Participant 60). Similarly, students who participated in #BlackLivesMatter did so because they identified themselves as black and related to the issue of police brutality that is faced by African Americans and black people.

The reasons provided by students strongly align with Milligan et. al.’s (2008) theory of factors which act as a catalyst for people to become involved in activism efforts. Milligan et. al. (2008) believe that personal experiences, upbringing or events on a local or global scale or a strong

sense of injustice can be driving factors. The latter two points are evident in students participating in #BlackLivesMatter, which seemingly does not affect them directly as the majority of associated focus, protests and marches are happening in the United States of America but, due to students identifying with the struggles of those affected, they felt compelled to add their voices to the conversation.

Other students pointed to the ease of use of participating when using hashtags, stating: “The hashtag made getting data easier. I was able to find information and share my opinions by hashtagging appropriately. I supported from my couch – it was convenient, safe and informative.” (Participant 1) and “Hashtags conveniently highlight and isolate a discussion making it easier to engage with others who may share similar feelings. Discovering that people share your viewpoint can be validating.” (Participant 43). This illustrates Bonilla & Rosa’s (2015) assertion that hashtags serve as an indexing system which allows for the quick and easy retrieval of information. The #FeesMustFall hashtag campaign is the most popular of those listed in South Africa because students are actively engaged with the campaign and associated protests as it is a topical issue being discussed daily by students and the media alike.

For those who indicated that that they do not participate in hashtag campaigns, there were a number of reasons provided. The most frequent responses included that there were no campaigns that interested them, that they do not see the purpose of campaigns, do not agree with the campaign, they are not frequent users of social media or that they did not know of any campaigns.

The issue of participants finding no campaigns that are of interest is the inverse of other students who feel as though campaigns tackle the issues that affect them in their daily lives. For students who feel directly affected by campaigns, there is inherent interest in the progress and results of the campaign in which they participate, whereas, if a student feels as though a campaign has no bearing on them directly or even indirectly, there is no incentive for them to participate. As discussed, people who are affected or believe they are affected by an issue have an incentive to participate because they have a vested interest in the progress and outcome(s) of the campaign.

Another possible reason these students may have no interest in campaigns, may be due to the fact that students do not personally identify with the cause because it does not directly affect them. For example, if a student is able to pay their university fees, they may not necessarily identify with the issues faced by students who are not able to, or those who struggle to for a multitude of reasons. Therefore, they would not be inclined to participate in #FeesMustFall, for example, because they are removed from the issue.

Students who claimed to not know about campaigns form a large percentage of those who explained that they do not participate in hashtag campaigns. This is noteworthy because one of the most popular reasons proponents of hashtag campaigns use them, is because they claim that they reach a large audience quickly and easily. However, students lack of knowledge most likely stems from the fact that the members of the sample group indicated that they do not use social media or, if they do, that it is fairly limited. As these students have pointed out, they are not avid users of social networks and that is where the majority of hashtag activism campaigns

are based. Therefore, if someone doesn't use social networks or social media, there is little surprise that the likelihood of them being exposed to any hashtag campaign would be slim.

Another issue is the technological divide that exists between those who can afford the necessary technology and those who cannot. One respondent (Participant 22) responded that the reason they do not participate in hashtag campaigns is because they do not have "a sophisticated cellphone". While this is a single case, it highlights the fact that, even though one may not participate in hashtag campaigns, it does not necessarily mean that they do so because they aren't affected or they do not identify with a cause, but rather they may not be able to due to limiting factors such as finances.

As a number of proponents of online activism believe that using social media is beneficial in reaching large numbers of people and raising awareness, participants were asked whether they believe online activism campaigns can successfully aid in raising social awareness about issues.

The following data was collected:

	Response	No. of Students (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
	Yes	54	90
	No	6	10
Total		60	100

Figure 4.1.3.

As illustrated, 90% ($n = 54$) of students said yes. Despite the fact that the majority of respondents do not participate in hashtag activist campaigns themselves, an overwhelming majority of them do believe that hashtag campaigns successfully raise social awareness about issues, compared to just 10% ($n = 6$) indicating that they do not believe this. Of the respondents who said “yes”, the majority point to the fact that hashtag campaigns reach masses of people and do so quickly, as well as the fact that hashtag campaigns can aid in educating people about the issues at hand.

Respondents identified that online activism, and hashtag activism in particular, takes place on social networks which has millions of users and that hashtag campaigns tend to permeate these networks allowing them to be seen by a multitude of people and thus, receive a lot of attention. Participants stated that: “it’s an efficient way to spread messages across to a larger number of people quickly.” (Participant 13) and “I believe social media is far greater than empty shares. It allows people to make their voices heard and bring awareness to social issues. Most people are involved in social media and it makes an expanse of information easily available.” (Participant 55).

Equally, respondents pointed to the fact that these campaigns help to garner attention and aid in educating those who may not have known about them or who may have been ignorant about them. Students believe that these campaigns can help spark interest in issues and thus, inspire people to find out more about a cause. Participant 37 stated “Everyone wants to be part of something and make a difference. It’s a platform where many people have access to and can get involved in issues they would have not known about if it wasn’t for those campaigns”.

The idea that hashtag campaigns help to educate people is a recurring theme in the responses from students who believe that they successfully raise social awareness. This correlates with Jenkins' (2006) theory that within a participatory culture, like one that can be fostered within social groups on social networks, there is the capability that those with more knowledge will educate those who are less knowledgeable. This can occur directly through discussion and debate or indirectly, by accessing information on posts which bear the relevant hashtags. This allows for people to isolate the conversation in order to get a better grasp or receive clarity on the issues they may be unsure about. Participant 51 echoes this idea by saying: "anybody on Twitter can get full information of the cause by simply clicking on a hashtag and see other people's tweets about the matter and join if they relate."

Of the six students who responded "no", one respondent stated that they believe that these campaigns are not treated as a pertinent issue, but rather as a trend. Another stated that they felt hashtag campaigns didn't raise awareness and was just "endless debate" (Participant 12). Another felt that they exclude those who are poorer and do not have access to technology. With the last respondent's point, there is another reminder of the fact that the digital divide still affects a great number of people in developing countries as they simply have no way of accessing new media technologies as it is simply too expensive for them to afford. This is not to simplify the digital divide to a matter of finances solely, as there are numerous other facets of the digital divide.

Students were then asked whether they would be more likely or less likely to participate in protest action if they had engaged in online activism first. This question was asked in an attempt to test Lee & Hsieh's (2013) concept of 'moral balancing'. As mentioned, the concept of moral

balancing considers how individuals will “not only consider the costs and benefits, but will also draw on their past behaviours as references” (Lee & Hsieh, 2013:815). Respondents answered in the following way:

	Response	No. of Students (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
	More Likely	25	42
	Less Likely	32	53
	Undecided	3	5
Total		60	100

Figure 4.1.4.

42% ($n = 25$) indicated they would be more likely to. Generally, the result is one of two outcomes: either one will want to keep their behaviour consistent and will therefore participate in subsequent meaningful action such as protests or marches, or alternatively, they may view their online activism as sufficient and therefore, not participate any further.

Students who indicated that they would be more likely to participate in consequent protest action indicated that they felt the need to do so because either they were motivated to do so by engaging in hashtag activism related to the protest (for example, #FeesMustFall) prior to it or they felt that protesting was necessary past just participating online.

Students who said that they felt inspired by the hashtag campaign stated that “I would be thoroughly informed on why I’m protesting and what I could gain or what other people will

gain if I do” (Participant 46) and “I am informed about it and I am able to do my part in it. I am hyped up to join the protest thereafter” (Participant 51). Neither of these responses align with Lee & Hsieh’s (2013) theory of behaviour congruence as these students use engage with online activist campaigns in order to educate themselves about the issues at hand which may serve as a catalyst for further engagement. Therefore, this highlights how hashtag campaigns allow people to get information to either join the cause or disassociate themselves from it.

Other students feel it is necessary to participate in more meaningful forms of action as they believe that one’s actions are more important than merely engaging online. Respondent sentiments included: “Even though I feel online participation is valid, actions do speak louder than words. I feel I have to back up my words through actual involvement. Social media raises awareness but protest action disrupts day to day life” (Participant 55). Other students feel that hashtag campaigns are not sufficient and that they need to engage in further actions such as protests because they believe that such action is the only way for them to voice their dissatisfaction, as well as a way to get the attention of those in power. Undecided students stated that their participation in subsequent civic action would depend on how passionate they were about an issue.

Of the 53% ($n = 32$) of students who indicated that they would be less likely to participate in subsequent protest action, a number of respondents provided no reasoning for their decision. However, those who did provide a reason stated that they would be unlikely to participate in protests due to the tendency of protests in South Africa to become violent. In this case, student responses do not correlate to Lee & Hsieh’s (2013) theory that people don’t engage further because they view their online actions as sufficient but, rather, students are fearful of the violent

nature of protests. Whether that means they would be reluctant to engage with other forms of ‘meaningful engagement’ such as donating money or time, for example, is unclear as the question only considered protest action. The remaining 5% ($n = 3$) stated that participation in further meaningful action would depend on how passionate they are about a cause.

As mentioned, one of the major critiques of online activism is that it is a lazy substitution for more meaning forms of engagement such as protests/marches. When asked whether they agreed with this accusation, students answered in the following manner:

	Response	No. of Students (n)	Percentage (%)
	Yes	18	30
	No	42	70
Total		60	100

Figure 4.1.5.

30% ($n = 18$) of students agree with the criticism. The reasons they cited include that they believe that online activism ends on the internet and that they do not believe it extends into the offline world. They do not feel that people engage in more meaningful forms of activism and that online activism is ‘easy’.

These students believe that while hashtag activism allows for people to engage in meaningful debates, actual action rarely ever happens. One student claims that people who engage in hashtag activism are not willing to do “work on the ground”, but rather people just want to share their opinions without actively aiming to create change. Another respondent echoed this

sentiment by stating “They post about how they feel but do not participate in marches” (Participant 23).

Others believe hashtag activism takes no real effort. One respondent claims that it is “easy to be an “activist” on your couch at home. The hard work and major difference is made through protests and marches. Actions speak louder than words” (Participant 51). Others point to the fact that it is easy to like a page or share a picture, but there is no effort associated with clicking or sharing. It is apparent that those who view hashtag activism as a lazy substitution think that more meaningful engagement is more important than merely sharing or clicking content. One respondent, on the extreme end of the spectrum, labelled hashtag activism as “cowardly”, stating that “anybody can be bold while typing statuses online, so I say that online activism is a cowardly form of activism” (Participant 21).

70% of students ($n = 42$) disagreed with the idea that online activism is a substitution for meaningful forms of engagement. They believe that it helps to create wider awareness, the fact that people can engage without having to participate in protests and also, they believe that hashtag campaigns are not a substitute, but rather, they are a supplement to traditional activism.

Many respondents believe that the fact that hashtag campaigns raise awareness locally as well as worldwide is extremely beneficial. The fact that it draws attention and creates awareness to the cause or issue is enough in some cases. Others feel that hashtag activism is easier for a lot of people to engage in, whether it is because they cannot physically do so due to distance, for example, or even if they elect not to participate due to their belief that protests have the potential to turn violent. Student responses to this effect include: “even if you can’t physically engage

in activism, it opens up room for debate possible solutions on the matter at hand; whether the issue at hand has any validity and prompts society to think on these issues” (Participant 52). Finally, there are respondents who feel as though, rather than being a substitute for more meaningful activism, hashtag campaigns are a supplement to them. They believe that hashtag activism serves as a tool that helps to educate people about the causes which in turn can rally wider support for protests and marches and explain why exactly things like protests are taking place.

When asked whether they believe that hashtag campaigns like #FeesMustFall can cause real-world change, students responded thus:

	Response	No. of Students (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
	Yes	45	75
	No	15	25
Total		60	100

Figure 4.1.6.

75% ($n = 45$) of students said yes. Students who indicated they believe hashtag campaigns can cause real world change, point mainly to the fact that these campaigns receive wide exposure and garner attention which allows for information about the cause to be spread and rally support. For a majority of these students, the ability to spread information to as many people as possible is key. A number of respondents believe that one of the most important capabilities of the internet is to allow information to transcend physical barriers and go global. One respondent illustrates this by highlighting that the #FeesMustFall movement, which started in South Africa, has spread to other countries stating: “the #FeesMustFall campaign, for example,

gained a lot of attention and even attracted the attention of students worldwide”. Others are in agreement with this sentiment, highlighting the fact that, generally, these campaigns receive global attention which is imperative to the cause therefore, even if separated by physical distance it allows a multitude of people to participate. Students also believe that the more awareness that is created, the greater the likelihood for issues to be addressed because they are in the public eye. Respondents argue that through the attention that hashtag campaigns garner, there is a chance for them to reach the people who “matter” as they believe that it grabs the attention of government and university officials, for example.

Further, respondents believe that the internet and hashtag campaigns allow for people to voice their opinions and views in their own words, negating the need for the media to play the “middle-man”, which could potentially result in the message being distorted, purposely or otherwise. One student argues that: “knowledge is power, coordination is key. Ideology driven media dictates what we know, see, feel, etc. People are impressionable” (Participant 1). Another believes that social media provides a platform for those who may not be featured in the mainstream media. There is also a sense of validation that students feel when they share their views, opinions and stories relating to hashtag campaigns. They feel as though others validate what they are contributing when they participate.

Lastly, students highlighted the recent #DataMustFall campaign which was started with the aim of reducing the costs of data in South Africa. Respondents state that the #DataMustFall movement required no accompanying protest action or marches, for example, as all it took was the hashtag campaign for members of the government to take notice of the issue and attempt to provide solutions.

Of the 25% ($n = 42\%$) of respondents who indicated that they do not believe hashtag activism can cause real-world change, the majority believe that hashtag campaigns, while effective in creating awareness, are not enough on their own to make a difference. The general consensus among this group of respondents is that, while hashtag campaigns may serve the purpose of creating awareness, there is still the need to mobilise and participate in further, more meaningful actions such as protests. Students believe that online activism is more about talking, sharing one's opinions, sharing content, debating and discussing issues, but there is no actual way for that to have an impact offline. One respondent believes, in fact, that protest action is the only way for progress to be made, stating: "the government does not respond to silent protest, people have to be violent in order to be heard". For these students, merely engaging online is not enough as they view traditional activist actions, such as protests and marches, to be the more effective form of activism when compared to online activism and hashtag campaigns. It is interesting to note the contradictory nature of some student responses, such as the case where one student points to the success of #DataMustFall reaching the government without the aid of any protest action whereas another believes that there is no way for them to get the government's attention without resorting to violence

Participants were asked whether they believe that online activism campaigns have to rely on traditional activism actions such as protests in order to create change. This question was based on another criticism levelled against online activism: that it relies on traditional activism in order to be successful (Budish, 2012). The aim was to discern whether students' beliefs aligned with this criticism and why. Students answered in the following way:

	Response	No. of Students (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
	Yes	33	55
	No	25	42
	Undecided	2	3
Total		60	100

Figure 4.1.7.

Of the sampled group, 55% ($n = 33$) of respondents said that they do believe online campaigns have to rely on traditional activism to garner real-world results. The group of students who indicated that they believe that hashtag activism has to rely on traditional activism provided reasons which echo some that had been brought up in answers to previous questions. For example, there is a strong indication that these students view traditional activism actions, such as protests, as necessary in order to bring about tangible results. Of the 36 students who said “yes” more than 50% mention the need for mass protest action. These students believe that actions are more important in attempting to create change. They argue that hashtags are not enough on their own because there is no evidence they create change and, that when one writes down their grievances but does nothing to actively seek a solution to it, there is a tendency for the issues to not be treated with the seriousness that it deserves.

Students further argue that campaigns are taken more seriously when there is accompanying civic action because some feel as though protests and marches allow them to show the seriousness of the issue at hand, because otherwise there is no incentive for those in power to acknowledge the cause or their grievances. Student responses highlight this with Participant 20 arguing that “with our government system, people need to go through extreme measures to get

their point across”. Students feel that protest action has a proven track-record in terms of creating change or, at the very least, getting the attention of those who “matter”.

Some respondents recognise that online activism is useful because it can help to spread information about a cause and aid in rallying people to join protests. However, they appear to be wary of online activism as they view it as superficial and as a way to “advertise” an issue rather than a way of engaging meaningfully. Two of the respondents were undecided as to whether online activism has to rely on traditional activism actions, with both saying it depends on what the issue at the centre of the hashtag campaign was about. One respondent stated that “For things like #FeesMustFall, yes, it needs to have a form of people on the ground – whereas a campaign like #DataMustFall, all it took was the hashtag for the government to take notice” (Participant 60). The remaining respondents indicated that they do not believe that hashtag activism has to rely on traditional activism. Students said that there is no need to protest, which seemed to be related to their reluctance to participate in protest action due to its tendency to turn violent, and the fact that these campaigns raise awareness.

The fact that hashtag campaigns help to raise awareness is a recurring theme throughout student responses. It seems as though, for some students, the fact that these campaigns have the ability to reach a multitude of people, both locally and internationally, is sufficient to be an effective catalyst for change. As mentioned, a number of students do not want to participate in traditional modes of activism such as protests and view online activism as a safe alternative for them to engage with a cause. This may be one reason why this group of respondents do not see the need for such action. Some respondents also believe that hashtag campaigns have the ability to reach

those in power as government officials, news platforms and major companies, among others, have social media accounts so campaigns can reach them through these channels.

Finally, students were asked whether they believe online activism can be as effective as traditional activism in creating real-world change. They responded thus:

	Response	No. of Students (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
	Yes	29	48
	No	31	52
Total		60	100

Figure 4.1.8.

48% ($n = 29$) of students stated that they believe that hashtag campaigns are as effective as traditional activism actions, such as protests, in terms of creating real-world change. A majority highlight the fact that online campaigns raise awareness and reach masses of people.

Students believe that the world is changing and that more people are becoming engaged in the online realm. Because of this, they feel that the way in which people engage with social issues has shifted. One respondent argued that previously, when there were no social networks, the only way for people to show their dissatisfaction and air their grievances was to take to the streets and engage in protests or marches, whereas now, people have the “liberty of changing the world from the comfort of our own homes” (Participant 37). Some believe that social media acts as a catalyst for many movements and that, the more well-known campaigns receive coverage from mainstream media which further adds to the surrounding attention. Others

believe that hashtag campaigns allow people to engage with a cause, regardless of where one may be in the world, this allows for the rallying of masses to support the cause, but also serves to unite people who share similar views.

While optimistic about the potential reach and effect that hashtag activism can have, some are tentative about whether hashtag activism campaigns are as effective in the long-run, as illustrated by Participant 30:

“Hashtag campaigns are capable of rallying more people but, it’s hard to say if online campaigns will be as effective in the long run, sadly. It is often the violence at rallies/protests that get a cause noticed. While hashtag campaigns eliminate this, it may be said that an online cause, with no real world repercussion won’t be taken as seriously as those that risk lives”.

Respondents who indicated that they do not believe that hashtag campaigns are as effective as traditional activism, stated that: hashtag campaigns do not extend past the online realm, that people who participate in these campaigns are prone to speaking about issues but not following through with more meaningful engagement and that others do not view hashtag campaigns with the seriousness that they do traditional activism actions.

One of the main recurring answers from detractors of online activism, and hashtag activism in particular was that they believe online activism is limited by the fact that people who share, post and like content, or engage in discussion and debate seldom ever engage more meaningfully. For these students, it takes participating in protest action or marches because while hashtag activism may have its place, there is a greater response from “people on the ground”. They argue that engaging in traditional activism shows that people are actually

engaging at more than a superficial level and that traditional activism is taken more seriously by those in power in a way that online campaigns are not.

Participant 58 argues that: “protests and marches require dedication and real action, posting on the internet does not. Therefore, online campaigns cannot inspire the same level of dedication, therefore, the level of action is less, if any at all”. Another points out that the reason why traditional activism is more effective than hashtag campaigns is because protests and marches disrupt the course of daily life and therefore, forces people to acknowledge the issue, whereas with online activism it is easy for someone to unlike a page or stop following someone if they do not wish to be exposed to a campaign. Students believe that online campaigns are not invasive and disruptive in the same way as traditional activism and thus, some view it as less effective. Students in this group view online activism as merely talk without action and that without action to accompany it there is little added to a cause as there is no way for what occurs online to extend into the offline world besides to spread information about protests that may take place, for example.

Lastly, there is little belief than any past hashtag campaign has garnered actual results or brought about the change they were seeking to. Students have not personally witnessed past campaigns creating or fostering change and this seems to be one of the contributing factors as to why this group does not consider online activism to be as effective as traditional activism. Students believe that traditional activism has shown to be effective in creating tangible change or, at least, helping to initiate the desired change.

4.2. Themes

In this section, the themes which have emerged from participant responses outlined above will be analysed in order to draw conclusions. From the collected data, the following emergent themes have been recognised:

1. Participation, both online and physical; and
2. The ability to raise awareness.

In this section, these themes will be discussed in terms of both student responses as well as theories covered in the literature review chapter. The aim here is to create a link between students' answers and the theories put forward in the literature review chapter in an effort to discern student attitudes and behaviour in regards to online activism.

4.2.1. Participation

One of the main objectives of this dissertation is to assess whether students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal engage in online activism. The theme of participation arises in student responses to questions relating both their engagement in online activism, but also in traditional activism actions such as protests.

As mentioned, the aim of asking students whether they would engage in protests related to online activism campaigns was an attempt to test Lee & Hsieh's (2013) theory of moral balancing, however, the results did not align with their theory. From the collected data, it is evident that student participation in online activism campaigns appears to be low, with only 40% of students indicating that they have participated. When it comes to the possibility of engaging in supposedly more meaningful forms of activism, such as protest, the percentage of

students willing to participate is more or less the same, with only 42% indicating that they would be willing to participate in protests. This is where student responses deviate from Lee & Hsieh's (2013) theory of moral balancing. Students who do participate in online campaigns but who are not willing to participate further do so not because they view their online engagement as a sufficient, but because there is a perceived threat of violence associated with protests. This is highlighted by the fact that 47% ($n = 15$) of students who said they would be less likely to participate in associated protests have specifically outlined violence or fear related to violence as a cause of them not participating further.

However, as discussed previously, while there are some students who do not care about online activism or do not feel as though they could identify with campaigns they have come across, the number of students who do not engage in online activism is not down solely to apathy. In some cases, students were unaware of campaigns being run due to the fact that they are not avid users of social media. This however, does not necessarily mean that if these same students did have knowledge of the campaigns that they would have participated.

It is interesting to note that while the percentage of students who engage in online activism and those who would be willing to participate in protests are fairly similar (40% compared to 42%), the number of students who participate in online activism campaigns and those who are willing to participate in protests are not equivalent. Of the 24 students who indicated that they participate online, 15 said that they would be willing to participate in subsequent protest action associated with a cause. This means that 63% of those who engage online are willing to engage further. From this, it is possible infer that when one participates online, that this serves as a motivating factor for further engagement.

This is not to say that online engagement is the only motivating factor, but there does appear to be a correlation between online engagement and more meaningful engagement. This finding supports Lee & Hsieh's (2013) theory of moral balancing and Bonilla and Rosa's (2015) theory of education through participation. The reason for this is that students have stated that they use online activism campaigns as a means to educate themselves about issues, as a means of engaging and that they would be willing to engage further due to their engagement online as they view online and offline engagement as a continuous way for them to engage with a cause, rather than having to choose one over the other.

This of course leaves the 10 students who do not engage in online activism but would be willing to engage in protest action. As has been discussed, many of the students do not engage online but for various reasons other than apathy for the cause. Using these 10 students, it is possible to argue that online engagement does not have to be a precursor to offline engagement as they are willing to engage offline without any prompting from online sources.

4.2.2. Awareness

The idea that online activism is a beneficial tool because it aids in spreading information to large groups of people is one that is continually raised by students. This idea hinges on the notion that this awareness has the ability to educate members of the public about social issues, but the question of whether students actually believe that this awareness can be parlayed into real world change needs to be examined.

Students point to online activism's ability to create awareness as a key factor in determining its success as a tool for activism. The idea that online activism has the ability to reach masses of people quickly and thus, raises awareness is mentioned seventy-six times by students throughout their responses to various questions; both by those who appear to be in support of it, but also by those who are seemingly more critical of it. This illustrates how much the idea that being able to reach large numbers of people pervades the notion of online activism.

For those students who are proponents of online activism, their belief is that educating people through awareness of social issues is the most important step. However, these students do little to elaborate on what exactly raising social awareness does to create change offline. Instead, for many of them, awareness is the key. A number of students believe that awareness may be beneficial but that it is only the first step in creating change in the offline world.

For those who are more critical of online activism, another theme arises. This theme is related to the idea of raising awareness, but illustrates that many students believe that, while awareness is beneficial, "actions speak louder than words". This theme emerges particularly in the responses provided relating to whether students:

1. View online activism as a lazy substitute for more meaningful forms of engagement;
2. Believe that online activism can cause real-world change;
3. Believe online activism has to rely on traditional activism; and
4. Believe that online activism can be as effective as traditional activism.

It is interesting to note, of the group of 18 students who indicated that they believe online activism to be a lazy substitution for more meaningful forms of engagement, 67% ($n = 12$)

indicated that they do not participate in online activism campaigns however, even more interestingly, the remaining 33% ($n = 6$) indicated they in fact do participate in online campaigns but view online campaigning as a lazy substitute. This 33% did not provide reasoning as to why they view online activism to be a lazy substitute, though it does seem counterintuitive to view it as such and yet still participate. Perhaps for them, as has been pointed out by a number of other students, the need for action is a necessary part of creating change.

As mentioned, 90% ($n = 54$) of students believe that online activism can aid in creating awareness, but for many students this awareness is not sufficient to create change. Of the 54 who said that online activism can create awareness, only 41 said they believe online activism can create real-world change, 31 said they believed that online activism had to rely on traditional activism to create real-world change and only 30 believed it to be as effective as traditional activism in terms of creating real-world change.

This data helps illustrate the fact that a number of students believe in the power of online activism to spread pertinent issues to large numbers of people, thus creating awareness, but for many, this awareness is seemingly not enough unless it is accompanied by action such as protests and marches. As mentioned, a number of students have specifically said that they believe online activism campaigns have a tendency to become derailed and turn into endless debates which no longer focus on the issues at hand. While the public sphere was theorised as a space where people were able to discuss and debate socially salient issues, for these students, it seems that debate is not conducive to educating people who may be ignorant or uninformed.

Of the 54 participants who indicated they do believe online activism can raise awareness, 13 did not believe it was capable of creating real-world change and 21 did not believe it to be as effective as traditional forms of activism. Once again highlighting the idea that “actions speak louder than words”, these students believe that online activism can create awareness however, there is little faith in its ability to actually create tangible change on its own.

Therefore, it can be concluded that, while for the majority of students, awareness is a beneficial aspect of participating, for most who fall within this group, there is little about online activism that can be parlayed into tangible real-world change without using it in conjunction with traditional forms of activism. This is a fact that a few students have put forward, arguing that online activism can serve as a supplement to traditional activism rather than as a substitute for it. However, it appears that for the majority of students in the sample group, it is not sufficient to engage merely by helping to raise awareness.

4.3 Conclusions

From the data analysed, a number of conclusions can be made about students’ behaviours and views concerning online activism.

4.3.1. Do Students Engage in Online Activism?

From the collected data, 40% of surveyed students currently participate in hashtag activism or have engaged with hashtag activism campaigns in the past. This means that the students who participate are in the minority. The majority of respondents do not actively engage in hashtag activism campaigns

Of the sampled students, it is evident that many seemed to be unaware of the fact that these campaigns existed, with numerous students stating that they did not know about hashtag campaigns. A large number of other students indicated that they typically do not use social networking sites and therefore, are not actively exposed to hashtag campaigns in the way more frequent users may be. There is no clear tie between the students who claim to have not known about the campaigns and those who do not frequent social networking sites, however, it is possible to infer that the reasons provided by both groups can be placed on ignorance.

Ignorance here not used pejoratively, but rather to show that students were not typically exposed enough to campaigns for them to be aware of them. This can also be considered a contributing factor as to why students do not engage in hashtag activism. As has been argued by scholars, an emotional investment in a cause can be the catalyst for inspiring one to become involved; one can argue that if students are not at all exposed to campaigns, they do not have the opportunity to become emotionally invested as they are not aware of information which may be available to them, relating to the campaign.

These respondents who indicated that they do not engage in hashtag activism indicated that they do not because they either do not think hashtag campaigns work, do not view them as a worthwhile investment of their time or have not found a campaign which interests them. A single respondent stated that the reason for them not participating in any of these campaigns is because they do not have a mobile phone which is capable of connecting to the internet. While this is a single example, it does serve to highlight the fact that the digital divide still affects people who are not able to afford new media devices which enable one to connect and engage with the online sphere.

As discussed previously, Milligan et. al. (2008) argue that people are compelled to engage in activism efforts when they feel a sense of injustice personally, or are inspired to do so because of specific events which may inspire a feeling of injustice. It can be argued that the reason for some students electing to not participate was because they were not affected by an issue that the hashtag campaigns were seeking to address or due to the fact that they did not feel as though the issue had any effect on them.

The group of students who claim to have no interest in hashtag campaigns, or did not believe the campaigns were worth their time, are not strictly akin to those who were ignorant of them. Indeed, neither group participate or engage, but the reasoning as to why is vastly different. The latter group did not know of the campaigns; whether they would have participated in said campaigns had they had exposure to the necessary information is uncertain. However, the former group possessed adequate knowledge of the hashtag campaigns and subsequently elected to not participate. Both subgroups elected not to participate however, one did so passively, while the other did so actively. Therefore, while it is factually correct to claim that 60% of students do not engage in hashtag activism based on the collected data, it is not adequate to fully explain the nuances which exist within this group. While the number or percentage of students who engage is helpful in providing an overall idea of the rate of engagement, it is through this extrapolation of information from the data that greater insight and understanding about student attitudes toward hashtag activism can be achieved.

The respondents who indicated they participate in hashtag activism provided various reasons as to why, however, the main reason is that they felt the cause had an effect on them directly. No matter if it is the #FeesMustFall campaign (which was the most frequent answer given by

students) or #BlackLivesMatter, students had a vested interest in them because they believed these campaigns tackled issues which they identified with.

It is unsurprising that the majority of students who indicated that they engage in hashtag activism participated in the #FeesMustFall movement because it is a topical issue which clearly has a direct impact on them. Likewise, campaigns like #DataMustFall garnered support from students because it is an issue which has direct impact on them.

Other campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter, while having no obvious direct impact on students, still inspired support from black students because they identified with the plight of African Americans who believe that there is prejudice within the police and legal system. Students are sympathetic to the cause because while they may not be affected directly by the issue of police brutality, they feel a kinship to those affected. This directly supports Milligan et. al's (2008) theory of involvement as the reason for student participation, as illustrated by their responses, appears to stem mainly from their perception of injustices being perpetrated not only on a local level, but on an international one as well.

Other students chose to participate in hashtag activism due to the ease of use and the fact that they believe that it is an easy way for them to get involved. Student responses illustrate that they used the necessary hashtags to not only participate in relevant discussions surrounding campaigns, but also to find related information and others who share their point of view or who differ in viewpoint in order to engage in discussion and learn more about the issue.

The ease of use component is illustrated by one respondent, Participant 1, who stated: “I supported from my couch”. It is this idea that is generally used pejoratively by detractors of online activism, who argue that people believe that they are able to “change the world from their couch”, however, this is precisely why students have chosen to engage through this medium; they are able to easily access information, participate in discussion and find like-minded people in a way that is convenient for them. For critics, engaging in this manner is seen as lazy however, it is apparent that majority of students do not agree with this. Whether or not students engage beyond the online space is irrelevant, what matters to them is that online activism allows for them to engage in the cause in the first place.

4.3.2. Do Students View Online Activism as “Slacktivism”?

One of the main criticisms levelled against online activism is that while it may serve a purpose, that it is not critical engagement and that it is, in fact, a lazy substitute for more meaningful forms of civic engagement.

On the question of whether students viewed hashtag activism as a lazy substitution, most (70%) indicated that they do not view it as a substitute. This statistic is surprising, considering the percentage of students who do not personally engage in hashtag activism versus the percentage of those who do. Based purely on numbers from the first question, one could have hypothesised that a higher number of students would view hashtag activism as a lazy substitution for civic engagement.

Respondent answers to support their belief appeared to rest mainly in the idea that hashtags reach large numbers of people. As illustrated by students' response to the question of whether hashtags are able to bring attention to salient matters, where 90% indicated that they do believe that hashtag campaigns raised social awareness.

The most frequent response provided by students explaining why they believed hashtags were a beneficial tool, had to do with their potential to reach millions of people through social networking sites. These social networking sites allow for information to easily be shared between users, one need only click a button and the information can be disseminated to a potentially endless number of people.

Students believe that the more popular hashtag campaigns have the ability to reach people easily because they garner attention because they have a tendency to permeate social media and become a talking point. Through this, a number of people come to learn of the cause or that the campaign is focused on which can, in turn, educate those who may be ignorant about it and thus, possibly lead to them becoming invested and involved in it. Other students did not believe that these campaigns were an adequate way of raising social awareness about causes as they argue that hashtags are treated as more of a trend than actually focusing on and championing the issue at hand. While some believe that hashtag campaigns provide the basis for people to engage in discussion of pertinent to issues, one student stated that they believed that these discussions become endless, baseless debates. Another issue highlighted by a respondent is that those who do not have access to new media devices are excluded from hashtag campaigns. Yet again, this is another illustration of the digital divide still existing and disqualifying those who are without these devices from being a part of the discussion.

Discerning whether students view these campaigns as a substitute is not simply a linear exercise, however. In this case, the issue of *why* students may elect to not participate in civic actions such as protests needs to be examined as well. Therefore, students were questioned whether or whether they would be likely to participate in protests associated with a hashtag campaign.

As mentioned, this served to test both whether students themselves used hashtag activism as a substitute for engaging civically, as well as Lee & Hsieh's (2013) theory of moral balancing or, as it has been labelled in this dissertation, the theory of behaviour congruence. When asked whether they would be more or less inclined to participate in associated protest action of a campaign they were engaged with online, 53% of respondents indicated that they would be less likely, 42% indicated that they would be more likely and 5% of respondents were undecided.

Of the 53% who indicated that they would be less likely to participate in civic action, the main reason for their reluctance is because they were fearful of attending or participating in protests as they feel that protests, especially in South Africa, have a tendency of becoming violent. Students indicated that they either were fearful of possibly getting harmed in the protests, possibly facing legal repercussion or, that they do not agree with the lengths some protestors go to in order to try and make a statement, such as arson and the destruction of property.

This does not necessarily support Lee & Hsieh's theory of moral balancing which states that one who engages in online activism will either view their online efforts as sufficient support for a cause, which subsequently causes them to not participate further or want to keep a sense of congruence with their behaviour from the online to the offline world. In this case, it is not

that students necessarily view their online activity as a sufficient contribution but rather they are faced with extraneous factors which serve as a deterrent to their participating any further than in an online capacity.

Some student responses however, do support Lee & Hsieh's (2013) theory. Of the group of respondents who indicated that they would be more likely to participate in associated protest action, students indicated that they believe their participation in subsequent mass action is a necessary extension of their online participation.

Students believe that participation online can be the catalyst for further engagement, stating that there is an opportunity for them to become informed about why protests are occurring and whether they identify with and/or believe in the cause. Others believe that participation through the use of social media and hashtags is valid, there is still a need for people to support their words through actual action and involvement. They believe that while social media does work to help raise awareness about issues, it does not serve to disrupt daily life. Students argue that it is this disruption that causes people to take notice because, in their view, it is civic action such as protests, which shows that they are serious about and committed to a cause. Some students were unsure of the likelihood of further engagement on their part, stating that their subsequent participation lies in whether they were passionate about the cause or not.

There are others who believe that hashtag activism does not serve to replace traditional activism, but rather that it works as a supplement to it. They argue that because these hashtag campaigns can be used as a way to inform people, it can serve to inspire them to attend rallies and participate in protests. Therefore, online activism can be one component in a repertoire of

an activist, it does not necessarily have to come down to one choosing either online activism or traditional activism.

4.3.3. Do Students Believe That Online Activism Can Cause Real-World Change?

Of the sampled population, 75% of respondents stated that they believe that hashtag campaigns are capable of creating real-world change. Again, as has been a recurring theme in students' responses, there is emphasis placed on the ability of these campaigns to reach multitudes of people quickly and easily.

In this regard, it is a widely held belief (among the sampled group), that awareness is a key factor in determining whether a campaign can be considered successful or not. Creating and raising awareness is important to these students as they argue that the more focus, and the greater the level of attention on a campaign, the greater chance there is of it being acknowledged by those with the ability to make tangible differences, such as members of the government, for example.

Furthermore, students believe that these campaigns allow for a level of participation that no other avenue affords. Where the mainstream media has gatekeepers and editors in place, the internet allows anyone to add their voice to the conversation, unencumbered and exactly as they intend. This is especially beneficial in places where the media may be censored or used as a tool of government propaganda. Social media allows for people to engage when they may have no other opportunity to connect with likeminded people, regardless of physical distance or physical disability.

Other students who believe that hashtag activism creates real-world change highlight a more recent online campaign: #DataMustFall. This campaign was created in an attempt to start a conversation about the pricing of mobile data costs of leading South African mobile networks. The creator of the #DataMustFall campaign argues that these prices are hindering South Africans from becoming engaged in the online realm due to data prices being too high and in particular, higher than other African countries which are serviced by the same networks. Therefore, this campaign aimed to challenge these mobile networks to lower their prices.

Students highlight that there were no protests or other civic actions associated with this campaign, only the hashtag which existed. From this, the issue received the attention of the Minister of Communications who subsequently ordered mobile networks to decrease their prices or else the government would step in to implement steps to ensure that they do. For students, this illustrates the possibility that campaigns create real-world change which will have a tangible effect on regular South Africans, all without any accompanying civic action.

Students are not entirely ignorant to the fact that the #DataMustFall campaign was a unique case arguing that whether or not a hashtag campaign is capable of creating change depends entirely on the objectives of the campaign. While #DataMustFall was successful to an extent, issues such as providing free tertiary education as the #FeesMustFall movement seeks, is far more complex as it will involve a number of different entities in order for it to be achievable. Therefore, while there is optimism in the way of online campaigns creating change, students recognise that there is no certainty as it comes down to the objectives of campaigns and what it may take to fulfil those objectives.

Respondents who were more critical of the idea of online activism creating real-world change argue that in order to create change, words are insufficient and that only through traditional modes of activism can change be accomplished. There is the belief that what occurs in the online space usually devolves into endless, baseless debates which cannot have any bearing on the offline world because there is no way for discussion to create change. Students argue that there is no one in power who take hashtag campaigns seriously and that therefore, they cannot create change.

When posed the question of whether they believed that hashtag campaigns have to rely on traditional activism in order to create change, 55% of respondents said yes, while 42% said no and the remaining 3% were undecided. This provides a slightly more in-depth view into their feelings.

While a majority of respondents indicated that they do believe that hashtag activism can create real-world change, it is clear through the response to this question that a number of them believe that this change can only be accomplished through the use of traditional activism actions. What it comes down to for a majority of students is the idea that “actions speak louder than words”. While there is recognition of hashtag activism’s ability to inform, educate and spread the cause to wider audience, what is viewed as actually important for creating change is people engaging in more meaningful ways.

Students believe that in South Africa, there is a need for protests and marches because otherwise the government is not likely to treat an issue with seriousness. Therefore, students

argue that they need to engage in traditional modes of activism, even if it means going to extreme measures, in order to achieve their desired outcome.

Those who are undecided on the matter argue that whether an online campaign has to rely on traditional activism depends on what exactly the cause is about. Once again they point the #FeesMustFall and #DataMustFall campaigns, stating that in the case of a campaign like #FeesMustFall, it is necessary to have a component of protest action, whereas for campaigns like #DataMustFall, there is simply no need for it as the issue can be resolved without it.

The respondents who believe that hashtag campaigns do not rely on traditional activism argue that there is not necessarily a need for it as people in positions of power, such as government officials, all have a presence on social media and that they too are exposed to these hashtag campaigns and therefore, it is not necessary to protest or march in order for them to become aware of the issue. Others argue that online campaigns which were founded locally, such as #FeesMustFall have shown their power by crossing borders, in a manner of speaking, as the movement has extended to countries other than South Africa and has sparked similar protests in other parts of the world.

The recurring theme of hashtag activism's ability to raise awareness is once again highlighted by students. For many of those who do not want to participate in traditional activism due to the extraneous factors which were previously discussed, participating online allows them to feel as though they are contributing meaningfully to the cause.

Finally, students were asked whether, in terms of creating real-world change, they believe that hashtag campaigns were as effective as traditional campaigns. The responses received were fairly equal, with 48% of students stating that they do believe hashtag campaigns to be as effective as traditional campaigns, and 52% stating that they do not.

Student responses regarding why they stated either “yes” or “no” tended to repeat two recurring themes which have been brought up throughout responses to other questions. For those who said “yes”, a number of students highlighted hashtag activism’s ability to reach people and those who said “no” indicated that they believe that actions are more important than words.

Students who believe hashtag activism is as effective as traditional modes believe that the way of the world is changing and that, as technology advances, so too must the way in which people address and try to tackle social issues. They acknowledge that prior to the advent of certain new media technologies, the only way for people to try and address injustice was for them to protest, march, have sit-ins, among others, but new media has afforded new avenues for voicing grievances. There is a belief that people are becoming involved with the internet and social networking at an ever-growing rate and therefore, the online world exposes causes and issues in a way that traditional activism simply cannot. Millions are reached on the internet, regardless of where they are from, whereas with a protest for example, there is no guarantee that there will be any media attention on it, unless it becomes violent and even then the exposure it receives is generally only on a local scale. Students do however, recognise that there is no proven track record on the successes of hashtag campaigns and therefore, it is difficult to determine whether they have the ability to create change in the long-run or change that is lasting.

Those who are critical of online activism once again argue that traditional activism is more effective than online campaigns because “actions speak louder than words”. Students feel that online activity has no way of crossing over into the offline world and that, because of this, there is no way for them to foster change. They view it as a way for people to share content and engage in debate but there is little belief that much comes from this in the way that it does when traditional activist modes of engagement are employed.

The reason for this is that students believe that the tactic of disruption is one that is vital in order to get attention and focus on the cause. In the case of online activism, and hashtag campaigns in particular, they exist only in the online space, therefore, exposure to information is something that is not guaranteed. Even if there is initial exposure, it is extremely easy for someone who is not interested to unlike, ignore, block or unfollow anyone who may be presenting this information. When there are actions such as protests and marches, there is no way for people to ignore the masses of people because they create a disruption of daily life. Students believe that this means that online activism cannot be as effective as traditional activism as it does not cause disruption in the way protests do and therefore people are not forced to be cognisant of a hashtag in the way they are of protestors.

There is also the belief that traditional activism inspires a sense of loyalty and dedication to a cause in a way that online activism does not. It is easy for someone to join a cause online by liking a page, for example, but it is equally as easy to unlike that page and thus, detach from the issue altogether. Some students argue that hashtag campaigns can be deemed to be superficial without any form of accompanying civic action because there is usually talk but no follow-up action. Finally, students argue that they have not witnessed past hashtag campaigns

garnering success in achieving their objectives and therefore, there is reason to believe that online campaigns are as effective as traditional ones.

From the collected data, there is no definitive answer as to whether students believe that hashtag campaigns can bring real-world change. There are students who fall on both ends of the spectrum, with both sides providing plausible arguments to support their cases. Students vary greatly in opinion regarding this matter, with proponents and detractors. However, it is possible to draw conclusions based on the findings presented in this chapter.

5. Conclusion

As has been stated, the aim of this dissertation is to attempt to discern students' views and behaviours in relation to online activism, particularly in regards to the rate in which students engage in online activism, whether their views align with those who are critical of online activism and whether they believe that real-world change can be achieved through the use of online activism. In order to do this, the data which has been collected has been analysed and related to theories covered in the literature review chapter.

The rate of student engagement in regards to online activism is surprisingly low. As evidenced by the collected data, less than 50% of students have indicated they have engaged in online activism prior to participating in the study. This result is surprising as one could hypothesise that because of the ever-growing number of social media users, that there would be greater exposure to online campaigns and that therefore, engagement would be higher. However, numerous respondents have stated that they did not know of any online campaigns and this is surprising as many proponents point to online campaigns' ability to reach people in a manner that no other form of activism does. One needs to question whether this is necessarily the case as students have pointed out that it is easy for one to simply unlike, unfollow or block content which does not interest them. So yes, while it is incredibly easy to reach numerous people through the internet, it is not certain that there are people who are willing to receive what is being produced.

This is illustrated by the number of students who have indicated that there have been no campaigns which have compelled them to engage or that they simply don't believe online campaigns to be worth their time. Regardless of whether it is due to ignorance or apathy, it is

clear that online is not a popular form of activism for students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

When it comes to the criticism of online activism being a lazy substitution for more meaningful forms of engagement, it is apparent that students do not agree with this assertion. A majority of participants (70%) surveyed disagreed with this criticism. While it is surprising that 70% of students disagreed when only 40% engage in online activism themselves, it illustrates that just because students may not engage in a personal capacity, they still recognise the ability that online activism has to create awareness about social issues and educate people about salient issues. This is further corroborated by the fact that 90% of students stated that they believe online activism aids in raising awareness about social issues.

Students have expressed their views particularly about the notion that online activism is a substitute or replacement for traditional forms of activism. For those who are critical of online activism, they tend to frame the narrative as “traditional activism versus online activism” and as has been argued by students and activist alike, online activism should be seen as a supplement to traditional activism actions. It is also apparent that for many students, that traditional forms of activism are not viable as many students are fearful of protests and marches turning violent. For these students, online activism is not a substitute, but the only way for them to engage in the conversation surrounding issues.

One needs to also consider that the idea of participating ‘meaningfully’ is not universal. This is to say that just because scholars or theorist believe online activism to be a lazy form of engagement, it does not necessarily mean that others do as well. It is evident from the data

collected that students do not agree with this assertion. This begs the question of whether what students and others are doing online can really be classified as lazy if they believe that they are contributing meaningfully, even though others may not view it as such. For many, engaging in the online realm is the only way in which they have the ability to share their views and opinions as there may be barriers to engagement such as physical distance or physical disability preventing them from attending things like protests and rallies.

The belief here is that online activism does not serve to usurp the role of traditional activism, but rather it is an addition to it that can help to augment it. Therefore, it is a fallacy to consider online activism to be a substitute when in fact, it serves as a supplement.

In regards to online activism's ability to create real-world change, students were divided. 75% of students do believe that online activism is capable of creating real-world change. This however, is not without caveats. Only 42% of students believe that online activism is capable of creating change on its own as the majority (55%) believe that it has to rely on traditional activism in order to create this change. Finally, only 48% of students believe online activism to be as effective in terms of creating change as traditional forms of activism. So while many of them do believe online activism is capable of creating change, they are also weary of the fact that online activism can only extend so far and that traditional activism is still needed in order to create change. Once again illustrating the theme of actions speaking louder than words.

Therefore, it is evident that while online activism is heralded by many as the future of activism, it does not appear that students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal are particularly willing to agree with that sentiment. While there are students who engage, it is a relatively small

percentage of students and while students believe that online activist campaigns are capable of creating both awareness and change, there does not appear to be much faith in online activism as a medium of engagement on its own.

It is clear that students use the internet and online activism as a form of the public sphere, as some use it as a way to discuss and debate socially salient matters. The internet seems to function as a public sphere as it fulfils the idealised version presented by Habermas (1989), where there is the shedding of perceived hierarchy in order to allow for people to engage each other in discussion and debate on equal ground. The public sphere formed on the internet however, does tend to align more with the conception of Kemmis & McTaggart (2007) which has been outlined as it tends to be more inclusive, allows for a wider range of involvement and has been used in relation to social movements such as #FeesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter. While the rate of engagement is lower than one might expect, students are using the internet and online activism campaigns in order to become informed and engage with social issues (Garcia-Galera & Valdivia, 2014). This also illustrates Bonilla & Rosa's (2015) theory of people within a participatory culture using their participation in order to educate others or learn from those who may be more knowledgeable.

While this study aimed at discerning student attitudes and behaviours regarding online activism, it initially aimed at focussing on other issues, namely: whether there was a difference in the usage patterns between males and females, whether differences existed between different race groups in terms of online activism engagement and whether there are any differences in engagement in online activism between students from different academic disciplines. These

aims were abandoned in favour of trying to get a more focused look at student perceptions and behaviours in general however, these may be viable areas for future study.

As online activism is a relatively new concept and there has been relatively few studies focussed on the reasons for people engaging, it is hoped that the findings of this dissertation will add to the existing pool of knowledge regarding online activism. Particularly whether they believe it to be a worthwhile, valuable avenue for activist efforts. More especially, it is hoped that it will aid in understanding why exactly people choose to engage in activist efforts in the online space as opposed to engaging in more traditional forms of activism. Furthermore, it is hoped that the findings of this dissertation will provide a unique perspective on the issue of online activism as there seems to be little when it comes to research regarding online activism in the African context.

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Appendix A: Information Sheet

Dear Student

My name is Nikolai Pillay from the Media and Cultural Studies Department at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves how UKZN (PMB) students perceive online activism campaigns such as #FeesMustFall. I am therefore asking if you would agree to participate in my research. The study is expecting to sample 60 random students from across the University to answer questionnaires and then possibly conduct follow-up interviews with 6 respondents, should the study require it. The duration of your participation if you choose to participate is expected to be no longer than ten minutes for the questionnaire and thirty minutes for the interview if it takes place and participation therein is agreed upon.

Participation in the study will pose no risk to you in any way. I hope that the study will offer critical insight into the fairly new phenomenon of online activism. While it is unlikely that you will benefit from participating in this study on an individual level, it could provide important benefits for South African society in terms of understanding how students use social media platforms to organise social activist campaigns. Please note that all information will remain confidential and all raw data will be stored on electronic databases on password-protected computers in the Media and Cultural Studies Department on the Pietermaritzburg campus for a mandatory 5 years. After this period has lapsed, all data will be deleted. Additionally, no identifying data will be published in the final dissertation. Participants will only be referred to by pseudonyms, and will have access to the final dissertation via the UKZN library.

If at any time you wish to withdraw from the study for whatever reason, you may do so without any repercussions to yourself. However, the researcher will request that you withdraw in writing within two weeks of completing either the questionnaire or the interview, so that a replacement may be found, and that the validity of the research is not compromised.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at nikolai_pillay@yahoo.com or the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION:

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Tel: 27 31 2604557

Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Appendix B: Consent Form

I (please print your name) have been informed about the study entitled *Hashtag Activism: UKZN (PMB) Students' Perceptions of Online Activism Campaigns* by Nikolai Pillay.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and have received answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I am aware that I may withdraw at any time without any repercussion.

I am aware that if I have any further questions, concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at nikolai_pillay@yahoo.com.

I am aware that if I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researcher then I may contact:

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION:

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Tel: 27 31 2604557

Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby provide my consent to:

Participate in answering a questionnaire: Yes No

Participate in a possible follow-up interview: Yes No

.....

.....

Signature of Participant

Date

If you are willing to participate in a possible follow-up interview, please provide an email address where you can be contacted:

.....

Appendix C: Questionnaire

1. Do you participate in hashtag campaigns (i.e. online campaigns which use hashtags, e.g.: #FeesMustFall)?

Yes No

If “YES”, please name any campaigns you’ve participated in and why you felt compelled to participate.

If “NO”, please explain why you have elected to not participate in any campaigns.

.....
.....
.....

2. Do you believe that hashtag campaigns can successfully aid in raising social awareness about issues?

Yes No

Please provide a brief explanation as to why you feel this way:

.....
.....
.....

3. If you were to participate online in a campaign like #FeesMustFall, would you be more or less likely to participate in a protest associated with Fees Must Fall thereafter? Why?

.....
.....
.....

4. Hashtag campaigns have been accused of being a lazy substitution for more meaningful forms of activism, such as protests/marches. Do you agree with this assertion? Yes No

Please provide a brief explanation as to why you feel this way:

.....
.....
.....

5. In your opinion, do you believe that hashtag campaigns like #FeesMustFall can cause real-world change?

Yes No

Please provide a brief explanation as to why you feel this way:

.....
.....
.....

6. Do you believe that hashtag campaigns have to rely on ‘traditional activism’ actions such as protests in order to create real-world change? Yes No

Please provide a brief explanation as to why you feel this way:

.....
.....
.....

7. Do you believe that hashtag campaigns are as effective as traditional activism actions, such as protests, in terms of creating real-world change? Yes No

Please provide a brief explanation as to why you feel this way.

.....
.....
.....