

**Lurking or listening? An ethnographic study of online and offline student political participation through the #MustFall protests at Rhodes University**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The way media is created and consumed plays an important role in political participation as it provides information, guides thinking and allows citizens to make informed political choices. It can also interrogate the status quo and challenge existing systems or power relations. This thesis discusses the use of social media by Rhodes University students in the context of the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa.

This thesis interrogates the concept of slacktivism, a term used to describe online or digital activism which is considered to be less active and not as effective as physical activism. Furthermore, the thesis acknowledges that even when digital political participation is recognised, the emphasis and value is placed on those who speak and create content. The thesis examines the notion of participation and what counts as active citizenship. In particular, the majority of social media users who merely lurk and never contribute to content creation or online discussions are further investigated.

The qualitative methodological approach used for this thesis involved three parts which looked at student activity on Facebook, student engagement offline, and how students made sense of their online and offline involvement. Firstly, a cyberethnographic investigation was done in order to understand the cyber world in which students are present. Thereafter, a participant observation was carried out to immerse myself in the offline spaces that students engaged in politically, to get a better sense of how their online presence influenced or supplemented their offline activity. Finally, individual interviews were carried out with lurkers to determine why they did not participate in traditional ways, both online and offline.

The findings suggest that lurkers are in fact doing more than just being passively present. The high levels of attention paid to content posted by others on social media, as well as the way that the content influences their offline lives suggest that the choice to lurk is far more active than assumed. Students are consciously deciding to lurk for a multitude of reasons, one of which is for the opportunity to learn.

Social media is a fast developing, increasingly used form of communication and how political communication across social media platforms is framed affects what we consider to be active engagement. By using theories of listening and emotion talk, the thesis provides new ways of understanding lurking by Rhodes University students on social media, which in turn can lead to better listening, better understanding and greater political participation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

“Described variously as being amoral, atomised, apathetic, hedonistic and out of control, there is a widespread sense that contemporary youth are particularly disengaged from the structures and processes of democratic citizenship.”

(Coleman 2006:257).

Although it is widely acknowledged (Hartmann 2015; Jacobs & Wasserman 2015; Thomas 2015; Mutsvaire 2016; Oxlund 2016) that social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter have played an increasingly valuable role in the recent South African student protests, not all the ways in which it is done so has been fully explored. There are many users who frequent these social media networks yet do not engage in ways that are traditionally considered to be participation, and the presence of those who merely ‘lurk’ online has been largely ignored and sometimes disparaged. This thesis aims to deconstruct the ways in which social media has influenced how students participate and engage politically. By positing that social media networks can affect participation in ways that are not necessarily visible online, this thesis aims to explore how the “Rhodes University SRC” Facebook group in particular has enabled Rhodes University students to be politically active both in and beyond the online sphere.

Understanding how students use online spaces as political platforms to protest counters the belief that the youth are disinterested in politics (Boyce 2010; Coleman 2006; Harris, Wyn & Younes 2010). What is usually considered political participation is limited to youth voter turnout and affiliation with a political party (Resnick & Casale 2011). According to Bosch (2016:3), “student activism is an international phenomenon, but there is little research on how it has played out in contemporary African societies”. The political involvement of students in online spaces is topical, requires interrogation right and is also currently under researched.

The representations of South African student protests do not always take into account the multiple ways in which students are using digital media to participate in a community, and do not consider the vast majority of people who may not be continuously vocal online, yet are still participating in ways not traditionally explored by researchers of youth participation and the media. Despite the high numbers of members present on social networking sites, on the

surface most users give the impression of being lurkers, who give no 'real' contribution to the online political sphere.

In order to contextualise this research, a brief history of protest action in South Africa will be introduced, beginning during the apartheid era and ending with the #FeesMustFall student protests. The first chapter also explores the perceptions around the youth and their participation or lack thereof in political activity against a background of very active youth participation in the anti-apartheid struggle. The use of social media as a platform to engage with current affairs is considered. This thesis is located in media studies, as it is an investigation into the ways in which social media is changing how people engage with politics, as well as affecting our traditional ideas of participation. This chapter then introduces the main social media platform to be researched, the Rhodes University Student Representative Council (SRC) Facebook group ([www.facebook.com/groups/rhodessrc/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/rhodessrc/)).

In Chapter 2 the theoretical frameworks used in this research will be explored. These include participation theory (Verba & Nie 1972) and listening theory (Crawford 2009; Dreher 2009; Lipari 2010). In Chapter 3, the methods and methodology used and the processes undertaken to conduct this research will be explained. Cyberethnography, as a primary method of making meaning of the way students use social media networks to engage politically, will be further described. Chapters 4 and 5 will describe the findings of this research and analyse it in order to understand listening online as an underexplored phenomenon. Chapter 6 will present the conclusion.

## **Youth protest action in South Africa**

Taking to the streets to protest dissatisfaction at a system is not a new or unexpected concept to the people of South Africa.

During the apartheid era, the youth in particular were at the forefront of the protests, strikes and school boycotts. According to Straker (1992), the youth at the time saw their efforts as a way of leading the older generation to their freedom from apartheid laws. For many of the marginalised youth, protest action was an important part of their everyday life. In addition, the majority of the black youth, as well as a minority of white youth in South Africa in the early 1990s were socially engaged and involved in programmes targeting them (Everatt & Orkin 1993).

Immediately after the transition to democracy in 1994, the number of protests in South Africa



could be considered low compared to what was experienced during apartheid as the country was in a state of negotiations. The mid-1990s are referred to by Everatt (2000) as a period of disillusionment for the youth. As South Africa went back and forth between negotiations going smoothly and then facing problems, the need for youth mobilisation was constantly changing, leaving youth activists in a state of limbo (Everatt 2000).

However, due to increasing frustration with the government as a result of lack of service provision, corruption and inequality, social protests has been on the rise since the early 2000s (Bosch 2016). Resnick & Casale, writing in 2011 on political participation of youth in Africa, posited that with high levels of dissatisfaction and unemployment, the youth may be voting less but engaging more in political protest. Although apartheid has ended in South Africa, the country is considered to be in a state of transition as citizens are still facing issues of inequality, lack of access to basic human needs and general discontent with the government (Bosch 2016). Media reporting has often portrayed protests after apartheid in a negative light, showing them to be violent and disruptive. Until 2015, these protests, which have mainly revolved around service delivery, were largely seen as a poor working class issue, which only received attention from other citizens when services such as refuse removal were disrupted. Following the #RhodesMustFall protests across the country, more and more citizens across class and race lines have become involved in protest as a form of political engagement.

Yet even with various post-apartheid protests, South African youth are generally still seen as disinterested in mainstream politics, not motivated to political action and apathetic about their future (Deegan 2002). According to the Mellon Media and Citizenship Project, South African youth participation and interest in civic and political affairs remained low, as well as their trust in and respect for democratic processes (Bosch 2016). In terms of media representation, the youth are not seen as the highly political activists that they were during apartheid, but rather, they are spoken of in relation to crime, poor school results, unemployment and a disinterest in politics (Everatt 2000; Diouf 2003; Reed 2011; Allison 2014).

### **Background – #RhodesMustFall**

On 9 March 2015, the #RhodesMustFall protests (although unofficially a movement at the time) began with University of Cape Town (UCT) student Chumani Maxwele throwing human faeces at a statue of Cecil John Rhodes. The defacing of the statue of the coloniser, situated at the UCT campus of which the majority of land was donated by Rhodes, resulted in at first shock, outrage, and then a series of discussions on the space which was considered

largely untransformed. What started as a movement to have the statue removed, as it represented the source of much black pain and oppression, developed into a movement that called for the decolonisation of the tertiary education space, as well as the transformation of university curricula across South Africa. UCT students and supporters of the movement occupied Bremner Building, the main administration building of UCT, to discuss the need for reform as well as plan an agenda to set about decolonising the university space. Following discussions, further protests and negotiations, the statue was removed a month later on 9 April 2015. This was just the beginning of a new protest movement that has been in a constant state of evolution. The movement spread to other South African universities, with students addressing the concerns relevant to their tertiary institution. At UCT, the issue of outsourcing staff was raised, while at Stellenbosch the language debate was reignited as students protested against having to be taught in Afrikaans. At Rhodes University, the name of the university was called into question, as well as the white privilege and institutional culture which were felt on campus. Led by the Black Student Movement (BSM), a student activist group revived to tackle the process of decolonising Rhodes University, students initiated a series of protest actions across campus. This included the occupation of the council chamber in the main administrative building, graffiti and posters on campus buildings, a protest circle at the garden party of the 2015 Rhodes University graduation, as well as a series of meetings, discussions and seminars led by students. While there have been student protests at universities prior to #RhodesMustFall, this stood out in that it included former white universities, as well as international support.

### **#FeesMustFall: nationwide protest**

After almost a year of protesting and talking about inequality, the #RhodesMustFall movement culminated in the #FeesMustFall protests. While the discussions during the #RhodesMustFall protests divided some students as some failed to understand concepts of privilege and inequality, the #FeesMustFall protests gave students a tangible expression of black pain (Luescher 2016). Students at almost every university across South Africa brought the academic programme to a standstill as they protested the inaccessibility of tertiary education to students who could not afford it. The #FeesMustFall protests were as much about class as race, which allowed white students to better understand and empathise. As a result, participation levels were much higher than that of previous protests during 2015. The national shutdown of South African universities resulted in a 0% fee increase for tertiary education students in 2016.

## **Protesting in the social sphere: contextualising the Rhodes SRC Facebook page**

With the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the use of social networks to assist with protest action has been on the rise. At Stellenbosch University, where the language debate arose among other conversations around decolonisation, students made a video entitled *Luister*, which went viral across South Africa, reaching over 350 000 views on YouTube after being posted in August 2015. In addition to the language debate, Stellenbosch students interviewed in the video spoke of their experiences of racism and exclusion at Stellenbosch. While YouTube was the platform for posting the video, Facebook played an integral role in allowing students to share and have discussions about the video. At Rhodes University, members of the BSM also created a video which depicted police involvement in the Black Students Movement's attempts to join a senate meeting, which they likened to tactics used during apartheid.

Digital media has allowed students to capture the protests in a way that was previously unheard of, and social networks has allowed this digital media to be shared and experienced by a wider reach of students, thus garnering more support. Students have been able to connect their private identities to wider political spaces and to some extent, social networking sites can be seen as central to the organisation of the #RhodesMustFall campaigns and nationally across campuses in the #FeesMustFall campaign (Bosch 2016).

At Rhodes University in particular, Facebook was used to disseminate information and to virtually participate and show support for protest action across campuses. The Rhodes SRC Facebook group, initially created and run by current SRC members for the purpose of communicating to students and building a student network, is used by current and former students to discuss politics in addition to other student matters. The Rhodes SRC group has 8759 student and alumni members, a comparatively large number for a university with roughly 7 000 registered students. It is an open group, which means that it can be accessed and viewed by anyone, not necessarily Rhodes students but anyone who shares the interests of what is posted. What is posted is not protected by any privacy settings, and all posts can be linked back to the Facebook profile of the user who has posted a post or comment.

Prior to the #RhodesMustFall campaign, the majority of posts were about students selling textbooks, offering houses to let, or looking for lifts at the beginning and end of term. Students also discussed current student affairs, as well as posted funny musings or memes that related to pop culture or other students. As the #RhodesMustFall movement gained

traction at UCT, Rhodes University campus also became a heated space in which students increasingly used the SRC Facebook group to discuss their concerns. While Twitter was the main social network used as an organising tool during the protest movement across South Africa, Facebook was the place for conversation, discussion and slowed down, thoughtful engagement.

Following the #RhodesMustFall hashtag prompt, students created other hashtags such as #RhodesSoWhite to discuss white privilege on Rhodes campus in particular. Prior to Maxwele's protest at the statue of Rhodes, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter had also been widely in use. As more and more politically aware students began to discuss the #RhodesMustFall movement, a number of other students began to complain that this was detracting from what was commonly perceived as other 'legitimate student concerns'. In response to this, the Rhodes SRC group administrators created a separate Facebook group, called SRC Activism and Transformation, to discuss issues relating to student politics. Compared to the initial group's 8000 student membership, this group had roughly 250 users choosing to join. Activity levels on the new page remained low, despite the SRC group admin threatening to remove #MustFall posts on the SRC group. The new group, although still in existence and occasionally used to advertise posts by the SRC, was a comparative failure.

The large membership of the Rhodes SRC group allowed students to communicate with many people who they were not otherwise connected to. Unlike Twitter, which requires one to be following someone in order to see their posts (unless someone retweets it), you could see posts by anyone in the group if you were a member. The posts follow a fairly chronological order, with a more interacted with post being bumped up to the top. Rather than responding directly to an original post as on Twitter, students could comment on a thread after a post, which allowed for greater discussion and interactivity between users. On 17 March 2015, a post on the SRC group by a former Rhodes University student with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter had 627 comments on it, making it one of the most interacted with posts on the group.

The Rhodes SRC Facebook group also allowed members to communicate messages to people who would otherwise choose to not be involved in specific issues that affect other students. The SRC Activism and Transformation group, though created with the good intention of having a specific space to discuss student politics, allowed students to choose whether or not to join. This meant that #RhodesMustFall related matters were only communicated to those

already interested, and allowed other students to remain disinterested and uninvolved.

### **Online participation: what really counts?**

While social media has allowed active protesters to mobilise, co-ordinate, share information and document the movement (Luescher 2016), there still remains a large number of students whose use of social media has not been taken into account as they are not seen as ‘active’ in the usual sense. Those who have posted, commented or produced media online are considered active, while the rest are considered ‘lurkers’ (Crawford 2009). What’s interesting to note is that these lurkers make up the majority in most online spaces, and this is true of the Rhodes SRC page as well because while there are over 8000 members, not all 8000 people are speaking and commenting. These lurkers are not the ones being quoted in media articles or engaging in the usual sense online, yet are still forming an integral part of this online community. The minority of members produce the majority of online content, to be consumed by the majority who lurk. How this affects student politics, engagement and transformation and the role these lurkers play is the basis of my investigation.

### **Conclusion**

Through social media, and in particular the #RhodesMustFall hashtag, discussions were created not just around the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, but on broader South African socio-political issues that affect the youth (Bosch 2016). These discussions and resulting activism were influenced by the way South African students used social media. While a small number of Facebook members were vocal on public groups, allowing other Facebook users and researchers to gain insight on the way social media played a role in their activism, the majority of student users merely ‘lurked’. However, how we understand this ‘lurking’ can change the way we view the interest of the youth and our notions of participation in a South African context.

Former Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor, Dr Saleem Badat proposes that “the relevance of such scholarly engagement is founded in seeking to understand the role, character and significance of the movements” (Badat 1999). With this in mind, I intended to understand the character and significance of student participation in the #RhodesMustFall movement, going beyond the traditionally active users and the most vocal voices and sought to understand the role of the majority who perhaps are listening, rather than lurking.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1 Social Media

##### **Social media versus traditional media in shaping politics**

Politics and engagement cannot be separated from the media, because “the ideas that constitute the basis upon which society is formed and developed are transmitted through (mainly) mass media” (Hassan 2004:3). Yet the way we consume journalism and media is rapidly changing as internet usage is increasing and becoming a part of people’s everyday lives (De Lanerolle 2012; Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2012). The use of social networking sites (SNSs) and its increased usage also influences news consumption in that people are able to access the news and stay updated through the networks that they are a part of. Furthermore, the increased use of social media can be used politically (De Lanerolle 2012; Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2012). In order to understand how citizens engage politically through non-traditional forms of media, it is important to understand how social media differs from mainstream media and how it affects the person making use of that media.

Unlike traditional media platforms, social networks allow media creators to communicate with their audience in real time, and information can be distributed much faster and to a wider reach of people (Anderson, Bell & Shirky 2012; Castells 2012; Skoric 2012). Twitter hashtags, Facebook posts and blogs can be seen as “a snapshot of a rapidly evolving ecology of news production and consumption” (Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2012:18). Online social networks and blogs have become a way of providing regular updates to stories, as well as allowing journalists to make contact with their audiences more regularly. In addition to the more immediate transference of content via social media, the actual ways in which the media itself is made and consumed differs from traditional media.

The way media is being made, and in particular who is doing the making has changed because of the access to digital media. Traditionally, it was thought that only news media institutions could provide journalism. Yet if you consider the kinds of media being created and the way it is distributed, such as the funding of journalism projects via Kickstarter or

protest movement coverage via mobile phones, it is clear that it is not only professionals and institutions making media (Anderson, Bell & Shirky 2012). According to Jay Rosen, the audience are no longer just recipients of information, but rather, people who have become both creators as well as conduits for information, thus making them people with communicative agency (Anderson, Bell & Shirky 2012). Individuals now have the ability to publish content at their will, in the knowledge that it can easily be spread on social networks. This media is more interactive and allows for group conversation rather than just individual consumption (Anderson, Bell & Shirky 2012). Furthermore, if “journalists exist because people need to know what has happened and why” (Anderson, Bell & Shirky 2012:20), then any user who is able to use social media may provide information on what is happening and why, perhaps even better than journalists at news organisation, as the people on the ground may have a better understanding and deeper knowledge of the content required.

This change in how media is created, distributed and consumed has a political effect. Prior to this, citizens relied on mainstream media to provide political information, which in turn influenced how citizens thought and participated politically. Politics is no longer just reported on and informed by traditional media; rather is it discussed and created in the online sphere by ordinary individuals. With digital media and social networking sites, individuals and groups can have more ‘communicative power’ by forming networks of communication online, and are therefore less dependent on mainstream media to provide information (Newman, Dutton & Blank 2012). In addition to being less dependent, they are also more capable of using this communicative power to set the agenda for political action. A change in communicative networks is linked to a change in power, which is done by citizens using social media to communicate messages and meanings in the same way that mass media would.

Chomsky (1994:1) asserts that:

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, inform and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structure of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda.

In the digital sphere, social networking sites also fulfil the function of entertaining and

informing. However, according to Chomsky (1994) the mass media reflect the dominant ideology while making claims to objectivity in the messages it imparts. Digital spaces also have the opportunity to either reflect or challenge the dominant ideology and inform people's beliefs. However, it is a form of media and communication that does not make claims to objectivity. Anybody can contribute to content creation, and how other social media users choose to make meaning from the content differs. However, the subjective nature of social media content is no less powerful in influencing political beliefs and action than traditional media. "The politics associated with the Internet is a process of engaging with power" (Breen 2011:55) and to communicate over the Internet is a new form of communicative power, one that is recognised and not seen as a neutral media source.

It's important to understand the digital media sphere and the power of interaction and communication within it when looking at political participation, because "what binds these and other theories of media-culture interaction is that there exist spaces in which the interaction takes place" (Featherstone & Lash 1999, as quoted in Hassan 2004:41). Digital media spaces intersect with culture and media. There are "many different spaces" and "a diversity of ways" in which information is communicated and received" (Hassan 2004:41). The Internet is therefore a hybrid space which then influences how people send and receive information and meaning, which gives the space political power and the ability to contribute to the outcomes of politics, social movements and the #MustFall student protests in particular.

Digital media and social networks also have the ability to shape power dynamics and question pre-existing social hierarchies, by reframing the way people are seen in comparison to others in society. By allowing people to speak and create media which is shared online, it frames them as discussion participants and media creators, rather than "disadvantaged youth" or marginalised people (Dreher 2012:160). This elevates the position of people, as well as what they have to say or contribute online.

### **Representation and Access**

In South Africa in particular, the traditional news media institutions perceive themselves to be the 'voice of the voiceless' as well as a champion of the poor, due to a strong opposition to the government rather than a sense of duty to the public (Wasserman & De Beer 2005; Malila



2014). Rather than consulting with the ‘voiceless’ to consider their points of view, media institutions use the idea of giving voice as a way of taking an oppositional stance against the government, while maintaining the guise of objectivity.

While mainstream media may appear to voice the concerns of the public and oppose the government on systems and policies that further marginalise people, there are also other systems, institutions and cultures ingrained in the fibre of society that serve to silence and sideline the already marginalised. In attempting to represent the marginalised members of society by opposing government structures, the mainstream media may fail to notice and focus their attention on other situations and structures. In this instance, it is possible that citizens may turn to social media in order to represent themselves and their concerns against the institutions and cultures which oppress them, rather than relying on traditional news platforms to speak on their behalf. This may explain why, in the wake of the furore of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at UCT, young South Africans are turning to social media to represent themselves and their experiences.

However, a short while ago this was not an option. Access and what has been termed ‘the digital divide’ remained a concern. Reporting on online usage among African citizens noted that access was a consideration, as uneven internet access meant an uneven representation of online voices (De Lanerolle 2012). Christensen (2011) asserted that the Internet creates a divide by intensifying differences among citizens as it is only the well-educated who use these online platforms for political activity, while Hassan (2005:65) lamented that there are “outsiders who have never heard a dial-tone, or have never surfed the Internet; those millions for whom the gentle buzz of a mobile phone in their pocket would be an unimaginable thrill – those who have been deleted from the network society, those on the wrong side of what has been termed the digital divide”.

Not only has technology progressed beyond dial-tones, as YouTube and Facebook are now the two most popular social networking sites in South Africa (Bosch 2016), but the diversity of people using the Internet and social media has greatly increased. Recent Information and Communication Technology (ICT) research from the University of Witwatersrand has shown that in South Africa,

“The community of Internet users has changed over the last five years. Most users now

are black, almost half are women, two out of ten users live below the official poverty line, and four out of ten are on incomes below R1,500 per month. So overall, the Internet community is becoming much more representative of the population as a whole.” (De Lanerolle 2012:8)

Not only do previously marginalised citizens now have access, but this access can lead to empowerment. A 2010 study showed that “Internet use empowers people by increasing their feelings of security, personal freedom and influence: all feelings that have a positive effect on personal well-being. The effect is particularly positive for people with lower income and less qualifications, for people in the developing world, and for women. Empowerment, autonomy and enhanced sociability appear closely connected to the practice of frequent networking on the Internet” (Castells 2012:233).

### **Slacktivism versus the power of the networked society**

Despite the increase in Internet users as well as the diversity of people online, there has still been much criticism around the use of the Internet for political purposes. Critiques of the internet posit it as an unsafe space (Sandywell 2006; Picard 2015), rife with racism, sexism, homophobia, trolling and hate speech. Furthermore, Picard (2015) argues that to think of the Internet and its services as an empowering force and democratising institution is naive, with the term ‘slacktivism’ being used to describe political involvement on social media.

‘Slacktivism’ is used negatively to describe the use of the Internet for political purposes through conversation and commentary, without any constructive action. It is most commonly associated with the youth, as the largest group of digital media users. It is believed that the seemingly low effort online activities provide a sense of fulfilment, as if users are participating, without any actual political outcomes or further engagement (Morozov 2009; Christensen 2011; Skoric 2012). The negative use of the term implies that slacktivist activities are not the same as traditional participation and political commitment (Christensen 2011). The wave of student activity during the #RhodesMustFall protests has been compared to the physical students protests during apartheid, with the latter being considered ‘real’ participation and involvement.

Another concern expressed over slacktivism is that it takes away from the drive to actual participation that can make an impact (Christensen 2011). Online networks are then seen as

an effective tool for informing already active citizens, but which fail to mobilise and motivate passive citizens (Bimber 2001). However, while this criticism exists for digital media activism, the same can be said for traditional media which has the opportunity to provide information but cannot be credited for ensuring the media consumer uses the supplied information.

In addition, citizens who engage in digital activism are seen as participating individually online and not interacting socially or participating in political matters as a group (Putnam 2000). This in turn is equated with lesser and more noticeable impact. However, this critique comes before the popularity of social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook, which have taken what would be individual online activism and assisted it in becoming more social through online discussion groups as well as hashtags which can bring together otherwise unconnected individuals in one conversation.

Perhaps the biggest critique of slacktivism is not just that it is lazy, but that it is pointless, having no real political outcomes (Shulman 2005, Skoric 2012). Slacktivists then are not seen as disinterested; rather their intention to create political change is acknowledged while the efficacy of their intentions is questioned (Christensen 2011). Earlier researchers and media theorists purport that slacktivists are well meaning, but do not consider the lack of value and outcomes associated with their actions (Landman 2008; Morozov 2009a). It's important to note that the term slacktivism was not created to describe activism over the Internet. The word 'slacktivism' precedes Internet use, and by this definition of it, then bumper stickers, t-shirts and wristbands which show support for a cause but do not contribute to it can be considered slacktivism as it has no real outcome (Skoric 2012). With online activism, it is not so straightforward to decide the outcomes. The recent use of digital platforms in the Egyptian, Tunisian, and Occupy Wall Street movements proved this (Castells 2012).

It is important to note when researching the #MustFall protests and youth participation that the term slacktivist was initially used to describe activities by young people on a personal level that would then have an effect on society (Christensen 2011; Skoric 2012). Since its inception, slacktivism has been associated with the youth. It is then not surprising that the political efforts and engagement of the youth are dismissed. The activism that takes place online is criticised as activity involving weak ties between participants that seldom show a genuine intention to lead to political outcomes (Skoric 2012). However, in communicating

through online social media platforms, users can influence the power structures that lead to political outcomes.

The impact of online media production platforms must be taken into account when considering political engagement and protest action. This is because “the transformation of the communication environment directly affects the forms of meaning construction, and therefore the production of power relationships” (Castells 2012:6). A different communication environment such as social networking sites creates a new network society with different dynamics and different ways of making social change and reconstructing power relations. In the book *Network Logic*, Castells (2004:224) asserts that “power does not reside in institutions, not even in the state or in large corporations. It is located in the networks that structure society.” This new network society has “placed the interactions of media, culture and politics on to a new level, to the level of digitisation and informationisation” (Hassan 2004:4).

One of the key ways in which social media succeeds in affecting power relations is related to control and who has it. “Mass self-communication is based on horizontal networks of interactive communication that, by and large, are difficult to control by governments or corporations” (Castells 2012:7). At Rhodes University, attempts were made by university management to send out circulars to disseminate information that had been ‘approved’, yet what was shared on social media and how the initial information was interpreted was largely beyond the control of the institution. Students themselves had the chance to share information, dispute ‘official’ notices and argue for their cause, thus creating their own networks of power. According to Castells (2012:7), “Networks of power exercise their power by influencing the human mind predominantly (but not solely) through multimedia networks of mass communication. Thus communication networks are decisive sources of power-making”.

Rhodes University students, in communicating their own information and statements regarding #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, “exercise counterpower by constructing themselves in the first place through a process of autonomous communication, free from the control of those holding institutional power” (Castells 2012:9). Not only did students escape institutional power by being able to make autonomous statements using social media, but they also relied on the interactive nature of these communication platforms to further the

movement. According to Castells (2012), the characteristics of a communication process of the movement determine the characteristics of the movement itself: “the more interactive and self-configurable communication is, the less hierarchical is the organisation and the more participatory is the movement” (Castells 2012:15). Rather than information being disseminated from a central institutional source, new media technology was appropriated by students for their own purposes, to assist with decentralisation and the weakening of control from dominant centres of power (Castells 2004; Banda et al 2009). By doing this, Internet users and #MustFall protestors in this case were able to use ICTs to subvert the dominant ideology and contribute to political and social activism online (Hassan 2004). While it can be recognised that social media could be used by students to subvert power relations and challenge forms of oppression, their online activism is still not necessarily linked to political participation and engagement. The traditional notions of what constitutes participation need to be interrogated and reconsidered in order to make sense of student activism in a digital space.

## **2.2 Participation**

### **Theories of participation**

While the contribution to activism and social causes through social media is acknowledged as more than just slacktivism, it is not necessarily considered when discussing political participation, which was defined by Verba and Nie in much earlier research as “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba & Nie 1972:2). Their idea of participation excluded “passive forms, civil disobedience and political violence, efforts to change or maintain the form of government, behaviour outside the sphere of government, behaviour mobilized by the government, and unintended political outcomes” (Conge 1988:242). This definition is considered too narrow to explain participation, and has been criticised for its omission of other forms of participation (Conge 1988).

Since then, there have been attempts to redefine political participation that is more inclusive of forms of action overlooked by Verba and Nie. Nelson (1979, as quoted in Conge 1988:243) defined it as “action by private citizens intended to influence the actions or the composition of national or local governments”. This was taken to include aggressive, violent and illegal action. Booth and Seligson (1978 as quoted in Conge 1988:244) defined it as

"behaviour influencing or attempting to influence the distribution of public goods." Public goods in this instance are taken to include healthcare services as well as education. Other definitions of political participation describe it as action aimed at influencing decisions made by public representatives and officials (Parry et al. 1992) and as a way for citizens to communicate their concerns and preferences to the government in order to pressure them into a response (Verba et al. 1995). The concept of participation then grew to include donating money to social causes, signing petitions, protesting, fighting with the police, volunteering and social engagement (Van Deth 2001).

Despite the efforts to redefine political participation to better explain how citizens have a political influence, common theories of participation still have a strong focus on governmental issues and therefore political participation is often taken to mean voting in local elections and participating in a community forum (McLeod et al 1999; Christensen 2011). Other conventional political activities include "reading about politics, discussion of politics, contact with public officials, work for a party or candidate, and other activity related to the electoral process" (Conge 1988:242). Even more recent research looking at the role of the Internet in citizen participation focuses on how Internet use provides election information and affects voter turnout (Tolbert & McNeal 2003).

Disagreements over what counts as participation have also centred on issues of active versus passive forms, aggressive versus nonaggressive behaviour and governmental versus nongovernmental aims among others (Conge 1988). If participation is just active, non-aggressive actions with a governmental aim such as voting, where then does civil disobedience (aggressive) and signing petitions (passive) in order to gain free higher education (non-governmental aim) fit into traditional ideas of participation? It is necessary to reconsider what constitutes political participation in relation to the recent student protests around South Africa, as they are unlike any form of protest seen in South Africa in the past. In order to recognise the richness of political behaviour, the definition of political participation cannot be narrowed. According to Conge (1988:246), "if activity is not focused upon national or local state structures, authorities, and/or allocative decisions regarding public goods, then it is not political participation." However, in the case of the #MustFall student protests, activity that was not focused on national or state structures and authorities still had the ability to influence decisions at state level. What Conge considers social engagement, as opposed to political participation, are capable of enhancing deliberation and

affecting political power structures. A more holistic definition of political participation describes it as ‘acts that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned with shaping the society that we want to live in’ (Vromen 2003, as quoted in Harris et al 2010).

Rather than looking at traditional and agreed upon ideas of participation and citizenship, perhaps it is more beneficial to seek to understand “the everyday, and often highly contingent and improvisational, negotiations and performances through which people define and pursue their desires and aspirations” which then lead to social and political participation (Cornwall et al 2011:8). In particular, this can be thought about in relation to the #MustFall protests in a South African context. According to (Thompson 2014:335), “all aspects of our democracy in South Africa emphasise participation, either through representatives or through direct channels of participatory governance”. The concept of ‘acts of citizenship’ can also be used to think alternatively to how people are citizens, with Isin & Nielsen (2008:2) proposing to “shift focus from the institution of citizenship and the citizen as individual agent to acts of citizenship – that is, collective or individual deeds that rupture social-historical patterns”. With this in mind, it is possible to rethink online engagement and consider it as an act of citizenship, as well as a substantive form of political participation.

### **Slacktivism as a form of political participation**

In considering what counts as participation, it is necessary to consider the media. Political participation is mediated by communication because “through communication, citizens acquire information about issues and problems in the community and learn of opportunities and ways to participate” (McLeod et al 1999). Avaaz.org (<http://avaaz.org/en/>) is one such example of an online platform that raises awareness and creates a sense of a global community concerned about social issues. These online communities are becoming a larger and more accepted part of Internet users’ lives, with varying degrees of involvement (Bishop 2006). This is because information is easily disseminated, thus enhancing traditional meetings and coordination (Christensen 2011). The availability of political information online also promotes political expression in these online spaces and “political expression online is, in turn, related to traditional civic and political participation” (Skoric 2012:84).

Online spaces are not just platforms for information, but also for deliberation. The public

sphere is where citizens come together to share their views and make decisions in order to inform and influence political institutions. The internet and media communication technologies greatly contribute to this public sphere as they “favour democratisation, strengthen democracy and increase civic involvement and autonomy of the civil society” (Castells 2012:104).

Broadening the forms of political participation through the interactive characteristics of the Internet can then lead to “enhanced citizen involvement and participation” (Banda et al 2009:8) and “contribute to the reinvigoration of democratic citizenship” (Coleman 2006). The contribution of online social networks to democracy is supported by Castells:

“These networked social movements are new forms of democratic movements, movements that are reconstructing the public sphere in the space of autonomy built around the interaction between local places and Internet networks, movements that are experimenting with assembly-based decision-making and reconstructing trust as a foundation for human interaction” (Castells 2012:246).

Castells (2012:245) believes that recent political revolutions and protests across the world which has been assisted by technology signal a call for “new forms of political deliberation, representation and decision-making”. Therefore while some argue that the hashtag movements are often just forms of slacktivism, Cornwall & Coelho (2007, as quoted in Thompson 2014:335) claim that acts of citizenship can occur “either through self-created, or invented, forms of mobilisation and organisation”, which would include online participation.

Critics of online engagement posit that “in contrast to Facebook activism, traditional activism often involves significant time investment and risks to personal safety” (Skoric 2012:82). However, as online and offline worlds intersect, even Facebook activism involves risks to personal safety. Furthermore, in order for online activism to be considered effective “awareness needs to transform into action, something at which social media are yet to be proved successful” (Skoric 2012:82). Three years later, the 2015 #MustFall protests have proved otherwise and shown that online awareness can be transformed into physical action with offline results. The ways in which citizens engage with politics through media, particularly in the case of the #MustFall protests, needs more attention in order to understand the possibilities and limitations of this media use for participation (Malila 2014).



## **Online youth participation**

If political participation is “any action (or inaction) of an individual or a collectivity of individuals which intentionally or unintentionally opposes or supports, changes or maintains some feature(s) of a government or community” Conge (1988: 246), then this can include online voting, online petition signing and politically motivated hackings (Christensen 2011). While these new forms of activism are on a smaller scale, they are many-to-many forms of communication, resulting in a number of people being reached (Christensen 2011). The internet is an informal participatory space, and online actions then invite further involvement, particularly among the youth, who are skilled Internet users and participate avidly online (Delli Carpini 2000; Harris et al 2010). Online communication can provide information for already politically active citizens, but it can also mobilise inactive citizens such as the seemingly disinterested youth (Delli Carpini 2000; Skoric 2012).

In order for the South African youth to be active citizens, the need to have access to information that is relevant to issues that affect their daily lives (Malila 2014). Social media sites have the ability to provide that information and create interest. Coleman (2006:257-258) notes that “the very young people who are most politically alienated and disengaged are the most active users of the internet” and therefore online actions may be used to encourage the youth to be part of political activities which “overcome traditional barriers to participation”. The Internet can encourage the youth to greater levels of civic participation, and can not only engage them, but motivate them to political action (Iyengar & Jackman 2003; Livingstone et al 2004; Delli Carpini 2000). Other research into the use of online spaces by the youth show that they also use the Internet to have a say in social and political matters and to make shared meanings of their individual circumstances (Harris et al 2010). What appeals to the youth is that the Internet is a largely unregulated space where “self-expression and sociality are its guiding principles” (Harris et al 2010:27)

If what defines slacktivism is a lack of real life political outcomes, as well as unwillingness by participants to get their hands dirty, then we can assume that in the case of protest movements such as the #MustFall campaigns, this is not the case. Instead, this is political participation, by the South African youth, using online resources. Furthermore, it is possible that the youth do not fit into the extreme categories of either an activist or an apathetic student, but that there is a middle group that consists of youth who share an interest in the

political issues that affect their daily lives, but who also feel excluded from traditional political spaces (Harris et al 2010). Social networking sites therefore give the youth a platform to receive information, feel a sense of community, represent themselves and to participate by having a platform to voice their concerns.

## **2.3 Voice and Emotion Talk**

### **The importance of having a voice**

Crucial to being a citizen is whether or not people have a voice or feel they have a platform to use that voice (Couldry 2006). All humans have the capacity to speak, and so the need to have their say is central to all human beings (Couldry 2009). This capacity to speak requires recognition of another, and so having a platform to speak is as important as being able to do so. Voice does not just refer to the sounds made by speaking, as explained further by Couldry (2009):

“By ‘voice’ – necessarily – we mean something more: we mean the second-order value of voice that is embodied in the process of mutually recognizing our claims on each other as reflexive human agents, each with an account to give, an account of our lives that needs to be registered and heard, our stories endlessly entangled in each others’ stories” (Couldry 2009:580).

Having a voice requires recognition, and so self-representation and “naming one’s own reality... can serve as emancipatory means for marginalised groups and individuals” (Chetty 2014:91).

However, while the media has the ability and space to offer marginalised groups such as the youth a voice, they are failing at it (Couldry 2010; Malila 2014). Mainstream news media fails at enabling young people to be active citizens by not providing information which engages the youth and by not featuring the voices of young people (Malila 2014). In a study done on local Eastern Cape news coverage, articles about the youth still did not feature voices of the youth, but rather, voices of government officials and school and university management (Malila 2014).

The importance of having a voice is not just about being heard. It is also linked to political involvement and participation because

“in liberal notions of the public sphere, the media play a central role in facilitating what

happens in the space between citizens and the government by providing information, promoting debate and allowing people to articulate their ideas and grievances” (Malila 2014:24).

While previous research has asserted that traditional media fail to give voice and fairly represent marginalised groups, further research is necessary into how these groups are attempting to use new forms of media to give themselves voice. In discussing voice and the representation of the marginalised, Gayatri Spivak (1988) asked if the subaltern could speak. Even as a person of colour, Spivak’s attempt to give power to the misrepresented must be considered in light of her as a privileged academic in a first world country (Breen 2011). The subaltern cannot speak, Spivak (1988) declared. Yet at the time, the Internet did not function in the same form that it does today. With new ways of using the Internet and the rise of social networking sites, “the new importance of the subaltern is to be found in their relation to the Internet which offers them another way of speaking, a way of self-representation...” (Breen 2011:83). Social media gives voice to “people who have otherwise been denied, and are transformed by their access to a presence” whereby “silence is the alternative” (Breen 2011:56).

Not only does the Internet provide a space for marginalised voices, but it also contributes to a more accurate representation. When traditional media do attempt to feature the voices of the previously silenced, there is a chance that this representation is inaccurate or lacking as the media consumed is a “sanitised version of reality” that has been filtered multiple times through the media institutions itself (Chomsky 1994, as quoted in Hassan 2004:45). By using social media and online platforms, it is possible for groups to avoid a filtering of their voices by speaking and posting on behalf of themselves. Self-representation can then be considered a refusal by marginalised people to accept their silencing and to interrupt the dominant narratives by changing the voices that have kept these narratives in place (Breen 2011). It gives people, particularly the youth, the ability to take their voice back through their own forms of media use, rather than being given it (Malila 2014). By giving voice to those wanting change in society, social media can have a direct impact on self-representation and political participation. While considering the opportunities for self-representation and voice on social media, it is absolutely necessary to also consider emotion in speaking, because the way people respond to the tone of the speaker and the way they consider and value emotion determines how they acknowledge the other and listen as citizens (Bickford 2011).

## **Emotion talk**

One of the concerns around everyone being able to ‘have their say’ in a political space is that the conversations that arise then become emotional. Communication studies previously rejected the idea of empathy (which requires a sharing of emotion) in speaking as they believed it to be too subjective and non-scientific (Lipari 2009). What is considered the norm with regards to good political communication is not neutral, with good being seen as rational and rational taken to mean the opposite of emotional (Bickford 2011). Furthermore, this rational way of communicating is most often associated with already powerful social groups (Bickford 2011). In order to debate politics, you have to sound reasonable, with grassroots activists seen as “too hysterical to be able to participate meaningfully” (Greider 1992, as quoted in Bickford 2011:1030). ‘Emotion talk’, which Bickford (2011:1026) regards as “the way we talk about emotions, which is often intertwined with or prompted by talk that is emotionally expressive or that uses emotional appeals” is often disregarded in political conversation and participation and taken to be a state where one is incapable of affecting political change.

However, emotion can actually be part of the reasoning that allows for a shift in perception. Slacktivists are, according to McCafferty (2011, as quoted in Skoric 2012:80), people who are willing to make supportive gestures but do not have “the kind of emotional fire that forces a shift in public perception”. Furthermore, Bickford (2011:1025) describes the character of politics as “conflictual, impassioned, and power-laden”; words which suggest that emotion cannot be removed from political conversation. This “emotional fire” is not just necessary to change perceptions, but to also change societies as Castells explains:

“Social movements are emotional movements... Insurgency does not start with a program or political strategy. This may come later, as leadership emerges, from inside or from outside the movement, to foster political, ideological and personal agendas that may or may not relate to the origins and motivations of participants in the movement. But the big bang of a social movement starts with the transformation of emotion into action” (Castells 2012:13-14).

The way people view the use of emotion can affect the way they view the person expressing that emotion as “we are habituated to value certain kinds of emotions expressed in certain ways by certain kinds of people, and to denigrate, suspect, or avoid expressions that don’t fit those parameters” (Bickford 2011:1031). Therefore, an upset woman is seen as hysterical and

unreasonable, or a black person who stands up to inequality is considered to be angry and perceived as violent and threatening (Bickford 2011). Emotional expressions are interpreted in a context of difference and influence our ability to communicate democratically. It influences how we hear and listen to the claims of the subaltern because

“it makes a difference whether these claims are interpreted as the resentment of those who see themselves primarily as perpetually injured victims (Brown 1995), or as the anger and indignation of citizens who are being prevented from full cultural and political membership.” (Bickford 2011:1032).

In the process of giving voice to marginalised groups, how their emotions are perceived influences the level in which they are able to participate politically because “the systematic attribution or denial of particular emotions to others (particularly on the basis of group identity) prevents certain emotion-beliefs (and those who hold them) from playing a role in joint communication over what matters and what makes sense” (Bickford 2011:1031-1032). Therefore it is easy for students involved in the #MustFall protests to be categorised as angry and irrational due to the emotion talk in their conversations, rather than their concerns being listened to and perceived as valid. Furthermore, while the voices of some students in the movement do not represent all or the majority of students at the University, this is not a valid reason to dismiss their voices and emotion, as “appeals to the “shared purposes” or “common interests” of a community are not neutral; they often serve to falsely universalize the perspectives of the powerful, while the concerns of those not part of the dominant culture are marked out as particular and selfish.” (Bickford 2011:1025). There is clearly a danger in attempting to speak rationally and neutrally and it is that you play into the narrative and dialogue of the dominant culture.

The danger of appealing to rationality as the opposite of emotion is especially important to note in the media where objectivity is emphasised. Bickford argues that if one had to say something really meaningful with no emotion, the meaning would actually be lost. Mainstream media, in striving to ideals of objectivity, may lose the meaning in ways that speaking for oneself online may not. According to Castells (2012) there can be many people feeling hurt, anger, humiliation and they may be ready to transform that emotion into action, but first they need to overcome the fear of doing so. That fear is overcome when someone with whom they can identify suffers the same. For people to connect over these emotions and form a social movement is a process that “requires a communication process from one

individual experience to others” (Castells 2012:14). Online communication is this communication process which enables individuals to find others who share the same emotions.

This meaning expressed in subjective emotion talk which is then communicated and shared online through social networks cannot be dismissed or underestimated.

Emotion talk “is a means of challenging and of reinforcing power, and it can be used to expand or constrict relations between citizens, groups of citizens, and publics. Emotion talk, as a way in which moral and political judgments are expressed and contested, is neither illegitimate nor innocent. Its moral and power-laden character—power in both the structural and the strategic sense—is what we need to understand as we continue to think through a communicative democratic politics” (Bickford 2011:1029).

Social movements which require political talk and discussion cannot exist without emotion talk as “social change involves an action, individual and/or collective that, at its root, is motivated emotionally (Damasio 2009, as quoted in Castells 2012:219). This emotional motivation can be considered a sign of being fully committed and passionate to something, rather than objective and distanced. To Bickford (2011:1026),

“emotion is opposed not to reason but to alienation, estrangement, and disengagement. Emotion signifies a fully alive and committed way of being in the world, and emotional experience is the fundamental element of genuine human selfhood”.

In researching the use of media and communication during the protests, it is then necessary to understand the importance of having a voice and the importance of valuing emotion in this speaking. Not only does the way we view emotion inform our judgements, but it also “gives us the materials to remake those judgments, and thus ourselves, and thus the world” Bickford 2011:1036). This is because understanding does not lead us to empathy and compassion, but rather, compassion which comes from sharing emotion through communication leads to a greater understanding of the other (Lipari 2009). This understanding of the other, as well as feeling and acting “rightly” require “a society whose laws, customs, and political and educational practices engage people to practice a certain habit of thoughtfulness about emotion and action” (Bickford 2011:1028). The #RhodesMustFall protests have been about institutional culture and systemic oppression, which if not enforced by law cannot be changed

by law, but rather by a habit of thoughtfulness, compassion towards the other, and a commitment to listening to the voices of the marginalised in a way that validates their emotion as reasonable.

## **2.4 Lurking**

While there has been recent emphasis placed on the importance of voice and emotion talk, particularly with regards to online communication, the majority of online users are still not using the online platforms to ‘have their say’. Many are merely ‘lurking’, pointing to either a failure of the online network to adequately give users a platform to voice their concerns, or a lack of participation and interest on the part of the online members.

A ‘lurker’ refers to a member of an online community that does not post regularly or at all but who frequently reads what is posted on a group (Nonnecke & Preece 2000; Bishop 2006). It also refers to a user who observes the setting and is present, but does not contribute in a noticeable way (Dennen 2007). Lurkers constitute the majority of individuals in most online spaces (Crawford 2009), with some online researchers estimating them to be as high as 90% of online groups (Nonnecke & Preece 2000; Zhang & Storck 2001). As the number of users online grow each day, there is an increasing number of studies and research on those who actively participate in these online forums and groups, and very few on those who lurk, despite them being in the majority (Nonnecke & Preece 2000).

The term ‘lurk’ carries negative connotations and is used as a pejorative term (Dennen 2007; Crawford 2009) with researchers seeking ways to encourage lurkers to become active users (Bishop 2006). Lurkers are perceived as freeloaders who take from what is available online without giving anything back (Preece, Nonnecke & Andrews 2004; Dennen 2007). In virtual ethnography in particular, the presence of lurkers is often considered unimportant (Dennen 2007) as lurking is believed to be a form of non-participation (Nonnecke & Preece 2000; Bishop 2006). What is considered active participation such as posting a message is seen as requiring “a drive that appears to be absent in the members who chose not to participate in online communities” (Bishop 2006: 1882).

The danger of these negative connotations is that it is dismissive and fails to take into account the details of these interactions, and the outcomes of them. If these are simply non-participants, it would be easy to dismiss them in researching online communication.

However, while those who post messages are the most visible and easiest to measure, they are not necessarily the only contributors (Dennen 2007).

### **Ideology and meaning making**

As Castells explains,

Humans create meaning by interacting with their natural and social environment, by networking their neural networks with the networks of nature and with social networks. This networking is operated by the act of communication. Communication is the process of sharing meaning through the exchange of information (2012:6).

Therefore in order for an act of communication to occur and for meaning to be created and shared, it is not enough to merely give voice to the marginalised, but to also ensure that the platform to speak has an available audience. Those who ‘lurk’ are therefore essential in the meaning making process.

Online lurkers, depending on how they consume and interpret information, can also contribute to creating different meanings and readings of texts. The mass media are controlled by a small number of people and businesses and those who work in the media industries internalise the dominant ideologies and perpetuate them (Hassan 2004). However, Hall (1981:135) argues that media texts and their meanings are sites for negotiation and may be read in different ways, although there is a preferred reading (Hassan 2004). Therefore the role of the lurker must be considered, as it is not just about the text, the medium or the message, but the ways in which it is read, which is dependent on the lurker’s place in the social, political and economic structures (Hall 1981). By consuming texts which are created by other users online, in particular texts that are self-representative and use emotion to express a view, lurkers can read these in different ways which can interrupt the creation of a dominant ideology.

### **Social inclusion**

Furthermore, in spaces where people are usually marginalised, even lurking online can be a form of inclusion for these groups. This is because in a digitally mediated world, to be “disconnected, or superficially connected, to the Internet is tantamount to marginalisation in the global, networked system” (Castells 2001:269). As a result, it is critical to pay attention to how people are socially excluded digitally and how this can be resolved through forms of



online participation (Allan 2004). Lurking then, as a form of inclusion as opposed to marginalisation, is important for being a part of society and can be considered a form of participation, even if it is passive.

## **2.5 Listening**

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (Arundhati Roy 2004: n.p.)

### **Listening in relation to voice**

What Roy’s comment above suggests is that in empowering the marginalising and giving voice, the responsibility lies not just with those doing the speaking, but more importantly those doing the listening. The role of an audience and a willingness to listen is vital.

The Listening Project, which involves established and emerging Australian researchers focusing on the ethics of listening, has brought to the fore new ways of thinking about speaking and listening, particularly with regards to participation and citizenship (Dreher, Lloyd & Thill 2008). Political theory has fixated on the politics of speaking (Bickford 1996) and media studies has largely focused on a politics of self-representation and in representing others in a fair manner to address issues of a lack of diversity (Dreher 2008). However, The Listening Project “begins from the observation that media studies routinely has explored questions of voice and speaking, but paid rather less attention to the dynamics and politics of listening” (Dreher 2012:159).

With an increasing commitment to community media, as well as millions of people using social media, there are many opportunities for people to tell their stories and have a voice. However, Dreher (2012) argues for a greater commitment to political listening rather than what she believes to be a promise of voice being partially fulfilled. It is not enough to give citizens a chance to have their say without considering the effect of their speaking, how it will matter, who will hear it and what will happen in response. How people listen influences how others can speak and be heard (Bickford 1996; Dreher 2010)

Crawford (2009) identifies three types of listening: background, reciprocal and delegated. Online users, whether they are individuals, politicians or companies can switch between all three. The focus here will be on individuals and not business Facebook pages or profiles where there is the expectation of being listened to as a customer.

Dreher (2008) highlights various ways of thinking about listening and what listening can do, which will be explored further. These include:

the crucial role of listening in engaging across differences, the ways in which listening can either enable or constrain another's ability to speak freely, the ways in which a refusal to listen can operate as an exercise of power and privilege, and also as protest, the creative and ethical possibilities produced by attentive and respectful listening, the ways in which institutional structures and conventions can shape relations of speaking and listening. (Dreher 2008:3)

### **Listening across difference and acknowledging the other**

In order to address issues of racism and misrepresentation, research on cultural diversity in the media has emphasised speaking, having a voice and self-representation. Attention has been drawn to issues of how to represent “the Other” in order to create an inclusive media space (Dreher 2008:3). From a media producer perspective, efforts to combat racism and prejudice involve media literacy and skills training, with a focus on teaching the marginalised ways to speak up (Dreher 2009). However, it is necessary to ask not just how previously marginalised people can have a voice, but how those previously marginalised voices will be heard (Dreher 2008). While those who are either misrepresented in the media or not represented at all may be given a chance to have their say in the media, there is a need for those different to them to pay attention to what is being said in order to listen across difference and gain understanding towards the experiences of the other. Listening in this instance refers not just to ability to hear, but rather

“the act of recognising what others have to say, recognising that they have something to say or, better, that they, like all human beings, have the capacity to give an account of their lives that is reflexive and continuous, an ongoing, embodied process of reflection” Couldry (2009:579–580).

As mentioned previously, there is the belief that understanding is needed in order to empathise and be compassionate towards the other. However, the false belief that one already has the knowledge and understanding required to empathise can and does lead to a lack of listening (Lipari 2009). Instead, compassion is required before understanding rather than the other way around, and this process of being compassionate requires listening. Furthermore, listening is relational and “thus a politics of listening does not simply allow another to speak, but rather foregrounds interaction, exchange and interdependence” (Dreher 2009:450). Listening then is particularly important in the politics of representation and in striving toward multiculturalism in the media, not simply so that the previously othered have a platform to

speak, but so that their voices may be genuinely heard (Dreher 2008).

### **Listening and lack thereof in mainstream media and communication**

If the previously ‘voiceless’ have the ability to speak in mainstream media, it appears that there would be no reason for them to not be heard. This, however, is not the case as “the ability to speak in the media is surely shaped by the perceived interests of the audience and what media producers assume that the audience will listen to” (Dreher 2008:6). The concerns of the mainstream audience rather than the marginalised remain the focus, and who is speaking and who is being listened to is shaped by entrenched news values (Dreher 2008; Malila 2014). People in spaces of privilege and power, such as male voices and those without an accent have their voices prioritised and are better heard (Dreher 2009).

In order to facilitate genuine engagement and challenge the stereotypes of what is expected from a mainstream audience, the media need to be listening to more voices and not necessarily just the voices of those “who occupy spaces of power” (Malila 2014:25). Couldry (2006b) suggests that it is necessary to stop speaking in terms that the dominant media audience prefer and are familiar with, and rather open up a space where the voices of those who may think differently and disagree may speak, in order to commit to working towards living well together despite a difference. Social networking sites are a possible space where those who may not agree can choose to come together on the same platform to deliberate.

### **The ethics of listening and a shift of responsibility**

It is important to note that the ability to listen is not just dependent on how the speaking is carried out, but also on the extent to which one chooses to listen as listening is a conscious decision that one takes responsibility for. Not listening is not a passive act. To refuse to listen is an exercise of power and privilege and can be a refusal to open oneself up to persuasion and different ways of thinking (Bickford 1996; Dreher 2008).

By acknowledging listening or the lack thereof as an active act, it is possible to also realise and acknowledge where the responsibility for change lies, “from marginalised voices and on to the conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard in media” (Dreher 2008:7). The burden of responsibility then lies on “privileged individuals and powerful institutions” (Dreher 2008:13). This can be seen not as an option but rather as an obligation to listen by those with media access and power “just as much as the world’s poor

had a right to speak” (O’Donnell, Lloyd & Dreher 2009).

While the physical act of hearing emphasises perception and sensation, listening emphasises attention and acknowledgment of a reality other than one’s own (Lipari 2010). Hearing foregrounds a focus on the experience of oneself, while the attention found in listening foregrounds a focus on the other (Lipari 2010). Listening can then be seen as an invitation to other narratives, which one does not necessarily have to understand or feel (Lipari 2010).

Rather,

What I do need to do is stand in proximity to your pain. To stand with you, right next to you, and to belong to you, fully present to the ongoing expression of you. Letting go of my ideas about who you are, who I am, what “should” be (Lipari 2010:351).

According to Husband (1996, as quoted in Dreher 2008), with listening comes the responsibility to seek understanding which balances the right to free speech. For Lipari (2010) listening is not just an act of doing, but rather one of being. This way of being influences how we be in relation to others, and how we act as a result of that. This act of listening cannot be grounded in passivity and requires a conscious effort from oneself to not experience the same, but to acknowledge that the experience of the other exists (Bickford 1996; Lipari 2010). Listening is thus an ethical consideration, which acknowledges difference and is receptive of it, rather than just listening out for sameness (Lipari 2009). This difference cannot be received without engaging with “what is unfamiliar, strange, and not already understood” (Lipari 2009:45).

Listening is a response which is tied in with responsibility and is difficult to confront (Lipari 2009). However, listening is not just a response; it is understood as the only response. One can speak and act but without first listening, “there can be no genuinely engaged response” (Lipari 2009:47). In addition to the shift of responsibility for social justice that listening brings, it must also be understood that to listen is not an attempt to transform the world, but rather to transform oneself by giving up one’s certainties (Lipari 2009). If listeners can be as self-conscious about how they listen as speakers are about how they speak, then “listening, as an active and creative process, might serve to undermine certain hierarchies of language and voice” (Bickford 1996:129).

### **The value of listening during protest action**

Listening as a way of undermining hierarchies of language and voice, and thus of dominance

and power, are crucial in understanding the processes of communication in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests. Listening is seen as a distinct activity and not as a metaphor for related activities (Bickford 1996). Therefore holding a student body meeting that allows all students to attend is not enough to just count as listening. What needs to be investigated is the other ways in which listening can assist the progress of the protest movements, and how this is taking place.

Listening according to Lipari (2009) is a difficult way of being because it disrupts what is familiar and comfortable. Lipari's use of the word 'disrupt' is apt because following the #MustFall protests, recent protests at Rhodes University have made use of the #Disrupt to describe the protest movement on campus. Listening does not involve just hearing a language or story of someone different, but of listening to "painful and confronting stories, histories and criticisms" (Dreher 2008:9). In being exposed to uncomfortable truths, people are forced to confront the suffering of others.

Listening, or the refusal to listen then is an exercising of power afforded to the privileged (Bickford 1996). By not listening to the suffering of the other, one is able to

"protect [oneself] and [one's] privileges with what [one] already know[s] and understand[s]" (Lipari 2009:46). If privilege is when one's circumstances do not affect a person, then choosing to not listen in order to protect their privileged reality is a double privilege. Choosing to listen means opening oneself to responsibility and rejecting privilege, and the overwhelming anxiety that emerges from this responsibility gives me all the more reason to turn away and not listen" (Lipari 2009:46-47).

When one does choose to commit to listening, however, it can be a validating and empowering process, both for those speaking and those listening. Speaking in 2014, Malila notes that while South African youth "have a place as the main characters in stories about education, they are however neither being spoken nor listened to with regard to education or citizenship in news stories" (Malila 2014:32). The youth are therefore marginalised in their socioeconomic circumstances, and further marginalised within the coverage of education matters in news media (Malila 2014). In the #FeesMustFall protests, political listening can rectify this and ensure that South African are listened to and considered with regards to their own education. In being listened to, their experiences and struggles are validated, even if they are not shared by those in power. As Lipari (2010:350) notes,



“not that we will come to agree, or to see things the same way, or even come to understand in the same way. But we share the experience of *being* listening—and up from the listening bubbles a speaking.”

Listening does not always result in people agreeing, but this is not a failure of speaking. Rather, just the process of being heard and having one's lived experiences acknowledged can be a validating experience which encourages the youth to continue fighting for social justice. Furthermore, listening with the awareness that challenge and conflict could arise implies a willingness to learn and change which comes from giving up control (Dreher 2008). In doing so, the process of listening “can entail a decentring and denaturalising” and “unlearning as well as learning” (Dreher 2008:10). One of the key concepts that have emerged from the protests at Rhodes University has been the idea of both learning, as well as unlearning harmful and oppressive discourses.

While it is important to acknowledge difference and disagreement, listening can also arise from a preconception of interconnectedness and solidarity, with people listening to what is ‘different’ to find what is the same (Dreher 2008). This is important as during the #MustFall protests, one of the biggest calls was for solidarity and for privileged students as well as academic staff to stand alongside those who were marginalised. This highlights the fact that to be given a voice is not enough as to stand alone and speak can sometimes do more harm. A silent gaze from someone who chooses to not listen takes the place of spoken communication and can make the speaker feel objectified rather than empowered (Bickford 1996). Listening therefore changes the relationship between the speaker and the audience as it is grounded in interaction and exchange and draws people together (Bickford 1996; Dreher 2008).

While there are opportunities for voice and participation, Couldry (2009, 2010) argues that voice does not necessarily translate to having an influence on decision-making. This can be taken as a refusal to listen to and value voice (Dreher 2012). The aim of listening then in decision making processes is to facilitate “engagement and possibilities for shared action across difference rather than consensus” (Dreher 2009:449). Coming to a decision by means other than force such as persuasion requires more than just someone to speak and make attempts at convincing, but additionally requires another to listen (Bickford 1996). Listening therefore opens up the possibility of different outcomes as more voices are valued in the decision making process (Bickford 1996). Political engagement is done in the context of socioeconomic inequalities and differences, and Bickford (1996) argues that the only thing

that makes politics able to work is the act of listening. It does not take away inequality, but allows people to make decisions democratically (Bickford 1996). This is pertinent in the case of the #MustFall protests, as students who were previously silent and marginalised were not only given a platform to speak, but were also listened to and had an influence in decisions regarding the naming of Rhodes University as well as university fee increases nationally.

Finally, the value of genuine listening is seen most clearly in the use of social networking sites during the protests. While governments and municipalities often provide email addresses to write to or attempt to create informational websites that citizens can engage with, “an ‘interactive’ website is worth nothing, unless someone is listening to the process of interaction, and as a result some impacts ensue” (Couldry 2009:580). It is clear that merely creating a page or website where one can submit suggestions or concerns is not enough; there needs to be dialogue and real interaction that has an impact. During the #MustFall protests, the primary method of communication has been social networking sites in which protesters and university management have been able to interact with each other. Furthermore, political listening requires disagreement and argument, rather than empathy and friendship (Bickford 1996; Dreher 2009). Offline, people may not easily come into contact with and engage with people they disagree with. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have given online users exposure to people who think differently, experience different realities and share different political views, allowing them to choose to listen.

## **2.6 Lurking as an active form of listening**

Using social media as the primary method of communication during a movement allows online users to choose to listen. They can make the decision as to who to follow on Twitter, which groups to join and which pages to follow on Facebook. This choice is therefore an active act rather than the passive lurking that it is assumed to be.

In attempting to research listening, O’Donnel, Lloyd and Dreher (2009) found this to be challenging as conversations tended to move towards issues of speaking. The fact that people find it difficult to speak of listening without reverting back to speaking shows that the two cannot be separated and that listening needs to be recognised as active, in the same way that speaking is.

According to Benjamin Barber (1984), the first contemporary theorist to discuss listening, political action involves not just doing something or making a change, but also not doing

something or not making a change. To do nothing is also a form of political action (Bickford 1996). This means that we need to examine not just those who say nothing online, but also the consequences of this saying nothing and simply lurking. Bickford (1996:180) asks, “What kinds of attention do various media foster, what kind of citizens do they work to construct, what forms of power do they produce or prevent?” To this, Dreher (2008:13) adds “Which media forms or spaces encourage listening and action across differences? Where and how do media sustain privileges of refusing to listen?” We can ask this of mainstream media, or we can turn to social media and ask what kind of listening citizens, rather than lurkers, is it producing.

Lurking is evidence of listening in response to the voices of those empowered to speak online. The way the Internet works, or does not work proves this.

According to Coleman (2006:258), “The internet is a network; it works best when people are communicating in fluid and unconstrained ways, as in the social magnet sites, such as Myspace, Bebo, Facebook and Youtube. The tendency of governments, funders and educators to regard the internet as a form of broadcasting in which youth ‘audiences’ can be trained to interact with them has been a huge mistake.”

If people were simply passively lurking, then perhaps information relayed via the Internet could be recognised as a form of broadcast media. But this is not the case as the Internet users are actively listening and responding and making meaning of the information online themselves, rather than having information broadcasted to them.

While the term “lurker” has negative connotations, Nonnecke and Preece (2007) argue that if everyone were posting, no one would be reading. It is therefore vital that online users are receiving the information as opposed to just posting, as reading what is posted is the online equivalent of listening (Dennen 2007).

One of Morozov’s (2009) criticisms of online social engagement was that a slacktivist’s actions are motivated by narcissistic and selfish reasons, where people act on Facebook as they see their ideal self (Skoric 2012). The online world allows people to post information and construct an identity that they would like others to think of them as (Skoric 2012). In the case of those who lurk, their actions can perhaps be considered more authentic, as they are participating online in order to listen, rather than voice out an imagined constructed identity.



Furthermore, in terms of researching online communication, our understanding of online groups is incomplete without a further understanding of lurkers and lurking (Nonnecke & Preece 2001). By acknowledging lurking as a form of listening, it allows us to be more critical of it in a way that allows us to develop its use for media, communication and social change.

### **Lurking as a form of participation**

Furthermore, acknowledging lurking as listening allows for better assessment and understanding of online engagement, and “decentres the current overemphasis on posting, commenting and ‘speaking up’ as the only significant forms of participation” (Crawford 2009:528).

As mentioned before, the youth of South Africa are criticised for being apathetic and not participating in political transformation. However, previous research on participation has excluded “private email discussions or behind-the-scenes direct messaging in social media environments” (Nonnecke and Preece 2001:2) and even more so, those who just witness but do not react to the comments of others (Crawford 2009). Participation is seen as posting in online spaces, while those who do not are considered free riders who contribute nothing back (Morris & Ogan 1996).

By researching how social media contributes to acts of participation (Isin & Nielsen 2008), we can see how ‘lurking’ holds the potential to be an active state of listening (Dreher 2010) whereby the youth are more involved than they appear to be. Lurking as a form of participation is just as important in social media groups, as “public posting is but one way in which an online group can benefit from its members” (Nonnecke & Preece 2000:6). Dennen (2007) believes it is not unreasonable to assume that lurking can be done with positive intent. The acting of posting is not necessarily the only indicator of good participation, as “discussion itself requires a pattern of call and response, with turn-taking and listening being as important as contributing thoughts to the dialogue” (Dennen 2007:1625).

Dialogue and discussion is not the only form of communication to consider in social media use during social movements. In his analysis of the use of social media in the Occupy Wall Street movement, (Castells 2012:177-178) noted that

“There is a constant practice of storytelling in the movement, with everybody taking

pictures and making videos, and uploading them to Youtube and to multiple social networking sites. This is the first kind of movement that tells every day its own story in its multiple voices in a way that transcends both time and space, projecting itself in history and reaching out to the global visions and voices of the world.”

It is important to note that what people are posting on social media is not just instructive information or the beginning of a discussion, but stories of the movement and the people within it. Storytelling is occurring online, but a story cannot be told without an audience. This further emphasises that point that in social movements, users are not passively lurking without paying attention. Rather, they are an audience that is being told a story, either about others or about themselves as part of the movement.

Therefore while the perceived effortlessness of online activism has been criticised, it has been acknowledged that it allows a younger generation to participate, which in turn develops civic skills (Skoric 2012). Even by listening and following the political conversation, it generates interest in political issues and increases motivation to be an active citizen, while also providing an audience for the political stories being told.

### **Lurking as a form of learning**

Listening can also lead to a form of learning. Dennen (2007:1625) refers to this as “pedagogical lurking”. Lurkers could be considered peripheral participants who learn through observing (Lave & Wenger 1991; Dennen 2007). Listening and lurking may also play an important emotional function, especially with regards to sensitive topics such as race and institutional oppression. Speaking about online learning, Dennen (2007) posits that this form of learning may lower the emotional load of learning about difficult to discuss topics, as it takes the pressure of the person doing the learning to articulate their understanding, allowing them to focus on the content that they are reading. While Dennen (2007) does focus on online education, the same could apply to a group discussion whereby students may not be able to cope emotionally by contributing, but can focus on learning from the discussions of others, in particular, conversations about whiteness and white privilege which can be difficult to grapple with when one engages with it personally. Lurkers therefore benefit by observing the questions that others pose and the insights that are offered in return (Dennen 2007).

Traditional media is often used as a tool to provide citizens with information that enables them to participate and engage politically (Malila 2014). If providing information through print media enables citizens to be more politically active, then by simply lurking and using

the information provided online, one can still be in a process of engaging politically and thus enabling citizenship.

While Skoric has criticised online groups for being unable to “foster discipline and clear strategy, which are both needed to effectively challenge established order” (Skoric 2012:85), Louise Vincent (2011) who has done extensive research on the institutional culture at Rhodes University argues that it just takes a change of thought and for something to be questioned in public for the institutional culture and established order to be challenged.

### **Lurking leading to other active engagement**

Charles Husband (2008, as quoted in O'Donnell, Lloyd & Dreher 2009:436) argues that listening should not be a process that stops at understanding, but rather, one that “catalyses change and action”. While the Internet itself cannot be a source of social change, the way people use it can, according to Castells (2012) who further explains that:

“Social movements arise from the contradictions and conflicts of specific societies, and they express people’s revolts and projects resulting from their multidimensional experience. Yet, at the same time, it is essential to emphasise the critical role of communication in the formation and practice of social movements” (228-229).

Bishop (2006) argues that in order for an online group to flourish, group members need to contribute and lurkers need to be encouraged to participate online. However, this is not the case. The reason why mobilisation via social media networks has been so successful during protest movements is precisely because these ‘lurkers’, while not contributing actively online, responded to calls offline by attending and participating in demonstrations (Castells 2012), thus allowing for the Internet to be used as a tool “for mobilising, for organising, for deliberating, for coordinating and for deciding” (Castells 2012:229).

Even if all online members participated by posting, Skoric (2012) argues that social network sites are still not enough to achieve real socio-political change by claiming that “network-like movements do not have a centralised leadership and levels of authority, and thus have real difficulty setting goals and reaching consensus” (Skoric 2012:85). This analysis assumes that the only real political outcome can be a decision made by a majority on the group which results in some concrete action. However, it is not necessary for a consensus to be reached. Just the conversations and the speaking and listening alone can be the outcome that achieves

social change. In fact, it depends on people not reaching consensus in order to have members argue, discuss and validate their views. Furthermore, social media networks allow for the lack of centralised leadership that Skoric criticises as it “creates the conditions for a form of shared practice that allows a leaderless movement to survive, deliberate, coordinate and expand” (Castells 2012:229).

### **Lurking and active listening in the #MustFall movement**

Listening, understanding and learning is important in the student protests, particularly when the different backgrounds and experiences of students lead to differences in support for the protest. In research on student protests that preceded the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, Chetty (2014:97) noted that

Modern forms of class prejudice remain invisible even to the perpetrators who remain unconvinced of the class struggle of black youth and dismiss it as unruly behaviour, a lack of respect for the new order governing universities, irrational action and a lack of understanding of fiscal imperatives facing universities. The students who protest are viewed as insensitive to the feelings of their peers who want to get on with their education and whose progress is hampered by the disruption of the academic programme.

A lack of listening can be used to explain the reason for this. While black youth are voicing their struggles and concerns, they are not being heard and are rather being dismissed with no real effort made to listen and understand them.

Those who are against the protest movement, who believe that protesters are acting insensitively, may benefit from listening as it allows them to better voice their concerns against the protests. This is due to the fact that “the adjustments we make in order to listen better to others turn precisely on finding better ways of taking account of the complexities, the processual subtleties, of voice” (Couldry 2009:580). Therefore by listening through lurking, we become better at speaking and having a voice.

Communication acknowledges separateness between people, but also the possibility of relatedness (Bickford 1996). Those who lurk online show a small expectation that there may be something of value there, something that one can relate to and understand. According to Barber (as quoted in Bickford 1996), talking and listening has the ability to change a person’s self-interested preoccupations and activities and the decisions they make. Listening then is

not just tolerating what is said, it is an active straining to listen out for what makes us alike and what we agree on (Bickford 1996). Furthermore, listening allows one to understand how things may affect others differently to what one experiences, therefore realising that your interests and experiences are part of the interests of others as a whole (Bickford 1996). While these possibilities of listening online then appear to be a tool to bring people together, Bickford (1996) warns that this may be dangerous as succumbing to a collective will and striving towards common interest may not always be best, as common interest is not necessarily neutral and may ignore the experiences of minority groups.

However, the kinds of lurking and listening being done online are not being done as part of a policy making or consensus reaching activity, but rather to facilitate understanding of a system that oppresses and excludes some people, in order to change that system. It is therefore important to be careful in seeing online communication as an effective and fair form of decision making. However, as a path to gaining understanding of different socioeconomic perspectives in order to be mindful of others, it can be useful.

There is still more research that can be done into developing a framework of listening that acknowledges the relation between media use and political engagement (Dreher 2008). By doing this kind of research, we can understand how the media provide opportunities for the youth to speak, to listen, to understand, to engage and to create change, even when those ways of doing so do not fit the traditional ideas of political engagement.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction and research aims**

This chapter describes and discusses the research methods and methodology used in the investigation of online and offline student political participation at Rhodes University during the #MustFall protests. It also explores the manner in which students did or did not openly communicate, in order to understand the students who were considered politically inactive lurkers.

The research questions were investigated systematically through a multiple step approach as each method proved useful in understanding different aspects of the use of social media during protest action. While some methods allowed for an understanding of how students communicated during the protests, other methods explained why.

The research aimed to not only focus on the tangible results of the protests, such as the 0% fee increase at South African universities in 2016, but rather on how online interaction could lead to a community of students capable of critically listening, learning and understanding (Iyengar & Jackman 2003; Livingstone et al 2005; Delli Carpini 2000). Social media was understood not just as a platform for sharing information (Coleman 2006), but as an active space capable of inscribing power relations, giving voice and providing an audience (Teli et al 2007).

These are the main questions that guided this research and the methods used:

- Are Rhodes University students, through online and offline engagement, changing the perception that the youth are politically apathetic?
- How is the Rhodes SRC Facebook group enabling discussion, action and involvement in student politics, and how does this fit into traditional ideas of citizenship and participation?
- How does this participation contribute to our understanding of communication and in particular, of listening rather than ‘lurking’?

The aim of this research was not to generalise for all students, as one group of students, even if they match the specific demographics of another group, cannot be fully representative of that group (Bryman 2004). Rather, the research aimed to find data that spoke back to previous research on social media usage and student activism, which

perpetuates the belief that students are politically apathetic, and that online participation is dependent on speaking.

### **Qualitative research**

I conducted qualitative research by exploring the subjective experiences of students' online and offline involvement in student politics. Qualitative research aims to get in-depth descriptions and an understanding of social action in context rather than a generalisation (Babbie & Mouton 2001). Prior to the 1970s, researchers viewed qualitative methods as less valid and important, compared to quantitative research in the sciences (Bryman 2004). However, qualitative research does not attempt to generalise and can explore previously ignored or misrepresented voices (Byrne 2004). My focus was therefore on online 'lurkers' who were ignored in favour of the examination of louder voices online.

The research question was explored in the interpretivist tradition because student participation is subjective and fluid (Deacon et al 2007). The research could be considered inductive as I explored the ways in which social media cultivates a practice of listening and participation. However, parts of the research design are deductive in that a hypothesis was formed that not all students who 'lurk' online are apathetic. Inductive research forms a theory based on findings, whereas deductive research is the derivation of a hypothesis from prior theories (Bryman 2004).

In qualitative research the emic view is emphasised (Babbie & Mouton 2001). As a Rhodes student and member of Rhodes social media groups, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of student participation and students were possibly able to feel more comfortable talking to a peer. However, they may have hesitated to freely discuss sensitive issues due to differences in gender, race or class between us and because of my status as a researcher. The fact that I am an English speaker, and that interviews were conducted in English could also have affected the responses. Therefore, there needed to be reflexivity and awareness of my social positioning and how this affected my data (Byrne 2004; Goodall 1991). Furthermore, I could not claim to be completely objective as I was operating as a student, a researcher, a journalist and a protester simultaneously. This means that often, my approach was quite subjective. Being aware of how this influenced the way I viewed online content as well as how I engaged with other students during interviews was necessary.

Another factor which affects the data would be an overreliance on a specific qualitative

method. While cyberethnography allowed me to be a part of an online community and view all the posts available online, there is a danger in thinking this gives one a full understanding of how this online space is being used. Technologically-mediated environments can influence the kinds of information viewed and there is the danger that most online research has a textual bias which focuses on the written word only (Garcia et al 2009). Triangulation with other data sources is necessary here in order to avoid a textual bias which results from only relying on a content analysis of the texts available on the Facebook page being observed (Beneito-Montagut 2011). Rather, by analysing the texts available online and comparing it to the information gathered from physically participating and observing and then further supplementing it with information gained from interviews, I was able to provide a thick description (Ryle 1971; Geertz 1973) which requires “understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behaviour” as well as “ascribing present and future intentionality to the behaviour” (Ponterotto 2006:539). This research began with an understanding that within Rhodes University, an institutional culture exists which benefits some and oppresses others, a culture which students have used the protests and their voices online to speak out against. According to Geertz,

culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly, that is, thickly-described (1973:14).

In describing this specific culture and context, I make no attempt to replicate this study and the research findings. While universities across South Africa engaged in protest action in 2015, using both online and offline spaces to further their actions, the lived experiences of students across the country were vastly different. Therefore, while the research methods can be used to investigate other contexts, the research findings will not be the same. This is the difference between replication and replicability; it should be feasible to use the same methods to replicate the study in another setting, but not necessarily achieve a replica of the results (Bryman 2004).

## **Research Design**

My specific methods of data collection included cyberethnography (also referred to as virtual ethnography or online ethnography), which was supplemented with interviews and participant observation for context (Miller & Slater 2000; Rybas & Gajjala 2007). As with traditional ethnography which requires the researcher to immerse herself in the studied



community (Rybas & Gajjala 2007), I immersed myself in the Facebook community, in particular the Rhodes University Student Representative Council (SRC) group. Facebook was chosen over Twitter, as it is a space that allowed for longer posts and more interactive conversations which were easier to track. I did a textual analysis of the most interacted with posts on the Rhodes SRC group, and used conversations that happened on the Rhodes Confessions group, another Facebook group which allowed for anonymous submissions of posts, to supplement my understanding.

I also participated in offline spaces that were enabled by Facebook, as cyberethnography is not just a study of online groups, but how online and offline intersect (Teli et al 2007). My participation and own lurking generated not just field notes, but also questions for the interviews as well as reflections on my previous assumptions and thoughts.

I began my participant observation by attending residence discussions in 2015. These included talks across dining halls facilitated by the 2015 SRC and mediated by Rhodes University staff members, as well as smaller discussions initiated by students in residence common rooms to discuss what was being posted online. As protests from 2015 carried on into 2016, social media continued to be used to enable offline participation. I continued to attend these talks as well as emergency meetings which were called by students.

Based on the content seen on the Rhodes SRC group as well as my offline interactions, I used typical case sampling (Deacon et al 2007) to identify interviewees. I contacted a few of the names who regularly appeared in online posts, as well as people who used the Rhodes SRC group to facilitate conversation and engagement. This included past and present students. By speaking to participants in offline spaces and noticing people who attended offline talks yet never actively contributed online, I determined the ‘lurkers’ and requested interviews with them. In addition, I sent out a call via a post on the Rhodes SRC group, requesting that anyone who identified as a lurker and did not mind being interviewed contact me.

I conducted in-depth interviews both online and offline. While most participants were happy to meet offline, there were some participants who were not physically on Rhodes University campus, and others felt more comfortable conducting the interview via email. The interviews were semi-structured with a schedule of themes related to lurking and online participation. In total, I conducted interviews with six research participants, four of whom were lurkers. Following the interviews, I organised the responses from participants thematically and

compared them. I also used the responses from interviewees to determine what I went back to and further researched online. This included further hashtags I had not considered, as well as other posts.

## **Ethnography**

Ethnography is a method used to uncover meaning, “in particular, the meanings inherent to a particular group and its practices” (Cramer & McDevitt 2004:127). Furthermore, the researcher immerses themselves so deeply in the research setting not just to understand and uncover meaning, but to ensure that the actual experiences and views of the researched group are communicated and not just the experience of the researcher (Cramer & McDevitt 2004). Ethnography is used to describe lives and experiences as accurately as possible, and doing so requires one to be “sensitive and reflexive towards his/her subject/object of analysis and the context in which it is acting and performing” (Beneito-Montagut 2011:718).

The research field, context and setting included both the online and offline worlds of Rhodes University students, who met on campus and in lecture halls, but also used Facebook groups to communicate and negotiate their place and understanding of the student protests. I initially just observed the interactions that were taking place in public spaces on the Internet, such as the Rhodes SRC group and the Rhodes Confessions page, as well as the interactions occurring at meetings and protests. I then began taking selective and descriptive field notes (Emerson et al 2001), which allowed me to reflect on the space without interfering with how students naturally participate. This was enabled by the fact that I was a student myself and did not appear as an outsider. I must also note that the majority of my actions were not just done for the purpose of my research, but were actions I performed daily as a student. I regularly checked the Rhodes SRC Facebook group to stay informed about current events, and I was often on campus and participating in talks and conversations.

In addition to Facebook, I also checked Twitter for context when conversations on Facebook referenced what was being shared on Twitter. I read blog posts written by students as well as news articles that Rhodes University students were sharing about the protest in order to understand their understanding of the events occurring and the arguments and opinions that were being formed. A large number of the arguments and conversations during the #MustFall protests were linked to matters of race. In reflecting on the politics of race in South African education, Chetty (2015:93) notes that “It was far easier to understand racism during the pre-

1994 era, when racial practices in universities were overt, and it is far more difficult to engage with the concept currently, where racial practices are subtle, indirect and strongly interlinked with notions of class.” Therefore in attempting to understand the subtle race issues that manifest in communication both online and offline, it was necessary for me as a participant observer to monitor what was being said across as many platforms as possible, even if they were not the direct spaces being researched. Furthermore, it was necessary to not see the Facebook group as a complete separate space to Rhodes University campus, as “the distinction between online and offline worlds is therefore becoming less useful as activities in these realms become increasingly merged in our society, and as the two spaces interact with and transform each other” (Garcia et al 2009:52-53). While I was acting as an ethnographer and as a cyberethnographer, the real and cyber world were not separate. The only difference between them was how students utilised them for different purposes. Because of the high usage of social media during the #RhodesMustFall protests in particular, I chose to focus on cyberethnography, as my intention was to not just understand how and why students participated, but how this participation was influenced by media usage.

### **Cyberethnography**

If ethnography looks at the lives of people and how culture informs their experience, then the Internet as part of this culture must also be considered (Beneito-Montagut 2011). On the Internet are “symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life” (Geertz, 1973: 89). Most ethnography is still in the offline world, with computer mediated communication being largely quantitative according to Garcia et al (2009). The recent rise of the usage of social media and its use in political uprisings has resulted in qualitative analyses of the online texts. However, not much of this research has been ethnographic. While there are numerous studies on internet use, there are less studies “scrutinizing its role in everyday life as a crucial part of communication processes and interpersonal relations” (Beneito-Montagut 2011:717). I attempted to rectify this by paying attention to particular posts related to the protests to understand its role in the everyday lives of Rhodes University students.

On the SRC Facebook group, I filtered posts by searching for the hashtags #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, #RhodesSoWhite and #BlackLivesMatter. Hashtags on Twitter allow relevant posts to be tracked in an easy manner and allows other users to follow the conversation and join the conversation (Bruns & Stieglitz 2013). The same could be said for the use of hashtags on Facebook, which are used to search for related conversations, or to flag

a post as related to an ongoing topic. It was necessary to use relevant hashtags, not to analyse but to search for and collate posts. While the Rhodes SRC group was being used by students for political discussion, it was still very full of the kinds of posts that existed before (textbook sales, lift club offers, society and student news). Therefore it was not possible to systematically go through all posts in order to view and consider every post relating to the protest movement, as this would mean having to access the Facebook group every single time something new was posted. Hashtags allowed me to go back on a regular basis and search for protest related posts that I may have missed. I took screenshots of the posts between 9 March 2015 and 9 March 2016 which included my searched-for hashtags so that both textual and visual data could be recorded. I chose this time period as it begins when Chumani Maxwele threw faeces on the Cecil John Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, resulting in the #RhodesMustFall movement at UCT, which very quickly spread through social media to Rhodes University. I then followed the conversations and actions for a full year, as it includes the #FeesMustFall protests which began in October 2015 and continued into 2016.

### **Cyberethnography: the overlap of online and offline spaces**

While the term cyberethnography is commonly used to describe the ethnography and participant observation of a researcher online, I choose to disregard this as a separate or virtual ethnography, as “virtual ethnographies consider that the virtual realm is something different to the real world (Beneito-Montagut 2011:719). The boundary between communication online and offline becomes blurry (Beneito-Montagut 2011) and this can be seen by the way people post about offline happenings on social media, and speak offline about what they have seen on social media. Online and offline inform each other and to differentiate between them as separate spaces denies us a holistic understanding of how people think, act and communicate. Social and political actions both online and offline are “intrinsically linked and we need to expand our methodological toolbox to better capture this social reality” (Beneito-Montagut 2011:717). In fact, it is not just optional that researchers work between online and offline as one sphere, but rather it is vital as “the internet is no longer exclusively accessible with computers but it is moving across devices (mobile phone, PDA, laptop) and across places (home, work, public places)” and so to observe or participate only online or only offline as an ethnographer “will give a limited, partial and fragmented idea of how people communicate on the internet” (Beneito-Montagut 2011:720).

Virtual or cyber-ethnography only differs from ethnography in that the field of research is

online and the ways in which we observe and participate are through the internet. Research online does require adjusting how the research setting is defined, how the interviews are conducted and how access to research participants is obtained, but this does not change the experiences of people being researched (Garcia et al 2009).

### **Cyberethnography: participant-experiencer**

As mentioned above, these online spaces are groups and communities which I frequented as a student. I was a member of these spaces, as well as a participant observer. Some researchers have chosen to use the term ‘participant-experiencer’ rather than ‘participant-observer’ in their research online as this role refers to someone who has personal experience with the problems and discussions of group participants (Garcia et al 2009). To a large extent, while I was trying to understand the experiences of the student body in communicating online, I was already aware of the political issues that were occurring on campus as well as the racial and institutional matters that concerned students.

As a participant observer, or ‘experiencer’, I could also consider myself a lurker. Offline observation would require a researcher to be present in the research field and to unobtrusively observe (Garcia et al 2009). Online groups allow a researcher to do this without being noticed at all, which can be considered lurking. By doing this, “a researcher can gain enough information to reach a better level of understanding that assists with formulating interview questions for later on (Garcia et al 2009:58). Furthermore, the content online is not seen as traditional texts to be analysed as a form of media, but rather as the equivalent of offline conversations in which one would eavesdrop, and these overheard conversations which the reporter notices “should give us qualitatively different insights from those generated by self-reported measures used in traditional social research” (Skoric 2012:86).

There is some concern that lurking cannot be considered the same as active participation, as it may limit the researcher’s understandings (Garcia et al 2009). In order to counter this, I constantly assessed what further information I may have needed and how I could have gained this. By interviewing people, I attempted to fill in the kinds of knowledge that lurking alone cannot prove. It is argued that “achieving familiarity in the setting is a key factor; the researcher must be close enough to the subject/object of study to understand how it works” (Beneito-Montagut 2011:728). While I made myself very familiar with the setting and the subjects of my research, I deliberately avoided announcing myself as a researcher at the beginning of dining hall meetings or student body meetings in order to not influence the way

students naturally acted and spoke. These meetings were not set up by me, and so I wished for them to proceed as they would have without a researcher being present. While I could not avoid subjective thinking or expectations at times, being simultaneously a student and researcher, I attempted to avoid openly siding with people or expressing an opinion, and thus alienating people who may have had different opinions. In particular, with #RhodesMustFall, the debate was around the statue and whether it should be removed from the UCT campus or not, followed by a debate on changing the name of Rhodes University. During #FeesMustFall, the most highly contested posts were about whether free education was feasible or not. By even ‘liking’ a post, I would then be implicitly agreeing with and showing support for a side. I did not wish to prevent research participants speaking to me, or having the information provided to me skewed because they believed I supported a certain side. My aim was to remain ‘one of the group’ as I was before I began my research because “the ethnographer should attempt to experience the online site the same way that actual participants routinely experience it” (Garcia et al 2009:60).

A limitation of researching online spaces that Garcia et al (2009) identifies is the inability of a researcher to use their interpersonal skills to access and interpret the research area and people within it. They urge ethnographers to “learn how to translate observational, interviewing, ethical, and rapport-building skills to a largely text-based and visual virtual research environment” (Garcia et al 2009:78). However, as a student on Rhodes university campus, I was physically co-present and could establish a greater sense of trust between myself and my research participants by interacting offline and attending meetings and talks where they were present. Again, while the environment that I was researching is a virtual one, it was not completely separate from the physical environment in which students operated.

### **Cyberethnography: Anonymity and trust**

Furthermore, earlier online research faced the problem of anonymity between online users. This meant that the only information the researcher had about the users who posted content was their online usernames, and they had no information at all about those who viewed the posted content but did not respond. However, Garcia et al (2009:78) note that the online environment “is in a continual state of transformation and development”. This is especially true of social networking sites and Facebook in particular, where a large amount of information is available about every user. On Facebook, you can access the profile of anyone posting, allowing you to see who they are, what they look like and any other information that

they have chosen to make publically available. You can also gain access to those who lurk by seeing who are members of the group who never appear to post, or which names appear to 'like' posts without ever contributing by posting content of their own. The ability to click on a user's profile on Facebook also added to the trust levels as when I messaged a user on Facebook to request to speak to them for research purposes, they were able to see that I was a student at Rhodes University, that I had been a part of this social setting for years and often enough, Facebook showed that we have mutual Facebook friends, which added to the levels of trust between us.

## **Interviews**

In most online groups, members often have very little offline contact beyond the screen (Garcia et al 2009). In this case, the ethnographer has only the online texts to rely on. Where there is some offline contact, it is feasible and acceptable to only research online activity (Garcia et al 2009). However, in choosing to attempt to understand how students used social media and online devices to interact with protest action and participate, it was obvious that mere observation would not be enough. Furthermore, in the case of the #MustFall communication on the Rhodes SRC group, the levels of contact offline between group members, whether intentional or not, were incredibly high and could not be ignored. Offline research proved to be as necessary as observing online.

Previous research on participation and citizenship found that "the 'culture' of citizenship (whatever it is) may intersect with people's media consumption in a wide range of ways, whose meaning can be grasped only by listening closely to individuals' reflexive accounts of their practice" (Couldry 2006:328).

For this reason and for the purposes of accurate interpretation, individual interviews were conducted with members of the Rhodes SRC group and Rhodes University students. Offline interviews are a way of verifying information that has been gathered online through participant observation, clarifying information that may be misunderstood and directing my attention to content that may be overlooked (Garcia et al 2009). In the process of the interviews, research participants mentioned keywords, names and phrases that I was able to further search for on the Rhodes SRC group and as my knowledge and understanding developed, so did my interview questions.

Through my observation online, I was able to use typical case sampling to identify those who had visibly contributed to the online space, either by posting or commenting on other posts

and engaging online. I contacted these users through Facebook to request interviews. Despite my research focus being on lurking, I felt it necessary to interview those who had shaped the content of the Facebook group in order to provide context and ensure that no important conversations were overlooked. In approaching research subjects, I gave clear information on who I was and why I was conducting this research. Furthermore, the potential participants were able to click on my Facebook profile and find out more information about me in order to establish trust. Of the three active users that I contacted, two were willing to be interviewed. Interestingly, during the interviews their responses revealed that despite there being occasions in which they visibly participated on the group, they also considered themselves as lurkers at times. Following this sourcing of participants, I posted a message on the Rhodes SRC group, explaining my research and requesting that those who identify as lurkers contact me should they wish to participate. I received responses from both current and former students who were interested. Unfortunately, not all the interviews took place as some interviewees did not follow through. In total, six participants were interviewed.

Some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the others were done using email as some of the participants were no longer on campus and other students, particularly those who identified as lurkers, felt more comfortable talking online. Online interviews can be just as valuable as face-to-face interviews as they add to the analyses of online observation (Garcia et al 2009) and may even be the preferred mode of communication for the research participants. While the structure may be different, online interviews are no less valid than offline interactions (Garcia et al 2009). The online interviews were done by sending through a list of questions through Facebook messenger, allowing for the participants to respond in a comfortable space. Responses and follow-up questions were exchanged through Facebook.

Face-to-face interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours with a focus on the interviewee's presence on the Facebook group and their personal observations and experiences. While the interviewees were aware that I was researching those who lurked, I did not make the link to participation clear, as I wanted them to define for themselves their understanding of their involvement and participation. The interviews were semi-structured and while interviewees were prompted to speak about certain topics according to an interview guide, this was minimal and if an interviewee did feel the need to discuss a completely separate topic, this was allowed as it had the potential to offer insight that I had not previously considered. While the number of participants interviewed was small, the



information provided was rich and useful.

Each interview was conducted in a space chosen by the interviewee in order to ensure that they were as comfortable as possible. This ranged from residence bedrooms on campus to public restaurants in town. Participants were made aware that the interview was being recorded, but were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder as well as on a cellphone as a back-up. In return for the participants' time, I bought them a beverage of their choosing and light snacks depending on where the interview was conducted.

### **Interview guide**

I conducted a pilot study in 2015 with a range of Rhodes University students from various fields. This enabled a clearer understanding of what students wanted to speak about for further interviews. I then developed an interview guide which covered the content they had either themselves posted or read online, their offline interaction, their feelings and emotions toward the protests and the online communication, and their views on lurking and participation. Rather than just asking if they lurk and why, I asked students to describe the Facebook group as they understood it, and further describe in their own words how they were a part of it. This was to not just understand lurking, but to understand involvement, participation and student political action as it is being played out online.

Having an interview guide assisted me in ensuring the conversation was always relevant to my research. It also ensured a flow and for similar themes to emerge within each interview, even if the responses were different. Talking about a specific incident that played out online and specific hashtags also assisted in jogging the memory of research participants and making them feel as if they were familiar and knowledgeable enough, thus giving them confidence to talk freely about their experiences and understandings.

However, I did not adhere to the guide too rigidly as I wanted the research participants to speak about what they felt needed to be said. In some instances, this allowed them to speak about casual topics that made them feel more comfortable speaking to me, and in other instances it allowed them to mention issues that I had not noticed as a participant observer. To some extent, I allowed them to direct the conversation, with myself only interrupting to bring it back to the Rhodes SRC Facebook group. This was sometimes necessary, as interviewees did tend to at times talk about personal interactions on Facebook. While

unrelated to the protest action, I found these diversions interesting in that they allowed me to understand how participants use social media in general. I also allowed interviewees to ask questions back, so that they would understand fully what they are participating in, and also so that they could add anything useful that we may have missed. Furthermore, I used points raised in previous interviews and conversations to probe and prompt subsequent interviews, allowing for research participants to speak about similar issues but from different perspectives. However, because of the conversational nature of the interview rather than a quantitative questionnaire style investigation, I was able to gain a more thorough understanding of how people participated online, rather than just a basic comparison of research participants. While a comparison of why people ‘lurk’ or engage the way they do is necessary, I found it far more important to describe how they participated, and to what extent this influenced their general political involvement. By researching students’ reasons for joining the Facebook group, their understanding of the content they viewed, their activity online and the relation to their lives offline, I was able to gain a richer understanding and provide a thick description.

### **Ethics and limitations**

Informed consent was necessary for the interviews and confidentiality and anonymity was prioritised. Before each interview, participants signed a form that gave explicit information on what the research project was about, how the information would be used and who had access to it. Research subjects were able to, by ticking off various statements on the consent form, give varying levels of consent to how the information could be used. They had the option to remain anonymous or not. I also assured them that data from private communication with them would not be used unless it was necessary and explicit consent was obtained. Furthermore, I assured interviewees that once the research was complete, the findings and analysis of the study would be made available via the university library

Ethnographic work is ultimately political and the researcher’s primary obligation is to the people and place studied (Arnould 1998). In both research and publication, I worked with the intention to do no harm. My field notes were used to guide my interview questions and my thinking, but are confidential and will not be published. In discussions offline I chose to acknowledge publicly my position as researcher when asked or when speaking to people, unless it was a general meeting in which my presence as a researcher might make students uncomfortable. In those situations, I participated as a student and unobtrusive observer. My

presence on social media groups posed minimal risk to members. The SRC group is open and members were aware that their posts are public. There are mixed responses as to how to respond ethically to the content posted online;

while some argue that Web sites are analogous to magazines or television shows, and hence are intentionally and inherently “public,” others argue that some Internet locations are inherently private (Garcia et al 2009:75).

The Rhodes SRC Facebook group is open to the public and is not private; it is used for general content and is often quoted in news articles as even journalists who do not attend the University have the ability to view the content. The way in which a public Facebook group operates allows for covert research to take place. Users are aware that their posts are publically available and it was not been necessary to assert my presence as researcher. In a sense, I too was lurking’. However, the users of the group may not necessarily have expected a researcher to be gathering data, despite the openness of the group (Beneito-Montagut 2011). Therefore despite the group allowing for a research process that does not require consent, I made a post on the group calling for research participants to interview and therefore also making it clear that I was researching the group and its content. With ethnographic research, consent is therefore not gained once-off but has to constantly be renegotiated and so required continuous reflection as I negotiated my place as both researcher and student in online and offline spaces.

With regards to the limitations of collecting online content, I am aware that posts and comments can and have been deleted. Furthermore, despite searching for specific hashtags, it is possible that students could have posted content without using the hashtag. As a result, alternative search terms such as “name change” and “free education” were used. There are also limitations to using the Rhodes SRC group specifically, because once users began to speak more frequently about political issues on the group, the SRC created another group for conversations around Activism and Transformation. Posts that related to this matter were redirected and deleted off the main SRC group. It is also necessary to note that members of the SRC are the administrators for all group content and have the ability to police the posts, which could be influenced by their ideological stance. In 2015, anyone could post on the group without prior approval. Since then, the settings on the group have changed and all posts have to now be approved by an SRC administrative member before it is published online.

In terms of online anonymity on platforms such as Facebook, even if a user’s profile name

has been blurred in screenshots or not mentioned in text, keywords from their post or comment can be searched for and this can be linked back to a specific Facebook user's profile. Ethical considerations around anonymity therefore have to be adjusted for online use (Garcia et al 2009). When speaking about a specific post or comment that can be linked back to a user, I chose to make other information about that person vague so that any other information garnered from them through interviews cannot be linked to a specific comment, unless they have given permission to be identified this way. Furthermore, discretion was relied on regarding individual cases as "one cannot assume that a subject that is considered sensitive or private in the offline world will necessarily be considered so online" (Garcia et al 2009:77). In addition, it is important to note that not all the subjects observed could be informed as there were individuals who interacted with the main participants that I interviewed, but they were not the focus of the analysis. Mentioning the nature of their online activity without reference to their identity did not cause any harm and so it was not necessary to gain their consent.

Finally, ethnography as a method has its limitations in that data is generated through the observation and experience of humans who can and will make mistakes (Beneito-Montagut 2011). The results it produces will also only be partial depending on what the researcher chooses to focus on, making it impossible to fully describe the research area no matter how thick the description is (Beneito-Montagut 2011). This does not mean that ethnography cannot add to our understanding:

It should be noted that ethnography is an interpretive process and its goal is to make meaning of culture. In order to achieve this it is necessary to be reflexive about the interpretations, limitations and potential research biases in the process of data collection, analyses, interpretation and theorization (Beneito-Montagut 2011:729).

In the process of participating offline, observing online, collecting screenshots of data, contacting research subjects, interviewing, taking field notes, lurking and listening, I was aware that the most important and valuable thing I could do as a researcher was to constantly reflect on the environment and on myself as a participant observer within it.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

My interest and investigation into the ways in which students were participating in protest action began in March 2015 when, as a Rhodes University student and member of the Rhodes University SRC Facebook group, I began noticing increased political posts and discussion on the group. This was the beginning of student protests across South African campuses, much of which was discussed, documented and fuelled online. In this chapter, I attempt to describe and illustrate the online sphere that Rhodes University students participated in, as well as the offline spaces in which political participation occurred. Both the online and the offline spaces cannot be separated as they intersect and mutually inform how students engaged in the protest action. I began with a cyber-ethnographic documentation of the Rhodes University Student Representative Council group on Facebook, followed by accounts of my experience as a participant observer offline on the Rhodes University campus. While my immersion into these spaces provided invaluable insights, I cannot speak for the students themselves as their individual experiences and interpretations of the spaces they are in cannot be understood by observation alone. Following months of observation and participation, I began interviewing students, staff and alumni of Rhodes University. The interviews can be considered a form of extended observation in order to further engage with the space and more importantly, the people within it. While my focus is on online communication, it is important to remember that the Internet does not produce the media, people do and the Internet merely enables this production. Therefore, actually speaking to students was vital in order to gain a thick description and understanding. Their responses and interpretations of their experiences enable us to understand the many ways in which students engaged or disengaged from the student protest action, and allow us to expand our ideas on what participation means to the youth of South Africa.

#### **4.2 Cyber-ethnographic observations**

Following the incident on 15 March 2015 where Chumani Maxwele threw faeces onto a statue of Cecil John Rhodes, Facebook emerged as a way to connect Rhodes University students with the happenings on UCT campus, as well as develop their own stances on issues

relating to politics and race. New groups, such as the UCT: Rhodes Must Fall group, were created on Facebook while existing groups and pages were increasingly being used to discuss race and institutional culture within the university as well as across South Africa. Social media during the protests in general “emerged as important vehicles for mobilizing support, both inside and beyond university environments” (Oxlund 2016:np).

While some ethnographers see ethnography as a detached researcher visiting a ‘site’ as an outsider (Forte 2004, as quoted in Garcia et al 2009), I had been a member of this group as I had been a student of Rhodes University since 2011 and so I did not require special permission to join for research purposes. As the group has just under 10 000 members, many of whom do not attend the university, group members post with the knowledge that while what they say applies to Rhodes University students, it may be read and accessed by outsiders as well as staff members in this group.

I began tracking the activity on the page from 15 March 2015 and continued until 15 March 2016. Prior to the protests, the Facebook group was used by current students and alumni to discuss matters relating to life at Rhodes University. Typical posts were about textbooks being sold, student accommodation, requests for lifts to and from the airport, as well as information regarding student societies and events. From 15 March 2015 onwards posts of a political nature appeared and steadily increased. I interpreted the posts within the context of the Rhodes University campus and my experience of student life in an attempt to illustrate the online sphere that Rhodes University students actively participated in. A major influence in my understanding was the decision to treat the posts online not as media texts to be broadcast and read as traditional media, but rather as conversations and interactions between people. Therefore, I did not read online posts and comments as sources for a critical discourse or textual analysis, but rather as conversations that need to be considered in the same way as face to face conversations would be researched ethnographically. Garcia et al (2009) argue that the virtual world and the offline, ‘real’ world are no different in that “there is one social world which contains both traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and sites of social activity” (Garcia et al 2009:54). As such, I treated technological modes of communication as part of one social world that includes both online and offline speaking.

Furthermore, according to Beneito-Montagut (2011:720), online ethnographies have often ignored the possibility of data obtained from audio, videos and pictures by “giving an over-emphasis to the textual aspects”. In reading the online spaces, not only have I treated the texts

as conversations no different to speaking offline, but I have also paid attention to videos, sound, photos, memes and illustrations being shared to inform my understanding of how students communicate, even if those forms of media are not explicitly researched here. Despite being a part of the online community, I had to be flexible with my perceptions. I began researching with a broad understanding of the Internet, online activism and ideas of participation and allowed my findings to influence my analysis.

In 2015, the SRC group had roughly 8500 members but this number has steadily increased since then. It is a public group, meaning that anyone can search for the group, see the members in it as well as the posts and comments, even if they are not a member. According to the description on the group, “The SRC Facebook page is a platform provided to the students of Rhodes University to channel healthy discussions and debates on contemporary issues facing studentship, society and youth in general, as well as a forum for students to have direct contact with the SRC and other students within the University. Its aim is to be a positive, helpful aid to all students at Rhodes University.” While not necessarily used before for this purpose, the SRC page has been put forward as being available as a platform to discuss and debate politics. However, for the duration of the 2015 and early 2016 student protests, the discussion of politics and activism on the page was discouraged with attempts by the SRC to redirect the conversations elsewhere. This will be explored further at a later stage. In 2015 there were five administrators of the group, consisting of members of the SRC at the time. Administrators have the ability to delete posts and create posts pinned to the top of the page. At the time of research, there were no group moderators and members could post directly to the group without the prior approval of a moderator. This has since changed, prompting the creation of another Facebook page where admin approval is not required. By the end of 2016, the new group has been steadily overtaking the SRC group as the main Rhodes University Facebook group.

In addition to these groups, students also created a Rhodes Confessions Facebook page. Modelled upon other similar community confessions groups, which peaked in popularity in 2015, the group allowed Facebook users to submit anonymous confessions, which were moderated by the group administrators and then published. Initially started to ‘confess’ or admit stories that students could not say openly, the page contained posts which ranged from silly to scandalous to funny. It then evolved into a space where students could ask questions anonymously about topics that they did not feel comfortable speaking about openly, such as abortion options, as well as a space where people could publish unpopular opinions. Just like

the Rhodes University SRC group, the Rhodes Confessions group was an open group in which anyone could join and view the content posted.

However, for the purposes of this research the main focus will be on the SRC group as it was the most active and most relevant during the sample period.

While actively checking and reading through the SRC group every day in order to inform my understanding of what was happening in offline spaces, I was also able to go back and make sure I had seen every post relevant to the 2015 student protests using hashtags to filter posts. The initial hashtags used to search were #rhodesmustfall, #rhodessowwhite, #feesmustfall and #blacklivesmatter. In searching for these hashtags, I found other relevant hashtags such as #rhodesletstalk which I also then explored as it related to current events. It's important to note that many posts used multiple hashtags and so there was some overlap between hashtags and the content posted. While generally searching for a hashtag would garner all responses that contain that hashtag, it is possible to search for a specific hashtag within a group only.

### **#blacklivesmatter**

There were 21 posts in the Rhodes SRC Facebook group during the sample time period using #blacklivesmatter. The hashtag was used to link the conversation to an international situation where the oppression of black lives needed attention drawn to it. It was the broadest hashtag in terms of related post content, as it dealt with issues of whiteness at Rhodes University, the lack of care for black lives and black matters across the globe, as well as to talk about the extensive coverage in the media over tragedies in Western countries while African countries remained largely ignored. It was also used to call out racist people and racist incidents. One particular matter was a video made and posted on YouTube by students of Stellenbosch University, detailing the racial discrimination that they experienced. The video, entitled *Luister*<sup>1</sup> was then shared by Rhodes University students using #blacklivesmatter because, while the video was about Stellenbosch University, it included experiences that were faced universally by black people.

While the number of posts using the hashtag appear to be low in relation to the global usage of the phrase 'black lives matter' at the time, it's important to note that the conversations online were in no way lacking engagement. On 17 March 2015, a former Rhodes University student who was studying at the University of Cape Town at the time posted a message using

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<sup>1</sup> Luister is the Afrikaans word for 'listen'



#blacklivesmatter, calling out white privilege and addressing the need to tackle institutional racism within Rhodes University.

██████████ March 17, 2015

it's quite amusing how white kids at rhodes never want to talk about "race" related issues because we have "bigger" issues to worry about, like race maybe? you're tired of talking about race at rhodes? try being black. too much for you? i figured. rhodes reeks of white privilege and it's disgusting and appalling. black people can & do exist without white(ness). black student: "black students suffer". white student: "but white students suffer too." um okay, because i don't already know? we need to address and tackle institutional racism! #BLACKLIVESMATTER!

This post resulted in 616 comments in response, as well as 502 likes. The responses ranged from support and agreement to outrage, disgust and accusations of hate speech.

Considering that this was a time when race and race issues were just beginning to be spoken about, the magnitude of the response is notable. Within the comments, students shared links to articles online as well as YouTube videos explaining white privilege, while others asked questions and queried how others thought they could move forward. While there were some derogatory responses, many students used the post as an opportunity to teach and learn.

The phrase ‘black lives matter’ was also used offline, in the form of graffiti spray-painted around the Rhodes University campus on 2 August 2015. The Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, Dr Sizwe Mabizela, responded to this by stating that “This act draws our attention to the fact that there are voices crying out to be heard. Graffiti is a form of communication and freedom of speech is protected in our Constitution”. This was initially distributed via email communication to the student body and then shared on the Rhodes SRC Facebook group. The communiqué also stated that “CPU<sup>2</sup> have been asked to not remove the message, at this stage, outside the Main Admin Building as Dr Mabizela has called for this to be used to generate discussions and engagement around social inclusion and exclusion at Rhodes.”

### **#rhodesmustfall**

The hashtag #rhodesmustfall began being used across South Africa in reference to the call for the statue of Cecil John Rhodes to be removed from the UCT campus, but later started being used by Rhodes University students to discuss the possibility of a university name change. The adoption of the “must fall” hashtag by students beyond the UCT campus proved that the protest was about more than just a statue; rather “the hash-tag prefix soon became

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<sup>2</sup> Campus Protection Unit (CPU) is the on-campus security company for Rhodes University.

emblematic of a new wave of student protests identifying socio-economic barriers and infrastructures that “must fall” to ensure equal opportunity in education” (Oxlund 2016:np).

During the sample period, there were 56 posts, some of which were linked to news articles, events related to protest action, or photo albums from other protests. While the main focus was the removal of the statue and the university name change, it was also used to discuss incidences of racism, institutional culture and privilege. Students also used it to discuss inequality within the university such as the high cost of vacation accommodation, which adversely affected students who could not afford the transports costs home. This led to queries and discussions questioning the effect that race had on who could and could not afford accommodation costs. Following many online conversations on transformation, a student panel discussion for 24 May 2015 was organised and advertised by the Oppidan Press, one of the student newspapers, on the SRC group using #rhodesmustfall. In the Facebook post, there was a call for students to submit questions for the panel and set the agenda, therefore starting an online conversation in order to facilitate a larger discussion offline. In turn, the panel discussion was to be livestreamed so that people could also participate by listening offline. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements were protests that simultaneously occupied cyberspace and offline spaces (Luescher 2016).

The panel discussion was not the first time that online conversations led to offline meetings and debates. Following the heated response to the #blacklivesmatter post, an emergency student body meeting was called two days later on 19 March 2015. Students had the opportunity to attend the meeting or listen in through a live streaming link. The hashtag #rhodesletstalk was temporarily used to post about the meeting and keep students who were following updated on what was being said. The hashtag was mainly used on Twitter, and started trending at the time of the meeting, yet only 12 posts with the hashtag appeared on Facebook. However, a Twitter user and Rhodes University student decided to create a post on Facebook during the meeting, and then comment on it using tweets copied from Twitter. By doing so, she was able to transmit information to those who could not access the live stream and did not use Twitter. The post received 231 likes and 81 comments. It is significant that in this situation, Facebook was used to transfer information originally posted on Twitter. While Twitter is useful in uniting people nationally and internationally in a conversation, Facebook is much easier and more useful in a small space such as Rhodes University, where the majority of the student population are connected through a Facebook group.

Furthermore, while the meeting was taking place at Rhodes University, I was in Cape Town at a conference with a group of academics. Despite being out for a social dinner, many of us spent the night on our phones on Twitter and Facebook, keeping each other informed on what was happening and discussing the progress of the meeting. It is clear that the number of posts relating to a topic do not correlate with the actual amount of information being transmitted and engaged with. It is easy to reduce a hashtag and the conversations it produces to what we see online, yet there is much more engagement happening offline that cannot be as easily noted. If as journalists and media creators, “we are only as good as the quality of our conversations” (Suwyn 2002 as quoted in Willey 2014:75), then it is only by listening to what citizens are saying and how they are interacting that one can understand the full extent of a situation. It is not enough to merely name and list the frequency of hashtags used, but how people are speaking and the quality of conversations need to be analysed.

Following the emergency student body meeting and the #rhodesletstalk hashtag, students questioned what would be done next and whether these conversations, which were deemed valuable, would continue to happen.

██████████ March 20, 2015

Moving forward from last night, now that the discussion has started, are there plans for successive meetings? Perhaps a formal debate where various representatives (e.g. from management, the Black Student Movement, and other interested parties) engage each other on the critical points raised last night? I feel like we're off to a good start, but that one night is not enough to meaningfully engage with the issues raised by various parties. There are more voices that need to be heard, and more rational debate and critical discussion that needs to occur.

#RhodesSoWhite #RhodesLetsTalk #RhodesMustFall

The response from the SRC was to create a separate Activism and Transformation group which students could join and talk solely about matters of race and transformation. Related posts on the Rhodes SRC group were deleted and redirected to the new group. While the Activism and Transformation page was posited as a dedicated platform for discussion, many students argued that it took away from valuable engagement, as those unaffected by institutional culture and racial oppression could choose to disengage and ignore these conversations. To many, it appeared to be a form of silencing rather than a platform for voice. The number of posts, comments and interaction on the new group remained low throughout

2015, with it finally being completely unused in 2016. The few who did post did not receive a response or follow up to their posts.

By using the original Rhodes SRC group, rather than creating a new one, students were re-appropriating an existing space and making use of an existing audience, emphasising that the issues being fought for could not be separating from other student matters. Gerbaudo (2012, as referenced in Bosch 2016:4) “argue that social media has resulted in the emergence of new forms of protest and is used as part of a project of re-appropriation of public space”. Space is a very important factor to consider in that who it belongs to and who lays claim to it are intrinsically tied to matters of citizenship and participation. By speaking and engaging on a public Facebook group, students are laying claim to a space and by participating, asserting their place within it.

### **#RhodesSoWhite**

The hashtag #rhodessowhite generated 55 posts in the sample period, after being used by a student online following a series of A4 posters which were put up around campus by students. The posters used the hashtag and detailed descriptions of typical ways in Rhodes University perpetuated and sustained an institutional culture that benefited white students and staff members. This was continued online, where students documented examples such as “#RhodesSoWhite They shorten my name from Lihle to Leesh to Lee to "Elle" because Lihle is too hard”.

A documentary named after the hashtag (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCityGJCaYI>) was produced by Rhodes University journalism students and posted on YouTube. It was shared and discussed widely on Facebook. Because of the controversial nature of the hashtag, the responses towards the conversations were divided according to those in favour of it and those who felt offended by it. However, the interest that the controversy raised allowed the conversations to go far beyond just the Rhodes University campus.

██████████ March 21, 2015

A long-lost family friend of mine who goes to Wits saw a few things on my Facebook wall and asked me for more information about #RhodesSoWhite and the name change and everything that has gone on this week. I told him that because I am not there it is hard to give the most accurate details but I read up on everything and gave him my personal insights that I believe to be knowledgeable and engaging and open-minded. I wrote quite a lot about it with good points I think and sent it to him, and he is going to raise what is going on at Rhodes and UCT in an informed way to his Anthropology tut

this week. I hope that this sparks really healthy dialogue and discussion among students in Joburg too, because this shit is going down everywhere not just in Grahamstown and Cape Town, and we all notice it when we go home for the holidays. It is necessary to interconnect, let's get people talking all over South Africa. (This may be ambitious, but it is worth a try) x

Facebook posts such as the one above show a willingness to engage with an idea or thought that differs from one's own in an attempt to learn and engage more consciously rather than dismissing the experiences of others.

### **#FeesMustFall**

#feesmustfall was a much later used hashtag, used in news and social media across South Africa regarding the national student protests to prevent exorbitant fee increases that excluded academically deserving but financially lacking students, which directly linked to racial divisions. The hashtag was included in 57 posts during the sample period, having first appeared on the SRC group on 24 October 2015. In addition to posts about fee protest events and updates, students shared personal stories of their own fee battles to encourage other students to keep protesting.

The use of the hashtag and the subsequent conversations were less about race and more about class, despite the intersection of the two. There were therefore more non-black students at #feesmustfall protests than any other. Furthermore, the #feesmustfall conversations and student protests were the largest in the duration of this study, as it included students across most South African universities. A variation of the hashtag, #feeswillfall was also used. Towards the end of 2015, various additional Facebook groups were created to solely discuss protest planning and action. As of 21 October 2015, there were roughly 160 000 tweets nationally on Twitter using the hashtag #feesmustfall according to Topsy<sup>3</sup>, as Twitter was the main source of national commentary and protest updates.

### **#shutdown**

As a result of extensive #FeesMustFall protest action across South African university campuses, 21 October 2015 was declared a national university shutdown to discuss a way forward. The hashtags #nationalshutdown (46 posts), #rhodessshutdown (8 posts) and #rushutdown (14 posts) were used. The posts were created by students and the student newspapers and included information on when to protest, what was happening next, legal issues regarding protest participation and updates on liaisons between students and university

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<sup>3</sup> Topsy was a social analytics company which partnered with Twitter to provide insights on conversations and trends on the social networking platform. Topsy closed in December 2015.

management. The mostly informative posts allowed students to be updated and join at any time, even if they were not participating from the beginning. In addition, posts included emotional calls to action and requests for support and solidarity. Using the hashtag #rhodesshutdown was also an opportunity for Rhodes University students to align themselves with the larger #nationalshutdown objectives, or conversely to distance themselves by releasing public statements stating their disagreement with the protest.

Collectively, the use of the various hashtags showed an awareness of the value of linking a conversation to a broader argument as well as creating awareness and allowing it to have greater reach. It also showed a need to go beyond just the online sphere, by turning conversations into action and offline engagement. While hashtags are originally a function of Twitter to connect conversations around a specific topic and make it easily searchable, at Rhodes University the size of the student population and the Facebook group already created that connection.

The posts on the Rhodes SRC Facebook group served a variety of communicative functions which went beyond just speaking and having a say. These included calls to action, requests for help and information, emotional rants, personal thought pieces, mobilisation of students, sharing of related media, updates and reports, as well as humour through memes, appropriation of hashtags and illustrations.

While I have solely focused on the Rhodes University Facebook group, it is important to note that there is a multitude of intersecting social circles on Facebook. Many of the posts using the hashtags were on the Black Student Movement page. The Black Student Movement (BSM) describes itself on their Facebook page as “a group of students concerned about the institutional culture of Rhodes University” which “came out of conversations about our personal experiences as marginalised students who are not able to cope because of the structural, class-based, and intellectual oppression of the Rhodes environment.” What began as a small group of students with concerns based on what was being said on social media turned into a movement with just under 3000 followers on Facebook. Offline, the number of people at meetings grew as the BSM used social media to announce future meetings and points of discussion. However, strategy regarding protest action was not discussed online, therefore encouraging those who were interested in participating to attend the meetings.

Many of the SRC posts referenced the BSM, but I have chosen to not focus on the BSM, particularly because its members were in support of the protest. While the BSM page had

been integral in protest, what I have been interested in is the space of the SRC page with differing views. Posts from the BSM were also shared on the SRC page.

There were also hall groups, res groups and class groups in which students could engage on political matters. I only had access to one hall and one residence Facebook group, of which I was previously a resident. Political engagement was not excluded from these groups, as this was where I found out about offline hall and residence talks. It is likely that there was a higher level of ‘lurking’ happening here, as the groups were smaller, there was less content posted and it was thus more likely to be noticed and considered relevant. I later attempted to find out more about this through interviews with students in residence.

In observing the posts shared on the Rhodes SRC Facebook page, as well as the comments, likes, reactions and hashtags, I found that the quantitative values did not matter as much as the content and how it was understood in this context. How many posts appeared per hashtag made no difference to understanding the value and usage of a hashtag. The hashtag, created to be used as a search function to link related posts on social media, has now become part of the language of the cyber sphere, in which people use hashtags to communicate and convey thoughts and social stances on a matter. For some, adding the suffix “MustFall” to another word to create a hashtag has become a way to convey their disapproval of something. Hashtags have also been used online, either spray painted on buildings and roads (#BlackLivesMatter), or used in posters to start a conversation (RhodesSoWhite).

#### **4.3 Participant observation**

In conjunction with continuously observing the online spaces that Rhodes University students were in, I also physically participated in various offline gatherings, both as a student and as a researcher. This was done in order to make sense of what was being planned and discussed online, as well as to determine how effectively online deliberation translates to offline participation and involvement. Furthermore, I wanted to see how separate or how intersecting the ‘real’ and the virtual world were, in order to speak back to prior research. At these gatherings, I appeared as a participant in students’ natural environment, so as to not influence the process in any way. None of the meetings were set up by me, but rather by the students and management themselves as part of their engagement with student politics. Being able to physically participate in student meetings allowed me to observe non-verbal behaviour such as students being on their phones, their body language in response to what others are saying, their hesitation to do something, laughter, applause and cheering, or sometimes simply

walking away from something. It also allowed me to see who spoke, who did not speak, and when or why they did so.

From the beginning of the #RhodesMustFall communication, offline meetings were being organised at Rhodes University. This was partially due to students wanting to know how to move forward now that race matters were being discussed, but in the case of the emergency student body meeting on 17 March 2015, it was also to reduce panic and possibly prevent further protest action that would be deemed disruptive. From the beginning of 2015, leading up to the #FeesMustFall protests which continued into 2016, there has been a gradual shift in who has organised and led these meetings.

### **SRC-led dining hall discussions**

In mid-2015, the Rhodes University SRC organised a series of talks at each of the university dining halls, allowing students within each hall to come together and air their grievances around institutional culture and transformation or lack thereof at the university. This was advertised to the student body through the Rhodes SRC Facebook group, as well as individually on the various hall Facebook pages by the respective hall administrators. As a former student in residence, I was still a member of my former residence Facebook group as well as my former dining hall Facebook group. Despite no longer living in residence, I requested to join the conversation as a participant. I made it known that this was related to my research to the dining hall warden, who allowed me access and acted as gatekeeper to the space.

At the dining hall talk, my intention was to observe and gain further understanding on how students were participating and communicating. I did not record the talk to protect the privacy of the participants. However, the SRC organised the talks with the intention of noting what students had to say and gathering this information in order to publish it at a later stage.

When I attended the talk, I was surprised by the number of students present. For a hall of roughly 200 students, I expected at least 50 students to be present, based on the level of interest and communication online in which students called for opportunities to speak out. Despite this expectation, there were just over 10 people present, including the hall warden, sub-wardens, SRC members and staff mediators. The exceptionally poor attendance did not result in a highly fruitful discussion. This was further exacerbated by the manner in which the discussion was run. While the mediators listened in, the SRC members facilitated the



discussion by asking what concerns people had, what they thought could be done better, and what suggestions they had for future students. However, the discussion also began with a reminder that we only had an hour for the discussion, and that comments needed to be wrapped up so we could move on to another point, or so that some of the SRC members could move on to another dining hall talk. Many of the dining hall talks took place simultaneously, with only one or two SRC representatives present at each. My perception as a student was that this was organised to appease the student body and give a sense of being taken seriously. While the SRC may have intended for this to have practical results, the final report based on all the talks was never released, and according to my knowledge at the time, nothing much happened as a result of these discussions. As a researcher, it appeared that this was a typical example of giving people a platform to have their say, with an emphasis on speaking and voice, without understanding the importance of actively listening in response.

While students listed various issues which were noted almost in a point form way, the only time a discussion began to emerge was when a student and sub-warden at the time noted that perhaps a lot of the problematic beliefs and culture within the university stemmed from students who are taught these beliefs from their parents and then bring it into the university space, only to then perpetuate them and teach it to the first years. An example of this was the way older students encourage new students to go out partying in orientation week as a way to fit in and become a proper “Rhodent”, the term used to describe a typical Rhodes University student. This ignores the fact that many cannot afford to do so, and the idea of what it means to be a “Rhodent” excludes a large number of students. In discussing this, the student showed an awareness of other lived realities and this was hopefully the beginning of a larger conversation towards what institutional cultures are perpetuated from the beginning of a student’s time at the university. As an outsider, I cannot know whether or not this conversation was continued beyond the dining hall talk. Apart from this, the rest of the talk did not appear to do anything constructive. Despite making the effort to be there, of the few that did attend, not many people spoke. However, it must be acknowledged that my perception is subjective and influenced by both my role as a researcher and as a student. Furthermore, memory can be distorted and reflect a situation differently. In order to lend credibility to my memories and perceptions, I later interviewed students who had attended dining hall discussions, as well as a mediator who was present at the talk I attended.

## Student-led offline discussions

It is important to note that the poor attendance of the SRC discussions did not reflect the students' desire to speak and be heard regarding issues of transformation. While conversations began with SRC-led hall discussions and official emergency student body meetings, students also began to facilitate their own smaller gatherings informally. In dining halls during meals, in class discussions, in between classes, at bars and social gatherings, students were consistently discussing transformation, race and student politics, regardless of whether they were for or against the #RhodesMustFall movement. Bosch (2016:2) notes that at the University of Cape Town “#RMF successfully set the agenda for public debate in other virtual and real-world spaces including campus workshops and meetings, as well as mainstream print and broadcast media.” At Rhodes University in particular, debates over #RhodesMustFall on the SRC Facebook group set the agenda for further discussion on campus and in student newspapers such *Activate* and the *Oppidan Press* as well as the campus radio station, Rhodes Music Radio (RMR).

Much of what was discussed in classrooms and during meal times was prompted by what students were seeing on social media. It was not uncommon to have a conversation begin with, “Did you see what that person posted on the SRC group?” When online spaces such as Facebook and physical spaces such as campus dining halls are simultaneously occupied by people, Castells (2012:45) describes it as a “hybrid public space made of digital social networks and of a newly created urban community”. In this situation, students were already present in the same space as students of the university, but in participating both online and offline, created a hybrid public space that allowed for discussion, learning and further protest action. Even when students never appeared to be present online, their offline conversations showed that an incredible amount of attention was being paid to what was posted by other students. Furthermore, while students were not responding by commenting or liking a post online, they were more vocal and spoke freely about the content seen on Facebook when they interacted with people in offline spaces.

In addition to informal, spontaneous conversations about the #MustFall movement offline, students also took it upon themselves to organise gatherings and discuss offline what was being started online. In the same hall in which I attended an SRC dining hall talk, I also noticed that the members of the hall had announced on their Facebook page that they would be having an informal meeting to discuss the protests and how people were feeling about it.

This discussion happened over a lunch in the dining hall. The Facebook post advertised the date, the time and which table the students would be seated at. At this talk, far more students across the various residences in that dining hall attended. Despite it being louder and more difficult to speak across the table, there was still more engagement and speaking than at the SRC talk. Within a larger conversation prompted by the hall warden, students had smaller conversations in which they showed a greater willingness to listen. Perhaps it was because students were sitting with people they knew over a meal, but even when students expressed different views to each other, time was taken to hear them out. Students took turns speaking, allowing other people to express their opinions and be heard.

As well as the talk organised over lunch, evening discussions were also held. These took place in one of the residence's common rooms, with tea, coffee and cake provided. The relaxed environment encouraged students to feel comfortable. Furthermore, as this was organised by senior students and not the SRC or University management, there was no obligation to have anything in the conversation noted down. In the evening conversation that I attended, students gathered to watch, and later discuss, the documentary *Luister*. Following the sharing of the viral video on social media, students were eager to discuss the similarities at Rhodes University and to express their opinions on the allegations of racism. For some, this was their first realisation of such incidents, and so the viewing and the discussion afterwards proved to be a learning opportunity. The video itself, a form of digital storytelling where students recounted their experiences, also prompted those watching to discuss their own experiences. One of the criticisms that Dreher (2012) has of digital storytelling is that while they allow a celebration of individual stories and the voices of marginalised people, they do not necessarily result in political listening and engagement. However, social media has allowed people to not just view, but also share and discuss a video. By hosting a public screening followed by discussion, Rhodes University students have encouraged offline engagement with the digital stories, which allows for political listening. Students listened as others spoke or explained things, and then proceeded to ask questions and show a genuine interest in understanding. While there were more dominant speakers, it still remained a space where quieter, less confident students were able to speak or share an opinion.

### **Occupying Purple Square**

While students were using spaces available to them, such as dining halls and classrooms, to participate in political communication, they were also claiming spaces not necessarily

assigned to this purpose. Following the smearing of faeces on the Cecil John Rhodes statue at UCT, students in Cape Town marched to Bremner building, the UCT administrative offices, on 20 March 2015. Students then occupied the building for a period of time, renamed the building Azania House, and used their time there and the space to gather as a chance to discuss plan a way forward in terms of achieving a more transformed university space.

In a similar fashion, the BSM occupied the Council Chambers at Rhodes University on 26 August 2015. The BSM submitted a memorandum to Dr Mabizela which included their demands regarding student accommodation for the September vacation. Many students could not afford to travel back home for such a short period (10 days), but could not afford the cost of staying in residence either. According to the BSM Facebook page, the request was that “the University provide accommodation to students in a manner that does not undermine anyone’s dignity or exceptionalise their financial status.” At the time, students were expected to give an account of and justify how poor they really were in order to receive accommodation. On 26 August 2015, the Vice-Chancellor met with students to respond, but did not meet their demands. As a result, the Council Chamber in the Main Administrative Building was occupied. The occupation of a building affirms the right of public space (Castells 2012) and in this case gave legitimacy to the concerns of the BSM. Furthermore, “the control of space symbolises the control of people’s lives” (Castells 2012:11) and this was a time when students were taking control of their experiences within the university culture.

As protest action in the form of marches and vigils began to happen across campus, the space between the Rhodes University Drama Department and Faculty of Humanities building was occupied by protesting students. This space is the main Rhodes University entrance and is visible to the public, even without entering campus. This section of the public road began to be used as a starting point for marches as well as a meeting point for speeches and discussions and as a result came to be known as “the Purple Square” as purple is the official Rhodes University colour. As the main entry point into the University, it was also very often blocked with tables, benches and bins during protests to disrupt the usual space. While students were successfully using social media and dominating the SRC Facebook page with political discussions, this needed to be taken further.

Since the institutional public space, the constitutionally designated space for deliberation, is occupied by the interests of the dominant elites and their networks,

social movements need to carve out a new public space that is not limited to the Internet, but makes itself visible in the places of social life (Castells 2012:10). While the university management and SRC were organising comparatively poorly attended talks and meetings which seemed to be aimed more at quelling a potential protest situation rather than genuinely listening to students, students themselves were creating their own public spaces for talking and listening. By reclaiming a space at the entrance to the university, the students symbolically asserted their right to be there. Furthermore, while the usage of blockades across university entrances received backlash from university management and other students, it was also seen as a physical disruption that symbolised a need for further disruption to the status quo in order to achieve transformation. While a disruption implies violence or force, much of the protest action of 2015 remained peaceful at Rhodes University (although this was not necessarily the case for protests across the country as a whole).

### **#FeesMustFall protests**

While the beginning of 2015 saw students communicate with each other and challenge the issues they faced primarily online, the rise of the #FeesMustFall protests across the country took the protest from social media to the streets. From occupying a space on campus, students went on to march through the streets of Grahamstown. This was done to emphasise that issues of race and transformation do not affect students alone, but rather the whole community. These occupied spaces play an important role in social change because they create a sense of community and togetherness which Castells (2012) believes is what is necessary to overcome fear of speaking out.

At the main #FeesMustFall march in solidarity with all South African universities in October 2015, hundreds of students of all races and nationalities sang, held placards and had opportunities to speak and listen. Students were also joined by staff members in support of the fight for free education. News of the protest march was planned on Facebook and spread through Twitter as well as Whatsapp. However, real life social networks also assisted in increasing the number of participating students, as many of the participants arrived at the march as part of a larger group or with a partner. Speaking of the Arab revolution, Castells (2012:59) notes that this type of communication both offline as well as online can break the barriers of isolation and make it “possible to overcome fear by the act of joining and sharing”. By joining each other, students were able to continue what was started online.

Another benefit of mobilising through social media was that anyone could call a meeting or suggest offline action, not just student representatives or university staff. Both the online and offline spaces influenced each other in terms of how students communicated visually.

Students made posters and placards based on slogans and phrases seen online. Some of these were serious while others made use of puns and humour to express students' feelings. In turn, once protests had occurred, photographs of these placards and slogans were posted online, leading to viral photos as well as memes. The multimedia character of social media allows for this kind of exchange, whereby students can communicate with more than just spoken words to greater effect.

The power of images, and creative narrative-activated emotions, both mobilising and soothing, created a virtual environment of art and meaning on which the activists of the movement could rely to connect with the youth population at large, thus changing culture as a tool of changing politics (Alhassen, as quoted in Castells 2012:107).

In addition to challenging traditional notions of participation by using social media to facilitate offline protests, students (and some Rhodes University staff members) also opposed the idea of having to be rational and unemotional in order to liaise with university management and effect change. By connecting with large groups offline, and holding up placards with highly emotive slogans, students were able to convey valid and important points without compromising on the expression of their emotions. Rather than meetings and decisions made around a table in an office or boardroom, which would traditionally be considered a rational method of confrontation, students and staff met with the University management on the street directly after protests and marches to discuss a way forward.

Despite these changes in how social media has influenced offline activism, there still remains criticism of online activism, or slacktivism, with Skoric arguing that

the danger that slacktivism presents... is the misperception that these digital activities directly lead to actual political or social changes, and thus may lull citizens into an illusion that such activities are not only effective, but also preferable to the methods of traditional activism (2012:86).

The #FeesMustFall protests disprove this by showing that rather than being preferable to traditional methods of engagement, online activism has been used to enhance traditional participation. "Slacktivism should not be scorned, but instead cultivated to take their actions beyond the social media sphere and into the real world," suggests Skoric (2012:88). Not only has the ideal way of using online activism been realised by students participating offline, but furthermore, the #FeesMustFall movement in 2015 achieved actual social changes by leading to a 0% fee increase in university fees for 2016.

Clearly, students' political actions offline were highly influenced by and organised through social media, showing that previous criticisms of online activism are no longer relevant to the way the Internet is being used. It is no longer accurate or fair to say that being active online does not constitute participation because

this is not a purely virtual society. There is a close connection between virtual networks and networks in life at large. The real world in our time is a hybrid world, not a virtual world or a segregated world that would separate online from offline interaction (Wellman & Rainie, as quoted in Castells 2012:232).

It is in this hybrid world that online activists and Rhodes University students in particular are using virtual spaces to result in offline listening and engagement. Therefore, because these spaces intersect in this way, one cannot rely only on what can be observed online to analyse the way social media has been used in the protest movement. Rather, we need to take into account what is happening offline, as well as speak directly to students to understand their experiences of participation.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

“When you aggregate enough individual participants, you get a crowd. One thing that crowds do better than journalists is collect data.” (Anderson, Bell & Shirky 2012:24)

Having spent a full year immersing myself in the online spaces that Rhodes University students contribute to, as well as participating as a student and as a researcher in the offline gatherings that were created to supplement this online world, I was able to make a few basic observations. I was able to see how students were using social media to communicate by looking at their posts. I was also able to see how social media was used to mobilise and canvass student protest movements by going to meetings and discussions. By taking note of activity in this hybrid world, I was able to see how slacktivism can go beyond its negative connotations when students use their online activism to have real offline consequences. However, what was difficult to understand through cyberethnography and participant observation alone was the full extent to which students were participating and adding to the movement, as well as the way this participation and engagement affected the way they think and feel.

Furthermore, it was difficult to fully understand where the lurkers of the online space fitted in. I could tell that far more people were lurking, because although the number of posts per hashtag remained mostly below 50 posts, the number of people ‘liking’ the posts went well into the hundreds. Therefore, the amount of people viewing the content online and paying attention to it exceeded the number of people posting, what would be considered actively participating. Furthermore, at dining hall discussions, informal talks and conversations over meals, students showed a high level of awareness of what was being posted online, despite having never posted, commented on a post or even ‘liked’ something on the Rhodes University SRC Facebook group. Individual interviews were not necessary to prove that people *were* lurking, so much as they were necessary to have a better understanding of *why* they did so. I identified the lurkers using two methods; firstly by posting a call on the SRC Facebook asking those who identified as lurkers to participate in my research, and secondly by paying attention in offline gatherings to those who appeared to have a high level of interest in what was being posted on the Facebook page, yet whose names never appeared



online as active participants or contributors.

### **5.1 Research participants**

The first lurker, \*Kate (not her real name), is a middle class black South African in her fourth year at Rhodes University at the time of interviewing. She was a residence sub-warden at the time, and in addition to being present online, she also actively assisted in organising the *Luister* viewing and discussions in her dining hall. This is where I approached her as a lurker. She has always lived in residence on campus. Our interview took place within her residence, as this is where she was most comfortable.

\*Dani (not her real name), was primarily a lurker, having only posted once online during the emergency student body meeting. By reposting Twitter updates from others onto the Rhodes SRC Facebook group for those who did not physically attend the meeting, she gave the impression that she herself was at the meeting. In the interview, she explains why she was not. Dani is an Indian, middle-class student, in her third year of studying at Rhodes University, who has lived both in residence and off-campus. Prior to my research, I had never physically met Dani and so the interview took place at a local coffee shop where we both felt comfortable enough to speak.

\*Chanel (not her real name), is a white South African Rhodes University alumna who graduated in 2012. She contacted me after I posted a call for lurkers online. She described herself as “a dedicated lurker during the RMF, FMF and RUReferenceList protests” and “a fairly regular lurker on Rhodes Confessions” who “found the conversation that took place especially on the Confessions page absolutely riveting during the protests.” Our conversation took place through emails and Facebook messages.

\*Helen (not her real name), is a white South African Bachelor of Arts student, completing her third year. She has lived in residence, as well as off campus and served on the Oppidan Committee. She also responded to my call for research participants, stating that the most involvement she had online was liking comments, and then questioning further, “Not sure if that counts as participating?” Despite requesting lurkers, it was interesting to note that the people I spoke to were surprised that their insight could be of any value, as they did not consider what they did to be participation. Helen appeared to be the most introverted, not only self-identifying as a lurker but questioning the value of her responses. Despite being on

campus, she requested to respond through Facebook messages rather than meeting face to face.

In addition to these four lurkers, I interviewed \*Bernadette (not her real name), one of the staff mediators who participated in the official SRC-led dining hall discussions. I did this in order to get the perspective of someone leading the discussions, as well as to corroborate my experience with someone else in order to avoid bias, or distorted memories. We had the interview on campus in her office.

Finally, I spoke to \*Lesedi, the former Rhodes University student who posted the very first political post of 2015 that resulted in heated discussions and the emergency student body meeting being called. This was done in order to better understand her online activism, the response it received and her experience of using social media as a platform to have her say. I approached Lesedi to be a participant, and she responded through emails as she no longer lived in the same town.

Despite speaking to both lurkers as well as people who participated on other levels, the themes guiding my interview questions remained the same. The interview schedule (Appendix A) influenced the course of the discussions. However, in many instances participants and I went “off topic”, in a way that I consider beneficial to the research. While not strictly best practice, it was found that when discussing individual involvement in protest action and matters relating to race and class, students responded better by being able to talk freely. To a large extent, I wanted to conduct the interviews as discussions aimed at getting rich descriptions and insight, rather than interviews that simply brought forth answers and facts. Furthermore, I attempted to locate people within a context and as part of a larger, interconnected narrative, based on both my cyberethnography as well as my participant observation. Often, without prompting, participants either spoke about the same person, the same Facebook post or the same incident. In one case, a research participant mentioned activity on Facebook by another participant. In many ways, their responses and their narratives are connected, as their offline worlds intersect through a shared online sphere. This also further emphasised that students were aware of specific posts and content relating to the protest movement, despite not responding to it through likes and comments online.

I asked research participants to describe their online selves and activity in general, in relation

to the 2015 protests, and in particular on the Rhodes University SRC group. We also spoke about their offline activities and how this was influenced or not by what was online. In particular, I asked participants about their knowledge of and participation in dining hall conversations, as this was something almost all students except Chanel (as an alumna) had in common. While I did not directly ask students if they thought they were actively listening while lurking, I was able to gauge this by the level of detail in their responses regarding what they had noticed on social media. The idea of listening did come up when students expressed feelings of not being listened to, or feeling that people were merely talking over each other online. In questioning participants on how they use social media, the conversation often naturally led to their reasons why they did or did not do certain things online and in real life. We discussed the value of online communication, based on conversations they had had, or had witnessed. What came up without much prompting was the need for a platform for voice, and the role that some people played in speaking out for others who did not. Furthermore, the research participants greatly emphasised the need for various kinds of learning and unlearning that needed to take place. Perhaps the most important yet unanticipated insight garnered from the interviews was the levels of anxiety that existed during the protest movement, both on social media and in physical spaces. This anxiety influenced the process of lurking, listening and learning and affected the way students did or did not participate. While preliminary research took into account the role of emotion and feeling in talking and listening, this was focused on feelings of anger or unhappiness. These are feelings that can lead to reaction and speaking out. However, the feelings of fear and anxiety and their possible influence on communication was not expected. The interviews revealed that while other forms of emotion can result in emotion talk and highly impassioned speaking, fear and anxiety can be restrictive and result in a lack of speaking altogether.

## **5.2 Social media usage**

With almost constant access to computers, mobile phones and internet, young South Africans are increasingly using social media networks to live out their lives. I found it important to speak to people about their online conversations and usage, especially as there are instances when social media communication completely replaces, rather than adds to offline communication.

**Lesedi:** Online conversations are key, also given that we spend a lot of our time on social media engaging each other on those platforms instead of offline – for some people.

In particular, Rhodes University students have constant internet access in residence, as well as wireless access on all their devices through Eduroam. As a result, the internet and social media becomes an extension of their everyday lives, which they check and update consistently.

**Helen:** Essentially I'm permanently logged on because of the Facebook app on my phone and I get notifications as something happens. But I log into Facebook at least daily. It will be the tab I open up on my laptop as I open up my emails first thing every time I open my computer. I usually check my Facebook notifications as I receive them on my phone.

When asked to describe her social media usage, Dani called it "excessive", adding that she checked it "every hour. Minimum. That I'm awake."

**Dani:** Instagram all the time, Snapchat all the time. Facebook all the time. Whatsapp, not so much, that's more just for mum. I always have my phone on me. I can't not check something at some point in the day. It's more like an anxiety thing. I don't even log out.

Students confirmed that social media was not just something they checked, but an activity that they spent time on and paid attention to.

**Helen:** [I spend] minimum 10 minutes, but usually more. I use Facebook in two ways; I will sometimes be working and have it as a tab that I'll check every now and again and just scroll until I see the last thing on my NewsFeed again. Or, sometimes if I'm not doing anything and my activity is solely being on Facebook I can easily spend two to three hours just online.

Despite the large amount of time spent online in Facebook in particular, students posted very little of their own to contribute to the online content. The majority of their time spent online was viewing other users' content. This correlates with research on lurker behaviour.

**Dani:** There's scroll time, just tagging people on tumblr<sup>4</sup>. But actually posting stuff on my timeline, probably once a month. There's not very much of my own activity. I don't really post statuses, I don't really post photos too much, sometime I'll see something cool and put that up but other than that nah not too much of doing anything.

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<sup>4</sup> Tumblr is a microblogging and social networking site.

While just scrolling through, or checking their Facebook newsfeed intermittently between working was something that students did, they also noted that they spent time thoroughly reading posts, clicking on further links, and even reading the comments and comment replies<sup>5</sup> on posts to understand the full extent of the conversation or topic.

**Helen:** In general, my Newsfeed will be made up of articles shared by various pages I follow, people posting to groups and various statuses. In terms of statuses I tend to skim read or at least read everything. Posts that will attract my attention more will either be posts to do with gender activism/equality, rape culture, social justice, that kind of thing. Posts like that I'll actually read the article, be more interested or read the comments on it.

**Chanel:** I wouldn't only read the posts, but often also the comment threads and sub-threads. I think I was pretty well-informed throughout the protests, but that was because I was a journalist reporting on the movement so I followed all the action quite closely and made an effort to read widely about it.

Initially, it would appear that because of how long users spend online, it would be easy to miss or forget what content they view. Yet despite spending time just scrolling through a mass of content, the research participants revealed the ability to notice and retain detailed information. In particular, students were able to name other users and students who had posted content, or who had Facebook posts written about them. The names and specific posts they mentioned correlated with the posts I had viewed through my cyberethnography on the SRC Facebook group.

**Dani:** I remember one name; I think it was \*David Harrison. He had a thing for this \*Eddie person and they would fight all the time, but David would be taking it lightly, just kind of like hah this is funny and one of them, I can't remember if it was \*Hlezi or \*Eddie would get so fucking bleak with life. And I'm pretty sure \*David was the one who named him \*Hlezibae. That's where the whole name and bae came from.

**Helen:** During the protests someone I've never met called \*David Harrison was commenting with a lot of privilege and just general problematic-ness. I then went on to Facebook stalk him and now whenever I see him, even though he has no idea who I am and we've never met, I now know his standings on things and dislike him.

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<sup>5</sup> Facebook allows users to reply directly to a comment, rather than having to create a new comment. It is possible to have multiple comment threads within the main reply thread of a post.

While there were many prominent names and figures known through social media to students during the 2015 protests, \*David Harrison was not one of them. Despite this, both Dani and Helen were able to name him and specific incidents in particular. Despite both identifying as non-participants online, the amount of attention paid to specific incidents tells otherwise. The same names and online incidents were also brought up in informal offline discussions with other students, showing the widespread reach of the posts on the group.

In terms of social media usage among students, it is clear that it is used often, a large amount of content is read and noticed, and despite the constant stream of content, Facebook users are able to retain and remember detailed information about what they have read. This is particularly useful to Rhodes University students, who have used what they read and remember to inform their views and involvement in the protest movement.

### **5.3 The Rhodes University SRC group**

The SRC group has been in use for many years, serving as platform to connect past and present students with information and discussion relating to Rhodes University life. Many students join in their first year, or even before they arrive as a student at University as it serves as a source of information for prospective students.

**Helen:** I joined the page in first year. We already had a Rhodes First Years of 2014 group and then following on from that I think I just joined all pages affiliated with Rhodes and Grahamstown. [I'm] not sure exactly why I joined, but I think it was something to do with thinking by following the page I would be informed of events and notices to do with the university, so information purposes. The content used to be more reduced to advertising of events, people asking various questions, lost and found or meme sharing.

**Lesedi:** I joined in my second or third year, I think. I saw the group as a platform to keep up to date with current affairs on campus, and also as a means of communication for students to communicate with each other i.e. selling books, asking for information, promoting their societies. I remember back in 2012/2013 when we had the water crisis; everyone was glued to the page because that's how we'd find out what's really happening. This goes for a lot of other occurrences that we had at the university, the page is the first place you go to for information.

**Dani:** Ooh I joined in my first year! Straight away off the bat I thought 'Student

Representative Council, it will be informative.’ I thought it was very properly managed as in a noticeboard, so the SRC would say stuff and you would have banter with them and it would be very professional. I think when people started losing faith in the SRC it became less so. I think it was kind of nice to find lifts in Grahamstown, to hear about MalSoc (a Rhodes University society) events.

Because of the relative small size of the university, it is possible to have one Facebook group that not only connects all Rhodes Students, but is also a space where almost everyone can find the content relevant. As a result, students are dependent on the group to receive basic information as well as stay updated on what is happening socially on campus.

**Lesedi:** Rhodes is a very small university and because of this one feels the need to know almost everything happening in and around campus. I read a good number of posts in a day. Often after lectures or in the evening after supper, one would read posts on the page and we’d discuss them among our friendship groups – especially posts we thought were ‘spicy’ or very important. The page sort of became a student online Twitter timeline/newspaper.

Initially, the group could be seen as mainly informational. However, there has been a tendency towards political discussion during relevant times such as when students have to run, campaign or vote for SRC positions, or when there has been a major political issue in other parts of the world.

**Helen:** I think the page has been controversial for as long as I can remember, I think that’s just such a Rhodes University thing. In first year I think the content was a lot more internally spicy if that makes sense and there would also be specific patterns to when people would get dramatic. This would usually be around SRC grazzle and election time and then there would be memes teasing candidates about their suits, hair, more trivial things.

The page, I can remember would get interesting around SRC elections in 2014 in my first year and students would be ‘spicy’ about candidates. So for example, Dlomo ran for Environmental Councillor in my first year and he firstly wore a white suit to grazzle and secondly printed massive posters with him doing things like hugging trees, so students were teasing and hating on him for those things.

Occasionally there would be the odd person posting something like ‘This and this

tragedy just happened in Nigeria but none of you care!’, but it was less frequent.

While not the main point of discussion, race has been an issue that has been discussed on the group.

**Helen:** In terms of ‘student politics’, because everything is political in my view, there were also screenshots of \*Justin Richardson using the ‘k –word’ and then students getting angry and calling for his exclusion.

While currently social media can definitely be identified as a space used for political discussion, it appears that even prior to the #MustFall protests there has been a history of using the Facebook group for political discussion. Despite this, students were still seen as inactive and politically apathetic. With the onset of the 2015 protests, the character of the group changed drastically in that students were now talking about protest action, student politics and race relations on a daily basis, rather than just when something major happened. Perhaps it is not that students were previously apathetic about social issues, but rather that their interest and active participation is now more noticeable because of the concentration of political content online following the protests.

**Helen:** Now, the content is a lot more political, a lot more revolutionary. I think in terms of ‘protesty’ kind of stuff – that first happened in 2015 when there were initial posts about #RhodesMustFall after the UCT statue incident when students then began the name change debate here.

While many students have expressed the need for discussion and engagement on political matters, not all users share the opinion that the Facebook group is the best platform for this.

**Dani:** it was definitely not engaging, I wouldn’t call it [the Facebook group] engaging in terms of social and political issues originally. I think the changeover to what it is now, I think it was needed but not on that page. I think the SRC page should have just stayed as a notice board because it’s the Student Representative Council. It’s just exactly that, it’s representing, not an actual space to communicate.

While Dani believes that the group should have remained a space for disseminating information and representing students only, she does mention that there was a time when “people started losing faith in it.” When the Rhodes University name change debate began, many students expressed outrage at the fact that the SRC did not post a statement expressing



their views on the matter. Students stated that as representatives of the larger student population, it was their duty to say something. It is possible that one of the reasons for the extent of the political discussion on the group is because students did actually use the space for representation. Rather than waiting for the SRC to make an official statement or a decision, students took it upon themselves to use the group as a platform for self-representation by posting their own views and comments, which in turn led to many of the political discussions.

Despite being averse to using the group as a medium for political discussion, Dani's activity on the group contradicts this opinion. While following the emergency student body meeting through social media, she decided share information from Twitter onto Facebook, thus initiating further discussion. She recalls the decision to do this:

**Dani:** I thought 'I don't have Twitter but I know that Oppidan Press and Activate were doing the tweet things'. Then I remembered I had made one [Twitter account] for Journalism in first year and I went onto that and I just looked through everything and I was like 'Jesus Christ is this what people are actually saying?' And then I would look to my side and then there was no one actually sharing my incredulousness with me so I was like nah, [I need to] put this on Facebook. This needs to be followed by people. Yes, I think a lot of people got to that post and got to follow it. I think there was a stream of the event and then there were people who couldn't get through. Oh that's also why! That's what sparked me is the stream wasn't working online. Check the hashtags. Did that. I figured I wouldn't be the only person that couldn't access the stream.

While earlier saying that she did not post content on social media, Dani's online activity shows that she is participating in political issues, even if it is not through traditional methods such as physically attending a meeting or voting on a decision. Furthermore, by adding to the amount of information and starting a discussion online, she is contributing to the group's informal role as a news source for students.

The Rhodes University SRC group began as a group where students could share general information with each other because of the relatively small size of the campus, and grew to become a group that included more political content, which became more noticeable after the 2015 protests due to the frequency of the posts. In addition, the group was not only the place where students first heard about something that was happening, but it also became the platform they went to for information and guidance *before* they read newspapers and official

Rhodes University communication. It is possible that in such a small university space, students feel a greater sense of community and therefore experience higher levels of trust towards their fellow students than in news publications. Students are then more likely to go to a Facebook group to see what others are thinking, before consulting an in-depth news analysis.

#### **5.4 Facebook as an alternative news platform to traditional media**

Speaking of South Africans citizens, Malila (2014:24) says that

“One way in which the media facilitate engagement in the public sphere and invoke notions of active citizenship is through their role in informing citizens on issues, processes and opportunities for engagement.”

While this is so for traditional media, social media can also do the same. In particular, students turned to social media during the protest for first hand experiences of what was happening at other universities, as well as for personal accounts from people who had experienced different forms of racism and oppression.

**Lesedi:** I had left Rhodes as I had completed my Honours. Leaving Rhodes did not result in leaving the SRC page; I was still very much interested in what was happening in and around campus. During March [2015], there were a lot of status updates around white privilege, institutional racism and hashtag black lives matter, but in a South African student context. Also during that time, RhodesMustFall was gaining a lot of momentum and attention – Fallism was born.

**Kate:** I heard it first on social media but not necessarily Facebook. I read an article on News24 about the faeces being thrown at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at UCT. And so I read an article about that when the protest started happening and then obviously when people caught wind of what was happening it was on the news and it was on social media and stuff so basically social media, Twitter, News24 and Facebook.

There was also to some extent a level of mistrust in traditional news media. While the media has to be objective, it still to some extent prioritised different sides to the protest movement, while also sensationalising the protests. Social media was then used to actively subvert the approach that traditional media took to the protest (Thomas 2015).

In particular, those who exclusively followed the #MustFall movement through news outlets

and not through social media and students' own narratives were often misinformed about what was happening on the ground. Many students felt this in the conversations they had with concerned parents.

**Dani:** I think [traditional news] is sensationalised to be honest. I have my mom calling me from Zimbabwe last year saying 'Listen we've heard there's police and like oh my gosh, it's wrecked, just be safe.' I'm like 'I'm fine, trust me, really we're fine, we're the most peaceful ones here. You see Cape Town, you think we're the same. We're not the same.'

Students relied on Facebook not just as a source of reliable information, but for its immediacy as well. Because of the large number of members in the SRC group, there were more people with ability to contribute to the pool of information, so if something of interest was happening, you could count on at least one person being able to post about it. One such example was when the statue of Cecil John Rhodes was taken down from the UCT campus; people were posting photos of the process on social media as it was happening.

**Kate:** It's been quite a helpful source in terms of just keeping updated because you can trust people on social media to pretty much let you know in the moment that statue came down, they will let you know that the statue came down.

By monitoring Facebook, users were also able to take a 'screenshot' of content on Facebook and send it to friends over Whatsapp, therefore using multiple forms of social media to increase the immediacy of information shared. While traditional news platforms are useful in summarising and analysing information, they were not always able to inform and guide the immediate actions of people in the same way that social media did. The greater immediacy of social media and the ability for one post or piece of information to reach a large group of people in a very short space of time gave social media the advantage in calling people to action.

**Bernadette:** There was no warning when the protests started. It started early in the morning hours, I still remember it very clearly. Most of the wardens had no idea what was going on. We started Whatsapping each other at like 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and I was whatsapping a subwarden saying 'what's going on?'

In addition to the immediacy, social media allowed for subjective, personal experiences that provided a certain nuance missing from news reports.

**Lesedi:** In looking at #FeesMustFall, my source of information on what was happening at Rhodes was on the page, and Twitter, but mostly on the page. It was important to get stories and to read stories from the people affected and how this had impacted on their private lives and on campus. This first-hand information definitely informed how I view the protests. To add, during #FeesMustFall, the Black Student Movement's posts were key in informing us on a lot of issues, but also key in actually highlighting why the protests at Rhodes for example, happened or did not happen the way they did.

**Dani:** I don't think there's been as much reading between the lines by the media as I would liked. The media shouldn't just take it at face value. I think that's what they've done. They've gone 'Rhodes University, Fees Must Fall, poor students protesting. Fact fact, source source.' It's standard Journalism first year set up and layout. It hacks me off to no end that people still follow that format. That's not a proper story.

Rather than seeing it as just a large protest movement, people were able to see what the protests meant to people on a personal level. While traditional media platforms have followed standard news formats, social media has allowed for new reporting formats, as well as the potential for storytelling. What this indicates is an increasing tendency to consume emotive media and acknowledge emotion talk as opposed to the conventional objective news media, which people are finding insufficient.

Furthermore, Facebook and the SRC page trumped Twitter in that it had greater potential for discussion, as it was easier for a newcomer to follow a conversation from the starting point and then join in.

**Lesedi:** I liked Facebook as the movement slowed down because Facebook allowed for a much more in-depth timeline, critique and analysis of the moment, which on Twitter is difficult to follow with 140 characters. Threads are great, but there is only so much one can write. If you look at the #RMF page, and the RU SRC page during the protests, a lot of information was discussed there which was not on Twitter. Also, on Facebook it allowed for a lot of people to engage and to ask questions – I enjoyed the *discussions* that took place on Facebook.

By using Facebook, students were able to share and experience first-hand, personal accounts of experiences during the protests, which added a nuance to the protest coverage that they felt traditional news media lacked. While Facebook users were not all journalists, the multitude

of users in one group allowed for a greater immediacy of information sharing as each person could share what information they had and this could collectively form a story. This was further enhanced by the interconnected nature of social media: tweets could be shared and discussed on Facebook, and Facebook posts could be ‘screenshot’<sup>6</sup> and shared over Whatsapp, allowing users to share information far more quickly than a newspaper article would take to reach the same number of people. Students were well aware that what they consumed on social media was subjective; this is what they sought in attempting to understand the movement.

## 5.5 Voice

### **Affirmation and participation through speaking**

Storytelling through the sharing of personal experiences and narratives on social media may not fit the mould of traditional journalism, but it does have a valid part to play in contributing to participation the student protest movement. It gives people the opportunity to document what oppressions they experience and in turn challenge it. In addition to conveying information regarding protests and social action, people are also able to empower themselves and garner support as “digital storytelling is increasingly deployed in culturally diverse communities as a strategy for empowerment through ‘finding a voice’” (Dreher 2009:446).

**Kate:** I feel like for me with social media, I don’t want to say I’ve been relying on it but it’s a space that people say what they say. Sometimes it’s not always something you agree with but people get to really say what they need to say.

This process of using social media to have a voice can occur as a result of not being able to speak elsewhere, or as a result of frustration in response to what has already been said, particularly when users feel that their perspective has not been represented.

**Lesedi:** A white male, I cannot remember who he was, posted about I think it was parking *again*. The post read along the lines of privilege not being a thing, and how everyone is overreacting and making it a race issue when actually it isn’t because *human race* – the usual. I lost it at that moment and I decided to write on the page. I’d never written anything on the page before, I think it was my first post. The page had become quite controversial before my post, and I was careful about what I commented on when I commented because I did not want to become centred. My post came as a

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<sup>6</sup> What is seen on the screen can be saved as a photo, which can then be shared.

surprise to me, given that I do not express my views so openly to the masses. To be honest, I was fed up, I remember that much.

While Lesedi says she was careful about what she said online as the topic of transformation started growing controversial, Kate also mentioned that she believed that people were being cautious online about what they believed they could and could not say. However, posting online can be empowering for both the person who speaks, as well as for those who read it and echo the opinions or feelings of the original poster. While people may still be cautious, reading something by someone else similar to you might validate your feelings and experiences, and make you less hesitant to state what you previously thought was an uncommon opinion.

**Kate:** I don't actually want to bring the Black Student Movement into this but I will say this for them, it is useful having people like them. It's useful because they aren't afraid to talk about the issues and sometimes it's important to have that one person that will get straight to it, for those who are being cautious to be like 'oh we can actually say that'. I think that what's happened with all of this actually, this whole Rhodes Must Fall thing and why so many people have joined the call.

**Lesedi:** The engagements were not necessarily because of my post, but more so because a *new* revolution had been brewing and it was time to have those conversations.

What this suggests is that while the Rhodes statue incident at UCT did catalyse a move towards transforming university spaces and the time was ripe for a student revolution, it was also the conversations online and the affirmative nature of certain posts that allowed other students to join in and feel like their contribution mattered.

**Kate:** I think that's why so many people have joined this movement. Because a lot of things that have come up on social media from, I don't want to say white people, should I say, people that don't understand, ask "why now? Why suddenly is there an issue where there hasn't been?" I would say it's not that there wasn't an issue, there just wasn't a space. Nobody knew that it was ok to say something because I know I personally I felt that if I say something, I am going to break this whole rainbow nation mould. I don't want to be that person who suddenly goes "things aren't actually ok". And then suddenly when that first Facebook post came out last year where that girl, I

forgot what her name was... Lesedi! I thought “Holy crap, this is the time? Like oh now?! Great, let’s go!”

In later speaking to Lesedi, she explained how she felt when she posted that message that inspired other students.

**Lesedi:** Many of us for the first time felt that we could *finally* express our silence, frustrations and shared pain that we experience in not only South Africa, but in white spaces – being the white institutions that we occupy. Almost everyone on my Facebook timeline was openly having this conversation – about race, about South Africa, about our ‘liberal’ universities, and how for the longest time we believed in myth of the rainbow nation.

It’s important to note that while the conversations and posts about race and oppression peaked together with the #MustFall movements, it does not mean that the issues faced by students were new. Privately, students had been experiencing and feelings things that they did not feel empowered to speak openly about. Social media and the Rhodes University SRC page provided a platform to highlight and validate these issues.

**Dani:** I think it’s always been there. I think there have always been undercurrents of bristling and anger and then... I can’t remember what the spark was. I think there are too many social issues that boiled down to one thing that sets people off all the time.

**Kate:** Because we’d *been* talking about it. You were still in the hall last year, we’d been discussing this, not in depth but this is a conversation that we’d *been* having and suddenly somebody was saying it out loud and we thought “oh wait is this the time to speak out? Let’s go!”

**Lesedi:** We, as black students – using Steve Biko’s political blackness, we have had these conversations before, but in private spaces, because we did not want to upset any of our white friends or make anyone feel uncomfortable for that matter. These are conversations we would have every single day, everywhere, but amongst ourselves.

**Kate:** It was great what she did, because it literally was like opening up the gates and going “Hey man look it’s not just you.” Because when you do have these small conversations I think it worries you that what if it is just you? What if you are making a big deal out of nothing? I’ve asked myself a good couple of times in all of this ‘are you

sure you're not trying to make something out of nothing?' But to hear these same sentiments reiterated by other people, you sit there and think there's actually something to this. Social media has been great in that way, knowing that you're not alone and while you may not have the same opinion about certain things with all people but there are definite similarities in peoples' lived experiences and their stories.

**Dani:** I think it's because there's safety in numbers. I think because now more people are talking about it than before, you feel like it's a nicer space to engage in.

Being able to say loudly and collectively what you have been keeping back for years can be a liberating gesture, which makes the movement expressive as well as instrumental (Castells 2012). Sharing personal narratives can be empowering for the speaker, as well as for those reading and listening as it can affirm feelings and validate experiences they believed to be isolated. By sharing and relating these stories, students are enabled to participate in that they can share not only problems, but also ideas and solutions.

### **Voice and representation**

While the empowering nature of social media has allowed people to speak up about their experiences, it has also allowed students to openly challenge situations when they feel they are not being fairly represented by those doing the speaking. While the ability to now have a voice and discuss student politics online is being celebrated and encouraged by students, there are concerns over who speaks for whom, and what happens when one voice dominates. Furthermore, the manner in which people speak and how that either includes or excludes others has also been called into question.

**Helen:** Recently the kind of 'revolutionary' individuals running for SRC and not getting in has also shown me that just because someone has a big voice or has very active opinions on social media doesn't actually mean that's the sentiment of the majority.

**Dani:** \*Hlezi and \*Eddie, they have some great opinions somewhere but because they shout and because the way they present their opinions is so finger-pointy and aggressive, I tend to stay far away from listening to them.

**Chanel:** I found it a forum for very boisterous opinions; a place where the goal was to "win" an argument, not to share views and experiences.



**Lesedi:** Online debates are great, however they can be exclusionary. This is because there are some people spoken for – and this is not okay. For instance, given the social context of South Africa, some important people who need to be included in conversations on race, gender, class and ableism etc aren't in those conversations, and this could limit the potential progress to be made offline.

**Dani:** She's quite vocal on the feminist things. This whole protest she was the one yelling at him the whole time and I was like hmm, white girl, white man, it's not really your fight because your fees are paid in full and you're not shitting yourself for your next meal. The problem I have with social justice warriors is that they're middle class white people with no problems mainly. I've noticed here, in particular at Rhodes, the people that actually do the fighting, that actually will make a difference are people that have nothing, that have everything to fight for.

In social justice movements there will always be concerns over misrepresentation and wrongly speaking on behalf of and thus silencing others. Usually, movements have an appointed leader that represents the particular cause. However, the #MustFall protests were interesting in that there was no constant leader. While the Black Student Movement did to a large extent set out and put into place the agenda for the movement, those on the frontlines and the most vocally active both online and offline were a wide range of students. The protests were intended to be a leaderless movement, relying instead on the collective action of all students in order to remain as fair as possible. Perhaps it was because social media allows anyone to ask questions, plan meetings, update others and voice their opinions that when one voice began to dominate discussions, students were able to call this out, or in turn add their own voices so that anyone who wanted to say something could. This resulted in various overlapping but different narratives and non-binary experiences. How students experienced privilege or lack of it was not simply black or white.

**Kate:** It's been so great because I've wondered where I fit into this because I don't fit into this narrative as a poor black person. I am a middle class black woman, went to a former model C school, I'm a coconut, let's just use it that way, everything that encompasses coconut, the accent, knowing that a sarmie is a sandwich, that's who I am and the narrative that is often given of a black person is a different kind of black person, a person who is from a lower class black family, didn't go to a former model C school, comes from the township and what not. It's almost as if this fight is supposed to

be for them. But now where do I fit into all of this?

The idea of one common narrative or story is often used not to unite people, but to undermine and invalidate the experiences of some people. Louise Vincent, a researcher at Rhodes University who has done work on the institutional culture that exists within the university reminds us that

“if we mean to challenge our story stock and provide opportunities for new telling we need to be aware of how existing hierarchies serve to privilege some telling over others. Even as we provide new opportunities to suggest what should be told and listened to, we may be involved in a process of re-inscribing power relations” (Vincent 2011:np)

In addition to understanding the experiences of others on a deeper level because people are able to speak for themselves and tell it like it is, students have also found that they are able to better understand their own place and where they fit in.

**Kate:** And it’s been so interesting reading other peoples stories because it’s helped me understand, ja I agree with what they’re saying, no I don’t agree with this. I almost see myself as having a double narrative in all of this because while I understand the side of, and I don’t want to say black people, I also do see the other side of it. I for example would take a taxi from Soweto to get to Sandton every day so I understand the two worlds. It’s not just a binary, one or the other.

**Chanel:** It was as if people simply wanted some kind of record of their existence and experience to be known and considered part of the discussion. People wanted their lives to be heard, even people who aren’t of the character that allows them to be protest leaders or vocal activists or faces of the movement.

By mentioning that those who weren’t considered ‘faces’ of the movement could speak, Chanel highlights the fact that some people did assume leadership and frontline positions. If the entire movement had occurred entirely offline, it would have been easy for ordinary students’ stories and experiences to be missed. However, just being able to express their thoughts online meant that even followers of the movement could feel included, validated and have their experience known. Castells (2012:3) notes that in most of the political movements that he researched, “it was the search for dignity” that was a recurring theme. To a large extent, students who post their experiences online or not necessarily seeking an argument or validation, but just want to have their lived experiences to be noted. It also became a refusal

to be silenced and an effective way to change the dominant or most commonly believed narrative. By creating more nuanced narratives, more students could relate, and in turn participate in a social movement that included them and their struggles.

### **Differing voices: Disrupting echo chambers**

For many students, it was previously possible to live in a bubble of privilege whereby you did not have to consider, or address experiences different to your own. Through the personal narratives and stories shared online, the Facebook group become a platform to speak to, and also listen to people and ideas you ordinarily would not engage with.

One of the concerns around conversation and deliberation in social media was that users would form virtual echo chambers where diversity was decreased and in the case of speaking about politics, prejudice was increased.

An echo chamber is created when individuals seek to find information and sources that support their viewpoints and filter out countervailing information. As they find added support for their views repeated online via such mechanisms as emails, blog posts, retweets, social media posts or links, possibly in a more extreme form, they become even more set in their views and less likely to seek countervailing opinions.

(Newman et al 2012:7)

The possibility of this happening grows stronger when users only engage with the people they are friends with on Facebook, who often share similar if not the same views. They then do the same offline. Traditional media can play a role in reducing echo chambers by “enabling citizens to encounter and make sense of events, relationships and cultures of which they have no direct experience”(Coleman and Blumler 2009 as quoted in Malila 2014:24). Through groups such as the Rhodes University SRC group and Rhodes Confessions, social media had the ability to do the same.

**Lesedi:** I think the value and role that social media can play and does play in such instances goes both ways. In one sense it is a useful platform to facilitate such heated debates. This is to say that it opens up the debates for more voices to partake in instances where in normal social settings some voices might be silenced. It can also be considered to be one of the only platforms that is able to mobilise a wide variety of different voices engaging in one topic.

**Helen:** I think Social media, especially in terms of something like the Rhodes

SRC/UCKAR<sup>7</sup> Student Body page are (and Twitter more so, but I don't use Twitter that much) are a good way of getting to understand and know how students feel, especially in terms of students and feelings I wouldn't usually have contact with.

**Chanel:** Conversations are important! And they are no less important when they happen online. Structural racism and sexism is a massive problem, but most of us are not in career positions where we can easily affect those. What we can do is have the tricky conversations with our friends and family. It's not the responsibility of black people to explain to white people why various behaviours and attitudes are racist. But many older white people don't regularly interact with young black people because of persisting social divides, and so have absolutely no complex understanding of their lived experience. One way to bridge this massive gap in understanding is to immerse yourself in conversations online, where you have access to a range of opinions that you'd never hear in your immediate friend group. It's a way of getting out of your own non-digital echo chamber I suppose.

**Dani:** It's very sheltered, the view that people have and I think that the role that Facebook plays in all of this is just calling to light opinions that wouldn't necessarily have always been heard.

**Lesedi:** I really like the group because it has become a space where students actually get to engage with each other honestly, and whether you agree or not with what is being expressed, you will listen regardless. It is a space that has exposed many students to the realities of Rhodes, Rhodents and surrounding communities. It became a space of meaningful discussions, debates, while at the same time celebrating each other.

While most users felt that Facebook played a huge role in exposing people to different opinions that they would otherwise have missed, there was still the acknowledgement that if users wanted to remain in their bubble, they could have chosen to do so by only engaging with some people online.

**Lesedi:** When engaging with a lot of people, you need to decide who deserves a response and who doesn't – some people did not deserve a response from me, and thus I did not engage them, but others did. The post wasn't about me, and it did not become

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<sup>7 7</sup> The University Currently Known as Rhodes (UCKAR) is the term used by people to refer to Rhodes University and indicate their support for the name change.

about me and who I engaged with or did not engage with. People were having their own discussions and opinions, and choosing to engage with whomever they wanted to engage with.

While Facebook members could choose to not reply or engage with certain views or people, as long as people were part of large public groups such as the Rhodes SRC group, they were exposed to different viewpoints simply by being present and lurking. By reading and lurking, students were able to learn more without placing the burden on others to teach them about issues of privilege, or to justify their experiences of oppression. A Facebook group with thousands of members ensured that different voices are mobilised while encounters with different experiences and viewpoints were enabled. Sometimes, depending on the nature of the posts, particularly emotive or shocking content could have caused a reaction in readers even when their intention was not to engage but merely lurk.

### **5.6 Emotion talk on social media**

The binary of emotion talk as the opposite of rational, logical conversation (Bickford 2011) must be considered when looking at how students spoke and responded to content on social media. While traditional media is seen as objective and full of reason, social media is seen as the opposite; a subjective, non-scientific space that would have previously been rejected in communication studies for the levels of emotion present (Lipari 2009). While news media organisations were expected to provide objective coverage of the protest movement, there was no such expectation of users on social media. In terms of fairly representing the protest movement, rational and objective was not necessarily good, while emotional and impassioned media coverage was not necessarily bad.

In some instances, both traditional objective media and subjective social media can and did work in conjunction with each other. Kate mentions that when people first started talking about the Rhodes statue, not many people knew the history of Cecil John Rhodes and social media did not provide that information. However, it did provide critique and analysis of different viewpoints.

**Kate:** I didn't get a lot of information about history on there, but how people felt about and their opinions about it, yeah definitely from social media.

Posts on social media were either from those part of, in support of or opposed to the

movement and so everything posted would have been subjective and biased. However, this was not necessarily a factor that stopped Facebook users from relying on social media to inform their thoughts and actions. Furthermore, how they considered emotion in others speaking affected the way they listened as citizens (Bickford 2011).

**Chanel:** Being a journalist, I was all too aware of how much personal story, experience, nuance and complexity is lost in what the media publishes. I found the real value to be in the raw online testimonies of journalists, students, staff members and others involved and affected by the protests across the country.

These raw testimonies often arose from people venting their frustration and anger, which in turn encouraged previously non-existent discussion.

**Lesedi:** I remember during one of our Politics lectures, a good friend of mine came up with a term called ‘Black Fatigue’ because to be black *in the world* meant to be in rage all the time, but you had to be in rage while silent.

Now, people were taking that silent rage and turning it into something more verbal. Lesedi admitted that her original post that flared up on the SRC group did come from a moment of anger.

**Lesedi:** the page had become very busy and controversial. I thought my post was going to be just that – a post by an angry black student. Yes, I was angry and I own up to it.

While she ‘owned up to it’ as if her angry reaction was definitely a negative response, Castells (2012) believes it is easier to mobilise people who were already angry or upset at something. Having an online space allowed people to share their anger which collectively could have overcome their fear and motivated people to participate. Speaking of how emotions come together to influence action, Castells (2012:81) notes that “outrage had been there for quite a long time. The key difference was that another potent, positive emotion was present: Hope... The Internet provided the safe space where networks of outrage and hope connected.” Emotion, either anger or frustration, led to political action, as politics involves the everyday lives of people which are not objective and passionless (Bickford 2011).

The extensive emotional nature of the posts around the name change debate, as well as other issues of transformation at Rhodes University, had also extended to how students spoke about other students, particularly those of different races. This resulted in people being emotional

not just in how they spoke, but also how they reacted.

**Helen:** Since the name change debate people seem to be a lot more anti-white and a lot more constant with posting about things that should change. People also seem to be a lot angrier? I'm not sure if that's just my impression though because now the periods of online conflict seem to be more regular. How I felt about things – often offended or hurt when people would be very anti-white people in general because most of the drama is racially loaded and there are extremists on each side of the spectrum and obviously when people say all whites must leave South Africa or even worse it does hurt.

A person who sees emotion talk as irrational and illogical may often take an emotional post less seriously. How we view emotion talk affects how we listen, as well as who we pay attention to and who we validate (Bickford 2011). Because of Lesedi's 'angry' post, many people chose to ignore the point of the post and instead focus on her tone. Comments in response included:

“This is disgusting I will not have people addressing fellow rhodents in such a condescending manner”

“Everyone... Stay calm... And engage in a rational manner. Please. For everyone's sake”

“This post has been reported to the Rhodes student affairs. This is blatantly racist and highly offensive.”

In addition to comments on the post, many people privately messaged Lesedi on Facebook.

**Lesedi:** I received a lot of private messages, a lot. Most of them being from people I did not know, many of whom were very upset by the post and I was called names. I received an inbox by a white male who demanded that I apologise for my post, after calling me racist. These are the things you laugh at. The private messages were just as overwhelming as the comments from the post on the page. I received some unexpectedly sweet and heartfelt messages.

The responses showed that a strong emotional reaction can lead to either extreme anger or a change in thinking. However, it can also lead to a complete avoidance of something because one feels there is nothing they can do.

**Helen:** It has definitely made me feel very attacked just because of some of the more

radical people. This relates again to automatically feeling bad and just like everyone hates me because I'm white. It makes me feel that even if I want to help/contribute/fight against rising fees, even if I can't afford fees myself (or whatever issue it is), I feel like people automatically assume I'm wealthy and don't care about the issue. How many of the people in the protest talks make me feel like that and that that's their perception of me, that there's no place for people like me in protests. I also feel like the people within the protests are exceptionally radical.

While some were averse to the emotional reactions of people as well as to their own emotional response, other found it useful and necessary to spark a debate as well as an interrogation of one's privilege and place. An emotional response can be the fire that forces a change in thinking and shocks you into a shift in perception (Skoric 2012).

**Kate:** It has happened a couple of times, I've had a conversation with somebody and they've just walked off. For me personally I've obviously just given them their space and later go to them and say 'listen it's ok that you feel the way you feel, you're allowed'. I've always gone with the thing that if you're feeling this way, it means a chord has been struck in you and my suggestion to you would be explore that, go and find out why this has upset you so much. It might not be because you agree, it might be because you disagree. Look into it because there's something definitely there. I actually get kind of offended when somebody doesn't react. Because then I'm thinking this person doesn't even, there's nothing there. I'd much rather somebody actually reacts because it means something is stirring, and I think it's in their best interests to go and explore why they felt that way.

Because of the emotional and deeply personal nature of communicating about the protest movement online, which often resulted in strong responses, people also opted to remain anonymous. Rhodes University Confessions is another Facebook group commonly used by students, which allows you to post anonymously. In addition to being a safer space to have your say without your words being linked to your name, it also provided those who merely lurked with even more raw, honest sources of information as students were more likely to speak with emotion there.

**Chanel:** I found Rhodes Confessions to be one of the most fascinating sources of opinion and experience during the 2015 protests. There was a level of honesty on there, at least that I perceived, that I didn't find anywhere else - and being a journalist



covering the fees protests, I consumed a LOT of content on the topic. I absolutely loved the way the anonymous confessions were free of pretension or grandstanding.

**Helen:** [I was] also paying attention to Rhodes Confessions during ‘spicy’ times because a lot of people post there when they’re too afraid to post on the SRC/UCKAR pages.

**Chanel:** That page was a testimony of lived experience. Unmediated, unedited. Spelling errors, assholery and all. To me, it was the most valuable source of debate and discussion I found during the protests, and that includes all the think pieces from our country’s various excellent academics and writers. I found that the anonymity of the Rhodes Confessions page - and perhaps its nature as a page on which very private and intimate things are often shared - gave it a significantly less aggressive and egotistical slant than many of the discussions I saw on the Rhodes SRC page.

The considerably honest, less self-focused nature of the posts on Rhodes Confessions showed that in using social media, the content was more important than the persona of students posting and responding. Rather than performing as a “keyboard warrior”, the term often used to describe social justice activists online, students were also posted anonymously and focusing on the topic rather than their personalities.

While Castells (2012:232) argues that “the key to the success of an SNS is not anonymity, but on the contrary, self-presentation of a real person connecting to real persons. People build networks to be with others,” it is clear that during a social movement where people can be incredibly divided on their opinions, both an open as well as an anonymous space played a valuable role in encouraging engagement and participation. Speaking and voicing one’s thoughts, particularly with emotion, signified being fully committed and passionate about something, rather than alienated and disengaged (Bickford 2011). However, to speak passionately and engage completely with emotion can and does result in angry responses. Even when posting anonymously, one was still exposed to the backlash. In some cases, people were more likely to respond in a more hurtful manner to an anonymous “Rhodes Confessor”, as they had no knowledge of, and feelings towards them. While emotions such as anger and frustration can lead a person to speak on Facebook regardless of the response, emotions such as fear and anxiety can hinder a person from speaking altogether, resulting in their lurking online.

## 5.7 Online and offline anxiety

While students believed there was value in speaking and engaging online, they also showed a hesitance to actually do so. They expressed a fear of speaking online in case they were misunderstood and attacked for it. Students were very concerned about the difficulty in conveying the right tone online and being understood.

**Kate:** With speaking to people, you can see when they've actively holding back or something and I think that's what makes it different. Unlike on social media where words can get misconstrued, tone is everything to do with and sometimes you misunderstand the tone in which somebody might have said something and you'll think they're being argumentative when actually they were just like whatever and then like the nice thing with talking to people in person is that its right then and there and it's in the moment.

**Dani:** That's another reason that I don't talk too much on social media or publically, is because my tone is misconstrued, everyone's tone is misconstrued. You can't tell how a person is speaking to you across two computer screens. You might say something like the protest is happening in the Great Hall right now, massive crowd, and someone may read it as something entirely different. That's the whole wonderful thing about languages. They're lost online and that's where half the fights stem from.

**Kate:** While I think social media, it's the way it is for people to just air their things, but the tone in which you said it is everything. The tone is lost on social media, it's completely lost. I don't really mind if somebody misspells something on Facebook, that's really not a problem for me but then other people go 'oh because you spelt it wrong, I'm not listening and that's garbage'. Somebody will say something like '#blacklivesmatter' and somebody will answer 'fuck you'. Then somebody else will say '#whitelivesmatter' and somebody else will say 'fuck you' and I'm kinda thinking but then that also doesn't help either. Apparently there was a Rhodes Confession saying there was somebody standing outside the library shouting at white people saying "why are you guys doing this, why are you guys causing this?" Now if somebody was to talk to every single white person and 'say why you guys doing this', I don't really blame white people for then getting angry and saying "oh what the hell man, why do I have to do this?" I don't blame them for getting upset. Yes while they should find out what's going on, I don't blame them for getting upset. How people speak to each other is quite

important.

In addition to concerns regarding tone, students were also fearful that should they accidentally make a mistake, either in their spelling or their understanding of a topic, the backlash would be far more extreme than they could handle.

**Dani:** That happened all the time; imagine typing, mistyping one wrong word on the thread and that is what happens all the time. End of your Rhodes career.

Some students also felt attacked as a result of their race, believing that their opinions and viewpoints would be rejected because they were white by radical students.

**Helen:** On the Facebook group I don't get involved other than liking because I'm afraid of people attacking me. A lot of it has to do with my identity as a white woman; I feel that because of my identity the radicals or even most people are immediately going to assume that I'm racist and wealthy. Or even if I'm going against someone who is being racist, I'm scared that people will then attack me and say something like I'm speaking on behalf of someone else.

Furthermore, students were aware of the relatively small size of the university and their proximity to other students. Perhaps in a larger public group, it was possible to post something online without someone linking the post to your person offline. At Rhodes University however, this was near impossible due to the small campus and small student population.

**Bernadette:** If you're put into a space I would say where you are out of your comfort zone, because at the dining table you are with your friends, you are with familiar people so you can actually say whatever you want to. Not having this fear of 'someone might remember what I said and hold it against me.'

Even your residence conversations, students are aware of the times but they... the sense I got was it's difficult for people to speak where they put a face to the name almost. It's easier on social media to make comments, to say whatever you like to say than being in a confined space and actually saying how a situation made me feel and why it made me feel like that.

As mentioned earlier, there was the option to post anonymously should students have wished to not have their name linked to what they say. However, this did not prevent other students

from responding to anonymous posts in a way that would make the original poster feel attacked. As a result, students made the decision to not post online and avoid getting into conflict. By refraining from posting and commenting online, students also protected themselves from damaging and potentially triggering comments and responses. The decision to lurk, rather than speak could then be considered an active decision to participate in a specific way that is not hurtful to the student.

While online spaces allow for trigger warnings, or some sort of precaution regarding content, it is difficult to be this protected offline. As a result, many students' existing anxiety and fears were heightened during the protest in physical spaces, leading them to avoid offline protest activities in addition to avoiding speaking online. On 19 October 2015, students began mobilising at Purple Square, as well as barricading the entrance to Rhodes University so that vehicles could not pass through. On 21 October 2015, during the National Shutdown, students marched together with lecturers through the streets of Grahamstown to protest for free tertiary education in South Africa. Following the peaceful march, Rhodes University management responded by stating that they would be unable to meet the demands of the protest, and that academic activity would resume as normal the following day. This resulted in further marches, gatherings and protest action during which some students felt threatened by the processes of mobilisation, which in some instances involves a small group of students entering residences and forcibly urging other students to join.

**Helen:** I didn't attend much of the protests... I was too scared to be honest. During Fees Must Fall at Rhodes I went to the big march through Grahamstown and then I think I went for a bit on the first day. Whilst I 100% agree with the cause, I think social anxiety and fear of feeling judged by actual protestors kept me away. Through the posts on the group I was able to keep updated with the progress of the protests in terms of how close the students were to reaching various goals, as well as whether or not the protests would be likely to continue the next day.

**Dani:** I participated to the best of my ability. I've been questioned about this before, 'if you're so passionate about social issues, where are you when we're fighting out there as an Indian woman? We need more people of colour doing the things.' I have social anxiety, I freak the fuck out in crowds and I would literally be incoherent, incapacitated, more harm than good so I stay at home. I can't physically be there as much as I would like to be.

**Bernadette:** Anxiety, stress and fear was one thing that was real. You know, this is now irrelevant but a couple of times students came into the reses, this was one thing we really fought for, saying this is their home space, do not, please do not impose. A student sitting in his or her room has this banging on their door, you have no idea where this student is coming from, what they had to go through to cope with life up to this point. That might have been a trigger, as simple as a hard bash on the door, taking them back to experiences. That child is harmed, that student is harmed. They need to start the counselling process again, they need to go through what they've already come, just to repeat, so yes I believe it could be one of the reasons that people actually prefer not to physically be part of that and in that space.

Despite the anxiety and fear experienced by students over posting online, as well as over physically participating in potentially triggering spaces, students remained present in the movement. They showed that their feelings of anxiety either made them lurk online and choose to engage face to face with people offline, or it made them withdraw from offline spaces altogether and only participate by being present online, or it made them do a combination of lurking both online and offline. However, it did not result in a lack of interest or attention, even if this is what their lurking appears to be.

## **5.8 Lurking**

The students I interviewed either self-identified or displayed lurking behaviour on social media. This included reading and paying attention to what was posted only, with little to no input from the users themselves in terms of posting their own content or engaging with existing content.

**Helen:** Being a lurker, I can't remember a time I ever commented on a post, even if there was something I strongly disagreed or agreed with. Usually I would then read all the comments, tag friends that I think would be interested in the drama and sometimes I would do the whole posting a full stop so I would receive notifications thing. I only recently knew you could turn on notifications for a post. So I'd be notified when there'd be something new to read. Sometimes I'd screenshot particularly dramatic things and send them to friends. I also even told my friend at Wits to join our page so she could follow the drama too.

**Dani:** last year I stayed very much out of it, I didn't want to cause trouble. I hadn't

picked a side yet because apparently you have to.

For some, their only activity was to 'like' Facebook posts as a subtle way of showing support.

**Kate:** I generally don't comment a lot but I read a lot and I like posts, so if you are one of those people who looks and sees who likes things, my name will probably pop up. But in terms of commentary, no.

**Helen:** I think that's just my way of showing I support it. Or feeling like I'm agreeing without actually getting myself 'dangerously' (to do with the fear of being attacked earlier) involved. Don't think anyone's tagged me, as I usually am on Facebook already or have already seen the 'drama'. But I've tagged friends and then this is to alert them to be reading what's going on.

**Lesedi:** I am a 'Liker'. Rhodents are quite funny; I enjoy those posts – reminiscing. Since I do still have an interest in the page, I do *still* 'like' politics related posts.

By identifying as lurkers, students did not associate their lurking with participation. This was despite the fact that their lurking was not just passively scrolling through content, but actively paying attention and forming opinions and thoughts about what they were reading.

**Chanel:** I follow the Rhodes University group, and the Rhodes Confessions page. I identify as a lurker because I follow the pages, read their posts and comments, but don't participate in the online conversation myself. I do have strong opinions about the posts, and definitely respond to them in my own head and in my real-life conversations, but in the groups themselves I'm a silent observer.

Previously, students spoke about the many benefits of social media, particularly its ability to bring together different people and allow them to engage in discussion over important matters. They also prioritised the importance of social media in giving people a voice and empowering others to speak. Considering these views, it would be expected that these participants would be using Facebook for those purposes. However, students were lurking as described above. There are many reasons for this which was explored by looking at what students thought about other posts online and what they thought about the way people responded to posts online. In each case, the act of lurking was a conscious decision made by the students, often with the purpose of showing consideration to other people.

For Lesedi, her decision to not post content arose out of a desire to foreground the experiences of others who she believed were more affected by the #MustFall movement at Rhodes University.

**Lesedi:** I am no longer at Rhodes, and so for me I feel it is important to not impose myself on student politics happening in and around Rhodes campus. The political climate on campus has changed a lot, and in as much as I keep up or at least try to with what is happening at the university, I think that those at campus and surrounding areas – people who have to still *deal* with the everyday silencing and pain, are in a position to post and comment. As a former student, I absolutely understand the struggle and can relate to a lot of what is being said, but sometimes I do not think that the current struggle at the university is mine to speak about or comment on – basically, I do not want to centre myself. I have my opinions and I do discuss them with former Rhodents, however off the page.

In addition to remaining quiet so that other, more necessary voices could speak, students also chose to not add to what they considered online noise, thus allowing those who did speak to be more noticeable.

**Kate:** I've just stayed away from commenting on something unless I've really felt like holy crap nobody said something about the fact that somebody said something problematic and nine times out of ten, someone says something and does say what I wanted to say. So I'll just show my support for it and just like it. Maybe it's because I'll catch the post late. I just don't like being redundant and adding to what someone else might have said.

This confirms the observation on lurkers by Nonnecke & Preece (2000:6) that “when traffic is high, there is a sense that adding messages to the list only increases the traffic without improving the quality. For them, lurking was a way of reducing the noise on the list, a civic duty so to speak.”

Furthermore, students lurked as a way of genuinely showing interest and using it to learn and better understand others. This was done especially in times when social media gave them access to information and experiences that they would otherwise have found themselves excluded from.

**Dani:** With regards to being a lurker on the SRC page, I'm not listening to spread

gossip, I think that's where the difference lies. You have people who are like, "shit it was lit, oh my gosh, how the hell could they say that, what what what". Then they would begin their discussion from gossip. My discussion would be, 'ok I don't quite understand what this privilege is that you're speaking of, please tell me the things and let's talk about this properly.' I come from the space of self-improvement rather than oh I found this hahaha let's gossip about it.

**Chanel:** I don't lurk under a sense of 'you should be reading this stuff'. I find myself reading it because I have an overwhelming curiosity about it. I feel like I'm eavesdropping on a conversation I would never actually be invited to.

While many of the reasons for lurking showed a positive characteristic of those who used social media, there were also reasons that highlighted that the online space was not always a positive one. Rather than discussions, many conversations became arguments that were tiring to continue, resulting in students choosing to not start a conversation at all because they did not feel it would be constructive.

**Helen:** I also often don't feel like I can express myself well enough to argue against someone, and I also know that as soon as I comment one thing, people will argue with me and I'll be sucked into a kind of endless emotionally draining battle.

**Chanel:** I'm white, and from a white family, school and area. This means that an awful lot of my Facebook community reacts very tiresomely to this kind of content. And ain't nobody got time to argue with trolls<sup>8</sup>.

**Lesedi:** Common to any interactive social network is the heightened propensity to people not being held accountable for their views. Meaning that, people can and have used this flaw to bully, insult and silence some voices. What this eventually comes down to is that often the 'heated debate' ends up not be progressive and open and instead a thread of personal attacks between the participants.

While people expressed a hesitation to speak online, they also showed a willingness to carry those conversations offline in order to communicate, rather than not speaking at all. This suggests that rather than passively lurking and doing nothing in response, students were

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<sup>8</sup> An online troll refers to someone who deliberately posts inflammatory or unrelated content to a conversation, with the intention of creating an emotional reaction or discord.



responding to online content by discussing and doing offline.

**Chanel:** I rarely responded online to what I saw. I shared a few posts and made a few comments, but only in exceptional cases. I think part of the reason for my silence was because I felt that as a journalist I was under scrutiny and expected to be as impartial as possible, and not publicly “take sides”. If I’m going to discuss these matters, I’d prefer it to be in person, where we are far more likely to actually achieve some understanding.

**Helen:** In person I feel a lot more confident, I mean to start with I actually have conversations with people. Also offline conversations tend to be with people I know, so then it’s easier to defend myself if they aren’t understanding what I’m saying and I feel more confident to back up whatever point it is I want to make, and people you know offline are less likely to attack you as harshly if you do say something wrong; the conversation can be a lot more fruitful in terms of learning (on either side...). Like if I say something problematic to a friend, I welcome them to call me out, but then they will educate me and not just attack me... or if you’re educating someone and calling them out I think they’ll be more receptive.

Students’ reasons for lurking ranged from the positive – wanting to give others a chance to speak, not wanting to add unnecessary content and take away from valid concerns, and wanting to learn and understand better – to the negative in that they lacked the confidence to argue or discuss online and believed that they did not have the energy to deal with the difficulty of discussing politics online. This was in addition to their feelings of extreme fear and anxiety about speaking up online, as mentioned previously. However, rather than lurking and letting the fear of posting online stop them from speaking completely, they instead chose to let the online content influence their offline actions. Because of both their anxiety and their reasons for lurking, students began to increasingly move between intersecting offline and online spaces, depending on what was accessible and comfortable.

### **5.9 Intersecting social networks online and offline**

While the main online space connecting the majority of Rhodes University students during the protests was the SRC group, it was not the only place where conversations, discussions and the sharing of information took place. In the same way that the online world intersects with the offline world, so the content within Facebook groups intersected with other spaces that users navigate on Facebook. These networks which went beyond social media groups and pages enabled users to have more personal and meaningful conversations, but they also

made it hard to track and identify the myriad conversations about the #MustFall protests, proving that what is visible online was not a good enough indicator of the extent to which students were participating and engaging. Furthermore, it is easy to assume that students were not participating and that their lurking was inactive when you do not consider the other ways and avenues in which they were communicating.

**Helen:** I shared an article (can't remember by which news organisation) that was essentially a budget break down of government spending, and it was illustrating how if things were only slightly readjusted then higher education should be free. The only conversation I can remember that I had was involving myself in a Facebook fight with this white girl from my high school studying at UJ [University of Johannesburg]. Essentially she was condemning the protest and being racist towards students, with words like 'savages', and I got involved and tried to educate her about the protests and stuff a little more. After much frustration, she then said she understands and agrees but just not with violence and I stopped commenting.

Many people did not comment or interact with a post on a public page, but instead chose to share the link and have a conversation about the post within their own network of friends and known people.

**Chanel:** I am friends with many journalists on Facebook and follow them on Twitter, and often found their first-hand accounts (including Facebook lives, videos and pictures) to be a much richer source of information than what was published through the official channels.

**Kate:** Not on the SRC page. On my own feed yes I have [spoken about the protests] but not on the SRC page no.

Kate and Chanel's use of their personal Facebook Newsfeed to communicate showed that people were speaking about the #MustFall movement beyond the SRC group. Mostly, they were lurking and using what they had seen about the #MustFall movement on social media to contribute to offline conversations and interactions.

For some, this could have been partially due to a fear of how they sound online. For others, it was exactly because of how different networks of social activity and communication intersected that they were hesitant to say anything online. The experience of fear was not just

a result of the protest movement, but it was also inherent in social media and in some cases, the medium itself posed an opportunity for fear to arise.

**Dani:** I don't want to start shit online because I know things like this will pop up and people will find your name. My parents and my uncle who have like PHDs and are in university set-ups now warned me not to. They're like 'Your employers will see your opinions and they will judge you based on that and you won't get a job'.

For others, it was a natural transition to go from conversations online to discussing the same things in offline spaces. The Facebook group content, the private Facebook conversations, and the discussions, whether public or private, all contributed to furthering the protest movement. According to (Castells 2012:229), "it is through these digital communication networks that the movements live and act, certainly in interaction with face-to-face communication and with the occupation of urban space".

One way to monitor how students were taking conversations out of their original medium and discussing it elsewhere was by looking at the comment sections of Facebook posts. One of the most common types of comments on Facebook posts were not actual thoughts or responses, but rather a user just commenting with names of other people. In doing so, they 'tag' those named users and the tagged people then receive a notification alerting them to the post. This is one way in which students alerted others to content online, with the intention of discussing it further later offline.

**Dani:** Regularly, at least once a day I will bring something up, like I saw this. I will tag your name and then I will tell the other to go look. Go look at this. Go follow this. I remember at the beginning of this term I think there were rumblings about a protest happening and we were sitting at the Geography labs at 2 in the morning doing work and posts would pop up and we'd huddle around one of the computers to look at the things. 'No wait hang on, let me tag you. Names names names names names'.

"Dining halls are the most common spaces" of further discussion, according to Kate. She also found that conversations about transformation at Rhodes University came up while setting up for her band, as well as while casually talking to her supervisor. Through other people's posts on the Facebook group, both staff and students at the university had a cue to discuss issues they may not have ordinarily spoken about before.

**Lesedi:** The 2015 Fees Must Fall protests served as a key moment in South African and

student politics. Given that the movement was a nationwide movement, it was important for all students from across the country to keep on sharing information and updates. For me, conversations around Fees Must Fall were mostly had offline at the protests, at dinner and with random people – as a student, everyone wanted to know why and what was happening was happening. My Facebook feed was more for information and being updated.

**Kate:** The thing is with me, I've found that I often take things that I've seen on social media and then discussed it, not on social media but with my friends together or with people like in person. So that's how I've negotiated this whole thing, where I've gone "oh did you see this post by so and so," then talk about it. So I haven't really used social media as a discussion platform, I've used it as just a "Ok I see this, let me take it out and go and discuss".

I found that with my group of friends it's been a little easier but with other people not necessarily, but I've kind of started trying to engage with people. Because most people do see what happens on the SRC page so they will know what I am talking about. So that's just how I've done it.

With discussions about race and transformation becoming heated and divisive, it may have been difficult to engage in conversation with people who may have drastically different views. By asking a fellow student if they have seen a certain post online, it became a way to test the waters and establish where you stood before speaking.

**Kate:** If it is the right space I do tend to just probe a little bit and see what people think.

It also allowed for people talking to provide more context, more information and to effectively convey their points using non-verbal cues that would have been lost over social media. By being able to better explain and engage, it was possible that people were able to understand and learn more.

**Dani:** There are too many people who will misconstrue what you are trying to say and take away from the greater meaning of things, so I will go rather to a person specifically that I know is better versed than I am and talk about it rather than being misconstrued by a stranger that I don't know who will have a negative opinion of me which is not even true.

**Lesedi:** Post Fees Must Fall, I believe in the power of social media and online conversations. For many, especially myself and the resources I have access to, conversations online always shift to offline spaces and in those spaces we are able to discuss them more in depth and in how to move forward – given context of what is happening, where we come from etcetera.

**Chanel:** This understanding shapes the way I discuss these issues with my colleagues, family and friends and contributes towards shaping my opinions.

Just as engaging offline can be learning experience for some, it also provided the opportunity for those involved in the movement to educate those who know very little or misunderstand it. The way in which this is done was very different to online, where people have less patience and were less likely to try and educate someone, particularly because it is sometimes unclear when someone genuinely does not understand, or they are ‘trolling’ (deliberately saying something to upset another and get a reaction).

**Chanel:** I definitely do carry the conversations offline, especially to people who don’t spend much time online or aren’t on Facebook (like my parents). I do this because I am invested in social justice and I care about these issues. I wish more people cared, and I wish more people tried to spread empathy for opinions and life experiences beyond their own. But at the same time, I don’t feel like I have an obligation to “educate” people, especially racist/problematic people online. If you can operate Facebook well enough to troll the comments section, you can operate Google. Damn well educate yourself. Read up. There is no excuse to be ignorant, and there is definitely no excuse to make your ignorance someone else’s problem.

**Dani:** I think my way of doing things is educating, so when I get presented with an idiot at Friars where I work singing a sexist drinking song, I would tell them off and ask them why that’s funny and they’d be like ‘no no because this’ and I’d be like ‘you know that means this’ and continue the conversation from there and shut them down and shush them quite nicely. So rather than actively be playing a role at a place, I will do what I see as good work elsewhere.

Furthermore, because social media content provided the starting point for conversations offline, there was more scope to go beyond just basic conversations on race. It was not unusual for students to spend hours discussing transformation offline, as opposed to just

mentioning something in passing.

**Lesedi:** I did engage in conversations both online and offline. A lot has changed in what we say and how we say it. On various platforms including offline, there has been growth in the conversation in that we cannot only be fighting only one form of oppression – being race, the conversation has grown to include talks on gender politics, on intersectionality, ableism capitalism – looking at the workers struggle for example, and *other* forms of struggles and challenges largely experienced by the people, read black, of South Africa.

It is clear then that not only did spaces of engagement overlap and intersect online when students shared content from groups on their personal timeline to engage with their network, but spaces of engagement also intersected when students took online content and conversations into offline spaces to discuss further. They also used the different spaces to engage for a variety of reasons, including choosing to stay within a safe network of people and avoid online trolling as well as choosing to avoid leaving behind a cyber-trail which can influence future career opportunities. Furthermore, students found that by taking what they have seen on social media to offline spaces, they were able to have longer, more thorough conversations that benefit from the knowledge of non-verbal cues and being able to hear tone. This also provided opportunities for talking to and educating people such as older family members who would not necessarily have encountered certain information on social media.

What is vital to understand here is that because of these intersecting and overlapping spaces of speaking and lurking, students were actively participating in ways that could not always be monitored, but did exist. What this suggests is that their lurking was not as passive or inactive as it appeared to be. Rather, the knowledge gained from their lurking, and the ways in which their lurking influenced their offline activity suggests that students were doing something more active; they were listening.

### **5.10 Listening, not lurking**

While there were many opportunities and platforms for students to engage with the #MustFall movement by speaking and participating in traditional ways, we also need to look at the importance of listening in this process and how it affected how students participated and engaged.

## Hearing or listening?

As students increasingly began to carry conversations about transformation through their everyday lives, there were attempts to formalise offline engagement with the matter in a way that would allow for practical solutions.

**Bernadette:** At that point the discussions were also a lot about transformation. So, “what are you unhappy with that is currently happening on campus or in your dining hall or in your res?” I remember as well we were asked to put up, or have discussions with our residences and also put up blank papers so students could actually go and write things that they would like to be discussed or things that they would like to see changed, in the university and in residences.

The SRC led dining hall conversations, as well as the informal ones initiated by students themselves, were also attempts to take the many offline conversations and turn it into productive conversation between larger groups of people. However, my participation at the SRC conversations showed that it was not as effective as imagined. The attendance levels were low, with many students choosing to stay updated through Facebook rather than attend the discussions planned by the SRC.

**Bernadette:** They [the SRC] called on the trained mediators to partake in certain dining hall conversations where there would be SRC representatives and two mediators. If I remember correctly it was wardens at the time that they used as mediators. So basically I was there as a backup assistant for the hall warden that chaired at the dining hall conversation at the time. So ja, my involvement was purely because I was a mediator and I was chosen for that dining hall. It was a small group at the time, there weren't, we expected a few more students but I think it was a good conversation.

**Dani:** I think the problem with things like that is they wouldn't have been as well received as you think they would be. It all depends on the tone and mood of the students. I don't think we [dining hall] ever did have one. And as much as I know there's like a lot of engagement spaces that we could have gone to, it's not a priority. I'm doing my assignments, I could go on Facebook.

**Bernadette:** So I don't know if people don't want to face reality and it's just easier to hide, as they call them keyboard warriors, just to hide behind that. I'm not criticising anyone but groups were extremely, extremely few. I remember specifically at that time,

there were hundreds and thousands of comments and issues and stuff and that's why they decided to create the spaces. And the disappointment was actually just huge because you didn't even get a quarter of the audience that was actively involved on social media.

While the comfort and low pressure that staying on Facebook offered compared to physically attending a meeting may have been a potential reason why students did not attend, it did not explain why when students in dining halls hosted their own discussions, the attendance and conversations levels were much higher.

**Kate:** We had a hall committee meeting at the beginning of last term, all of this peaking but it was after the peak in the anger and everything was happening and I was feeling like as Drostdy<sup>9</sup> we kept complaining about how people didn't go to the SRC one [discussion]. Then I thought 'why aren't we doing it ourselves, why are we waiting on an outside body to come and do something?' I mean this is our hall this is our space and this might be the only comfortable space that people might feel like they have.

For many of the students, it was not simply about having a platform to speak, whether it is online or offline. It was about whether they felt safe and comfortable in a space to be able to discuss deeply personal and complicated issues relating to race and transformation. It also mattered to students who attended, whether people were listening and for what purpose.

**Kate:** So I said in the hall committee meeting that I don't know how and we can talk about how, but it was concerning that we weren't even talking about it all and so I proposed that we provide spaces in which people can actually have these discussions both formal and informal. And we see how they work out because what tends to happen when people know this is actually happening, and then maybe they might get interested, just see how it goes and for those who are interested, that space is perfect.

The student led conversations were hosted for the sake of discussion alone, to allow people to freely talk about what they had been holding in knowing that they would be listened to.

**Kate:** As somebody in the hall I was proud of who attended that discussion and the way that they were willing to discuss it, whether or not that their opinion was that the *Luister* video was good or bad, they pitched and that for me was great. There was a lot

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<sup>9</sup> Drostdy Hall is one of the dining halls on Rhodes University campus.



of Drostdy leadership there, not everybody but a lot of leadership was there and I thought to myself well this is fantastic because you know it's a start in the right direction. It's a small discussion but it's a discussion none the less.

Who was listening and how they were listening were the most drastic differences between the SRC and the student hosted hall discussions. With the student led conversation, people came in knowing they would have different opinions and would be allowed to freely discuss for as long as necessary, with no forced outcome or point other than to talk. The SRC-led discussion, however, appeared to be forced with the purpose of saying a platform for students to speak exists, without a commitment to actually considering their thoughts. In particular, students were reminded at the SRC talk that a time limit existed and the SRC members needed to leave after to conduct another talk at a different dining hall. While the SRC and staff may have had good intentions, the lack of student perspective affected how the conversation was run and the impact it had on students.

**Bernadette:** It was just a checklist. I recall those kind of words but I most probably didn't focus on it like a student would have focused and thinking "hey they creating time for us but they're putting us in a box and telling us just this limited time and come on, say what you need to say, we're in a hurry, we need to go to the next meeting". So I didn't experience it most probably like a student but thinking about it, it could have had an impact, definitely because as you are saying they kind of giving you the space but they telling you "ok you only have an hour" and while there's still discussions going on, "come one we need to wrap up". It does make you feel uncomfortable and not wanting to open up and feel as though they honestly wanting to hear what your problems are.

The underwhelming response to the SRC hosted hall discussions showed that the importance of giving people a voice cannot be considered in isolation to the importance of listening in response. When students do not feel listened to, they are less likely to engage and speak.

**Bernadette:** I mean we all tried very hard but there's a lot of different views, lots of different feelings, you know so what one student would like changed isn't necessarily what majority of students would like changed in a res or on campus. A huge part of the discussion was transformation and what made students feel uncomfortable, unwelcome and ja, they had opportunity to actually suggest change, to kind of propose strategies that would be implemented to bring about the change they want to.

By mentioning that students had the opportunity to suggest changes implies that this was enough for change to actually occur, or for students to feel like their concerns had been sufficiently addressed. On yet another occasion, there was an attempt to provide some sort of voice or representation for the students by creating a position on the residence house committees for a Transformation Representative.

**Bernadette:** One thing that did come out of that [dining hall talks] into the res system, was one of the new portfolios was Transformation Rep. This representative had to actually ensure that transformation discussions took place, that regular discussions took place but this was all kind of res set-ups. I'm not sure what happened within the university. I know they very big on transformation and they have a transformation office so I would assume there are things in place and strategies were implemented, we might just not be aware of it. But there's nothing I can pinpoint and say I'm aware of this that was implemented other than knowing that transformation became a new portfolio.

Creating a position for a Transformation Representative gave the impression that students' concerns over transformation and activism were being noticed and represented by someone, who would then follow up on their concerns. However, this also implied that something like institutional culture and transformation could be divided into a separate portfolio, rather than being something every student leader tries to achieve. It gave the illusion of having a voice through a representative who could speak on your behalf, when in reality, the actual abilities and outcomes of creating this position remained unknown even to a staff member who was a house warden.

### **Hearing and a lack of listening**

Listening is also being present and allowing someone to speak without silencing them. This was not necessarily done intentionally, but naturally there were louder, bolder voices offline that could dominate conversations, making it difficult for others to have spoken and felt listened to.

**Dani:** In the dining hall... We would leave, make sure we're not around as many people who would get so boxy because a lot of the time when people have these talks they talk to talk, not to listen. So we would go sit outside, have our little talk there, they would be open minded. But the problem with being friends with Drama kids is that they're

louder than everyone else so I would often get drowned out, they wouldn't really listen to me also because I have shit articulation.

However, there were times when people intentionally spoke over others and refused to listen, even online.

**Dani:** It goes back to the listeners and the talkers, people online are all about 'oh I'm online, my voice has to be heard'. That's what this generation is about; my voice. Like freedom of speech. Me. So much to the point that they don't even listen anymore.

When Lesedi posted her message complaining about the privilege on campus, she received messages on her Facebook inbox telling her to take her post down. This was a way of refusing to listen and participate in the conversation.

As we saw with the SRC's attempts to host dining hall conversations, the intention of allowing people to speak was not enough of a guarantee that they will be listened to. Another instance in which this occurred was in the creation of a separate Activism and Transformation group for students to solely discuss student politics and the protest movement. Some students were not even aware that the group existed.

**Dani:** Nope. I would have picked up on that one because I'm not as vocally involved with all the things because my friends are more outspoken than I am, so I kind of just can't articulate as nicely as them so I keep quiet. But I still follow all the things and I like to keep in touch with them, but there was no activism page. I think the activism page might have been the SRC page and might have been Rhodes Confessions.

Those that did remember it could not say much about it, because it did not have the same kind of influence as the SRC group did. Students quickly pointed out that the group, while having the intention of giving people a dedicated platform to speak about specific issues, actually took away the larger existing audience on the SRC group. As a result, students felt that others wanted to choose when to listen and when to ignore certain posts.

**Helen:** I do have a vague memory of the SRC in maybe 2014? Early 2015? Trying to make a separate group for political posts, yes I did join it. But all I really remember was students then saying that the whole point of the SRC page should be to have these discussions such as is said in their 'mission' on the page info.

Furthermore, it was a way of removing the issues brought up by the #MustFall movement, as

if it could be separated from the everyday life of all students. Again, this plays into the idea of there being binaries in terms of some people being involved or affected, and others being neither involved nor affected. As Kate said earlier, there was no sole narrative for each race, but rather, intersecting narratives that were important to understand. The SRC group gave people the opportunity for people to detail these varying narratives, with the knowledge that a large number of people would be lurking and listening.

**Lesedi:** I remember the request coming from a student who had other students backing them. I did not join the group. Politics are part of us and part of us being at Rhodes. We are black and we are Rhodents. One should not have to separate their political voice to their Rhodes liberalism ‘character’. Having such a page would mean if you want to be black and talk about being black – you have to voice it on the Activism page, but when you want to talk about Purple Thursdays and being a Rhodent, then you can freely talk about it on the SRC page – I am not one or the other, I am both. Activism should never exist outside of the institution; it is part of it. A different page would also allow people to easily remain ignorant on the issues being discussed, and they would easily choose to not join the page. For example, for white people that would mean that they would not have to confront the issue of their privilege and race, it would have heavily enforced the status quo and left those comfortable to remain at their comfort. It is ridiculous to expect black students to discuss their issues in private – because that is something that we have done before, in me previously highlighting that we have had these chats before is exactly what the page would serve as – conversations that black people have amongst other black people and a few ‘liberal’ white people.

With this in mind, it is fair to say that students understood the importance of being listened to in order to validate their speaking, and as a result were constantly attempting to listen, pay attention to and foreground the voice of the other. When students described their lurking and their actions online, they considered it unimportant, passive and non-participatory. However, their reasons for lurking and their feelings of not being heard suggest that they were in fact grasping the importance of listening and doing it in their daily interactions.

### **Listening as a form of learning**

While the students interviewed seemed to be quite aware of social issues related to the #MustFall movement, they admitted that there was still a lot that they were unaware of. By actively lurking and listening to what others had to say through social media, they had been

going through a process of learning and unlearning.

**Kate:** I just know that when the entire discourse started happening I started thinking, ‘ok wait I need to do my research.’ So as much as social media was keeping me updated on how people felt about it, I personally was like ok obviously there’s a much bigger issue here so I then started going back and reading about who is this Cecil John Rhodes, what is the statue, what is his legacy.

**Helen:** So in my white privilege, I had legitimately never thought of the name of Rhodes as oppressive. I didn’t even connect it to Cecil Rhodes and even my prior knowledge of Rhodes was nothing to do with how awful he was, that all came from the name change debate. Previously my knowledge of him (even with a government school history till Matric education) was just about him wanting to build a railroad and being a diamond mining bigshot. But then through reading all the posts and stuff, learning how much it hurts some students to be here is so interesting to me (not to trivialise and reduce others’ pain into spectacle for me, but I hope you know what I mean?) and gives me such an opposite perspective to my own. So that kind of learning is a big reason. Another is because I also think social media is the catalyst for these protests, so that’s interesting to track and follow. I think it’s just important to be aware of the mood of students.

**Chanel:** My purpose in following those pages is to open myself up to a variety of opinion, so that I can better understand the climate of public discourse on certain issues. With that purpose in mind, I don’t approach the page content with a desire to comment - just to consume and absorb. I find it gives me a much better understanding of what people at universities are thinking, and how their identities influence their experiences.

**Lesedi:** Online debates have benefited many. I have read a few debates for example on transgender people, and this for me has sparked a keen interest to learn more about the reasoning behind the ‘topic’, and therefore be able to treat people better both online and offline. Related to the post and other posts and debates on racism online, you read and you acknowledge that you might have been the shitty person spoken about, and depending on the kind of person you are, you take that and ask yourself ‘how can I be better and not be racist, not be prejudiced?’ – and also working on asking yourself why you think the way you think about a particular a group, and whether or not you wish to unlearn what you have been taught about the particular group.

Not only did students learn about things they had not previously considered, they also unlearned thoughts and attitudes about things they thought they understood. This was both in relation to the #MustFall movement, as well as intersecting issues of gender, sexuality and class. In doing so, students were able to better communicate with and understand other people. This mindfulness before speaking is also what brought people together in the protest movement. Both Dani and Lesedi acknowledge that this starts with the humility necessary to listen first. Dani describes her experiences of speaking online and being subsequently educated as “so much humble pie”.

**Dani:** From all this, because initially I started out the Fees Must Fall with a status of my own. I wrote it at 2 in the morning when they started marching and I was quite sarcastic and Stephen Fry in my tone and I sort of said something like ‘It’s 2 in the morning, it’s kind of very loud, no one seems to know why but everyone’s shouting, why is everyone shouting?’ And it was just from the most ignorant space that I could have come from because it was 2 in the morning. I understand why they do it now but at the time I was an arsehole about it. Then when I started engaging by like the, started on a Sunday? I started engaging on Tuesday like wait, what the fuck is this actually about, let me not be a poes and actually listen to people. Then it went from there. Then by the time it was time for the meeting I was like all on board, ok doesn’t matter about my opinion, get people informed because if people are just talking and shouting, no one’s going to listen.

**Lesedi:** Apart from awareness of various issues and being updated, I have learnt a great deal of different struggles that exist on campus that I was not previously aware of, and also learning about instances where I have been unintentionally shitty or not been emphatic enough towards a situation. I think generally it has exposed me to the different perspectives that are sometimes similar to mine or sometimes extremely different. Apart from that I have mostly also been able to get a glance of how multifaceted and intersectional the movement is. This has also made me conscious of how sensitive we need to be on such platforms because there are so many narratives and voices that we are often not aware of. This unmindfulness is often what kills and harms the movement.

**Dani:** [if you’re not listening] you’re not learning anything.

**Chanel:** Not all people are social justice warriors, and not all social justice warriors are

comfortable being vocal online. If lurking is where a person feels comfortable, that's fine. Nobody is under any obligation to contribute to the conversation. Lurking, observing, absorbing, listening is better than not bearing witness to the conversation at all.

Despite previously describing her online presence as non-participatory, Chanel here acknowledges that by lurking and observing, she is part of the learning process. Learning is not as simple as listening to a different narrative and changing one's thoughts and opinions. It can sometimes be a lengthy, emotional and difficult process, as the very act of listening and acknowledging the other sometimes involves opening oneself up to discomfort.

**Lesedi:** Race is always going to be an uncomfortable topic for white people. Mostly because it's it requires white people to face reality and for once listen and take collective responsibility of history and of the present.

**Kate:** The only thing that has been worrisome for me, but I understand it's the nature of this discourse; the worrying thing for me has been how people speak to each other on social media. I suppose because when they talk to each other face to face, it changes slightly because you know to be courteous but not always. It's how people have been talking to each other and I worry that, it always happens if somebody is rude to you you're not going to hear what they're saying but I think it's coming from everybody and that is not helping people to listen. Because when someone is shouting at you, you won't listen. But if someone is speaking to you softly you won't listen either.

Listening is not easy and is to a large extent influenced by how the other is speaking. It is possible to choose to not listen. But rather than that, students were still lurking and by doing so, were showing an active and conscious decision to pay attention.

**Chanel:** There is such violence that stems from people not listening to one another, not understanding different life experiences, and not giving credence to the pain that those experiences cause. And there is such ignorance that stems from only discussing issues within the narrow identity-defined echo chambers we find ourselves in, where our families and neighbourhoods and social circles are largely limited to the same skin colour and economic class as our own. Communities such as Rhodes Confessions are a whole lot less segregated than real-life South Africa, and I wish more people would lurk a little and listen to opinions vastly different to their own.

Even by lurking with no intention to change one's opinion, students may have been shocked, upset and outraged at what they encountered because it included new narratives that did not fit with their prior experiences.

“Listening thus involves an encounter with radical alterity that disrupts our everyday understandings and habits of thought. But to encounter this alterity is not to freeze us into some kind of subject/object relation. Rather, it is to let the “gathered” subject and object lie before us, *as reference points*, relative to a point of view, a position from which we take up in our engagements in the world.”

(Lipari 2010: 350)

To listen then, is not as easy as simply hearing. It is not as passive as lurking is perceived to be. Rather, listening is an active decision made, with effects on how people view themselves within the world around them. Listening allows for learning, it enables one to experience the other, it allows people to change their reference points and be shocked into thinking differently, it allows one to place others before oneself, and it enables lurkers to be better people. When Rhodes University students were thought of as disengaged lurkers who do not participate or contribute to both online and offline spheres, they were actually lurking, and listening.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

In this thesis I have explored how Rhodes University students used social media, and a Facebook group in particular, to navigate and participate in the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests. This was done in order to understand and further explain students' political and social activism, and to interrogate the concepts of slacktivism and lurking in social media usage by the youth. While the following conclusions cannot be claimed to apply to every South African youth, the observations and interviews indicate that it is true for a number of Rhodes University students, and therefore it is worth questioning our set ways of thinking about participation, political activism, and effective communication.

In order to understand and unpack activities that seem to be passive on the surface, this thesis has employed and emphasised theories of listening and emotion talk as part of the need for a deeper evaluation of how students communicated and acted during protest movements. It has acknowledged that it is not enough to determine whether social media use is 'real participation' or slacktivism based on what is visible online. A quantitative knowledge of how many 'likes' or comments a post garnered, or how many hashtags appeared per post does little to explain how those hashtags work to communicate ideas or positions on a subject. Furthermore, it is impossible to use the number of comments or posts to understand how meaning has been made by students who have seen and paid attention to the content without responding to it. Therefore the thesis has sought to understand and explain the actions of a majority who lurk online, whose presence is difficult to monitor and judge.

By firstly monitoring online activity in shared spaces and then participating in offline spaces, as well as speaking to students to hear their interpretations of their experiences, I was able to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how and why students are lurking while also examining their actions against traditional notions of participation.

#### **Social media: a new form of protest**

While there are numerous research projects focused on social media use during protest action, the focus has largely been on Twitter, and the role of social media to transfer information and

mobilise physical protest action. As there were times during the #MustFall protests when social media, in particular Facebook, completely replaced offline communication as indicated by the research participants, it was important to go deeper into how and for what purposes students were using this form of social media during the protest movement. To do this required going beyond just tracking the increase in political conversation and the hashtag trends, but rather actually considering the conversations of Rhodes University students on Facebook within the context of the protest. The findings of this study show that the Rhodes SRC Facebook group created a sense of community for students who felt involved and exposed those who did not necessarily choose to participate to ideas and experiences that they may have been separated from otherwise. Due to the non-binary nature of the narratives and experiences posted online, more students could relate and participate. Furthermore, they felt a large sense of trust in the information posted on Facebook by fellow students, choosing to pay attention to this over official news reports and university communiqués.

### **Speaking: empowering and debilitating**

During the #MustFall protests, students found Facebook to be a platform to speak and represent themselves. Whereas traditional media may have previously ignored or misrepresented them, students now had the ability to have their own voice rather than be spoken for. This was empowering, both for the speaker whose opinion was validated by the ‘likes’ and comments in agreement that their post received, as well as empowering for those who read what others were saying and realised that other people felt the same as they did while they had been keeping this to themselves. However, despite the potential for affirmation and validation, Facebook was also a space in which those who ‘spoke up’ received negative and emotionally or verbally abusive backlash. This resulted in high levels of anxiety, as well as a fear of speaking up both online and in offline gatherings. However, it was found that while not feeling comfortable enough to speak, students did not avoid the online space either. Rather, it led to high levels of lurking whereby students were present but did not leave a visible trace of their presence.

### **Lurkers have just as much a role to play**

Students had multiple reasons for lurking; the most prominent being their anxiety over saying something online and the reaction it could receive as well as their anxiety to engage physically in offline spaces. This resulted in them lurking online to stay informed and aware of the protest movement, while also choosing to have conversations with friends in personal

spaces, as well as within trusted networks offline such as dining halls, rather than attending larger protest marches and discussions. Prior to the 2015 protests, students lurked during particularly interesting or heated times on campus when discussions would flare up online. Following the onset of the protests and the rise in political discussion online, students lurked to foreground the experiences of others, to avoid creating unnecessary noise which would detract from other important discussions, to use the opportunity to encounter differing experiences and opinions and learn from them, and finally to use what they had encountered online to have offline discussions and enable offline participation.

Students did not consider their lurking to be participation, and a large portion of prior research on social media activism emphasises the role of those who speak and create content online rather than those who lurk, thus lessening the attention paid to the importance of lurkers. Currently, lurking may not yet be fully explored or understood as important by media and communication theorists, but for students, the concept of lurking was something that they easily identified with and used to describe their presence on social media. It gave them a way to explain how they engage, how they learn, and how they form opinions and make active decisions. Furthermore, what this research and analysis shows is that the lurking by students was by no means inactive; it was a conscious decision made to participate in the protest movement, albeit in a careful, considered, silent way.

### **South African youth are not apathetic**

Perhaps the most well-known example of student protests in South Africa is the Soweto Uprising of 1976 where up to 20 000 students protested against Afrikaans as the main medium of instruction at schools. Their actions were met with police brutality which resulted in student injuries and deaths.

In 2015, students were still protesting against Afrikaans as the main medium of instruction, this time at Stellenbosch University. However, this was done through social media and the sharing of the online documentary *Luister*.

It may appear that students behind a computer screen speaking about transformation cannot compare to on the streets protest action during apartheid. If we rely on traditional models of political participation, such as voting, having civic meetings and physically protesting, it may appear that the youth of this generation are politically inactive and apathetic.

However, the medium and platforms for communication have changed, and social media has

allowed students the opportunity to make a statement and activate change in different ways. One form of activism and protest does not necessarily have to invalidate the other, and as we have seen in recent protests, they can operate in complementary ways.

In particular, one could question why nationwide students are only now voicing concerns over transformation and institutional culture, despite it being over twenty years since the ending of apartheid. It is not necessarily the case that the issues brought up did not exist before, or that levels of unhappiness and dissatisfaction have increased. In addition to a growing youth population in Africa, students also have the benefit of a “rising internet penetration and its ability to open up the continent to the rest of the world for some of these young people through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Whatsapp among others” (Kazeem 2016:np). The development of social media and its use in everyday life has in the case of Rhodes University students during the #MustFall protests encouraged and allowed them to be more conscious and critical of the shortcomings of the institutions that they are part of (Kazeem 2016), which is why there is now more unrest and criticism expressed on social media networks.

In order to be critical and actively voice that criticism, be it on social media or offline, one first needs to be conscious and aware of the subject matter that they are forming an opinion about. Lurking then can be seen as an active choice to listen in order to increase one’s awareness and consciousness.

### **Active listening and participation**

While the majority of Rhodes University students did not post content online during the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests, they paid attention to online content and carried this information into their offline lives. Where they could not, or chose not, to be active offline, they lurked online to stay abreast of protest progress and to learn from what others were discussing. Students were often listening, not lurking, and this engagement was as active as those speaking in terms of it influencing offline action. Lurkers provided an audience to those who spoke, contributing to their empowerment and validation. Social media in this instance was not just a form of pointless slacktivism, but rather it was a tool used by interested and engaged students to contribute to the movement by listening, learning and carrying the online content to offline spaces.

## **Concluding remarks**

This thesis suggests that in a time when alternate media is being utilised to communicate during protest action, the ways of understanding and interpreting student involvement need to move beyond traditional ideas of active political participation.

The findings suggest that students are not always passive, inactive and apathetic. Rather, they are actively, consciously choosing to be a part of and contribute to the protest movement, beginning with lurking and listening.

It is clear that in discussing matters of race and transformation, it is not enough to think in binaries. Race matters are not just black or white, neither online or offline participation is more valid, online activism is not necessarily slacktivism which counters 'real' activism, lurking is not the opposite of participation, and neither speaking nor hearing can contribute to a productive discussion without the other. It is in the integration of online and offline spaces, by students who are neither traditionally active in student politics, but are not completely absent either that we can begin to understand that in the spaces between those binaries, so much more is happening.

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## INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

\*Note that any mention of student protests refer to the Rhodes University #mustfall protests of 2015, and NOT the rape culture protests that took place at Rhodes University in 2016.

### **General lurker questions**

Can you describe your relation to Rhodes University? (eg. Former or current student, how long you are/were here for)

How often would you say you log onto Facebook?

For how long do you spend browsing?

What kinds of posts grab your attention?

Can you remember when you joined the Rhodes SRC group and why?

What kinds of content were you originally reading on the group?

How has the content shared on the group changed since you first joined?

How has it stayed the same?

Do you pay more attention to some posts over others? If so, which posts and why?

Do you remember when people started talking about student politics on this page and what the reaction was?

What was your response?

Since the protests, how much attention have you given to posts and comments regarding the political situation on Rhodes campus?

Was this your own choice, or just because it was already there?

In terms of the kinds of content, were you paying attention to just messages posted on the group, or also consuming other forms of media ie. videos, memes, photos shared?

Can you remember which hashtags caught your attention?

And if there was anything in particular, maybe a specific conversation, thread, photo or video that caught your attention?

What purpose has the posts on this group about the protests served for you?

Have you ever engaged in conversation on the group? If yes, can you describe how.

If not, can you tell me a bit about why not?

Do you 'like' posts on the Rhodes SRC group?

If so, what purpose do you intend with it?

Have you ever just tagged someone in a comment/been tagged?

Has the content shared on the group affected your perception of the protests and the people within it?

Did you ever share content about the 2015 student protests on your own Facebook timeline?

How would you say reading about the protests on the Facebook group compares with getting updates via other social networks such as Twitter for example?

Has the content that you have seen on the group about the protests influenced any of your conversations or actions offline and face-to-face with people?

How do your offline conversations compare to your involvement on the Facebook group?

Have there been any drawbacks to lurking on the Rhodes SRC group?

Can you describe why you consider yourself a lurker?

Why would you say you lurk?

Do you remember the SRC making a decision to make a separate Activism and Transformation group? If so, did you join this additional group and what were your thoughts on it?

Do you have any further thoughts on yourself as a member of the Rhodes SRC group and your position as a lurker during the protests?

### **Questions for \*Lesedi**

Same as above, with additional questions below.

In March last year, you wrote a post on the SRC page that garnered a considerable amount of attention. Do you remember what prompted it?

What was going through your mind as you posted it?

You weren't at Rhodes at the time, but obviously you had noticed the kinds of conversations happening online. What was your sense of how people were speaking and the kinds of conversations they were having, and more importantly, not having?

Did you expect the reaction your post received? Can you describe the response from people?

Did you know any of the people who commented? Or did you get to know them? And what was it like to engage with this many people via a Facebook post?

How would you characterise the discussion/engagement that followed? There's been a lot of debate as to whether these kinds of conversations are productive or not and I would like to hear your view on this.



Was it just online that you received a reaction to this post? Did you have conversations/responses offline or on other platforms?

In your original post you said “white kids at Rhodes never want to talk about race”. How has this changed/not changed since people started having more conversations about race online?

There were some comments asking about the point of the post and what good a debate online could actually result in. Do you have anything to say about this? Obviously quite a bit has changed since this first discussion...

Yours was one of the first few posts about racism at Rhodes which got quite heated. In the comments, people said things like “let’s take a step back and not let this get heated”, “let’s calm down” etc. How do you think conversations on social media allow us to express emotions regarding heated topics? Is it helpful/useful?