

**The meaning of community: the viability of Public Sphere theory and
Social Cohesion on social media groups.
A reception study of the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook Group**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the meaning of community to Grahamstown's online social media community, through a case study of the 'Grahamstown' Facebook group (GFG). The study explores the possibilities of social media as a public sphere and the way geographically-based social media sites might contribute to social cohesion in a community. The study explores what kinds of discussions take place on the GFG and why they are happening. It investigates whether these discussions can promote understanding and social solidarity, and whether useful deliberations are taking place, in some kind of approximation of a public sphere. Is this Group contributing to the wellbeing of the community, and how?

Drawing on public sphere theory and various conceptions of the concept of social cohesion, the dissertation aims to find out how much of an impact the GFG has on Grahamstown/Makhanda inhabitants' lives and sense of community. The study argues that with the advent of digital media, another 'structural transformation' in Habermasian terms, is underway, both empirically and theoretically. Through more than a dozen in-depth interviews combined with content analysis (via participant observation), the study finds that participation in and exposure to the GFG does lead, for many, to a sense of belonging and social cohesion as community members come together to act in relation to the state, local business and other institutions. The viability of ideas of highly localised (in time and space) 'public sphericules' as an alternative to broader more overarching concepts of a public sphere, is explored in this study. The study also suggests a typology of users, identifying the frequency, tone of voice and motives for participating on the GFG and attempts a periodisation of the GFG's changing role in the community over the past decade.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The growth of the internet and related digital technologies has provoked a substantial debate about the nature of the ‘public sphere’ in modern society. Digital technology has disrupted longstanding norms in the traditional or ‘legacy’ media industry, causing a proliferation of content, a fragmentation of audiences and contestation for the attention of consumers who are increasingly online and have access to a wide range of other content (Romaniuk & Nguyen, 2017). This fragmentation has contributed to declining revenues throughout the traditional media industry globally and has impacted on local and hyper-local news and entertainment media – the media serving specific geographical areas – in particularly severe ways. Often smaller in size and without the ability to provide the quality and quantity of content that bigger players can manage, many local news organisations have become financially unsustainable and either moved their content exclusively online or have ceased operating completely¹.

As this study examines, this has often created a void in terms of residents’ ability to discover what is happening in their communities, even in terms of basic civic information, news about local crimes, service interruptions, emergencies, and so forth. Partly to fill this gap, many areas where local news media has declined or ceased to operate (or where there was never a local information provision hub), have seen the increased use of social media via localised ‘pages’ and ‘groups’ to provide basic news and information. Facebook groups have been particularly important in this regard (Carson, et al., 2016; Nielson, 2015). These global trends are also occurring in countries such as South Africa.

This study explores one such group, the Grahamstown Facebook Group (hereafter the GFG) – based in Grahamstown/Makhanda² South Africa, – and looks at the meanings participants make of the role of the Group and their role in the Group, and as ³active audiences.

¹ As portrayed in the 2018 OSFSA report (Dugmore, 2018)

² The name Grahamstown has officially changed to Makhanda in June 2018. However this is still being contested legally and the Administrators of the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook Group have publically stated that they will not change the name of the group. This study will mostly use the term Grahamstown as a convenience, but will occasionally reference the new and still legally contested name.

It explores if and how – and to what extent – a community-based Facebook group can play a role in both providing a space for sharing information, discussion of important issues, and even in fostering a sense of social cohesion or at least a ‘sense of belonging’ among its members. More than a decade in existence, and with 22 500 members in January 2019 (out of an estimated total population of over ⁴80,000 (Makana Local Municipality, 2017) people), it is plausible that the GFG has started playing a significant role in the lives of people living in this rural ‘city’⁵ even if some members are not physically present in Grahamstown and even many members are relatively inactive most of the time. Drawing on individual interviews with key members on the GFG such as the ‘Admins’ and members of the GFG, and examining the content posted and discuss on groups (particularly in the 2018 year), this study explores how relatively new forms of networked communication, such as Facebook, might facilitate something of a public sphere, i.e. a space where a reasonably representative section of the Grahamstown community are able to discuss and deliberate and often fiercely contest various issues and concerns, and they might (or might not) develop some sense of community, and build some sense of belonging and solidarity i.e. some form of social cohesion.

This chapter outlines the background to this research by examining the current state of digital technology and interactivity in South Africa and the affordances, opportunities and limitations of so-called Web 2.0 more generally. This chapter also locates the study in the current milieu of the city and previews the theory this study will draw on. This introductory chapter then outlines the key research questions that this study seeks to answer:

- How is the GFG set up and managed, and how and why do people participate by either looking at the site, i.e. consuming the content posted, or in some way contributing to the site by posting, commenting, liking or sharing (amount a range of other possible participatory actions) i.e. what are the day to day dynamics, routines of both the ‘Admins’ and the ‘members’?

³ Members who are engaging and responsive to the posts and comments made on the Group are identified as the active audience in this study.

⁴ Various different figures exist for the city, as the last Census was recorded in 2011 with 80 390 being the last recorded Census results for the city (StatsSA). Makana Local Municipality (2017) reports 82 060 people in 2016 on their website.

⁵ Grahamstown is considered a city due to the fact that it contains the Eastern Cape High Court, a university and also a more historical characterisation requirement, a diocesan cathedral.

- What topics are the members posting about and discussing and how, i.e. what is the content of the site and what is the nature of the discourse, i.e. the tone, tenure and encoded power of the words and images posted on the site?
- If it is possible to discern any particular function or gratification that users get from participating, and particularly if the GFG helps generate a sense of belonging or of social solidarity or even a sense of social cohesion that members feel because of their membership and participation in this Facebook Group?

Through examining these questions, the study will assess whether geographically-based social media groups, more specifically Facebook Groups, are an important communication space and whether they are facilitative of a ‘public sphere’ of sorts where deliberation of a kind can happen, and some kind impact on ‘real’ life happens. The chapter also offers an overview of the theoretical perspectives used in this study (which are explored in more depth in Chapter Two), and outlines the research methods and the overall methodological approach of the study, which are examined further in Chapter Three. The findings, based on the research sample and data – consisting of 14 interviews and participant observation of postings on the GFG particularly in 2017 and 2018 – are explored in Chapter Four. Chapter Five concludes the study.

1.1 Research background and context

1.1.1 The rise of Web 2.0

The initial iteration of WWW (World Wide Web) - Web 1.0 took place before WYSIWYG displays and interfaces were commonplace, and this meant that there were relatively few online contributors and content creators. The original ‘internet’ infrastructure and WWW content sharing overlay was mostly ‘read-only’ and creating and uploading content, in the form of websites, required a good deal of skill (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008), until the advent of so-called Web 2.0 in approximately 2004 (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012). Web 2.0 introduced the capacity for much more social interactivity. In what came to known as the ‘participatory web’ (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012), the new capabilities afforded by the net made it easier for users to generate their own content and interact with others (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012).

In particular, the 2008 introduction of the HTML 5 mark-up language (Hickson, 2018) made coding for online easier and brought more interactivity. As significantly, HTML 5 allowed for the spread of ‘multimedia’ on the internet possible (Hickson, 2018) allowing audiences to engage with websites and have audio/visual content. This facilitated sites as Flickr, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. With more interactivity possible, users could now do a variety of more complex things such as play interactive games on the internet. For example, games such ‘My Second Life’ where users can operate in an onscreen virtual world where they can ‘have a second life’ via role-play, started to become very popular. Through the internet they could now connect with other players and live in a ‘real’ but virtual world (Hayes, 2006).

With the release of HTML5, the internet was now more appealing, especially for writers, business entrepreneurs and journalists, via the introduction of weblogs aka ‘blogs’ software and weblog platform sites, (Bradshaw, 2017). Blogs allow users to ‘post’ content regularly and this content is published online with little technical effort. Blogs have more interactive with more capabilities such as adding tabs (new pages) and making outputs look more like a normal website than a limited online journal (Bradshaw, 2017). This also led to the rise of multimedia blogs such as audio blogs called podcasts, vlogs – slang for video blogs – and photography blogs (photoblogs) (Bradshaw, 2017). The most significant affordance of Web 2.0 was the emergence of social networking sites (SNS) (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008) in the early 2000s. Friendster and LinkedIn launched in 2002, MySpace in 2003, Facebook in 2004 (Shah, 2018), Youtube in 2005 (Dickey, 2013) and SoundCloud in 2007 (Hansen, 2011). Of these networks, Facebook and Youtube have become very successful with billions of users from all across the world (Dickey, 2013).

These SNS’s (more commonly called ‘social media’) are internet sites where users can interact and link with each other and a wide range of multimedia content as well as editing and writing content they want to share with others – bringing a level of sociality to the internet and creating online communities (or cybercommunities) who gather online to share particular interests or activities (Johannessen, Saebo & Flak, 2015).

One of the simplest working descriptions of social media stresses this sociality:

“Social media is a collection of online platforms and tools that people use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media itself, facilitating conversations and interactions online between people”.

Doreen Moran – Digital and Social Marketing Strategist (2018: 1).

Ariel & Avidar (2015: 25) describe the sociality of social networks as follows:

“...the platforms themselves might be seen as affordance technologies that enable various levels of social involvement and participation. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) used the terminology of “spreadable media” to describe the social media nature as a platform of active engagement in spreading content.”

Web 2.0 has opened up platforms via the creation of social media which changed the way people share and consume news (Dugmore, 2018) and revolutionised advertising and marketing. This has globally led to the rapid decline of the printed newspaper industry, especially at the local level (Dugmore, 2018). This is partly due the global ‘duopoly’ of Facebook and Google which, through providing more precise and target aggregated audiences to marketers, have attracted the lion’s share of digital advertising revenues. The interactivity of the internet has made it a more attractive media platform for users as ordinary people can now actively engage and share news (Bird, 2009). Far fewer users are now paying for a printed newspaper as they rather turn to the internet where there are more options and faster news sources (Bird, 2009).

This is borne out by the closure of more than 300 community papers in the UK since 2010 (Armstrong & Del Arbol, 2015) and in South Africa there is widespread evidence that most community newspapers and radio stations have been struggling financially, with a large number closing over this period (Bratt, 2015; Dugmore, 2018). In South Africa the only new daily newspaper to start publishing in South Africa in the last decade, *The Times*, stopped printing in January 2018 after ten years of substantial losses (Dugmore, 2018). And, close to Grahamstown, the town of Cradock in the Eastern Cape, a major regional centre, saw the *Cradock Courant* closing in 2017 (Somersetbudget, 2017), after more than 100 years of continuous publishing. In 2011 *Grocott’s Mail* in Grahamstown was also forced to change from publishing twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays (which it had done since the 1950s), to only publishing once a week on Fridays. In 2018 the paper also stopped charging a cover

price to improve its 'reach' and lurches from financial crisis to financial crisis, with staff numbers halving since 2007. The role of *Grocott's Mail* – which has its own Facebook page, and whose content is also shared on the GFG – and its relationship to the GFG are explored later.

To partly fill this gap, forms of 'citizen journalism' have become increasingly popular, taking over some the previous roles of community newspapers, with new technologies enabling and encouraging ordinary people to share news and tell stories (Wall, 2017). One of the roles community newspapers also fulfilled was to facilitate conversations within communities and to allow for political and socio-economic issues in their local environments. Social media is also used as a space where community members connect to each another in the virtual space about these issues (Park, et al., 2009). Facebook Groups, for example, provide a level of empowerment and freedom for users as they can communicate with users of similar interests and share information of specific topics or information only relevant to a specific group of people (Park, et al., 2009).

All these developments and shifts from community newspapers to user-led conversations on social media are facilitated by the confluence of three factors: the interactive and 'social' nature of 'web 2.0'; the advent of social media; and the rapid uptake of 'smartphones' from about 2006/2007 onwards, that allow people to access the internet via their cell phones, no longer confined to laptops or desktops. The landscape is rapidly changing with 50% of adult South Africans accessing the internet regularly on their mobile phones and 40% of the population in total with access the internet via other connections (Matangira, 2018). Web 2.0 also became more popular with the evolution of bandwidth speeds. Bandwidth speed has increased throughout the years, especially with broadband technology becoming more popular from the early 2000s onwards (Eha, 2013). While the digital divide is real and persistence in South Africa, often limiting public information flows and participation possibilities, this study argues that at least in terms of access, the past year or two has seen the GFG grow massively.

1.1.2 Local Context – the establishment of the Grahamstown Facebook Group (GFG)

Shortly after the 'Group' feature was introduced to Facebook in 2007 – a function that allows people to become connected to local and global groups on Facebook – a Grahamstown

resident started a group called ‘Grahamstown’. It began as a relatively small ‘community noticeboard’ for residents to share information such as business details, events, and the buying and selling of products. However, as Facebook added new functionality and optimised its platform for mobile (Dickey, 2013), more than 22 000 people have joined the GFG, i.e. roughly 26% of adults in a town of an estimated between 70 000 and 83 000 according to the latest available recorded statistics by the municipality (Municipalities.co.za)⁶, making the GFG significant online community. The GFG now averages about 2 000 posts per week according to Facebook metrics, and the study’s preliminary research showed that many people who use the GFG, check their Facebook feed more than once a day.

As a Grahamstown local and Rhodes University student, I became a member of the GFG six years ago to stay updated on local events and debates of concern in the city. Over this period, I have noticed the GFG’s evolution into a space for community expression and communication. No longer just a ‘message board’ of the early years, it has become a more interactive space with members – varying in race, class, gender and age – debating and commenting on many different aspects of life in Grahamstown. The biggest change from this previous ‘message board’, is just how many people seem to participate: often hundreds of comments, likes, shares, posting etc. a day.

But what is the nature of this participation? I have long wondered, especially after doing the coursework component of the Master’s degree where the public sphere theory was examined, if the GFG facilitates mostly just ‘venting’ or if it helps create a space for discussion and serves, alongside other media, as a local ‘public sphere’, ‘public sphericule’ (Gitlin, 2001: 173) or ‘networked public’ (boyd, 2011). From discussions with many people over the years, I have also wondered whether this helps evokes a sense of community for its members. Grahamstown, like much of South Africa, is very fractured and scarred by its segregated past during colonialism and Apartheid. Can or do new affordances of social media create spaces where people feel like they ‘belong’? Are these kinds of sites part of the ‘social glue’ that allow people to develop a sense of place, connection, and commitment to either Grahamstown or each other?

⁶ Statistics of the Grahamstown population has varied amongst different resources due to the fact that the last census happened in 2016. Very few updates are available online. The Makana Municipality website cannot confirm a number and only gives an estimate of the range it falls under (municipalities.co.za).

Some have argued that local newspapers – Grahamstown newspaper *Grocott's Mail*, for example, is the oldest running independent local paper in South Africa – provide a specific impetus and mode of connectivity for communities, and I wondered if this could be true of GFG, and whether online news sharing and discussions about ‘what’s going on’ contributes to any sense of social cohesion that might exist. *Grocott's Mail* has a Facebook page which anyone can like, meaning community members have the newspaper and the ‘Grahamstown’ group for their news and information available online. However, places where newspapers have shut down, now only has newspapers that exist in the virtual realm. For example, Cradock does not have a local newspaper anymore but only a Facebook group, which is sometimes active but not nearly as much as the GFG.

As many scholars have observed, community media serve as an important ‘meeting place’ for members of the community and can play an important role in developing social cohesion (Yamamoto, 2011). Community media is also an important part of facilitating a local ‘public sphere’ where deliberations about important civic and social matters can take place. (Habermas, 1989).

There have been several empirical studies globally to examine and expand this notion of media-facilitated public spheres (Bruns & Highfield, 2015; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). In South Africa, a survey conducted by the Right2Know Campaign in 2011 suggested that community radio stations and newspapers in general have enriched local communities and helped develop some sense of belonging and cohesion by giving the community a social space as well as a political space (Weinburg, 2011) to work out issues of common mutual concern. This study examines the role of the GFG, in both a political and a social sense, in creating a sense of cohesion between people and facilitating discussions about important civic issues.

In addition to considerations about the nature of the public sphere in the digital era, the role of digital social media in either facilitating or inhibiting ‘social cohesion’ (a sense of belonging, trust and concern or empathy in a community) (Lewis, 2008) and theorisation about the mechanisms through which this might or might not develop, is also explored in this study. Social cohesion can be described as the way that a group of people integrate themselves into a community and how they adopt a sense of belonging within that

community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Lewis, 2008). Jukubowicz (2007) suggests that the concept of social cohesion has two “societal goal dimensions” which, he proposes, can be analytically distinguished – a dimension where there are deliberate attempts to reduce disparities, inequalities and social exclusion and a dimension which focuses on strengthening of social relations and promoting social connection. My interest is to identify whether that sense of belonging and community integration is challenged by social media and the discussions and debates that happen on groups such as GFG or if they challenge this theory. In a city like Grahamstown there are many social issues and the community standing together and finding a space where people feel a sense of ‘belonging’ can be a very important aspect in terms of discussion about what to do against failing infrastructure, poverty, and related issues.

In Grahamstown, as a city in South Africa, the effects of Apartheid and colonialist segregation are still visible. Apartheid was a system which divided the country by race until 1994 when a democratic system took over and the country was liberated from segregation (Maylam, 2001). Former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, introduced the term ‘ubuntu’ – an Nguni term to describe having human compassion and humility – into the country’s development programme (Nkondo, 2007). ‘Ubuntu’ is a way of living, a philosophy of life that seeks to promote social cohesion (Nkondo, 2007). But in Grahamstown as elsewhere, Apartheid era schisms and fractures along the vectors of ethnicity, notions of race, language, genders and class/income categories are still prevalent in present times. This reality challenges the GFG’s role as public sphere and having social cohesion as result of the GFG. The ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group clearly states that it is only acting as a ‘community noticeboard’ (Addendum A) which means that social cohesion is only a by-product of the conversations that have been evolving on the GFG.

Technology might create platforms that have the potential to bring people from different cultural backgrounds together in one space, but that does not ensure that they will understand each other nor guarantee that they will enter into deliberation and debates (Papacharissi, 2002: 16). As Jones (1997: 30 in Papacharissi, 2002: 16) notes, the internet also allows us to “shout more loudly, but whether our fellows listen...is questionable”. These perspectives are useful for analysing the possibilities, or not, of social cohesion. For example, in 2017 a member of GFG complained about alleged substance abuse by Rhodes University students,

and also then made a comment about the university's perceived rape culture which angered students. Subsequently, his post was reported as abusive to the GFG's Administrators – volunteers who control access and moderate content – who blocked him from the GFG. The roles of these Administrators are problematized and discussed in detail in Chapter Four as they could potentially be, in their efforts to encouraging some kind of social cohesion, be harming the freedom to deliberate over issues, and freedom of expression, which are quintessential to notions of the public sphere.

This issue of 'Admins' is a key characteristics of Facebook groups: self-selected Admins have power to control the flow of conversations (Walton & Leukes, 2013) and block and expel members. As a result, some blocked group members periodically split from the group and start their own groups and, as Chapter Four explores, this has happened repeatedly in the context of GFG. Admins, this study suggests, have a lot of power, but little accountability for their actions.

As this study explores, how might the GFG play both a social cohesion-enhancing role, and a public forum-facilitating role? How does this work 'on the ground'? Looking at it from a high level, it is clear that a more sceptical counter-argument – that the GFG is elitist, classist, English-dominated, and a force of division and demoralisation, might be more plausible. The GFG and most of its contributions are in English, although first-language English speakers account for only 10% of the town's population. isiXhosa speakers make up 67% of local residents, and Afrikaans 14% (StatsSA, Census 2011). This language policy is on the surface, exclusionary, but as is explored later, can also be viewed as an attempt to create a common language for discussion. The interviewees note the recent change in the language policy made in the GFG dynamics as, from mid-2018, any language may be used as Admins realised that many voices were being excluded by the restriction. The possible consequences of this will be discussed in Chapter Four.

The history of the GFG aids in the understanding of the group environment, this is done through a periodisation in the study. This periodisation brought out interesting behavioural patterns visible from members of the GFG. Through frequency, tone and motif of members when they post (or if they do not post), a typology could be identified to understand the interactions on the GFG which might lead to a public sphere and social cohesion.

The key focus of this research is thus trying to understand the various social roles the GFG plays in the lives of its members and in the town more generally. This includes exploring: do members find that being part of the GFG creates a sense of belonging and community? How does the content posted and comments made affect the way people interact with one another? Does the GFG help build ‘social capital’ and bonds – and if so, does it do this in a strong way or are the effects relatively mild? Might the GFG even be taking over some of the role of community newspapers and radio stations in becoming the main space for sharing community news and hosting dialogue about community issues? How does the potential for fragmentation and the formation of public sphericules affect the social cohesion in the GFG? The study will analyse and make sense of group members’ experiences: of the way the site is regulated, the general tenor of the debates on the GFG and the members’ feelings and opinions on these debates. The following sub-questions guided the research:

- How do members’ experiences of this Facebook group’s dynamics relate to their sense of belonging, and ability to be ‘heard’ in discussions?
- How did members experience the splintering of the GFG and the formation of what became essentially two sub-groups?
- How do different social media elements, e.g. the comments feature, impact on members’ sense of belonging and community?

1.1.3 Theoretical Perspectives

1.1.3.1 Evolving concepts of public spheres in the digital age

The Habermasian concept of a ‘public sphere’ describes a set of social processes (and initial physical settings) where individuals can come together to deliberate issues of general concern (Habermas, 1989), often political in nature and ideally leading to some kind of action (Webster *in* Bruns & Highfield, 2016). Public sphere theory is a foundational media studies concept, but has had to be adapted to fit modern digital mediums, with various adaptations in counter theories. The adaptations employed in this study in particular are ‘public sphericules’ (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; Gitlin, 2001: 173) and boyd’s⁷ ‘networked publics’ (boyd, 2011).

⁷ Lower case used for last name, as preferred by author

The internet has created some controversial theories however as some argue it disperses audiences, creating polarised ‘echo-chambers’ (Sunstein 2009 in Rasmussen 2016). ‘Public sphericules’ are more adaptable versions of the public sphere, introduced by Gitlin (2001 in Bruns & Highfield, 2006). These ‘public sphericules’ are smaller sphericules speaking to a smaller, more specific audience rather than the public sphere which used a much wider audience through mass media (Bruns & Highfield, 2006). The media plays an important role in the public sphere. As McQuail (1994 in Lewis, 2008) argues, in late modernity there is a significant relationship between media and sociality, in with the media playing a central role in creating a sense of social cohesion and belonging in some instances (Lewis, 2008). Networked publics are groups of people who become users of the internet – most recently the interactive Web 2.0. The online network that the people use is characterised by more interactivity, sustainability and opportunity to capture discussions (boyd, 2011). For example, the public can refer back to past conversations and even take screenshots (a function on a digital device to capture a ‘photo’ of the contents on the screen). During the Habermasian public sphere this was impossible as you only had to rely on word-of-mouth and what the mass media reported. With Web 2.0, networked publics can get information from anywhere, at any time (boyd, 2011).

1.1.3.2 Public sphericules and social cohesion on social media

Notions of social cohesion try to capture elements of a sense of belonging, trust and community integration that develops (or doesn’t) between people (Lewis, 2008). An important part of identity development is a sense ‘belongingness’ which social media can engender (Seidman, 2013). However, the tone, topic and language of discussions on social media can shape and hinder a developing sense of community. Social media has as much potential to isolate people and fragment society as it does to bring people together and create a sense of place and belonging (Schroeder, 2018). This study explores this spectrum of potential in relation to the GFG.

Another challenge to the public sphere and the related concept of social cohesion is the networked individualism (Wellman, et al. 2003) that the internet allows. Networked individualism points to the internet that has opened the possibility for individuals to partake in group-like activities without sharing a geographical location. Conceptually, the GFG is about living in the same geographical space, contradicting the networked individualism

theory. However, they do not have to all physical meet to discuss topics and could be anywhere in Grahamstown (or even when travelling) to comment on subjects posted.

For the most part, community newspapers such as Grahamstown's *Grocott's Mail* do not offer the level of social interactivity as that which social media can provide (Johannessen, *et al.*, 2015; West, 2013; Ngai, *et al.*, 2014), although the paper has a Facebook page where readers can access news, and the editor as well as some journalists often 'share' stories on the GFG. Community newspapers commonly provide a space for the marginalised groups to 'tell their stories' (Yamamoto, 2011; Lewis, 2008) but social media spaces are becoming important areas for community deliberation and representation, potentially creating new forms of publics and new ways of interacting (boyd, 2010; Gitlin, 2001).

Alternative community media in South Africa became an important space for dialogue and for community mobilisation in the Apartheid struggle and became known as the 'people's media' in the 1980s (Duncan in Bosch, 2014). This form of media became a strong political platform for the people to voice their concerns and join in on activism (Bosch, 2014). Social networking sites have taken over this role as platforms for people to voice concerns and come together, as it has been used for many activist movements recently. Examples of such are the #MeToo, or locally the #FeesMustFall movements. These movements are important background information to note for the study to accentuate the importance and power that social media can have in a community.

One of the most powerful social media movements for South African universities could be seen as the #FeesMustFall movement. The #FeesMustFall movement started in 2015 when the SRC of the University of Witwatersrand started a protest against the increase of university fees following the increase announcement by the government. It started with the use the hashtag #FeesMustFall on Twitter. As the hashtag and actions on campuses across the country started gaining attention, this led to protests organised at various universities in South Africa (Davids & Waghid, 2016). At the end of 2017 the South African president at the time, Jacob Zuma, announced that the government was in the process of implementing a plan to make higher education at undergraduate level free for all South Africans (Areff & Spies, 2017). The movement started on a social media platform and ended up in action by the government that will go down in the South African history.

Internationally a recent online movement also demonstrated how single issue topics can become powerful part of national and international debate. In the USA in 2017, Hollywood actresses started to break the silence about sexual harassment, rape and abuse by posting on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook with the hashtag: #MeToo. The campaign received so much attention that women from more than 196 countries started opening up about their experiences by posting under #MeToo on social media sites (Langone, 2018). It led to police investigations of various influential men in the entertainment industry (Langone, 2018). Once again social media activism led to powerful action. It could be argued that this links with the public sphere theories' suggestion that the importance of the media lies within its role in a democracy; to create spaces for activism and free deliberations about political and socio-economic issues.

A key question for social scientists looking at the digital affordances of social media and mobile phones, particular in the past decade, is whether various platforms and services on the internet can serve as a public sphere which contributes to a healthy democracy (West, 2013). Cronin and De Grief (1998 in West, 2013) argue that democracy can be identified by the way the government can justify their actions through giving the public autonomy. Habermas' public sphere works towards creating various sections of the public that can identify problems and suggest solutions which they can present to the government (West, 2013). Deliberating on community concerns is essential for a democratic society: therefore, communities need to feel able to get involved in these spaces.

If this happens, this can contribute to a sense of 'belongingness' and impact on the levels of social cohesion in a community. Such a sense, as is explored in Chapter Two, can come about via much a number of different means: 'deliberation' about things requiring some social consensus is not the only way to create some positive benefit and user gratification in terms of belonging to the GFG. Some people just post appealing photos of Grahamstown or surrounds. Others mention and praise acts of kindness or tell stories of the history of the place, i.e. via noting some anniversaries. Others celebrate various local teams' sporting achievements. There is a complex nexus of content that helps create both a sense of place and a sense of 'belonging' to this place (for many people) which is explored as much as possible in this study, although a full exploration might be beyond its scope. Although the study has drawn on interviews with 14 people who are active on the GFG, I have also looked at literally thousands of posts, threads, replies, likes and visuals, partly because I have been a member of

the GFG for five years (and also partly because of my role of social media manager for the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes for the majority of the study, which required my close engagement with a wide range of social media, locally and nationally). The meanings people make, in terms of this sense of ‘being of this place’ and ‘belonging’ and the contribution of this to some kind of positive sense of ‘cohesion’ counter-balancing the divisions of class, ethnicity, gender and language, are deeply entwined with any consideration of the GFG as a public sphere where people are accepted ‘as they are’ (a Habermasian prerequisite, at least in its idealised form).

In addition to the theoretical lenses of public sphere theory and its digital critiques and enhancements, and also in addition to theories of social cohesion and a brief discussion of notions of social capital (the growing of which might or might be aided by participation in social networks), as a sub-analysis, the study will explore the behaviours of GFG members and the way they respond to comments and how and why they decide to post and engage on the GFG. These behaviours incorporate self-disclosure (Huang, 2016) which means that members reveal, both consciously and unconsciously, their personalities and information about themselves by responding to posts. Motives might differ, but it is hard to understand how the GFG works without considering the different levels or kinds of participation. As self-disclosure proves for some, being ‘on’ the GFG is about gaining more attention and feeling more confident; for others it is a sense of wanting to create a better community (Huang, 2016; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014);. As is further explored in Chapter Two and outlined in detail in the findings chapter, this study attempts not just a periodisation of GFG its history, but also briefly explores and tries to identify a typology of kinds of participation involved in the GFG.

1.2 Research Methodology

1.2.1 Methods

As is further explored in Chapter Three, studies that try to understand how public discussions and sense-making actually work and explore public sphere theory, as well as studies that look at belonging and ideas of social cohesion, most often employ qualitative methods and do not rely on quantitative approaches such as surveys, as surveys cannot provide much insight into

the nuance and granularity of people's lived experiences. Therefore, this study takes more of a qualitative approach, using broadly ethnographic methods. This is based on an interpretivist approach (Deacon, et al, 1999) which acknowledges the subjectivity of participants and my own involvement and understanding of the group.

Using a 'from the inside out' or emic approach, which allows a focus on the subjects' perspectives rather than the 'outsider' view of the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270), I conducted interviews with fellow members of the GFG in an attempt to understand participants' experiences and perceptions of the GFG. I set out to find out how the interviewees interpret discussions that influenced the development of the group and the formation of sub-groups. Due to the nature of the research, the subjective views of the interviewees are an important part of my understanding, and the emphasis will be on their individual experiences on social media. I also conducted a thematic content analysis of the Facebook posts to accompany the interviews, which gave me a deeper understanding of the context.

For interviews conducted, I requested that participants fill out a consent form before answering questions individually. Quotations from screenshots made use of 'member' and a number for the person quoted (eg. Member 1), and in the case of interviews I use 'member' and two alphabet letters (eg. Member MW), to create anonymity. Members thus stay anonymous as per the ethical agreement made with the members and university. A total of 14 interviewees agreed through informed consent, to take part in the study. Questions were uniform (see Addendum B) with one or two exceptions such as the Administrators who were questioned about their roles as moderators and the history of the GFG.

After careful consideration I decided to contact members/interviewees through Facebook Messenger – as it is a space where most members are comfortable to voice their opinion and where they can quickly refer to posts from the GFG when answering questions. Indeed, using online chat tools seems like a natural option when performing a cyber-ethnography (Ward, 1999). The space proved to give some more comfort as they could think about questions and respond in their own time instead of responding on the spot as in face-to-face interviews. For me as a researcher, it also proved more reliable as answers were recorded on 'paper' (so to speak) and so there was no danger of misquoting. It was thus a fitting method to use in this study.

As is explored in Chapter Three, this study deployed purposive sampling (Suri, 2011) and recruited informants by identifying key contributing members. The study focused on a dozen highly active members, as well as the Administrators of the site. I also interviewed some members who left the GFG and started rival Facebook groups. Discussions occurred using online communication to create a digital log of information which proved to be a useful tool to refer back on.

1.2.2 Ethical Considerations

Part of the data collection for this study required the use of screenshots of old Facebook posts which were relevant to the study. The most prominent ethical consideration on social media is the notion what is ‘public’ and what is ‘private’ content (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). No permission was required as these posts are considered public due to the GFG’s Facebook privacy settings and users’ shared understanding. The line between ‘public’ and ‘private’ often becomes blurry on social media (Lunnay, 2014) with questions arising about privacy settings on Facebook, the use of data in different contexts, and how the internet ‘keeps’ data. Facebook users and the Admins can also decide to delete posts or comments on the GFG (Lunnay, 2014). This could hinder the research and deem it unethical to use deleted data. In this study, I decided not to direct quote any content I might have recorded before it was deleted, to avoid any unethical procedures.

Members cannot reasonably assume their posts to be private as the GFG is listed as ‘public group’: the posts are still viewable by anyone outside the GFG. There are almost 22 000 members in this public group, and they join with the knowledge that there will be ‘strangers’ who are able to view and comment on their posts. It is common in social media research to use direct quotes from social media posts (Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017), although some have raised concerns about participants’ “right to be forgotten” (Weber, 2011). However, even though people participate in a public forum, they do not necessarily expect their posts, comments, likes, photos to be subject to academic research. As such, I have treated the content sensitively. This was done through using pseudonyms when speaking about discussions that were made on the GFG. Social media opens a whole new range of ethical considerations in media studies research. It is up to the researcher to use their discretion to try protecting their informants as best possible. Anonymity is a very important aspect of research

with most research subjects choosing to stay anonymous (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). In this study, efforts were made to try and provide interviewees and those mentioned from the analysis, with peace of mind by keeping them anonymous.

Many of the traditional ethical approaches are replaced by new considerations as social media has changed the way research is carried out online. The fast-paced digital world has made it difficult to keep updated with the latest data and challenges even the most seasoned researcher. Thus, Chapter Three will deal with the methodology and ethical considerations in more detail.

1.3 Summary of chapters

From this introductory chapter the study moves onto the literature review in *Chapter Two* and explores Public Sphere theory by looking at various digital and other critiques of Habermas' key theoretical contribution. The literature review will include the importance of democracy to the public sphere as well the new public sphericules and networked public theories developed. In relation to these theories, I will look at the way social cohesion as a set of concepts has been developed - and how it plays out in studies of South African media. The study will also investigate how public sphere theory and the concept of belonging, place and social cohesion can be connected on social networking sites.

Chapter Three will outline the methodological approach that underpinned the collection of data and how methods were used to analyse the responses from interviews and participant observation. The methodology chapter will provide an understanding of the way research was interpreted.

Chapter Four will explore the findings from the collected responses and how these relate to the theoretical lenses that were used. It will focus on the public sphere theory and how respondents deliberated political content and investigate how the GFG influenced, if at all, the social cohesion in the community.

Chapter Five will conclude the study by summarising the main findings, and, in the context of the limitations of the study, outline suggestions for possible further research.

CHAPTER TWO

Public Spheres in the digital age: an overview of key theoretical concepts used in this study

2.0 INTRODUCTION

What has come to be known as Public Sphere theory has created a valuable foundation to the role of the media in society and in democracies in particular, and helps illuminate the roles of both the local newspaper and social media in a community such as Grahamstown. But how does the GFG play this role? Is it just noise and chatter, or do some of the classic Habermasian attributes of deliberation take place, for example directed discussion seeking to solve real-world problems? As outlined in Chapter One, is the GFG a valuable asset in creating a sense of belonging and social cohesion in a community? Is it, or can it be an important political tool towards democracy (Jensen, 2010).

This study explores in particular how GFG members perceive social cohesion, and looks at their concerns regarding their own representation and the understanding of the GFG as a platform for some kind of useful discussion. The GFG is also considered in light of whether deliberations turn into action, aligning with public sphere characteristics and also highlighting a valuable purpose for the creation of localised Facebook Groups.

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that this study draws upon, particularly theories about the media's role in facilitating a public sphere in the digital age. Part of this theoretical framework use social cohesion as a way to understand the GFG and the role the Group plays in the community, using 'self-disclosure as behaviourism' as the meso-analysis.

2.1 PUBLIC SPHERE: PARTICIPATION, DEMOCRACY AND THE DIGITAL AGE

2.1.1 *The Habermasian idealised Public Sphere*

Many of the key ideas for the role of the media in modern societies were developed by Jürgen Habermas, a German media and communications researcher, and first introduced in his book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962). It was much later translated to English to *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989; Bruns & Highfield, 2016, Broeder, 2005) and started to provoke debate and contestation from the late 1980s onwards.

The initial concept of the ‘public sphere’ refers to the space created when citizens form a public body where deliberations about issues of general concern are addressed (Habermas, 1964: 49). The public space, i.e. a physical or virtual place where discussions can occur, ideally develop best when entrance is open to all citizens regardless of who they are, and they have the freedom to assemble in an accessible location without feeling any sense of exclusion (Habermas, 1964: 49). Habermas introduced the theory of the public sphere after observing how public interactions have changed over the years, especially in the political area (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). The main function of the public sphere is to act as a space where citizens can freely debate without government interference. The government and the public sphere do not intersect, but rather stand somewhat opposing each other (Habermas, 1964: 50). This element of the public sphere is applicable to the GFG as the local government (municipality) often get criticised on the GFG but does not interfere in the Group.

Hjarvard (2013 in Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2017: 99) observes that the media is important in some complex societies to provide information and stimulate political discussions and action, two important aspects of the public sphere, and becoming a ‘negotiator of public consent’ (Hjarvard, 2013: 55 in Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2017: 99). These two aspects – political discussions and political action – are central to the idea of the public sphere as the concept originated from Habermas’ observations of political situations in Western Europe. According to Habermas (1989), a specific kind of public sphere emerged in Western Europe in the eighteenth century, particularly in England, Germany and France (McManus, 2009: 222; Papacharissi, 2002, 2009; Mahloully, 2013). Sections of the bourgeois society of the time, mostly but not exclusively white men with some wealth, participated in a public sphere

via print media as well as in physical locations and at social gatherings. The public opinion formed in these public spheres consequently influenced governmental processes and policies (McManus, 2009: 222; Papacharissi, 2002, 2009; Mahlouly, 2013).

The eighteenth century public sphere was largely based on physical meetings in coffeehouses and other public spaces; however, the public sphere underwent a structural transformation in the twentieth century when mass media gradually became more popular with the integration of radio and mass circulation newspapers (Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 99). Actors such as journalists and commercialised or political entities became the mediators of discussions (Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 99). The mass media, and the modern day online media, serve as platforms and facilitators of the space where debates take place, i.e. the public sphere space (Dahlgren, 2005: 148).

For Habermas, the mass media era of the twentieth century promoted commercialism and the hegemony of the capitalist system and its core ideas, reducing the possibility of a sphere where the public could discuss issues without strong political or economic influences (Fuchs, 2014: 60). Modern media has been mostly influenced by commercialism and state control, which undermines the public sphere (McManus, 2009: 222). Despite this, there is still some space for discussion, even if it is often contaminated by commercial and other interests. Some media spaces are politically engaged and driven by their social responsibility to the public, which opens spaces for public deliberation without pressures from the state or commercial entities (Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 100). The media can thus act as a means for the public to communicate their concerns to those in power, possibly leading to action. The media can be seen as a vehicle for public dialogue (Garnham in Dinan & Muller, 2009: 254).

The media's role in communication between the state and the public is also changing in the modern era. Since the late 1990s, the internet has become the main channel for news consumption globally (Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 101) and this is also advancing in South Africa as more and more people go online. The forming of 'public opinion' now has more of a global dimension as people can share thoughts across the world (Broeder, 2005). Social media has made it possible for the everyday user to disseminate information on newsfeeds by 'sharing' it to friends and family who they have as Facebook 'friends'. These users can also 'like' pages of specific interest and become 'members' of Facebook groups. Pages are strictly run by the Administrators of the page and offers limited interactivity whereas 'Groups' allow

members to post and comment as they wish, essentially letting them steer the conversation (Facebook: About, 2019) – although Administrators and moderators still have the final say.

With the digital era changing the media landscape, the public sphere is now seen in a different environment, taking a new shape. The idea of a single public sphere has been challenged by a number of scholars and the new affordances of the internet (Dahlgren, 2005: 152) has created new and interesting mash-ups of the private and the public. Bruns and Highfield (2016: 102) argue that the fragmentation is part of the public sphere in the 21st century. The idea of a public sphere as a cohesive space where the public can unify as equals is seen as an “explicitly idealistic concept” (Weber in Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 102).

Previously, the public sphere existed between mass media and the public, creating a relationship whereby the media was active and the public merely watched events unfold (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). With the internet there is more opportunity for interactivity and thus the public sphere will have to undergo another structural transformation to adjust to the digital era (Elsjan & Steer-Johnsen, 2017: 99-100). Social media in particular has changed the way the public interacts and has created space for people from a wider variety of backgrounds to gather and deliberate (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). This merged the individual public spheres into a larger global network of information (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). The public is able to ‘meet’ online, regardless of geographical and sociological constraints, making a more diverse public sphere a possibility. Considering McLuhan’s ‘global village’ idea (1964 in Cottle, 2016: 344) and Habermas’ public sphere, Volkmer (1999 in Cottle, 2016: 344) suggested the concept of a ‘global public sphere’ which is more appropriate to the modern day era. Even though the GFG is geographically bound to Grahamstown, it can be accessed by anyone in the world who requests to join, supporting some elements of the thought around a ‘global village’.

Unlike previous conceptions of the public sphere, where wealth and status determined one’s ability to participate, the internet, mobile phones and social media allow for a much wider range of people to enter into discussions about various issues (Mahlouly, 2013: 10). Flichy (2010 in Mahlouly, 2013: 11) notes that the diversity of the individuals participating in the conversation online, affects the quality of the debate, depending on the situation, in different ways.

This falls in line with Mouffe's (2005 in Papacharissi, 2009: 7; Fuchs, 2014) idea of the existence of agonistic pluralism where discussions of democracy take place, rather than a rationalised public sphere. This idea of agonistic pluralism is a useful idea, because it suggests that a broader online space where people from different economic classes, cultures, backgrounds, languages, and so forth might 'meet up' in communicative spaces must be realised in these modern times (Dahlgren, 2005: 152). The internet creates opportunities for the public to debate issues, good and bad, and try evoke action from others in society and from the government at various levels. It is clear that there is a wide range of people participating in the GFG and this study explores how these different people meet up to discuss a variety of positive and negative issues relating to the community of Grahamstown.

However, as the study discovers, one of the biggest problems with the internet in South Africa is accessibility. As Papacharissi (2002: 13) notes, only those with computer access can be a part of the virtual public sphere. Since the release of her research in 2002, the media landscape has changed significantly. The statistics reflect important background to understand the landscape of the GFG and the local community. In September 2002 only 9.4% of the world population had access to the internet, by 2005 when Facebook came out it had risen to 15.7% reaching one million users (Internet World Stats, 2016). As of September 2016, 50.1% of the world has access to the internet (Internet World Stats, 2016).

Currently, in South Africa, there are 28.5 million active internet users – roughly 52% of the population now have access (Internet Live Stats, 2016). Of these users, 13 million use Facebook as their main social media platform (Snyman, 2016). The accessibility of the internet has grown immensely in the 2000s as smartphones and tablets were introduced around 2009.

However, if 52% of the country has access to the internet, this still means that 48% is offline. This suggests 48% of the country will be excluded from the debate, should there be political discussions taking place online. The 52% online also will not guarantee a democratic discussion and a more dynamic public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002: 13). Grahamstown has a large population living in poverty, meaning many do not have internet facilities even on their phones (as mobile data is too expensive) and therefore get excluded from the important conversations online. This is an important factor which will feature in the findings of the study. Those who are on the GFG form connections as they 'like' and 'comment' on each

other's posts. These connections, "constitutes a global patchwork of interconnected micro-publics, tying together social media, face-to-face, and other communication forms and channels, that may be seen as the lowermost foundation of the overall public sphere." (Bruns & Highfield, 2016).

Social media profiles start blurring the lines between public and private spaces as selected content can be made public and some private. This is also the case with Facebook Groups, as a group can be listed as 'public' and anyone can see posts made on the Group, but you have to ask permission to join, making it difficult to distinguish between private and public, as with the GFG. The 'global patchwork' explained by Bruns & Highfield (2016: 110) serves as a bridge to Papacharissi's (2010 in Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 110) idea of a 'private sphere'. The 'private sphere' describes a space where private public conversation can be achieved by social media users in discussions that are neither completely private nor public (Papacharissi, 2010 in Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 110). While using Facebook, a user can negotiate their privacy by using the optional privacy settings on their profile, however, simply engaging with the social media platform means that there will be aspects that are not private, and thus it will be a private public conversation (Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 110). Users who participate in the hashtag function (where hashtags are used to contribute to an automatically curated, topic-specific feed) fall under 'ad hoc public' according to Bruns & Burgess (2011 in Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 116).

The effect of social media as a space for public deliberation has been seen on a continental scale in Africa. The continent has seen much political use of social media for mobilisation and activism (Nolle, 2016). One of the most prominent examples of this use was during the Arab Spring in 2011, with some African countries involved, where social media was used for not only mobilisation but also for political pressure (Nolle, 2016). The use of social media in the fragile political systems in Africa has shown a need for democracy to overthrow the authoritarian rule in many countries. Governments have realised the threat social media can hold and have tried to restrict access in certain countries, for example Egypt who was the first to ban use of social media in 2011 for political reasons (Nolle, 2016). Since then other countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe and Burundi have also restricted some social media and phone messaging services to try prevent political mobilisation (Nolle, 2016).

As is explored later, the GFG has seen its own smaller scale political activism on a local level (as well as its own censorship). Posts were made about the mismanagement of the municipality, and later led to a protest in Grahamstown in front of the City Hall. Social media can thus be seen as a powerful platform to encourage action and the public sphere helps to understand the way in which the public communicate on the platform and how it aids in democracy.

Papacharissi (2009: 2) sees the internet as a tool the public can use for democracy and social change. Kranzberg (1985 in Papacharissi, 2009) describes technology as a “mirror of society” which acts as a construct of the historical and political environment it is operating in (Papacharissi, 2009: 2). It opens up a space for deliberation about various affairs of public concern, such as political issues. As a version of the public sphere, the internet can facilitate democratic discussions and opinions (Papacharissi, 2002: 11). As Papacharissi notes, “a virtual space enhances discussion... [and] democracy,” (2002: 11). Democracy is one of the important outcomes of the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). It is thus a worthwhile theory to apply to this study, to prove that social media can in fact be a version of the public sphere and thus aid in the development of democracy.

Some debates about democracy suggest that it frequently struggles to maintain order within communities (Dahlgren, 2005: 150). The challenges of Western democracies in modern technological societies can be identified as:

- the considerable digital media growth in media outlets and genres, which blur the lines between journalists and non-journalists;
- an increase of political communicators such as spin doctors;
- the plurality of voices coming from the media due to the growth of media outlets with digital media. This makes it more difficult for readers to distinguish which news sources are reporting unbiased truth and which are reporting with commercial and political interests.
- and lastly the increasing disinterest and cynicism from citizens (Dahlgren, 2005: 150).

These challenges show some relevance to the study, as I recognise two main connections:

- The GFG has blurred the line between journalists and non-journalists, as anyone from the community can post on the GFG page. This could lead to false information being spread as some members could mistake opinion for fact.
- Another challenge to democracy, visible in the GFG, is the disinterest and cynicism from some members. A number of members do not participate in any posts, distancing themselves becoming merely observers. Others show continued negativity as they only comment with cynicism and criticism for all issues, especially those in political arenas.

These challenges in the GFG are important to take note of for the study, as they may provide insights into the possible hurdle the study will have to overcome during the research using the public sphere as one of the theoretical frameworks. Debates in the GFG could be affected by above challenges and therefore disrupt efforts of offline action after a deliberation.

Ideally, there should be a link between discussions and some kind of real world action (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). This is an important aspect of the study where debates over infrastructural and municipal problems come into play. The study would set out to explore if any of the discussions led to action. Deliberations would be made by a group rather than by a single power, highlighting the importance of creating and preserving a positive environment and ‘good life’ for *all* (Dewey in Papacharissi, 2002: 10). The public sphere is interconnected with the fundamentals of a democratic society (Broeder, 2005). The public can only deliberate if such opportunities exist within a society and rational discussions are attempted (Broeder, 2005).

The public sphere is an evolving concept, reconstructed to suit the technologies and socio-political environments:

“...‘the’ public sphere is a construct of its time, and the mass media-dominated environment which it describes has given way to a considerably more fragmented and complex system of distinct and diverse, yet interconnected and overlapping publics that represent different themes, topics, and approaches to mediated communication.” (Bruns & Highfield, 2016: 98)

As Bruns & Highfield (2016: 103) argue, there is a need to reshape the public sphere model into a more dynamic, complex one which will allow overlap and linking between multiple public spheres to make it more applicable to social media. The public sphere is meant to be a framework from which “to think about the problem of democracy in the modern world,” (Garnham, 2007: 203). The public sphere can be fragmented into different smaller groups, called public sphericules (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). These public sphericules can incorporate networked publics and networked individualism as discussed further in below section.

2.1.2 Networked Publics, Networked individualism and Public Sphericules

‘Networked publics’ (boyd, 2011) and ‘networked individualism’ (Wellman, et al., 2006) are sub-concepts which enable us to understand the public online environment. These theories can lead us to an alternate conception of the public sphere that could be more applicable to the internet: public sphericules (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; Gitlin, 2001). Understanding these concepts are important to the study due to the fact that they give insight into how publics work online and how the public sphere concept can better suit online spaces and subsequently the GFG.

Networked publics focus on the imagined communities connecting over the internet instead of face-to-face, as well as the virtual space that the internet has introduced for such interactions (boyd, 2011). The internet creates a different way for people to engage with each other, without geographical or social borders, creating a new dynamic between people (boyd, 2011). The environment of where the people who collectively make up the ‘public’ engage and how it has changed through the internet is an important aspect of networked publics (boyd, 2010). Livingstone (2005 in boyd, 2010) argues that a good way to understand a ‘public’ is to think about it as a collection of people with a shared interest. They highlight the interest that is shared as opposed to, for example, language or place (although both can also create different kinds of publics, and shared interests can be built around these characteristics as well). Habermas (1991 in boyd, 2010) sees ‘publics’ more narrowly as collections of people interested exclusively in civic issues. Networked publics can be used to understand the members of the GFG in their context as the concept explains the way information gets shared by the ‘public’, online.

A theory which challenges Habermas' 'public' theory is that of Mizuko Ito (2008 in boyd, 2011), arguing that publics can engage in different cultures and act as "reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors" (Ito, 2008: 3 in boyd, 2011). Habermas' view on 'publics' is seen as too narrow and specific as Ito (2008 in boyd, 2011) reimagines the concept to suit the digital era with a more open and flexible definition. Ito (2008 in boyd, 2011) first introduced the concept of networked publics to describe a public that gets involved with the growing engagement and socio-cultural progress taking place with digital advancements.

The structure of networked publics distinguishes them from the other forms of publics, and boyd (2011) accepts the 'messiness' of the concept as well as its growth. The internet has changed the flow of information and the engagement between people and this moves networked publics into a different direction as the traditional conceptions of 'publics' (boyd, 2011). The internet allows the public to choose who they want to connect and share information with, and also allows them to create private communication channels (boyd, 2008).

Networked individualism on the other hand, focuses on how the individual has changed their social behaviour and becomes more focused on online communication, losing a sense of face-to-face interactions (Wellman, et al., 2003). Wellman, et al., (2003) suggests that social media and the internet moved away from traditional neighbourhood communities and small villages, with the internet making room for anyone who is able to access it (Wellman, et al., 2003).

Additionally, the internet also has other affordances such as giving people the space to do whatever they want and give them a 'purpose'. People can shape technology to serve their needs such as to brag, rant, gossip, raise awareness, communicate with their loved ones, express their creativity, and so much more. This is called the domestication theory (Hynes & Richardson, 2009). The internet serves a certain purpose to people and as such becomes an integral part of their lives. Communities have moved away from the traditional meeting spaces such as restaurants, pubs, town halls, and so forth to the internet for many of their interactions (Wellman, et al., 2003). Wellman, et al., (2003) acknowledge that the internet provides people with the opportunity to connect globally, as well as its wireless capabilities and the personalisation of content on the internet. Another advantage is that the internet can

actually encourage community activity as people can communicate more easily and directly with other community members (Wellman, et al., 2003). The GFG is an example of a community that has taken to the internet to communicate with itself about mutual concerns, as explored in this study.

Different public spheres exist such as Dahlgren's (2009 in Bruns & Highfield, 2016; 105) "political public sphere" and the "cultural public sphere" (Hunter & Green, 2006 in Bruns & Highfield, 2016; 105) illuminating the fact that multiple spheres are possible. Calhoun already identified in 1992 (in Bruns & Highfield, 2016; 103) that the public sphere is more complex than Habermas' original ideal and needs to account for the fragmentation of different communities and publics. Habermas' public sphere should rather be used as a framework than a literal interpretation, and needs flexibility to adjust to the times (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; 105). Numerous studies have shown that it is useful to move away from overarching concepts of the public sphere and focus instead on what appears to be more bounded, smaller 'micro' spheres. These micro spheres have been described as 'sphericules' and these are bounded by size and reach according to Bruns & Highfield (2016). With the digital space changing the way people interact with each other, the way communities are formed and how they communicate, the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere does not account for the large number of people connecting on the internet with different interests as well as the interactivity of the internet which has taken over many of the roles of mass media. *Public sphericules* (Gitlin 1998; Cunningham 2001; Bruns 2008 in Bruns & Highfield, 2016) suggest that smaller virtual communities are created on the internet with people gathering in communities of similar interests (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; Gitlin, 2001). This is a seemingly more appropriate concept to social media and spaces like the GFG due to its nature as a smaller public space connecting similar interest groups.

These fragmented groups exist as sphericules of communities which join to specifically address particular interests and issues (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; 107). These reduced size communities of interest could possibly provide more quality deliberations rather than a larger group where some voices might get lost (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; 107). Even if it attracts others from other interest groups, active members with valuable input will shape the conversation and constitute its main audience (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; 108).

The internet provides a space for a wide plurality of spheres, therefore making a single national overarching public sphere as Habermas suggests less critical and possible even impossible in the digital age (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; Gitlin, 2001). But on a more local level, or around particular interests, collective deliberation can still take place. There is thus, this study argues, still considerable utility in the overall notion of public sphere, but much more adapted to local circumstances, such as with the GFG which is a public sphere or sphericule on a much smaller, more localised scale where the concept might have much more explanatory power.

2.2 SOCIAL COHESION, BELONGING AND TOGETHERNESS

2.2.1 *Social Cohesion*

As outlined in Chapter One, I had long noticed some concern about ‘social cohesion’ on the surface of the GFG in that many people seem to want to be in the group to ‘help out’ and ‘bring people together’ or express sentiments such as these. For some people it is clear that this is a key role the group seems to play – by being on GFG you are, by joining, expressing your belonging to something: a Facebook group that keeps you up to date with happenings in Grahamstown, and ‘connects’ you to 22,000 others with some interest in the town (enough interest to request membership, be ‘vetted’ by the Admins and then accepted onto the GFG).

Social cohesion is a complex and somewhat contradictory concept in social science and policy formulation. It is often used by policymakers to describe ways they would ideally like to bring communities together to be ‘harmonious’ – no matter what cultural, ethnic or lingual differences they might have – to avoid political disturbances, and so forth (Hudson, et al., 2007: 91). However, many scholars have had different definitions for social cohesion and critiques of it as concept, insisting it could be a useful term if problematised correctly, and used in tandem with terms such as social capital developed by Bourdieu and others (Friedkin, 2004). Social capital has been used to refer to people having a sense of ‘purpose’ in their community/society (Naseri, 2017). This ‘purpose’ can be fulfilled through posting online about your opinions, recommendations and advertisements – making a person feel of use to others (Naseri, 2017). The GFG can be seen as a platform for people to fulfil this idea of social capital.

Friedkin (2004) argues that groups only enter a socially cohesive space if the group members' relations and interactions remain positive. These cohesive groups are self-maintaining to keep the group interactions respectful and attract more members (Friedkin, 2004). It manifests in higher levels of trust, lower levels of crime, sharing of resources, more collective ways of operating and dealing with social problems. Palmary (2015) disagrees about the groups always being positive. Often in literature the mafia has been used as an example of a social cohesive group that functions in a completely different way as what we consider as a 'normal' cohesive group as there is still a level of 'togetherness' and respect that is developed, even if this is through fear and even if they did have negative aspects for society more broadly (Palmary, 2015).

The study will explore the dynamics of the GFG to find out whether group members feel collectively that they are respected and feel that some kind of sense of solidarity and cohesion is either promoted or 'emerges' through their participation in the GFG.

Social cohesion is not only about the group behaviour but most importantly each individual's participation in the group (Friedkin, 2004). Their intention when they join the group, remain in the group and their loyalty to other group members are strong indications of the level of social cohesion taking place (Friedkin, 2004). Individuals contribute to the groups in different ways and each group/community will have their own level of social cohesion, and therefore it is important to take individual perspectives, identities and social context into account (Friedkin, 2004; Marlowe; Bartley & Collins, 2017). The GFG can possibly be beneficial to members, resulting in cohesion, or could be detrimental to the community causing disputes and feelings of isolation. The study looks closer at individual members of the GFG and their feelings of social cohesion or isolation. This will bring a clearer view on whether the GFG can have an important impact on the Grahamstown community.

Social media can provide a platform for communities and the individuals in those communities to 'discover' each other (Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2017: 99). Social media groups such as the GFG currently brings the community of Grahamstown to one virtual space and provides a platform for discussions which might either fragmentise or be cohesive to society. From a South African perspective, social cohesion has become something the government strives for in each community due to the divisions sown by the Apartheid government pre-1994 (Palmary, 2015). In 2014 the South African Government Department

of Arts and Culture hosted a social cohesion summit with results later represented to parliament to analyse the levels of social cohesion in communities now, and how they could be improved in the future (Palmary, 2015). On a national scale social cohesion becomes a part of nation building and a type of patriotism towards a country (Palmary, 2015).

Looking at the national scale efforts towards social cohesion are informative when trying to gain insight into the Grahamstown context. With Grahamstown still rife with social problems and the effects of Apartheid still showing in settlements where poverty is prevalent, integration is still slow to progress and thus affects the social cohesion between different classes. One of the affordances of social media platforms is to break barriers between social groups. This is noticeable with the GFG as members consist of different cultural and social backgrounds. Social cohesion is important in society to maintain order, these social media groups could be assisting in bringing people together and breaking down barriers such as those created by Apartheid, or they could be doing the opposite and causing a split in the community, and this study is set out to investigate which of the two is currently occurring in Grahamstown. Part of this study will incorporate sense of belonging as it is a vital part of social cohesion. For people to feel trust and integration they also have to feel included and like they belong. In the next section I look at sense of belonging and what it means for the study and in terms of social cohesion.

2.2.2 *Sense of Belongingness*

A sense of belonging starts with the individual and their reactions and experiences with others (Lee & Robbins, 1995). In psychological studies the need for belonging already shows in early childhood (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Sense of belonging was first proposed by Kohut (1984) in the field of psychoanalysis (Lee & Robbins, 1995). This falls in line with the focus on the individual experiences of the communities and their level of social cohesion (Friedkin, 2004). The importance of a sense of community for individuals is to feel 'safe' and like they have someone 'looking out' for them according to research by Hudson, et al. (2007). The feeling of being 'at home' is an element of feeling a sense of belonging (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017). The feeling of belonging is also connected to the feeling of familiarity, connectedness and security (Yuvul-Davis, 2011 in Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017).

Even though social media provides affordances that could possibly be used to strengthen social cohesion, social media could also have negative effects on these aspects (Marlowe,

Bartley & Collins, 2017). These include at the most obvious levels creating an ‘insider/outsider’ set of issues, widening the gap between those who have internet access and computer literacy and those who do not (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017). The time and emotional investments users make online can also hinder their relationships with other people and sociality offline as they become more accustomed to communicating through the internet (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017). This might be the case in this study as not all Grahamstonians are able to communicate through social media for economic, technological or literacy reasons. Technology can thus either be a disruptive or positive force in the sense of belonging and social cohesion, with affordability and accessibility being of main concern.

Theorists have realised that with the digital era, the way communities communicate and the cohesion that takes place has now taken different forms and structures (Wallace & Vincent, et al., 2017). The ‘disembedding’ (Wallace & Vincent, et al., 2017) of social relationships are further enabled through digital communications such as social media platforms by being available across space and time (Wallace & Vincent, et al., 2017). Social media has become integrated with our everyday lives due to its ability to connect people through cell phones and other portable devices (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017). Now with social media, even local communities can create spaces to communicate easier online (Wallace & Vincent, et al., 2017). This falls in line with the study as it takes into consideration inhabitants of a small city who communicate with each other online via the GFG whereas they might have never met outside of the digital sphere.

Social media platforms have become important technologies to keep individuals connected and give them a sense of belonging. The increased availability and access and mobile interfaces influence the way people interact through SNS platforms (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017). Social media can provide many opportunities for promoting a greater sense of social cohesion with the social groups that can be created with Facebook Groups and Pages (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017). These networks can provide more interactivity on a wider range as social cohesion can take place across geographical divides and those who would not normally go to physical gatherings (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2017). The GFG will bare one such example as an interviewee was situated in a different country. This interview will be explored later in Chapter Four.

2.3 A TYPOLOGY OF FACEBOOK USERS

Facebook serves as a platform for a spectrum of personalities, all showing different behaviours in different situations. Facebook users have shown particular sorts of behaviours and often display a sense of self-disclosure on the social network during their visits to the site. Self-disclosure is a trait which allows members to reveal a part of themselves – or even a persona that they have taken on – and receiving feedback and attention for it (Huang, 2016). The term ‘self-disclosure’ can be understood as the way people share information about themselves in order to build relationships and gain more acceptances from society (Deriega, 1984 in Huang, 2016). Social media sites can thus play a psychologically self-exploratory role (Burkell & Fortier, 2016). One of the important outcomes of self-disclosures is building relationships online which gives one a sense of belonging or feeling of importance (Huang, 2016; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). Private information can now be shared online through social media and the user can structure their participation in their own way (Burkell & Fortier, 2016). Being free to view others’ posts and essentially their lives unfold as others also self-disclose, can be a liberating experience with members consequently building their self-esteem on social media (Burkell & Fortier, 2016).

Social media can pose a threat to users. Users show that one of the biggest challenges is concerned with keeping content separate in each social spheres of life, for example content meant for friends are not necessarily appropriate for employers to see. In some cases the content overlaps, leaking to the wrong audience – this is called a ‘context collapse’ (Marwick, 2011 in Burkell & Fortier, 2016). A line also gets blurred in terms of private vs. public content (Burkell & Fortier, 2016). Profiles on social media platforms such as Facebook are usually deemed as public. However, there are settings on Facebook to control your privacy and make some content invisible to those who are not ‘friends’ on your profile. Thus, it is hard to define some people’s expectations regarding privacy online and the way they use self-disclosure (Burkell & Fortier, 2016)

Behaviours also change when people interact with others (Huang, 2016) and this can be seen in the GFG as people become more opinionated in the space and discuss topics of high concern with each other – as discussed in Chapter Four. At the level of micro-analysis, Chapter Four will also discuss six different Facebook Group respondents which were

identified during the research; lurkers, keyboard warriors (including ‘trolling’), ‘Gung-ho’ responders, peacemakers and the occasional commenter. Each one has their own characteristics which play a role in the way the members respond to discourse on the GFG.

2.4 CONCLUSION

The Habermasian ideal of the public sphere is still a useful and core concept to understanding the role of the media and nature of democracy – and the media’s relationship to political process, with some adjustments (Dinan & Millar, 2009: 254). The term could undergo another structural transformation as it did after the appearance of mass media, to adjust for the online environment (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). Social media in particular could have the ability to form part of the public sphere and the concept of public sphericules is perhaps better suited to studies in online spaces due to its flexibility.

The GFG has the potential to help engender and promote some kind of useful sociality and/or social solidarity, and can be seen, optimistically, as a socially cohesive public sphericule in line with theorists such as Marlowe, Bartley & Collins (2017) over the potentials of social media and its ability to create a space where people can connect, feel a sense of belonging to something, however inchoate.

Different behaviours online can also influence the flow of a conversation and how it connects community members who are using the space to deliberate concerns. The members choose to use self-disclosure as a means to build relationships and feel a sense of belonging (Huang, 2016; Burkell & Fortier, 2016). Behaviours can determine whether the GFG creates a successful public sphere/sphericule and promotes social cohesion. These theories are identifiable in GFG conversations and thus, it is appropriate to use them to understand the importance of social media spaces such as Facebook Groups. The next chapter will discuss the methodological approaches and research methods used in this study.

CHAPTER THREE:

Methodological Approaches

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Two outlined the theoretical framework for the study and, in particular, explored key developments and refinements to public sphere theory in the digital age, and theories of social cohesion and the social role of social media. This chapter deals with the methodological approaches and methods used for data collection and analysis in this study. This chapter recaps the key research questions followed by an examination of some issues in quantitative and qualitative research methodology, which lays the foundation for explaining this project's research design including the data gathering techniques and sampling processes used. A consideration of some of the key ethical issues concludes this chapter.

3.1 GOALS OF THIS STUDY

Can social media, in particular Facebook groups, facilitate and provide a platform for a local 'public sphere' to develop and thrive? Can social media groups such as GFG encourage a sense of community, which includes a common 'imagining' of that community (Anderson, 1983), and sense of being 'in and of' a particular, in this case, geographically bounded community? And can such groups impact on the way participants (and outsiders) think, feel and see 'social cohesion' in a given community? These are the main preoccupations of this study.

The media can provide a platform for both the discussion of public matters and the provision of information needed for these discussions, and through this, or in addition to this, allow for a sense of belonging, community, nationhood, ethnic identity and social cohesion to take hold (Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2017: 99). With digital technology underpinning much of mass media, and social media becoming a phenomenon in its own right since about 2004 onwards, it has become imperative to better understand social media's power as a new medium and communication platform, that is, unlike older mass media, more interactive, participatory and personalised. With this in mind, this thesis proposes that broader sociological understandings of key concepts such as public sphere, community and social cohesion, can be usefully

explored via close focus on particular forms of social media, especially as platform start becoming a powerful shaping force in daily life, as more and more people use it on a daily basis as a source of news and social communication.

I have lived in Grahamstown for more than a decade. I joined the 'Grahamstown' Facebook group in 2014 and I have followed posts ever since. It became of research interest to me when, during the course of my Masters by coursework and thesis, I realised how many debates and discussions were taking place and even shaping 'real world' actions – in both positive and negative ways. It became clear that the GFG has a real impact in the town, and on what it means to be 'here and now' in this place (whether for the short duration of a stay as a student, or, especially, for long-time or permanent residents). I wanted to explore whether it fragments or helps bring together the Grahamstown community. Social networks, as media platforms mediating communication and interaction between people, became my focus as I set out to find the answer to whether this space had the power to enrich the community and fell in line with media study theories about online communities.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY CONSIDERATIONS

In the social sciences, researchers are often faced with stark qualitative or quantitative approaches towards data collection (Bryman, 2006: 1). Media and communication studies have arisen from several well-established fields such as sociology, psychology, political sciences and history, to name a few (Gunter, 2012: 237). Over the years, media studies have often featured economic or linguistic components. As such, the field of media studies has developed various flexible methods between scientific and social approaches in its research methodology (Gunter, 2012: 237). Qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection each have their advantages and disadvantages which have sometimes led to disputes amongst researchers as to which is the most appropriate to adopt.

This study focuses on a more qualitative approach because it wants to look at how and why the GFG members act and react in certain ways during controversial conversations and the meaning this has for the community. It also looks at the connections and feelings provoked by GFG members during these conversations, and whether the group contributes to a sense of belonging for group members. These factors will give a sense of whether the members feel

included or excluded, and if this is contributing to a socially cohesive community in Grahamstown.

3.2.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research emphasises an understanding of how people feel and why they behave the way they do in certain situations (Bryman, 2006: 1; Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). Using an emic approach, researchers attempt to comprehend people's actions through studying their subjective understandings of situations (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). The term qualitative research describes various techniques and approaches to research, such as qualitative data collection and qualitative data analysis (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). A difference between quantitative and qualitative research is that the qualitative studies are performed under natural environments with minimal interference, whereas quantitative studies are extensively controlled (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). Qualitative studies also contain very little opportunity for generalisation due to their emphasis on the individual nature of each subject and situation (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). This has to do with the limited number of subjects that are usually used for such studies and their specific subjectivities – it's about depth rather than breadth. The naturalism in qualitative research has been brought to the foreground in the two alternate titles for qualitative research; naturalistic inquiry and field research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). The goal for most qualitative orientated researchers is to interfere as little as possible with their surroundings by only observing them (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). The researcher can therefore be considered an observer (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 271).

There are three types of data collection in qualitative research: ethnographic, case studies and life history studies (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). In-depth interviewing and participant observation are the tools used for collection within the three types of data collection associated with qualitative research (Bryman, 2006: 1). The qualitative researcher can interpret the findings with a phenomenological (or interpretivist) approach (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 28). This approach supports the ethnological study as a way to collect data effectively due to its alignment with understanding human behaviour (Deacon, et al., 1999: 6). The phenomenological tradition illuminates the importance of the human cognisance by focusing on the behaviour and subjectivity of a person as a unique individual (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 28). In contrast to positivism where the sole emphasis is on the scientific facts

and explanations of actions, phenomenology is interested in understanding the psychological depths of behaviour (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 28). In the interpretivist approach, which is fundamentally embedded in the ideals of the humanities, researchers aim to understand how people make sense of their worlds and their existence (Deacon, et al., 1999: 6-7).

Qualitative research focusing on specific individuals and their life and family history is aptly named life history studies (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 279). Case studies focus on small specific groups in their studies such as specific families or events, whereas ethnography investigates larger clusters of subjects such as communities or cultural groups and their behaviours within those groups (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 279). Ethnography can be used online as an appropriate way to study communities in the online space, cyber-ethnography (Ward, 1999; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007), which will be discussed in the next section. Ethnography is a useful tool in this study as I understand it to be a social science research tool where the sociological and anthropological aspects of a community are interpreted by a researcher. This study makes use of cyber-ethnography – as outlined below – to understand the users of the GFG as a whole, and looking into the viability of social cohesion in the online environment by observing the group as a community.

3.2.1.1 Cyber-ethnography & Participant Observation

My research study draws on cyber-ethnographic methods and a moderate level of participant observation. This study makes use of 14 in-depth interviews as well as participant observation over the period of three years (2017 to 2019). I am a member of the GFG and have commented on posts before but have taken a step back to observe and collect data at times. I have thus tried to both participate and observe throughout the time I have worked on the research.

The internet has become a ‘merged space’ where there is more accessibility than ever before, and boundaries are broken (Ward, 1999: 2). Anyone with internet access can thus go online and participate on different platforms. With the dynamic development of web culture, it is important to have a flexible research method (Ward, 1999). *Cyber-ethnography* provides an opportunity to take note of changes in an online and use them to the advantage of the research (Ward, 1999). A major concern with online sampling and interviews in qualitative research is that the researcher needs to form a type of relationship with the subjects. This can prove to be

difficult as it might take longer online to earn an individual's trust due to security and privacy concerns and is only possible once the person is logged in online (Ward, 1999). Nevertheless, Rybas & Gajjala (2007: 4) are in favour of cyber-ethnography, arguing that behaviour online is not influenced by the technology itself but rather by cultural and socio-economic contexts, which I shared with many of the research participants.

I chose to conduct *in-depth individual interviews* in order to understand people's feelings and the sense they made of things that happened in the GFG. Cyber-ethnography presents the basis for the understanding of behaviours and subjectivities of people on the internet (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007: 4). For the researcher the cyber-ethnographic methodology can assist in making meaning of discourses and interactions (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007: 6). Whereas ethnology focuses on a locational study, taking geographical and cultural spaces into account, cyber-ethnography understands that online communities break some boundaries of time and space (Garcia, et al., 2009). I also needed to acknowledge the limitations of cyber-ethnography. The researcher and participants need to have the necessary technological skills to partake in the study, which could prove difficult with digital technologies constantly changing and advancing (Robinson & Schulz, 2011). The researcher also needs to take into account their own position within the online space as their research might be eschewed with their own knowledge and participation on the web pre-research (Robinson & Schulz, 2011). Researchers must acknowledge that their data will only accumulate data from those who have access online. This study's biggest challenge thus is to take into account the lost voices of those who are not able to access the GFG.

Participant observation is used to support and complement the accounts of the interviewees in this study. Observations are a popular method used within ethnological methodology. Researchers can focus on the way of life and various events occurring with comprehensive ethnology (Spradley, 1980), or focus on a specific occurrence or participant (Spradley, 1980). Participant observations can be defined as the researcher becoming an observer but also participant of the daily life and habits (Dewalt, et al., 1998). The research is done over a long period of time with research observing the environment and research participants. The time taken for research is subject to change depending on the type of research (Roux, 2018). To be a participant observer, a researcher needs to be part of the community or group he/she is researching and both observe and participate (Roux, 2018). The range of participation varies with the highest level being complete participation – researcher becomes completely

subjective – to no participation level where the researcher becomes a complete observer (Spradley, 1980). In online participant observation, the researcher has to look at texts on a computer screen in front of them, rather than observing people in a physical “offline” space (Garcia, et al., 2009).

3.2 DATA GATHERING

3.2.1 Sampling & Selection Techniques

This study focuses on interviews and participant observation. As a reception analysis, the interviews are key to understanding how the GFG members interpret the posts on the group. Participant observation is not enough to understand the individuals’ emotions which are evoked during the discussions on the GFG and whether the group helps them feel as though they belong to a community. Therefore, individual interviews were imperative for this study. Purposive sampling chooses a participant specifically for certain qualities they possess or due to specific events, demographics, spaces, etc. (Herring, 2004). I chose the participants firstly because they were part of the GFG and secondly based on their level of activity.

Online data collection can be challenging as you do not do face-to-face interviews but rather have to rely on texts sent by the participant (Garcia, et al., 2009). Interviews which take place through digital technology such as email or an online/cellular messaging services, limit the researcher’s ability to observe the participants’ physical reactions and level of comfort (Garcia, et al. 2009). In this study I decided to use textual interviews to my advantage by focusing on the fact that the answers will be in participants’ own words which avoids mistakes and missing some of the conversation key points. Even though the researcher uses online data, they must also take the ‘offline’ in consideration when doing research (Garcia, et. al., 2009), thus I looked at the GFG’s effects ‘offline’ as well as online to fully grasp the role of the group in relation to the public sphere and social cohesion in the community.

I started the research by asking permission to do my research from the Administrators of the GFG by messaging them in a private Facebook group message, as there are three of them. Once I had permission from them to continue, I communicated with specific active group participants via Facebook Messenger. I asked whether they would be interested in participating in my research after explaining the research goals, secured informed consent

and sent interview questions to those who were willing. Some participants preferred the questions emailed to them and as such, I emailed them a Word document with the research questions.

I specifically chose Facebook Messenger as a means of communication, due to the fact that the members were clearly comfortable with this space. The platform also allowed for interviewees to consider questions and respond when they feel ascertain of the answer, making them more at ease when talking to me. The messenger service is also easily accessible to all Facebook users and thus, easy to access by the GFG members with little time and geographical logistic constraints. Messenger also allowed me to use accurate direct quotes from the group.

I designed a set of questions (Addendum B) to guide me in the interviews which would give me information about the participants' involvement in GFG and feelings toward the group. These questions were separated into three sections: the individual's background and involvement in the GFG; the group as a public sphere; and the group and social cohesion.

All participants also received an information and consent sheet wherein the research objectives and information were given as well as an area for them to sign consent to me using the research for the data collection of my hypothesis. For the selection of participants, I used purposive random sampling by going through the membership list and looking at the most active participants.

3.3 Data analysis techniques

Periodisation

During this study, content analysis was done partly by looking at the GFG's past and the various stages it has gone through. In order to do this, I had to take 'screenshots' (snapshots of content on the screen of a digital device). This method was used between 2016 and 2019, which were the main years of focus for the study. For the period of the GFG's induction in 2007 until 2013, I had to rely on word-of-mouth information from the Administrators as it proved impossible to retrieve. For the period between 2013 and 2016 I referred back to the GFG to see what was posted and the trends throughout the years.

In my analysis of the data in Chapter Four, I make use of periodisation to organise data and capture the trends and anomalies in the GFG. Laying out the themes and history of the GFG in a periodisation provided a framework to give an understanding of the dynamics of GFG. These trends and themes illuminated by the periodisation also showed certain traits in the members who joined the GFG. I used typology to make sense of their behaviours.

Typology

Different behaviours were identified throughout the participant observation part of the research. I used typology techniques to determine how members are likely to interact in the GFG. To get to these conclusions and create the typology I used three indicators which guided me to identify the type of member, frequency, tone and motif.

This allowed me to compose a scale which went from least frequent respondent to most active. Within the frequency, the member usually expressed themselves in different tones, for example, some people stayed calm and tried to make ‘peace’, while others aggressively enforced a viewpoint. In general, the more expressive a person was, the more frequently they posted. Lastly I looked at their motive for posting. Some members wanted to post to calm everyone down and others wanted to post to rile people up. These determined which category they were placed in and thus a typology was chosen. These techniques proved helpful when exploring the environment and responses of members which enabled me to understand the dynamics of the GFG and how the community communicated.

3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main concern with social media research ethics is the question of private vs. public (Townsend & Wallace, 2012: 5). It is easy to expect all posts online to be public as it is posted on a public platform, however many spaces are password protected and can be considered as private, for example Facebook groups which are set to ‘private’ and require specific permission to join the group (Townsend & Wallace, 2012: 5).

The GFG is listed as ‘public’ which means anyone from the public can see posts even if they are not a part of the group. However, if you want to comment and be active on the GFG you have to ‘join’ the group and the Admins or another group member has to accept your request to join. Due to the fact that the posts are made public, no permission was required to make

‘screenshots’ of the posts that were on the GFG. With a group as large as the GFG with around 22 000 members, posts are no longer private and therefore I could use it for my study without permissions.

For the interviews the group members were given a full disclosure of what they were getting into and what the purpose of the study was, giving the participants a chance to informed consent (Townsend & Wallace, 2012: 6). According to Townsend & Wallace (2012: 11) a first step should be to contact the Administrators of the group which you are doing research on. In my research I made contact with the Administrators in my initial stages of the research proposal process to ensure I have permission from them to continue the study on the group. Only after I received their go-ahead, did I continue my research on the GFG.

Ethical considerations can be difficult to determine as the field of social media research is still relatively new. However, making sure you are aware of the possible repercussions and the blurring of the divisions between private and public, you will most likely be able to avoid ethical problems in your research.

3.5 CONCLUSION

This study was conducted through a qualitative methodological lens. It focuses on cyber-ethnography and participant observation as I did interviews online and drew on ‘screenshots’ of posts made by members of the GFG.

The ethical considerations I was faced with were a matter of deciding whether the GFG members’ posts were private or public. I concluded that the posts were made in public due to the ‘public’ settings of the GFG and size of the group and therefore I had more freedom to use material from the group.

The next chapter will explore the findings from the research after in-depth interviews and observations of posts on the GFG.

CHAPTER FOUR

Control, Resistance and Contestation: Deliberation or Debasement?

Administrators, Rules and the History of the Group

4.0 INTRODUCTION

The Grahamstown Facebook Group describes itself as “a fun, family-friendly community where people can share their passion for this wonderful Eastern Cape city.” The group has achieved significant growth since it started in 2007, and particularly recently: as of January 2019, when this study was completed, the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group membership stood at over 22 000 users. The site is run by four Administrators (three of which are active). According to the Group Admins, in January 2019 there were 15 350 ‘active members’ (members who ‘like’ and comment on posts). Between 1 January and 10 January 2019 for example, there were 832 new posts added to the page. On a monthly basis, approximately 60% of the posts are of classifieds nature and 40% debates about issues of concerns. This ratio will change depending on the events of the month. Should there be an issue such as a major water outage, it would attract a higher number of debates in that particular timeframe. Memberships have also become significantly higher in recent years. In December 2018 alone, Admins approved 1 300 membership requests, declined 272 requests and blocked 16 accounts. These actions – of approval, declining and ‘blocking’ are explored further below.

It is evident that the Group is active with a wide reach, albeit not the entire Grahamstown community. In contrast, the local community newspaper, *Grocott’s Mail* has a print readership of 10 500 (according to the *Grocott’s Mail* website) and 9 900 ‘likes’ on their Facebook page. What differentiates the *Grocott’s Mail* Facebook page from the ‘Grahamstown’ group is that only *Grocott’s Mail* team members can publish on their page – whereas any member can publish on the ‘Grahamstown’ group, making it a more interactive space. The *Grocott’s Mail* page is thus ‘read-only’, where other users may comment, but not

create posts. The GFG offers members the option of posting their own opinion and views on a subject and then discussing it with other members.

Many of the posts on the GFG are classifieds, for example events, buying and selling, business advertisements, recommendations, and so forth. However, regular posts about town affairs appear as users discuss the municipal and civic issues that plague Grahamstown. Interestingly, these everyday posts are found in between fiery discussions and debates. Deliberations are able to exist parallel to these commercial posts.

A major tension that exists within the GFG is the friction between Administrators and members. The Admins have the power to control the conversation and censor what is said on the Group. Many members resist the idea of censorship and limitations on their freedom of speech. Other members comply with the rules and would like to see *only* uncontroversial classified-type posts, limiting those who would like to discuss socio-political issues. As outlined in Chapter One, the GFG is a highly contested space just as Grahamstown is a highly fractured post-Apartheid city, with extreme variations of wealth, income and opportunity. Service delivery is at an all-time low, with shortages of water, contamination of water, regular electricity power outages, and ruined roads full of potholes that have not been repaired for many years. These online contestations – Admins versus members and between members who want it to be a deliberative space or want to ‘vent’ versus those who just want a ‘community noticeboard’ – are on-going and indeed are frequently mentioned on the Group, and examining them forms a major part of this study.

As part of this study’s overview of the content of these posts, examples will be discussed as screenshots from the discussions were taken. Interviews with group members will shed light on whether these discussions could be regarded as the kind that fit notions of ‘public sphericules’ (Bruns & Highfield, 2016) and cover common issues, and if social cohesion is a possible outcome of the Group. This chapter aims to understand and assess the notions that the Group is somehow facilitative of something akin to ‘deliberation’ and able to promote a sense of belonging and connection to both the geographical space and place of Makhanda (Grahamstown) and to ‘each other’, as fellow members of a common area. Drawing on two years of close observation of the site and various interviews with past and present group members and Admins, the findings seek to outline and explore the nature of these daily ‘wars

of attrition’, battles for attention and the various positions that different parties take in their daily online contestations.

4.1 GROUP GUIDELINES AND MODERATION

Group moderators (or commonly known as ‘Administrators’ or ‘Admins’), are set up via the Facebook system to run and Administer groups, as they see fit. The first Admin of a group will usually be the group creator, who can then add more Admins. They don’t have to be ‘neutral referees’, nor take on the role of making sure that discussion is free-flowing, respective, and so forth, but many do take on these kind of roles and this has been embraced in the GFG. More broadly, the Admins serve as the maintainers of ‘networked publics’ and spaces that “allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes” (boyd in Matias, 2016: 3). Administrators, in a sense, set up their own public spheres, or spaces for public deliberation - or commerce or socialising (Matias, 2016). Four Administrators currently run the GFG. One of the Admins has moved out of Grahamstown and henceforth no longer takes part in any Administering tasks but remains listed as an Admin. This particular member is the founding member and started it during his time as local in Grahamstown, to communicate noticeboard style messages with his fellow local friends. Other Admins were added at a later stage as the Group became bigger and more difficult to handle. All Admins are locals from Grahamstown who have commented frequently on posts prior to their inclusion on the moderation team. The other three Admins are all white South African women who could be described as ‘middle-class’ based on my knowledge, interactions of them, and observations of their interventions.

These Administrators have the ability to decide whether a post will be:

1. Allowed according to the rules;
2. Deleted due to inappropriate content going against either the GFG or Facebook rules;
3. Commented upon (or not) for a particular time when comments on a post can and have been switched off if Admins deem there have been too many inappropriate comments or heated debates.

Admins can also block accounts from the group, ban members for a period or forever, and decline new memberships.

“The harsher the offence, the harsher we enforce the rules, i.e. banning straight away, instead of just getting put on the watch list. It is not only about enforcing the rules and focusing on the rule breakers - we also have to think about the rest of the members that do abide by the rules, as we want them to be in a good/safe/friendly environment.” (Admins: Transcript 2, 2019)

The Admins, both on the page and in interviews with me, explain they are guided in terms of making decisions ‘by the rules’, as outlined in the ‘Group Guidelines’ (see Addendum A) which can be found in the “About” section of the Facebook group webpage. These multifaceted set of rules were co-written by the various moderators guided by the general Facebook Group Rules (as outlined on Facebook.com) and the original moderator who created the Group’s ideals. The guidelines, (Group Guidelines, 2016; Addendum A) state, for example, that no racism is allowed and that ‘religious’ or ‘political’ posts are not allowed on the Group. The latter provision, as this study explores, is particularly contentious and often leads to members seeking deliberation being banned or posts being deleted.

These powers are, in the context of group, comprehensive. When deleting a post, the post will disappear completely from the GFG timeline. The Admins and the person who made the post are the only ones who can delete a post from the GFG. From my observations, Admins seem to delete posts when they are ‘controversial’ and particularly when they see a comment getting a great deal of negative feedback. Should a member be a ‘repeat offender’ – in the Admin’s eyes – they risk getting banned from the GFG (Admins, Transcript 3: 2019). This means that they will be unable to join again unless the Admins lift the ban. The only other way to re-enter and re-join would be to create a different profile and then re-joining again through the new profile. This practice, from discussions and interviews, seems to be widespread on the GFG.

The Admins, for example, recently dealt with an issue where it was suspected that a banned member created a new profile to re-enter the Group. This created tension as the person started ‘disrupting’ discussions again. In response, they banned his new profile, and posted this message to group, ‘reassuring’ members they were ‘on it’:

“[The Member in question] was definitively banned after his threatening private message to Admin (together with all of the other threatening comments he let on several posts over time). We’ve been wondering the same thing as you (how he managed to come back) and the only way that could’ve been possible is if he created a new profile and joined that way. We receive a 100 or more new join requests on any given day and can’t vet every single name. All we can do is monitor those that join according to what they post and ultimately that’s what put him on our radars once more yesterday and he was once again removed from the group. We don’t take kindly to having our group, group members or ourselves threatened and will ban anyone for doing so. Every. Single. Time.” (Admins: Screenshot 29/01/2019).

There is a natural tension between Admins and group members in any voluntary space, from the smallest WhatsApp chat forum to large spaces such as the ‘Grahamstown’ group. What exacerbates this is of course scale: this is a public group of more than 20,000 people living in one of the poorest areas of South Africa, in a town that was at the centre of nine fierce wars of colonisation and dispossession in the 19th century, in a country with a 90% black majority and the highest income inequality (still divided largely along racial lines) in the world as outlined in Chapter One. The town itself crackles with tension along multiple fault lines reflecting divisions of race, class, gender, and also language and location. All of this is been exacerbated by the worst drought in living memory and, in January 2019, the prolonged ‘go-slow’ by municipal staff.

In the example above, what is striking is that all three women who ‘Admin’ the FB page are white and middle class, and the person banned (in this case) was a black African man. As discussed in Chapter Two, to have an effective communal space, you need a dynamic space where the community is fairly represented (Papacharissi, 2002), and in this respect the Admins have to walk a very fine line.

An important part of democracy is a functioning public sphere which allows people to gather and discuss any issue, including their mutual concerns about the world they live in, and ‘political issues’ in terms of interacting with the state, as consumers of state (and private) services and as citizens with some obligation to be involved in civic matters (Papacharissi, 2002). These ‘democratic’ deliberations on the GFG are put to the test during the heated

debates that take place online and the unequal representation of group control. Admins are all white and clearly have the resources (of time in particular) to commit to the group, often spending many unpaid hours a day as Admins. In an interview with one of the moderators, she said that a total of 740 Facebook users have been banned by the Group to date since it started (Admins: Transcript 2, 2019). Taking into account that some of those banned members were ‘spambots’ (a programme designed to either mine information – such as email addresses – for spam purposes or to spread spam messages) and fake profiles of people from other countries, she made it clear that they don’t make such decisions lightly, and they aim to ensure the space “stays safe” and is “without any abuse of other members’ rights” (Admins: Transcript 2, 2019). This often takes time and discussion and ‘free labour’ from the Admins.

The relationship between moderators and the networked public they are in charge of, determines the outcome of the way conflict is resolved in the Group and the Group popularity and growth (Matias, 2016). These Admins see themselves as being there to ‘protect’ the members from harassment and discrimination making it a ‘civil rights issue of governance’ (Matias, 2016: 3), although some members clearly feel discriminated against by the Admins themselves: “...go through posts that have been stopped and you will find many examples of censorship of posts, just because a particular post does not interest or agree with an Admin...” (Screenshot: 27/08/2016). However, many members of the GFG feel that the Admins are fulfilling their roles as moderators adequately. One such member for example, made a post declaring the Admins are doing the ‘best they can’ in support of another member who posted that they felt others were ‘bullying’ the moderators: “I think that the Administrators of this group are being bullied...Those who want to debate can start a new group...” (Member 1: Screenshot 11/01/2019).

The Administrators are constantly being scrutinised for their work on the Group. The question, however, becomes when are they being bullied and when are they just being called out for an overzealous use of their power? Members can fiercely criticise the moderators and the actions they take, especially when the Admins often feel they need to censor the Group discussions. Various cases have existed where Administrators felt that they were being bullied – and have said so. One such case is when one member sent private messages to the Admins and was revealed later on the Group to have been banned for doing so, as can be seen in Screenshot 29/01/2019 quoted earlier.

The Administrators have a tremendous amount of power and responsibility as they can control the flow of a conversation and decide whether to end it or let the debate carry on. As outlined above Admins can turn off comments for a certain post and decide to delete a post. This means they get to decide which subjects are allowed to be discussed: they are quintessentially ‘gatekeepers’ who can ‘set agendas’ and shape discussions. It has been brought into question many times over the past few years whether this is fair – and whether the Admins are biased towards or against certain subjects. One of the rules that the Admins keep reiterating is that ‘no politics’ are allowed. This seems like a broad and arbitrary prohibition as they do not define what they consider as political and why they allow certain political discussions and not others. Admins protest against claims that they are biased and insist that they do not take sides in debates and only stop a conversation if it goes against the Group rules, as said during an interview as well as mentioned in a comment: “...it's not censorship. We are as objective as possible - we DO NOT delete certain viewpoints that we may not like etc. We allow for all perspectives and most of the time, we actually facilitate the conversations, as we too are part of the community and care about GHT.” (Screenshot 27/08/2016)

In Facebook groups, the users who serve as Admins are known and visible to everyone. The members tacitly agree to abide by their rules by joining the Group. But there is widespread awareness of how the ‘game is rigged’ and a lot of pushback on these rules:

Member 2: “Just curious about and questioning some of the censorship on this page. I feel it is so helpful to hear all views and comments. Whether or not I agree (or you agree) it is very healthy to hear all perspectives. I am yet to find anything so overtly offensive that it requires censoring. I am not the only one feeling this way. Perhaps Admin could post on it? I love this page and it is always so helpful as an online notice board for GHT-related topics.”

Another member argued, in what is a frequent theme,

Member 3: “I still fail to see why Admins would deem it necessary to close down a topic people are still interested in discussing? I understand that it started out as a community notice board, but things do have a way of evolving and I don’t see harm in that – as long as members remain respectful towards

other members and society in general. If they don't, members can report them to Admin.” (Screenshot 27/08/2016)

On the Group you can see a constant back and forth between members and Admins as they grapple with the issues of restrictions. Some members are supportive of the Admins' choices while others feel that they are biased and misusing their power. The Admins of the 'Grahamstown' group are also seemingly more lenient with certain topics than other. This perception, if widespread, can create a sense of Admins abusing their power and being too subjective in their interpretation of 'politics'. Let us examine a few examples closely:

In January 2019, one member posted about a school in the North West province in South Africa that made headlines for alleged racism in a classroom of Grade One scholars. The post was deleted by Admins after a debate started about racism in South Africa. The following day, the member posted about the event again and asked why her post was deleted:

“Is it just me, or has the conversation about the #SchweizerReneke school been removed from the page? I have scrolled and can't find it. It was a tricky conversation, with strong opinions from a number of people, but it was an important conversation to have. We are a small town, and the racial and class divides are impossible to ignore in this place. These conversations are, I believe, so important in helping us understand each other. Even if they get heated, we MUST keep having them.” (Member 15, Screenshot: 11/01/2019).

Another member took on the Admins: “‘It has no relevance in Grahamstown’ they said. The ignorance and censorship on this page continues to baffle me...” (Member 15, Screenshot: 11/01/2019). The same person, who posted originally, responded to comments:

“...and yet we all know that we do also have discussions on this page, and that it is an excellent platform for learning to understand each other. I agree that we should not push or slate particular political parties on this page, but we can't escape the fact that racism, sexism, classism, etc. are very much a reality in our little town, as in SA. And this 'Grahamstown' page is such a good platform to have these important conversations. Don't you agree?” (Member 15, Screenshot: 11/01/2019).

For Member 17, the Group provides a good space for conversations and wants the Admin to take it into consideration:

“Admin, I’m going to respectfully disagree with you. If we were to draw such a distinction, we must then be much clearer about the rules. For example, when I post something critical about our Muni or the current Ruling Party, should these not be deleted as well? This is an important subject. We need to embrace it, not hide from it. I know it hurts, but we must engage...Please I beg you, give space for Freedom.” (Member 17, Screenshot: 11/01/2019).

The Admins kept to their story though and responded that it was not censorship but rather that the Group was the incorrect platform for such a debate and then stated: “...We have thought long and hard about our rules and discussed them over many coffees – while we are open to minor changes, our rules are clear and final, and are in the best interest of everyone.” (Admins: Screenshot 11/01/2019).

The comments that followed showed clear signs of disapproval of the fact that the Group is only a community noticeboard in the Admins’ view. This signifies the constant tension between the Group members who feel the need for deeper conversations more aligned with a public sphere, and the Admins’ resistance and insistence on maintaining what they feel is a community noticeboard with mostly classifieds being posted. The comments were later switched off for the post, again questioning the role of moderators and the power they hold, and whether they become actors of censorship restricting the natural flow of discussions (Matias, 2016).

One member sent a message to Admins stating her feelings about the way that the Group is managed and what it should aspire to do:

“...part of our human interaction is shaped by socialisation. We are made in the image of our lived experience and by disallowing the reactions across the board of various opinions tend to create hostility, othering and a bias view of lived experience. As a community we have various types and roles within our make-up but unfortunately the Admins of this page do not reflect a reality outside of their own socialisation. By policing the page in the way you do,

unfortunately it comes across as racist (not racist but there is a definite slant towards white voices and experience) and you honestly make more work for yourself than necessary. I urge you if you are finding issue with the criticism to please offer an Admin role to someone else. This is a community page for the members of the community and thus should not be about personal ego and ownership...” (Member 6, Transcript 1: 2019).

The member captures the struggle between the members and Admin as they try to make the Group open and have some kind of consistent moderation across the Group. The message comes after they deleted a post the member made about racial views in the community. The member posted another post that referenced her previous post and brought forward a new group that she created,

“As unfortunately commenting has been closed on my previous post we cannot continue having a healthy debate about the merits and demerits of this group. Here is an alternative platform for those interested. I am white and a student so don't make up the majority of citizens of Grahamstown so would like to hand over Admin-ing of this page to a more representative demographic of the community. Please get in touch if you would like to take on this responsibility. It should be less work than this site as hopefully there will be less policing of that space.” (Member 6, Screenshot: 09/09/2016)

One of the Admins responded: “I closed the comments on your other post as it was not actually a healthy debate in any way. You feel the need to start a second group then start one - I think you made your point about that and have already started the group. Good luck with it” (Admin Screenshot: 09/09/2016). This split in the Group will be further explored in section 4.3.2, during the thematic analysis.

The conversations between Member 6 and the Admins showed the persistent tension between what the Admins think the Group should be and what some of the members want it to be. Members have tried to start new groups in the past, but struggled to gain the high membership figures that made the GFG such a productive space, as discussed later on in the thematic analysis. The Admins desperately try to hold onto this ‘first mover advantage’ and keep the original concept of the Group acting as ‘community noticeboard’. Most of the

interviewees agree that the Group hosts important topics of concern for the city. As Member 3 (Screenshot: 27/08/2016) notes above, the Group keeps evolving over time to include more and more debates and deliberations. Moderators enforce rules on our online freedom of speech; this means they essentially shape our digital interactions (Matias, 2016). This role as conversation guide opens them up to public scrutiny and will not always keep everyone happy (Matias, 2016). The Group becomes an oligarchy (Matias, 2016) as the Admins take over control of the whole Group and have reign over what is discussed.

4.1.1 Community noticeboard or platform for discourse and discussion?

In an interview with Admins (Transcript 1: 2018) they described the Group as a ‘community noticeboard’ rather than a space for deliberations about political and socio-economic affairs. However, this has been disputed by the members as an unfair conception and vision for the Group restricting their freedom of speech. One member responded to an argument about these rules, after a post about racism was censored:

“This assertion seems disingenuous given the wide range of topics that appear on this page. Rather it would appear to me and a fair number of people that it only reverts to a ‘Notice Board’ [*sic*] the moment uncomfortable conversations are to be had about racism and white privilege. In any event, the topic is of obvious interest to many people and is an important topic to be discussed. There is no need to remove said post.” (Member 4: Screenshot 10/01/2019)

The Admins’ response to the discussion mentioned above illustrate their impact on important debates: “While we agree that this is an important discussion, this is simply the incorrect platform. This group’s rules and intentions are clear – we serve more as a community noticeboard.” (Admins: Screenshot 10/01/2019).

The founding member of the Group – the person who moved overseas and is not an active Admin of the Group any longer – commented in 2016 about his intentions when creating the Group after a long argument about the issue of Admin censoring content:

“I created this Group close to nine years ago on 10 October 2007 and it was started as a Community Notice Board. From the beginning it has been made clear that the Group is not a platform for activism, it is not for political or religious discussions and demeaning, racist or offensive comments will not be tolerated.” (Admins: Screenshot 27/08/2016).

The contractions of this original statement demonstrate a conflation of what it calls ‘activism’, and/or of political and religious discussions with racism and offensive comments. This is on the face of it, a very naïve reading. This could be because these kinds of subjects usually attract different and contesting views and discourses between members. These differences in views are difficult for Admins to monitor and they often feel that freewheeling, heated discussion can threaten the ‘safe space’ they try and create for members.

However, even with their insistence that the GFG should remain a ‘community noticeboard’ for classifieds and recommendations, since 2016 when I started taking an interest in the GFG, the members have raised and discussed many political and socio-economic concerns which clearly go way beyond the GFG’s intention of being a community noticeboard. These discussions usually concern, for example, the municipal service delivery failures, the rise of xenophobia in the town, experiences of racism and more recently the very vital and existential debate over the name change of Grahamstown to Makhanda. These discussions are notably the posts with the highest level of interaction on the GFG with many hundreds “likes” and often dozens of comments. Real debate takes place about difficult subjects contrary to all the Admins’ efforts – or at least contrary to their stated policies.

From the interviews it become clear that the majority of the interviewees agreed that they would like to see debates about town concerns discussed more frequently on the GFG, going against the initial intentions of the Admins. Member 3 (Screenshot 27/08/2016) wrote in 2016, “...I understand that it started out as a community notice board, but things do have a way of evolving and I don’t see harm in that...” Some members are thus pushing for the GFG to be a space rich with debates and commentary on the political and socio-economical concerns of the town. They feel that it is natural for the Group to have grown out of its initial community noticeboard function into something of more value and weight to its members.

But other members have different views. Some feel that the GFG is better off being just a space for advertisements, events and other similar classifieds. One interviewee noted that the debates about municipal and political issues get too heated and they would prefer if the Group stayed a space for “advertisements and updates”, notices about water/electricity outages, and “crime alerts” (Member AT, Transcript 2: 2018). Another person noted that there is already a separate and unrelated Facebook group for Grahamstown-based ‘classifieds’ and thus there is no need for the GFG to post advertisements. This member is lobbying for it to become more of a space for residents’ concerns to aired and shared and for debates to happen (Member AC, Transcript 1: 2018).

There are in fact currently two competing groups on Facebook for ‘classifieds’ in Grahamstown (Makhanda). One is called ‘Grahamstown Classifieds’ and the other ‘Grahamstown Classified Ads’. This is alongside a number of other buy-and-sell groups such as ‘Second Hand Grahamstown’. The first mentioned group currently has 6 800 members and was created on 28 September 2014 with only one Admin. It works the same as the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group where you have to request to ‘join’ the group. It is there for the purpose of buying and selling, advertising businesses, advertising events, advice and tips as per its ‘About’ section (Grahamstown Classifieds, 2019). The second group ‘Grahamstown Classified Ads’, was created on 17 January 2016 and only has 1 850 members, operating the same way as ‘Grahamstown Classifieds’ and serving the same purpose but managed by three Admins (Grahamstown Classified Ads, 2019).

Both these groups were created long after the ‘Grahamstown’ groups’, meaning that the original Facebook group has remained the most popular space for the networked public from Grahamstown to get their information and news. Even though these two groups are still very small in comparison to the size of the ‘Grahamstown’ group, they serve the function of being a space for various kinds of commerce and social transactions including forms of barter. They seem to function effectively in their key purpose of serving as advertisement spaces. Recommendations and advertisements are made on a daily basis on the groups and seem to fulfil the need for a classifieds page well. They do not however, contain any debates: people do sometimes post critical comments on specific posts, but generally these groups are noticeably debate and issue-free. It could thus be argued that this leaves the ‘Grahamstown’ group open to grow as debate space, as other groups are already fulfilling the role of classifieds platform.

It is clear that there is a constant and on-going tension between the Admins and the members as many feel either the Admins are censoring issues or avoiding issues of community concern. But how did it get to be this way? The next section will attempt to periodise the history of the GFG from its inception in 2007 until 2019. This periodisation helps explain why, in my estimation, certain changes took place, and the site evolved to become something of an identifiable public sphere and, perhaps inadvertently, a space for social solidarity and ‘connection’: possibly the beginnings of some sense of social belonging and cohesion. The section ends with a separate in-depth focus on each of the four years the study covers from 2016 to 2019.

4.1.2 Periodisation of the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook Group

2007-2011 – Supermarket noticeboard

The Group was created on 10 October 2007 shortly after Facebook introduced the ‘group’ function. The creator intended the Group to be a space for him to connect with his friends, but then strangers from Grahamstown started to request to join and he decided to change the Group to a public group (Admins: Transcript 3: 2019). He intended it to be similar to a community noticeboard that would be found in a shopping centre – a simple wall of notices and advertisements (Admins: Transcript 1: 2017), but online. For the first few years the Group mostly fulfilled its intended function with most posts being classifieds in nature, as interviews with the Admins revealed. The Group slowly gained traction and became more popular as Facebook user numbers grew in South Africa and the Eastern Cape.

Unfortunately all the posts and interaction made between 2007 and 2011 have proven completely inaccessible, most likely being deleted by Facebook due to server updates and therefore specific content could not be accessed during this study – however, I was able to gain information from Admin interviews.

2012-2015 – an early warning system

In 2012 – some the earliest surviving posts – most posts were notices about events happening in town and posts from other platforms shared about municipality service delivery (or lack thereof). The municipality and other ‘town issues’ were seldom discussed as the Group was

dominated by the Admin's posts and the direction he took with the Group. Posts also received very few interactions.

The following year, 2013, proved difficult for the community as Grahamstown struggled with massive water outages. The town made national news for its water problems with the University and parts of the town ending up without water for many weeks, and Rhodes University, which accounts for 60% of the town's GDP, standing on the brink of closing (Wild, 2013). Due to the severity of the water problem, it was frequently mentioned throughout the year on the Group and sometimes debate and argument broke out. For example, when the water shortage was at its peak, the Rhodes University community planned a protest march from the university to City Hall. The call for participation from community members was posted on the GFG. Some however, questioned whether these type of protests would only happen when the rich part of town was without water: "This time it's the turn of Gtown West. I hope there will be RU led march next time Gtown East suffers another of its many water crises." (Member 19, Screenshot: 13/08/2013). To this the poster (who was also the original founder of the GFG) answered:

"...the water problem affects each and every-one of us living in Grahamstown. The fact that the most disenfranchised of our people are suffering the most, highlights the importance of banishing the sick thought-stream of pitching, rich against poor, black against white, East against West, student against squatter out of the collective consciousness. THE POINT IS THIS! ALL OF THE RESIDENTS OF GRAHAMSTOWN ARE SUFFERING, AND ALL OF THE RESIDENTS ARE SUFFERING AT THE HAND OF THE SAME PEOPLE IN THE SAME POSITIONS OF THE SAME MUNICIPALITY RULED BY THE SAME COUNCELORS THAT HAVE BEEN FAILING ALL THE RESIDENTS OF GRAHAMSTOWN FOR YEARS." (*sic*) (Member NM, Screenshot: 13/08/2013)

So much for the 'neutral community notice board' approach! It was thus in 2013 that the Group started facilitating more discussion about major civic issues. This was also the year that the original Admin added another Admin to help him moderate the Group. The second Admin was a friend of the original Admin who as a member proved helpful in defusing heated arguments on the Group and was therefore asked to aid in moderating the Group. The

decision to moderate was thus completely made by the original Admin and the friend he asked to help him.

The water problems continued in 2014 as more water outages happened all over town and more people started using the Group to report outages in their area. The Group started becoming the ‘go-to’ place to report water issues – and for people to find out what was going on. One municipal member started posting updates on water outages on the Group to keep the residents of Grahamstown updated on the latest developments. There was an obvious shift in 2013 and 2014 in the Group’s function as more ‘service delivery’ issues came to the fore.

In 2015 the water outages continued but an additional electrical outage issue threatened the service delivery to residents. South Africa’s power supplier, Eskom, announced a load shedding programme to lighten the pressure placed on stations as they were struggling to perform maintenance on power generators (Nicolaides, 2015). These failures in service delivery often lead to sharp questions about the government’s inability to provide adequate services. These debates can quickly become overly ‘political’ (they are of course political in nature, but political in the sense of ‘party politics’) as they grapple with the question of whether the governing party, the ANC, is leading the country in the ‘right direction’. Conversations evolving into political discussions are one of the themes identified through the periodic analysis. This will idea will be further explored in the thematic analysis in the section below section.

The Admins also posted in 2015 for the first time – as far as I could see – about moderation problems. They put up another post asserting the Group rules. One Admin posted about how they choose who can join the Group, declaring that they can only accept Facebook users who are *from* Grahamstown or surrounding areas with a specific interest in the Grahamstown community. The same Admin also posted about the intentions of the Group as a community noticeboard and not a space for ‘naming and shaming’ of businesses or individuals (Admins: Screenshot 5: 2015) after hundreds of people had attacked the council and mayor online for ineptitude regarding the water and other service delivery issues.

In October 2015 the town experienced a series of xenophobic attacks during a protest which was caused by the totally unfounded and untrue rumour that there was a foreign (Muslim Pakistani) serial killer ‘on the loose’ in the town (Lewis, 2015). The protestors demanded that

the police take action or hand over the person they had in custody for questioning to allow the citizens to take justice into their own hands. The protest quickly spiralled out of control as protesters and riot police clashed (Lewis, 2015). It escalated to protesters running through the streets looting foreign-owned shops and threatening the lives of shop owners (Lewis, 2015). That night foreign citizens were too afraid to return home and police had to organise a major evacuation from the city, and the community had to hire safe houses due to the threats the foreigners received (Lewis, 2015). This went on for weeks, and it took substantial intervention by local churches, Council officials, Rhodes University, and the government to defuse matters.

The GFG was used as a platform to gain information about these terrible events. Most of Grahamstown West were seemingly unaware of the conflicts unfolding and used the GFG to find out why there were a sudden influx of police – oblivious to the extreme conflict happening downtown in Grahamstown East. A typical post from that time reads: “What is going on in Milner Street down towards African? Huge crowds and lots of cops and police vehicles. I had to do a serious detour to get home.” (Member 28, Screenshot: 21/10/2015).

What was also interesting was that the members who commented immediately jumped to the unfounded conclusion that it was the student #FeesMustFall protest, which had started nationwide and at Rhodes just a week before: “Students what else. I needed to get to Cradock Heights, so had to use a long detour. Pathetic” (Member VT, Screenshot: 24/10/2015).

Grocott's Mail also started to make more use of the group to share articles about the attacks to ensure that the community stayed informed about the protest and violence (Screenshot: 24/10/2015). It served to spread the information to a wider audience as *Grocott's* had fewer users that ‘liked’ their page than members joined on the ‘Grahamstown’ Group. This was important and necessary because the GFG also inadvertently became the space for the propagation of the ‘moral panic’ of an Muslim serial killer ‘in the streets’ – a claim there was no evidence for at all, at the time or after. One member wrote:

“It’s always been a solution 4 da black nation we jst cant take da kllings anymore,the police are a joke n its high tym we got our messege across because they dont take these killings seriously,we definately takibg the law

into our own hands,the suspects are walking the streets wth us,we are nt safe...the killings have been happening 4 more than a month nw bt still no word frm the police,we aren't stopping” (*sic*) (Member 29, Screenshot: 24/10/2015).

Grahamstown, like many other South African cities, has high crime statistics and thus the community did not have much evidence as to why this occasion could have been a foreigner and gave reason for a xenophobic attack. Social media, specifically Facebook and WhatsApp, was used to inflame the violence and spread rumours between community members about the alleged serial killer. Another member later revealed that they were an alleged victim’s family member, which gave a more personal perspective, but continued to perpetuate the myth that Muslims were involved:

“There are always 2 sides of a story n yes we shudnt be encouraging violence n yes at da end of da day these ppl help us n yes at da end of da day our cetaz are being killed im one of family victim that has bin brutally killed its so sickning n yes that duznt mean we shud tyk da law on our own hands but sumthn had 2 be done but the problm is dat ther is no certainty who is doin all this its jst suspicion but guyz we cnt wrk on suspicion we as a community we took da law on our own hands da rng way coz sum of these shops that u lootin have nothing 2 do wif any of this yes i understnd that the suspect ownz almst 75% of the shops but we dont knw 4 sho wich 1z but 2 destroy every 1 now look who is struggling at da end of da day US we have nowhere 2 buy airtym bread eletricity all the little things thngz are done in a responsible way guyz even thou we hurting we cnt jst destroy other pplz lifez who myt have nothing 2 do wif this lets use our heads,” (*sic*) (Member 30, Screenshot: 24/10/2015).

Those with conflicting views responded that taking the law into your own hands is not the answer: “I would let the police do their job! I wouldn’t go on a rampage looting shops etc.” (Member 31, Screenshot: 24/10/2015). What struck me as interesting about this post is that members of the GFG started talking about another victim. However, there was no proof given of this but members believed the story. It is very easy for people to go onto social media and say whatever they would like to, without providing proof or taking accountability (Karl, et

al., 2010) and thus rumours can easily be spread and lead to the same problem that started the xenophobic attacks in the first place.

This event also led to interesting activity on the GFG as someone updated live on the situation, asking for help: “Plz can anyone inform the police to go stand by the second shops like bye rite I tried to contact the police bt can’t get hold of them people are selling the assets of the foreigners,” (*sic*) (Member 5: Screenshot 22/10/2015). The importance of this is that people felt that the GFG was a place they could turn to for immediate help. The GFG served the function of members helping other members creating a sense of community and essentially bringing everyone closer together.

At the same time as the xenophobic attacks and protests, Rhodes University students were protesting as part of the national #FeesMustFall movement. This group of students demanded that university fees be scrapped and free higher education for all be introduced. During the protest many members posted about the event to ask information about what was happening and where and when it was happening. Posts about the subject started attracting many comments and views on the subject as protesters and sympathisers debated against those who were anti-FeesMustFall. This major event in the town became a big discussion point on the Group. Some of the comments in the group showed the conflicting views on the student movement:

Member 32: “Maybe we all need to support the students as they r trying to fight a corrupt government which is something we all need to do.”

Member 33: “Please read the stuff on the RHODES SRC [student Facebook group]. I have empathy for our students... they have very valid concerns. I for one would NOT like to be in the shoes of a young person today, trying desperately to prepare for a successful future... as I commented in another post, the fees have gone up a LOT since the old days. Just imagine trying to get a degree now, but not having any decent source of income. As one of the protest posters said, "Education shouldn't be a Debt sentence",” (Screenshot: 24/10/2015).

Grocott’s Mail also played a role in this protest, keeping members informed of the activities taking place. They started sharing a large number of posts during this period with links to

their articles about the protests. One such post with two photos and a caption about the students burning furniture to block entrances attracted 33 comments. Some examples:

Member 34: “Sheer madness. What happened to the art of communication without violence? [...] Tyres burning are madness. Streets already potholed are destroyed. Black smoke polluting the air. All madness,”

Two members retaliated with a student’s view on the situation:

Member 35: “Fees rising so high that dozens of students won’t be able to finish their degrees and come back next year. That’s madness.”

Member 36: “...we cannot get stuck in a discussion that only "allows protest when the protesters can present 'concrete solutions' or behave in proscribed ways. "This places the burden of fixing the intricacies of oppression on the oppressed." - Natasha Vally.

That the government has not delivered and thereby oppressed is beyond doubt.”

For some members the views of the protesters evoked a very emotional response, strongly discouraging the actions taken by protesters. These outbursts of emotional comments show the importance that some people feel to express their opinion:

Member 37: “Why burn anything at all???? I'm so disappointed in the culture of throwing our toys out of the cot when we don't get our own way in this country. Perhaps all of the students that actually WANT to study should protest too.... then all of the parents paying their fees should protest too. Then the rhodes Administration should protest over not getting paid too... then the whole community can protest against the noise and smoke and disruption to daily life. Soon we'll have total anarchy and everyone will be happy. Not! You kids are educated - or at least we're hoping you are trying to GET educated - can't you find other solutions to your issues? Really?”

The comments were also critiqued by a member who analysed the conversation as a whole and came to a conclusion which was pro-protest:

Member 38: “The comments on this thread reflect the deeply conservative stance of Rhodes and Grahamstown more broadly. We're masquerading as non-violent, and yet the status quo is deeply violent. How are students from middle class families supposed to cover R100000 a year, let alone those from working class families? The only way these students (and their fully justified cause) will be listened to is if they protest in this fashion. Get off your tired high horses and imagine for a moment what it's like to try and make it in this country, and this town, specifically, with limited resources.”

Not all members were using facts and information to make their points. The comment by Member 39 is either a quick burst of opinion or could also be seen as trolling (see Section Two). The member who responded used information and ‘facts’ to debate the subject, which could be seen as a more productive method to use towards a deliberative space where a public sphere is possible:

Member 39: “These students are just idiots.”

Member 40: “There are not enough loans and bursaries to cover everyone's education. And working for your degree is great - if you can find a job that will pay enough to help and that won't take up all of the time you need to study [...] And the only 'sheep' I see are the people calling these students 'idiots' because they saw two pictures of burning tyres. Students attempted to discuss these issues with management, but were not listened to/taken seriously.”

Lastly, the only person who weighed on the viability of the discussion came in much and seemed to also use factual data to debate her viewpoint:

Member 41: “SA cannot possibly raise the amount of revenue needed to support free education with 5% of our tax payers paying over 50% of total income tax.”

This thread received the most comments of all the posts made about the protest, possibly because of it showing the more aggressive side of the protest. *Grocott's Mail* and other members of the movement posted various times during the protest period to update members

of the community and to try evoking support. As seen in above thread, the community remained divided over whether they would support the protest or not.

The GFG grew significantly between 2013 and 2015 from its 2007 community noticeboard space to a space where people could ask help when they were in need and discuss serious issues of community concern.

2016 – 2019 – becoming the mass media of a small city

During 2016 the GFG started to become a heated debate space as tensions between students and local residents started to rise. It could be argued that the tension started in October 2015 during the student protests when many residents were against the student movement and criticised the students and the protest. Due to the increase in heated debates and growth in membership, two more Admins were appointed (Admins, Transcript 3: 2019): “[Admin 3] and [Admin 4] both joined the group early in 2014. I think [Admin 1] and I [Admin 2] asked them to be Admins in 2016 (they were both very active and helpful in the group).” (Admins, Transcript 3: 2019).

Moderation concerns raised again

The year was rife with discussions about the way the GFG was managed and how Admins were deleting posts and comments. One member, Member JF, felt the need for a more diverse set of Admins as all Admins were middle-class white people (as of writing, they still are). The post attracted members commenting on the racial issues in the city as well as the divide between students and residents. The posts were later deleted after the debate became heated – at least in the eyes of the Admins. Later on in response to the post, they posted that the people who were chosen to be Admins were picked for their track record of facilitating friendly, healthy debates and not because of their race (Admins: Screenshot 09/09/2016). The member shared in an interview with me a private message sent to Admins where she commented: “Unless there is outright hate speech, inciting violence, excessive advertising or illegal activity being posted- there is very little Admin intervention,” (Member JF, Transcript 1: 2019). This however is in contradiction with the Admins’ continuous reminders that the GFG

strives to be a community noticeboard only. The dispute was raised again as Member JF posted on the GFG again and offered a new group that they created as retaliation against the Admin's rules. This will be discussed in full in the thematic analysis in subdivision 4.2.3

In November, Admin posted a reminder again about the GFG rules as a community noticeboard space and that it cannot be used to 'name and shame' others and businesses and also cannot be used as a platform to discuss political issues (Admins, Screenshot: 14/09/2016):

"Hi, just a friendly reminder that naming and shaming will not be tolerated in this group. Bad-mouthing and complaining here serves no purpose and doesn't solve or achieve anything. It is akin to cyber bullying and defamation of character, which could ruin someone's reputation or business and for that reason it will not be allowed. If you have a problem with a person/company/business/institution, respectfully take it up with them, their managers or their head office directly (they often have their own Facebook pages for just that purpose) or complain/vent about it on your own personal Facebook page. In this group your post will be removed...We appreciate your cooperation. –Admin" (Admins, Screenshot: 25/11/2016)

The repetition of these rules and the statement that it is a 'community noticeboard' shows that members were still posting issues that evolved into heated debates and by 2016 still did not see the GFG as solely a 'community noticeboard'.

2017 – A shift in scale

An important milestone was reached in 2017, 10 years after the Group's creation, as the GFG hit the 10 000 member mark (Admins: transcript 3: 2019). The GFG showed a steady growth from 2007 and became a known community group on Facebook for Grahamstonians.

This was not the only important event that grabbed attention in 2017. This was the year "Shattercat" made his debut. In early 2017 the owner of a glass fixing company in Grahamstown found a stray cat wandering into the office on a regular basis and posted on the GFG that they decided to take him in. The first post about the cat received 162 comments

suggesting names for the cat. In the end they called him “Shattercat”. The owner (a member of the GFG) thereafter started posting “Shattercat’s comments” where he would take on the persona of the cat and comment on what he (the cat) did during the day. The posts receive many likes and comments as people enjoyed the comic relief on the GFG. This persona the member had taken on, demonstrates the possibilities that social media offers. You can take on any personality and say anything, even if it is ridiculous, in the social media space.

“Shattercat” still comments on the daily life in Grahamstown to this day and is still considered a popular frequent poster on the GFG. Pretending to be someone or something else can be a sign of loneliness offline (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003) – or it may just be a clever and endearing marketing ploy. Either way, the “Shattercat” persona has definitely been integrated into the community. The internet can provide a platform to make a person feel a sense of belonging and less like an outsider (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003).

Whereas the member behind “Shattercat” might feel more connected with the community, another member (Member MW) became an outcast through the GFG. This was the year that Member MW became invested in the GFG and made various attempts to gather citizens into activities of goodwill. In his first attempt, he tried to gather community members to remove abortion posters around the city. The conversation contained debates about the ethics of taking down the abortion posters as well as leading to the action of meeting to take them down. Other members decided to join in and get together to remove the posters. The event was essentially organised through this GFG, showing that post conversations could lead to action offline.

Member MW also created conflict in the Group and subsequently led to him creating his own group, which will be explored in the thematic analysis in the succeeding subdivision.

2018 – A public space for a debate about the essence of what this community is

Early July 2018 the government announced that Grahamstown will change its name to ‘Makhanda’ in the *Government Gazette*. The community took to the GFG to voice their concerns and it quickly became a space for a very intense debate as not all members agreed on the change. The debate was an important one for residents as the name change had been a

subject of much controversy in the city over the past few years. The debate became a frequent topic of discussion throughout the second half of 2018. There were seven posts made which ended in heated arguments about colonialism, politics and racism. These all went against what Admins deemed as appropriate use and the function of a ‘community noticeboard’ and yet these posts were not deleted or stopped. An example of one of these debates is the first of its sort about the name change on 04 July 2018. Here is the post and selected comments that followed:

POST:

Member 6: “So my hometown is now called Makhandia and not Grahamstown anymore. Why fix something that is not broken? Instead of renaming why not first fix the potholes, dirty drinking water and electricity?”

COMMENTS:

Member 7: “It isn’t called Makhandia – this is simply a gazetted proposal. People are reacting like it’s a done deal but there is a window to lodge objections ‘til end of July. And even then it may not be passed – so don’t worry you still live in Grahamstown.”

Member 7 shows an avoidance of the subject of colonialism, simply stating a fact and then not commenting again:

Member 8: “...because the guy who the town is named after, John Graham, murdered 20 000 people in what he described as a reign of terror, burnt crops and indiscriminately shot women and children at random. Fun guy.”

Member 8 shows a strong opinion throughout the thread, explaining the history behind the name Grahamstown and its colonial connotations. The member shows characteristics that I later in section two identify as a gung-ho respondent.

Member 9: “...There are different budget allocations for these things. Even when there was no money being spent on renaming processes service delivery

was still poor. So, even if the name remains the same there is no guarantee that service delivery will improve.”

Member 8: [in response to another comment] “since 1994, more than 8 out of 10 people who didn’t have access to electricity have it now. So actually, a huge effort has already gone in. The new name will have absolutely no impact on any department working on the infrastructure issues the city currently has. I’m so surprised to see people think that it’s either one or the other. Either we fix potholes and water or we change the name. What’s wrong with both? Tshwane has managed just fine. It’s been 25 years since democratization and these ridiculous arguments resisting change and holding onto the past are becoming tiresome, pedantic, and I would go so far as to say it’s covering something more sinister. It’s time to change. It’s less painful if you get with the program. It’s time to move forward and stop complaining. 80% of the population has access to something they never had for generations. They are the ones who matter now. They are all our responsibility.”

Another member responds with a strong political agenda against the current governing body, clearly bringing politics into the conversation:

Member 10: “How many people were and still are murdered under ANC rule, yet their names [do not] appear on buildings etc.”

Member 10: [response to Member 8] “money badly spent, for what, VOTES?”

Member 8: “[Member 10] LOL as much as I detest Jacob [Zuma, former President of South Africa] I’m pretty sure he didn’t whip out a gun and shoot women indiscriminately in the name of democracy. Criminal acts are criminal acts. If you think a politician who has a town named after him was a mass murderer please do not post your evidence on their town’s group Facebook page and passionately argue as you have done here. Evidence please. I’m not asking you to buy an ANC T-shirt and sing freedom songs at the next caucus.”

Member 10: “[Member 8] trust me I will never wear a ANC shirt. Go back in

history at the church street bombings, wimpy bombings, innocent children, mothers and fathers were killed. So please don't try and pick out some sections of history that suit you, we all tired of the Apartheid card, but that's all the ANC can talk about."

Member 8: "...There is nothing on this planet that can be argued successfully to keep this name. And nothing any of you do will stop the change. People in this country are fed up, because too many people are still trying to hold onto power and authority they illegally obtained...Are you on board, or are you staying at the racist station pointing fingers at the dishevelled train? Some of these arguments quickly became subtle colonial snide remarks – they don't work – I haven't stopped smiling all day..."

Member 10, strongly disagreeing with Member 8, decides to step away from the conversation rather than trying to deliberate over the issue.

Member 10: "[Member 8] to talk to you is the same as talking to a brick wall. I don't have time to talk to people who only see the bad in whites. Bye bye"

The conversation leads to a 'peacekeeper' stepping in and trying to defuse the tension:

Member 11: "Now this is a typical human response. Someone makes an innocent statement on how she feels at the moment, and the Grahamstown responds with their typical political and personal vomit. Chill people. This poor soul said nothing wrong. Goodness, don't you sometimes just say something out of disillusionment or frustration?"

Member 12: "then she should have recorded her concerns on her personal diary not a public platform."

Member 11: "life should be more than being so afraid to disagree without being victimised or fearful. Life should be considered, forgiving, spreading hope and love. If I see someone afraid or in a bad place, it encourages me to

be nice towards them. Life is too serious nowadays.” (Screenshot 04/07/2018).

Member 8 and Member 10 took the conversation in a political direction as mentions of the ANC, and the Apartheid government were made. Politics are on the list of inappropriate content in the Group Guidelines (Addendum A), however, the members were not banned and comments were not deleted by Admins. This suggests that the Admins became more relaxed since 2017 with their moderation of content, or they were responding to critiques against their moderation style: either way, this allowed for more controversial content to be discussed.

What is also interesting to note is that Member 8 decided to simply leave the conversation instead of continuing to engage. Social media allows users to make a quick exit from a conversation and later ‘catching up’ when they have ‘cooled down’. However, this exit could also signal to others that this member simply does not want to understand the other members’ viewpoint and no deliberation can successfully continue making it a useless venture as both parties stick to their own opinions without consideration for the other. This hinders the ideal of the public sphere as they do not reach a consensus of ideas and do not stand together against the state. The argument between Member 8 and 10 brings to life the words of Jones (1997: 30 in Papacharissi, 2002: 16): that the internet allows us to “shout more loudly, but whether our fellows listen...is questionable.”

An interesting observation that can be made from this thread is the racial tension and the history of the country that goes along with it. The majority of commenters on the side of changing the name to Makhanda were black – by far the majority population group in the city. The more opinionated group against the name change, were almost exclusively white middle-class – and male. The racial tensions on the GFG had been steadily growing as more of the poorer Black areas gained access to the Facebook Group and joined controversial discussions about issues which concerned Grahamstown East as well. The GFG that has been representative of predominantly white, middle-class people had expanded through the years as internet became more accessible and thus the GFG grew in representative demographics. The Admins however are still white, middle-aged women and thus cannot be fully representative of the GFG who now has a larger Black audience as it had when the GFG was created.

Standing together and reaching a milestone

Another issue of major concern was discussed at the end of the year when a new Municipal Manager (MM) was introduced to the city. This came after the citizens protested against poor municipal management and service delivery. The protest gained traction through posts containing information about the gathering times and places being posted on the GFG. There were also photos and videos posted on the GFG to update everyone else on how the protest was going.

The newly appointed MM raised questions from the GFG members and a sudden ‘coming together’ of the community could be seen. Whereas the name change debate fragmented the Group between July and October, the poor service delivery and municipal mismanagement seemed to have brought everyone closer again by end of November. The members started showing a clear ‘us vs. them’ mentality as they started teaming up to combat the decay of Grahamstown. One post called for the dissolving of the municipal council (Screenshot: 28/11/2018_1) and another for the Auditor General Report so that community members could see where taxpayers money was going (Screenshot: 28/11/2018_2). One member summarises the cohesion of the Group perfectly in response to the latter post: “We will accept nothing less. Heed our call. We are united!” (Member 13, Screenshot: 28/11/2018_2).

The GFG reached 20 000 members on 12 October 2018, growing by 10 000 members in less than two years. This is a significant jump as it took them 10 years to get to the first 10 000 members. This growth could be because of the rising popularity of Facebook, the growing accessibility of the internet as well as data prices becoming cheaper. Data prices have steadily declined by 2018 as consumers have called for lower prices from cellular companies (Gilbert, 2018). The protest against data prices which made its rounds on Twitter, #DataMustFall, influenced telecommunications companies as they had to answer to the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) to justify why prices were so high. The government considered regulating internet prices to help bring costs down and aid in getting more people connected (Reuters, 2018). This lowering of data costs could be an influence in the reach of the GFG as more people in Grahamstown were able to access the internet as the year went on.

2019 – Possibilities in an Election year

The study touches briefly on January 2019. In this month the Group grew at a rapid speed as it went from 21 000 at the start of January to 22 600 by the end. The GFG was filled with activity as issues of concern in the city were growing. In this short time frame, GFG members discussed water shortages, a refuse removal strike, and had a major falling out about racism. Tensions were on the rise as the city struggled with municipal service delivery, politics – as the upcoming presidential elections draw closer – and issues of racism as the effects of Apartheid still divide the city even after 25 years of democracy.

At the time of writing, Grahamstown was undergoing a water shortage due to a lack of sufficient rainfall, failing infrastructure, and a long history of poor planning by the municipality. The community posted updates about the water shortage throughout January. Posts varied from updates about areas that were experiencing water outages to tips on how to save water and posts lashing out at the municipality's mismanagement of the crisis. Once again, municipal mismanagement seems to bring townspeople together during GFG discussions about the service delivery failures and surrounding issues.

Another problem caused by the municipality during January was a strike by refuse removal workers. They demanded that the municipality provide standard protective gear for each worker. The strike meant the streets of Grahamstown were strewn with garbage as the refuse removal workers halted all removals for the duration of the strike. The members on the GFG posted several times a week about the situation and it subsequently led to a group of community members going through streets to pick up rubbish. The GFG was a space to call for action from other members as some requested that others refrain from throwing their rubbish in the streets or to illegally dump it and add to the pollution:

“We are in a serious predicament...our city is becoming worse every day, it's not even funny. There's piles of rubbish in every corner of the street...I just don't understand why people [leave] their refuse knowing the situation with our municipal workers...I just don't know.” (Member 14, Screenshot: 31/01/2019).

This post received 13 comments, all in support of the poster – and this was only one of the many posts made over the period the protest took place. The members once again came

together to stand against the municipality mismanagement and call on others to take care of the city.

A community divided?

This year has not been all positive as the Group battled with other more controversial issues which divided them again. Once again the topic of discourse is racism and politics which seem to have a particular relevance as 2019 is the presidential election year. The public sphere fundamentally needs citizens to interact on issues of concern (Calhoun, 2002), and racism is one of the important issues Grahamstown residents need to address. The GFG offers a space for them to discuss racism and similar equally important issues:

“...we all know that we do also have discussions on this page, and that it is an excellent platform for learning to understand each other. I agree that we should not push or slate particular political parties on this page, but we can’t escape the fact that racism, sexism, classism, etc. are very much a reality in our little town, as in SA. And this ‘Grahamstown’ page is such a good platform to have these important conversations...” (Member 2: Screenshot 11/01/2019).

Following this post thread, someone posted on 10 January asking why racism has become such a major concern on the GFG and racist remarks have started appearing in posts. Another member commented, shedding light on the importance of issues (in this instance racism) in South Africa being discussed in the group: “Grahamstown is in South Africa...matters happening in our country affect us all...we cannot run away from the fact that racism is alive even in Grahamstown, even on this group.” (Member 3: Screenshot 11/01/2019)

Another post where members debated a subject that supposedly should have been deleted by Admins, was of clear political nature. A thread included different opinions, for example:

Member 4: “...I personally believe that I find no party with true betterment [ANC]...DA (countless racism), EFF (don’t get me started)
NB I am not an ANC member I think they have failed the nation but I don’t believe in removing without a better substitute... If we must change which is vital... Change to who?” (*sic*)

Member 5: "...it's a tough situation, I don't think DA is perfect. But they have proven themselves to run better municipalities in the Western Cape (my opinion is based as service delivery statistics) But I would love to see more options. We know that [the] ANC municipality is terrible. I think it's worth giving someone else a shot. It really makes me sad seeing people of Grahamstown suffer." (*sic*)

A debate with approximately 75 comments (27 main comments, 48 replies on main comments) arose from the post showing the interest in the community to discuss the topic. The comments were not switched off and the post had not been deleted (at the time of the study). On this post, members were still enjoying their right to deliberate freely as Admins had not restricted any parts of the post yet, allowing some debates to still happen. Members commenting on this particular post also started encouraging action against the municipality by voting in the upcoming elections. Deliberations that lead to actions are one of the important principles of the public sphere (Bruns & Highfield, 2016) and the Group fulfils this by various posts leading to action 'offline' in the community.

4.1.3 Thematic Analysis

Online discussions vs real world actions

Various protests also gained traction after posts had been made about them. As mentioned above in 2012-2013's periodic analysis, the Rhodes University community planned a protest against the water outages in Grahamstown at the time. The details of the protest were shared with the community on the Grahamstown Group, giving community members a chance to join university students and staff in the protest. A large number of people ended up joining the protest and it made it onto a national news level. Another protest was planned in late 2018 against the mismanagement of the municipality. A call for participants was posted on the GFG and attracted members to attend the picket in front of City Hall where a memorandum was handed over to the Municipal Manager. Progress of the protest – including photos and videos – were posted on the GFG for those who were unable to attend. This protest was as a result of all the woes expressed throughout the year on the GFG about mismanagement of the municipality.

Some positive ‘real world’ outcomes have also been visible. In October 2018 a heatwave struck Grahamstown at the same time as major water outages (as explained above in the periodisation of 2018). Members came together on the GFG to call for action and members started handing out water to those who did not have:

Post 1 (Member 20, Screenshot: 29/10/2018):

“Water just arrived. Opposite Fingo liquor store. Bring your containers.”

Post 2 (Member 20, Screenshot: 01/11/2018):

“WATER WARRIORS – Where around town is water still needed? We’ll bring.”

Some members responded to this post offering their services:

Member 21: “Where can one drop off 5l containers of water?”

Member 22: “I’ll be there to help again just after 12. Going to try bring extra hands to help too”

Member 23: “We are on our way with our bakkie from Riebeeck East, be there after 9 just starting our day up here. I have 2 x 220 Lt drums.”

Many other members followed Members 21, 22 and 23’s example and offered their help. The water aid went on for a week and was completely coordinated through the ‘Grahamstown’ group. This was an important time of social cohesion in Grahamstown, where the community got together offline due to the coordination online. However, fragmentations also frequently happen on the GFG such as with the splits in the GFG.

Splitting the ‘Grahamstown’ Group

During 2016 the GFG underwent a disagreement with Member JF where she questioned the role of the Admins and the fact that she felt they did not create an open space for all. Member JF created a new group and portrayed it as a space where everyone can participate without racial, political or socio-economic boundaries. This new group, ‘This is Grahamstown’ was

created with the aim to provide an open space to all members to raise issues for debate without any interference or censorship from the Admin. This could be seen as an attempt to create a more liberating ‘public sphericule’ with less interference and more elements of an ideal public sphere. This shows that when a member disagrees, instead of trying to understand others’ viewpoints they can simply create their own group where they can voice their concerns.

‘This is Grahamstown’ however did not gain any traction and closed down a year later, for a lack of growth, interaction and an Admin to manage it. Only a few members initially joined the new group but after a year the interactions start to slowly disintegrate. The main group continued to be the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group. The split in the GFG was the first major break that happened between the members because of differing opinions about an important issue in South Africa. Another split in the GFG happened a year later.

In 2017, Member MW created a conflict when posted about his experience while going out one night, and criticised the way female students acted while out. He proceeded to say that some (with reference to a specific female student he saw at a bar) were “asking to get raped” by the way they dressed and how reckless they were with drinking. The post received backlash from the student community especially, as they felt that they were being judged and also that he was promoting rape culture by blaming the victim and shaming women. The post was later deleted by Admin due to all the comments and heated debate it attracted. The debate caused so much controversy that the student newspaper *The Oppidan Press*, wrote an article on Member MW (Fish, 2017). The article questioned Member MW’s reputation as a ‘good Samaritan’ in Grahamstown and especially on the ‘Grahamstown’ group commenting: “Communities do not require saving by a lone wolf with a heart of gold, they need a targeted and constructive engagement that has sustainable long-term effects,” (Fish, 2017: 3).

Member MW was also banned from the ‘Grahamstown’ group after numerous posts about his daily activities and for attracting heated discourse with many of his posts. It did not take long until those who stood behind him requested the Admins to add him back to the group, which they did. One response to disagreements with the rest of the GFG is starting your own GFG and the other is to make peace: in this case another group was formed again. Member MW broke away, creating ‘Grahamstown: The Magic’ which aimed at posting only the positive

things about the city and mostly ended up hosting his own posts about the ‘good Samaritan’ tasks he did around Grahamstown.

This split in the GFG was the second of its sort in a year. During 2016 and 2017 there was an obvious fragmentation in the GFG with many sides. One key strand was the more liberal, activist side which mostly consisted of students and academics and the other was the conservative, white, middle-class residents of Grahamstown. There had been a gradual increase in tension between the two sides between 2015 and 2017. However, even with the tension, the new groups could not gain the same traction with membership in comparison to the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group. An interviewee noted that the reason she did not join was because she simply did not want numerous similar posts and explained what she thought other members experience:

“...most people will stick with the page that has the largest number of members. I have seen people form their own groups because of something that was posted on the Grahamstown FB page, and in a few months those new pages are dormant and the parties are on the original page again. This could be because people are:

1. Apathetic;
2. Stuck in their comfort zone;
3. Not interested in growing a new page;
4. Not interested in reading through duplicate postings on multiple pages;
5. Happy to stick with the page that has the most visibility.” (Member LG, Transcript 5: 2018)

The group, ‘Grahamstown: The Magic’ only lasted a year before it started dying down and eventually closed. The creator, Member MW, started a webpage with the same title – however, this webpage was also closed. Other groups that try to separate from the GFG group never reach the same levels of activity, as they never have the same reach. Users tend to go where there are the most members in a herding effect (Hooper & Kalidas, 2012). Herding behaviour describes how people group together and tend to follow the majority (Hooper & Kalidas, 2012). It involves decision-making – if the majority of people agree on a certain decision, the theory suggests that other people will tend to follow that decision implying that a consensus is equivalent to the correct decision (Hooper & Kalidas, 2012). On social media

it happens on Pages and Groups as people will mostly join the ones with the largest membership numbers. The ‘Grahamstown’ Group contains the largest number of members and thus attracts the most people – and indeed, it makes sense when the aim is to talk to fellow community members and discuss issues of mutual concern.

Multiple groups can also be identified in other similar cities or towns. Cradock, a smaller Eastern Cape town approximately 174km from Grahamstown, has several different Facebook groups for the community to join. The groups are so popular that they may have played a small role in century-old *Cradock Courant* newspaper closing down in 2017 due to readership plummeting and accompanying financial woes (Somersetbudget, 2017). The community now turns to social media for news and interactions with other town’s folk. The town has a number of groups on Facebook which range from job-seeker groups and classifieds to news groups. The most popular of the groups seem to be the ‘Cradock Times’ which describes itself as “the ears and eyes of Cradock” (About: Cradock Times, 2019). The group was created six years ago in 2012 and now has over 6 100 members, averaging in about two posts per day, (About: Cradock Times, 2019) making it the biggest one of its sort in Cradock.

Even though the ‘Cradock Times’ group has the most members out of all the groups from that area, it is still far smaller than the GFG. This could be because Grahamstown has more internet access due to the university taking up a large size of the city. Another reason could be that the ‘Grahamstown’ group started much earlier – about five years before the ‘Cradock Times’. This gives the GFG a head start and more time for members to have joined over the years. The third possibility could be that Cradock does not have a simpler group with a more general description for example just ‘Cradock’ where people can discuss any subject. There are so many different small groups of interest that users are spread all over across the platforms making it a more dispersed set-up. In the case of Cradock, smaller groups are working but it is still notable that one group has grown much bigger than the others as the ‘Cradock Times’ might be showing elements of herding behaviour.

The ‘Grahamstown’ group has proven to be a very successful group with its level of activity and membership numbers, challenging the two sub-groups that formed. The splits from GFG both happened after problems in Grahamstown were brought to the foreground. These problems were not always in line with what was allowed according to the Group Guidelines

(Addendum A). Despite the idea of the Admins keeping the GFG a community noticeboard, throughout the year's members continued to bring up issues that were important to the community. It thus contains deliberations of citizen concerns and actions leading from some of them – all elements of the public sphere (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). In the following section the study will look at the interviews and discussion thereof, divided into two themes: the public sphere and social cohesion.

From service delivery to politics

Grahamstown has had a long history of municipal mismanagement and a lack of service delivery, recently becoming seemingly worse. The corruption in the state and inadequacy of leadership in the municipality creates a variety of issues in the city. Problems of the municipality service delivery often overlap with discourses about the competence of the ANC:

“Majority of the people are disagreeing and still don't see solutions even though there's a newly elected mayor he hasn't addressed anything thus far. But then what actions can be taken if we as people of the city feel we have been taken for a ride. And we had enough because all this is plain nonsense the ANC is not taking us serious! We are the laughing stock with our troubles. Street lights have been out since last year tar is not being maintained water bursts everywhere blocked drains over flowing. And the people without proper housing still have to suffocate in this tremendous heat no water no sanitation. This isn't the City I grew up in. Can't be right.” (Member 24, Screenshot: 23/01/2019).

Another post started off with a service delivery and then the comments evolved into a discussion about politics:

Member 25: “This granny is forced to live with sewage due to Makana Local Municipality lack of care and compassion.”

Member 26: "...the Makana Municipality is run by the ANC. Whenever they canvas for votes, they promise people service delivery and free this and that. The two [municipality and the ANC] cannot be separate I am sorry." (Screenshot 12/11/2018).

Some posts start as discussions about other subjects but have comments which lead to discussions of racism:

Member 27 [post]: "Jokes aside today. How can SPCA reprimand Cow slaughtering and our beliefs when on the other side there is trophy hunting. Week in out week out animals are killed via the partnership between games reserves and trophy shops.

Member 28 [comment]: "Referring specifically to the Clifton Bay [where a sheep was slaughtered in public] incident: many people commenting on the posts across various pages have taken the ritualistic slaughter as a deliberate means of scoring political points and as a slap in the face to the white citizens in South Africa, who they seem to think will take most offense. Whatever the reasoning behind the event and the aftermath, it shows that many South Africans have confused "racism" with "intolerance" to throw at those who do not hold the same views. For myself, I was appalled at what was done in such a public place, because of the politics which seemed to be behind it."

Member 28: "Looking at the comments, racism will never end, as black people we are just fooling ourselves, whites will always believe that they are above us," (Screenshot: 29/12/2018).

Critique has been implicit in most conversations on the GFG, even when they started off as bland discussions about municipal service delivery they can become inflamed and erupt into debates over racism and politics which the Admins have to choose whether they will censor or allow. Since the Group's induction it has hosted many interesting debates which brought the GFG together but at times tore it apart. Behaviours of members on the group play an important role in how conversations develop and the direction they take. Behaviourism of members is thus an important meso-theory to apply to the study.

Social media behaviours, the Public Sphere and Social Cohesion

4.2 SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIOURS, SELF-DISCLOSURE AND TYPE OF USERS

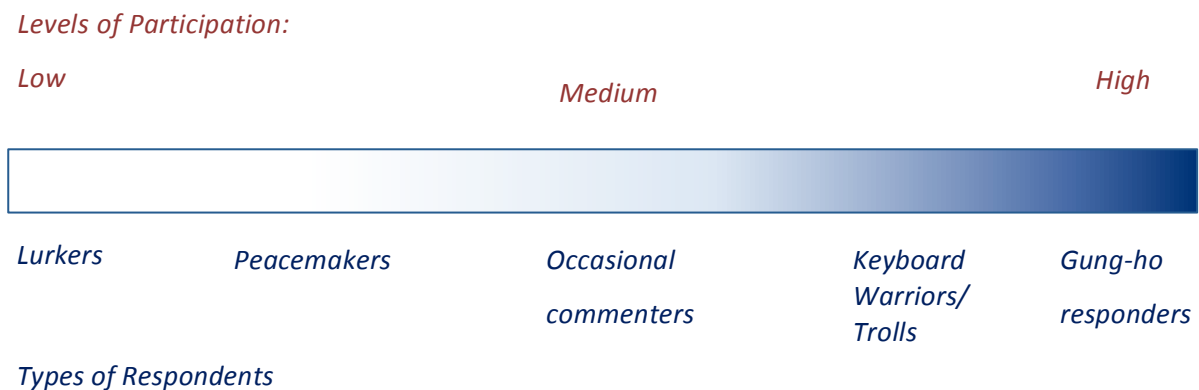
Social networking sites such as Facebook attract different people from different backgrounds to congregate in one space. Users have to offer some kind of self-disclosure online in order to be known and accepted in the group and then to share their opinions with other people (Huang, 2016). Self-disclosure forms a key part of the maintaining of relationships online (Huang, 2016; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014) as people find each other more relatable when they share opinions. The concept of self-disclosure means to share a message of information about yourself to someone else (Deriega, 1984 in Huang, 2016). The positive outcomes of self-disclosure are higher confidence and self-esteem as well as a better social relationship with others (Huang, 2016). As a social media network, Facebook's core function is to connect people and to give them the opportunity to self-disclose in order to build social relationships (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). Facebook groups are part of the idea of coming together on a social network to connect socially.

When the 'Grahamstown' Facebook group members start posting issues of concern to them, they start self-disclosing. If nobody interacts with the post the person might feel excluded or disconnected from the GFG. However, when members do start interacting it could be encouraging social connection between the person who posted and the rest of the GFG. It does not always have a positive social effect as suggested by Huang (2014). Members at times can become very aggressive about their opinions within the GFG which might lead to feelings of exclusion and neglect as with Member MW (transcript 6, 2018). This person felt

that members were starting to form “cliques” and making him feel like an outsider (Member MW, transcript 6, 2018). It led to him leaving the GFG in January 2019. These situations could be hindering the ‘sense of belongingness’ and social cohesion in the GFG, as discussed in the later section.

From my content analysis and from the interviews, and drawing on other studies and recent theoretical contributions, I have concluded that different people have different behavioural patterns on the GFG. I have identified five different behavioural types on social media groups which are different to that of the usual Facebook profile poster, as visible on the GFG: lurkers, keyboard warriors (including ‘trolling’), ‘Gung-ho’ responders, peacemakers and the occasional commenter. The typology for these group-commenters are necessary as they give insight into the behaviourism of the GFG and why the conversations happened the way they did (especially during heated debates). Future research into groups can benefit from a custom typology of Facebook groups in order to understand trends and psychological aspects which affect discourse between members.

These five concepts can be rated on different degrees of interaction on the Group:



Graph 1: Five types of respondents and their level of participation

Lurkers

‘Lurking’ is not a new concept as it is frequently used to describe those users on the internet who only observe other people’s activity without getting involved (Barnes, 2018). Lurkers might not be collecting information but they might act on the information at a later stage as

Hampton (2016 in Barnes, 2018) notes. Lurkers however, play an important role in the social media space as ‘listeners’ of those who do interact and comment or ‘like’ status updates. If there were no listeners, those who comment would not see the need to comment or update their status (Crawford, 2009 in Barnes, 2018), or in this case post in the Group.

I have identified that many GFG members must fall into the lurker characterisation, and some interviewees showed an interest in topics that are discussed but did not want to interact with posts in the fear of becoming part of the cross-fire or just a lack of interest in interacting with other members. For example Member AC (Transcript 2: 2018) says, “I generally prefer to stand back and observe – I’m aware that the group has a large audience and I don’t want to get into contentious arguments with people on Facebook.”

Not every one of the 22 000+ members have posted or commented on posts making it a feasible theory that there is a considerably large number of members who are just lurking on the online space. Even though these members are not actively taking part in the GFG discussions, they are still forming a part of the audience that posts and comments reach, making them a valuable part of the GFG (Barnes, 2018). Some lurkers start commenting or posting occasionally either because they start getting comfortable with the GFG or they have a non-opinionated post about a classifieds-type item or similar post. This is when the lurker grows into an occasional commenter.

Occasional commenters

Occasional commenters are what I identified as members who only post on the Group on very few occasions. This could be once to around five times a year, but not on a weekly or monthly basis like some more vocal members.

These members are lurking for the majority of the time but tend to sporadically post or comment when a topic of interest arises or they gain the confidence to join a conversation. When they post on their own, they usually share specific, intentional content such as advertisements or recommendations. One member, I noticed, only posts when she has a water outage and asks if there is more information about the outages. Another posted only when they had advertisements from their business to share. Many other similar members can be found on the GFG following the same trend.

Peacemakers

Some members only comment during heated debates to try and ‘keep the peace’ and bring the Group back together. They tend to post only a few comments as they try avoiding too much conflict. Their posts usually try to defuse the tension on a post thread. During a 2018 discussion about the Grahamstown name change, one member tried to calm the heated debate as commenters started to argue about colonialism and racism in the comment section:

“Now this is a typical human response. Someone makes an innocent statement on how she feels at the moment, and the Grahamstown responds with their typical political and personal vomit. Chill people. This poor soul said nothing wrong. Goodness, don’t you sometimes just say something out of disillusionment or frustration?”

[...] “life should be more than being so afraid to disagree without being victimised or fearful. Life should be considered, forgiving, spreading hope and love. If I see someone afraid or in a bad place, it encourages me to be nice towards them. Life is too serious nowadays.” (Member 11: Screenshot 04/07/2018).

The members do not always succeed in keeping the Group calm as debates just keep going on and keep receiving more conflicting views. Peacemakers operate on the view of ‘can’t we all just get along’. Those who are keyboard warriors or Gung-ho responders will retaliate against this idea as their goal is to enforce their views, even if this means keeping conflict alive indefinitely.

Keyboard Warriors and Trolls

‘Keyboard warriors’ is also an existing term applicable to commenters on Facebook groups. A keyboard warrior is a person who only becomes vocal on issues online whereas they would normally be calm or quiet in face-to-face conflicts offline (Mali, 2015). These ‘warriors’ of the online space ‘fight’ for what they believe in, and often turn the conversation more controversial and ‘aggressive’ as they reinforce their positions. They often say things without

taking into account the consequences and do not display the same attitudes offline as in face-to-face situations (Mali, 2015).

Another group, which posts as often as the Keyboard Warriors but should not be conflated with them, is the Trolls. The troll engages with the express purpose of hurting and teasing other conversation participants, with little emotional connection to the issue at hand (Cheng, et. al., 2017). He or she focuses on his one goal and does not stray from the goal. This goal is to cause chaos and harm, just for his or her own enjoyment (Rafferty, 2011). As Mali (2015: 36) puts it:

“Trolls are like the Joker villain, operating as ‘agents of chaos on the internet’, the study said. They are ‘Online sadists’ and are insatiably nasty. There is no reasoning with them. The more havoc they sow, getting more people to argue with them, the happier they are.” Trolls usually lure their targets into a conversation. Trolling is deemed to be antisocial behaviour and can prove to be disruptive of constructive deliberations in the online space (Cheng, et. al., 2017).

Trolls enjoy the fact that people can get riled up by conversations online and find it an entertainment to create more debates. For example, a person who was later found to have a very new profile and little information available on them – pointing towards a fake profile – posted on the GFG asking when the Group will change its name to Makhanda – an issue that had been discussed numerous time before. Everyone on the GFG knows that this has been a major subject of discourse and in the end some people did try call the person out as a troll. Majority of the more gung-ho respondents did not let that stop them and kept arguing. The post succeeded in its ultimate goal: to get commenters to argue with each other and aggravate people without being too involved so the ‘warrior’ can sit back and relaxingly watch the war go down.

Trolls clearly take up a lot of the Admins’ time, as they post yearly reiterating ‘no trolling on the Group’ (Group Guidelines, 2018). Trolling can be a form of cyberbullying and cybercrime (Mali, 2015) and thus it is important to keep track of the trolling activities on the GFG to make sure they do not escalate and become more fragmenting to the community. Trolling is mostly aimed at those members who are quick to respond and get emotional about a subject – the Keyboard Warriors especially. Gung-ho respondents become easy targets for

trolling as they are the most active commenters with the most changes of retaliation and reaction on the troll post.

Gung-ho respondents

Gung-ho respondents are different from trolls and keyboard warriors by being more serious and emotionally invested in what they post. Unlike trolls, they post because they have a genuine need to get involve and fight for their opinion to be heard whereas a troll only post to get unnecessary reactions as a joke. Unlike keyboard warriors, they often employ dirty tactics. Any post which goes against their own viewpoint, they will get involved in and aggressively address using flaming techniques.

Flaming is defined as recurrent hostile messaging (Allison, 2018) which I have identified as a frequently used tactic by Gung-ho respondents. It is usually directed to outsiders who threaten the group's cohesion. In most cases on the Group it is not about the outsiders of the 'Grahamstown' group in particular but rather those who are outside of the largely accepted positions and opinions that form within the GFG. For example each time they start discussing the name change, groups of thought are shaped and come together to point out their views. In this situation, it becomes a perfect platform for Gung-ho respondents to take to the floor and start employing flaming tactics. The Gung-ho becomes a sniper where his words are the bullet and he sets aim by identifying a comment in a post that goes against what he sees as his group of people and starts shooting accusations, personal insults, and aggressive comments.

These hostile comments can in the end lead to something more serious such as cyber harassment (Barnes, 2018). On the 'Grahamstown' group one member ended up threatening Admins in private messages when his view was questioned on one thread and his comments were deleted by Admins. After he started threatening the Admins they banned him from the Group. He was so angry and adamant to be back on the Group to share his views that he created a fake profile to get back on the Group. The Admins found out and he was once again banned in January 2019. In the most extreme version of the Gung-ho respondent, they can become obsessed with attacking any others who disagree with his opinions.

These behaviours form an insight into the type of commenters that could be expected in such Facebook Groups.

4.3 SOCIAL COHESION vs FRAGMENTATION IN THE GROUP

As discussed previously, the public sphere is a space for people to gather and discuss subjects of mutual concern (Papacharissi, 2009). This could lead to the public feeling a sense of belonging and social cohesion as they all connect with a mutual issue at heart:

“I think the group allows us to identify issues which affect us all whether we are from the wealthier or poorer areas. These commonalities mean we feel socially cohesive on some levels. For example we all moan about service delivery and identify the ‘common enemy’ as ‘THE MUNICIPALITY’, or ‘THE ANC’ and we bemoan our common victimhood and we develop means of dealing with it (organise protest, petitions, etc.),” (Member AC: transcript 1).

This reflects Friedkin’s (2004: 410) view that groups can be cohesive when group-level attitudes reciprocally link individuals. This means that if group members have something in common then individuals will feel a sense of belonging and the group can be cohesive.

Not everyone in the GFG needs to contribute in the same ways as there can be multiple dimensions to social cohesion (Friedkin, 2004). Each individual can contribute to cohesion on a different level as the Group does not have to conform to a single manner of staying a cohered community (Friedkin, 2004). It could be argued that each group identifying with each other, within the ‘Grahamstown’ group, is a smaller socially cohesive group. For example, the isiXhosa speakers could feel left out due to their language barrier to the larger conversations happening in English, but they could feel a sense of belonging in the group and connection with people who speak isiXhosa on the group. Often when there are posts in isiXhosa, it receives many responses in the same language with many comments, usually all positive towards the poster. Therefore, there is some kind of social cohesion in these smaller groups like the language groups and those who take the same sides in the comment sections.

One isiXhosa speaking interviewee accentuates the importance of the group and how it leads to action, fulfilling the public sphere role and becoming cohesive to the community:

“...it unites the community. Community members tend to stand together when there are burning issues such as lack of services and township struggles. Without the group people who are willing and available to assist would probably not know when they are needed and the opportunity would pass them,” (Member PM: transcript 8).

A sense of social cohesion and belonging is clearly only felt by some members, as interviewees bring to light times that they felt the Group did not contribute to a sense of belonging:

“I think that most of the people on the group are well-intentioned, but they still post some things that make me (and others) really uncomfortable. Whenever politics of any kind are involved, I would rather stand by and not say anything for the fear of being lambasted by those who would not necessarily agree with me. As such, I would say that even though there have been instances where the group contributes to social cohesion, it mostly separates [social classes],” (Member ES: transcript 13).

“...it can also be fragmenting when certain issues are put out there. (eg. the traditional slaughter of a sheep at Clifton. I think that debate was raw, ugly and unsophisticated with everyone taking refuge in absurd racist stereotyping. It was awful and left many feeling alienated and angry.) Another example was the plea to change the name of the group to Makhandu. It was polarising and led to comments like “if you don’t like it leave”...which was unhelpful and alienating.” (Member AC, transcript 1)

The latter comment, “if you don’t like it then leave” is a frequently used one which is an easy way for members to push away opinions that they do not agree with. This creates a large divide in the GFG and has sometimes led to some Group members leaving and creating their own Groups. One such person, member MW (transcript 6), decided to leave the GFG for a final time after he had another fall out with the Admins of the GFG in December 2018:

“I feel like an outsider who is treated as such, regardless of my actions... The split in the group is based on race (white people have more say and get more

help than any other race), social standing (business owners seem to have more say about who and what can be posted), and cliques (people will oppose, insult and join together when attacking simply because they're sticking up for their friends regardless of subject matter)..." (Member MW: transcript 6).

The disgruntled former member shows clear signs of feeling alienated in the community due to the GFG's behaviour, showing that social media can at times work against social cohesion and a sense of belonging. Another respondent also feel negative about the sense of belonging created online, bringing into question the sense of community that may be created online:

"I think social media gives a false sense of community. Most of the time opinions and views expressed on the platform are not taken seriously by those who do not already share those views and they never lead to much real world change (long term or systematic anyway)," (member SP: transcript 11).

Social media groups still poses many questions as to whether they can create a sense of belonging. With the right combination of online and offline actions, some participants feel that it could be achieved. Some members feel that members of the GFG still have to be active 'offline' in a community to be cohesive:

"It [the Group] gives one a sense of 'belonging' when you identify commonalities in your experiences but I believe this a false sense if you are not actively involved in some way in your community. To some extent one becomes an observer rather than an activist," (Member AC: transcript 1).

A minor detail that I observed which could give insight to the sense of belonging in the GFG was during the interviews when majority of the participants used the word "we" and "us" while talking about the Group. This could point towards a feeling of 'belongingness' and personal connection. Notably, the member who felt alienated and removed himself from the GFG, member MW (transcript 6), used "them" when he described the GFG members and their conversations, indicating a level of disconnect from the GFG. The usage of words like "we" in many interviews show that the members do feel some sense of belonging or a kind of connection to each other in the GFG.

Member LG (transcript 5) accentuates the importance of the individuals who partake on the GFG in social cohesion:

“It is the people on such groups who contribute to social cohesion or fragmentation, not the group itself. We all, myself included, need to be less quick to take offense and try to take into account the other points of view. We need to try educating each other, not pulling each other down.”

This comment shows the value that members place in learning from one another and changing attitudes to work towards a cohesive community. The GFG communicates over the internet and becomes a ‘networked public’.

4.4 A PUBLIC SPHERICULE?

The GFG has hosted many discussions on issues regarding municipality service delivery, politics, racism, animal rights, the name change of the city, and so forth. For example the name change debate became a major concern in July 2018 when the government announced that Grahamstown’s name has changed to Makhanda. The community took to the Facebook Group to voice concerns: “So my hometown is now called Makhanda and not Grahamstown anymore. Why fix something that is not broken? Instead of renaming why not first fix the potholes, dirty drinking water and electricity?” (Member 6: Screenshot 04/07/2018).

The post received 35 comments, turning into a debate over the name change and municipal service delivery. The debate quickly evolved into a discussion about politics in the country showing that there is a desire to discuss political topics on the GFG: “Make sure you vote for someone else in 2019 ok? No good saying they [the ANC] is useless if you don’t vote.” (Member 7: Screenshot 04/07/2018). Six such debates about the name change were recorded during the time I spent observing. Each debate turned into a discussion about politics and racism without the Admins turning off comments or shutting down the post. The need for these conversations is obviously high in the GFG as members keep bringing up topics like the name change and swaying it in a political or socio-economical direction.

A crucial point of the public sphere is the opportunity it provides for discussions about governmental issues (Papacharissi, 2009). Some interviewees felt that the most important topics to be discussed on the GFG should be political and socio-economic ones:

“...they are crucial right now when we are going further and further backward with regards to service delivery and attention to our poor, and the municipal management and the ANC REC seems to have a “fuck you” attitude to the whole situation,” (Member LG: transcript 5: 2018).

The municipal and government concerns are discussed on a weekly basis with issues surrounding service delivery coming up frequently. This is most likely due to Grahamstown’s crumbling infrastructure, weak service delivery and mismanagement of the municipality being a concern to most of those active on the GFG.

The tendency of the members to debate issues of concern freely, reflects the notion that the public sphere facilitates rational discourse working towards the ‘common good’ without any interference from political or commercial entities (Papacharissi, 2009). One of the members reiterated the fact that political entities were not involved in the discussions and that the conversations should be fairly balanced between socio-economic issues and classifieds (such as advertisements and general notices):

“[there should be] ...a good balance of all matters relating to the city and its inhabitants. Like in all things, balance is essential. And politics should definitely not be high on the agenda. Social-economic issues yes, if politics is left out of it. This Group has been excellent in getting people to help each other, without getting politics involved. I mean, they are not even visible, are they?” (Member RK: transcript 9: 2018).

Some members feel that the governing body should be more involved by making comments on the GFG when complaints are posted: “I think the municipality should have people who respond to questions on the group, being open and transparent” (Member RK: transcript 9). A

key goal of the public sphere is decision-making and hopefully even action (Papacharissi, 2009) although this often does not happen. Members have united to follow through with deliberations made on the GFG and turn it into action, as an interviewee points out:

“Lately I saw how members used the group to mobilise people to help those in the townships with access to water during a prolonged municipal water cut. It was cheering to see how the group provided a forum for townspeople to come together to help their community. The same is true of the protests against the municipality’s mismanagement – I was happy to see that these protests spanned the town’s demographics and a lot of the organising and marketing of these was done via the Grahamstown group,” (Member AT: transcript 2).

Reaching a decision and leading to action as a united group is not always possible (Papacharissi, 2009). The GFG does not always agree on subjects and thus a consensus is not always reached. The public sphere should be a space of deliberation and therefore the value of the public sphere lie in the space it creates for people to come together to discuss subjects of mutual concern (Papacharissi, 2009). When asked what members deemed most important to discuss, the majority of the interviewees wanted members to be free to drive the discussion to any issue of mutual community concern: “People should be allowed to discuss or post whatever they feel is important to them, otherwise it is no longer a community group,” (Member LG: transcript 5, 2018). This is in line with the idea that the public sphere is ideally about the public debating freely about concerns that they consider necessary (Papacharissi, 2009). The GFG also provides a space for people to voice their concerns when they do not have the opportunity to do so offline because most people are ‘braver’ when online than face-to-face (Farrell, et. al.: 2014) as Member SP (transcript 11: 2018) explains:

“I don’t know how honest people are at the best of times on social media so it is a good place to raise some issues and awareness about the opinions people hold but I am not sure it should take the place of in person public dialogue spaces...but there aren’t many opportunities for those where people come in such great numbers”

The Group is able to provide a space for many of the Grahamstown community to gather and communicate. However, the GFG is not representing the whole of Grahamstown's community. The issue of accessibility is still a major concern because not everyone in the community has internet access. The majority of interviewees agreed that the GFG is not fairly represented due to internet access being a problem in the poorer areas: "...many of our poorer citizens do not have smartphones therefore are not able to access FB [Facebook] and the internet as easily as others," (Member LG: transcript 5).

Internet accessibility in poverty-stricken communities is of major concern in ICT and social media research, and this is reflected in my interviews. As one states: "our concerned citizens in the location do not use social media or have access to internet..." (Member AM: transcript 3). It means that many voices are neglected on the internet – and 12 out of 14 interviewees agreed that accessibility is the biggest reason the GFG is not fairly representative of the Grahamstown community. With an estimated 26% of adults in Grahamstown / Makhanda community on the GFG – still a fairly large number compared to other similar groups – it does not account for a further 74% of the population. Data costs are getting lower, enabling more people to join the Group. However with most mobile networks offering 1GB for around R150 (Mckane, 2019) we are still a long way off the international standard.

When the study started at the beginning of 2018, the GFG had 18 000 members. A year later in January 2019 the GFG number stood at 22 300 members. However, the population without smartphones and internet largely remains without access and therefore without a voice on the GFG. For those who are members of the GFG, there remain other barriers to overcome as well. One of the other concerns of the GFG is that it is divided by the language barrier. In Grahamstown there are three main languages: isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans. For a long time the Group Admins only allowed English to be spoken on the GFG to create mutual understanding. However, recently this changed and I have noticed more isiXhosa posts appearing with the occasional Afrikaans post. This was reaffirmed by interviewees:

"...it [the Group] is still dominated by older, white English voices. I think this is perhaps because these people have the time and data to sit on Facebook a lot of the time...but it also has to do with the relative confidence that these people have to make their opinion made on Facebook. Lately I've seen more posts in isiXhosa and I was happy to see this – I know at one time the Group banned

all posts not in English which I think was self-limiting,” (Member AT: transcript 3).

Another member noticed this as well: “I am pleased to see that many more people are posting their questions in isiXhosa and that the rules of the group no longer state that only English may be used,” (Member LG: transcript 5). With these language barriers slowly being overcome more and more members can be included in conversations and create their own posts on the GFG. The public sphere ideally aims to have a fairly represented public which can deliberate freely (Papacharissi, 2009). This could also affect the members’ sense of belonging, as discussed in the next section.

The ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group contains many members who prefer to converse over the internet instead of face-to-face, which we can observe as a ‘networked public’ (boyd, 2011). The GFG members all have an interest in the city of Grahamstown, but do not have to be in the same geographical space necessarily to communicate on the GFG (boyd, 2011). For example, one member is not in Grahamstown anymore, “I no longer live in Grahamstown nor South Africa...My folks live in Grahamstown so it was just to see what’s going on...[the Group is] good for infrastructure/municipal issues and general problem solving. I mean people used it to coordinate giving out water during the heat...” (Member CS: transcript 14).

Not having geographical boundaries, as made clear in example above, is one of the many affordances of the internet, and is one of the characteristics of ‘networked publics’ (boyd, 2011). The GFG thus contains ‘networked publics’ communicating over geographical and social bounds. The GFG is a mainly geographical interest group (however, it is not bound by time and space), within the larger social media network, Facebook. It can therefore be seen as a smaller ‘bubble’ of voices with specific interests at heart, within the larger public communication space. When looking at the Habermasian ideal public sphere, it is clear that not all the characteristics can be applied to the GFG. As discussed in Section One, the internet sees a need for a structural transformation of the public sphere to suit the affordances of modern technologies. The internet would be more suited by theories that accommodate a multitude of public spheres with multiple interest groups (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). These multiple smaller ‘bubbles’ are ‘public sphericules’ (Bruns & Highfield, 2016).

Through my participant observation and the interviews which portrayed different views on the public sphere elements, I realised that the GFG cannot achieve all the benefits and affordances of the idealistic public sphere as described by Habermas. As mentioned above, the fact that some members are excluded by comments such as “then just leave the group” and people are being banned by Admins can hinder the functioning of a healthy public debate. The GFG also does not always lead to action and only caters for a specific interest group, namely the geographical location of Grahamstown.

Another opposing factor is that the Group mostly caters for advertisements, recommendations and classifieds information. The GFG also lists itself as a ‘community noticeboard’, influencing its viability as a public sphere. Some members also enjoy that the GFG serve this function and would not want it to be a public sphere, where they deliberate on political and socio-economic issues and act against the state. While interviewing Member AT (Transcript 2: 2018) it became clear to me that she was not interested in a public sphere being created: “I don’t think this is the right group for political deliberation. It’s not that I don’t want people to discuss politics, but honestly, I belong to this group to see more practical issues about the town, such as events, municipal issues such as water and electricity, safety and crime alerts etc.”. Some other interviewees had the same thoughts on the subject, feeling the GFG should keep to its original purpose.

4.5 THE INTERTWINING OF A PUBLIC SPHERE/SPHERICULE AND ISSUES OF SOCIAL COHESION

Public sphere theory works towards an ideal democracy where discussions can be free and open to make suggestions and deliberate concerns about the state (Bruns & Highfield, 2015). These debates can draw a community together as they congregate and stand up against a common ‘enemy’ that they find in the government. The study found that this can have a positive effect as members of the GFG usually felt a sense of belonging and social cohesion when they discussed the lack of service delivery and called upon the municipality for action – standing together as a community. This is visible during many discussions on service delivery. As the member mentioned earlier commented, “we will accept nothing less. Heed our call. We are united!” (Member 13, Screenshot: 28/11/2018_2).

Social cohesion is a fluid concept and often a ‘policy goal’ in many democracies and can be seen during attempts by politicians to pull a community together to create social order (Friedkin, 2004). The ideal of social order is to not have any contentious discourse between the members and have peaceful interactions (Friedkin, 2004). This is somewhat problematic as people cannot reliably be cohesive and agree at all times (Friedkin, 2004). Social cohesion theory has been difficult to pin down as theorists have different views on what social cohesion should be. As Friedkin (2004) phrases it, “The definitional confusion in the social cohesion literature is symptomatic of the complexity involved in reciprocally linked individual-level and group-level phenomena.” Groups can be cohesive when they are positive in attitude and when they try to maintain the positive interactions (Friedkin, 2004).

Elements can be seen in some posts made in the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook Group. Some of the posts will share a positive outlook on how something good happened in Grahamstown. The comments that follow will usually be positive and draw members closer as they all comment on how there is good in the city and feel a sense of community through the post. This has happened on several occasions throughout the past few years since the GFGs creation in 2007. It can also take different forms. It could also be that members come together to work towards a common goal which derives from a common issue of concern as discussed in the previous section. This overlaps with the function of an ideal public sphere.

With the public sphere, contributors have to work together to formulate a plan of action after deliberating about an issue of concern. This creates a positive outcome as they collaborate to find solutions. An example in the Facebook Group would be when the city identified that some people did not have water and temperatures were rising. The community pulled together for a week after a call to action on the GFG and organised that some members go around handing out water to those who did not have (Screenshots: 30/10/2018; 01/11/2018; 02/11/2018; 04/11/2018). These ‘real world’ actions that have derived from the GFG discussions, not only supports the idea of a type of public sphere but also shows signs of social cohesion. The water crisis mentioned above is an important example of how a community can come together in social solidarity to help one another and build trust in fellow members.

Public Sphere theory and conceptualisation about social cohesion thus have various communalities that overlap and are, this study has argued, an appropriately combined theoretical framework to understand the dynamics of the 'Grahamstown' Facebook group. The findings showed clear elements of both the theories to support the research into the importance of a Facebook group which is geographical community focused.

4.6 CONCLUSION

From the findings it is clear that the 'Grahamstown' group has introduced a valuable online space to the community to deliberate concerns as well as share more commercial or 'classifieds'-based posts. The roles of the Admins have been called into question as the friction between members and moderators have proven to be an on-going challenge. Admins persist with the notion that the GFG functions as a community noticeboard, whereas some members retaliate with the idea that the GFG has become more valuable as a deliberative space than a community noticeboard. The interviews showed that a spectrum of respondents exists as some lean towards a community noticeboard function, some a debate function and some would like to see both in the GFG as it is currently doing. The constant back-and-forth pull between those who are pro space for deliberation, vs. the Administrators have led to a fragmentation in the Group at times. Two major splits in the GFG occurred two years apart after highly argumentative posts where members disagreed with others and decided to create their own groups. These splits seem to have hindered the possibly positive social cohesion enhancing role of the GFG and led to many rifts in the Group. The two groups did not survive however and later both shut down, showing that the 'herding' and 'first mover advantage' effect drew people back to the 'Grahamstown' group.

The chapter offered a history of the GFG which brought context and perspective to the Group's dynamics. This periodisation illuminated some events which gave context to the most important discussions supporting the theoretical framework of the study. The last four years, 2016 to 2019, formed the focus point of the study however and gave valuable insight into the way the GFG dealt with interactions between members. Three important themes were drawn from the periodisation and led to an in-depth discussion of each one in a thematic analysis. The study also identified five types of respondents on Facebook Groups which I could discern and make sense of due to the close participant observation I have done on the

GFG. These five types are lurkers, peacemakers, occasional commenters, keyboard warriors (including trolling) and gung-ho respondents.

Analysing content and drawing on interviewee's opinions, the Group showed most members feel that social cohesion is possible on some levels during certain posts such as the handing out of water in areas where there was a water shortage in October 2018. However, other posts can have a damaging effect as they can implode and cause a divide in the GFG. Thus, members agreed that sometimes the GFG contributes to cohesion and sometimes it fragments the community – depending on the topic discussed.

Through the interviews and some of the comments left on the GFG, it is noticeable that not all members felt the need for a specifically deliberative space to be created. Not all members wanted to involve politics or socio-economic issues and not all members would have like the GFG to serve as more than just a community noticeboard. These views are in contrast to the more gung-ho respondents who are often opinionated about the political and socio-economic issues in the city as well as in the country. Ordinarily uneventful posts about mundane everyday life can quickly turn political – it only takes one person to comment linking something in the post to the lack of services from the government. These tensed conversations are sometimes banned and sometimes allowed, bringing the level of censorship by the Admins into question again. The chapter has presented various elements from the GFG to aid in the conclusion of whether the GFG functions as a public sphere and if it aids in social cohesion.

The concluding Chapter Five will merge the findings with the theoretical framework to provide a clear final statement about the abilities of a Facebook Group. It will also include future work that can be done to enhance the study and provide further investigation into the importance of social media groups in communities.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

5.0 INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter, I introduced this study's key research questions: can a social media platform provide the 'space' for public discussion about important local issues, i.e. a public sphere? By so doing, does this contributed to members of the Grahamstown Facebook Group (GFG) developing some sense of being in and of a community, that is, in the context of striking divides of ethnicity, race, class, language and gender in the broader Grahamstown/Makhanda area? And does this enhance a subjective sense of 'social cohesion'? The study attempted to suggest at least some ways of thinking about answering these questions by focusing on the GFG as a small case study, suitable for consideration in a Masters half thesis, but suggestive enough, in terms of my analysis of the data, of 'answers' that might be useful in broader considerations of local media eco-systems, and the changing nature of the public sphere (and its constituent public 'sphericules') in the current era of proliferating social media and smart phone access and use.

The study drew on thematic and content analysis of GFG conversations and on interviews with 14 GFG members, including the group's 'Admins' who are gatekeepers, censors, secretaries all rolled into one role. The study drew on these interviews and content to capture something of the behaviours and lived experiences of these group members, with the goal of observing whether the GFG is a viable sphericule on its own, i.e. a facilitator of some deliberation in a virtual public square, and whether participation by members allows for, or is pursued for a sense of belonging and community, making some contribution to the sense of cohesiveness.

Chapter Two focused on public sphere theory and its role in modern democracies where the 'mediation' of societies is advanced and advancing further each year. This formed the main theoretical framework for the study. The chapter also introduced recent critical adaption of the Public Sphere theory and most particularly the notion of multiple, overlapping, 'public sphericules' (Gitlin, 2001; Bruns & Highfield, 2016; Papacharissi, 2002) with explanations

drawn from recent discussions on networked individualism and networked publics. Social cohesion as a concept was also investigated and the sense of belonging that could possibly be felt within the community, explored.

Chapter Three outlined the methodological approaches of the study. Employing a qualitative lens, the study attempted to make sense of the feelings evoked in members when they discussed issues, based on a common set of questions (Addendum B). This gave a more in-depth understanding of what online participation means to the members of GFP. Interviews and content analysis, at least at thematic level, but with occasional forays into detailed parsing of content, were the main methods used to create data this study could analyse. As I did this research, over much of 2018 and early 2019, I acted as a participant observer of the GFG conversations and I eventually interviewed 14 members through Facebook Messenger. This platform proved to be a more comfortable space for members and provided me with a more concrete base of data which could be referred back on. Thus, interviews were on a digital platform where it could not be misinterpreted or misquoted.

Ethical considerations were important to take note of as social media is a relatively new research field because, on Social media, the public and private are conflated and lines blurred. Public vs private data is one of the major obstructions in social media research (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Content that was made public online, might be considered private due to individual privacy settings or nature of the person's profile – and vice versa. The GFG's overall setting is 'public' but with the stipulation that members ask permission to join the GFG. This complicated the field, and after confiding in colleagues and the GFG Administrators it was decided that posts were 'public' and that I was able to harvest them as data. Furthermore informed consent (Townsend & Crawford, 2016) was obtained to ensure interviewees were aware of the research goals and ethical clearance issued. The interviewees agreed to participate anonymously and therefore only the word 'member' and a number or two letters were used to refer to interviewees and those mentioned from content analysis.

Lastly, the findings were presented as vividly as I could, allowing some members of GFG to 'speak for themselves' from the pages of debates on the GFG as well as responses from the interviews. These quotes gave insight to how the theory could be 'applied' in terms of

assessing whether public sphere theory, as a broad and rapidly developing field in the digital era, was a viable concept for understanding social media platforms like Facebook and their role both in our public and private lives. The 14 interviewees gave their personal opinions on whether certain GFG conversations made them feel excluded or alienated and forged any sense of belonging.

To make sense of the data, this study attempted both a periodisation of GFG and tried to develop an initial typology of user, based on my observations of the intensity and frequency of users' participation, and of the type of content they posted or were drawn too. The attempt to periodise the GFG aids in the understanding of how the GFG has gone through different stages of development and how it changed over time and thus formed a crucial part of the content analysis. The periodisation makes sense of how the GFG changed and grew between 2007 and 2019, evolving more into a type of public sphericule from its original community noticeboard role. In the attempt to comprehend the full effects of the GFG on individual members and the dynamics of the GFG, typology was used to identify the type of users who become part of Facebook groups such as GFG. The members are reshaping the dynamics by insisting to Admins the GFG is better as a debate space. As the domestication theory suggests, societies have a need to bend and shape technology to serve their needs such as the community of Grahamstown who need a space to vent and discuss issues.

The findings showed interesting results with some aligning with my initial thoughts on the theories and some conflicting with my expectations. As an additional theory to aid in the understanding of group members, I suggest it is possible and useful to discern five types of Facebook group respondents which I have identified as: lurkers, peacemakers, occasional commenters, keyboard warriors and trolls, and gung-ho respondents.

5.1 SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONTINUED EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY

As pointed out in Chapter One, social media as a phenomenon has made a significant impact not just on the media industry and the way that audiences consume and disseminate

information but on social life and sociability in general. It now forms a vitally important part of the modern day life in so many respects and is reshaping, entirely the media landscape. Thus, it has become a burgeoning topic for research in media studies. As many scholars have pointed, the initial theorisation of the nature of public participation in democracy, and indeed, the nature of democracy, its relationship to media, was structured to be “idealistic” (Papacharissi, 2009).

Although Habermas and his supporters and detractors focused on the role of powerful mass media, they did not anticipate the affordances of social media, and especially social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter on smartphones: media deeply embedded in everyday life for a great many people. The theory has been continually revised, first with the proliferation of mass media and more recently the rise of the internet, the advent of social media sites highlight a clear need to get to grips with another ‘structural transformation’ in order for it to be relevant to today’s technologies (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). A new set of concepts has shown its usefulness in terms of locating, problematising, and critically viewing such as the GFG as explored by Bruns & Highfield (2016) working of Gitlin’s (2001) idea of multiple contesting but reasonably coherent ‘public sphericules’. These ‘public sphericules’ are ‘spaces’ online where conversations on a particular topic take place (organised by hashtag or grouping, or Reddit thread or some other kind of digital ‘shaping’ of the space and way of connecting the participants) of similar interests take place, rather than the initial conception of national-level public spheres where political conversations that sometime lead to social action, i.e. fed into political and social processes are most important.

When I first became interested in the GFG, it was clear that ‘facilitating deliberation’ was neither the reason it was established nor necessarily members’ main reason for joining. On the contrary most people want to receive information about events in the city, crime alerts, service delivery updates such as water or electricity outages, recommendations, advertisements and business information. What is fascinating is that even though people do not necessarily join to ‘deliberate’ a great deal of deliberation does take place. Often only a dozen people will interact, whereas it is clear that thousands are lurking. Debates rage on, from debates about whether the city council should install traffic lights or whether the National Arts Festival should host more shows in Grahamstown East, to debates about the

name of the city, or much more trivial issues: it is clear that deliberation is taking place. But it is also clear that this is a very small localised, and sometimes exclusive ‘public sphericule’ (Bruns & Highfield, 2016) bounded by geography and the need for some obvious connection to this ‘place’, which has to be ‘proven’, i.e. there is an application and motivation process and there are gatekeepers that can keep you ‘out’ even if anyone, anywhere in the world, can ‘look’, only members can comments, and join the conversations.

The GFG also did not create a space for all to communicate freely, as English was the only language allowed on the GFG for many years. It was only recently that the space was opened to allow the inclusion of other languages, which has proven to be a major shift in the GFG dynamics as more Afrikaans but more noticeably isiXhosa posts have emerged. The language issue excluded many voices and isolated members who did not understand English very well. This brought the viability of the group as a Habermasian public sphere into question as that would require fair representation of groups and the inclusion of different people. Many people who did not speak English did not post about subjects and were therefore excluded from many conversations and opportunities. Since the inclusion of these language groups, more members have felt a sense of belonging and social cohesion as they can now express themselves along with other GFG members. This could also contribute to the argument that the Group is better suited as a public sphericule, as it forms a smaller group with few languages as medium of communication.

I have noticed a level of social cohesion in some conversations on the GFG. Social cohesion, as explored in Chapter Two, has many definitions from different theorists. One such theorist is Friedkin (2004), who says that social cohesion can only be a possible when there is positive interaction between citizens. In contrast, Palmary (2015) argues that cohesive groups are self-maintaining and focus more on respect than whether the conversation is positive or negative. It is also clear that majority of the interviews indicated they felt a sense of belonging in the community due to the GFG, depending on the subject discussed and action taken. As member AC (Transcript 1) showed in quotes discussed in Chapter Four, the GFG can create a sense of belonging when certain subjects are discussed, but also fragment society when stronger issues that can divide (such as racism) are discussed. Enhanced social cohesion is possible if the members carry through action offline which started in ideas in the online space, according to some interviewees.

“It gives one a sense of belonging when you identify commonalities in your experiences but I believe this is a false sense if you are not actively involved in some way in your community. To some extent one becomes an observer rather than an activist,” (Member AC, Transcript 1: 2018).

Social cohesion is a difficult concept to define as there are many different views on it. The general notion is that social cohesion has to do with the coming together of people in a certain community and conversing in peace (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Lewis, 2008). This is not always possible in the GFG, but people do feel connected with others through the GFG which might lead to a feeling of social cohesion. The mere connection with other people gives some people a feeling of usefulness can be described as social capital (Naseri, 2017). On the GFG, it is clearly visible when people bond on the group and some of the members become well-known just by posting frequently. Not all members will feel a sense of belonging at all times with some members being alienated – as seen in the case of Member MW explored in Chapter Four. Many discussions proved to splinter the GFG as they had different views on controversial topics.

“The split in the group is based on race (white people have more say and get more help than any other race), social standing (business owners seem to have more say about who and what can be posted) and cliques (people will oppose, insult and join together when attacking simply because they're sticking up for their friends regardless of subject matter),” (Member MW, Transcript 6: 2018).

However, I have found that this is part of the liberating process as members have the free will to disagree with one another. The study found that many posts brought the GFG community together as they stood up against a common enemy, the municipality. The lack of municipal service delivery has seen members come together and strengthen the cohesion in the community. I thus found that social cohesion was viable during times of crisis in ‘Grahamstown’ as the community stood together when there were moments of emergency.

The concept of the public sphere and that of social cohesion often overlap. The public sphere attempts to bring people together, in a cohesive manner, where they can discuss matters that are of concern to them, followed by action against the state (Papacharissi, 2002). This coming together can be taken as a step towards binding together the community, creating a sense of belonging and social cohesion. As discussed by one of the members, social cohesion mostly occurs on the GFG when posts lead to ‘real world’ action – such as with the example about handing out water above.

To conclude, I found that the GFG could in fact be argued to fulfil some public sphere requirements by taking on the form of a public sphericule (Gitlin, 2001 in Bruns & Highfield, 2016) which affords more flexibility to be reshaped for social media platforms. In this sphericule, deliberations bring members together to perform actions offline which creates a sense of belonging within the community and contributes to social cohesion. However, this is not always the case as some debates bring forth arguments which split the GFG and cause fragmentations in the GFG. Further research could be done on this.

5.2 SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This area of investigation and this field is relatively new, and would definitely benefit from more and investigation into the role that online social media play in offline communities. Various elements were used in this study which could be improved upon. A periodisation followed the GFG from 2007 until 2019 however the focus was only from 2016. A deeper investigation could be done by looking more closely at other events since 2007. A major obstacle in the study was the lack of data pre-2013. Due to Facebook deleting data – presumably to make more space on their servers – much of the information was lost. Unfortunately, due to time constraints I was unable to retrieve information from these earlier years from members who had already joined in 2007, however this would make an interesting perspective for further study. A more in-depth analysis with more discussions as case studies would enrich the research findings.

After the periodisation I did a typology to understand the member’s behaviours and interactions with posts. The typology was based on the frequency of posts/comments, tone of

voice and the motive they had for posting. The typology could be improved to be more specific, with more evidence that they exist on other groups as well. This study only focuses on one group which limits its evidential support for these theories. A whole research project could be done on typologies to explore the options and reach of the types of group members. Future research could further the typologies and apply them to different other groups on a more global scale.

The prospect of a specialised conception of public sphericules which focuses on geographic communities could be introduced and researched in more depth. The creation of a specialised field within theories around the public sphericule will give a deeper understanding of the milieu that the groups operate in and the effectiveness of the public sphere on online platforms.

A further investigation could be done by using more than one case study and comparing various Facebook groups that share similar elements. What this study lacks is insight into more than one group and how they might differ or relate. It is difficult to determine how applicable the public sphere and social cohesion is to the wider social media communities if only one case study is used. A broader view would be beneficial for a more globalised sense of how Facebook groups function. A comparison between similar groups would make for an exciting project about Facebook Groups. The GFG and various other groups in the area such as towns like Port Alfred, Cradock, Graaff-Reinet and even one on a bigger scale such as Port Elizabeth, could be used to compare and contrast in a study.

Another interesting aspect going into the future would be to look at the group's activity leading up to and during the 2019 presidential elections. The GFG has already shown interest in politics and the upcoming elections as they grapple with issues regarding the state. It would be constructive to build on this study by following the GFG throughout the year and analysing their conversations surrounding elections and whether this contributed to social cohesion or fragmented the GFG. These election debates could form a valuable public sphere space as they deliberate over political issues and might lead to important action which is imperative for a democratic society. Democracy is the ultimate goal for a public sphere and thus is beneficial for South Africa – as a democratic ideological state. This study could be an ongoing research project which introduces different aspects and builds on the foundations of social media research.

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Field Notes:

(Transcripts numbered as filed; members to stay anonymous as agreed in ethical clearance).

Transcript 1. 2018. Group Admins

Transcript 2. 2018. Member AC

Transcript 3. 2018. Member AT

Transcript 4. 2018. Member AM

Transcript 5. 2018. Member LS

Transcript 6. 2018. Member LG

Transcript 7. 2018. Member MW

Transcript 8. 2018. Member NE

Transcript 9. 2018. Member PM

Transcript 10. 2018. Member RK

Transcript 11. 2018. Member RF

Transcript 12. 2018. Member SP

Transcript 13. 2018. Member VT

Transcript 14. 2018. Member CS

Addendum A: Group Guidelines

The Grahamstown Facebook page is a fun, family-friendly community where people can share their passion for this wonderful Eastern Cape city. We welcome all members of the community, but we do ask everyone to follow the rules as set out below. By participating and being a part of the group, you are agreeing to the rules & guidelines.

By using or accessing the Grahamstown Facebook group, you are also agreeing to comply with Facebook's Terms and Conditions (<https://www.facebook.com/legal/terms>). Any content that is a violation of these terms or is contrary to the group's values as set out here will be deleted. Facebook has an automatic spam filter and some posts may be hidden unintentionally as a result. If your post is hidden by this automatic filter and does not violate our house rules, we will un-hide the post for public viewing.

If you feel that you cannot abide by these guidelines, please remove yourself from the group.

THINGS WE LOVE:

(THE FOLLOWING IS WELCOME HERE)

- **BE FRIENDLY:** Encouragement, Support, Advice.
- **BE GENEROUS:** Give to others more than you ask for. Share what you know. Comment on posts...get involved :)
- **SHARE:** helpful & relevant resources/articles that positively impact the group.
- **RECOMMEND:** Grahamstown is full of friendly service and great people – we love to support each other so go ahead and give someone props.
- **INVITE OTHERS:** Feel free to add any friends that you feel will benefit from being in this group.
- **ENGLISH, PLEASE!** Please note that the lingua franca of this group is ENGLISH.
- **USE THE SEARCH BAR:** Remember if there is something specific you are looking for assistance with; search for it in the search bar for the group. It could be that someone has asked that question before.
- **FAVOURITES/NOTIFICATIONS:** Remember you can adjust how much of the group shows up in your newsfeed by changing your favourites and notifications. Add the group to your FAVOURITES if you don't want to miss anything. Or, set your notifications to "all posts". Or do both :)

THINGS WE *DON'T* LOVE:

(THE FOLLOWING WILL NOT BE TOLERATED HERE)

- **NO NAMING AND SHAMING:** If you believe someone has broken the law, report the incident to the relevant authority immediately and let the law take its course. If you have an issue with a person or business take it up with them in private. If you'd like to complain about a business or service, look for their Facebook group.
- **NO RACIST, RELIGIOUS OR POLITICAL POSTS:** These posts will be deleted without warning at Admin's discretion.

- **NO DIRECT/PRIVATE FB MESSAGING:** Please do not private message other group members unless you have asked them for permission in the group feed. If someone contacts you directly on a private message without your permission, please report them to Admin as this is not allowed and they will be removed immediately. *We all need to be respectful & mindful of each other's inbox and "space".*
 - **NO EMAIL ADDRESSES / CONTACT NUMBERS:** Email addresses & contact numbers are not allowed in the feed/comments or on any images please. This is to protect you, and those out there that are "email fishing" with the intent to spam.
 - **WE'D LOVE TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS:** Just not **all** the time. Excessive advertising is SPAM and will be deleted.
 - **DO YOUR DUE DILIGENCE:** In the event that you decide to hire anyone or create any contractual relationship (verbally or written) for service/product exchanges, with someone you've met via this group - ***you do so at your own risk.*** Be sure that you have done the necessary research and you have a clear written contract and/or service agreement in place before commencing business. Admin and other group members are not responsible for any loss of revenue, damages, breach of contract, or any other unfavourable circumstance as a result of that relationship.
 - **STAY SAFE:** If you buy/sell anything advertised on the group make sure to meet the seller/buyer in a busy, well-lit, public area. Take a friend, take two friends.
 - **NO MULTI-LEVEL MARKETING (MLM) or GET-RICH-QUICK SCHEMES:** The business model of an MLM is not endorsed by Admin, and not allowed in this group in any form. Anyone seen to be promoting an MLM will be removed from this group without notice.
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- **POSTS OR COMMENTS WHICH CONTAIN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WILL NOT BE TOLERATED AND WILL BE DELETED:**
 - Profane, defamatory, offensive or violent language (NO SWEARING);
 - "Trolling", or posting deliberately disruptive statements meant to hijack comment threads or throw discussions off-track;
 - Attacks on specific groups or any comments meant to harass, threaten or abuse an individual;
 - Hateful or discriminatory comments regarding race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation or political beliefs;
 - Links or comments containing sexually explicit content material;
 - Spam, link baiting or files containing viruses that could damage the operation of other people's computers or mobile devices;
 - Acknowledgement of intent to stalk an individual or collect private information without disclosure;
 - Violations of copyright or intellectual property rights;
 - Content that relates to confidential or proprietary business information;
 - Content determined to be inappropriate, in poor taste, or otherwise contrary to the purposes of the forum;

- Conduct or encouragement of illegal, harmful or offensive activity.

- **RULE BREAKERS:** Anyone who does not abide by the above rules & guidelines, will have their posts deleted, and will be removed from the group without notice. Those who are considered to be “treading on thin ice” will be given one (and only one) warning and Admin will keep a list of those members considered to be troublemakers. The Admins of this group reserve the right to delete any post for any reason we deem appropriate. If your post is deleted, please don’t be offended. The Admin of this group work very hard to make it a fun, friendly community for all.
- **FILES SECTION** - Please don’t upload, delete or edit any files in this area. If there is something useful you’d like to share with the group, then please get in touch with Admin.

NB: *These rules & guidelines are subject to change without notice. It's on you to make sure you keep yourself updated.*

**If anyone is found to be contravening the rules & guidelines; please do report them to Admin immediately.*

Addendum B: Questionnaire

**“The meaning of community: social cohesion and the public sphere on social media.
A reception study of the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group.”**

Researcher: Ettioné Ferreira (student nr: 08f0706)

Date & Time: _____

Interviewee name: _____

Research code: Example: Member AC

History and activity on the group:

1. When did you join the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group?
2. How often would you say you comment or post on the group, if at all, and what type of content do you usually post (eg. Secondhand items, advertisements, discussions on service delivery, etc.)?
3. Do you like engaging (commenting, etc.) or do you rather like to just observe on the group and refrain from commenting?

Sense of belonging and social cohesion:

1. Do you feel that you are included more in the community by being able to discuss topics with fellow community members? Please elaborate on your answer.
2. Do you think the group contributes to social cohesion or does it fragment (split) the community?
3. (If you are aware of the splits in the group):
How do you feel the splits in the group (“This is Grahamstown” and “Grahamstown The Magic”) influenced the sense of belonging in the group? Did it influence the way you felt about the group’s dynamics or did it make you feel the group was unstable or not trustworthy? Please share any comments you have on this.

The group as a possible Public Sphere:

1. Would you say the ‘Grahamstown’ Facebook group fairly represents the whole town (demographically) and why do you think this is?

2. Do you feel that a sufficient amount of political deliberation takes place on the Facebook group? Please elaborate.
3. Do you prefer the group to only post classifieds or would you want to see more in-depth discussions taking place about political and socio-economical situations in town?
4. When you discuss municipal issues, do you feel that there is space for everyone to debate the issues and voice their opinions?
5. Do you feel that your opinion or some opinions/voices get 'lost' in the floods of comments some posts receive? Do you feel heard?
6. Which topics do you think are the most important that are discussed on the group?
7. Which topics do you feel should be discussed more (or more often) on the group?