Navigating Change: A Critical Analysis of Social Media's Role In Shaping Gender Activists' Perspectives

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Thesis in partial fulfilment for the requirements of the degree of

Masters in Development Studies (by coursework)

Department of Sociology

Rhodes University

February 2024

ABSTRACT

This research explores the unique challenges and opportunities that social media offers gender activists fighting for equality and social justice. It examines the negative and positive elements of social media, highlighting the ways it can be adopted to build communities, amplify voices, and advance social change in unique ways, but also the ways in which it can adversely contribute to existing power imbalances and inequalities. This research does not concentrate on any specific gender-based movement, but rather aims to understand how gender activists in South Africa have embraced social media in their local activism. The study followed a qualitative approach and collected the data through in-depth semi-structured interviews. It also followed a thematic framework in its analysis of the data collected from the interviews. The study found that, while online gender activism in South Africa faces challenges such as harassment and the digital gender divide, there is still progress in terms of community building and political engagement on social media. The findings suggest that, in spite of the challenges, social media can still be an important tool for advancing gender-based social justice in South Africa. This research made use of Counter-publics and Cyberfeminism as guiding theoretical frameworks. The theory of Counter-publics provides a valuable way of understanding how virtual groups emerge and challenge dominant societal norms and values. Cyberfeminism provides insight into how women have challenged contemporary inequalities through the adoption of technologies such as social media. As sub-components to Cyber-feminism, Intersectionality and Standpoint perspectives were used to understand how activists' diverse identities and social positions influence their individual forms of activism.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

The adoption of social media for gender activism signifies a progression in the use of media technologies to support grassroots movements which have always been an essential means for women to challenge the "cycle of oppression" and "culture of silence" surrounding their "personal and public lives" (Lewis & Orderson, 2012; Malik, 2022; Subramanian, 2015). Historically in South Africa, activism has been a means of effecting social and political reform. Activism is particularly important for South African women, due to their historical lack of access to "institutions of state power," making civil society their primary means for "political change" (Britton and Fish, 2008: 5). The use of activism as a tool for democracy and visibility is reflected significantly in South Africa's struggle against Apartheid where women played an instrumental role in challenging state policies aimed at maintaining sex, race, and class oppression. For instance, Hassim (2006: 59), states that during Apartheid, women created organisations such as the United Women's Organisation (U.W.O) and the Natal Organisation of Women (N.O.W) which used grassroots mobilisation to challenge issues such as "human rights violations, low minimum wages and unemployment." The organisations were based on "mandates from women," which linked political concerns with the "removal of laws and customs that act against women" (Hassim, 2006: 59).

As virtual spaces such as social media have increasingly become intertwined with the offline world in a complex manner that can be both beneficial and disadvantageous, a form of symbiosis, gender activists have adopted them as new tools to agitate against dominant institutions for social justice (Cammaerts, 2005; Ureta *et al*., 2021). For instance, during the #RapeAtAzania protests in Cape Town against sexual violence, women "took the world with them, through their on-the-ground activism," by using X previously known as Twitter to share details about their movement and advance their social justice goals (Dlakavu, 2016: 102). This example illustrates the powerful role social media can have on gender-based movements. It is a tool that has the potential to amplify activists' voices and create social change.

Whilst social media platforms have several benefits such as amplifying activists' voices, it is crucial to recognise some of the problems these technologies have. The digital platforms have a number of shortfalls such as censorship and cyberbullying which gender activists have to negotiate and this is because many of the oppressive institutions and structures found offline

have an online presence (Daniels, 2021; Nurik, 2019). These shortfalls play a negative role by making it harder for activists to attain their social justice objectives. Nevertheless, whilst the virtual world is a complex terrain which simultaneously reflects challenges and reconstitutes social structures found in the offline social world, it still has several opportunities that can be exploited by gender activists.

This research will make use of Counter-public, Cyberfeminism, Intersectionality and Standpoint perspectives as guiding schools of thought. Cyberfeminism provides the research with insight into how women have challenged contemporary inequalities through the adoption of social media. In addition, Intersectionality is drawn on, in order to follow a mutually constructive and nonadditive understanding of social categories of inequality such as "race, gender, and class" (Evans and Lepinard, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Intersectionality is crucial because activism reflects "multiple and intersecting" types of personal and structural power imbalances which motivate people's inclusion into movements, particularly in South Africa where gender interlocks with various social and political identities (Evans and Lepinard, 2020; Segalo, 2015). On the other hand, Stand-point perspectives view women's subjective experiences and voices as a form of knowledge (Mosedale, 2014; Naples and Gurr, 2013). Intersectionality and Standpoint perspectives allowed the study to understand gender activists' various identities and the subjective social positioning from which their individual activism emanates. Additionally, the study utilised Counter-public theory to understand how platforms such as X and Facebook have become crucial virtual meeting points which allow activists who have similar views and goals to communicate and question prevailing ideas that normalise patriarchal stereotypes and behaviours (Jackson and Welles, 2015: 4).

1.2 THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The primary objective of this research is to critically analyse gender activists' perceptions of social media as a platform for activism. The secondary objectives are:

- To understand the manner in which social media technology has impacted how individuals perceive and express their political subjectivity today.
- To investigate the general effects of social media use on political activism.

- To understand the specific implications of social media on gender activism in South Africa.
- To apply insights from feminist theory (Cyberfeminism, intersectionality and standpoint perspectives) and Counter-public theory to explore these contemporary shifts in activism.

1.3. RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY.

1.3.1. PHILOSOPHICAL BASES FOR THE STUDY.

This research is based on a social constructionist and interpretivist approach. Social constructionism views "knowledge and the truth" about the social world as being "created not discovered" by human minds (Andrews, 2012: 40). This complements the study, as the theory advocates for research that aims to understand the subjective perceptions of people which are vital towards understanding how they makes sense of what exists in their social worlds (Burr, 2015: 3). This approach echoes the principles of cyberfeminism, which advocates for understanding people's lived experiences with technology through considering the manner people's identities interact with digital technologies (Shaw, 2003; Sunden, 2007). As a result, the research uses qualitative methodologies which follow a "naturalistic" approach in understanding the subject matter of the study (Miles and Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2010: 6). The approach aims to understand social life and people's experiences of it, in uncontrolled, real-world environments, through non-numerical measurements that investigate "people's experiences, meanings and social processes" (Mohajan, 2018: 2).

The aforementioned ontological and epistemological bases are applied because they provide the worldview for capturing people's perceptions in order to produce a "deep" understanding of individual experiences (Sechrest and Sidani, 1995: 79). In these times where social media use is increasingly becoming an essential part of people and activists' everyday lives it has become an important tool by which they express and share their subjective experiences of meaning-making in the world. This is because social media platforms have become important virtual spaces where people exchange information, communicate and in overall make connections, making them an influential aspect of how people interpret their social worlds.

1.3.2. SAMPLING STRATEGY

The study made use of snowball and purposive sampling to select the participants. Purposive sampling involves the identification and selection of the right participants who are specifically "knowledgeable about or experienced in the phenomena of interest" (Palinkas *et al.,* 2013: 3). As a way of attracting potential participants the researcher placed physical posters at local organisations around town (Makhanda) that may potentially be frequented by gender-based activists. This being done after permission had been attained from all relevant authorities. In addition, to physical posters, the researcher made use of online posters and contacted online organisations as a means of attracting a larger pool of participants. Due to the mix of nationalities at Rhodes University and South Africa in general, the study accepted participants from other countries, if they had spent over a year in South Africa and had engaged in gender-based activism.

The researcher used snowball sampling to find participants with the help of the recommendations made by individuals selected through purposive sampling. The initial individuals served as the "seeds" from which the study found other participants (Etikan *et al.,* 2016: 6). The study attempted to reduce the downfalls and recruitment biases associated with snowball sampling such as homophily which is the tendency of people to recommend individuals who have similar traits or views as them (Chan, 2020: 62). The researcher did this by limiting the amount of references interviewees could provide, thereby reducing the clustering of individuals from similar networks and potentially similar views (Johnston and Sabin, 2010: 39).

1.3.3. THE PARTICIPANTS

The research selected six participants who self-identify as gender activists and are actively engaged in gender activism through online spaces. The study had no age restrictions and included women from all age groups. Additionally, the participants chosen were from various racial and class backgrounds. South Africa's past is impacted by Apartheid which has diversified the social and political experiences of gender activists. Social context and the nature of resources gender-based activists have available to them can have a bearing on the manner they utilise and interact with social media platforms which can also ultimately affect their

perceptions about its uses (Couldry, 2012: 33). Therefore, the study found it essential to focus on the perceptions of gender activists that are from various backgrounds, as a way of gaining numerous views about the adoption of social media for gender-based activism.

1.3.4. INSTRUMENTS USED IN THE STUDY.

The study made use of in-depth interviews which were advantageous towards gaining a "deep" understanding about the perceptions of gender activists (Brouneus, 2011: 130). The interviews were carried out following a semi-structured method which allowed the research to have pre-planned questions based on the objectives of the study whilst still giving the interviewees room to delve into their experiences or perceptions (Adams, 2015; Brouneus, 2011). The interviews were 20 minutes to an hour long and were audio recorded during the course of the conversation. These recordings were later transcribed as a means of safe-keeping multiple copies of the data and for analysis. All the participants gave informed consent before the recordings or interviews were done. The transcribed data is being kept at the Sociology department to ensure the information shared by the interviewees is safely stored.

1.3.5. ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The research utilised a thematic framework in its analysis of the data collected from the interviews. The thematic framework requires the researcher's "involvement and interpretation" in describing and finding themes that are present in the data collected (Guest *et al*., 2014: 9). According to Zammit and Xu (2020: 2), themes are crucial towards identifying patterns, which highlight important "information about the data in relation to the research objectives." The need to identify patterns, pushes the researcher to better familiarise themselves with the data collected, so they are better able to find the prominent similarities within it. The research made use of themes guided by its research objectives which were helpful in identifying patterns in the data. As the researcher did the analysis, they remained open to the development of the themes including the discovery of contradictory findings through interacting with the data (Joffe and Yardley, 2004: 57). Therefore, the research benefitted from using a thematic framework because it offered a useful means of not only summarising and organising the data but interpreting and making sense of it (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017: 3).

1.3.6. LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

According to Denscombe (2010: 186), a disadvantage of using qualitative methods is while they offer a depth of information, they are usually based on a small sample size which does not involve a large enough number of participants for them to be a representative sample or generalisable. The small sample size used in this study offered rich insights into the adoption of social media platforms by gender activists but was not large enough for the data to be generalisable. Due to the limited time frame dictated by the degree program, the sample size for this research was constrained, which consequently impacted the overall scope and depth of the study.

Additionally, the researcher is aware that his positionality as a man may have influenced the responses the gender activists gave to his questions. It may have also impacted the experiences they shared. In order to mitigate these issues, the researcher engaged in a process of reflexivity by considering his own position in the study and reflecting on how it impacted the research process.

1.3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Punch (2006: 56), there are "ethical responsibilities" that need to considered in the execution of research which include consent, confidentiality, and the participant's protection. The research adhered to the ethical principles and values, as well as the approval mandated by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee, to ensure that the study benefited participants and avoided harm. This involved obtaining full informed consent from all participants before their involvement in the research, ensuring that they were aware of their right to withdraw any provided information at any stage of the research process. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, with participants being given the choice to select pseudonyms as a means of keeping their identities anonymous.

Whilst the research is not based on any particular gender movement and focuses on the adoption of social media by gender activists, the researcher was aware that asking particular questions in relation to gender activism might lead to participants having negative memories of past experiences. In order to mitigate against this, participants were encouraged to share their experiences at their own pace and to only detail that which they were comfortable with

sharing. The researcher also made available counselling service contact information in the case a question triggered the participants. In general, the participants did not show any form of discomfort and shared their experiences without any difficulty during the research process.

CHAPTER 2: THEORY CHAPTER

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The adoption of virtual spaces for political and social contestation is increasingly becoming popular through the use of social media making them an important arena. This virtual realm is progressively becoming entangled with the offline world with the two-living side by side in a form of symbiosis. Gender activists have been instrumentally adopting the use of social networking sites exploiting their potential to challenge dominant institutions and structures that normalise patriarchal tendencies and stereotypes. In this study, activism will be regarded as actions individuals take to advocate for their social and political objectives which can take many forms such as supporting policy changes or engaging in organisations (Curtin *et al.,* 2010; Martin *et al*., 2007).

The virtual world can provide new possibilities for the attainment of social justice through facilitating spaces for gender activists to group, discuss and agitate against the wider society. However, the possibilities it offers come with a number of shortfalls which activists have to negotiate. For instance, many of the oppressive institutions and structures present offline are evident online such as (cyber)misogyny. Gender activists have to negotiate their virtual existence with this dichotomy between the pros and cons of the virtual world leading to unique knowledge production that can only be attained from them.

The theories used in this study will offer a framework by which to understand the manner gender activists have adopted this complex world in the attainment of social justice. The study makes use of counter-public theory which offers a framework by which to understand the creation of virtual spaces that provide a sense of community. Counter-publics on social media usually termed network counter-publics have become important points through which gender activists raise awareness about gender issues and group with other women in a manner that can lead to agitation strategies against dominant institutions in both online and offline spaces. Additionally, the study will make use of Cyber-feminism to explore the manner social media has facilitated new forms of gender activism that advance equality. The theory believes the adoption of technology by women (through cyborgs and cyborg politics) can lead to the emergence of a new kind of politics and gender construction that challenges patriarchal tendencies.

Whilst the theory offers a useful lens to understand the new possibilities of virtual spaces for women, it is important to highlight the theory has been criticised for its blind faith in the power of technology by ignoring the issues women encounter in their adoption of technologies such as social media which replicate offline issues. Moreover, the study will include women with various identities which makes the use of intersectional and standpoint perspectives beneficial due to their analysis and appreciation of people's complex and differing social backgrounds. Social media use and activism tend to be rooted in subjective experiences or reasons. This point being quite crucial within South Africa a rainbow nation where women hold various forms of privilege and disadvantage based on their racial and socio-economic background.

2.2. (CYBER) FEMINIST THEORY

Cyberfeminism which means "cybernetic feminism," is a diverse movement with many definitions but it can be regarded as focusing on the potential of technology to empower women (Girsang, 2023: 269; Paasonen, 2011: 335). For this study it is an important framework to combine with Counter-public theory, Standpoint perspectives and Intersectionality. This is because Cyberfeminism is useful towards highlighting the challenges and opportunities that gender activists encounter on social media. Standpoint perspectives help in understanding how gender activists in South Africa interpret and make sense of their experiences on social media while intersectionality offers a framework for understanding the manner social categories such as class, race, gender, amongst others intersect to define individual's experiences of digital spaces. Additionally, Counter-public theory highlights the ways in which gender activists in South Africa are using social media to create alternative spaces for activism and expression. These theories provide the study with a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of gender activists' experiences of social media.

The term cyberfeminism was coined by an artist collective called the Venus Matrix group which was comprised of four women interested in the emerging relationship between feminism and technology, with particular interest in the manner this dynamic could be useful towards challenging established gender stereotypes and roles (Paasonen, 2011: 337; Rai, 2017: 5). Donna Haraway is one of the leading scholars who have advanced this school of thought (Paasonen, 2011: 338). Haraway argues that "online and offline spheres" of social life tend to intersect in a complex manner making the binary between the two irrelevant (Milford, 2015:

58). This merging of the offline and online realms of life offers new freedoms to women who were previously limited by time and space, allowing them to reach the world and express their own commentary or views on gender issues they face (Rai, 2017: 5). In order to illustrate the manner machines and humans (through technological interaction) are becoming one Haraway uses the term "cyborg" (Fahs and Gohr, 2012: 1; Milford, 2015: 58).

The cyborg and "cyborg politics" (another term Haraway uses) highlight the manner technology has led to the establishment of new "structural conditions" which have given rise to "a new kind of politics" and identity construction (Milford, 2015: 58; Muravyeva and Andreevskikh, 2020: 206; Pecourt, 2023: 3). Haraway argues that cyborgs question "what it means to be human" and offer new modes of identity construction because they represent a post-gender world (Milford, 2015: 58). Scholars argue that social media offers women a virtual space that allows them to be disinhibited from gender norms or roles found in the physical world, allowing them to redefine their social identities (Fahs and Gohr, 2012; Muravyeva and Andreevskikh, 2020). This is because social media offers a sense of bodily transcendence which means women can find innovative and creative ways of challenging and constructing their identities on social media (Fahs and Gohr, 2012; Muravyeva and Andreevskikh, 2020). Individuals have actively seized the opportunities offered on social media to redefine their identities by exploring and experimenting with gender identities which in overall gives them greater fluidity in gendering themselves (Fahs and Gohr, 2012: 1).

Gillis, (2007: 168) argues that Cyberfeminism will be instrumental in ushering in this new era of post-modernity through the use of technology which will become crucial in breaking down hegemonic patriarchal structures. This is because the manner in which gender relations are performed and constructed on social media is similar to the way they are re-enacted in the offline world (Guzzetti, 2008: 459). This means if gender activists successfully challenge the manner gender relations are framed online by confronting patriarchal norms or stereotypes, it will influence a change in the dynamics of the offline world (Guzzetti, 2008: 459). For instance, in order to challenge gender relations on social media, gender activists have actively used communication tools such as memes to subvert hegemonic masculinity and introduce new feminine meanings to social life (Muravyeva and Andreevskikh, 2020: 207).

Sadie Plant another leading scholar in Cyberfeminism has often followed an essentialist approach in her conceptualisation of the relationship between women and technology (Gillis, 2007: 170). She argues that women have an "affinity" to the "new freedoms of cyberspace"

where they can communicate with each other and find general self-expression in the fight for social justice (Gillis, 2007: 170; Puente and Jimenez, 2011: 2007: 41). The hope is when women from various racial, social, and national backgrounds connect and work together on the internet, a space that transcends borders and boundaries, it will lead to an inclusive movement that advances equality and social justice goals such as during the #MeToo movement which had the involvement of various women from numerous countries (Puente and Jimenez, 2011: 2007: 41). Plant believes that the body-less nature of cyberspace offers women opportunities to be free from the constraints of the physical world and provides them with opportunities to fight for equality and social justice (Gillis, 2007: 170).

However, while Cyberfeminism acknowledges that digital spaces and discourse is impacted by power dynamics between men and women, it has been criticised for being technologically deterministic in its approach (Gillis, 2007: 168). The technological determinism of Cyberfeminism can be credited to the theory's focus on the manner technology can empower women in their fight for social justice without interrogating the manner social and political dynamics found in the offline world have become replicated in the online world (Jane, 2016: 287; Milford, 2015: 60). For instance, women are often the victims of sexism and targeted violence perpetrated by men in the offline world with the aim of disempowering them (Jane, 2016: 287). These issues are replicated in the virtual world, where women are subject to the same types of abuse with the aim being to suppress their freedom to express themselves freely and openly (Jane, 2016: 287).

Additionally, another issue Cyberfeminism has been criticised for is eurocentrism because it tends to negate the experiences and issues faced by women in the global south who may not adopt the internet or social media due to issues pertaining to affordability and accessibility in comparison to women from the global north (Gillis, 2007: 176). This means the potential for cyberspace to be emancipatory is not an opportunity all women have equal access to which limits some women's realisation of such gains. Nevertheless, the theory will be advantageous to this study because it offers a framework that allows it to understand the manner social media has been adopted by some gender activists in the fight for social justice. The study will also aim to advance the theory by using the perspectives of gender activists from the global south so as to understand how they have (or not) found social media useful in advancing their causes.

2.2.1. INTERSECTIONALITY

The study uses the arguments raised by Cyberfeminism, and Intersectionality to better understand the manner people's social and political identities shape their engagement with social media platforms. This is because gender activists have to "negotiate their social identities" when they interact on social media sites which have become important virtual publics where society meets and interacts (Galpin, 2021: 164). Additionally, gender activism in South Africa reflects "multiple and intersecting" types of personal and structural power imbalances which motivate people's inclusion into movements, which an intersectional framework can help understand (Evans and Lepinard, 2020; Segalo, 2015).

Patricia Hill Collins in the book titled *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) advanced the scholarship through her interest in third world feminism, and in particular the subjective experiences of black women (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Stoll and Block, 2015). Collins' interests led to her advancement of the concept, "matrix of domination" (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 13; Stoll and Block, 2015: 389). The matrix of domination being similar to the theory of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (Yuval-Davis, 2006: Zimmerman, 2017). Intersectionality explores the manner various "social categories such as race, class, gender, and nationality," either empower or disadvantage particular individuals or groups (Choo & Ferree, 2010: 129). Scholars argue that intersectionality is a crucial lens by which to understand the interwovenness or rather simultaneousness nature of oppressive systems (Carastathis, 2014; Evans and Lepinard, 2020). It offers a means of understanding the manner "oppression is experienced simultaneously" in people's everyday lives (Carastathis, 2014: 307).

A cyberfeminist lens highlights that an intersectional framework is key towards understanding the manner women's identities are constructed and performed on social media (Richard and Gray, 2018; Sunden, 2007: 35; Yoon, 2021). In most scenarios, "the lived experiences of women," including their intersecting bases of privilege and marginalisation, are often visible on social media, and these experiences can have an influence on the movements they engage with on social media (Richard and Gray, 2018: 123). To illustrate this point, black gender activists have used social media to voice their concerns about the representation of black women in media, such as music videos (Okolosie, 2014: 90). The activists have used hashtags such as #NotYourHoodOrnament to challenge these problematic portrayals of black women and to offer alternative perspectives on the manner women should be portrayed (Okolosie, 2014: 90). This highlights the fact that women's experiences of social media and their

engagement with social media activism is not uniform, but rather is shaped by a complex interplay of their various social identities (Okolosie, 2014: Zimmerman, 2017). Scholars argue that this is because online interactions are tied to people's offline lives which means people's social, political, and geographical contexts play a role in defining their online experiences (Galpin, 2021; Zimmerman, 2017).

2.2.2. STANDPOINT PERSPECTIVES

This research benefits from using standpoint perspectives because they "situate knowledge" in activists' experiences (Naples and Gurr, 2013: 24). Additionally, standpoint perspectives added value to this research because they allowed it to understand activists' unique perspectives about adopting social media that differed from other standpoints. Standpoint perspectives in conjunction with cyberfeminism and intersectionality are beneficial towards understanding the multifaceted and complex experiences of gender activists.

Mosedale (2014: 1118), argues that stand-point perspectives embrace the "social situatedness" of people, which is impacted by "various experiences of social marginality" and advantage. According to Jackson and Banaszcyk (2016: 394), the theory has often been viewed as an extension of Marxist theory because it emphasises knowledge is embedded in systems of power. This means marginalised groups with limited amounts of power have unique ways of interpreting the world around them in comparison to those in more privileged positions (Jackson and Banaszcyk, 2016; Mosedale, 2014). As a result, standpoint perspectives offered the study a useful framework through which to embrace the "voices of the marginalised" as an important source of knowledge (Gurung, 2020: 106).

Lewis and Hendricks (2016: 5), point out that "embodied experiences" have been crucial to the feminist movement because they help determine what people know, how they have come to know what they know, and who can be regarded as a legitimate knower. Standpoint perspectives therefore provide the epistemological basis for framing the expression, and constitution of political identities online. The social situated knowledge from the marginalised becomes key to understanding the "systems of power" women have to encounter in their daily lives which includes but is not limited to gender inequality, the effects of colonialism, and capitalism. (Goh, 2013; Jackson and Banaszcyk, 2016). Scholars argue that the effects of these systems of power does not simply lead to the marginalisation of women but gives them agency

to resist, which leads to a unique form of knowledge that can only be attained from them (Goh, 2013; Jackson and Banaszcyk, 2016; Mosedale, 2014). Gender activists must navigate the interplay of their social identities, while also challenging societal issues like sexism and patriarchy on social media (Goh, 2013: 1022). This navigation can lead to insightful perspectives about gender activism, informed by the activists' own experiences and standpoints.

2.3. COUNTER-PUBLIC THEORY

The theory of counter-publics allows the study to understand, how gender activists have used networked counter-publics such as hashtags, to create a sense of identity and solidarity towards the realisation of social justice goals. The theory is particularly important because social media has become a space from which gender activists articulate their oppositional perspectives and narratives.

Jurgen Habermas's book titled *The Structural Transformation Of The Public Sphere* (1989) has been crucial in advancing the study of the public sphere (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019; Jackson and Welles, 2015). The German sociologist in his analysis of the bourgeois class argued that the public sphere is an important space that allows for "rational dialogue" which places checks and balances on state power (Jackson and Welles, 2015: 2; Pecourt, 2023: 3). While Habermas's contributions about the public sphere are important, he mainly concentrated on the development and modernisation that occurred in Europe and the manner this impacted the relations between "civil society and the state" (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019: 10). He also focused on the role played by citizens who are men and own property, while excluding the experiences of groups such as women and people of colour (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019: 11; Pecourt, 2023: 2). These groups usually have unique experiences and histories when it comes to accessing and being involved in public sphere. The "exclusionary" nature of the public sphere as discussed by Habermas has drawn a lot of criticism from feminist scholars (Kassa and Sarikakis, 2022: 1745).

Scholars such as Nancy Fraser have been crucial in highlighting the German scholar's study of the bourgeois class and the public sphere does not reflect an opposition to power but is rather a reflection of the dominant masculine public sphere (Kassa and Sarikakis, 2022; Pecourt, 2023). This dominant public tends to have the power of universality whereby the values,

perceptions and discourses established in it are viewed as the norm, and anything that deviates from it is scrutinised (Warner, 2002: 88). Many South African women have often fallen victim to the exclusionary nature of androcentric public spaces that have "sexist attitudes," which propagate unfair "gender and cultural expectations" (Walsh, 2012: 1329). Scholars argue that there needs to be consideration given to counter-publics which act as "parallel discursive" spaces that are used by marginalised groups such as women (Fraser, 1990: 67; Squires, 2002: 446). These parallel spaces allow women to "invent and circulate" oppositional discourses and create their own interpretations about their "identities, interests and needs" (Fraser, 1990: 67; Squires, 2002: 446).

Fraser (1990: 68), highlights there are two main characteristics that describe counter-publics: they act as "spaces" where people can "withdraw" and group with others; and they "function as bases and training grounds" where "agitational activities" are directed towards the wider public. The use of social media amongst gender activists has become crucial in establishing (networked) counter-publics that produce "counter power" which challenges dominant institutions and establishes oppositional "values and interests" (Jackson and Welles, 2015: 4). An important way in which counter-publics emerge on social media is through the use of hashtags (Ademolu, 2023; Jackson and Banaszcyk, 2016). Okech (2021: 1025) highlights that during the #MenAreTrash movement women used the hashtag as a discursive space to speak about their experiences of gender-based violence and misogyny, which soon spread across South Africa. The naming of the hashtag was strategically made provocative so it acted as a counterhegemonic tool people cannot easily ignore but engage with (Okech, 2021: 1025).

Jackson and Welles (2015: 4) highlight that hashtags are an effective means of distributing alternative political views to the wider public because they can even reach audiences that were not necessarily seeking the information. This becomes useful towards galvanising the wider public in favour of gender-based causes and in some instances can lead to on-the-ground action. For example, #MenAreTrash had various individuals sharing their experiences and discussing their views about crimes against women which ultimately led to on-the-ground action in the form of the #TotalShutdownSA movement with the aim of demanding more accountability from the government (Okech, 2021: 1025). Hence, social networking platforms in comparison to traditional media, offer gender activists new possibilities and communication tools they can use to engage in socio-political discourse and reach audiences that would have been harder to access (Pecourt, 2023: 4). Gender activists have innovatively repurposed the traditional use of

hashtags by turning them into counter-publics that advance and demand social justice for women

2.4. CONCLUSION

The theories mentioned above offered the study useful frameworks through which to better understand the adoption of social media by gender activists. The chapter discussed network counter-publics which offer activists opportunities to group with similar minded people and agitate against wider society. These virtual spaces have become crucial points from which individuals can share their narratives and be heard by others in society. Cyberfeminism was also discussed because it provides a useful means of understanding how gender activists can merge their digital and offline identities in the fight for social justice. The theory also highlights that digital spaces have become intertwined with the offline world in a complex manner that offers women new opportunities in the fight against patriarchal tendencies. Lastly, intersectionality and standpoint perspectives were adopted by the study because they offer a means of exploring and understanding the subjective and diverse nature of women's experiences. They are useful towards appreciating the multiple identities that gender activists in South Africa can have.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. INTRODUCTION

South African women have for generations fought against a plethora of issues related to poverty, crimes against women and a lack of economic opportunities. Whilst the fight for social justice has been about gaining rights that protect women, it has also been about swaying the hearts of the public away from patriarchal tendencies/biases towards a more egalitarian society. As a result, gender activists have over the decades engaged with a number of media platforms such as television, radio and print to mount pressure on public officials for policy reform and to draw the public's attention to gender-based issues. As global society has changed under the influence of advancing media technologies, it has opened up new media spaces that gender activists can use to advance social justice movements. For instance, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) like social media have a number of functionalities which allow gender activists to recruit people into their organisations and mobilise towards social justice movements in ways that are innovative from the past.

Women and several other marginalised groups have increasingly used social media sites to create pages or groups that share crucial information about gender-based issues and share personal stories about social injustices. Individual forms of activism which involve self-motivated individuals striving for social justice goals through using their horizontal social networks have particularly increased. These individual acts of activism are taking place in an increasingly globalised world where various groups of people are interconnected, widening the spread and potential for social justice initiatives to reach a wider audience than was intended. Cammaerts (2015: 2), states that the "profound impact of network technology on society socially, economically and politically," has been suggestive of a radical shift through "a new era of information networks." This social media era has resulted in people living undistinguishable lives online and offline as social life becomes digitalised, with many people using digital platforms for day-to-day tasks. The fight for social justice is ever-evolving through the use of ICT technologies and gender activists have taken advantage of this 'new space' in conjunction with on-the-ground activism to advance their goals of equality.

There are a lot of seminal texts which contribute to and discuss gender-related dynamics in South Africa. Intellectuals such as Mamphela Ramphele and Shireen Hassim are some of the notable scholars who have contributed to topics centred around gender such as patriarchy,

gender-based violence, politics, race and class (Hassim, 2003; Ramphele, 1989). While the contributions of these scholars and others are important, they have not been centred around the emerging digital society which is accessed through social media. There has been a growing community of scholars such as Tamara Shefer and Herman Wasserman who have been providing crucial insights into the manner women in South Africa have made use of social media to advance their goals of social justice (Wasserman, 2018; Shefer and Hussen, 2020). This ever-increasing literature on social media usually focuses on the manner in which the platforms have been used to mobilise and organise during movements such as #Metoo (Puente *et al.*, 2021; Fatimatuzzahro and Achmad, 2022). This study aims to contribute to the growing literature on social media by not focusing on any particular gender movement. Instead, the research aims to explore the unique perceptions and experiences of gender activists based in South Africa. This will provide insights into the way African women have adapted to the complex and ever-evolving digital platforms and the impact of these digital spaces on their political and social lives.

Moreover, the research makes use of Cyberfeminism which offers a lens through which to understand the manner women have adopted digital identities which allow them to challenge patriarchal tendences and galvanise against dominant institutions that oppress them (Girsang, 2023; Paasonen, 2011). Many of the notable scholars that have contributed to the school of thought such as Sadie Plant, Trevor Milford and Donna Haraway have been from North America and Europe (Plant, 1997; Milford, 2015). This has resulted in scholars from the global north being at the centre of the school of thought while African voices have been left on the margins. By exploring the perceptions and experiences of gender activists based in South Africa, the study aims to contribute towards moving African voices from the margins to the centre of the school of thought. Gender activists based in South Africa have unique challenges and opportunities that differ from those in the global north, this makes their perceptions of the digital platforms crucial towards advancing the school of thought.

3.2. POINTS OF INQUIRY/ THE PHENOMENON IN QUESTION

3.2.1. SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS VARIED IMPLICATIONS

Numerous definitions of what social media is have been adopted over the years as the media platforms have grown in popularity and their communication functionalities have widened (Carr and Hayes, 2015; Hall, 2018: 165; Nau *et al.,* 2022). In some cases, scholars have mostly focused on social media as platforms for communication, by mainly highlighting their communication functionalities. To illustrate this point, Davis (2015: 1) states social media can be regarded as a number of "interactive internet applications" that allow individuals to "receive, create and share" their own personalised content. However, it is important to recognise that while social media platforms are subsets of media tools with communication features, they also have a social dimension. Carr and Hayes (2015: 51) argue that while the social engagement found on social media is different from the offline world, actions such as posting or tweeting offer a sense of "perceived interactivity" that is similar to the physical world. This 'perceived interactivity' offered by the communication tools found on social media allows for personalised forms of political expression and a sense of shared identity when people articulate the same views (Barassi, 2018; Bennett and Segerberg, 2015). For instance, individuals can share their views on a particular matter through hashtaging their posts while also contributing to the wider discussion with others under the hashtag theme.

Carr and Hayes (2015: 50) adopt a more comprehensive definition of social media which highlights the platforms' possibilities for self-representation. The scholars state that social media can be viewed as "internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others" (Carr and Hayes, 2015: 50). Carrigan and Fatsis (2021: 13) state that "social media fuels identity politics" because it has blurred the division between private and public life allowing people's private existence into public spheres of political and social life. The communication features found on social media have made it easy for people to share their personal experiences with a wide audience allowing them to contribute to social and political discussions. Due to this merging of the online and offline spheres, individuals are now more likely to engage with social and political exchanges online as part of their daily routines (Slavina, 2021: 87). This is due to the arguable "low economic and social resources" needed for engagement with public discussions on social media (Slavina, 2021: 87).

This engagement with socio-political matters on social media can be performed within what feels comfortable for individuals based on their "skills and preferences," including their "social and political" contexts (Slavina, 2021: 87). Zaid *et al*., (2021: 204) argues that the shift of society onto virtual spaces does not reduce the importance of individuals' offline identities but rather amplifies their ability to self-express their views and connect with others. In most cases, due to the "disinhibition effect," individuals are more open and honest about expressing their political and social views online than offline, allowing them to better engage in difficult conversations or express controversial opinions (Zaid *et al.,* 2021: 204).

The general advancement of I.C.T technologies such as social media and their growing communication functionalities have often been described using the term web 2.0. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) state that web 2.0 describes the phenomenon whereby the development and refinement of digital platforms including their content is not only done by software developers but has become a collaborative and participatory process which includes users too. Users assist in the development of web 2.0 by testing the changes made to the platforms and offering feedback to software developers. In comparison to web 2.0, web 1.0 had a one-way relationship between software developers and users. This is because it mainly had "read only" content on static web pages whose primary purpose was to deliver information to users (Tokgoz and Altin, 2022: 145). Tokgoz and Altin (2022: 145) argue that web 1.0 mainly allowed users to "search and read information" in a similar manner to a book or newspaper but with the added advantage of being widely available due to its "online presence." The development of web 2.0 has been viewed as a "new architecture of participation" allowing for the "co-production of information, social networking and rich user experiences" (Barassi and Trere, 2012: 1271). For instance, people can now actively interact on digital platforms through sharing "textual information, audio recordings, video material and pictures," allowing users to be greatly involved in the creation and "management of content" found on digital platforms (Sendall *et al.,* 2008: 3). The hope is, as communication becomes easier for people through social media, there will be more possibilities for political participation through public discussion and networking (Gerbaudo, 2012: 7).

3.2.2. SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SITE OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Social media activism will be regarded in this research as any form of action individuals or groups take to advocate for social or political change through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter (Yilmaz, 2017: 149). This research acknowledges and embraces the various forms social media activism takes because the manner individuals or groups of people express social media activism tends to be subjective and widely diverse (Murthy, 2018: 2). In some instances, social media activism can be mainly based on tweeting or posting about social issues which can profoundly contribute towards public discourse on a matter and in other scenarios, it involves more organisational activities such as recruiting participants for a cause and organising campaigns (Murthy, 2018: 2). All these forms of activism are important in advancing gender-based movements and highlight the manner web 2.0 technologies such as social media have empowered people to take on various forms of social and political action (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2014: 365).

In this study, political activism will be regarded as any action individuals or groups take to advocate for social or political change, which includes actions such as "supporting policy changes; contacting public officials; and engaging with political parties, campaigns and organisations" (Curtin *et al.,* 2010: 944; Martin *et al*., 2007: 78). Political activism is concerned with the manner individuals or groups utilise their agency to lobby for their interests, through a negotiation of power with the state and other dominant institutions (Drozd, 2015: 229). While political activism aims to challenge the status quo in society, it also involves working towards re-envisioning the world through establishing new ways people in society can live and interact with each other (Cammaerts, 2007: 217). Agency and internal motivation are important when engaging in political activism because it usually requires individuals to partake in actions that extend beyond "conventional politics" such as civil disobedience and engaging in marches (Martin, 2007: 20).

3.3. FORWARD LOOKING AND HOPEFUL ASPECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

3.3.1 MASS VISIBILITY IN THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE-CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

Political subjectivity is ingrained in the way people express their deeply embedded and socially constructed, personal and collective views about power structures (Martinsson and Reimers, 2020: 431). Hirblinger (2015: 706) argues that political subjectivity is expressed through society's everyday interaction with the limits set by dominant social structures and institutions such as laws and social norms. The development of political subjectivity is often associated with the concept of gaining a "voice," which makes people "visible" in the face of major institutions and emboldens them to speak on issues impacting them (Schramm *et al*., 2018: 247). Dumitrica (2020: 585) argues that when people voice their concerns or "speak up," it gains political significance in a democratic environment because it is a reflection of the impact "power structures" have on their lives, allowing people to share personal accounts about their self and to be "considered in the management of common life". The scholar further states that the lack of an opportunity to articulate one's voice has often been associated with oppressive and unjust political systems (Dumitrica, 2020: 585).

When gender activists use their virtual voices to become visible in the face of major institutions it can be referred to as the politics of visibility. Politics of visibility refers to "representational struggles" that form part of larger "collective" activities whose goal is to "expose power" dynamics with the aim of transforming them (Clark-Parsons, 2019: 3). This entails gender activists bringing attention to "taken-for-granted gender norms" that are prevalent in everyday life with the aim of having them "denaturalised and deconstructed" (Clark-Parsons, 2019: 3). Scholars argue that gender activists have often used discursive activism to make visible and challenge mainstream narratives which on a daily basis privilege some bodies while marginalising others (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Wilhelm, 2021). Activists have challenged dominant narratives by constructing and sharing new interpretations and perspectives about "oppressive experiences and systemic injustices" (Clark-Parsons, 2019: 4). For instance, by using frameworks such as intersectionality activists have exposed the complexity of marginalisation (Clark-Parsons, 2019: 4). Wilhelm, (2021: 107), argues that the "openness and accessibility" of digital platforms coupled with their communication opportunities has led to the "emergence of new discourses on feminity," which creates opportunities for women to enter

"discourses and online spaces previously reserved for men," allowing them to challenge misrepresentations.

Furthermore, when gender activists engage in the politics of visibility through posting various forms of content and engaging in online debates on social media they make South African gender-based issues more visible which includes but is not limited to the lack of access to healthcare, sexual violence and unemployment which worsened during the covid-19 pandemic (Gouws, 2022; Seidu, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2022). Subramanian (2015: 73) argues that gender activists often bridge the gap between "private and public spheres" of social life, because "individual struggles" often belong to "a larger patriarchal structure." Scholars vouch for the power of social media to shed light over gender-based issues in society particularly through the use of hashtags (#) which have become a prominent means of making experiences of inequality visible and public. For instance, the #MeToo movement began with individuals sharing their personal experiences of sexual violence but later led to wider public discussion about gender-based violence (Sharma, 2017; Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015). Scholars argue that social media provides activists with sites to share potentially "viral information" about social injustices to a wide audience, which has a high likelihood to sway public opinion (Cortes-Ramos *et al*., 2021; Poddar, 2020). Hence, gender activists have used social media platforms to express their virtual political voices which they use to "bridge the gap between private and public" spheres of life (Subramanian, 2015: 73). They have done this through sharing their personal stories online in a politicised manner, turning such stories into sources of knowledge that the wider public can learn from (Subramanian, 2015: 73).

3.3.2. THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACY AND EQUALITY

More so, the sharing of various forms of content related to gender-based issues can have a positive impact in the attainment of gender equality in South Africa and the overall development of democracy. The act of multiple voices speaking out on social media in contrast to traditional media has often been referred to as the "digital democracy" (Hong and Nadler, 2015: 93). Hong and Nadler (2015: 93), highlights that information technologies allow various individuals to share, access and produce online content that improves information diversity, resulting in increased attention being paid to marginalised groups. When people interact with a variety of political discussions through expressing and sharing political opinions online, they

develop their political subjectivity and potentially participate more with democratic institutions (Matthes, 2022: 9). This is because the wide sharing and interaction by citizens with political opinions online, enhances the amount of political information or know-how they have, which increases the chances of offline political action, improving democratic participation (Matthes, 2022: 10). Nguyen *et al.*, (2022: 188) argue that information is an important means of influencing any "political reality," and social media has become an important means of influencing its dissemination which impacts civic consciousness.

Social media platforms promote (digital) democracy because they allow for what is regarded as "many-to-many" information sharing which differs from the traditional "one-to-many" structure which permitted a few mainly the "elite and traditional media" to communicate with wider society on media platforms such as the Television or radio (Tucker *et al.,* 2017: 49). The use of the "many-to-many" structure allows for the "horizontal" sharing of information among the general public through their "peer-to-peer networks" quite instantly (Tucker *et al.,* 2017: 49). In most instances, when gender activists engage in the sharing of information on social media through expressing their political realities, they can shape how people reflect on social and political issues in society which can be beneficial towards the attainment of gender equality (Tucker *et al.,* 2017: 49). Hong and Nadler (2015: 93) highlight that through their communication possibilities social media platforms have offered multiple opportunities for representation to marginalised groups such as women, which widens their opportunities for political engagement in society. Therefore, by using social media to engage in the digital democracy, gender activists are able to share their political views with the wider public who may not be aware of their causes or movements. The digital interactions can also lead to the creation of social relationships or networks which assist the activists in advancing their social justice goals (Matthes, 2022: 9).

3.3.3. THE GENERAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON COLLECTIVE MOBILISATION AND COMMUNICATION

The adoption of social media has played a complementary in the development of traditional mobilisation strategies (Anduiza *et al.,* 2014: 750). To illustrate this point, the #RUReferenceList movement began as online phenomena on X with women sharing their experiences of "violent masculinity" and gender-based violence (Gouws, 2018: 4). The aim of the movement was to shed light on issues related to toxic masculinity through using the hashtag

but as the women's demands were side-lined by the university, the movement led to mass demonstrations and protests (Gouws, 2018: 4). Scholars argue that the low communication costs and the opportunities for direct communication between activists and the wider public, have made it more efficient and easier to disseminate movement related information (Theocharis *et al*., 2015; Tsatsou, 2018). This allows activists to expose the wider public to a large breadth and diversity of "mobilising information" which increases the chances of people engaging with gender-based movements on-the-ground (Tsatsou, 2018: 2).

Gender activists have often used hashtags to take advantage of the communication possibilities found on social media. Activists have used hashtags to share their calls to action to the wider public such as during the #RememberKhwezi and #RUReferencelist movements, amongst others (Naidoo and Buiten, 2022; Maluleke and Moyer, 2020). The hashtags become virtual meeting points where various individuals can voice their concerns, connect with others with similar views, while also strategizing their on-the-ground action towards the realisation of a common goal (Khalil and Storie, 2021; Reneses and Bosch, 2023). Hashtags used by gender activists as calls to action are usually inclusive so they can incorporate people from various segments of society (Naidoo and Buiten, 2022: 61). It also makes it easy for individuals to contribute their own political and social experiences to the movement through their personal action frames which diversifies the voices and standpoints in the movement (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Brunker *et al*., 2020).

Scholars state that using inclusive calls to action can lead to higher engagement because people are more likely to feel motivated to engage with movement-related posts that speak directly to them or their lived experiences (Bouvier, 2022; Lee and Lim, 2019). The inclusive calls to action will motivate individuals to engage and participate in the sharing of the movement-related posts with their social networks, which results in the movement growing as more people engage with the mobilisation information (Trott, 2019: 34). Greijdanus *et al*. (2020: 51), highlight that virtual connections or networks are quite crucial in the sharing of protest-related information "before, during and after" social movements, this is because they ultimately help with getting people on-the-ground and with coordinating people as protests are taking place. Hence, the communication affordances offered by social media allow for the simultaneous sharing of protest-related information to multiple people, making it easier for gender activists to mobilise for on-the-ground action.

3.3.4. NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The arguments raised by Mancur Olson are insightful towards understanding the role and importance of organisations in movements. Mancur Olson identified a few issues associated with collective action and found that individuals do not always work together just because they share a common goal (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 749). Olson highlights that in large groups where individual efforts are not as noticeable, "rational individuals" will free ride off the efforts of others because it is more "cost-efficient" to avoid contributing if you can benefit without putting in effort, this is also known as "weak individual commitment in large groups" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 749; Mirbabaie *et al*., 2021: 5). Additionally, these "atomistic individuals" may avoid engaging in collective work because if few people join the cause their efforts will be in vain (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 749). In order to solve these issues, organisations play a crucial role in providing leadership structures and creating mobilisation strategies that guarantee individuals put in effort towards attaining the common goal (Khalil and Storie, 2021: 3044). The growing use of social media platforms has allowed for the emergence of various types of organisational structures that make use of digital communication affordances.

Theocharis *et al.* (2015: 204) states that traditional organisations rely on formal membership, and are managed through "formal and hierarchical institutional leadership," which results in the organisation playing a central role in recruiting, organising and mobilising people towards a cause. The central organisation usually sets the action plan, and provides a framework for working or collaborating with other groups or organisations (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Theocharis *et al.,* 2015). The central organisation acts as the unifying force which brings people together under a common cause and raises the necessary capital or resources needed for the achievement of a political or social goal (Theocharis *et al.,* 2015: 204). In addition to traditional organisational structures, they are hybrid organisations which relax the need for formal membership by using the communication and networking possibilities found on social media such as horizontal social networks like friend groups and online forums (Bennett and Segerberg, 2005: 374).

While hybrid organisations maintain leadership hierarchies and play a central role in mobilising the resources needed for collective action, they tend to offer flexible membership, and have inclusive collective goals which people can engage with and contribute to through exchanging ideas on social media (Bennett and Segerberg, 2005; Gerbaudo, 2012). The relaxed need for

membership is usually because hybrid organisations make use of "online citizen action," and aim to collaborate with horizontally linked groups on social media which are affiliated to a similar cause as the organisation (Chadwick, 2007: 284). This makes such organisations more open and accessible to people with various identities and backgrounds allowing them to deal with gender issues from various perspectives. Additionally, hybrid organisations have an added advantage in comparison to traditional organisations and this is because they take advantage of the networking potential found on social media allowing them to mobilise and co-ordinate a large amount of people affiliated with the organisation during movements (Chadwick, 2007; Rennick, 2013). Hence, social media use has facilitated the formation of fluid organisational structures which has led to wider collaboration and representation of voices in the management of organisations. This allows for a diverse amount of perspectives to be incorporated towards finding solutions to gender issues in society (Theocharis et al., 2015: 2045).

3.3.5. SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIRTUAL COUNTER-PUBLICS

The growing shift by gender activists into online spaces can be credited to the increasing formation of virtual communities that offer a sense of belonging and solidarity. Activists have increasingly made use of online spaces to network and socialise with like-minded people (Mino-Puigcercos *et al.,* 2019: 124). Mino-Puigcercos *et al.* (2019: 124) argue that virtual interactions on social media have been known to create a "sense of political and spiritual belonging", and this can potentially lead to offline action in the form of on-the-ground activism. One communication tool that has been highlighted by scholars as allowing for this virtual grouping and agitation against wider society is hashtags (such as #BelieveSurvivors) (Kuo, 2018; Siemon *et al*., 2024). Gender activists have often adopted hashtags as networked counter-publics where they can discuss issues and "negotiate new meanings" to normalised social norms and values that are oppressive (Trott, 2021: 1130).

The hashtags are often used within particular socio-cultural meanings making them relatable to their users (Kuo, 2018: 496). This makes it easier for individuals to not only understand the conversations under them but also contribute towards their development (Kuo, 2018: 496). The hashtags act as "conversation anchors" which makes it easy for people to participate in discussions because all they have to do is share a comment or post which includes the hashtag and the social media algorithm will group them (Jackson and Banaszcyk, 2016: 395). The

conversations contributed under hashtags can be impactful as they allow women and other marginalised people to share their experiences of disempowerment and find solidarity with others without needing any previous interaction with them (Siemon *et al*., 2024: 5). Siemon *et al*. (2024: 5) state that such expressions or storytelling can "elicit collective empathy" leading to action as was evident during #MeToo movement. Jackson and Banaszcyk (2016: 395) argue that the conversations under hashtags are also easy to retweet or reshare on platforms such as X or Facebook making it easy for them to circulate outside the initial person's social network potentially leading to virality.

3.4. SHORTCOMINGS OF ONLINE ACTIVISM

3.4.1. SOCIAL MEDIA AND ISSUES PERTAINING TO DISINFORMATION.

The wide availability of social media platforms and their ease of access has made them convenient for the consumption of news and information in general (Shu *et al*., 2020: 1). This is because social media platforms offer a wide range of alternatives to the information provided by traditional media such as news channels, due to the efforts of numerous individuals and organisations that produce their own opinions on public matters and in several cases "rework" the information provided by traditional media (Lengel and Newsom, 2014: 91). Such efforts have resulted in a growing audience base that actively relies on social media as a source of information which influences their views and actions as opposed to traditional media (Lengel and Newsom, 2014; Shu *et al.,* 2017). This has led to the decentralisation of information production which works in favour of gender activists because they have greater power when it comes to influencing public opinion.

However, whilst the sharing of information from a wide range of sources creates space for "information pluralism" from not only gender activists but minority groups too, it can lead to the circulation of "fake news, poor quality and meaningless information" (Lyubareva and Rochelandet, 2021: 118). This can have disastrous effects on the authenticity of "news ecosystems" as people are left believing what is not true, affecting how they "interpret and respond to real news" (Shu *et al.,* 2017: 22). The sharing of information on digital platforms is often times not done by professionals such as journalists and such individuals are motivated by various "political and financial goals" leading to problems related to "info-tainment" (information mainly for entertainment) and biased misinformation that can be emotive (Lyubareva and Rochelandet, 2021: 119; Shu *et al.,* 2017: 22). Therefore, information

pluralism is important in the attainment of social justice for gender-based movements but the production of information by multiple social media actors can have negative impacts on the production of fact-based news and the legitimacy of traditional news outlets.

3.4.2. SLACKTIVISM AND SELF-SATISFACTION

There has been growing debate among scholars about the impact of social media use on collectivity and offline action (Brimacombe *et al*., 2018; Subramanian, 2015). The term "slacktivism" which is a grouping of the terms "slacker" and "activism," has been used to describe the manner by which people's engagement may appear high on social media but their "actual identification with the movement can still be low" (Glen, 2015; Mirbabaie *et al*., 2021). According to Marti *et al.* (2020: 108), this is because online activism tends to be "low-risk and effortless" in nature, which causes people to evade offline engagement that is generally more effortful in nature and demanding.

Additionally, people can become content with exercising their political agency on social media because they fulfil their "personal desires to participate" in causes without needing to commit more effortfully (Alodat *et al*., 2023; Zohouri, 2020: 179). This leads to a sense of political apathy because people feel they have already done their part when they reshare movement-related posts or like them (Alodat *et al*., 2023; Zohouri, 2020). Such actions also make people feel good or pat themselves on the back while they avoid real engagement that can advance causes such as committing resources or time (Glen, 2015: 81; Subramanian, 2015). Greijdanus *et al*. (2020: 50), argue that the effects of such low engagement with movements can hinder the development of productive and effective action on-the-ground.

While some scholars have argued that slacktivism is unproductive and does not lead to meaningful social change, others have highlighted that there is potential for "low-threshold actions" to lead to more meaningful activism in the future (Wilkins, 2018: 24). Zohouri (2020: 180) argues that slacktivism can be viewed as the first step that is taken by people who are new to activism. This is because while the amount of effort and time the individuals invest is low, they are still engaging with movement-related material which gives them "activism experience" (Wilkins, 2018: 54; Zohouri, 2020: 180). This experience can gradually lead to "participative efficacy beliefs" which is the belief they can make a difference through their own actions and by engaging in collective action (Wilkins, 2018: 54; Zohouri, 2020: 180).

Therefore, slacktivism can be viewed as a way of getting familiar with social or political movements which can gradually translate to more "substantial levels of engagement" when people feel more strongly about the issues being driven by the cause (Zohouri, 2020: 180).

3.4.3. THE DIFFICULTY OF CONVERTING TEXT-BASED ACTIVISM TO PRAXIS

Milosevic-Dorcevic and Zezelj (2017: 113) state that some scholars perceive online activism as being less socially influential because people are "isolated and physically separate from each other." This becomes an issue because political subjectivity tends to be "collective in genesis" meaning the separation of social media users by space and time can be counter-productive towards the creation and the formation of communities or organisations that can physically engage in on-the ground action such as marches or protests (Markham, 2014: 93). Additionally, the potential of social media to promote widespread movements and develop political subjectivities is restricted by the unequal access to digital spaces. For instance, due to issues pertaining to connectivity and infrastructure development people in rural areas do not have the same access to the internet in comparison to people who lives in cities (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2014: 367). This can be detrimental towards engaging in online activism because its effectiveness is greatly linked to people's "exposure and sharing of political information" and when people cannot access this information, they are less likely to benefit from any social or political movement initiated online (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2014: 367). Therefore, on the one hand scholars view social media activism as a "force for societal change, empowering individuals to unite" (Malik, 2022: 3029). On the other, some scholars are sceptical about the potential of social media activism to translate into on-the-ground action because it does not reach all segments of society that may be impacted by the issues discussed online.

3.4.4. CENSORSHIP AND PRIVATE INTERESTS

While social media sites allow for a wide range of discussions, the ability of social media companies to censor what can be posted remains an issue. This censorship varies over a range of issues such as what is appropriate attire or nudity and freedom of speech (Kelly, 2023; Mauro and Schellmann, 2023). What tends to be deemed appropriate attire or speech by social media

companies is often based on the interests of advertisers who rely on "old fashioned depictions of the body" and norms (Are, 2022: 2003). For instance, social media platforms like Facebook have censored the use of words such as miscarriage, infertility and period which are usually important towards discussing women's health (Kelly, 2023). Nurik (2019: 2887) highlights that the censorship tends to particularly impact women who are marginalised based on factors such as race and "other intersectional identifiers." According to Are (2022: 2003), shadow-bans have been used on gender activists and countless other women to hide videos or photos on social media sites "deemed as inappropriate without deleting them." These shadow bans effectively hide activists' posts in a manner that curtails their freedom of speech with the effect of reducing and in most cases completely limiting their ability to attract new audiences for their causes (Are, 2022: 2003).

Additionally, Feezell *et al.* (2023: 222), state that social media companies use two methods to moderate content posted by individuals which includes: computer algorithms that identify and "flag posts" with particular "language;" and users who report posts they believe to have violated community guidelines as set by the social media platform. Nurik (2019: 2887) states that content reported by users is often rife with "inconsistencies and subjectivity" which disproportionately affects marginalised groups such as women. The moderation done by algorithms has also come under criticism for gender biases and the objectification of women's bodies by unfairly targeting posts made by women (Mauro and Schellmann, 2023). Most content moderation on platforms owned by Meta is done by humans, who more than often have subjective views or biases which impact their work (Feezell *et al.,* 2023; Nurik, 2019). Nurik (2019: 2886), argues that these content moderators usually abide by "conventional views," due to fears of "alienating dominant interests," resulting in hegemonic norms setting the standard of what is regarded as permissible content or discourse. This results in the regulation offered by platforms such as Meta upholding a "hegemonic social order" which reflects "offline social dynamics" that disadvantage women (Nurik, 2019: 2886).

3.4.5. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND ISSUES PERTAINING TO ONLINE HARASSMENT.

Women in South Africa have been the victims of numerous cases of physical abuse and bullying which have shifted onto online spaces (Chukwere and Chukwere, 2017: 9983). According to Smith (2015: 176), women are often subject to cyberbullying which can be defined as "intentional aggressive acts" performed by a "group or individual" through the use

of digital devices or the internet. In addition to cyberbullying, women are also subject to trolling which are actions meant to provoke, irritate, or socially harm people (Pathak, 2023; Sanfilippo *et al.,* 2017). The crucial differences between cyberbullying and trolling is the 'intention to harm' and the 'targeted nature' of the attacks (Pathak, 2023; Smith, 2015). Due to the frequency of the online harassment women are subjected to in comparison to men, the term cybermisogyny has often been used to describe the phenomena (Daniels, 2021: 125; Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2015: 163). Daniels (2021: 125) highlights that cybermisogyny is visible online through acts of "sexual harassment and stalking." It also includes threats of rape or death (Daniels, 2021: 125).

It is usually easy for trolls and cyberbullies to harass women because they can hide their identities by remaining anonymous (Daniel, 2021; Pathak, 2023). According to Lopez *et al.* (2019: 205), this leads to disinhibited actions that would not be acceptable in the offline world such as "harsh criticism, rude language, hatred and anger." Additionally, online harassment tends to spread very quickly due to the "unrestricted access" and ease of communication offered by social media platforms (Pathak, 2023: 195). The impact and spread of this harassment can have disastrous effects on women with low self-esteem and those who do not know how to cope well or defend themselves when being bullied (Mabika, 2022: 91). Pathak (2023: 195) argues that cyberbullies take pleasure in preying on these weaknesses "in order to oppress women." This results in cyber-bullying having terrible effects on women's well-being and can lead to "mental health difficulties, low-self-esteem, and drug abuse" (Makori and Agufana, 2020: 53). It also attacks women's "identity, dignity, autonomy," and can lead to suicide in the worst-case scenario (Lopez *et al.,* 2019: 206; Makori and Agufana, 2020; Patahak, 2023).

Due to the effects of online harassment, gender-based conversations are at times subject to silencing from individuals who vehemently disagree with the discourse (Daniels, 2021; Lopez *et al.,* 2019). This can lead to the distortion or dismissal of the message being shared by women (Daniels, 2021; Lopez *et al.,* 2019). Trolls can be "dozens to hundreds of people" challenging gender-based discourses and they usually challenge individuals who are speaking about their personal experiences of patriarchy or toxic masculinity (Mantilla, 2013: 565). Such trolling can have negative effects on the ability of gender activists to express their political subjectivities through their virtual voices (Mino-Puigcercos *et al.*, 2019; Daniels, 2021). This is because the hostile behaviour exhibited by trolls can ultimately limit women's freedom of speech and their right to equally access public life by restricting their ability to use virtual public spaces (Pathak,

2023: 195). Therefore, whilst social media platforms offer opportunities for women to advance social justice goals, they can also act as sites of hate and violence that undermine such objectives.

3.5. SOUTH AFRICA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

3.5.1. THE HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA AND ACTIVISM

Historically in South Africa, activism has been a means of effecting socio-political reform. It is particularly important for South African women, due to their historical lack of access to "institutions of state power," making civil society their primary means for "political change" (Britton and Fish, 2008: 5). Under Apartheid women were subject to a number of patriarchal laws which disadvantaged them. For instance, the migrant labour system deprived women of many employment opportunities in urban areas, resulting in single mothers having to fend for themselves and their families in the homelands which were largely inarable whilst men worked for long periods in the cities (Andrews, 2001: 2). In addition, Ndinga-Kanga, (2020: 24) highlights that the homelands offered little to no government service delivery such as water and electricity, making many non-white citizens reliant on "civil society and religious institutions" for help. The lack of arable land for self-sustenance and poor government service delivery made it tough for women to fend for their families and in general exist in the homelands. This history of oppression facilitated an environment for activism against the government as a way of attaining social justice and freedom.

Furthermore, as a result of the tyranny imposed by the Apartheid regime a plethora of women-led organisations and movements took a stand against the state. Hassim (2006: 59) highlights that during Apartheid women created organisations such as the United Women's Organizations (U.W.O) and the Natal Organisation of Women (N.O.W) which through grass-roots mobilisation challenged issues such as "human rights violations and unemployment." The organisations were based on "mandates from women," which linked political concerns with the "removal of laws and customs that acted against women" (Hassim, 2006: 59). Laber (1999: 30) highlights that the development of women's political consciousness and organisation resulted in their challenging of Apartheid legislation such as the pass laws in 1913 for a number of "sporadic years," which resulted in the law being withdrawn. When the law was returned in the form of "pass books" during the 1950s, more women participated in the protests compared to men who were equally impacted (Laber, 1999: 30). As is evident from the organisations and

movements mentioned above, South Africans have historically partaken in activism as a means of challenging oppressive and dominant institutions. The changes brought by social media have the potential to amplify and transform the manner activism has been historically done in South Africa. Digital platforms offer a 'new arena' through which South African women and other victims of inequality can fight for equality today.

3.5.2. ACTIVISM UNDER A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

The legacy of Apartheid still shows its effects in a number of ways in South Africa. The digital divide exemplifies this point. This phenomenon has often been used to describe the unequal access and distribution of ICTs based on factors such as poverty (Bornman, 2016; Lembani *et al*., 2020; Alozie and Akpan-Obong, 2017). However, according to Lembani *et al*. (2020: 72), this definition tends to be simplistic because it only differentiates between the "haves and have-nots." The digital divide is a complex issue that needs to be placed within the context of individuals' "resources and capabilities" (Kwami, 2020: 3). Bornman (2016: 268) similarly argues that the connection between "education, income and internet usage" determines the manner people adopt ICTs. Such factors impact South Africa negatively where policy initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between inter-racial dynamics have assisted the black African middle and upper classes but the lower classes still feel the effects of poverty, unemployment and poor literacy (Loss *et al*., 2024: 1). These social imbalances mean the more affluent find it easier and affordable to interact with digital platforms compared to poorer communities.

Furthermore, it should be noted, the impact of the digital divide tends to have a gender dimension that impacts women more than men (Alozie and Akpan-Obong, 2017; Bornman, 2016; Kwami, 2020). The "digital gender divide" has been blamed on "patriarchal structures and socio-cultural" perspectives about women's roles in society which results in men playing a leading role in the adoption of ICTs (Kwami, 2020: 4; Alozie and Akpan-Obong, 2017: 141). ICT adoption also tends to favour men because they are more involved in the "decision-making and leadership" of social media platforms (Alozie and Akpan-Obong, 2017: 141). This means men are more likely to be involved in the designing of the platforms making them biased towards "men's worldviews" (Alozie and Akpan-Obong, 2017: 141). For instance, most of the chief executive officers (CEOs) of social media companies are men such as Mark Zuckerberg (Meta), Elon Musk (X) and Sundar Pichai (Google).

In spite of the digital gender divide, South African women have continued to fight under the nation's new democratic dispensation as a way of combatting a plethora of patriarchal and sexist tendencies. This makes an exploration of South African women's political subjectivities and activism on social media important, as it offers insights into the ever-evolving nature of activism in Africa. Cammaerts (2015: 2) argues that even the "sceptics" have to "acknowledge" the benefits for "disadvantaged groups" such as women to "self-represent" on social media.

Social media platforms have allowed for female discourses to expand globally particularly in South Africa leading to the spread of "multiple female truths and realities" (Jain, 2020: 4). The adoption of social media by South African women can be associated with the growing international trend among gender activists who use social media to create virtual solidarity groups and start 'public' conversations about issues impacting them. Lewis and Orderson (2012: 17) state that in South Africa there is a "culture of silence" that is perpetrated against the violence women face, giving such forms of abuse a form of normalcy. Ureta *et al.* (2021: 2), suggest that the growing co-operation between gender activists through digital platforms such as social media, beneficially allows for a broadening of public matters and the impact of civil action. For example, according to Dlakavu (2016: 102), a protest occurred at the University of Cape Town (UCT) called #RapeAtAzania, which aimed to hold a student accused of rape accountable for their actions. The gender activists "took South Africa and the world with them" through their activism, by posting messages, videos, and images on sites such as X and Facebook (Dlakavu, 2016: 102). Cortes-Ramos *et al.* (2021: 1), states that social media amplifies activists' communication efforts with the public because it gives them control over both "direct and bidirectional dialogue." This kind of dialogue coupled with the sharing of multimedia allows for informative conversations online that led to better "awareness and involvement" from the public about gender-based movements (Cortes-Ramos *et al.,* 2021: 1).

In addition to using online communication affordances to advance their offline activism, South African feminists are increasingly challenging patriarchal tendences present in society which discredit feminist narratives (Okech, 2021: 1027). Machaba (2023) states that South African women are subject to both "institutionalised patriarchy, gender-based violence and silencing in a number of spaces of their lives." The emergence of virtual spaces on social media has become an "effective tool," for women to share "stories of violence" and challenge patriarchal tendencies (Machaba, 2023). Van Der Heyde and Bengu (2022) argue that gender-based social media campaigns have become an effective means of swaying public opinion on issues such as gender-based violence and in overall "unequal gender norms." They credit this to the ever-

blurring line between what is considered the online and offline world in society (Van Der Heyde and Bengu, 2022). Hence, whilst South African women have historically fought against gender-based violence through offline activism, there has now emerged a new 'world,' within which they have a voice to fight for equality.

Moreover, as highlighted, South African women are part of a growing global feminist phenomena which uses social media to raise awareness and hold the perpetrators of violence against women accountable. For instance, the #Metoo movement started primarily online as a movement to expose the sexual violence women are subject to, but quickly spread to the streets of numerous nations across the globe (Malik, 2022; Jain, 2020). Notably, the protests grew in scope through social media sites such as X, by using communication tools such as hashtags, which allowed for a spill-over of the movement across the world. Jackson (2018: 33), argues "young feminists actively use information sharing, education and community building as important tools in progressing online feminism" causes. South African women can be seen as joining this growing online feminist community as they have used social media to fight for accountability.

To illustrate this point, Maluleke & Moyer (2020: 886), state the RUreference list protests occurred when a "reference list" of "alleged rapists" was published on Facebook but later went viral on X, at Rhodes university. Miño-Puigcercos *et al*. (2019: 130), argue that social media can be used to share women's private experiences in the public domain, raising wider awareness whilst, creating a sense of community for the victims. In this protest many of the participants were against the aforementioned 'culture of silence' surrounding issues impacting women (Mail & Guardian, 2018). The protests were used by the students to raise public awareness on issues impacting them whilst shifting the blame and shame from the victims to the perpetrators of the abuse (Maluleke & Moyer, 2020: 886). Hence, as women in South Africa fight against toxic masculinity in society, they have become part of a growing global trend that finds social media crucial towards mobilising and effecting change.

3.5.3. THE FEMINISATION OF POVERTY AND ITS IMPACT IN SOUTH AFRICA

The feminisation of poverty does not only refer to the number of women who are in poverty compared to men but to the "severity of poverty and the greater hardship women face" when trying to overcome poverty for themselves and their children (United Nations Development

Programme, 1997). Olufemi (2000: 223) highlights that women have a higher likelihood to be in poverty compared to men and the poverty-rate among women-headed families is higher in comparison too. It is important to highlight that while this issue does not affect all women in South Africa it does have an impact on a large segment of the population. Such socio-economic imbalances have resulted in South African women making up a large proportion of the protests held in urban townships which aim to tackle issues such as the lack of housing, clean drinking water and electricity (Benjamin, 2007: 176). These gender imbalances present "in the home, family and mainstream economy," can be credited to a culture of patriarchy that normalises them (Bentley, 2004: 256). To illustrate this point, women earn less than men and have a harder time getting "employment opportunities in the mainstream economy," making it harder for them to break out of poverty (Bentley, 2005: 256). Hence, these challenges can potentially hinder gender-based activism on social media amongst poorer women leading to the over-representation of more affluent communities' concerns.

3.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the complex nature of social media and the manner the platforms provide opportunities for individuals to express their political subjectivities through their virtual voices. Gender activists can use their voices to make public and politicise issues that were once restricted to the private spheres of social life. This allows them to draw attention to issues they face in their day-to-day lives and expose the need for social change. The virtual voices are also crucial because they allow women to engage in the digital democracy. This gives them the opportunity to engage in public discourses and influence public matters. Additionally, social networking platforms facilitate the development and construction of alternative communities which allow women to connect and share their experiences. These communities also act as social networks that can be used to mobilise individuals during protests and other on-the-ground action. However, social media platforms have a number of issues that gender activists have to deal with. Some of the issues gender activists face include online harassment and the digital gender divide which limits the ability of gender activists to fully utilise the potential of social media. In spite of the challenges posed by these issues, social media platforms still have a great amount of potential gender activists can utilise in their fight for social justice.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters have explored the complex and multifaceted nature of social media use in relation to gender activism. Digital platforms are entangled with the offline world with the disadvantages and advantages of both being reflected in the other. Gender activists must negotiate this complex but inextricably linked terrain whilst striving for social justice and equality. The study found that while online harassment and the digital gender divide affect the progress of gender activism online, these issues are outweighed by the positive developments in political engagement and community building. The data analysis chapter draws upon the literature reviewed and theoretical frameworks to analyse and understand the role of social media in contemporary gender activism. This chapter is divided into two main themes namely the impact of social media use on political subjectivity and political activism. The analysis for this chapter is based on the accounts and experiences of six women, whose names will be replaced with pseudonyms in compliance with the Rhodes University ethical guidelines. The participants are:

Lola is an older white woman who has acquired extensive knowledge and experience through her engagement with gender activism.

Lexi is a white undergraduate student who is relatively new to gender activism but is passionately engaged.

Knight is a black woman who works for a non-profit organisation that advocates for gender-based issues.

Rocky is a black PhD student who has been engaged in local activism in Makhanda.

Black is a Zimbabwean national living in South Africa who has been involved in gender activism in Makhanda and Zimbabwe for several years.

Daisy is a postgraduate Botswana national who engages in gender activism in South Africa

4.2. POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

While people still use 'spatial publics' such as community centres to voice their views, they have also adopted network publics found on Instagram and Facebook which amplify their political voices due to their added communication functionalities and greater audience reach (Cammaerts, 2015; Rai, 2017). As such, these two publics co-exist as sites for the expression of political subjectivities (Tierney, 2013: 7). Network publics and their ease of access offer women great potential to engage in political conversations with the wider public making them a democratic space that can be used to challenge traditional power structures and amplify the voices of women that have been historically "excluded from mainstream media and political debate" (Lukamto and Carson, 2016: 192). The participants to this study found social media platforms beneficial towards sharing their views on numerous matters related to gender, which were often inspired by their personal experiences and concerns about societal problems. The matters included sexual and gender-based violence, the effects of toxic masculinity in their day-to-day lives and other issues.

Godrej (2011: 114) highlights that often times the power of patriarchy stems from stories shared in society which are based on sexist ideals that are repeated to control and judge the actions of women through making them feel inadequate or treat them as sexual objects. Gender activists usually produce counter-narratives through politicising their personal experiences, allowing them to challenge the way society treats female bodies and reveal the impact and limitations of dominant institutions on their lives (Cahill, 2007; Kruks, 2001). Scholars argue that rich insights can be gained when women share their standpoint perspectives on social and political issues because they usually negotiate with complex systems of power such as masculinity or patriarchy in their everyday lives which gives them unique knowledge (Lewis and Hendricks, 2016; Jackson and Banaszcyk, 2016). In most cases women are not only interested in understanding their own positions in relation to systems of power but try to understand that of their oppressors because this knowledge is essential towards the way they navigate their lives (Johnston *et al.*, 2011: 273). This makes women's political subjectivities expansive and have great detail about the socio-political dynamics in society because they have to negotiate with numerous issues which are often overlooked such as poverty, gender and sexual violence, poor healthcare access and other social injustices, (Gordon and Collins, 2013; Johnston *et al.*, 2011). As a result of facing all these issues women can provide a holistic understanding of the world we live in.

The participants used social media platforms to express their views in a variety of ways, such as posting or sharing content, commenting on posts, and engaging in online discussions. Some of the participants made use of creative approaches in the articulation of their political views through using poems. Khilnani (2021: 136) states that poems distributed on social networking sites such as X and Instagram are known as instapoems. The poems tend to be sensitive and emotional in nature which when shared to the wider public can evoke an emotional response from readers (Khilnani, 2021: 136). This is because instapoems shared by gender activists are usually "confessional poetry" which is used to express deep thoughts and experiences (Miller, 2019: 4). Taiwo (2011: 216) states that these poems reflect a poet's life and are used to invite others to engage with the conversation that is taking place within the poem. Activists have used these poems to challenge societal limitations placed on their bodies and identities such as being relegated stereotypical gender roles like domestic work and being forced to adhere to harmful Western beauty standards (Miller, 2019: 4). They have also used them to discuss issues which are often ignored in society such as sexual violence, abuse, and menstruation, allowing activists to bring visibility to them (Khilnani, 2021; Miller, 2019; Taiwo, 2011). Daisy mentioned the importance of posting poetry on social media as a way to raise awareness about sexual and gender-based violence in South Africa. She highlighted that her poems usually reflect issues she has faced, and her desire to make a difference, Daisy says:

> "*I started writing poetry in 2016, and most of my poetry is surrounded by gender-based violence, mental health, and the like, It helps me, kind of heal people that I don't know. It has helped me spread the word and the like. So yeah, it has actually had a very huge impact on my activism and it's also, um, helped me in terms of like meeting people like this, you know, spreading the word, building awareness… It* (social media) *also helped me in the sense that I'm able to find more ways and see different ways on how I can be more impactful, because you know the pages all over, they are conferences being done, those kinds of things…"*

Similarly, Knight reflected on how starting conversations online and expressing herself through poetry had become an important aspect of her activism, Knight states:

> *"I come from a strict household, so I'm that 20 something old that's at home, I need permission to leave the house and what not. So I thought to myself what am I going to do? What impact am I going to have from within my room…I mean right now I'm sitting in my room I'm like, what I'm going to do from being at home and I believe that social media is a tool if used properly. So essentially, after I wrote my first poem. I just felt that I needed*

to share it… I think my motive or my, my motto is just continue speaking. I never stopped speaking, essentially. So through poetry, now through conversation…"

Rogan and Budgeon (2018: 6), argue that social networking platforms are present in women's everyday lives and are easily accessible through phones, laptops or tablets on-the-go, providing women with constant opportunities to share their political experiences. This empowers gender activists as political subjects because they can effortlessly incorporate their personal experiences of social life into "everyday talk about politics" found on Facebook groups and under hashtags on X (Lokot, 2018: 806). Activists can benefit from engaging with everyday conversations centred around politics because it is unstructured dialogue which is vital towards helping others understand or analyse political information which can be gender related (Johnston and Searing, 2005: 270). These political conversations tend to be sensitive towards issues faced in society making them crucial discussions that shape what the public will regard as the common good on various matters including issues pertaining to gender-based policies or laws (Sun *et al*., 2022: 215). The sharing of gender related information on network publics can influence people's civic consciousness making them aware of the realities women face, and their own ability to shape or help change them (Brites *et al.,* 2017: 399). According to Lexi, posting her views online has afforded her the opportunity to participate in a number of discussions. Lexi uses these discussions to share her perspectives and engage with others who may disagree with her views, Lexi states:

"*I've also gotten to a lot of really, like a lot of really good conversations because of my social media activism and because of how loud I'm about stuff. So a lot of arguments, but a lot of like I don't mind arguments either, a lot of like whatever discussion is happening ....*"

Smith and Bressler (2013: 457) argue that online conversations are advantageous because they have a real-world impact and are more comfortable to engage in compared to offline discussions which are marred by social imbalances such as class, gender or age that are clearly visible when people interact face-to-face. It is also easier to engage online because people can make their accounts anonymous allowing them to express themselves without restraint (Smith and Bressler, 2013: 457). It is important to highlight that while online discussions beneficially open up political spaces by allowing people with different views to interact, some individuals who engage in online discussions are not trying to have constructive dialogue but are simply doing so to challenge and argue with people who do not share their views (Cho *et al*., 2018: 4). This is an issue because while gender activists try to use virtual dialogue to change the attitude

of the public around gender issues, these senseless arguments can derail the purpose of the conversations. Nevertheless, despite the risk of senseless discussions, activists have used online discussions to have meaningful conversations centred around gender-based violence and other issues. In essence, the activists are using their virtual voices to advocate for social change and create a space where dialogue and understanding can take place.

4.3.THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL ACTIVISM

4.3.1. THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON MOBILISATION

The participants who had taken part in on-the-ground activism found social media to be useful in getting people involved in offline action. The participants had particularly found platforms such as X and Facebook to be useful in spreading awareness and getting people engaged with gender-based movements. The ease at which mobilisation information can be distributed widely on social networking sites facilitates a type of mobilisation known as crowd-enabled connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 749) This type of mobilisation gains momentum and strength from the participation of individuals who join together *en masse* on social networking platforms to advance a social movement (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 749). While the individuals participating in crowd-enabled connective action may not know each other personally or be affiliated with any particular organisation, they are still able to come together and form a collective through the use of social media (Bennett and Segerberg, 2015; Khalil and Storie, 2021). Scholars argue that social media platforms become an organising agent through the use of communication tools such as hashtags which allow people to group and take action around a shared cause or issue while reducing the need for traditional, formal and hierarchical organisational structures (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Trott, 2019).

Kavada (2018: 108) state that digital platforms have led to the rise of more "flexible, decentralised, and individualised forms of activism," which have complemented how collective action occurs. In comparison to social movements which rely on the efforts of hierarchical organisational structures for mobilisation, crowd-enabled connective action allows for a grassroots approach in which individuals take a more active role in shaping the movement (Trott, 2019; Brunker *et al*., 2020). In crowd-enabled connective action self-motivated individuals create personalised action frames related to the movement and share them with others in their horizontal social networks (such as Facebook friends or X followers) who then co-produce and share the content leading to the movement growing (Bennett and Segerberg,

2012; Brunker *et al*., 2020). This allows individuals to politically express themselves in a personalised manner whilst growing the movement through sharing movement related information (Bennett and Segerberg, 2015: 375). One way in which crowd-enabled connective action has occurred is through the use of hashtags which offer a discursive space where movement related information can be shared (Ta'amneh and Al-Ghazo, 2021: 11).

Rocky a participant highlights how social media use was beneficial during the #RUReference List and #FeesMustFall protests, she says:

> "*There's been days where social media has done quite a lot. I mean, during Fees Must Fall and during RUreference list… and various movements. We saw social media come to people who didn't know people, and people were being arrested, people were donating money, people were bailing people out. People were using their voices for the power of good to bail people out, to get people out, to shed light on a particular thing…the more people speak up, I mean multiple people around the world have hit the streets and are protesting in one town or another but all because someone was like hashtag, we need to stop this and people met up somewhere (protesting)…*"

Another participant had also found social media to be important towards the distribution of movement related information, Lola says:

> "*I was posting lots of things on social media at that stage, on Facebook, because the hashtag reference list* (#RUReference list) *was a thing, and it was trending…* She further states: "*I think mostly it* (social media) *was for passing information on. I know that during protests, I was constantly telling people what was happening because I didn't want it to get lost and buried here because Grahamstad is out of the way and it's only Rhodes University* (in the town)*, and I was putting it out there."*

The literature highlights that social media facilitates the distribution of communication tools such as hashtags which make it easy for activists who are geographically scattered to communicate and distribute mobilisation information (Liu *et al*., 2016; Lokot, 2018; Valenzuela, 2013). The effectiveness of hashtags in facilitating gender-based movements has led to the term hashtag feminism being used to describe the manner gender activists often use hashtags as "safe spaces" they can virtually group to discuss social issues impacting them and "galvanise public support" (Reneses and Bosch, 2023: 586). Hashtags act as parallel discursive spaces that are separate but co-exist with the dominant public through which gender activists can practice citizen journalism bringing attention to issues that are taken for granted, and allowing them to push for social change (Jackson and Welles, 2015; Gouws, 2018). For

instance, during the #MenAreTrash movement women made use of the hashtag as a virtual space they could share their experiences of "sexual violence, harassment and sexism" while criticising the manner society has normalised and failed to provide solutions to gender-based issues in South Africa (Reneses and Bosch, 2023: 586). Gouws (2018: 8) in her study of #EndRapeCulture states that due to the criminal justice system failing many women in South Africa, hashtags offer survivors of sexual violence a space they can express their need for justice while finding "validation" and support from a wide audience who make them feel understood. While hashtags improve the visibility given to issues women face in society, they also allow activists to criticise and challenge the manner "misogynistic aggression and gender violence" is narrated in society (Linabary *et al*., 2020: 1829). As gender activists criticise dominant narratives on such issues, they usually offer new ways of narrating them which differs from the views of people in powerful positions such as policy makers who may advance their own political motives with disregard for the lived experiences of women (Linabary *et al*., 2020: 1829).

The hashtags make it easy for women to share their experiences of injustice and shape public discourse because anyone can contribute their perspectives to the topic or issue under discussion by simply hashtaging their content or message (Righler-McDaniels and Hendrickson, 2014: 175). When people hashtag their posts, social media algorithms group all the posts under the hashtag theme making it easy for the public to discover and engage with the information (Ta'amneh and Al-Ghazo, 2021: 11). This gives the public a holistic understanding of the issue because the hashtag space becomes a form of virtual library that is full of women's posts which highlight their shared experiences, giving women's individual experiences collective meaning and importance.

The public's ability to access women's experiences is important towards galvanising public sentiment which contributes towards on-the-ground action. Ransan-Cooper *et al*. (2018 :638), argue that emotional habitus is a useful concept which adds a "structural layer" towards understanding and analysing the way that movements occur. When women share their emotions and stories of social injustice, it intensifies the emotions of the individuals already involved in the movement while potentially spreading the sentiment to the wider public (Dunn, 2004; Goodwin *et al*., 2004; Ransan-Cooper *et al*., 2018). This leads to the establishment of a shared emotional habitus that motivates people to engage in on-the-ground action like protests. (Ransan-Cooper *et al*., 2018; Goodwin *et al*., 2004).

Affective bonds are crucial to collective action because people are more likely to view the "costs of participation" in movements as low if they feel they are spending their time on something they like or are passionate about (Goodwin *et al*., 2004: 419). In most cases, collective action relies on the development of emotional connections through emotions such as loyalty, trust, frustration and hope, to create a sense of shared identity, and to encourage people to take action on-the-ground (Dunn, 2004; Goodwin *et al*., 2004; Ransan-Cooper *et al*., 2018). This is because people do not simply take part in on-the-ground action for "material interests" but do so to assist those they feel an emotional connection to, and to hold those they perceive as wrong accountable (Goodwin *et al*., 2004: 418). Therefore, emotional sentiment is important towards galvanising public support and leading to action on-the-ground.

4.3.2. THE GROWTH OF THE GENDER ACTIVIST COMMUNITY AND NEW FORMS OF ORGANISATION

The participants stated that they believe the adoption of social media has positively grown the gender activist community. They felt that social media platforms have made it easy for individuals to join and engage with the gender activist community in their own unique ways. People in society have increasingly gravitated towards engaging in movements in their own unique ways due to the impact of neo-liberalism which over the past few decades has influenced society by increasingly making individual agency and political expression important (Dascalu, 2014; Semenzin, 2022: 120). Modern society has promoted what can be regarded as "do-it yourself biographies" where individuals under the threat of economic sanctions are pushed to "self-organise" making them accountable for their own decisions and political agency (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 24). Foucault's ideas regarding neoliberal governmentality highlight that, society has increasingly focused on individual responsibility, and encourages individuals to pursue their own interests and goals, which contributes towards making people prioritise individual forms of political expression (Ramey, 2015; Rose, 1999; Rose *et al*., 2006). While neo-liberalism has encouraged individuals to focus on self-expression and self-determination, the adoption of social media has made it easy for people to self-express their political views in movements and hybrid organisations.

Knight highlights how social media has made it easy and comfortable for people to engage in gender activism, she says:

"*Absolutely, Absolutely. I think, yes, and I'm saying absolutely because even I, myself, before calling myself an activist, it seemed like a very intimidating title*." She further says: "*So, I think that social media has definitely given people um, an entryway, like, you know, they thought that they couldn't get into the room, they didn't have room at this table, but this social media has allowed them in their own comfort, in their own way...*"

Another participant, Daisy highlights that while social media has made it easy for individuals to engage in activism, they are still organisations that work towards advancing the cause too, she says:

"*Yeah, actually, I think without social media, it's not that we wouldn't necessarily have activists, but probably not as many. Um, and I'm saying this in the sense that some people don't like to be in the limelight. So activism is not just me speaking up and saying, I'm fighting for gender based violence. No, it's also Women for Change, South Africa, you know, having that page as a form of activism, you know, because in a sense you're speaking, but you're not in the limelight. We don't know who this person is, but they're doing, they have such a great impact, you know, so definitely without social media, where would we be really*?"

The views of the participants highlight that while social media has complemented the growth of the gender activist community by making it easy for individuals to engage in it, organisations still play a crucial role in growing the community. Non-profit organisations such as Women for Change, which is mentioned by Daisy, blend traditional organisational structuring with the communication affordances found on social media (Bennett and Segerberg, 2015: 374). Such organisations are known as hybrid organisations which use digital social networks to collaborate with groups and individuals that share similar social justice objectives (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Cristancho and Anduiza, 2013). Puente (2011: 35) states that this can be credited to the use of horizontal communication which has made it easy for gender activists to collaborate and share resources with each other on social media. In hybrid organisations individuals create and share personal action frames that "fit their own beliefs and personal experiences" but offer a sense of shared collective identity with their social networks which includes the organisation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2015; Trott, 2019). For instance, gender activists can share personal stories about the impact of gender discrimination or inequality in their lives through tweeting or posting which can resonate and connect with the experiences of others who have faced similar experiences. This allows activists to politically express themselves while having their participation in the organisation or movement reinforced through

the recognition and engagement offered by others who also produce their own personal action frames (Bennett and Segerberg, 2005; Cristancho and Anduiza, 2013).

Additionally, social media has complemented the growth of the gender activist community because it is easy for women to find online gender-based communities or organisations which share similar views as them, something that could have been hard to find in their geographical locations (Schuster, 2013: 17). Youngs (2004: 189) argues that women have often faced "double domestication" within private spheres of social life and national spheres of public life. This is because women have often been "unequally present or absent" when it comes to decision-making in "national and international settings," spaces that are often "a bastion of masculinist principles and influence" (Youngs, 2004: 189). Youngs (2004: 189) states that digital platforms allow women to create spaces where they can engage with each other while making socio-political contributions to "local, national, and international issues and processes, as individuals or collectively." Jackson (2018: 34) argues that these online gender communities usually cater for a diverse intersection of identities which makes it easier for people from diverse social backgrounds to engage in them. While these virtual gender-based communities are usually comprised of individuals from various backgrounds, they have a strong sense of solidarity based on their shared circumstances of marginalisation and commitment to end social injustices (Jackson, 2018; Swank and Fahs, 2017). Hence, social media has made it easy for activists to create gender-based communities which can be global in scale allowing them to share their experiences, resources and expertise with each other and advance social justice goals.

4.3.3. THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Participants such as Knight highlighted that social class imbalances limit the adoption of social media platforms in South Africa. South African women from low social classes often face limitations when it comes to accessing the internet (Khumalo and Saurombe, 2022; Ojo and Segone, 2022). The digital gender divide often becomes worse due to the prevalence of low literacy rates which impacts women's capabilities when it comes to accessing digital spaces (Bornman, 2016; Elliot and Earl, 2018). In South Africa, the lack of capabilities is often complicated by the lack of ICT resources and education at many schools in rural areas and townships which worsens the effects of the digital divide (Dlodlo, 2009: 169). The lack of ICT

education deprives individuals of the skills needed to engage in the "current information age," limiting their ability to participate in the social interactions and collaborations found on the internet (Dzansi and Amedzo, 2014: 341). Black shared the same views as Knight, she believes poverty is an issue limiting women's access to digital spaces, Black says:

> "*I also think that it's tied to the social issues. There's a lot of poverty, and so you know, there are a lot of social issues in that it's the last thing that people would attend to...*"

The negative effects caused by the digital divide can in many ways restrict women's access to the social, economic and political dimensions of life (Ibrahim *et al*., 2021; Roux and Dalvit, 2014). Digital platforms are important tools women can use to get a job or start e-businesses, they offer educational opportunities through online courses which improve literacy, and they offer digital health services (Hilbert, 2011: 479). A lack of internet access or literacy means women will not have the opportunity to access all these benefits (Hilbert, 2011: 481). Additionally, limited access to the internet among women has a negative impact on their political participation and engagement (Gray *et al*., 2016: 328).

A study done by Hendricks and Olawale (2022: 7), highlights that digital technologies are crucial for South African women's empowerment because they encourage political engagement among disadvantaged women and promote women's participation in democratic processes. A lack of access to ICTs will have a negative impact on gender activism and social justice movements because less women will be able to use their virtual voices to share their unique standpoint perspectives about the impact of social and political issues in their lives which can limit the attention given to the issues or discrimination they face in their locales. Lola expresses the same concerns as the other participants, but she mentions some issues that merit discussion, She states:

> "*Well, who can afford a smartphone? who gets to read online activism? Not the vast majority of the poor…social media is great in many ways, but we mustn't pretend that it's universal…Yeah, you almost look, where's the money? …*"

Whilst being connected is generally expensive for most they are bigger social institutions and structures at play that cause the situation. Keating *et al*. (2022: 2), highlights that while many people in South Africa own mobile phones which is over 80% of the population, only 40% of those phones can connect to internet. This is a result of the expensive nature of mobile phones for many in society. The expensive nature of mobile phones is worsened by the high cost of mobile data which is particularly an issue because South Africa is a "mobile centric nation"

(Keating *et al*., 2022: 2). The literature highlights that issues pertaining to affordability and accessibility can be partly blamed on the South African government (Sutherland, 2021; Gilwald, 2005). This is because while parliament is involved in the creation of legislation and reviewing of appointments made to the Independent Communications Authority in South Africa (I.C.A.S.A) which issues licences and regulates the telecommunications sector, the engagement has not been as critical in comparison to parliaments in the global north leading to a lack of public oversight and accountability in relation to data prices (Sutherland, 2021: 7).

Additionally, in comparison to the United States of America where they are a multitude of telecommunication providers, South Africa has a limited amount of telecommunication providers namely MTN, Telkom, Cell C, Vodacom, and Rain which limits the choices available to women from low socio-economic groups (Easy Leadz, 2024; Mothobi, 2018; Statista, 2024). As a result of the limited amount of telecommunication companies, there is a lack of incentive among the companies to engage in competitive pricing which can beneficially lead to lower data prices that are affordable to low socio-economic groups (Mothobi, 2018; Sutherland, 2021).

The literature also highlights that while urban areas have issues pertaining to connectivity and affordability, the experiences of individuals in rural areas makes these problems even more visible (Alao *et al*., 2017; Lembani *et al*., 2020; Oyedemi, 2012). Rural populations often earn way less than people in urban areas, and many of these areas lack basic internet connectivity and infrastructure which results in many rural populations being left behind when it comes to adopting digital spaces (Ngwenya *et al.,* 2023: 2). Black echoes these views when she states:

> "*Yeah, it's really affecting how people engage and how people become aware of social media activism. If we look at Makhanda for example, or the Eastern Cape in general, it's more rural you know, and um you actually find that most people don't have access, um yeah to certain, they don't have Wi-Fi spots, they don't have all these things…*" She also states: "*…most would probably describe it as a luxury, you know, engaging in feminism. Oh, that's a luxury, you know, because of the social issues that we currently face in South Africa…*"

Black highlights an important issue when she says the expensive nature of data and the effects of poverty turn online gender discussions or feminism into a luxury preserved for the better-off in society. Gray *et al*. (2016: 328), states that "cyber-pessimists" believe ICTs have made the "poor poorer" because they lack access to the potential offered by ICTs while the elite have

gained more power and wealth. There is fear that as women who are better-off engage with social media more, it may lead to the overrepresentation of their concerns and worldviews online which can negatively impact the recruitment of low socio-economic class women into virtual gender-based communities (Elliot and Earl, 2018: 701).

The new digital frontier in the fight for social justice has "hybrid conditions of potential" which differ locally and globally based on women's "material and social conditions" (Youngs, 2004: 188). The diverse impacts of these social and material conditions, and the implications of the digital divide has drawn criticism onto cyberfeminism from scholars who highlight that the school of thought tends to be dominated by Western perspectives that negate the experiences of women from the Global South. Toto and Scarinci (2021: 138) state that such conceptions tend to be based on the "wrong assumptions" or rather western-centric conceptions about third world women's "actual living environments." The scholars state that many women in the third world do not have access to internet technologies and may not have access in the near future (Toto and Scarinci, 2021: 138). Everett (2004: 1279) states that while there are issues such as the "technology gender gap," there still exists a lot of technophilia in cyberfeminism. Such positive outlooks on the potential of digital technologies are because global north feminist discourses are usually centred around the views and contributions of mostly white middle-class women whose privileged position differs from the majority of African women (Wasuna, 2018: 273).

These socio-economic differences usually marginalise and exclude the experiences of South African women who historically suffered from racial policies that have led to issues such as the feminisation of poverty (Bentley, 2004: 247). In South Africa female-headed households are more likely to be reliant on social grants and be poorer in comparison to male-led households (Kehler, 2001; Parry and Gordon, 2021). This is worsened by the gendered nature of the economy whereby women are more likely to be paid less than men and hold low-skilled jobs (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024; Parry and Gordon, 2021). Additionally, women make up a large segment of South Africa's rural population and are more likely to be unemployed in comparison to rural men (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024; Kehler, 2001). These dynamics have a crippling effect on the ability of many South African women to engage with digital technologies. Cyberfeminism needs to account for the digital gender divide because it is entwined with the history of South African women and reflects the socio-economic conditions that shape their lives (Toto and Scarinci, 2021: 138). An intersectional perspective

should be adopted as a way of appreciating the diverse issues women face and finding solutions to them.

Nevertheless, there are solutions that were identified and adopted by gender activists as a means of bridging the gap to those who cannot afford to constantly be online. Lola has adopted a few ways of coping with these issues through her understanding of the social media platforms. Lola states, “so because Facebook is free, that's the medium that I'll use if I want to get a message out …” Lola’s efforts indicate that gender activists are learning to adapt their communication strategies to try reach marginalised socio-economic groups. Lola has learnt to communicate and cope by using social media platforms that have free access when people do not have data. As the researcher, I have through my own experiences found platforms such as Facebook to be free on my network provider MTN, this allows me to access the platform with limited use (without images) but still interact with the discussions and text-based posts found on the site. Lola’s efforts reflect the manner gender activists are adapting their efforts to the South African context through using their understanding of the population and the digital landscape. Such coping mechanisms allow them to spread their messages to populations which have an unequal access to social networking sites.

4.3.4. PUSHBACKS AND HARASSMENT ON SOCIAL NETWORKING PLATFORMS

Cyberfeminism highlights that while cyberspace offers women opportunities for the attainment of social justice, it still remains a highly gendered space (Gillis, 2007; Mohanty and Samantaray, 2017). Many aspects of interacting in the offline world including the negative ones such as bullying and threats of violence are replicated on social networking platforms (Chukwere and Chukwere, 2017: 9983). The emancipatory potential of social networking sites needs to be balanced with the acknowledgement that such platforms also harbour people who target and disrupt the development of activists’ counter-publics which progress social justice causes (Lopez *et al*., 2019: 205).

TROLLING

The participants had all experienced trolling in one form or another through pushbacks or harassment. The difference in most of their accounts was the severity of the pushbacks or harassment. Cuklanz (2023: 5) argues that gender trolling can be understood as an extension

of the "misogyny" that is already present in "the wider historical culture." A study done by D'Avanzato (2022: 33) found that the harassment South African women face online is rooted in issues pertaining to "socialisation and the legitimisation of violence in society" which has normalised the behaviour. This highlights that the prevalence of gender trolling on social media is a reflection of larger social issues such as patriarchy which are adapting to digital spaces (Cuklanz, 2023; D'Avanzato, 2022). Lexi stated that she has faced a lot of pushbacks when she posted about gender and sexual violence, she also says the following:

> "*…I get a lot of that. I think I used to get a lot more when I commented on, when I used to get in Facebook fights in the comments with people, which I'm not doing anymore cause I'm protecting my peace (laughs). But um yeah, I mostly, I'll really engage with someone if they are in my dms um, when they reply to my stories or if they comment something on my post, which I think maybe is like, I don't know, needs to be talked about. I usually private message people or they private message me and we'll chat about it, and it doesn't always end well, I won't lie and it doesn't always end with us being on the same page, but I do get to say my say…*"

Rocky's experiences also illustrate the impact of trolls on gender-based movements. She says the following:

> "*The Twitter trolls and the male Twitter trolls all the time, every day, yap, yap, yap, blah, blah, even on TikTok, sometimes I just watch people going back and forth, and harmful masculinity, and some guy comes, women this women that. It just happens a lot, that's unfortunately, that's the, the sad truth actually… when issues of gender and sexuality are involved in discussion, the uncomfortable, problematic, hypermasculine, I don't know anything about this, but I'll have an opinion, we'll jump onto it…*"

Trolling is usually disruptive or even abusive in nature with the intention of disturbing discourse through acts such as commenting or posting counter-narratives (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017: 1337). In this instance, Lexi takes a strong stance regarding her views and does not shy away from debating with individuals who disagree with her. Her experiences illustrate that the articulation of counter-narratives is not a comfortable process because it usually entails challenging naturalised worldviews that are often masculine in nature and are supported by some people in society (Jackson and Welles, 2015; Warner, 2002). Sharing women's stories of gender and sexual violence can challenge dominant masculine narratives that focus solely on individual responsibility while often overlooking broader societal issues like sexism and

patriarchy (Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). Kapse *et al*. (2023: 63), highlight that trolls are usually not sympathetic to women's stories because some of them lack the ability "to internalise and understand the emotions" being shared. Nevertheless, it is crucial for women to react and cope well when trolling occurs so they reclaim power and oppose patriarchal attitudes that lead to trolling (Sun and Shen, 2021: 1).

CYBERBULLYING

While trolls aim to provoke and disrupt, cyberbullying tends to be unique from trolling because it involves intentional attacks on a person repeated over time with the purpose of causing some form of harm (Pathak, 2023; Sanfilippo *et al.*, 2017). Some of the accounts shared by the participants showcase the manner digital spaces intersect with the offline world resulting in a form of hybrid bullying that can be very hostile. When asked if she has faced any pushbacks or bullying online, Knight discusses her experience of posting her first poem on Instagram which was her way of speaking about being a victim of sexual violence. The accused perpetrator and his friends did not take it lightly and this resulted in her being bullied and harassed in multiple ways. Her negative experiences are also a result of her being the spokesperson of a gender based non-profit organisation which makes her the victim of attacks due to her Television appearances. Knight states:

> "*I'm not a provoked person, but just also just spiritually, God just said speak child, so I did, and since then, that's been the thing and, um, after that, I received death threats…I'm gonna burn your house, you know, commit suicide, you know, like, I've received all these things, people told me to die again, somebody in the presence of my predator when I was out, I think we were at a Roman's pizza, somebody said out loud, do it to her again, rape her again, all these different things*" She also states "… *people used to circulate my number plate of the Mercedes I used to drive. My house address, people would come by and take pictures of my house and, um, people will follow me in the mall and point at me, you know…*"

Scholars highlight that cyberbullying attacks women's sense of dignity and self esteem, which can ultimately limit their access to public life, stifling their political engagement (Lopez *et al.,* 2019; Makori and Agufana, 2020; Pathak, 2023). The literature reflects Knight's experiences, she says that due to the hostile nature of the attacks she spent a year indoors only leaving when forced to by her friends or families. The threats of physical violence she endured can be psychologically devastating particularly due to the prevalent and persistent problem of sexual

violence in South Africa in the form of rape, which means such threats cannot be taken lightly (Amner, 2022; Gouws, 2022). Threats of violence against South African women are also condoned by "gender-based customs and traditions" which reinforce such "abusive practices." (Sundani *et al*., 2022: 34). This can lead to a sense of impunity among perpetrators who usually face little social sanctions for their actions. It is crucial to highlight that they have been legal milestones reached in South Africa against cyberbullying through the adoption of the Cybercrimes Act 19 of 2020 which offers legal recourse and increases law enforcement regarding the issue (Legal Wise, 2022). The law criminalises acts of violence conveyed through electronic messages and the sharing of intimate images without consent such as nude images (Legal Wise, 2022). While there are a limited number of studies which assess the impact of the legislation in reducing the prevalence of cyberbullying, some sceptics believe that the lack of social support and awareness about the law may limit its impact (Sundani *et al*., 2022: 34).

Nevertheless, the threats experienced by Knight highlight the negative trajectory bullying can take as it can often resembles criminal-like behaviour (Powell *et al*., 2020: 201). Individuals such as those who bullied Knight, often vehemently disagree with women's views or narratives and try to silence them or distort the message they are sharing (Daniels, 2021; Ureta *et al.,* 2021). It is in essence an attack on women's freedom of speech through using heinous threats of sexual violence (Pathak, 2023: 195). Therefore, the type of attacks endured by Knight are a unique form of harm which combine threats of physical violence with cyberbullying. Such threats impede on gender activists' freedoms by silencing their political voices and imposing barriers to their engagement in social and political life.

4.3.5. ROAD TO ON-THE-GROUND ACTION

A significant phenomenon identified by the research was the sheer lack of motivation among people to participate in more effortful on-the-ground action. This is an important consideration because in the journey towards gender equality on-the-ground action is a crucial means of driving social change by directly challenging dominant institutions. Engaging in action on-the-ground is a crucial means of "following through" with the demands made by movements and guarantees that they go beyond just being expressions of socio-political views that do not lead to any "meaningful social change" (Smith *et al*., 2019 :183).

Skoric (2012: 79) highlights that the occurrence of slacktivism in relation to social media activism is not unique to the internet era but should be understood as the continuation of a phenomena from the pre-internet era, when people would minimally engage in movements through wearing "t-shirts or rubber wristbands, and using political bumper stickers" that support a movement, without more effortful or committed engagement. In essence, social media forms of slacktivism can be understood as the emergence of a phenomena that was already occurring in the offline world. Some of the participants faced issues of slacktivism when trying to get their acquaintances on-the-ground, and others highlighted it was a dilemma they faced themselves. Lexi pointed out how she has often avoided offline interactions or engagement because she is content with her social media activism, a dilemma she says she has now worked on. Lexi states:

> "*Um I think I've found that it's really easy for me. As I said like it's really easy for me to avoid having conversations with people in person because I have gotten my stance like so on blast on my socials…*"

Black highlighted the fact that she has faced problems when trying to push for offline action. She feels people are active online but slack when it comes to on-the-ground action. Black says:

> "*I feel like people are very active, people are very, you know, they volunteer and all. They'll say, we're going to do this, you're together, this spirit. But when it comes to the actual ground, it's different and I feel like that difference in energy affects the progress of things*."
> She further states: "…*people are very good at being active on social media*."

The views shared by the participants reflect the literature which argues that it is important to understand why slacktivism occurs in virtual spaces and what motivates people to have limited engagement in movements nowadays (Zohouri *et al*., 2020: 179). As more people interact and spend their lives on virtual platforms, social media sites have become important ways to publicly demonstrate their beliefs and values to others, which can be as simple as using profile pictures related to movements so it seems they are paying attention or are engaged in the movements (Johnson, 2021; Zohouri *et al*., 2015). Scholars argue that slacktivism is often times a way of signalling one's values or a means of making an impression on others who share similar beliefs, without taking concrete action such as through committing resources or time to advance the cause (Lanuza, 2015; Zohouri *et al*., 2020). For instance, an individual can like the page of a non-profit organisation which aims to combat gender-based violence so they feel like a good person and make their virtual friends or followers view them in a positive light while not contributing money or volunteering in the organisation's initiatives. Zohouri *et al*. (2020:

179), highlight that people often use social media to create "online personas" that are superficially aligned to movements. Therefore, slacktivism can be self-serving forms of political engagement which are often ineffective and detrimental to the establishment of productive connections and action related to gender-based movements (Christensen, 2012; Greijdanus *et al.*, 2020: 50).

While most of the participants highlight that the lack of on-the-ground action is due to people being content with engaging with activism on social media, a different perspective was shared by Knight. Scholars argue that women's standpoints offer unique outsider-within knowledge particularly in South Africa where women have freedoms entrenched in the constitution but often face a lot of marginalisation in various aspects of their social and political lives (Collins, 1990; Collier, 2023; Kehler, 2001). Knight provides insight into the topic of police violence which she blames for the lack of on-the-ground action in gender-based movements, she says:

> "*As much as we want to participate in these protests and fights and stuff, not fights, protests, unfortunately we can't always be there… It's not going to be beneficial for each of us to be there, you know. We see what occurs when, um, there was another protest…when somebody who was just walking was a bystander. I think he was shot, and he didn't make it, if I'm not mistaken…This just happened to be a bystander who was in the crossfire of what meant, was meant to be a peaceful protest and he was, I think he was walking to work but the police shot him and that was what, recently...*"

Roberts *et al.* (2017: 3), states that during Apartheid policing had a violent reputation, the transition to democracy saw the government try to regulate and restore public confidence in the manner police treat the public and handle protests. While policing has been regulated under democratic principles, there have been a number of issues related to the way police control crowds during protests particularly the use of violent measures such as firearms (Breakfast *et al.,* 2019: 115). Scholars argue that police crack downs on protests have often been brutal and repressive due to the excessive use of force leading to serious injuries or deaths such as during the Marikana massacre in 2012 where 35 individuals lost their lives (Roberts *et al*., 2017; Breakfast *et al.,* 2019). Gender-based protests have often been faced with violent repression from the police through mass detentions and the use of force in form of stun grenades, water cannons and firearms which have resulted in serious injures (Majola, 2020; Mogoatlhe and Letsoalo, 2019). The threats of violence from the police can deter gender-based activists from participating in on-the-ground activism while making social media activism a more attractive and less risky option. This creates a tension among gender activists between the desire to effect

change by being on-the-ground through protests and the need to protect themselves from violence.

4.4. CONCLUSION

The analysis found that social networking platforms have a significant impact on gender-based activism in South Africa. Social networking platforms offer gender activists virtual spaces where they can share their views and make gender-based issues more public than they may have been otherwise. The adoption of social media by gender activists has also created new opportunities for mobilisation through the use of hashtags which distribute calls to action and act as virtual meeting points. The growing popularity of virtual meeting points has led to the emergence of digitally mediated organisational structures which exist alongside traditional organisational structures. These digitally mediated organisations benefit from the communication affordances found on social media and allow for a more fluid membership structure which makes it easy for people to engage in gender-based causes. While it is evident that gender activists have benefitted from adopting social networking sites, it is crucial to acknowledge that there are some caveats associated with adopting the platforms. The adoption of social networking platforms is complex and requires a balancing of benefits and risks. This is because a number of social issues that are present in the offline world are prevalent on social media which includes bullying and harassment. Additionally, engagement on online spaces is not equitable across society due to the impact of the digital divide. The digital divide also has a gender dimension in the form of the digital gender divide which means not all women benefit from the gender-based initiatives and communities found on social media. Nevertheless, social media remains an important tool gender activists can use in the fight for social justice and for advancing gender equality.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The main aim of this research was to explore gender activists' perceptions of social media as an emerging tool for activism, recognising its nuanced and multidirectional impacts. The research adopted a qualitative methodology and used in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore the various experiences of gender activists who have made use of social media activism in South Africa. The study made use of Counter-public and Cyberfeminism theory. As sub-components to Cyberfeminism the study made use of Intersectionality and Standpoint perspectives. South Africa is a nation with women from various socio-political and economic backgrounds which made Intersectionality and Standpoint perspectives crucial towards understanding the manner activists' identities and perspectives intersect and interact on social networking platforms. Cyberfeminism allowed the study to understand the manner gender activists have adopted social media in their fight against social structures and norms that are harmful to women and how the platforms have empowered women by giving them a platform to articulate their views. Additionally, Counter-public theory assisted the study in exploring the manner gender activists are creating virtual spaces where they can express their views, challenge dominant narratives and connect with other individuals who share similar views as them.

The research explored the manner social media assists women in developing their political subjectivities. The use of virtual voices on social networking platforms can be seen as the development of political subjectivity which allows women to share their political and social views about the impact of dominant and hegemonic institutions in their lives. Virtual voices are empowering and provide gender activists with a sense of political agency which is important towards advancing their social justice goals. While virtual voices are important towards the articulation of political subjectivities, they are also a crucial part of engaging in the digital democracy because they allow women to discuss public issues and contribute towards decision-making in society. Moreover, the research explored the manner social networking platforms have been used to create digital communities that provide safe spaces where women can interact and provide support to each other. These spaces come in many forms such as groups, pages, or hashtags. They are also used towards mobilising for protests and other on-the-ground action. While social networking platforms have various benefits they have to offer, they are also some risks and challenges that gender activists have to negotiate. Activists in South Africa face a lot of gender-trolling and cyber-bullying. They are also issues pertaining

to the digital divide which limit the ability of many to access internet technologies and engage with the virtual communities found on them. The digital divide in South Africa has a gender dimension which worsens the negative impacts of this issue among women.

This research contributes to the literature on social media and gender activism by providing insights into the specific experiences and perspectives of gender activists in South Africa. Gender activists in South Africa have adapted to the social networking platforms in a unique manner based on their social and political contexts which highlights the potential of the platforms to be used even in challenging circumstances. Therefore, the study offers insights into the manner social media can be leveraged in the fight for social justice and gender equality. The digital platforms play an important role in amplifying the voices of women in South Africa, bringing their experiences and perspectives to the global stage. They also allow women to raise awareness about the marginalisation and inequalities they face in their various locales, making them a powerful tool for advocacy and change.

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