Hashtags, Comment Threads and Re-tweets: The Emergence of Young Voices and Alternative Communicative Practices for Socio-Political Change at the Time of COVID-19 in South Africa

Mncedi Eddie Magade*

Department of Corporate Communication and Marketing, Walter Sisulu University, East London, South Africa

*Corresponding author: Mncedi Eddie Magade, Department of Corporate Communication and Marketing, Walter Sisulu University, East London, South Africa, Tel: +27742935786; E-mail: mmagade@wsu.ac.za

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Abstract

Social media platforms continue to play an increasingly significant constitutive role in organising individuals and Collective Action movements both on a local and global level. The use of social media for social activism and mobilisation by young South Africans has also risen in recent years. Ordinary young citizens have taken up to themselves the task of uplifting and helping their fellow citizens with the challenges they face in their daily lives. It is no secret that ordinary citizens still find it difficult to connect with government leaders, political representatives and managers of multinational companies either for laying complaints, reporting unfair treatment and to discuss issues of social injustice. The rise of social media has led to the emergence of alternative communicative practices that provide opportunities for agency and a space where social media users are able to resist the socio-political and systematic structural constraints that impede ordinary citizens' social upward mobility. This paper therefore, seeks to study the emergence of young thought leaders in the South African social media landscape by using three examples of online Collective Action (CA) groups that assist citizens to voice out their opinions by using hashtags, comment threads and retweets. These include the following; O Jewa Ke Eng? (What ' s Bothering You?), #Covid19SA and #LockdownSA social movements that thrived on Twitter prior and during the Covid-19 global pandemic. The last two examples are directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic while the first one offers a glimpse of how social media comment threads can be used to assist citizens with their daily challenges - with some comments relating to COVID-19. The study aims to find out what role(s) if any, do these movements play in providing active citizens with alternative means to discuss solutions for ordinary citizens, and whether or not this role can yield to any increased political participation.

Introduction

COVID-19 globally

On the 30th of January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the current COVID-19 epidemic a Public Health Emergency of International concern [1], and urged all nations to treat it as such. By mid-February 2020, the epidemic had registered over 42 000 cases in China and had reached a widespread of about 25 countries [2]. With the rapid spread of the virus across the world, many countries issued travelling restrictions to and from China [3], whilst also trying to measure the potential effects that the virus would have on the daily lives of all citizens, particularly those in Africa whose resources are very limited to deal with the epidemic.

COVID-19 in South Africa and why it is a problem

As a way of responding to the widespread of COVID-19 in South Africa, the South African government initiated a lockdown plan that would put the country under a State of Disaster from 27 March to 30 April (HSRC Website). Although many global and local organisations were learning about the virus and its behaviour, there remained little that ordinary citizens could do in order to curb the spread of the virus except by following the directives of hand washing and keeping a clean environment at all times. With many parts of the African continent and South Africa being rural and facing major issues when it comes to access to clean water and other resources, these guidelines were not going to work if people were not being provided with the necessary resources they needed. The virus also posed major threats to South African citizens since many of them are already suffering from pre-existing health conditions like HIV, TB and many other diseases that could potentially weaken their immune systems should they contract the virus. These factors are amongst many other

socio-economic factors that needed the government to respond decisively on how it was going to handle this virus. South Africans utilised many platforms in an effort to engage the government on this matter including social media platform Twitter, which saw a rise in the number of trending topics or hashtags relating to COVID-19 and the lockdown.

Comment threads and re-tweets: "O jewa ke eng?"

On the 5th of January 2019 a South African Twitter user created a post titled "O jewa ke eng?" [4], which translates to "What's bothering you?" in English. Social media users have since been using this thread in order to voice out their frustrations and challenges that they face as ordinary citizens, particularly the youth. The comments have created what is known as a comment thread; where users are able to respond to, comment on and re-tweet each other's tweets. To date, the tweet has generated over fifty-six thousand comments, over twenty-one thousand re-tweets and has roughly reached seventy-two thousand reactions [4]. This kind of engagement on social media is usually witnessed on online profiles of prominent figures, and as such this could be one of the unusual cases to be created by an ordinary person who was initially not seen as a celebrity – though the post has brought the owner some kind of fame amongst Twitter users. This kind of creation represents ordinary citizens' urgency for engagement about the systematic structural challenges that hinder their quest for upward social mobility.

This comment thread is particularly interesting in the context of this paper in that it provides a picture of ordinary citizens' need to engage on socio-political issues prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic. It also offers a range of topics that the users are engaging on such as; rape, unemployment, poverty, social life and recently issues pertaining to the COVID-19 global pandemic. In this online Collective Action movement, users have offered each other advices on a range of issues such as those mentioned above, and one of the things that is linked to its success is the fact that it grants its users the freedom to post about anything that affects them. Some users have received assistance through this online CA than they have from their leaders. In other cases, community and national leaders have been pressured to respond to issues affecting the constituencies by being tagged in some of the conversations that take place on this platform.

The hashtags and the discovery of COVID-19 in South Africa

On the 31st of December 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) China Country Office received the news of an unknown pneumonia in the city of Wuhan in China and began running tests [5]. Between the 2nd to the 28th of January 2020, 'Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2) is confirmed as the causative agent of 'Coronavirus Disease 2019' [6], the first case is discovered in China and WHO announces COVID-19 a world pandemic [5].

On the 5th of March 2020, the South Africa government makes an announcement of its first discovery of COVID-19 through the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and Minister of Health, Dr. Zweli Mkhize [7]. On the 23rd of March 2020 South African President Cyril Ramaphosa announces a new measure "to combat the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus in South Africa – a three-week nationwide lockdown with severe restrictions on travel and movement, supported by the South African National Defence Force – from midnight on Thursday, 26 March, to midnight on Thursday, 16 April" [7]. 14 days into the lockdown period, President Ramaphosa announces an extension of the lockdown to the 30th of April 2020 [8].

Between the announcement of the first COVID-19 and the announcement of the lockdown and subsequently the extension, there is one thing that is notably observable on the South African social media landscape – panic. People are panicking and demanding answers about the new yet unknown virus that has impacted the way they socialise with each other. It is during this period of confusion that hashtags such as #COVID19SA and #LockdownSA start to trend on Twitter for days. The South African government responds to the requests of the people by launching a website, a Twitter account, a Facebook information page and a WhatsApp line as means to engage the people on the developments about this new global pandemic that has infiltrated people's lives. The hashtags generated an enormous amount of responses from people seeking advice on how to deal with the new virus. Through observation and participation in these Collective Action groups, it is noticeable that people are scared and that there is an urgency for answers and accountability.

These incidents are particularly interesting in the sense that people could now be able to gather themselves using online platforms for common interests. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of ways explored by ordinary citizens in order to hold those in power accountable – and also to lookout for their shared interests. These new communicative practices that have seemingly become evident during the time of crisis are no special cases particularly amongst young South Africans who demand that their voices must be heard – as evident during the #FeesMustFall movement, a South African online Collective Action movement that protested for free education for students.

The "O jewa ke eng?" comment thread is another example used in this paper in order to indicate that Collective Action movement participants do not wait for historic moments to take place in order to demand accountability from their leaders, but that this has become a part of their daily social life. This way of life has also obligated ordinary citizens to think differently about what they think should be or is the role of government and their leaders in fulfilling people's needs and aspirations as guided by their quest for a better life. The aim of this research paper therefore, is to look at what role(s) do social media platforms such as Twitter and online Collective Action movements play in restoring hope for citizens, and whether or not their formation can yield to any increased

political participation that can in turn change lives of ordinary citizens.

Twitter

The development of new technologies has led to the establishment of internet-based tools that provide what is commonly known as 'life streaming. The phenomenon of 'life streaming' refers to the ongoing and uninterrupted publishing of information and events as they happen through a range of digital media [9]. A service such as Twitter is one example of such tools that enable people to stream their lives directly using short messages called tweets [10]. With regards to protests and social movements, organisers usually make use of hashtags (#), which are user-generated coding for searchable terms and keywords, in order to publicize their cause of action.

Literature Review

Social media and the use of mobile phones

The term social media refers to web-based tools and services that allow the users to create, share, rate and search for content and information without the need to log in on any other portal [9]. These kind of tools are said to be 'social' in the sense that they allow people to share information with one another [10]. The sharing of information amongst social media users is made possible through the use of technological tools like mobile phones.

The African continent has seen a rapid rise in the use of the mobile phone as a tool for communication [10]. One of the things that can be attributed to this rapid rise is the fact that mobile phones allow for a mobile form of communication which makes it easy for people in remote areas to communicate with others [10]. The growing penetration of mobile phones and internet usage in the African continent has caused an increase in terms of citizen's potential to instigate change due to the fact that citizens literally have power in their hands, with just a touch of a button [10].

Challenges in internet access in Africa

Even though there is a growing number of people interested in using the mobile phone in the African continent [11], with Facebook being the most visited internet site, there are still many challenges and constraint limiting people's access to the internet in the continent [10]. Africa remains the only continent in the world with the lowest internet connection rate with very few of its people being able to get internet access [10].

These constraints can be attributed to a variety of reasons which range from the lack of infrastructure for internet services to the fact that such connections are financially costly and scarce [10]. The other challenge that Africa is faced with is the limited number of personal computers that people can use in order to access the internet, which reduces the rate of internet penetration in the continent. With this being said, it must be stated that, the internet services that can be accessed

by using a mobile phone remain the most effective way in which people in the continent can access the internet.

Defining a social movement

A social movement can be defined as a social process through which a number of collective participants collectively gather themselves in an effort to articulate their interests, voice grievances and critiques, and proposed solutions to the problems identified by engaging in a variety of collective actions [12]. There are three distinctive features of a social movement. Social movements have three of the following features; they are conflictual and have clearly identified (ideological) opponents, they are structured through dense informal networks, they are geared towards developing, sustaining and sharing collective identities.

Digital networks and social media

The rise of networked technologies has led to the merging of channels of transmitting information and communication formats that include social media [12]. The emergence of networked technologies has led to some arguing that we have entered a new era of knowledge society [12]. When governments fail to fulfil the wishes of citizens, people are left with no choice besides to mobilise in an effort to get attention from authorities. In some instances, people form these social movements not necessarily to get government responses, but to find ways in which they can help each other. Cammaerts [12] suggests that even those who are sceptical of the ICTs' potential to alter power relations in society are acknowledging the opportunities at the disposal of disadvantaged groups to self-represent and gather themselves for social change through the use of social media platforms.

The uses of social media for activism

It is argued that there is a positive link between the use of social media and political participation [13]. Valenzuela also goes further to state that while this statement is a fact, there has not been a clear elaboration of how using social media can lead to increased political activity [13]. In the study of the use of social media for protest behaviour, Valenzuela [13] identifies three possible explanations that can help us understand the link between social media use and increased political activity; (a) information (social media as a source for news), (b) opinion expression (using social media to express political opinions), (c) and activism (joining causes and finding mobilizing information through social media). Valenzuela's explanations are useful in that they will help in understanding the roles played by online movements in bringing about social and political change amongst South African citizens.

In trying to help conceptualise and theorise the role of social media for social activism, Cammaerts has identified the differences that exist when it comes to the roles and functions of social media usage for activism. This, Cammaerts does by distinguishing between the internal/inwards roles and the external/outward roles (2015). Cammaerts [12] explains that:

Inward roles refer to organisation, coordination, internal debate and decision making while outward roles relate to mobilisation, recruitment, attack strategies and the creation of alternative or independent channels of communication that contribute to a vibrant public sphere (2015).

Critique of the political power of social media

There are two arguments that need to be considered when discussing the critique of social media's influence on political change on the African continent [14]. The first argument to be considered is one that states that the social media tools themselves are ineffective [14]. Secondly, Shirky [14] argues that these tools have a potential to produce harm just as much as they can be used to do good.

The first critique stems from the idea that casual participants tend to seek social change through low-cost activities such as joining a particular social movement on a certain social media platform without the intention of being active [10]. Shirky however adds on this first critique by stating that; though this critique might be true; it is in no way central to the question of the power of social media. The fact that those who join social movements through low cost means are likely to remain inactive, does not mean that those who are committed cannot use social media affectively to influence socio-political change.

The second critique has to do with the fact that many governments have gained more sophisticated and technologically advanced means of monitoring social media tools [10]. Some authoritarian states are regularly shutting down these social media platforms in order to deny citizens the opportunities and resources to make "public" any real time events [10]. This second critique leads us to the assumption that social media tools can be used as tools of state oppression [10].

Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe [10] however argue that; the success of social media tools as means to provide momentum and to bring about socio-political change in the African continent should not be taken lightly. In this respect, the authors further argue that; Africa as a continent is experiencing a period of enormous change, and from this it is evident that there is no doubt that social media will continue to play a role in ensuring active continental political participation [10].

Alternative communicative practices

Some researchers within the field of communication have been calling for the need to regard the study of communication as a practical one rather than a scientific activity [15]. Instead of assuming that the role or the goal of inquiry is to produce general explanations of phenomena as scientific enquiry does [16], the goal of a practical enquiry must be seen as one that is "centrally concerned with what ought to be; it seeks to articulate normative ideals by which to guide the conduct and criticism of practice" [15]. Communicative practices then refer to the forms of communication that cut across sites [16]. From this conception

we can then deduce that "practice" is also a way of describing all the activities that take place at a certain place amongst a group of people [16]. In the communication sense therefore, practice is another way of referring to a speech event [17] or what participants take to be a situation's frame [18,19], in a form of talk or text [16]. In a way, practice is the way in which we unitize the world that we are part of in order to enable our own analysis of that world [16].

Various studies have explored Twitter's ability of enabling its users to converse and communicate with one another by making use of direct messages from one user to the other [20], and in some cases to a larger external audience. Other researchers have examined Twitter not only as a conversational tool [21], but also as platform that enables "a conversational ecology in which conversations are composed of a public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context" [20], through a Twitter function known as retweeting. Twitter supports a variety of communicative practices such as hashtags, retweets, comment threads which allow for conversations that emerge on the platform to be often experienced by broader audiences than just the interlocutor [20]. In this manner Twitter offers its users with an opportunity to explore alternative communicative practices that mainstream media do not make provision for. However, the recent developments in the Information Communication Technology sector have enable such functions to be incorporated into mainstream media.

Methods and Methodologies

The emergence of cyber-collective movements has attracted a lot of attention [22], and has drawn researchers towards the need to find effective ways of studying online Collective Action and digital activism. A number of studies are making an attempt to study and understand Collective Action (CA) [23,24]. Collective Action can be defined as all the activities that involve two or more individuals with a common aim of contributing to a collective effort on the basis of common interest and perhaps the possibility of benefiting from the action taken [25].

In the exploration of online Collective Action's role in fostering political participation, qualitative methods were used during the process of collecting and analysing the data. The data was collected through the sourcing of tweets under the comment thread "O jewa ke eng?" additionally, tweets using the two hashtags #COVID19 and #LockdownSA were sourced in the process. The reason for choosing these online Collective Action movements was due to the fact that they were amongst the top trending topics under the section of politics during the announcement of the first COVID-19 case in South Africa and subsequently during the lockdown period. It must be said however that, though the "O jewa ke eng?" tweet or comment thread has been an ongoing thread prior the pandemic and lockdown period, its focus on a variety of topics allowed it to resurface on trending topics during this time as its users were using it in order to voice out their opinions related to COVID-19.

The number of engagements that these hashtags and tweets got was massive and provided sufficient information that could be studied in relation to how ordinary citizens make use of social media as a source for alternative communicative practices. This showed the magnitude of the urgency from the people and the seriousness of their call for political interference during this time of confusion and doubt. It is no doubt that social media platforms capture what people tend to pay attention to and how exactly the feel about certain topics [26]. Over time, the change in the kind and amount of information that is available on social media tends to reflect the changing interests of social groups or individual [26]. In this sense then, social media streams can be seen as tools that tend to mirror a certain aspect of our society [26].

Social media based interactions can be used in order to understand the complexity of cyber-collective movements by methodologically tracking their formulations [22]. New insights and understanding of online CA can be gained by developing a systematic methodology using various existing methods such as; network analysis, sentiment analysis, text mining, and content analysis [22]. The web can be used in order to mine information and data about emerging trends and behaviours in almost any area, and this data can be used in order to reveal how ideas diffuse [22].

Analysis of data

In analysing the data for this research I am interested in how usual political behaviour, particularly in a time of crisis (or state of disaster), affects the development and livelihood of the poor and the disadvantaged in their quest to aspire for a better future. The announcement of COVID-19 as a global pandemic carried with it lots of uncertainties particularly for the poor. This meant that poor people had to rely on government support for some kind of social relief. The usual practices of long government processes and neglect of the needs of the poor was yet to be tested.

As I have outlined throughout this research paper that, social media, particularly the use of Twitter in the context of my research has so much to tell us about how ordinary people view their own experiences and those that they share as a collective, and the role that social media can play in advancing their actions as a collective during a time of need. It is no surprise therefore that when COVID-19 became a reality, people began to talk on Twitter in order to share their fears and feelings about the new reality they were about to face – thus in the process calling for a rapid and effective socio-political engagement.

It is for these reasons I find Apparadurai's theory of the capacity to aspire to be effective in the analysis of data for this research. In particular the three concepts of politics of recognition, compliance and future orientation as explained by Ngidi et al. [27] will be utilised. Referring to the politics of recognition Ngidi et al. uses Apparadurai's explanation that through use of words and actions, Collective Action participants have the ability to advance their own interests [27,28]. The second concept of "compliance" deals with the personal reflection of place in society or the poor's ability to

stay attached to the very same ideals that seek to normalise their degradation [27,28]. In certain instances as proven by Ngidi et al., participants of social movements maybe tired of such degradation treatment and fight for recognition and resistance against that which seeks to delegitimise their existence [27]. Lastly in the framework of capacity to aspire is the concept of future orientation – where one or a collective movement as a group allows for movement into the future and derives a prospective path in which to thrive [27].

In addition to this, a textual analysis as proposed by Cuiker et al. [29] will be used wherein themes and patterns within the text are identified and grouped together in order to derive meaning from them. This means that an inductive analysis approach will be applied whereby patterns and themes are derived from the data collected as compared to being imposed on them [30]. Fürsich [31] argues that media texts present a different discursive moment between their production and consumption that justifies their scholarly worthiness. Furthermore, the narrative character of media content, its potential as a site for ideological contestation and its impact as mediated "reality" makes it worthy of being interpreted [31]. A sentiment analyser will also be used whereby tweets will be classified as either positive, negative and/or neutral based on the sentiment they represent [32].

Results and Discussions

For the purpose of this research the focus is on the way that members of an online Collective Action use social media platform Twitter. This involves a great deal of investigating the kind of conversations that they have and how they talk, behave and treat each other in trying to meet their collective goals and interests. The sentiment visualisation analysis of the tweets is able to outline the different kind of sentiments that these tweets carry while at the same time flashing out the kinds of topics that the users engage in. The tweets under each online Collective Action (CA) movement were then analysed according to the following categories;

Sentiment

Each tweet is shown as a circle positioned by sentiment, an estimate of the emotion contained in the tweet's text. Unpleasant tweets are drawn as blue circles on the left, and pleasant tweets as green circles on the right. Sedate tweets are drawn as darker circles on the bottom, and active tweets as brighter circles on the top. You need to hover your mouse over a tweet or click on it to see its text.

Topics

Tweets about a common topic are grouped into topic clusters. Keywords above a cluster indicate its topic. Tweets that do not belong to a topic are visualized as singletons on the right. You need to hover your mouse over a tweet or click on it to see its text.

Tag cloud

Common words from the emotional regions Upset, Happy, Relaxed, and Unhappy are shown. Words that are more frequent are larger. You need to hover the mouse over a word to see how often it occurred (All category descriptors are attributed to the sentiment analyser).

First collective action results: O je wa ke eng? by @akreana_:

The sentiments that the tweets in the "O jewa ke eng?" comments thread range from unpleasant to pleasant. **Figure 1** indicates whether or not the tweets were active or subdued. In this case of this online Collective Action, there were a few tweets leaning towards the unpleasant side that ranged from the sentiment of being tense and very low on being active. This indicates the fact that some people during this period were feeling down and demotivated. One of the tweets was from a user who indicated that due to COVID-19 they have lost their job and their marriage was falling apart. The pandemic was affecting people's social life. At the same time, majority of tweets were on a pleasant side with many of the users being excited or being pleased by something. What is noticeable is that people in this social movement are all about assisting each other. Many of the tweets were about showing gratitude to some of the members of the group who had bought other members of the group electricity and in some cases food parcels. These members also advocate for unity in their movements, so participants are often dedicating time to follow each other on Twitter and they are about making new members feel welcomed.
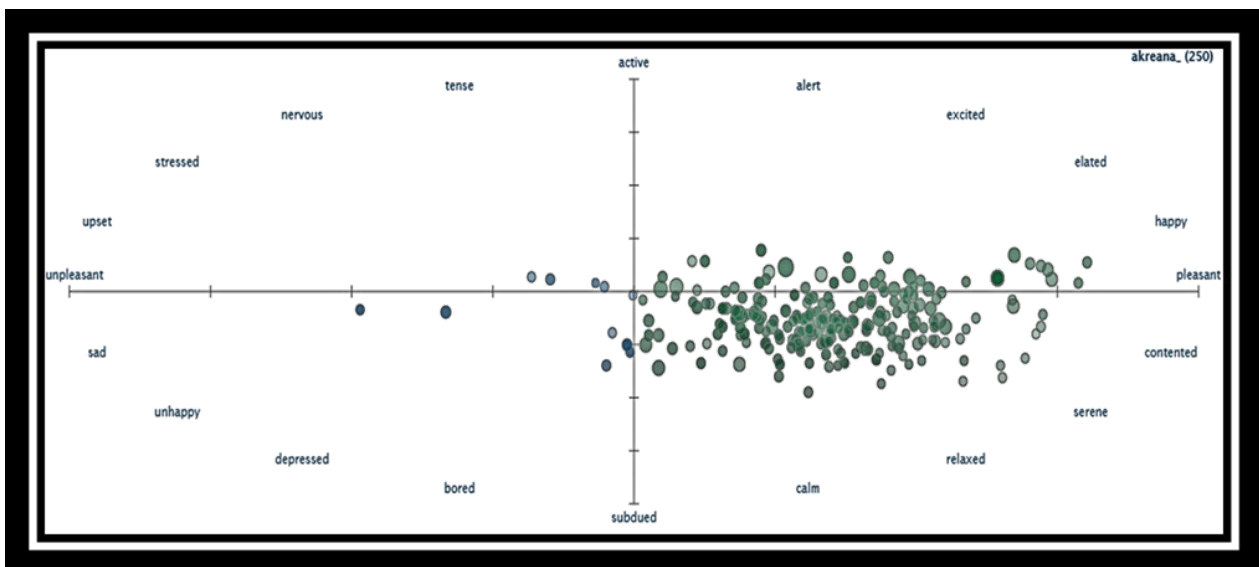

Figure 1: Sentiments shown by tweets in the O je wa ke eng? Comment thread.

Social media in this instance is being used as a vehicle to boost other people's social morale. It is also used as a vehicle for social justice, where members are able to go out of their way in order to assist each other. Words and statements such as "god bless you", "appreciated" and "we need more people like you" were found in the tweets that users were posting – in most cases referring to each other. These words and statements are an indication that the feelings amongst members of this group were positive and it was clear that they were going all the way in assisting each other as ordinary citizens when it came to dealing with the challenges that people were facing during the time of the COVID-19 epidemic. Some of the topics that members were engaging on included sharing information about those who were selling masks and those that were in need of essential services such as food parcels.

Second and third collective action results: #COVID19SA and #LockdownSA

The #COVID19SA hashtag has been categorised in to two; the clustered and singletons (**Figure 2**). Clusters are all the topics that have been clustered together due to the fact that they relate to each other or that they focus on the same theme. The singletons are all the topics that do not fall under any of the identified clusters. What is interesting to observe about the clusters is that majority of the tweets in this group are related to the lockdown which is the third Collection Action to be analysed in this research, the #Lockdown hashtag. The tweets were mostly about how people were adjusting their lives since the announcement of the lockdown regulations were made such as working from home and restricted movement. They were also about the different stages of the lockdown which were announced by the South African government in an effort to ease the regulations so as to allow some economic activities to take place.
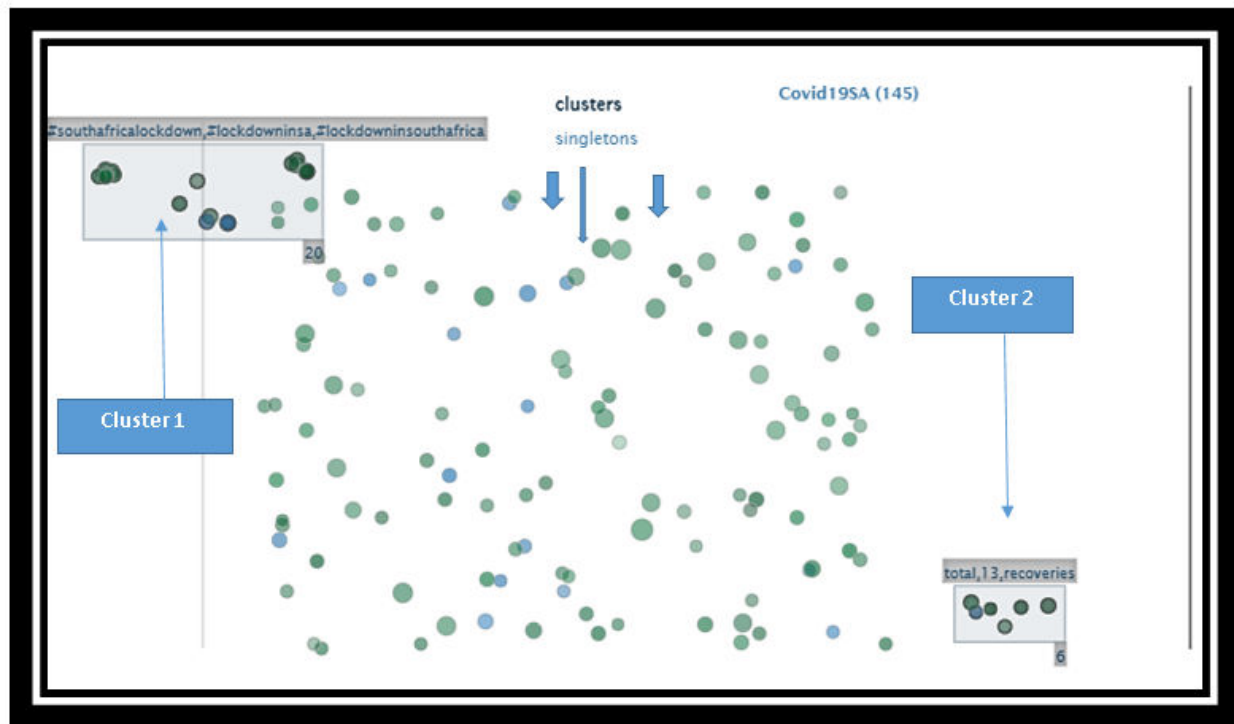
Figure 2: Topics relating to the #COVID19SA hashtag.

Under these lockdown themes, people were also sharing information about how to stay safe during the difficult time of the COVID-19 epidemic. In this context, this shows that people are able to use social media as a tool to educate and share information amongst each other. Ordinary citizens were engaging with government leaders by commenting on their posts and by sharing information from the public representatives like the president and some ministers. There also seems to be a much more action in terms of what people on Twitter were requesting from the government and how the government responded to those requests. For example, when the first few cases of COVID-19 emerged and began to grow rapidly in the country, a lot of people on social media, particularly on Twitter, started pressuring the government to "lockdown" the country and implement a State of Emergency. A few days after, the government implemented the lockdown and implemented a State of Disaster plan as a response to the epidemic. Secondly, during the announcement of the easing of some of the regulations of the lockdown, the president made an announcement that cigarettes were going to be permitted to go on sale during stage 4 of the lockdown while alcohol was to remain banned. Many people including leaders of some of the opposition parties went on Twitter to show their dissatisfaction regarding this issue, and later the government retracted its decision, stating that it is a government that listens to its people.

There is also a second topic cluster in which people were tweeting about the number recoveries, number of deaths and the total number of people that had been tested. What came as a surprise in this section is the fact that most of the tweets under this hashtag were mostly showing signs of positive sentiments. While there were signs of negative tweets that related to the number of deaths, most tweets showed signs of positive sentiments relating to the number of people being tested and the number of people recovering as these seemed to be on the rise. Some of the positive sentiments were related to the petrol price that was gradually decreasing during this period, while other tweets were commending the fact that government had set aside money in order to implement COVID-19 social relief grants. Some of the tweets showed that most people were excited that they were finally going to go back to work after regulations were eased during level four of the lockdown. The high number of positive sentiments was unexpected since in the beginning a lot of people showed signs of fear and frustration. Some were unwelcoming of the measures the government was taking as they were concerned about losing their jobs and being separated from their loved ones due to restricted movement. In this instance, social media was used as a tool to mobilise people in order to work towards one goal. Additionally, it was used to spread positive information as much as possible. What was also plausible in this period was government's adaptation tactics of making social media platforms, including Twitter, their official tools to spread information to the people in real time.
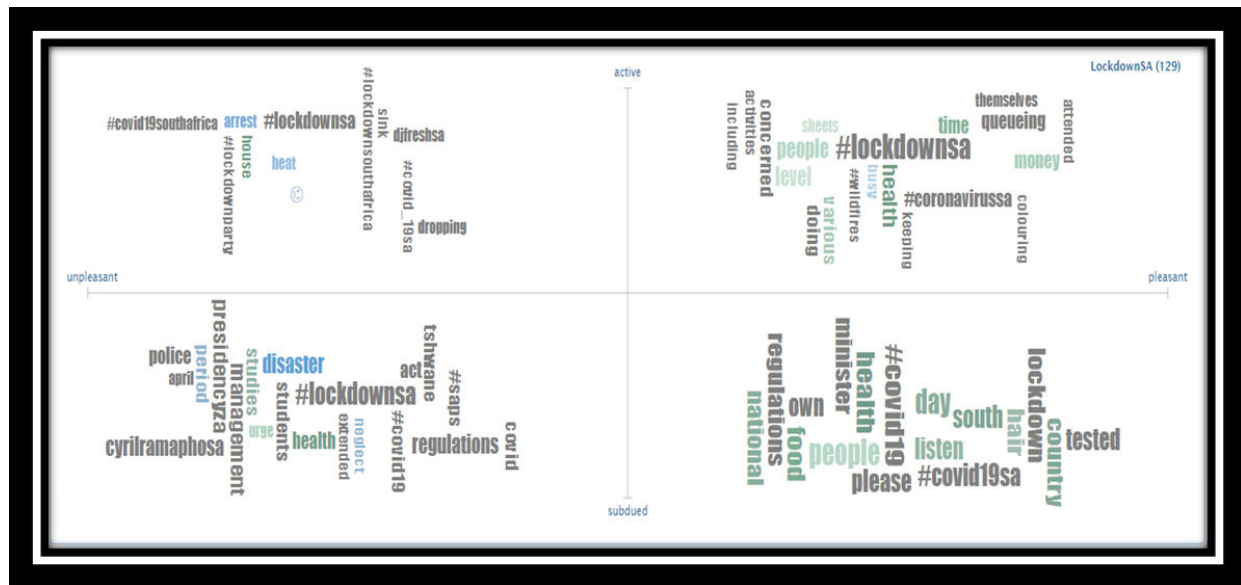
Figure 3: Tag cloud relating to the #LockdownSA hashtag.

As mentioned in the analysis of the #COVID19SA hashtag, the topics and sentiments of tweets surrounding the #LockdownSA hashtag were very similar to the ones of the #COVID19SA hashtag (**Figure 3**). This is caused by the fact that these two hashtags were used interchangeably during this period of COVID-19. The Tag Cloud analysis enables us to derive from the words used in the tweets signs and an indication of the kind of sentiments that the tweets contained. Also, these are words that refer to things that make people experience certain kinds of emotions like anger or happiness.

This kind of analysis does not only give us a glimpse of things that members of these movements tend to be talking about, but also, the kinds of feelings that they attach to these conversations on social media platforms like Twitter. The results show that some of the tweets under this hashtag, did contained in them negative or unpleasant feelings, but like in all the other tweets under the different hashtag (#COVID19SA) and comment thread (O jewa ke eng?), these negative feelings however, were outweighed by the positive emotions as made explicit by the tweets.

The words that appear on the section that represent unpleasant emotions include; "lockdown extension", "students", "studies" and "SAPS". This came after the South African president announced an extension of the lockdown which many people did not take well. Students and learners were also concerned about their studies and there had been no clear direction as to when schools and universities were going to open. Both the Ministers of Basic Education and Higher Education tabled their guidelines after lockdown regulations were eased to level four, with Basic Education proposing to start in June and Higher Education Institutions planning to roll out online teaching and learning in May. There were still many concerns regarding these dates as many people felt like it was too early to go back to business as usual. The South African Police Service (SAPS) also appeared on the side showing unpleasant emotions. This is after social media users were circulating videos of both SAPS and SANDF members treating citizens in an ill manner by beating them for failing to adhere to the regulations. Social media in this instance was used as a tool for addressing corrective measures in relation to people's behaviour and how people should treat each other irrespective of the place they hold in society. Additionally, social media was arguably also used as a tool to address issues of social justice within the Higher Education sector. With Higher Education Institutions proposing an online teaching strategy, many people including social media users were concerned with issues of accessibility as majority of South African students do not have access to resources such as data, internet connectivity and laptops that will enable them to thrive in an online learning environment.

On the positive emotions side, words such as "food", "tested" and "health minister" were amongst words that contained positive sentiments. This is due to the fact that restaurants and outlets selling hot foods were going to be opened for deliveries during level four of the lockdown. Also, food is a necessity in people's lives, in this instance, Twitter enabled users to assist each other with essentials such as food parcels etc. The assistance and sense of unity that people showed towards each other resulted in people reacting positively. The number of people being tested was also increasing even though this was happening at a very slow rate, at least something was being done, and thus people were happy that the government was starting to take these issues seriously, especially since people residing in rural areas were initially not being tested. People were also happy with the services being delivered by the ministry of health. The minister of health was always updating people and giving them feedback on how government and experts are handling COVID-19 issues. The kind of research and collaborative work that was forged with other stakeholders such as the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and the private

healthcare sector was also plausible, and social media users were reacting positively towards this gesture of a united nation.

The expectation to have people staying at home was to expect people to welcome a situation that further perpetuated their state of need and poverty, while arguing that this was for the benefit of their health. In a way this can be seen as a way of trying to persuade people to accept the very same conditions that threatened their economic stability. In essence, doing so was to ask people to comply to new social norms of isolating and social distancing while exacerbating their poverty and further deepening their lack of access to resources, without offering any assistance in many instances. Even in these conditions, the poor still believed that they will beat the virus – they looked into the future with positivity even as they continued struggling to deal with the virus' impact on their lives. Their hope for a better future is evident in the signs of positive sentiments that are found in their tweets which outnumbered the presence of negative sentiments.

Conclusion

There is no denying that social media has become an integral part of our daily lives. As a result it can be used to achieve different functions depending on the collective interests of its users. These networks, particularly Twitter, in the context of this research – create a space where people can be able to gather themselves for collective action using online systems just as they would on a face to face interaction. Social media can provide a space for social media users to discuss, engage and share issues that otherwise conventional media would not give them the space nor the time to share

From the analysis done in this research, it is clear that social media platform Twitter can be used by its users to achieve many goals. As evident in this research, amongst the many uses of Twitter, it can also be used to achieve three significant goals for Collective Action groups. Firstly, social media can be used as a tool to address issues of social injustice. Twitter users where able to address issues relating to lack of accessibility to resources such as food, online education and employment opportunities. Secondly, social media can be used as a tool to educate and as means for sharing information deemed important by a Collective Action movement. Users were also able to share information about the safety measures that people needed to follow in order to stay safe. In some instances they also shared information on how to access the social relief grants that were directed to the unemployed and the elderly. Thirdly, social media was used to communicate with political representatives directly and to influence political action. After social media users reacted to the emergence of COVID-19, they urged the government to implement a lockdown, and the government responded accordingly. During the time of compiling of the regulations for the lockdown period, government ministers urged members of the public to submit their comments and inputs using social media. It is during this period that many people responded by rejecting some of the provisions that were made like the permitting of cigarettes. As a result, this decision was over turned. The

digital space as a platform of communication has enabled social media users to experiment with various communicative practices that require political leaders to think and act decisively about the way they engage with the public.

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