Social Media and Student Protest Mobilisation in South African Universities: A Review of Literature on Motivations and Limitations

Bonginkosi H. Mutongoza*[a] & Eleanor A. Hendricks[b]

* Corresponding author
Email: bmutongoza@ufh.ac.za

a. University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa.
b. North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is frequently referred to as the global protest capital because of recurring social uprisings, especially against poor service delivery. Student protests at South African universities have increasingly relied on social media for mobilisation, information dissemination and activism. This study employs a systematic literature review of 34 studies sourced from JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Taylor & Francis to examine the motivations, opportunities, and limitations of social media in student protest mobilisation. The findings indicate that students use social media for rapid information dissemination, broader reach, decentralisation, narrative control over mainstream media, and garnering global solidarity. However, key limitations include the risk of infiltration and misinformation, the persistence of the digital divide, unethical conduct, leadership and coordination deficits, and the short-lived nature of clicktivism. These findings contribute to the ongoing debates on the intersection of digital activism and student protests, raising critical considerations for policymakers and higher education stakeholders regarding the regulation of social media in the context of protest mobilisation.

KEYWORDS

Social media; student protests; digital activism; mobilisation; higher education; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for mobilisation, transforming the way individuals and groups engage in activism. Unlike traditional forms of mobilisation, digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for disseminating information, coordinating collective action, and challenging dominant power structures (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021; Bosch, 2018). Social media activism enables users to reclaim control over narratives – which are usually the forte of mainstream media – and thus shape discourses that challenge state and institutional authority (Mateos & Erro, 2020). These platforms provide an accessible and cost-effective means for activists to amplify their struggles and mobilise support beyond geographical limitations (Said-Hung & Segado-Boj, 2018). In contrast to the conventional media, which often reflects elite perspectives, social media often amplifies participatory engagement and empowers marginalised voices to contest systemic inequalities (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2020; Mutsvairo & Rønning, 2020). The accessibility of social media has been particularly instrumental in student activism, enabling students to voice their grievances, mobilise peers, and advocate for systemic change in educational institutions.

South Africa has a longstanding tradition of protest, often regarded as the "protest capital of the world" because of the frequency of demonstrations addressing social injustices and inadequate service delivery (Runciman, 2017). In recent years, student-led protests have intensified, especially so in response to widening inequalities and exponential rates of gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide (Kamga, 2019; Mhlekude, 2021; Sempijja & Letlhogile, 2021). Rooted in the country's history of resistance against apartheid, contemporary student activism continues to draw from an extensive culture of mass mobilisation (Runciman, 2017; Vilakazi, 2017). One can draw from recent notable movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, which leveraged social media to organise demonstrations, facilitate inter-university collaboration, and amplify students' demands (Cini, 2019; Luescher, Loader & Mugume, 2017; Sempijja & Letlhogile, 2021). These movements and the general character of successive student protests in South Africa have demonstrated the transformative role of digital mobilisation in advancing social change.

This study adopts Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition of social media as a collection of internet-based applications built on Web 2.0 technologies, enabling the creation and exchange of user-generated content. In this research, social media encompasses platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and LinkedIn. Social mobilisation refers to the collective efforts to engage with socio-political topics and problems to achieve social justice (Luders, 2016). As Sutherland (2020) argues, the fourth industrial revolution further contextualises digital activism, representing a period of rapid technological advancements that reshape social interactions, economic structures, and political engagement. Protests, a fundamental aspect of democratic participation, remain a key mechanism through which students and other marginalised groups express dissent and demand institutional

transformation (Mooijman et al., 2018). Consequently, this study sought to address the following questions:

- What are the primary motivations for social media mobilisation in student protests at South African universities?
- What are the limitations of social media mobilisation in these protests?

Social media mobilisation: A conceptual framing

Understanding social media mobilisation in university settings necessitates a robust conceptual framework that synthesises theoretical perspectives on digital activism, networked publics, and collective action. One can draw on studies such as Bosch (2017), Tang (2018), and Jitsaeng and Tuamsuk (2022), who emphasise the networked structure of contemporary social movements. They argue that social media can be conceptualised as a space where information flows rapidly and bypasses traditional hierarchical structures that once controlled communication. This view is supported by Leong et al. (2019), who argue that the digital landscape enables a more horizontal form of activism, where students are not merely passive receivers of information but active participants in shaping the discourse.

Ahmed, Madrid-Morales and Tully (2023) state that the affordances of platforms such as X, Facebook, and WhatsApp—and specifically their capacity for immediacy, reach, and interaction—allow for the rapid formation of protest networks. In explaining social media affordances for coordinated action, Mirbabaie et al. (2021) and Vaast et al. (2017) provide insight into how these platforms facilitate the individualisation of activism. An example of this, according to Cini (2019), was during the #FeesMustFall protests, when student leaders mobilised social media platforms to recruit like-minded individuals to connect, organise, and support the movement. The student activists formed online communities and solidarity networks, which created a sense of belonging and collective purpose.

Accordingly, social media became a site where grievances are not only shared but amplified, contributing to the development of collective identities and fostering a sense of solidarity that transcends geographic boundaries (Ahmed et al., 2023).

This dynamically transforms social media into both a tool for information dissemination and a mechanism for political engagement. Mobilisation in this context is not only the rallying of individuals, but it is a complex process of identity formation as students coalesce around shared narratives of injustice (Chiwarawara, 2023). As Omodan (2022) reveals, the real-time coordination of actions—enabled by the immediacy of digital platforms—raises questions about the shifting power dynamics in student movements. Traditional gatekeepers, such as university administrators and mainstream media, are thus side-stepped, giving students unfettered control over the framing of their protest actions and influencing public opinion on a larger scale (Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022). Thus, social media is not merely an accessory to student activism, but it has become a critical space where protest architecture is constructed, negotiated, and redefined.

METHODOLOGY

This study examined the role of social media in mobilising students to participate in violent protests at South African universities through a systematic literature review. The review focused on academic sources that explore the relationship between social media and student protest movements, with special emphasis on the South African context.

Data sources and selection criteria

To ensure a comprehensive and rigorous review, the study utilised multiple academic databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Taylor & Francis. The literature search targeted peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and peer-reviewed conference proceedings that address the impact of social media on student mobilisation and violent protests. The following inclusion criteria were applied:

- Publication period: The study only considered studies published between 2010 and 2025.
- Methodological rigour: Only studies with clearly defined methodologies were considered.
- Relevance: The study focused on the South African higher education context.
- Accredited publishers: The source had to be published by an institution recognised by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training.

The search incorporated key terms, such as "violent protests", "student mobilisation", "universities", "social media", and "South Africa". These keywords were applied across all databases to generate a comprehensive dataset of relevant studies. The research concluded with 34 studies from an initial sample of 137 articles.

Data analysis

The selected studies were subjected to thematic analysis by using inductive content analysis methods (Vears & Gillam, 2022). This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to social media's role in student protest mobilisation. To enhance the quality assurance, the review process followed Snyder's (2019) guidelines. Studies and thematic categorisations were independently screened by two researchers, with discrepancies resolved through consultation with a third reviewer—an expert on student protests in South African universities. The emergent themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1 below (see appendix).

Limitations

This study relied exclusively on secondary sources and did not include primary empirical data from social media platforms or direct student interviews. As a result, emerging trends in social media mobilisation that have not yet been captured in the academic literature might have been overlooked. Additionally, the reliance on published studies limits the analysis to perspectives already documented in scholarly discourse.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Motivations for social media mobilisation at South African universities

The reviewed literature reveals that motivations for social media use in student protest mobilisation in South Africa are rooted in its ability to facilitate rapid information dissemination, extend outreach, decentralise activism, challenge mainstream media narratives, and foster global solidarity. The findings demonstrate that as social media continues to evolve, its role in student activism is likely to expand, further reshaping the landscape of protest movements in the digital age.

Rapid information dissemination

Social media platforms provide an unprecedented speed of information dissemination, making them an attractive tool for student protest mobilisation. Studies, for example by Olagunju, Frankish and Wade (2022) highlight that these platforms allow instant access to real-time updates, outpacing traditional mainstream media, which often struggles to keep up with the rapid spread of information. A prime example is the #FeesMustFall movement, which caught South African authorities off-guard because of its swift escalation across university campuses, compelling government to respond at a faster than usual rate (Cini, 2019). The agility of social media aligns well with the fast-paced nature of student activism, allowing protesters to broadcast live updates, share strategies, and coordinate actions seamlessly (Nhedzi & Azionya, 2025; Platzky Miller, 2024). The ability to disseminate provocative content in real time further intensifies public engagement, resulting in a sense of urgency and solidarity among students and supporters (Bosch, 2019). Such an ability to instantly mobilise large numbers of students increases the effectiveness of protests, putting pressure on university administrations and the government to respond promptly. However, this immediacy can also contribute to significant misinformation, as unverified content spreads quickly, potentially escalating tensions and leading to misinformed activism.

Wider reach

Social media platforms extend the reach of student protests beyond university campuses to a broader audience that includes alumni, civil society, and international observers. The affordability and accessibility of social media make it an indispensable tool for mobilisation, especially among millennials who are heavily engaged in digital spaces (Olagunju et al., 2022). Unlike mainstream media, which is often restricted to national audiences, platforms such as X and Facebook facilitate the transnational spread of student movements, amplifying their visibility (Ntsala & Mahlatji, 2016). The viral nature of social media ensures that protest narratives spread beyond their initial contexts, allowing movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall to gain traction far beyond the confines of South African universities (Bosch, 2018). As social media increasingly shapes public discourse, its role in enabling protests to transcend geographical limitations becomes even more pronounced (Daniel & Platzky Miller, 2022). The findings demonstrate that the broader reach of social media allows for increased support and advocacy, drawing attention to systemic issues that might otherwise be

overlooked. However, this can also lead to external interference, where individuals and sometimes organisations with different agendas attempt to hijack the movement for their own purposes, potentially diluting the original objectives of student protests.

Decentralisation

One of the key motivators for using social media in student protest mobilisation is the decentralisation of communication and decision-making. Unlike traditional protest movements, which often rely on hierarchical structures, social media allows for a more fluid and participatory approach (Kamga, 2019). Protesters can initiate discussions independently, organise events, and share information without necessarily depending on central leadership structures (Vilakazi, 2017). This decentralised model empowers students to mobilise collectively while maintaining autonomy, making it more difficult for authorities to suppress the movement effectively (Luescher et al., 2017; Sutherland, 2017). Additionally, the lack of regulatory control over social media further incentivises its use, as universities and government institutions struggle to exert influence over online spaces in the same way they do over campus-based protests (Platzky Miller, 2024). Thus, students have been known to build robust networks of resistance that are more adaptable and resilient to external suppression by leveraging social media. Although decentralisation makes student movements more agile and resistant to state and institutional crackdowns, studies from contexts such as Sutherland (2017) demonstrate that it can also result in fragmentation, where multiple factions within the movement emerge with conflicting strategies or goals, making coordination more challenging.

Narrative control over mainstream media

A significant advantage of social media is that it enables students to counteract mainstream media narratives, which are often perceived as biased or incomplete (Bosch, 2018). Traditional media outlets are frequently accused of aligning with institutional and governmental interests, framing protests in ways that downplay students' grievances (Mateos & Erro, 2020). Social media disrupts this dynamic by providing an unfiltered platform for activists to share their perspectives and document events first-hand (Nhedzi & Azionya, 2025). The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements illustrate how students used social media to highlight post-apartheid educational inequalities, challenging dominant media narratives that often sought to delegitimise their demands (Cini, 2019). Thus, social media empowers students to shape protest narratives and ensures that their voices are heard without distortion by institutional gatekeeping (Badaru & Adu, 2021). The ability to control narratives ensures that students' grievances are accurately represented, thereby garnering broader public sympathy and support. However, Mateos and Erro (2020) warn that this also opens the door for misinformation and echo chambers, where alternative perspectives are dismissed, leading to polarisation and potential misrepresentation of facts.

Global solidarity and awareness

Social media facilitates global solidarity by connecting South African student movements with international audiences and activist networks. Hashtags such as #FeesMustFall not only gained

traction locally, but it also resonated with students and activists worldwide, drawing attention to broader issues of educational access and inequality (Ahmed, 2020; Nyamnjoh, 2016). Digital activism has blurred the lines between local and global struggles, allowing South African students to receive morale and material support from international allies (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021). This interconnectedness also exposes oppressive institutional practices to external scrutiny, pressurising governments and universities to address students' concerns more seriously (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017). The increasing role of social media in transnational activism demonstrates its capacity to transform student protests into movements and strengthen their legitimacy and impact on a global scale. Regrettably, while global solidarity enhances the credibility and visibility of student protests, it can also create dependency on external actors, whose interests might not always align with the local movement. Additionally, as demonstrated by Ahmed (2020), heightened international attention might lead to increased state surveillance and repression of activists.

Limitations of social media mobilisation at universities

Having examined the motivations behind social media mobilisation in student protests, this section critically analyses literature on social media's limitations and risks. While social media platforms have become powerful tools for activism, their potential drawbacks can undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of protest movements.

Infiltration and misinformation

Social media mobilisation in South African student protests has demonstrated a troubling susceptibility to infiltration and misinformation. Although social media platforms facilitate rapid information-sharing and organisational flexibility to protesters, Nhedzi and Azionya (2025) caution that they also create opportunities for the unchecked dissemination of misinformation and radical ideologies. Gasztold (2020) defines radicalism as the adoption of extreme ideologies aimed at societal transformation, and social media can reinforce these perspectives through constant repetition and selective framing. Olagunju et al. (2022) warn that the anonymity afforded by online platforms exacerbates these risks, allowing individuals to spread extreme viewpoints without accountability. This has been evident in major South African student protests, where misinformation—sometimes deliberately spread—intensified tensions and complicated the movements' objectives (Kamga, 2019; Ntsala & Mahlatji, 2016). Misinformation distorts the public's understanding, delegitimises genuine grievances, and shifts attention toward sensationalised claims, instead of substantive policy demands. To counteract this, it is incumbent upon student movements to develop strategies to verify and disseminate accurate information while mitigating the impact of misinformation on their legitimacy and effectiveness.

The digital divide

The effectiveness of social media mobilisation is also constrained by the digital divide, which limits access to these platforms among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While social media theoretically democratises activism, its impact is uneven because of disparities in digital

access (Luescher et al., 2021; Omodan, 2022). Students from wealthier backgrounds, with reliable internet connectivity and access to technology, are more likely to participate in online mobilisation, whereas those from lower-income and rural communities face significant barriers to engagement (Kamga, 2019; Vilakazi, 2017). This digital divide exacerbates pre-existing educational inequalities, restricting the inclusivity of student activism. As such, movements driven primarily by digitally connected students risk marginalising those most affected by systemic injustices. Consequently, Hove and Dube (2022) argue that digital activism – in cases where it remains purely digital and does not cascade into offline presence – might fail to represent the full spectrum of student voices and significantly reduce its legitimacy as a tool for equitable mobilisation. Without targeted digital inclusion strategies, social media activism risks remaining an exclusive rather than an inclusive mechanism for student mobilisation.

Unethical conduct

The anonymity and ease of engagement on social media has also been known to breed unethical conduct, including cyberbullying, harassment, and coercion. In the context of student protests in South Africa, Mutongoza (2023) reports that social media has been used to intimidate individuals who oppose, or fail to fully engage in, protest activities. Mbhele and Sibanyoni (2022) identify this behaviour as a form of cyberbullying, where activists in positions of influence use digital platforms to publicly shame, insult, or threaten those with differing views. Habib (2019) reveals that this form of online harassment discourages open discourse and can alienate potential allies, weakening the collective strength of a movement. Additionally, coercive tactics—such as pressurising students to participate in protests through online shaming—undermine the ethical foundation of activism (Aitchison, 2018; Luescher, 2025). As such, ethical leadership is essential to counter these negative dynamics and cultivate a digital culture that upholds respect, encourages differing perspectives, and protects individuals from online victimisation.

Leadership and coordination deficits

Another critical limitation of social media-based mobilisation is the absence of clear leadership structures. Unlike traditional protest movements with centralised leadership that ensures accountability and strategic direction, social media activism is often decentralised. While this enables broad participation, it has also been noted to lead to disorganisation, inconsistent messaging, and internal divisions (Ntsala & Mahlatji, 2016). This leadership vacuum has been evident in several South African student protests, where internal disagreements have weakened collective action (Bosch et al., 2019; Greeff et al., 2021). Hussen (2018) contends that the lack of cohesion in message and strategy reduces the movement's credibility and effectiveness in engaging with policymakers and university administrations. To address this challenge, Omodan (2022) argues that student activists need to develop leadership models that balance grassroots participation with structured coordination of protests. Thus, hybrid leadership approaches that combine decentralised engagement with clear strategic guidance can enhance the coherence and impact of social media-driven movements.

The short-lived nature of clicktivism

Another fundamental limitation of social media mobilisation is its tendency to encourage "clicktivism", a form of passive activism, where individuals engage with protest movements by liking, sharing, or commenting on content, rather than participating in sustained and transformational offline action (Khan et al., 2022). While social media is effective in raising awareness, it often fails to translate digital support into real-world activism. After the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements in South Africa, student protests that are meant to address systemic challenges, such as tuition fees and educational access, have not been as successful, based on an overreliance on online activism that creates a false sense of progress **(**Omodan, 2023**)**. The ease of digital participation might lead students to believe they are contributing meaningfully without engaging in substantive efforts, such as organising events, negotiating policy changes, or attending physical demonstrations (Ndlovu, 2017). According to Hewlett et al. (2016), the lack of sustained engagement weakens the long-term impact of protest movements. Therefore, it is essential for student leaders to integrate social media activism with tangible offline actions, ensuring that digital engagement serves as a catalyst for meaningful, sustained activism rather than a substitute for it.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media has undeniably become a powerful tool for student mobilisation, offering accessibility, rapid communication, and the ability to challenge institutional narratives. However, this study has highlighted major limitations, including misinformation, digital exclusion, unethical conduct, leadership challenges, and superficial engagement. These constraints pose risks to the sustainability and legitimacy of student protests, potentially undermining their effectiveness. While social media allows for widespread participation, it also creates 'echo chambers' that limit exposure to diverse perspectives, and its unregulated nature can encourage radicalisation and cyber-induced hostilities. Without strategic intervention, social media activism risks being reduced to fragmented, reactionary efforts, rather than serving as a cohesive and transformative force for student-led change. To address these challenges, universities and student organisations must collaborate to establish structured platforms for socio-political discourse, ensuring that student grievances are effectively communicated and addressed beyond social media spaces. Digital literacy programs should be implemented to equip students with critical skills for identifying misinformation and engaging in ethical online activism. Additionally, universities must strengthen institutional policies to combat cyberbullying, incitement to violence, and digital manipulation, and instead promote constructive engagement. A balanced approach is needed that upholds freedom of expression while ensuring accountability.

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APPENDIX

Table 1.

Summary of selected studies

Theme	Sub-theme	Authors
Motivations	Rapid information dissemination	Bosch (2019)
		Cini (2019)
		Nhedzi and Azionya (2025)
		Olagunju et al. (2022)
		Platzky Miller (2024)
	Wider reach	Bosch (2018)
		Daniel and Platzky Miller (2022)
		Ntsala and Mahlatji (2016)
		Olagunju et al. (2022)
	Decentralisation	Kamga (2019)
		Luescher et al. (2017)
		Platzky Miller (2024)
		Sutherland (2017)
		Vilakazi (2017)
	Narrative control over mainstream media	Badaru and Adu (2021)
		Bosch (2018)
		Cini (2019)
		Mateos and Erro (2020)
		Nhedzi and Azionya (2025)
	Global solidarity and awareness	Ahmed (2020)

		Ahmed and Madrid-Morales (2021)
		Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017)
		Nyamnjoh (2016)
Limitations	Infiltration and misinformation	Gasztold (2020)
		Kamga (2019)
		Nhedzi and Azionya (2025)
		Ntsala and Mahlatji (2016)
	Digital divide	Hove and Dube (2022)
		Kamga (2019)
		Luescher et al. (2021)
		Omodan (2022)
		Vilakazi (2017)
	Unethical conduct	Aitchison (2018)
		Habib (2019)
		Luescher (2025)
		Mbhele and Sibanyoni (2022)
		Mutongoza (2023)
	Leadership and coordination deficits	Bosch et al. (2019)
		Greeff et al. (2021)
		Hussen (2018)
		Ntsala and Mahlatji (2016)
		Omodan (2022)
	The short-lived nature of clicktivism	Hewlett et al. (2016)
		Khan et al. (2022)
		Ndlovu (2017)
		Omodan (2023)