

# Social Media Advocacy in the #MustFall Campaigns in South Africa

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## Abstract:

South Africa has always been a protesting nation that fights for a righteous cause. These protests were witnessed at the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 when blacks refused to carry passbooks (Identity books) everywhere they went within their own country; to the 1976 Soweto unrests where students were gunned down by the South African police for fighting for the banning of Afrikaans as the language of study for core subjects. Such protests present South African historic past of the disenfranchised and refusal to take unrighteous cause. By 2015, the outburst of social media (such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp) had given the disenfranchised in South Africa a powerful voice that could reach, not only most of national corners, but spread across the globe. Presented in this article, is a case study of the role played by social media in support of the recent South African student protests, collectively known as #MustFall campaigns, for free tertiary education with a specific focus on the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, and compares them with previous national protests and movements.

**Keywords:** #MustFall, Protests, Social Media, Advocacy, Regulations

## 1. Introduction and Background

The much broadcasted Arab Spring provided the low-hanging fruit for this argument. Across the Middle East, crowds gathered, shared, tweeted and “liked” their way into global consciousness. They filled squares and toppled governments but in their place has come chaos and, in many cases, regression. Bulgarian political scientist, Ivan Krastev stated that Societies are not made up of disrupters and protesters alone. The vast majority are intimidated by what Krastev calls “the demand for constant change and the hosannas for creative destruction” and will support the conservative option when it really matters. ‘Hashtaggers’ forget that tweets do not equal election votes [1].

Public protests in South Africa are common, such that the country has been dubbed the “the protest capital of the world” since the ‘70s. These protests can be classified as: service delivery protest, protest against undemocratic laws or land distribution, to mention a few [2]. It is with no surprise then that for a number of years, the country has witnessed numerous student protests from all its provinces. These are usually comprised of a wide range of activities that indicate student dissatisfaction with a given political or academic issues. Students mobilise to communicate their dissatisfaction to the authorities, such as the university, the state or both. Protest forms include but are not limited to: sit-ins, occupations of university offices or buildings, strikes, etc.

The student protests that erupted across South Africa in the year 2015 have been compared to the 1976 Soweto uprising which was sparked by the Apartheid government mandating Afrikaans as the language of study for core subjects in schools [3] and [4]. Those estimated 20,000 students - many of which were killed on the streets on 16 June - were fighting an incredibly oppressive and violent regime and risked their lives in order to be able to study in English, a language that they could learn and understand [4] and [5]. The 2015 student protests were advocated mostly by social media to mobilise with other students around the country and around the globe [6]. Social media advocacy can be defined as an act of using digital technology to contact, inform, and mobilise a group of concerned people around an issue or cause [7]. This act helps to amplify efforts by potentially reaching more people, more places, faster than ever before [8]. Its purpose is to galvanise supporters to take action which will remedy the situation. In order to use social media effectively, one needs to have a clear plan of who their audience is, which social media platforms are suited for that audience, and what are the anticipated results from the plan [9].

This case study seeks to investigate the role played by social media in support of the #MustFall student campaigns in South Africa, with the focus on the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, and compares them

with previous national protests and movements [10], [11] and [12]. Various digital tools and social media platforms will be studied to understand their role in support of these campaigns.

The results of the case study will then be categorised and classified in order to determine the social media platforms that contributed immensely in the advocacy of such campaigns. As introduced above, the study will also investigate which audience was targeted by which social media platform and also provide insight on the impact of the two campaigns [13].

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: the next section, section two, presents the national regulations with regards to protests; section three looks at the general use of social media in South Africa; section four looks at the #MustFall campaigns and similar previous protests; section five presented the impact of social media advocacy on the #MustFall campaigns in South Africa section six, discusses the case study; and section seven, makes a conclusion on the results and the case study.

## 2. Protests in South Africa and their Regulations

As a response of the injustices of the Apartheid era in South Africa, the Regulation of Gatherings Act was put in place in 1993 but only practiced in November 1996. In efforts to regulate protests the act states that: “every person has the right to assemble with other persons and to express his views on any matter freely in public and to enjoy the protection of the State while doing so” [1] and [14]. The act also provides guidelines on how and where it is legal to protest as well as the role of the people responsible for and in the protest [2] and [15]. The people responsible and their roles are summarised as follows:

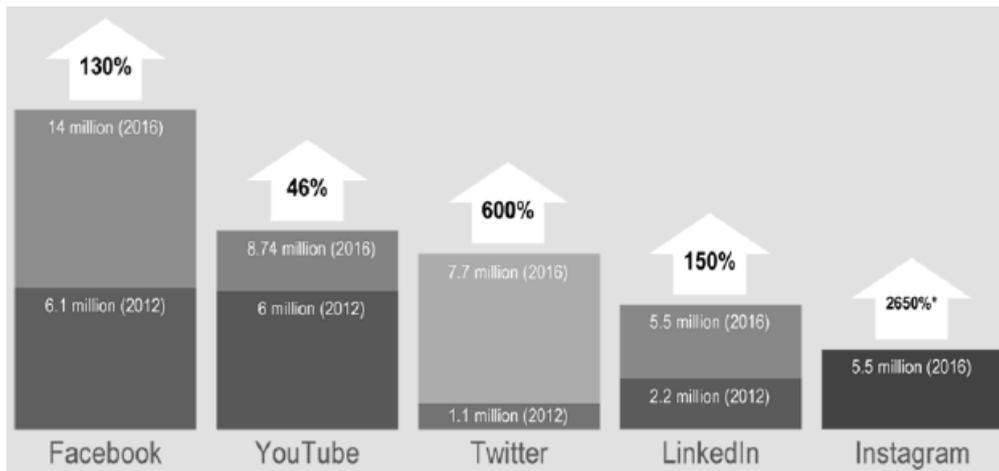
- **Convener:** The convener is the leader of the gathering. This person is responsible for notifying the local council of the planned gathering. This notification must be sent to the council seven days before the planned protest. If a 7 days’ notice cannot be given, a reason must be given 48 hours before the planned date.
- **Responsible Officer:** This person is responsible for receiving and reviewing gathering notifications.
- **Police:** Members of the South African Police Service (SAPS), who are of Charge Offer Level, are responsible for making sure that there is no violence, which can harm civilians or damage property, taking place. The role of the police during protests is also found in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Section 205 sub-section (3)). The act states the role of the police is “to prevent, combat and investigate crime, to maintain public order, to protect and secure the inhabitants of the Republic and their property, and to uphold and enforce the law”
- **Gathers:** The people participating in the gathering. This group of people has to adhere to the law at all times and can be arrested if they choose not to.

The South African Constitution also provides a section on protests that states “Everyone has the right to, peacefully and unarmed, assemble, demonstrate, picket and present petitions” [3] and [16]. The term unarmed in this context means participants of the protest may not carry any weapon such as example bricks, whips, knives or guns that can be harmful or pose a threat to others and properties. The term “demonstrates” in this context means a protest to bring attention to a cause with 15 or less people [17]. Picket is a form a protest which prevents gathers from entering a place or building by blocking the entrance. A petition is a document which requests someone to act in a certain way [2] and [3]. In summary, the South African citizens are free to protests their views or feelings as long as the gatherings are within the restrains of the law.

## 3. The Use of Social Media in South Africa

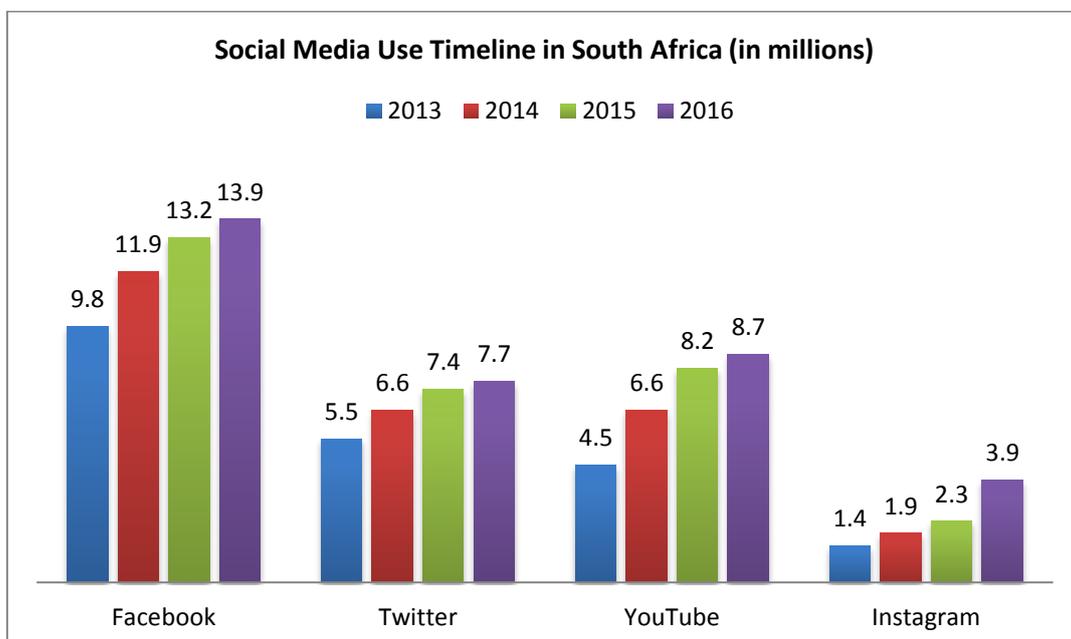
According to the 2017 edition of the SA Social Media Landscape by World Wide Worx and Ornicco, social media is predicted to be an indispensable tool for most of the South Africans, including marketers, politicians, artists, activists, reporters and media personalities [15] and [17]. Their study included a survey of 116 brands as a representative sample of the national major brands.

In 2016, 91% of these brands were using Facebook while 88% were active on Twitter and 66% were on YouTube [18], [19] and [20]. LinkedIn saw a decrease in use, from 70% to 63%, due to its target audience and initial purpose of professionalism. On the other hand, Instagram use increased from 42% to 62% by the national brands. These brands intend to use Instagram (no less than 26%) and 16% said they will be using YouTube [21]. Taking a step back and looking at the growth of these national social media platforms, Figure 1 shows the growth of these platforms between 2012 and 2016.



**Figure 1: Social Media Growth in South Africa between 2012 and 2016**

When it comes to social media platforms in South Africa, Facebook has always been leading in both use (shown in Figure 2) and growth, with Instagram being the least [22], [23] and [24].



**Figure 2: Social Media Use Timeline in South Africa (in millions)**

In the past year (2016), South Africans witnessed the role of social media in the public debate moving from the periphery to activism, symbolised by the fact that one of the most high-profile campaigns of the year, #MustFall, which is partly defined by its Twitter hashtag [25] and [26]. This led to the majority of the campaigns being mounted with a hashtag. This was to mainly emphasise the core role played by social media to the public life of the country.

In 2016, Instagram and YouTube redefined the social landscape compare to the previous years. Examples include the fact that Instagram continued to grow at a high rate, that is, by 32% up to 3.5 million users [27] and [28]. This means that social media is hardly stagnating in South Africa. It is rather maturing into a more stable and measurable environment that can be leveraged more effectively by almost everyone. Currently (2017), Facebook has more than 14 million South African users, followed by YouTube with 8.74 million users, and Twitter follows with 7.7 million users. While a significant number of these users are also accessing these platforms using computers and tablets, a mobile device has become the primary form of accessing social media. For an example: Facebook has 10 million of its users, accessing the platform using mobile devices, which is a significantly increase from 77% the previous year [29] and [30].

## **4. The #MustFall Campaigns and Similar Previous Protests**

This case study acknowledges that student protests are not new in post-apartheid South Africa. Historically, black universities have been characterised by multiple and violent student protests, far before the #FeesMustFall movement in 2015 and 2016.

Challenges with other forms of tertiary education institutions, previously known as "Technicon", can be traced back to the politics of higher education funding post-1994 and the decision by the state to reduce the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 21 by merging these Technicons with then called Universities [1] and [31]. One of the key reasons for the merger was to facilitate transformation and improve, particularly for previously disadvantaged black students, access to higher education and financial support (National Commission on Higher Education 1996). However, it appears that many of these ideals were not achieved post the mergers due to many universities are still marked by differences based on the material, cultural and social positions of their separate histories [1]. Example of this is the Soshanguve Campus of the Tshwane University of Technology, which appears to be negatively affected by its merger, with the previous Technikon Pretoria, a historically white institution. The merger with Cape Technikon, a former white institution, has resulted in inequalities between campuses along class and racial lines. These changes provide some insight into the rationale behind student protests at these universities tended to be more violent than on other campuses.

One of the key issues regarding student protests is funding. In 2015, the majority of students throughout the country, and beyond, mobilised in their masses to protest a proposed university fee increases for 2016 that was announced in October. Using social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, students and those who supported the campaign, used the hashtag #FeesMustFall that led to nationwide movement with various national universities joining the campaign which was initiated at University of Witwatersrand (Wits University). This campaign, which in some places turned to violence, resulted from the announcement by the president of the country, Jacob Zuma, of a 0% increase of fees for 2017. This announcement led to yet another hashtag trend related to the university fees, that is, #FeesHasFallen. The #FeesMustFall campaign was one of the national successful student protests in South Africa that received a positive response from government.

### **4.1 #FeeMustFall**

#FeesMustFall is a student led protest movement that began in mid-October 2015 in response to an announcement of increase in fees at South African universities for 2016 [6]. This protest was not only started for response increase in University fees, but also seek to address the low wages of the University staff who worked for private contractors such as cleaning services and campus security and for them to be employed directly by the Universities [3].

Protests started at the Wits University and spread to the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Rhodes University before rapidly spreading to other universities across the country [7]. The 2015 protest ended when it was announced by the South African government that there would be 0% fee increases for 2016. The protest in 2016 began when the South African Minister of Higher Education announced that there would be fee increases capped at 8% for 2017; however, each institution was given the freedom to decide by how much their tuition would increase. By October 2016 the Department of Education estimated that the total cost in property damage due to the protest since 2015 had amounted to R600 million (equivalent to US\$ 44.25 million) [8].

### **4.2 #RhodesMustFall**

Rhodes Must Fall (#RhodesMustFall) is a protest movement that began on 9 March 2015, originally directed against a statue at the UCT that commemorates what was deemed apartheid representative, Cecil John Rhodes. The campaign for the statue's removal received global attention [2] and [3] and led to a wider movement to "decolonisation" of such representations, including education and to promote racial transformation across the country [3] and [4]. On the 9th April 2015, following a UCT Council vote the previous night, the statue was removed. Rhode-Must-Fall captured national headlines throughout 2015 and sharply divided public opinion. It also inspired the emergence of allied student movements at other universities, both within South Africa and elsewhere in the world such as Oxford University [5].

## **5. Impact of Social Media Advocacy in the #MustFall Campaigns in South Africa**

Students' protests against fees are not new in post-apartheid South Africa, especially in historically black universities. However, many of these protests were not widely covered in the mainstream media, raising

questions such as who is worth media coverage. Jane Duncan (2015) argues that the media’s coverage of protests depends on who is involved and whether or not the protest is violent. Duncan (2015: 142) asserts that the media tends to focus mainly on violent protests, ‘creating the impression that the protests in South Africa are inherently violent, and that police action against them is warranted to protect property and public safety’.

### 5.1 Damage to University Property

Figure 3 shows the cost of damaged property for 18 universities as reported by the respective institutions for the period of 2005-2016. The data is broken between two phases: 2005-2014 and 2015-2016, covering until the second quarter of 2016. The data was obtained from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) website and online media source [9], [10]. No official data could be obtained from the DHET at the time of print for the period of 2015-2016. A number of universities reported no damage to properties for the period of 2005-2014, while the total reported cost for the same period was estimated at R 3 354 082 (1.2%). For the period of 2015-2016, four universities reported no damage to property, and the total reported cost to property, for the same period, estimated at R 300 302 848.58 (98.8%).

In September 2016, the minister of higher education reported that the cost to university property damage has shoot up to R 600-million since the beginning of 2015, i.e. doubled in the third quarter of 2016. While the university tally of the cost of damage to property alone estimated at R1-billion in October 2016 [9]. The increase could be attributed to the burning of the SANLAM auditorium at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), estimated at R 500-million. The damage to universities’ property includes burning of lecture halls, books and auditoriums, damage to vehicle within campus and outside, defacements, including vandalism of laboratories and libraries, etc. The South African Special Risk Insurance Association (SASRIA)<sup>1</sup> reported that claims of more R 300-million were assessed from universities during the student protests [11]. Many claims had yet to be assessed.



Figure 3 University cost to damage for period of 2005-2016 (First two quarters of 2016)

### 5.2 Law Enforcement and Safety

The law enforcement also reported to have incurred costs during the #Mustfall movements. In Gauteng alone, the cost was estimated at R 3-million in September 2016 [11]. The costs included the re-enforcement of the

<sup>1</sup> SASRIA SOC Ltd is the only short-term insurer that provides special risk cover to all individuals and businesses that own assets in South Africa, as well as government entities. <http://www.sasria.co.za/company-profile/>

force from neighbouring police stations, vehicle fuels, re-focusing priorities, over time bills, etc. Police and private security guards were called and stationed on the university grounds, 567 students were arrested between February and October 2016 during the #FeesMustFall movement, as reported by then acting national police commissioner [19], causing more stress to already over-crowded correctional facilities.

### **5.3 Psychological Impact**

Dr. Shose Kessi, Senior Lecturer at UCT and transformation advisor to the Vice Chancellor's office reported that most of the impact of these movements were characterised by physical damage to property, and other tangible measures, and negating the psychological effects the movements and protests had on students [18]. These effects includes, but no limited to, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), witnessing of fellow students get arrested, militarisation and securitisation of campus, and intimidation. This emotional disturbance require some time to be dealt with, hence further taking time away from classes and learning.

### **5.4 Academic**

High school pupils and their parents began to show concern as the protest continued with no end in sight, closer to the final examination period. Their concern was that: if the academic year is not saved – if there is a very low pass rate from the university students, this will impact the in-take for the following year – particularly with regard to registration spaces, accommodation, and other fees [12]. The UCT reported that if there was a housing or accommodation crisis, it was related to the fact that 700 beds were not free due to deferred exams [13]. Students also jeopardized their chances of being re-admitted to the university [15].

### **5.5 Economic**

The protests screamed chaos and un-ruling to potential international investors. This was further fuelled by the fact that the protestors, in this case the students, are also viewed as educated, meaning their actions are well thought off, as opposed to un-governed behaviour. The absorption of skills from graduate will be greatly affected – affecting the unemployment rate. According to a study by University of Pretoria (UP), using a model for economic research and in collaboration with the Centre of Policy Studies<sup>2</sup>, the GDP of the country can also be affected by a lower rate of graduate absorption [17]. This will in turn affect a number of sectors such as health care, service delivery, and other public and private sectors. The negative affection of service delivery itself has a potential of causing more protests from the concerned parties [16].

## **6. Discussion**

These student protests were effective mostly due to the national support garnered by the hashtags, that is, #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall. These protests were supported by the involvement of the whole nation, yet driven through the social media. These protesters did not depend on traditional media, which usually misrepresents the truth and chooses what to report on. Social media was driving the news, forcing the journalists to report on what was trending on the social media platforms.

One of the main reasons behind the voices of other student protests not to be heard is that violence and vandalism made the headlines instead of the purpose of the protests. Traditional media reporters had control over the content of reports compare to the direct trending incident from the social media reports. As soon as violence breaks out focus gets shifted. Hooliganism takes priority and everything else that was protested for is disregarded.

The outstanding matter in the catastrophe of the #FeesMustFall, is the source of extra funds required by government to substantiate 'free education'. According to the Higher Education Minister, R37 billion is needed to roll-out free university education over the next three years. However, this money is more readily available than what the government makes us believe. If government tackles Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) for 2017/8 alone, there could be sufficient funds to provide free quality tertiary education. This could be achieved without changing any law, but simply enforcing existing ones. It would further assure an abundant surplus for further planning, upgrading and qualitative transformation of tertiary education.

On the whole, the #FeesMustFall movement was lauded for its achievement in raising awareness about the funding crisis in higher education in South Africa. This is a long-standing problem that universities have been battling for years but the #FeesMustFall movement brought the crisis to public attention within a very short

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.copsmodels.com/>

period. The movement achieved a number of positive things at various universities, including the renaming of university buildings, curriculum transformation and the insourcing of general workers. The state has also been pushed to explore other options and finance models to fund higher education, although the progress has been slow so far.

However, it is also important to reflect on the darker side of the #FeesMustFall movement, including the domination of male students within the movement, rape incidents, the exclusion of gender nonconforming activists and the party-political power dynamics and battles for leadership positions within the movement. These observations suggest that the movement was not homogeneous and was characterised by tensions and contradictions. Some of these tensions led to the emergence of splinter groups, and to divisions and ruptures within the movement which made it difficult for all those involved to speak with one voice. These darker aspects of #FeesMustFall need to be analysed critically to assess how they may have contributed to the collapse and divisions within the movement in various universities.

The #MustFall campaigns, especially those impacting on higher education, necessitate further scrutiny and analyses by all relevant stakeholders in an attempt to positively move beyond the notion of “fallism”. Questions in this regard are far more numerous than answers: What is being done within South African institutions, or various regions, to assist moving beyond the #MustFall campaigns – in a positive way? Is there really anything to grasp the implications of issues and opportunities that need to #fall in our endeavour to plan for the future and move forward? Are the voice and momentum of the #MustFall campaigns incorporated into our case study in support of so-called efficiency and effectiveness in our institutions of higher learning? What new initiatives are institutions engaging in that can in any way be associated with, implicated in or impacted on by the #MustFall movement as portrayed in social media? Initiatives can be strategic or operational. Initiatives can possibly be related to, but not limited by, the generating and analysis of Management Information (MI) or business intelligence, surveys, quality assurance, academic planning, teaching-learning related activities such as access; retention and success; student experience; enrolment planning; curriculum design; teaching; assessment; student attributes; facilities/ infrastructure; and access to technology.

## 7. Conclusion

It all began with the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, which, in the end, did not quite fall, but was gently hoisted by a crane to a safe place. Then #MustFall was attached to the broader campaign to transform South African universities and remove the financial barriers to tertiary education. Suddenly, everything #MustFall; from his honourable President Jacob Zuma (#ZumaMustFall), to rain, supermarket prices, whomsoever the Springboks or the Proteas (national Rugby and Cricket teams, respectively) were battling against. Most South Africans can find a hashtag of their own to pin their hopes on.

This case study investigated the role played by social media in support of the #MustFall campaigns. It focused on two most successful campaigns in the recent years in SA, including, the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall and compared them with previous unsuccessful protests and movements. The use of various digital tools and social media platforms were studied to understand their role in support to these campaigns, with more focus on the above mentioned two successful campaigns. This paper also presented the national regulations with regards to protests; the general use of social media in South Africa; the #MustFall campaigns and similar previous protests; the impact of social media advocacy on the #MustFall campaigns in South Africa; the discussion of this case study.

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