What Now for the Zimbabwean Student Demonstrator?

Online Activism and Its Challenges for University Students in A COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

University student activism is generally characterized by protests and demonstrations by students who are reacting to social, political, and economic challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic revolutionized university student activism, and closed the geographical space for protests and demonstrations. The pandemic locked students out of the university campus, thus, rendering the traditional strategies of mass protests and demonstrations impossible. The COVID-19-induced lockdowns made it difficult, if not impossible, to mobilise for on-campus demonstrations and protests. It seems the pandemic is the last nail in the coffin of on-campus student protests. This theoretical paper uses a collective behaviour framework to explain the evolution of student activism in Zimbabwe, from the traditional on-campus politics to virtual activism. It discusses the challenges associated with cybernetic activism. The paper argues that, despite challenges, Zimbabwean university student activists need to migrate to a new world of digital technology and online activism. In the migration to online activism, students activists face a plethora of challenges. On top of the already existing obstacles, activists face new operational challenges related to trying to mobilise a constituency that has relocated to cyberspace. Student activists utilize the existing digital infrastructure to advance their politics, in spite of a hostile state security system and harsh economic environment, and other operational challenges.

Keywords: online activism, university student, COVID-19, social media, #hashtag

1. Introduction

This theoretical paper discusses the COVID-19-induced evolution of activism of university students in Zimbabwe. It argues that COVID-19 revolutionized university student activism by closing the physical space and pushing activism to cyberspace. The lockdowns closed university campuses, and forced student activism to evolve. Online crusades become the only viable option, as students could gather virtually on twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and other online platforms. To trace the evolutionary pattern of student politics, the paper reviews literature on the history of student activism, before investigating common issues that have triggered student protests in the past. It details the logistical and operational challenges associated with the new cybernetic activism. Common among the challenges facing student activists today is that access to the online space demands financial power (Gukurume 2017). It also demands that students who wish to communicate have access to modern digital gadgets, such as smartphones and laptops or computers. Gone are the days when students typed and printed placards and petitions. This means that financially disadvantaged students are automatically locked out of the virtual campus, thus, in a way, blocked from participating in online protests. This is explained by Taru (2020), who reports that university students in rural areas are usually locked out of the virtual space because they cannot afford the digital equipment required, and, at the same time, they lack the required internet connection. These students can not sacrifice their scarce resources for activism, while they struggle to fund access to online education. The capacity of the digital infrastructure in Zimbabwe to adequately support online services is another factor that contributes to the efficacy of online activism. Matimaire (2020) argues that Zimbabwe is digital-shy, because there are areas in the country that have no or poor internet connectivity. Even in urban areas where there is relatively good connectivity, power outages pose a threat to online activities (Banya 2019).

2. Research Questions and Research Objectives

The major research question of this paper is the following: How has student activism in Zimbabwe evolved because of the COVID-19 pandemic? This question leads to the following subquestions:

What are the challenges faced by university students involved in online activism?

How has the state responded to the new form of digital activism?

What can be done to promote student activism in Zimbabwe?

The following research objectives guided the researchers to respond to the research question using examples from Zimbabwean universities. This paper will

1) Explain how COVID-19 has impacted the evolution of student activism;

2) Analyse challenges associated with the transition to online activism; and

3) Examine the state's reaction to online activism, and the strategies used by student activists and stakeholders to promote online crusading.

3. Literature Review

Student activism is defined as fighting injustice, which has been the curriculum of the student throughout history (Gismondi & Osteen 2017). Literature reports that, despite facing various challenges, student activism has proven to be a powerful force in university education reform and governance (Barnhardt 2015). Substantial work have been done on student activism the world over. Hanna and Hanna (1975), Altbach (1989), Zeilig (2008) and Makunike (2015), among others, produced publications on student politics, spanning the 20th and 21st centuries in different parts of the world. There seems to be agreement amongst the scholars that student politics is marred by operational challenges and requires a degree of bravery and commitment.

In his various publications, Philip Altbach, one of the founders of student activism theory, explains the nature, challenges and factors that shape student activism. Altbach (1969) argues that students find identity and belonging in a body or community with specific characteristics. Student groupings emerge because of trigger conditions, which give impetus to mass mobilization. Altbach (1969) says that student groupings represent communities with a sense of identity and belonging, and these student groupings are shaped by similar aims. Therefore, the efficacy of student activism is dependent on groups or crowds, which supports McPhail's (1991) argument that activism can be explained by the "madness" of the crowd. It is the activists' duty to mobilize the crowd. In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the crowds that used to be found on university campuses have moved to virtual spaces on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp. Altbach's explanation helps us to understand the history, nature, and evolution of student activism. However, in light of COVID-19, there is need to shift thinking on student activism towards construction of online activism devoid of cyber bullying and hate language. This helps to achieve the goals of activism without trampling on the rights of other groups.

In Zimbabwe, the history of student activism has been documented by scholars such as Mlambo (1995), Zeilig (2008), Makunike (2015) and Hodgkinson (2019). These scholars agree that student activism is characterized by organized student councils at tertiary learning institutions. In other words, without tertiary learning institutions, like universities, there can be no student activism to talk about. In an article that discusses the 1973 Chimukwembe demonstration at the University of Rhodesia (now University of Zimbabwe), Mlambo (1995) explains that student activism is defined by mass mobilization and collective effort by students. Activism can be violent and destructive – like the 1973 Chimukwembe demonstration, where the mass mobilization of students resulted in violence and destruction of property. Hodgkinson (2019) agrees with Mlambo (1995) and Makunike (2015) that universities are a breeding space for student activism. He argues that universities groom student leaders, who later become national icons – Simba Makoni and Witness Mangwende are some of the examples (see Hodgkinson 2019; Mlambo 1995). Activism could be right or left-leaning, peaceful or violent, but, in the end, it is about fighting injustice. These scholars wrote about on-campus demonstrations and protests because they wrote in an era when student activism was defined by the geographical setting of students at the university campus. Even today, their work is important, because, in addition to tracing the history of student activism in Zimbabwe, they clearly show that activism requires mobilization and collective effort – a requirement that is still valid, even for cybernetic activism. This helps us to understand the evolutionary process of student activism, from traditional on-campus activities, to online activism. It is clear that the nature, strategies, and goals of student activism have remained the same, despite the shifting of the university campus to the virtual space.

The strong link between national politics and student activism is also a factor that is difficult to ignore. Student politics can become a collective effort of students and nonstudent actors. Lipset (1969) and Altbach (1989) agree that student activism is shaped by the national political, social, and economic environment. Students react to events, and they mobilize to effect change. Makunike (2015), Mlambo (1995) and Chikwanha (2009) agree that, in some African countries, student activism is generally leftist, and students mobilize and use both violent and peaceful strategies to fight injustice. Their activism usually attracts the iron fist of state security. Mlambo (1995) and Zeilig (2008) agree that the Zimbabwean government has been aggressive towards and intolerant of student activism since the late 1990s, because activism poses a threat to the status quo. This claim is confirmed by Gukurume (2017), who argues that the state's reaction to student politics has been aggressive, to the extent that activists have been victimized for their utterances on social media. This response continues to be a challenge for online activism, because the Zimbabwean government is intolerant of activism in whatever form and on whatever platform. Millora and Karunungan (2021) report on several cases in Zimbabwe where the government used COVID-19 lockdown rules to clamp down on and arrest student activists. Some, like Allan Moyo of the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU), spent days in pretrial detention. These obstacles expose the rough terrain of student activism.

The evolution to online activism meant a shift from traditional strategies, such as on-campus demonstrations, sit-ins, stay-aways and peaceful marches. Such strategies were easy to implement when students attended on-campus lectures, because activists could mobilize, gather, and start crowd protests. The COVID-19 pandemic revolutionized traditional methods of activism. COVID-19-induced lockdowns and the health risks posed by congregating on campus made the transition to online crusading a viable option. We believe that the goal of student activism is still that of fighting injustice, though the battlefield has shifted to the virtual space. Altbach (1989), Lipset (1969), Chikwanha (2009), Mlambo (1995) and Makunike (2015) are among the scholars who help us to understand the nature of student activism in the world, and in Zimbabwe, in particular; they help to analyse the causes of activism and the strategies used by students. Their scholarship makes it possible to identify the changes in student politics that were likely caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also makes it possible to analyse how cybercrime laws are used by the state to clamp down on online activism.

There is, however, a dearth of literature on online student activism in Zimbabwe. This could be because online activism is relatively new, and has not yet attracted scholarly attention. However, a number of scholars have written on social media and politics in Zimbabwe; this literature is significant, because social media defines online activism. Gukurume (2017) agrees with Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020), that social media has been used in Zimbabwe as a mobilising tool by citizens to reclaim their political voices and spaces. Social media has provided an alternative platform for the subaltern voices. It has changed the nature of activism by providing a discursive space for people to share their challenges and to mobilise against injustice. Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020) refer to the internet and social media as "liberation technologies", because they provide an alternative voice against authoritarian governments. In explaining the importance of social media, Gukurume (2017) says,

> social media technologies created a virtual community of dissent that actively fostered counter-hegemonic discourses, hence affording the hitherto suppressed voices an audible voice against the authoritarian Mugabe government … social media was an instrumental tool for protesters to organize, strategize and congregate regardless of their temporal and spatial locations.

This shows that online activism gave the people a space where they could bridge geographical distances and collectively gather to fight a common problem. In this case, the problem was the oppressive nature of the Robert Mugabe-led government. Bosch, Admire and Ncube (2020) echo this view when they argue that social media is slowly being turned into a decisive factor in shaping African politics. Opposition political parties have found a way to counter state-controlled media; at the same time, the ruling regime tries to maintain its monopoly on media and communication. This paper is unique because, instead of focusing on activism in general, it zeroes in on student activism and details the nature of the state's reaction to online student activism. Therefore, literature explaining the use of social media in Zimbabwe will help to contextualize the evolution of student activism in the country.

4. Theoretical Framework

This paper is located in the context of the collective behaviour framework, which is a theory rooted in the Freudian theory of frustration-aggression and in a Durkheimian theory of social control. The theory was developed through the work of Gustave Le Bon, a French polymath of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – a time when scholars were eager to understand the psychology of the mob – and moving into the 1950s, when conservatives sought to understand the impetus to rebellions, protests, and upheavals in the United States soon after the second world war. The psychology of the mob was popularized further in the 1960s and 1970s by the work of Ralph Turner and Lewis

Killian on collective behaviour (Marx & Wood 1975).

Biddix and Park (2008) argue that collective behaviour theory suggests that social protest is an activity "in which organized groups seek goals, mobilize resources and employ strategies". To be successful in their operations, activists need to mobilize community resources (McAdam 1983). Millward and Takhar (2019) mention that oppressive practices and exclusionary policies catalyse participation in collective action, and generate a conscious move towards social, cultural, and political change. McPhail (1991) refers to the "madness of the crowd", and argues that collective behaviour explains the difference between the behaviour of a crowd and that of an isolated individual. The central thesis of collective behaviour is that individual behaviour is shaped by the crowd. Individuals behave differently when they become part of a crowd (Le Bon, 1895, cited by McPhail, 1991). In other words, crowd behaviour is contagious, which explains why some social scientists use the term contagious theory synonymously with collective behaviour theory. The common denominator of these theories is that a group comes together for a purpose.

There are different forms of collective behaviour, and it includes crowds, masses, and public and social movements. Le Bon (1895), Blumer (1937) and McPhail (1991) agree that the crowd plays a role in shaping human behaviour. The crowd has a contagious effect, such that people tend to behave differently when they are in a crowd. Blumer (1937) also argues that the specific audience of a particular issue becomes the public. It is important to use the mass media to reach out to the public and to shape crowd behaviour; doing so usually results in established social movements with known membership and known agendas. A mass is a relatively large number of people with a common interest, though they are not necessarily in proximity (Lofland 1981); examples are players of the popular Facebook game Farmville. A public, on the other hand, is an unorganized, relatively diffused group of people who share ideas. Collective behaviour theory helps us to understand online student activism, in the sense that the activism is open to the public and various stakeholders can, quite easily, join online student protests if they share a common interest. As an example, Millora and Karunungan (2021) mention that Zimbabwean university students' online protests against the criminalization of demonstrations during COVID-19 lockdowns gained sympathy from politicians and members of civic society and other groups throughout the country and the world. This collective action threatened the state.

In addition, student activism has always been about groups of students fighting to achieve the same goals. The COVID-19-induced lockdowns simply shifted the collective behaviour to the virtual space. It was inevitable that students would "panel-beat" their strategies and tactics, so that they would be compatible with the new, COVID-19-induced order. Therefore, the crowd influence, as described by McPhail (1991), has shifted from university campuses, to an online space, where the public can be enlarged to include nonstudent actors – all with the same goal, that of forcing social, political, and economic change.

5. Challenges Facing Online Activism

The online learning induced by COVID-19 was the prelude to online student activism. We can, therefore, assume that there were common challenges facing the two phenomena. Technically, Zimbabwe's digital infrastructure faces difficulty handling a growing number of online activities (Matimaire 2020). The citizenry, and students in particular, are not used to being so dependent on virtual life; some even lack the digital literacy required to navigate online platforms. Economically, online activities added a financial burden to the already burdened populace, since there was an urgent need to purchase data and digital gadgets (Hove & Dube 2021). University students, as financial dependents of their already burdened custodians, experience difficulties spending extra resources on activism. Those that can afford the extra cost are usually members of the privileged class that benefits from the status quo and are, therefore, least likely to join in leftist activism. Above all, the state remains aggressive in cracking down on student activism. This section will explain the challenges associated with online activism in Zimbabwe in detail.

5.1 Operational Challenges

The COVID-19-induced lockdown resulted in an abrupt shift to online activities, regardless of the readiness of participants (Tam & El-Azar 2020). Consequently, a number of technical obstructions hinder the smooth flow of student cybernetic crusades. Digital illiteracy, a lack of, or poor internet connectivity, and power blackouts are some of the common problems that derail online crusading by university students. Because of the COVID-19-induced lockdown, students are no longer living or learning on campus, where they could be easily mobilized on or offline. In addition, one's economic status and geography is now a contributing factor to the availability of digital resources (Taru 2020). Visualize the situation of a university student who lives in a rural area with no electricity or mobile network, and compare it to another student, who lives in a city where there is a range of network choices, and power

backups. These different students are likely to participate differently in activism, despite having similar academic concerns.

Statistics report that the rate of internet penetration in Africa is relatively low, and few people are actively using internet platforms. According to the Internet World Stats (2019), internet penetration in Africa by the end of the year 2018 was slightly above 35% (35,2%, to be specific). Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020) argue that little of the internet usage in Africa involves interactive behaviour; that is, most internet users rarely use social media platforms. This highlights one of the major challenges facing online activism, because low participation in social media means a reduced constituency. Even more concerning, Internet World Stats (2019) reports that not all smartphone owners are active internet users – only 12% are active. Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020), explain: "even for those with access to smartphones, in regions where Internet connection is low and slow, there is a tendency that many just read the headlines of newspaper articles and not the full story". This shows that few people in Africa are active on social media. The situation is the same in Zimbabwe, where internet coverage is relatively low. Kemp (2021) reports that internet penetration in Zimbabwe stood at 33.4% in January 2021, with 5.01 million internet users in the country. In contrast, the World Bank (2019) and the Internet society (2019) put the internet penetration percentage in Zimbabwe at 27.06 % and 27.1%, respectively. This is a low percentage, considering that we are now surviving in a digital world, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to conduct most of their activities virtually. It is clear that a low percentage of Zimbabweans use social media platforms. Kemp (2021) states that only about 1.3 million Zimbabweans – about 8.7% of the total population – were using social media in Zimbabwe by January 2021. University students are included in these statistics. This low percentage emphasises that access to and use of the internet and social media are major obstacles to online activism.

University students in Zimbabwe arguably lack the basic digital equipment needed. Some may have the resources, but may not be keen to participate in online public platforms, for personal reasons. This, coupled with the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe, and lack of a digitally sound infrastructure in the country, makes it difficult for students to participate actively in online activities. Gora (2020) agrees with Taru (2020) that university students, especially those that live in rural areas, find it difficult to access online resources. This affects their participation in online activities. Taru (2020) laments,

> Most rural students do not have a laptop or a personal computer, and cannot afford to buy one. The spatial arrangements in their homes often do not allow for an adequate workspace. I hear heart-breaking stories of students travelling for dozens of kms to access a computer, or to power their laptops and find a working internet connection – and all this in a middle of a lockdown that imposes strict conditions on movement and contact with other people. Family work obligations can also be competing for time.

It becomes clear that, in the face of such challenges, the constituency that participates in online activism is greatly reduced, especially considering that online activism demands extra financial resources. The students would rather sacrifice to participate in online education before they consider participating in activism. Activism becomes a luxury.

The total absence of, or erratic, power supply also poses major obstacle to online activism. The percentage of the population with access to electricity in Zimbabwe stood at 41.09% in 2019 (World Bank, 2021). This is a low percentage, considering that electricity is an important resource in this digital era. Power outages are the order of the day. Most communities connected to the national grid in Zimbabwe spend the greater part of the day without electricity (Banya 2019). This affects online activities, because digital gadgets require charging and electric power to function; consider that mobile network boosters, computers, and smartphones, and many other digital gadgets, cannot function without electric power. Even though students who live in areas where there is no electricity are the worst affected, the issue of electricity is a national problem – erratic power supply characterizes both rural and urban areas (Matimaire 2020). This shortcoming makes it difficult for students to timeously congregate for online crusading. Instead, students may opt to use the scarce resource of electricity to write assignments and study, instead of engaging in online protests.

The hostile state reaction to activism remains one of the challenges facing online activism. The state has a history of using an iron fist to silence left-wing student activism. According to Makunike (2015), the honeymoon between students and the Zimbabwean government ended in the second decade after independence, when students started resisting autocratic government policies, such as the one-party state system. It seems the relationship is still sour today, to the extent that the state is eager to clamp down on online crusading. Gukurume (2017) reports that the Robert Mugabe-led regime was not tolerant of the political use of social media. There was a deliberate state media blackout of social media protests such as the #thisflag and #thisgown movements. When the movements gained traction, their leaders were arrested and accused of causing instability and inciting insurrection (Gukurume 2017).

The pattern of state response continued into the COVID-19 era, to the extent that some scholars, including Gora (2021), argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is being used by the government to gag student activism. In several recent incidents, student activists were arrested and harassed for mobilizing and demonstrating. The cases of Allan Moyo, Takudzwa Ngadziore and other students arrested in 2020 and 2021 serve as examples. Such a brutal response by the state means activism, both online and offline, remains a place for the brave, especially considering how easily digital footprints can be traced, even if some students use pseudonyms and ghost accounts to camouflage their footprints. The state remains aggressive about stopping online crusading. Gora (2021) says, "The students' attempts to raise their voices about the conditions during the pandemic resulted in the arrest and detention of more than 30 student leaders since June 2020 and have sparked condemnation from human rights and civil society organizations". This report indicates the nature of the relationship between the state and student activists. The state works to dismantle the activism machinery. However, it is evident that online media platforms continue to give activists an alternative platform. According to Gora (2021), students, citizens and other activists collectively lobbied for Allan Moyo's freedom, using the hashtag #freealanmoyo, which trended on Twitter and Facebook for days. Hashtags are fashionable in online activism, and it appears they quickly send the message and attract crowds nationally and internationally, thus, in a way, providing a lifeline and expanding the constituency of student politics.

5.2 Economic Challenges

The material resources required to access and control digital technology stand out as one of the major obstacles to online activism. Hove and Dube (2021) argue that the cost of digital resources, such as laptops and smartphones, is beyond the reach of an average student in Zimbabwe. Taru (2020) adds that some university students, particularly those with a disadvantaged background, find it difficult to afford a laptop or a 3rd generation smartphone. Therefore, to such students, internet access remains a luxury. The situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown, which restricted the movement of people, such that the possibility of visiting an internet café was no longer as feasible as it used to be. Musarakufa (2020) adds that internet data charges in Zimbabwe are relatively high – even civil servants like teachers struggle to afford it. This claim is echoed by Matimaire (2020), who explains that, by June 2020, the average cost of internet data for a month was at around US$40 to US$50. This is exorbitant, considering that many workers, including teachers, earn less than US$200 a month (Matimaire 2020). This means students struggle to access online resources, and have to set priorities in accordance with their inadequate financial resources. In most cases, activism is secondary to learning, thus, activism suffers. Also consider that, before the COVID-19 lockdown, students used to depend on campus Wi-Fi; when they were forced to start studying from home, the cost of internet connectivity shifted to their shoulders. However, it will be a miscarriage of justice to argue that these challenges killed online student activism in Zimbabwe – Zimbabwe's university students are still active in online activism. They use different strategies and engage different stakeholders to push their agendas.

Though cybernetic activism is still relatively new and faces operational challenges, it has changed the world of activism. Today's student activists are stimulated, connected, and sustained by the power of the internet and social media platforms like twitter and Facebook (Hernández 2015; Wong 2015). The energy and enthusiasm of online activists seem to have been renewed and they seem more energized than in previous years. Online activism, which has its roots in the second half of the 20th century, has already shown that it can be a powerful tool in student activism. At the turn of the millennium, social media platforms became instrumental in the mobilization and logistical organization of student political activities. This made the spreading of information amongst student groups fast and easy (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Dendere (2019) explains that, in 2017 Facebook users sent about 31.25 million messages and viewed about 2.77 million videos every minute. Tweets also reached high volumes: more than 300,000 per minute; and over 48,000 Instagram pictures were shared per minute, and more than 300 hours of video were uploaded to YouTube every minute.

Kemp (2021) reports that there were 1.30 million social media users in Zimbabwe in January 2021, this number had increased by 320 000 (+33%) between 2020 and 2021. Even though this data is not specifically for students, it helps to show the trend of social media use. Ramírez and Metcalfe (2017) argue that ''hashtivism'' – that is, online activism through hashtags – is an important factor in student activism. It was used in response to the disappearance of students at the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers College in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, in September 2014. The same modus operandi, of using #hashtags, is increasingly becoming popular and effective in recent student activism in Zimbabwe, with #hashtags like #thisgown and #freeallanmoyo, and others being widely used to advance students goals.

6. The Way Forward

Though the COVID-19-induced digital revolution presented several challenges, it also presents opportunities that could be utilized to promote collective action that could benefit student activism. Students had to restrategize and fully embrace the reality that online activism is now a more viable option than traditional approaches to activism. Therefore, it means that student demands and actions must shift to the virtual space. The structures that used to meet on campus should relocate online. Petitions can be digital. Student activists can utilize digital platforms to monitor, evaluate and reflect on their activities. Doing so can reduce the unwanted side-effects of activism, such as rioting that may result in loss of life and destruction of property. At the same time, the impact of the Le Bon's collective behaviour theory becomes more visible and accommodating to other groups of students, like those that experience physical challenges, such as visually impairment, who would have faced challenges participating in on-campus demonstrations. Therefore, online student activism has become more inclusive and powerful than before.

Literature portrays student activism in Zimbabwe as a process characterized by violence and clashes with state security. McPhail (1991) explains this behaviour as the "madness of the crowd", whereby individual behaviour is shaped by the presence of the crowd. Mlambo (1995) and Makunike (2015) agree that student activism in Zimbabwe is leftist and violent in nature. With the transition to digital activism, it means limited physical interaction will be possible, thereby reducing the chance of violent clashes. This can be a benefit to all stakeholders. However, we cannot ignore that, in digital activism, physical violence may be replaced by cyberbullying and hate speech. Online activism, therefore, calls for responsible activism devoid of cyberbullying and hate language. The authorities need to upgrade the laws to refer to new cybercrimes, without undermining the rights of students and blocking the goals of activism.

The virtual space offers students the opportunity to recruit and export their ideas to a bigger constituency. Doing so could attract more members, sympathy, and solidarity from stakeholders who are not members of the student community; thus, exemplifying Le Bon's collective behaviour theory, which states that people of different backgrounds may temporarily converge to solve a common problem (McPhail, 1991). Gukurume (2017), Dendere (2019) and Gora (2021) all agree that social media has resulted in citizens using collective action to keep the government of Zimbabwe accountable. Hashtags, like #thisflag, #thisgown and #freeAllanMoyo have shown the power of social media to unite people to strive for a common goal. Gora (2021) explains that, through the social media hashtag #freeAllanMoyo, a university student activist gained sympathy from politicians, civic society, journalists, and many other activists nationally and internationally, who helped send a message to the authorities and the international community about the plight of students at the hands of state security. Therefore, the COVID-19-induced digital revolution, if it is fully utilized, can benefit student activists.

7. Conclusion

The paper explained the common challenges university student activists faced during their COVID-19-induced transition to digital activism. COVID-19 exported the university student constituency to the virtual space, in the process raising fears that it would erode the impact of collective behaviour action that had, in the past, been promoted through mob psychology or the "madness of the crowd" (McPhail, 1991). It was noted that the transition to online activism has been marred by economic and operational challenges that emanate from the bigger national atmosphere, which is characterized by poverty and a shortage of digital infrastructure. It was also discovered that online student activism is now a privilege for financially stable students who can afford the digital gadgets and internet data needed to access various online platforms. However, despite all the challenges associated with the evolution to a digital era, online activism offers various opportunities. Student activists could utilize social media and take advantage of online networks to export the collective behaviour action concept to online activism. In a digital world, students can mobilize, recruit, and export their ideas to a larger constituency than before. Online social media platforms make it possible for digital activism to be inclusive and friendly for students who face physical challenges, such as the visually impaired. It reduces the risks associated with the "madness of the crowd", such as the risk of riots, violence, and destruction of property. Digital activism can lead to responsible activism devoid of hate language and cyberbullying. University rules and regulations also need to be amended to cater for changes in the digital atmosphere, without threatening the rights and freedoms of students.

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