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The virtual public sphere and social movements on social media

The engagement and longevity of the social movements Black Lives Matter and MeToo

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Abstract

Like many things, social movements have been able to take a new form, and behave differently, thanks to the rise of the internet and social media networks. The purpose of this study is to analyze how long lasting this engagement is from its participants, and how short-run participation in social movements can be understood. This study has been heavily inspired by Zizi Papacharissi, therefore the topics being analyzed and discussed will revolve around the public sphere and what form it takes in the digital space. The aim is to contribute to understanding of the virtual public sphere. The cases used to examine this phenomenon are discussion surrounding the Black Lives Matter and Me Too social movements. This study will be limited to looking at data from twitter and google trends. The method used in this study is a quantitative analysis and a qualitative text analysis, by piecing together previously conducted research. The results are that participation in virtual discussions increases and decreases quickly, over a short time period. Anonymity, bots, and the technological foundation of virtual public spheres are suggested as explanations. The conclusion made is that participation is possible, but limited to affectual attachment.

Key words: social media movements, public sphere, digital public sphere, affect, twitter, Black Lives Matter, MeToo

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1. Introduction

George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American, was killed whilst being arrested on the 25th of May 2020. During the arrest one of the police officers responsible for the arrest held his knee to Floyd's neck. Before and during Floyd complained about difficulties breathing. Two autopsies conducted the following day found the cause to be manslaughter (FOX 9, 2020). The event was filmed and photographed. It spread on social media and through classic news media. In the city of Minneapolis, where Floyd had been killed, members of the Minneapolis City Council, the legislative body of Minneapolis city, went out demanding the police to be defunded and dismantled (Dickinson, 2020). Furthermore, almost precisely one month later on the 26th of June the City Council, the legislative body of Minneapolis city, laid forward a proposal that would effectively dismantle the police force in the city. The idea was to replace it with a Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention, that would function innately different from the police (Navratil, 2020). Indeed, it seems these sweeping changes took some hold. However, on the 9th of December as the council was to vote on the budget for 2021 those promises of structural reform resulted in a decrease in \$8 million, from a total of \$179 of the total Minneapolis police budget. Furthermore, a proposal to lower the size of the police from 888 to 750 failed to be accepted (Dickinson, 2020). Trying to understand the underlying causes of what appears to be shifts to diametrically opposite moods can be interesting to examine. Looking at how such discussions have evolved over time could be one way of doing that. Specifically, the public sphere, the area where groups of people can discuss and aim to resolve issues believed to be shared between them, could be investigated.

1.1 Research Question and Aim

The effect of the internet on the public sphere has been raised in congruence with its growth as a platform. We borrow Gerard A. Hauser's definition of the public sphere as, "a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them" (Hauser, 1999; p.61). Comprehension of the

public sphere is thus interesting because it contributes to understanding of public opinion, which has the potential to influence politics.

The division of the public and private sphere is nebulous, and has been since prior to the establishment of the internet and social media. That ambiguity is reflected in the varied research focus of the public sphere. The cause can be traced to the fact that it consists of several different constitutive parts, that have varied over time. To begin with the difficulty of determining the “common concern” has been brought up. Other concerns regard the effect this division has on a number of areas, described below. Individuals’ behaviour in the different spheres, and in which a person is their true self has received attention. For Martin Heidegger, a person is their true self in the private sphere, where one can act freely without interference (Collins & Selina 1998, p.64-90). In contrast, Hannah Arendt argues that it is in the public sphere one is their true self because it allows for political action (Arendt, 1958). Locations that have exemplified the public sphere differs as well, including the Greek agora, French saloons, and US town-halls. Locating some, or all, of these parts often, effectively, leads to normative claims about how the public sphere should be organized. Who is able to participate, and who is excluded, has also received attention. How the theoretical divide crumbles in practices has also been shown, effectively criticizing its value (Papacharissi, 2002).

Similar questions to the ones raised above have been applied to social media and the virtual space. There are also questions unique to the public-private division on the virtual space. Those include contemplations regarding to what extent the virtual space could be considered a sphere. Another new component that has surfaced with the advent of the internet is whether the public sphere is different virtually in contrast to its physical predecessor and current partner (Papacharissi, 2002). The aim of such research is to locate underlying assumptions that guide the organization of the physical public sphere – regardless of variation in the aforementioned components – that differ for the virtual public sphere. One contribution of this work is to that area. The aim of this paper is locating and discussing some parts that could be constitutive to virtual public spheres. A possible outcome is that these theoretical foundations are new in comparison to previously conducted research. One implication of such results could be support for a distinctly virtual public sphere.

To ground the theoretical work of this paper the discussion surrounding two social movements, Black Lives Matter and MeToo, will be analyzed. Both were created in the United States and are responses to national issues, but spread, and have been discussed globally. We argue that the debate and discussions caused by both Black Lives Matter and MeToo are examples of issues treated by the public sphere. It is a localisation of issues, police violence and sexual harassment, respectively, that are considered of common concern. Communication is broad, and there are aims of finding appropriate responses. It should also be noted that for the organisations themselves, of course, implementation of specific policies to battle the issues are also a purpose.

The first part of the paper hence aims to answer the following question:

- *How long-lasting is the engagement with the social movements from its participants?*

Researching the time allotted to resolve the concerns is interesting because it could be indicative of how discussion is conducted virtually. To answer this question data from Google trends and Twitter will be analysed. A result from that question is that participation in discussions surrounding the social movements surge significantly but also rescind quickly again, everything occurring over a short period of time. In between surges are long periods of complete inaction.

The second part of the investigation consists of a discussion, grounded in previous research, discussing some areas that can be thought to affect short-run virtual participation.

The question leading the second part is hence:

- *How can short-run virtual participation in social movements be understood?*

To clarify, the purpose of this paper is not primarily to look at the effects of these social movements, but rather to contribute knowledge regarding how long-lasting social movements that spread virtually are.

1.2 Case background

In this paragraph both of our cases, the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movement will be introduced and given the proper background to allow for further analysis.

1.2.1 The Black Lives Matter Movement

Black Lives Matter first came to be as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a Florida man who volunteered as a neighborhood watch man who fatally shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old boy. Zimmerman was just one of allegedly many hundred victims of police brutality from the black community. Dissatisfaction started to erupt in the black community as a response towards large structures of police misconduct and this when the slogan of black lives matter was first tossed (Obornea & Cooke, 2020; p.1). Since then, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has been a trending topic on twitter from time to time, but the movement gained the most traction that it ever had in June 2020 when the video clip of the killing of George Floyd went viral (Grimes, 2019; p.4).

While the movement started as a hashtag, we have to make a distinction between the movement of Black Lives Matter and the #BlackLivesMatter. The movement started where the civil rights movement left off, to cite Opal Tometi “to think that our fight is solely about civil rights is to misunderstand the fundamental aspirations of this movement... It is about the full recognition of our rights as citizens; and it is a battle for full civil, social, political, legal, economic and cultural rights as enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (Tometi, 2015). A big difference between the former is that this movement is not centralized and without a clear leader. Instead, it operates through a network of independent local groups (Grimes, 2019; p.5-7). As for the #BlackLivesMatters which interests us is a bit different because it really has had one single purpose, to spread and point out the unjust and unlawful killing of black citizens by the state's own law enforcement as well as its civilians (Grimes, 2019; p.6-10).

The events that started the Black Lives Matter movement all took place in the US, despite that the traction from the hashtag have spread around the world. It became big enough in Europe to inspire protestors to act in countries like Germany, Netherlands and Britain in Europe for example but in South Africa as well. All for the same cause, the systematic racism that takes place in this world and the police brutality, the Black Lives Matter managed to spread thanks to the internet and become more of a global movement (Washingtonpost, 2016).

1.2.2 The MeToo Movement

The inception of MeToo dates to a now lost Myspace post by the movements founder, Tarana Burke, a social activist and community organizer working with children and women of color who have been victims of sexual assault. The post got some initial traction which motivated Burke to form the organization, with the explicit purpose of promoting "empowerment through empathy" (metoomvmt.org) to women of color who had been sexually assaulted (Warfield, 2018). Since its inception the organisation worked with providing assistance by having call-ins, hotlines, and roundtables to share with each other. It would also provide information to schools and educators (Shugerman, 2017). Separately of the organizations work, in 2017, actress Alyssa Milano made a post on Twitter where she encouraged followers to repost their experiences of sexual assault and to use the hashtag #Metoo to spread awareness of the issue (D'Zurilla, 2017). In Milano's first tweet she credited a friend with providing her with the phrase, but the following day, as she was made aware of Tarana Burke's MeToo organization, she diverted credit to them (Warfield, 2018). Milano's blog post was made in relation to, and the context of, sexual assault accusations made against US movie producer Harvey Weinstein (D'Zurilla, 2017).

The MeToo movement, like the Black Lives Matter movement, originated from events that took place in the US and despite that, the spread on it gained on twitter and managed to reach all around the world. This was perhaps not a surprise since sexual assault was not something that only women in the US experience, but it happened worldwide as the hashtag was circulating in over 85 countries around the world. Ever since the hashtag and movement gained traction through the social media platform twitter, woman in countries like south Korea, Egypt, France and Sweden have gone out and told their story and affected the countries, which speaks for how global the movement that originally started in the US had become thanks to the social media (foreignpolicy, 2019).

1.3 Definitions

Publics sphere participation will be used frequently throughout the essay and have therefore been defined by us in two ways, as active and as passive. Passive participation refers to people listening in and reading up on the discussions around certain subject matter. Active participation

includes not only listening in on the conversation, but also contributing to the discussion. There is an overlap between the two, where every active participant also is a passive. However, there might be participants who are only passive and therefore constitute an equally large or wider group.

There is also a third form of participation up in the essay we call political participation, which is taking action to enforce an opinion. Active participation can be considered a form of political participation but extends further than merely discussion, to action. Of course, it is also possible to be a political participant in one arena, and only a passive participant in another. Although true it is not relevant to our study because we do not compare participation in different arenas or social movements.

Zizi Papachirissi defines affect in *Affective Publics*. Affect in psychology is related to emotion. In philosophy however, affect comes before, and is more diffuse than, emotion. It describes something on the cusp of being formed. Dually, in comparison to the classical division of emotion and reason, both are included in affect, meaning it both creates and causes emotion and reason. Philosophical affect is transformative and encourages both action and inaction. Concretely she relates it to bobbing the foot or head along to music, and the mood felt. Social media can unlock affect and encourage taking action, such as protesting (Papacharissi, 2015; p. 9-17).

1.4 Previous research

This section covers previous research relevant to the paper. Later on the research will lay the groundwork for our own analysis and research. The previous research starts with two public sphere works, by Jurgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser, predating the internet. Following are two studies focusing on virtual public spheres by Zizi Paparichissi. Lastly, various research relating to the internet is presented.

1.4.1 Habermas' public sphere

The foundational work on public spheres was written by Jurgen Habermas. He was the first to coin the term “public sphere,” in his 1969 book *Structural Formation of the Public Sphere*,

although the political division is ancient, both in thought and practice. Aristotle in his *Politics*, made a distinction between the private and the public. To Aristotle, the public sphere was the arena where decisions between citizens (landowning males of the polis) were made. The public sphere *is where* political decisions are made. Other areas of action, such as those concerning the economy and household were located in the private sphere (Roy, 1999). To Habermas the division of public and private differs, and he instead argues that the public sphere exists as a separate entity of both the political realm and the private realm. To him the public sphere is where private individuals come together to discuss issues of general concern. It is separated from the state, which ideally would implement decisions made in the public sphere. The state would play no role in deciding the solutions (Burger, 1989; p.30-31). To show this Habermas describes the history of different public spheres, such as French salons, British coffee shops and American Town Halls (Burger, 1989; p.36). From a historical-sociological reading of the rise and fall of these examples, he formulates three general requirements for an ideal public sphere. He is thus both descriptive and normative.

The demands he sets are (Burger, 1989; p.27):

- “Disregard of status.” The purpose is not to deem everybody in the public sphere equal, but rather not consider status whatsoever. Habermas contends this was never actualized in his practical examples but that it was, in all cases, a state’s aim.
- “Domain of common concern.” Issues that stem from areas that had not previously gotten problematized. It stemmed from a movement from political and religious control into one of cultural products.
- “Inclusivity.” For issues to be of common concern they could never be divided up into cliques but had to be inclusive of all abled individuals desiring to participate. 'general' not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility

The actual public spheres can vary in size and style, as long as the requirements are met, where individuals can come together to discuss without political or economic involvement. It has been noted that Habermas public sphere implies a spatial concept (Negt & Kluge, 1993) When

looking at the public sphere discussion virtually, he rejected the notion that it was Habermasian. For him, fragmentation hindered the ability to be inclusive (Habermas, 2006; p423).

1.4.2 Nancy Fraser:

Habermas idea of the public sphere is not without its criticisms. Nancy Fraser locates three issues in *Rethinking the Public Sphere*. The first regards what is to be considered of common concern. Fraser claims that the concept is not predefined and can be only located in hindsight. The second problem is the bracketing of inequalities, which means that during deliberation, social and economic inequalities is to be set aside in favour of discussion where everyone stands on equal ground. In practice, she argues, what happens instead is that oppression is veiled as deliberation. Habermasian publics thus favours dominant groups over disadvantaged groups. Lastly, Fraser points to the fact that the public sphere historically excluded marginalized groups (Fraser, 1990). The result of the inclusive public sphere would mean a shift in power from “a repressive mode of domination, to a hegemonic one” (Fraser, 1990; p.62). This shifts the rule from being based in power in favour of ideology. She suggests that counter-publics would form as a response effectively creating a multitude of publics, rather than one universal.

1.4.3 Zizi Papacharissi

In *The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere* Papacharissi argues that the online space shifted civic engagement from being conducted in the public space, to take place in the private space instead, resulting in a fundamentally different public sphere virtually contra physically (Papacharissi, 2002). Furthermore she argues that the virtual sphere consists of many “culturally fragmented cyberspheres that occupy a common virtual public space” (Papacharissi, 2002; p22). Technology provides the ability to overcome spatial divides. This both affects the behaviour of virtual participants, and allows them to constantly communicate with individuals from other cultures to “expand each other’s horizons (Papacharissi, 2002; pp21-23).

In *Affective Publics* she extends the argument to look at the ontological underpinnings that make people act politically in the physical public, as a consequence of engagement in the virtual public sphere. She pins this phenomenon to the philosophical concept of affect that is unlocked through social media. *Affective publics* provides five tendencies of affective publics, as Papacharissi

refers to them. Firstly, *“Affective publics materialize uniquely and leave distinct digital footprints.”* The first point which illustrates that the way the public engages with online issues depends on “the sociocultural context, a variety of political economy system factors, and the mediality of the platform itself” (Pappacharissi, 2015; p.127). The second tendency is, *“Affective publics support connective yet not necessarily collective action.”* Collective actions are born out of personal views on current affairs together through the collective and expressing benefits of social networks, like twitter (Pappacharissi, 2015; p.128). *“3. Affective publics are powered by affective statements of opinion, fact, or a blend of both, which in turn produce ambient, always-on feeds that further connect and pluralize expression in regimes democratic and otherwise.”* The point here being that streams allow people from distant publics to connect and create issues out of events and is even more fueled and sustained by the always on nature of these digital platforms (Pappacharissi, 2015; p.129). The fourth point she makes is, *“Affective publics typically produce disruptions/interruptions of dominant political narratives by presenting underrepresented viewpoints.”* The soft storytelling function of social network platforms like twitter, allow for the public to contribute, evolve and most engage people in these stories, through these stories affective consent (Pappacharissi, 2015; p.130). *5. Ambient streams sustain publics convened around affective commonalities: impact is symbolic, agency claimed is semantic, power is liminal.* “This implies that these narratives, these streams are mostly symbolic. Only when combined with other factors like activities that can help these streams to sustain a movement that may end up with a political impact. (Pappacharissi, 2015; p.131-132).

1.4.4 Anonymity, bots and miscellaneous

Anonymity is the state of not being known, identifiable or recognizable (Merriam Webster). It has been argued that anonymity allows users to be more open about their beliefs and values because of the lack of accountability (Papacharissi, 2002; p23). On the other hand, it has been suggested that anonymity leaves participants with “a false sense of empowerment” (Papacharissi, 2002; p17), that is not reflective of the impact achieved. Anonymity lessens the impact of the user. Similarly, Breslow posed the question, “how should I know who is at the other end, and when the chips are down, will people actually strip off their electronic guises to stand and be counted?” (1997; p.255).

A bot is a computer program that either “performs repetitive tasks” or replicates human actions (Merriam Webster). One study trying to estimate the number of social bots active on Twitter suggests that 10-15% (Varol et al, 2017). Another study looking at discussion on Twitter in relation to the US presidential election also suggests that 15% of the activity were made by social bots (Bessi & Ferrera, 2016). Systems with the purpose of detecting bots need to be updated regularly, because advancements make bots harder to recognize over time (Grimme et al, 2017). Social media users’ inability to recognize and also be influenced by bots have been found (Messias et al, 2013). Lastly, Papacharissi presents an argument made by Alberto Melucci (Melucci that social movements have gone from existing around the interest of a social group, but rather around personal identity. He calls this identity politics, and Papacharissi argues works well virtually (Papacharissi, 2002; p.22).

Instantaneity is the process by which events occurring instantly become news stories. Events transpiring, being recorded and reported all happens at once. It is not a phenomenon created by the internet and can be found earlier in around the clock news reporting, for example. However, with the internet and social media the gatekeeping power news media used to have has dissipated and is equally accessible to all individuals with access to social media. (Papacharissi, 2015; p.45)

Online media has given voice to marginalized groups that were previously silenced.

Media online has caused marginalized groups and people to get a voice where previously they had none. Despite this “spheres of social, cultural, political, or economic activity” (Papacharissi, 2015; p8) does not intrinsically become more democratic (Papacharissi, 2015; p8). Citing Jodi Dean, Papacharissi writes that although affect to media does not produce communities, it is possible “feelings of community” (Papacharissi, 2015; p.22) can be created.

1.4.5 Psychology

The social intuitionist model of moral psychology suggests that moral positions are oftentimes both non-verbal and behavioral (Haidt, 2001). Jonathan Haidt, the model’s creator, argues that people “care more about looking good than about truly being good.” (Haidt, 2012; p.220) Furthermore he argues that “intuition comes first, strategic reasoning second” (Haidt, 2012; p.347). People’s behaviour, Haidt finds, will act differently when they know their reputation is at stake.

In *thinking, fast and slow*, Daniel Kahneman describes a number of examples connecting to the concept of priming. Priming is the process by which human exposure to a stimulus effect reactions to other stimuli. In particular one study brought up by Kahneman stands out. The experiment found that people's aptitude to be generous increased when they were watched. To test this a couple of paintings with two different motives, one of flowers and the other human eyes, were hung above a coffee machine where people paid themselves. The coffee buyer test subjects were not told about the experiment, nor when the changes occurred. The results found that the eye paintings gave significantly higher payments on average.

1.4.6 Social media movements on the internet

In this digital age, social media networks allow humans to connect like never before and be able to reach a large number of individuals almost instantly. This can cause certain material to go viral, and this material could have a political message, causing a whole movement to start from simply sharing material of some sort on a social media network. There has been numerous researches done on this phenomenon for example in the science journal *ScientificAmerica*, Sander van der Linden showcases how movements go viral as well as failures to replicate and why some of these movements could be short lived. Linden in his articles goes through numerous behavioural causes that could explain why movements that start on the internet decay, examples like the difference of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations or just losing sight of the goal (Linden, 2015). An article about social movements and with the case of Black Lives Matters by Mundt et.al. has also been something we have taken into consideration. Through the method of interviews, the active members of the Black Lives Matters movement explain the perks of social media, for example the how it enables connection and organisation, but also the hardships of sustaining a movement through the use of social media. Hardships such as: the movement dying if not proper in real life events are organised, "slacktivism" which is when digital participation is simplify useless for the goal of the movement, and that the bigger the movement grows the broader it becomes and the harder it is to achieve the movements original goal (Mundt et.al., 2018; p.2-10)

2. Method

The research question will be answered in two complementary parts, each with their own methodological application/way of doing things. The first part attempts to look at how long-term engagement is on issues discussed virtually. To ground the research, question the cases of Black Lives Matter and MeToo are used.

This method and way of comparing cases was inspired by Zizi Papacharissi in *Affective Publics*. She primarily analyzed the Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring Movements. Consistent for both movements were that large parts of the communication surrounding them was conducted virtually, whilst also having physical manifestations and events. She also complimented the cases with general trends on twitter. The cases in this study were chosen on similar motives.

To answer her question of why people act politically, she combines quantitative frequency analysis, quantitative content analysis, and qualitative discourse analysis, to research communication by social movements on twitter. Since this analysis also concerns social movements on Twitter, ideally this paper would use all three as well. The three methods are all of them looking at Tweets. Unfortunately, since it would be too big of an undertaking, we do not use the same approach in our paper. Nonetheless, Papacharissi's approach provides more reliable results and could be a way of expanding this paper in the future.

Instead, what is done in the first leg of the analysis is a quantitative exploration of Google trends and hashtag activity on Twitter for the two social movements. In both cases the raw data has been collected by outside sources, Google and Pew Research Centre, respectively. For Google search some of the raw data has been compiled and processed by us. The purpose behind the choice of data is that they are intended to be operationalizations of the two forms of public sphere participation. Google trends shows the selection of passive participants; people who can be thought to find some material about the two topics. What information they receive in the search results, and what they end up reading is unknown, but that they have found some material seems likely. Going through the effort of searching the topic, but not looking at any information

about it seems more unlikely. Hashtags are instead supposed to show the active participants, since it requires production of material, in the form of a tweet, to be made.

The data from Google Trends is partially downloaded as premade graphs and partially processed by us. The graph of Worldwide Google searches was downloaded by going to the google trends webpage, writing in the keyword or keywords (in our case Black Lives Matter and MeToo) and downloading the graph from there. For the country specific graphs, the data was downloaded from Google Trends and then constructed into graphs by us. The graph from Pew Research Center comes fully formed. The content of these graphs will be analyzed.

In the second leg of the analysis the results from the first part are compiled with previously conducted research to look at some constitutive parts of political participation conducted virtually. Firstly, what we do is a qualitative text analysis of the previous research done on this subject. Our research questions are used as an analytic tool for us to go through and compile an answer based upon analyzing the texts of the previous research. Thus, our research questions become the building stones for this paper analysis and should be considered empirical indicators for the phenomenon, which we are researching. The validity question then becomes a question of the validity of the previous research. You would have to look at what kind of question those researchers asked, what method they used to achieve their answers as well as if they could have done something different, this does imply that having a critical view on the previous research is healthy for this kind of method (Esaiasson et.al, 2012; p.214-218).

Operationalisation: *Engagement*, in the context of social media and the internet, will be defined and measured by how much a topic gets mentioned and re-tweeted (re-tweets only being applied to twitter) on the social media platforms, as well as how many people will search for a topic in the google search engine.

2.1 Empirical Material:

The material used in this study is a combination of academic papers, journals, books, journalism and scientific research, all on relevant subjects for this thesis, some more used than others. This material was primarily found through the use of LUBcat, Lund University's own library catalog along with the political science complete, PSC database. To filter through the databases and to

find our desired material, a range of different keywords were used in search, keywords like “public sphere”, “social media movement” “#BlackLivesMatter”, “#MeToo” and “Affect” to name a few. For example, *Affective publics* by Papacharissi has been a great source of inspiration as well as a vital resource in helping us understand affect theory and the use of the public sphere on the internet. We have also picked twitter as the social media platform to analyse the social movements. To complement that we have also decided upon analysing google trends, to see the number of searches on the subjects of MeToo and Black Lives Matter, during those times. Our statistics and graphs that displays the frequency of tweets tweeted that contained the hashtag of social movement on the twitter platform, comes from the think tank Pew research center. The graphs are significant material in this paper since they let us strengthen our reasoning in trying to answer our research question.

2.1.1 Twitter

Twitter is a social media service that was founded in 2006, with 330 million users worldwide as of 2019 (Twitter, 2019). We borrow Boyd and Ellison’s definition of social media “as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; p.211). What Twitter does differently is that it combines elements from other social media sites such as Facebook and myspace together with blogs to make its own unique platform. One of the reasons why the platform is so widespread is how easy it is to access, you can use your cellular device to access it through the twitter application, your computer on the website twitter as well as the range of third party applications that makes use of the twitter network (Boyd, Golder & Lotta 2010; p.2-3). Twitter is our choice of social media platform for this study, simply because of how it is organized, and functionality of spreading the trending topics throughout the platform. Furthermore, the content of the tweets may contain links to content from other forms of media, which lets us see a more comprehensive picture of a movement starting and spreading on the digital sphere. It is even more relevant to examine twitter for our study since both the #MeToo and #BackLivesMatter gained traction on twitter.

2.1.2 How Twitter works

Twitter creates an online community that lets people communicate through the use of short 140 characters long messages that can include photos, videos or links, also called “tweets”. The essential part of twitter is the feed, the first thing the user sees when they log in, a flow of tweets from people that the user follows in a chronological order. People can use this function in different ways, some follow thousands and some follow a few and some only follow celebrities. Another essential part is the user's profile, their @username, profile picture, a short introduction to who they are and their own twitter time-line. There you can see all the tweets the user has tweeted as well as other tweets that the user has interacted with (Boyd, Golder & Lotta 2010; p. 2-3). Another distinguishing aspect of twitter is the *trending topics page*. The trends that show up on the trending topic page are determined by an algorithm, but takes into consideration things like your location for example. The topics are the things that are popular now rather than topics that have been relevant, these trends are usually the hot topic on twitter. The topics show up on the trending page the more people tweet about the topic, and usually the topic is signified by a hashtag “#” (Glossary twitter, 2020). The trending topics have the # sign before the word or phrase, this hashtag marks the tweet and makes it related to the topic, helping other people find the tweet as well making it trend. A contributing factor to the spread of a topic is the re-tweet function on twitter (Glossary twitter, 2020). Re-tweeting a tweet means that you take a tweet that a twitter user has posted and share that tweet with all your followers, either blank or with a comment of some sort. This fuels the spread of a topic even more because a tweet can be re-tweeted by an unlimited number of users which creates a chain tweet that reaches out to more people. This can be very effective since it either creates a discussion or simply more traction since it often can be easier to retweet a popular tweet to spread the message even more than tweeting something original (Glossary twitter, 2020).

2.1.3 Google trends

Google trends will be a part of our analysis but not the main focus of it, as it is not a social media nor any other medium of communication. We will rather treat it as a complement to strengthen

the point that a topic trending on twitter is not only trending on twitter but also trending on other parts of the internet, in this case of google trends, in the search engine google. Google trends is an engine that lets the user search for a word, sentence or topic and then see the total volume over a given period of time or/and a specific geographical area. This keyword related engine lets us gather data and analysis and match keyword spikes with events that would trigger the keyword search volume (Google trends, 2020).

2.1.4 Demarcation in our material

For the purpose of making this study a fruitful one, some demarcation had to be made. For example, another case could have been picked to be analyzed alongside our two picks of the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movement to strengthen our findings and arguments. Due to time, resources and limitations it was unfortunately not possible, we are still content with the chosen material despite those facts. Another demarcation in our material was the choice of social media platform. To gain the most comprehensive picture imaginable of communication and movements on the internet and social media, a wider range of social media for us to examine would be the ideal. Due to limitations in time, size and the fact that data from other social media being a lot harder to access, we settled down for twitter as the platform to focus on. Twitter is a place for conversation of topics, a place where topics can start to trend and spread throughout the world and as well the place where MeToo and Black Lives Matter blew up and gained a lot of traction. We are aware that the statistics and graph leaves a bit to be desired. We had hoped to be able to gather the data ourselves to be able to paint a more comprehensive picture of the situation as well as one more tailored for our research question. This was unfortunately not the case and we were unable to do that. The twitter data was locked behind a paywall, and the university was unable to provide us with any data nor any funding. We even tried to make our own tool for collecting this twitter data but that was no luck either due to our lack of technical expertise and yet again a paywall to get access to our desirable data. Still, we are happy to have obtained the graphs that we were able to obtain for our thesis. The time period chosen for this thesis has been restricted to the time period that we were able to obtain data for. Preferably the data would show the activity of a hashtag since the beginning of the movement up until the end of 2020 when this study is conducted. This can be said is fulfilled in figure 1 but not in figure 2.

This however does not hurt the study's validity as we are still able to read of the movement's activity during its lifespan.

3. Analysis and Result

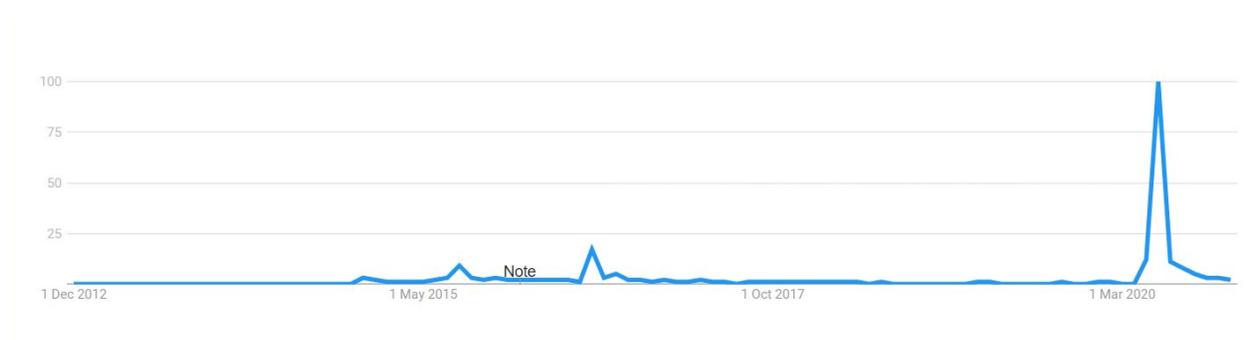
3.1 Participation in Black Lives Matter and MeToo Movements over time

Relative Google searches is the proportion of searches for words in relation to themselves, over time. As such, they do not show the absolute value of searches made. Even so, it is possible to read relative amounts of engagement in various topics from the results.

3.1.1 Passive Participation, Worldwide

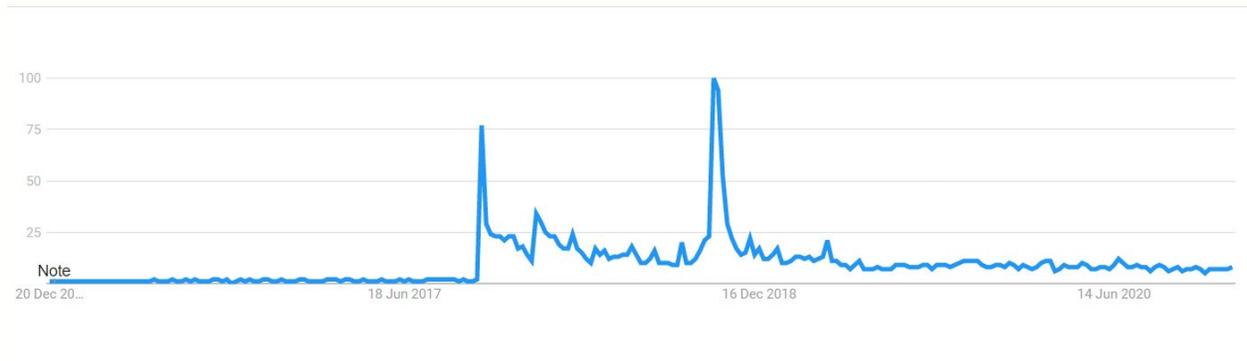
Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show relative Google searches worldwide for the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements, respectively. That percentage is shown on the vertical axis. They date from December 2012 to December 2020, which is presented on the horizontal axis.

Figure 1.1: Worldwide Google Trends, Black Lives Matter Movement



During the eight years recorded searches for the Black lives matter Movement are largely nonexistent. That trend is broken three times. First two small bumps appear, once in July 2015 with approximately 10% relative searches, and once in July 2016, at almost 25% relative searches. They both die down within a week approximately. After another 4 years of inaction there is a big spike in engagement at 100% of the relative searches in late May of 2020. This happened shortly after the death of George Floyd during a police arrest. That spike lasted for 2 weeks, between may 25 and starting to rather die out after June 7.

Figure 1.2: Worldwide Google Trends, Me Too Movement



The trend for Me Too worldwide is not as diametrically opposed as Black Lives Matter. There are two spikes of activity, one at 75% and the other at 100%, for Me Too, similar to the giant spike for Black Lives Matter. These also die down quickly like the case for Black Lives Matter. However, in between the spikes there is more activity in Me Too, going as far as around 35% at one point. The ups and downs during that time are not as significant either. After the second spike searches are still made on the topic at a steady, but small relative amount.

3.1.2 Passive participation by country, Google Trends

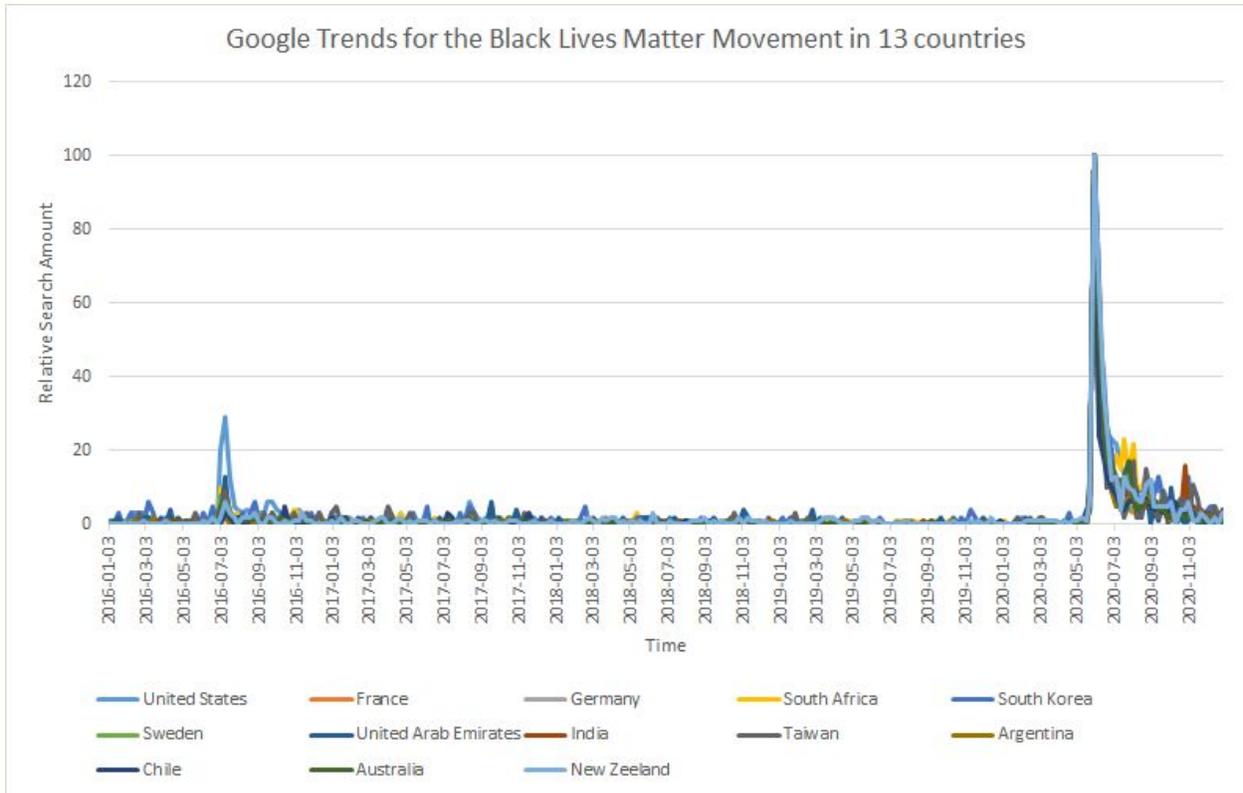
Graphs X and X-X show Google trends for the Black Lives Matter movement and MeToo Movement, respectively, in 13 different states. This was done to compliment the results for the Worldwide search trends by checking if the results of the individual states chosen differed significantly from the worldwide trend. They were chosen strategically, following a set of principles, we decided on. Firstly, one state from each continent was desired, excluding antarctica. Within each continent as big a state was desired, that still had access to the internet. Furthermore, democratic states were preferred over autocratic to increase the probability of free access to the internet. Lastly, countries with continuous data were desired. Denmark and Sweden are anomalies to the choosing strategy but were picked nonetheless to provide a local perspective on the trend. One additional point to be made is that data with values described as “<1” (string) in the excel file were changed to 0 (numerical) before the construction of the graphs.

The time frame in the graphs for both movements date back five years, between January 3rd 2016 to January 3rd 2020. In all graphs the horizontal axis shows time passing. The Y-axis shows the relative size of the amounts of searches. As such, the graph does not illuminate the total number of searches made on Google by its users. The number of participants can therefore not be discussed. Despite this it does show interest in a topic over time.

3.1.3 Black Lives Matter Movement

Figure 2.1 shows the relative search trends for the Black Lives Matter Movement divided up into the 13 chosen countries. The results are very homogeneous between the different countries. All, irrespective of size or geographic location see a large increase in searches in May, 2020. Shortly thereafter searches quickly drop again, and around July, 2020 the searches are back down to 0% for most countries. Some take a bit longer to reach 0%, but all experience a steep initial downturn. The United States, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand also experienced a steep, albeit smaller, increase from around early July. The United States had the highest relative size at around 30%, whilst the rest peaked at around 5%-15%. By around the end of the month those numbers had once again rescinded back to practically no searches.

Figure 2.1

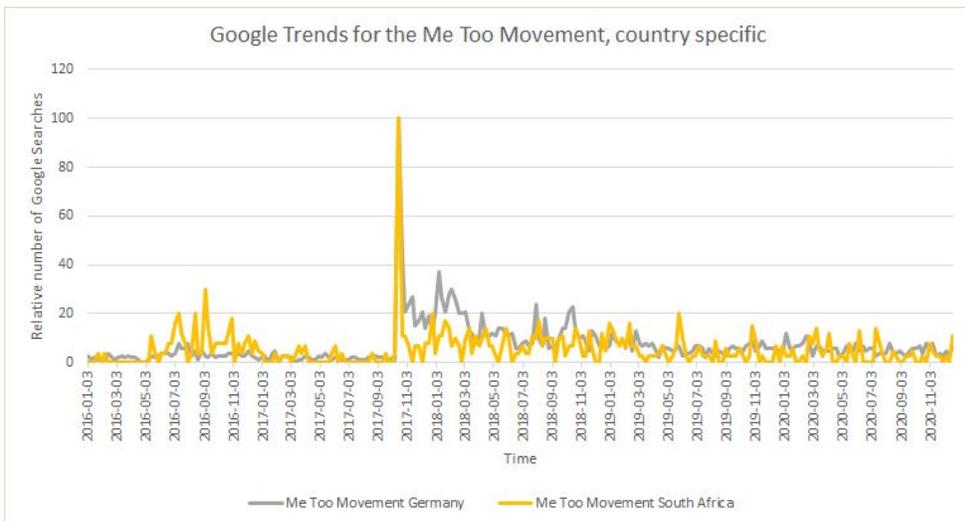
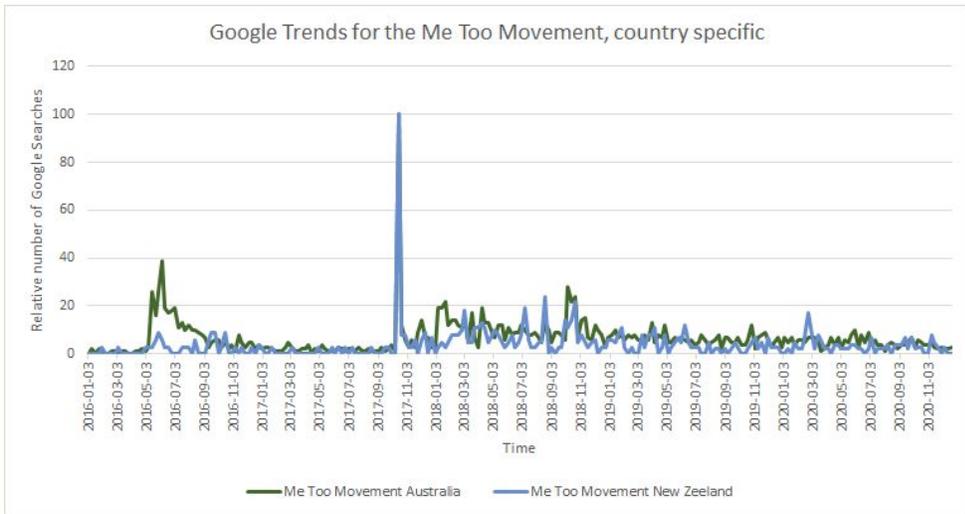
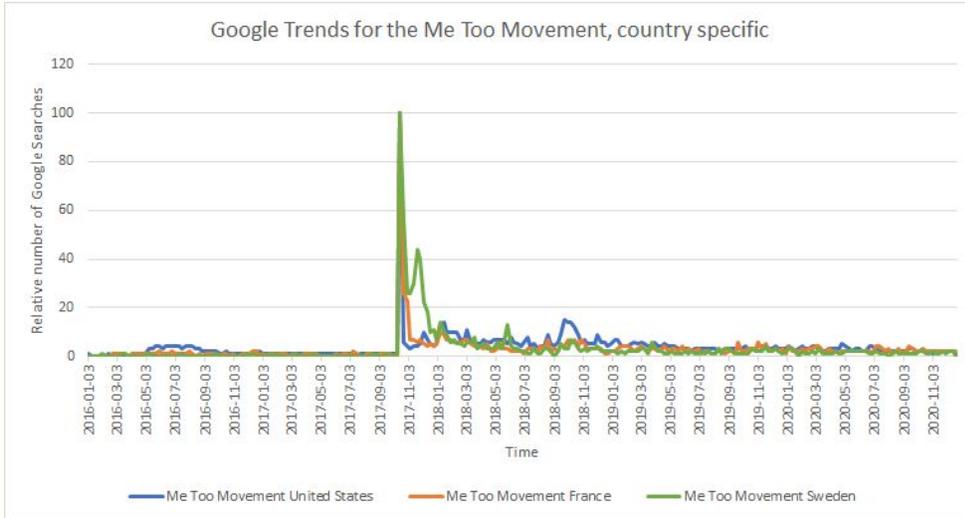


In comparison, the pattern for the country specific graph of Black Lives Matter fits well with the one made for worldwide search trends. They both experience a large increase and decline around late May 2020 to early July that same year. Furthermore, the spike 2016 exists for the Worldwide graph as well.

3.1.4 Me Too Movement

Figures 2.2-2.7 shows the relative Google searches divided up between the 13 different countries. Instead of having one graph like the Black Lives Matter movement, they have been divided up into six separates. This was done to clearly show the results of each state. They have been categorized by when they experienced their peaks. Figure 2.2-2.4 consists of the United States, Sweden, France, Australia, New Zealand, Germany and South Africa. All had their peaks around October of 2017.

Figure 2.2-2.4: States with peak around October 2017



All states in graphs 2.2-2.4 experience an increase from around 0% of relative searches all the way up to 100%. Additionally, they decrease back down quickly to low relative percentages as well, eventually nearing 0% again. After the quick downturn all countries also have a period of relative activity before nearing 0% again. Australia and South Africa also have some searches made around July to November of 2016. These spikes match the first spike visible in the graph 2.2 for worldwide Google trends.

South Korea and Taiwan make up figure 2.5. Both experienced a steep increase around march of 2018. By around May 2018 searches had fallen back down to the levels they were at prior to the peak. South Korea experienced a similarly fast peak around July 2020 as well.

Figure 2.5. Countries with peak around March 2018

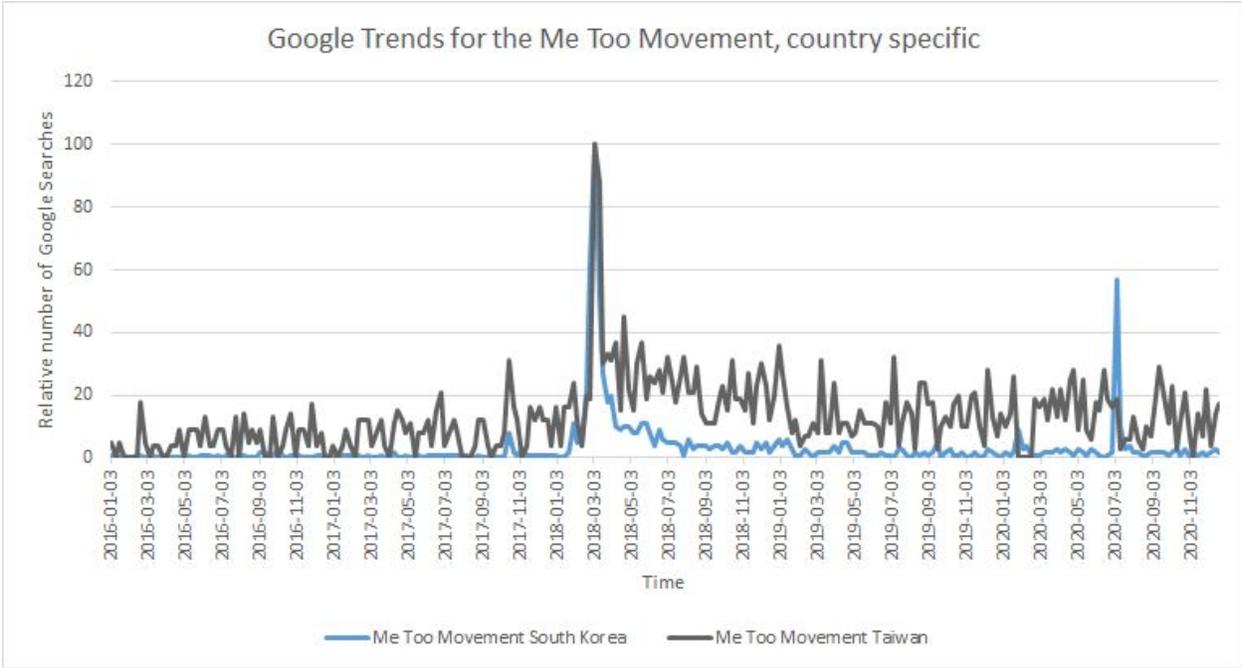
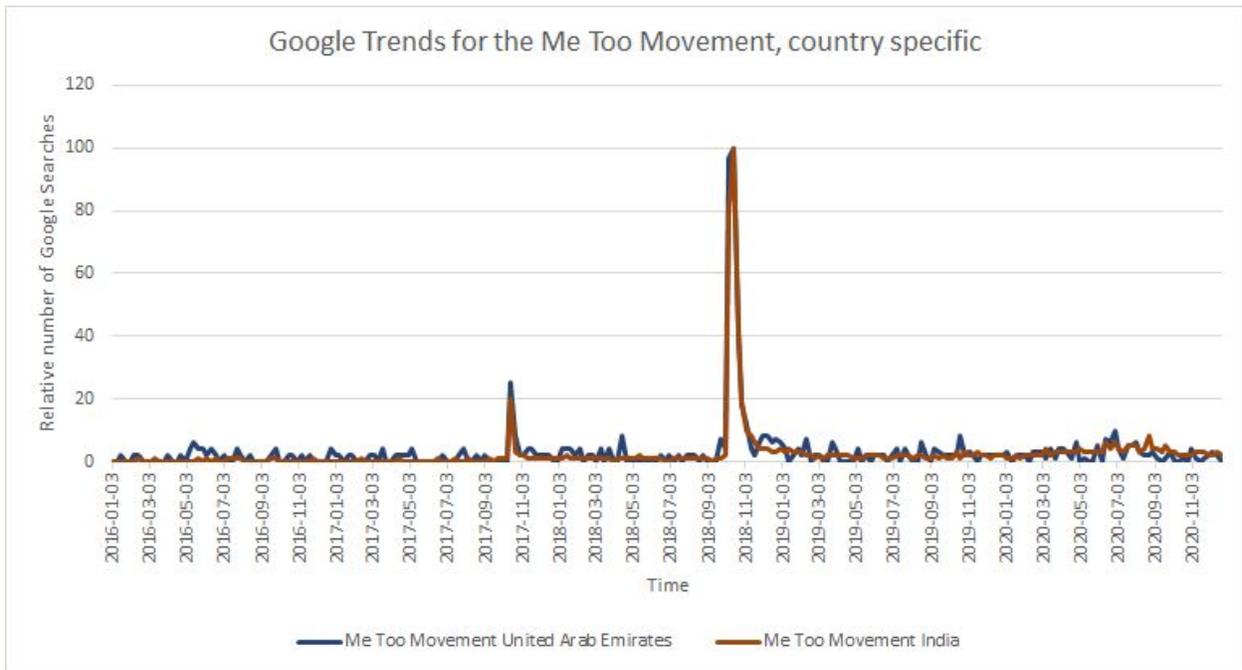


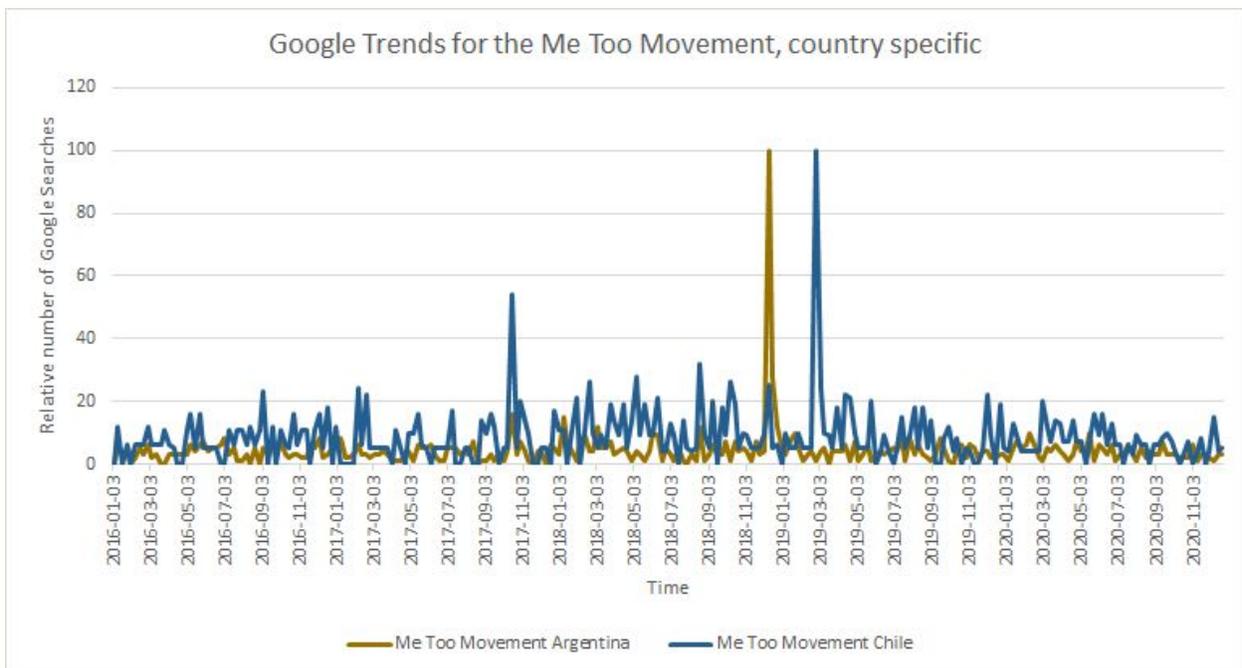
Figure 2.6 consists of the countries United Arab Emirates (UAE) and India. The two had long periods of practically no search activity whatsoever, excluding two short-lived increases of much activity. They happened simultaneously for the two countries. The first in October 2017, which peaked at just over 20%. The second reached 100% and lasted around October into early November 2018.

Figure 2.6. Countries with a peak around October 2018



Argentina and Chile are displayed in figure 2.7. In comparison to India and UAE they did not experience their steep increases at the same time, but when they occurred, they followed the same pattern of steep increase in relative searches shortly followed by a steep decline in relative searches.

Figure 2.7. Countries with peak late 2018 and early 2019.



The peaks around the shift of the year 2018-2019 correspond well with the second peak for the graph of worldwide google trends for Me Too. Chile and Taiwan make up the two exceptions in the sense that their relative search results were not around 0% in the periods surrounding the peaks. Even though they display an incongruent with the other countries in that sense, a similarity is that their relative search trends were somewhat steady at around 0-20%.

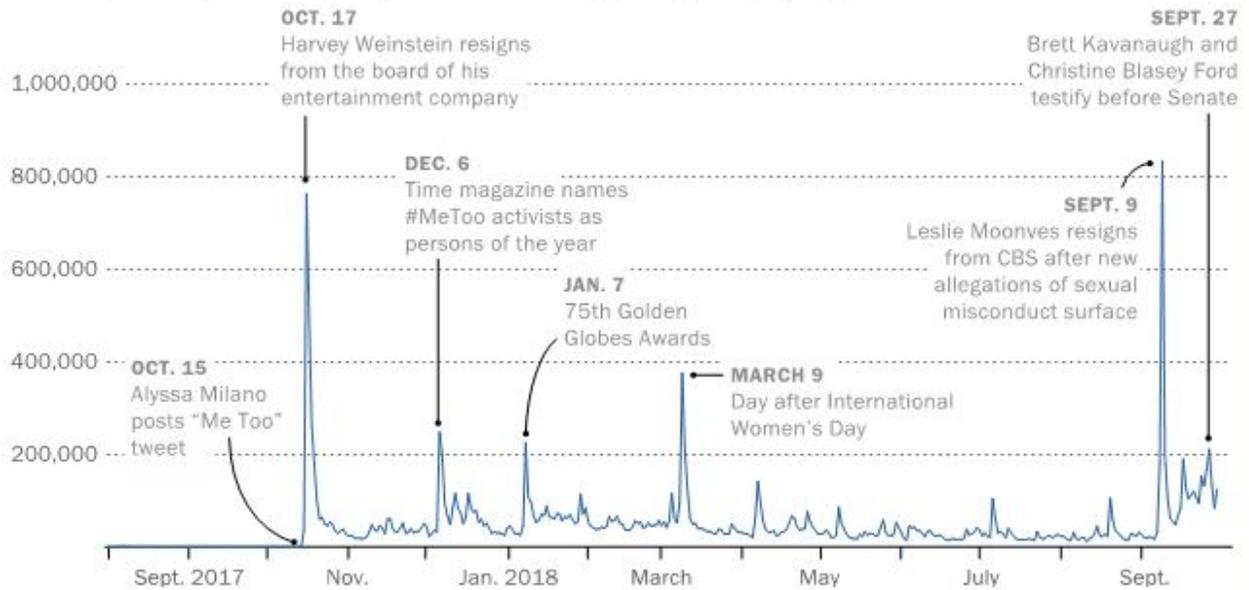
3.1.5 Active participation, Pew Data center

Figure 2.8 displays the number of tweets mentioning the #MeToo hashtag from October the 15, 2017 to September the 30, 2018. Examining the graph one think is clear, the sudden spike in the hashtag #MeToo activite under a small number of dates as well as how suddenly it falls off. The same occurrence happens twice to a bigger extent and thrice to a smaller extent during the year when the MeToo movement was the most active. The same thing can be said for figure 2.9 which displays the number of tweets mentioning the #BlackLivesMatters hashtag from January the 1, 2013 to June the 6th. This figure is a bit more obvious than the previous one on the topic of #MeToo. Here we can really see the huge peak of 8.8 million mentions on May 28 then a drop rather drastic drop off in the first weeks of June. Despite not having more data to fully see the drop below 100 000 mentions for example, we can still expect it to follow the same pattern. A similar incident happens in july 2016 with mentions of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter reached up over 1 million mentions but then more or less did not have any significant mentions until may 28, 2020 with the exceptions of a couple minor incidents that did not give the movement any viral traction in comparison to the ones mentioned. This data was gathered and assembled by pew research center, a fact tank, but as an addition we have compared those data graphs with the graphs of google trends. Comparing Twitter activity to Google trends, it becomes clear that they coincide and both tell the same story of the activity of these two movements on the internet.

Figure 2.8. Hashtags with Black Lives Matter Movement BLM

The #MeToo hashtag has been used roughly 19 million times on Twitter in the past year, and usage often surges around news events

Number of Twitter posts mentioning the #MeToo hashtag, Oct. 15, 2017-Sept. 30, 2018



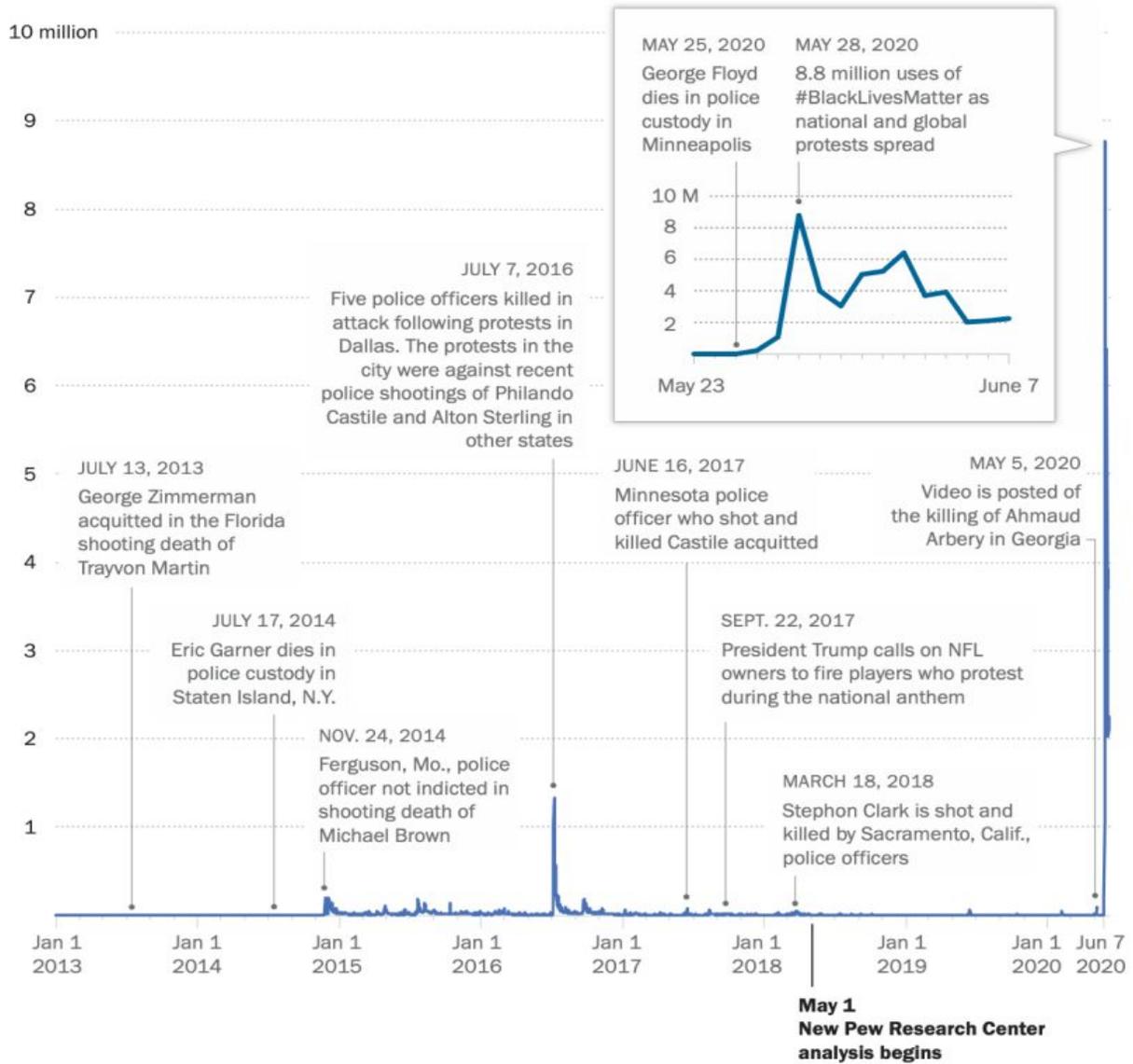
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of publicly available tweets using Crimson Hexagon.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2.9. Black Lives Matter Movement.

Use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag hits record levels amid global protests over George Floyd's death while in police custody

Number of public Twitter posts mentioning the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, Jan. 1, 2013-June 7, 2020



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of publicly available tweets using Crimson Hexagon. Data for Jan. 1, 2013-May 1, 2018 collected in June 2018; data for May 1, 2018-June 7, 2020 collected in June 2020. The latter data collection phase was used for May 1, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

3.2 Discussion about the virtual public sphere

Participation in virtual public discussions seem to be reactive to news events, rather than proactively causing them. This can be presumed since spikes in hashtag activity on Twitter concurs with events that take place, such as the allegations towards Harvey Weinstein and the death of George Floyd. These spikes, and their short duration are usually reflected in worldwide patterns for google trends as well. An investigation into potential causes of this pattern could be interesting. Following will be such an inquiry, looking at three entities that can be thought to be unique to the virtual space.

3.2.1 Anonymity

Anonymity could be considered one of the main constitutive parts of virtual political participation. In the virtual context anonymity has primarily been looked at from a subjective perspective. How the individual responds to being anonymous, and whether their behaviour changes, has been in focus. This is exemplified in the research existing about anonymity. The skewed sense of accomplishment that Papacharissi has suggested social media invites, and the heightened ability to contribute.

Several psychological studies interested in heuristics, techniques of finding sufficient, albeit neither rational nor necessarily optimal answers to problems, have looked at people's actions under the perception of anonymity (contrary to when under scrutiny). The results have shown that people behave differently when they believe no one is watching. The example of the paintings of eyes and flowers can be used to show this. People act more generously when the feeling of being watched is introduced, compared to the alternative. Since the anonymity found virtually does not differ in form from the experiments, it follows that an actor's behaviour virtually when anonymous changes. The psychological studies can thus be used as support that individuals change their behaviour when accountability is removed.

What has received less attention is the inter-subjective character of anonymity. By inter-subjective we mean the implications that knowing everybody else has the ability to remain anonymous virtually has on actors. Rather than focusing on the subjective experience of one individual, it aims to look at the interpersonal aspects and the implications of shared knowledge

of anonymity. Breslow comes closest when arguing that individuals might not participate when they are unaware of their fellow participants. The difference that can be argued remains is the dichotomy between 'we' and 'them' for the individual. Instead, the perspective looks at effects where all individuals of the group feel a sense of belonging to one another. As anonymity online is fully extended to any participant at any time, and sufficiently apparent amongst other users, knowledge and awareness about its existence ought to be fully extended as well. If not at consciously, articulated level, at the very least subconsciously. Therefore, we think anonymity can be seen as having an inter-subjective side.

Together both of these perspectives on anonymity can be thought to affect the participants in virtual public spheres. Firstly, it lowers the cost of participation for all participants, because accountability is removed. This could be supported by Papachirissi's argument that people are more likely to contribute since they can freely share their values and beliefs. Furthermore costs of participation are lowered because factors of inequality, such as those pointed out by Nancy Fraser for example, are invisible in virtual publics. They can therefore be said to play a limited role. This is further helped by the fact that marginalized groups are more present virtually.

This can be thought to have two side effects. One is that it creates uncertainty in communication between participants. Many factors that are foundations of inequality compose a subgroup of characteristics that also have been cause for unification, in deliberation for example. All difference has the double effect of both serving as a divider and unifier. Since these classic divisions based on differences make no sense virtually, they are unable to serve as areas of unity. To solve this uncertainty individuals divide up into groups based on pre-existing (pre-virtual) common values. Papachirris' argument that Melucci's identity politics functions well virtually, can exemplify this. People's behaviour changes, as Papachirissi also argued, around groups based on the belief in common values or identities because of anonymity.

The second side effect is that it can be thought to create parity in discussions between participants, where only the content, meaning a text's substance and form, matters. Such results can be thought to etch discussion closer to Habermas' ideals for the public sphere, without having to sacrifice Fraser's objections. Despite this Habermasian publics have not formed virtually (Schäfer, 2016; p6). Furthermore, access to the public has been lowered to include

many disadvantaged groups, but it has not become more democratic. The following section on bots suggests why that might be the case.

3.2.2 Bots

A second aspect that could be argued to be constitutive of political discussion virtually are bots. There are a variety of bots, that serve many different functions. The particular bot interesting in this paper is the social bot, which appears on social media. It is used as a communicator with users on social media for advocating various ideas or supporting political campaigns (Ferrera, 2020; p.96-98). Additionally, it can be used to boost other accounts or themselves by behaving like a follower. The proximity between the bot and an individual, human creator varies. Some bots rely more on human decision making, whereas others have built in capabilities to learn from a broader library than the single creators. This is primarily done with artificial intelligence and when used to support the bots they are more independent from the human creator (Grimme, 2017; p.279-293). Bots are always created by someone that can be held accountable. However, as bots get more able to learn by experience, this could become more blurry. This is not the main effect bots have, however.

The main implication of bots for participants in virtual discussions is that they do not know the power balances with the other participants. Nancy Fraser's argument that public spheres were exclusionary, historically, points to asymmetrical power distribution between men and women, among others (since women were excluded from publics). Similar power asymmetries can be found in the creation of hegemonic publics, based instead on ideology. Virtually these differences are hidden by virtue of anonymity, but that does not mean they are removed, merely hidden. Bots allow for one person to appear as many. Coupled with the fact that bots have been found difficult to recognize by people, means that in any discussion virtually there is a possible power imbalance, simply due to the quantity of imagined members. Remedying these asymmetries is made difficult by the fact that anonymity makes them invisible. The fact that bots make up 15% of Twitter activity is made up of social bots, this is not an insignificant factor. An auxiliary point to make is that similar effects can be achieved even without the technical use of bots and computer written code, simply by one person using several accounts. The time costs makes this less of a significant factor in comparison to bots.

3.2.3 Technology as a basis for communication

The virtual public spheres dependency on technology is a final constitutive part that can be argued to exist. Political activity virtually can be argued to be dependent on technology, as an arbiter of the instant communication between members that are separated spatially. That makes it the basis for the aforementioned constitutive traits that exist virtually, and as such it has a relational value. Neither anonymity nor bots existed prior to the advent of the internet and virtual spaces because those publics were not technologically dependent. That is not to say that technology did not play a part in these publics, but rather that they were based on the physical connection between people.

The public sphere theories predating the internet by Jurgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser showcase this. In Habermas ideal version of the public sphere, the saloons, coffee houses and town halls, technology plays a limited role. They would function similarly without any technology whatsoever. Instead the direct interaction and deliberation between people takes center stage. A similar role for technology can be found in critiques of Habermas ideal. Nancy Fraser's argument that it brackets inequalities presumes the ability to locate who the counterparty is. Technology is more apparent in the polluted public sphere Habermas brings up, where news media has a lot of influence. The media both transmit information between participants in the public sphere and contribute themselves in discussion. Media helps support the discussion between participants, by spreading information between discussants and themselves contributing to debates. Nonetheless, media is solely an outgrowth of already existing spheres of communication.

For the virtual publics by comparison, the virtual space predates the formation of discussion. It creates new spaces where communication can occur, and public opinion be formed. Effectively, it flips the old structure of people forming discussions with the help of technology, to technology allowing for discussion. An implication of this is that the role of technology has a unique quality, along with its role as a base for the other possible constitutive parts. Issues concerning technology needs, therefore, be addressed. One such consequence is that the previously discussed foundations of the virtual publics are hard to change with much certainty. The research paper finding that bot detection software regularly needs to be updated, because technological

improvements makes it outdated implicitly shows this uncertainty. Physical people are forever fixed and constant, whereas technology is variable and changes over time. Attempts to lower the uncertainty in interactions could always be undone by the invention of new technology.

4. Conclusion

The first concluding point to be made is that the pattern for public sphere participation in social movements seems to be long periods of inaction, interspersed with short-lived, but intense impulses of participation, as we can see with the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements. A possible explanation for this could be found in the structure of virtual public spaces. Some qualities possibly inherent to these spaces are anonymity in the interaction of participants, the existence and influence of bots, along with technology as a foundation for, rather than a mediator of, social interplay. A product of these factors could be that participants do not know their group. Another effect could be a mismatch between publics formulating opinions and political organisations capable of implementation. This does not mean that participation is useless; discussions in public spheres can motivate political action, something succinctly described in Zizi Papachirissis' *Affective Publics*. Seeing as the virtual sphere is more pluralistic than its predecessor, perhaps that is a good thing? Unfortunately, the consequence of public discussions occurring virtually under the conditions described above, is that it is limited to relying on feelings or affect to cause participation. The cost of low barriers of entry for participation is the long-term engagement. Changes that take time to change suffer as a result.

There are a few available options for future studies. Firstly, examining why the Black Lives Matter spike occurred simultaneously in various countries, whereas the spikes for MeToo happened at different times. Examining the causal link between the possible explanations provided and engagement would be valuable. Also, looking at the transition from participation in the virtual public to political action would be a way forward. Lastly, looking at whether this applies to virtual publics of all sizes or if they are unique to globetrotter events could be interesting.

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