

From slacktivism to activism: exploring the increase of youth participation in online social movements through Twitter.

Abstract

The emergence of social media platforms has changed the way that young people advocate for a social cause. Slacktivism is the new phenomenon that has revolutionised the world of online activism by empowering young people to participate in social movements from the comfort of their homes. Often criticised as the ‘laziest form of activism’, this paper will challenge the popular discourses surrounding this new form of online activism by exploring its effectiveness in increasing the level of youth participation in social movements through Twitter. By exploring the cases of the Black Lives Matter movement, the plastic straw debates and the Me Too movement, I will look at how slacktivism is creating an unprecedented opportunity for young people to change traditional activism and adapting it to their generation.

Keywords: onlineactivism, Twitter, communities, teens, slacktivists

Over the past years, the success of any social movement has been measured by the number of retweets and likes that such cause may generate (Lane & Dal Cin, 2018). Social media has emerged as a popular online platform where retweeting tweets is the new form of advocating for a social movement. Often referred to by the pejorative term of ‘slacktivism,’ any users partaking in online activism, particularly on social media are criticised as being too lazy to leave their screens to participate in ‘real’ activities that translate into effective change such as protests and boycotts (Lane & Dal Cin, 2018). It can be linked to the popular discourse of portraying “Millennials and the Generation Z as being self-centered and morally lazy” (Lane & Dal Cin, 2018, p. 1524). The Black Lives Matter movement and the #MeToo movement are prime examples of slacktivism at its best, generating millions of dollars in online donations and the mobilisation of millions of young people in protests with the power of only one tweet. There is an increase of youth participation in activism through slacktivism due to social media platforms such as Twitter offering unprecedented opportunities for young people to join social movements through its low barrier of participation, socio-technical features and weak ties. Despite the

various discourses surrounding this new form of activism, the burden of proof is way too high to condemn slacktivism as an ineffective form of online activism.

Do slacktivists hurt traditional activism?

Slacktivism, a combination between the words 'slacker' and 'activism' is a term used to describe the "low-cost, low-risk participation in a social cause whereby individuals confine their outrage to the computer screen" (Smith & al., 2019, p. 183). Often criticised as not being "real activism" due to the minimal effort required to change a profile picture into a black square to support the Black Lives Matter movement and not actually protesting in the streets to make a real change, slacktivists are perceived as hurting traditional activism. These discourses are present even after the prominent impact of hashtags in movements such as the #BlackOutTuesday where thousands of individuals shared their support for the Black Lives Matter movement through retweets on their accounts (Ince & al., 2017). Do those actions really make a change? Did the act of sharing #BlackOutTuesday on a Twitter account really make a difference? The power of slacktivism lies in the "large number of users who engage with the causes online" (Mundt & al., 2018, p. 2). Therefore, the network effect created by just one retweet has the potential of reaching millions of young activists online and translating into online donations. Through its network effect, slacktivism encourages diverse communities to collaborate and match their online actions to concrete on-ground actions. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement gained more than \$10 million through online donations and encouraged millions of young people from diverse communities to join on-ground protests. On the same line of thought, Mundt & al. (2018) argues that those engaged in typical forms of slacktivism have more power in empowering 'would-be' protesters than traditional activists (p.2). Therefore, the slacktivists who are perceived as the 'core periphery' of social movements are instrumental as through their casual tweeting, they are responsible for doubling the reach and mobilising millions of young users to join the cause (Mundt & al., 2018, p. 2). The role of slacktivists is crucial to the success of a social movement as it has the potential to reach more people than traditional activism, therefore they should not be regarded as mere lazy activists.

Twitter as an information hub

The distinctive structure of Twitter facilitates social movements to become viral which as a result translates into an increase in user engagement. Twitter is one of the most popular social networking platforms with 290 million monthly users and young people between the age of 13-24 accounting for 33% of these users (Edrington and Lee, 2018). The distinctive format of Twitter facilitates the dissemination of information through its two key features: the tweets and the use of hashtags. As compared to other social networking sites, Twitter is the only platform with a 140-character limit that enables users to write brief tweets. Therefore, this word limit makes the format easier to be understood and to be shared which as a result increases its potential for becoming viral (Edrington and Lee, 2018). Attention is a crucial resource needed for the success of a social movement; therefore, this feature is favourable for brief and impactful posts that have can empower millions of young users to join a social movement. As mentioned above, popular discourses argue that tweets cannot translate into effective on-ground changes, however the case of the plastic straw movement, particularly made viral by young people through their tweets proves otherwise. This online social movement gained millions of retweets and translated into laws being implemented worldwide to ban the plastic straws in countries such as in Canada and the United Kingdom (Smith & al., 2019). Consequently, the attention economy leads to virality which offers a favourable environment for online and offline actions to coexist and overlap. Therefore, these popular discourses surrounding slacktivism as not translating into effective actions are deemed to be false as proved by this online social movement made popular by slacktivists who through the power of their tweets were able to apply pressure on the governmental policies about straws worldwide. The other key feature of Twitter which is the hashtags has revolutionised the way that young people advocate, gaining so much prominence that it created a new category of online activism on its own coined the hashtag activism (Ince & al., 2017). Through the use of only one hashtag, slacktivists are able to make their voices heard about a specific social movement and informing millions of their followers about a cause. The plastic straw movement is a prime example of the power of one hashtag having the potential to inform millions of young users in one click. Through #SaveTheTurtles, users were able to be exposed to an array of information through the indexing format of hashtags which grouped

particular information on the cause together in a category which facilitated the distribution of information to a vast network. Therefore, Twitter plays a central role in the dissemination of information which is directly linked to the propensity of user participation.

The power of retweets

The low threshold nature of slacktivism empowers more ‘would-be’ activists to participate in social movements. The main criticism surrounding slacktivism is that it requires minimal effort that will not translate into effective on-ground actions. Ironically, it is the “low-cost, low-risk participation nature of slacktivism” (Smith & al., 2019, p. 183) that empowers more young people to join social movements as compared to traditional activism which contains various barriers to participation such as a certain level of expertise is needed to join a protest. With slacktivism, anyone with an internet connection and a Twitter account can participate in any social movement of their interest without the need to protest in the streets to show their support (Smith & al., 2019). With only a retweet, a young person is able to join a cause that he is passionate about regardless of his disabilities or of geographical boundaries, and which has the potential of quickly spreading to reach millions of other users with a minimal number of resources and expertise. Therefore, Twitter acts as a “virtual gateway” (Smith & al., 2019, p. 185) for those who cannot participate in the protest but who want to support the social movement. Twitter acts as a third space for young people as it helps online and offline communities to collaborate through a decentralised structure. Young people view this type of activism as a safe space without the traditional organisational structure and therefore lower barriers to participation which empowers more people to join the causes. Smith and al. (2018) argue that slacktivist actions such as retweeting a post about a social movement is considered as the “laziest form of activism” (p. 184) as it will not lead to on-ground meaningful changes. However, one tweet may not translate into any effective actions, but thousands of retweets can “disseminate beliefs” (Smith & al., 2019, p. 183) that will. The most successful example of using tweets as a catalyst for meaningful actions is the case of the Black Lives Matter movement. It started as a hashtag where a critical amount of youth participated in retweeting and sharing the hashtags, and which was responsible for mobilising millions of young people to join the cause.

This movement was not powerful because of its physical closeness but by its “ability of mobilising on its social media force” (Edrington and Lee, 2018, p. 290). Therefore, through their small contributions slacktivists are creating aggregated ones. They may not participate to protests due to geographical boundaries or due to disabilities, however their small actions combined together have the power to bring meaningful changes to a cause.

Twitter and weak ties

The socio-technical features of Twitter allow young people to create a coherent network globally through the use of weak ties. Twitter is a social networking site that emphasises on weak ties to build relationships through a diverse network of users (Mundt & al., 2018, p. 2). A tie refers to the connection between people within a network. Weak ties are often perceived as a “non-essential element of the social network” (Valenzuela & al., 2018) as they require minimal engagement and intimacy as compared to strong ties. However, Valenzuela and al. (2018) argue that young people with few weak ties are “deprived of information from distant parts of the social system” (p. 121) and are limited to views of their close friends as their only source of information. However, the socio-technical features of Twitter are designed to connect like-minded young people from diverging group of friends together through their common interests. Therefore, this platform exploits the power of acquaintances as Twitter prioritises “followers” as compared to “friends” to create relationship between users, therefore broadening the connections between strangers with similar interests and creating new communities. The decentralised structure of Twitter facilitates the creation of “large and sustainable interpersonal networks” (Mundt & al., 2018, p. 2) that do not need the support of formal organisations to function as compared to traditional activism which is dependent on this hierarchical structure. Any user can create its own hashtag and empower its network of followers to join its cause by retweeting a tweet or by signing an e-petition. This decentralised structure of online activism has empowered a rise in youth-led movements who were previously excluded from political and social movements. For example, the #ENDSARS Nigerian movement is a youth-led digital movement against the “rampant police brutality in the country” (BBC, 2020). Twitter was used as a crucial tool for mass mobilisation of young protesters to support the cause through simple slacktivist

activities such as retweeting or liking the posts. As a result, the movement gained more than 28 million of retweets in one weekend and mobilised thousands of Nigerians to voice out their opinions and protest in the country (BBC, 2020). Therefore, social media has changed the way that young people advocate by decentralising the protests and the donations which are now led by young people and not by formal organisations anymore as they are not essential in the digital age for the success of a social movement.

Conclusion

Slacktivism has revolutionised the way that young people participate in social movement. The casual tweets of one young person have the power of reaching millions of like-minded users to join a social cause. Although slacktivists are regarded as lazy users who only provide minimal efforts in causes, even the smallest contribution counts and has the potential to translate into aggregated ones. Through its low standards of participation, unengaged young people feel more empowered to take a first step into more levels of engagement, therefore increasing the number of participants willing to join a cause. Furthermore, the decentralised structure of Twitter offers an incentive for young people to create their own movement without the need of formal organisations which often excludes them as real activists who can bring a change. Therefore, slacktivism is essential for the success of a social movement and should not be considered as a mere tool for lazy activists. There is a crucial need to put an end to the stereotypical standard of who is a 'real activist' or not.

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