

Role multiplicity of FeesMustFall students:

Role differentiation analysis of Twitter data

Marié Hattingh

Department of Informatics
University of Pretoria
Pretoria, South Africa
marie.hattingh@up.ac.za

Sunet Eybers

Department of Informatics
University of Pretoria
Pretoria, South Africa
sunet.eybers@up.ac.za

Bruce Liu

Department of Informatics
University of Pretoria
Pretoria, South Africa
yiyubruceliu@gmail.com

Abstract— The FeesMustFall movement is an ongoing electronic and physical movement protesting against the need to pay fees for tertiary education in South Africa (SA). This paper reports on the online component of the movement under the Twitter handle FeesMustFall. Previous research has, through the lens of Role Theory, reported on the different roles social media users play in terms of propagating Twitter messages. This paper extends previous studies by considering the different roles assigned to/ or assumed by subjects of Twitter conversations, in this instance “students”. The study has shown that the student fulfills multiple roles, primarily that of activist. The role of activist involves internal role strain between those activists classified as victims versus those classified as perpetrators. Furthermore, the role of activist is in continual role conflict with socially differentiated roles such as the police, media and government. Situation specific roles that have developed due to the movement include those of students as “solutioneers”, scape goats and actors. The multiplicity of the student role in the FeesMustFall movement contributes to a small degree towards understanding the definition of the FeesMustFall movement. The multiple roles of the student are complex and fluid, influenced by current events in SA both on political and social level. This will affect the identity of the student which can have long term implications for tertiary education in SA. Further research needs to be dedicated to understand how the identity and student roles and behavior are influenced by social media.

Keywords— *eActivism; Feesmustfall; text-mining; social role theory; role differentiation analysis*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms are giving society a stage to voice their opinions, likes, dislikes and more recently a platform to protest. The Internet provides a democratic platform for society to voice their opinions as long as they are connected to the Internet [1]. The Arab Spring protests in 2011 is the most prominent example of using social media platforms for public and online protest. It set in motion a series of protests all over the world where social media was used to firstly mobilize protesters and secondly serve as a platform to protest [2]. The Arab Spring protests are said to be the originators of using hashtags for political activism [3]. In South Africa, a number of hashtag protests emerged, most prominently from 2015 with the #TRANSFORMWITS that was associated with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) difficulties, and #RHODESMUSTFALL that describes the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The removal of the statue was actually a metaphor for

the call to end institutionalized racism and #FEESMUSTFALL (#FMF) was associated with the rejection of the proposed fee increase for universities in 2016 [4].

This paper will focus on the latter hashtag movement in South Africa: #FMF. This hashtag was started in October 2015 [4] and is still active in November 2016. The relative longevity of the #FMF hashtag has prompted the authors to consider whether, after a year, the “definition” of #FMF is still the same as what it was when it started in 2015. Although these hashtag campaigns have been reported on in terms of youth participation in online protest [5], from a political point of view [6] and from a psychological point of view [7], none of the researchers considered the fluidity of the focus of the movement and the emerging categories that will form a definition of the movement. Anecdotal reports have been observed where it was mentioned that it is “no longer about fees must fall” [8] implying current events might influence the focus of the original movement.

Towards understanding the definition of #FMF, this paper will address one aspect of the movement, the multiple roles of “the student” within the ongoing hashtag movement. Social role differentiation on Twitter has been understood in terms of the “originator” or “propagator” in the diffusion of messages in the creation of topic models [9]. However, this paper will explore the multiple roles assigned to or assumed by students throughout the ongoing hashtag discourse. The study will use Social Role Theory to explain the different roles assigned to or assumed by the student. Social Role theory explains roles by presuming that persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviours and those of other persons [10]. In order to understand the various roles assigned to/assumed by the student within the movement, the paper first has to establish the dialogue surrounding the Twitter movement. Against this background, the paper aims to answer the following research question: *What is the role of the student in the #FMF Twitter movement?*

In answering the research question sections two and three will provide background of the #FMF movement followed by a discussion on using social role theory to understand social media usage. Sections four and five will explain how content analysis was used to determine the multiple roles fulfilled by a student in the Twitter discussion whilst making sense of the roles within the context of the movement. Section six provides a conclusion and recommendations for further research.

II. #FEESMUSTFALL MOVEMENT

In 2015 large-scale student protests started in South Africa (SA) under the Twitter handle #FMF. The ongoing student protest prompted the President of South Africa to give in to the student demands by announcing no fee increase at universities across SA for 2016. According to Lancaster and Diallo [11] this decision by the President set a precedent where students now realise that if force is used the government will give into their demands without proper negotiation. They further explained that this is the reason why the relatively calm protests of 2015 has escalated into more violence with severe mortality consequences [12, 13].

The #FMF movement is both an online campaign in addition to a physical campaign. Figure 1 illustrates a scene from students protesting during the #FMF movement. This duality of the movement dispels fears of “slacktivism” that refers to individuals that are willing to support a movement online but is not willing to physically participate [2]. The movement is still very much alive in November 2016 and Universities across SA had to implement contingency plans to continue with the academic year [13].



Figure 1: Student protest [14]

III. SOCIAL ROLE THEORY AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Social media platforms are ideal to serve as a democratic platform as a vast majority of citizens have access to it and it is easy to use. Cha et al [15, p. 992] stated that “The democratization of technology like Twitter is fundamentally changing the way people interact with one another, as well as with local opinion leaders, small businesses, and mass media”. Web 2.0 technologies allow normal citizens now to partake in content creation and sharing whereas previously they were only observing content through reading and watching in addition to the e-commerce possibilities of buying products. This transformation in the use of the Internet allowed a normal citizen to push and pull information depending on his/her needs and is thereby an active participant in meeting their own needs [5].

Each social media user is a social actor who behaves according to particular patterns or fulfils a particular role. Each social role includes a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms and behaviours. Within the social media setting each actor can interact with other social media actors (users) which may influence how other actors behave [11]. The definition of “role” in role theory is part of an ongoing discourse. In role theory, roles are defined as “those behaviors characteristic of one or more persons in a context” [10]. In social media, a role is defined as a “set of characteristics that describe behavior of

individuals and their interactions between them within a social context” [16]. In sociology there are different categories of social roles: cultural roles that are created by culture and influenced by political and social environments such as a feminist, social differentiation that refer to “job specific” roles such as a teacher, situation-specific roles that were developed due to the situation of the specific environment such as an eye witness, bio-sociological roles such as a human in a natural system, and gender roles such as male/female, man/woman [17]. This study will consider cultural roles, social differentiation roles and situation specific roles. It is possible to assume more than one role at a given time, for example a female teacher.

Within the various roles that a person can assume one can experience role conflict (RC), role strain (RS) and role substantiation (RSub). Role conflict refers to the tension among the roles that have more than one status, for example a working mother. Role strain refers to internal conflict in a role where there is critique on the performance of the role for example a student that is also an employee [16]. Role substantiation refers to confirmation of role activities and behaviours.

When considering the different roles a social media user can assume, it is evident that a user can interact with other social media users discerningly in information exchange on topics that they are most interested in. During these interactions, a user is influencing and is being influenced by those who they interact with. [9]. However, in previous studies using social role theory, the roles assumed by social media users are between the different social media users themselves unlike in this paper where the roles assigned by the social media users to an object in the social media discourse taking place. This is problematic as some of the users might be the object under discussion. For example, some of the Twitter users tweeting about #FeesMustFall are also students participating in the #FMF protests. This unique stance on role differentiation when social media is being used, particularly Twitter, is adopted in this research.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A week’s worth of Twitter feeds under the hashtag #FeesMustFall was extracted using Chorus Tweetcatcher version 1.3.1. A total of 19,771 tweets were extracted between 21 October 2016 and 26 October 2016 and saved in a .csv file. Data that did not contribute to the study such as retweets, the followers and following count, was removed. This data were removed as it did not contribute to understanding the role of the student in the discourse. In addition, Twitter user information was removed as the focus was on the tweet subject. The data cleansing exercise reduced the number of tweets to 5,329 with 874 “student” occurrences.

The study initially followed the CRoss-Industry Standard Process for Data Mining (CRISP-DM) [18] methodology using RapidMiner. We used the six steps dictated by the CRISP-DM approach: understanding of the issue under investigation; understanding the data; data cleansing; data modelling, evaluation of results including a suitability assessment of the data to answer the research question; and finally the utilization of the results. However, following the completion of the final step, the correlations among the prevalent categories (as shown in Figure 2) were not useful or significant in answering the

Figure 2: Prevalent categories

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the categorizing of the respective roles together with example tweets that explain the classification. Furthermore, the interaction between the different roles is indicated in the “role interaction” column of each table. These interactions will be discussed in section five below. The data showed that performers such as “cassper” use popular movements such as the #FMF platform to promote their events on “mtvmamma”. Analysis of these types of occurrences is outside the scope of the study.

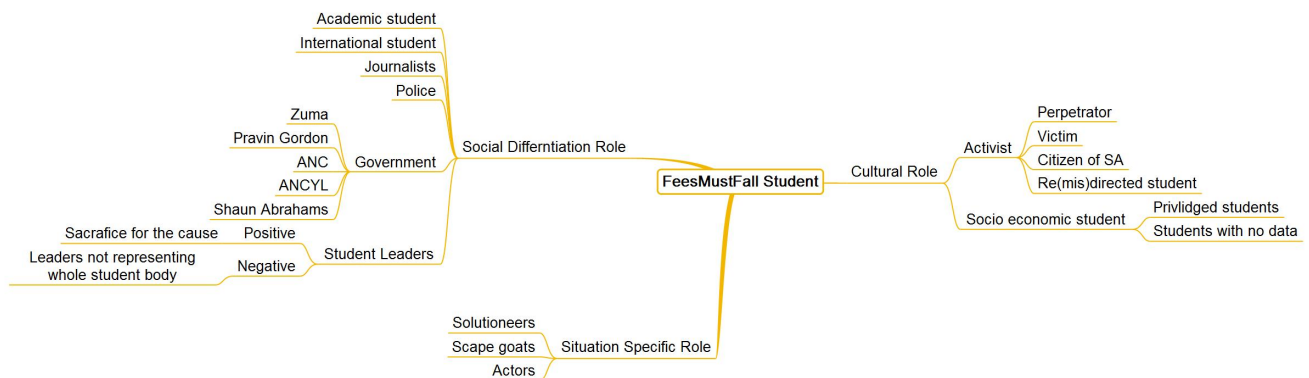


Figure 3: Student Roles identified from the data

TABLE 1: CULTURAL ROLE DATA

	Role	Tweet	Role Interactions
Activist	Perpetrators	“So....a bus set alight again by these student terrorists. Viva SA Viva. #FeesMustFall” [tweet 113]	RS: Victims RC: Scape goats
	Victims	“SA thinks we are crazy when @SAPresident Jacob Zuma' gvt sends police with all arms to disperse students to universities #FeesMustFall” [tweet 998]	RC: Academic students RS: Privileged students
	Citizen of SA	“Its time to stand up and assist students as they not doing it 4 themselves but 4 your kids as well #MceboDlamini #FeesMustFall” [tweet1677]	RSub: Victims
	Re(mis)directed student	“#Braamfontein #FeesMustFall nStudents! Your fight is at the Union Building, not with people struggling to make a living[...]" [tweet 386]	RSub: Victims
Socio economic student	Privileged students	“Guess what, privileged students that u are fighting for, are getting private lectures & WILL write their exams #FeesMus[...]" [tweet 57]	RC: Victims
	Students with no data	“Putting lectures on the web, without considering data costs for students, won't address the #feesmustfall issues. https://t.co/jKf7RH1jKc " [tweet 1456]	RC: Academic students RSub: Victims

TABLE 2: SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION ROLE DATA

Role	Tweet	Role Interactions
Academic Student	"@varsitynews If that was true, you would write safety+study tips for 26k students who suffer because of #UCTshutdown +#FeesMustFall violence" [tweet 68]	RC: Activist – Perpetrator RSub: "Solutioneers"
International Student	"We support the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa. ABS fights against fees for foreign students in Germany." https://t.co/rHeyR1qDOZ [tweet 1021]	RSub: Activists - Victims
Journalists	"Can we just understand that media is only focusing on a burning vehicle whilst students have been shot at"... #Braamfonte[...] [tweet 80]	RC: Activists - Victims
Police	"The police are the ones fueling this anger & violence from students. Why shoot?! Nx!" #FeesMustFall #Wits [tweet 672]	RC: Activists - Victims
Government/Politicians	"@UCTLawStudents we must blame Jacob Zuma and @DrBladeNzimande." #FeesMustFall" [tweet 879]	RC: Activists - Victims
Student Leaders-negative	"When @WitsSRC value the safety of all students more than their own agenda, scenes like this won't be necessary anymore." #FeesMustFall [tweet 961]	RC: Activist
Student Leaders-positive	"#FeesMustFall the student leadership are rotting in jail and some are fighting for their life's after been shot 13[...]" https://t.co/q33cBBBrwhB [tweet 39]	RSub: Activists

TABLE 3: SITUATION SPECIFIC ROLE DATA

Role	Tweet	Role Interactions
“Solutioneers”	“#FeesMustFall Solution to be fair to students AND have them study: 1st yr No subsidy, 2nd yr 33% subsidy, 3rd year 66% Subsidy 4th year 100%” [tweet1541]	RSub: Academic Students RSub: Activists
Scape goats	“I feel like #feesmustfall is the scapegoat for everything nw. soon Guptas will be blamed on students. 9/11 was fees must[...]” [tweet 310]	RC: Activists - Victims
Actors	“@cctvnewsafrika: Police car set on fire & protesters throw stones at police in S.Africa as University students protest” #FeesMustFall htt[...] [tweet 200]	Contextual interaction

V. DISCUSSION

Analysing the concepts associated with the #FMF handle gave the researchers an understanding of how Twitter is used by the particular hashtag movement. From Figure 2 above it is evident that “student” is one of the most prevalent categories that have emerged from the Twitter data. The prevalence of the student category is what prompted the authors to understand the role(s) the student assumed or/ were assigned to during the movement.

In the context of this study a number of Twitter users posted under the hashtag #FeesMustFall. Within the snapshot of Twitter posts under consideration, it was observed that the Twitter users consisted of students (which were expected), normal citizen and news institutions. Previous researchers have considered the roles of the Twitter users [6, 9, 16]. However, in this study, the roles assigned to/assumed by the respective Twitter users of a specific category (i.e. students) are under consideration. The roles assigned to/assumed by the Twitter users to the student category are not only understood in the context of the ongoing Twitter discourse but also in terms of the ongoing current and historical events in South Africa against which the movement plays off. The roles assigned to/assumed by the students were classified into three categories: Cultural role, Social differentiation role and Situation specific role. Each of these will be discussed below in terms of the role conflict, the role strain, and the challenges and opportunities - experienced in role making [17].

A. Cultural roles

Two cultural roles were identified within the #FMF movement: Activist and Socio Economic Student, see Figure 3. According to Social Role Theory, cultural roles develop when cultural changes occur that prompt new roles to develop and some to disappear depending on the social and political influences on the environment [17].

The #FMF movement is an example of activism, and this paper only focuses on the online activism component. Activists are people and organisations whose efforts are directed to bring about social or political changes [18]. In this instance the #FMF movement aspired to change the status quo regarding the need to pay for tertiary education. Given the history of South Africa, the role of activism in student movement can be seen as a continuation of the 1976 student protests [20]. Social media platforms make it easy to assume the role of activist. A number of tweets placed the student in the role of *activist*. The following tweet illustrates students advocating for the removal of Afrikaans [20].

“@Mdakani TV: #Braamfontein When students fought for Afrikaans to fall in apartheid no1 said it was wrong and they did so this is similar[...]” [tweet 20]

Table 1 indicates that the role of *activist* is informed by a number of other roles: *perpetrator*, *victim*, *citizen of SA*, and *re(mis)directed student*. The ongoing hashtag movement concerning student activism emerged due to the plight of the socio economically disadvantaged students – where it is argued that tertiary education should be accessible to all. However within the cultural role of *activist* there is role conflict with social differentiated role of *government* as the *activists* feel that the *government* is not supporting their cause. The tweet below demonstrates that contrary to the 1976 protest [20], the current protests are marred by political influence in the #FMF movement where the political aspirations of some of the activists might interfere with the behaviour of some of the students participating.

“The 1976 students message was clear and not influenced by the individuals who wanted to achieve their political agenda #FeesMustFall” [tweet 1747]

Two role conflicts have been observed. Firstly, there was role conflict between the *perpetrators* and *scape goats* as outside entities infiltrated the #FMF movement. This will be discussed in more detail under the “Situation specific roles”. Secondly, role conflict was also observed between the *victims* and *academic students*. The *victims* wanted to continue with the movement but at the same time they wanted to study. The tweet below illustrates that the protesting students were urged to prepare for the examinations that are forthcoming.

“@DeludedWitsSet: Braamfontein seems to be lit fam again. We discourage all students from taking part. Exams are around the corner #wits[...]” [tweet 240]

Role substantiation was observed between the *no data students* and the *victims* as the lack of data made some students victims of the #FMF movement. The *no data students* are now excluded from progressing with their studies, as they have no funds to acquire data to access online content made available by universities as a contingency measure to continue with the academic year [13]. This is the underlying argument of the #FMF movement, where students are being disadvantaged based on their ability to afford studies [4].

Perpetrators and *victims* have interpersonal role substantiation (as opposed to conflict) where they want to rationalize their cause. They argue that the #FMF movement is not just for them, but bigger than universities as they, and future students are all *citizens of SA*. This ideology was supported by International students thereby extending the

interpersonal substantiation. The following tweet was made by a Twitter user in Deutschlandweit who shows his support for the #FMF:

"We support the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa. ABS fights against fees for foreign students in Germany. <https://t.co/rHeyR1qDOZ>" [tweet 1021]

The roles of *victim* and *citizens of SA* was generally supported, apart from two roles which caused role strain as the strain occurred internally to the role of *activist*. Firstly, *re(mis)directed students* which referred to the response from the Twitter users where they indicated that the students' focus need to be on the government.

Role strain was firstly observed between the role of the *victim* and the role of the *perpetrator*. The strain was caused by the difficulty in distinguishing between students that are victims or perpetrators. The tweet below shows the uncertainty regarding the perpetrators in the ongoing #FMF movement.

"According to one person whose car was set alight at CPUT yesterday this was the work of previous security guards not students #FeesMustFall" [tweet 1660]

Secondly, the role of *victim* was strained by those students who are classified as "privileged". This includes having access to a tutor [tweet 57].

The cultural role has emerged as a result of the current socio economic situation in SA. Due to the magnitude of the offline protest extended by the "online protest" the cultural role experienced internal role strain and role conflict between the mandate of an academic student *versus* that of a student activist.

B. Social Differentiation Roles

Social differentiation roles refer to "job roles" [17]. A number of social differentiation roles have emerged from the data as indicated in Table 2. However not all social differentiator roles refer to roles that students assumed but also roles that students interacted with. Social differentiation roles identified from the data included: *academic students*, *international students*, *journalists*, *government/politicians*, *police*, and *student leadership*. *Victims* were continually in conflict with the police and the media (*journalists*). Whilst the *activists* were getting frustrated with a number of these social differentiated roles. Firstly the *activists* reacted negatively to the *police* who were accused of "police brutality" [tweet 902] whilst the *journalists* were accused of focusing on "other" events whilst the movement was ongoing.

"Police must stop provoking the students we don't want to lose life again @News24 #FMF" [tweet 647]

"Can we just understand that media is only focusing on a burning vehicle whilst students have been shot at... #Braamfonte[...]" [tweet 80]

Another socially differentiated role that mostly caused tension with the role of *activist* is that of *government/politicians*. The role of the *activist* was fuelled by ongoing events where it seemed that the SA Government was not supporting the cause of the movement, and their failure to recognize the needs of the students.

"Govt of the ANC killed our parents in Marikana and is now killing us in our universities #FMF @MbeteBaleka @UN @ParliamentofRSA" [tweet 992]

Dahrendorf [cited in 17] argues that another component of role theory is that people accept their own roles in the society and it is not the society that imposes them. The *student leaders* have both been portrayed in a positive and negative light. The role of *student leader* is a conventional role within a tertiary institution. With this role there are a number of responsibilities. From the data it was evident that the *student leaders* did not always "lead by example" which is an example of role making. Different students (depending on their roles) had different expectations of how *student leaders* needed to behave which caused tension with student roles. Some student leaders were accused of promoting their own political agenda.

Social differentiation roles are conventional roles, assumed by everyday citizens. Being a student is seen as a conventional role until graduation where the student moves onto another conventional role. Very little role strain was observed within the social differentiation roles apart from the negative roles which some of the *student leaders* fulfilled. However, due to the conventional status of the social differentiation roles, a lot of role constrain was observed with the cultural role of *activist*. This is interesting, but not surprising as the role of the *activist* is to change the status quo for political or social reasons. Social movements such as the #FMF are characterized as being conflictual and have clearly identified (ideological) opponents [15], such as the government, the police and the media.

C. Situation Specific Roles

Situation-specific roles emerge on an ad hoc basis influenced by the environment surrounding it. However, the characteristics and behaviours associated with situation specific roles still need to conform to the social convention [17]. A number of situation specific roles have emerged from the data: "*solutioneer*", *scape goats* and *actors*. The situation specific roles are detailed in Table 3.

"*Solutioneers*" refer to the students that have proposed solutions to the problem addressed by the #FMF movement. The role of "*solutioneer*" substantiates the role of an *academic student* that is what tertiary education would like to instill in students – solving problems. This behaviour is also consistent with other social movement characteristics where solutions are proposed to the underlying problem [19].

"The #FeesMustFall FUNDING Model by Wits students <https://t.co/SgVN2mkTMJ> via @YouTube" [tweet 823]

Role substantiation was observed between the "*solutioneers*" and *activists* where the *activists* put forward a list of demands as well as the proposed solution to the underlying problem. However, from the tweet below the internal role strain of the *activist* between the *victim* and *perpetrator* is evident as the usage of petrol bombs is associated with the conduct of *perpetrators*.

"Apparently these are latest demands from #UCTshutdown group, demanded prior to apparent petrol bomb attack at UCT[...]" <https://t.co/3qw7UwNeef>" [tweet 1471]

Critique of the role theory is the inability to describe and explain deviant behaviour [17]. From the data it was evident that students were cast in deviant roles – *perpetrators*. Even

though the context in which the role was cast was understood, it is still open for interpretation depending on whether one is sympathetic towards the cause of the students or whether the students were seen as entitled.

"But #FeesMustFall students are an entitled bunch?" [tweet 950]

"The media portrays da students as villains & many parents think #FeesMustFall is absurd. People @ home are not aware of da police brutality" [tweet 564]

However, due to the fluidity of the movement and the inability of the *government/politicians* to take control of the situation, it has been suggested that other participants are hijacking the movement for their own gain.

"Either people are pretending to be #UCT protesters burning cars or #FMF #UCTshutdown are now qualified terrorists." #FreeEducation ? [tweet 1579]

The external interference may have led students now to be considered *scapegoats* where they got blamed for "everything". *Scapegoat* students refer to those individuals that are not students but are acting as if they are students. This is problematic as it casts the *activists* in a negative light causing role conflict with the *victims* and substantiating the role of *perpetrator*.

"@donovanmekgwe: I feel like #FMF is the scapegoat for everything nw. soon Gupatas will be blamed on students. 9/11 was fees must[...]" [tweet 310]

The final situation specific role is that of *actor* where scenes from the physical protests are described by third party observers.

"@cctvnewsafrika: Police car set on fire & protesters throw stones at police in S.Africa as University students protest #FeesMustFall http[...]" [tweet 200]

The role of *actor* to a certain extent confirms the deviant nature of the movement and the roles of the students assumed in this movement. The way students are portrayed during the movement is in contradiction to how one will assume an *academic student* should behave. However, as a situation specific role, in the context and history of SA the role of the student as an *actor* in the ongoing protest is not surprising.

VI. CONCLUSION

The student has been cast in multiple roles by Twitter users during the ongoing #FMF movement. The student roles were classified into cultural roles, social differentiation roles and situation specific roles. The internal strain experienced by the *activist* role was interesting, but not surprising due to the fluidity of the movement that have metamorphosed from 2015 to where it is now. Although the underlying aim of the movement is largely the same, the influence of external factors has given rise to situation specific roles such as that of *scapegoat* where students get blamed for the actions of non-students, activists sometimes get portrayed as *perpetrators* when student actions are associated with example burning of cars, which is diluting the cause of the movement. The ongoing conflict between the cultural roles and the socially differentiated roles increases the tension between the student and those roles that are traditionally characterised as protectors

(SAPS), reporting the truth (the Media) and governing the future of SA, including that of the students (Government/Politicians).

Overall the understanding of the multiplicity of the student role in the #FMF movement contributes to a small segment of the overarching goal of the authors – understanding the definition of the #FMF movement. The multiple roles of the student are complex and fluid, influenced by current events in SA – political and social. This will influence the identity of the student which can have long term implications for tertiary education in SA. Further research needs to be dedicated in order to understand how the identity, role and behavior of a student on social media will influence educational expectations.

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