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Original Article

The Nature and Trends of Student Activism in Contemporary African Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Student activism has long been a pivotal force for social, political, and institutional change, particularly within the context of higher education. Grounded in Philip Altbach's theory of student activism, which emphasizes the socio-political and institutional conditions driving student movements, this article aims to examine the evolving nature and trends of student activism in contemporary society. Altbach's framework underscores the dual role of universities as both arenas of dissent and microcosms of broader societal conflicts. Building on this foundation, the article reconceptualizes student activism to address shifts in its focus, strategies, and outcomes. Three critical dimensions are explored: (1) the transformative impact of digital technologies on student mobilization, (2) the integration of intersectionality to confront global and systemic injustices, and (3) the tensions between collective action and individualism within neoliberal university environments. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical research, the article argues that traditional activism remains relevant but is increasingly complemented by digital activism, intersectional approaches, and responses to neoliberalism. This reconceptualization highlights student activism's enduring significance as a catalyst for social change and its adaptability in addressing complex contemporary challenges. Situating these developments within Altbach's theoretical framework, the article provides fresh insights into the evolving role of student activism in higher education and its implications for scholars, policymakers, and institutional leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

Student activism in higher education is a dynamic and influential phenomenon that has evolved over centuries, playing a critical role in shaping institutional policies and societal values. This section contextualizes student activism by exploring its historical background, its significance in driving change, and the diverse forms it takes in contemporary times. Student activism has long been a critical force in shaping the governance and management of higher education institutions (Luescher, 2024, pg. 4). As Lo (2025) highlights, the tensions between shared governance and student activism underscore the dynamic interplay of power within universities. Student activists often challenge the entrenched hierarchies of decision-making, advocating for more equitable and transparent institutional policies. Their efforts not only pressure university administrations to reconsider their governance practices but also enhance accountability and inclusivity in institutional management. This activism reflects broader societal movements, making HEIs microcosms of larger democratic struggles (Hammond & Alemany, 2020).

The neoliberal turn in higher education has further intensified the relevance of student activism. Ahoketo and Suoranta (2024) argue that performance-based funding models, often promoted under neoliberal policies, have eroded the autonomy of universities, compelling students to mobilize against the commodification of education. In many cases, these movements have successfully resisted policies that prioritize financial metrics over educational quality and equity. For example, Wheatle and Commodore (2019) emphasize the historical and contemporary role of student activism in influencing policy reforms aimed at ensuring justice and equity for all stakeholders in higher education. This underscores the transformative potential of activism in realigning institutional priorities toward the public good.

Comparative studies of student activism reveal its diverse manifestations across global contexts, shaped by varying political, social, and cultural milieus. Hammond and Alemany (2020) examine contrasting "spaces of autonomy" in Japan, Hong Kong, and the UK, demonstrating how institutional frameworks either support or suppress activism. Similarly, Hodgkinson and Melchiorre (2019) highlight how historical and sociopolitical factors in African universities have fueled decolonization movements, situating student activism within broader struggles for identity and autonomy. These studies reveal that while the forms and objectives of activism may differ, its significance as a catalyst for institutional and societal transformation remains universal. Therefore, the integration of student activism into institutional processes can serve as a powerful tool for quality improvement and leadership development. As Garwe (2017) notes, embracing student voices in decision-making fosters a sense of ownership among students, contributing to more responsive and inclusive institutional policies. This aligns with Jacoby's (2017) argument that student activism cultivates critical leadership skills, empowering students as agents of social change. By recognizing activism not as a disruptive force but as a constructive element, HEIs can enhance their governance structures and fulfil their social responsibilities more effectively. This paper aims to explore the nature of student activism and suggest future trends of the phenomenon in higher education,

The Significance of Student Activism in Shaping Higher Education Policies and Societal Values

Student activism has profoundly influenced both higher education and broader societal structures. Within the university context, activism has catalyzed significant policy changes. For instance, the student-led protests of the 1960s in the United States played a pivotal role in establishing ethnic studies programs and promoting diversity on campuses (Altbach & Peterson, 1999). Similarly, movements like #FeesMustFall in South Africa forced universities and governments to address systemic inequities in access to higher education (Swartz et al., 2019). Beyond academia, student activism has often served as a barometer of societal change. During the civil rights era, student-led organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were instrumental in advancing racial equality in the United States (Brooks, 2017). Globally, students have contributed to democratization efforts, such as the Tiananmen Square protests in China, and have

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continued to challenge authoritarian regimes. The intellectual engagement fostered by activism also reshapes societal values by introducing progressive ideas into mainstream discourse. For example, contemporary student movements advocating for environmental sustainability and LGBTQ+ rights have influenced public policies and cultural norms (Gerbaudo, 2018).

Historical Background: From Early University Protests to Contemporary Movements

The roots of student activism trace back to medieval universities, where early protests often revolved around institutional grievances such as tuition fees and academic freedom (Altbach, 1989). For example, in the 13th century, the University of Paris witnessed student uprisings against the control of clerical authorities, signalling an enduring relationship between higher education and activism (Rüegg, 1992). In the modern era, student activism became more overtly political, with significant movements arising in response to socio-political upheavals. The mid-20th century saw landmark student protests such as the 1968 global wave of activism, including the Paris student uprisings, anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in the United States, and calls for decolonization across Africa and Asia (Brooks, 2017; Klemenčič, 2014). In recent decades, student activism has increasingly addressed global issues, including climate change, social justice, and human rights. The 2019 global climate strikes led by students exemplify the continuity of student activism as a force for challenging systemic issues (Swartz et al., 2019). The evolution of student activism reveals its enduring significance in shaping political, social, and educational landscapes across time. Each era of student activism reflects the sociopolitical context of its time, evolving from localized political struggles to globalized movements influenced by economic and technological changes. This section traces the historical trajectory of student activism, focusing on its major phases from the early 20th century to the early 21st century.

Early 20th-Century Student Movements: Political Activism, Civil Rights, Anti-War Protests

Student activism in the early 20th century was characterized by its alignment with political ideologies and broader struggles for social justice. In Europe, movements like the German Youth Movement protested militarism and societal conservatism, emphasizing cultural and educational reform (Altbach, 1989). Similarly, the Russian student movements of the 1900s were integral to the revolutionary activities leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution, highlighting the role of students as agents of systemic change (Rüegg, 1992). In the United States, student activism gained prominence during the Great Depression, with groups like the National Student League advocating for economic justice and opposing fascism. By the 1940s, anti-war sentiment grew, particularly in response to World War II, marking the beginning of a strong tradition of student-led pacifist movements (Brooks, 2017). In colonial contexts, such as Africa and Asia, student activism during this period was intertwined with anti-colonial struggles. In India, for example, students actively participated in the independence movement, aligning with figures like Mahatma Gandhi and advocating for decolonization (Altbach & Peterson, 1999).

1960s-1970s: The Rise of Campus Protests

The 1960s and 1970s marked a global surge in student activism, driven by a convergence of civil rights, anti-war, and free speech movements. In the United States, the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, became a symbol of student defiance against institutional restrictions on political expression (Altbach, 1989). Simultaneously, students were pivotal in the civil rights movement, with organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) championing racial equality through sit-ins, marches, and voter registration drives (Brooks, 2017). The Vietnam War was a particularly galvanizing issue during this era, with widespread student protests against U.S. military intervention. These protests highlighted the increasing influence of students in shaping public opinion and challenging state policies (Klemenčič, 2014). Globally, the 1968 protests epitomized the international nature of student activism, encompassing movements in Paris, Prague, Mexico City, and Tokyo. These protests often centred on demands for educational reform, political

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democratization, and societal transformation, underscoring the interconnectedness of student struggles worldwide (Swartz et al., 2019).

1980s-1990s: Changing Dynamics—Emergence of Student Organizations and Political Campaigns

The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift in the dynamics of student activism, marked by the rise of formal student organizations and issue-specific campaigns. In this period, activism increasingly focused on political advocacy, economic justice, and human rights. In South Africa, student activism during the 1980s played a central role in the anti-apartheid struggle. University campuses became hubs of resistance, with students mobilizing against systemic racial segregation and state violence (Swartz et al., 2019). the United States and Europe, student movements began to adopt professionalized structures, forming alliances with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties. The campaigns against nuclear proliferation and environmental protection, such as the formation of Greenpeace chapters on campuses, reflected this trend (Altbach & Peterson, 1999). Meanwhile, in the Global South, the debt crises of the 1980s prompted students to challenge the structural adjustment policies imposed by international financial institutions. These policies were criticized for undermining public education and exacerbating inequality, prompting a wave of protests in countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and Brazil (Rüegg, 1992).

Early 21st Century: Influence of Globalization, Neoliberalism, and Privatization of Education

The early 21st century brought new challenges and opportunities for student activism, shaped by globalization, neoliberalism, and the increasing privatization of education. Globalization facilitated transnational activism, enabling students to address issues like climate change, human rights, and social justice on a global scale (Klemenčič, 2014). At the same time, neoliberal policies reshaped higher education, emphasizing market-oriented reforms, privatization, and reduced public funding. These changes provoked student protests against tuition hikes, education commodification, and rising inequality. For instance, the 2011 student protests in Chile and the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa exemplified the resistance to neoliberal restructuring of education (Swartz et al., 2019). Digitalization further transformed activism, providing new tools for organizing, mobilization, and global outreach. Online platforms enabled movements like the Arab Spring and Fridays for Future to transcend geographic and institutional boundaries, while also raising questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of digital activism (Gerbaudo, 2018).

In Uganda and other parts of Africa, student activism during this period addressed both local and global issues, such as governance, corruption, and climate justice. However, limited access to digital technologies and state repression remain a significant barrier, highlighting the uneven impacts of globalization and digitalization (Nanfuka, 2020). The historical development of student activism reflects its adaptability to changing sociopolitical and economic contexts. From early 20th-century movements addressing political and social injustices to contemporary digitalized, globalized campaigns, student activism has remained a vital force for transformation in higher education and beyond. Recognizing this evolution is essential for understanding its current dynamics and implications for future scholarship and policy. Student activism in higher education has undergone significant transformations in response to evolving societal, technological, and economic conditions. This review synthesizes insights from theoretical frameworks addressing shifts in the nature of activism, the role of intersectionality, and the impact of neoliberalism.

Shifts in the Nature of Activism: From Physical Protests to Online Activism

The transition from traditional, physical protests to digital activism marks a profound shift in the tactics and strategies of student movements. Digital spaces, particularly social media platforms, have revolutionized how activism is mobilized, communicated, and sustained. Online platforms enable instantaneous information dissemination and the creation of decentralized networks, fostering participation across geographic and demographic boundaries (Tufekci, 2017). Digital activism has expanded the reach of student movements, exemplified by hashtags such as #FeesMustFall and

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#BlackLivesMatter, which amplified local struggles to global audiences (Booysen, 2016). However, scholars highlight both opportunities and challenges in this shift. While digital tools facilitate low-cost, scalable participation, critics argue that they risk promoting "clicktivism" or shallow engagement that lacks sustained commitment (Gladwell, 2010). Furthermore, the use of online platforms exposes activists to risks of surveillance, misinformation, and algorithmic bias, complicating efforts to achieve lasting change (Gerbaudo, 2018).

Activism and Intersectionality: Addressing Global Issues

The incorporation of intersectionality into student activism reflects a growing awareness of how race, gender, sexuality, class, and other identities intersect to shape experiences of oppression and resistance (Crenshaw, 1989). This theoretical approach allows movements to address multifaceted issues such as climate justice, decolonization, and broader social justice concerns. In higher education, intersectionality is increasingly central to activism that critiques systemic inequities. Decolonization efforts, for instance, challenge Eurocentric curricula and advocate for knowledge systems that reflect diverse cultural perspectives (Mbembe, 2016). Similarly, climate activism on campuses often links environmental degradation to broader social injustices, emphasizing how marginalized communities disproportionately bear the brunt of climate change (Klein, 2014). Intersectional frameworks thus empower students to navigate and resist interconnected systems of power, fostering more inclusive and transformative movements.

The Impact of Neoliberalism: Individualism Versus Collective Action

Neoliberalism, characterized by market-driven policies and an emphasis on individualism, has profoundly influenced the nature of student activism. In a neoliberal university, where education is increasingly commodified, students are often positioned as consumers rather than agents of change (Saunders, 2015). This ideological shift complicates the ability to foster collective action, as students are incentivized to prioritize personal success over communal well-being. Nevertheless, neoliberalism has also served as a catalyst for resistance. Many student movements critique the commodification of education, rising tuition fees, and the erosion of public funding, framing these issues as symptoms of broader economic inequities (Chatterton, 2010). These critiques often align with global anti-capitalist movements, reflecting a renewed commitment to collective struggle despite the pervasive pressures of individualism (Naidoo, 2018). Theoretical frameworks addressing shifts in activism, intersectionality, and neoliberalism provide a critical perspective on the evolving landscape of student activism in higher education. Digital spaces offer new opportunities and challenges for mobilization, while intersectional approaches enable movements to address complex global issues. At the same time, neoliberalism poses significant barriers to collective action, even as it spurs critical resistance. These frameworks underscore the adaptability and resilience of student activism in the face of contemporary challenges, offering valuable insights for future research and practice.

The Diverse Forms of Activism.

Student activism manifests in diverse forms, reflecting the adaptability of movements to shifting contexts and challenges. Traditional forms of activism, such as sit-ins, marches, and strikes, remain powerful tools for students. Movements like the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in the 1960s and more recent demonstrations against police brutality illustrate the enduring relevance of physical protests (Klemenčič, 2014). The advent of digital technology has transformed the landscape of student activism. Online platforms enable rapid mobilization, global outreach, and decentralized leadership. Movements such as #MeToo and Fridays for Future leverage social media to amplify their impact while bypassing traditional barriers to organizing in Sweden (Gerbaudo, 2018). In addition to external protests, students engage in institutional advocacy through participation in governance structures, lobbying for policy reforms, and collaborating with faculty and administrators. Such efforts have led to tangible outcomes, including curriculum diversification, and improved mental health services on campuses (Brooks, 2017). The contextualization of student activism underscores its

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historical depth, transformative potential, and multifaceted nature. From its origins in medieval university disputes to contemporary global movements, student activism has continually shaped the trajectory of higher education and societal values. Recognizing the diverse forms of activism provides a comprehensive understanding of its role as a catalyst for institutional and societal change.

The Changing Landscape of Student Activism in Higher Education.

Student activism has long been a catalyst for institutional reform and societal change, but its manifestations have evolved significantly in response to contemporary realities. Modern movements have deviated from traditional forms of activism, presenting challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions (HEIs). This research problem seeks to explore the changing nature of student activism and its implications, emphasizing the need to reconceptualize activism within the digitalized, globalized, and localized contexts in higher education. Traditional student activism was predominantly characterized by on-campus protests, sit-ins, and strikes aimed at addressing local or national concerns (Altbach, 1989). These movements often emerged in response to socio-political and economic injustices, as seen in anti-colonial protests in Africa, the U.S. civil rights movement, and anti-apartheid demonstrations in South Africa (Brooks, 2017; Swartz et al., 2019). Such activism was largely collective, hierarchical, and tied to physical spaces within universities. In contrast, modern student activism is increasingly shaped by digitalization and globalization, leading to decentralized and transnational movements. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have transformed activism by enabling rapid mobilization, global outreach, and real-time communication (Gerbaudo, 2018). For instance, movements like #FeesMustFall in South Africa and Fridays for Future demonstrate how digital tools amplify activism while allowing students to challenge traditional boundaries of engagement (Klemenčič, 2014). This shift raises critical questions about the sustainability of digital activism and its implications for HEIs. While online campaigns have broadened participation, they often lack the cohesion and long-term impact of traditional protests. Research by Loader et al. (2014) highlights concerns about "clicktivism," where digital engagement may not translate into meaningful action, posing challenges for institutional responses.

Despite growing research on student activism, several gaps remain in understanding its reconceptualization in contemporary contexts. Existing studies extensively document the transformative role of digital platforms in activism (Gerbaudo, 2018), yet there is limited research on the specific implications for African HEIs. While digital activism has democratized participation, issues such as digital divides and cyber-surveillance remain underexplored in regions like Uganda, where internet access and freedom are constrained (Nanfuka, 2020). While globalization has enabled transnational activism, its interplay with localized contexts requires further exploration. Klemenčič (2014) observes that global movements often overshadow local struggles, yet grassroots activism remains vital in addressing specific challenges faced by HEIs in Africa, such as underfunding and political interference. In Uganda, student protests have historically revolved around tuition fees and governance issues, but there is insufficient analysis of how these local concerns intersect with global advocacy trends (Tindyebwa, 2022). Another critical gap lies in the intersectional analysis of student activism. While research acknowledges the role of race, gender, and class in shaping activism (Brooks, 2017), studies focusing on African contexts often fail to account for the unique socio-cultural and economic dimensions influencing student movements. For example, issues such as tribalism and generational divides in Uganda remain underexplored (Swartz et al., 2019). Finally, there is a paucity of research on how HEIs adapt to the evolving nature of activism. Studies on institutional responses to traditional protests are well-documented (Altbach, 1989), but the strategies for managing and engaging with digital and hybrid forms of activism remain nascent. This gap is particularly pronounced in African contexts, where HEIs often face resource constraints and political pressures (Tindyebwa, 2022).

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The changing landscape of student activism holds significant implications for HEIs. Institutions must navigate the complexities of digital activism, balancing freedom of expression with the need for campus stability. Research suggests the need for inclusive governance structures that integrate student voices while addressing concerns about cyber surveillance and data privacy (Loader et al., 2014). The digitalization of activism underscores the importance of equipping students with critical digital literacy skills. Klemenčič (2014) argues that HEIs should foster curricula that empower students to engage in ethical and impactful activism. In African contexts, HEIs must adopt localized approaches to activism that address the unique socio-economic and cultural realities of their student populations. This includes engaging with grassroots movements and recognizing the intersectional identities of activists (Swartz et al., 2019). Modern student activism represents a departure from traditional forms, driven by digitalization, globalization, and localized contexts. While existing literature provides valuable insights, significant gaps remain in understanding the reconceptualization of activism in Africa, particularly in Uganda. Addressing these gaps will require an approach that integrates global and local perspectives, intersectional analyses, and strategies for institutional adaptation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF STUDENT ACTIVISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

Student activism in higher education has long been a site of scholarly inquiry, underpinned by diverse theoretical frameworks. These frameworks offer insights into the motivations, strategies, and impacts of student movements. This review synthesizes four dominant perspectives: political economy and activism, social movement theory, cultural and identity-based approaches, and digital activism.

Political Economy and Activism

Political economy frameworks examine the structural conditions that shape student activism, particularly the influence of university governance, funding models, and neoliberal policies. Universities increasingly operate within a market-oriented paradigm, where governance structures emphasize efficiency, accountability, and profitability, often at the expense of student welfare (Marginson, 2016). Neoliberal policies, characterized by reduced public funding and increased tuition fees, have heightened student precarity, spurring protests against privatization and inequities in higher education (Saunders, 2015). The research underscores how governance and funding reforms influence the dynamics of student resistance. For instance, Chatterton (2010) highlights the role of "managerialism" in fostering discontent among students, who view education as a commodified service rather than a public good. Such conditions create fertile ground for activism aimed at reclaiming the democratic and transformative potential of universities (Naidoo, 2018).

Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory provides a lens to understand student activism through collective action, framing, and the pursuit of social change. Framing processes are critical, as they allow activists to construct shared meanings around grievances, thereby mobilizing collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000). For example, during the 2015–2016 #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa, students framed their struggle as a fight for decolonized and affordable education (Booysen, 2016). The theory also emphasizes resource mobilization and political opportunity structures. Student movements rely on organizational resources, such as networks and leadership, to sustain activism (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Moreover, shifts in political contexts, such as changes in government policy or public sentiment, can create windows of opportunity for student mobilization (McAdam, 1999).

Cultural and Identity-Based Approaches

Cultural and identity-based approaches foreground the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and other identity markers in shaping student activism. These perspectives reveal how activism is often rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized groups who navigate intersecting systems of oppression within and beyond universities (Collins, 2000). Studies have highlighted the ways in which identity influences activism. For instance, Black student movements in the U.S. have historically challenged systemic racism in academia, advocating for

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inclusive curricula and institutional accountability (Patton, 2016). Similarly, feminist and LGBTQ+ student movements emphasize the need for safe spaces and policies that address gender-based violence and discrimination (Linder, 2018). Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), provides a crucial analytical tool for understanding the complexity of these struggles.

Digital Activism

The advent of digital technologies has transformed the landscape of student activism, facilitating new forms of mobilization, communication, and advocacy. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook serve as spaces for amplifying voices, disseminating information, and organizing protests (Tufekci, 2017). Digital activism also enables transnational solidarity, as students connect with global movements addressing issues like climate change, human rights, and social justice (Gerbaudo, 2018). However, scholars caution against overestimating the democratizing potential of digital platforms, noting the risks of surveillance, misinformation, and performative activism (Gladwell, 2010). The theoretical frameworks discussed, that is, political economy, social movement theory, cultural and identity-based approaches, and digital activism—offer complementary perspectives on student activism in higher education. Together, they underscore the multifaceted nature of activism, shaped by structural conditions, collective strategies, identity politics, and technological innovations. Future research should continue to integrate these frameworks to provide a holistic understanding of student activism in an evolving global context. After a critical study of the above theoretical lenses, it is evident that student activism in an African setting can be better conceptualized by Altbach's Theory of student activism (Luescher-Mashela, 2015).

Altbach's Theory of Student Activism in Higher Education

Student activism has been a persistent and transformative element of higher education worldwide. Altbach's theory of student activism provides a framework for understanding the socio-political, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape student movements. This literature review synthesizes existing research to analyze Altbach's contributions to the understanding of student activism in higher education and its relevance across different contexts. Philip G. Altbach's theory situates student activism within the broader societal and institutional dynamics, emphasizing the interplay between generational consciousness, political structures, and educational environments (Altbach, 1989). His model identifies universities as "seedbeds of activism," where students, as semi-autonomous social actors, leverage their unique position to challenge societal norms and political systems.

Altbach (1989) identifies political discontent, economic conditions, and institutional constraints as primary drivers of student activism. Subsequent studies have built on this, demonstrating that student movements often arise in response to authoritarian regimes, economic crises, or perceived injustices in higher education systems (Brooks, 2017; Klemenčič, 2014). For example, in authoritarian states, student activism is frequently catalyzed by restricted political freedoms, while in democracies, it may centre on issues such as tuition fees and campus diversity (Altbach & Peterson, 1999). Universities, as per Altbach's framework, are not only sites of intellectual development but also of political ferment. The open intellectual environment fosters critical thinking and political awareness, which, coupled with the structural autonomy of university life, creates fertile ground for dissent (Altbach, 1984). This dynamic is evident in both historical and contemporary movements, from the anti-apartheid protests in South Africa to climate activism in Western democracies (Swartz et al., 2019).

While Altbach's theory offers a universal framework, its application varies across contexts. Studies highlight how local socio-political conditions shape the nature and impact of student activism. For instance, in developing countries, student movements often play significant roles in national liberation struggles, whereas in developed countries, activism frequently addresses global issues like climate change and social justice (Klemenčič, 2014; Brooks, 2017). Altbach's theory

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has faced critiques for its potential overemphasis on structural factors at the expense of individual agency and for its limited engagement with the intersectionality of student identities (Brooks, 2017). Recent scholarship calls for integrating gender, race, and class analyses to better understand the diverse motivations and experiences of student activists (Swartz et al., 2019). In the digital age, student activism has increasingly shifted to online platforms, yet the principles of Altbach's theory remain relevant. Digital activism mirrors traditional movements in its organizational structures and objectives but operates within new technological affordances, amplifying both reach and impact (Gerbaudo, 2018). Altbach's theory of student activism remains a foundational framework for understanding the complexities of student movements in higher education. While subsequent research has refined and critiqued aspects of his work, its emphasis on the interplay between societal, institutional, and individual dynamics continues to provide valuable insights into the ever-evolving landscape of student activism.

Philip G. Altbach's theory of student activism offers a seminal framework for understanding the dynamics of student movements within higher education. His propositions articulate the drivers, contexts, and outcomes of student activism, providing a lens to analyze its relevance across diverse educational and political landscapes. However, his theory has also been critiqued and expanded upon in subsequent scholarship. Altbach's theory is grounded in three central propositions viz; Universities as seedbeds of activism, interplay of social, political and economic factors and generational consciousness and semi-autonomy. On universities as seedbeds of activism, Altbach (1989) posits that universities are uniquely positioned as "seedbeds of activism" due to their role as spaces of intellectual development and relative autonomy. Students are exposed to diverse ideas, encouraged to question societal norms, and granted organizational freedom, creating an environment conducive to dissent. This proposition is supported by historical examples, such as student-led movements during the civil rights era in the United States and anti-apartheid protests in South Africa (Swartz et al., 2019). When discussing the interplay of social, political, and economic factors, Altbach (1984) argues that student activism is a response to a confluence of societal conditions, including political oppression, economic instability, and educational inequities. For instance, during periods of economic crisis, student movements often emerge to challenge policies perceived as detrimental to their future prospects (Klemenčič, 2014). On the issue of generational consciousness and semi-autonomy. Altbach highlights the generational consciousness of students, emphasizing their tendency to view themselves as agents of change. This is amplified by the semi-autonomous status of students within universities, which allows for organized activism without complete subjugation to societal norms (Altbach & Peterson, 1999).

The relevance of Altbach's propositions lies in their applicability across various historical and cultural contexts. Research substantiates that universities consistently serve as hubs for activism, whether addressing local issues like tuition hikes or global concerns such as climate change. For example, Brooks (2017) notes that universities provide the intellectual tools and social networks essential for mobilizing collective action. Furthermore, the theory's emphasis on socio-economic and political catalysts is validated by case studies from both developed and developing countries. In authoritarian regimes, student activism often centres on demands for democratic reforms, whereas in democracies, it focuses on systemic inequalities (Klemenčič, 2014). The flexibility of Altbach's framework allows it to encompass diverse motivations and outcomes, making it a robust model for analyzing student activism.

Critiques of Altbach's Theory

While Altbach's theory remains influential, it has faced several critiques. Critics argue that Altbach places excessive emphasis on structural factors, such as political and economic conditions while underestimating the role of individual agency and identity. Contemporary research highlights that the personal motivations and lived experiences of student activists, particularly related to gender, race, and class, are crucial to understanding their engagement (Swartz et al., 2019). The theory has been critiqued for its limited engagement with

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intersectionality. Modern movements, such as those addressing racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights, demonstrate how overlapping identities shape activism in ways not fully addressed by Altbach's framework (Brooks, 2017). Altbach's propositions predate the rise of digital activism, which has transformed the methods and scope of student movements. Gerbaudo (2018) argues that while digital platforms amplify activism, they also introduce new challenges, such as fragmented participation and reduced physical presence on campuses. This shift necessitates updates to the theory to account for technological advancements.

Despite its critiques, Altbach's theory provides a foundational understanding of the socio-political dimensions of student activism. Its core propositions remain relevant, particularly in explaining how universities foster activism and how broader societal conditions influence student movements. However, integrating insights on individual agency, intersectionality, and digital activism would enhance its applicability in contemporary contexts. Altbach's theory of student activism offers valuable propositions and justifications for understanding the dynamics of student movements in higher education. While critiques highlight areas for refinement, the theory remains a cornerstone in the study of student activism, offering a framework that is both historically grounded and adaptable to ongoing changes in higher education and societal structures. The aim of this work is to examine the nature and trends of student activism in contemporary African higher education.

METHODOLOGY.

This study utilized a qualitative desktop research methodology to explore the nature and trends of student activism in higher education. The analysis relied on secondary data sources. The desktop approach facilitated an in-depth examination of historical and contemporary trends in student activism without direct engagement with participants, allowing for a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature and publicly available content. The desktop research methodology was chosen to capture the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of student activism while maintaining feasibility and breadth of analysis. By analyzing documented case studies, historical records, and digital media, the study was able to integrate multiple perspectives and frameworks into its analysis. This approach also minimized ethical concerns, as it did not involve direct interaction with individuals. By relying solely on secondary data, issues such as anonymity, confidentiality, and consent were inherently addressed. Additionally, the desktop method allowed for a broad comparative analysis of activism across cultural, geographic, and institutional contexts, which would have been challenging to achieve through empirical methods. Data were sourced from a variety of publicly accessible materials: University archives and student union reports provided historical context and insights into the evolution of student movements and their institutional dynamics. Peer-reviewed journal articles and books offered theoretical frameworks, particularly Altbach's theory of student activism, and empirical findings from prior research. Social media comments like campaigns and hashtags from platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook were analyzed to understand the digital strategies and narratives employed by contemporary student movements. Data Analysis was done through thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and themes across the collected materials. This included examining the structural and ideological drivers of activism, the impact of digital technologies, and the influence of global issues such as intersectionality and neoliberalism. Content analysis was employed for social media campaigns, focusing on the use of hashtags, discourse, and visual materials to mobilize support and engage audiences. Comparative analysis across regions and institutions was also undertaken to highlight how local and global factors interacted to shape student activism. This qualitative approach provided a robust framework for reconceptualizing student activism, emphasizing its historical roots, contemporary shifts, and continued relevance in higher education and societal contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Nature of Student Activism in Contemporary Higher Education in Africa.

The nature of student activism in African universities today reflects a dynamic interplay

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between historical legacies, contemporary socio-political contexts, and global influences. Hodgkinson and Melchiorre (2019) emphasize that student activism in African universities is deeply rooted in the decolonization struggles of the mid-20th century. Institutions like Makerere University and others in South Africa have historically served as incubators of political thought and activism, shaping broader movements for social and political change. These historical antecedents have significantly influenced the organizational structures and strategies of modern student activism, which continues to challenge institutional inequalities and advocate for decolonized educational systems.

In the 21st century, student activism in Africa evolved to address both local and global challenges, including fee protests, governance issues, and broader societal inequalities. Luescher (2024) observes that the shift towards neoliberal policies in higher education has intensified student unrest, as seen in movements like #FeesMustFall in South Africa. Similarly, Oluoch-Suleh and Osuji (2024) highlight how hidden curricula and shared responsibilities within university governance shape the dynamic and often contentious nature of student activism. These scholars underscore that contemporary activism is not just about resistance but also about reclaiming agency within university structures, often navigating complex relationships with political entities. The role of universities as spaces for activism remains critical in African societies.

Mwongela (2013) and Mpatlanyane (2018) point out that student activism often reflects broader struggles for democratic space and societal transformation. At Makerere University, for instance, student protests have frequently been a microcosm of national political dynamics, highlighting tensions between authoritarian governance and democratic aspirations (Mugume & Luescher, 2017; Tibasiima et al, 2024). Moreover, the intersection of activism with digital technologies and social media has amplified its impact, enabling students to mobilize beyond campus boundaries and connect with global movements (Ntuli & Teferra, 2017). Despite its transformative potential, student activism in African universities today faces significant challenges, including repression, co-optation, and the transient nature of student populations. Luescher and Klemencic (2016) argue that while activism has been a powerful force for change, it is often constrained by institutional policies and state interference. Additionally, the neoliberal commodification of education has led to increased financial pressures on students, which, as noted by Tazwaire and Oketch (2022), often serve as catalysts for unrest. Nonetheless, the resilience and creativity of student movements demonstrate their enduring relevance in shaping the future of higher education and societal governance in Africa.

Future Trends of Student Activism

Recent scholarship highlights the evolving dynamics of student activism in managing higher education institutions, particularly in South Africa and across the Global South. Masungo (2024) and Teferra and Ntuli (2021) emphasize the deep-rooted connection between activism and socio-political histories, with contemporary movements targeting equitable access, governance reforms, and policy advocacy. Activists increasingly address structural inequalities and advocate for democratized governance, as evidenced in the work of Oluoch-Suleh and Osuji (2024), who explore the role of shared responsibility and hidden curricula in fostering engagement. Meanwhile, global movements, such as those outlined by Farago et al. (2018) and Zeilig and Ansell (2008), continue to influence localized activism, blending global justice themes with specific institutional challenges like discrimination and resource allocation.

Looking ahead, future trends suggest student activism will become more decentralized, tech-driven, and issue-focused. Masungo (2024) and Mpatlanyane (2018) highlight the increasing role of digital platforms in mobilizing and sustaining activism, broadening participation and redefining traditional modes of organizing. Scholars also predict greater alignment with global social justice movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter, to amplify the push for systemic change (Downey, 2020). At the same time, there is a growing emphasis on activism's capacity to shape higher education policy frameworks, as noted by Davids (2021) and Cole and Heinecke (2020). As these movements continue to

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evolve, they are expected to challenge structural inequalities and drive long-term transformations in higher education governance.

CONCLUSION

Given the contextual and evolving nature of student activism in higher education, it is prudent to opine that student activism will follow hybridity with the use of analogue and digital affordances. It should be clearly understood that contextual circumstances will always be paramount in fostering the spirit of activism. Additionally, student politics will be greatly influenced by activism in academia and the bigger societal political landscape within local and global demands. Educational managers in this regard need to pay attention to understanding student experiences and give timely guidance. In the same way, the use of a global intersectional view may stop endless protests in a post-neoliberal environment.

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