

'Slactivism' or Real Social Change? The Role of the Hashtag in the Repeal  
the 8th Movement in Ireland

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*MSc Management of Information Systems | 2019*

## Declarations

I declare that the work described in this dissertation is, except where otherwise stated, entirely my own work, and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university. I further declare that this research has been carried out in full compliance with the ethical research requirements of the School of Computer Science and Statistics.

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30<sup>th</sup> April 2019

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## Abstract

Social media infiltrates modern life in many facets. The realm of activism is one of them. With the influence of new media technologies becoming more and more apparent the question is whether this online influence is having real world impact on activist movements and voter outcomes. The use of the Twitter hashtag as a signifier was examined in the course of this study and evaluated in the context of the Repeal movement - the pro-choice movement to legalise abortion in Ireland.

A review of movements in which social media activism was a relevant factor was carried out. The various viewpoints on what constitutes 'slactivist' versus activist behaviour in the literature was examined. A survey of those who engaged with the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement was conducted, and analysis carried out to identify the common themes that emerged in relation to the use of Twitter hashtags in the context of this particular movement.

A data mining exercise was also carried out whereby data was extracted from the Twitter platform in order to analyse tweets containing the #repealthe8th hashtag in the lead up to the referendum whereby the Irish people would vote on whether or not to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2018. The tweets were subject to text analysis identifying sentiment and regularity of terms used.

This dissertation seeks to identify the perceptions around Twitter activism and how it is used in the context of achieving social change. It concludes that the contribution of Twitter to the Repeal movement was a positive one. Themes identified included the use of social media as a means to organise, communicate and share personal narratives.

It was also identified that further work is required in the area with regards evaluating sentiment of text in relation to political movements, with interesting results to be generated from future research undertaking a broader scope encompassing both sides of the abortion debate in Ireland to evaluate social media usage and impact on political outcomes.

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## Abbreviations

SMO	Social Movement Organisation
API	Application Programming Interface
REST	Representational State Transfer
NLTK	Natural Language Toolkit
NLP	Natural Language Processing
IDE	Integrated Development Environment
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
JSON	JavaScript Object Notation
SO	Semantic Orientation
PMI	Pointwise Mutual Information

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The usage of social media technologies has the potential to influence outcomes in campaigns and social movements. In recent times social media had a major impact on how activist gathering was orchestrated and communication enabled outside of channels such as traditional media sources. The events around the Arab Spring and the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine showed the world the powerful mobilising capabilities that social media possesses.

The potential to be used as a tool for change is there certainly, but a social media presence alone is not enough to achieve real transformation, it is how one utilises the landscape afforded by these technological tools. As noted by Kirkpatrick (2008), "Technology is actually embedded in culture, actively shaped by social actors who invest it with meanings and bend it to reflect the desires and interests of (non-technological) forms of collective life". (2008, p.25) There is a need to examine what the necessary conditions are for optimal use of social media by such social actors in the course of grassroots activism and political movements.

There are diverging views in this area of research, ranging from techno-pessimist ideas of social media activism as ineffective and class it as 'slacktivism' (Morozov, 2011), to those who link social media activism to successful outcomes (Etling, 2014; Sullivan, 2009).

This study looks at the role of social media during the movement to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment in Ireland to decriminalise abortion and legislate for its safe provision. The movement culminated in a referendum on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2018 whereby the majority voted 'Yes' to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment. This study is motivated by the need to look at where social media and activism intersected in the Repeal movement. In particular the role of the hashtag on the social media platform Twitter is examined as a means to explore the use and impact of this technology on activism and cultural transformation.

### 1.1 Context of Study

Various studies have been conducted which look at other activist events/social movements which involved an online element. Gerbaudo in his 2012 book outlines three

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case studies whereby the intersection of social media and activism is examined; the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the indignados movement in Spain, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. Throughout the literature there are many examples of international movements and the effects of social media on interaction and mobilisation. It is an incredibly diverse and fascinating research area. For the purposes of this study the focus is on the Irish Repeal movement and the #repealthe8th hashtag which was not found to be researched elsewhere.

## 1.2 Background

This research seeks to examine the efficacy of hashtags as a form of political activism online. The act of retweeting or using certain hashtags to support/highlight an issue can be perceived as a passive act. This paper will seek to examine the role of this form of activism and look for indicators of mobilisation and support. This research endeavors to understand the impact social media hashtags have had on the movement and potentially voting outcome. It looks to situate online social media activism (in this case twitter) in the greater political strategy of gaining public support of an issue – in particular with the “Repeal the 8th” movement in Ireland, culminating in the majority vote to repeal the 8th Amendment in the Irish constitution in May 2018.

## 1.3 The Research Question

The primary research question is: What is the role of the hashtag in the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Movement – is it ‘Slactivism’ or contributory towards social change?

Secondary questions include:

Q1 – What is the pattern of hashtag use relating to the “Repeal the 8th” in the run up to the referendum of May 2018?

Q2 – Is there a correlation between hashtag use for the Repeal campaign and attendance at marches/demos/offline activism for the movement?

Q3 – What are the sentiments observed with the tweets using the #repealthe8th hashtag?

Q4 – How did members of various pro-choice groups related to the Repeal the 8th movement view the use of the twitter hashtags – did they aid or hinder the movement?

#### 1.4 Why This Research Is Important

Social media has been credited with creating new public spaces, these online spaces could potentially replace mobilisation via physical gatherings which are arguably necessary to perform activism in a traditional sense. There are those who decry this move towards online activism (Gladwell, 2010), mourning the loss of physical mobilisation and the change that it can achieve.

No doubt physical mobilisation was instrumental throughout the abortion rights campaign in Ireland in the granting of a referendum. Public demonstrations were the keystone in political agitation that led to the government granting the Irish people a say via a referendum. This research examines the role of social media in the lead up to the 2018 referendum, in particular focussing on the use of Twitter hashtags in the online movement and the effect it had on offline mobilisation and potentially the end result.

#### 1.5 To Whom It Is Important

The insights provided throughout this paper regarding the role of social media elements such as hashtags in the bringing about of social change would be of interest to activists, political campaigners and policy makers alike.

#### 1.6 Scope

The scope of this study pertains to the use of the hashtag by Twitter users that relate to the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement in Ireland. It includes an examination of activist behaviours as they are linked to hashtag use and a review of tweet content to situate the hashtag in the movement and determine the importance of its use. The data analysed from Twitter was extracted from tweets originally posted in the period spanning from May 2017 – May 2018.

## 1.7 Timeframe

This study began in October 2018 and completed in May 2019. Survey contents and rationale were submitted to the Trinity College School of Computer Science and Statistics Research Ethics Committee on 27th February 2019. Approval from the Ethics Committee was received on 21<sup>st</sup> March and the survey was made available to respondents from the 25th of March – 9<sup>th</sup> April 2019. Data extraction from Twitter took place between 9th January and 3rd of February 2019, followed by analysis. The final paper was submitted on Monday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2019.

## 1.8 Chapter Roadmap

Chapter 1 - This chapter describes the context of this research paper; it details the background to the research problem and outlines the Research question and a number of sub-questions. Within this chapter lies the rationale for undertaking this research in this way and for whom the results would be of interest. The scope and timeframe for the study is also described.

Chapter 2 - Here, the existing literature in the area of study is examined and discussed. Major themes that appear in previous texts relating to social media and activism are considered and categorized in the relevant order relating to Activism and Slactivism and the classifications that define them. The perceived dichotomy between activist and slactivist action described in the literature are also explored.

Chapter 3 - Methodology is outlined in this chapter. The philosophy and approach underpinning the research is outlined in addition to methodological choice and rationale. The strategy and chosen research instruments are discussed in addition to ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 - Within this chapter a review is performed of all of the findings generated by the data collection methods of both survey and data mining. A breakdown of questionnaire responses and various analyses of the data mining exercise are described to examine the role of the hashtag in the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement.

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Chapter 5 - Here conclusions are made based on the data collected and analysed, responses to the research questions are discussed along with any limitations of the research. Future work in this area is described and a summary of the contribution made by the study.

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## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction:

Throughout this chapter literature relevant to the subject area of online activism will be evaluated and its efficacy in bringing about social change will be examined. The aim here is to identify themes and theories that emerge in the current research to provide an analysis of existing literature. This thesis will focus on a particular socio-political movement – that to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment, liberalising abortion law in Ireland. This movement will be examined through the lens of activism carried out on social media, Twitter in this case. This paper seeks to establish the role social media had in the Repeal movement, and more generally whether online activism goes towards creating social change or if it is ineffective or neutral – merely slactivism? The literature referenced throughout this chapter will go to address this question, identifying the main themes throughout the research.

The literature broadly divides itself into two schools of thought – for and against – those that advocate for the value in online activism and those that argue against it. Ultimately there is disagreement over what constitutes ‘real’ activism – does online activism contribute to social change? Does online activism result in offline activist behaviours? What constitutes ‘Slactivism’? Do behaviours perceived as Slacktivist by some, contribute in some way towards a successful social movement? This research will be addressing Twitter activism specifically in relation to the movement in Ireland to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment, to that end the research will be informed by the greater literature on social media activism which will be outlined here. This paper will include research on global movements.

If the origins of social movements were to be examined, the term was first recognised in 1850 by German sociologist Lorenz von Stein, in a book published in 1850 regarding French social movements (New World Encyclopedia Contributors, 2017). Steinberg (2016) holds that the belief that change can occur is at the heart of social movements – this is achieved through advocacy and action undertaken by a group of individuals in an attempt to challenge the existing status quo. This adverse relationship to the “status quo” is also alluded to by American sociologist Charles Tilly when discussing social movements (Riegelman, 2009). In addition, Steinberg attributes group actions as being part of establishing “group norms” which “solidify the unity of the group and demonstrate that each individual member is truly committed to the goal” (Steinberg, 2016, p. 421).

Twitter is a social media platform founded in 2006. It's central unique feature is that of the hashtag – a word or phrase placed after the # symbol is tagged and all other posts featuring the same hashtag are linked and can be found by searching for a particular hashtag. Users must create an account in order to use the site. It has become widely used in a very short space of time, and has particular come to attention in the organising and gathering of people with particular political views. This has led to its use as a communicative and organisational tool in various political movements which I will discuss in more detail in this chapter. Opinions are divided on its effectiveness – is it a revolutionary platform or is the hype being fed by technological determinist beliefs? Does its relatively simple user interface contribute to 'lazy' activism or slactivism? The use of various social media platforms will be examined in the course of this literature review and their contribution to various movements and the discussion around them, establishing the main bodies of research that have emerged around the subject of online activism.

## 2.2 Movement to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment in Ireland

The 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment was introduced in 1983 into the Irish constitution (Article 40.3.3) by way of Referendum, to protect "the right to life of the unborn". It severely restricted abortion law in Ireland, resulting in criminal charges to be brought against those found guilty of having terminations. A referendum was held in May 2018 where the majority vote was to repeal this amendment from the Irish constitution and replace with the 36<sup>th</sup> Amendment – 'Provision may be made by law for the regulation of termination of pregnancy'. Subsequently legislation – the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 - was passed to permit abortion without restriction during the first twelve weeks of pregnancy and after the twelve week period where there is a risk to life or serious harm or in cases of fatal foetal abnormality.

This is the first instance where liberalisation of abortion law in the history of the Irish state. Previous amendments – the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments – concerned the lawful obtaining of abortion overseas and obtaining information in relation to abortion. The Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act of 2013 was legislation given effect as a result of the X case, whereby abortion was allowed in the cases of a pregnancy endangering a person's life, including through the risk of suicide. The Act introduced the maximum penalty of 14 years imprisonment for "destruction of unborn human life".



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“(T)he Irish people had never been asked whether they wanted to liberalise abortion laws (all proposals on the substantive matter since 1983 had been to further restrict access to abortion so that the risk of suicide would not be a sufficient risk to life to allow for abortion where chosen by the pregnant person)” (de Londras & Markicevic, 2018)

The Repealing of the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment was the hard-won result of decades of activism (Quilty, et al., 2015), even advocating for a referendum in the first place was a long difficult road. De Londras and Markicevic (2018) describe how the referendum was brought about, due to a change in political stance and the enormous demand for the ‘Repeal’ movement and resulting political pressure. The repeal movement was a grassroots movement which utilized social media and offline activism to raise awareness and bring about social change. The rapid growth of the repeal movement in years leading up to the referendum placed this issue front and centre as something that could not be ignored. In my research I will examine the role of social media activism in this growth and the support it garnered, determining its effect on the repeal movement overall.

De Londras and Markicevic (2018) claim that though huge ‘popular demand’ for repealing the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment pushed politicians to propose a referendum, the outcomes of the ‘Citizen’s Assembly’ had an equal role, going on to argue that the submissions that came out of the Citizen’s Assembly had an effect on voters on the day in ‘motivating’ them on the day, ultimately leading to a majority vote to Repeal. It could also be argued that that consistent engagement on social media and the highlighting of art and media projects using social media kept these stories at the forefront of the public imagination.

## 2.3 Activism

### *2.3.1 Effective Online Activism*

Grassroots activism and student activism increasingly use social media as part of their activist strategy (Obar, 2014) (Obar, et al., 2012) (Biddix, 2010), both were important elements in the Repeal movement in Ireland. In this section the movements highlighted by the literature will be highlighted wherein social media played a key role in their success. Ronzhyn (2016) examines the role of social media in activism in Ukraine, particularly after the Euromaidan protests. Looking at Facebook in particular as a conduit of online activism, Ronzhyn (2016) highlights the use of social media as an “important political tool”, whereby Facebook groups that were established during the 2013-14 protests remained as a source of support for Ukrainian citizens involved in the conflict in East Ukraine and also served to continually highlight corruption in the government. During the events of Euromaidan itself, Twitter as a hugely important platform in terms of imparting an account of events on the ground and to mobilise support, structuring a narrative via the use of both text content and images (Asher & Asher, 2015). In another study focussing on the protests in Ukraine during the winter of 2013-14, Etling (2014) showed the amount of public support on social media platforms (the majority of which was Twitter based), highlighting the effectiveness in gathering public support for a political movement via social media.

The use of social media as an activist tool has been widely discussed in the context of the Arab Spring (Murthy, 2013) (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011) (Valenzuela, et al., 2014). Both Twitter and Facebook were commended in their capacity as tools to drive social change (Wolfsfeld, et al., 2013). The creation of a space for political discussion was made possible by these platforms as highlighted by Howard et al. (2011), a concept that will be discussed further on in the context of public spaces and social media. In addition, in settings where mainstream media is controlled in an overt fashion by governmental interests, it can, as argued by (Khondker, 2011) form an alternative media source. That being said, Ronzhyn (2016) calls for a critical look at the Western media view of social media platforms as “a kind of ultimate weapon for democracy” (Ronzhyn, 2016, p. 96) as it can be sometimes used by autocratic governments in an attempt to control democratic movements. Ronzhyn (2016) notes the difference between the usage of social media during the Arab Spring and the Ukrainian protests – for Ukraine it was not the battle of traditional media versus social media as it had been with the Arab Spring; for the former, many professional journalists utilised online platforms including Facebook and alternative websites to write about the events.

Social media as a collaborative tool in the practise and organisation of activism has been highlighted by Lovejoy & Saxton (2012), as a collective way to work collaboratively with various allies. Indeed, Sullivan (2009) in reference to the uprising in Iran at the time, declared that “The revolution will be Twittered”, believing social change possible as a direct result of social media activism. A human rights issue which has progressed greatly in recent times is that of LGBTQ rights. Social media campaigns have been examined in the literature in terms of gaining visibility and support (Vie, 2014) (Steinberg, 2016). Vie (2014) examined a Human Rights campaign on Facebook which encouraged supporters to change their profile picture to a red logo to denote their support for gay marriage. This was a small measure, and could be argued to be quite a small action, or slactivism (discussed later). However Vie (2014) maintained that this small action generated huge online support for the issue, helping it gain visibility and prominence, challenging existing societal norms and thus was an example of effective activism. Other examples of where social media propagated awareness and activism around a problem and its resultant social movement are the Flint Water Crisis and the Dakota Access Pipeline in the United States (Karpus, 2018).

Lim (2013) highlights Indonesian case studies which she uses to illustrate the success of social media as an activist platform. Indonesia has been dubbed a “Twitter Nation” (Lim, 2013). Lim takes a less polarized view than some, e.g. Gladwell (2010), Morozov (2011) and doesn’t dwell on the argument of whether social media activism is effective or ineffective, rather she focuses on the factors linking social media participation with fruitful political activism (Lim, 2013, p. 636). Shubert (2009) highlights Indonesia’s “online social networking-addict” society where social media is being used as a tool to ignite change. The two cases highlighted as successful examples by Lim are the gecko vs crocodile case (KPK case) and the libel case of Prita Mulyasari (Lim, 2013, p. 636).

Lim (2013) however remain unconvinced of the complete power of social media activism to cause change on a large scale, citing their “many clicks” theory:

“Social media activism has a tendency for being fast, thin and many. In other words, online campaigns emerge each minute and often quickly disappear without any trace. The result can be many clicks, not equally distributed for each and every cause, but little sticks in the sense that very few causes make for mass activism in an online environment.” (2013, p. 637)

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Hashtags in particular appear to promote a sense of unity in the propagation of an online movement – it is a useful means of tagging a post or a tweet as being part of a larger whole.

Steinberg (2016) points to Obama’s call for online activism in response to the student debt hikes in 2012. He proposed the hashtag under which social media activism should take place - #dontdoublemyrate. She surmises that that the resulting action is proof that “social media advocacy seems to have earned a seat at the table with policy makers” (2016, p. 417)

“Social media can be used by policy makers and lawyers working on behalf of advocacy groups in many ways. It can be used to promote an in-person event, like the types seen by traditional social movements, such as sit-ins and protests.” But social media also provides a platform for virtual advocacy, including the use of hashtags to promote a common cause, sharing memes that relay information, suggesting individuals place overlays on their profile pictures, and encouraging supporters to simply 'like' a status on an online newsfeed. With little more than a click, social media allows individuals to become a part of a much larger movement. The impact of these online interactions is often large.” (Steinberg, 2016, p. 418)

The women’s march on Washington can also be viewed as an example of how online social movements can become truly powerful – utilising the hashtags #WomensMarchGlobal and #WhyIMarch among many, with the 2017 march to protest the inauguration of Donald Trump drawing large crowds and a large presence on social media. Other powerful movements fueled greatly by social media activism are #BringBackOurGirls, and #BlackLivesMatter all of these are key examples of the power of the hashtag in uniting a worldwide movement. (Steinberg, 2016)

Black Lives Matter in particular was a movement credited with shaping the “national discourse about race” (Carney, 2016, p. 180). It had its origins in Twitter debates and went on to result in activism on the street. (Murthy, 2018) Social media activism has also made its mark on the movement of gun reform in the US (Steinberg, 2016) – it has affected the actions of individual senators.

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### *2.3.2 A Voice for the Less Powerful*

Online activism, in particular via social media has shown to be a useful conduit for lending a voice to the marginalised or those with less power – this is a view held by Murthy (2018) in relation to gendered movements, arguing that social media has a role of ultimately enabling women to have more of a democratic involvement in some social movements.

Given that women have been found to be more likely to be social media users (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010) – this could have implications on the type of activism occurring online, as a platform such as Twitter can help amplify previously marginalised movements such as the Irish abortion rights movement.

This idea of giving a “voice” – this was hugely important during the Repeal campaign, where starting the conversation was viewed as pivotal to garner support for the movement but also to break the stigma that had shrouded the issue for so long (Mullaly, 2018), in addition to the gay rights movement, social media narratives served to personalise the issue (Steinberg, 2016, p. 437).

### *2.3.3 Social Media Effects on Public Policy*

Thus far the usage and boost to online and real live movements that social media activism can give has been demonstrated, but how does that translate in terms of real life policy change, and can this be linked? For the Repeal movement the referendum to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment has resulted in a new Bill legislating for abortion in Ireland. How strongly this can be linked to the role of social media remains to be borne out by the research.

Steinberg (2016) seeks to provide advocates of social change with an introduction of social media’s role in creating legal change, believing it is indeed possible and demonstrable as a practise. She points to research that links policy with social media posts, whereby MIT scholar Amy Zhang and Microsoft researcher Scott Counts were able to predict whether a policy measure would pass from analysing state residents social media post content. They were able to do this with 80% accuracy by examining Twitter posts related to same sex marriage at the state level to measure against legislative outcomes (Zhang & Counts, 2015).

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This level of accuracy surpasses that of traditional polling methods and “lends itself to the theory that, indeed, social media does have a substantial effect on the law” (Steinberg, 2016, p. 442).

#### *2.3.4 Value in Symbolic Support*

Even though social media activism frequently comes up against accusations of being not of any real substance (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011) with questions raised on whether online activism leads to offline or to material change, there are those who point to its intrinsic value. Social media has the potential to promote activism and raise awareness of movements; “Indeed, digital communications technologies, and social media in particular, have been lauded for their potential to promote activism and social change through ‘raising awareness’ of injustices, their ability to motivate people into political action and the facility to organize and coordinate that action for maximum effect.” (Miller, 2017)

Indeed, Karpus (2018) identifies the revitalizing qualities that social media can have on a grassroot movement, particularly in relation to environmental activism, allowing millions to “join the conversation”. He maintains that social media can now allow movements greater funding opportunities as the online spreading of support can be done with ease, letting those on the ground continue with their work. It allows participation by those who may not have large resources of time and or energy. This was particularly apparent in the Go Fund Me initiative by the Together for Yes, a crowdfunding drive to raise funds for posters and promotional materials in the lead up to the referendum. Karpus (2018) describes this form of online participation as ““microcontributions” led by “microactivism” where instead of having the small amount people who care immensely to do a lot, one convinces a large amount of people who barely care to contribute in some small way.” (2018, p. 101)

Steinberg (2016) acknowledges the lack of consensus in how the value of online activism is measured;

“While some online activists also involve themselves in the grassroots work of social movements, others participate in advocacy for symbolic purposes alone. This is somewhat similar to off-line advocacy efforts such as planting a tree (symbolizing support for the environment) or wearing a ribbon (which might offer support for medical conditions or other causes). And while supporters of online

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activism might argue that their support is similar to signing a petition, others insist that a tweet, hashtag, or share has far less value.” (2016, p. 443)

She gives a UNICEF advert which circulated social media as an example – “though perhaps unexpected, UNICEF inadvertently provided a prime example of how activists can capture the power of social media to create meaningful change” (2016, p. 443)

Steinberg (2016) argues that for some, participation in online movement is only symbolic, they take no further part, this would be in line with ‘slactivist’ behaviours. However, acknowledges the potential for further activity. For those who merely engage by way of a symbolic gesture of support and no more, it is likely that there was no potential for these individuals to become members of the activist movement to begin with (Tufekci, 2010). She argues that there is value in even symbolic engagement in terms of a wider impact, where extra voices can serve to strengthen a burgeoning movement and offer support to those engaged in more difficult or grassroots levels of activism.

“Social media advocacy can play an important role in the lives of all individuals, even those not directly affected by social justice issues. The symbolic gesture of liking or sharing a post has meaning in and of itself, for both the person who decides (perhaps for the first time) to voice their opinion on a contested issue and also for those who are truly engaged in activist work. These actions strengthen social justice movements.” (Steinberg, 2016, p. 451)

Similarly, Jones (2015) in his analysis of video sharing on social media found that taking part in such activities, often deemed ‘slacktivism’, relate to a rise in behaviours considered to be ‘activist’. Overall there is a positive association in the literature with the power of symbolism of online support and the propagation of a social movement.

### *2.3.5 Role of Emotions*

Interaction via social media in the context of a movement can involve emotive content and feedback and thus goes to facilitate an emotional need in those who partake in it. One of the key elements for ‘real’ activism identified in the literature was a sense of ‘strong’ vs “weak’ ties and true commitment required (Lim, 2013) (Gladwell, 2010). Taken as a place where emotions can be heard and facilitated, social media has embedded itself as a real

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place for engagement and thus growth of a movement. It can go on to serve as a starting point for further activism – an emotional ‘hook’ as it were.

The role of online exchanges in the realm of activism holds value. Miller (2017) speaks to the importance of this role:

“Apart from the exchanging of information, an important role of conversation and communication is to promote social harmony through the maintenance of relationships. This is referred to as the ‘phatic’ function of communication.”  
(2017, p. 251)

Poell & Van Dijck (2016) call attention to the “technocommercial architectures” through which social media practises take form, arguing that public space for activists is constructed through “processes of emotional connectivity”. (2016, p. 226)

Thus there is consensus in certain aspects of the literature whereby the facilitating aspect of social media for communication, debate and the resulting possibility of change is recognised.

Along the same vein, Poell & Van Dijck (2016) point to a study relating to the Ferguson protestors of 2014 to illustrate the many layers of emotional investment a social media platform can help facilitate:

“Lynn Schofield Clark’s study of 22 American high-school-age students of color, who considered participating in a walkout in solidarity with the 2014 Ferguson protestors. Clark shows how the students used Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter to receive and exchange photos, videos, quotes, and commentaries that exhibited their emotional investment and participation in the protests. Analyzing the dynamic of these exchanges, she points out that it is important to not just focus on the creators and circulators of key materials, but also on the recipients of these materials.” (2016, p. 227)

Activism can be a long hard road for many causes and social media can provide a medium through which to keep supporters motivated and engaged in a movement over a long period of time maintaining a sense of emotional investment in a protest. Poell & Van Dijck argue the role is now vital for social media in activist movements, where “Platforms play a key role in processes of activist mobilization, emancipation, and identification, in



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which online and offline activity become inextricably entangled. It is through the mass sharing of emotions that (temporary) public spaces are constructed.” (2016, p. 229)

### *2.3.6 Organising Mechanism*

A key role that social media platforms play in a movement is one of an organising mechanism, which can shape the life of a movement. Murthy (2018) has pointed to the literature not quite catching up with or recognising the impact on movement organisation that social media can have.

“the literature on social movements and social media has not fully grasped just how much social media have fundamentally changed the landscape of organizational communication, ranging from stakeholders being able to directly mobilize resources to making grassroots transnational social movements more organizationally feasible. A major gap in the literature is this lack of understanding how social media have shaped social movement organizations (SMOs) and the organization of social movements.” (2018, p. 1)

The interconnectivity of movements is relevant in online spaces. Murthy (2018) holds that social media has served to change and influence the very landscape of how social media activists communicate and thus the movements themselves by extension.

identify Twitter as an “organizing mechanism”, crediting the platform with the potential to shape the structure of how a movement is organized in addition to its communicative role.

### *2.3.7 Ripple Effect*

The value of social media activism at times can be found in knock on effects, or ‘rippling effects’ as is acknowledged by Murthy (2018):

“Ultimately, social media often create rippling effects which touch many different aspects of the movements process from resource mobilization to actual interventions. They may also be making SMOs<sup>1</sup> more democratic, breaking down traditional hierarchies between activists, other stakeholders, and movement leadership.” (2018, p. 2)

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<sup>1</sup> Social Movement Organisations.

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Even participation in what has been identified as ‘slactivism’ can be beneficial – it can be a starting point out of which “more meaningful social protest” can emerge. (Kristofferson, et al., 2013) This is a sentiment shared by many in the literature, where participation online in a movement can provide those who would otherwise be disengaged with a space to learn and develop (Vissers & Stolle, 2014; Vitak, et al., 2011).

In acknowledging the positive force of even minor political engagement in this light, Leyva (2017) extrapolates that “over time, online participation, slacktivist or otherwise, may eventually lead to an increase in traditional modes of off-line participation.” (2017, p. 465)

### *2.3.8 Public Space Theory*

There is value in the space provided by social media platforms, this is space for people to organise and communicate in a way that is instantaneous and provides an element of anonymity where necessary. Poell & Van Dijck (2016) introduce the idea of social media as a public space in its own right. They highlight that the appropriation of social media platforms as public spaces is not without its complications; viewing it under two categories – that of providing a space whereby in areas where state media surveillance is underway, rendering traditional methods impossible, and also in the realm of the context of social media platforms as corporately owned spaces, informed by commercial needs and thus may come up against the wants and needs of an activist movement conducted on its platform.

“First, activist social media activity often clashes with the efforts of state authorities to maintain public order, most evidently in the case of authoritarian regimes such as China and Egypt. Yet, the Edward Snowden leaks make clear that liberal democratic states also have developed mass online surveillance programs, often in collaboration with major social media corporations. Second, although the connection between social media and activism seems natural, these media are not designed to facilitate activism. In fact, the technological architectures and user policies of social media are primarily informed by commercial considerations and frequently clash with activist interests and objectives.” (2016, p. 226)

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Public sphere theory is explored critically by Poell & Van Dijck (2016) in relation to “the construction of publicness” in light of interests from corporations who operate social media platforms:

“Hence, it is at the intersection of online popular contestation, the controlling efforts of states, and the technocommercial strategies of social media corporations that the construction of publicness needs to be situated. Exploring these connections, we, at the conclusion of this introduction, critically reflect on the conceptualization of publicness in the tradition of public sphere theory, which has been the main conceptual framework through which the relations among popular contestation, mediated communication, and power have been examined” (2016, p. 227)

Building on this idea of commercial interest in a seeming public space constructed online, Poell & Van Dijck (2016) argue for these platforms to be understood as “technocommercial assemblages” and critiques the assumption of social media platforms as a flat structure for activist networks to utilize. Rather than being a new free space away from the evils of mass media, there are parallels with traditional media terms of who gets seen and who’s voices are heard. Due to the commercial origins of these platforms, the very nature of how users see and interact with each other is dictated by the of how the platform is structured (Langlois, et al., 2009).

Gerbaudo in his 2012 work, expands on the concept of social media as a place or extension of public space, extolling the ability of the online space to gather and for emotional ties, ties which can spur on social movements:

“In front of this situation of crisis of public space, social media have become emotional conduits for reconstructing a sense of togetherness among a spatially dispersed constituency, so as to facilitate its physical coming together in public space” Gerbaudo (2012, p159)

Thus concludes the first body of research which shows positive links between social media engagement with a movement and ‘activism’. Next, I the literature which views social media activism as ‘slactivist’ with marginal value in overall social change will be examined.

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## 2.4 Slactivism

You will not be able to stay home, brother  
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out  
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag  
And skip out for beer during commercials  
Because the revolution will not be televised

Gil Scott-Heron (1970) "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"

The term "Slacktivism" itself has been defined by many in the literature. It has been attributed to those who merely wish to increase their own "feel-good factor" without achieving any political impact (Christensen, 2011) . It is generally a pejorative term, commensurate with online activity that is politically inept. (Morozov, 2011) (Vie, 2014) (Cabrera, et al., 2017). Slacktivist activities are "low-risk, low-cost activities via social media whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity" (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). Murthy (2018) defines slactivism as a "weak form of activism" performed through microblogging, also echoed by Gladwell (2010) who argues that microblogging as a form of activism is futile.

Examples of 'slacktivist' behavior is outlined by Leyva (2017):

"...clicking "like" on a political post, blogging about political issues, participating in a digital protest, e-mailing a politician, joining an SNS political cause group, and signing e-petitions (Christensen, 2012). Correspondingly, in the majority of studies, measures for online participation tend to exclude higher commitment practices like hacking and predominantly include what are arguably mostly "slacktivist" practices (e.g., Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Christensen, 2012; Ekstrom & Ostman, 2015). Hence, when divorced from traditional formal and activist off-line participation, the significance of online participation, or slacktivism if you will, is contentious." (2017, p. 465)

Even detractors, however concede there are instances whereby social movements progress from social media spaces to the streets, as in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement (Murthy, 2018; Carney, 2016). There have been several cases of activism

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identified in the literature which have led from past slacktivism behaviours (Jones, 2015; Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Šteka & Mazák, 2014; Cabrera, et al., 2017).

We cannot merely dismiss online action as slactivism in every case, the modern world being what it is, the organizing of most activities involves an online element and activism is no exception to this. A strong connection with this online element and the grassroots organisation is imperative to avoid falling into slactivist practices (Christensen, 2011; Cabrera, et al., 2017). For all the successful movements utilising social media discussed in prior sections there is still a sizeable argument in the literature that would argue that engaging on social media or online activism only would constitute 'slactivism', a replacement for the earlier 'armchair activism'. To address this viewpoint I will highlight these arguments, beginning with the social media movements that were unsuccessful.

#### *2.4.1 Unsuccessful Social Media Movements*

While the use of social media platforms can impart a "sense of virtual community", (Majchrzak et al., 2013), Murthy (2018) highlights areas where such platforms experience difficulty as an activist tool, including the inability to create a clear group structure – however this view is based upon the perceived need for a clear hierarchical structure. This view of a hierarchical or leadership requirement in a successful social movement is echoed by Gladwell (2010).

The other drawback argued by Murthy (2018) is the amount of resources involved in keeping a movement 'alive' online. i.e. retweeting, creating new posts and tweets, keeping the hashtag going and so forth. Additionally, he points to the possibility that social media networks may be under government surveillance which could be detrimental to many movements depending on the setting.

Examples of movements which were based in social media but unsuccessful are highlighted by Lim (2013) in which the author describes two cases in Indonesia, the Lapindo and Ahmadiyah Cases – where social media coverage failed to generate any real change. (2013, p. 647) As noted previously the Arab Spring success was greatly attributed to online resources, however other movements such as Hong Kong protests of 2014 were ineffective despite also using social media, thus "social media alone cannot create meaningful change." (2016, p. 434)

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#### *2.4.2 Importance of Physical Organisation*

Of course, many seismic movements of social change have taken place on society, long before the advent of social media. Gladwell's (2010) argument against slactivism draws on these important movements as examples where leadership and resources and deep investment by the participants were required, leaving no room for those who would sit at home – "Activism that challenges the status quo- that attacks deeply rooted problems – is not for the faint of heart" (Gladwell, 2010).

Interestingly, Steinberg (2016) also talks about the importance of leadership and organisation in traditional forms of activism, and the difference between these forms and a social media network. McAdam (1986) for example linked high risk activism to those who had "strong ties" in the movement, by way of close friends and acquaintances. The argument being that the ties created between groups and individuals are stronger when forged through 'real life' activism and lead to stronger bonds and a longer fight whereas those forged by such flimsy ties as a stranger on the internet are more likely to fall away if times get difficult or if the road gets too long. (Lim, 2013; Gladwell, 2010)

Leadership comes through as a strong theme in the literature, whereby loyalty and commitment were demonstrated through actions undertaken at individual and group level on the ground (Gladwell, 2010; Steinberg, 2016), this has changed somewhat with the ability to donate now online to a cause to show support and certainly many organisations and movements need and encourage this type of support. This then results in supportive action being possible from a relatively separate position, a 'weak tie', where lasting loyalties are not founded in the traditional sense.

As noted by Steinberg (2016):

"Before the advent of the Internet, being a part of a social movement often required hard labor. Individuals had to band together to create a collective group that could physically mobilize and influence change. For example, the Communist Party of America required its members to attend weekly meetings, lasting three to four hours in length... Today's social movement momentum can take place from the comfort of one's home or office through social media. This requires a dramatically different level of involvement than participants of an earlier time."  
(2016, pp. 421-422)

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Both Steinberg and Gladwell stress the importance of **physical** mobilization, citing the Montgomery Bus Protest (1955-1956) as a key example, a highly organized protest resulting in bus segregation being declared unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court. This was long standing orchestrated action, involving a carpool organized to transport African Americans to their work while the bus boycott took place.

#### *2.4.3 Exaggeration of Role – Technological Determinism*

Miller (2017) holds a similar position to Gladwell and Morozov (2011) but focuses more on “the relationship between talk, togetherness, the relationship to transformative politics and how that is or is not enacted by the use of social media.” (2017, p. 252)

Miller (2017) introduces the concept of “Technological Determinism” and how it relates to social media platforms and activism. He looks at how political engagement has been previously measured and the function of ‘social media politics’, noting the lack of empirical investigation into its real merit. How much of the successful outcome of the Arab Spring be attributed to social media – “thus assuming, in a somewhat technologically determinist way, that connective technologies lead to increased activism”? He also questions the conflation of increased traffic online which relate to a particular cause, with an increase in political involvement. (2017, p. 253) We would do well to be more considered in how we relate to and examine social media engagement. Miller goes on to demonstrate this lack of evidence of the role of social media in various political events including the Arab Spring, arguing it has been widely exaggerated or misunderstood.

Social media contribution in relation to social movements has been critiqued by McCosker (2015) as a discourse produced by a neoliberal sense of crisis of its own voice, feeding on a capitalism of communication (Couldry, 2010; Dean 2005, 2010). Limitations abound with existing research in relation to the question – does social media precede political activism? Leyva (2017) examines the research and finds it wanting:

“However, only a handful of studies have specifically investigated how these SNS content selection processes affect youth online and off-line participation, and these have relied on self-reported measures that gauge attentive frequency to broad political content categories. For example, such measures have entailed Likert-type items that prompt respondents to indicate how often they paid attention to SNSs

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that provide information about specific issues or policies they agreed or disagreed with (e.g., Zhang et al., 2013) or to information about a political campaign or politician on SNSs such as Facebook (e.g., Towner, 2013). Hence, while these early instruments have certainly produced insightful data, they are limited in terms of ecological validity and are susceptible to respondents' recall errors and social desirability biases. Moreover, they tend to offer minimal contextual and textual detail, which makes it difficult to ascertain or unpack the specific content functions through which social media may help to induce participation." (2017, p. 463)

Leyva (2017) asks the question – are social media mobilizing youth? To expand on the theme of cause and effect and technological determinism, there is research which shows a positive correlation between social media activism and future activism – “this faith in the politicizing function of social media is not without sound theoretical grounding.” (Leyva, 2017, p. 464). The literature shows a positive connection over time between social media activism and further political participation both offline and online (Ekstrom & Ostman, 2015; Enjolras, et al., 2013; Lee, et al., 2013). In addition, there is a body of research which shows consumption of social media has little or no effect in the rise of participation offline. It does however have an effect on further online engagement (Baumgartner & Morris, 2009; Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Leyva, 2017; Ternes, et al., 2014; Vissers & Stolle, 2014; Vitak, et al., 2011; de Zuniga, 2012).

Leyva's (2017) research indicated that regular use of social networking sites and the content within that related to political activism had a positive but weak association with activism offline, and a strong link with online activities that fell under the category of “slacktivism”. He found that the demographic of the participants was a predictor of offline political activism:

“.. those with typical demographic and psychographic markers of participation (e.g., upper socioeconomic status, early political socialization) showed significantly greater levels of engagement with political content and off-line and online participation. Together, these findings suggest that frequent social media consumption is linked to a minimal and narrow mobilizing impact.” (2017, p. 462)



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## 2.5 Against Dualism

Rather than focus on the dichotomy between those that believe social media is a positive thing for social change and those who believe it to merely slactivism there is perhaps another way. As advocated by Lim (2013), “The social impacts of the internet and social media, or “change” in society, should be understood as a result of the organic interaction between technology and social, political, and cultural structures and relationships” (p. 637). Instead of arguing the binary definitions of effective or ineffective – activism or slacktivism, the context in which activity takes place should be taken into account – the nuanced effects of online organizing, the qualities which make it succeed and or fail in each instance.

“... social media should not be perceived as a causal agent having a pivotal role in promoting social change or advancing democracy. There is nothing intrinsic in social media that automatically achieves this potential. Societal contexts and arrangements around the technology are key to its impact on politics” (Lim, 2013, p. 638)

Morozov’s idea that one form replaces another is heavily critiqued by Jones (2015), who dismisses the idea of a binary where activity is pronounced as either activist or slactivist. As Jones notes, “there is no evidence for Morozov’s substitution thesis” (2015, p. 12), rather both kinds of action can be utilized successfully in the course of a movement.

A key understanding emerging from an assessment of research is that a direct cause and effect link between social media activism and direct affect is not always possible to establish. Nevertheless, subtle affects are observed such as the facilitating power that social media platforms hold, the power for transformation contained within them. Lim encapsulates the nuanced, oft misunderstood role of social media activism in modern movements:

“I argue that social media does not inadvertently generate an ideal public sphere in which effective and robust public participation takes place. Social media enables multiple and diverse networked spheres to emerge. While not aiming to advance and deepen democracy, these contested spheres allow individuals to have a greater participation, culturally and socially. Under certain conditions, social and cultural participation in social media spheres may translate into civic or political

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engagement... such translation, however, is neither automatic nor unproblematic.”  
(Lim, 2013, p. 638)

## 2.6 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter two main bodies of research have been identified: firstly, that which would support the view that social media activism is indeed helpful and, in many cases essential in successful movements of recent times. The second body of research compiled here argues against online activism and highlight its shortcomings in the realm of activism. Various theories are contained within these overall themes which have been explored accordingly in this chapter. There is a third viewpoint, which takes a more holistic approach rather than an either/or approach regarding whether something can be classified as activist or slactivist behaviour. Rather, the argument is that both activities can come together to form a collectively constructive part of a social movement:

“Social media does not inherently promote civic engagement and should not be perceived as a causal agent for social change and democratisation. At its best, it facilitates and amplifies a culture that helps establish a foundation, a training ground, and a learning space for individuals to express their opinions, to exercise their rights and to collaborate with others. By understanding the nature and limitations of social media activism and its conditions for success, activists may utilise, employ and transform it into meaningful civic engagement and political participation.” (Lim, 2013, p. 647)

The research encountered here will go on to frame the themes and inform the methodology utilized in further chapters to establish the role of the hashtag in the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement and whether its use should be considered ‘Slactivism’ and thus ineffective or a valuable piece of activism which contributed to momentous social change.

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## Chapter 3: Methodology and Fieldwork

### 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe this study's research design. Here the primary research objective will be outlined and the questions that emerge from this research area explored. The choice of methodology will be described, and reasons supplied for why this was deemed the best method to perform the research and answer the questions posed. The instruments used to extract the data needed to answer the research question will be described. Limitations of the research and lessons learned in the course of executing this research is also traversed, with a summarisation of obstacles encountered or foreseen in the methodological choice at the closing of the chapter.

### 3.2 Research Questions and Objectives

The purpose of the project is the examination of the use of hashtags related to the 'Repeal the 8th' movement in Ireland in the run up to the 2018 referendum - regularity, sentiment and amount - to ascertain the role they played, if any, in mobilising a grassroots issue to one with majority public support. This research seeks to examine the efficacy of hashtags as a form of political activism online. The act of retweeting or using certain hashtags to support/highlight an issue can be perceived as a passive act. This paper will seek to examine the role of this form of activism in relation to the Irish abortion movement leading up to the referendum to Repeal the 8th amendment. It looks to situate online social media activism (in the case of this study, Twitter) within the greater political strategy of gaining public support of an issue. The particular campaign being examined is the "Repeal the 8th" movement in Ireland, culminating in the majority vote to Repeal the 8th Amendment in the Irish constitution on 25th May 2018. The need being addressed is the examination of online social media activism, in this case in the form of Twitter hashtags, and situate it in the context of other forms of activism such as attendance at marches and canvassing. The study ultimately aims to examine whether the use of Twitter hashtags as a form of political activism works to garner public support.

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Research Questions:

Q1 – What is the pattern of hashtag use relating to the “Repeal the 8th” in the run up to the referendum of May 2018?

Q2 – Is there a correlation between hashtag use for the Repeal campaign and attendance at marches/demos/offline activism for the movement?

Q3 – What are the sentiments observed with the tweets using the #repealthe8th hashtag?

Q4 – How did members of various pro-choice groups related to the Repeal the 8th movement view the use of the twitter hashtags – did they aid or hinder the movement?

Theoretical themes involved: Online activism; Feminism and its intersection with online activism and social media; Situating the Repeal the 8th movement in the historical context of Ireland.

### 3.3 Research Methodology

#### 3.3.1 *Philosophy*

In order to determine a research philosophy for this study, the possibilities had to be examined in relation to the data needed and how this data would be used and analysed in this study. The research philosophy was informed by these parameters.

Creswell (2018) advises that from the outset, the researcher should espouse the larger philosophical ideas and worldview underpinning their research undertaking. Worldview here is used by Creswell as defined by Guba as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (1990, p.17). There are four research philosophies explored in the start of the research process of this study, Post positivism, Constructivism/Interpretivism, Transformative and Pragmatism. I will briefly summarise the approached below.

The Postpositivist viewpoint is often known as ‘the scientific method’ (Creswell, 2018), generally more aligned with quantitative than qualitative research. The term is ‘Post-positivism’ rather than ‘Positivist’ as it represents the worldview taken after positivism, whereby the notion of absolute truth is questioned (Phillips and Burbules, 2000). The type of research undertaken with the postpositivist paradigm would be one where a theory is formulated, then data collection takes place that tests this theory and revisions made to the original hypothesis with additional testing undertaken as necessary.

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Constructivism, an approach typically referred to in the context of qualitative research, holds that various subjective meanings are held by individuals in relation to their experiences. From a research point of view the researcher will seek to gather these subjective meanings as best they can, recognising their own subjective interpretation of events. Thus, open ended questions are often used in the course of constructivism research to elicit these various viewpoints and experiences which may not be identifiable by the researcher at design stage.

The Transformative paradigm is informed by an acknowledgement of the role power structures play in the acceptance of knowledge and 'truth', feeling that positivism overlooked the experiences of the marginalised. Transformative research is intertwined with political and social reform (Creswell, 2018) (Mertens, 2010), focusing on the voices of disenfranchised or marginalised groups and individuals.

The Transformative research philosophy has been described as follows:

"It places central importance on the study of lives and experiences of diverse groups that have traditionally been marginalized. Of special interest for these diverse groups is how their lives have been constrained by oppressors and the strategies that they use to resist, challenge, and subvert these constraints. In studying these diverse groups, the research focuses on inequities based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class that result in asymmetric power relationships. The research in the transformative worldview links political and social action to these inequities. Transformative research uses a program theory of beliefs about how a program works and why the problems of oppression, domination, and power relationships exist." (Creswell, 2018, p.39)

Pragmatism is a worldview whereby the research problem itself takes centre stage and all methods necessary to solve it can be utilised, as defined by Creswell (2018): "Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality. This applies to mixed methods research in that inquirers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage in their research." Various world views and methods can be used in the pragmatic approach – it is very flexible.

The worldviews that inform this study are Transformative and Pragmatism. Transformative due to the focus on a movement which dealt with the reproductive freedom affecting the

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marginalised in a greater way – i.e. those individuals of low income could not financially afford a trip to the UK for a termination. Additionally, women were unfairly targeted and criminalised by the legislation underpinned by the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Pragmatism –an approach which utilises mixed methods of data collection – positivist quantitative analysis where necessary an interpretivist look at the results situated in their wider context.

In addition, an element of Feminism Epistemology and Philosophy of Science exists in my research – “Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science studies the ways in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification. It identifies ways in which dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage women and other subordinated groups, and strives to reform these conceptions and practices so that they serve the interests of these groups.” (Anderson, 2017) The focus of this research is on a movement to achieve reproductive rights and for women in Ireland, a gendered issue that is part of a long history of suppression of bodily autonomy for women in this country.

This study adopts pragmatism with a heavy influence of transformative and feminist epistemology to explore broader context of meaning around the social movement around the issue of abortion in Ireland.

### *3.3.2 Approach*

The research will take an inductive approach – data used to develop theory with the research moving from data to theory. My research will be examining the hashtag of repeal the 8th using public space theory in addition to explorative research - in a sense to infer an answer to the research question – by examining the data and see what it tells us. The research question(s) will be addressed by both the examination of the data collected in the scope of this research paper and also the findings emerging from the literature review.

There is an element of ethnography to this study in that it focuses on the experiences of the activist and the meanings attached to the hashtags used to further the movement they are involved in. The study seeks to understand the online social media landscape when it comes to activism, conducting an ethnography of the public space.

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### 3.3.3 *Methodological Choice*

This study will involve mixed methods and a triangulation of the resulting data. The overall research will take the form of an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach.

This will take the form of examination of tweets using text mining, NLP (Natural Language Processing) and data analysis. In addition, surveys will be sent to individuals involved in the movement.

“Mixed methods research is an approach to inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. The core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone.” (Creswell, 2018, p. 32)

### 3.3.4 *Rationale*

An extensive literature review was conducted to examine the academic work in this field. There, broad concepts of general social media usage and ‘Slacktivism’ were examined. Due to the topic of the Repeal the 8th movement being relatively new, in order to collect data to answer the research question, it was necessary to examine the prevalence of the hashtag #repealthe8th on Twitter and delve into any patterns emerging around it to see its usage in an explorative way. In addition – to truly answer the research question as to the ‘role’ of the hashtag in the movement to Repeal the 8th amendment – the effect or impression it made on social media users and activists needed to be measured in some way. This was not something available as a secondary source at the level of granularity that was needed, therefore a method of conducting a form of primary data collection was decided upon. At first, data collection via qualitative interview methods was the intended approach. This was in line with feminist methodologies and it was felt that perhaps a richer multi layered result set could be determined through the medium of interview, facilitating the participants in expanding further and providing narrative on the effects of social media on the movement as a whole. After evaluation of this possibility, it was determined that due to the limited scope of this research, a succinct capturing of the data relating to the research question would be more advantageous and generate sufficient quality of datasets for triangulation and analysis.

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Data Collection encompasses two phases. The first phase involves collecting Twitter data programmatically using the Twitter RESTful API. The second involved distributing online surveys and collating results.

The survey sought to examine both the objective qualitative proportion of the sample size who had participated in Twitter activism for the #repealthe8th movement and also to examine subjective opinion from participants as to what effect they perceived the hashtag as having on the movement as a whole. To allow for greater possibility of future research and to frame the existing research question in a larger context, questions were included in the survey pertaining to future possible activism outside of the Repeal the 8th movement. This approach emerged from the findings of the literature review. The literature on the subject focussed greatly on the juxtaposition of two views – whether social media activism could indeed be defined as activism at all and its lack of value in on-the-ground activism, and the view that engagement in social media activism not only generates value as an activity in its own right but also situates the engager on a continuum which could lead to greater engagement in future movements and drive them in a fundamental way.

Questions posed were both quantitative and qualitative in nature, with some questions establishing quantitative fact, others elicited the opinion of participants. Where open-ended questions were used, they were posed without reference to the research theory or literature. This study thus utilized a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative approaches of data collection.

### *3.3.5 Strategy*

Approaching the Twitter data extraction segment of the data mining raised many question – how far back to go? How much to extract? How much data would be enough to provide a large enough sample to do meaningful analysis? Although the gathering of this data took place up to 12 months after the fact, it constitutes quite recent research on the subject; there was no published research in this area linking the Repeal the 8th movement and social media at the time of undertaking this study.

The Twitter data extraction was intended to take a quantitative look at the tweet data related to the movement and what the contents were. The survey was looking at the perceptions and subjective experience of the users themselves to map the actual role these tweets had in the movement overall.



A dilemma was faced early on whereby it would be wise to focus solely on the Twitter data extraction and put all resources into analysis of this data and generating theory from it. Following further deliberation, considering the purposes of the study, to situate the hashtag in the Repeal the 8th movement in the larger context of online activism, it was felt that including the opinions and experiences of users of the Twitter platform and participants in the movement would greatly enrich the data and thus the research itself.

Twitter data was gathered based on the inclusion of the #repealthe8th hashtag in a tweet -this was the main identifier for extraction. The other parameter in the selection was the date – the months leading up to the referendum including the date itself were included as the critical time to be observed. The survey participants were individuals who were involved with several pro-choice groups, it was felt that these individuals were sufficiently involved in the movement to be in a position to provide meaningful data and shared experience, given their familiarity with the context and terms, not to mention the valuable information about the situation on the ground that these individuals could contribute. To make the survey available to a wider population who may have less or no familiarity with the concepts within would have not met the needs for this study and so a more refined sample was sought. This dual-collection strategy was deemed to be the best option available to assess the research questions with the resources available within the timeframe allocated.

To form the sample of survey participants two methods were used, that of access via gatekeepers and the snowball method. For the former, groups that were deemed knowledgeable of the subject matter were targeted and contact made with the 'gatekeepers' of these groups via the main group email address. A number of groups were identified, and they were contacted with details of the survey to request that they share the survey amongst its members for anyone who wanted to participate. In addition to this, individuals known to the researcher were sent the survey and asked to distribute to other individuals that would be in a position to contribute meaningfully, i.e. had had some involvement or interest in the #repealthe8th movement. Utilising the Qualtrics survey platform, licensed by Trinity College Dublin, the survey was created. It consisted of 13 questions, which was the maximum amount an individual would be posed with, depending on their choice of question the user flow was tailored. For example, if the user answered that they did not have a Twitter account, they were not asked anything further about personal Twitter activity.

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The questions on the survey consist of a mixture of Yes/No, multiple choice, Likert scale and more expansive questions to elicit a qualitative subjective response. The survey was intended to identify participants who would utilise Twitter for activism and those who would not, both for this movement and for past and future movements. It also sought the experiences of the participants on social media in the months leading up to the referendum in how they viewed the efficacy of the use of hashtags to spread word and gather support for the movement. This three-pronged approach was greatly informed by the literature review, whereby patterns and questions were raised on the links between the power of social media to ignite support on the ground and its ability to be a power for change. The questions were then phrased in the hope to generate rich data to analyse in this respect. The estimated completion time of the questionnaire was expected to be 10 – 15 minutes. The questionnaire was designed to be accessible from all devices, laptops/desktops, tablet and smartphones.

### 3.4 Research Instruments

#### 3.4.1 Survey

An email was sent to various groups involved in the movement from a grassroots level via a snowball sampling method – a ‘gatekeeper’ was identified for the group and they were requested to circulate the survey to members who were invited to fill out the survey if they wished. The sample size was determined by the number of successful surveys completed. Participation is optional so I cannot forecast numbers at this stage. In order to form a satisfactory base for data collection, at least 20 completed surveys were required. The final number of survey respondents was 53. The inclusion criteria were based on membership of the activist groups identified below – this is because it is anticipated these individuals will have knowledge of activism on the ground, and their contribution is greatly valued in this research. There were no exclusion/inclusion criteria on the basis of age, gender, the participants took part completely anonymously.

Exploration of themes raised in the literature review led to the structure of the survey questions. The literature review greatly informed the study in this way. Points and questions raised in prior research were extrapolated to take the form of broad themes in this study and thus the questions were shaped to elicit the data needed to answer these questions. In identifying determinants for social media activism for the purposes of this study, it was decided that Twitter would be the social media platform of choice within

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which behaviours and patterns of use related to the Repeal the 8th movement would be measured. Thus, a key indicator would be whether the participant was a Twitter user. The next main piece of data needed was whether participants as Twitter users were themselves exposed to tweets on the subject of #repealthe8th and determine what effect if any this had on their actions in relation to the movement and what perceived effect it had overall from their point of view. A point raised in the literature review was whether social media activism had value in its own right, asking whether it could lead to further 'real-life' activism. This possibility was catered for in the survey questionnaire, with questions included to collect this data in relation to social influence and the facilitating capacity of Twitter usage and the Repeal the 8th movement – did it contribute to those taking part in on-the-ground activities or perhaps future engagement in other political action?

Care was taken to ensure that questions were asked in a neutral, non-judgmental tone. Several questions included follow-on questions which contained text boxes so that participants could include as little or as much information as desired in response to a subjective query. All questions were marked as optional. Participants were informed at every stage of the survey that they could exit at any point and after the final question consent was asked for again as to whether participants wanted to submit responses with no penalty incurred in any eventuality.

At the beginning of the online survey, an information sheet was provided to the participant, providing full debriefing and information about the study. The participants were asked to confirm that they were over the age of 18 in order to participate. There was a consent form, where participants were asked if they gave their consent prior to beginning the survey. Participants had the option to navigate freely back and forth through the survey to revise or skip questions if desired. At the end of the questionnaire participants were given the option to quit the survey whereupon all answers would be discarded without penalty, or to submit their responses if that was their choice. Participants were thanked for their participation and invited to contact the researcher if any further information was required.

Prior to sending out the survey, several acquaintances of the researcher did a test run to verify the user flow of the survey was coherent and user-friendly and that all questions were understandable.

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### 3.4.2 Twitter Data

In addition to the survey as a source of data, Twitter data was extracted to generate another stream of data to enable triangulation of results thereby facilitating greater insight in the research conclusions. Initially, a number of hashtags were going to be used as identifiers to extract tweets over a two-year period in the run up to the 25th May 2018 – the date of the referendum to Repeal the 8th Amendment. When a test extract was done in the exploratory stages of the study, such a large volume of tweets came back for just a one-hour period for one hashtag - #repealthe8th – that these parameters had to be revised. Constraints such as time and data storage resources, in addition to the extracts from Twitter required a volume which would have been quite costly and above budget for the research.

Twitter has in place several pay plans for developers depending on the amount of usage and individual attributed required in each extraction and how often queries are made. Limits are placed on how much data one can query on a daily and monthly basis. Streaming live data in real time is available at no cost, requiring a pre-approved developer account. However, if one is to query historical data past a 30-day period, which was the requirement for the research in this case, one is required to engage with their payment system if the allocated limit of 30 requests per month is surpassed.

It was decided that for the three months in the run up to the 25th May 2018, a sample of tweets would be taken which used the #repealthe8th hashtag. This was initially done, and several requests were remaining in the payment plan for the researcher, so several more requests were made with extracts going back further in time to examine any remarkable patterns. These tweets were then tokenized and gathered for sentiment analysis.

### 3.5 Ethics

Once it was determined that the data gathering involved an element of human participation in the form of online surveys, an application had to be made to seek permission from Trinity College Dublin's ethics committee to do so. The gathering of Twitter data was not put to the ethics committee as this is publicly available data and so does not involve contact of humans or any consent to participate as Twitter is a public platform. As part of the application process, a research proposal was created, detailing

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the research questions being asked by the researcher, the planned methodology for the study and the academic rationale for the answering of the research questions raised.

In addition, a consent form was created detailing the declarations from both the researcher and the participant, along with an information sheet for the participant. These were both submitted to the ethics committee along with the research proposal and the ethics form. As the surveys for this study were hosted online, both the participant information form and the consent form were integrated into the questionnaire on the Qualtrics platform, consisting of the first two pages. They can both be found in Appendices B and C at the end of this document.

The survey was structured so that no personal identifying information was collected from the individual. The participants were asked to verify they were over 18. This was merely for the purposes of obtaining consent to participate in the study, to verify the participant was an adult. No date of birth or age parameters were requested. In addition, no information that could potentially identify a participant was compiled including name, address, location or IP address.

### *3.5.1 Withdrawal*

Participants were informed at each stage of the survey that involvement was entirely voluntary, and they could choose to leave the survey at any time without submitting. An extra check at the end of the survey was put in place so that a participant had the option of exiting without submitting their responses should they wish to do so, without penalty. Navigation buttons were developed as part of the questionnaire so that participant could navigate the pages of the survey easily and change answers or skip ahead if desired. This was to ensure the greatest possible ease for participants in partaking in the study and that any responses given were given freely and not under duress.

### *3.5.2 Submission*

Prior to submission several drafts were sent to the research supervisor to ensure requirements of the ethics committee would be met in advance in order to minimize delays and the need for resubmission. Once the application was deemed complete, all documentation was compiled and submitted to the School of Computer Science and

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Statistics Research Ethics Committee (SCSS REC) via online submission on 27th February 2019.

### 3.6 Analysis Techniques

The Twitter Data was extracted using the Premium Developer search API into separate files determined by date of the extract. Using Python 3, Search Tweets, a wrapper for the Twitter premium and enterprise search APIs, was used to query the Twitter Premium endpoint. A list of URLs for the above resources can be found in the Appendix A. I also used the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK 3.4.1) library for tokenising and processing extracted tweets.

A program, written in Python, was then ran on all the extracted files to tokenise them in preparation for sentiment analysis. Microsoft Visual Studio code was used as the IDE (Integrated Development Environment) to develop the relevant Python scripts. Bash scripts were written and executed to process and concatenate files as required. A Mac laptop was used for all extraction and processing work.

Using NLP (Natural Language Processing), the data was then analysed to determine sentiment. Further querying of the data was then carried out to identify patterns. After the survey had been distributed and responses returned the data was gathered for the analysis phase. The data was analysed using Qualtrics data analysis tools and Microsoft Excel.

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## Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will contain a discussion of the main findings and analysis of results obtained from the two methods of data collection conducted for the purposes of this study. I will start with detailing the execution of the survey and the interaction with respondents. Subsequently I will deal with the outcomes from the survey, analysing in particular how they pertain to the themes raised in the literature review. Finally, I will examine the execution and findings from the Twitter Data mining exercise.

#### *4.1.1 Data Gathering*

The approach taken for Data Gathering for this study took two forms, Survey and Twitter Data mining combined. These two sources of data allowed a more detailed picture to emerge of the Twitter activism during the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement.

### 4.2 Survey Details

The survey was hosted on the Qualtrics platform and the flow of questions were structured in a way as to best tailor the experience for each user. This involved only showing users certain questions based on their previous answers. For example, if users answered 'No' to the question enquiring if they had a Twitter account, they would not see any further questions about their own personal Twitter usage. This led to a higher quality of response data for collection. Thirteen questions were posed to participants. These questions were designed to explore usage of Twitter by those familiar or involved with the activist movement to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment. It consisted of a combination of Yes/No and Likert questions to establish themes and link back to discussions in the literature review.

### 4.3 Survey Execution

The survey was distributed to initial 'gatekeeper' respondents on the 25th of March 2019 and closed to responses on the 9th April 2019. The initial receivers of the Qualtrics survey

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link were contacted via email and WhatsApp and asked to complete the survey and circulate to others within their group or to acquaintances. This approach was chosen to establish relevancy with respondents. Once the survey was closed to responses, results were exported from the Qualtrics application and exported to Excel .csv format. Using Excel, the responses were analysed and categorised. A total of 53 responses were recorded during the timeframe outlined above.

All participants passed the initial survey criteria to commence the survey. Two participants did not consent to their responses being used, and 9 participants had incomplete surveys. These responses were omitted from the final analysis. Forty-two responses remained on which detailed analysis was carried out.

The output from Qualtrics was not instantly readable – e.g. it was unclear what integers pertained to which responses which was particularly problematic for Likert scale responses, so these had to be reformatted using input from the Qualtrics platform results web page. Recoding then had to be carried out as the numeric values assigned by Qualtrics had ranked the higher-level agreement as having the lowest score. The preference was to numerically show the level of agreement – i.e. the greater the level of agreement for a statement, the higher the value attached to it. This would make the calculation of the mean scores of respondents more accurate. Where higher levels of agreement are designated higher values, higher mean scores are synonymous with the level of agreement for each statement which contains a Likert response. Correspondingly, lower mean scores will indicate disagreement of respondents with the statement posed. Out of 40 valid responses, 3 did not have a Twitter account and 37 did.

#### 4.4 Survey Findings

Once the survey was closed to responses, the analysis portion of the study could commence. Questions were split into three types based on how their analysis would differ: Yes/No, Likert, and Qualitative Analysis/ Free text responses.

For Yes/No responses, frequency tables were created to generate an overview of response to each question. Likert questions were re-coded in some cases so that they could be streamlined during analysis based on levels of agreement and the mean scores were calculated for each, details of which are provided in the section below. Qualitative or



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free text responses were codified based on the themes identified in the text and levels of occurrence.

#### *4.4.1 Mean Scores of Likert Responses*

Four questions in the survey contained Likert responses. These were Question 7, Question 8, Question 10 and Question 13.

Question 7 responses had a mean score of 4.6 out of a possible 5 in level of importance when faced with the question: “How important do you consider the use of hashtags to be in the campaign to Repeal the 8th?” The majority of respondents considered the use of hashtags in the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> context to be ‘Extremely Important’.

Responses to Question 8 had a mean score of 5.7 out of a possible 7 in levels of agreement with the question: “Do you think the use of Twitter hashtags resulted in more people attending events/marches/canvassing as part of the Repeal the 8th campaign?”

This question measured the personal perception of each respondent to what they felt was a causative relationship between Twitter campaigning and activism on the ground.

Question 10 responses had a mean score of 4.2 to the question “Did Twitter ever lead you to engage in ‘real-life’ activism for any movement?” out of a possible 5 points, ranging from “Definitely yes” to “Definitely not”.

Question 13 responses had a mean score of 4.6 out of a possible 5 in levels of positive response to the question: “Will you engage in street protests/ offline activism in the future for a cause you believe in?” The majority of respondents to this question chose the option “Definitely yes”.

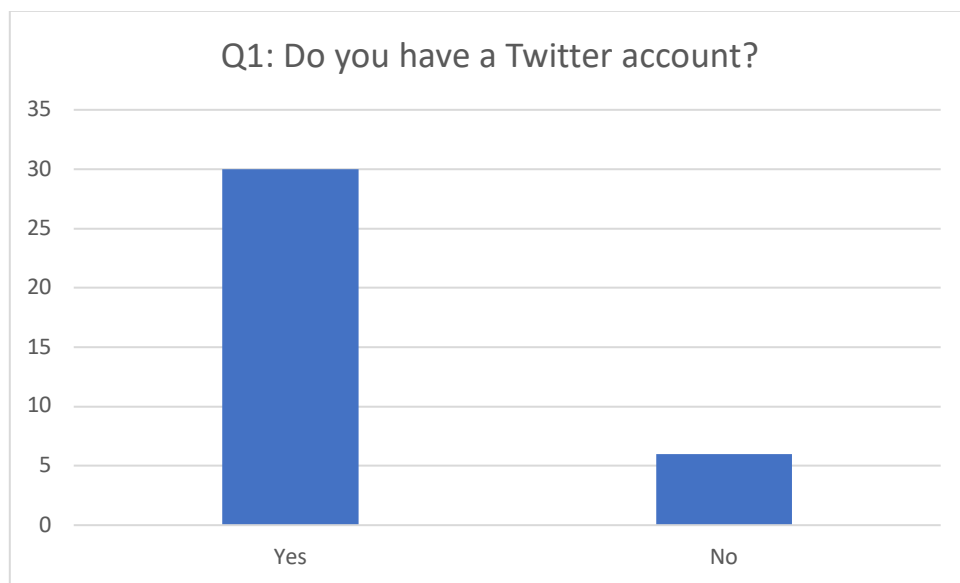
This outcome goes towards arguing against the concept of online Twitter use as ‘slactivist’. Users who answered “Definitely Yes” here, stating their intention to engage in offline activism, and expressed support for the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement would be proving the theory that use of one type of activism does not negate the other – there is often a continuum of engagement, a theme that emerged in the literature (Murthy 2018, Leyva, 2017).

#### 4.4.2 Frequency of Yes/No Responses

For the questions in the survey that elicited yes/no responses, the following is a summary of data gathered:

##### **Q1: Do you have a Twitter account?**

Eighty-three percent of respondents to this question had a Twitter account, while 17 percent did not (Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Twitter Account Holders*

##### **Q2: Did you observe any use of hashtags relating to the movement to Repeal the 8th Amendment?**

Ninety-three percent of respondents replied Yes to this question, with seven percent responding No (Figure 2).

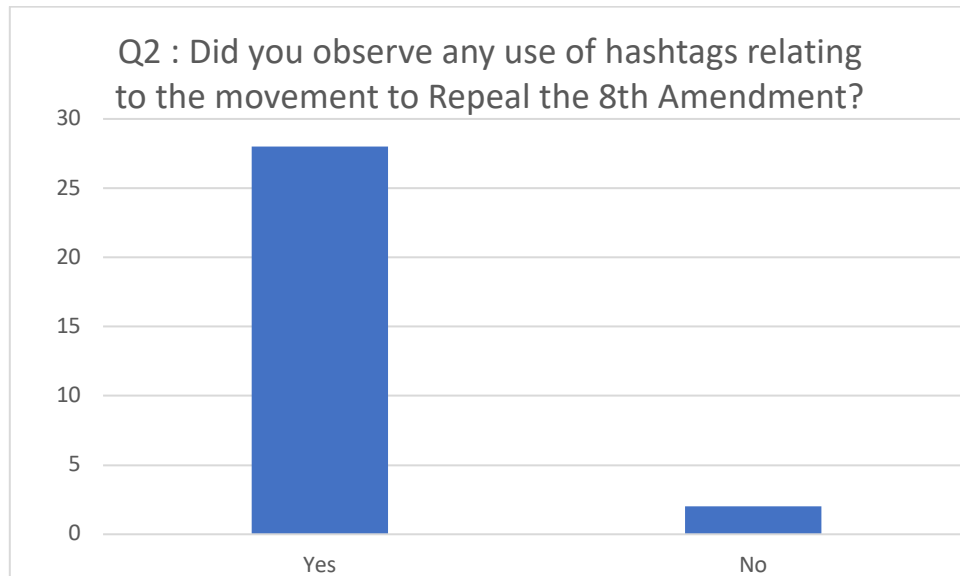


Figure 2: Observed Use of Hashtags

**Q4: Did you use any of these hashtags as a form of activism?**

This question relates to Question 3, which was a free text response, which will be detailed in a subsequent section. It invited respondents to list hashtags they remember from the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Movement. As a follow-on question, Question 4 asks if the respondent used any of the hashtags they listed previously.

Ninety-six percent of respondents replied Yes, with 4 percent replying No (Figure 3).

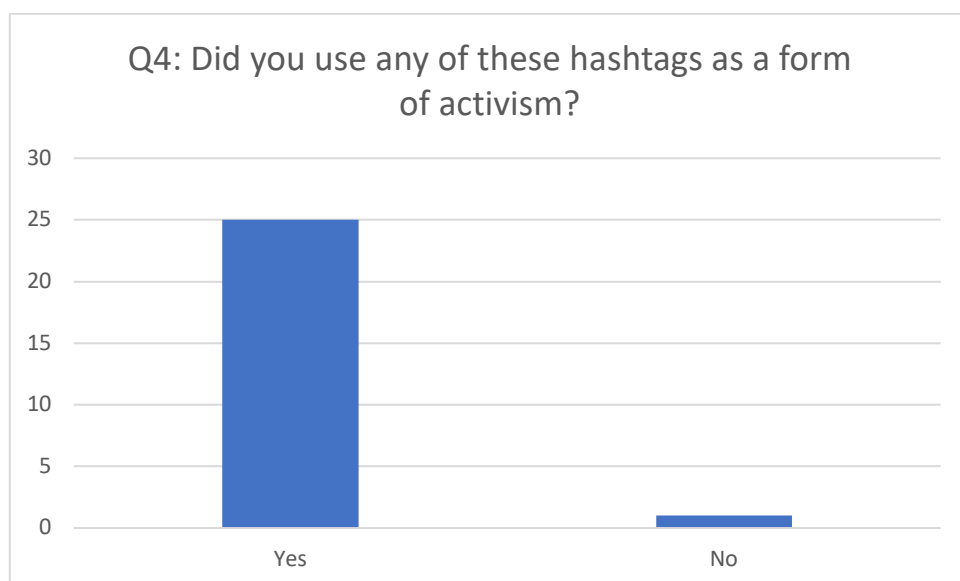
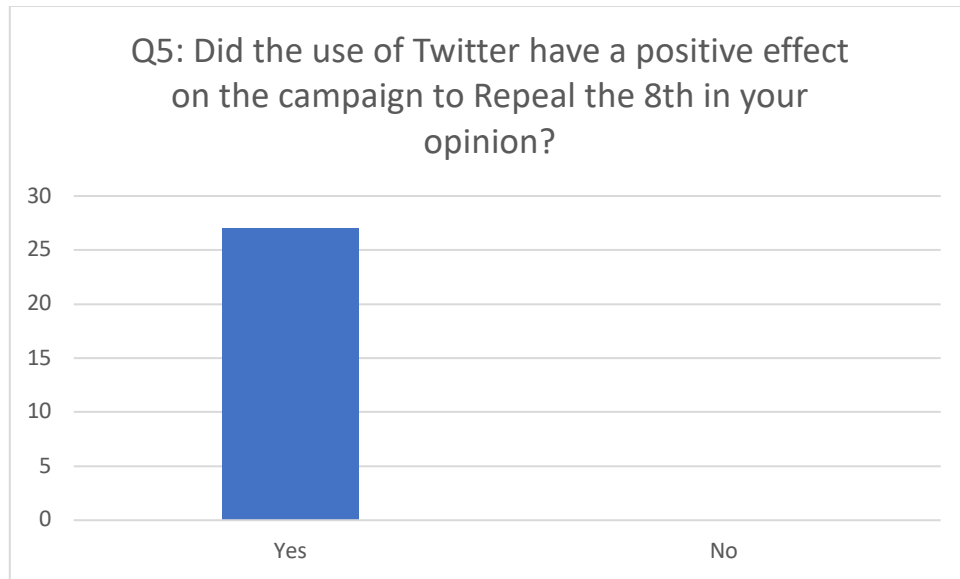


Figure 3: Personal Use of Hashtags

**Q5: Did the use of Twitter have a positive effect on the campaign to Repeal the 8th in your opinion?**

One hundred percent of respondents to this question replied Yes (Figure 4).



*Figure 4: Opinion on Twitter Effect*

**Q9: Did the use of Twitter result in you personally taking part in a campaign related activity such as a march/event/canvassing?**

Sixty-five percent of respondents said Yes in response to this question, with thirty-five percent answering No (Figure 5).

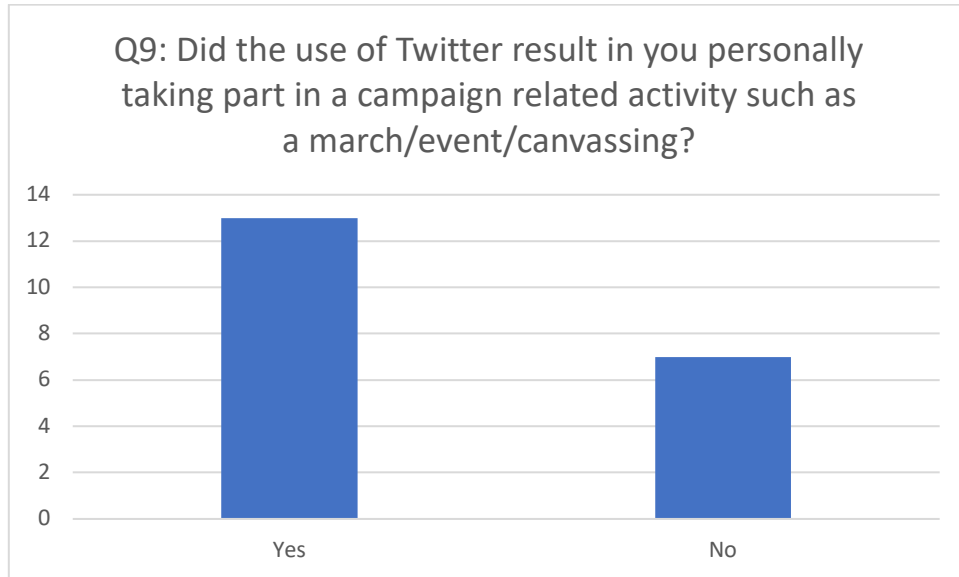


Figure 5: Twitter leading to Incidents of Activism

**Q11 - Have you ever taken part in an offline protest or march for a cause?**

All respondents to this question replied Yes (Figure 6).

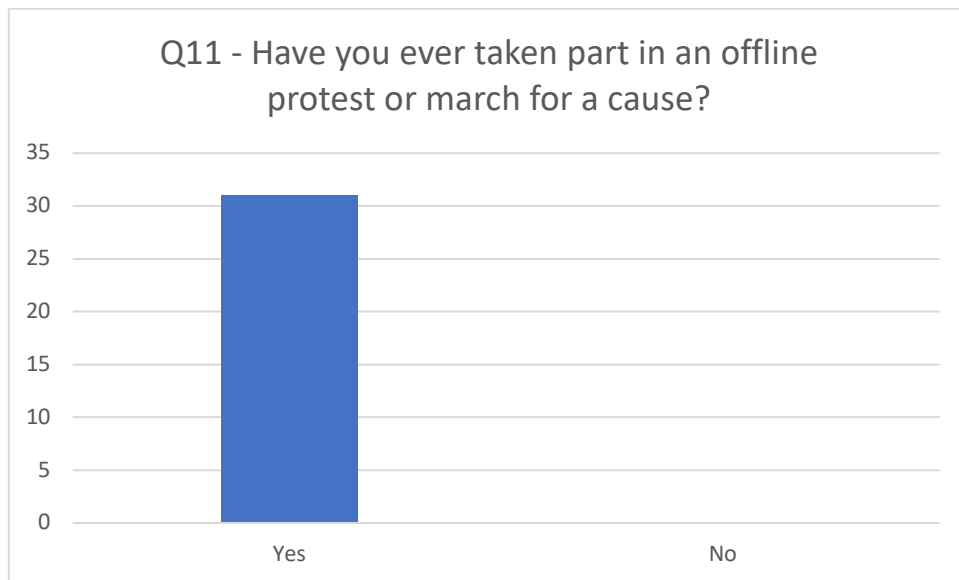


Figure 6: Offline Activism Participation

**Q12 - Did you take part in 'real-life'/offline action to help Repeal the 8th Amendment?**

Ninety-three percent of respondents replied Yes to this question (Figure 7).

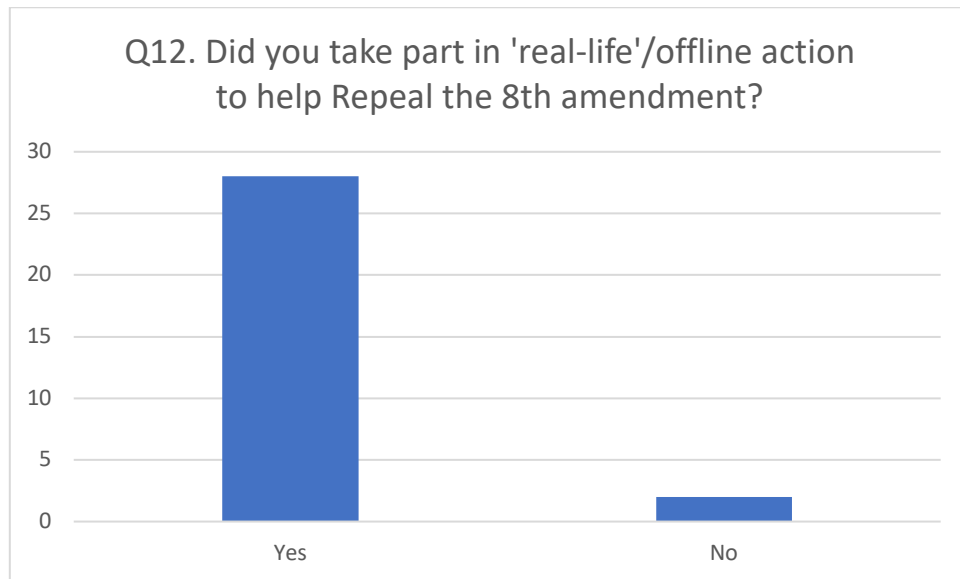


Figure 7: Offline Activism to Repeal the 8th

The majority of those surveyed had a Twitter account, with the vast majority linking Twitter use with offline activist activity – an important finding. Ninety-six percent of respondents used Twitter hashtags as a form of activism in the course of the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement. Ninety-three percent of respondents took part in offline activism as part of the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement. There is correlation between online and offline activist activities by survey respondents.

#### 4.4.3 Analysing Qualitative Survey Data

Question 6 was posed in the survey to elicit personal opinion and generate a freeform qualitative response– “Please elaborate on the effect you feel Twitter had on the Repeal the 8th Campaign” was a question that was posed conditionally, based on the user answering the prior question, Q5 – “Did the use of Twitter have a positive effect on the campaign to Repeal the 8th in your opinion?”

Responses to Q6 were recorded and exported to excel whereby they were analysed for common themes. The responses were then classified under the themes they corresponded to. The most commonly occurring themes across responses were:

- Perceived Effect
- Spread Awareness

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- Community & Connectivity
  - Sharing stories
  - Highlighting Fake News

These were the most common themes that emerged in the responses. Below a sample of quotes has been included, alongside the theme under which they were categorised during the analysis phase, to illustrate the various attitudes towards the effects Twitter had on the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> campaign. The data is also analysed with themes raised in the Literature with a view to incorporate the results within the body of existing research.

#### Perceived Effect

“Think it had a very positive effect.”

“I do in large part believe social media had positive impact on the overall trajectory of the repeal campaign.”

“Social media isn't an adequate replacement for showing up to a meeting”

In describing their perception of the effect Twitter had on the campaign, respondents mirror the same dichotomy found in the literature with their views. The positive effect is outlined here and also in the literature by Etling (2014) in their work on the positive effect Twitter had during the Ukrainian protests. The importance of the contribution of social media during political movements have been argued by many, including Ronzhyn (2016), Obar (2014), Obar, et al. (2012) and Biddix (2010). Also present in the responses is the elevation of physical presence as the truest form of activism, as we see in the third quote above. This perspective echoes that of those in the literature such as Gladwell (2010) and Lim (2013). “Showing up to a meeting” involves an element of the “hard labor” believed by Steinberg (2016) to be a key feature of physical mobilization and effective activism.

#### Spread Awareness

“As someone who organised events and demonstrations during the campaign, using hashtags was how we ensured news about our event reached other people engaged in the campaign and meant we could draw large numbers of participants to these events and demonstrations.”

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“Also made it easier to keep up to date with what was happening as events occurred”

“Firstly the 'Not a Criminal Campaign' raised Awareness to many people. Some not even knowing abortion was illegal.”

“It spread awareness, it reached a larger audience, and I feel a new demography of social media users.”

This theme of spreading awareness reflects the argument made by Miller (2017) in the literature for social media’s capacity for contributing towards social change through “raising awareness”, motivating people to act.

### Community & Connectivity

“Using Twitter hashtags allowed me to find a community of people engaged in the campaign in Ireland and across the world.”

“Community. Informed.”

“Visibility and connecting activists”

“Feeling part of a wider effort to change the law provided an invaluable sense of support and motivation to continue campaigning on the issue.”

“It helped those of us involved connect to the wider campaign outside of our county”

“We shared strategies with campaigners in other countries ...We connected to these other groups through social media, including through the use of Twitter hashtags.”

“Help build communities i.e. Disability activists who were pro-choice.”

These results highlight the organising capacity that the connectivity made possible by social media provides. It is in alignment with the theme of social media as a tool to aid the organising of social movements which is found in the literature, with Murthy(2018) emphasising how social media has shaped how social movements organise and Segerberg & Bennett (2011) identifying Twitter as an “organizing mechanism”. The



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responses here relate to the creation of a sense of connection and community – in the creation of spaces for political discussion as does Howard et al. (2011), utilising hashtags as ‘signifiers’ in the creation of public spaces (Gerbaudo, 2012).

### Sharing stories

“stories and tips were shared that helped keep the momentum going”

“It allow(ed) people to share their stories and show it's a topic that effects everyone”

The sharing of stories is an important element in the dialogue around the function of Twitter throughout the campaign. The spreading of personal narratives via social media can lead to identification from others as we saw in the work of Steinberg (2016). The sharing of stories again contributes to the formation of ‘strong ties’, integral to the success of a movement (McAdam, 1986). Here in one of the survey responses given, stories were said to have kept “the momentum going”. The sharing of stories described here involves an element of emotional connectivity which appears in the literature in the work of Miller (2017) on the important role of communication in the maintenance of social harmony. The potential for emotional connectivity in the sharing of stories is the method of construction of public space for activists as argued by Poell & Van Dijck (2016).

### Highlighting Fake News

“Twitter threads were used to fact check some of the 'fake news' spread before vote.”

“Highlighted lies from the retain side.”

This role of the hashtag in a fact-checking capacity was an interesting one. It served as a linking signifier to those on the pro-choice side that they could trust the content of a particular tweet – debunking myths and misleading stories propagated by the opposing side. The microactivism (Karpus, 2018) involved in this action showed that even purely online activity can have real value in a movement.

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#### 4.4.4 Detailed Response Analysis

What follows is a reflection on the longer form responses. Here I will go through the more detailed responses to Question 6 – the most open-ended question with a free text field for responses. I will include three sample responses here and give a summary analysis of each. A full transcript of all responses can be found in Appendix F. I will analyse the chosen individual responses in the context of themes raised in the course of the literature review:

#### **Question 6: Please elaborate on the effect you feel Twitter had on the Repeal the 8th Campaign**

Response A:

“I do in large part believe social media had positive impact on the overall trajectory of the repeal campaign. There were specific instances where social media was used particularly well for example Strike4Repeal in 2017. Huge momentum grew behind Strike4Repeal after the launch of viral video calling for an action on 8th March. Thousands were mobilised in Dublin, with numerous other events taking place across Ireland and globally. All events were organised locally and through the medium of social media. It's also worth mentioning that it's now much harder to get the same level of organic reach without paid promotion, particularly for political content, compared with a number of years ago. Which obviously effect grassroots organisers more than it would political parties or NGOs. I think also there is a distinction to be made the efficacy of social media with respect to mobilising opposed to actual organising. Social media isn't an adequate replacement for showing up to a meeting, knocking on doors, leafleting, etc. and ultimately that is what the success of the repeal campaign depended on.”

This response credits the use of social media as a positive force in the course of the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> campaign, citing in particular the Strike4Repeal event which was believed to be a pivotal movement in the campaign. The respondent here links the use of social media for Strike4Repeal with the on the ground mobilisation of thousands of people. This links back to the themes in the literature review around effective Hashtag use and the value of social media activism (Wolfsfeld, et al., 2013; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The respondent also makes the distinction between mobilisation and organisation, stressing the importance of on the ground participation, and how social media activism cannot replace these important forms of activism. This links back to the strong theme in the

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literature, of which Gladwell (2010) was a huge proponent, emphasizing the superior value of physical organisation for social change.

Response B:

“Stories were shared that may have influenced peoples' decisions. Campaigning updates, stories and tips were shared that helped keep the momentum going as well as the #hometovote images. Twitter was also used to warn people where graphic images were around the country that may cause distress. Twitter threads were used to fact check some of the 'fake news' spread before vote.”

The respondent here elaborates on the perceived efficacy of the use of Twitter during the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> campaign. They point out the sharing of stories and how this could lead to changing voters' perceptions. This relates to a theme in the literature around lending a voice to the less powerful, Twitter in this case formed a source of storytelling to amplify voices that perhaps were not heard in traditional media or public conversation as seen by Steinberg (2016). The practical aspects of the uses of Twitter during the course of the movement are also espoused, relating to the organising mechanism which Twitter is credited with by Segerberg & Bennett (2011) and Murthy (2018).

Response C:

“1. Mobilising: As someone who organised events and demonstrations during the campaign, using hashtags was how we ensured news about our event reached other people engaged in the campaign and meant we could draw large numbers of participants to these events and demonstrations. 2. Information: Using Twitter hashtags was my primary way of staying up-to-date with real time news about the campaign. Of course, some information online is unreliable, but we also found that reporting in mass media was unreliable (e.g. some things were not widely reported or certain things were emphasised over others). Taken together with Twitter news, we could build up a more complete picture of what was going on in the campaign. 3. Harnessing media attention: During the campaign, as part of a Repeal group, we used Twitter hashtags to leverage media attention for our events and demonstrations. Mass media outlets monitor Twitter for stories and pick up on things that go viral. We were able to capitalise on this and share pictures from demonstrations which subsequently went viral on Twitter (e.g. #205kTravelled) and which were then picked up by Irish and international media outlets, spreading the message and reaching a wider audience than it would have otherwise. Criticisms of Twitter often centre on its reputation as an echo chamber which only reaches like-minded people. However, by leveraging Twitter hashtags, our message spread to

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traditional media outlets and reached different demographics than it would have on Twitter alone. 4. Community: Using Twitter hashtags allowed me to find a community of people engaged in the campaign in Ireland and across the world. Feeling part of a wider effort to change the law provided an invaluable sense of support and motivation to continue campaigning on the issue. It was also a means of sharing ideas and strategies with other campaigners. For example, I was a member of a group that was not based in Ireland. We shared strategies with campaigners in other countries who were also finding out the best ways to contribute to the campaign from overseas (for example, we shared information about laws related to fundraising overseas). We connected to these other groups through social media, including through the use of Twitter hashtags.”

The respondent here identifies four main themes in their perception of the effect of Twitter on the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> campaign:

- As a Mobilising Tool;
- A Provider of Information;
- Harnessing Media Attention;
- Community

The respondent outlines the value they experienced through Twitter use under the above themes throughout the campaign. The respondent acknowledged the unreliability of information at times but clarifies that traditional media reporting was often guilty of the same. They credit the use of Twitter hashtags with achieving all four elements listed above. Here we can see the use of both online and offline tools; Twitter and hashtags for the former, events and demonstrations for the later. This illustrates the activist format put forward by Jones (2015) whereby in contrast to Morozov’s theory of substitution where one type of activity (online) supplants the other (offline), both can take place and complement one another in the course of a movement.

#### 4.4.5 Hashtag Identification

The ability to recall and replicate hashtags relating to the movement is an indicator of the respondents' awareness and involvement in the online sphere of the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement.

*Table 1: Hashtags Commonly Mentioned*

Rank	Hashtag	No. of mentions
1	#Repealthe8th	16
2	#TogetherForYes	9
3	#Repeal	8
4	#HometoVote	5
5	#Together4Yes	4
6	#freesafelegal	4
7	#inhershoes	2
8	#VoteYes	2
9	#mybodymychoice	2
10	#8thcommittee	2
11	#KnowYourRepealers	2

A major theme in both the survey results and literature was the use of Hashtags and their promotion of a sense of unity in the propagation of an online movement (Steinberg, 2016; Carney, 2016).

A full listing of all the hashtags mentioned can be found in Appendix F.

### 4.5 Twitter Data Mining Findings

#### 4.5.1 Data Mining

The Twitter Data Mining portion of the data collection phase was carried out by querying the Twitter Platform Developer API using the programming language Python.

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The data collected comprised of Tweets from the general public in the run up to the May 25<sup>th</sup> Referendum. The criteria by which this data was extracted was on the basis of containing a Hashtag - #repealthe8th, and date/time of the tweet. The extraction phase of the data mining process commenced on the 9<sup>th</sup> January 2019 and data was extracted for a period until 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2019. The work undertaken at this time included refining Python queries and interacting with the Twitter Developer Platform API to extract the necessary data.

Mining the Twitter Data required setting up a Twitter Developer Account. In order to do so a request had to be made to Twitter, outlining the uses of the account, what data would be mined and what the data would be used for. After a number of days, the request was approved. The packages offered varied depending on amounts of data to be extracted, increasing in price as the data allowance rose. For the purposes of this study, the Premium Account was identified as the best option.

To stay within the limits of no more than 100 tweets per request, the decision was made to start extracting tweets for the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2018, the day of the referendum and work backwards to the 25<sup>th</sup> April, a month beforehand, thus providing a daily view of the tweets for that period. For the remaining request allowance allocated to the Twitter Developer Account, a monthly sample of tweets going back to May of the previous year (2017).

#### *4.5.2 Data Analysis*

Once the Data had been mined and written to text files, it was parsed for pre-processing. The Tweet object is a JSON object that contains many different variables. For the purposes of this study, the only relevant information from each tweet was the 'created\_at' – the date of creation, and the 'text' – the text of the tweet, variables. These variables had to be extracted out of the data set and written to text files. This was done using Python commands.

The Natural Language Toolkit was identified as a suitable resource for utilising the Twitter dataset. It is an open source platform providing libraries for working with human language data ([www.nltk.org](http://www.nltk.org)). Using the NLTK library, the text from each tweet was tokenised, again using Python commands, this served to isolate each word in the tweet for analysis, e.g. the tweet text ["Repeal the eighth amendment"] would be converted to ['Repeal', 'the', 'eighth', 'amendment']. A tokenisation script was run across the entire dataset.

The analysis took the form of three main queries on the data:

- Term Frequency
- Term Co-Occurrence
- Sentiment Analysis

The Term Frequencies queries were carried out on the aggregate data and breakdowns of the data by month. Term Co-occurrence and Sentiment Analysis queries were performed solely on the aggregate dataset. The queries were greatly informed by Marco Bonzanini's work on Mining Twitter Data (Bonzanini, 2015).

#### 4.5.2 Term Frequency

A Python script was executed against the dataset to establish what words appeared the most frequently. This approach results in an effective overview of the content of the tweets at a high level.

Below are the most frequent terms from the full dataset, the top ten are listed here:

*Table 2: Top Ten Most Frequent Terms*

Rank	Term
1	'women'
2	'ireland'
3	'abortion'
4	'vote'
5	'8th'
6	'people'
7	'yes'
8	'today'
9	'irish'
10	'get'

Full monthly breakdown of top ten frequent terms can be found in Appendix G.

#### 4.5.3 Term Co-occurrence

A script to establish term co-occurrence was also run against the dataset on an aggregate basis. This query establishes patterns of terms that frequently occurred together, side by side in the tweets relating to #repealthe8th.

Below are the most frequent co-occurrent terms from the full dataset, the top ten are listed here:

*Table 3: Top Ten Co-Occurrent Terms*

Rank	Term 1	Term 2
1	'vote'	'yes'
2	'ireland'	'women'
3	'8th'	'amendment'
4	'abortion'	'ireland'
5	'amendment'	'8th'
6	'irish'	'women'
7	'remember'	'voting'
8	'abortion'	'women'
9	'may'	'8th'
10	'repeal'	'voting'

#### 4.5.4 Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis is a form of analyses that tries to capture the emotion or sentiment of text. It is “a means of determining what people think of a product, service, social topic, or political initiative.”(Ungvarsky, 2017) In this part of the data analysis, a form of sentiment analysis was used whereby the text of the extracted tweets was examined to determine which were the highest scoring positive and negative words contained within the aggregate dataset.

For this portion of the data mining, the Hu and Liu dataset was used to classify terms as either positive or negative (Hu and Liu, KDD-2004) The Hu and Liu positive and negative term dataset had been compiled primarily from customer reviews online.



#### 4.5.5 Sentiment Analysis Approach

The approach used to calculate the sentiment of words contained in the extracted tweet data is a combination of techniques used by Peter Turney (2002) in his paper on calculating Semantic Orientation, and later Marco Bonzanini (2015) in his work on Twitter Semantic Analysis.

The approach determines the Semantic Orientation (SO) of a term by measuring the difference between the terms relation to positive and negative terms – the aim is to calculate the degree of ‘closeness’ a word has with a positive or negative word. This degree of ‘closeness’ is calculated by measuring Pointwise Mutual Information (PMI) and is calculated as follows (with terms represented as  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ ).

$$PMI(t_1, t_2) = \log\left(\frac{P(t_1 \cap t_2)}{P(t_1) \cdot P(t_2)}\right)$$

Where  $P(t)$  is the probability of term  $t$  appearing and  $P(t_1 \cap t_2)$  is the probability of  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  appearing together.  $P(t)$  and  $P(t_1 \cap t_2)$  can be further expressed as follows:

$$P(t) = \frac{DF(t)}{|D|}$$

$$P(t_1 \cap t_2) = \frac{DF(t_1 \cap t_2)}{|D|}$$

Where Document Frequency (DF) is defined as the number of tweets being examined and  $DF(t)$  is the number of times a term appears in the sample of tweets.

A list of positive and negative terms was compiled from the opinion lexicon from Hu and Liu (2004), this built on Turney’s original approach whereby he determined the Semantic Orientation of a term calculated against the terms ‘excellent’ and ‘poor’. The libraries of positive and negative vocabulary are represented as  $V^+$  and  $V^-$  respectively to calculate the Semantic Orientation of each term ( $t$ ) as follows:

$$SO(t) = \sum_{t' \in V^+} PMI(t_1, t_2) - \sum_{t' \in V^-} PMI(t_1, t_2)$$

(Bonzanini, 2015)

Below is an excerpt of part of the Python script used to calculate semantic orientation:

```
pmi = defaultdict(lambda : defaultdict(int))
for t1 in p_t:
    for t2 in com[t1]:
        denom = p_t[t1] * p_t[t2]
        pmi[t1][t2] = math.log2(p_t_com[t1][t2] / denom)

semantic_orientation = {}
for term, n in p_t.items():
    positive_assoc = sum(pmi[term][tx] for tx in positive_vocab)
    negative_assoc = sum(pmi[term][tx] for tx in negative_vocab)
    semantic_orientation[term] = positive_assoc - negative_assoc
```

Figure 8: Segment of Sentiment Analysis Python Script

After sentiment analysis was run the outcome was as follows with the top ten highest scoring positive and negative words below.

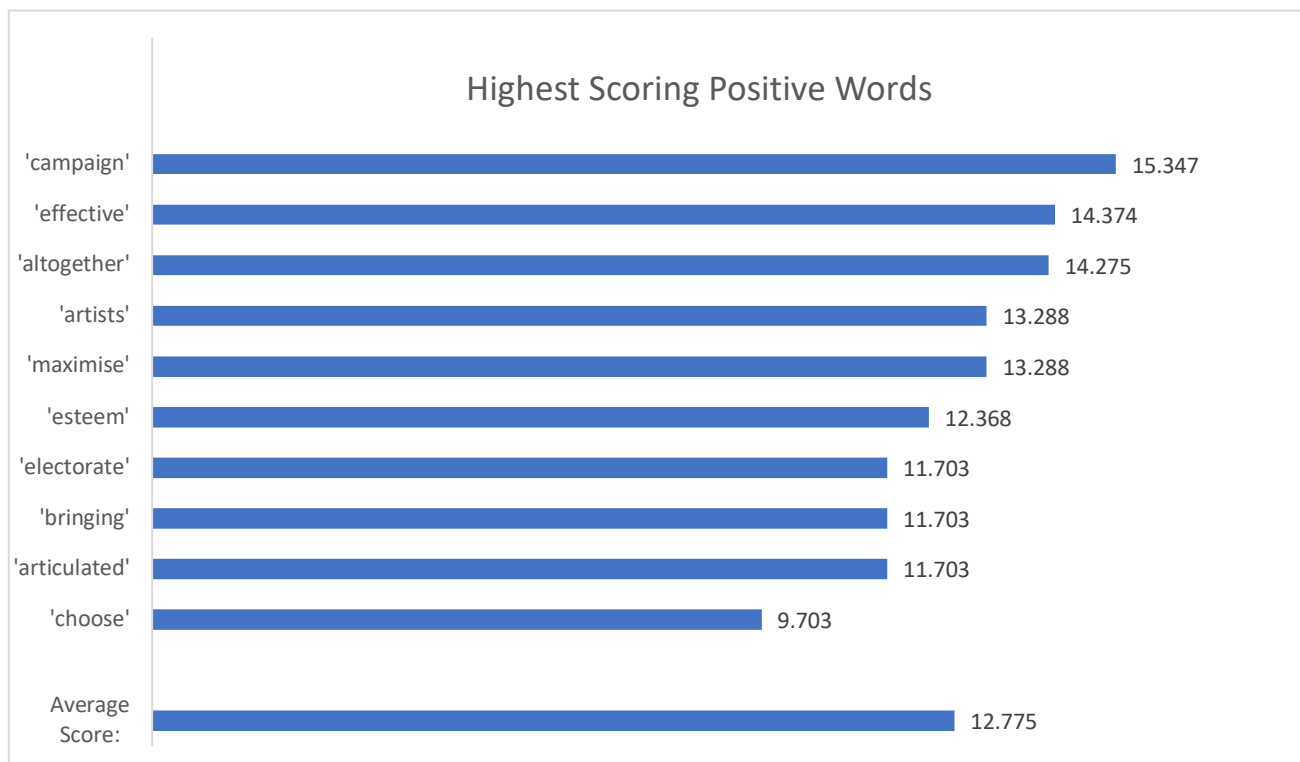


Figure 9: Chart of Terms Scored Highest in Positive Sentiment

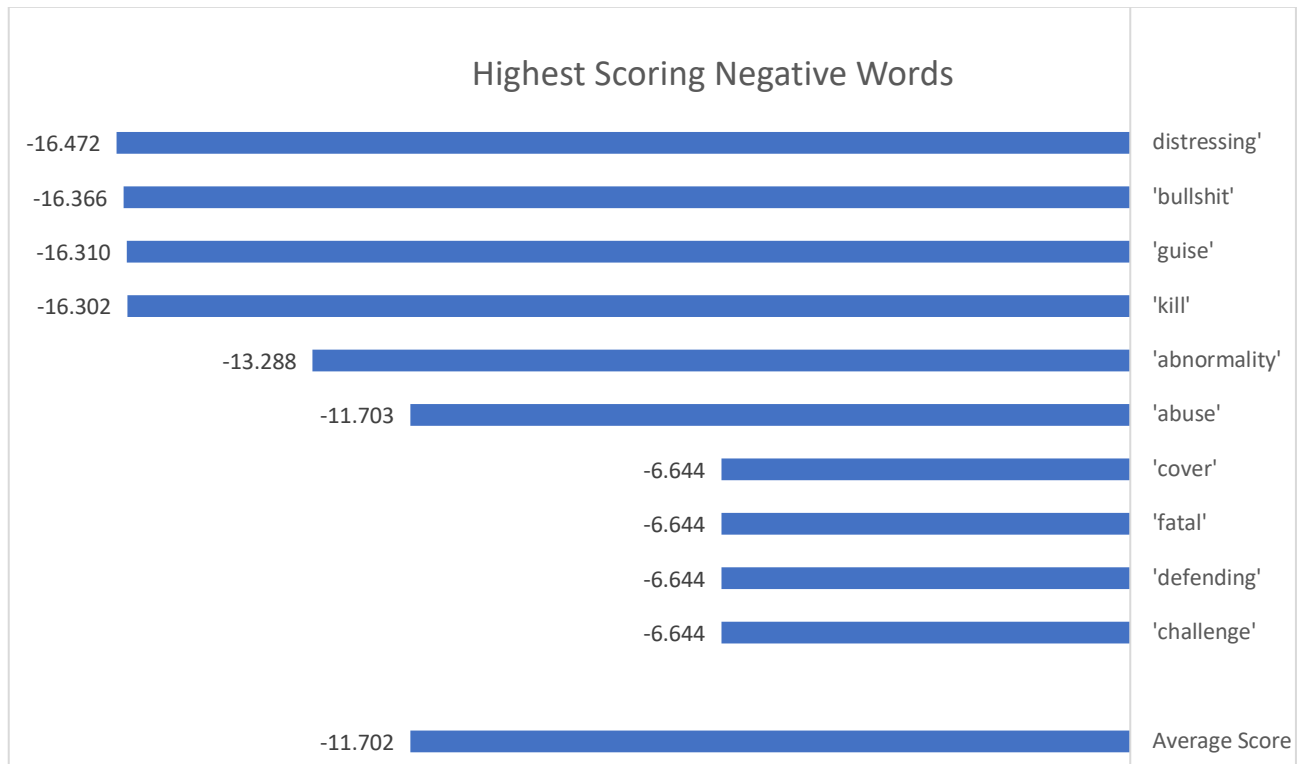


Figure 10: Chart of Terms Scored Highest in Negative Sentiment

#### 4.6 Difficulties Encountered

The Twitter Developer account created had a strict limit on the number of requests that could be made on a monthly basis. Starting off initially querying the API, I inadvertently hit the limit before I could extract the bulk of the data and had to wait until the start of the new month (February in this case) before I could resume data collection.

The amount of Twitter data that matched the extraction criteria had an impact on how much data could be extracted, given the sheer volume for the repealthe8th hashtag was so large. Initially the aim was to examine several hashtags, however the volume returned was such that this option was not possible. Data mining approaches are limited by nature due to lack of access to computational resources for data storage and processing, using an 8-core laptop renders many data mining methodologies that require use of multiple servers with up to 48 cores unreproducible. Executing the data mining on Twitter and the subsequent sentiment analysis was by far the most time-consuming area of the project.

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## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Future Work

### 5.1 Introduction

By bringing together the preceding chapters detailing literature review, survey and data mining findings, this chapter seeks to illuminate the role of the hashtag in the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement, determining whether its use could be relegated to the category of 'Slactivism' or an instrument to aid the achievement of social change through incitement of activism and the spreading of ideas.

The literature review highlighted the arguments made encompassing those for and against the idea of social media activism as a valuable tool. The question of what constitutes 'real' activism and what can be measured in relation to the effect a post or a retweet might have on an individual and a collective movement has not been definitively answered in the literature thus far. The results of this study seek to add to this conversation, rather than prove definitively either argument.

What this study seeks to establish is; can a link be drawn between online and offline activist behaviours? Is social media activism of any valuable in the context in a wider movement? It seeks to explore the roles of the use of the hashtag against the background of Irish Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement. It seeks to examine the hashtag itself and the data found on examination of the hashtag #repealthe8th in particular. It explores the use of social media during the campaign in the lead up to the referendum in the context of the two pillars of thought around online activism – can it be defined as 'Slactivism' in this case or included as part of the overall 'Activism' of the movement?

### 5.2 Answering the Research Questions

#### *5.2.1 Hashtag Use and the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Movement*

The aim of this study was to examine the role of the hashtag during the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement. After reviewing the literature on the use of social media hashtags as activism and conducting surveys and mining social media data, the following conclusions can be made.

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From the survey results almost all participants observed the use of hashtags that related to the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement, with the majority of respondents displaying an ability to recall several of the hashtags in use at the time unprompted. Overwhelmingly these hashtags were in use as a form of activism by the survey respondents. These included #Repealthe8th, #TogetherForYes, #HometoVote, #Together4Yes, #freesafelegal, #inhershoes, #VoteYes, #mybodymychoice among many more.

The survey respondents were associated with several pro-choice groups involved in activism at the time of the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement and a high use of hashtags in relation to this movement was determined based on survey results.

The hashtag #repealthe8th was the top most quoted hashtag as one that was used by activists throughout the campaign, which was also the hashtag that was used in the data mining portion of the research for this study. The volume of tweets created was such that in a data extract of just one hour of tweets, over one hundred tweets using the #repealthe8th hashtag could be found consistently in the 2018 run up to the referendum, which gives an indication of the sheer scale of usage this particular hashtag experienced.

The terms found in the context of tweets using the hashtag #repealthe8th were divided into co-occurrent terms and frequently used terms. The top co-occurrent terms were the words “vote” and “yes”, showing the #repealthe8th hashtag was mostly used in line with pro-choice activists, rather than the opposing side.

Terms that emerged from the frequency analysis strongly featured terms such as “women”, “Ireland”, “abortion”; illustrating the narratives being told using this hashtag, allowing those to tell their stories, a strong theme in both the literature and the survey and data mining results. The terms “vote” and “yes” also featured heavily as stand-alone terms, showing the use of Twitter as a mobilising tool to exhort the people to exercise their vote.

### *5.2.2 Linking Online and Offline Activism*

An aim of this research was to ascertain if there was any link between online activist behaviour such as hashtag use and offline ‘on the ground’ activities with regards to the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement.

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As previously outlined the majority of respondents (96%) stated they had used Twitter hashtags as a form of activism during the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> campaign. All of these same respondents reported that they had taken part in 'real-life'/offline action as part of the movement to Repeal the 8th Amendment. Respondents also reported in high numbers that use of Twitter had led them to engage in offline/'real life' activism. A high level of agreement was also observed on the possibility of engaging in 'real life' activism for a future cause they believed in, engagement in Twitter activism can include or lead to offline activism or bodily assembling at another stage. Thus, the survey highlighted a link between the activity of online activism and offline action– the presence of one does not negate the other but rather can be combined to produce results.

### *5.2.3 Sentiments of Tweets*

The outcome of the sentiment analysis of the words found in the tweets using the #repealthe8th hashtag were largely balanced with an even score of positive and negative. The higher the positive score, the higher the positive sentiment and vice versa. Combined averages indicated a slightly higher level of positive sentiment in words contained in the tweets with an average of 12.77 for positive tweets versus -11.7 for negative tweets. The #repealthe8th hashtag was used very much by the pro-choice side, a higher score of positive terms would be consistent with this evaluation. However, my expectation was that there would be that there would be a bigger difference in the sentiment score using this analysis. The positive sentiment is marginally higher in this case.

The algorithm for evaluating sentiment produced some interesting results. As a piece of analysis, it would require more in depth investigation for sentiment analysis as I have reservations on the use of the Hu and Liu dataset as a positive and negative vocabulary due to the results that were returned. For example, the word 'Abnormality' got quite a high negative score, this was a term that appeared many times throughout the movement and in the data as part of a discussion on fatal foetal abnormalities as one of the cases where abortion should be made available. This word objectively has negative associations but in the context of the politics of the surrounding movement it did not. The scoring of this term could point to the possibility of many terms such as this being misclassified, skewing the result set and resulting in a higher average negative score than expected. I found the Hu and Liu dataset to be quite limited in this context. The origins of this dataset are within a customer review context and does not do so well in the application of the same classification of positive/negative terms in a political context such as abortion referendum.

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#### *5.2.4 Pro-choice Groups Views on Twitter Hashtags*

Overwhelmingly the survey respondents believed Twitter hashtags had a positive effect on the Repeal movement – according to the survey 100% believed so. This sample was generated from the snowball method of contact through known pro-choice group members therefore we can see that within activist groups there is a belief that activist activity online is overall a positive force.

Respondents indicated that overall the effect of Twitter hashtags on the Repeal movement was positive, although a few outlined reservations in that it was not a standalone tool instrumental in the success of the 'Yes' side of referendum, the on-the-ground work that was done was of utmost importance and value.

#### *5.2.5 Activism or Slactivism?*

The study showed through various data sources the overall positive contribution that Twitter hashtags had on the movement to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment. In light of this contributory role the activities encompassed by hashtag use falls into the category of activism.

The survey results indicated the use of hashtags contributed to the formation of ties between groups, in particular with regional and overseas groups in some cases, creating the kind of community and 'strong ties' required by Gladwell's (2010) assessment of radical political action. The individuals involved utilised the Twitter platform as a form of 'public space' whereby connection, and emotional facilitated the coming together in physical public space (Gerbaudo, 2012)( Poell & Van Dijck, 2016).

Referendum result: The Yes side won the referendum on the question of whether to repeal the Eighth Amendment, by 66.4 per cent to 33.6 per cent.

#### *5.2.6 New & Interesting Findings*

An interesting outcome from the survey was the policing aspect social media users can have on stopping the spreading of fake news. This was a particularly useful benefit of hashtag usage on Twitter according to many survey respondents.

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The grassroots potential of social media activism may be at risk, as highlighted by survey respondent – paid promotion of tweets and posts has become more prevalent in particular those of a political nature. Overall this could have an exclusionary effect on grassroots organising online and erodes social media’s potential for existence as a “public space”.

### 5.3 Advancing Current Knowledge

Existing research focuses on examining social media activism to determine whether it can be classified as ‘Slactivism’ or Activism, successful social media campaigns and looks at the effects social media activism may have on the formation of public policy. However, there was a gap in the research regarding the Irish movement to Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment in this light.

This study advances the current state of knowledge by highlighting the particular role social media hashtag use had in the mobilisation of activists and communication between groups, facilitating a dialogue to generate support for the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement in Ireland. It examines the use of social media throughout the campaign, focusing on the hashtag as a key aspect through which to examine the contribution of online spaces to the campaign and eventual referendum result.

### 5.4 Research Limitations

This research was undertaken part time and thus resourcing and time available was limited as a result. Thus, it was not possible to include a broader population sample in the survey conducted. The data collected provided a valuable insight into the use of social media hashtags as a tool to aid activism during the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement. The access to activist groups’ thoughts and experiences of Twitter usage and the movement has produced material of significant value and various insights can be made as a result. Limitations exist however, given the sample size the findings are not generalisable for the wider populace. These limits were placed intentionally for the purposes of this study – it provided direct access to those who would have familiarity with the subject matter. Although the views given were overwhelmingly in favour of the positive role of Twitter hashtags in the context of the Repeal movement, a wider selection of voices would add further dimensions to this study.



This study measured the use of Twitter hashtags for a specific movement, the results may not be generalisable across all social media platforms and even across other movements in other countries.

Drawbacks encountered in the course of the sentiment analysis portion of the research include the use of the Hu and Liu dataset. This dataset of positive and negative words was developed in the context of customer reviews online and as such did not generate expected results for many terms, for example 'abnormality' and 'fatal' appeared in the returned result for top ten negatively scored terms, with a score of -13.29 and -6.64 respectively. These terms were likely to have been used in the context of the collective term 'fatal foetal abnormality' in the discussion of the conditions whereby a termination could be sought. The individual words are likely to have flagged under the objective sentiment in line with the Hu and Liu dataset, however I would not class it as a negative term in the context of the Repeal movement.

Another interesting result which is a possible indicator of a potential misclassification or unsuitability with this dataset within the sentiment analysis piece is the lack of correlation between the most frequent occurring terms and the top scoring positive words, the terms "vote" and "yes" appeared consistently in frequently used and term co-occurrence however did not appear as scoring highly in positive sentiment.

Utilising standard text analysis for evaluation of sentiment may not have been the best fit in this case considering the political context of the Repeal movement. Given more time and resources the development of an alternate dataset would be the preferred course of action. The suggested approach is described in more detail in the following section detailing future research.

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## 5.5 Future Research

This study focussed on the experience largely from the pro-choice side. An interesting piece of future research would include pro-life survey respondents and hashtags for analysis.

Extraction of Twitter data was restricted to Tweets which used the #repealthe8th hashtag, the inclusion of other hashtags relevant to the movement, many which have been quoted in this study, would be beneficial for a more expansive piece of future research.

Increased sample of data would generate greater detail when looking at sentiment of tweets, future study could involve extracts of all tweets relating to the movement and conducting sentiment analysis against this data, it would generate interesting results. This study only had the opportunity to execute one type of sentiment analysis on the data.

Future work should look at incorporating extended methods of sentiment analysis; it would be beneficial to examine the attitudes and themes emerging from such an analysis.

The development of a purpose-built dataset would be beneficial in subsequent research. I would propose the building of a positive/negative dataset based on commonly occurring words, this part has already been conducted as part of this study in the Term Frequencies and Term Co-Occurrences portion of the data mining exercise. Classification of commonly occurring terms extracted from both sides of the debate using pro and anti-choice hashtags as a parameter for extraction would be a suggested approach. This would act as a training set and I'd perhaps develop an algorithm to create a type of machine learning to further expand this dataset. It would be very interesting to examine the results coming out of this research where the sentiment dataset was tailored so it could take the political context of the movement into account.

This study looked at amassing of survey respondents via snowball sampling for certain groups related to the pro-choice movement. Future work should look at expanding the recipient sample to include the general populace and thus gathering data from a more diverse population sample.

A wider assessment of social media platforms which included Facebook and Instagram in the context of online activism would provide the opportunity to perform a cross-platform

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analysis of the various features and contributions of each social media platform along with the experiences of those using them in the realm of social change.

## 5.6 Summary

Social media is a huge force and social media platforms increasingly influence public opinion and spread news and communication between groups and individuals. This is no less true within the realm of activism; the online sphere has come to be a place where organising and awareness-raising takes place for many social reform movements. The Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> movement was one such movement.

The switch of focus from offline to online activism has led to calls for the prioritisation of on the ground action and the elevation of such organising above offline activities in terms of perceived merit. To take an absolutist stance of the proposed dichotomy of offline activism = true activism and online activism = slactivism obscures the potential for mobilisation and positive effect that social media activism can have on a campaign for change. This study highlighted how both offline and online activities can take place side by side – contribution of one to the other rather than replacement (Jones, 2015).

A point this study contributes to is the positive effect social media activism, in particular Twitter hashtags can have on a movement. Though it can be difficult to draw direct correlation between online and offline bodily assembling in public, the rippling effect social media can have in terms of creating and sharing narratives that provoke action must not be overlooked.

“Arguably, contemporary movements could get by well enough without the tactical affordances offered by social media. But what they cannot do without (or what they do better with) is the capacity of such media to become the instruments of an *emotional narration* capable of motivating individuals to take to the streets”

(Gerbaudo, 2012, p162, italics authors own)

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Technologies Utilised

Python 3.0 – <https://www.python.org/download/releases/3.0/>

Natural Language Toolkit - <https://www.nltk.org/>

Search Tweets Python Wrapper - <https://github.com/twitterdev/search-tweets-python>

Twitter Developer Premium Search API -

<https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/search/api-reference/premium-search.html>

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## Appendix B – Survey – Participant Information

### Participant Information Sheet

#### **Twitter Activism Survey – the Role of the Hashtag in the #RepealThe8th Movement**

Survey Link: [https://scsstcd.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_6QYVAXGEqa00E7z](https://scsstcd.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6QYVAXGEqa00E7z)

**Research Title:** The Role of the Hashtag in the Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Movement in Ireland

**Researcher:** Orla Fallon

**Contact Details:** Email: fallono@tcd.ie

You are invited to participate in this research project which is being carried out by Orla Fallon as part of a dissertation for the Management of Information Systems taught masters in the School of Computer Science & Statistics, Trinity College Dublin.

#### **Background & Aim of Research**

This short questionnaire is for research for completion of a study in relation to social media activism in particular in relation to the repeal the 8th movement. . This research seeks to examine the efficacy of hashtags as a form of political activism online.

The purpose of the research is the examination of the use of hashtags related to the 'Repeal the 8th' movement in Ireland. As part of this information gathering I will examine twitter data and survey data, to ascertain the role played, in mobilising an issue to one with majority public support.

#### **Survey Information**

- You are invited to participate in this survey as you have displayed in interest in certain groups pertaining to the Repeal the 8th movement.
- **Your participation is voluntary at all times** and you may withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. You also have the option of omitting questions you do not wish to answer.

- 
- You will be presented with an online Qualtrics survey of 11 questions. These will be a combination of yes/no and multi-choice questions and should take about 10 mins to complete.
  - Your responses will be **confidential and aggregated** and **we do not collect identifying information such as name, email or IP address**. If you have any questions or queries regarding this survey you are welcome to contact me on [fallono@tcd.ie](mailto:fallono@tcd.ie).

### **Data Security**

Your survey responses will be kept anonymous. The data will be stored on Qualtrics University licensed secure database which complies with ISO 27001 security certification and will be password protected and encrypted. Retention will be undertaken in full compliance with the Data Protection Act of 2018. All data will be destroyed in September 2019. All data collected will be aggregated and not identifiable as being attributed to any individual.

### **Publication**

Results, data and findings from this research will be published as part of Orla Fallon's final MSc thesis. Additionally, results, data and findings from this research may be published in one or more peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and a variety of other research publications and conferences. Individual results will be aggregated and anonymised and any research will be reported on using aggregate results.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The researcher declares that there are no conflicts of interest with this research, all information will be used for the purposes of this masters project and will not be used nor benefit the researcher in any way outside of this remit.

### **Third Parties**

I would ask that you do not name third parties in any text field of the questionnaire. Any such mentions will be excluded from the results.

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**Declaration:**

I confirm that I will (where relevant):

- Familiarize myself with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of 2018 and the College Good Research Practice guidelines  
[http://www.tcd.ie/info\\_compliance/dp/legislation.php](http://www.tcd.ie/info_compliance/dp/legislation.php)
- Tell participants that any recordings, e.g. audio/video/photographs, will not be identifiable unless prior written permission has been given. I will obtain permission for specific reuse (in papers, talks, etc.)
- Provide participants with an information sheet (or web-page for web-based experiments) that describes the main procedures (a copy of the information sheet must be included with this application)
- Obtain informed consent for participation (a copy of the informed consent form must be included with this application)
- Should the research be observational, ask participants for their consent to be observed
- Tell participants that their participation is voluntary
- Tell participants that they may withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty
- Give participants the option of omitting questions they do not wish to answer if a questionnaire is used
- Tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identified as theirs
- On request, debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)
- Verify that participants are 18 years or older and competent to supply consent.
- If the study involves participants viewing video displays then I will verify that they understand that if they or anyone in their family has a history of epilepsy then the participant is proceeding at their own risk
- Declare any potential conflict of interest to participants.
- Inform participants that in the extremely unlikely event that illicit activity is reported to me during the study I will be obliged to report it to appropriate authorities.
- Act in accordance with the information provided (i.e. if I tell participants I will not do something, then I will not do it).

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## Appendix C – Survey – Informed Consent

### Participant Consent Form

#### **Researcher Declaration:**

I confirm that I will (where relevant):

- Familiarize myself with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of 2018 and the College Good Research Practice guidelines  
[http://www.tcd.ie/info\\_compliance/dp/legislation.php](http://www.tcd.ie/info_compliance/dp/legislation.php)
- Tell participants that any recordings, e.g. audio/video/photographs, will not be identifiable unless prior written permission has been given. I will obtain permission for specific reuse (in papers, talks, etc.)
- Provide participants with an information sheet (or web-page for web-based experiments) that describes the main procedures (a copy of the information sheet must be included with this application)
- Obtain informed consent for participation (a copy of the informed consent form must be included with this application)
- Should the research be observational, ask participants for their consent to be observed
- Tell participants that their participation is voluntary
- Tell participants that they may withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty
- Give participants the option of omitting questions they do not wish to answer if a questionnaire is used
- Tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identified as theirs
- On request, debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)
- Verify that participants are 18 years or older and competent to supply consent.
- If the study involves participants viewing video displays then I will verify that they understand that if they or anyone in their family has a history of epilepsy then the participant is proceeding at their own risk
- Declare any potential conflict of interest to participants.
- Inform participants that in the extremely unlikely event that illicit activity is reported to me during the study I will be obliged to report it to appropriate authorities.
- Act in accordance with the information provided (i.e. if I tell participants I will not do something, then I will not do it).

**Informed Consent Declaration:**

- I am 18 years or older and am competent to provide consent.
- I have read, or had read to me, a document providing information about this research and this consent form.
- I have been provided the researchers contact details and know that I can contact him to have any questions answered to my satisfaction and to understand the description of the research being provided to me.
- I agree that my data is used for scientific purposes and I have no objection that my data is published in scientific publications in a way that does not reveal my identity.
  
- I understand that if I make illicit activities known, these will be reported to appropriate authorities
- I freely and voluntarily agree to be part of this research study, though without prejudice to my legal and ethical rights.
- I understand that I may refuse to answer any question and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.
- I understand that my participation is fully anonymous and that no personal details about me will be recorded.



Appendix D – Survey – Questionnaire

ID	Question	Type of Response
Q1	Do you have a Twitter account?	Yes/No
Q2	Did you observe any use of hashtags relating to the movement to Repeal the 8th Amendment?	Yes/No
Q3	Please list the Twitter hashtags you remember below:	Free Text
Q4	Did you use any of these hashtags as a form of activism?	Yes/No
Q5	Did the use of Twitter have a positive effect on the campaign to Repeal the 8th in your opinion?	Yes/No
Q6	Please elaborate on the effect you feel Twitter had on the Repeal the 8th Campaign	Free Text
Q7	How important do you consider the use of hashtags to be in the campaign to Repeal the 8th?	Likert Scale
Q8	Do you think the use of Twitter hashtags resulted in more people attending events/marches/canvassing as part of the Repeal the 8th campaign?	Likert Scale
Q9	Did the use of Twitter result in you personally taking part in a campaign related activity such as a march/event/canvassing?	Yes/No
Q10	Did Twitter ever lead you to engage in 'real-life' activism for any movement?	Likert Scale
Q11	Have you ever taken part in an offline protest or march for a cause?	Yes/No
Q12	Did you take part in 'real-life'/offline action to help Repeal the 8th amendment?	Yes/No
Q13	Will you engage in street protests/ offline activism in the future for a cause you believe in?	Likert Scale
Q14	Do you consent to your responses being used for this research study?	Yes/No

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## Appendix E – Survey – Screenshots

**Survey Questionnaire**

Do you have a Twitter account?

Yes

No

*Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however the researcher would be grateful if all questions are responded to.*

Did you observe any use of hashtags relating to the movement to Repeal the 8th Amendment?

Yes

No



*Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however the researcher would be grateful if all questions are responded to.*

Please list the Twitter hashtags you remember below:

Did you use any of these hashtags as a form of activism?

Yes

No

Did the use of Twitter have a positive effect on the campaign to Repeal the 8th in your opinion?

Yes

No



*Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however the researcher would be grateful if all questions are responded to.*

Please elaborate on the effect you feel Twitter had on the Repeal the 8th Campaign

How important do you consider the use of hashtags to be in the campaign to Repeal the 8th?

Extremely important

Very important

Moderately important

Slightly important

Not at all important

Do you think the use of Twitter hashtags resulted in more people attending events/marches/canvassing as part of the Repeal the 8th campaign?

Strongly agree

Agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree



*Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however the researcher would be grateful if all questions are responded to.*

Did the use of Twitter result in you personally taking part in a campaign related activity such as a march/event/canvassing?

Yes

No

Did Twitter ever lead you to engage in 'real-life' activism for any movement?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

Have you ever taken part in an offline protest or march for a cause?

Yes

No



Did you take part in 'real-life'/offline action to help Repeal the 8th amendment?

Yes

No

Will you engage in street protests/ offline activism in the future for a cause you believe in?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

Do you consent to your responses being used for this research study?

**Yes, please submit**



**No, quit without saving**



*Each question is optional. Feel free to omit a response to any question; however the researcher would be grateful if all questions are responded to.*



**End of Survey Message:**

You've reached the end of the survey. Thank you for your time.

Your responses if given with consent will be used to inform the Masters Thesis - "The Role of the Hashtag in the Repeal the 8th Movement" as partial fulfillment of the MSc of Information Systems at Trinity College Dublin.

If you have decided to quit without saving no responses will be recorded.

If you have any questions or would like more information about the study please contact [fallono@tcd.ie](mailto:fallono@tcd.ie)

Appendix F – Survey – Free Text Responses to Q3 & Q6

Hashtag Recollection and Perceived Twitter Effect

<b>Q3 - Please list the Twitter hashtags you remember below:</b>
<b>Repealthe8th</b>
<b>Repeal</b>
<b>#Repeal, #Repealthe8th, #TogetherForYes, #RoscommonForChoice, #VoteYes</b>
<b>#Repealthe8th #TogetherforYes #Together4Yes #KnowYourRepealers #Roscommon4Yes</b>
<b>#repealthe8th #repeal</b>
<b>#repeal #RepealThe8th #notacriminal #itstime 8thcomitee #Sept28</b>
<b>#repealthe8th #repeal #repealtheeighth #mybodymychoice #loveboats #togetherforyes #freesafelegal #together4yes #voteyes #8thRef</b>
<b>#repealedthe8th #Repealthe8th #Voices4choice #LoveBothMyArse</b>
<b>#repealthe8th #savethe8th #loveboth</b>
<b>#repealthe8th, #Choice4Xmas, #205kTravelled, #MarchForChoice, #freesafelegal, #HealthcareNotAirfare, #togetherforyes, #HometoVote, #RepealGlobal, #LDNIrish4Choice</b>

<b>Hometovote, repealthe8th, freesafelegal, 8committee, neveragain, stoppunishingtragedy</b>
<b>#repealthe8th #freesafelegal #togetherforyes #together4yes</b>
<b>#repeal #repealthe8th #hometovote #inhershoes #healthcarenotairfare #choice4xmas</b>
<b>#repeal #togetherforyes #strike4repeal #marchforchoice #freesafelegal #repealthe8th</b>
<b>#repealthe8th #togetherforyes #together4yes #knowyourrepealers</b>
<b>#repealthe8th, #hometovote, #hometocanvass</b>
<b>#repealthe8th #repeal #togetherforyes #farmersforyes</b>
<b>`#repeal #repealthe8th #inhershoes #arc #hometovote #repealtheeighth #grandparentsforrepeal #farmersforrepeal #dontstoprepealing #8ref #choice #togetherforyes #mybodymychoice</b>

**Q6 - Please elaborate on the effect you feel Twitter had on the Repeal the 8th Campaign**

**Think it had a very positive effect. Allowed activist groups to spread the message to the masses openly without having to worry about funding. I also feel it make the topic more relevant for the younger generation who have had historically low**

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<p><b>turn out rates in elections and referendums. It allow(ed) people to share their stories and show it's a topic that effects everyone.</b></p>
<p><b>Visibility and connecting activists</b></p>
<p><b>It spread awareness, it reached a larger audience, and I feel a new demography of social media users.</b></p>
<p><b>Firstly the 'Not a Criminal Campaign' raised Awareness to many people. Some not even knowing abortion was illegal. Then as the Repeal movement gained momentum people were using various hashtags as it was trendy. Which I believe then brought the conversions people had at home and with Auntie Mary who was a Godfearing woman. Which personalised and normalised the issue leading more to accept it</b></p>
<p><b>It helped those of us involved connect to the wider campaign outside of our county</b></p>
<p><b>Help build communities ie. Disability activists who were pro-choice. Also made it easier to keep up to date with what was happening as events occurred</b></p>
<p><b>Highlighted lies from the retain side. Community. Informed.</b></p>
<p><b>1. Mobilising: As someone who organised events and demonstrations during the campaign, using hashtags was how we ensured news about our event reached other people engaged in the campaign and meant we could draw large numbers of participants to these events and demonstrations. 2. Information: Using Twitter hashtags was my primary way of staying up-to-date with real time news about the campaign. Of course some information online is unreliable, but we also found that reporting in mass media was unreliable (e.g. some things were not widely reported or certain things were emphasised over others). Taken together with Twitter news, we could build up a more complete picture of what was going on in the campaign. 3. Harnessing media attention: During the campaign, as part of a Repeal group, we used Twitter hashtags to leverage media attention for our events and demonstrations. Mass media outlets monitor Twitter for stories and pick up on things that go viral. We were able to capitalise on this and share pictures from demonstrations which subsequently went viral on Twitter (e.g. #205kTravelled) and which were then picked up by Irish and international media outlets, spreading the message and reaching a wider audience than it would have otherwise. Criticisms of Twitter often centre on its reputation as an echo chamber</b></p>

which only reaches like-minded people. However, by leveraging Twitter hashtags, our message spread to traditional media outlets and reached different demographics than it would have on Twitter alone. 4. Community: Using Twitter hashtags allowed me to find a community of people engaged in the campaign in Ireland and across the world. Feeling part of a wider effort to change the law provided an invaluable sense of support and motivation to continue campaigning on the issue. It was also a means of sharing ideas and strategies with other campaigners. For example, I was a member of a group that was not based in Ireland. We shared strategies with campaigners in other countries who were also finding out the best ways to contribute to the campaign from overseas (for example, we shared information about laws related to fundraising overseas). We connected to these other groups through social media, including through the use of Twitter hashtags.

Connected activists

allowing individuals to feel and see the collective solidarity, at home and abroad. be able to access/follow pro-choice content and users with greater ease

it helped spread the message and engage people to be more active in the campaign

I do in large part believe social media had positive impact on the overall trajectory of the repeal campaign. There were specific instances where social media was used particularly well for example Strike4Repeal in 2017. Huge momentum grew behind Strike4Repeal after the launch of viral video calling for an action on 8th March. Thousands were mobilised in Dublin, with numerous other events taking place across Ireland and globally. All events were organised locally and through the medium of social media. It's also worth mentioning that it's now much harder to get the same level of organic reach without paid promotion, particularly for political content, compared with a number of years ago. Which obviously effect grassroots organisers more than it would political parties or NGOs. I think also there is a distinction to be made the efficacy of social media with respect to mobilising opposed to actual organising. Social media isn't an adequate replacement for showing up to a meeting, knocking on doors, leafleting, etc. and ultimately that is what the success of the repeal campaign depended on.

I don't really follow trending things on twitter I do however follow people/ org that were pro repeal

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**Stories were shared that may have influenced peoples' decisions. Campaigning updates, stories and tips were shared that helped keep the momentum going as well as the #hometovote images. Twitter was also used to warn people where graphic images were around the country that may cause distress. Twitter threads were used to fact check some of the 'fake news' spread before vote.**

Appendix G – Data Mining – Results

Top Ten Terms - 2017 Twitter Data Monthly Breakdown								
	May-17	Jun-17	Jul-17	Aug-17	Sep-17	Oct-17	Nov-17	Dec-17
1	'women'	'issue'	'abortion'	'8th'	'8th'	'people'	'abortion'	'christmas'
2	'health'	'abortion'	'irish'	'amendment'	'repeal'	'abortion'	'ago'	'see'
3	'constitutional'	'rights'	'spoofing'	'many'	'rape'	'women's'	'leave'	'day'
4	'abortions'	'must'	'women'	'people'	'made'	'today'	'become'	'ireland'
5	'get'	'healthcare'	'2013'	'reasons'	'ireland'	'ireland'	'waters'	'women'
6	'violated'	'sentence'	'caught'	'unaware'	'keep'	'abortions'	'years'	'need'
7	'religion'	'go'	'letter'	'thread'	'can't'	'help'	'house'	'emails'
8	'view'	'prison'	'march'	'impacts'	'women'	'goes'	'bought'	'dear'
9	'irish'	'year'	'choice'	'consequences'	'vile'	'love'	'available'	'please'
10	'rightwing'	'criminal'	'like'	'day'	'victims'	'ripping'	'ireland'	'abortions'

Top Ten Terms - 2018 Twitter Data Monthly Breakdown				
	Feb-18	Mar-18	Apr-18	May-18
1	'abortion'	'every'	'abortion'	'women'
2	'8th'	'today'	'8th'	'vote'
3	'ireland'	'taken'	'vote'	'ireland'
4	'women'	'receiving'	'one'	'yes'
5	'reason'	'session'	'women'	'today'
6	'need'	'pregnancy'	'trust'	'8th'
7	'woman'	'test'	'yes'	'people'
8	'yet'	'women'	'back'	'abortion'
9	'posters'	'8th'	'may'	'irish'
10	'vote'	'abortion'	'choice'	'voting'