#SCANDAL:

An exploration of social media in light of René Girard's mimetic theory

by

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

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I hereby declare that *"#SCANDAL: An exploration of social media in the light of René Girard's mimetic theory"* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used have been acknowledged in the form of complete references.

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ABSTRACT AND KEY TERMS

ABSTRACT

Social media can be perceived as forging one's relationships and influencing one's world view, but has it always allowed individuals to connect meaningfully? It mesmerises and grips the mind of its users. It fascinates, yet does not allow users to see how some of the content spread on these networks is being reduced or magnified in a way that blinds most individuals into disregarding the reality it represents. Users scroll vigorously, compulsively and intensely and yet desire without 'seeing'. Individuals are engrossed in this virtual world, yet feel as if they are onlookers. This is how social media tend to operate; it is a form of allurement. These networks succeed in making users hysterical, attracting them with what initially repelled them. The influence these networks have on users is evident: individuals are mesmerised and kept entranced but they cannot move beyond this. In other words, users are entombed in a 'scandalous' relationship with social media. Users look inquisitively or voyeuristically into others' lives as they become frenzied or hysterical. They desire to peek into the lives of the 'sacred' or at sacred content, and this content tends to be formulated in a manner that distorts reality. To interpret the reality, it is necessary to look beyond the surface-level and interact with this content in a more meaningful way. However, social media are constructed in such a manner that inhibits meaningful dialogue. This echoes McLuhan's (1994:22) idea that electronic media are essentially without perspective because of the deep involvement of the senses.

From these observations, I have therefore dedicated my study to exploring what a Girardian hermeneutic reveals about social media as a medium, in essence the environment engendered on social media, in order to illustrate the mimetic and scandalous dimensions of these networks. Mimetic theory becomes a method of analysis through which we may interpret the significance of how social media effect the ways that individuals interact on these networks. Moreover, this study demonstrates how these networks are an efficient channel of mimetic desire. Thus, its value lies in the amalgamation of mimetic theory and media theory to formulate a better understanding of the inner-workings of these thriving platforms.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Avatar: The online individual is an extension of an offline self through the creation of an avatar. Avatars are described as a public characterisation of the self-identity through a selected visual (Van der Walt 2018:90). Thus, the avatar is a persona existing in an online social setting. This visual is a persona because it depicts a self-representation where particular personality characteristics are carefully chosen and portrayed as a public self (Van der Walt 2018:90).

Conversion: Girard defines conversion as the ability to be aware of one's own immersion in the mimetic contagion, which could be individual or collective. Furthermore, it is the ability to deny fabricated idols and opt for true transcendence. It recognises that the scapegoat has been 'singled-out' and detested without a plausible reason, merely because the collective has ousted that individual or group (Alison & Palaver 2017:537). Thus, conversion involves both experience and introspection that brings about a denial of scapegoating and the effort to assert a spirit of forgiveness and empathy.

Desire: A Girardian understanding of desire illuminates that desire is what makes us human. It differs from biological needs — such as food, shelter, and sex. Desire is not innate but rather fundamentally other-centered, reliant on models, such as parents and work colleagues, to pinpoint its objects and express them as desirable. Desires derive from culture, not from nature. In essence, human beings are "saturated with otherness" and are interdependent (Oughourlian 2016:55).

Digital applications: Digital applications refer to "any application software that can be used by a computer, mobile device, or tablet to perform useful tasks" (About APIs 2020).

Facebook: Facebook is a social networking site where users post comments, share images and post links to news or react to content on the internet. Facebook is mostly used for entertainment, allowing users to create a friends list and upload photos and other content (Nations 2019). The Facebook like button and other reaction features allow users to engage with posts, comments, content, links shared by friends, and advertisements.

Hot and cold media: Marshall McLuhan (1969:11) illuminates the effect of a medium by distinguishing between hot and cold media. In determining whether a medium is hot or cool requires an assessment of the society into which it is introduced and how technologically advanced that society is.

McLuhan (1969:11) explains that a hot medium excludes, is high definition and requires low participation by its audience, while a cool medium includes, is low definition, provides less data, and requires higher participation. High definition involves an entire completion of data by the medium without acute audience participation. A photograph, for instance, is high definition or hot; whereas an animated character is low definition or cool, because the drawing provides less visual information and requires the audience to complete the image (McLuhan 1969:11).

Instagram: Instagram's features allow for editing and uploading of photographs and short videos through a mobile app. "Users can add a caption to each of their posts and use hashtags and location-based geotags to index these posts and make them searchable by other users within the app. Each post by a user appears on their followers' Instagram feeds and can also be viewed by the public when tagged using hashtags or geotags" (Holak & McLaughlin 2017:[sp]).

Mediation:

1) The concept of mediation highlights that between any subject and its object of desire, there exists a mediator who renders the object — an individual, place, or thing — desirable. When the model and the subject do not exist in the same milieu, owing to historical or distant personage, culture or tradition, there exists "external mediation": The subject and the model do not engender conflict. If this model occupies the same social space as the subject and they are perceived as being equal, there exists internal mediation, where the subject and model engage in ways that can result in conflict. In other words, when the subject and model desire the same object, the model constitutes part of the imitating subject's milieu. Thus, this mediation is no longer external (Palaver 2013:59).

2) Processes aiming to bring about greater understanding, insight, consciousness between two views, opinions or philosophies.

Metaphysical desire: A subject's imitation of a model may fixate on what he perceives as the model possessing in abundance and what he lacks, in essence the objects in the model's possession. Initially, this desire is acquisitive or appropriative, but that later transforms into metaphysical desire: A desire to be the model, to desire his quality of being and to displace him. This is frequently not a conscious action, nor a tactic devised by the subject. Here, the subject desires "to be what the other becomes when he possesses this or that object" (Girard 2010:31).

Mimetic: The term derives from its Latinate synonym, "imitative," which is used to characterise the nature of human relations (cited by Alison & Palaver 2017:538). Girardian theory contends that desire tends to be imitative and that its mimetism can either inspire creativity and fuel cultural progression, or it can bring about competition, jealousy, and envy and inevitably result in violence. Girard refers to the first distinction as positive mimetism or positive reciprocity and to the second as mimetic rivalry or negative reciprocity (cited by Muñoz 2016:160).

Myth: A Girardian understanding of myth describes a narrative which contemporary vernacular justly claims is distorted and false. In other words, it is a socially constructed truth. Girard's interpretation of ancient religions elucidate that all myths inform us about cultural origins as emerging from a divine intervention, the efforts of a sacred being, a divine being which is to be praised and pacified by ritual sacrifice. From a mimetic perspective, this divine being is a mystified renewal of the victim of chaos and disorder, when the conflict of all against all transforms into the violence of all against one, reinstating peace in the community (Alison & Palaver 2017:539). Myth conceals the collective violence that begets the uncontested expulsion or murder of a victim.

Network:
1) Any arrangement of elements that are interconnected (TechTerms 2020).
2) A system that transmits data between users. This includes computers, cellphones, servers, routers, cables, antennae, tablets and phones (TechTerms 2020).

Platform: Any software can be defined as a platform if it provides programming interfaces (APIs), which are a set of rules and codes that applications are written to interact with. Social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter provide APIs and are thus called 'social media platforms.' (TechTerms 2020).

Sacred: Girard interprets the nature of the sacred in ancient communities prior to the advancement in legal and judicial systems. The sacred refers to what ancient religion deems as being both good and evil; that which maintains order and harmony in the community and endangers it from within (cited by Lawtoo 2013:210). The sacred is beneficial to honour at a distance, and to ritually appease in pursuit of its safeguard; it is dire in its proximity; being conceived as the supernatural catalyst of societal catastrophes such as epidemics, poverty and drought (Alison & Palaver 2017:539).

Sacrifice: Girard (1977:1) interprets sacrifice as rendering the 'sacred' character of a victim of violent unanimity, the victim who reinstates peace and harmony in the community.

Scandal is defined by the Oxford dictionary as "causing general public outrage by a perceived offence against morality or law: *a series of scandalous liaisons, a scandalous allegation, a scandalous state of affairs*" (Lexico 2020). There are also certain phrases which might also be used to convey scandalous actions. These include 'morally grey', ethically dubious', 'questionable', et cetera. In addition, mimetic rivalry and its aftermath is referred to as scandal. The Greek root of the word means "to trip up an enemy." Moreover, scandal refers to an impediment that is difficult to evade as opposed to a simple impediment that we can conquer (Alberg 2017:482).

Scapegoat: Our knowledge of the scapegoat is borrowed from Biblical interpretations of sacrificial practices: an individual or community that is blamed for the chaos engendered in the community. Sacrificial victims are scapegoats of collective violence, and our misrecognition of a victim's innocence, strengthens the lie to the myths that preserve them (Girard 1977:81).

Scapegoat mechanism: Girard (1977:286) refers to the scapegoat mechanism as a social phenomenon that functions to identify an individual or community to blame for the chaos and disorder engendered in the community. Ancient rituals of scapegoating are rooted in social force, which endures in the modern era despite ancient rituals becoming less effective.

Sensorium: McLuhan (1969) highlights the effects of media on the sensorium (our senses), postulating that media affect us by altering the ratio of our senses.

Social media: Taprial and Kanwar (2012:8) explain that all web-based applications which allow for the creation of online communities to share information, opinions, personal messages, and other content can be regarded as social media. "These could be in the form of social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube) blogs, Internet forums, bookmarking sites, online community sites and Q and A sites et cetera". In essence, social media are media for social interaction; users of these sites have access to accelerated publishing methods.

Internet trolls: Internet users who create and incite conflict online are referred to as Internet Trolls. They cause distress by posting provocative or off-topic messages in the online community (Hanson 2020). In essence, an Internet troll intentionally causes controversy in order to provoke other users.

Truth: In the context of this study, the truth refers to how we relate and can improve our relational worlds.

Twitter: Twitter is a social networking site where users post and engage with messages referred to as tweets. Twitter involves many activities; including news reading, following popular individuals, and communicating with friends and family. At its core, the app is used to disseminate information quickly (Forsey 2019).

Violence: In this study, violence is not interpreted as an occurrence or a series of occurrences, but as a relation that spawns from mimetic conflict and that tends to heighten and intensify greatly, specifically by mimetic reciprocation.

YouTube: "YouTube is a video sharing service where users can watch, like, share, comment and upload their own videos. The video service can be accessed on computers, laptops, tablets and via mobile phones" (What is YouTube 2020).

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INTRODUCTION

Technology shapes many of one's intimacies and interactions, but has it always allowed individuals to connect meaningfully? Sherry Turkle (2011:3) explains that social media platforms provide a fantasy world that fabricates the idea of companionship without people having to make a concerted effort. These networking sites grant us the ability to avoid one another while simultaneously being bound to one another. In *Team human (2019)*, Douglas Rushkoff asserts that digital applications cannot grant us the ability to establish a true understanding of one another. Turkle (2011:11) reinforces this by asserting that mankind has transformed technology to the extent that it now acts as a replacement for connecting. Individuals no longer engage as much in face-to-face interactions because computers and virtual worlds mediate relationships by allowing for networking to take place. Rushkoff explains that human behaviours developed over years of evolution do not function via social media. Mirror neurons never activate, oxytocin never flows throughout the body, and, on the whole, we do not communicate meaningfully with one another. This is a time in which the value of social interaction is being reconfigured.

It has also become evident that aggressive ways of communication have become more frequent, particularly on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Forms of violence have multiplied and now involve different modes of verbal, indirect and mediated modes of violence. Turkle (2011:4) explains that technology even inhibits our ability to confront our problems in the real world. Devices such as computers, laptops and smartphones have become gateways allowing individuals the ability to live virtual lives in a digital realm. People 'exist' in a digital world where they are not restricted to a small number of friends. Rather, they possess hundreds of friends and followers, allowing for voluminous modes of 'connection'.

This idea of accumulating 'friends' and making connections on platforms such as Facebook is the result of mechanisms which advocate imitation. This is the driving premise of the platform's popularity and expansion. For instance, Facebook increases its popularity through network externalities, which provide positive feedback. In other words, if an individual connects to the network, this is a motivation for others to imitate him.

Antonio Rosa (2018:95) explains how the "friends attract new friends" model is illustrated by the manner in which the number of new friends increases rapidly owing to existing friends affirming the platform's appeal. By imitating a public appearance, users can be models for, and imitators of, each other (Rosa 2018:100).

Moreover, because of the imitative nature of social media, René Girard's mimetic theory, which centres on mimesis, becomes useful for explaining how an individual who is active on these platforms affects the desires and interests of someone else.

Rosa (2018) explores how spatial form stems from mimetic desire in social media networks and focuses on network theory rather than on the mimetic nature of human beings. Therefore, there is still a need to analyse social media platforms in more depth using mimetic theory. By viewing social media through a Girardian perspective, I intend to explore the ways that people relate on these platforms and how these networks thrive through systems of imitation. To date, research linking mimesis (that is, mimetic desire) and social media is minimal at best, and my aim, therefore, is to show that mimetic theory provides ample insight for a better understanding how social media operate to structure human relationships.

1.2 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This dissertation aims to explore the mediation of desire through social media using a Girardian standpoint. In service of this aim, the study has a number of objectives; it seeks to:

- **Understand mimetic theory as a theoretical framework**

If the fundamental aim of this dissertation is to analyse the mediation of desire on social media and thus better understand the environment of the various social media platforms, understanding mimetic theory as a theoretical framework becomes essential.

- **Use mimetic theory and its concepts to analyse the nature of human interactions on social media**

Mimetic theory offers a heuristic approach through which we may understand social media antagonisms, violence and group behaviour on these platforms. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how the social media platforms channel mimetic desire — in essence how they are able to both contain and transmit mimetic violence.

- **Understand how social media contribute to a hermeneutics of scandal**

This study also seeks to demonstrate how language and texts on social media function in a scandalous manner. It demonstrates how texts are generated and further shaped, by the rivalry implicit in scandal. The very platform that individuals turn to in order to gain perspective and comprehend culture frequently, presents the opposite—a hinderance or scandal.

• **Analyse social media trends that seem to foster both negative and positive reciprocity**

This study seeks to articulate how social media stimulate mimetic desire by exploring popular social media events that appear to foster either negative or positive reciprocity, or a combination of both. Moreover, this paper explores what Girard's hermeneutic reveals about these trends. It demonstrates how social media platforms are designed to generate and heighten mimetic desire and become powerful agents in the shaping of social values.

• **Find and investigate possible ways to mitigate the scandalous on social media using Jeremiah Alberg's hermeneutics of forgiveness**

Jeremiah Alberg suggests ways to regulate scandal through the spirit of forgiveness in his book *Beneath the veil of strange verses (2013).* Alberg (2013a) explains how an individual can overcome the effects of scandal through forgiveness Moreover, Alberg provides insights on the issues which accompany scandal and thus makes one of his central concerns the possibility of transcending scandal. This study thus explores how Alberg's thinking is relevant to transcending some of the more problematic mimetic trends that manifest themselves on social media.

1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is explorative and entirely theoretical. The media events discussed are derived from specific trends and often hashtags referred to in the public domain. The study investigates and considers the work of Girard and other theorists working in mimetic theory — the field of study established by Girard. While it consults media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan to a lesser degree, the primary emphasis is on contemporary seminal sources of both mimetic and media theory. Furthermore, by adopting and deepening a Girardian hermeneutic, this research analyses social media content through applied semiotics.[1]

Using this methodology, the study attempts to apply knowledge from mimetic theory and media theory to the research topic to highlight the ways in which desire is mediated on social media platforms.

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[1] In Chapter four of *Looking at media: An introduction to visual studies (2013)*, semiotics is defined as a sign which is interpreted as a "distinct unit of meaning" and includes various things such as visuals, body language, colour, sounds and words. In essence, anything that has the ability to communicate is referred to as a sign. Ferdinand de Saussure asserts that anything that communicates meaning can be analysed in an identical manner as linguistic signs. Things that are considered to be non-linguistic, such as music and visuals, can be interpreted as linguistic or as writings that can be examined (Reyburn 2013:58). Thus, social media can be understood from the perspective of semiotics because social media are tools of thought situated in culture, consisting of signs that possess meaning and significance. Importantly, mimetic theory tries to see structures hidden beneath signs. This is to say, signs are utilised as a means to better access what mimetic desire itself has structured.

1.4 LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media fit within the field of digital media and communications exemplified by sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube. Studies of the Internet and social media frequently emphasise the digital era's transformative power, especially with regard to how anyone is permitted to participate on these networks, and where society's role has changed because of these media (Fuchs 2014:57). Facebook and Twitter, for instance, are interactive online platforms that grant the ability to share information and opinions across a broad spectrum. In most instances, Facebook users connect with individuals who share similar interests across political, economic and geographic borders (Caers *et al* 2013:983). To understand the nature, purpose and features of social media platforms, it becomes worthwhile to discuss and view social media as varieties of the same medium. Thus, it becomes possible to raise the question why social media are indeed more 'social' than other forms of media. Sociality can be interpreted in terms of ideas moulded by society and concerns individuals exchanging symbols by engaging in social relations, as they collaborate and establish standards (Fuchs 2014:58). Moreover, sociality is about individuals creating and sustaining communities. On social media, participants create, share and renew personal and social communicative information deriving from their roles in their economy, politics and community (Caers *et al* 2013:983). In *Voices from the south: Digital arts and humanities (2018),* Amanda du Preez reiterates these ideas by explaining that social media possess a democratic character. Human participation is thus implicit in this terminology.

Henry Giroux asserts that social media have allowed rethinking and reframing freedom as the platform enables, or seems to enable, a sense of free-will (cited by Du Preez 2018:66). The assumption here is that freedom itself depends on an erasure of hierarchy in favour of equality. Mimetic theory, however, points to the conflictual dimensions of equality and Girard explains that this is one of the primary reasons for escalations in social violence (Palaver 2013:62). This becomes evident in social media culture where trends tend to give rise to forms of violence — that is aggressive ways of communicating, but also aggressive and destructive ways of acting. Given its capability for elucidating the human capacity for violence, mimetic theory is able to provide insights into the ramifications of the democratic nature of social media.

Importantly, this is not just a matter of specific messages, but a matter of what social media actually are. As McLuhan's (1994) insights inform us, when media are integrated into the patterns of human relationships, both the form and function of certain human interactions are changed. In particular, the scale, intensity and speed impelling social media and its users shifts.

These ideas help to explain how technology shapes society: "The medium is the message, but the user of the medium is the content of the medium, in the way that any medium is an extension of the human body" (quoted in Gordan 2007:12). When a society creates an extension of itself, as in the case of social media, all other operations of that society are most likely to metamorphose to serve that new mode; once any new technology infiltrates a society, it infiltrates every organisation of that society. This is to say, social media are metamorphosing instruments.

In the social media environment, the self is continuously being hounded by a greater network comprised of pattern recognising algorithms.[2] Understanding how individuals interact and engage with one another on social media platforms requires an understanding of how the 'self' is constituted in this network. Therefore, it is worthwhile analysing the idea of the 'self' from the perspective of mimetic theory. Social media platforms have created a space where individuals have lost their sense of self in the era of advanced technologies. Such advancements offer a space for the re-creation of a 'self' wedged between the device and reality to become an actuality through technology (Turkle 2011:18). In his book, *The genesis of desire (2009),* Girard's colleague, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, explains that desire is a psychological action stemming from a relation to the other. This relationship with the other is fundamental and should not be understood as a relation between two individuals but, instead, as a back and forth motion shaping each of its entities — that is, each 'self' (Oughourlian 2009:32). Furthermore, mimetic desire does not gain its energy from anything other than the relationship to the other; that is, from the "interdividual" relation (Oughourlian 2009:32). This relationship is redefined on social media networks, which seem designed to appeal to the desire of others. This exaggerates the imitative capacities of all users.

On social media, everyone is to a great extent equal in the worldly pursuit for differentiation. All aim identically for signalling the difference embodied in their "individualities" made public on these networks. The differences fluctuate a great deal and tend towards undifferentiation, since each one can establish the main position of difference by being the object of others' attention (Rosa 2018:100).

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[2] Various social media sites collect and keep information about individuals' actions on social media networks. The intention behind these social media companies capturing this information is to transform private, semi-public and public information into a commodity that is purchased by advertising agencies and used to market specific advertisements to users (Fuchs 2017:79). Transforming user information into something that can sold and used by social media corporates is justified in their privacy policy. Google utilises the data gathered from their users to supply, preserve, safeguard, and enhance their products offered. In addition, they supply this data to provide customised content including search results and advertisements. Facebook utilises a similar process and uses the data collected to supply advertisements that are targeted at these users (Fuchs 2017:79). When Twitter users follow, tweet, search or comment on tweets, Twitter analyses these activities and customises Twitter advertisements. For example, when users search for a particular word, twitter displays an advertisement associated with that word. Additionally, they customise advertisements using profile data or locations, which are derived from the user's mobile device location. This aids the company in depicting local advertisements. Social media sites are essentially profit organisations providing communication services which are the digital equivalent of an advertising agency (Fuchs 2017:79).

Girard defines undifferentiation as exorbitant unification through mimetic desire which results in the inauthentic communication and disconnection between self and 'other' (cited by Reyburn 2017:53). There exists a mass depersonalisation whereby individuals take on a numeric value and create an environment of collective rest and unrest. In reflecting on McLuhan's work, Reyburn (2017:54) asserts that the "traditional" function of media has collapsed; rather than media being an extension of people, people have become extensions of media. A person's desires are dictated by the media — in this case, social media.

In this space, the self can reconstruct itself in the midst of interdividual relationships. Social media platforms grant individuals the ability to constantly transform themselves, moulded and penetrated by otherness. This results in a break from any model so that he can imitate another whom he interprets as possessing the excess of being that he needs. Turkle (2011:169) reinforces these ideas by explaining that social media platforms provide a space for identity experiments. Thus, the ability of individuals to imitate others online is what forces them to transform into what they are. In other words, individuals who are active on social media can recreate a persona that stems from their social environment (Van der Walt 2018:89).

The social media sphere affects the decisions a person makes when choosing which character traits to suppress in the portrayal of a persona. This persona helps an individual to adapt to a social setting. This technological climate fuels the progression of a persona through the portrayal of the public self. Van der Walt (2018:89) explains how social media users make use of persona to sustain control in their social environments by disguising some characteristics of their personality and displaying other parts of it. Ultimately, advances in technology have changed how we portray ourselves and how we communicate with one another.

This is a result of developments in mass communication via social media, which has also granted individuals the ability to publicise their opinions, political views, social stances, et cetera, with minimal consequences. This is an important consideration when analysing social media. They have become spaces for publicising ourselves and various scandals. In previous eras, individuals responded to scandalous events by concealing them. Today, an advanced "scandal culture" exists by which social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are committed to publicising the transgressions of reputable and well-known leaders, celebrities, and the like. Thus, this dissertation explores Girard's notion of scandal as it relates to social media.[3]

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[3] The emergence of a new culture of simulation through social media is akin to the way that the Victorians interpreted sex—a dangerous fixation that was simultaneously alluring and condemned (Turkle 2011:11). This is the essential logic of scandal.

Jeremiah Alberg (2013a:87) explains that scandal operates "scandalously" as it captivates, surprises, ensnares, but never delivers. Scandal fascinates and intrigues without fulfilling, mesmerises without delivering, and pledges without satisfying. The Internet accelerates the progression of this form of public-shaming through call-out culture and cancel culture.

Wayne (2019) explains that call-out culture refers to attitudes and values held by a group of people who manipulate and intensify aggressive reactions against individuals who possess alternative views. The strategies used to accomplish these desired results frequently involve humiliating and shaming the subject. Moreover, many advocates of call-out culture refuse to engage in dialogue with individuals who hold alternative viewpoints, strongly believing that it weakens their cause or movement. Social media are saturated with this thinking as can be seen in South Africa in the #OurLandNow movements and #ClicksMustFall.[4]

For these reasons it becomes important to understand how social media affect us through Girard's notion of "scandalous language". Alberg (2013b:11) explores how words lose their signification, not in a denotative sense, but rather through a loss of power to allow for access to reality while simultaneously obstructing it. Furthermore, language becomes tainted and can communicate alternative messages and meanings (Alberg 2013b:13). In essence, this dissertation explores scandal at the level of language on social media. Social media have become mechanisms that strip a person of an individual experience and potentially incite resentment. Duplicity is a natural part of language and its relation to reality (Alberg 2013b:14) and the use of language on social media arrests reality in a manner that is inconsistent and nebulous.

Should words lose their power of signification, the meaning of language is devalued, with the result that we lose the reality to which it allows access. In this research, the notion of scandal thus becomes a way to examine meaning-making on social media.

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[4] #OurLandNow is a movement initiated by the Economic Freedom Front (EFF) political party, that calls for the expropriation of land without compensation. The EFF's manifesto states: "The emphasis on NOW is also because our people live in absolute poverty. Similarly, the emphasis on NOW is because our people are landless" (Economic Freedom Fighters 2019). After an advertisement describing natural black hair as "dry, damaged, frizzy and dull" appeared on *Clicks* website, the pharmaceutical company was subjected to vehement public outrage on social media (Planting 2020:[sp]). The political party, the Economic Freedom Front, added its voice to the #ClicksMustFall movement and initiated protests outside of many Clicks stores nationwide, despite Clicks apologising for the incident and removing the advertisement. The pharmacy group was forced to close all of its franchises for two days after thirty-seven stores were vandalized, looted and in some cases petrol-bombed (Planting 2020:[sp]).

Scandals are heightened by globalisation to such an extent that the reciprocity of a minor incident can have global ramifications. Social media users thus operate in a realm where they are continuously altering their relationship with the network, as the network alters its hold on them.

Technology does serve us, but we would do well to better understand its nature to see where it robs us too, and where it may serve us better. In addition to the above key sources discussing mimetic theory and social media, the study also makes use of the following sources to bolster its argument: Wolfgang Palaver (2013), Kathleen Vandenberg (2005), Scott Cowdell (2013), Paul Dumouchel (2014), and Duncan Reyburn (2017).

1.5 PRELIMINARY OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The study begins in Chapter two with an outline of René Girard's mimetic theory, which provides the theoretical underpinning of the argument. The objective here is to demonstrate how mimetic theory is useful when analysing the nature of human behaviour and relations, and subsequently human interactions on social media. The mimetic mechanism is used to characterise the development of mimetic desire into mimetic rivalry, inevitably heightening to a stage of mimetic crisis that results in the scapegoat phenomenon. Chapter two demonstrates how these stages can be formulated around the processes of scandal. Chapter three then discusses what Girard's hermeneutic reveals about trends on social media, specifically those which foster negative reciprocity. To create a better understanding of how trends on social media function mimetically, this chapter analyses popular hashtags and movements on social media such as the EFF's campaign strategies, the coverage of gender-based violence in 2019, and the downfall of the YouTube celebrity James Charles. All of these trends and movements can be defined in "scatological" terms, in essence scandal at the level of language (to use Alberg's terminology). Moreover, these movements demonstrate how social media are able to amplify certain ideas and how they become a tool for the containment and transmission of mimetic violence. These trends reveal, to use McLuhan's terminology, how social media occupy a space that is essentially 'cool' but tend towards being 'overheated'. This is also a space where individuals tend to entertain their inner desires and this creates the impression of popularity as well as a fabricated sense of connectedness.[5] Lastly, Chapter three explores how social media relate to sacrifice through techniques of ostracization and discrimination allied with a connection to violence and mythology which reveal a sacrificial essence.

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[5] Marwick (2015:333) explains that the concept of celebrity has altered as a result of transformation in the media. In recent years, there have been seismic shifts in the idea of celebrity, from being solely affiliated to mass and traditional forms of media to one that mirrors the social media sphere.

Chapter four begins by bolstering the ideas discussed in Chapter three through the exploration of the natural "mimetic" reaction on social media, and in politics through an analysis of the media-saturated context of the coronavirus pandemic. Using a mimetic interpretation of the coronavirus pandemic, this chapter provides insights into the mimetic character of social media and its immense capacity to change and transform what is perceived as reality. At issue here is not so much the truth or falsehood of assertions, as the fact that such assertions uncover patterns formulated by mimetic desire. In addition, Chapter four reflects upon the finer attributes of mimesis and the need to evade scandal, specifically by fostering forms of positive reciprocity, namely joy and humour. There are thus two possibilities at play in mimetic desire: movement towards positive mimesis or negative mimesis. Furthermore, reflections upon Girard's interpretation of laughter reveal how humorous and joyous content on social media can elude scandal, by permitting access to reality and bringing us closer to his interpretation of the 'truth'. Chapter five then builds on ways to foster positive reciprocity by discussing possible ways to mitigate the scandalous on social media using Jeremiah Alberg's hermeneutics of forgiveness. Alberg (2013a) emphasises the possibility of moving beyond scandal. Crucially, Alberg's hermeneutics of forgiveness offer a new outlook of reality, one that allows us to understand the nature of the overwhelming amount of information that consumes the internet.

Lastly, the conclusion comprises of a summary of the chapters and delineates the contributions of the study. The conclusion also includes the limitations of the study and suggests areas of research that may strengthen discourse in mimetic theory in relation to digital culture.

2. CHAPTER TWO: UNDERSTANDING MIMETIC THEORY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Mimesis is the biocultural web in which we are entangled; it tends to be hidden but it is inescapable. As human beings, we are entrapped in its threads, and the spirals that enmesh us—our friends, family, work colleagues and the groups we belong to online — have a mimetic influence on our thoughts and actions every day. Mimesis may not always be readily perceptible, but it forms part of an environment that people "feel with all of their senses" (Lawtoo 2019:200). Individuals might not be aware of it, particularly if they are accustomed to their given environment. Nevertheless, it affects them intensely.

Mimetic theory is useful when analysing the nature of human behaviour and relations (Girard 2008:56). The mimetic mechanism is used to characterise the development of mimetic desire into mimetic rivalry, inevitably escalating to the point of a mimetic crisis that results in the scapegoat phenomenon. To gain a greater understanding of this sequence and its relevance to social media, this chapter seeks to clarify mimetic theory as a theoretical framework. It shows how mimetic theory is restructured around the processes of scandal in its varied forms and demonstrates how it applies to all concepts of mimetic rivalry. Scandal derives from the Greek word *skandalon*, meaning "stumbling block", "snare," or "trap" (Alberg 2017:482).[6] Since this study deals with the scandalous nature of social media from a mimetic perspective, and the primary objective of this chapter is to explore mimetic theory as a theoretical framework, this chapter begins by exploring the initial stages of the mimetic mechanism — mimetic desire — and how one can be scandalised in this process.

2.1 Mimetic desire

René Girard (2008:56) contends that "[t]he intense capacity of humans to imitate is what forces them to become what they are". Human desire is, to a great extent, mediated desire. Girard refers to this concept as "mimetic desire" after the Greek word "mimesis" meaning "to imitate". In order to understand the distinctive character of mimetic desire, a distinction between appetites and desires is necessary. Girard (2008:56) explains that appetites are instinctual or "biologically grounded," such as appetites for food or sex. However, appetites can be tainted with mimetic desire when there is a model present. Girard refers to the character Sancho Panza in Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and explains that Panza'a response to cheese and wine is instinctual and natural; his craving is triggered by simply seeing the desired objects (cited by Palaver 2013:35).

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[6] The Hebrew name given to mimetic rivalry and its aftermath is "skandalon". It translates as scandal, which is an impediment that is difficult to evade as opposed to a simple impediment that we can conquer (Alberg 2017:482).

However, Girard contends that these natural cravings or appetites fail to explain the nature of desire.[7] Human desire is not rooted in the subject but instead in the desires that encompass the subject. In fact, people are unaware of what to desire, and this leads them to imitate the desires of others (Palaver 2013:36). Girard (2008:58) contends that "[m]imetic desire is what makes us human, what makes it possible for the breakout from routinely animalistic appetites, and constructs our own, albeit, unstable identities."

The capacity for mimetic desire is innate in human beings. Passion, a form of heightened desire, emerges when ambiguous yearnings are exercised on a model to signal what one should desire, which usually takes the form of desiring the model (Girard 2001:29). Girard refers to this concept as metaphysical desire which involves a deficiency of being that prospers by desiring the being of a model (cited by Palaver 2013:76). Once fundamental necessities are acquired, an individual gives into heightened desires, even when not aware of what such desires mean. Ultimately, 'being' is desired — a quality or character an individual feels she lacks and which another individual appears to possess (Palaver 2013:76). The subject refers to the mediator or model for cues regarding what she should desire so that she can possess this elusive 'being'. If the model, who apparently possesses this being, desires an object, that object then seems to become a means by which this abundance of being can be acquired.

2.2 Mimetic rivalry

In Girardian terms, scandal is used to characterise the presence of a mimetic model who has evolved into an alluring hinderance. The model's repulsiveness intensifies the subject's desire and spawns aggravation, hatred, fury and resentment. The more the subject is saturated with desire, the greater the likelihood of pursuing and obsessing with an impediment that cannot be conquered. As scandals disperse, they infect human relations and endanger the social bonds that unite society (Alison & Palaver 2017:540). Scandal thus becomes useful for interpreting mimetic rivalry, and it converses analogously with the concept of idolatry and "interpersonal deification". In Girardian terms, the expulsion of true divine being results in the adoration and deification of one's neighbour. In our modern world, individuals abandon traditional forms of divinity and opt for seeking the divine self in the other (Palaver 2013:19). This deification of the other relates to the anthropology of Ludwig Feuerbach who, one might say, is intent on exploring how men become gods for one another (Palaver 2013:21). McKenna (2002:4) contends that idolatry designates at the communal level what scandal designates at an interpersonal level.

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[7] Girard separates himself from all theories that perceive violence between humans as instinctual or unconscious, as mimetic theory has been frequently misinterpreted in this manner (Palaver 2013:36).

In other words, scandal refers to something that we are dissatisfied with in the behaviours of others, but this only cloaks our own mimetic desires, which collude with the being of the other. McKenna (2002:6) compares scandal to idolatry's guilty "secret"; it allows individuals to condemn another's idolatry, which seems to not share any similarity with their own idolatry. Nevertheless, this idolatry is rooted in mimetic desire itself.

Although it is more frequently a single person whom an individual idolises, the model can also take on the form of a community. Thus, desire has three participants — a subject, an object of desire and a model or mediator. The shape of a triangle can be used to explain Girard's mimetic theory. The apex depicts the mediator, the two vertices depict the imitating subject and object (Palaver 2013: 58). Girard (2001:29) contends that desire is completely detached from oneself and that it stems from others. Therefore, there is a 'social aspect' to desire; desire heightens for both individuals (Girard 2001:31).

Oughourlian (2009:32) explains that this relationship with the other is fundamental and should not be understood as a relationship between two individuals, but instead as a back and forth motion of shaping each other's selves-of-desire. Mimetic desire is not merely a mirror effect; it is rather behaviours or attitudes that one develops that transform our relationships with others. Desire is a force of attraction exercised and maintained by each individual in relation to others that supplies the psychological energy necessary for action. Mimetic desire does not gain its energy from anything other from the relationship to the other (Oughourlian 2009:32). From here on, my use of the more common word *individual* should be taken as implying this Girardian notion of the *interdividual.*[8] Because desire is mimetic and replicated from the other's desire, it receives from the other both its energy and its purpose (Oughourlian 2009:32). Again, the self is reconstructed in the midst of its relationships.

We are constantly being transformed, moulded and penetrated by otherness, resulting in a break from ourselves and our model so that we can take on the desires of another whom we perceive as possessing the excess of being that we lack (Oughourlian 2009:32). If we take into account the way that society is structured and at our lifestyles within this structure, we begin to realise that mimetic desire moulds the decisions we have made, from minor decisions such as what to eat, to more significant life decisions such as our religious beliefs or career paths.

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[8] In *Inventing the individual: The origins of western liberalism (2014),* Larry Siedentop explains that the concept of an 'individual' was invented. The 'individual' is a modern interpretation of the self which is independent whereas Girard's notion of the interdividual suggests a more 'porous' self.

Because of mimetic desire, the individual will aim for the identical object attained by her model. This individual either exists in the same 'milieu', as her model or in an alternative milieu.

If an individual exists in a separate or alternative world from their model, he will be unable to attain his model's object. What emerges is what Girard (2008:56) refers to as a "relationship of external mediation". For instance, if an individual and his beloved soccer idol exist in separate worlds, then an explicit rivalry between subject and object is not conceivable. On the other hand, if an individual desires what a model who exists in the same 'world' desires, with the objective of possessing the object lusted after through the model, he acquires this object. Thus, conflict between these individuals becomes unavoidable. This inevitably results in mimetic rivalry and what Girard (2008:58) refers to as a "relationship of internal mediation". When an imitator seeks to take away from his model the object of shared desire; the model opposes and desire heightens for both individuals. As Girard (2001:31) contends: "The model becomes the imitator of his imitator and vice versa". The individual's behaviour is reciprocated and defined in an acute reciprocal imitation that intensifies the 'likeness' or 'sameness' between the rivals. The more an individual moves towards sameness, and thus towards rivalry, the more this creates what Girard (2008:58) refers to as (mimetic) doubles or doubling. Doubling takes place when the object is eliminated during heightened stages of conflict - two rivals are fixated on competing with each other, as opposed to possessing the object. In fact, as rivalry increases, the object becomes of least concern, with its presence merely acting as a false justification for heightened rivalry.

Girard (2001:58) refers to undifferentiation as what happens when rivals start to resemble each other. The focus on revenge intensifies rapidly. McKenna (2002:4) argues that if desire is a form of prolonged appropriation, then resentment is the excruciating feeling of prolonged revenge against those who impede the fulfilment of that desire by inhibiting appropriation. The strain in these forces, essential to comprehending the intermingling of the sacred and profane's transcendent purpose within the realm of universal desire, is what Girard calls scandal. If one looks from the outside inwards, the predominance of violence makes it apparent that the rivals are confronted with an exchanged dispute. However, an entirely separate interpretation emerges. With regard to the increasing rate at which violence occurs, and with which the rivals take up the places of accomplishment and failure, they are unable to differentiate between the two. Such conflicting instances rapidly merge into one thing; the rivals view one another and dispute each other as "monsters" (cited by Palaver 2013:145). An outsider is aware of the same character of the enemy, or the doubles, whereas the rivals themselves generate perceptions of one another as malicious beings.

The opposing individuals are deranged by their own delusion of each other and are not capable of discerning their own double character (Palaver 2013:148). All deranged rivals have a tendency towards doubling, and as a result, all doubles, on a deeper level, have malicious characteristics (Palaver 2013:148). Girard refers to this phenomenon as the "monstrous double" (Girard 1977:145). Girard explains that the monstrous double is the delusion or monstrous exchange introduced in the midst of mimetic crisis (cited by Bubbio 2018:9). The monster replaces what the subject desires; in other words, the monster replaces the rival. During this spiralling, individuals double each other in escalating rivalry, and this heightens the illusionary happenings of doubling. Scandal aggravates this "mimetic snowballing" as it spawns more rivalry at an intensified rate.

A crisis of differentiation emerges when the subject and model are seen purely as rivals. Mimetic crisis heightens as those on the periphery of the rivalry become ensnared and infected by this frenzy. The paradox of mimetic desire is that it appears to be directed at an object. However, it reveals itself to be entirely self-seeking. When this happens, individuals who are ensnared by it direct their attention at an alternative model or rival. We exist in an era of scandals where this type of shift in desires proliferates in society. Scandal is the most common of mimetic relations and elevates the equivocal essence, both captivation and repulsion, of human desire. Because scandal sets up those who are consumed by it to fail, encountering the same hindrance continuously — that is, its compulsive repetition — results in its own dissemination, similar to a contagion (Girard 2001:125). Girard refers to scandal as something that is habit-forming and obsessive; it simultaneously entices and repulses, such as "drugs, sex, power and competitiveness" (cited by Cowdell 2013:23). These hinderances entice individuals in heightened stages of mimeticism. Girard compares scandal to an "aching tooth that we cannot stop testing with our tongue, even though it hurts there" (cited by Cowdell 2013:23).

Thus, the distinguishing attribute of imitators is compliance — "herd behaviour". Martin Heidegger characterises the "inauthentic self" as the "they" of group recklessness and mindlessness (cited by Girard 2001:37). In *The crowd*, Gustave LeBon (1895) refers to this herd behaviour as a collective mind. The group evolves into an organised crowd and it creates an individual being (cited by Tratner 2013:26). These changes do not always take place with groups of people but in particular environments. An individual on her own, may be a cultured being capable of individual thought; however, in a crowd she is a "barbarian" (cited by Tratner 2013:26).

Thus, passive imitation surrenders the struggle to establish individuality and results in undifferentiation (Girard 2001:37). In *Love in the time of the zombie contagion: A Girardian-Weilienne reading of World War Z,* Reyburn (2017:53) refers to undifferentiation as excessive consolidation through mimetic desire which brings about the impossibility of authentic communication and connection between self and other. Other than a crisis of identity, undifferentiation can be understood as having two other key senses. It refers to mass depersonalisation, whereby individuals become numbers and figures and it refers to numerous conditions of collective rest and unrest (Reyburn 2017:53). Thus, the more the rivals start mirroring each other, the more they relate to each other. Undifferentiation is a form of violence which endangers our very existence as its violence is rooted in excessive imitation. Individuals are quick to call out the hostility in their rival but cannot recognise their own intensified vindictiveness and jealously. In undifferentiation, we cannot distinguish between our rival's actions and our own. The result is an absurd exchanged hostility that individuals feel towards each other. This happens because desires are shackled or inhibited in the interdividual relation: when a minor scandal becomes self-seeking, it gravitates towards a major scandal, often proliferated by media. Thus, instead of gravitating towards a specific rival, mimesis itself becomes corrupted. This indicates an expanding crisis.

2.3 The desire-self and a false sense of the autonomy

"An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid the grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will" Gustave Lebon (1895:[sp]).

Mimeticism contradicts the myth of autonomy. At its worst, it can bring about a coercion by others and the surrendering of will to popular demands and shared beliefs (Girard 2001:37). Desire is fabricated and stems from the other. Thus, conflict and rivalry must be interpreted as an affirmation of the mimetic essence of our desires. Nonconformists are deluded if they believe that they no longer imitate anyone; that they have actively conquered their model. Competition is ingrained into our existence (Girard 2001:37). Individualism, its affinity with desires and assuring difference, authenticity and greater being, derives from models. This modern, idealistic conception of human beings attempts to create a better image of the reality of Western communities that are saturated in envy and that internal mediation generates. Nonconformists seem to desire to be what they want to be in our modern era of ungoverned desire; however, in actuality they are merely committing their thoughts and energies unknowingly to mimetic desire and rivalry. Thus, while seeking desires that generate the idea of autonomy and uniqueness on a surface level, individuals are captivated by internal mediation and ultimately remain the same as others. It is thus in the movements of mimetic desire that culture is created (Cowdell 2013:45).

Mimetic theory argues that there is no self who is distinct from desire, that it is desire that triggers the self, and that the self is a "self-of-desire" or "desire-self" (Oughourlian 2009:34). Owing to the fact that our consciousness is generated by otherness, it can be transformed and modified by, and in relation to, the other. This is why Oughourlian and Girard are disinterested in the concept of an 'individual,' interpreted as a self-restricted and self-encompassing entity that can uncover the origin of its identity and autonomy within itself. Oughourlian (2009:34) ignores traditional psychology that defines that type of self, choosing instead the concept of "interdividuality". The real psychological reality is not placed within the individual but is found in the relation between two individuals. This psychological relationship, this ongoing engagement, is entirely mimetic (Oughourlian 2009:34). It is typified by the exchanged action of imitation and suggestion, transmitted from one person to the other, an equal motion that we make and alter constantly (Oughourlian 2009:34). Our desires, and thus ourselves, are generated in that "in between", in that relation; the self is visible, exposed, and revealed within itself, but the result is a continuous mode of reestablishment within our continuous exchanges with those around us. It cannot be formulated other from these exchanges (Oughourlian 2009:34).[9]

2.4 The scapegoating mechanism

The concept of mimetic desire at this point appears inherent to "inter-individual relationships," however, it can also have a detrimental impact on communities, bringing about a mimetic crisis and obliterating social hierarchies (Girard 2008:64). As this exchanged imitation between rivals occurs, doubling builds a rivalrous spirit that spreads to those on the margins of the rivalry. As this conflict ensnares more individuals, its mimetic appeal intensifies. The concern for competing for the object dissipates with the rise of conflict. This is a crucial stage of the mimetic mechanism because as the expansion of doubles takes place, a mimetic crisis occurs. Hatred and violence by increasing antagonisms and hostilities bring about the chaos of "all against all" (Girard 2008:64).

Amidst the chaos, individuals become fixated on a victim who is accused of causing the chaos and of being the one who brought about the community's state of crisis.

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[9] In terms of autonomy, it becomes worthwhile to consider George Simmel's ideas on fashion which assert Girard's concept of mimeticism. Imitation and the desire for difference are not paradoxical, but simply complex modes of the same idea (cited by Palaver 2013:69). Simmel refers to the "anti-mimetic" fashion. The effort to portray one's non-imitative essence by modes of imitation is explicitly a form of "negative imitation" (cited by Palaver 2013:69). When an individual dresses himself in an unconventional way, he does not acquire the sense of autonomy through any actual distinct credentials of his own, but instead through the simple negation of the social manifestation. If modernity is the imitation of this social manifestation, then the purposeful deficiency of modernity demonstrates an analogous imitation, however, belongs to a switched symbol, but regardless gives the same confirmation of the hold of the social tendency.

What prevents the community from self-obliteration is the channelling of all animosity and hostility towards this victim. However, that victim is not any less culpable than any other, even if the entire community is under the impression that he is (Girard 2008:64). The escalation of scandals and rivalries is what introduces chaos and instability into society. However, this chaos is vanquished when a community's internal state of violence is directed against the scapegoat to reinstate peace and harmony.

The scapegoat mechanism generates a kind of fake transcendence that creates harmony in society and an order that is not permanent; it will inevitably regress into a disorder of scandals (Alberg 2017:487). Social order is established from chaos, for the chaos of this nature is the vanquishing of any disputed objects identified during the conflict, and it is at this stage that acquisitive mimesis changes into antagonistic mimesis which has a propensity to consolidate conflict against an opposition. This disorderly violence of "all against all" escalates into the violence of "all against one". The individual is murdered, sacrificed or expelled by the community (Palaver 2013:151). Essentially any mode of violence in this environment of communal possession has the potential to result in the unanimous violence of everyone against a particular individual. Nearly any individual in society can be sacrificed in this process (Palaver 2013:151). Mimesis brings together all members of the community against someone and thus provides a sense of communal harmony. Solidarity is restored.

All forms of violence and animosity that were formerly spread throughout the community now take the shape of conflicts channelled towards an individual (Palaver 2013:152). The community perceives the individual as accountable for the development of the crisis and ultimately the manifestation of all heinous behaviour. The tragedy of the prior crisis becomes embodied in one particular being (Palaver 2013:152) and the community addresses one individual, who has evolved into the scapegoat. Owing to the fact that rivals can never share the object of desire, this decision to expel the victim satisfies the community. If we analyse the way in which the scapegoat phenomenon operates, it results in a scandal that dominates others, and thus creates one victim. Because one victim has been banished or killed, there is no opportunity for animosity and retaliation to arise. After all, the entire community has directed their anger at this victim. Thus, reconciliation and peace are reconstituted in the community, and the community does not give itself credit for the harmony; it attributes this harmony to the victim who has been banished from the community (Girard 2008:66).

This is destructive because it brings about a crisis. However, it is also constructive because the victim's death results in harmony. Thus, at least anthropologically speaking, the scapegoat is deified (Girard 2008:66).

Girard (2008:68) notes that the victim is not completely randomly selected, even if a measure of arbitrariness can be observed. He highlights that throughout history there have been certain groups of people or individuals who have been prone to being scapegoated, such as disabled people, women and immigrants. These "symbols of victimisation" make an individual more vulnerable to being chosen as a scapegoat. They are used to justify the targeting of individuals and, although these rationalisations are nonsensical and scandalous, they reinforce Girard's idea of a scapegoat being arbitrarily chosen. When a scapegoat has been selected, anything translates as a sign and all members of the community are deluded into thinking that they have identified the perpetrator. If individuals are aware of the innocence of the scapegoat, the community would not enact violently against the victim. In order for the scapegoat mechanism to be effective, the community should not recognise the innocence of the scapegoat (Dumouchel 2014:84).

The scapegoat phenomenon operates similar to "fake news" — something has been uncovered and individuals adopt the viewpoints of those around them without asking questions or verifying its truth. Thus, the position and biases of the crowd are affirmed. The scapegoat mechanism takes place when the major scandal consumes the minor scandal until there exists one scandal and one victim. There is an inclination towards scandal, frenzied in the uncovering, condemning and "differentiating". Public feuds operate in a similar manner. Thus, an individual is capable of mimetically luring an entire group of people into the scandal of others. A mimetic crisis says more about those coercing others to get involved in the scandal, than it does about the victim (Cowdell 2013:44). However, Girard argues that the victim of this contagion is exhilarated and causes commotion in the crowd by selecting a mediator from amongst them. Furthermore, the victim makes an effort to pull his model down to his level.

Individuals in the community have long-established grievances and mimetic blockage motivates their perturbed and misleading behaviour. Thus, McKenna contends: "Scandal gratifies our craving for a sense of our own worth" (quoted in Cowdell 2013:45). Scandal also creates a moral righteousness that is developed to achieve an advantage over its adversaries as opposed to building any credentials of its own. The growing animosity that individuals feel towards each other is a result of expanding mimetic rivalry which transforms into larger animosity directed at an arbitrary aspect of society. The death or banishment of the victim brings an end to the chaos as the redirection of animosity and hatred is kindled. Thus, the significance of the scapegoat mechanism lies in its ability to redirect collective violence against one arbitrarily selected individual from the community; this victim becomes the "common enemy" of the whole community to bring about peace and harmony (Girard 2008:65).

The mimetic essence of this process is evident in ritual, where each stage of the mimetic mechanism is performed. Often rituals begin with constructed disorder with an intentional replicated cultural crisis, and ends with the banishment and murder of a victim. The intention is merely to emulate the mimetic crisis which leads to the scapegoat mechanism. In doing so, members of the community foresee the regeneration of harmony and peace to the community (Girard 2008:65). Ritual is a cultural embodiment that equips itself for the sacrificial resolution, however, its primary purpose is to govern violence. Thus, ritual conceals violence through violence. The scapegoat mechanism is a prerequisite of cultural order and the advancement of culture. Thus, culture evolves through ritual.

In order to prohibit unforeseen incidents of mimetic violence, practices of organised, governable, mediated, episodic, ritualised and designated violence are established. Ritual brings an end to crisis and appears at the same stage of the mimetic crisis. Girard (2008:72) compares ritual to a regulatory board that governs crisis, such as the crisis of death which permits funeral rituals. Girard (2008:72) contends that whether the crisis is fictitious or real, either one will end in chaos. Ritual is designated as "legitimate violence" to keep violence in check. Where the law permits corporal punishment, for instance, the repetition of the founding murder is performed. In historical times, the entire community would participate in this type of punishment by stoning or flogging the victim and nobody would be held accountable. This, Girard contends, is the foundation for the birth of a new culture.

In *Intellectual sacrifice,* Paolo Diego Bubbio (2018:4) asserts that rituals are an effort to generate a method of purification. The scapegoat or ritual victim, is a successor for the victim of the initial banishment. Individuals would not be able to rid themselves of their own violence if there was no redemptory victim to banish. Furthermore, members of the community would not be able to banish the victim if they were aware of the transmission of violence from them onto the scapegoat. The success of sacrifice is reliant on this "misrecognition" or "*meconnaissance*". In some instances, the mimetic crisis could be the result of a disastrous incident such as disease or drought.[10] Girard offers numerous examples of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry in biblical texts and myths.

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[10] The scapegoat mechanism takes effect when the community displaces mimesis of the desired object — which eventually takes the form of antagonistic mimesis — and gives way for polarisation against the victim. The entire sequence is embodied in this polarisation. It is necessary in order to bring an end to the crisis as is the transference from the desire of the object, which separates the imitators, to the antagonism of the rival, which brings harmony when the animosity is directed at one victim. Conflictual mimesis then transforms into reconciliatory mimesis (Girard 2008:65).

He contends that myths have an aspect of truth and "referentiality" and that, contrary to what most people think, they are not the construction of uneducated people (Girard 2008:62). Girard also explains that myths are modes of grouping and arranging knowledge, and this knowledge is linked to desire and sacrifice.[11]

2.5 Girard's interpretation of myth and texts of persecution

Girard compares "medieval texts of persecution" to myth in order to illustrate scapegoating phenomena. The medieval texts that mention the assassination of Jews — as a form of retribution for the supposed contamination of wells that resulted in the plague — are perceived today as "texts of persecution," which implies that the Jews were scapegoated during the plague (Palaver 2013:10). Furthermore, Girard demonstrates how myths can be decoded in a synonymous manner to texts of persecution. Girard highlights that medieval texts relate the banishment of Jewish victims from the point of view of their persecutors. He also asserts that myths are records of mob violence channelled towards a sole victim from the point of view of the persecutors; history is written by the victors. Therefore, myths stem from violence and strive to lure others into thinking that the scapegoat created chaos in a community. The difference between medieval texts of persecution and myths is that the latter obscure and mask what is really going on; thus, they require decoding (Palaver 2013:10). Girard also makes use of texts of persecution like incidents of mob violence against Jews, witches, immigrants and the ill. Violent behaviour is primarily linked to instances of crisis, particularly the contagion. There are scarce historical sources that supply any factual or rational testimony of these persecutions. The testimonies that do exist are mostly skewed because they are recounted from the viewpoint of the persecutor. Girard therefore postulates that texts of persecution are rooted in real violence. Furthermore, he identifies four attributes of "stereotypes of persecution".

Girard first references the "stereotype of crisis" whereby the social order or hierarchy of society is in chaos. Irrespective of the motivation behind the cause of the crisis, it ultimately results in the downfall of cultural order. The differences within the community disappear and a deficit of differentiation arises. Secondly, Girard refers to the "stereotype of accusation". The persecutors detect the crises of non-differentiation and resort to crimes that eliminate differences within the group. Allegations associated with persecutions of Jews depict many such crimes. The third stereotype involves selection victims.

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[11] Desire is evidently portrayed as mimetic in biblical texts. Eve is persuaded to eat the apple by a snake, and Adam desires the exact same object through Eve. This demonstrates an apparent sequence of imitation. Girard (2008:62) Girard also mentions the aspect of envy in the killing of Abel by Cain.

Throughout history, particular communities or specific individuals have been accused and murdered repeatedly. There are particular qualities that appear to doom individuals to being scapegoated. Girard refers to these as "symbols of victimisation," which, he argues, depict a difference separate from the cultural structure that approximates difference within the group, and brings about anxiety amongst the individuals. Archetypal qualities of victims consist of cultural differences, physical qualities such as being disabled or having features that are not consistent with the norm, gender (women), vulnerability (children and elderly), and possessing a high social or political status (politicians, individuals in power) (Palaver 2013:186). The fourth factor of persecution texts is the "stereotype of violence". This is the most fundamental and comprehensible of all the stereotypes.

At the height of crisis, the individuals within the mob behave violently and assault the victims they perceive to be accountable for disorders (Palaver 2013:186). Girard mentions that not every stereotype needs to be apparent. The presence of at least two stereotypes indicates that violent behaviour and crisis is certain. The victims are selected not because of the actions they are blamed for but because of the characteristics they exhibit, since it is the characteristics that indicate their culpability and connection with the crisis. The strategy is to hold victims accountable for the crisis by eliminating these victims or by expelling them from the community that they have contaminated.[12]

Myths show an inclination to conceal their violent attributes, which Girard translates as Freud and Derrida's concept of "effacement of traces". Frequently, the first attribute to disappear is mob violence, which is substituted by individual violence. In the final stages of the crisis, remnants of individual violence disappear as well. This "effacement of traces" originates from the religious confusion which is evident during the inception of myth. Girard's mode of analysis becomes complicated as the myth progresses, specifically in later mythologies. Furthermore, there is confusion at the core of mythical accounts. The religious uncovering of the sacred is a lot more apparent in myths than in texts of persecution.

Mythical accounts are rooted in what Girard refers to as the "mythological crystallisation" whereby the veiling of the incident is not possible (cited by Rose 2017:127).

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[12] This methodology is typically acknowledged by modern discourses. Girard's authenticity lies in his application of this theory to examine myths and persecution texts. However, Girard's mode of analysing myth has many ethnologists uncertain and doubtful as they believe myths cannot be decoded so simply (Palaver 2013:188). In response to these opposing views, Girard has rewritten texts of persecution to demonstrate how the repositioning of a myth in a recognisable historical setting is able to generate greater comprehension of its persecutory essence. Girard contends that an individual should look into the history or development of methodology.

An individual can differentiate between myths and texts of persecution by examining the two phases of the scapegoat mechanism, manifested in Girard's idea of "double transference" (cited by Hodge 2017:517). If one compares myths and texts of persecution by referencing "negative transference" — that is mob violence and animosity directed at one victim — the accused appears to be affiliated solely with criminal actions. The blame is placed on the victim, and her existence in the community is enough to induce a crisis. On the other hand, in texts of persecution, there is an attempt to determine a correlation between the alleged perpetrators and their crimes. The more detached or separate this correlation appears, the simpler it is to translate historical texts of persecution. In terms of "positive transference," one can differentiate between myths and texts of persecution. In myth, although the scapegoat is accountable for the crisis, he generates peace and harmony in the community. The scapegoat is both a sinister entity and a beneficent god. In antithesis, texts of persecution, the positive transference — the sacred — is not apparent. Jews, for example, have been perceived in some persecution texts as being sinister and can only induce animosity. The non-existent positive transference allows for a simpler interpretation of the texts of persecution. The victims are depicted explicitly as the perpetrator, whereas the sacred attributes in myth makes the unveiling of the violence more difficult. Ultimately, if one applies this mode of analysis to texts of persecution and to myth, it illuminates the nature of myth as being inextricably linked to the sacred. Moreover, because scapegoating forms the foundation of all cultures, it becomes possible to find how it stems from myth (Bubbio 2018:5).

Generally, the scapegoat is seen in an unfavourable light in myths, and the banishment is interpreted as a positive event. "Misrecognition" is essential in the formation of ritual (Bubbio 2018:5). In other words, scapegoating is only effective if the members of the community believe in its power. Every demystification of the structure results in a deterioration of the intended effect. The sacrificial crisis translates as undifferentiation, which is essentially a violent misunderstanding. In the development from ritual to secular establishments or modernism, individuals isolate themselves from elemental violence, but never detach from it. Thus, the expulsion of myths scandalises a society as myths are fundamental to every culture (Bubbio 2018:8). They are accounts of historic sacrificial crises. As Girard contends, 'The expulsion of myths is therefore nothing less than the intellectualised version of the original violence and it is with this expulsion that, significantly, Western culture is born. Cultures seek new justifications of expulsion of victims' (cited by Bubbio 2018:8).

Girard's work consists mainly of disclosing relationships in a world saturated with violent mimeticism and the subjects are always a part of a mob that is incapable of individual or intellectual thought.

However, Bubbio (2018:18) challenges this notion by asserting that if the subjects refer to human beings, their relationships are ritualised. Thus, they can be perceived as being intellectual because the nature of this relationship needs to be indoctrinated in order to be internalised by others.

Therefore, in Bubbio's view, the banishment of the scapegoat may be accomplished in an intellectual form and the scapegoating mechanism possesses an intellectual essence.

2.6 Mimetic theory and consumer culture

At this point, mimetic theory appears to be only applicable to archaic communities who enact primitive violence and where the selection of the sacrificial victim is explicit. However, desire has become ever-present with the advent of modernism. In our modern era, mimetic desire thrives in a culture where there is a proliferation of models to select from and where there is a disappearance of class and other differences. Thus, external mediation in our modern era has imploded. Individuals that occupy the lowest social position desire what people at the highest position of the social order possess. They believe that they must possess certain objects, whereas, in historical times social restrictions and hierarchies did not allow for members of specific social classes to access particular items which were scarce and governed by those in higher social orders and classes.[13] Girard (2008:74) contends that in a ruthless and vicious society, like most archaic communities, violence stems from necessity. Furthermore, not all violence is mimetic, also stemming from scarcity. However, even if one considers necessities, when conflict envelops an object, it will inevitably become corrupted by mimesis.

In *The ambivalence of scarcity*, Dumouchel (2014:4) explains that scarcity causes an individual's desires to concentrate on identical objects and this causes conflict. In economic theory, scarcity is characterised as goods that are accessible to individuals in small amounts but not enough to meet the desires of everybody. If the goods available are not sufficient to satisfy the desires and needs of people, it is certain that violence will take place either in modes of injustice, forms of deceitful and conniving behaviour, or in physical violence with the aim of vanquishing those who possess goods in abundance. Scarcity diminishes individuals and causes them to engage in conflict with one another (Dumouchel 2014:4).

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[13] Girard explains how the changes in the 1900s regarding the manner in which people communicated changed attitudes towards envy (Vandenberg 2006:262). The upper class provided a model for the middle class, which in turn, provided the models for the lower class, these hierarchies ensured continuous repetitive imitative behaviour. The progressions and expansions made in mass production, which allowed products that had once only been accessible to wealthy members of society, became accessible to individuals of both middle and working classes. With the growth in the availability of products, the world transformed (Vandenberg 2006:262). In addition to the lower classes imitating the upper classes, the barriers between classes became more undefined. Those in the upper classes were constantly re-establishing their superiority to their growing "inferiors," creating an alternating relationship between model and imitator (Vandenberg 2006:265). As the number of individuals who became envious grew, the meaning of contentment transformed.

Based on this, one may assume that scarcity rather than mimesis is the root cause of violence. But this interpretation brings us to the idea of economic prosperity and a thriving consumer culture as a means of achieving peace because it is a way of guaranteeing infinite resources and goods. It is possible to consider scarcity as the basis of order in modes of economic activity because economic prosperity motivates individuals to create different industries that allow for more economic growth. Scarcity is perceived as both the cause of disorder and the basis of order; it is therefore "ambivalent" (Dumouchel 2014:9).[14] Because of this, Dumouchel essentially favours modern society and finds consumerism positive. He asserts that consumerism can be used to combat mimetic rivalry and diminish its conflictual power. In essence, by making goods accessible to everybody, society has lowered the possibility of conflict and rivalry. Girard (2008:79), however, disputes this argument and explains that modern consumer societies can reach a point where they no longer desire these "universally" accessible items. Girard contends that with the advent of the modern world, consumer society makes goods more accessible. However, it renders them undesirable and thus devours itself. Similar to the sacrificial resolution, consumer society has to discard goods so that it can endure and survive. The trend, however, is for all sacrificial resolutions to lose their potency the more abundant they become. At best, then, consumerism is an incomplete solution to problems of mimetic rivalry and violence.

Consumer society renders mimetic desire as a mechanism of economic prosperity. However, unlike Dumouchel, Girard believes that there are repercussions: the more accessible the objects, the less desirable they become. This system creates a waste society. Girard (2008:80) explains that consumer society consists of an "exchange of signs" as opposed to a trade of real objects. This is the reason that the world has become reductive. After all, in a world where consumption as a symbol of affluence is no longer desirable, one has to look elsewhere so that one may appear appealing (Girard 2008:79). Therefore, an individual has to appear radical in order to impress others. The outcome with this is that everybody makes use of the same tactics and they begin to look identical.

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[14] Instances where there is manageable scarcity allow for economic prosperity, whereas excessive scarcity brings about violence. Both instances are comparable, but the difference lies in the prevalence of goods accessible. If the amount is insufficient and if everybody's desires are not satisfied, then this will result in violence. If there is enough available, but not sufficient to meet people's needs, then envy will induce economic prosperity (Dumouchel 2014:10). Samuelson and Nordhaus explain that high production activities result in increasing consumption values (cited by Dumouchel 2014:11). There is a cyclical causal relationship between accessible objects and an individual's desires. Individuals work, barter, and create industries in order to satisfy their needs and make their desires more attainable. Thus, needs influence production activity. On the other hand, if increasing production activity results in individuals feeling that they 'need' and 'desire' certain goods, it is the abundance of items produced that affects and dictates the extent of needs. In essence, high production activities result in heightened needs, and heightened needs call for higher levels of production activities. The causal relationship of production and needs results in the inability to diminish this distance between available objects from desires (Dumouchel 2014:11). The number of goods can increase boundlessly, and because it determines the extent of needs, the scarcity restrictions stay the same. Scarcity does not diminish; it is continuously revived. Scarcity correlates to no actual amount of available goods and there is no measurement of violence.

Consumer society has the ability to transform its members (us) into idealists in the way it presents objects that will never fulfil everyone's desires. It can trap us in all kinds of futile practices, but it also draws our attention to something that consumer society can never satisfy (Girard 2008:80). Anything can become an object of desire in modern consumer culture. This is because it persists in making products seductive in order to attract a global market which consists of individuals who strive to become the object of desire that the product supposedly guarantees. Although individuals may denounce this consumerist system, it is an effective marketing tactic that is a result of the essence of desire itself, as opposed to any innovative advertising strategy (McKenna 2002:11). What endures in consumer culture is the tactic of desire: mimetic, infectious, mediated and riddled with scandal. Scandal functions through doubling— simultaneously promoting and defying desire, captivating and contaminating the mind. Desire proliferates among the legions of mediations that formulate a 'free' society entrenched in consumerism.

Rather than focus on function, products are cleverly promoted as objects of desire. This saturates society and is advertised as a differentiating attribute of the product shown. Girard refers to this concept as an "obstacle addiction": both captivation by and disgust in the model. Thus, the way in which consumer culture operates spawns scandal addiction. Scandal satisfies our yearning for a feeling of self-worth, a moral character that is developed by its perpetration instead of substantiating its own existence. Consumer society operates scandalously and appears to be a lasting conspiracy prohibiting us from attaining the goals it abnormally ascribes to us (Girard 1996:[sp]). Dupuy refers to consumer society as the most "spiritual of universes," because its concern is not merely materialistic or an abrupt acquisition of material goods. Its attraction and intrigue is rooted in envy (cited by Girard 2008:20). These goods are a sign of envy in which the role of the mediator, of the other, is always present.

In our era, individuals do not live in a civilisation that promotes the character of embracing satisfaction and acceptance of one's lot in life; rather, it advocates that individuals indulge in their desires. For one to be content and satisfied means to have what one desires, to be sufficient of everything and to envy no-one. This inability to achieve contentment through acquisition was visible to all with the advent of modernity. People therefore easily participate in "the uncontrolled human cult of advantage" not because they desire objects, but because they are drawn to the persuasion itself and because they cannot see their desire as metaphysical (Vandenberg 2006:265). Mimetic theory closely examines some of the primary devices of consumer culture itself; it is able to highlight the origins of culture's present embodiments. Mimetic desire generated a shifted transcendence whereby men became gods to one another when they were not worshipping themselves (Alberg & Palaver 2017:354).

In *René Girard and secular modernity: Christ, culture, and crisis*, Scott Cowdell (2013:21) asserts that the commencement of modernism has resulted in heightened instances of violence which began with the movement from external mediation — which is in some way constant and non-threatening since the model is less prone to entering into a rivalrous situations with the subject — toward internal mediation. Girard asserts that envy is simply the exchanged imitation of other's desires in an environment which ensures equality in order to allow for the progression of mimetic rivalries. Modernity intensifies the inner workings of mimetic rivalry. In ancient communities with a definite social order, there is external mediation. In today's world, however, any individual can analyse their lives and ways of living amongst celebrities on television and social media and desire to mimic them. The idea of sharing each other's fortunes has progressed with the rise of modernity. Girard describes our increasingly egalitarian world as an extensive middle-class court where the courtiers are prevalent and the king no longer exists (cited by Cowdell 2013:25).

Modernity is thus mimetically explosive and demonstrates a disintegration of individual social relationships, uncertainty, and mob mentalities, all of which characterise the developing "apocalyptic" attributes of our current era (Cowdell 2013:26). Our modern world has developed diverse and innovative ways of managing rivalries. One of these forms of fulfilment is attained through social media (a form of consumption) and the extensive scandalising at the heart of social media. Having discussed the basics of mimetic theory and its elucidation of the ramifications of mimetic desire in our globalised world, it now becomes possible to raise a few questions about how new forms of media extend and mirror the unrestraint of modernity, and how it generates an environment that embraces equality and subsequently greater rivalries. To answer these questions, Chapter three turns to the mimetic dimensions of social media networks and the 'hidden' contours of these technological environments especially with regard to negative reciprocity.

3. CHAPTER THREE: AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS AND MOVEMENTS THAT FOSTER NEGATIVE RECIPROCITY

This chapter explores what Girard's hermeneutic reveals about social media trends and how these networks spawn violence and promote it because it is founded in scandal—scandal at the violent madness of crowds, or scandal at social media's magnetic allure. To create a better understanding of how social media operate at this level and how mimetic antagonisms tend to be transmitted on these platforms, this chapter analyses popular stories that have trended on social media and which appear to foster negative reciprocity. Before this chapter turns to an analysis of specific social media trends and movements from the perspective of mimetic and, to a lesser degree, media theory, it details in greater depth "social media as a medium". Owing to the fact that social media users are seemingly unaware of what these networks do to them, they have no knowledge of its ubiquitous effects on them. Thus, Mcluhan's (1994:22) assertions become insightful: "it is the medium itself that is the message, not the content"; it functions over and consumes, shapes and transfigures every sense ratio[15]

3.1 Social media as a medium

3.1.1 Scandal at the level of language on social media

As a medium, social media captivate the user's mind. They entice the user yet do not allow her to see how some of the content circulating on these platforms is being sensationalised in a way that most individuals tend to overlook. Social media demonstrate how violence is discharged from the content yet simultaneously shapes the content created. The very platform that individuals turn to in order to gain perspective and comprehend culture, results in the opposite, namely scandal. The platform that seems to guarantee access creates obstruction and obfuscates; therefore, the user is scandalised. Social media users are captivated by varieties of compelling content. desiring to "understand and to be beyond understanding" (to use Alberg's terminology). However, social media content will not free the user. This echoes McLuhan's (1994:22) idea that electronic media is essentially without perspective because of the deep involvement of the senses. Social media tend to be paradoxical. On the one hand, they are cool and low-definition, allowing for ample participation within newly created tribes.

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[15] McLuhan characterises the sense ratio as the control of the many human senses within the human "sensorium". Furthermore, McLuhan contends that various media extend different senses, and their embodiment alters mental processes (Mcluhan 1994:22). He argues that sounds and speech are more essential than written language, and perceives writing and printing as having brought about a perceptual bias; perceiving vision as being superior to other senses in Western cultures. Furthermore, this obstructed the "natural balance of the senses". However, McLuhan perceives electronic media as repairing this balance by "stimulating all the senses simultaneously" (Oxford Reference: Sense Ratio 2020).

On the other hand, they are easily overheated as they frequently engender an environment that is oversaturated with information and therefore, in a sense, high definition media. This does not allow much for space for meaningful dialogue or interpretation from the audience.

Social media users scroll vigorously, obsessively and attentively and yet desire without "seeing". Individuals enter this virtual world, yet feel as if they are spectators. The content on social media remains hidden but, regardless of what it reveals and how intensely we look at it, it cannot deliver. The effect on social media users is apparent: individuals are enticed and kept enthralled, and cannot move beyond this. In essence, users are trapped in a scandalous relationship with social media. When analysing Friedrich Nietzsche's *Birth of tragedy,* for example, Jeremiah Alberg (2013a:27) describes the work as scandalous because it urges us to look but it does not "allow us to [really] see". This is the essential logic of social media, too. Alberg (2013a:27) highlights the following in Nietzsche's work: "for [the image] seemed to reveal as much as it concealed; and while it seemed, with its symbolic revelation, to demand that we tear the veil, that we reveal the mysteries behind it, that brightly lit clarity kept the eye in thrall and resisted further penetration."

This is how social media tend to function, it is a mode of seduction. It prevails by making users "frantic" and 'obsessive,' enticing them with what originally repelled them. Social media users look voyeuristically into the lives of others especially as they become trapped in the deranged 'hysteria' or 'hype'. Users desire to get a glimpse of the lives of the sacred or at sacred content and for the most part, this enigmatic content is composed in such a way that reality is blurred and obscured. To understand the reality, one would have to look beyond the content and engage with it on a deeper level, but social media are designed to prevent that. There is a natural yearning to gain a better understanding and to go further than just 'seeing'; there is a yearning for transcendence which soon manifests as a counterfeit double: violence. The extensive disregard for communication as requiring involvement in a shared situation results in avoiding the mode of communication as being fundamental (McLuhan 1994:20). When media integrates, both form and function alter. Thus, these trends and movements show how social media content is not designed or constituted in way to be analysed in-depth, but rather to produce an effect.

The medium is a space that generates change. Culture and social media are inter-woven because the influence of these platforms is so extensive that it changes and reshapes the culture that adopts it.

As mentioned already, Reyburn's (2017:54) reflections upon McLuhan's theory reveal that the "traditional" function of media has collapsed; rather than media being an extension of people, people become extensions of media. Thus, a person's desires are dictated by social media—by the very form of these media. The roles of subject and object have reversed invoking the submission of subject to object (Reyburn 2017:54). The ability of media to effect change is associated with the concept of language as the human being's initial technology. As McLuhan's says, "[m]edium is the message is a metaphor for metamorphosis" (quoted in Gordan *et al* 2007:39). In other words, that media are more significant than their content implies that it is the medium itself, rather than its content, that generates change.

If one analyses social media and their characteristics, in essence media hosted on open networks which allow anybody to introduce programs on these platforms, (easily accessible platforms made possible by affordable technology, networks touched very lightly by minimal government regulations), it becomes clear that social media have minimised the barriers to content generation and content distribution (Rosa 2018:94). Thus, social media exhibit a democratic character which progresses with advances in technology and grants individuals the ability to instantly take and share visuals and thoughts with others (Du Preez 2018). In this process, individuals become equal and the playing field is levelled. Thus, social media are decidedly (to use McLuhan's descriptor) cool, even if the 'design' is somewhat hot, owing to its mechanical, uniform and repetitive nature. In other words, social media "retribalize" (again, to use McLuhan's terminology). Notably, social media start to echo the patterns that Girard finds in ancient tribes. We would not see a resurgence of this type of tribal structure (scapegoating, et cetera) apart from the tribalisation of media. All of this intimates that social media foster Girard's concept of internal mediation.

3.1.2 Social media and internal mediation

The environment engendered on social media allows for the progression of internal mediation. In internal mediation, the mediator and the individual mediated exist in the same world, unlike in traditional forms of media. Communication does not need the external mediations present in traditional media; instead, it is primarily the basic creation of a social connection between individuals that replicates in social media platforms. Social media platforms intensify present realities while allowing for infinite means of communication (Rosa 2018:100). Also intensified is the competition between users. This comprises of the ongoing pursuit for attention since each person aims to be a model for others through the number of likes or retweets. This phenomenon has achieved extremes on platforms such as Instagram where leading the competition by receiving the highest number of followers appears to be the aim of using the network (Rosa 2018:100).

The process of internal mediation is apparently embodied on social media where the barriers between people of different social statuses have been erased. Individuals who obtain more "cultural capital" or who are of a higher social status are constantly re-establishing their superiority to their growing "inferiors", revealing an alternating relationship between model and imitator.[16] According to Girard, internal mediation is an attribute of modernity rooted in an intensified mimetic process. As the metaphysical space between subject and model disappears on social media, thus increasing the likelihood of internal mediation, the possibility of rivalry and violence escalates (Girard 1977:167). The smaller this space becomes, the greater the possibility that mimesis will result in rivalry and violence. The progression of mimetic desire mirrors the advent of the modern world, where the rise of democracy and equality has translated into the elimination of rigorous hierarchical differences. The restrictions on mimesis cease to exist as internal mediation and replaces external mediation. Thus, the modern world experiences excessive competition, jealousy, rivalry and idolatry (Palaver 2013:61).

3.1.3 Social media and idolatry

On social media, the environment accelerates the extent to which individuals idolise and raise one another to divine status. Girard's mimetic theory provides insights into mankind's inclination towards "worship" and "divinity". Camus argues that the modern world is formulated by a metaphysical revolt and the outcome is a tendency of humans to idolise one another (cited by Palaver 2013:28). Furthermore, he perceives idolatry as resulting in unstoppable torment. Girard argues that methods of deification have existed since the beginning of time and although religious practices are increasingly dissolving with the rise of modernism, mankind's inclination towards worship and deification will prevail in contemporary democratisation. Human-beings require "communality in worship" and features on social media platforms which allow an individual to accumulate "followers" and "friends" fuel an illusory sense of belonging and community.

Certainly, social media platforms are designed to generate and heighten mimetic desire; we desire according to the desire of the other. Profiles and content affiliated with individual profiles are linked by the functions mediating desire such as likes, follows and retweets. Moreover, the signals of desire, which are evident and communicated by such links, accentuate themselves.

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[16] Social capital is characterised as the accumulation of resources which are affiliated to the possession of an everlasting network of relationships of acquaintance and acknowledgment. Social capital characterises binding relationships between people that define and sustain combined comprehension within the fields of cyberspace (Alexander *et al* 2015:8).

Geoff Shullenberger (2016) explains that the more mediated an individual is through the desires of others, the more popular and attractive these individuals become (determined by the number of likes and subscribers). Popularity captivates popularity. Desire creates more desire. The new social media platforms are spaces showing the perpetual desires of individuals (Rosa 2018:99). On these platforms, everyone is to a great extent equal in the worldly pursuit of differentiation; all aim identically or casually for the difference embodied in their individualities made public on Facebook or Instagram or any other social medium (Rosa 2018:99).

Differences fluctuate a great deal and tend towards undifferentiation since each one can effectively establish the main position of difference that comprises being the object of others' attention (Rosa 2018:100). By imitating that public appearance, users can be both the models for and the imitators of each other. Furthermore, social media are grounded in behaviour which can be understood as the most "spiritual of universes" (to use Dupuy's terminology) because its priority is not exclusively materialistic or attainment of physical items, but rather stems from envy. These items are indicators of envy where the role of the mediator, of the other, inevitably exists. In light of this, even while taking the specific messages of social media into account, we need to envision social media as a structuring principle, colluding with mimetic desire, to bring about a number of consequences. Thus, this study turns to more specific examples of how mimetic desire is evident on social media. Notably, while the study singles out the following trends and movements, these should not necessarily be taken as the only possible examples of the consequences of mimesis.

3.2 Social media trends and movements that foster negative reciprocity

The first social media movement and trend that is explored is that which is initiated by the South African political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The group exercise their ability to publicise their socio-political stance while simultaneously mobilising a large number of people on social media. The EFF's campaign strategies are defined in terms of scandal, in essence scandal at the level of language. Their aggressive use of language is justified on the premise that expressing oneself in this manner is a "right" of a so-called marginalised population — working class South African citizens living in poverty.[17] Emotional vehemence and virtuous symbolism define this rebellion.

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[17] The idea that the EFF's members are poor is a myth framed by their own ideological constructions since, on the whole, the EFF tends to have the greatest number of well-educated people (Schreuder 2017:[sp]). Much of the EFF's rhetoric is "mythologization" — at least, it fits what Girard refers to as mythologization. Mythologizing violence implies embodying it, and this brings about "mythic crystallization." Furthermore, the myth is recounted from the perspective of the persecutor; therefore, the arbitrariness of these assertions and other "banishments" are not recognised.

The EFF's leader, Julius Malema, is adored, deified and is 'followed' by many. Thus, movements initiated by the EFF demonstrate how forms of idolatry and scandal are exacerbated on social media through practices that are rooted in mimetic desire. The second social media movement and trend that is analysed is the gender-based violence coverage on social media following the murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana, a nineteen-year-old university student who was raped and killed in the suburb of Claremont, Cape Town in 2019. This movement demonstrates how scandal —especially scandal around a victim — brings about an implicit rivalry.[18] It shows how individuals who are active on these platforms feel the need to belong to a particular group or are coerced into choosing sides. In 'worshiping' the victim, the victim gains a sacred status. This may be perceived as harsh, but the Girardian mode of analysis identifies patterns of archaic religion within the modern sphere. Furthermore, a dichotomous relationship between "against" and "with" comes to fore - scandal clearly focuses on the "against" — the negative. This movement illustrates a general problem that Duncan Reyburn (2018) identifies as "mono-causality" — that is naming a single cause for what is actually a complex and systemic problem.

The third social media trend reflects upon the presence of exaggerated personas and the sense of companionship and intimacy that is constructed and disseminated on social media, homing in on James Charles, a popular YouTube beauty blogger, who makes use of calculated intimacy to captivate potential followers. This example depicts a kind of 'rhetoric of mimeticism'. In addition, given a scandal perpetuated in Charles's name, it demonstrates how social media are closely related to sacrifice. They consist of methods of ostracization, and its resemblance to more explicit forms of violence and mythology reveals its sacrificial essence. Moreover, it demonstrates the distorted dynamics between idolatry, which is public, and scandal, which is initially more private. It assists in showing how our fixation on social media practices impedes us from understanding our relationship with them. At its core, this chapter reflects upon the environment engendered by social media and how this can impede existing processes, alter speed or algorithmic patterns and exaggerate the magnitude of human behaviour. In essence, this chapter analyses how social media tend to become overheated, to use an idea from Marshall McLuhan.

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[18] The focus on gender-based violence is rooted in a strong "Christian" heritage (Rakoczy 2004). The "deification of the victim" is enacted in much of mimetic discourse. Oddly, the EFF's focus on "marginalised" can be argued to be part of the same ethos.

3.3 The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)

3.3.1 The scandalous and radical public image of Julius Malema

Before this chapter analyses the EFF's social media accounts from a Girardian perspective, it provides a brief background and history of the EFF's leader, Julius Malema. Malema is known for his contentious socio-political remarks and has frequently become subject to political ridicule. In June 2008, he led the ANC Youth League and stated that they would go to war or rise in rebellion if the prosecution of Jacob Zuma for alleged fraud and corruption did not stop. At a Youth Day rally, Malema stated, "Let us make it clear now: we are prepared to die for Zuma. Not only that, we are prepared to take up arms and kill for Zuma" (South African History Online 2011). Malema's undying loyalty for former president Jacob Zuma—arguably his mimetic model—initially did not waver, and he defended him against many corruption allegations.

Within the ANC Tripartite Alliance, Malema ignited conflict with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), by proposing the nationalisation of mines (South African History Online 2011). Malemaa's proposition for nationalisation was deemed by many to be objectionable, as he would benefit directly through this. The conflict and rivalry made many wary about the solidarity of the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the South African Communist Party (SACP) (South African History Online 2011). In 2012, Malema was expelled from the ANC on the grounds of violating the ANC Constitution by defaming the party's public image. Devoted and committed to the cause of land expropriation and nationalization of mines and banks, Malema established his own political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, in July 2013 (BBC News 2019). One can read this as a shift from external mediation, where Malema was first loyal to his superiors, to internal mediation, where he took up a political position not as a subordinate but as a rival.

The EFF strategically positioned itself as a "radical, leftist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movement" concerning themselves with issues of economic equality and because of this, Malema's shameless and brazen militarism has gained him the support of many belonging to the impoverished population (BBC News 2019). In the most recent elections, the EFF won six percent of the national vote. However, its leader's lifestyle and actions are contradictory to his manifesto. On September 2012, national prosecutors charged Malema with having committed money laundering (McKenna 2019:[sp]).

Figure 1: Julius Malema's Facebook homepage (2019).

Other charges including corruption and fraud against Malema have been frequently deferred, however, Malema has not wavered in the face of these disputes, aggrieving various people including women's rights movements and white farmers (BBC News 2019).

When addressing his supporters about land concerns in 2016 he asserted that: "The land will be taken by any means necessary. We are not calling for the slaughtering of white people. At least for now. What we are calling for is the peaceful occupation of land and we don't owe anyone an apology for that." In February 2018, Malema stated that, "The time for reconciliation is over; now is the time for justice" (The South African 2019).

Despite Malema's charges of fraud and corruption — for example, he owed more than one million Dollars in unpaid taxes in 2013 — his support group remains loyal to him and continues to grow (The South African 2019).[19] From this brief background and history, some of the scandalous culture that encircles the EFF is revealed. None of his supporters question how he is able to maintain a lavish lifestyle and to what end he will be able to effect change. This is especially evident when one looks at the rhetoric of mimeticism on Malema's social media accounts (See Figure 1). Mimetic theory highlights how the followers of the EFF have a tendency toward 'worship' and 'deification'.

3.3.2 Scandal at the degree of language on the EFF's social media accounts

Arguably, the furore that surrounds Malema is owing to his supporters considering him a victim of discrimination. Girard's "anti-sacrificial" interpretation of the Bible suggests a new way to establish a society by enacting processes that are free from this form of mythologization (cited by Muñoz 2016:168). Christianity itself overturns the scapegoat mechanism to allow for solidarity with the innocent victim. This logic is obviously overturned when victims become 'absolute'.[20] Individuals tend to gravitate toward and adapt to 'hierarchies of oppression' which echoes Marx's "zero-sum game" logic.[21] When we characterise our lives as this zero-sum game between different groups competing for the oppressed status, it deprives us of the energy to engage in dialogue and to discuss a way forward. Girard discredits Marx's zero-sum logic as it easily promotes resentment and envy.

Malema positions himself at the highest point of the hierarchy of oppression, he not only grew up in impoverished conditions during apartheid but he also fought for democracy and was a loyal member of the ANC before he was expelled—arguably scapegoated. Malema's expulsion is also perceived as a form of discrimination by his supporters, in their eyes he was expelled for fighting for their cause which the ANC failed to do. In other words, supporters of the EFF gather around Malema because he is an 'ideal victim'— so framed by his own ideological commitments. However, as a Girardian paradigm highlights, Malema associating himself with the marginalised is clearly part of a political strategy. This association is constructed and followers support him because he frames himself as a victim.

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[19] In 2012, Malema was charged with money-laundering and dishonest and fraudulent business dealings. After frequent deferrals, the case was discharged by the courts in 2015 as a result of delays by the National Prosecuting Authority, leading to assumptions that the accusations were driven by political goals (News24:2012).

[20] In this context, the term absolute refers to the ability to not be diminished in any way.

[21] Kenton (2020) defines zero-sum as a "situation in game theory in which one person's gain is equivalent to another's loss, so the net change in wealth or benefit is zero. A zero-sum game may have as few as two players or as many as millions of participants."

However, this association is embodied in an emotional and physical manner as well which is evident in the way the EFF's manifesto, style of speech, and dress attire in media appeal to their followers. When there is an event that will be publicised by media, the EFF dress in uniforms of the "working class" (seen in Figure 1). Their intent is to persuade people that they are "economic freedom fighters", they claim that they represent the workers and the poor. Malema addresses and speaks to his followers in an excessively sensational and emotive way. However, the EFF's "militant economic emancipation movement" and manifesto are not revolutionary or avant-garde, although they are presented that way. The EFF's media strategies and arguments involve a rephrasing or rewording of existing manifestos from anti-apartheid movements, as well as other rebellious and emotive policies such as the Nazi Party's twenty-five-point programme.[22]

The Nazi party's founding manifesto included a demand for radical land reform as well. In similar vein, the EFF's political strategy is built on what is essentially a focus on acquisitive mimesis — what belongs to some, legally speaking, should really belong to others. Malema is viewed as the "son of the soil" and as the "commander in chief"; a leader who has a commanding and militant appearance and who represents the lower-class, the impoverished and the voiceless. Considering these developments, many people perceive the way in which Malema has challenged the incompetence of Zuma's leadership as captivating. In addition to the EFF's militant leadership approach and dress attire, the political party emphasises the expropriation of land and the acquisition of jobs on their various media platforms.[23]

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[22] The Nazi's twenty-five-point programme includes clauses that state:
"We demand land and territory (colonies) for the maintenance of our people and the settlement of our surplus population. Only those who are our fellow countrymen can become citizens. Only those who have German blood, regardless of creed, can be our countrymen. Hence no Jew can be a countryman…[T]hose who are not citizens must live in Germany as foreigners and must be subject to the law of aliens…We demand the nationalization of all trusts. We demand profit-sharing in large industries. We demand an agrarian reform in accordance with our national requirements, and the enactment of a law to expropriate the owners without compensation of any land needed for the common purpose" (History Place:[sa]).

[23] On their webpage, the EFF (2019) state: "Consequently, the EFF's theme for the 2019 elections is: OUR LAND AND JOBS NOW. The emphasis on NOW is informed by the fact that 25 years is a rather long time for any political party to keep making empty promises. The emphasis on NOW is also because our people live in absolute poverty. Similarly, the emphasis on NOW is because our people are landless. The emphasis on NOW is because our people are jobless. Yet again the emphasis on NOW is because the crises of racialised poverty, inequality, underdevelopment, landlessness and joblessness are being experienced NOW, and must be resolved NOW!"

Figure 2: Designer unknown, EFF election poster, (EFF 2019)

Figure 3: Designer unknown, Nazi propaganda poster (Ora 2016:[sp]).

In *Repetitions repeatedly repeated: Mimetic desire, ressentiment, and mimetic crisis in Julian Rosefeld's Manifesto,* Reyburn (2019) reflects upon Julian Rosefeld's film *Manifesto* (2015), which he describes as a mesmerising integration and "interpretation of modernist, avant gardist manifestos". This article uses the film itself as a mode of analysis, and centres on the use of the rhetorical device of repetition, with mimetic theory as a mode of analysis. Although Reyburn's (2019) exploration focuses on re-envisioning trends in artistic production, his insights inform us about the nature of political and social trends.

Social media tend to focus on the various arguments made, as opposed to its adaptations. McLuhan (1994) attributes this to form holding more value than the content. Malema's manifesto and socio-political media strategies conflict with one another, which points to an imminent collapse of the party's efforts. When the environment on social media becomes overextended, these networks restrict dialogue and meaningful participation. This results in inadequate logic and reasoning and faulty argumentation that lacks a synthesis and which opposes recognising positions of assertion. As it turns out, the EFF's political strategies are not definite or rational but rather ambiguous. On social media, these ideas result in trends which gravitate towards self-mediation — the mediation of the other is identical to that which is suggested by the scandalous language – and results in ambiguity.

Owing to the fact that many social media activities are rooted in repetition — features which allow for the sharing of the same or similar content, et cetera — the platform's antithetical framework, as Reyburn's (2019:6) insights show, implies that the arguments stem from something that is fixed. Social media tend to focus on the existence of the identical. As Girard shows, it is out of such a fundamental identity that conflict arises. The EFF's political strategies are constructed upon a previous rivalry, namely the ANC and the "white minority".

Figure 4: Screenshot from EFF's Facebook page, (2019)

They thus encourage resentment in their political strategies and texts on social media. Arguably, there is a dissimilitude in the desires of the EFF — the desire for authenticity which intends to sustain the idea of an independent separation from the past, which stems from unacknowledged mimeticism. This contrary desire is rooted in emotivist moralism which is detailed in greater depth in Alastair McIntyre's book, *After virtue (1981)*. McIntyre (1981:33) argues that because the emotivist self possesses no definite precedent, it "can have no rational history in its transitions from one state of moral commitment to another," therefore, its rivalries are typified by the identical "confrontation of one contingent arbitrariness against another" that outline public moral debate. This becomes apparent on social media where forms of emotivism dominate the environment.

Thus, the way individuals interact with each other on these networks disguises the nature of the medium, specifically the back-and-forth movement of suggestion and imitation where both the subject and model derive information from one another. Such interactions are less a matter of individual will than a matter of what such media demand because of how they have been structured. It is important to note how the "new" is described by the EFF and Malema in terms of morality and the old, in the form of the ANC's policies, is described as immoral. This resembles the way social media create a scandalous environment and culture. Nietzsche describes resentment as a "reversal of the evaluating gaze" when confronted with the incapacity to accomplish the goals of the initial system (cited by Reyburn 2019:11). Action searches for its negation so that it can validate itself (Reyburn 2019:11).

Resentment implies a motivation or inclination towards revenge without revenge itself (Reyburn 2019:12). It stems from acquisitive mimetic desire despite coming across through behaviours that go against the initial, mimicked desire. Resentment is comprised of hatred and admiration; however, it is hatred that dictates the evidently 'ethical' result — the designation of a moral position that substitutes that which was initially resented or envied. This is evident in the EFF's social media content. Many assertions made by social media movements frequently consist not simply of a goal but also of rebuking the other. This depicts the aftermath of resentment.

When movements thrive on social media, they can alter and govern the scale of human relationships and behaviours, as algorithmic patterns accelerate the process of resentment and mimetic contagion. Social media are capable of distorting our reality by clouding our judgement and replacing it with heightened forms of resentment and hate. In order to evade this scandalous relation, an individual should, as the Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki suggests, "see with eyes unclouded by hate" (Goodreads [sa]). This idea foreshadows the hermeneutics of forgiveness that is the focus of the fifth chapter of this study.

Unquestionably, the supposed moral attributes of the EFF's manifesto seem to have a minimal interest in actual morality and more to do with revenge. On social media, the 'revolutionary' stems from the 'rebel,' who is reliant on the current establishments to polarise his adverse and borrowed identity that is fabricated against it. This formation of an identity "against," as opposed to having any credentials of its own, is prevalent in the development of modern self-consciousness (Reyburn 2019:12). Charles Taylor explains that this form of consciousness is a "negative freedom"; an "opportunity-concept" where an individual obtains the negative freedom if she is not oppressed as a result of external forces, and possesses equal access to the society's resources (cited by Askland 1993:123). Moreover, Nietzsche argues that resentment is the underpinning of this form of moral valuation: "the value-positing eye … needs a hostile external world" (quoted in McKenna 2002:6). Animosity supports the individual's dogma, which safeguards the subject's sense of inadequacy or poor self-esteem. Affirmations of purpose warrant the substantiation of systematic effects. Resentment's sacralising seclusion conceals a universal grievance. Heroic charm as the antithesis of seclusion is how the subject boasts of his own "moral superiority" over others that he detests.

Often on social media, individuals transform from antagonistic observers to confrontational participants who are against the culture in pursuit of a higher moral purpose. What is expressed as morality is really the reliance on strengthening the force implemented by the other (McKenna 2002:7). It is a relation demonstrated in the extremes of self-glorification and self-detestation, which amplify one's desires to overpower others while simultaneously degrading them. These internal incongruities are a result of failed rivalries with models. Similar to the mimetic crisis of scandal, social media corrupts its users, often urging violent reciprocity for the sake of a reductionistic politics. Resentment as a systematic notion is an effective mechanism of thought for understanding human relationships. As an affect, an individual experiences resentment mostly imparted with adverse forces of attraction, such as envy (McKenna 2002:9).

In *The elementary forms of religious life,* Durkeim (1976:[sp]) highlights the following with regard to morality: "…[w]e are constantly forced to submit to rules of thought and behaviour that we have neither devised nor desired, and that are sometimes even contrary to our most basic inclinations and instincts". Social media's power originates from its apparent (moral) authority, as opposed to its enforced power. Furthermore, social and cultural forces amplify an individual's being on social media. Individuals become prone to emotions and behaviours of the crowd to the extent that they are incapable of feeling or processing their own. These ideas converge with Girard's concept of how mimesis in heightened phases of desire can bring about an intense capacity for contagious expansion.

In the online environment, this method is referred to as "massive scale contagion experiments," where emotions expressed and subtle cues generated by users have an influence on other users' emotions and prompt them to perform certain activities (Guillory *et al* 2014:[sp]). These social forces generate collective moral consciousness. Because social forces operate in an ambiguous manner and because they are predominantly outside of our power, moral consciousness is perceived as a divine product. This reveals how moral consciousness is shaped in the social media environment. As a magnification of moral consciousness, social media lessen the role of one's sense of individual thought, exaggerating the culture of tribal man, signifying an erasure of differences which renders its intricate and integrated thought into a homogeneous culture that we interpret as a typical part of sensible existence. McLuhan examines some of the paradoxes of "tribalism" mentioned here but these are exaggerated by social media. While cool media manifest as fragmentation — everyone begins as a separate individual joining the tribe from outside, so individuals are "fragmented" (the world itself is presented as fragmented through hyperlinks and google searches). In his book, *You are not a gadget: A manifesto (2010)*, Jaron Lanier highlights how this fragmented state eventually engenders a tribe in an age of information.

Lanier (2010:61) explains that the word "information" in the technical sense refers to something completely real. However, this essential type of information, which endures independently of culture, is different from the type of information put in computers, the type that apparently desires to be "free". Thus, information is an "alienated experience". However, Lanier (2010:61) likens culturally decodable information to an implicit type of experience. Moreover, information on a hard drive, for instance, does possess information of the type that exists objectively. This information tends to be understandable rather than being fragmented in a network. However, if these fragments possess meaning to the reader, they can be experienced. Thus, experience is the only way to "de-alienate" information. This de-alienation of information begets a "commonality of culture between the storer and the retriever" of the fragments.

Thus, the environment engendered is enchanting in a sense, but this enchantment is managed through "surveillance capitalism" — driven by algorithms. Therefore, we have become fragmented; social media rob us of an enchanting environment in the tribal world, reducing individuals into a collective of restricted and deprived individuals, or algorithms, functioning in a world of an absolute reality and where there exist a finite number of dimensions.

Durkeim (1976:[sp]) highlights the following about tribal man, "He could not escape the feeling that outside him there are powerful causes which are the source of his characteristic nature, benevolent powers that aid him, and assure him a privileged fate. And he necessarily granted those powers a dignity comparable to the great value of the benefits he attributed to them." Durkheim's (1976:[sp]) insights corroborate Girard's notion of mediated desire, but also demonstrate how the two fundamental influences on mankind, the physical and the social, generate a division of the universe into two single classifications, sacred and profane. The physical world invigorates the profane, while the social world stimulates the sacred. Malema's political strategies also illuminate what is characterised by Riley (2019:[sp]) as the "positive cult of a contemporary totemism".

In social media's mimetic milieu, Malema is the totem perceived as being an honourable and righteous victim; an "object of innocent purity" (Riley 2019:[sp]). The victim totem is perceived and is cited in an overtly flattering manner. This is evident in Figure 4, which depicts followers commenting on Malema's posts stating, "Great leader" and "I enjoyed every bit of this interview last night … it was touching when he mentioned after the demise of his grandmother he no longer feels he needs to be in politics because she was his drive … that was touching." The righteous victim solely preaches the 'truth' and is, in terms of its own ideological construction, incapable of committing error. The mutualism of idolatry and scandal heightens as the models of desire expand.

Figure 5 is a Twitter post made by Malema in 2018. The post shows how he appeals to the crowd; he states: "All we want is our land." The ambiguity in the statement and the complexities involved in ensuring that this mimetic demand be met are far from obvious. Who is this 'we'? Which land is 'our' land? How does one go about expropriating land without compensation? What do the processes of land expropriation involve? These are questions that the post should be addressing, given South Africa's complex and difficult history. Regardless of what the content of Malema's posts reveals and how intensely we look at it, it cannot deliver anything more than a vague demand.

This is where the conversation and dialogue ends because the users cannot move beyond it; what follows this demand is followers entering 'frenzy' and 'hype'.[24] If a follower comments on a particular post, this encourages others to imitate him and comment as well, either as imitators or as mimetic rivals. Social media tend to perpetrate an either/or logic in the way that individuals choose to imitate others or not. Individuals either like or ignore certain images or posts: the 'hot' medium of text on social media tend to promote this in particular, since it is the hot medium within the cool medium of the internet that often generates fragmentation.

Followers are trapped in a mimetic craze as they feed off each other's energy, posting comments such as "Indeed what belongs to us" and "Black people lets [sic] unite." One follower goes to the extent of posting a picture of a black man about to whip white people in cotton fields — thus conveying the idea of revenge. Those holding opposing views to Malema tweet, "Why don't you give up your title deeds. Shouldn't you lead by example … oh wait you're a champagne socialist who preys on the naivety of the poor." Another posts, 'what they want and what they get is another matter! They can buy it and get a loan like everybody else! No stealing!" Figure 5 demonstrates how Malema incites resentment as well as how mimesis in heightened phases of desire brings about an intense capacity for contagious expansion. The transformation of rivals into violent twins is particularly apparent in figure 5. The responses to "All we want is land" demonstrates that all deranged rivals have a tendency towards doubling, and as a result, all doubles — on a deeper level — tend to manifest malicious characteristics (Palaver 2013:148). These are just a few comments among the hundreds that are posted and shared online.

These comments not only show how the "monstrous double" emerges but also how the totem functions in a binary way; the sacred totem, namely Malema, is endangered by profane critiques.[25]

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[24] In *The crowd*, written in 1895, Le Bon analyses the dangers of the collective mind. Furthermore, Le Bon explains that when individuals become part of a crowd, a new type of mentality and way of thinking exists in the "consciousness" that substitutes the conscious personalities of individuals in the crowd (cited by Tratner 2013:2). Le Bon explains how crowds are not necessarily aware of the environment they are situated in. When the structure of society becomes corrupt, it is always mass society that brings about its demolition. Le Bon focuses on the particular attributes of crowds and the "psychological law of mental unity". The fixation on the same purpose of the notions and beliefs of individuals make up the crowd and the evaporation of personality (Bosanquet 1899:9).

[25] Durkheim (1976) explains how society forms the basis of all religious practices. Furthermore, Durkheim demonstrates that religion is rooted in totemism. Totems are unified symbols that represent god and society. Consequently, the fundamental objective of religion is to permit individuals to envision its society and assert its social harmony. Totems are rooted in somewhat meaningless objects such as animals or plants. Totems are not universal energies that spawn immense powers such as the stars, sun and moon. If the emotions totems evoked were of this nature, the emphasis of the group would be the object itself, but it is not, it is what it symbolises that is sacred.
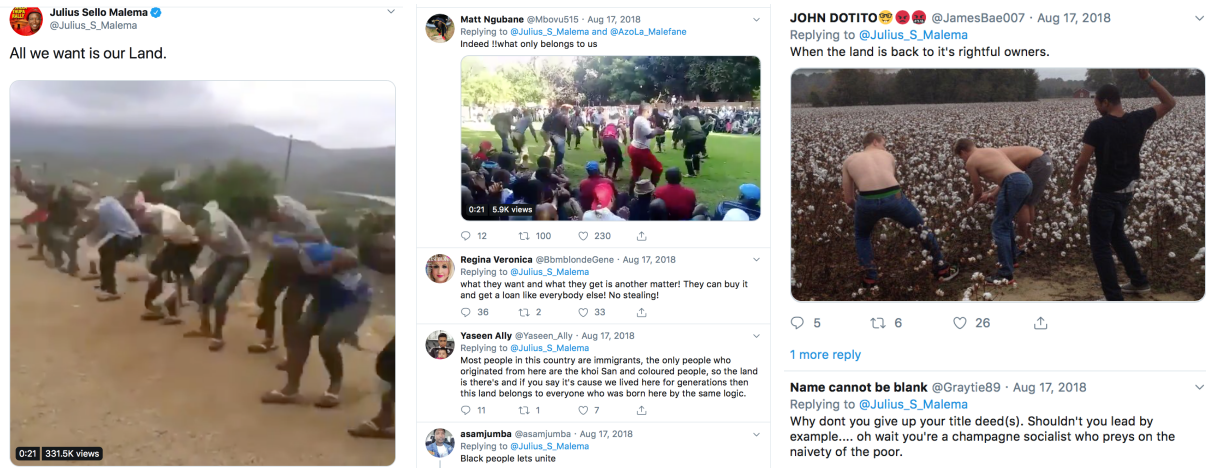
Figure 5: Screenshot from Julius Malema's Twitter page, (2013)

The profane holds completely different views and opinions to the totem, and this manifests as the "anti-totem" (Riley 2019:[sp]). Followers of the EFF hold the totem in high respect and defend it from the corruption of the anti-totem. Arguably, it may be in the name of some other totem that the EFF may be regarded by the opposition as the anti-totem. In the positive cult of a contemporary totemism, the attack on corruption is of a primary concern and holds more value than identifying with the victim. The positive cult provides short-term remedy from oppression as opposed to raising spirits and prompting constructive action. Often, the tendency is towards "activism" which tends to be less constructive than deconstructive. The idea of a righteous victim is effective because it fuels the desire for the ultimate accomplishment of justice or even, in some cases, revenge. The totem heightens spiritual prospects and addresses the spiritual stresses between the sacred and the profane but does not assist the crowd in finding a workable solution. Thus, there is frequently violence, anger and animosity that accompanies the collective.

Some EFF followers' comments demonstrate a strong desire to defend and preserve the virtuous victim from corruption. As the expansion of doubles takes place, mimetic crisis occurs. Hatred and violence by accrued antagonism and hostility creates the chaos of "all against all" (Girard 2008:64). Hundreds of followers, whether supporters or antagonists, are captivated and kept enthralled but cannot move beyond this conflict; an individual cannot process what, "All we want is our land" means. The "All we want is land" is 'cool' for those who want to import their own meanings into the idea; but it is 'hot' for those who see it as a clear statement about how their own land is likely to be taken away from them. Even the complexity of this idea seems to be overlooked and set-aside by anyone looking at this statement.

McLuhan (1994) asserts that individuals know how to communicate, in the sense that they know how to read and write, but they are not aware of how the world of space is conveyed in words. Thus, social media users are not aware of the environment that is being created.

The extensive disregard for the nature of communication as involvement in a shared situation results in avoiding the mode of communication as being fundamental and holding more meaning than the message being communicated (cited by Gordan *et al* 2007:39). When media integrates, both form and function alter. Furthermore, the scale, intensity, speed and environments encircling social media and its users also change. Social media content is not designed or constituted in such a way as to be analysed in-depth, rather it is set up to produce an effect. The emphasis on effect rather than on meaning is a fundamental change of our era, for effect concerns an entire situation, and not a sole level of information development (McLuhan 1994:26). Furthermore, McLuhan's (1994:8) insights inform us that social media are an existing tool of thought, "which is in itself nonverbal".

McLuhan brings to light the metaphysical and social ramifications of the patterns on social media as they heighten and intensify actual processes. With regard to social media, "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that moulds and regulates the form of human relationships and behaviour. The content on social media is as varied as it is futile in moulding modes of human relationships. Thus, the 'content' of this medium prohibits us from understanding the nature of the medium (McLuhan 1994:9). Furthermore, the effect of social media treatment does not involve much empathy or participation. Lanier (2010:79) explains that "empathy inflation can also lead to the lesser, but still substantial, evils of incompetence, trivialization, dishonesty, and narcissism." Online anonymity, for instance, engenders a counterproductive and detached environment that endorses crowd violence. This anonymity is granted by the way many social media platforms are designed, which allow users to create temporary, anonymous personas. This grants them the ability to engage in discussions or debates without having to be accountable for their behaviour. For instance, users frequently create "flamer" accounts to cause havoc and make obscene comments in anonymity, while simultaneously avoiding any connection to a real online persona, such as a Facebook profile. This "*drive-by anonymity*" warrants offensive actions on these platforms (Lanier 2010:33). This bad behaviour is expressed as swarm-like attacks online and is present in the examples mentioned above. Social media platforms demonstrate how individuals hiding behind the veil of anonymity would rather instigate conflict and violence instead of engaging in meaningful dialogue and contributing constructively to discussions.

In his book, *Liquid modernity (2000),* Zygmunt Bauman's insights regarding moral insensitivity in liquid modernity inform us about this type of empathy deficit and detached participation. Bauman (2000) puts forward the concept of "liquid modernity", in essence the assertion that modernity coexists with a mode of "liquefaction" or the persistent dismantling of secure positions and relationships.

Bauman (2000) contends that modernity in its entirety is distinguishable from previous eras because of its compelling and obsessive modernising attributes which equate to "liquefaction" and "melting". The most significant of these attributes are the ideas of "melting and smelting" institutions and public spaces which aid free-will and agency. As delineated in his book, *Moral blindness,* Bauman (2013:143) contends that moral perceptivity and sensitivities are numbed by this newly-formed culture, whereby "the tsunami of information, opinions, suggestions, recommendations, advice, and insinuation" overflowing from mass media, begets a "blasé attitude". Simmel, a primary influence on Bauman, had defined this as an outcome of the modernism and characterised it as an attitude of complete boredom and lack of interest. He contends that individuals possess insufficient emotional capacity which limits their ability to care. The overwhelming amounts of information about disastrous events delivered by the media overwhelm individuals, resulting in "compassion fatigue" (Bauman 2013:143). The discarding of a visual formation and opting for one that allows for detached participation of the senses, a condition that is hindered when one sense, particularly the visual sense, is 'hotted up' to the extent of extreme control of a situation. In addition, the 'hotting-up' of one sense results in hypnosis (McLuhan 1994:32).

As individuals respond to the social issues of the global village, they become regressive. Participation or engagement that involves the instantaneous nature of social media transforms those who have an awareness of important social issues into counter-revolutionaries. Social media create an environment in which senseless and boundless exchanges take place. Furthermore, there exists invisible and visible clutters of words (tools of thought) and deformed mindscapes. These ideas of social media converge with McLuhan's thoughts on technology and its relation to mankind: "The medium is the message, but the user of the medium is the content of the medium, in the way that any medium is an extension of the human body" (quoted in Gordan *et al* 2007:12).

Vonk De Ridder 2 hours ago
Musa Johannes Sithole when these red idiots open their mouths only racism spew out.

👍 👎 REPLY

Musa Johannes Sithole 2 hours ago
@Vonk De Ridder That's what you hear because it's in your mind but not the EFF advocates.
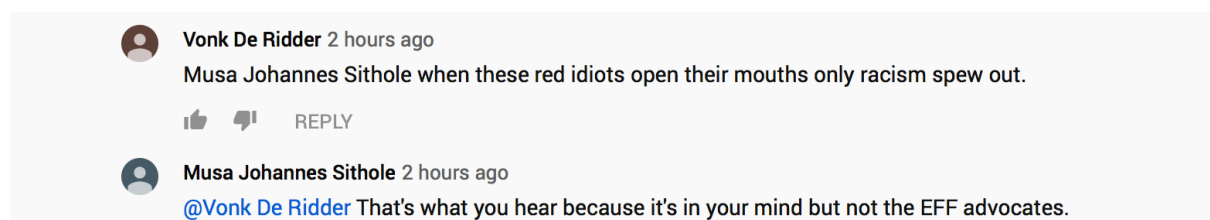
Figure 6: Screenshot of Julius Malema's YouTube channel (2019).

The heightened rate at which the electronic media transforms into an instantaneous form inverts explosion into implosion (McLuhan 1994:35).

This is what Kenneth Boulding refers to as disintegrating barriers at which the medium quickly transforms into another in its effective development (cited by McLuhan 1994:37). Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook tend to easily become overheated; this leads to an "overextended media culture". This is the result of "cross-fertilization" with another system, in this instance it is print and other texts merging with the internet. From a Girardian perspective, the barriers between individuals of different classes or social statuses have dissolved on social media, leading to more cases of internal mediation and thus promoting the potential for greater conflict.

Social media grant an additional democratising characteristic, namely any ideas or texts can instantly be disseminated to others. When analysing social media with regard to modes of democratisation, social media creates the perception of free-will. This is to say that even while human beings are being unconsciously shaped by the media environment, they are more consciously convinced that they are free to choose its content. This naturally allows for scandal, totemic practices and resentment to be amplified, as exemplified by the ease with which the ideas of the EFF are disseminated on social media. Some EFF supporters are hostile and dispirited because they cannot escape their current situation, but making headway and progress is not the goal of a movement driven by social media. The latter perpetuates a kind of dualism or split between appearance and reality, and even sets up appearance against reality.

It becomes challenging to find a way forward or to gain understanding when it is not the primary intention. Moreover, these ideas which are rooted in identity politics might operate as tools for attributing advantages in a competition for social status and ritualised strife. but they cannot function as tools for accomplishing a fair, just society. This would require us to move beyond the scandalising environment generated by social media. Without doubt, the environment cultivated on social media intensifies animosity and anger. Individuals reach a stalemate position where the conflated and sensationalised nature of the platforms themselves prompt users to lean toward allegiance to the totem and fierce attempts to eradicate the anti-totem. As a result, followers experience spiritual and political fatigue and fall by the wayside. Thus, the platform of guaranteed access is obstructed, and the users are scandalised. Scandal is generated by mimetic rivalry and does not refer to an 'object' separate from the subject. It is a potent model that the individuals generate and that ensnares them in a cyclical pattern. Girard contends that the violence that scandal engenders is the actual root of the fabricated forms of transcendence that interferes with one's ability to rationalise. Scandal, as seen in this example, is elemental idolatry, where unrecognised forces demand that we submit to our rivals and insist on sacrifice.

As Girard explains "An individual scandalised by something will inevitably scandalise someone else" (quoted in Alberg 2017:486). The transgression involved in any incident brings about the spreading of the scandal. The outrage provoked by the EFF, for example, is seen in a frenzied desire to distinguish between the culpable and the innocent, to administer obligations, to uncover the secret without concern or obligation, and to attribute punishment. An individual who is scandalised has intentions of making the scandal public; Malema appears to yearn to for the spread of scandal and to berate those he perceives as guilty.

Scandalous content demands "demystification" (Alberg 2017:486). This is indicative of the entire mimetic mechanism. Scandal transgresses and entices in a deceitful manner, intertwining the transgressed with the transgressor in resentment that impedes moral decisions. Scandal captivates and repels like the forces of the primordial sacred and the antagonism it stimulates awakens a mimetic frenzy of violent reparations and scapegoating measures, inducing a continuous obsession to fabricated transcendence which in actuality is an idolatry of violence itself (McKenna & Hidden 2017:482). It is easy for an individual to morally apprehend, to denounce evils or pass judgement generated through content disseminated by media. However, it is insincere as it characterises judgement imparted on others that may result in one's own culpability. Girard associates scandal with violence and the "knowledge attaching to violence" (quoted in Alberg 2017:486).

Girard asserts that he identifies in scandal a definitive characterisation of the mimetic mechanism. Social media — as a medium — consist of sequences that constitute and amplify all the underpinnings of mimetic desire, rivalry and conflict, allurement and repulsion, imitation and defiance, engendering a rivalry that easily shapes human relationships to end in crisis. It generally 'requires' a scapegoat to reinstate peace and harmony in the community. Having discussed how scandal is generated in an online environment, this chapter now turns to some gender-based violence coverage on social media, since it offers further insights on how scandal prevails in making users frantic and interferes with one's ability to think reflectively.

3.4 Gender-Based Violence (GBV) coverage 2019

Figure 7: Calls for the death penalty on Facebook
following the murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana,
(2019).
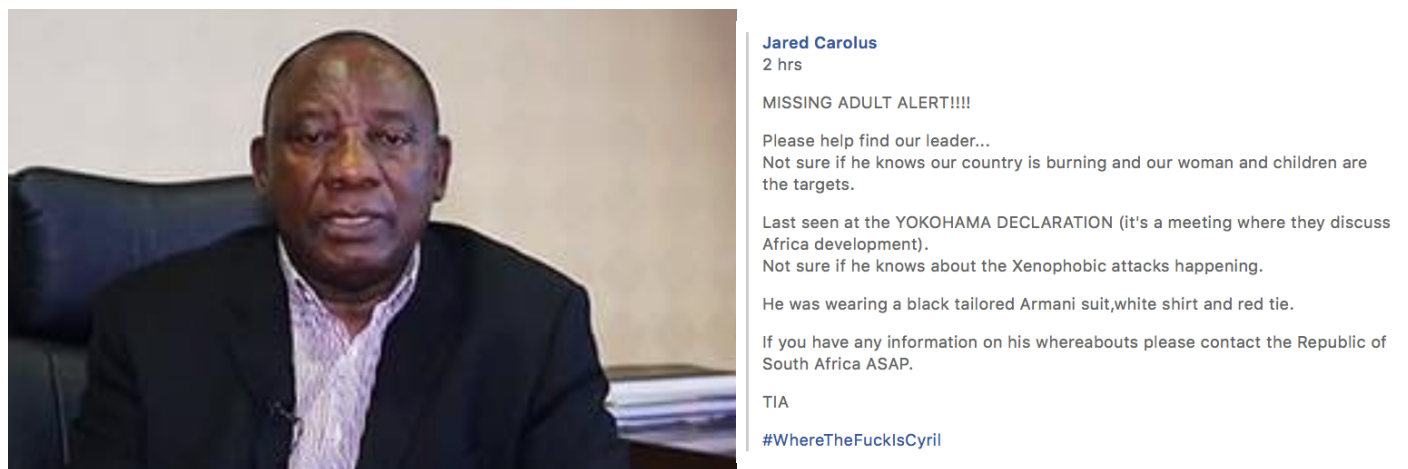
Figure 8: Responses to GBV in the country, Facebook (2019).

3.4.1 Social media and explicit content

With regard to the social media coverage of gender-based violence in 2019, graphic content of women
who had gone missing and/or who were raped and brutally murdered that year was prevalent on social
media platforms in South Africa. These posts were triggered and provoked by the murder of Uyinene
Mrwetyana, a nineteen-year-old University of Cape Town student who was tortured, raped and killed in
the suburb of Claremont, South Africa (Cloete 2019).

When users encounter this type of explicit and disturbing content, there is a scandalous element in this inner conflict that involves a desire to both look and not look at the victims. Even though we do not see the victims of violence in reality, we interact with the idea that we have of them while hiding behind the struggle to know and to prevent ourselves from knowing in a conflict with the mediator (Alberg 2013a:19).[26] The graphic images of abused women elicited a 'violent' response from those in the online community.[27] These responses included petitions calling for the death-penalty, the castration of assailants and pleas for the government to declare a state of emergency.

Taking into consideration social media and the entire cultural environment within which the media function, social media tend to be a mode of symbolic violence, in other words, it is a form of violence which occurs through language.[28] Many social media users reacted, shared and commented on various articles, texts and images being spread on these platforms. Popular hashtags trending on Facebook and Twitter included #MenAreTrash and #WhereTheFuckIsCyril. Here, the words spread on social media are a mode of information retrieval that tends to be of a similar nature across the entire environment, experienced at an accelerated speed.

Consequently, 'men' received public dishonour for "toxic masculinity" and "patriarchy". The common message being conveyed was that South African men — all men, not just the guilty few — are the reason for the violence against women and children. Apart from the problem of refusing to root such a claim in anything like concrete facts, this represents a general problem in "mono-causality" — that is, naming a single cause for what must in reality be a complex, multi-layered problem. Social media users have become accustomed to terms and phrases such as "smash the patriarchy" and "toxic masculinity" and my intent is not to undermine the issues they bring to light. However, I am arguing that in this case it is a "misdiagnosis", being too simplistic, and this has evidently resulted in incorrect judgments and prescriptions.

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[26] Susan Sontag (2003) explains that individuals view the world — including the pain of others — as a display. On social media, individuals become enthralled and lose the ability to process and think for themselves. Sontag asserts that no amount of visual content can substitute reality. The scepticism regarding mass modernism results in individuals yearning for heightened visual stimulation that weakens an individual's ability to rationalise. An individual's sympathy for pain may only show their feeling of separation from the suffering they see. The content on social media merely makes more spectators — it is in a human-being's nature to watch. It is in the essence of vision and not of social media that generate this separation, of isolation from the action.

[27] On social media platforms, there are features that allow users to report abusive content, such as graphic imagery of abused and mutilated women, by using the *report link* that appears near the content itself. Users and non-users can report nudity, bullying, graphic violence, and other violations to the network's terms of service (WebPro Education:2015). Owing to the democratic character of social media and the intense speed at which content goes viral, many users see the explicit or violent content before it is reported and removed.

[28] Bourdieu (1991) confers these ideas by explaining that symbolic violence is generated through language. It may be worth considering, however, the danger that concept slippage may in the end water down the meaning of the word 'violence'. It is often dubious to equate violence as harming a person's body with violence as merely using offensive language.

On social media, senseless and morally fashionable political concepts are interpreted as facts. Mimetic theory highlights that scandal brings about an implicit rivalry. The environment created on these networks urges individuals to pick a particular group or, in most cases, coerces them into choosing sides. In his lecture, *The grievance studies scandal*, Reyburn (2018) discusses the "*Grievance studies hoax*" and how easy it is be to get nonsensical political and social concepts published as permissible academic research.[29] Furthermore, Reyburn (2018) contends that once an individual chooses a side, she feels obliged to justify her existence. A dichotomous relationship between "against" and "with" comes to fore, with scandal focusing on "the against" in essence the negative. Scandal does not just occur, it is a manner of perceiving and deciphering the world. Scandal redefines existence in rivalrous terms. It opposes restoration, harmony and pacifism. It can be perceived as a "hermeneutic of unforgiveness" because it pursues friction and then preserves it (Reyburn 2018). The occurrence induces a contamination of the mind in the witness because the witness is coerced into taking part in this corruption. In essence, scandal opposes understanding. Those opposing other's views on social media are not attempting to question or eradicate bias but rather sustain it.

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[29] Over the course of a year, three scholars — James Lindsay, Helen Pluckrose, and Peter Boghossian — presented fake papers to various academic journals concentrating on activism, and what they refer to as "grievance studies". Their intention was to uncover how easy it would be to get "absurdities and morally fashionable political ideas published as legitimate academic research". Within a year, their study had seven papers that were acknowledged and even published (Quilette Magazine 2018). One of the papers included a three-thousand-word extract of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, reworked in the language of intersectionality theory and published in the gender studies journal *Affilia (*Quilette Magazine 2018).

Figure 9: Responses to GBV in the country, Facebook (2019).

Thus, patently biased notions and opinions populate these platforms. On social media, nebulous ideas such as "toxic masculinity" are rendered as the sole cause of gender-based violence in South Africa. If one follows the "argument" being made on social media, one sees that the content is constructed to place users in a scandalous position where they are pressured into picking one of two sides: (1) one can accept and disseminate similar viewpoints that are spread online. In other words, users can perpetuate the idea that men are the sole reason for gender-based violence and be perceived as an "ally" for holding the same viewpoint; or (2) they can reject these viewpoints and be branded as egotistical and against the cause that prevents violence against women. As the medium thus becomes overheated, where there is no space for dialogue or interpretation by its users, nuance is neglected. As seen in this example, individuals cannot move beyond a certain point. These texts have not provided further knowledge or enrichment. Individuals do not question who exactly is the patriarchy? Why are (some) men abusing, raping and killing women? And what is the underlying problem? Social media reinforce the scandalous situation as people are captivated by many scandalous texts and images and desire a greater understanding; however, the content does not deliver. In essence, individuals reach a stagnant position trapped in the hype of a mimetic storm.

It is a trend to call out men, all men, on their overtly masculine traits, rather than engage in meaningful dialogue on how to overcome this issue. This way of addressing problems and speaking about serious issues is indicative of a "call-out culture".

Call-out culture is a term used to describe the manner in which certain radical liberals, nonconformists and activists, publicly label or brand instances of oppressive actions and behaviour and language used by others. Individuals are called out for behaviour that is perceived as being sexist, racist, misogynistic, et cetera (Ahmad 2015:[sp]). Because call-outs are a public display, they allow for an "academic" type of activism. This coincides with the notion of critical constructivism which is a theory of learning rooted in concepts that are shared and constituted by language.[30] In this way, critical constructivism is not solely what is said, nor only the interpretation of an assertion. Instead, it is a system of knowledge established by what can and cannot be said. Social media perpetuate many absurd forms of constructivism. Many modes of extreme constructivism oppose realism and render reality inaccessible (Reyburn 2018). Gavin Kitching explains that constructivists essentially infer an essentialist view of language. Thus, language does not solely influence us but rather dictates our being (cited by Reyburn 2018). The way individuals interpret information on social media is considered as subjective and as a way to maintain power relations. This notion stems from Foucault (1972), whose insights inform us that critical constructivism is a way of representing the world that is expressed as relationships of power and control, and its generation is sustained through particular rules established by and in society.

It coerces individuals into believing that if you cannot persuade others to believe in your 'truth,' you must pressure them until they comply. Furthermore, these constructs are amplified on social media and as Reyburn's (2018) suggests: "It prevents self-understanding, the understanding of others, and an understanding of the actual social systems and networks at play."

On social media, the main priority is not epistemic humility or reality seeking, but it is rather to impede the chance of understanding what is true. Thus, on social media reality itself can be scapegoated as there exists a gap between appearance and reality. The content on social media is interpreted as real and is conflated with the truth. Thus again, we see the scandalous character of social media. And, to take the above example further, the pursuit of calling out is perceived as an end in itself.

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[30] Critical constructivism can be interpreted as an underlying belief that many attributes or characteristics of experience are socially constructed. These constructions are perceived as being reliant upon power relations, frequently determined by race and sexual or gender identification (Boghossian *et al* 2018).

Call-out culture is contagious because of the disposition and public display of the call-out itself. In other words, it is the nature of the medium that amplifies the content and accelerates the rate at which it is spread. Calling an individual out is not a private conversation between two individuals but rather a public display where others can show how savvy (in essence shrewd, knowledgeable) they are or how passionate they are about a particular cause. This is why it appears as if the performance itself is more meaningful than the content of the call-out.

A great deal of effort was invested into developing an argument against the reactionary #NotAllMen movement (Seen in figure 10 and 11) and against the South African president (Seen in figure 8) for supposedly being absent during this of time of disorder, rather than finding a more constructive way to change perceptions.[31] What became evident was that the medium and the message homogenised the reception of the original notion that #MenAreTrash.

In essence, the original #MenAreTrash is conflated with the medium itself, being the "first" and thus most foundational text, whereas #NotAllMen, being parasitic and secondary, cannot be conflated with the medium itself. In other words, the counter-statement is not just fighting against a notion but against the medium itself. From the perspective of mimetic theory #NotAllMen and other reactionary movements are therefore perceived as taboos. Content on social media interpreted as opposing the dominant view is easily perceived as "impure" and that which contaminates the online community. A taboo, in this case, refers to content on social media that has been excluded from the online community; this is perceived as forbidden. Taboos awaken fear and are a constant source of chaos even in peaceful communities (Girard 1977:33). Taboos tend to be surrounded by behaviour or language that results in others expressing disapproval, anger, distaste or hatred - or there exists an effort to eliminate this behaviour. In an attempt to mitigate severe or heightened rivalries that may ignite a mimetic crisis, cultures construct taboos to prohibit certain behaviour and actions. Taboos are enforced, as are laws and other modes of sacred differentiation that will weaken and impede the progression and impact of mimesis.

However, taboos keep violence in check by imposing "legitimate" violence (Dumouchel 2014:192). With regard to social media, limiting free speech (in essence opposing views), can be interpreted as an attempt to limit mimeticism amongst those with whom one disagrees.

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[31] #NotAllMenAreTrash is a reactionary movement supported by both men and women. Supporters of this movement feel that #MenAreTrash is public dishonour to those men who have not harmed women and therefore feel it is a gross generalisation (Nemakonde 2017).

In other words, content which is 'prohibited' on social media, such as #NotAllMen, could possibly heighten mimetic rivalry as the behaviour which typifies and define its violent stages, and the users who seem to possess these 'symptoms', are perceived as 'contagious' (Girard 1977:36).

Figure 10: #NotAllMen post, Twitter, (2019)

Figure 11: Comments and reactions to #NotAllMen, Facebook, (2019)

In terms of call-out culture, it becomes permissible to treat others as if they are not human beings. Individuals do not take into account the fact that human beings who exist in separate social spaces will be responsive to alternative methods of learning (Tucker 2018:4). The majority of call-outs scapegoat individuals who have offended others. In other words, the trend is to discard individuals rather than engage with them as human-beings who have complex experiences and histories. Call-out culture mirrors the behaviour of archaic witch-hunts - those who are calling-out others criticize people on the premise of actions, or supposed actions, with scrutiny and judgment being of a fundamental concern, and an effort to comprehend the issue as the least concern. There is an underlying and subtle totalitarian inclination that exists in call-out culture and in the way that certain liberal groups monitor who is included and excluded from the community (Ahmad 2015:[sp]). In most cases, the parameters of exclusion are put in place through the use of "politically and socially correct language" — a language that is constantly evolving and difficult to keep up with — language that operates with a strong degree of scandal because it both grants access and blocks it. Furthermore, call-out culture seems to match up with the dominant ideology of Silicon Valley, in essence social media reflect the ideology of its creators.

In her book, *The age of surveillance capitalism,* Shoshana Zuboff (2019:15) reiterates these ideas by explaining that designers working at these corporates are encouraged to design empathetically and persuasively to mould and determine the user's actions. In his book, *The madness of crowds: Gender, race and identity,* Douglas Murray (2019) explores the ramifications of living in a technologically-ingrained society and the new tribal structures that accompany it, particularly those of social and news media. Furthermore, Murray (2019:112) explains how Silicon Valley is known for its liberal image and is situated on the extreme left of the political spectrum. These corporates, including Google, hire individuals who are socially conscious, 'woke' and who hold similar ideological dispositions.[32] Not only has Silicon Valley endorsed and embraced the ideological beliefs of radical intersectionalists and social activists, they have extended themes so extensively and overwhelmingly that it has induced an entire new mode of chaos in any society which ingests it (Murray 2019:112).

If we analyse how Google has employed "machine-learning," for instance, we gain a better understanding of how social media reflect the ideologies of its creators.[33] There appears to be a drive to generate images that are of a diverse and varied nature rather than providing content that matches an individual's search term. Google justifies their implementation and fairness of machine learning by explaining that they intend to eliminate technology that generates human bias. Although this may be the case, these searches depict an observably skewed perspective. Thus, for example, a search for " (an image) of a 'white couple' will deliver a mixed-race gay couple in the first five images and then a white couple who has given birth to black babies by using black embryos." Murray (2019:120) explains that an apparent problem with this approach is that it surrenders facts in favour of a political ideology. It frames the truth as the problem and as a hinderance that must be overcome. Our culture is saturated with a kind of narcissistic self-glorification that has brought about a denial of the meaning and significance of history.

In *Post-liberalism: Recovering a shared world (2019),* Dallmayr explains that this form of narcissism is no longer an individual disorder or sickness but rather a "social pathology" or a "public culture". Girard's insights converge with those of Murray: he contends that we relinquish the myth of advancement and become trapped into a Nietzschean myth of the eternal return.

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[32] Athalye (2019:[sp]) refers to "woke capitalism" as large corporates profiting on social movements. The term "woke" is defined as a presumed knowledge of social issues regarding social injustice.

[33] Machine learning assists users in navigating the online space. It programmes the internet to propose content for us and has the ability to translate. This becomes possible when individuals code solutions to problems which individuals need solved. Machine learning grants devices the ability to think through problems by using algorithms (Murray 2019:112). However, considering that the content stems from information does not make it unbiased. Even with honest and pure goals, it is difficult to disregard our own preferences. These biases reflect our online world which we generate. Tech corporates have become profitable in perpetuating their adaptations of things that will be accepted all over the world.

On social media, there are denials of shared meaning; denials of knowledge that engenders an assuredness which is indicative of a particular heightened mode of hermeneutics.

These constructions are apparently boundless and exist in a state of continuous conflict. This ensures the proliferation of violence, since the process of scapegoating is mystified as it once was in mythology. Moreover, social media users aim to validate the superiority of their own thoughts and beliefs by attaining the nearest form of truth — a truth that eludes others. Users assert that they possess the truth merely by virtue of the fact that they assert judgement on others. When rivals are engrossed in a mimetic conflict, they become progressively violent and are simultaneously captivated by one another. Social media users, similar to most rivals, act as impediments and inhibit a path to truth which engenders a debilitation of meaning. Social media assert and make more apparent what is hidden: sacrificial violence. Thus, social media are often analogous to medieval texts of persecution, demonstrating its sacrificial essence.

Scapegoating phenomena are reflected in the way an individual's identity is quickly conflated with ideas of 'privilege' on social media, such as being male, and ridiculed as such. Thus, any specific person is replaced by a general category and the individual becomes a symbol for a larger whole, to such a degree that the person is no longer significant apart from what he represents. Individuals are thus identified with hierarchies of oppression and this shifts integral evaluations into moral judgments. This reiterates how moral consciousness is shaped in the environment engendered on social media. As social media become 'heated-up,' they generate an abundance of high-definition information that impedes further interpretation by users. As a medium, it becomes a space where limited characterisations of an individual's identity become intensified to represent 'everything'. Essentially, as a medium, social media serve reductionism in keeping with patterns of mimetic nature.

Trends on social media function intensely because they function mimetically — from imitations which progress from suggestions. This is the reason there tends to be a common opinion and 'hype' on social media, such as calls for the death penalty and #MenAreTrash. This is observable in less contentious trends, although it is more noticeable when topics are 'hot'. Over time, severe accusations can be interpreted as the norm. In the case of #MenAreTrash, modes of heightened cynicism became ingrained on social media (Murray 2019:98). This is something that some feminists, such as Camille Paglia and Christina Hoff Somers, are set against. Paglia and Somers try to resist this 'scandalous' type of feminism. In *Sexual personae: Art and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson (2001)*, Paglia explains that feminists tend to "[g]rossly oversimplify the problem of sex when they reduce it to a matter of social convention."

Sommers (2016:[sp]) reiterates these ideas by explaining that many feminist activists rely on extreme statistics to invigorate their cause. However, killer stats diminish distinctions between more or less severe issues. Furthermore, they encourage bigotry. This existed in earlier waves of feminism but is more prevalent and victorious today. In 2010, third-wave feminism transformed into fourth-wave feminism because of the rise of social media (Murray 2019:98). This demonstrates how social media have the ability to heighten movements and arguments.

Ultimately, social media depict their power in morphing and confusing arguments. In #MenAreTrash, it has become standard and agreeable for individuals to respond with vitriolic language. Most of the expressions used in these movements derive from the periphery of American academia and social media and appear simple and straightforward. However, it becomes difficult to pinpoint a definite source or cause. Employing expressions such as "toxic masculinity," "male privilege," "mansplaining" and "the patriarchy" does not address the issue, confirming that complex issues have been oversimplified (Murray 2019:102). In essence, this approach intends to transform men into objects of scandal. Seen through a Girardian lens, it appears to become a mode of revenge and reveals itself as a form of "intellectual sacrifice". In our era, social media quickly become sacrificial mechanisms intensifying content and transmitting mimetic rivalry accompanied by violent resolutions: conflicts are made a reality and transformed into literal violence.[34] However, this mechanism sustains itself in less apparent modes, in what Bubbio (2018:19) characterises as "intellectual symbolism".

Social media employ scapegoating phenomena in order to sustain the advantageous influence of sacrifice and other subjects in the scapegoat relationship. Owing to the fact that crises cannot determine a legitimate resolution, they become more frequent and heightened on social media. These sacrificial crises articulate themselves through social media users but at the expense of Girard's interpretation of the truth. Girard's work emphasises the heightened moments of this sequence of intellectual symbolism of scapegoating phenomena, which is established by the sacrificial banishment of truth itself.

As Girard contends: "The monster is always expelled in sacrificial rituals, first in person, and later in purely intellectual operations, for it is waste of time, we are told, to think what is contrary to the laws of thought" (quoted in Bubbio 2018:20).

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[34] This is starkly exemplified by the way that protests around the George Floyd incident (Floyd was a black man who died while in custody of the Minneapolis police), gave rise to a defunding of police and literal violence (Reynolds 2020).

Social media echo, in an apparent manner, the function of repetitive mimesis. The victim is banished from a text — a form of intellectual banishment that possesses actual ramifications. Thus, intellectual banishment can be interpreted as spawning social media content itself and the whole of social media can be seen as a series of such intellectual banishments. The success of these banishments is dependent on the "misrecognition" where individuals are unaware of the transmission of violence from themselves onto the scapegoat. Such misrecognition is an intensification, an amplification on social media, and when it occurs, an individual's mind appears to enact a desensitizing of the affected area, shielding and numbing it from conscious understanding of what is injuring it. This process resembles that which affects the body under trauma. This new media-generated environment becomes omnipresent and transforms our perception, yet simultaneously is concealed.

Importantly, it is possible to show the function of mimetic scapegoating in the spreading of doctrines on social media. The hysterical pursuit of scapegoats is thus evidently not pursued solely by human beings, but by agreed-upon cultural entities. On these networks, every subject perceives the other as being completely different. This relationship is established at an intellectual level. All rationalisations are perceived as being justifiable. The lack of accuracy indicates the advent of the concept of doubles (Bubbio 2018:56). Social media users progressively mirror each other, becoming the other's double as the conflict becomes more aggressive. These networks are susceptible to the mimetic process — it mediates on melding with its own double and becomes one with it. Everything, therefore, coincides with the undifferentiated thought of mimetic desire. Doubles misinterpret this undifferentiation as they perceive one another as being completely different. Thus, social media users pass judgement based on substantiations of violence.

The sacrificial crisis translates as undifferentiation which is essentially a form of misunderstanding. Thus, call-out and cancel culture can be seen as being a result of excessive imitation fostered by features on social media which result in chaos. If the ancient religious and legal structures put in place to minimise violence have come to an end, social media can be viewed as an alternative, technological way to accomplish similar ends. For instance, social media platforms, by transmitting mimetic desire, can also channel the violence that accompanies it. Subsequently, this would imply that call-out content and culture is a form of scapegoating that pertains to online activities.

Thus, social media social structure by transmitting mimetic behaviour, also increases the inclination towards envy, rivalry, and hatred of the other that fuels online violence (Shullenberger 2016).

The way to view this is that all media are amplifications: what is good in people will be amplified; and what is not good will also be exaggerated. The use of hyperbolic metaphorical language is evident in these trends. The language used is excessively emotive and arguably for that reason people might agree. The assumption is also that statistics are implicitly accurate. Again, my intent is not to undermine the horrific social issues that occur in this country, I simply intend to draw attention to the rhetorical dimension of content that becomes' hot' on social media.

Having discussed the sacrificial and scandalous nature of social media, this chapter now turns to a discussion of the internet personality and YouTube blogger, James Charles, since his online escapades offer further insights on the sacrificial nature of social media and ideas of myth which proliferate the platform.

3.5 James Charles: internet personality, beauty YouTuber, and make-up artist

Figure 12: James Charles: Internet personality, beauty YouTuber, and make-up artist, ENews, (2019)

James Charles is a twenty-year-old beauty blogger, internet personality and make-up artist who became popular after launching his makeup- and beauty-focused YouTube channel in 2015. Charles' videos are perceived as a mode of artistic expression and have gained him a large number of followers (Sands 2019). His popularity is attributed to a yearbook photograph which went viral in September 2016 and he has gained many followers because of his appeal; in essence the way in which he creates a sense of companionship and intimacy on social media. Figure 14 demonstrates how Charles' makes use of calculated intimacy to captivate potential followers by sharing mundane activities on his Instagram page, such as driving. This form of constructed intimacy is kind of 'rhetoric of mimeticism'—that is, rhetoric constructed around mimetic desire rather than, say, around specific rhetorical figures or artistic deviations (Vandenberg 2006). This is also seen on Charles' *YouTube about page,* where he demonstrates how he makes use of calculated intimacy through his use of language in his biography: "HI SISTERS! I'm James Charles, a 20-year-old kid with a few blending brushes. Subscribe to my channel and join the sisterhood for all things makeup, entertainment, music, and more!"

James Charles demonstrates how the concept of celebrity has altered as a result of the transformation in media. In recent years, there have been severe shifts in the idea of celebrity, from being solely affiliated to traditional forms of mass media to one that mirrors a more varied media sphere (Marwick 2015:3).
For example, on social media platforms such as YouTube, nothing is too mundane or embarrassing to share with others. This is seen in the way that famous celebrities and ordinary people post about and share intimate moments of their lives. Celebrities supply glimpses of their everyday lives and engagements with followers/fans that provide the idea of 'raw' and honest communication. Moreover, social media platforms have granted celebrities and ordinary people the ability to produce a number of personal messages, and to change and disseminate this content broadly to appeal to the masses. Marvick (2015:3) explains that the modern movement towards participatory media and thriving social media platforms, especially amongst the youth, results in shifts in culture. He refers to how traditional celebrities who have adopted social media generate immediate and unmediated relationships with audiences, or at least the impression of this. Social media change the interactions one has with celebrities —— such interactions are perceived as being interpersonal.

James Charles makes use of this form of constructed intimacy to attract followers, and refers to his audience as fans. This confirms how social media allow for heightened cases of internal mediation where an individual might possess few followers in comparison to more popular and 'traditional' celebrities, but he is still considered a celebrity because he uses identical social media platforms used by more 'renowned' celebrities.

Figures 14 and 15 demonstrate how individuals deify each other on online platforms such as Instagram; Charles' fans whom he also refers to as "sisters," refer to him as an "icon" and express their love and adoration by sending him heart emoticons. Ultimately, as explained in Girard's work, human beings praise their idols — in this case James Charles.

Figure 13: Screenshot from James Charles' Instagram page, Instagram post, (2019)

Figure 14: James Charles, Instagram post, (2019)

In our modern world, individuals abandon traditional forms of divinity and opt for seeking the divine self in the other (Palaver 2013:19). James Charles' social media accounts are saturated with ideals of living an extremely extravagant and glamorous lifestyle. His online posts range from expensive clothing and make-up to his time spent on leisure activities. Social media users do not identify with these items on a surface level; they are "interpretive agents" (to use Dupuy's terminology). When individuals are active on social media, they are aware of the ongoing exposure to popular sociocultural ideals conveyed on these platforms. These platforms have the ability to reconstruct us into idealists when they present us with models that will never satisfy our desires. Social media can persuade us to take on differing pointless practices; however, they fixate on something that can never be fulfilled. The fact is that social media operate scandalously and seem to be a lasting conspiracy to impede us from achieving the goals abnormally dictated to us, similar to consumer culture. Moreover, social media pledge uniqueness. A user assumes that she is joining a social media platform that will grant her the extraordinary originality and authenticity demonstrated by individuals who use it. Users are led to believe that by acquiring the 'object' they can evade the temporal mass. This guarantee is contradictory because imitation and authenticity are generally separate.

Social media infer mimetic desire; this corresponds to the hyper-mimetic nature of our contemporary era. Thus, social media establish an entire and almost immediate shift in culture, values and behaviour. This major shift engenders never-ending agony and 'identity loss', which can be mitigated solely through a mindful cognisance of its mimetic dynamics. If a person comprehends the major transformations induced by new forms of media, she can foresee and manage them; however, if she remains trapped in this self-inflicted hypnotic state, she will forever be subjected to this unstoppable torment. Because of the digital era's great acceleration of information retrieval, individuals have the opportunity to understand, anticipate and influence the environmental forces constructing them. As McLuhan (1995:5) asserts in *The Playboy interview,* the new extensions of man and the environment establish core embodiments of the evolutionary process; however, individuals remain trapped in the illusion that the way a medium is used matters, as opposed to accepting what it does to society.

3.5.1 The downfall of James Charles

In a vengeful and emotionally-driven forty-three-minute video entitled "Bye sister' posted by fellow beauty influencer Tati Westbrook, Westbrook calls out James Charles for advertising a brand's rival, as well as making an array of other allegations. Westbrook accuses Charles of being a "sexual predator, transphobic, racist as well as disloyal" (Mbude 2019:[sp]). Since this video went live, James has been proclaimed "cancelled" in social media beauty groups, leading to his evident monetary detriment.

Westbrook's allegations led to the scandal being spread beyond the YouTube beauty community and was heightened by the rest of YouTube, as well as other social media platforms (Sands 2019:[sp]). This fad made James Charles the first YouTuber to lose over a million subscribers in twenty-four hours (Sands 2019:[sp]). Although Charles and Westbrook only uploaded five videos of the incident, there were many reaction videos uploaded online. These videos include individuals' reactions to Westbrook's allegations that Charles is a predator who takes advantage of heterosexual men. What preceded Westbrook's scandal was numerous heterosexual men or their friends posting about their encounters with Charles, or uploading screenshots of private exchanges with him using instant messaging.

Many of the stories were fabricated, such as the woman who accused Charles of sexually assaulting someone in high school, or were intentionally deceptive, such as YouTuber Jordan Beau's video entitled "exposing my DMs with James Charles…" (Sands 2019:[sp]). These were amplified and spread online, receiving millions of views and thousands of likes on social media. This demonstrates how in cancel culture there is a crisis of distinctions in which blame and responsibility are conflated, in essence where accusation is taken as equal to guilt. Furthermore, the assumption is also that content on social media is implicitly accurate. This is a result of excessive amounts of imitation fostered by features on social media that result in this disorder and chaos.

This becomes more apparent when we look at the manner in which famous and well-known YouTubers and celebrities such as Emma Chamberlain, Karlie Kloss, Selena Gomez, Zendaya, some of whom he had made YouTube videos with, also unfollowed him (Mbude 2019:[sp]). Twitter users called out James Charles for being a sexual predator: "James Charles is a predator. plain and simple. he should be arrested. — ainsley (@polaroidpml), May 11, 2019." Since Westbrook posted her video on the 10th of May 2019 and Charles made a follow-up apology video, Charles has lost a large number of followers. Apology videos on YouTube are generally meaningless to viewers and low in impact, and this was the case here as well. Charles released an apology video titled "tati" promptly after Westbrook made her allegations and his number of followers began to decrease. The apology video was condemned by the YouTube community for superficial reasons such as insufficient makeup, being low-pitched, and for being filmed at a peculiar camera angle, but it appeared to be an effort to be forthright, even though it was shunned by viewers (Sands 2019:[sp]). This conveys the idea of permanence on social media: one cannot forgive because one cannot forget. There are no tools for ridding ourselves of the situation that technology has spawned.

The apparent offence, because of its scandalous nature, seems to have greater permanence than any attempt to undo that offence. Technology seems to bring about and magnify tragedies but not remedy them (Murray 2019:174). Consider the concepts of call-out and cancel culture; the most detrimental parts of an individual's life comprise of the data that demands social media users to look at. This is ideal for a platform that finds pleasure from another person's misfortune. There is a sense of delight that comes with observing a reputable individual's reputation disintegrate, the position of being holier-than-thou, the conscientious feeling that comes with uniting against and punishing the culprit (Murray 2019:175).

Significantly, there is a digital footprint that is left behind and that can be discovered by new people. To come across objectionable content that was posted years ago on social media can invoke a response as if it occurred recently. Hannah Arendt explains that the sensitivity and uncertainty of human relationships translates as continuously behaving in accordance with a "web of relationships" whereby every action stems from a reaction, resulting in a "chain reaction" (cited by Murray 2019:177). This reinforces Girard's concept of humans as social beings that are reliant on their relations to others. Every development or series of actions results in unforeseen new actions. A word or action could alter and transform and affect everything. Arendt explains that as a result, we are not aware of what we are doing (cited in Murray 2019:177). With the advent of the internet, individuals cannot shake loose their online avatars wherever they may go. Even when a person has passed on, people will continue to look into that person's history, not with the intention of forgiveness but for vengeance.

3.5.2 Social media and myths

As discussed in Chapter two, myths hide the existence of the scapegoat — the mediator both beloved and detested — in a similar way that social media hide the existence of the mediator. This hiding or burial is more misleading than religions that integrate violence and sacredness, and ally it to a form of transcendence that governs the future of human relations. Social media often have a tendency to advocate a fabricated sense of autonomy of society. Bubbio (2018:8) contends that: "subjectivisms, objectivisms, romanticisms and idealisms, individualisms and positivisms" seem to be in defiance but are actually in consensus about hiding the existence of the mediator. The online community is reliant on the fabrication of instinctual desire. All members of this community advocate the same fabrication of autonomy to which individualists are loyal. Historic texts depict a correlation between metaphysical structures and violence (Bubbio 2018:8). Social media violence is conveyed in the very essence of metaphysics which deny alternative perspectives and opinions. This violence is furthermore rooted in cultural structures that the community epitomises. Thus, this violence does not pertain to the social media community, but is 'infected virtually' into the societies in which these cultural constructs govern.

Social media obscure their own mythical attributes, the account of the previous sacrificial crisis and simultaneously the reasoning for the banishment of victims. These networks also conceal ritualistic attributes – they sustain the banishment of an alternative victim in the social media realm. Social media integrate and conceal the buttresses of the sacrificial mechanism, namely myth and ritual. With the advent of modernism and the move away from religion and towards secularisation, individuals discard of ancient forms of divinity and assign new ones. These sacred attributes pertain to the scapegoat who is both beloved and detested, and it is this relation that generates the sacred.

What becomes evident in the James Charles case study is that social media, as modes of mystification, will not reach a point where the innocence of the scapegoat is uncovered. Arguably, this is because social media do not allow us to contemplate the victim or anything else very much. Ritualistic ways of thinking can never perceive its source, which is sustained by the nature of social media. Social media epitomise an inclination towards allegations and proclamations, as opposed to factual evidence. Consequently, social media dissolve the object of desire This appears to relieve mimetic rivalry, taking into account the object of desire, namely truth, is available to everyone. On the other hand, the mythical feature does not dissipate because it is distinctive of social media and the solution it conjures is not permanent. One way to see it is to notice that while the 'object of desire' vanishes in the digital realm, what remains is almost a purer form of mimesis: now we simply imitate desires without being fully aware of the objects of our desire.

Content creators on social media associate the pleasure in creating and sharing texts with the pleasure of shattering the online world. Moreover, people have a strong desire for approval and to be 'liked' by others on social media, and the simplest way to achieve this is by creating a common enemy, in essence a scapegoat. In our desire to receive the most likes, views, or subscribers, we have failed to engage in dialogue and question the medium itself. Instead, individuals require and share more scandalous content to keep them captivated and to accumulate and sustain their number of followers. It would seem that the medium itself supports and even encourages this perpetual scandalising, as if the medium is structured 'scandalously.'

This is nevertheless contingent on the 'victim,' without whom individuals would not be able to eradicate the violence between them, to create from it an individual being that is supreme. Social media consist of what Nietzsche interprets as the "content of the tragic myth". This refers to an epic occurrence that reveres the struggling hero (cited by Alberg 2013a:29).

As social media users celebrate the eradication or banishment of the hero, the "tragic effect" is accomplished. That effect is witnessing a new order arise from the destruction of the old.

All of these attributes specified are crucial. The eye that is kept in thrall, the pleasure in the banishment of an individual, and the emergence of a new order. These attributes hint at what will inevitably be apparent; tragedy's power stems from sacrifice (Alberg 2013a:35). Social media violence is predominantly rooted in scandal because of its "sacrificial and scapegoating indifference" to the singling out of its victim. It operates as a mimetic ambush warranting a vehement exchange with minimal differences in its aggression and resemblance to its victims. The amplified dissemination of popular beliefs and trends on social media implies that the risks of violent reciprocity have increased.

Girard (2010:18) explains that with the advent of modernity, humans are always consumed by order and chaos, peace and war. This has signalled an erasure of differences. Girard (2010:18) further contends that "[r]eciprocal action is so amplified by globalization, the planetary reciprocity in which the slightest event can have repercussions on the other side of the globe, that violence is always a length ahead of our movements." Thus, mimetic theory reveals the vice-like grip of the mimetic contagion in the online sphere that transforms witnesses into participants in violence that is initially challenged.

This chapter demonstrates how easily social media is able to spawn violence because it is rooted in scandal, scandal that feeds the madness of the crowd, keeping us enthralled. Our intention, however, should be to move beyond scandal. Furthermore, the underlying and distinct themes on social media are the banishments that are repeated and ritualised. Social media's sacrificial nature denies looking at the victim upon whom obliteration is built, in essence the victim created in an effort to validate one's own existence. In most cases, social media movements provide minimal interpretation and illumination. Girard interprets this as concealing the actual and sinister desires motivating a movement. Social media content is not constructed by validations, but rather by what it denies without clarification. The authenticity announced by these texts would be unattainable without the banishment of the victim.

At this point, mimetic theory has revealed and rationalised some of the intricacies of online relationships while demonstrating how online activities can be restrained by three dimensions; ritual, myth and taboo. Thus far, this study has emphasised the conflictual aspects of mimesis and its ramifications for relations of individuals in online communities. This chapter argues that reciprocal action is heightened on social media by operating simultaneously as an exchange, transaction, and a mode of violent reciprocity. Violent reciprocity, which signifies the erasure of differences, is at the root of all myths and cultures (Girard 2010:11).

Taking into consideration the interactions between rivalrous groups on social media, mimetic theory becomes a useful mode of analysis. As seen in the examples discussed in this chapter, social media wars gain momentum from upholding certain ideologies and not from strengthening any specific argument through reason.

Considering this, it is not unexpected that groups of people prepared to expose their worst behaviour through a medium that tends become overheated, can beget massive, 1930s fascist-style crowds. Lanier's (2010:283) concern is that this way of communicating will endure in future generations, where internet-based technology will intensify mob mentalities. Lanier (2010:43) explains that emphasizing the crowd means disparaging individuality in the structure of society, which spawns mob behaviours. This engenders "empowered trolls," but to a mostly "unconstructive online world". Furthermore, history informs us that collectivist goals can heighten into immense social disasters. Taking this assertion into account, the next chapter turns to the social dimensions of the media event of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The chapter focuses on how social media can foster both negative and positive reciprocity. The discussion thus shifts to accommodate an ambivalence in social media and its capacity to continue generating negative reciprocity (also discussed in this chapter), as well as its capacity for encouraging positive reciprocity.[35]

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[35] The negative bias is an individual's inclination to not merely process negative stimuli effortlessly, but also to dwell on these occurrences (Cherry 2020). It is also referred to as "positive-negative asymmetry." This negativity bias means that an individual is affected by negative stimuli, such as criticisms and insults, more intensely than joyous events. Thus, there is in the human brain, a trend towards a 'negativity' bias. This is one reason why it is difficult for positive reciprocity to triumph.

4. CHAPTER FOUR: AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS AND MOVEMENTS THAT FOSTER BOTH NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE RECIPROCITY: THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

A global pandemic tends to signify the world's impending doom and the emergence of violent reciprocity where individuals perceive one another as rivals.[36] A pandemic renders everybody the same: it sets up the same situation for everyone and thus, to a great degree, signifies the erasure of differences. Violence easily proliferates throughout the community, similar to a pathogen that only an 'immunisation' by sacrifice can inhibit. The scapegoat, who reinstates peace in a community endangered by its own violence, is both the antidote and the virus, culpable for the chaos as well as being the conservator of order (Girard 2010:24). It is this equivocation of the sacred that temporarily vanquishes violence. Thus, in service of the greater aim of this study, this chapter turns to the natural 'mimetic' reaction on social media and in politics through an analysis of the media-saturated context of the coronavirus pandemic. And, while there is a difference between the literal pandemic and the 'media event,' a difference between them cannot easily be maintained. This chapter explores the media events surrounding the pandemic, not the science around the pandemic per se. In addition, the chapter demonstrates how the 'contagion' of the news spread quicker than the actual contagion and has had effects beyond the effects of the literal virus.

This brings us to the question of how an individual understands and interprets his or her own violent tendencies. Is one merely trapped in an infinite cycle of reciprocal rivalries on social media? Is there any substitute for the prevailing account of violence that involves disembodiment, conflict and rivalry? Girard's theory, at this point, appears to be rooted in a concept of mimesis in the negative sense — that is, in the fact that it frequently results in 'violence'. This, however, does not mean that mimeticism cannot generate positive reciprocity. While this chapter continues to explore how social media generate negative reciprocity, later the discussion turns to how social media foster positive reciprocity. Girard's work on mimetic theory appears to represent two points of view: one focusing on the 'goodness' of mimesis and the other focusing on the need to evade mimetic violence. In this context, mimetic theory appears to be paradoxical. In an interview with Rebecca Adams, Girard unravels this confusion by explaining that mimetic desire is not inherently wicked (cited by Steinmair-Posel 2017:188). Thus, when Girard refers to a wicked form of mimetic desire, he is referring to a form of mimetic desire that engenders mimetic rivalry. There are thus two possibilities at play in mimetic desire: a movement towards positive mimesis or negative mimesis. One cannot evade mimesis since it is fundamental to human nature.

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[36] In *Battling to the end: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, Girard (2010:11) describes the disastrous contemporary world: "Violence is presently being unleashed . . . across the entire planet, fulfilling the predictions of apocalyptic texts: confusion regarding those disasters caused by nature and by man, confusion regarding what is natural and what is artificial. At present, global warming and rising sea levels are no longer metaphors."

For this reason, mimetic desire should be interpreted as being inherently good. Mimetic desire, according to Girard (1999:16), is "responsible for the best and worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal level as well as what elevates us above it." In his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and other in literary structure,* Girard (1965:105) contends that mimeticism can either encourage creativity and nourish cultural progression, or it can provoke competition, jealousy and envy, which inevitably brings about violence. Girard refers to the former as positive mimeticism or positive reciprocity which is governed externally, and to the latter as a form of negative reciprocity or undifferentiation. With this in mind, this chapter explores the mimetic character of the pandemic media event and how social media has the power to modify and amplify what is interpreted as reality. Furthermore, this chapter explores how social media foster both negative and positive reciprocity. At the time of writing, the pandemic is still ongoing. Many countries in the world, including South Africa, have been under one or another form of "lockdown" to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

4.1 An interpretation of the coronavirus pandemic through mimetic theory

The coronavirus pandemic is indicative of the undifferentiation now proliferating across the globe through electronic media. Although there is no vaccine or cure for the virus at this point, we can impede the spread of the virus by staying indoors and practising social distancing, in essence by retreating into the electronic media environment.[37] McLuhan's insights inform us about the paradoxes stated here. Individuals have to escape the dangers posed by the virus by being enveloped completing in the 'viral' media flood. On one hand, there is a complete separation from others but on the other, there is a complete immersion in the totality of global media. Given how penetrable borders have become across the globe, pandemics illuminate us about the nature of human relationships (Girard 2010:24). Fear is a constituent element in these forms of reciprocity. Ancient fears reappear and are embodied in different ways nowadays, but no forms of scapegoating will reinstate harmony or peace. This is because the system of sacrifice on which traditional scapegoating phenomena depend, has been demystified for modern individuals through our Western cultural inheritance. Owing to the fact that the scapegoat mechanism has been unveiled, Girard contends that modern scapegoating is frequently banal and doused with cynicism, whereas traditional scapegoating was not (cited by Reveley *et al* 2019:9).

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[37] Research concerning how people relate to contamination in "disgust" theory in psychology illuminate practices such as social distancing. In his book *Unclean: Meditations on purity, hospitality, and morality,* Richard Beck (2011:15) explains that the boundary-surveilling role of disgust is primarily shaped to protect the barrier between the sacred and the profane. Individuals essentially experience disgust when feelings of repulsion and repugnance arise, usually when the profane transgresses a boundary and encounters the sacred. In addition to interpreting disgust as a "boundary psychology," Beck (2011:16) acknowledges disgust as a "expulsive psychology." The expulsive character of ritual and scapegoating would be inept in archaic and modern cultures without the governance of disgust over ideas of purification and cleansing. The concern, undoubtedly, stems from human beings becoming objects of expulsion when communities pursue purity by cleansing themselves through scapegoating processes.

An alternative culture needs to be developed in this time of chaos; chaos needs to be reordered through clearer thinking. Thus, one of the aims of this chapter is to elucidate the existing risks of what mimetic theory illuminates as we reflect upon our digital era, and especially upon the media-saturated context of the coronavirus pandemic. The analogy of a virus spreading through shared reciprocity becomes applicable for mimetic theory because individuals share desires in a similar manner. It is also important to recognise that the pandemic itself cannot be divorced from the use of media as a means for interpreting the pandemic.

4.2 The media-saturated context of the coronavirus pandemic

On the 12th of March 2020, The World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic (Gumbrecht & Howard 2020:[sp]). At that time, there were one hundred and eighteen thousand cases, more than four thousand deaths and the virus had been rapidly spreading throughout every continent except for Antarctica (Gumbrecht & Howard 2020:[sp]). Given that this study is being conducted in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and that this event is still unfolding, news reports are constantly being updated and the statistics referred to in this paper are subject to change. Nevertheless, it becomes important to reflect upon the media-saturated context of the virus and how the panic, amplified and overheated by media, extends into the real world. Global panic buying has soared and some people have become violent and deranged owing to fears evoked by the media-saturated context of the virus. As the panic around coronavirus escalates and more cases and deaths are confirmed, what becomes evident is how this frenzy consumes intellectual thought. Video footage, photographs and voice notes on WhatsApp, for instance, instil fear and urge people to prepare by stocking goods such as canned food, hand sanitiser and other necessities during the national lockdown.

We are living in an era of massive global communication and this exacerbates the mimetic contagion (Girard 2010:26). The speed and the scale of social media networks enable information to move faster in the digital realm. Social media effect individuals across countries and continents, as opposed to only the small social circles that physically surround people in the real world. Expansive technologies such as social networking sites have the ability to heighten and intensify both the best and the worst of humanity. Before this dissertation turns to how social media can generate positive reciprocity, it looks again at Girard's notion of undifferentiation and how it further illuminates ideas of violence, chaos and disorder during the pandemic. Furthermore, it analyses the particular stresses that emerge during a pandemic from living in a technologically-driven society, which McLuhan defines as a global village.

The filmmaker George Romero describes media as "zombifying" because it renders everything identical, diminishes difference and vanquishes our perception of experience and reality (quoted in Reyburn 2018:48). Social media transmit more uncertainty than one expects and can transform into an aggressive environment with complex interdependent beings that form a mob. On these platforms, mediations are amplified which explains the ambiguities and uneasiness encircling the outbreak. The outbreak reveals that social media are chiefly communicative tools that unveil something of the nature of human beings. Moreover, social media reveal how feeble human beings become amidst crisis. Rather than aiding the human experience and bolstering human brilliance, social media can amplify human frailty (Reyburn 2018:48). Thus, contrary to what many believe, social media can cripple individuals rather than empower them. In comprehending media as "extensions" of ourselves, we need to accept that media moulds our understanding of being.

4.2.1 The coronavirus pandemic and the violence of undifferentiation

It has become apparent during the coronavirus pandemic how desire centralises, compels and guides the self. The growing and permeating common desire in a crowd demonstrates an image of immense unity. However, as Reyburn (2018:53) reiterates, "When two hands grasp simultaneously for what cannot and will not be shared, discord is inevitable." This is demonstrated in quite a literal sense in the case of panic buying. Thus, mimetic desire is the origin of both order and disorder, peace and hostility. It is the origin of order and peace when it permits the autonomy and liberty needed to select which desires to imitate, and allows individuals to share beliefs and belief systems. Mimetic desire becomes the origin of disorder and hostility when it represses the self within the punitive sense of negative reciprocity. Furthermore, it can also be the origin of subjugation to the 'pandemic' of shared desire. As noted already, Girard refers to this concept as "undifferentiation," as the erasure of distinctions, bounded in a harmonious liberation (cited by Muñoz 2016:170). This harmony is evident especially where there is some or other form of technological overreach. I have already shown how this is evident in the digital sphere, but it is worth noting how electronic media can collude with other forms of technological overreach.

In his book *Medical nemesis: The expropriation of health,* Ivan Illich (1976) discusses how the medical industry itself has transformed into an extensive threat to health itself. Illich proposes the term "iatrogenesis" which describes a form of doctor-induced sickness, discussing the negative effects of medicine, rather than the myth that surrounds it. Furthermore, Illich's insights offer valuable critique on the behaviours that have defined the reactions to the coronavirus pandemic. Although Illich never uses the term undifferentiation, his concepts corroborate what Girard discusses regarding the mimetic mechanism.

For both Girard and Illich, the contemporary evils of modern society stem from the cultural structure that moulds desire. In particular, Illich (1976:[sp]) suggests that when one dominant conceptual system becomes totalising, human beings struggle to separate themselves from that system. Thus, Illich and Girard articulate similar views about the modern world. In *Tools for conviviality (1973),* Illich (1973:79) contends, for instance, that "there is no off-switch for an ecological apocalypse." Furthermore, Illich (1973:451) explains that when deranged behaviour becomes the benchmark of a society, individuals adapt to compete and engage in it. Envy distorts an individual's perception of reality and urges them compete and enter into rivalrous relationships.

Illich, similar to Girard, believes that society has experienced a momentous shift. There existed some type of a disastrous disintegration in the way in which people perceived things. Illich describes this shift as the emergence of "the age of systems".[38] Illich (1976:[sp]) explains how this age of systems has engendered a society where even life expectancy becomes a commodity. Illich explains that what defined archaic and ancient societies specifically was the difference between subjects and objects and devices and their users. In a technological era, he argues, these differences have disintegrated. When objects of desire become virtual, what is left is something similar to a pure process of mimesis.

McLuhan's theory bolsters this argument. McLuhan insists that any medium is an extension of ourselves but also has an amputative nature (McLuhan 1994:41). This corroborates with Illich's notion of disembodiment. Illich interprets our reality as disembodying because it can be comprehended through the narrow lens of "risk awareness". Risk is disembodying because it is a statistical notion that renders us all the same; that is, as without individual value. It does not refer to the individual person but rather to communities or groups of people. Illich (1976:[sp]) explains that that society is so systematized that medicine can change individuals into patients because they are "unborn, newborn, menopausal, or at some other age of risk." Thus, society eventually surrenders its autonomy to medical professionals. Girard's understanding of ritual demonstrates that this is not something new. What is new, however, is this "age of systems" which Illich describes as intensified medicalisation. In the midst of the pandemic, we are not aware whether an individual will be infected and to what degree of severity, but the "age of systems" nevertheless reconfigures the lives of all people across the globe in terms of a singular way of negotiating statistical information.

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[38] This era that Illich perceived as closing had been proliferated by the notion of instrumentality (quoted in Cayley 2020:[sp]). In other words, we exist in an era where we make use of "instruments" or devices to accomplish or attain the desirable. Individuals do not live in a civilisation that promotes the character of embracing satisfaction and accepting one's life, rather, it advocates for individuals to indulge in their desires (Vandenberg 2006:262). The progressions and expansions made through mass production, which allowed products once only accessible to wealthy members of society, have enabled such products to become accessible to individuals of both middle and working classes. With the growth in the availability of products, the world has been transformed.

In the article *Questions about the current pandemic from the point of view of Ivan Illich,* David Cayley (2020) explains that to recognise oneself with this mathematical formulation is to participate in "intensive self-algorithmization". Illich's main concern is that people re-envision themselves according to a statistical formulation, in essence as part of the group. For Illich, this is an obscuring of individuals by communities in an attempt to hinder the world from revealing anything unexpected – it is opting for mathematical and statistical formulations as opposed to a perceived experience. Independent cases are frequently treated as general cases, (almost a 'one size fits all' way of thinking) with their distinctive differences being ignored. Medical professionals and prominent political leaders are frequently to blame because their sources of information sidestep particular individual distinctions and traits in order to condense the facts to make them palatable to the mass.

Girard contends that when individuals become part of a group, a new type of mentality and way of thinking comes into being that substitutes the conscious personalities of individuals in the group. This reiterates Illich's concepts of "self-algorithmization" and disembodiment and emphasises the role of both media and technology in heightening human frailty, as opposed to being extensions of human brilliance (Reyburn 2017:51). It would be a mistake, however, to regard Illich's ideas as merely abstract when, in reality, they reflect the deeper structures set up by electronic media. In fact, the degree to which self-algorithmization and the like are possible, as Illich himself knows, is owed to a particular media environment. This type of environment homogenises its users, creates a mass mind and mass uniformity.

Throughout the pandemic, individuals have been constantly bombarded by statistics of people who have lost their lives or who have contracted the virus. However, an individual cannot identify with these individuals because they are depicted as statistics. This again reiterates the disembodying and de-humanising character of media in general: individuals often want to detach. Scandal is perpetuated here too, since access is granted, then blocked, all in the name of 'facts'. It is difficult to understand these statistics and probability curves and the information becomes emotionally overpowering. Survival demands that we disconnect.

A similar feeling is experienced with regard to data asphyxiation, commonly referred to as information overload. Individuals become emotionless and the overload inhibits their ability to be deeply moved as they are drawn away from empathy (Quinones 2016). In other words, individuals cannot identify with the other. Social media are particularly overloaded with information and do not aid interpretation.

With regard to the way information circulates on various social media networks during the pandemic, there seems to be a lack of a degree of human connection; these media separate us from reality to the extent that we can merely forget that we are engaging with actual people. Social media aid and amplify this disembodiment and thus encourage a condition of numbness.

McLuhan (1994:64) explains that the idea of numbness is applicable to electric technology. Here, it becomes applicable to social media as well. McLuhan (1994:64) asserts that an individual has to numb their central nervous system when it is made vulnerable; that is, when it is exposed or endangered. This explains somewhat why this technological era is also an era of insensibility and indifference. This also supports Illich's ideas around disembodiment — the immaterial transforms into the material, the speculative becomes real, and the everyday experiences become inseparable from its resemblance in media, medical facilities and data representations (Cayley 2020:[sp]). McLuhan's analogies and notion of a technologically ingrained society further illuminate the occurrences of the pandemic. During the pandemic, the procedures required to repair damage or contain the virus inevitability spread across the entire system. Social media and technologies by which individuals magnify and extend themselves comprise of an enormous collective surgery performed on the social being with an inattention to the possibility of disinfectants — that which reduces and inhibits the spread of the infection. If the procedure is required, the likelihood of infecting the entire system during the procedure needs to be taken into consideration. For when operating in a society that is ingrained in technology, it is not the infected area that is predominantly affected — each new development alters the ratios among all of the senses (McLuhan 1994:64). The area that is wounded and operated on is numb.

Thus, it is the whole network that has altered. Social media have both auditory and visual effects, for example, so each development alters the proportions among all the senses. A metaphor from the pandemic itself expresses this well: to have contracted a virus — that is, a new media environment — and not show its symptoms is to be asymptomatic. However, no generation has ever understood enough about its behaviour to declare it has no symptoms to modern technology and social media.[39]

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[39] Unlike McLuhan, there are many authors who believe that our technological era does not pose any threats. Cayley (2020:[sp]) refers to Donna Haraway's concepts which are discussed in her book *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature*. Cayley (2020:[sp]) takes note of how this shaped Illich's idea of how modern medicine was changing, but additionally how Haraway's opinions are averse to Illich's thoughts. Haraway makes reference to the "post-modern body". Furthermore, she suggests that mankind, similar to other constituents or subsystem, must be confined in a structure whose fundamental form of functioning are probabilistic and mathematical. In some way, Haraway believes that human-beings no longer live in pursuit of knowledge, but rather allow for biotic constituents to alleviate this gap. This spawns a world where no human being is sacred in themselves. In a technologically-ingrained era, where the barriers that govern proliferation of information as opposed to detecting any distinctions ceases to be of significance. The character or genuineness of an individual, Haraway believes, similar to Illich, as authentic, constant and sacred beings who have diminished into conditionally self-governing structures in continuous exchange with the more immense structures in which they are integrated (Cayley 2020:[sp]).

At the core of the coronavirus reaction is the assertion that individuals should comply with lockdown regulations and act probabilistically to avert what has not yet happened namely, a rapid surge in the number of infections, a devastating impact on the resources of the health care system, resultant pressures on medical staff, et cetera. The alternative, propagated by mass media and medical professionals, is that if we continue as normal, we will lose numerous lives. This is true, of course, but what is not stated is that the mortality rate currently, is still under one per cent (SA Coronavirus 2020). However, the aim here is not to discuss the truth or falsehood of the claims in question but to highlight the effect of electronic media on the mediation of the pandemic. Even where caution is most certainly required, there has no doubt been a degree of paranoia involved because of a distortion of the facts. This is not merely a matter of the content of media, but a matter of a greater immersion in media. Social media thus act as a functional metaphor in its ability to encapsulate this experience into new configurations.

In our technological era, individuals are being embodied more frequently into a configuration of information, tending toward the "technological extension of consciousness" (McLuhan 1994:67). For instance, in a world where everyone has become accustomed to and detached from the repeated phrase "flatten the curve," everyone becomes more likely to conceive of illness and disease in terms of population statistics. At this point of the crisis — late August — there are still many uncertainties and much confusion about the way forward. What has become increasingly apparent in South Africa is that, with the exclusion of a small number of medical facilities in actual crisis, the inescapable sense of panic and chaos is mostly attributed to the precautions and regulations put in place to prevent the spread of the virus, and not the media pandemic itself. During the pandemic, social media platforms have been saturated with content about the virus to the extent that it appears as if nothing else is happening in the world. Media do not operate in isolation — individuals have a desire to look where the media suggests they do. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic is a formulated object that could have been formulated in a different manner. Thus, individuals cannot preserve their identities, but are rather degraded to being the tools of the agendas and desires of individuals who are of a higher status and who are consequently tools of the desires of the catastrophic mimetic structure of domination and reign, as well as the locus of desire determined by the situation. Moreover, the scandalous essence of social media is not only demonstrated in the reporting of COVID-19 deaths and cases, but also in the way that prominent political leaders, particularly American and Chinese political figures, as discussed below, have shifted blame onto one another for engendering the crisis around the globe.

Haraway asserts that human-beings are constructed and fashioned into a combination of machine and living-being. Illich's response, however, differs from that of Haraway. Haraway urges individuals to identify and embrace this new way of living and to perceive it as a form of independence and freedom.

As seen in figures 16 and 17, social networking sites aid political and social agendas and operate at a level of scandal while dictating desires to its users. Discriminatory and speculative content and posts such as these easily incite resentment and hatred against specific groups of people. Figure 16 shows a tweet made by the American republican activist Scott Presler which states, "The media is reporting Chinese propaganda. How can we possibly trust the numbers coming out of China when China covered up the virus, China covered up the deaths and China downplayed the threat. China is not our friend and no one should believe their numbers." It appears as if some American political figures are creating a foundation to blame the Chinese government for the global coronavirus pandemic, and subsequently clear the American government from any blame for their high death toll (Hong 2020:[sp]). Trumpian rhetoric, as seen in figure 16, has a definite mirror reflection in China.

While the American president refers to coronavirus as a "Chinese virus," the Chinese are referring to it as an "American virus" (Hong 2020:[sp]). Zhao Lijian, the representative of the Chinese foreign ministry, implied by tweet that the United States engendered the coronavirus pandemic: "CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in U.S? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! U.S. owe us an explanation!" (Hong 2020:[sp]).
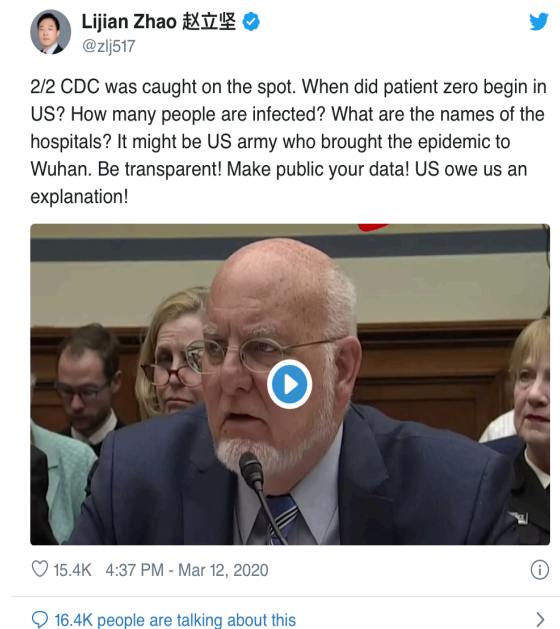

Figure 15: American activist Scott Presler on the coronavirus, Twitter, (2020)

Figure 16: Chinese epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan on the coronavirus, Twitter, (2020)

As intimated before, what is at issue for this study is not so much the truth or falsehood of claims, but the fact that such claims reveal patterns structured by mimetic desire. It is evident in these tweets how political leaders quickly become rivals of one another and double each other, heightening an already present mimetic doubling. Scandal aggravates this mimetic snowballing, spawning more rivalry at an intensified rate. The mimetic crisis heightens as those enmeshed in rivalry pick sides and become ensnared and infected by frenzy. In the above posts, language becomes a mode through which politicians articulate their own desires and subsequently their follower's desires. Furthermore, #ChineseVirus rhetoric has also been linked in the conspiracy around 5G. On the 20th of January 2020, *Les moutons enragés*, a French conspiracy website posted that the coronavirus could be affiliated to Wuhan installing 5G towers before the outbreak (Heilweil 2020:[sp]). Shortly after the blog post, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, a Belgian newspaper, published a discussion with a doctor who denied this theory (Heilweil 2020:[sp]). The original post on *Les moutons enragés* was removed shortly after. However, the content of the blog post had been spread to English-language social media platforms (Heilweil 2020:[sp]). Soon, theories linking the coronavirus and 5G had been exaggerated to a level of absurdity on social media. Many have contended that 5G networks result in radiation, which subsequently generates the virus. Others have suggested that reports of the coronavirus are an attempt to hide the installation of 5G towers. An alternative narrative being circulated on these platforms is that 5G and coronavirus constitute a larger attempt to exercise population control.

This is an example of a conspiracy theory that was exaggerated and spread across all social media platforms. The various platforms' own recommendation engines are presenting information to individuals who had never searched the term 5G before.

Sinan Aral, a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, asserts, "Falsehood diffuses significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth, in all categories of information, and in many cases by an order of magnitude" (quoted in Dizikes 2018). This is to say that social media networks are systems that favour false information. The narratives mentioned in the previous paragraph are obviously ridiculous but, because people feel that the virus has caused a viral sensation, in a sense, the internet is to 'blame' for the rise of mimetic rivalry and people sense this unconsciously. Certainly, without the internet the same degree of mimetic rivalry would not have been possible.

The escalation of coronavirus conspiracy theories and scandals encourages chaos and instability in society but this chaos is temporarily vanquished by the scapegoat who reinstates peace in the community. As mentioned before, the scapegoat mechanism has no permanent hold, as Girard suggests, because of the impact of the Christian revelation around the innocence of the victim. At least, to follow Girard's anthropology, the scapegoat represents the possibility of reinstating peace, which is partly why people might revert to employing this mechanism even where it does not seem to have an effect. This might explain something of why, after the term "Chinese virus" had been used by the United States president, Donald Trump, Asian people living in America became victims of racial prejudice and were being blamed for the coronavirus outbreak (Scott 2020:[sp]). This highlights how, amidst a crisis, individuals tend to single-out a victim. During the lockdown in South Africa, many communities suffered an economic downturn and were destitute. Owing to this instability and chaos, some communities performed violence against policemen patrolling the streets (Reporter 2020:[sp]). In Kenya, for instance, evidence of literal scapegoating presented itself when a Kenyan man who allegedly contracted coronavirus was stoned by a group of young people (Lötter 2020:[sp]). In South Africa, healthcare workers working in hospitals claimed that they had been ostracised by their communities and were refused access to public transport facilities (Lötter 2020:[sp]). Similarly, in Khayelitsha, a township outside of Cape Town, people who had contracted coronavirus were forced out from their homes and expelled from their communities (Lötter 2020:[sp]). The scapegoat mechanism produces artificial transcendence that generates peace and order in the community that is temporary, and that will eventually regress to the disorder of scandals (Alberg 2017:487).

It is likely that this violence was heightened by the fact that misinformation or "fake news" proliferated on social media platforms blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction.[40]

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[40] For instance, "mask-wearing" was initially strongly opposed by the World Health Organisation and then later, inadvertently, endorsed. Even though the research is still unclear at present, it has been mandated in South Africa that everyone should wear masks to prevent the spread of disease and in the "hope" that masks work (Science alert 2020).

The point here is not to dwell on the specifics of the debate on truth, however, but to note that often a distinction between fact and fiction is difficult to ascertain owing to the dominance of digital culture. In a sense, words can lose their meaning, not always in a denotative way, but instead through a disposition of power to permit access to reality while simultaneously inhibiting it. Language itself can become "contaminated" and can convey various messages and meanings neither explicit nor implicit in specific words and sentences (Alberg 2013b:13). This is key to Girard's thinking; words somehow convey mimesis even though mimesis goes beyond language. Unique and varied realities are arranged according to a class of signs. There is a form of falsehood which comprises of language and its relation to reality in the above posts. The use of language on social media permits access to a reality in a way that is conflicting and ambiguous, because the ambiguity is in the mimetic desire implied by language. The idea of words losing their meaning proposes that the use of language renders reality inaccessible.

Moreover, individuals accept the reality with which they are presented and are vulnerable to confirmation bias. In other words, social media isolates its users' desires and they become hyper-mimetic. When an individual searches for something specific on the Internet, it will appear everywhere including the user's social media feed. After all, pattern-recognising algorithms show content an individual would prefer seeing and removes content that they do not like (Quinones 2016). Social media are designed to be habit-forming which is why social media users are positioned amidst volumes of algorithmically-filtered information. This restricts their exposure to alternative viewpoints and reinforces what they already agree with. In essence, desire has a reinforcing character. Thus, on social media, personal and individual thoughts frequently transform into dull duplications through sharing, commenting, reacting and hashtags. Furthermore, social media create the illusion of individuality through algorithms that tap into the subject's content. However, the content which proliferates on these platforms does not reflect the subject's own thoughts, but rather the 'thoughts' of the networking site itself.

Lanier (2010:79) reiterates these arguments by explaining that when the digital swarm expands, it forfeits individuality. Furthermore, the deification of digital culture is to society's detriment, which subsequently causes the undermining of human individuality. This a result of computer systems that confine life experiences to a series of classifications. For instance, on Facebook your life is expressed as a "series of information boxes": where you attended college, what music you prefer listening to, what your relationship status is. This signifies an erasure of differences as everyone is made a variation of identical themes, which permit a restricted domain to exemplify one's 'uniqueness'. Our individuality is stifled by the way in which individuals glorify the collective — only what the collective regards as good is considered.

When individuals extend their minds throughout the globe via social media and the internet, what is left are the remnants of an immaterial self where individuals are degraded to being mere data at the mercy of algorithms. Individuals are rendered the same, engendering no distinctions and difference. The advent of social media has resulted in the annihilation of a subjective opinion or experience. Thus, intellectual thought has been downplayed as the self becomes a communal thriving being. The pandemic is symptomatic of a deeper reciprocal violence that attempts to eliminate the difference of the other. Thus, taking into account the mimetic model, it becomes difficult to visualise an escape.

Reflections upon the media-saturated context of the coronavirus pandemic reveal how easily individuals transform into unidentifiable beings within the whole group model of mass mediations. The pandemic becomes an analogy for mass mediation: a detached being that conquers the individual point of view. There is a sense of compliance with communal command. Expanding on this idea of blind tribalism and herd behaviour is the philosopher Simone Weil. Weil has often been connected to Girard as complementing and expanding his thinking.[41] Both Weil and Girard contend that an individual's desire for complete autonomy is the origin of idolatry and violence. However, complete absorption into the crowd can be equally idolatrous. Weil's notion of the collective also converges with Girard's views of the crowd. In her book *Needs for roots,* Weil (1952:25) contends that the idea of intellectual and individual thought dissipates within a group.[42]

4.2.2 A detached expression of connection as opposed to the undifferentiating pandemic

This raises the question of how the mimetic pandemic within the crowd can be dismembered or at the least disentangled? One could search for the source or origin of their desire. The first carrier of a communicable disease in an outbreak becomes representative of the role of intentionality; he symbolises the beginning of a story — intentional technology — and also implies the prospects of curbing the pandemic. Detecting the source of the pandemic brings us closer to attaining an antidote.

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[41] Girard interprets "mimetic desire" as being borrowed and as the idolization of another who appears to possess an abundance of being: when the subject's desires of possessing autonomy through another are unsatisfied, she colludes with others to single out a scapegoat. Similarly, Weil contends that individuals are influenced by others and that individuals are repressed by a 'force' as transgressors or victims of violence which is induced by ideology — this can be taken as a type of idolatry (cited by Meaney 2010:565).

[42] Weil (1952:25) specifically discusses ideas relating to freedom of expression and asserts that no collective can, strictly speaking, validate or declare freedom of expression because no collective requires the need for it. When a collective begins establishing thoughts and opinions as orthodoxies, it undoubtedly tends to impress them on the individuals who constitute it. This inevitably results in a situation where individuals are harshly excluded. Additionally, individuals are prevented from differencing from the collective on various issues of significance, unless they are willing to be expelled from the group. Social media pose the same risks. In Weil's view, reflective thought is overthrown when the articulation of an individual's ideas is expressed as 'we'.

The mimetic mechanism highlights that mimesis is inescapable; it is definite and characterises and governs an individual. Thus, what becomes crucial is not just the matter that desires are copied, but which desires are copied and precisely how they are subsequently mediated.

Having reflected upon how the media-saturated context of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 fostered negative reciprocity, what becomes key to note is the Girardian interpretation of Hegel's dialectic. A salient reason to consider Hegel's dialectic is because Girard's own thinking seems to stem from a reading of Hegel. Broadly speaking, Hegel's dialectic involves a negative (antithesis) that generates a positive (synthesis) (Girard 2010:27). It is when an individual opposes something that it advances its substance and power. Thus, this becomes a question of reframing, in essence many people trying to accommodate the "dialectical negative" into a more positive and affirmative "synthesis". Some people adopt negative reframing, whereas the positive reframing is an attempt to cope with the pandemic constructively. Thus, this chapter turns to a positive reframing which considers ways of dealing with the pandemic productively in order to assure that the self has access to the desires of others that preserves life; in essence desires that assert an affirmation of being. This raises the question of how the shift from negative reciprocity to positive reciprocity occurs.

Reyburn (2019b:78) explains that by understanding how these two modes of reciprocity differ, we can begin to understand how this shift can take place. Firstly, negative reciprocity is dependent on a deficiency as its main driving force, and this is rooted in a lack that generates a prevailing focus on a single or restricted view. This restricted view translates as an obscured viewpoint, in essence not being capable of perceiving outside of this condition. Negative reciprocity fixates on deprivation — that which is perceived as irreparable — and brings about a fixation on reclamation, and on revenge. Taking the characteristics of negative reciprocity into consideration, positive reciprocity then inverts those attributes. Negative reciprocity fixates on immediacy, doubling, the past, revenge, and relinquishes individual thought, whereas, positive reciprocity endorses pensive delay, embraces difference and individual thought, focuses on gratuitous giving and a willingness to be open to otherness (Reyburn 2019b:79). When taking into consideration openness to otherness, positive reciprocity takes us back to the notion of liberty, in which we are cognisant of our desires being saturated with otherness. Thus, at least to an important extent, the choice of a model can become open to us — about which more is said in Chapter five.

4.3 The coronavirus pandemic and positive reciprocity

There are authors who focus on how collectives form the foundation for all things that require learning and how this allows for the conveyance of cultural knowledge (Biava 2013:53). Weil (1952:7), for instance, offers a positive reframing of the collective, contending that individuals should appreciate "collectivity," of any form — community, family or friends — not for its mere existence, but because it provides "food" for many individuals.[43] Moreover, one should express the utmost appreciation to "collectivities". Each collectivity is authentic and, if dissipated, cannot be recreated. Weil (1952:7) contends that the food which a collectivity provides for the souls who constitute it cannot be compared to any other collectivity in the whole world. Secondly, a collectivity progresses into the future because of its continuity. It possesses food, not only for the individuals who constitute the collectivity, but also for the individuals who will join it in the future.

Girard (2016:3) explains that an individual's social identity is a mesh of relationships of belonging that are so amalgamated and intermixed that it comprises of something unique namely, a distinct being that is authentic. Although our relationships of belonging are never distinctive or unique in the rigid sense, they are varied and constitute a combination distinct from similar combinations, in essence an authentic identity.[44] Initial relationships of belonging by an individual, form the foundation for everything concerning education and knowledge. An individual's family provides him with his initial models — it is when a child mimics his parents that he learns and acquires the necessary behaviour and conduct for life. Hereafter, individuals go to schools and are supplied with models that ensure that as adults they are 'functioning' effectively in society. The working world is also a space of learning.

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[43] Weil characterises hunger as a human need which guides our feeling of constraint to one another (Reyburn 2017:68). Her outlook is that hunger itself must be addressed and she explains that an individual's obligations should link an individual's necessities, similar to hunger. There are certain types of hunger that are not characterised by the bodily or tangible, but pertain to moral well-being. Similar to bodily needs, however, they are physiological, and not directly linked to the fate of human beings. But they constitute, similar to our bodily necessities, a vital component of our life in this world. Furthermore, Weil (1952:6) contends that if this hunger is not addressed, we begin to disintegrate or dissipate into a condition similar to death, or a condition similar to idle or stagnant living. Weil (1952:8) also highlights the following: "It very often happens that the roles are reversed. There are collectivities which, instead of serving as food, do just the opposite: they devour souls." Thus, hunger can transform into a compelling, frequently scandalous analogy used in narratives that follow a pandemic. Furthermore, Weil's (1952:8) concept of hunger is as an amplification of the pandemic that is resemblant of mimetic desire. The hunger rooted in the mediated response to the coronavirus pandemic is especially dominating in character because it is a destructive, starving hunger that struggles to confront the other and that intends to devour the being of the other. If one considers the mimetic mechanism, hunger can also symbolise the openness of an individual to desires that perpetuate positive reciprocity. Addressing this hunger is akin to assuring that the self is open to the desires of others that sustain or revitalise life; these would be desires that favour the validation of being. To society's detriment, however, hunger is often sated with anything that is accessible, frequently correlating with the consuming vigour of the crowd.

[44] It is important to note the scandalous aspects of relationships of belonging. As relationships of belonging become more boundless, issues concerning belonging concern issues of identity and difference (Girard 2016:4). The disintegration and cultivation of relationships of belonging are linked with the universal amalgamation of all dimensions of life – political, social and cultural. On the other hand, as relationships become more all-embracing and freer, they lack security and feel less dependable. This undermining is not evident because it is usually caused by a deviation in relationships of belonging.

These first relationships of belonging allow for solid social integration. Thus, all human behaviour is learned and rooted in imitation. If humankind were to stop imitating, all modes of culture would disintegrate and disappear. Thus, both Weil and Girard contend that collectives are unique and that they form the foundation for learning and establishing cultures. Weil (1952:187) explains that there are specific moments when the thoughts and efforts made by the collective perform an extremely significant role in the individual life of each of its members. This is when the thoughts and opinions carried out by the collective create the opening for performing an action, which, while it is targeted at the collective, remains elementally an individual, not a collective, one.

Thus, instead of suffocating or oppressing the value concealed in an individual's mind, which is what many group actions undoubtedly do, this form of action stimulates, invigorates and resuscitates their evolution. Given how detrimental the social media environment can be to an individual, this raises the question of how social media can play a role in this resuscitation, in essence how social media can help create an environment where individuals can voice their personal opinions freely? The following examples demonstrate how a collective established by an online community perceiving one another as equals grants its members the opportunity to provide an individual opinion through interactions and debates. In addition, these movements tend to generate and encourage positive reciprocity by creating a common goal which members of the group agree to share. When individuals exist in the same world and have the same objectives or pursue identical goals, this imbues in them the same desires that can be shared and results in no conflict or rivalry. This type of online behaviour allows for new opportunities to generate individual opinions. Yochai Benkler (cited by Fuchs 2014:57) emphasises that the advent of a public networked realm has resulted in the redefinition of a user's role from that of a passive observer and listener to becoming a viable voice which engages in important discussions. These platforms permit individuals to alter their role within the public realm. They are not consumers and passive observers but rather essential subjects and creators of content. In this way social media users' thoughts remain elementally individual and not collective. This generates positive reciprocity.

In *Subversive joy and positive reciprocity*, Reyburn (2014:158) contends that G.K. Chesterton's work becomes useful for understanding positive reciprocity. Furthermore, there is a reciprocal illumination: by using mimetic theory as a mode of analysis for Chesterton's work, both works illuminate each other. Chesterton refers to an imitation of a model in a manner that converges with Girard's concept of mimetic theory. Chesterton's concept of an "ideal" is expressed as a definite conception or a model which pertains to something desired, however right or wrong it may be, either between two individuals or by groups (cited in Reyburn 2014:158).

He defines an ideal in a way that is akin to an ideology, belief, purpose or drive that expresses a sense of connection that simultaneously binds and disconnects (cited in Reyburn 2014:158). It is a point around which groups comprise and manoeuvre, as well as the origin of conflict between each other. As discussed in Chapter one, when there is a shared desire, such as objects of sexual desire and social status, mimetic desire results in competition, rivalry and conflict (Palaver 2013:58). An individual's sense of self transforms into a volatile, weak, unsettled being giving way to ideas of jealousy and pride. Pride is fundamental to Girard's notion of the metaphysical revolt[45] and thus, his declarations on humility as contrasting pride become significant.

Girard asserts that authenticity emerges with the disintegration of the individualistic self (Reyburn 2014:161). It is apparent that humility permits an alternative manner of conceiving the pacifying imitation of true love that Girard sees as being crucial to dismembering mimetic rivalry (Reyburn 2014:161). This becomes crucial when discussing ways to dismember forms of rivalry engendered in the environment on social media. Furthermore, for Girard, retrieving moments of history is a fundamental aspect to humility, because it uncovers this idea that an individual's perception of his identity does not stem from the self. This idea cannot be divorced from social media where an individual's identity is constructed upon an abundance of mimetic inputs that do not originate from the self. Thus, acknowledging this, allows for the vanquishing of pride which in turn engenders humility and a Girardian understanding of the truth (Reyburn 2014:161). Chesterton also affiliates humility to truth and how this inquiry of humility delves deeper than Girard's work. This provides insights into the inner workings of positive reciprocity and how it may be generated, and for purposes of this study, how it may be generated on social media.

In the light of Chesterton's work, it is possible to characterise humility as a relinquishing the self that imitates the desires of the other, as well as acknowledging that the self is simply a fabricated form driven by the admiration of the other. The thinking behind this inversion is to acknowledge an individual's relation to and reliance upon something that is more significant than the self. Considering how social media operate, the mimetic influences here should not be disregarded, for it is the algorithms or patterns developed by social media that accelerate online activities and behaviour that are rooted in the adoration of the other. A reflection upon McLuhan's insights reveals that the 'message' of social media is altering of the magnitude or speed or pattern engendered in this environment and in human relationships.

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[45] Girard refers to the "metaphysical revolt" as an individual's attempt to replace a divine being or higher power (Palaver 2013:28). In Girardian terms, the modern era is constituted by this metaphysical revolt and the outcome is a tendency of humans to idolise one another. Girard urges individuals to deny all forms of idolatry in order to avoid human deification altogether, which he perceives as resulting in an unstoppable torment.

Having considered this, how does humility and joy operate in this environment? Humility is revealed when an individual selects a model and desires their being. Chesterton refers to a model as a hero but in a specific "context of enjoyment" that can only manifest in true form before the model transforms into a rival. He notes, furthermore, that enjoyment cannot be attained without humility (cited in Reyburn 2014:162). However, Chesterton considers enjoyment to be fairly evanescent; a symbol or a rite of something more enduring that is at the core of existence, specifically joy (cited in Reyburn 2014:162).

Furthermore, he argues that human beings are truly themselves, more humane, and thus more connected with the world when joy becomes the core of their being as opposed to any other temporary emotion. Joy is the resonant endeavour by which we exist. This raises the question of how an individual could engender Chesterton's interpretation of joy in an online environment. How can joy meld into the medium, in essence social media? The answer to this question cannot be divorced from electronic media. After all, they mould and govern the scale and form of human relationships and behaviour. The content and uses of social media are as varied as they are futile in moulding the form of human relationships. Again, it becomes important to note that the 'content' of any medium tends to veil the nature of the medium.

Chesterton does not disregard adversity, despondency, wickedness and rivalry as apparent issues in life, but points to these issues as infectious and deforming of the enigma of joy. Joy cascades and responds to the deficit that is at the core of mimetic desire (Reyburn 2014:163). It transforms a being into a unified self with a kind of desire that is self-serving as opposed to being other-indulgent. It changes the metaphysical desire that pursues the quality of being of the other into an inner desire for the other to be themselves (Reyburn 2014:163). It acknowledges and strives for individuals to be distinctly individual, and thus seeks avenues to accomplish their wholeness and the wholeness of their being. An individual would have to imitate an essentially good desire, one that makes it difficult to injure the other.

Reyburn (2014:163) contends that joy aids the shift of negative reciprocity into positive reciprocity. Humility aids the initial stage of the inversion that is articulation in the condemnation of self, but joy permits for the following stage of this inversion, namely the revival of an individual's being. From a Girardian perspective, recognition with the scapegoat is essential for evading ensnarement in conflict and rivalry because it acknowledges likeness. In other words, an individual's being will always be derivative of and susceptible to the other. Chesterton's emphasis on joy results in a corresponding crucial attribute of positive reciprocity, specifically the acknowledgement and jubilation of difference (cited by Reyburn 2014:163). Thus, Chesterton proposes a relationship between humility, joy and love that warrants the exciting interaction of likeness and difference.

It is by way of this interaction that metaphysical desire changes completely to foster positive reciprocity (Reyburn 2014:163). The idea of joy spreading through shared reciprocity translates to social media which act as functional metaphors in its abilities to encapsulate joyful experiences online into new formulations. In the same way negative reciprocity is exacerbated online, forms of positive reciprocity, such as joy and humour, can also achieve similar ends.

Something like Chestertonian positive reciprocity is demonstrated by British singer and songwriter Chris Martin's use of social media during the coronavirus pandemic. Figure 18 is a post made on Twitter which shows a clip taken from Chris Martin's live-streamed concert on the 17th of March 2020, which he conducted from his home-studio while in social-isolation. With many events, festivals and concerts being cancelled around the globe, Martin remained optimistic and turned to social media to spread words of encouragement during the quarantine period. Many fans from across the world tuned into Martin's live-streamed Instagram concert to curb their feelings of uncertainty and anxiousness during this time of seclusion. In addition to keeping his fans in high spirits during this unsettling time, Martin's Instagram live-stream #TogetherAtHome spread awareness on how to inhibit the spread of coronavirus. His fans on social media continued to tune in to his live-streamed videos because of his appeal; in essence the way in which he constructs a sense of companionship and intimacy through his live-streamed content. Martin's use of calculated intimacy captivates his fans by allowing them to ask questions, comment and make song requests during this live-streamed concert. Martin's appeal stems from his use of language and in the way he makes himself 'vulnerable' by filming and recording himself in his home to his audience. By filming himself in his home, he is sharing an intimate part of his life.

Thus, Martin provides the idea of 'raw' and honest communication by confessing that he was a bit nervous to try something new: 'I was supposed to be with the band today, but we are stuck in different countries, so we can't play together. So I thought what would be nice would be to check in on some of you out there and see how you are and what I can do for you' (cited by Ewing 2020:[sp]). In an online environment that tends to render everybody the same and to a great extent signifies the erasure of differences, Martin's posture allows his followers to view him as 'someone like me' as opposed to a dehumanised other. In other words, Martin's fans identify with him — the individual behind the technology. Furthermore, this movement stresses the "non-mimetic" in the way that individuals experience this same situation differently. This helps to set up some differentiation even within the mimesis. Moreover, Martin presents a form of humility, love and joy in his creative endeavours on social media and thus demonstrates how joy has the ability to denigrate or overturn negative reciprocity on social media.

Martin's #TogetherAtHome live-stream brings to light the inner workings of mimetic desire. He explains in his live-stream video that: "No one's really going anywhere, my kids seem ok. I feel like the right thing to be doing is staying quiet, staying at home and not buying too much toilet paper." At no point during the live-stream concert does Martin show an urge to disregard the mandate regarding the social-isolation period and go venture outside. He does not have a desire to escape confinement and remains optimistic, appreciating this rare quiet time, the opportunity to spend time to unwind and to take a break from his busy schedule. Many of his fans expressed similar views during the live-stream concert, a form of positive reciprocity.

On the other hand, it also becomes important to note that this 'celebrity' posturing has been criticised, on the grounds of a form of envy. People like Chris Martin are wealthy and have means to live very comfortably, after all. There have been many others who have suffered terribly in the lockdown, but even this has given rise to forms of positive reciprocity, such as looking for ways to assist people during this difficult time by donating food parcels, and launching campaigns et cetera.[46] This desire for goodness is thus an attribute of imitation that does not beget mimetic rivalry, because it is not rooted with the intent or posture of a lack but instead from the experience of gratitude. As observed in the #TogetherAtHome campaign, Martin and his fans have no shared desire and thus there is no conflict and rivalry. Positive mimesis is thus typified when models never become hinderances and rivals for their subjects because they desire nothing in an excessive and rivalrous manner way. His experience is one that has enriched his understanding of the state of being of his fans.

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[46] The radio station 94.7 launched the campaign "Dineplan", which is a free service for merchants to sell gift vouchers, for consumers to redeem when the national lockdown ends (Dineplan 2020). This initiative prevents businesses from shutting down, losing an excessive amount of money and having to let go of employees as a result of the mandatory lockdown period.
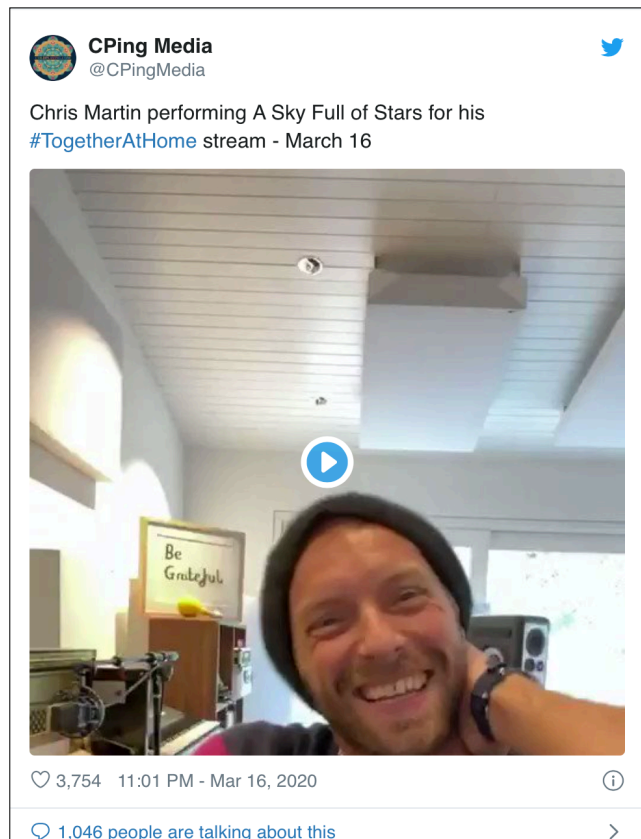
Figure 17: Chris Martin's
#TogetherAtHome Instagram live-stream,

Martin's intentions, coupled with his understanding of humanity, grant him a better understanding of the inner desires of his fans in a manner that they themselves may not be able to recognise. Thus, he seeks goodness and this becomes perceptible and indicative of a sensible mind.

Weil (1952:87) contends that this type of movement consists of words that possess a legitimate essence and that are persuasive. The environment engendered here operates in a more humane way; it acknowledges difference and attempts to escape the scandalous nature of the platform. Therefore, Martin's followers can draw motivation from the degree of those ideas and concepts which lie within their minds and foster a form of positive reciprocity online. This form of positive reciprocity was amplified on social media when other artists decided to follow suit to raise the spirits of their fans and to spread positivity during the coronavirus pandemic. Artists Keith Urban and John Legend also performed live from their homes on Instagram (Ewing 2020:[sp]). The artist Pink orchestrated a live-stream concert where she offered piano lessons, while the artist Lizzo conducted a live flute performance and a meditation session to encourage healing during the pandemic (Ewing 2020:[sp]).

The movement is not perceived as being representative of authority either; that is what is needed to voice opinions on behalf of the world. Given that Martin is not a governmental or powerful authoritative figure over his followers, and that #TogetherAtHome is rooted in unrestrained compliance and understanding, the movement possesses some sort of a spiritual essence.[47] This also demonstrates how social media are in some ways unrestrained – this predominantly without any forms of domination, government authorities or safeguards. It is in this way that social media operate as a cool medium. McLuhan (1969) explains that a hot medium excludes whereas a cool medium includes. Hot media are low in engagement and interaction by the audience whereas cool media are high in participation. Where high definition requires a completion by the medium without rigorous audience interaction and engagement, cool media supplies minimal data and requires the viewer to participate in the creation of the message. Owing to the fact that this interactive live-stream concert is in no way repressive and demands a substantial amount of completion by the viewers and listeners, it acts as a cool medium. In this state, social media permit the audience to become an active part of the viewing or listening experience. With features on social media, such as comments, interactive stories, gifs, et cetera, that allow for a type of constructed intimacy and individualised responses, we observe the presence of cool values and the integrated engagement and participation they bring about. This reiterates why the medium *is* the message, as opposed to the content; it is the participatory nature of the social media experience that needs to be taken into consideration, as opposed to the content of the concert.

When compared to the disembodying 'heated' effects of media posts of probability curves and statistics dictating the number of deaths, risk factors and the like during the pandemic, it becomes evident that the #TogetherAtHome movement is a form of cool media because it is high in participation as opposed to when the platform is overloaded with information and does not aid interpretation from the audience. In addition, the #TogetherAtHome movement fosters positive reciprocity because it echoes Weil's idea of goodness. Weil's (1952:195) understanding of goodness possesses a spiritual tone. Weil (1952:195) contends that what is spiritually good is good in its entirety, "at all times, in all places, under all circumstances".

The desire for goodness is thus a characteristic of the kind of imitation that does not engender mimetic rivalry, because it does not stem from a mindset or demeanour of a deficit but rather from the experience of gratuitous forgiveness and from the given prospects for life. This mode of positive mimesis, given by this experience, is not intent on replacing the model.

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[47] In a sense, Martin is authoritative in the eyes of his fans. But his authority is not sanctioned by official channels. His authority comes from his skills, his history as a musician, his personality as known from concerts, interviews, et cetera.

Positive mimesis does not pursue substitution but rather gratuitous involvement in the good and divine life. In *Original sin, grace, and positive mimesis,* Steinmair-Pösel (2007:10) explains that positive mimesis is fundamentally the "experience of having gratuitously received something." It is fostered wherever individuals experience themselves as having acquired a gratuitous gift and are therefore prepared to give what they have acquired, willingly and without forethought. Steinmair-Pösel (2007:10) explains that this occurs prominently in the Eucharist. The Greek term Eucharist refers to the given gift and the appreciative acknowledgement to it. Furthermore, Steinmair-Pösel explains that the verb *eucharistein* translates as behaving as an individual who has received a gift. Thus, honouring the Eucharist means fostering the experience of existing in gifted abundance. This is observed in #TogetherAtHome where the origin of positive mimesis emerges from a collective where positive mimesis is recognised. #TogetherAtHome fosters positive reciprocity by asserting the idea that gratitude is a formidable human moral responsibility. A nurturing and giving quintessence are unlikely without the joyful means of gratitude shown this post. Joy aids the shift of negative reciprocity into positive reciprocity. The post does not differentiate and condemn, in essence it does not resemble scapegoating culture.

It also does not promote the idea of "all against one" but rather reiterates that we are experiencing the same predicament worldwide and should be assisting and identifying with one another, even as we experience this same situation differently. When these ideas are shared on social media, individuals identify with this notion and mediate the same message. Humility supports the beginning stage of this switch, in essence communication of the repudiation of self, but joy warrants the subsequent stage, which is the renewal of an individual's being (Reyburn 2014:170). Mimetic theory highlights that the acknowledgement of the existence of the scapegoat is essential for escaping scandal in conflict and rivalry, because it recognises similarity rather than difference. Thus, if an individual imitates the jubilant desires of rehabilitation and healing, an individual is granted the liberation to show both his likeness and difference.

Moreover, an individual is able to imitate the other's desires without feeling a deficit of being and without perceiving the other as a rival, and as a result fosters positive reciprocity that allows him to embrace his being. Mimetic desire is closely associated with positive reciprocity, but solely when the desire that is imitated is "humble, joyful, and loving" (Reyburn 2014:170).

4.3.1 Humour as a form of positive reciprocity on social media platforms

As seen in the above example, social media exhibit an extraordinary dexterity for encouraging the enjoyment of things even in the midst of the disorder of the pandemic which has overwhelmed the Internet. Social media tend to work with extremes and this becomes increasingly apparent with the coronavirus pandemic. On one side there are individuals who are spreading panic and disorder, a form of negative reciprocity, while on the other side there are individuals whose social media feeds are saturated with humorous and yet informative content, a form of positive reciprocity. This content ignites and reciprocates laughter amongst users, every scroll illuminates or amuses. Why do we laugh at humorous content and why do we find laughter delightful? In *Perilous balance: A comic hypothesis*, Girard (1972:822) analyses the similarities between tragedy and humour, tears and laughter, and provides an explanation as to why we find certain things humorous.

Tears imply that tragic sentiments and feelings are affiliated to a method of purification and expulsion. As discussed throughout this paper, Girard (1972:814) argues that religious purification cannot be divorced from sacrifice and other modes of ritual. Furthermore, the initial scapegoating process, has the power to reinstate peace and order in the community because it allows for the polarisation of everyone against one victim. The ritual banishment of the scapegoat is the banishment of violence itself. In antithesis, humour engenders laughter. This is the body's attempt to rid itself or fend off something. Girard (1972:815) contends that laughter appears to be affirming, similar to tears, that the body must expel something. Moreover, laughter appears as it is attempting to rid itself of something more promptly than the act of crying. Excessive amounts of laughter and weeping bear a close resemblance. Girard (1972:815) argues that the crisis element is more visible in laughter than in tears.

Laughter resembles, more than tears, a sudden attack or outburst that would turn it into spasms and into an experience of deterrence and expulsion. Laughter is a reaction to something that endangers the self and is regarded as overpowering. Alberg's (2018:150) reflections upon Girard's work inform us that tragedy and humour are both sacrificial structures that assist individuals in the process of expulsion. Where tragedy has a tendency to stress the "independence" and "autonomy" of an individual, particularly the hero, and affirm his difference over everybody else, comedy highlights similarities in order to render it humorous. In tragedy, the idea of autonomy is dimmed; in humour it forms part of the joke. Comedy makes this explicit by understating the individual and stressing the framework.

When an individual laughs, she is actually laughing at something that could occur to anybody who laughs, not ruling herself out.

Girard (1972:822) explains that we laugh because we are uncertain about our perception of self, our ego, and our identity. As observed in previous chapters, this becomes a pursuit whereby an individual seeks something of perceived worth which transforms into an unstoppable torment, a form of baggage we readily try to rid ourselves of, on another individual. Owing to the fact that an individual cannot rid herself of this baggage indelibly, she continues to search for a momentary release, which laughter engenders (Girard 1972:822). In laughter, we momentarily appear to possess the great character of two conflicting worlds. An individual's sense of autonomy and power is heightened as she sees others displace theirs as they become engrossed in this practice. Subsequently, an individual also rids herself of any feelings of stringency and pressure which are attached to a dominating character (Girard 1972:822). The uproarious feeling of laughter endures for some time and will eventually bring about the fragmentation of the self-control that an individual hopes to sustain. Laughter can even render us physically impotent; it brings about a feeling of powerlessness. As an affirmation of dominance in an intellectual embodiment of laughter, it translates as a renunciation of reciprocity.

An individual who attempts to make another laugh has already attempted to do so and failed to condemn reciprocity between himself and others. When an individual laughs, she mimics and enacts the entire process she has been observing, both the effort to create dexterity and failure, both the bewildering feeling of dominance and instability. This stems from the bewilderment and the fragmentation of self-control which is always present in the unstrained responses of the laughter itself (Girard 1972:823). Reciprocity is recreated by means of behaviour which is supposed to unbind it.

Laughter forms part of the process and this is the reason why it can be humorous. Laughter reaches a moment where we eventually do not know if we laugh 'with' or against an individual who is already laughing (Girard 1972:823). It is in this manner that laughter is infectious. In addition, humour buzzes with sensibility and joy. An individual's sense of cheerfulness and joy is bound to sensibility, and it is this specific connection that elucidates how humour — a form of positive reciprocity — is spread on social media platforms. In *The beautiful madness called laughter,* Reyburn (2016:474) reflects upon Chesterton's writings and how these often link humour to the "truths of human experience."

Humour is characterised by the notions of satire, bizarreness, parody, sarcasm and absurdity; all of which constitute the use of language in the following extracts taken from social media content. Reyburn (2016:474) argues that humour implies an understanding of the uproarious or unseemly of a particular sort. Chesterton contends that we live in a world that stresses and amplifies the adversities in our society (cited by Reyburn 2016:474).

These assertions hold truth when we take into consideration the environment engendered on social media. In times of a pandemic, which is perceived as being serious and solemn, it becomes useful to consider Chesterton's viewpoint on the notion of seriousness and how it is amplified on social media. Chesterton contends that seriousness, particularly when it estranged from the probability of humour, is insipid. In his view it is more applicable to regard seriousness as a form of depravity as opposed to something of special worth or merit, specifically when it is displaced in the numerous facets of our very being (cited by Reyburn 2016:474). He justifies this assertion by explaining that when seriousness consumes an individual, it creates complacency and vanity. It spawns a type of comfort or understanding that invokes thoughtlessness, which results in a deficit of inquiry into the phenomena of life (cited by Reyburn 2016:474). This kind of excessive and domineering seriousness opposes both gratitude and humility, especially by operating scandalously. Social media, when 'heated up,' are saturated with information that users interpret as being entirely factual, in essence users interpret this content as being serious. However, it is this domineering seriousness that limits interpretation from the user.

This seriousness is intensified and heightened, creating a numbing affect and insulating one from being aware of what is occurring in this environment. Subsequently, the individual experiences a form of intellectual strain. Alberg (2013a:57) argues that certain sights petrify an individual, inhibiting her comprehension and understanding. If we analyse social media in this regard, seriousness, can spawn a type of "intellectual trauma." Furthermore, it depicts the unsound insights and discernment of the content creator's expertise on a particular subject. Social media users and content creators write about, share and comment on issues, subject matters and themes that they have limited knowledge on, however, this is perceived as deriving from a credible or expert source. When users who obtain more social capital share content with other users, the information is linked to authority and conflated with the truth. Seriousness can swiftly falsify an individual's relationship with the truth when it is divorced from joy. Thus, it is the serious nature of social media itself that is the message, not the content. It dominates and shapes every sense ratio. Moreover, social media tend to be untrue to the phenomenology of being and existence.

Chesterton emphasises the notion of humour as being affiliated with humility in a manner that seriousness cannot be. Pride, on the contrary, dries up laughter, it dries up wonder, it dries up chivalry and energy (cited by Reyburn 2016:476). Alberg's (2018:158) reflections upon Girard's interpretation of laughter inform us that an individual cannot laugh when he feels that he needs to take up the position of command. However, this reveals an individual's failure to recognise that such a position does not exist. The position of the victim is the position of impotency. On the other hand, by merging seriousness with humour, it is possible to construct an honest and true experience of an event.

Thus, humour allows for a more sensible interpretation of the world, with the solidified essence of an individual's engagement of things.[48] Although seriousness is not essentially unethical or despicable, it can effortlessly pervert our relationship with Girard's interpretation of the truth when it is divorced from humour. Thus, over-seriousness disguises itself as the truth by refusing to allow itself to be relativised. However, it evolves into an alluring hinderance, one that operates similar to a stumbling block and inhibits us from attaining a more worldly perspective or drawing nearer to the truth. Thus, over-seriousness functions in a scandalous manner.

Chesterton encourages employing light-hearted analogies on "serious questions" (cited by Reyburn 2016:476). This allows an individual to examine the seriousness of a situation.[49] Humour has the ability to conjure wonder; particularly when it is adorned in mystery. Thus, Chesterton's ideas regarding humour are not proposed to undermine the issues of the world. They are also not simply a remedy to the dangers of intensified melancholy and cynicism. Instead, humour may be indicative of the realities of our world. McLuhan's (1994:31) assertions converge with Chesterton: humour cools off the hot events of our world by miming them. Humour as a system of communications and as an inquiry into the environment engendered on social media grants us an anti-environmental device. It grapples with immediate experiences and the realities of our world. It equalises the sensorium — or Gestalt interaction of all the senses — and generates social harmony. Furthermore, the idea of dignity becomes central to Chesterton's notion of humour.

It is here that Chesterton identifies the main quality and predicament of humour which separates it from others. Chesterton illuminates the development where the outcome is a joke which commences with a particular notion of dignity (cited by Reyburn 2016:480). Humour commences with an individual and its very essence dignified. Only human beings can be ridiculous, for only they are truly dignified. In the below Nando's advertisement, figure 19, it becomes apparent that the concept of dignity, specifically human dignity, is central to the message being communicated. In true Nando's satirical style, the popular fast food chain restaurant seized the opportunity to make a satirical comment on the current pandemic while subtly ridiculing their competitor, KFC, whose slogan is "It's finger lickin' good'.

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[48] In his book *(New) fascism: Contagion, community, myth (2019),* Nidesh Lawtoo refers to the ambivalence which exists in the rhetoric of satire and comedy. With the aid of satire, an individual is capable of creating witty responses to political lies, react to submissive subjection to power and engender a temporary release or "cathartic outlet" that is crucial for political activism. Contrarily, comedy appears to distort the perception of politics and in some ways meld it with fiction (Lawtoo 2019:193). The way in which comedians curate exposés, for instance, can be scandalising depending on how they execute it.

[49] Some may misread Chesterton's assertions regarding humour and translate his ideas as undermining the truth. However, humour presents the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality and existence in an understated (or even overstated) way. Effective humour frequently signifies vulnerability, a trait that generates a profound feeling of relatedness to the universe and an awareness of the shameless essentiality of being (Reyburn 2016:476).

The advertisement's punch line, "Turns out finger licking isn't good," comes across as comical because it is remarkably honest during the coronavirus pandemic where individuals are urged to practice good hygiene by regularly washing their hands and not touching their faces. Such a response to the pandemic does not capture the entire truth about the health crisis, but it does bring us closer. Chesterton's understanding of humour is that it is essentially paradoxical; it is a perspective that warrants the preservation of the dignified in the undignified form.

Figure 18: Designer unknown, screenshot of *NandosSA* advertisement, Twitter, (2020)

There are many instances on social media where humour infringes upon the ethical. These modes of humour are not what Chesterton is referring to. Instead, he refers to that which reminds an individual of his peculiar existence (Reyburn 2016:479). It is that which begets a type of thought that will revive the splendour of the normal and afford the individual with a true perspective of his relationship with the universe.

In these forms of humour, individuals are both dignified and undignified. Girard (1972:823) elaborates on this state asserting that for an individual to be engrossed in laughter, she must essentially remain "above all" even faced with the possibility of "sinking under." The prerequisites for meeting these two opposite states are to create actual sacrificial victims. A comedian understands that the quintessence of humour lies in knowing that an individual will only laugh at the cost of herself or the cost of somebody else.

The memes[50] and humorous content created online encapsulate this dichotomous state: the dignified in an undignified form. An additional characteristic demonstrated in coronavirus memes is the medium's ability to ignite user-generated derivatives and content expressed in forms of ironies, mix-ups and remixes. Limon Shifman (2014:2) highlights the intertextuality of memes and how they frequently link to each other in intricate, innovative and unpredictable ways. Memes, a form of participatory culture, seem to be frivolous and insignificant constituents of culture, however, an in-depth analysis reveals how memes allow for dialogue and personalised contributions which reflect individual stories and embrace difference. Thus, memes offer a cool experience.

Memes encourage modes of expression and public discussion. They create an environment of multiple perspectives where numerous thoughts and identities are expressed. Since memes are rooted in shared networks that encourage forms of variation, memes grant users the opportunity to engage in public group actions, while sustaining their 'individuality'. Memes allow for connective action in forms of "networked individualism" (Shifman 2014:129). As the coronavirus progresses, many perspectives are revealed through a generation of memes and counter memes. Whilst many individuals approved of the lockdown, many were against it. The prospering of multifaceted and diverse opinions is characterised as a "polyvocal" characteristic of meme culture, where various perspectives and identities are circulated.

The below memes are created by comedian Donovan Goliath and well-renowned violinist Davina Mae Gordon. The humorous duo were inspired by the lockdown to generate ad-like content referencing popular fashion brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel and Levi's (Kabwe 2020:[sp]). Through this content, they bring to light the reality of the daily life under quarantine such as stockpiling, constant sanitising and being in confinement. Memes thus allow individuals to share their stories and their opinions regarding social issues in an interactive and witty way. Considering this, social media are essentially cool and have the ability to include as well as acknowledge and embrace difference. The nature of online memes and humorous content allows for its users to meaningfully participate and take part in a continuous dialogue. Therefore, when the desires imitated on social media are essentially joyful and saturated with goodness, these networks allow for individual thoughts to develop through the imagination of the user. Humour necessitates great personal engagement and participation on social media and memes require users to continuously interpret and "fill in the gaps". Thus, social media are an inclusive gestalt.

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[50] In *Memes in digital culture,* Limon Shifman (2014:2) explains that the term meme was put forward by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to characterise minor events in culture disseminated in society by copying or imitating. Du Preez and Lombard (2014:254) contend that social media have provided the most fruitful environment for the proliferation of memes to date. Nowadays, memes are generally used to characterise the circulation of jokes, videos and images between individuals on the internet.

In this way, social media can be understood through heightened participation and low definition — a cool experience, in comparison to the 'heated up,' or high definition and low engagement that is necessitated by overly serious images and texts, such as the probability curves and statistics that have been inserted on social media during the pandemic.

Figure 19: Meme created by Donovan Goliath during the coronavirus pandemic, Facebook, (2020)

Figure 20: Meme created by Donovan Goliath during the coronavirus pandemic, Facebook, (2020)

Figure 21: Meme created by Donovan Goliath during the coronavirus pandemic, Facebook, (2020)

The way in which a meme or a joke is constructed reconfigures the conventional so that it can elicit an authentic wondrousness that acts as a metaphor for the primary moment that reconstructed history. If we look at Nikolous Wandinger's definition of positive mimesis which he interprets as "receptive mimesis" — a result of having received and independently handing over what one has been given — humour is a form of positive mimesis as it relinquishes its divine attributes when one embraces their deficit of being. Being open-minded and receptive to adopting provisional senselessness, or a condition of bewilderment for an endured time, will ensure an expansive outlook and true paradigm of reality. Humour involves annihilating oneself in-front of the other in order to liken or equate oneself with the other. Self-annihilation before the other in a "non-masochistically" way cannot be accomplished through self-restraint but rather as a result of "grace" (Steinmair-Posel 2017:189).[51]

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[51] According to Freud, masochism and sadism refer to alluring and exaggerated sexual deviations which are two psychological forms in his sex-based interpretation of desirable objects (Cowdell 2013:41). However, Girard argues that masochism and sadism are diverse and ordinary examples of heightened mimetic desire that have little or nothing to do with sex. In the case of masochism, it is the state of the subject who is disappointed by many unfulfilling victories and who pursues a model who is relentless enough from impeding him from attaining his aspirations, not because he is in search of pain but because he avoiding despondency (Antonelli 2017:322). Masochistic subjects measure themselves negatively against their mediator as they yearn for the pain that they believe the mediator should impose on subjects as flawed as himself. Masochism uncovers the entire mimetic mechanism, in particular heightened mimeticism, which inevitably brings about culpability and deficiency. Moreover, the masochist accepts his eventual demise and remorse. Girard's theory opposes any "sexual appetitive for pain" and argues for the mimetic inclination to pursue progressively relentless models whose worth is imbued by the subject in its model.

Moreover, Girard acknowledges that laughter can disintegrate as well as fortify the boundaries that distinguish individuals from the others. Thus, laughter embraces its own failure.

Having covered how negative mimesis and positive mimesis differ, we understand how the shift from negative reciprocity to positive reciprocity occurs. Social media are capable of creating widespread emphasis on a limited view that functions as a distorted perspective, in essence not 'seeing' outside of this state. Over-seriousness tends to be conflated with the medium which fixates on deprivation and revenge. On the other hand, positive reciprocity overturns the characteristics of negative reciprocity. While social media seem to follow a posture that stresses immediacy, doubling, revenge and surrendering personal thought, its essentially cool nature, as seen more prominently in more participatory movements and meme culture, has the potential to be anti-mimetic — embracing differentiation, focusing on gratuitous giving, and a readiness to be open to otherness. Laughter, a form of positive reciprocity, encourages these ideas and highlights Girard's idea of "infinite mercy and the infinite greatness" of human beings (cited by Alberg 2018:159). For Girard, the basis of this paradox is the inherent goodness of mankind with a coexisting acknowledgement of the doctrine of original sin. The true foundation is embracing and adopting grace or forgiveness, an adoption that reveals original sin for what it is. Notably, one of the core purposes of forgiveness is to acknowledge positive reciprocity. Forgiveness is an attempt to overturn the mimetic structure. Forgiveness disentangles and reconstructs our discomfort, our yearning, and our knowledge of our being in the world — about which more is said in the next chapter.

5. CHAPTER FIVE: A WAY FORWARD USING JEREMIAH ALBERG'S HERMENEUTICS OF FORGIVENESS

Building on the previous chapter's brief exploration of positive reciprocity, this chapter turns to possible ways to alleviate the scandalous on social media using Jeremiah Alberg's hermeneutics of forgiveness. Alberg provides possible ways to overcome scandal through the spirit of forgiveness in his book *Beneath the veil of strange verses (2013).* Moreover, Alberg reflects on the issues accompanying scandal and thus stresses the possibility of transcending it. Alberg's insights offer a fresh perspective on reality, one that allows us to rationalise and comprehend the overwhelming amount of information available on social media and the conflicting perspectives that we are hounded with daily. The aim of this chapter is to expand on mimetic theory, to grant it a new kind of momentum, including a more expansive response to the growing unpredictability and complexity of the world and, especially, of digital culture. To comprehend the complexities in global violence, mimetic theory assists in understanding ourselves and our relationships with others, and the violence we implement. Owing the fact that mimetic theory delves into human behaviour and violence, it assists in interpreting how we establish governments and laws, the systems put in place for learning institutions, and most importantly, how we interpret violence, how it proliferates and how to impede and inhibit it.[52] When a specific ideology prevails and becomes politically ingrained into society, and we disregard or reduce the offerings of other outlooks and thoughts, the inquiry and interpretation are simultaneously weakened.

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[52] Analysing the political and social sphere from a mimetic perspective brings to light the social processes which extend the standard interpretations offered by political science. Studying politics from a Girardian viewpoint focuses neither on individuals nor groups, but rather on the mimetic mechanism, in essence doubling, reciprocation, scapegoating, et cetera. Many Girardian theorists grapple with global implications using mimetic theory.

In his book *Mimetic politics: Dyadic patterns in global politics,* Roberto Farneti (2015:1), for instance, interprets mimetic theory as dyadic patterns and denounces the manner in which political science perceives individuals as being autonomous. Informed by Girard's insights, Farneti focuses on the tendency of individuals or groups to participate in mimetic competitions. a propensity which stems from their nature to imitate each other's desire. Farneti brings to light phenomena that political scientists tend to not recognise, such as doubling and its role in bringing about conflict, the arbitrary polarisation in human conflicts, which is what motivates each party to eradicate each other.

Dumouchel (2014:227) proposes a Girardian reading of the philosopher Hobbes' illuminations on the role of violence in human and political affairs. Hobbes asserts that society spawns from a condition of nature that is a condition of conflict and chaos of all against all, and this very condition, that uncovers specific aspects of human nature, dictates the type and form of political government. Furthermore, no civilisation or culture exists prior to political government. Violence is the prerequisite, and the governance, which is supposed to resolve or bring an end to violence, establishes civilisation. In the end, communities achieve harmony when their violence is rendered sacred (Dumouchel 2014:227).

In his essay, *(New) fascism: Contagion, community, myth (2016),* Nidesh Lawtoo discusses new fascism and refers to a quote by the philosopher Umberto Eco in his opening: "Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and to point our finger at any of its new instances— every day, in every part of the world". Furthermore, Lawtoo (2019:193) explains that the glorification of politics as a mode of mass-mediated spectacle that hounds, via new media, an individual's daily and personal life is a new reality. Society is mesmerised and enthralled by political scandals. Considering the mimetic dimensions of new media and how it exacerbates the contagion, it is evident how the rhetoric spread by fascist leaders who incite fierce nationalism, violent reactions and scapegoating tactics is amplified in the online sphere. Moreover, Lawtoo analyses fascism's "mimetic power of attraction"; how individuals tend to become susceptible to fascism because they are all susceptible to mimetic contagion.

Moreover, a scandal emerges and our knowledge and experiences create a blurred perspective which limits us from venturing into what we do not have knowledge of. Driven by pattern-recognising algorithms, social media bring about a slight and imperceptible change in the behaviour of its users. These users are not consciously aware of how they are being made more susceptible to desire. Crucial to any overcoming of negative reciprocity must therefore involve a kind of awareness of mimeticism, which Girard refers to as "conversion". In other words, Girard doesn't think that we can completely overcome negative mimesis without an awareness of how bound up to mimetic desire we are.

5.1 Converting scandal into a paradox

As previously intimated, the more one attempts to move past scandal, the more one becomes ensnared by it. Alberg (2013a:51) states that "one can get beyond the scandal through forgiveness, not by forgiving the scandal but by receiving forgiveness from this 'scoundrel' for what we have done to him" (Alberg 2013a:51). However, practices of hatred are difficult to destroy and individuals are scandalised when their hatred is disputed. Content on social media has to be interpreted in its own context — this may be the context of the medium as well as other aspects like history, politics, time, et cetera — so that the modes of forgiving and understanding arise from engagement with the content itself. Individuals need to pay attention to what they are engaging with, treating aspects that need to be redeemed with care and in a manner that perceives it as already redeemed. Alberg (2013a:46) explains that: "Only as forgiven *sin* will *sin* reveal itself as *sin*". Here, the word *sin* implies not just the theological idea of missing the mark but the idea of mimetic rivalry and violence. Similarly, Reyburn (2019b:73) explains that this concept is encapsulated in the idea that we "ought to love the sinner while hating the sin". Forgiveness repudiates sin and argues against the repudiation of being. It unravels that which injures wholeness. It reasserts and replenishes being in the presence of any power of degeneration. Thus, Reyburn (2019b:73) contends that core to the idea of forgiveness is the notion that we need to be mindful of what appears to be happening and what actually is happening. Taking this into account, we need to keep in mind that people are religious by nature: sin is the worship of the wrong thing, in essence a form of destructive mimesis or desiring the wrong model. Thus, the break between the autonomous being or being of the transgressors and their interpretation of their behaviour, appears to be fundamental for making forgiveness a possibility.

Reyburn (2019b:73) explains that if an individual understands this separation, she can identify the distance between the sin, in essence the transgression committed and the irrational understanding of that transgression by its transgressor, and the being of the transgressor themselves. On social media, it is when an individual interprets content beyond a surface level that the content informs us what needs to be redeemed. The theme of scandal can assist an individual in delving into this process.

By pinpointing what is scandalous, individuals gain a complex understanding of what occludes and allows for forgiveness (Alberg 2013a:46). Content leads to scandal when it calls for the individual to understand or decode content that is both crucial *and* impossible. In other words, it places an individual at a point where she yearns for a greater understanding but cannot gain it. An individual cannot succeed in the journey for understanding; however, this is necessary.

Social media can be considered generally as scandalous rather than paradoxical because a paradox is an apparent contradiction that results in thought processes and understanding (Alberg 2013a:46). Moreover, scandals are hinderances to thought and understanding. Understanding involves the reconstruction of scandals into paradoxes. It achieves this by reinstating or strengthening that which has been denied, thus concluding and dissecting the content. An individual can preserve this view and achieve a greater understanding by identifying with the outsider, the offender, and the marginalised (Alberg 2013a:51). It is only when the offender is no longer perceived as being deceptive and is treated as a human being that it is possible to generate understanding.

Thus, negative reciprocity is bound up in unforgiveness, since unforgiveness ratifies the transgression without alleviating it (Reyburn 2019b:75). It reaches a point of stagnation, a type of historical inertia, in the neurotic outlook of mere victimhood. The desire-self rendered by negative reciprocity is inhibited from everything other than rivalrous desire of the other, and thus permits the continual conflation of self-assertion with autonomy. The other transforms into a simplified duplication of the subject's own detrimental mimetic desire. Forgiveness becomes inconceivable when mass unification and doubling are found to perpetuate negative reciprocity.

Here, scandal reveals the restrictions of our ability to rationalise. The yearning to look is scandalous and there exists an internal struggle which leads somewhere else. An individual can move past scandal to forgiveness, not just by forgiving the scandal but also by receiving forgiveness from this offender for the transgressions against him (Alberg 2013a:51). Still, certain sights can inhibit understanding, bringing about a type of "intellectual trauma". Here, McLuhan's insights inform us that social media as extensions can magnify a sense or interaction. Thus, an individual's cognitive and intellectual ability seem to generate a self-defensive numbing of the affected area, shielding and desensitising it from conscious mindfulness of what is occurring to it. McLuhan (1969:4) refers to this particular mode of self-hypnosis as "Narcissus narcosis" a condition whereby an individual is oblivious to the psychic and social effects of the medium. Thus extended, the environment modifies an individual's sensory balance (McLuhan 1969:4).

In order to oppose something like this condition, the Italian poet Dante urges individuals to shut their eyes to the surface level, while "opening them to a veiled meaning" (cited by Alberg 2013a:56). Ultimately, it is necessary to redirect one's attention to grasp the content being presented.

The writer John Freccero compares the notion of being scandalised to "petrification," which is the failure to be illuminated in an "interpretive glance" (cited by Alberg 2013a:56). This petrification is an explicative and moral trap and the comprehension of the text is reliant on a moral state. Social media users need to elude this trap. In spite of this, the language used on social media tend to be indicative of something scandalous, frequently because users are unable to attain their moral purpose. Many of the doctrines governing social media conventions remain hidden even to seasoned users. Furthermore, in an effort to triumph over scandal, one can fail and engender more scandal (Alberg 2013a:56). Thus, social media texts conceal a doctrine: How can an individual see beyond what has been hidden? The journalist and writer Mark Danner explains that one needs to surpass the shallow pits of society and examine what is actually happening in the depths of it (cited by Alberg 2013a:56). This requires us to avert our attention away from that which is appealing, in essence away, that is, from that which ensnares us. Social media users' skimming of texts presents a cloak that conceals a more profound meaning. Without doubt, users tend to be scandalised, in other words, immersed in content that tends to incite or heighten reactions and responses, content cloaked by doctrine and myth. Thus, users need to progress past surface interpretation and move towards a revelation of what is happening at the level of mimetic desire.

In essence, an individual needs to look elsewhere and interpret content indirectly, through particular hermeneutical methods and processes. It is necessary to ignore superficial content to discover an alternative referent separate from this text. Having determined this, it will be possible to establish a better sense of what is happening. Paradoxically, the content will then be examined in greater depth because the attention has been averted. This is demonstrated in the way that hypothetical constructions or deconstructions allow for "epistemic humility" — as suggested by Reyburn (2018).

The problem with social media content lies in the establishing of definite constructions that do not allow for dialogue. It is possible to understand reality as it is mediated and accessible. However, this calls for what Reyburn (2018) describes as "dialogue, not monologue disguised as dialogue". Scandal can only be resolved when the "conflict becomes a paradox," such as when appearance and reality are seen as complementary, not as antithetical. If no attempt is made to find the paradox, social media context becomes more ideological than academic. In essence, its main priority is advocating an ideological stance rather than seeking the truth.

The system of thought developed on social media is that if an individual does not support a particular cause, she is perceived as the "enemy." As Reyburn (2019b:74) informs us, forms of negative reciprocity present obstacles as well as pathways to attaining forgiveness. Forms of negative reciprocity manifest in the failure to prevent one person from imitating the vengeful other, and in the failure to imitate the one who is the root of all forgiveness. Being mindful of this failure to forgive is crucial for dismantling negative reciprocity; it allows for the possibility of forgiveness.

5.2 A hermeneutics of forgiveness

Alberg (2013a:57) refers to how the notion of confession suggests the framework of a transgression forgiven. An individual does not admit to or declare their transgressions merely to have them forgiven, but does so with the hope that they have already been forgiven. An admission of guilt, similar to storytelling and metaphorical language, enables an individual to conquer the obstacles that scandal possesses and to move beyond into the reality of forgiving love. Ultimately, forgiveness does not merely obliterate one's transgressions; it also allows for new opportunities of interpretation. Thus, to evade scandal on social media, one should go beyond the words and images, and move towards an honest pedagogy. As a result, the content on social media can foster two possibilities: it can either hold an individual captive and engender intellectual stagnation, or it can be interpreted as being potentially life-affirming. Social media content, with all its seductive strength and command to allure and captivate, can fascinate and petrify a user, or the user can redirect their attention to anticipate the transcendental content that will reveal the meaning of the text. This implies that there are particular types of understanding that can petrify an individual's thoughts. A great deal of responsibility lies on the shoulders of the social media user, who needs to take it upon herself to resist and forgive the scandalous.

Social media may be regarded as symbols of an agenda concealed beyond the surface to be uncovered, and in order for the scandal to be conquered, more is required. As discussed in the examples in Chapters three and four, when social media users create content, there is no intention of seeing beyond what is presented. Rather, the content draws attention merely to the creator or their agenda. The sole transcendent significance is the false transcendence of the idolatry. Social media content is often not created with the purpose of illuminating any other transcendence. It is created to ensnare users in a scandalous relationship with the content (Alberg 2013a:63). Content can present hinderances that impede any further development or progression which raises the question as to how we turn these hinderances into pathways.

Social media content that presents hinderances and scandals can become pathways to a more intricate interpretation and comprehension of reality. Social media users should then approach content on these networks by employing their surface understanding of an occurrence both to taint the prevailing interpretation from within and to allow for more substantial and complex meanings. Interpreting the content as it presents itself is a form of idolatry and bearing this in mind social media tend to limit any hermeneutic that allows for allegorical perception and understanding. As it is, the content tends naturally to lack complexity and nuance; that is, a "polysemantic" quality. As discussed in earlier chapters, social media are primarily a conflation of content and context, and so lack distinction because of the deep involvement of the senses. In other words, social media are so immersive that there is no reflective distance, as there would be for a standard hot medium.

Polysemantic qualities consist of two senses: the first being that which is interpreted on a surface level, in essence interpreting what is presented to us, the second which examines what the content symbolises or represents. The former refers to the literal, and the latter refers to the figurative, moral or metaphorical (Alberg 2013a:66). These enigmatic senses may be referred to by numerous terms and the figurative sense prevails, because it is distinct from the literal or the historical.

5.3 Dante's model for interpreting texts beyond a surface level

Alberg (2013a:xi) refers to William Franke's translation of Dante's work, *Dante's interpretative journey*, to provide insights into different modes of interpretation. Dante differentiates between the literal and figurative senses of signification with four forms of understanding or decoding: the literal and the allegorical, with the allegorical possessing three secondary classifications. Dante's model starts interpreting the literal or historical condition. The literal or historical condition is never in plain view. This condition also involves an interpretation.

Furthermore, this type of literal or historical condition that aids the allegorical reading requires an entirely separate type of interpretation from the one excised on the occurrence by a besieging power. Subsequently, only a particular kind of interpretation relating to the literal condition can aid the moral or allegorical condition. This model of interpretation presented by Dante can be employed to elucidate the manner in which literal interpretation influences everything that takes place afterwards. A single mode of the interpretation of language is perceived as moving toward a true transcendence, and an alternative binds them within a deceitful or veered transcendence.

Wow... Earth is recovering

- Air pollution is slowing down
- Water pollution is clearing up
- Natural wildlife returning home

Coronavirus is Earth's vaccine

We're the virus

8:25 AM · Mar 17, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

70.9K Retweets **290.9K** Likes

Figure 22: Commentary on the coronavirus pandemic, (Garcia 2020:[sp])

Distinguishing between these two forms depends on violence. For instance, during the time of the coronavirus pandemic, posts circulating on social media that referred to the virus as "the cure" and humans as "the disease," and reiterated ideas that the "earth is cleansing" (Garcia 2020:[sp]).

This incited an emotional reaction amongst the online community, especially environmental activists favouring the narrative of the virus having a positive effect on the environment. After all, air pollution and carbon dioxide levels had significantly decreased because of the lockdown regulations implemented to prohibit the spread of the coronavirus. On the other hand, there were those who were utterly disgusted by this perspective, asserting that this rhetoric is excessive, contentious and misanthropical. Here, the doubling character of mimetic rivals comes to fore. However, there is justification in the way of thinking associated with the narrative accounted from the environmental activists' perspective. Environmental activists and enthusiasts have interpreted the coronavirus pandemic in the following way: the global pandemic which has disrupted and brought the world to a complete standstill, has stopped much human activity. This has minimised greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution around the globe (Infrastructure news 2020). Taking this into consideration, the idea that the "earth is healing" does not appear so far-fetched.

Others on social media, however, may have comprehended this narrative in the following manner. The world is in crisis, encircled by an invisible enemy — a virus.

Thus, the idea that the "earth is healing" is perceived as being rooted in ideas around eugenics, eco-fascism and therefore as having roots in Nazism. Moreover, it discriminates against vulnerable populations. Thus, it is no surprise that texts that advocated for "Covid being the earth's vaccine" were condemned by many people online.

Figure 23: Commentary on the coronavirus pandemic, (Garcia 2020:[sp])

There are presumably two opposing interpretations. From the perspective of the dominant ideology which saturates these networks, the story of "humans being a virus" becomes a narrative that threatens mankind and thus it is expelled from the community. The assertion that the "earth is healing" competes with the narrative that we are experiencing a crisis that is endangering the lives of millions around the globe. Both are interpretations in the literal sense. Thus, the violent decision to 'ban' texts that are perceived as being rooted in eugenics cannot be perceived without its greater meanings, or as completely deficient of transcendence. It is a power dynamic with all that that suggests. A person cannot assert, however, that the power possessed by the dominant group as a literal interpretation is closed to figurative and metaphorical meanings. It is bound to this world. In an act of violence, the "eco-fascist" narrative is thus banished from the community. Thus, the banishment of this "eco-fascist" notion is rendered literally true. Moreover, the violent behaviour expresses the truth of the interpretation. This is what those who opposed this "eco-fascist" notion did; this is what they planned to do.

Thus, this violent behaviour can imply a meaning not overlooked by other persecuted groups. The individuals perceived as being eco-fascists were banished, and through this banishment harmony was reinstated in the online community. The violent act (the banishment of the "eco-fascists") and the character of the harmony engendered by it (online community has rid itself of "hateful" ideologies) are similarly sacrificial in nature. For example, the truth in this content demonstrates that these actions might mirror the post, "Air pollutants significantly dropped globally since lockdowns began in response to the COVID-19 pandemic". In actuality, these two interpretations are fundamentally different. The violent behaviour is separate from the restoration. A truth that is developed or established upon banishment depends on the former, violent repudiation. The truth that is established upon banishment is sacrificial in that it banishes other probable interpretations and signification.

Something is banished for the current model to endure, and that which endures is established exactly around the banished victim. Individuals deemed eco-fascists are scapegoated in order to advocate for social harmony in the online community. Simultaneously, the oppressor's perspective dictates itself to the omission of the victims' point of view. Posts that denounce and banish thoughts about "earth healing" assert that it is a form of eugenics. This may be metaphorically pertinent, but it is historically incorrect. This assertion uncovers how the sense of sacrifice remains. However, it is also correct that this violence can be captivating and scandalous to the point that the literal interpretation stunts thought processes and hinders any profound signification and understanding. When social media content is interpreted by the notion of sacrifice, the affiliation between the symbolism in language and the referent is a materialised one in which the assertions used to characterise the occurrence shut out further dialogue, possible interpretations and meanings. This is how a deficit of signification is engendered; in this manner in which it is understood as being not sacrificial but restorative.

Alberg (2013a:68) insights inform us that the relationship between the symbol and its referent is not sacrificial. This mode of decoding and comprehending content on social media permits its phrasing and the narrative to form part of the reality it depicts. It permits the narrative to possess other referents and the metaphorical and figurative meaning allows for multiple levels of meaning. Furthermore, it is solely with regard to the figurative allegory that the deficit of meaning in language can be conquered. Only then is it possible to comprehend the impulse that makes a person want to control the desire to look at mesmerising content and thus gain greater significance. Thus, instead of having contested meanings, sacrificed texts transform into a true accomplishment of an interpretation of reality that the content is allegedly suspected of extinguishing. Social media users are in danger of perpetuating negative reciprocity when they declare or command. An individual should love, forgive and heal.

By pinpointing what is scandalous, the user gains a complex understanding of what occludes and allows for forgiveness (Alberg 2013a:46). Thus, this hermeneutic eludes the typical nature of social media which tend to create or establish constructions as definite and that do not allow for dialogue.[53] As the above demonstrates, it matters a great deal not just that we pay attention to social media but what kind of attention or hermeneutic intention one adopts in using social media.

4.5 Scandal as the essential pathway to truth and conqueror of violence

As consumers of popular culture, we simultaneously yearn for it and apprehend it and Alberg's insights broaden our understanding through some illuminations on language. Social media have transformed the information era and opened up a world where an abundance of information is available to many people. However, this same information can also shut out reality and render it invalid. Both the benefits and the risks cannot be averted. Social media can assist in this process by expressing the reality we are experiencing. Alberg's (2013a:100) illuminations suggest mediating the confrontation between the user and reality. This way, creators of content will be urged to use their skillsets solely to depict the real but also to conquer the reader's established arguments or shields against the content. Where there appears to be the most opposition, it is possible to transform it into a space of deepest illumination.

Alberg (2013a:103) refers to Girard to enrich one's understanding of both the impediment to the truth and the kind of violence needed to conquer that impediment. The foremost impediment to truth is violence itself. Subsequently, therefore, violence must be transformed. To attempt to conquer it in an aggressive manner would prove counterproductive. The challenge exists in one's own opposition to this central truth. This is the point of departure and the refusal to start here engenders the risk of stagnating and remaining within the realm of misunderstanding, under the assumption that we are seeing when the truth is actually hidden. The predicament does not originate with violence, which is frequently apparent, but with an individual's own desires. The predicament is mimetic desire. The desire is to look, but this conflicts with the desire to avert attention. Social media content captivates and mesmerises, but at the same time, it repels. To comprehend the manner in which these desires can inhibit us from attaining the truth that violence itself inhibits, Girard's notion of desire illuminates the contradiction that social media users uncover the truth of desire in their content. However, even in disclosure, some truth is concealed. In other words, social media users believe a lie, one that is both rooted in, and brings forth, violence.

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[53] In order to understand texts beyond their surface level, an analogy explored by Combs becomes useful to consider. Combs refers to Isaac Newton's exploration of the "spectrum of light". In a space that is concealed from all forms of light except for a one beam of sunlight, Newton used a glass prism to uncover the distinct colours of the whole spectrum. In a similar manner, Combs explains that when mindful experience transmits through the suitable prism, the various colours appear, "in various perspectives" (cited by McGuigan & Popp 2014:79). The prism is symbolic of introspective and mirrored mindfulness.

This lie is the meaning that social media users apply to the world and to the text. This dissertation has illustrated the manner that this lie begets violence. It becomes important to note how the violence that spawns from this fabrication transcends not only the members who constitute the community but also the structure of the community itself. This is because this violence rearranges the community as a social being. It is not easy to differentiate between the type of transcendence rooted in a violence and the type of true transcendence rooted in love (Alberg 2013a:103). What becomes evident is the fundamental embodiment of scandal and the trivial ways we are immersed in violence, regardless of our attempts to avert it. Social media users should attempt to not be scandalized by this human posture. Rather, they should attempt to "see and make visible the truth" (Alberg 2013a:103). Thus, the hermeneutical procedures discussed in this chapter assist in unveiling this truth. In *Things hidden since the foundation of the world (1987)*, Girard contends that an individual should somehow identify with the victim without victimising in the name of the victim.

Social media users should establish the place of the victim through violence that concentrates on only one aim with regard to the truth, which translates as the violence being channelled against oneself and that is discovered in the reality, the spirit which spawns the self. In essence, an individual needs to detect the spirit that renders "the victim, the victim" (Alberg 2013a:105). A user fails to comprehend their desire and sacrifice. Furthermore, they fail to comprehend their followers' behaviours. Social media's inclination towards sacrifice corresponds with a user's assurance in identifying particular individuals as transgressors. Thus, the notion of scandal becomes central to understanding the way forward using Alberg's hermeneutics of forgiveness. Moreover, one cannot conquer scandal by merely avoiding the destructive use of the present forces. And, if one considers the relationship between an individual and social media, neither will social media rid itself of chaos and prosper through the employment of force, such as call-out actions and cancel culture. Instead, individuals need to acknowledge the threats and benefits of looking intensely at social media content. The danger is to get trapped on the surface. The benefit is to comprehend the particulars of a society within the framework of political violence. The bridge leading to the benefits is a move from the shallows to the depths. There are undeniably circumstances where it serves an individual not to 'look directly,' to perceive the reality in as much of its entirety as possible. T.S. Eliot (1943) said, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." Sadly, we never see the whole picture, but this also serves as a type of antidote to scandal.

Ultimately, the type of desire that allows an individual to understand and go beyond understanding is fundamentally a desire of humility. This will need to be modelled by someone who is humble, so that mimesis can be positive.

A receptivity to the truth allows for violence to assist us in understanding reality, more specifically, the truth of love. Thus, an individual should approach the medium (social media) according to Alberg's assertions: an individual should "desire mercy not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13). An individual should not merely sacrifice the content that scandalises, since the scandal is not solely present in the content or solely in the individual, but rather exists somewhere in between. An individual should approach social media in the spirit of mercy, and with forgiveness. This forgiveness does not operate in a single direction. An individual might be the one who requires forgiveness but it may also be the other. In a sense, the other is the medium, as in a model for the other's desires. In essence, social media users should forgive the medium itself. Rebuilding what was denied will disengage both ourselves and the medium simultaneously so that it engenders greater harmony and fulfilment.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of chapters

This study solely sets out to explore how Girard's mimetic theory helps to explain some of the trends we see on social media platforms. Thus, this research inquiry began by exploring mimetic theory as a theoretical framework. Mimetic theory centres around the processes of scandal in its varied forms demonstrating how it applies to all concepts of mimetic rivalry. At the core of this paper, reciprocal action and mimetic theory assist our understanding of how trends and content on social media are perpetuated. In essence, social media reflect an imitation of a model who subsequently becomes an imitator, which brings an intensified conflict between rivals, in essence "double mediation".

Chapter two discussed mimetic theory as a theoretical framework. This discussion is imperative for understanding the reciprocal nature of social media. Girard (2010:10) explains that reciprocal action can heighten the acceleration to great depths and can act as a concealed driving force of conflict and rivalry. Social media consist of mechanisms that advocate this type of reciprocal action, which is the premise of the platform's popularity and expansion. This echoes McLuhan's (1994:22) idea that form holds more value than the content. With regard to social media, "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and governs modes of human relationships and behaviour. Driven by pattern-recognising algorithms, social media cause a gradual and imperceptible change in its users' behaviour. It has the ability to alter users' thought processes, what they do and even the very nature of their being. Those active on these networks are not consciously aware of how their minds are being made more susceptible to desire. Analysing social media from a mimetic perspective provides an alternative view of how these platforms affect individuals. Technical engineers and designers working at companies, such as Facebook and Instagram, are knowledgeable in persuasive psychology and intentionally build it into technology via algorithms to alter an individual's behaviour.

Chapter three addresses how this reciprocal action tends to function simultaneously as an exchange, transaction, and a form of violent reciprocity. Violent reciprocity, which renders rivals identical, is at the origin of all myths and cultures (Girard 2010:11). Taking into account social media automatisms and interactions between opposing groups, mimetic theory becomes a useful mode of analysis. As seen in the concrete examples discussed — the EFF's social media accounts, the gender-based violence (GBV) coverage on social media, and the downfall of James Charles's YouTube beauty channel — which analyse scandal in online language, social media wars gain potency by preserving certain ideologies rather than developing or bolstering any specific argument through reason.

These characteristics pervade in call-out culture. Many advocates of call-out culture refuse to engage in dialogue with individuals who hold alternative viewpoints, believing that it weakens their cause or movement. In other words, their arguments are substantiated as being solely a reaction to aggression and are thus rooted in reciprocity. Reciprocal action and mimetic desire entail the same reality. The point is not the advancements made by either side but the acceleration of conflict as a whole. Social media conflicts are still, despite being online, social phenomena, and remain rooted in mimetic desire.

By reflecting upon the nature of these platforms and how conflicts arise in this realm, we gain a greater understanding of crowd violence and contagion. In terms of reciprocal action accelerating to extremes on social media, this is an effect of imitation. This conflict is essential, and assists in understanding interaction as a typical human response. However, on social media, this behaviour is amplified to extremes by pattern-recognising algorithms. Facebook refers to this method as "massive scale contagion experiments," where emotions expressed and subtle cues generated by Facebook users have an influence on other users' emotions and prompt them to perform certain activities (Guillory *et al* 2014:[sp]). McLuhan (1969:4) contends that modes of technology, as an extension of mankind, bring about extreme changes, and thus an individual needs to understand the environment that is engendered. The changes propagated by technology cause inner conflict as it is being processed. In previous decades, the effects of media were experienced gradually, unlike the instantaneous nature of the new media we know today. McLuhan (1969:4) contends that "electric media constitute a total and near-instantaneous transformation of culture, values and attitudes." On social media, this becomes more apparent. Individuals curate their lives and modify their behaviour based on a perceived idea of 'truth' which is formulated by algorithms that are essentially opinions implanted in code and that are not objective.

On these platforms, individuals are likely to have a different "customised" algorithm based on where they reside and what their interests are. Thus, individuals are presented with different information. When this happens to the extent that it occurs on social media, individuals no longer ingest information that conflicts with their views. The theme of scandal comes to the fore when we witness how individuals accept the false sense of reality with which they are presented. When conflict arises on social media, it is because an individual cannot understand why their viewpoints are disputed by others. Thus, significantly, conflicts on social media are driven by algorithms which generate polarisation in society.

Chapter three also considers the idea of polarity, which is resemblant of the zero-sum game, in essence when we characterise our lives as an infinite game between different groups competing for a particular status — a form of social capital (Girard 2010:13).

The aim on social media tends to be the eradication of the enemy, to render him socially and politically feeble, thus compelling him to surrender to whatever agenda the mob puts forward. The idea that reciprocal action exacerbates social media trends to extremes holds truth. It worsens when both rivals act identically, and react instantly by each modelling the tactics of the other.

Individuals are always engaging with each other, both within a group and as part of conflicting groups. Reciprocal action can, therefore, bring about both undifferentiation and difference, a means of rivalry, and a way to achieve harmony (Girard 2010:13). If it worsens the trend to extremes, the conflict of space and time vanquish, and this state mirrors the sacrificial crisis of ancient communities. On social media, everything appears to confirm that violent imitation tends to dominate. The trends and movements discussed in Chapter three and four provide ample evidence of this. If the decline of conflict is evident, it only makes way for its violent resurgence. This characterises the environment that is being created on online networks. Thus, McLuhan's contentions around how media enhance human fallibility become vital for understanding the environment created in the social media sphere. The medium — in this case, social media — is a space that generates change. Culture and social media are constrained because the effect of these networks is so broad that it alters and modifies the culture that embraces it. In essence, social media hold more meaning than its content implies.

The heightening of conflict on social media constitutes a double mediation because it is not always easy to identify who initiated the dispute. When violence constitutes disputes, transgressions are always shared. The subject is captivated by the other, just as much as the other is captivated by him. The mimesis of appropriation, which determines the transgressor's actions, also indicates a reaction and that acts as a form of resistance. Thus, Chapter three uncovers the scandalous nature of social media and how violence is always appreciated or understood by violence. In essence, violence is never vanquished. Social media mesmerise the user; it fascinates the user yet does not permit her to see how the information on these networks tend to be reduced and sensationalised in such a way that most users tend to disregard the reality it represents. This is a crucial concept for understanding the often scandalous character of social media and our interactions with it.

Social media users enter into a scandalous relationship with their rivals, they never perceive themselves as instigators even though their actions and behaviours are reciprocal. Mimeticism (shared desire) is what produces differences to create conflict (Palaver 2013:44). Thus, a minor or trivial difference on social media can heighten rivalry to extremes.

All who participate in social media always perceive the other as the instigator or transgressor and never the self as the one to initiate conflict. The reality is that all individuals are in some way accountable for the violence.

Human autonomy is a romantic lie. This becomes clear on social media where everyone is to a great degree equally in search of differentiation. However, all aim identically to achieve a form of difference manifested in their 'individualities' made public on these networks. Girard's notion of undifferentiation becomes pivotal as it describes the excessive unification through mimetic desire which engenders the disingenuous communication and disconnection between self and other (cited by Reyburn 2017:53). Moreover, mass depersonalisation is evident when users become numbers and engender an environment of collective rest and unrest. Individuals cannot regulate or govern reciprocity because they imitate one another to extremes with the result that their similarities to one another intensify. Individuals are always engaged in order and chaos, in conflict and harmony and it is difficult to distinguish between the two phenomena that, in archaic societies, were once categorised and ritualised. The boundaries between these two realities that once existed are now blurred, owing to the undifferentiation embedded in digital culture itself.

Girard (2013:18) explains that reciprocal action is heightened by globalisation to such an extent that the reciprocity of an incident can have ramifications across the world. This tends to be the case with the coronavirus pandemic — analysed in Chapter four — where "violence steals a march on politics, and technology escapes our control" (Girard 2013:18). The flow of disinformation witnessed during the time of COVID-19 is occurring across the entire information ecosystem. Thus, these networks heighten present realities and simultaneously scapegoat it. Furthermore, the scale and speed impelling social media also intensify. The media-saturated context of the coronavirus pandemic, which has highlighted the disembodying and conflictual aspects of mimesis on social media, also uncover social media's ability to generate positive reciprocity. Although Girard tends to understand the conflictual character of mimesis better, he contends that: "mimetic desire is intrinsically good … If desire were not mimetic, we would not be open to what is human or what is divine" (quoted by Steinmair-Posel 2017:188). Positive mimesis is demonstrated when models never become impediments and rivals for their subjects because they desire nothing in an exorbitant and rivalrous way. In essence, there is a desire for goodness.

Chapter four reflects upon Weil's (1952:195) insights on the concept of goodness: To be spiritually good is to be good in its entirety, "at all times, in all places, under all circumstances".

The desire for goodness is thus an attribute of imitation that does not beget mimetic rivalry. This is because it is not rooted in intent or in a position of a lack but instead, stems from the experience of gratuitous forgiveness. This form of positive mimesis, as shown #TogetherAtHome, does not plan on substituting the model. While it does appear that there is a model, it seems that the model prefers to model nonrivalry. #TogetherAtHome emerges from a "collectivity" where positive mimesis is acknowledged. Weil (1952:7) provides a positive reframing of the collective, asserting that individuals should cherish collectivity because it can provide "food" for the soul. Weil (1952:195) argues that each collectivity is unique and, if destroyed, cannot be regenerated. Furthermore, collectives advance into the future because of their continuity. Most important, however, is that a collective is established on a tradition that permits the sustenance of knowledge and skills over the years. Collectives transmit knowledge from generation to generation and allow for the development and sustenance of culture. This creates a sense of belonging. An individual's identity is a web of relationships of belonging that is so interwoven and integrated that, as a group, it generates something unique: an authentic being (Girard 2016:3).

A reflection on Reyburn's *Subversive joy and positive reciprocity* (2014) reveals that Chesterton's work becomes useful for comprehending positive reciprocity that illuminates both Chesterton and Girard's notions concerning mimesis. The concept of humility becomes crucial to understanding positive mimesis as it allows for a fresh way of generating the conciliatory imitation of true love that Girard perceives as being vital to dismembering mimetic rivalry (Reyburn 2014:161). Girard contends recovering moments of history as a vital attribute to humility because this reveals the notion that an individual's conception of his identity does not originate from the self. The vanquishing of pride begets humility and Girard's interpretation of the truth (Reyburn 2014:161). Chesterton associates humility with the truth. Girard's work picks up this pursuit of humility to illuminate how positive reciprocity functions and how it may be generated. Moreover, humility is celebrated when an individual chooses a model and desires their being. According to Chesterton, a model is a hero but in a particular "context of enjoyment," which can only be embodied in a pure form before the model becomes a rival (Reyburn 2014:161). Thus, enjoyment cannot be achieved without humility. In essence, the spirit of giving is attainable because of this joyful form of gratitude.

Joy is the catalyst for the conversion of negative reciprocity into positive reciprocity. Thus, #TogetherAtHome reveals that, on one side there are individuals who are spreading panic and disorder — a form of negative reciprocity — while on the other there are those whose social media feeds are saturated with joyful and sometimes even informative, non-rivalrous content, a form of positive reciprocity.

This joyful content often takes on the form of humour that brings sensibility and joy and sparks humour amongst users. The memes and content discussed in Chapter four reveal social media users' sense of joy and how it is bound to sensibility in a way that eludes the over-serious nature of social media which conceal the 'truth'. McLuhan's (1994:31) assertions imply that humour cools off the hot events of our world by miming them. Humour levels the sensorium, or Gestalt engagement with all the senses, and engenders greater understanding and social unity.

On the other hand, seriousness specifically when it is detached from the possibility of joy, is diluted from a more worldly perspective. When seriousness consumes an individual, it incites in them a type of presumption and vanity. It begets a form of comfort or interpretative absolutism that brings about thoughtlessness and indulgence, which results in a dearth of inquiry into the various phenomena of life. Social media tend to be over-serious and transform into a captivating impediment and obstacle, a hindrance which prevents a more worldly, and more truthful, view. Over-seriousness functions in a scandalous manner. An individual's response to humorous content on social media, however, brings users nearer to the truth rather than averting, or attempting an evasion of, the truth. Humour can potentially elude scandal because it grants access and permits dialogue to move beyond a surface understanding rather than inhibiting an individual from nearing some sense of the truth. Chapter four concludes by proposing ways of melding seriousness with humour on social media, in the form of memes, to get closer to an honest experience of the coronavirus pandemic as a media event, in essence a shared understanding of reality.

This study ends by suggesting possible ways to diminish the scandalous on social media using Jeremiah Alberg's hermeneutic of forgiveness. This is intended to complement the concept of scandal with which this paper began. Alberg (2013a) supposes possible ways to regulate scandal through the spirit of forgiveness in his book *Beneath the veil of strange verses.* Furthermore, his insights inform us that a user should not interpret social media content directly so that they may understand the depths of it. The purpose is not to entertain the scandalous display but rather to move towards transcendent love which is not immediately apparent in the shallow pits of violence. The hermeneutic that Alberg has put forward has the purpose of assisting readers to move beyond the surface, to occlude the ideology or interpretation of the violent fabrication into an interaction with true transcendence. Social media users' coupled desire to "pay attention and not pay attention" is an attribute of a scandalized consciousness.

The difference between the type of desire that gets mesmerised by the content or dismisses it and the type of desire that allows an individual to "understand and go beyond understanding" implies something that is simultaneously distinct from as well as a likeness between the two. In essence, both are desires.

The foundation of a type of desire that gets enthralled by content is a type of rivalry. To "look or to not look" is rooted in an effort of command of the circumstance or of oneself, with the intention of prevailing over the other. Thus, Chapter four reveals the core manifestation of scandal: the frivolous and obscure ways we are entangled by violence, despite our efforts to elude it. The wrestling with scandal never stops. It is possible to choose to avoid content that is unsettling, to avoid mimetic rivalry and to maintain a balance. But an attempt to evade scandal can result in an individual becoming more enthralled by it. The actual effort made to move away from scandal involves a restructuring of our relationships that separates us from rivalry.

Alberg's hermeneutic is put forward with the intention of helping social media users move beyond the surface, to re-structure the worldview or interpretation of the violent construction into an interaction with true transcendence. When a particular worldview dominates and becomes politically deep-seated in society, and we ignore or diminish the contributions of other perspectives, the inquiry and meaning are simultaneously tainted. Critical constructivism proves to be a clouded lens that simultaneously allows us to establish what we know and restricts us from seeking what we don't. As Alberg's insights suggest, the effect of interpreting social media content as it is shown, would petrify and severely limit the user from achieving an enriched understanding.

It is essential that users of social media not accept the surface value of content, but choose to seek an alternative referent separate from the text. Users should establish the place of the victim through violence that fixates on only one purpose concerning the truth, that is the violence being directed against oneself and that is found in the reality. In other words, social media users should identify with the victim but without victimising further in the name of the victim (Alberg 2013a:105). Ultimately, social media should not pursue sacrifice but rather mercy or love. In essence, individuals active on social media should relinquish their violence by identifying with the scapegoat.

Mimesis simultaneously engenders disorder but has the potential to resolve it. Acknowledging the innocence of the scapegoat puts pressure on an individual to recognise their hostility that is invigorated by mimetic dynamism. When an adherent of social media is consumed by mimesis, it is not possible to recognise one's own hostility. The user of social media feels that the other has engendered the chaos and disorder because the individual's true character is concealed. Identification with the scapegoat allows for an individual to be separated from mimesis and recognise how she is crippling the other and herself. Being accountable for one's mimetic tendencies calls for one to generate a space where positive reciprocity dominates. When an individual imitates an essentially good desire, it becomes difficult to denigrate the other because she is seen as "someone like me" as opposed to a dehumanised other.

Considering the environment of social media, it is more difficult to generate positive reciprocity when the platform is geared towards behaviour that endorses call-out practices — a form of negative reciprocity. Positive mimesis allows an individual to understand her relationship with the world and acknowledges her being in relation to others. Girard advocates for ideas of intersubjectivity and urges individuals toward a sense of goodness by co-creating each other and with each other. Essentially, this hermeneutic suggests that an individual should approach social media in an attitude of mercy and with forgiveness. In this way, the other is the medium, as in a model for the other's desires. Thus, social media users should forgive the medium itself. Reconstructing what was denied will disentangle both ourselves and the medium so that it engenders greater harmony.

6.2 Contributions of the study and suggestions for further research

This study is exploratory in nature and thus does not seek to advance any original thesis. Nevertheless, it makes several contributions that open up possibilities for further exploration and research. Below, I name the primary contributions of the study and include some suggestions for further research under each of the following headings.

- **This study provides a provisional application of mimetic theory to social media culture**

At the beginning of the study, it was noted that very little has been done to explore how René Girard's mimetic theory might elucidate aspects of digital culture, and it was based on this that the study was first proposed. Thus, this study takes René Girard's mimetic theory and his ideas on mimetic desire in relation to human culture as a viable way to consider the culture engendered on social media. Mimetic theory clarifies the cause of interpersonal confrontations and altercations and also provides solutions to them (Palaver 2013:31). This is something that is particularly pertinent for understanding online culture. Given the exploratory and somewhat experimental nature of this study, however, there would certainly be room to develop and expand many of the insights and conclusions presented.

- **This study demonstrates how social media are effective channels of mimetic desire and are capable of transforming into mechanisms that convey and sustain mimetic violence**

Social media endorse a collective goal that derives from herd behaviour. This notion of blind tribalism becomes noteworthy when one reflects upon how trends and movements are spread on social media networks. An amalgamation of Girardian hermeneutics and McLuhanesque thinking reveals that social media activities are amplified because they function mimetically. Moreover, social media are capable of shaping social and political values, attitudes and behaviours.

Given that this research is purely explorative in nature, further research could possibly look at collecting data and analysing specific mechanisms, features and patterns in relation to a specific case study to support what Girard's insights reveal about social media.

- **This study reveals how the environment engendered on social media allow for scandalous relationships to thrive**

Language and texts function scandalously on social media. The very network perceived as providing perspective and helping to understand culture tends to present the opposite, an impediment; in essence, a scandal. Murray's and Alberg's insights demonstrate how the apparent problem with social media is that they relinquish the pursuit of truth, especially the truth of the victim, in favour of the prevailing political ideology. The 'truth,' in this context, refers to how we relate and can improve our relational worlds. Thus, a Girardian hermeneutic reveals that social media content becomes a sacrificial tool from the moment it is spread, pursuing mimetic rivalry accompanied by violent resolutions - conflicts are made a reality by violence. Although, throughout the study, I make use of specific examples from social media to highlight these assertions, owing to the scope of the study, I am unable to use alternative methodologies that may help strengthen arguments made about mimetic theory. In particular, the mimetic mechanism is not rooted in a rigorous study of subjects and the administration of scientific tests, but rather, from analysing biblical and fictional texts. Thus, by administering scientific tests and qualitative research, Girard's mimetic mechanism can allow for a more meticulous dialogue that allows his research to form the basis of studies that involve observation of subjects in a 'lab setting'.

- **This study explores possible ways to mitigate scandal on social media using Jeremiah Alberg's hermeneutic of forgiveness**

Alberg provides possible ways to govern scandal through the spirit of forgiveness. In this study, his insights underpin the exploration of the issues which accompany scandal and emphasise the possibility of transcending it on social media. Alberg's insights assist in interpreting the truth of the victim and in understanding a world that has become more complex and rationally fragmented, specifically within the context of digital culture. Thus, future studies could build on research and theory concerning positive reciprocity (not solely in relation to digital culture) since most Girardian authors focus on the conflictual aspects of mimesis.

6.3 Limitations of the study

• **Comparing social media and traditional media in light of mimetic theory and media theory**

Since this study is an exploration of social media in light of mimetic theory specifically, I have not engaged with any other kinds of communication media or included an in-depth discussion comparing traditional media — print, radio, TV — and social media. Moreover, while I briefly discuss traditional media, an in-depth discussion surrounding traditional media falls outside the objectives and the scope of this study.

In future research, however, it might be worthwhile to include an in-depth discussion of the differences between traditional media and social media to help illustrate the different environments they create, which in turn might help one understand how social media differ from other modes of communication and how they affect the nature of social interaction.

6.4 Concluding remarks

Individuals have varied ideas and thoughts about social media and tend to place more emphasis on the content and information which is spread at the expense of examining the environment that is engendered on these networks. The advent and advancement of social media have profoundly changed how we communicate. One can perceive social media as a completely new culture, one that mobilises large groups of individuals, tends to incite resentment and endorses polarisation. Social media are as varied as they are futile in moulding human relationships. This study reflects upon the deeper structures set up by electronic media which promote the emergence and sustenance of this culture. Although these new communication platforms are creating new opportunities for mediation and alternative methods of communication with one another, these technologies also bring about uncertainties. In particular, they tend to extend into the consciousness of the world in a dangerous and uncertain space. Our society has transformed into an age of misinformation, where scandals are exaggerated to a hitherto unimagined extent.

Social media do serve us but we would do well to better understand the way they function in order to make them serve us better. Instead of rendering everything identical, diminishing difference, and vanquishing our perception of experience and reality on these networks, individuals need to strive towards authenticity and difference even as they recognise the unbreakable tie of mimetic desire. This means focusing on the individuals behind the technology and rendering each other more human through a critique of our own inhumanity. Ideally, individuals should engage with the information presented on social media in a meaningful way, regardless of the time it takes to process what they are absorbing.

Taking this into consideration, this can either be to an individual's detriment or act in their favour — this depends on what they choose to do with that information. If an individual satisfies their 'desire,' which takes the form of indifferent affiliation to the attribute of the networking site that shapes their individual being, then she joins the swarm. If, on the other hand, she chooses with intentional discernment to engage with the information that saturates these platforms, she can begin fusing and melding ideas to formulate a sort of truth that is more balanced, more whole and that holds more value than the one-dimensional content that aggregates these networks.

That said, the space engendered on social media itself is in need of reform. With the rise of digital culture, there were intentions of fostering a more connected world that would generate more opportunities for personal progression for everyone. However, there has been more of an opposite effect thus far. Internet-based technologies tend to pursue the mob mentality as efficiently as possible. As a society, we should rather pursue the "phenomenon of individual intelligence". Lanier (2010:168) explains that if we cannot "reformulate digital ideals before our appointment with destiny, we will have failed to bring about a better world." It appears as if society has opted for a dismal world where everything human is devalued. In the future, individuals will need to detach from the manipulation systems and have a discussion that is not defined by algorithms and persuasive technologies.

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